DOING HOMEWORK, DOING BEST? HOMEWORK AS A SITE OF GENDERED NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Social Justice Education Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis explores elementary schools’ homework practices on Prince Edward Island. I employ a feminist perspective that incorporates Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991a) to examine homework as a ‘site’ where institutions (family and school) interact and power circulates. I focus on the ways in which the daily lives and subjectivities of mothers, and to a lesser extent teachers, are organized and regulated in the process of making homework work.

I assembled and analyzed reports and policies related to education reform, parental involvement and homework. I draw on Foucault’s approach to genealogy (Foucault, 1984) to examine how homework has been established in these texts as a ‘good’ educational practice for young students, in spite of its dubious effects on educational achievement. Mothers and teachers are explicitly and implicitly addressed in education policy and practice as primary agents for the accomplishment of homework.

Following qualitative research methodology, I conducted twenty in-depth interviews with mothers and teachers of elementary aged students. These mothers and teachers often have ambivalent feelings about homework, sharing frustrations about its effects on family time and relations and doubting its value for children. At the same time, ‘doing homework’ was closely linked to being a ‘good mother.’ Thus, my analysis draws attention to the complex ways that homework and parental involvement discourses work
on and through people, to produce particular kinds of experiences and feelings. While homework may ‘fail’ to accomplish its professed educational aims for students, I argue that it serves to render women responsible for growing portions of educational labour.

My study sheds light on the workings of power in the home/school relationship and more generally on the workings of neoliberal governance and educational reform.

Modern government works through routine administration of our lives, in schools and families, and other institutions, often through persuasion, incitement and engagement rather than through explicit policy. I suggest the daily practice of homework is a concrete example of this and, extending Foucault’s analysis through feminist perspectives, I explore the unequal operation and effects of homework for those who are its main targets.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Homework is commonly defined and understood as “tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-instructional time” (Cooper, 1989a, p.7). In this thesis I discuss elementary homework, which I define as tasks assigned to students in Kindergarten through grade four. I delineate these schooling years deliberately because parental involvement is recruited and required to complete homework at this level of schooling. Further, I suggest that elementary homework offers an interesting site in which to explore the organization and experiences of home-school relations more generally. I show that homework, specifically elementary homework, can be viewed as an assignment to parents, an accountability tool, and as a way for teachers to encourage and recruit parent involvement. In addition, I suggest that homework provides a window that allows parents to see into the classroom and teachers to see into the home. In this way homework might be viewed as an instrument of surveillance or a governing tool that operates in both directions between home and school. Finally, I show that homework is a gendered practice. Thus, while I discuss and use the term parental involvement, it is the work of mothers that is my focus. I base this decision to focus on mothers by drawing upon the body of feminist literature that highlights the gendered nature of the work mothers do in relation to their children’s schooling, including homework (David, 1998; David, Edwards, Hughes, & Ribbens, 1993; Dehli, 1988, 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, 1995; Hutchison, 2006; Lareau, 2000; O’ Brien, 2007, 2008; Reay, 1998, 2000, 2005; Shumow & Miller, 2001; Vincent, 2000; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989).

A Sense of a Problem – The Beginnings of a Research Project

Most of us who have come through a formal public school system have had experience with homework in one way or another. I have experienced homework as a student, a teacher, a
parent and now as a PhD student. As an elementary school student in Ontario during the seventies, my recollection of homework was that it was very minimal, certainly not a daily occurrence and not something that my parents were particularly involved with. It seems I am not alone on this. In their Canadian study of parental opinions and attitudes Cameron & Bartel (2008) report that 75% of parents they spoke with believe their children have more homework than they did. I heard similar accounts in my interviews with mothers and teachers. As an elementary student in Ontario in the seventies I recall that I looked forward to getting homework. At that time it was a rare occurrence until later years in school and I thought of it as a marker of being ‘grown up’. I recall reviewing spelling words for a weekly test, or sometimes practicing math facts, but overall my experience was very different than what I have observed in my children’s experience in their elementary years (my children are now in grades nine, seven and three). The amount and frequency of homework increased as I got older and it gradually became part of my daily school routine by the time I was in high school. It is probable that my own experience in my elementary years affected my opinion about homework when I got my first teaching job teaching grade two at an International School in Dubai, United Arab Emirates in 1994. The school followed the British National Curriculum and I was informed that regular daily homework was to be assigned. This was the first moment of disquiet for me around the topic of homework. The school’s policy on homework meant that I was required to assign and monitor individually tailored homework on a daily basis. Or this was the theory. In practice it did not work this way. Assigning and reviewing individual homework was a source of frustration for me because, from a practical standpoint, it was very difficult to design meaningful homework assignments for each of my 25 students. The alternative was that one assignment was given to all with a set time for completion. This is what I ended up doing, with the uneasy knowledge that
what one student could do in 15 minutes, may take another student half an hour or more. Also, to bring school-work out of ‘school’ and into ‘home’ seemed to me to introduce an element of the unknown. Who was at home to support the student with this school-work? I knew that assistance would be required. Would whoever was at home be able and willing to assist with this work? What sort of physical environment did the student have – was it quiet, noisy, chaotic? And, in my view the students just seemed too young to be required to do homework regularly after a seven hour school day. Despite some initial resistance, reservations and discomfort, however, I soon fell into a routine doing what was expected, that admittedly was not particularly useful from an academic standpoint, but it apparently placated both the administration and seemingly, the parents.

Jumping forward to 2006 was the next significant moment of discomfort regarding homework, this time from my perspective as a mother. In the fall of 2006 I had just started the PhD program at OISE/UT as a full-time student, my husband was working full-time out of the house and my older kids were in grades three and one and my youngest child had just turned two. Homework for both of my school-aged kids was coming home with them every day. They each had a book called an Agenda, which outlined the daily homework and had a space in which my husband or I were to sign to indicate the homework had been completed. The homework generally consisted of assigned reading, sometimes with a writing response to the reading, spelling exercises, math exercises and games and occasional projects. The assigned reading required either my husband or I to listen, the games required our direct participation and the other work often required assistance, guidance, or at least an active eye to be sure that the kids were staying ‘on task’; meanwhile, our two year old also required attention. A couple of years later, when I conducted my research on homework practices in Prince Edward Island, one of the
mothers I interviewed told me of helping her daughter with homework in the bathroom while her
toddler was in the tub.

This story resonated strongly with me; I had been there myself. Also, other stories I heard in my interviews of mothers coordinating homework activities in the kitchen while simultaneously preparing or cleaning up dinner. These stories were very familiar. That particular year, was the most challenging for me in relation to homework. It was consistently something to fit into an already very busy household schedule. I look at it as a snapshot in time, under particular circumstances of ages and particular situations of both paid and unpaid work. In that school year, I grew increasingly frustrated with the imposition that homework was creating. I didn’t like the particular relation it was setting up between my kids and myself. I questioned the value of the homework, although almost simultaneously I questioned myself for questioning the homework. Not once did I let either of my kids’ teachers know how I was feeling about homework that year and never did I ask about the school or school board policy. I experienced homework and my participation in it as non-optional, an expectation. Much like some of the mothers I interviewed, I felt it was best to just get on with it.

My research and point of entry to this inquiry started from the personal experiences I have described. Following Dorothy Smith (1999), I came to this research with “a sense of a problem, of something not quite right going on, some disquiet” (p. 9). Reflecting back and paying attention to the moments I have described allowed me to understand these experiences as a ‘sense of a problem’ and a valid starting point for a research inquiry. I began to seek out literature surrounding homework, discovering quite a vigorous debate, which I will describe in some detail later. Simultaneously, my graduate studies course-work was taking me deeper into sociological, feminist and poststructural theory. This prompted me to begin asking questions and
paying attention to how homework was being discursively constructed at various sites and how I, as a mother and a teacher, was being recruited into participating in it. I also began to consider how I may or may not be invested in this work. My research project had begun. Paying attention to my own experiences and engaging with the research on and debates about homework, as well as reading social theory and educational scholarship, allowed me over time to tease out some the issues and paradoxes surrounding homework. I also began to see gaps in the scholarship on homework, and gaps between research and practice. In the next section I outline some of these issues, paradoxes and gaps and in so doing I offer a review of the homework literature terrain.

**Issues, Paradoxes and Gaps**

One of the first puzzles I encountered was that for a practice that is so pervasive and seemingly taken-for-granted, there is little explicit policy and much ambiguity about its effects. According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), “explicit policies on homework are not centralized in any provincial or territorial jurisdictions in Canada” (p. 4). Instead, the setting of homework guidelines is left to school boards, or in most cases, individual schools and teachers. This is the situation on Prince Edward Island (PEI). The Canadian Council on Learning (2009) states, “this lack of cohesive direction on homework may lead to vastly different experiences for students and families depending on the school attended” (p. 4), which is certainly one of the issues surrounding homework. This lack of formal policy surrounding homework extends beyond Canada, Barnes (2001) describes research focused on a survey of homework policies in the United States. Their results indicate that only 35.2% of school districts had a homework policy.

Based on my own interviews and studies conducted by other Canadian researchers (Cameron & Bartel, 2008; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2009; Barnes, 2001) homework
appears to operate according to guidelines and expectation, with vague explanations about its perceived value. The primary homework guideline in North America is what is referred to as the ten-minute rule (Cooper, 2001, 2007). As I will discuss later, in my interviews with mothers and teachers I heard many stories about how this apparently simple rule is often problematic. One of the goals of my research is to explore how it is that homework, in spite of a lack of explicit and prescriptive policies, has come to operate as an expectation, and how homework has become normalized as an ordinary feature of relations between schools and families.

As I suggested earlier, there is quite a large body of research literature on homework, and a vigorous debate within and about it. Good overviews of the research include those by Gill and Schlossman (2000, 2003 & 2004), Cooper (2007), Hutchison (2006) and Kralovec and Buell (2000). These authors illustrate that debates about the benefits, or otherwise, of homework are not new. Rather, as Australian researcher Kirsten Hutchison (2006) explains, these debates have accompanied formal schooling over many decades and they are reflective of the socio-cultural, political and economic climate of a given time and place. Hutchison (2006) says, “perceptions and practices of homework in any historical moment reflect prevailing educational discourses and ideological positions” (p. 14).

Homework has had a history of support and resistance. Public opinion has alternated between strong support, on one end, and concern about its value and contribution, on the other. Claims and counterclaims about its value and contribution have primarily been focused on academic achievement, with its impact on students’ self-discipline and work-habit emerging as an important secondary theme. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007, p. 10) outline the dominant binary in which the topic of homework is most often discussed. They suggest that the majority of the homework literature can be divided into the following two camps:
1. Proponents of homework argue that it can help reinforce what students learn in the classroom, prepare them for further learning, support the development of good working habits, help build their sense of independence and personal responsibility and enhance communication between parents, students and schools (see, for example, Baumgartner, Bryan, Donahue & Nelson, 1993; Bembenutty, 2011; Cooper, 2001, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2011).

2. Opponents question the contribution of homework to student achievement and suggest that, rather than contributing to learning, homework can make students feel overburdened, reduce their access to leisure, promote cheating and exacerbate the effects of socio-economic inequalities among students (see Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Marshall, 2007).

Several authors have conducted systematic reviews of research that examines homework’s effect on student achievement (Alanne & MacGregor, 2007; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Civey, Robinson & Patall, 2006; Coulter, 1979). These reviews aim to summarize the ways in which homework has been measured and analyzed and they attempt to draw conclusions about its merits according to a range of variables. For example, the Canadian Council on Learning (2009) summarized studies assessing the net impact of homework on achievement levels, which took into consideration the effect of time, frequency, effort and completion. Another set of analyses examined the type of homework completed, while a third examined student engagement. Harris Cooper’s studies have been among the most influential in the homework research field. Cooper (1989b) performed a meta-analysis (a statistical technique for combining numerous studies into the equivalent of one giant study) in which he analyzed research, primarily studies carried out in the United
States, on homework over the previous fifty years. He explored homework’s effects in three different scenarios: homework versus no homework, homework versus in-class study, and the effect of time spent on homework and the impact on achievement. He considered these variables across grade levels, student ability levels and subject areas. The results of Cooper’s research review indicate that there are some positive effects of homework at some grade levels. At the same time, and important to my study, he concluded that at the elementary level there are few positive effects in terms of academic achievement. In addition to many other articles, he and his colleagues published a similar review of newer studies in 2006 with similar conclusions (Cooper et al., 2006).

In this thesis I am focusing on homework in the elementary grades. I am therefore interested in the claims and cautions about this practice at this level of education. What has emerged in my review of the research is that the positive effect of homework on increasing achievement levels at the elementary level is doubtful (Alanne & MacGreggor, 2007; Cameron & Bartel, 2008; Cooper et al., 2006; Hutchison, 2006; Sharp, Keys & Benefield, 2001). Some authors go so far as to suggest that the practice of regularly assigning homework to elementary students is harmful. Alfie Kohn (2006) has been one of the more vocal and popular critics of the contributions of homework, particularly for young children, he is definitive in his view of the elementary homework/achievement link:

The fact is that after decades of research on the topic, there is no overall positive correlation between homework and achievement (by any measure) for students before middle school. More precisely, there’s virtually no good research on the impact of homework in the primary grades – and therefore no data to support its use with young children. The absence of evidence supporting the value of homework before high school
is generally acknowledged, but this is rarely communicated to the general public. In fact, it is with younger children, where the benefits are most questionable (if not absent), that there has been the greatest increase in the quantity of homework. (p. 38)

These contradictory conclusions about the link between homework and student achievement seem paradoxical in light of an increased frequency and quantity of homework assigned at the elementary level (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000, cited in Cooper et al., 2006). Hofferth and Sandberg’s study reports an increase in homework time for American students aged six to eight from 52 minutes per week in 1981 to 128 minutes per week in 1997. Elementary students in Canada have also seen similar increases in homework quantity and frequency (Cameron & Bartel, 2008; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). If researchers continue to be uncertain about its educational benefits, why is it that more homework is being assigned today than in the past? This is one of the paradoxes I investigate in this thesis.

Teachers’ and parents’ arguments in support of assigning homework are varied, and often vague. Research examining the purposes or rationales of homework is often framed in terms of instructional practice, preparation and participation and non-instructional or nonacademic purposes such as parent-child relations, parent-teacher communications and policy (Corno & Xu, 2004). Whether justification for homework is given in instructional or non-instructional terms, the fundamental end goal in most arguments is to increase student achievement levels. Given the contrasting conclusions regarding the link between elementary-aged students’ homework and achievement levels, I have found myself wondering how homework at this level is being rationalized. This, in turn, leads me to research that focuses on the non-instructional/nonacademic benefits that are claimed for homework. These are also referred to as soft benefits, such as work habits or self-regulatory practices. It is important to note that studies
addressing these aspects are often framed as a sub-topic within studies of achievement. It is argued or implied that boosting ‘soft’ skills in turn improves achievement levels.

Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) evaluate how homework completion is associated with the development of various self-regulatory behaviors (defined as managing distractions, self-efficacy, perceived responsibility for learning, setting goals, self-reflection, managing time, setting goals). Others have also examined whether homework boosts development in these nonacademic areas and conclude that it does (Bembenutty, 2011; Corno, 2000; Epstein; 1986; Pintrich, 2000; Trautwein & Koller, 2003). In contrast, Kohn (2006) adamantly refutes this, saying:

there is no research to support the belief that homework helps students to develop any of the characteristics that appear under the heading of work habits. Thus, if we were guided by the demand for “evidence based” or “scientifically validated” education policies that we hear so often these days, it would be impossible to use any nonacademic justifications for assigning homework. (p. 68)

There is a body of literature that supports the notion that homework acts as a tool to facilitate less tangible and measurable variables than achievement outcomes. Some argue that homework gives parents insights into a school’s philosophy, curriculum and objectives (Epstein, 2001; Strother, 1984). Cooper (2007) also advocates for homework at the elementary level based on its nonacademic benefits. In addition, he argues that homework is a means to involve parents. He suggests that homework in the early grades should reinforce simple skills introduced in class, encourage positive attitudes and character traits in students, and also allow what he terms appropriate parent involvement. This notion that homework in the early grades can work as a means to allow appropriate parent involvement is an important insight for my research. It is one
of the primary focal points of this thesis. It is notable that Cooper (2007) concludes that homework does not have any measurable instructional benefits related to achievement for elementary aged students. However, he continues to encourage homework in the early grades because of its nonacademic benefits for students and its positive effects on parental involvement.

**Parental Involvement and the Home-School Relationship**

The accomplishment of elementary homework is dependent on having an adult involved and, as I have stated, it is most often the mother who is doing this work. Without the recruitment of parents, the ‘buy in’ or take up of the subject positioning of teacher-at-home, or the establishment of the normalized assumption of involvement, homework at the elementary level would not be possible. Although my study takes up the practice of homework, it is situated in the broader juncture of the home-school relationship. I understand this relationship to be a complex set of relations between children, parents, teachers and government. As with all relationships, there are inherent power relations at work and it is one of the key focuses of my research to untangle and make visible some of these power relations.

There are two predominant ways that parental involvement and homework have been researched, focusing either on their pedagogical or social aspects. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins and Closson (2005) conducted a review of research on parental involvement in homework. They show that pedagogical research has mainly focused on the effect of parental involvement on students’ achievement, attitudes toward involvement in homework, and the best ways to involve parents. Their review suggests that the findings on the effects of parental involvement on achievement are inconclusive. Van Voorhis (2011) on the other hand found positive effects in her study about involvement. She examines the effects of a family involvement homework program and family attitudes on student achievement in the
elementary and middle grades. Van Voorhis concludes that the benefits of the homework program called TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork), in terms of emotion and achievement, outweigh its associated costs. Another study suggesting positive effects of involvement examines how parental involvement affects homework completion and children’s emotional and social functioning (Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007). Kenney-Benson and Pomerantz (2005) simulated a lab homework experience varying the manner in which the mother helped with homework and measured student response to that help. Their findings suggested that elementary students with mothers that were involved in a supportive manner fared better than those who did not have support.

On one hand, arguments have been made in favour of homework stressing its value in strengthening the relationship between home and school and increasing communication between parents and teachers (Epstein, 1992, 1995; Patton, Jayanthi, & Polloway, 2001; Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel & Green, 2004). These claims echo those made by Cooper, discussed earlier. On the other hand, researchers have documented that parents sometimes feel unprepared to help with homework, or feel that homework makes unreasonable demands on time (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Markow, 2007). Some researchers suggest that homework generates tension in family relations (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Hutchison, 2006). Forsberg (2007) analyzes how parents and children negotiate around homework, while Westlund (2004) emphasizes that homework generates stress and argues that homework blurs the boundaries between home life and school life. Kirsten Hutchinson’s (2006) doctoral study was framed within feminist theories that challenge the divisions between public and private spheres. One aspect of her research considered homework as an emotionally embedded educational practice that simultaneously structures learning behaviors and shapes identities within the family. She
analyzed the ways in which emotions shape interactions about homework between children, teachers and parents, together with analysis of what is produced through these interactions.

In her doctoral research, Mary Bullen (2011) outlines research on the intersection of parental involvement and student achievement. She writes, “over these last two decades, there has been a great deal of research that has linked parent involvement to student achievement” (Bullen, 2011, p. 40). While Bullen’s review addressed the broader area of parental involvement and achievement, my own literature review was focused specifically on the relationships between parent involvement and homework. As Bullen explains in her study, this body of research has stimulated much discussion about the development of parental strategies and skill development. As I discuss later in this thesis, I suggest that homework and some of the tools used to encourage homework participation (such as a text I examine called the Student Agenda) might be viewed as development of parental strategies and skill development.

There has been much talk about the challenges of ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘global markets’ and ‘the information age’ and this talk has been worked into rationales for current education ‘reform’. These discourses of ‘reform’ include notions of improvement, accountability and expectations of increased parental involvement (Epstein, 1992, 1995; Spencer, 2006). A number of authors conclude that with educational reform the amount of work demanded by the school of the family (and most often mothers) has increased (Dehli, 2004; deCarvalho, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Hutchison, 2007). A key element of the ‘school reform movement’ calls for parents to take more responsibility for the academic achievement of their children (Dehli, 2004). Parental involvement has been explicitly identified as a resource for school success in recent research and policy literature in the United States (de Carvalho, 2001, p. 10). Dehli traces the same trend in Canada (2004) and David (1993) comes to similar
conclusions in the United Kingdom. Most of the discourse surrounding parental involvement takes for granted its desirability and viability, while assuming that someone is available at home to ensure that it is completed. Parental involvement is now seen as a fundamental and essential component of successful schooling; it has become an accepted truth.

A growing body of research supports the notion that teachers and parents are ‘co-producers’ of student learning. This is referred to by Joyce Epstein as a theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001), which suggests that students do better in school when parents, educators, and others in the community work together to guide and support student learning and development. The essence of the arguments in these studies is drawn out by Berla (1991):

The research is overwhelmingly clear: when parents play a positive role in their children’s education their children do better in school. This is true whether parents are college educated or grade school graduates and regardless of family income, race, or ethnic background. What counts is that parents have positive attitudes about the importance of good education and that they express confidence that their children will succeed. Major benefits of parent involvement include higher grades and test scores, positive attitudes and behavior, more successful academic programs, and more effective schools. (p. 16)

Many such claims are repeated in the literature. In a research report conducted for the Toronto Board of Education in 1987, Ziegler stated that “The evidence suggests that no single focus has the potential to be as productive for students as the closer linking of home and school, of parents and teachers” (p. 4). However, in contrast to studies that accept the benefits of involvement as uncontested, there is also a body of research that argues that the family-school
relationship must be subjected to critical examination (Baez & Talburt, 2008; David, 1998; de Carvalho, 2001; Dehli, 1988, 2004; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hutchison, 2006; Popkewitz, 2003; Reay, 1998). Along with Bullen (2011), I position my research within this latter body of literature. By viewing parental involvement through a critical lens, Bullen clearly illustrates that gender, race, socio-economic and cultural factors all influence parents’ and educators’ understandings of whom, how and why some parents make certain school choices and others do not or, in fact, why others do not have a choice at all. Bullen (2011) also makes the argument that parental involvement is most commonly understood as a performance based activity and works as an indicator of ‘good parenting’. While I apply a different set of theoretical tools, I build on these ideas in this thesis. I analyze further how the link between expected ‘performances’, such as doing homework, and indicators of ‘good parenting’ is established, what this link accomplishes, and what some of the effects are.

Dehli (1996b) examined how education policies that were emerging in the 1980s and 1990s to involve parents, families or communities in schooling appeared to ‘travel’ across nation-state boundaries. She pointed out that the identification of parents as ‘key stakeholders’ in education is a relatively recent and transnational phenomenon and suggested that “while parents were historically positioned at the margins of state schooling, their roles as ‘stakeholders’, ‘partners’ and ‘consumers’ acting on behalf of children are of recent vintage” (Dehli, 2004, p. 46). In the context of education reform, parents are being recruited into partnerships as ‘agents of change.’ This is a theme that will be elaborated on in later chapters.

Situating My Work

It is not my intention to determine whether homework ‘works’ or ‘doesn’t work’ in this thesis. Rather, one of the core tasks in this thesis is to look beyond, or look differently at the
current polarized debate around homework and to bring women into the picture more clearly, rather than the gender neutral ‘parent’. As I suggested earlier, one way of viewing homework at the elementary level is as an assignment to the parent(s). Going back to my own experiences, teachers of my children assumed that I would be available to guide, monitor and support their homework. This assumption has become more and more apparent to me over time. As I have conducted my research, it is also clear that the practice of elementary homework is dependent on both teachers and mothers accepting and taking up this assumption. Moreover, as I discussed earlier, there is no concrete policy, only guidelines. Without parental involvement, therefore, homework at this level would not be achievable.

This leads to some of the fundamental questions that motivated my research: Are other parents experiencing this assumption of their participation? What is the basis of this assumption? Are teachers mobilizing it? What are the material, social and discursive conditions that allow for this assumption to be promoted and worked into everyday educational practices and governmental directives? In my own experience I have felt a moral imperative attached to the assumption of involvement – it is what a good parent, and especially, a good mother should do.

Is this why I was so hesitant to resist homework both as a teacher and a mother? How has this moral-pedagogical link been achieved and are other mothers and teachers experiencing this? How do teachers and mothers work with and take up this assumption in their daily practices and everyday lives? What are the effects of this assumption? What are the effects of homework as a normalized educational practice?

If there isn’t strong and consistent evidence to show that homework makes educational sense, especially for young students, why is there an increase in its use? If improving student achievement is the main goal of education reform, and if homework isn’t contributing to that
goal, why is it being defended and prescribed? Why isn’t it being questioned more strongly, particularly when it appears to be a source of stress among many families? The Canadian Council on Learning conducted a survey of 5,000 parents in 2007 (Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2007). The report from the survey states that more than two-thirds of Canadians agree or strongly agree that homework has often been a source of household stress: “Homework stress is experienced by the vast majority of families who have school-aged children, and is particularly prevalent among families with children transitioning between major school levels and among families facing work-life balance challenges” (p. 13).

Mothers are at times explicitly, but more commonly, implicitly addressed as primary agents for the accomplishment of homework. As I referred to earlier, my analysis has been deeply shaped by the work of feminist education scholars working at the intersection of schooling and mothering (David, 1998; David et al., 1993; Dehli, 1988, 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, 1995; Hutchison, 2006; Lareau, 2000; O’Brien, 2007, 2008; Reay, 1998, 2000, 2005; Shumow & Miller, 2001; Vincent, 2000; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). I build upon these authors’ feminist critiques of homework and I seek to further the existing conversations about mothers and schooling. By adding a different set of theoretical tools and by locating my study in a largely rural context, I also contribute something new to the body of literature that explores the intersection of education, gender and to a certain extent, class.

In order to ‘look differently’ at how the practices of elementary school homework are organized and experienced, I employ the ideas of Michel Foucault, particularly his ideas about governmentality. I bring these ideas into conversation with concepts from feminist poststructural theory. My work offers one way of asking: if homework isn’t doing much to improve school
achievement, then what *is* it doing? Through this thesis I suggest that one of the answers is that it is ‘delegating’ new educational responsibilities to families. It recruits parents into pedagogical work and therefore seeks to intensify the government of families in new ways. At the same time, it is a way of making teachers’ work visible to parents. Homework then, might be understood as a ‘dual-use’ accountability tool, making both parents and teachers accountable. Although I am looking at the specific practice of homework in a particular site, I argue that an analysis of this seemingly mundane, daily practice allows us to understand something more general about the ways that we are governed, and the ways we govern ourselves, through practices of accountability today. Furthermore, I show that these relations and practices are thoroughly gendered, relying on the labour, time, resources and identifications of women as mothers of young children.

There are few studies that take up homework from the parents’ perspective, particularly the perspective of mothers. These studies focus on homework as a gendered practice (David et al., 1993; deCarvalho, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 1990, 2005; Hutchison, 2006; Reay, 1998). There has been even less research exploring teachers’ framing and understanding of homework, and only a few studies take into account the social, economic, governance and cultural context within which homework occurs. A small number of studies situate homework in relation to changing forms of governance, often referred to as neoliberalism (Baez & Talburt, 2008; Dehli, 2004). My study of home-school relations and my review of homework research is located in these gaps. I draw from and contribute to overlapping, interdisciplinary fields of study, including feminist scholarship, governmentality studies, and examinations of self-governance and neoliberalism.
Thesis Chapters Outline

My thesis is divided into eight chapters. This introductory chapter has situated my study, outlining what I view as some of the concerns of homework and my personal positioning. In this chapter I have provided a brief review of the literature on homework and I have shown that homework is primarily examined in relation to student achievement, though not the only rationale or frame through with the topic of homework has been taken up and analyzed. I have pointed out some of the issues and paradoxes present in the practice of homework and the home-school space and I have identified some of the gaps in the field.

In chapter two, I discuss the most salient of the literature that has informed my research. In this chapter I begin to sketch in a perspective on homework that is attentive to gender and, to a lesser extent, class. The primary focus of my literature review is in the field of home-school relations, and more specifically, mothers and schooling and the feminist writing that has highlighted the gendered nature of parental involvement with schooling. I take up other bodies of literature that have also informed my reading in these areas, such as sociological and feminist scholarship examining gender formation and organization, family relations, household work, mothering, and the sociology of education.

In chapter three, I outline the theoretical framework that I utilize in this thesis. My analytical lens draws largely from feminist poststructural theory and from Michel Foucault’s notions of power/knowledge, discourse, subjectivity and governmentality. I work with the theoretical ideas that view discourse, subject, practice and governmentality as interdependent in order to explore the connections between education reform, parental involvement, accountability, homework and mothering. In this chapter I work to develop a governmentality lens combined with feminist theory – gendered governmentality - to help me to critically examine practices.
surrounding homework and in particular, how those practices impact women. I explain how these theoretical ideas help me to trace some of the many ways that mothers and teachers position themselves within the changing context of neoliberalism and how it helps me to theorize the constitutive effects of neoliberalism, the constitution of the ‘good teacher’ and the ‘good mother’. I develop an argument that gendered neoliberal governance operates through persuasion, incitement and engagement, rather than through explicit policies or domination. My aim in this chapter is to begin to show that framing the ‘problem’ of homework through a feminist governmentality lens highlights, and therefore opens up, the apparently neutral means, terms and practices which come to play out in the lives of those involved in elementary homework.

In chapter four, I outline how I mobilize the theoretical ideas that I lay out in chapter three in my own project. I explain and support the view that homework is a form of gendered governmentality and my decision to trace the genealogy of homework, its conditions of emergence or existence, its rationalization and its organization and effects. The discussions in this chapter support and explain this way of posing questions and pursuing analysis. I begin the chapter with some of the broad research issues within qualitative research methods/methodology. I then discuss the what, why and how of Foucault’s genealogy. From there I move to the specifics of what I actually did in my study, the methods I used to gather data and how I went about analyzing and writing about it.

In chapter five, I use the notion of governmentality to think about education reform as one of several contemporary fields where discourses and practices (such as homework) of improvement, effectiveness and accountability shape general and everyday conditions of teachers’ work and thinking; how teachers are being governed by reform but also how they are
mobilizing these discourses and governing parents through the practice of homework and its accompanying tools.

This chapter offers a sketch of broad and local articulations of education reform in PEI and a discussion of policies and devices for ensuring parental involvement and accountability. I also examine how teachers take up and put to work discourses of involvement and accountability through the practice of homework, and I analyze a specific homework device called The Agenda. By looking at the specific practice of homework and some of the dominant discourses, devices and teacher actions surrounding it, I am also trying to understand something about the shifts in ways that we are governed; changes in the ways that we are governed in ‘neoliberal times’ of educational reform.

In chapter six, I shift my focus to the ‘home’ part of the home-school relationship. I examine how homework is being experienced by those who are its primary targets and vehicles in the home – mothers. I delve into the daily-ness of home-working, especially as it is experienced and felt by mothers. I view homework as one site where parents encounter incitements to active participation in education and a site where mothers in particular experience the shift of educational work from school to home. One of the results of contemporary education ‘reform’ is the shifting of pedagogical work to families. Through homework, schools, whether they intend to or not, are moving some of the burden and time of educational work onto mothers.

I begin the chapter by describing what it is that mothers are doing around homework. This descriptive section is followed by a discussion of what compels mothers to do, or not do, this work of homework. I look to my interviews with mothers to see how they draw upon and navigate diverse discourses and actively work to position themselves within or outside the dominant desired subjectivity of the good mother/involved parent/partner. In the last section of
this chapter I discuss further how homework is an example of an educational practice acting as a
governing technology, this time in the daily lives of mothers through what I call the
technologizing of the self.

In chapter seven, I complicate the idea of homework as a governing rationality and
technology by examining the incompleteness of, and resistance to, homework. I aim to
complicate the ‘good’ mother, the ‘good’ teacher, the ‘goodness’ of homework, and the
‘goodness’ of parental involvement/partnership. Doing so, I point to gaps, tensions and
ambivalences in the organization, impact and ‘take-up’ of this form of neoliberal government.

Here I will explore in greater detail some of these tensions. There were many
ambivalences, mixed emotions and complications that both teachers and mothers conveyed in
their narratives about homework in their everyday lives, indicating that although it appears that
homework is getting done, homework may not be working in ways that it is prescribed, and its
effects may subvert some of the individual and social hopes vested in it. As well, individuals
don’t always ‘fall into line’ with roles prescribed for them, or they do so with mixed feelings.

Chapter eight is the concluding chapter of the thesis. The first part of this chapter presents
a summary. Next I shift to describing possibilities for resistance, following feminist
poststructuralist theorists who suggest that sites of governance must be examined for the many
ways in which they are also sites of resistance. In this chapter I suggest that the narratives of
conflict, stress and ambivalence that were taken up in Chapter seven may also be viewed as
points of resistance and as moments of ‘discontinuities’ and that it is these moments of
discontinuity that reveal the potential ways to slow down or perhaps even interrupt neoliberal
processes. In this chapter I outline the conceptual contributions that I make with my research and
I outline some of the possible areas for future research stemming from my work.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

My research is framed and informed by a series of ‘conversations.’ In the previous chapter I discussed some of the literature on homework that examines it primarily in relation to student achievement. At the same time, I showed that achievement is not the only rationale or frame through which the topic of homework has been taken up and analyzed. I also reviewed literature in the broader area of parental involvement, specifically in relation to homework, but also more broadly in its development as an accepted ‘truth’ as a fundamental component of ‘doing best’ in education. After having identified some of the gaps in the field of homework literature, here I start to sketch in a perspective on homework that is more attentive to gender and class.

The title of my thesis is *Doing homework, doing best? Homework as a site of gendered neoliberal governance.* In the previous chapter I reviewed some of the literature dealing with the ‘doing homework’ part of the title. I now turn to ‘doing best’. ‘Doing best’ is a difficult and slippery notion that I work with throughout my thesis. Here I provide some background and theorization of this idea. Within the idea of ‘doing best’ are larger concepts that need to be analyzed, such as love, caring, morality and governance and the intersections among them. Because I am enquiring about ‘doing homework, doing best?’ in my research, I discuss the role that mothers play in their children’s schooling. In this chapter I show that this role is not static, but rather changes over time. It is important to understand that there is a history to home-school relations with shifting expectations of family, and the role of mothers, in relation to schooling. In addition, there are changing expectations of the mother role within the family, and debate around notions of parental involvement and partnership. I do not offer a complete and detailed history of home-school relations. Rather, my intention is to ‘trouble’ the often uncontested relationship, or at least, the promoted home-school relations we encounter today, as I described in Chapter 1.
I also discuss some of the literature that reviews the role of education in society, showing that education is a governmental pursuit, linked to changes in the economy and in politics. Therefore ‘doing best’ in relation to schooling also changes over time and is contextualized by dynamic political and economic rationalities, such as globalization and neoliberalism. I will examine neoliberalism in the next chapter and discourses of educational reform will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The role of the family, and mothers in particular, has always been an integral part of the governance of education. In this chapter I outline some of the scholarship on relations between mothers and schools, including a body of literature that examines the role of mothers’ work in education as a contributing factor in social class reproduction and class construction. Attempting to work with and capture the notions of love, caring and morality that I suggest are contained within ‘doing best’ I look to feminist scholarship that examines discourses of motherhood and the theorizations of carework. It is in relation to this body of literature that I later in the thesis analyze the implicit expectations that surround homework (in the direction of school to home) and the felt responsibility of mothers in relation to homework, which is also often implicit, invisible, and unsaid.

**Conceptualizing Gender**

I conceptualize and use the term gender as a social and political construction, rather than a fixed biological trait. Working with a poststructuralist framework, I analyze gender in terms of norms and power, rather than undertaking a study of the relations between women and men. Connell (1987) terms this gender relations, or gender regimes. Following Meyerson and Kolb (2000), I consider gender as an axis of power, an organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge.
Much of the discourse of parental involvement that I discussed in Chapter 1 presents a genderless parent operating in a way to deny women’s work (Reay, 1998). Manicom (1984) also makes this point:

The use of the word ‘parent’ hides the fact that most encounters teachers have with parents are with mothers, and that when teachers talk about a meeting or discussion or telephone call with a parent, the pronoun they use most often is ‘she’. (p. 80)

Lareau (2000) notes that although gender-neutral, ‘parenting’ really means mostly mothering: “parent involvement remains primarily mother involvement in education while fathers, particularly in upper middle class homes, have an important symbolic role” (p. 95). Mothers, more so than fathers, are held to account for their child’s character, behavior and achievements in relation to schooling. This is not to say that some fathers do not do this work; however, mothers are assumed to be responsible. Further, Reay (2000) and O’Brien (2007) suggest that in our present climate of social, political and economic uncertainty, mothers’ involvement in their children’s education has become more intense and that it has shifted somewhat.

Doing motherhood is one of the major ways of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Though mothering is comprised of many tasks and attributes, caring is a large component. Most of the work associated with caring is carried out by women, not by men (Zukewich, 2003). As I will describe in more detail further on in this chapter, caring is discursively constructed as deeply gendered (Tronto, 1989, 1993) and shaped by notions of naturalness which in turn shapes accepted ways of being and acting; in many ways shaping the choices we make. I work with this idea to argue that contemporary homework practices comprise a site of gendered neoliberal governance. Following Rose (1999) I suggest that we are increasingly being governed through
our sense of care or ‘doing best’ and through the choices we make in our freedom, and
I further argue that government through care, choice and freedom is deeply gendered.

Across the world, women do significantly more household work than men (Eichler, Albanese, Ferguson, Hyndman, Lui and Matthews, 2010). Women perform on average 4.3 hours per day on household work, and men 2.5 hours per day (Marshall, 2006). Doucet (2006) explores the persistent nature of this gendered ordering. She explains that
despite mothering being affected by rising employment rates for women, and especially for mothers of young children, throughout all Western industrialized countries (citing Daly, 2002; O’Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999; Orloff, 2002) and fathers being more involved in their children’s lives than fathers of previous generations (citing O’Brien & Shemilt, 2003; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), there remains an outstanding stability in mothers’ responsibility for children and for domestic and community life. (p. 6)

Doucet goes on to say that “this pattern of gendered responsibilities has not shifted even where women have equal participation in paid employment” (citing Beajot, 2000; Coltrane, 2000; Coltrane & Adams, 2001; Doucet, 2000, 2001b; Silver, 2000) (p. 6).

The Shifting Role of Education in Society

A number of historians have detailed the emergence and establishment of public education in Canada (for example, see Axelrod, 1997; Stamp, 1982; Curtis 1988; Prentice 2004). Their historical analysis gives context to the interconnectedness of education with other institutions in society, all of which are subject to socio-cultural, economic and political forces. The role of education in society is not static and forms of families and education vary across time and space. It wasn’t until the beginning of the twentieth century that publicly funded, free elementary schooling became the norm and mandatory attendance became law in Canada (Axelrod, 1997). Education systems in Canada transitioned in the mid to late 19th century from
rural, locally controlled school systems to complex, highly centralized government bureaucracies (Bullen, 2011; Dehli, 1988; Griffith and Smith, 2005).

There are different visions of the social role of education in society. The way that education is perceived and the role it is seen to play in the lives of individuals is also viewed differently over time. For as long as education has been a government-funded social institution requiring mandatory attendance, it has been a governmental pursuit (Spencer, 2006), though not always considered in this way. One way of understanding the role of education in society is as an institution providing opportunity to all, an equalizer and potential path to self-actualization. As hopeful as this view is, it is characterized by some as idealistic. Another very different understanding is that the education system serves to reproduce social inequalities rather than eliminating them and there is a large body of literature that analyzes the intersection of education and class (Apple, 2005; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Ball, 1994; Willis, 1977). Reproduction theorists suggest that school success is closely related to the degree to which the culture of the home corresponds with the culture of the school (Apple, 1990, 2001; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). The argument is that schools and teachers are, for the most part, middle class and espouse middle-class values. The middle class is comfortable in school, and shares the values embedded in the school day. Each child brings to school knowledge, values, skills, and dispositions that are acquired outside of school, primarily through his or her family interactions. This cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990), these writers suggest, is differentially valued and rewarded by the school system, with schools possessing a systematic preference for dominant white, middle-class values, language, and views of the world (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2007).

**Mothers’ role in education / shifts in home-School relations.** The history of mothers’ involvement in schooling has been well traced (see Dehli, 1988; Griffith and Smith, 2005; Reay,
In the late 19th and early 20th century middle-class women came to play a central role in educational institutions both in creating the institutional forms that schooling came to have, and as mothers, in preparing their children for schooling (Dehli, 1988). Simultaneously, with increasing industrialization, urbanization and expansion of educational institutions, there were shifts in family organization (Fox, 2006). In economic terms, separation of home and workplace led to the redefining of the role of family and government, particularly in relation to the education of children (see Kleinberg, 1999 for a good historical description of changes in mother’s role in the family as a result of the Industrial Revolution). Families were increasingly expected to work with education systems to produce, in economic terms, what is now referred to as ‘human capital’. Dehli (1988) has noted the need for increasing “governance and public administration” in home-school relations as parent education and child study programs were increasingly put into the hands of new experts (p. 377). Dehli’s historical tracing shows this emerging expertise in the 1920s and 1930s as burgeoning scientific fields of study were established. Later in the thesis I suggest that governance of parents in various forms, including homework and accompanying tools, continues today; however, I also suggest that the form of governance may have shifted somewhat with neoliberal governance.

Stamp’s (1982) historical examination of schools and schooling in Ontario shows that there have been vacillations between “progressive” and “conservative” political rationalities in Canada and that educational policy and practice (including homework) shifts with these vacillations. Stamp (1982) and Axelrod (1997) discuss the reform movement at the end of the nineteenth century that took the name ‘New Education’ tracing the emerging and competing discourses and philosophies of education which came to shape educational practices and policy at that time. Stamp (1982) writes about how the “New Education was related to and crucial for wider social reform” (p. 53), serving as an illustration to the ways in which educational policy
and practice is both shaped by and for socio-cultural, political and economic context.

Later in this thesis I consider ‘reform’ in its most recent manifestation and how educational practices, such as increased elementary homework, and increased calls for parental involvement are produced, reproduced and mobilized. While I discuss ‘reform’ in greater contextual detail in Chapter 5, my intent at this point is to think about some of the shifts in home-school relations, particularly the shift of increased calls for parental involvement.

In her research on family, state and schooling in the United Kingdom, David (1993) explores the ways in which assumptions about the partnership between families (and she emphasizes especially mothers) and education were built into both the form and development of modern, post-war systems of education through law, social research and subsequent social practices and in her exploration she provides an historical account of this increased amount of work shifted to ‘home’. David (1993) writes that “since World War II and the framing of modern welfare states and education systems, there has been a gradual shift in the form of the partnerships between families and schools,” and she goes on to argue that “we are now at a time where emphasis has shifted to a concern for parental dominance of education processes” (p. 31).

1 David’s focus is on the UK but she claims similar processes in North America, Australia and much of Europe.

2 I carried out informal exploratory conversations with one ‘stay-at-home’ father; a teacher running a homework club at the Newcomer’s society in Charlottetown and the President of the Provincial Home and School Association. While the conversations were informative, I made the decision not to include these conversations in my research as they were outside of the parameters I set out.

3 The series of reports in the early 1990s were as follows: Advisory Committee to the Committee
The home-school relationship was largely ignored by education sociologists until the late 1960s and as they began to consider it, it was often seen as troubled (Ball, 2003, 2006; Gerwitz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Vincent & Ball, 2006). There is a body of literature that brings gender into the intersection of education and class and highlights the work that mothers are doing to sustain and reproduce class through their involvement in their children’s schooling (Dehli, 1988, 2004; David, 1993; Hutchison, 2007; Manicom, 1988; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Reay, 1998; Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Smith, 1987; Griffith & Smith, 2004, deCarvalho, 2001; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989; Vincent, 2000). Dehli (1988) writes about how local PTAs (parent teacher associations) in Ontario in the first half of the twentieth century made it possible for middle-class mothers to be directly influential in the schools of their children. Dehli’s historical work highlighted that this influence and the often hidden work of mothering is fundamental to the production and reproduction of middle-class education.

Lareau (1989/2000) notes that the interactions between families and schools are much more intensive in middle-class families than in working-class families, and argues that the intensive relationship coordinated by middle-class families with schools is one through which cultural capital is organized and invested on behalf of children, ensuring middle class futures. Lareau argues that the level of educational work possible in a school depends on the general level of background educational work contributed by homes in the area. Griffith and Smith (2005) make the argument that it is “not simply that middle-class mothering contributes to an individual child’s achievement” (p. 24). Rather, like Lareau, their emphasis is on how the supplementary educational and related work in the home delivered by women in a given community enables the school as a whole to function at a higher level than it can where those contributions are curtailed or absent. Griffith and Smith (2005) describe an “engine of inequality” (p. 127), interlocking the unpaid labour of middle-class women in the home and the
local practices of schools and they highlight mothers’ role in this social reproduction.

This argument follows Ann Manicom’s (1988) thesis that the complementary educational work of parents makes a significant difference to the level at which a school can operate. Her study shows that schools in relatively affluent areas can count on parents who are doing the background work that enables the school to meet, or even exceed, curriculum objectives. The teachers in the inner city schools where Manicom’s study was conducted could not rely on families to complement or reinforce their efforts. She observed that:

- teachers determined that they must spend more time on certain things, teaching children particular skills and habits before actually getting on with literacy. If children had trouble with scissors or glue, for example, or could not work in groups a listening station, the teaching of literacy was disrupted. (Manicom, 1988, p. 183)

Helping with homework would be considered complementary educational work.

Manicom’s (1988, 1995) studies have identified those differences in the teacher’s work that the presence or absence of mothers’ complementary educational work makes in the classroom.

Diane Reay makes use of Bourdieu’s theories to understand mothers’ involvement in their children’s education as sharply differentiated by social class (Reay, 2005, 2004, 1999, 1998, 1998b, 1998c). Hutchison (2006) has built on Reay’s work in her examination of mothers’ involvement with homework. Hutchison (2006), following the lead of other class-based analyses of homework (DeCarvalho, 2001; Dudley-Marling, 2001; Kralovec and Buell, 2000), argues that homework is a site of educational anxiety in most families, which acts to reinforce educational and social inequalities and underlines cultural differences. In her study she argues for an understanding of homework as a socio-culturally located practice, contextualized within a web of family and school relationships (p. 42). Similarly, Kralovec and Buell (2000) write:
Periodically over the last hundred years educators have tried to call attention to the ways in which homework assignments further handicap poor students. Homework may just be one of those schooling practices, like tracking, that in fact serve to sort students according to class and to magnify the class differences inherent in our society.

(p. 66)

**Mothering and ‘Doing Best’ in Education**

In this thesis I explore how it is that homework has come to be seen as part of ‘doing best’ in elementary schooling. In chapter 1, I argued that parental ‘involvement’ has been established as part of ‘doing best.’ However, as I have suggested, ‘parent’ is not a gender neutral term. Rather it is mothers who, for the most part, are doing the work required with elementary homework (Ball, 2003; Bullen, 2011; David et al., 1993; Deem, Brehony & Heath, 1995; Griffith & Smith, 1990a, 1990b, 2004; Hutchison, 2006; O’Brien, 2008; Reay, 1998, 2000; Vincent, 2000). Therefore I now want to explore the idea of ‘involvement’ and practices embedded within that term (such as homework) that are linked to mothering and the framing of the ‘doing best’ both in mothering itself as a caring practice, but also in relation to mothering and schooling. In this section I therefore examine the primary discursive framing of motherhood, some of the ways that feminism has engaged with motherhood, and some of the ways that feminist researchers attempt to destabilize notions of ‘naturalness’ in the work that has been attached to the gendered positioning of ‘mother’. Building from this literature, later in the thesis I make a theoretical connection between doing gender, doing mothering and doing homework as the basis for the implicit expectations and assumptions surrounding the gendered work of completing homework.

**Theorizing motherhood.** In my Masters of Education thesis (2006) I engaged with feminist theorizing of motherhood. Many of the feminist ideas that I work with in this thesis were first explored in my Master’s work. Grounding in that literature has been foundational for
my doctoral thesis work. Among the ideas that I wrestled with were notions of ‘maternal desire’ (De Marneffe, 2004), ‘maternal thinking’, embodiment and pleasure. I was interested in how feminists discussed these ideas (for example Chodorow, 1978; Di Quinzio, 1999; O’Reilly; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1995). Also prominent in my early literature review were theorizations of feminist scholars who viewed aspects of motherhood as limiting and potentially oppressive to women (Ball, 2009; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Friedan, 1970; Hays, 1996; O’Reilly, 2004b; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). This literature raised important questions and debates about societal structural constraints that mothers face. This theoretical base has been important as I question the constraints on women’s lives that increased recruitment into educational work brings.

Discourses of motherhood have been taken up in different ways among feminist scholars. For example there are those who challenge the social construction of what they refer to as the myth of the ‘good’ mother (O’Reilly, 2004b; Warner, 2005), and those who explore ideas around ‘essential’ mothering (Courtenay-Hall, 1998). The naturalized and normalized work of mothering has been investigated as moral work and moral responsibility (DeVault, 1991; Doucet, 2006). Again, this body of literature has contributed to my understanding of naturalized and normalized gendered work and the governmental assumptions that are made on these notions and has helped me to explore how this factors in to mothers feeling compelled to participate in educational work.

Another body of literature that has been foundational to the work that I’ve continued with in this thesis is feminist writing that engages with the ‘costs’ of mothering (Crittenden, 2001; Folbre, 1994, 2001; Waring, 1999), the gendered organization of market and family work (Williams, 2000; Wolf, 2001) and some of the potential effects on paid work choices once
becoming a mother (Belkin, 2003; Cossman, 2008). As I consider the effects of homework in Chapter 7, I draw upon this body of literature.

In their writing about mothering and schooling Griffith and Smith (1987, 2005) assert that the educational role of mothers is coordinated through a discourse of mothering that holds the absent mother responsible for her child’s behavior in the classroom. Powerful cultural discourses of mothering construct mothers as responsible for their children’s education (David, 1994; Dehli, 1988, 1994, 2004; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hutchison, 2007; Reay, 1995, 1998; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Mothering discourses are fundamental to the commitments that mothers, particularly middle-class mothers, make to educational work with and for their children (Dehli, 1988, 2004; Lareau, 2000; Reay; 1998, Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). According to Griffith and Smith (2005) “the discourse of mothering mobilizes the work, care and worries of mothers in relations to their children’s schooling” (p. 33). Their preferred conception “recognizes a mothering discourse as the creation of professionals, popularized in a media aimed systematically at women and designed to coordinate the mothering work done in the home and the work of educators in the public school system” (p. 35). Ball (2009) describes this as ‘intensive mothering’ or ‘total mothering’ – “the heavy investment of mother’s time, energy, money and emotional commitment into enhancing the child’s intellectual, physical, social and emotional development” (p. 207).

Schooling Work as Part of Mothering as Part of Household Work. There is a significant body of feminist literature that explores how household work gets subsumed in the gendered division of household labour and because of the attachments to love/caring/naturalness and the location (private realm), it is not seen as work (for example, Crittenden, 2001; Delphy, 1984; Eichler, 1985, 1991, 1997, 2005; Eichler & Albanese, 2007; Eichler, Albanese, Ferguson, Hyndman & Liu, 2010; Folbre, 2001; Fox, 1980; Luxton, 1997; Oakley, 1974; Waring, 1999). In
the early 1970s, an international campaign for “Wages for Housework” started to raise awareness of the importance and ubiquity of housework with the intent to drastically alter the conditions under which housework is performed (see Eichler 1980, pp. 133-139 for a summary and critique of this movement).

Household work, including mothering and mothering for schooling, resists being taken up as work. Unpaid household work is socially constructed as a “labour of love” (see Meg Luxton, 1980), “natural” and profoundly different from work in the money economy. One consequence of the construction of caring as “natural” for women is that care-work becomes invisible. DiQuinzio (1999) says that “when some aspect of human existence is theorized as natural, it is also understood as that which cannot and/or should not be changed. Essential motherhood represents women’s mothering as natural in this sense, determining it as inevitable, instinctive, and properly contained in its appropriate realm, the private sphere” (p. 10). As Eichler (2010) argues,

> given the nature of household work – most of which is unpaid and done for the sake of family, oneself, and friends, some of it is pleasurable - it is clear why many people have trouble seeing unpaid household work as work. (p. 48)

According to the scholars discussed here, women do a significantly higher amount of household work, including care-work associated with children’s schooling, and that this is seen as natural and normal.

Ferguson and Eichler (2010) explain,

> Although women are perceived to embody a “natural” capacity for caring, ironically, the notion of “naturalness” is itself a social construct. Caring—and the work that produces and flows from it—is, in fact, a social practice that is subject to gendered processes of learning and relearning. (p. 155)
Dorothy Smith conceptualizes maternal involvement in *education* as work (1987, 1998; Griffith & Smith, 2005). She argues that women’s unpaid work constitutes the “underside” of school restructuring and reform (1998, p. 131). Smith writes from the position that women’s mothering work is often taken for granted both by the women themselves and the academics who write about parental involvement in education. Reay (1998, 2005) and Griffith and Smith (2005) argue that there is no recognizable economy of women’s time as mothers. The mothering discourse presupposes that mothers’ time is indefinitely expandable and expendable. Hence, not having time is no excuse for failures to meet expectations that mothers should be available to care for, organize and manage members of their families. Indeed, as I will show, meeting such expectations is central to notions of being a ‘good mother’ and these notions feature prominently in my research and recur in the interviews I conducted.

My discussions with teachers and mothers confirm that schedules and ‘making time’ or ‘fitting in’ are not automatic; there is much work involved. I will show that schedule regularities, such as the beginning and ending of the school day for example, and ‘homework time’ are *produced* (and sometimes fail to be produced) primarily through the *work* of mothers. Yet, this is largely unrecognized as work. In the interviews conducted for this study it became apparent that homework, as work performed by women and as a regulator of their time, is unrecognized as such. Furthermore, the work that women do around homework disappears in the child’s success or failures. It is unrecognized as work because it is folded into what is expected of mothers around their children’s schooling – wrapped up into naturalized expectations of mothering and caring and household work. Though, I suggest that this goes largely unspoken.

I argue that it is this notion of the ‘naturalness’ of women performing caring work that is the basis of assumptions made by schools about mothers’ involvement. I propose that this ‘naturalness’ is a significant factor in what compels women to engage in involvement activity
such as homework and its framing as ‘doing best’. This is a central point of analysis in my research as I explore further how normalized and naturalized gendered caring work and responsibility for children’s learning become intertwined in practices of homework.

The feminist literature I have reviewed here is important for the work it does to *denaturalize* household work by making it visible. In a similar way, I want to expose the work that is being done around homework. I build upon the above literature to show how the obviousness and naturalness of the gender order governing these practices in turn shape how women come to govern themselves in their take-up of the subject positions that are produced through home-working.

Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) note the blending of pedagogy and mothering work. They argue that, as the home-school relationship boundary has shifted toward increased work expected of families, “the end result has been more complex relations between families and education, but with increased emphasis on the role of mothers as key educators, both at home and at school” (p. 33). Dehli (2004) adds to this by pointing out that “with the ‘involvement’ discourse, terms such as choice, empowerment and local democracy, efficiency and accountability mingle with notions of love, pedagogy, parenting, care and responsibility” (p. 57). This blending of efficiency and mothering, pedagogy and parenting, is an important thread in my research, for it is how I have come to understand ‘good mothering’ and ‘doing what is best for my children’. Seeing the blending of pedagogy and mothering work helps me to understand how education discourse plays a role in forming my conception of ‘good’ mothering and ‘doing best’.

**Addressing Gaps in Education Research**

Few education researchers have looked into the home or asked how the interactions between family members around homework are handled. Despite - or because of - ubiquitous official rhetoric emphasizing the importance of ‘good’ home-school relationships, and
contemporary policy moves to implement devolution in the governance of schooling, the investigation of the actualities of involvement in general and homework in particular remain under-researched. Specifically, there are few feminist accounts of homework which address both home and school contexts, There are no such studies of home and school relations on PEI. My study aims to fill this gap by building on existing feminist analyses of the role of mothers in their children’s education, through the microanalysis of the practice of homework.

When homework is considered from the perspective of families, with attention to class and gender, a very different picture emerges than what is visible in most of the homework research literature I have discussed so far. The literature I have reviewed suggests that rather than promoting educational achievement for all, the current parental involvement discourse, of which homework is one component, constitutes the imposition of a particular, class-based, parenting style and may lead to the increase rather than decrease of educational inequality. I do not foreground class in a conventional sociological sense (for example by explicitly recruiting participants representing different class locations), and my main interest is to examine how homework is working on and through mothers and teachers in ways that govern their conduct and subjectivities. However, I also speculate that, however unintentionally, mothers and teachers produce unequal gendered and classed effects through their participation in homework. I pay attention to subject positions that are made available and promoted through homework and examine some of its disciplinary effects. Some of the broader questions that my thesis brings to light have to do with power and participation. Like many of the authors whose work I have reviewed, I ask: Which parents are being involved, on whose terms and in what areas of school life is involvement invited and expected, and what are intended and actual outcomes for which students? Responding to these questions, I believe, can tell us something important about how social class is organized in relation to contemporary schooling.
My examination of elementary homework gives a specific example of mothers’ involvement, recognizing it as a gendered practice. I analyze the role of love and fear through an examination of how women are ‘doing’ homework and taking up particular subject positions and government technologies, revealing the larger political objectives being played out in everyday lives and relations of power. In the next chapter I discuss how I generate and mobilize a feminist ‘Foucauldian’ theoretical lens in order to conduct this analysis.
Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework: Feminist Governmentality

As discussed in Chapter 2, I view homework as a gendered educational practice that mobilizes arrangements for organizing and regulating the time and space, the activity, and the bodies of families and schools in particular ways. In this chapter I extend this argument to suggest that contemporary homework can be viewed as a practice that functions as a key mechanism of neoliberal governmentality. My aim in this thesis is not to prove or disprove whether homework is a ‘useful’ pedagogical tool. Although I am considering the specific practice of homework, I am also trying to understand something more general about the ways that we are governed in today’s society, particularly at the site of home-school relationships. One of my aims in this research, therefore, is to think about what we do and what we become when the rationalities of education shift and new technologies of schooling are introduced (Spencer, 2006).

My analytical lens – feminist governmentality - draws largely from feminist poststructural theory and from Michel Foucault’s notions of power/knowledge, discourse, practice, subjectivity and governmentality. I argue that homework is a site that makes visible how neoliberal government operates and how, in the case of homework, it operates in gendered ways. I trace some of the many ways that mothers and teachers position themselves within the changing context of neoliberalism and theorize the constitutive effects of neoliberalism, the constitution of the ‘good teacher’ and the ‘good mother’. Feminist governmentality allows me to highlight how neoliberal strategies of rule work in diffuse ways through teachers and mothers, encouraging them to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for particular performances that enact specific types of change.
In this chapter I outline key concepts that I will put to work in the analysis chapters, as I consider homework as a site of gendered neoliberal governance. I develop an argument that this form of governance operates through persuasion, incitement and engagement, rather than through explicit policies or domination. In the remaining chapters of this thesis I explore how homework targets and operates through women’s normative and moral identification with nurturing roles of teachers and mothers. By doing so, I explore how one of the main features of neoliberal forms of government is that it insinuates itself into the most intimate relations of everyday life.

My aim in this chapter is to begin to show that framing the ‘problem’ of homework through a feminist governmentality lens highlights, and therefore opens up to analysis, the apparently neutral means, terms and practices which come to play out in the lives of those involved in elementary homework.

**Combining Feminist Theory with Foucault**

I begin with attention to the feminist dimensions of my theoretical framework. Here I work to generate good concepts for understanding how it is that women are positioned as responsible for homework and how women negotiate this positioning.

The primary discursive construction of homework, often presented in the binary - does it or does it not boost achievement? - obscures many of the effects, unevenness and power relations generated by and through this practice. It leaves women, as mothers and teachers, out of the picture and fails to connect with the nuances, complexities and messiness of daily life and the concrete dilemmas and frustrations facing many mothers and teachers. My thinking about homework as a ‘problem’ and the assumptions of mothers’ work around homework were initially inspired by and situated within much of the feminist literature that I outlined in the Literature
Review Chapter. Yet, even with analyses of homework that have brought gender and class into the picture, there is space to think differently about this problem.

My interpretation of Foucault’s theoretical and conceptual ideas is informed by many sources. In addition to reading Foucault’s original writings (in particular 1977, 1978, 1980, 1991b), I rely on other scholars’ interpretations and extentions of his work (for example, Baez & Talburt, 2008; Cairns, 2011; Cruikshank, 1996; Dean, 1999; Dehli 2004, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Mills, 2003, 2004; Peters, Besley, Olssen, Maurer, & Weber, 2009; Popkewitz, 2003; Smith, 2010; Spencer, 2006). My analysis relies particularly on Foucault’s genealogical approach and his development of governmentality, and the elaboration by feminist scholars. I will discuss genealogy in the next chapter.

It was through feminist poststructuralism that I was first led to Foucault’s work on power. One of my initial concerns with elementary homework was about power relations present in the gendered assumption of the involvement required in its accomplishment. Foucault’s conceptualization of modern forms of power challenges the notion of power as something that one group possesses and uses to exercise power over other groups (Foucault, 1978). While Foucault did not claim that domination has disappeared – far from it – much of his work tries to understand forms of power that operate through (or as) knowledge, and forms of power that rely on the active participation of those who are its targets. One way to express this is to say that much of his work examined the ‘how,’ rather than the ‘why’ of power. Thus, his genealogical studies traced how power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions (Mills, 2003). Rather than viewing power only in a negative way, as constraining and repressing, Foucault (1978) argues that power is also productive, giving rise to new forms of behavior and new forms of identity. In The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 (1978) Foucault argues that power is
something which is performed; it should be seen as a verb, something that does something, something that circulates and is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. When understood as circulating in a web rather than as fixed positions in a binary relation, power is enacted by everyone rather than simply by those perceived to be wielding it. Foucault (1980) saw individuals as the vehicles of power, not its points of application. Mills’ clarification of this is helpful, as she suggests that “individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients or targets of power, but as the ‘place’ where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted” (2003, p. 35). Foucault famously stated that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). As I will discuss shortly, in the context of my study, this suggests a reconceptualization of power, and of the role of the individual in power relations.

Foucault’s analysis of power has been very influential, and fiercely debated, among feminist theorists. His emphasis on language and subjectivity, as well as the interconnectedness of power and resistance, is very compelling for many feminists (Brown, 2005; Cullum, 2000; Davies, 2000, 2005; Dehli, 1988, 1996a, 1996b, 2004, 2008; Gore, 1993; Larner, 2000; Lewis, 2000; Mills, 2004; Valverde, 2004 and Walkerdine & Lucey; 1989). In her book *Discourse*, Sara Mills (2004) explains that traditionally feminist theorists are generally concerned to analyze power relations and the way that women as individuals and as members of groups negotiate relations of power. She suggests that much feminist work has moved away from viewing women as simply a unified and oppressed group, as victims of male domination, and has tried to formulate analyses of power as it manifests itself and as it is resisted in the relations of everyday life by making use of concepts derived from Foucault.

As I will discuss in this chapter, and again in Chapter 4, the way that feminist post-structural theorists conceptualize discourse allows for this sense of the complexity of power
relations and their productive effects on subjectivity. In my study, it opens up ways of thinking about shifts in social relations and operations of power within home-school relations. Much of the feminist literature discussed in the previous chapter was framed within the binary construct of patriarchy/patriarchal power over powerless women and girls. This construct has always felt limiting for me as it places women in a passive position subordinate to an oppressive gender regime. I was looking for theoretical tools to assist me in thinking beyond such positions about choice and actions. Feminist poststructural theory and thinking along with Foucault offer helpful ways to think about the work that women are doing to sustain this educational practice, how we are drawn into participating and in what ways we may or may not be invested. This framework assists in making visible the patterns of power and powerlessness and the multiple and conflicting discourses through which gender is accomplished. Meyerson and Kolb (2000) describe what I take to be a feminist poststructuralist perspective on gender: “gender is not primarily about women, nor is it localized in discrimination practices; it is about the more general process of organizing itself. Gender is an axis of power, an organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge” (p. 563). I work with this concept throughout my thesis as I think about homework as a practice that draws upon and is governed through gendered norms and assumptions and in turn has potential gendered effects.

There are several approaches to feminist poststructuralism, but what they share is a concern with the ways language and discursive practices shape subjectivity, social processes and institutions. Feminist poststructural theory does not provide comfortable answers but instead continues to question, destabilize and unpack the very categories of our lives that we have come to understand as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’. As I outlined in Chapter 2 there has been much feminist writing and theorizing on how gender constructs naturalize particular activities for women, such
as carework and the practices associated with caring such as homework. This normalization or naturalization often renders the activities invisible and therefore contained in the private realm of love and caring, versus the public realm of work. I discussed how ‘doing’ motherhood is one of the major ways of ‘doing’ gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and that powerful discourses of motherhood construct mothers as responsible for their children’s education. Feminist poststructural theoretical ideas provide tools to think about how normalized and naturalized gendered caring work and responsibility become intertwined in practices of homework. Notions and feelings of what is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ incorporate a moral component and can be thought of as driven or directed by what can be conceptualized as desire. In later chapters I show that participation in homework is influenced by the desire to ‘do best’ in various ways by various actors. Bronwyn Davies (2000) discusses the ways in which poststructural frameworks shift our understanding of desire. She says, “fundamental to this shift is an understanding of selves as process, and of desire coming not from an essential core, but from the discursive practice through which selves are constituted” (p.15). But while Davies stresses the constitutive force of discourse, she is also concerned with the inclusion of embodied selves and the everyday in her analysis. This is an important vein of theorizing for my work and I will take this up further as I progress through the thesis examining the various discourses circulating around elementary homework, and the ways in which mothers (and teachers) are emotionally invested in, or resist, the subject-positions that these discourses provide.

**Discourse, the subject and subjectivity.** Taking up Foucault’s concept of discourse, Mills (2004) describes discourse as “something which produces something else - an utterance, a concept, an effect - rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analyzed in isolation” (p. 17). She explains that in terms of thinking about discourse as having effects, it is
important to consider the factors of truth, power and knowledge, since it is because of these elements that discourse has effects (see also Cairns, 2011; Cullum, 2000; Spencer, 2006; Valverde, 1994, 2004). Mills suggests that a discursive structure generates a systematicity (p. 17) of ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving, giving an example of the discourse of femininity, explaining that it organizes types of clothes, bodily stances and ways of thinking about oneself in gendered ways. In my reading, I found this example to be helpful, perhaps because of its familiarity, an example I can readily relate to. Foucault suggests that constitution of discourses operates through external and internal mechanisms, which keep certain discourses in existence. We speak and act within the bounds of what discourses map out for us, discursive limitations are sanctioned by institutions such as schools, the media and the labour market. Foucault (1977, 1978, 1994a) insisted that the subject should be thought of as constituted rather than taken as a given and his interest in the practices constituting that subject (discursive, social and so on) was much broader than previous theorizations. He argued that through discourse, certain practices, techniques, or modes of power can operate on or can be operated by the subject.

The application and use of the concept of discourse in literature utilizing feminist and Foucauldian concepts are helpful for thinking about the various circulating, overlapping and competing discourses present at the site of home-school relations, and the practice of homework specifically – discourses of parental involvement, homework, mothering, childhood, education reform, feminism - to name some of them. In this thesis I consider how discourses work to enable elementary homework, generate particular subject positions and also how the practice of homework is vital to reproducing discursive arrangements between families and schools.
Feminist theory has significantly modified the notion of what might be called Foucauldian discourse by setting it more clearly in its social context, by linking it explicitly to gender, and by examining the possibilities of negotiating with, within and through these discursive structures. The notion of discourse has enabled feminists to construct scenarios for social change and subject positions for women as agents, versus the passive positioning that theorizations of patriarchy posit (Mills, 2004, p. 78). Dorothy Smith’s (1990) work has made a significant contribution to feminist theorizing of discourse. She proposes a relational view that is attentive to what individual subjects do within and through discursive structures, rather than assume that discourses force us to behave in certain ways. She sees discourse less as something to which one is subjected than as a vehicle which is used by subjects to work out interpersonal relationships, complying with certain elements and actively opposing others. Similarly, McLeod and Yates (2006) critique theoretical accounts that posit individuals as the mere outcomes or effects of discourse. They argue that the positions and narratives made available in discourse are actively negotiated in relation to life histories, material realities and personal investments as subjectivities are fashioned (see also Davies, 2003; Pomerantz, 2008). A key idea here is that through discourse, certain practices, techniques, or modes of power can operate on or can be operated by the subject. Fundamental to this is an understanding of selves as process, subjection by and through discourse but that we are also in turn constitutive of ourselves and of the social world. Davies (2000) says, “given the centrality of choice and agency to the desire for social change in feminist practice, poststructuralist theorizing is of little use to feminists if it cannot generate good understanding of change” (p. 15). The work of feminist poststructural theorists such as Davies (2000, 2005), Weedon (1987) and Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) among others, shows how poststructuralist theorizing can be translated into a politics of action (Davies, 2000).
Davies (2000) explores subjectivity in her writing about desire and multiple readings of ourselves. She develops her view of subjectivity from poststructural understandings of personhood where, while we embody our subjectivity, it may be possible to take up multiple subject positions. She argues that it is important to emphasize the individual’s ability to ‘take up’ or to negotiate among the multiple and complex subject positions in order to assume a particular position within social relations. I draw upon this theoretical work to help me to think about what subject positions are made available for mothers and how they are being constructed or produced from ‘involvement’ and homework discourses. The ideas I have discussed here help me to think about how some subject positions are normalized and produced as ‘good’ and ‘ethical’ and while other subject positions are targets for surveillance and sanction. Davies’ writing is especially helpful for understanding of how it is that we can occupy seemingly contradictory roles, and how we are moved by contradictory desires. Fundamental to this shift in understanding ‘self’ and desire is an understanding of selves as process, and of desire coming not from an essential core, but from the discursive practices through which selves are constituted. Davies (2000, 2005) has helped me work with the idea that what is understood as possible and desirable is shaped by the persistent, yet seemingly benign, regulatory practices of government through public institutions and through the market as consumers, for example, of all that I am told I need to do and have for my children and family if I am to be a ‘good mother’.

In the previous chapter, I pointed to a body of literature that raises questions of power and participation in education. Much of the social reproduction literature in education has been framed through Marxist or neo-Marxist concepts. Feminist poststructural theory complicates social reproduction theory by suggesting first that a range of subject positions are made available through schooling, but that the ‘take up’ of available subject positions is not equally available to
all. Chris Weedon (1987), along with other feminist poststructuralists (Butler, 1990; Davies, 2000; Scott, 1992), argues that we can extend our readings of subjects’ accounts with the following idea:

How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to material social relations under which we live and which structures our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, and our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent (p. 26).

This is an important theoretical idea for me to work with in thinking about how some mothers are able to take up the desired subjectivities made available in involvement and homework discourses while others are marginalized and subject to disciplinary measures.

**Power/knowledge relations.** In Foucault’s work, discourse is enmeshed in discussions of power, knowledge and truth. Discourses define and organize what counts as truth, competing with and discounting alternate discourses. Foucault’s approach to analysis of modern forms of power offers insight into how the production of knowledge is complexly tied to power, bodies, discourse and the subject. He suggested that one of the key features of modern power is that it is imbricated with knowledge, such that knowledge is enabled through power, and power-regimes rely on knowledge. Foucault describes this connection as power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980). This tight relation has been counterintuitive to me, as the more vernacular linking of power and knowledge is that “knowledge is power” in the sense that knowledge can offer access to power, or that power can suppress knowledge. Foucault’s analysis is different, suggesting that the power to produce knowledge defines what we consider to be true. As I will expand on below, what we consider to be true gets circulated and repeated in discourse consequently shaping subjectivities and conduct. For example, ‘parent’, or more specifically the ‘good parent’ in relation to
schooling, comes to be defined as a knowable subject with expectations of conduct. I will take up these ideas in more detail in Chapter five where I consider what knowledges are produced in local discourses of parental involvement, the power relations inherent in making this discourse dominant, and not another, and what effects this particular power/knowledge nexus has in everyday life.

Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge and poststructural feminism emphasize that the “truth” is constantly under negotiation through various competing discourses. One of Foucault’s concerns is not whether a particular discourse is ‘true’, but rather how one discourse becomes accepted as truthful. In his view, the appearance, assertion and circulation of true discourse are contested and political, based on competing expert knowledges defining, contesting and sanctioning what comes to count as true, normal and natural. I am interested in untangling some of the apparent truths surrounding homework – the ‘truths’ generated about parental involvement and the ‘naturalness’ of the work that women do in relation to their children’s’ schooling.

Liselott Aarsand (2011) works with Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge in her work with parents, pedagogicalization and media conceptualized as a lifelong learning practice. She writes,

What counts as valid knowledge and activities highlights some subject positions while others are either never referred to, or are referred to in such a way that correction or discipline is implied, this can be discussed in terms of norms and power relations … power and knowledge are intertwined, that is, power draws upon knowledge about the object it operates on at the same time as power defines what is considered to be legitimate knowledge …. expectations define and establish patterns of preferred actions. These are discursively produced and govern people’s ways of making sense, speaking and acting
The play of prescriptions distributes and evaluates what is ‘desirable’ and ‘good’ versus what is ‘unacceptable’ or even ‘prohibited’ (Foucault 1982b, 1974/1991, 1997a). (p. 437)

Applying the concept of power/knowledge to my own work, construction of the ‘good’ involved parent is important to consider because ‘the parent’ is framed as a central category of reform. As Dehli (1996a) suggests, the parent has emerged as “an ascendant political subject in decentralized forms of school governance, as a consumer in the educational marketplace, and as a resource whose unpaid labour is pivotal to the educational enterprise” (p. 373). In the chapters that follow I work with the idea that ‘the parent’ is produced as an effect of power and knowledge, a population to be known and governed. I consider the production and operation of what Foucault calls ‘regimes of truth’ that both normalize and naturalize ‘the parent’ as subject in and object of contemporary educational reforms. These ideas also help me to consider patterns of power/knowledge relations at the home-school site. Within home-school relations the teacher is often framed as the expert, the one who knows and the parent is positioned as the one who needs to know. As I consider the role that homework plays in these power/knowledge relations I follow along with Foucault’s thinking in looking for power in how people effect knowledge to intervene in social affairs (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998).

**Governmentality**

As O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) outline, there has been a significant line of writing responding to the publication of Michel Foucault’s essay ‘On Governmentality’ (1979/1991b), “an influential body of thinking about government as a decentred process” (p. 501). The term governmentality suggests an approach to studies of contemporary forms of power that attends to the linking together of techniques of governing and rationalities - especially expert
knowledge – that make government thinkable and doable. The notion of governmentality displays power as a relational and decentralized phenomenon in modern society (Foucault, 1991, 1997b; cited in Aarsand, 2011, p. 438). The operation of power shapes the possible actions of different subjects. Foucault links power to the idea of governmentality, thinking not of state institutions but of how conduct is directed. He explains that “to govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action for others” (2003c, p. 138). That possible field of action is delimited through discourse, operating throughout the social body, indirectly and at a distance, to organize and enable the regulation of people and territories in terms of categories such as population, consumer, citizen and parent (Dehli, 2004; Foucault, 1991a; Lewis, 2000).

Foucault’s (1991a) definition of governmentality envisioned what constitutes government as:

a power/knowledge assembly, formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. (p. 102).

Foucault also defines governmentality as the “conduct of conduct” (Gordon, 1991, p. 48). The term also signifies the modern importance of governing beyond the state and the critical role of mentality in governing. Governmentality moves away from sovereign and state centered notions of political power and features state formation of subjects rather than state control of subjects. I concur with Brown’s (2005) statement:

what strikes me as so useful about Foucault’s notion of governmentality is precisely that it apprehends the extent to which rationality governs without recourse to overt rule, or
more precisely, the manner in which it governs through norms and rules, rather than rule.

(p. 145)

The concern of governmentality studies is to trace the terms, conditions and effects of emerging forms of government and self-government in contemporary society. I am interested in governmentality studies because they direct us toward the conditions that shape thinking and doing, the terms through which we come to know ourselves as particular kinds of subjects, and because they are interested in how governing works not only ‘on’ but ‘through’ individuals. One strand of governmentality studies that is very important for my work is concerned with the privatization of social problems and the proliferation of practices that recruit and compel individuals into practices of self-management and self-improvement.

A governmentality lens combined with feminist theory – what I will call feminist governmentality - helps me to critically examine practices surrounding homework and in particular, how those practices impact women. These theoretical ideas help me to trace some of the many ways that mothers and teachers position themselves within the changing context of neoliberalism and helps me to theorize the constitutive effects of neoliberalism, the constitution of the ‘good teacher’ and the ‘good mother’. Gendered neoliberal governance operates through persuasion, incitement and engagement, rather than through explicit policies or domination (Brown, 2005). This idea is very important to the arguments I develop in this thesis. I will elaborate on my take up of neoliberalism, neoliberal governance and subjectivity and how neoliberal governance operates in gendered ways in the next section and in further chapters. Framing the ‘problem’ of homework through a feminist governmentality lens highlights, and therefore opens up, the apparently neutral means, terms and practices which come to play out in the lives of those involved in elementary homework.
Technologies of power. Dean (1999) suggests that technologies work as the concrete and specific means of governmentality acting to shape moral and political conduct. Understanding what makes contemporary government possible requires looking at how the programs of a political center are linked to and affected in activities and practices at distant sites (Miller and Rose, 1993). Technologies of government are “the wide range of calculations, procedures and mechanisms of government” (Miller, 1994, p. 317). Technologies effect and are the effects of “regimes of practices” (Foucault, 1991b, p. 75). They are the organized practices and arrangements through which we govern and transform others and ourselves. Technologies, in this sense, may include legal and policy documents, books of account, educational curricula and examinations, statistical information and demographic reports, and the particular or prescribed ways in which these tools are used and practiced (Spencer, 2006). Modern government works through routine administration of our lives – in schools, families and other institutions operating at a distance (Rose, 1999).

I suggest that homework can be viewed as an example of a technology of government operating at a distance. The ‘friendly invitations’ from schools to parents seeking involvement and participation in homework are ‘governmental’ in that they seek to shape the behavior and dispositions of individuals – to govern their conduct (Foucault, 1991b; Rose, 1996). The various technologies of homework include texts, documents, statements, newsletters and daily communication and record keeping around homework. They include the ways in which such texts are organized and made operable: instructions/directives on carrying out homework, tips on ‘how to help your child with homework’, ‘homework without tears’ workshops. Technologies would also include administrative and curricular practices and processes effected by homework. They include various specific conducts and dispositions (i.e., technologies of power): organizing,
checking, following up. The technologies of homework are also of performance and discipline: staying ‘on task’, getting the homework done, parent being present and acting as a ‘good’ parent should in respect to getting the task done, self-evaluation, goal setting, decision making. Viewed as the ‘microphysics of power’, this array of interdependent technologies surrounding homework, are numerous and elaborate yet, at the same time, implicated in the mundane day-to-day practices of daily school and home life. These technologies enable the operationalization of homework.

Through technologies (such as those surrounding homework) governmentality works “at the micro level of the individual, in the body, in individualizing the particular dimensions of normality, as well as across populations” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 23). Technologies constitute “regimes of subjectification” (Rose, 1999, p. 43) for the “conduct of conduct” (Gordon, 1991, p. 2), therefore operating as “regimes of government” (Dean, 1999, p. 18). One of the defining characteristics of Foucault’s conception of governmentality is the notion that techniques of governing work through and upon the individual and her thoughts and actions, thus constituting the individual as an object of knowledge and as a subject enabled to conduct her/himself in predictable and recognizable ways (Foucault, 1980). I work with and develop these ideas through this thesis as I show homework working both on and through mothers and teachers. Foucault (2003) explains the technologies of the self as techniques:

which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. (p. 146)
The theoretical concept of technologies of the self can be used to think about how individual practices are drawn into the service of “collective” interests. Applied to my area of interest, these ideas help me to think about how mothers’ and teachers’ work is recruited to meet governmental (school) objectives. Working with the notion of gendered neoliberal governmentality, I suggest that recruitment and governance is carried out in gendered ways. As I said earlier, one strand of governmentality studies that is useful to my work is concerned with the privatization of social problems and the proliferation of practices that recruit and compel individuals into practices of self-management and self-improvement (Cruikshank, 1996, 1999).

Nikolas Rose (1999) draws on Foucault’s work on governmentality to consider how subjects are compelled to take up particular practices in order to prove themselves to be responsible citizens (see also Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006). He points out that an important feature of neoliberalism as a form of government is its capacity to reach into our very subjectivities (Rose, 1996, 1999) and desires (see also Davies, 2000). Wendy Brown (2005) adds to this, suggesting that neoliberal governance often works in gendered ways. Following this thinking, I view the ‘invitations’ to participate in homework not as heavy handed – homework is not written in strict policy, but rather it is represented as responsible, desirable practice, discursively framed as good parenting with a strong moral imperative. Mothers and teachers come to work on themselves to become the mothers and teachers who get this educational work done – to be ‘good’ teachers and mothers, and to conform with expected ways of ‘doing’ gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As Dehli (2004) explains:

Governmental power, as conduct and self-conduct, is integral to, and constitutive of, the ways we are known and identified by others, and the ways we come to know and identify
ourselves as particular kinds of individuals with memberships in, and affiliations to, particular groups, be they families, communities, religions, or nations. (p. 55)

Although technologies operate as a distinctive feature of government, they also complement the programmatic aspect of government by rendering its abstract rationalities into concrete forms and material practices and, therefore, enabling its operation (Miller & Rose, 1993, p. 317). Next I consider what might be considered the abstract rationality of neoliberalism.

**Neoliberal Governmentality and the Neoliberal Subject**

Neoliberalism emerged in the mid-20th century as a defense of capitalism and in opposition to socialism and was constructed upon the principles of classical 18th and 19th century liberalism. Some analysts (Brodie, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Luxton & Braedley, 2010) have pointed to the penetrating aspects of neoliberal policies which have brought the logic of the market to bear on seemingly every facet of social life, including education (Hill & Kumar, 2009). Many scholars view this as the primary difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism has been variously described as an ideology, a project, a logic of governance and a rationality. I follow Larner’s (2000) position that neoliberalism is both a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals ‘from a distance’. Larner (2000) points to literature that she refers to as neo-Foucauldian (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999) saying, “this literature makes a useful distinction between government and governance, and argues that while neoliberalism may mean less government, it does not follow that there is less governance” (p. 11). I work with the understanding that neoliberalism refers to a historically specific shift in economic and socio-political theory favoring a transfer of economic control from the public to the private sector. Brown (2005) helpfully distinguishes between the
terms neoliberalism and neo-conservatism, explaining that the first functions as a political rationality, while the latter remains an ideology. She says: “neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire” (p. 39). Brown considers neoliberalism as a rationality emerging as governmentality, a mode of governance “encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social” (p. 37).

Building on the work of these authors already mentioned, I will now turn to outline some of the features of neoliberalism that I consider in this thesis. Here I use Peters (2009) as a guideline. In his introductory chapter to the edited collection *Governmentality Studies in Education*, he describes twelve characteristics of neoliberalism (p. xxxii). The features that I work with are: 1. The relation between government and self-government: neoliberalism requires that individuals be free, autonomous and self-governing in order to govern; there is a ‘responsibilisation’ of individuals as moral agents and an all-embracing redescription of the social as a form of the economic. 2. ‘Government at a distance’: suggesting promotion of a new relationship between government and knowledge, developed through relations of forms of expertise. 3. Replacement of ‘community’ for ‘the social’: the decentralization, ‘devolution’ and delegation of power/authority/responsibility from the center to the region, the local institution, the ‘community’ and the encouragement of the informal voluntary sector. 4. The development of an ‘enterprise society’, the marketization of education and promotion of a curriculum of competition and enterprise.

According to Gordon (1991) governmental forms of power characteristic of neoliberalism work by (more or less) indirectly shaping general conditions and capacities for conduct,
particularly individuals’ exercise of freedom, self-reflection and self-improvement. Dehli (2008; citing Foucault, 1990; Hall, 1996; Rose, 1996), explains that in this account “freedom is not an essential capacity of human subjectivity standing in opposition to power. (rather) freedom and agency are simultaneously the ‘condition of possibility’ of power and its ‘effects’” (p. 145).

Miller and Rose (1993) describe the ‘making up of citizens’ capable of bearing a kind of regulated freedom and who align themselves with a particular set of community values, beliefs and commitments.

Rose (1996) describes this new reach as “governing through community”, explaining that as the state retreats from its social obligations, there is a proliferation of new techniques to remake “the imagined territory” (p. 331) of the social and citizen subjects. Rose goes on to explain that this new form of governing power is not objectifying, rather it is subjectifying because it constructs individuals who are capable of “choice” and “action”. Aarsand (2011) extends these ideas to suggest that “neoliberal governmentality, and the governable subject, emphasizes the idea of individual autonomy and the claims for making choices (and that) choosing from alternatives is not optional; rather it is something we are obliged to do” (p. 438). Referring back to Peters (2009) above, within the rationality of neoliberalism, this is what ‘responsibilised’ individuals do.

Through this approach we can see how space for expert advice is constructed and mobilized through homework and home-school relations,. Despite rhetoric around home-school partnership, teachers are positioned as those with expert knowledge, in addition to other expert sources such as ‘how to help your child with homework’ which give advice and make recommendations upon which parents are expected to act. As Aarsand says, “this then positions subjects as active; we are expected to always compare and evaluate ourselves to others, and to
work constantly on improvement” (p. 439). There is an element of moralization embedded in these ideas (Cruikshank, 1996; Dehli, 2004; Valverde, 2004), where individuals are expected to make the morally ‘right’ choice and is expected to bear responsibility for these choices. Thus as Brown (2005) suggests, neoliberal subjects are controlled through their freedom in part because of neoliberalism’s moralization of the consequences of this freedom.

Self-governance, self-improvement, individualization and responsibilization are features or characteristics of neoliberalism. A governing technique familiar in formal education can also be noticed in other settings, specifically pedagogy (Popkewitz, 2003). Pedagogicalisation has been discussed as a concept that suggests “actors are expected to arrange and behave in accordance with formal learning settings” (Aarsand, 2011, p. 439). Ball (2009) writes about ‘the totally pedagogised society’ in his discussion about lifelong learning and subjectivity. Governmental strategies focusing on pedagogic programs of development and capacity building are often associated with new forms of governmentality (Newman, 2010). Jessica Pykett (2010) also considers the ‘pedagogical state’ as a new form of governmentality and the focus on “citizens as the objects of pedagogy” (p. 712). These theoretical ideas are important for me to consider in my work as I think about the pedagogicalization of home that the practice of elementary homework encourages. I consider this specifically in relation to a text called The Student Agenda.

Making use of feminist governmentality as an analytic concept makes it possible for me to trace neoliberal restructuring as a form of educational change, or reform, that draws on and mobilizes the capacities of teachers and mothers as living resources to be managed in order to achieve state determined goals, such as boosting achievement levels and ultimately securing provincial and national economic performance. I consider homework as a practice, emerging
from rationalities of neoliberalism, acting in multiple ways as a technology of power/government. My study focuses on the particular site of home/school where, I argue, the freedom and obligation to be engaged are manifest through homework. Viewing homework through a conceptual lens informed by feminist questions and studies of governmentality allows me to see neoliberal strategies of rule as working through practices such as homework, encouraging mothers and teachers to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for particular performances that enact specific types of change.

**Critique/limits of governmentality.** A primary critique of governmentality as an analytic concept is that it tends to ignore the unequal and impositional effects of contemporary government (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997). Another critique is that governmentality studies rarely incorporate key concepts from critical race and feminist theory. Wendy Larner (2000) argues that governmentality perspectives ought to be modified through feminist and critical race analyses. Making use of Larner’s argument, Dehli (2004) explains that this is important to her work “both because these perspectives ‘remember’ the gendered and racialized targets and content of neoliberal power, and pay attention to how struggles in terms of class, gender and race are integral to neoliberal forms of power” (p. 59).

In this thesis I bring governmentality studies into conversation with feminist perspectives, and vice versa, in order to pay attention to the gendered organization and effects of the practice of homework. Foucault’s exclusion of gender analysis has been discussed at length in studies of Foucault’s use-value for feminism (Sawicki, 1991). A feminist re-working of Foucault’s notion of governmentality can help formulate questions and think about the ways that mothers are positioned as responsible for governing their children’s education, to attend to how traditional gender divisions of labour, notions of ‘naturalness’ and care all factor into the
the assumption that mothers will do what homework demands. Feminist theorists have provided specific tools for thinking about gendered labour at home, the mobilization of maternal love for pedagogy and the recruitment of women into government and restructuring. It is feminist poststructuralism and feminists taking up Foucault’s ideas that have furthered my thinking about links between discourse, subjectivity, power and how we are both governed and come to govern ourselves.

As I aim to explore effects of neoliberal discourses on women’s everyday lives, it is important to note that I share the critical perspective of a number of feminist poststructural theorists (Cairns, 2011; Dehli, 2004; Smith, 2010) who also explore neoliberal governmentality and everyday life, that the discourses of neoliberalism are never all-transforming, rather, they merely add to the complex and frequently contradictory discourses through which (in the case of my area of research) teachers and mothers are constituted every moment, everyday.

Engagement with feminist perspectives combined with Foucault’s governmentality is helpful to develop critique and to locate points of resistance. As O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) point out, “despite the clear potential for linking the governmentality approach to a critical politics, by and large it has not been realized” (p. 503). The addition of feminist perspective to a governmentality theoretical framework assists in keeping the ‘messy actualities’ (O’Malley et al., 1997, p. 504) of governance at the forefront, reinserting social relations into analyses of governance and avoiding what O’Malley et al. (1997) describe as “ritualized and repetitive accounts of ‘governing’ in increasingly diverse contexts” (p. 514).

**Influential Studies**

Several studies have mobilized governmentality as an analytic concept to examine parenting (e.g. Aarsand, 2011; Baez and Talburt, 2008; Dehli, 2004; McGowan, 2005; Millei and
Lee, 2007; Moqvist, 2003; Popkewitz, 2003; Rose, 1999). Here I briefly outline two studies that have been particularly influential to my research.

Similar to much of the work that Kari Dehli has done (1988, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2004, 2008), I want to explore how power, knowledge and subjectivity are being contested, reorganized and re-articulated in the interface between schools, families, government and civil society. Her research has been very influential to my understanding of the concept of governmentality and in many ways I utilize her work as a springboard for my own. Dehli (2004), drawing upon Popkewitz (2003), puts forth the argument that as a form of governmentality, parental involvement operates more by way of invitation and incitement, rather than by coercion and discipline and that ‘involvement’ mobilizes and regulates the conduct of parents by inviting them to monitor and assess, to reflect and calculate, and to act responsibly and ethically in relation to children. These ideas are important in the ways I analyze homework as a site of gendered neoliberal governance. Dehli goes on to suggest that ‘involvement’ operates in a number of quite different and not always consistent ways across the sites of the school, the community, the family and the individual and that ‘incitements’ to active participation are encountered in a number of sites. I suggest that homework is one of these sites of incitement. With Dehli and others I argue that governmentality as an analytic tool assists in paying attention to the moralizing and normalizing dimensions and effects in calls for parental involvement. In addition, governmentality assists in critically analyzing policies which seek to mobilize people’s sense of care, anxiety and responsibility for children and their success and achievement at school. Parental involvement polices are integral to, and are produced as effects of neoliberal forms of governance that operate through and with ‘the parent’ as their privileged subject, while conceiving of ‘parents’ as a population to be known and managed. Taking note of the feminine
en-gendering at work in involvement policies, Dehli asks, “if the school is one site where forms and terms of participation are changing, what might the new-found interest in the resources and citizenship capacities of parents mean for women in their role as mothers?” (p. 62). One of the objectives in my research is to take this question up and ask how a particular involvement practice – homework – is affecting mothers.

Baez and Talburt’s (2008) investigation and writing about a series of “how-to” pamphlets published by the U.S. Department of Education also mobilize governmentality as an analytic concept, however their use of ‘parent’ is gender neutral. Their analysis of *The Helping Your Child Series*, and particularly the pamphlet titled *The Multiple Technologies of Homework*, is relevant to my study. Baez and Talburt argue that homework “is not simply an activity for furthering curricular objectives, it is a technique for creating independent and responsible future citizens, a venue for governing the behavior of parents - a political technology in the art of governing” (p. 32). They go on to say that “the assignment of homework … can be redirected to other political objectives related less to the child’s development and more to the development of parental expertise and empowerment” (p. 32). Baez and Talburt claim that homework serves a number of political functions: a civic function (involves parents in their children’s school), a disciplinary function (creates self-responsible citizens), and a bureaucratic function (makes communication between parents and school officials more effective). These functions, they say, coalesce to constitute homework as a governmental technology.

I, too, view increased elementary homework as a governmental technology; one, among other, neoliberal practices situated in discourses of ‘reform’ that rely on the construction and recruitment of a particular neoliberal self-governing subject. Paying close attention to the practices surrounding homework can reveal what Foucault called the ‘art of government’ (Dean,
1999). The creation of continuity between ideals of the state and the actions of citizens can be made evident by paying attention to ‘everyday practices’ – the mundane, the technical and the practical (following Rose, 1999). Attention to practices reflect how minor shifts in conduct are objects of governmental rationalities, for it is these shifts that are linked up with larger political objectives of creating neoliberal subjects (Baez & Talburt, 2008).

As I shift into the next chapter, where I discuss in more detail the methodology and methods made available through the theoretical frameworks of Foucault’s governmentality and feminist poststructural theory, I address how I went about ‘paying attention’ to the practices surrounding homework.
Chapter 4 – Methods and Methodology

Thus far I have outlined key theoretical and conceptual ideas in addition to areas of literature that have helped me to frame questions and formulate my research project. My thesis is a study of governmentality that has as its main concern an examination of how a particular practice, homework, has come to produce certain conditions of governing at a ‘moment’ in the history of education in Prince Edward Island. Dean (1999) explains, “an analytics of government examines the conditions under which regimes of practice come into being, are maintained and transformed” (p. 21).

In this chapter I will outline how I utilize and adapt, with feminist interpretations, some of Foucault’s conceptual tools and mobilize them in my own project. My work is situated within the field of critical education research and I take up Foucault’s (1974/1991c) challenge, or his invitation, to use his strategies and techniques as a set of critical analytic tools for examining social problems in any field of inquiry.

A Feminist Study of Governmentality

I work with the understanding that governmentality is an approach to studies of contemporary forms of power that attends to the linking together of governing and rationalities that make government thinkable and doable. I take up neoliberalism as a political discourse and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance. Because I set out to examine a practice affecting women in particular, I combine my governmentality lens with feminist analysis which I have termed gendered neoliberal governmentality. An important concept I take up from feminist poststructural theory is that of the discursive constitution of subjectivity and connections with desire. Also very important is the strategy of questioning and destabilizing what we understand to be ‘normal’ or ‘natural’.
My research is looking at how the work of homework is organized, and what is it doing when it gets into the home. I am looking at practices rather than populations. This goes against the grain of most research in education which is fairly positivist and aimed at producing evidence (evidence-based research). My study also differs from much education research in that it takes up the perspective of women’s work as mothers in the family. My question is: what is homework doing and what are some of the effects it has on the people who interact with it on a day-to-day basis? To best approach this, most broadly, I turn to qualitative research methodology and methods, and more specifically I take up Foucault’s genealogical approach combined with feminist poststructuralist research methods. My research is based on in-depth interviews with mothers and teachers and document analysis. The questions I formulated, based on my interpretation of a feminist genealogical approach, have come from a theoretical grounding that necessitated a qualitative approach. Mason (2002) explains:

> qualitative research allows for the exploration of a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses and relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate. (p. 1)

Qualitative methodologies factor richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity into analyses and explanations. Because I aim to grasp what is happening in the everyday practice of homework, context is of utmost importance to my research.

As I explained in the previous chapter, mothers have been left out of homework research for the most part, while the literature strongly indicates that it is a gendered practice. Making women’s work visible is important to me and part of what I take up to be feminist research.
To do this, I must work with tools to help pull out gendered dimensions and effects of homework. Dehli (1996a) discusses the importance of highlighting feminist perspectives and developing feminist research methods in her work. She points to Weiner (1994) and Brodie (1996) who suggest that “the ways in which education reforms both invoke assumptions about sexual differences and target women, require analyses that can tease out their gendered dimensions and effects” (cited by Dehli, 1996a, p. 370). I have been drawn to scholars such as Bronwyn Davies (2000), Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990) and Kari Dehli (2004, 2008) who anchor their examinations of theory and policy with references to experiences and texts from everyday life. I concur with Smith’s (1999) suggestion that the feminist sociologist must refuse to put aside her experience and must make her bodily experience and activity a ‘starting point’ for inquiry and I agree with DeVault’s (1999) primary rationale for developing and using feminist research methods, which she describes as

research aiming to bring women in, to do the work of excavation, find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, to reveal both the diversity of actual women’s lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible. (p. 30)

With a key interest in the operation and effects of power/knowledge in educational practices in the home-school relationship and the social practices within both institutions, my study makes use of some of Foucault’s genealogical strategies for inquiry. However, I also take into consideration my feminist standpoint and incorporate feminist methodologies.

**Genealogy**

As I began to analyze my own experiences with homework in light of the reading I was doing, I came to ask myself what turns out to be a fundamental genealogical question: *What is going on here?* The feminist literature at the intersection of mothering and schooling informed
me that it wasn’t just me experiencing this assumption of participation. I also noticed a significant paradox surrounding elementary homework. The research literature suggests that at the elementary level, there are few positive effects in terms of academic achievement and that there is little actual policy. Rather, homework is operating on guidelines and implicit expectation. And yet, looking to my own experience, I felt compelled to participate. While I have discussed this in Chapter 1, the paradoxes present are important here as a description of my starting point with genealogy. This is the problematic I began with and the ‘truth’ that I wanted to unsettle.

In working to determine the theoretical and methodological framework for my research, I was drawn to genealogy as a conceptual and analytical tool because of the way that it isolates the contingent power relations, which make it possible for particular assertions to operate as truths. This allowed me to think about the various discourses that are circulating around homework and the home-school relationship and to think about and question the power relations at work in the assertions that homework is a ‘good thing’ and that parents will help in its accomplishment. I was interested in how this assertion was being mobilized and wanted to think about what else needed to be in place for it to operate. I understand genealogy to be a conceptual and analytical tool and an approach to ‘doing’ research. I was particularly drawn to a set of tools that could help me unsettle taken-for-granted truths, for helping me understand ‘what is going on here?’ Popkewitz and Brennan (1998) say that “a typical objective of genealogy is to problematize commonplace assumptions, to make the familiar strange” (p. 39).

Foucault (1984) adopted the term ‘genealogy’ to describe his later scholarship. Mills (2003) explains the transition in Foucault’s work from that he termed as ‘archaeology’ to what he called ‘genealogy’ as a shift from “the analysis of impersonal, autonomous discourse to one
focused on the workings of power” (p. 24). She emphasizes that Foucault’s concern with
genealogical analysis is not to focus on an ‘analytics of truth’, rather, his concern is with an
‘ontology of ourselves’. Citing Foucault (1988, p. 95) she interprets what he means by ‘ontology
of ourselves’: “to turn that analytic gaze to the condition under which we, as individuals, exist
and what causes us to exist the way we do” (p. 25). This idea resonates with me, because as I laid
out earlier, one of the goals of my research is to carry out an exploration of who we are and what
we become in shifting forms of governance, such as education reform as expressed in
neoliberalism.

In addressing the question ‘what is genealogy?’ Tamboukou (1999) describes genealogy
in the following way:

genealogy is concerned with the processes, procedures and apparatuses by which truth
and knowledge are produced, in what Foucault calls the discursive regime of the modern
era. Instead of asking in which kinds of discourse we are entitled to believe, Foucault’s
genealogies pose the question of which kinds of practices tied to which kinds of external
conditions determine the different knowledges in which we ourselves figure (p. 202).

It is important to note that Foucault’s genealogies were based on textual analysis from
archival data. He never articulated methods for sociological analysis of discourse within
empirical data. As Middleton (2003) explains, Foucault’s focus was “not on ‘living breathing
persons’ but, rather, on the ‘subject-positions’ that apparatuses of administrative and professional
surveillance, regulation, and monitoring made available” (p.42). Therefore, to meet the needs of
the research project that I set out for myself, I have needed to blend methodologies, bringing in
methodological strategies from feminist research methods and analytical tools from feminist
poststructural theory.
Feminist Poststructural Methodology/Methods

I understand feminist poststructural theory to take up many of the ideas conceptualized by Foucault such as power, discourse and its constitutive force, subjectivity and positioning; however, unlike Foucault’s theorizations, attention is paid to gender and the everyday worlds that people inhabit. The mobilization of these theoretical concepts into thinking about and doing research is where theory becomes methodology and methods for me.

Bronwyn Davies (2000) provides a helpful discussion about how feminist poststructural theory can be made usable as a conceptual framework for interpreting and analyzing the social world. It is through this framework that I read the narratives of the mothers and teachers I spoke with. Davies suggests that poststructuralist theorizing “opens up discourses and practices to questioning, and provides strategies for questioning that go against the grain of common sense and of dominant (and dominating) discourses and practices” (p. 169). She goes on to say that “what can be said and understood and done using a poststructuralist framework changes not only the nature of the research, but the nature of understanding brought to the detail of everyday life” (p. 170).

As I discussed earlier, one of the important concepts I have taken up from feminist poststructural theory (particularly Davies) is that of the discursive constitution of subjectivity and connections with desire. I expand on Davies’ description of these concepts and my understanding of them, in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Also very important is the strategy of questioning working to destabilize what we understand to be ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ and exploring ways to make visible the patterns of power and powerlessness and the multiple and conflicting discourses through which gender is accomplished. I bring these ideas together to blend with theoretical and analytical concepts and strategies set out by Foucault, and those interpreting his work, to inform
my approach to this research project. It frames what I pay attention to when I am reading related literature, it has helped me to formulate research questions and choose methods to address those questions. It frames a particular type of analysis which in turn leads to a particular production of knowledge in the form of what is included and highlighted in this thesis and what is left out.

This ‘mixing’ of methodologies has been useful to me in addressing the questions I have about homework. Mary Hill (2009), following Lather (2006), calls for ‘paradigm proliferation’ to help us see differently. Hill says:

despite the fact that mixing methodologies could be ‘dangerous’ (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003) it is not only possible but extremely useful and necessary if we are to better understand ‘what, what we do, does’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 187) in any context. (p. 326)

Formulating the Research / Applying Methodological Concepts

In Writing Genealogies: an Exploration of Foucault’s Strategies for Doing Research, Tamboukou (1999) helps researchers apply genealogical strategies to qualitative research. This has been very helpful in my own navigation of going from theoretical and methodological concepts to the practice, or methods for my research project. She explains that although genealogy is an historical examination, its orientation is to the present rather than to the past. This idea has taken some time and work for me to get used to, so deeply ingrained is the traditional sense of historical inquiry where one is looking for beginnings and endings and clear explanations of the ‘truth’. Working with the idea of orienting to the present rather than to the past, Tamboukou explains that a genealogical inquiry starts with the identification of a particular and present problem, a “socially shared ‘discomfort’ about how things are going”, with the intent of revealing “how this problem turned out to be the way we perceive it today” (p. 213). She goes on to explain that Foucault wrote that a starting point for doing genealogies should be to focus on
a particular problem or experience and then try to see it in its historical dimension: How did this problem turn out to be the way we perceive it today? Continuing to outline ‘how to do a genealogy’ (see pp. 211 – 214), Tamboukou says the next step is tracing the current practices that could relate to the diagnosed ‘problem’ and finally to try to formulate the network of relations between practices and the problem, explaining that here the genealogist is looking for networks or systems of relations between the practices and the problem, what Foucault (1977) called an apparatus. Locating the problem within an apparatus, the analyst isolates “a cluster of power relations sustaining and being sustained by certain types of knowledge” (Tamboukou, 1999, p. 213). Tamboukou explains that “situating the problem in a system of relations that can account for socially shared discomfort is a turning point for doing genealogy” (p. 213).

Applying concepts and analytic strategies of genealogy. In this section I use my primary research questions as an organizing framework to explain how I mobilize these concepts and analytic strategies of genealogy in my research. Spencer (2006) works with what she calls “three dimensions of the present history” (p. 37) in her exploration of how education reform for accountability through standardized literacy testing was made thinkable, doable and operable. The organization of this section is informed by Spencer’s (2006) discussion (see pp. 36 – 40). My primary research questions are formed around three dimensions of the ‘present history’. These are related to how homework for young people has been made (a) thinkable and (b) doable, and (c) operable. In taking up Foucault’s genealogy, I am reminded not to look for a solution to my problem, but rather to look for underlying assumptions and modes of thought on which accepted practices rest – in this case, homework. What allows homework to function? What truths need to be in place for it to continue? How are people positioned and mobilized in particular ways to allow homework to function? To activate these questions in my study, I need
to get a picture of how homework ‘goes to work’ in everyday lives, of what is happening now; to do an ‘effective’ history. What does it look like? What are people actually doing? Who is involved? What is said and not said? What is written about homework?

**Primary research question 1: If there is little research to demonstrate the benefits of homework for young children, then how is it that homework has come to be understood as a ‘normal’ and ‘good’ educational practice? What are the conditions (material, social, and discursive) that allow homework to be promoted? In other words, if homework is the answer, what is the problem that it is an answer to?**

Here, mobilizing concepts of genealogy allows for an examination of the conditions of possibility; how homework for young people has become thinkable. In more theoretical terms, how this particular technology (homework) has been produced in relation to specific forms of knowledge and sources of authority (Dean, 1999). Referring back to Tamboukou’s (1999) description above to carrying out a ‘history of the present’, I remind myself that the purpose is not to look at the problem in order to understand its hidden meaning, origin, or cause; rather it is to look at the problem in terms of an ‘event’ to search for the various subtle and minor details, that point to its emergence as truth. Tamboukou says “mobilizing concepts of genealogy promotes an examination of circumstances under which individuals can or cannot behave and think – the *conditions of possibility* that allow for a particular practice at a particular time” (p. 210).

Using these ideas in my reading and research, I investigate how homework for young students has been rendered ‘thinkable’, how it emerged as a practice within a context of educational reform and at a time of increased calls for accountability, and parental involvement. The primary method I used to address the tracing of the conditions of possibility was to first read
deeply about education reform, globalization and neoliberalism and to think about how homework fits into this. I then looked to provincial government documents and school websites to find examples of discourses of reform, the end result being that I traced a rationality of accountability that appeared to be driving many things, including new practices such as elementary homework. This analysis enabled me to think about how homework for young students has been rendered ‘doable’.

I will describe in more detail which documents I analyzed, and why, further along in this chapter. Focusing on the development of the material, social and discursive conditions surrounding homework enables me to think about what needs to be in place to enable the doing of homework. This method of thinking takes the practice of homework out of isolation and places it as part of, as a concrete practice of, the more abstract rationality of accountability within a broader context of reform.

**Primary research question 2: How is homework for young children organized and assigned and for what purposes? What happens when school-work comes home? How can I trace ‘how homework goes to work’ in the work/lives of elementary teachers, students and parents?**

Here, I am considering how homework has been made ‘operable’ in schools and at home. Part of my understanding of ‘doing genealogy’ is to look directly at what people do. I wanted to know about the ‘doing’ of homework. The “aim is to strip away the veils that cover people’s practices” (Tamboukou, 1999, p. 209) so as to reveal how such practices are and where they come from. Going into more detail, she explains that genealogy begins from a ‘critical’ position, a starting point of genealogy is that historically there are no final ‘truths’ about our nature or the norms our reason dictates to … in this line of analysis, the genealogist does not
look beyond or behind historical practices to find a simple unity of meaning or function, or a changeless significance of ourselves and the world around us. The aim is rather to look more closely at the workings of those practices in which moral norms and truths about ourselves have been constructed. (p. 208)

To address this second research question I consider how homework has been made ‘operable’ in schools and at home. The research method I used to address this research question was qualitative interviews. I will go into more detail about these interviews in the methods section below. Briefly, I chose to speak with mothers because the literature at the intersection of mothering and schooling told me that it was primarily mothers who were carrying out this work. I spoke with teachers because I wanted to know how teachers were making homework work. I spoke with 10 teachers and 10 mothers and approached these interviews with feminist research methods in mind. I examined the ways that homework is organized, assigned, carried out and accounted for. I was interested in how the carrying out of homework constitutes discursive fields or formations within which action was prescribed and ways of knowing were defined, and certain conditions for doing and for thinking about homework were established.

In addressing this research question, I was also interested in how homework functions to integrate and coordinate relations between home and school. I consider the kind of expertise that is expected to accomplish homework. I focused on the specific methods of carrying out homework and on the physical arrangement of space and bodies necessary to accommodate this practice. I was interested in finding out about the whole range of processes that produce certain conditions that make the carrying out of homework possible.
Primary research question 3: As a practice that has come to be taken for granted as what should be done, what are the concrete effects of homework in the lives of women who are mothers of young children?

The genealogical concept and strategy I work with to address this question is to think about how we are discursively constituted as subjects, and in turn how we are subjected within particular power/knowledge relations. Returning once again to Tamboukou’s (1999) ‘how to’ guide, she explains that the genealogist asks questions about how we, as subjects, become constituted and subjected within particular power/knowledge formations and relations. This aspect of my genealogical work is largely accomplished in my analysis of my participants’ telling of their experiences. In order to pay attention to shifts in power relations and to the effects of these on the capacities and actions of mothers and teachers, I asked how subjectivities are made available or produced under the conditions of this practice (homework), and how individuals understand or come to know themselves and others in the terms of, or in relation, to homework. I looked at how those involved in homework practices are governed, not only by homework as a form of regulation, but also through participation in self-governing practices that were produced as a result of engaging with homework.

There are two significant parts to this question: the first deals with ‘should’. I further explore what is behind this ‘should’. Beyond tracing homework as a practice embedded in neoliberal educational reform, there is something else significant going on, seemingly with a strong moral component. To address the question, I draw upon the interviews with mothers and teachers in an attempt to understand what compels them to participate in a practice with questionable value.
The second part of this question pays attention to *effects* of homework. What are the effects *on* the mothers and teachers (what I think of as subject effects) and what are the effects of ‘the doing’ that is being carried out *through* mothers and teachers (what I consider as broader societal effects)?

Conceptually and analytically, this has been the most challenging question to work with and presented significant dilemmas for me in making decisions about how to ethically ‘write up’ my participants’ experiences. I will expand on this in the following sections of this chapter.

**Methods**

The term ‘methods’ refers to the practical aspects, the specific techniques used for collecting empirical information and materials (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In this section I turn to the design of this study and provide more detail about what I actually did. As I explained above, to address my research questions I designed my study of homework as a gendered form of governmentality around two components in order to gain a sense of this ‘moment’: document analysis and individual interviews with mothers and teachers of elementary aged students. I have moved between interviews, documents, research literatures and my own experiential knowledge – what qualitative researchers call triangulation.

**Documents.** The first component of my study involved document analysis. The documents I examined are readily available to the public and were obtained through the PEI government, the school district and school websites. Discussions about education in the media also provided me with data and I examined a specific homework organizer called the Student Agenda.

I examined various documents that are related to education reform, parental involvement and homework specifically in PEI. I looked at all the PEI elementary school websites (38) to find...
out about specific homework policy but also to examine the language/phrasing directed toward parents, primarily through ‘mission statements’ and repeated expectations of involvement and partnership. I looked at key governmental education ‘position’ papers such as *A Philosophy of Public Education for Prince Edward Island Schools* (1990); *Model for School Improvement* (2004); *Task Force on Student Achievement* (2005) and the following *Action Plan* (2006) and *Student Achievement Action Plan Progress Report* (2008); *PEI Home and School Federation Parental Engagement Survey and Pilot Projects report* (2008); *The Minister’s Summit Report* (2010) and *Charting the Way: Final Report of the Education Governance Commission* (2012). All of these documents can be accessed from the PEI Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. I describe these documents in Chapter 5. I read these documents attempting to grasp the local articulation of educational reform on PEI and I was looking for key ideas and terms such as indicators of ‘changing times’ in the context of globalization and increased risk, ‘not keeping up’, increased calls for accountability, testing, parental involvement. I compared what I saw in PEI government documents with ‘reform’ literature describing Canadian and International trends and with broader literatures describing characteristics of neoliberalism and globalization (see Spencer (2006) for an excellent overview). I looked at how similar statements were repeated over time and I traced some of the curricular changes such as implementation of standardized testing, and policy changes such as legislating parental involvement through the implementation of policy around school advisory councils, and ‘third party initiatives’, with government money attached, such as the mandate given to the PEI Home and School Association to research and advocate for increased parental involvement. Finally, I examined *The Student Agenda*, the homework organizer which emerged from the interviews as an important text that operated in various ways. After collecting these documents, I read them
multiple times and highlighted passages where language of reform was evident. This included language of accountability, testing, parental involvement and partnership. I collected passages of the texts and organized them according to these themes. I paid attention to repetition of similar use of language across multiple texts. In order to “read” the texts as discursive productions, I kept in mind the analytical concepts of ‘doing’ genealogy as described by Tamboukou (1999) above.

As I read, highlighted and themed passages of text from these documents, I kept Dorothy Smith’s (1999) notion of texts as becoming “active” (p. 135) through our reading of them in the forefront of my mind. Smith explains that although the text can be seen as detached from its historical and material setting, “its making was work done in actual settings by one or more people and as part of a course of action” (p. 135-136). In this way, texts have the capacity to extend social relations through coordinating the activities of many. In working with my chosen documents, I utilized these ideas by thinking about how these texts were working, what they were accomplishing and how they may be framing conduct and ways of thinking and I listened for the ways that mothers and teachers mobilized some of this same language and ideas in their talk as I analyzed interview transcripts. These ideas align with Foucault’s (1991b) notion of governmentality whereby conduct is shaped through a range of tactics and techniques. In the following chapters I will show how documents describing or recommending parental involvement and homework are instrumental in organizing the work of families and relations between mothers and children in particular. Like Ball (2009), I am interested in how these various documents as texts work to “make us up” (pg. 211) through the establishment of what it means to be a ‘good’ involved partner in education and a ‘good’ teacher at this particular time.
Putting the ideas above into action, I approach text-based knowledges and discourses as active, in that they operate as technologies of ‘truth.’ That is, “they organize what can and cannot be said and done, they shape social relations, and they regulate the way individuals understand themselves within regimes of discursive practice of educational institutions” (Spencer, p. 49). In my analysis of documents I paid attention to how the discourses of neoliberalism circulated beyond their textual representations. An example to illustrate this is how a text sent home from school outlining the importance of reading – perhaps in the form of the ‘helpful hints/things to do with your child at home’ genre – sets up clear expectations of what a mother should do to be involved with their child’s education. In this example we can see a simple text operating as a governing technology in that it is working specifically to govern behavior of mothers.

Foucault is particularly concerned with social locations or institutional sites that specify the practical operation of discourses, linking the discourse of particular subjectivities with the construction of lived experience. He refers to these as discourses in practice (Foucault, 1978). In reading these texts I take up this idea in order to pay particular attention to the ways parental involvement is recruited and/or assumed, how ways of doing and being in relation to children, learning and schooling are asserted as normative and good. Foucault considers how historically and culturally located systems of power/knowledge construct subjects and their worlds. With this in mind, I considered how these documents might come to shape subjects in particular ways. I looked to see if these documents were recruiting a particular type of parent to do particular types of work and how this was done, how it was mobilized.

**Interviews**

The target of an analysis of governmentality is not institutions, theories, or ideology, but practices. The aim is to grasp the conditions that make these acceptable at a given
moment, and to analyze a regime of practices. Practices are understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted meet and interconnect. (Foucault, 1991, pp. 73-86)

One aspect of a genealogical inquiry makes the effort to look directly at what people do. To find out what people do when they do homework, I asked two of the groups of people immediately involved with it, mothers and teachers. I purposely identified ‘mothers’, rather than ‘parents’ as a specific group that I wished to speak with. As I have already stated, many researchers have documented that mothers continue to do most of the school related work at home (David, 1993; Dehli, 2004; Griffith and Smith, 2004; Hutchison, 2007). The fact that I have chosen not to interview fathers will no doubt be somewhat controversial and I recognize that there are many fathers who do engage in this work. However, given the strength of the literature at the intersection of mothers and schooling indicating that work associated with children’s schooling falls upon mothers more often than fathers, I made the decision to speak only to mothers for this study. It would be interesting in a later study to include the voices of fathers. The practice of homework at the elementary level makes gendered assumptions of parental involvement. To ‘pull this out’, to see how this assumption is ‘going to work’ in individual daily lives, I followed in the tradition of critical feminist researchers who aim to “do the work of ‘excavation’, shifting the focus of standard practice from men’s concerns in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women” (DeVault, 1999, p. 30). I selected ‘teachers’ as the second group that I wished to hear from in order to understand teachers’ perspectives on elementary homework. I was interested to hear how they organize it, how it organizes/affects their time and practices, attitudes towards it, whether it is useful as a pedagogical tool, what role they expect ‘home’ to take, what they believe parents expect around
it. What does this educational practice actually look like in daily lives? How is it carried out? What are the effects of this practice? An examination of my own experiences with homework generated some of my questions and highlighted some of the tensions and problems around homework. However, I wanted to know whether other mothers and teachers experienced homework similarly or differently. Was anyone else experiencing ‘a sense of a problem’ around homework? Like me, in both my teaching and mothering, were others ‘just getting on with it’ because that is what is expected and is the path of least resistance? And if they were ‘just getting on with it’, how were they doing so and to what effect? I felt that these questions were best explored through individual qualitative interviews with mothers and teachers involved with students from grades one through four. My concern was not with being able to generalize about the group of individuals I interviewed. Rather, I was interested in discovering and describing social processes that have generalizing effects. In keeping with a poststructuralist approach which destabilizes the notion of a universal human subject, I instead looked for processes of subject formation (Lewis, 2000). I viewed the participants in my interviews as ‘informants’ knowledgeable about the everyday practice of homework in homes and in schools. Talking with mothers and teachers helped me to understand how homework plays out in individual lives, and also how power acts through subjects who find themselves both implicated (participating) and struggling to resist homework practices at the elementary level as well as tracing the effects of homework in everyday life.

In order to recruit research participants I sent a letter via electronic mail to the principals of the 38 elementary and consolidated schools in the Eastern and Western School Districts (now consolidated as the English Language School Board) on PEI (see Appendix A). The e-mail contained information about the purpose of the study, proposed procedures (i.e., individual
interviews) and information about their rights as participants (i.e., confidentiality and the right to leave the study at any time). This allowed me to quite easily find teachers to speak with. The teachers contacted me directly and I suggested that they determine where we would conduct the interviews. I was able to conduct interviews with teachers from across the Island, giving both a rural and urban perspective (to the extent that Charlottetown can be considered urban with a population of approximately 35,000 people). All of the teachers chose to speak with me in their classrooms, after school hours.

Finding mothers of elementary aged students proved to be somewhat trickier. I recruited participants through snowball sampling and word of mouth through my personal network in a way that was removed two or three degrees. For example, I asked a neighbour to post a recruitment letter in her adult education institution. I asked a friend who works as a doctor if I could post a recruitment letter on his bulletin board outside of his office. I called the Newcomers Society of PEI and let them know about my research. I called upon ‘friends of friends’ when looking to recruit from Eastern and Western rural areas of PEI. I thought about attempting to recruit through various schools’ Home and School Association newsletters, however, I decided against it as I didn’t want to limit who I was able to recruit to only those involved with Home and School Associations and I didn’t want the research to appear to be connected to a Home and School project. I had an opportunity to talk about my research on local CBC radio and was able to end the segment with a recruitment pitch. This resulted in only one mother contacting me, but she is someone I would not have reached relying on my ‘degrees of separation’ networking.

Initially, I began with the intention of recruiting both within and beyond Charlottetown and with an eye to some diversity in family constitution and socio-economic status. I ended up with some of that diversity, though with a sample size of only 10 participants for the mothers, I knew I was
only going to be telling one segment of a bigger story. At the end of my recruitment effort I had 20 confirmed participants, 10 teachers and 10 mothers.

Although the theoretical framework that I have chosen for this project and my epistemological approach of viewing subjectivities as relationally and discursively constituted means that I am *not* in search of the ‘authentic self’ (which is often assumed within conventional qualitative interview design (Skeggs, 2002)), I have made the decision to provide the reader with brief sketches of each interview participant. Here I provide a generalized sketch of my participants. In Appendices F and G I provide a more detailed sketch that may be referred to.

The 10 mothers I spoke with were all biological mothers with the number of children ranging from one to four. Each of the mothers I spoke with had at least one child in grades one, two, three or four. All of the mothers identified as heterosexual with eight of the mothers married and two single. None of the mothers identified as disabled. The mothers were white with English as their first language with the exception of one Asian mother. Although this mother was a recent immigrant to PEI and English was not her first language, she was quite proficient. The mothers were primarily middle-class, with the exception of one who would be described as working class, or low socio-economic status. Three of the mothers worked full-time outside of the home, two were full-time students, four worked for pay part-time and one was a ‘stay-at-home mother’. All except one mother attended some post-secondary school education. Their ages ranged from 22 years to 48 years, with the majority of the mothers in their late 30s to mid-40s. Seven of the mothers lived in town/small city settings and three lived in rural settings. Clearly, the mothers I spoke with were not a diverse sample which places obvious limitations on claims I can make in my analysis and conclusions. Also excluded are voices from PEI’s aboriginal community, the gay and transgender community, non-biological mothers, mothers with disabilities, working-
class (present but under-represented) and those with a non-white racial profile. Obtaining a representative sample of the population would be a different study in scope and epistemological approach. Despite the exclusions, those I did include provided much insight into this educational practice and how it operates discursively.²

The 10 teachers I spoke with all taught full-time at the elementary level. I spoke with two teachers from each of grades one, two, three and four and two retired teachers who had spent many years teaching at the elementary level. I intentionally included these two retired teachers to get their perspectives on whether homework expectations and practices had changed over the course of their career. One of the teachers had been retired for 8 years and the other for 5 years. Geographically, the schools the teachers taught at were spread out across the Island. Without planning for it intentionally, it turned out that all the teachers I spoke with were also parents (I spoke with one male teacher). As I discuss later, this provided some rich data to work with. Essentially, this meant that I heard from 10 teachers, 19 mothers and one father. Like the group of mothers I described, the teachers were white and middle-class.

The interviews I conducted were one-on-one semi-structured interviews and ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed

² I carried out informal exploratory conversations with one ‘stay-at-home’ father; a teacher running a homework club at the Newcomer’s society in Charlottetown and the President of the Provincial Home and School Association. While the conversations were informative, I made the decision not to include these conversations in my research as they were outside of the parameters I set out.
verbatim. I transcribed half and half were transcribed by a professional transcriber. I framed the interview questions in a semi-structured and open-ended manner, and was oriented to finding out about ‘how things worked’. See Appendix D and E for my Interview Guides.

Berg (2004, p. 81) explains that in the semi-structured interview there are questions and topics predetermined by the researcher, but the researcher does not need to adhere rigidly to the interview schedule; rather she may digress in order to more fully explore an idea that comes up in the course of the interview. I followed this advice as I conducted my interviews and, similarly, I followed Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) suggestion that in the qualitative interview process, “the researcher should use open ended not closed questions and the more the better in order to elicit more in the participants’ responses” (p. 34). I wanted to encourage the kind of stories and descriptions that illuminated the discourses, and organizational arrangements, processes, and relations that shaped the activities around homework. It was my intent to approach the interviews as explorations of the everyday practices surrounding homework. My purpose was to find out what the interviewee actually did, what the practice looked like and how they spoke about themselves in relation to the practice.

**Analysis of interviews.** My interviews with both teachers and mothers felt quite conversational. I used my own experiences with homework, from both a teacher and mother perspective, as my starting point in the interviews. I was able to identify and empathize with those who were having difficulties with homework. DeVault (1999) suggests that feminism gives distinctive ways of extending the methods of traditional qualitative interviewing (p. 59). At times I felt that my own experiences were too close to those I was interviewing and that the interviews at times became too informal, or too conversational; I was not playing the role of the impartial, disconnected, objective interviewer that I imagined I was supposed to be. DeVault (1999)
reminded me however, that rather than a form of manipulation, this identity has offered me a way of relating to participants and highlighting commonalities through which I could connect and draw with participants and perhaps provide them with the confidence to discuss some of the more uncomfortable aspects of their experience with homework. This fits with my understanding of a feminist approach to qualitative interviewing.

Feminist scholars such as DeVault (1999), Cairns (2011), Smith (1987) and Walkerdine (1997) continue to debate the ethical implications surrounding personal relationships forged between researchers and participants. This is certainly an issue that I continue to think about. Throughout the interviewing process I had concerns about how my interactions may be impacting my findings, however, to somehow pretend to be neutral and ‘objective’ would feel completely false to me. Walkerdine (1997) explains, “as a researcher, I am no more, no different from the subjects of my research” (p. 73). Walkerdine’s advice is to remain aware of one’s own feelings as an interviewer and to recognize how researchers can come to influence the account told by participants. She says,

it is an impossible task to avoid something which cannot be avoided, instead of making futile attempts to avoid something which cannot be avoided, we should think more carefully about how to utilize our subjectivity as a feature of the research process. (p. 59)

I concur with Walkerdine’s view that it is impossible to avoid my researcher subjectivity. This perspective was important for me to keep in mind as I produced interpretations and analysis of my research data. Harding (1989), who had confronted the powerful foundations of scientific and social inquiry, argued that claims to objectivity, value-free research and separation of the knower from the known, are myths masked by masculine constructions of what counts as a
scientific problem and in the concepts, theories, methods, and interpretations of the research, which are “not only sexist but also racist, classist and culturally coercive” (p. 9).

As I stated earlier, I follow feminist epistemologies that suggest that personal perspectives are valid and perhaps even essential elements of any systematic attempt to know the social world. In my approach to interviewing I took up Smith’s (1987) suggestion that the researcher must refuse to put aside her experience and must make her bodily existence and activity a starting point for inquiry. Indeed, my own interest in elementary homework began with my own experiences as a teacher and mother and it is this experience that provides a point of entry to my investigation. In my analysis I was constantly reflecting on my own personal, political, and intellectual standpoint so that I was able to determine where my own story ends and someone else’s begins and to be sure that my listening is careful enough to hear what people are telling me.

The Problem of Experience

Blending a qualitative, feminist and Foucauldian approach to my research has meant that I chose to speak with the women most involved with homework (mothers and teachers), however, I attempted to listen beyond their telling and description of experience and pay attention to the discursive patterns arising in their talk. Thus, although I appear to be employing a traditional feature of qualitative research by including individual interviews in my research methods, it is the feminist poststructural analysis in combination with a Foucauldian analytic approach that has the potential to throw a reader off if they are expecting a traditional qualitative research analysis with reports of mothers and teachers ‘telling it like it is’.

The analytical concepts made available through genealogy draws attention to the ways that discourse works on and through people, to produce particular kinds of subjects and the
actions that they engage in and the feelings that they experience. Cullum (2000) adds to this saying “poststructuralist theories posit the subject as the site of disunity and conflict, subjectivities being produced in and through a range of discursive practices which are complex, shifting, precarious and often contradictory in their productive effects” (p. 60). Taking up these ideas and working with them in my research means shifting away from the individual speaking subject and instead focusing on the practices, the various discourses at work in their talk. It also allows me to pay attention to and work with the concept that different discourses position people differently, which helps me to think about the gendered and classed effects of homework.

Foucault (1984a) suggested that genealogy conveyed the idea that truth cannot be examined separately from the procedures involved with its production. For example, what mothers and teachers say about homework cannot be simply accepted as true without considering the multiple discourses circulating through home and school.

A persistent theoretical and methodological concern in the field of qualitative research when working with living research subjects and a poststructural framework is that of ‘experience’. This is a significant debate within qualitative research methodology, one of the key problems being that ‘experience’ is an assumed category and remains unproblematic (Cullum, 2000; Scott, 1992). Within a poststructural framework, questions are asked about whether research participants are always able to give a ‘valid’ and ‘trustworthy’ account of their reasons for doing the things they do given that this perspective questions the existence of a unitary and knowledgeable subject. These ideas reflect back to the discussion in the previous chapter about capturing “messy actualities” of “what actually happens” (O’Malley, Weir and Shearing, 1997, p. 509) and understanding patterns of desires that we take to be key indicators of our essential selves, as reflections of the discourses and subject positions that are made available
to us (Davies, 2000). I am reminded that genealogy conceives of the human realities experienced by individuals as an effect of the interweaving of particular historical and cultural practices and it attempts to trace those effects (Tamboukou, 1999).

Discourse analysis as a method of analysis allows me to move away from the idea of experience, or what mothers and teachers tell me about their experience, as being unquestionably representational, to understanding their telling as socially constructed and situated in discourse. To put the ideas of discourse analysis to work in my analysis I read and re-read through the transcripts of my interviews with mothers and teachers, I looked for common themes and moments of similarity and difference. I colour coded themes and charted them. I reread the transcripts searching for commonalities and disjunctures in the way in which people accounted for their activities and themselves.

It took time and effort for me to ‘look differently’ (Hill, 2009) at my research data, to work with and incorporate the feminist poststructuralist and Foucauldian analysis I had set out for myself in my framework. To do this I had to revisit, and revisit some more, the qualitative research methods literature, feminist poststructural theory literature and governmentality studies literature. I was uncomfortable about interpreting the stories of my participants within a particular theoretical framework. It seemed at times that I was trying too hard to fit my ‘data’ into a Foucauldian box. O’Malley, Weir and Shearing’s (1997) critique of governmentality studies, along with perspectives of feminist poststructural theorists, proved to be very important in helping me to learn how to blend living, breathing, research subjects and Foucault’s ideas. Emphasis on paying attention to the “messy actualities” (p. 509) and the “everyday” was necessary in order to ‘loosen’ the theoretical ideas that I was attempting to work with.
For quite some time I had difficulty working outside the parameters of what I consider to be a positivist research model, which was far more deeply engrained in my approach to research than I had imagined. My thinking was: I had collected data and now it was time to synthesize that data, represent what I had been told and make conclusions. I found myself focusing on themes that didn’t necessarily correspond to what it was that I was trying to do with my research. In a sense, I think of this process as ‘learning to read between the lines’, to look beyond summarizing the pros and cons of homework. I am not suggesting that ‘reading between the lines’ means I have a better or deeper understanding of my participants lives, or that I can make claims based on a representative sample, but my contribution is a deeper understanding of the discourses circulating around homework, what those discourses produce in terms of knowledge and power, what some of the subjectifying effects of those discourses are, what the practices at work in homework look like, who is recruited in these practices and who is disciplined by them and how we come to be governed by particular practices, such as homework.

In my analysis I worked with the idea that participants are invested in particular positions in discourse to protect vulnerable aspects of the self, what Hollway and Jefferson (2000) called the defended subject, for example being seen as a ‘good’ mother. Working with the concept of the defended subject employs the following ideas: participants may not know why they experience or feel things in the ways that they do (why am I experiencing stress over this homework? What is wrong with me?). Participants are motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions (I enjoy homework, I really do!). Gradually I was able to see that the narratives of my interview participants revealed the discourses, subject positions and power relations, which circulate amongst home-school spaces in relation to homework. In the process of analyzing the transcripts, I thought about my own
investments in particular subject positions and what those various investments do. Cullum (2000) expresses a similar idea, explaining that a key concept in the “fashionings of subjectivities” is what they call desires and/or investments: how do we come to want what we want in our lives?

Finally, in my reading of the transcripts I paid close attention to how ‘doing’ homework was governed. I considered the kind of expertise that was expected to accomplish homework. I was interested in how the carrying out of homework constituted discursive fields or formations within which action was prescribed and disciplined, ways of knowing were defined, and certain conditions for doing and for thinking about homework were established.

**Writing Up / Producing Knowledge / Issues and Power**

Like DeVault (1999), I begin from the recognition that research, like any human activity, is socially organized and shaped by the institutional contexts in which it occurs. The questions I frame and the methods I choose are not neutral tools, but rather practices that imply distinctive ways of understanding the world. Never before has this idea been clearer than when it came time for me to write up this thesis. All along this research journey, I have made decisions which have determined what my final story about homework and neoliberal governmentality is to be. There is a great deal of ethical handwringing and power associated with the production of knowledge.

At times in my research process, particularly when it came time to write this very chapter, I suffered from a lack of confidence in articulating my methods and describing what I did. Is this ‘valid’ research? was a question that plagued me. Part of my struggle, perhaps was that I was trying to grasp firm methods from theory that does not offer firm methods. Although I looked closely to Tamboukou and other scholars who engaged with Foucault and feminist poststructural theory for guidance, I somehow felt I needed to label what I was doing in a more traditional way. This led me to consider critical discourse analysis as a possibility for an
analytical tool that was more concrete, or perhaps more mapped out than analytical concepts offered through genealogy and feminist poststructural theory. Fairclough (1995) describes critical discourse analysis as a three-dimensional framework where the aim is to understand how each of the three separate realms intersect and interact with each other. The dimensions include analysis of either spoken or written texts, analysis of discourse practice (how the texts are produced, distributed and consumed), and analysis of how discursive events emerge as sociocultural everyday practice. Fairclough (1995) explains that when used as a research tool, critical discourse analysis allows the researcher to focus on these various documents not only for what they contain in terms of information, but also for what they produce through their public circulation and interpretation. This seemed more concrete than the methodological vagueness surrounding Foucault’s genealogy. Tamboukou (1999) speaks to these kinds of difficulties that she encountered in taking up genealogy. She says,

I have come to the conclusion that there is no way of truly understanding what genealogy is about, other than by concentrating on a genealogy per se, analyzing it in its minor details, reaching the most remote points of its network, revealing the hidden micro-mechanisms of its operation, grasping the most delicate aspects of its theorization (p. 211).

However, in the end, I rejected using critical discourse analysis and returned to literature taking up and providing examples of putting genealogy and feminist poststructural theory to work as usable tools. As I did so, I was reminded of why feminist poststructuralism and Foucault’s ideas opened up interesting and different ways of thinking and analyzing. Tamboukou (1999) writes,
Foucault’s genealogies create a methodological rhythm of their own, weaving around a set of crucial questions. What is happening now? What is this present of ours? How have we become what we are and what are the possibilities of becoming ‘other’? Foucault’s genealogies do not offer methodological ‘certainties’. They persistently evade classification, but they do inspire the writing of new genealogies to interrogate the truths of our world (p. 215).

Along with my difficulty in fully adopting and putting to work the theoretical framework that I had set out for myself, I also found it challenging to work out how to effectively and ethically present my research participants and write about their experiences within my analysis. These ideas also raise questions for me as a researcher who is expected to interpret others’ positioning. A ‘turning away’ from individual speaking subjects has been very difficult. Throughout my analysis and writing I felt a constant ethical concern about taking mothers’ and teachers’ experiences and looking for discursive meaning or significance – did it not belong to them? What right did I have in looking beyond the words they chose to represent their experiences? I have written and rewritten profiles for each of my participants in various places and versions of this thesis. One the main hesitancies I felt with including them was that no matter how I wrote them up none captured the complexity and nuance that I conceive to be part of any life, or particular categorizations became unintentionally highlighted. In part, this is about one of the struggles of blending methodologies and methods. Kathleen Gallagher’s (2008) edited book *The methodological dilemma: Creative, critical and collaborative approaches to qualitative research* was very helpful as I wrestled with these issues. Gonick and Hladki (2005) state that the task for researchers involves exploring the contradictory and ambivalent ways that people come to tell their life stories, recognizing “that they may never be fully known or representable”
(p. 291). However, after just saying this, in an attempt at remedying this tension between expected naming and describing my participants and leaving them unnamed and foregrounding discourses and practices, in the end I have opted to include brief profiles of my participants in Appendices F and G.

It has been difficult working with the different methodologies I have chosen. They generally go against the grain of what is expected and ‘what counts’ as good, valuable research in education – evidence-based, positivist, empirical research. However, I believe the framework I have taken up produces new ways of seeing and thinking about homework and has been worth the challenge and difficulty. Mary Hill (2009) writes:

rather than confining one’s methodological toolkit to replicable, generalizable and, often quantifiable approaches to understanding assessment in primary classrooms, educational research can and should include ‘paradigm proliferation’ (Lather, 2006) in order to interrupt the familiar, or ‘think differently’ about familiar practices and knowledge. (p. 310)

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained my decision to trace the genealogy of homework; its conditions of emergence and existence, its rationalization, organization and effects. Popkewitz and Brennan (1998, p. 39) say that a typical objective of genealogy is to problematize commonplace assumptions, to make the familiar strange. Utilizing genealogy as a methodology allows me to look at and describe the details of a practice, a technology of power, so that truths may be unsettled, and then the possibility of thinking otherwise may be opened up. The purpose of a genealogy of governmentality is to provide possibilities of thinking about how things might be done differently, and to draw attention to points of contestation and resistance. As I now move
into the analysis portion of my dissertation, I keep these objectives in mind as I work to explain and support my view that homework is a form of gendered government(ality).
Chapter 5 – Why is Homework Working?

This chapter addresses the question: why is homework working? I examine the *conditions* by and through which the practice of homework is “constructed as plausible” (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998, p.3) and I discuss the policies and devices which ensure that this type of ‘involvement’ and ‘accountability’ is normalized.

As I have discussed earlier, it is an interesting feature of homework that it is not explicitly mandated in policy-texts. Thus, there is no governing policy in Prince Edward Island about homework at the Department of Education or School Board levels. Rather, it is articulated through guidelines developed and disseminated at the individual school level. This is also true across most Canadian provinces and school boards (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Despite the absence of explicit policy, however, homework operates strongly as an expectation for teachers and, in turn, for families.

In this chapter I ask: Where does this expectation come from and how does it operate? The notion that homework should be assigned to students plays out as something that is taken-for-granted. However, as my interviews with teachers (in this chapter) and mothers (in the next chapter) indicate, although most teachers and mothers ‘just get on with it’, there is also an element of confusion about who wants what, and why.

This chapter offers a sketch of broad and local articulations of education reform in PEI and a discussion of policies and devices for ensuring parental involvement and accountability. I also examine how teachers take up and put to work discourses of involvement and accountability through the practice of homework, and I analyze a specific homework device called *The Agenda*. This chapter addresses the first set of my primary research questions: a) how is it that homework has come to be understood as ‘normal’ and ‘good’?; b) what are the conditions – material, social
and discursive – that allow homework to be promoted?; and c) if homework is the answer, what is the problem?

The chapter is divided into three main parts. Part one traces broad trends of educational reform and then focuses more specifically how reform is playing out locally here in Prince Edward Island (PEI). I discuss the local articulation of how accountability has emerged as a central policy solution in order to highlight the emergence of the practice of elementary homework. I then turn to examples of the parental involvement discourse on PEI. This is the crucial condition that allows homework to be promoted, while simultaneously acting as a two-way accountability tool.

In part two of the chapter I turn to interview transcripts to explore what teachers are doing with this practice and ask how teachers articulate their justifications and rationales for assigning homework. I discuss some of the effects that the practice of homework has on teachers and reveal how it is affecting their daily teaching routines. I conclude the section by focusing on changes and shifts that are occurring in relations with parents around homework. In part three I examine the Student Agenda, a tool to communicate about homework and to help organize and keep track of it. By looking at the specific practice of homework and some of the dominant discourses, devices and teacher actions surrounding it, I am also trying to understand something about the shifts in ways that we are governed; changes in the ways that we are governed in ‘neoliberal times’ of educational reform.

In this section I am interested in the knowledges that are produced through ‘reform’ and involvement discourses, the subjectivities that are constructed as desirable and the power/knowledge relations that stem from these discourses. I consider how ‘texts’ of reform and involvement in general, and homework in particular, enter into the public realm and begin to
shape meaning and action through notions of common sense. I suggest that the expectations surrounding homework are at least partially produced through discourses of reform and the mentalities/rationalities they generate. I begin with some of the more general features of educational reform and from there move into the local articulation of reform on PEI.

Educational debates and policy initiatives in many Western countries are increasingly framed in global terms, whereby education standards and student achievement are compared, or goals are articulated in relation to present or future challenges in the global economy (Dehli, 1996a). Prevailing ideas about educational reform transcend international boundaries to circulate among Western nations, via power/knowledge networks that are coordinated by ‘globalized’ rationalities (Levin, 2001).

Dehli (1996a, 2008) identifies and describes a number of trends in the literature as features of restructuring in education: reductions in overall state funding for education; contradictory and uneven moves to decentralize school governance while simultaneously centralizing curriculum planning and assessment procedures by tying them to fiscal controls and accounting practices; shifts from collective bargaining to individual (and competitive) negotiations with teachers and other educational workers about contracts, wages and working conditions; and moves to commercialize and privatize many educational services and to introduce forms of parental “choice”. Both critical and promotional literatures on restructuring of education in Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand situate these processes in the context of broad changes in late 20th century capitalism, such as the increased globalization of production and markets; the impact of computer technologies on production and movement of capital, services and goods; and the growth and reach of commodified forms of consumer culture (Kenway, Bigum, & Fitzclarence, 1993; Kenway, 1995).
Documents of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and The World Bank exemplify the function of supranational policy production (Ball, 1999; Levin, 2001; Lingard, 2000). Texts produced by these organizations are widely circulated and cited, and they authorize particular bodies of knowledge and assert certain globalized rationalities that have reframed the educational policy directions and approaches of most Western nations in accordance with the imperatives of a global economy (Lingard, 2000). Popkewitz & Rizvi (2009) give critical attention to what they describe as the naturalization and fatalism of globalization and schooling. They discuss the changing rationalities that come under the banner of globalization and say:

these rationalities are not merely discourses, but generating principles that order what is seen, acted on, and thought about. They cross institutional practices as they are given expressions in concrete social programs, theories and systems of evaluation, such as in the new management techniques of benchmarks that circulate in governmental policies about social reform and school reforms. (p. 9)

An increased focus on accountability is one such rationality, as is a culture of performativity. Performativity can be understood in this context as a shift in focus from ‘inputs’ to ‘outputs’ or from a focus on resources, the content of and organization of curriculum and teaching to a focus on students’ achievement, their ability to perform at specified and normative levels. Part of this shift has the effect of bringing each student into focus in a very specific way in relation to a normative level of performance, while teachers and parents are mobilized in the work of ensuring that each student can meet their level. In Canada, these aspects of reform can be traced to the early 1990s (see Spencer, 1999). As I show in this and the next chapter, the
rationality of accountability and the culture of performativity are important concepts for my study, as they are clearly evident in the ways homework is argued for, how it is practiced and how it is experienced and understood by teachers and mothers.

In Spencer’s (1999) tracing of the establishment of accountability practices such as increased implementation of standardized testing and reporting of this testing, calls for increased levels of parental involvement and construction of ‘partnership’ between home and school in Ontario in the 1990s, she argues that many of these practices act as governmental technologies. Spencer shows how accountability policy has operated discursively to shape the understandings, practices and social relations of public education in Ontario. She illustrates how the abstract concept of accountability is realized through multiple technologies of a particular standardized test (the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test) and how these technologies come to govern those who inhabit the school space. They are organized, classified or normalized by the arrangements, processes and performances of this particular test. Spencer describes how subjectivities are produced under the conditions of this reform, how subjectivities are made available, how individuals come to understand and ‘know’ themselves and others in terms of the test.

Dehli (1996b) cautions against suggesting that educational debates and interventions that do seem to have a transnational character issue from a single or general source such as globalization, pointing out that local histories and conditions shape the specific articulations educational policy. Similarly, Popkewitz and Rizvi (2009, p. 1) discuss the importance of understanding global processes through specific positions and perspectives. These observations are important as I now consider the particular articulations of accountability reforms and the culture of performativity in Prince Edward Island.
Local articulation of ‘reform’. PEI has experienced similar shifts toward market-driven approaches and neoliberal pressures as other provinces in Canada and other Western countries (described by Spencer, 2006 and Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The early 1990s saw a strong focus on education reform and PEI has seen an increase in central authority through centralization of funding, standardization of curriculum and outcomes, greater use of measurement and competition and an increase in the power of parents as ‘consumers’ of education.

From 1991 to 1993 five governmental processes\(^3\) examined the education system in PEI, with a strong focus on governance matters and accountability measures. Four existing school boards were consolidated to create the present two (and as of January 2013, there is now one English Language School Board). School Advisory Councils were established, therefore legislatively parental involvement. PEI has also followed the national and international trend of increased emphasis on learning outcomes which has lead to the rapid spread and regular use of assessment and reporting. The focus on assessment, in turn, has led to persistent concerns about student achievement in PEI, and the province participates in international modes of assessment.

\(^3\) The series of reports in the early 1990s were as follows: Advisory Committee to the Committee on Government Reform, Education for the 90s and Beyond (June 1991); PEI Task Force on Education; Education: A Shared Responsibility (March 1992); Working Group on Structure and Accountability (report not made public); Towards Excellence: Report on the Review of Structure and Governance of the PEI Educational System (June 1993); Community Consultative Committee, Public Response to Towards Excellence (July 1993).
The OECD assessment, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has become an “accepted measure by which PEI and its students are perceived in our global society” (Ellsworth, Francis, Perry, St. Jean & Whelan, 2012, p. 5). According to the Final Report of the Education Governance Commission (Ellsworth et al., 2012) PEI’s 15-year-olds “placed last, or close to last, in Canada on most measures in the 2000, 2003 and 2009 assessments” (p. 5). These ratings have been reported in both the local and national media and have contributed to a pervasive sense of the province’s schools and students ‘not measuring up’.

In 2005, a Task Force on Student Achievement was appointed by the PEI government. The discussions coming from the Task Force stressed the importance of refocusing direction, effort and money in education to prepare students for “21st Century skills, in a rapidly changing, competitive, high tech, knowledge economy. In a world that is opening up as never before, our province and our country will have to get smarter and study harder if we are to sustain and maintain a strong social fabric” (Kurial, 2005, p. 9). The 2006 report generated by the Task Force called for a number of measures aimed at improving student achievement on PEI: increasing student literacy, improving learning outcomes, establishing provincial standardized testing and reporting and more fully engaging students and their parents in education. The language used in this and other government documents of this period can be thought of as a language of reform, whose narrative and key terms circulate through larger national and international reform discourses. Following the 2006 report, a three-year plan was implemented resulting in the investment of significant resources and efforts to implement those measures, and to strengthen assessment of student achievement. Over the past five years provincial common assessments have been developed and implemented (currently there is testing for grade three math, grade three and six reading and writing and grade nine math). The Task Force called for
increased action around accountability focusing on standardized testing and increased levels of parental involvement. The 2012 report from the Education Governance Commission calls for “a renewed, integrated and comprehensive accountability framework in order to know how we are doing, to share that information, and to apply it to improving student learning” (Ellsworth et al., p. 63). One of the explicitly stated roles of assessment is to “achieve accountability at all levels when information is shared with education partners” (Ellsworth et al., 2012, p. 51).

Accountability, clearly, has emerged in PEI, as it has across Canada and internationally (Spencer, 2006), as a central policy solution to address prevailing governmental concerns of raising achievement levels and ‘preparing for the 21st Century’. I suggest that increased levels of homework at the elementary level is a practice that is directly connected to accountability in that homework is often justified as a practice that will improve student achievement and enable parents and teachers to know and support each other. Following Spencer’s suggestion that we view education accountability practices as governmental technologies, I consider homework specifically and parental involvement more generally, as such. As I will show in this and further chapters, homework seeks to recruit parents to become involved in their children’s schooling, therefore taking on new responsibility of increasing achievement levels. I argue that elementary homework is as much about governing the conduct of parents, and particularly mothers, as it is about improving the achievement of students.

The discourse of parental involvement on PEI. The brief tracing of the discourses of education reform illustrates that improving student achievement is a principal goal of education reform. Achievement and accountability emerge as the predominant rationalities upon which everything else is measured. There have been attempts in most provinces, including PEI, to create policy around parental involvement. This has been done by according legal status to a variety of parent
committees, school councils, and orientation committees at the school level, together with an
elected membership and an expanded role in influencing the ongoing life of the school (Levin,
2001, Rideout, 1995). In PEI, the 1993 Fogarty Report called for “school–based advisory
councils with broad community representation to become an integral part of the governance
structure of PEI’s educational system” (Fogarty, 1993, p.6). With this legislation has come
provincial government money to work toward promotion of programs to encourage and establish
involvement/partnership with parents in the form of parent councils, but also in other ways.

In this section I give examples of calls and arguments for parental involvement on PEI
from various provincial documents, and school websites. I am not expanding on the details or
particular significance of the document itself, rather I am highlighting excerpts that illustrate the
recruitment and stated importance of parental involvement and/or partnership. To do this, I have
chosen a rather unorthodox presentation in that I give the title and year of the document and then
the excerpt, emphasized by underlining. Discussion follows the examples I give. The following
examples demonstrate not just the presence of these statements over the past 20 years in PEI
government educational documents, but their circulation and repetition at multiple government
levels: the provincial Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the school
boards and school websites. I will argue that repetition of this discourse comes to both frame and
solidify involvement as a necessity in the goal of increasing student achievement levels and it
sets the groundwork for one of the conditions of possibility for elementary homework, and as I
will take up in the next section of this chapter it is also the groundwork for the assumption of
involvement on which teachers base their homework practices.
1990: A Philosophy of Public Education for Prince Edward Island Schools was adopted. It states: “education is a shared responsibility shared among the school, the family and the community” (p. 1).

1995: Minister’s Directive on School Councils: “recognizing the right and desire of parents to be involved in the education process. In each school, parents are to be provided with an opportunity to establish a school council, Home and School Association, consultative committee or other representative school advisory body. When established, school advisory bodies have a role in providing the school principal with advice on a number of school-related matters” (p. 1).

2004: Model for School Improvement document has a component that inquires about parental engagement stating that “schools cannot be expected to be the sole source of academic challenge for Island children” (p. 6).

2005: Task Force on Student Achievement – Recommendation 6 is titled: Parental Engagement and says: “research has demonstrated the positive impact of parental involvement in children’s learning. During the consultations, the theme of parental engagement emerged as one of the most supported concepts necessary to improve student achievement” (p. 27). It goes on to say, “all the available research reinforces the central fact that parental involvement in their children’s learning has a most positive impact. In the early stages of educational development, parents and other family members can provide children in grades 1 and 2 with hundreds of hours of no-cost reading and writing skills development support. In order to do so, however, parents and families require basic literacy and numeracy knowledge, and skills to accomplish these tasks effectively” (p. 27). The report concludes with three recommendations:
1. parental involvement continue to be an integral part of the school improvement plan and that schools identifying success in engaging parents share their practices with other schools;

2. the Department of Education, along with stakeholders, investigate models of family literacy initiatives and allocate funding to support those that give parents an opportunity to assist their children, whether at risk or not, to learn to read and write;

3. the provincial government allocate resources to assist parents to organize effectively for the purpose of identifying community and family educational needs.

2006: Action Plan - $9 million was earmarked to address the recommendations from the Task Force on Achievement (2005). Specific money was directed toward Parental Engagement Initiative. The department provided the PEI Home and School Federation with a grant of $50,000 “to consult with parents and explore best practices to improve parent involvement in learning”. The same funding was used to support 12 diverse pilot projects at schools across the province.

2008: Student Achievement Action Plan progress report: “parent involvement in schools and learning is increasing as a result of the School Development Process which is now in place in 63 schools” (p. 12).

2008: PEI Home and School Federation Parental Engagement Survey and pilot projects: “this request… recognizes our emerging role as a learning and teaching partner in the education system on Prince Edward Island” (p. 1).

2010: Minister’s Summit Report: In a section titled: What Influences Learning in Students’ Lives? The Family is one of the stated influences: “providing a loving home life where a child’s physical, mental and emotional wellbeing are nurtured is an incredibly important contribution to the students’ success … Family members are a child’s first teachers and role
models. A child learns much before they enter the doors of an early learning center or a school” (p. 20).

**2012: Charting the Way: Final Report of the Education Governance Commission:**

“The necessity of parents’ engagement in their children’s education is increasingly recognized” (p. 33).

Each of the school boards on Prince Edward Island possesses a mission statement which can be found on their respective websites (The Eastern and Western school boards were amalgamated in January 2013 to become the English Language School Board).

Partnership/involvement is included in all three statements.

1. Eastern School District: “we are committed to excellence in education. In partnership with the community, we will provide a safe and caring learning environment in which all students have the opportunity to reach their potential and face the future with confidence.”

2. Western School Board: “the ultimate goal of education is to provide the student with the skills necessary for life in the 21st century and to become life-long learners who are responsible and moral decision makers. We believe that the school must provide a positive, caring climate where individuals can grow as responsible community members and stewards of the environment and each other. We believe the students’ needs must be the most important focus of the educational system. We believe that parents, students, school and community should and must be equal and active and full partners in education.”

3. La Commission Scolaire de Langue Francaise: “we are an Acadian and Francophone collectivity that offers quality education to its students in a friendly and safe environment.
In so doing, we endeavor to promote and develop our language and culture. Together we strive to foster success and global development for every student; create a pedagogical framework based on proven practices and sound research; foster a dynamic collectivity, proud of our language and culture; and create a close co-operation between all educational partners.”

**Elementary school websites**

All of the elementary school websites on PEI have either a principal’s message or a school mission statement. All state, in very similar ways, the importance of schools and families working together in partnership. Before I give examples, it is interesting to note that all schools have a website and that there is an expectation that schools provide information about themselves in this form. Technology enhances the performative aspects of schooling by including the schools strengths and (sometimes) achievement levels. The website acts in a way to provide information to parents and at the same time there is an expectation that parents will read the website and stay informed and on top of school events and programs. These are some examples of excerpts taken from school websites. Again I have used underlining as a method to highlight passages I feel are working to recruit and ensure parental involvement:

- Both parents and teachers must accept responsibility of instructing our students; constant communication between school and home is very important. **Home and student and school all working together** to ensure that our students will receive the best education possible (Englewood Consolidated School).

- **Education is a joint venture between school and home** (Westwood Primary).
• We all share responsibility in making Glen Stewart an excellent school in all areas. We require committed efforts from all stakeholders: students, parents and teachers. Together we are strong (Glen Stewart).

• In partnership with home and community we believe we can move toward academic excellence (Sherwood Elementary).

• A dynamic learning environment where students, staff and parents work together toward a quality education (Parkdale Elementary).

• I invite you to get involved in your school and show your child that you are interested in their education (message from the principal, Cardigan Consolidated).

• Parental involvement improves student achievement, promotes positive attitudes toward school and motivates students to succeed. Successful schools are communities: communities of learners, teachers and parents. We ask for the support of parents (Georgetown Elementary).

In these documents, certain conditions for doing and thinking about families, schools, children and learning are established. Parental involvement in education on PEI is affirmed as desirable goal and a necessity, while being at the same time persistently vague. We see from these examples similar statements and constructions that appear and reappear in these written texts. My interviews with teachers and mothers confirm that they appear in spoken texts as well. Though it is not entirely clear which expert systems of knowledge have been drawn upon, this discourse has nonetheless been normalized so that the importance and truth of parental involvement have been established and taken-for-granted. Yet, it is also something to work upon – a governmental ‘problem’ to be addressed.
What became highlighted for me as I traced the reform discourses is the prominence of accountability and practices that are organized to ensure it. I have come to see ‘accountability’ as one of the ‘problems’ to which homework has been established as one of the answers. It is interesting in this context to think about the constitution of discursive fields or formations. As Mills (2004) explains “a discursive structure or framework is comprised of a systemacticity of ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving and the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving” (p. 17). Within a discursive field action is prescribed and ways of knowing and doing are defined. I suggest that one way to view elementary homework is as a practice that is generated from these neoliberal discourses of reform, as an educational tool to address some of the problems presented by reform – such as, how to encourage and ensure parental involvement. In this way, homework can be viewed as a site at which parents are recruited into educational work; a site at which parents and teachers are both made accountable, holding each other to account, and a site where power/knowledge is enacted with ‘truths’ being generated establishing norms, obligations and expectations.

Teachers: Governing and Being Governed by Homework

As I said earlier, an interesting feature of homework is that it is widely used, yet it is not written up as formal policy. Instead individual schools offer homework guidelines and it operates as an expectation for teachers to assign and for parents to participate. In this section I explore how this expectation works on and through teachers in their negotiations with homework practices.

I framed this chapter around the question ‘why is homework working’? In the previous section I suggested that broadly, the political rationality of neoliberalism has shaped educational shifts and changes, referred to generally as ‘reform’. Reform has manifested in new rationalities,
which in turn have produced new practices and ways of thinking, acting and being. So, in that section – why homework? I suggested one answer – because of reform. Educational reform is one of several contemporary fields within the context of neoliberalism shaping new practices and ways of thinking and working, homework being one such practice.

In this section I approach the answer to the question a little differently. Why is homework working? Because teachers are assigning it! Or, homework is working because teachers are making it work. Teachers are making it work by mobilizing discourses that target and recruit parental involvement and they are making it work by working on themselves. In this way we can see homework operating as a governing technology both through and on teachers.

I begin by describing teachers’ homework practices, and then I examine some of the justifications or rationales that teachers give about their homework practice. My interviews suggest that teachers feel compelled to participate in a practice for which there is a lack of strong evidence to show that it makes educational sense, especially for young students. While teachers expressed misgivings about homework, they continue to assign it.

All of the teachers I spoke with assigned daily homework and all, whether teaching grade one, two, three or four had some sort of specific homework routine in place. They told me that homework has become something separate from daily classroom work in that it is an activity to be planned, assigned, managed and assessed in and of itself. That is, it is not simply unfinished work from the day, although some teachers mentioned that this too would be sent home at times.

Guidelines about homework are found at the individual school level, and predominantly take the form of a time/grade recommendation, which has come to be known and commonly (and frequently) referred to as the ‘ten minute rule’. Harris Cooper (2001) is credited for developing this so-called rule, which says that homework should last about as long as ten minutes multiplied
by the student’s grade level. This is an integral part of the homework discourse and has become an apparent accepted truth. Parents, teachers, principals, newspaper articles, magazine articles, school websites and samples of homework guidelines and policy from across North America all refer to this ‘rule’, including PEI schools.

In addition to the teachers citing the ten-minute rule as the primary guideline for setting their homework assignments, there were many other similarities in teachers’ homework routines. All included and emphasized some type of reading assignment; most had weekly spelling words to be studied for a weekly spelling test, many teachers are used spelling workbooks as a source of ‘pre-packaged’ homework; many teachers were more hesitant to send home math homework “because parents might confuse the kids”, unless it was straight-forward memory work for math. Some of the teachers included games and from the teachers’ point of view this was presented as a ‘fun’ way for families to spend time together and also focus on something the child was working on at school. Many of the teachers assigned homework for the week on a Monday with a due date of Friday. Teachers who did this cited recognition of busy families as their reason for organizing homework this way. Interestingly, homework operates very similarly across North America with like patterns of assigning, content, tracking, regulating and ways of recruiting and involving parents (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Hutchison, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

Teachers’ talk about homework conveys a practical obviousness, a taken-for-grantedness about its place in teaching and learning. There is an institutionalized implicit expectation that homework will be assigned and parents will be involved in its accomplishment. An example of this is the one-way directive from teachers to parents – there is no discussion about if homework will be assigned, or if parents are willing and able: it is what/how homework will be carried out. Teachers said that the first communication about homework in the school year was at ‘meet the
teacher’ night held early in September in most schools. They explained that they took this time to inform parents of their homework ‘plan’ and expectations for the upcoming year. The way teachers described their homework routine and communication was as a one-way directive (from school to home) with the assumption of parental participation. Homework is operating on normative expectations, manifesting in the assumption that teachers will assign this work and parents will participate. This assumption reveals a structure of power relations where teachers expect that parents will submit to their instructions. What is interesting to me here is that much of the official language about the home-school relationship, is framed as a ‘partnership’ between parents and teachers. Analysis of the practice of homework brings into question the implicit equality in the language of partnership.

The detailed technologies of accomplishing homework varied somewhat amongst the teachers I interviewed, but all involved forms of surveillance. Some sort of homework record book was used by all the teachers for recording homework and monitoring homework completion. A few used a simple notebook and many used a commercial dedicated homework organizer referred to as a Student Agenda, which I will discuss in the next section. It was clear from talking with teachers that homework has become an expected part of daily school life, a practice that takes planning and time.

The description of what homework looks like gives a good indication that teachers’ daily practice is being shaped (to a certain extent) by homework. It is something to be managed everyday; it is something to be fit in to an already busy classroom schedule. There is the planning of assignments, communicating what the assignment is to students and parents, checking to see that homework is completed and following up with the assignment. Jenna, a grade one teacher says, “People can’t believe how long I spend on getting my homework
prepared on Sundays but I think you have to do that in order to get the comments from parents and the children engaged in what they are doing. It is not just going through word games.” In our interview, it was apparent to me that Jenna took her homework assignments very seriously. She planned out her homework strategy for each week and created games as part of her assignments. Jenna was the only teacher who mentioned that she solicits formalized parent feedback about her homework assignments in the form of a survey part way through the year. Kelly, a grade four teacher, also talks about the homework practice she has in place and the time it requires saying: I've been fitting in time to write it down, and I've been checking it, because if you are going to give it you have to give time to let them write it down and you have to make time to make sure it is written down correctly and then you have to make sure the next day it's checked and then you have to have a plan for the ones that aren't doing their homework, right? So, it's a lot of time taken away from teaching.

As I listened to teachers talk about their homework routines, it was evident to me that many teachers were bringing themselves in line with what they felt was expected of them in relation to homework. Ultimately they suggest that to assign homework is what a ‘good’ teacher should do. Many of the teachers talked about having mixed feelings about homework (speaking from both their teaching and mother perspectives), and yet they continued to assign it. I got the impression that the teachers were concerned to appear ‘good’ and competent and that assigning regular homework has become one performance marker among many of what it means to be a good teacher.

**Teachers rationalizing homework.** I now turn to what teachers said about why they assign homework. Surprisingly, in their rationales for assigning homework, boosting academic achievement was not explicitly cited as the primary reason for assigning homework (although
reading was consistently referred to as a skill to be reinforced and encouraged at home which I took to be implicit in boosting achievement). I say ‘surprisingly’ because, as I discussed earlier, homework research and debate surrounding it is most often framed in academic achievement terms, rather, what I found was that there was much more emphasis on assigning homework to develop the so-called ‘soft benefits’ of homework such as independence, responsibility and accountability. For example Christine, a grade three teacher, says that she sees “homework as primarily contributing to developing skills such as time management, organizational skills, independence and responsibility.” Kelly (grade four teacher) says : “I do think there has to be something….just to get the student accountable and independent” and later in the interview says “so it’s not so much the homework (the academic work), it’s the routine and it’s the accountability and the responsibility.”

Another grade three teacher, Mary, sees the benefits of homework coming more directly for older students, but that the habit of homework should be established in the early years of schooling. She says:

I see it (homework) more in the upper levels as a value and I think unless you promote it at the lower grade levels and get them used to it, it would be way too hard at the older levels to jump into it and say, ok, now you have homework. So I think the value is getting them ready and steering them in the direction.

Most of the teachers I spoke with rationalized their homework practices in a similar way. As I outlined in Chapter 3, these are highly desired characteristics of the ideal neoliberal subject. With this in mind, we can view homework as a practice that promotes development of an ideal student subject within the rationality of neoliberal governmentality. It seems as though teachers have internalized the ‘value’ of development of these characteristics and are using homework as
a tool to achieve these skills. I suggest that we might view this internalization as an example of reform discourses, or neoliberal governance, working through teachers.

However, not all of the teachers I spoke with are ‘on board’ in thinking that development of these skills and characteristics is achievable through homework. One retired teacher I spoke with (grades one and grade four), Joan, doesn’t agree with the argument that doing homework helps build skills around time management, organization and responsibility, she says: “well, to me, at the younger ages a parent is involved anyway, so the kids aren’t really doing these things, it’s the parents.” This comment resonated strongly with my own experience and that of the majority of the mothers I spoke with. For the most part it is mothers who are directing ‘homework time’, keeping students ‘on task’ and facilitating the whole homework process, in which case, it brings into question rationalizing homework in these terms (independence, responsibility, developing time management skills). Paradoxically, when the teachers who spoke with me talked from their ‘mother perspective’, most relayed the same things, thus contradicting their homework justifications in their teaching practice. The presence of this contradiction highlights that teachers are engaging in this practice because they feel they ought to; they feel obliged to do so, and that they are working on themselves (self-governing) to keep themselves in line with what is expected of them. I suggest that the strength of this “ought” statement lies, at least partially, in the strength of reform discourses that reminds us constantly of the ‘globalized, competitive environment that students will face in the 21st century’ and that particular skills and attributes are required for success (as manifested in the neoliberal subject). Here I turn to illustrate the ways teachers rationalized homework in relation to parental involvement discourses. In the first part of this chapter I outlined the various sites where repetition of the necessity of partnership and involvement were occurring (in government documents, school
websites, etc.). I suggested that this repetition sets the stage for both something to be worked upon and a ‘truth’ upon which practices could be justified. Here I illustrate how teachers are taking up and mobilizing these involvement and accountability discourses through the practice of homework and suggest that this can be seen as another example of the larger discourses of reform (a form of neoliberal governance) working through teachers and targeting parents. Framed this way, homework can be viewed as an educational practice that operates to both encourage parental involvement and ensure it. Many of the teachers I spoke with seemed to see it as part of their job to encourage and ensure involvement. This is part of what they understood to being a good teacher and doing good teaching. This practice is positioning teachers in a particular way and is framing the parameters of one aspect of teacher-parent relations. The teacher is positioned as the expert and the parent as the recipient of that expert knowledge, establishing and constituting a pattern of asymmetric power/knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980, 1982a).

In the following example, Carrie, a grade one teacher articulates her view of the necessity of parental involvement and illustrates the ways in which she uses homework to encourage involvement, but also how homework is used as an accountability tool to ensure involvement. I begin my interview with Carrie discussing homework from her ‘mother perspective’. She has three elementary aged children and she says that although she finds homework to “often be taxing” she feels very strongly in favor of it. She says:

I like to see what they are doing, it’s a connection, I want to know if they are struggling. Even if it is difficult at times, I still think its very valid, very important because it’s me involved in their education, otherwise I’m just sitting back watching them.
Clearly Carrie’s ‘mother perspective’ influences her ‘teaching perspective’ as she says “as a teacher, I’m full force on that same side where it’s my chance to say, Mom and Dad, you need to be involved, you need to be supportive.” Carrie goes on to explain that the homework she assigns gives parents a chance to see what the student is working on in the classroom. In this way she is rationalizing her use of homework as a communication tool (between school and home) but also as a means for accountability, in this case ensuring that she is accountable to the parents. She says, “my homework includes practicing printing, so if I say on the child’s report card: child not paying attention to letter sizing, well, they should have seen that already in the homework, it should not come as a surprise.” In vernacular terms, she is ‘covering her butt’. In this way, the oft-cited rationalization of homework as a means of communication can be seen as an accountability tool.

Part of this idea is that homework is a way to demonstrate being a ‘good’ teacher – one who is serious, rigorous, and understands what is at stake in this time of reform - increased competitiveness and rapid change, as I have stated, is so often repeated. Perhaps speaking most clearly and strongly citing accountability as a primary reason for assigning homework, Greg (retired teacher and principal) suggests that homework is linked in with people’s opinions about standardized test scores:

I think we’re still, you know: ‘we’ve got to make these kids smarter because we scored last on this test in the country, so we’ve got to be more task oriented, and nose to the grindstone’, that kind of thing. Homework is a wonderful way to have accountability. It used to be the Christmas concert. That’s how you showed you were doing a great job. Then it became that: ‘I’ll show you I’m a really good teacher through lots of work, oh really demanding’.
Greg’s quote illustrates the discourses of reform that are circulated in justifications of homework and provides insight to how the practice of homework is working to produce or construct a particular subjectivity in a particular context – in this case, the ‘good’ teacher in times of neoliberal reform – she is tough, rigorous, understands what is at stake, holds herself, her students and their parents to account. Homework has become a way to demonstrate this. Here homework can be viewed as a particular type of educational reform, one that re-forms subjectivities and recruits subjects into governance and self-governance (Popkewitz, 2000, 2003).

We can see homework as an accountability tool operating both ways between home and school – teachers are holding parents to account through the practice of homework as they mobilize specific practices such as ‘signing off’ in a homework log to ensure parents’ involvement and to hold them accountable. Jenna, expresses what she believes to be the importance of making parents accountable saying

there is part on the primary report card that says ‘completes and returns homework’ and you have to put a one, two, three or four, which is consistent. There is one little boy who reads his book, but doesn’t play his games; I put an asterisk and just say: I realize the books are being read, thank-you for your support. I would like to see so and so play his games…that way I put the onus on the parent.

Like Carrie, it is apparent that Jenna is using homework (perhaps in addition to a pedagogical tool) as a way to shift some of the responsibility for student success on to the parent. This shift of responsibility from public or state institutions to private, individualized domains is a primary characteristic of neoliberal governmentality. Also characteristic is the presence of homework on provincial standardized report cards. This raises something interesting, because, as
I said earlier, homework is not formalized in policy, it appears to be operating (unevenly) through expectation, and yet is something to be measured on report cards, therefore setting standardized norms into which all students are to fit.

Interestingly, some teachers used the students to ‘work on’ their parents to get them to sign the Agenda (homework organizer and log book) using a sticker incentive for the child. If the parent was not ‘signing off’, the teacher asked the child to get the parent to sign and the child received a sticker for each signature. Sally, a grade two teacher told me:

The kids would write in it and the parents had to sign it (the Agenda) and what I did was the sticker system. If they came back with it signed that means the parents looked at the homework and they got a sticker. And if the parents didn’t sign it, it wasn’t me going up to the parents it was the kid going up to the parents. So it kind of shifted the responsibility of them taking care of their own thing. It was funny because they would growl at their own parents. Mom you did not look at my homework last night and I did not get a sticker.

As I heard similar versions of the same scenario from several teachers, it struck me that this ‘signing off’ was an important piece of the homework practice for most teachers. Indeed, this minute practice was in fact a site of considerable surveillance and discipline. Parents who were (apparently) not participating in their child’s schooling were being made visible and the students were being drawn into recruiting parental involvement and being disciplined (no sticker!) if they did not successfully recruit their parent. All of which, though seemingly minor and trivial on one hand, is quite disturbing on the other when one considers the consequences of cumulative disciplinary actions in a students’ life. This is an example of a teacher, very likely
meaning well, doing what she feels she ought to be doing (encouraging and ensuring parental involvement), but perhaps not being critically aware of what her ‘doing is doing’.

To this point I have suggested that homework can be viewed as a governing technology mobilized by teachers and targeted toward parents, particularly mothers, whose involvement in schooling is discursively constructed as a necessary element in students’ schooling. In this way, I suggested that we might view discourses of reform as operating through teachers. Although homework as governing practice has parents as its targets, it also affects teachers’ work and teachers’ subjectivities to some extent; mobilizing particular arrangements for organizing and regulating time, space, activity and bodies of teachers in particular ways and in this way we might view discourses of neoliberal governance as working on teachers.

The descriptions of teachers’ homework practices and relations with parents and their rationales and justifications for doing what they do suggest that homework can be seen as an example of a micro-practice of ‘reform’, or a technology of government. The take up and negotiation of discourses surrounding homework – within reform (achievement/failure/risk; accountability; involvement/partnership) has normalized the practice and has normalized ways of doing/being teacher, with homework being understood as part of ‘good’ teaching. Homework makes visible how reform and restructuring of schools has introduced new modes of regulation of teachers and their work and how teachers are positioned to recruit parents into educational work.

On the one hand, I have suggested that this shift of educational work (of which elementary homework is one example) from school to home is an intended effect of ‘reform’, or neoliberal governance. On the other hand, I have shown that teachers are not articulating rationales and justifications explicitly in this way. However, regardless of whether it is an
intended or unintended effect, I would argue that through the practice of homework (among other practices) there is a pedagogicalization of family/home (Aarsand, 2011; Baez & Talburt, 2008; Newman, 2010; Popkewitz; 2003). In the last section of this chapter I examine a text that is used in the organization of homework that works to encourage this pedagogicalization, operating in such a way, alongside teachers’ incitements for involvement, to mobilize discourses of reform.

The Student Agenda

Earlier I suggested that one of the answers to ‘why is homework working?’ is because teachers make it work. Another answer to ‘why is homework working?’ is that parents are also making it work: elementary homework would not be working if parents were not participating. They are being effectively recruited into participating in this practice. In this section I shift my attention to a text, mobilized by teachers, that is integral to this recruitment, referred to as The Student Agenda.

The Student Agenda emerged early in my research as an important text. It is not a text that I originally set out to analyze but as I conducted my interviews with both teachers and mothers, it was referred to by almost everyone as the primary means for communicating the homework (school to home) and for teachers to check to see that it was completed, usually by way of a parent signature. Teachers and mothers generally referred to the Agenda as a homework management tool. However, I will suggest in this section that it acts in other ways. I see this text operating as one of many technologies at work in the home/school space to encourage parent involvement. The Student Agenda can be thought of as an example of a text that gets produced from the practice of homework. Here we can see a text – presented as a communication and organizational tool - operating as an accounting process, a surveillance tool, working to organize
time and space, and very directly working to develop a particular neoliberal subject, with both students and parents as the target. I will argue that this apparently neutral device operates in quite particular ways to govern the conduct of teachers and more so parents, thus providing an example of ‘governing at a distance’, which Foucault established as a distinct characteristic of neoliberal governance. Through the Agenda, teachers can ‘govern at a distance’, never having to set foot in the home, yet still having an organizing effect in that household – organizing everyday interactions and teaching parents to govern themselves and children in particular ways.

I will begin with a description of the Agenda. One of my earliest observations was that the Student Agenda is very similar to an adult day-timer. In addition to providing a weekly and monthly schedule, it is filled with ‘tips’ and strategies aimed at both students and parents for time management, character building, study improvement, organization and self-improvement. The Student Agenda I examined was one that my youngest son used in his grade one year (2010/11). This is not a dry, dull homework record keeping book. Rather, it is spiral bound, 8” x 12”, 136 pages, has a hard plastic cover with a very bright and colourful, cheerful holograph picture of fish. The whole book is very attractive-looking and, I’m told, expensive. This is a substantial book that PEI students are bringing home with them every day.

The Table of Contents includes a ‘parent tour’ section explaining the organization and purposes of the book. It states: playing an active role in your child’s education helps ensure his or her success. Get involved with the help of your child’s Skills Planner! The Skills Planner helps your child: keep track of homework, projects and activities; organize time in order to get important jobs done; develop positive character and academic skills. The Skills Planner helps you: play an active role in your child’s daily school life; establish a relationship with your child’s teacher; help your child learn and practice important skills.
The next two pages are titled the User Guide. It says: use your planner to get on TRAC. 

_T_ = Think: at the beginning of the week, think about what you want to do this week, and what you need to do. Think about your goals. Think about what you don’t want to forget. Then write these things down so you don’t forget them! 

_R_ = Record: the great thing about your planner is that you can write down everything you need to remember in one place. 

_A_ = Act: Plan your time and then act! Use your planner to write or circle the activities you want or need to do. 

_C_ = Check: at the end of the week, doesn’t it feel great to look back at everything you’ve done? Looking back is also a good way to see what you didn’t quite finish… so you can try again next week!

Following this, the Agenda is divided by months of the school year. For each month there is a page with a month-view calendar, followed by two pages per week, with space for the student, teacher and parent to write. With each month, there is a different theme, such as: work habits, team work, citizenship, relationships, listening and speaking, reading and writing, thinking skills, using information, personal choices, health. Each of the themes for the months have sub-themes listed and are examples of character traits and skills students may build each month. For example, the theme for November is Citizenship and the sub-themes are friendship, patriotism and community; for September, the theme is Work Habits and the sub-themes are responsibility, motivation and self-discipline.

Toward the end is a ten-page Building Skills at Home section. Directed to the parent, it says: help your child explore the skills he or she needs to succeed in school and life. Use these pages to generate discussion, explore possibilities, talk about positive and negative choices, have fun together. Completing the Building Skills at Home activities together shows a commitment to your child’s education. You are saying “I want you to learn. I want you to have fun. I want to spend time with you”. Following this is a ten-page Resources section with information on health
and healthy eating facts and tips, a guide for alphabet printing and cursive writing, math fact charts and a world and Canada map with ‘Canada facts’. At the beginning of this section in bubble letters (fun and inviting) it says: families: help your child build important skills! The description illustrates that this text is far more than a homework ‘log book’ or a means to organize and communicate homework. It is overtly targeted to parents and promoted by the text itself as a means to get parents involved in their children’s schooling.

Every school year each of my children have brought home Student Agendas. These have been used for them at school to record their homework. I’ve been told that they do this in the mornings and that the teacher usually does a check to see that it is recorded properly. Teachers sometimes write notes in the Student Agenda if there is something they want to bring to my attention and I sometimes write notes to the teacher. There have been notices stapled in at various times. I have been expected to ‘sign off’ on homework as it is completed. When I have forgotten to sign, the teacher has reminded me to do so. In this sense the Student Agenda has operated as a two-way communication tool, communicating something (though, not much) to me about what is happening at school and school seeing that I am involved, at least to the extent that I have apparently monitored and signed off on homework.

In addition to being a communication tool, I view the Student Agenda as a surveillance tool, or an accountability device operating on both teachers and parents. It operates as a surveillance tool in that teachers are able to check to see that I am involved and have a record of my involvement (my signature) upon which disciplinary action may be taken if necessary. (As I described in the previous section, one of these disciplinary actions is recruiting the students to work on their parents, with the disciplinary action being the withholding of a sticker if the parent is not recruited). From a parent perspective, I am able to see that the teacher is ‘on top of”
homework, an accountability process. In these ways the Agenda can be thought of as an instrument to secure accountability. The discourse of education reform has generated a disciplinary matrix around elements of reform producing new practices. Homework, and new tools and practices attached to homework, such as the Agenda are among these.

In addition to operating as a surveillance and accountability tool, the Agenda is operating as a ‘how to’ manual for parent involvement in education offering tips and strategies, expert advice, that construct parents as the teacher-at-home and encourages parents to become a particular type of involved parent. The Agenda can be viewed as a device or tool that helps parents cultivate the dispositions, knowledges, and skills that allow them to be produced as ‘good parents’ who can both school-at-home and involve themselves in schools (Baez & Talburt, 2008; Popkewitz, 2003). With suggestions, tips and strategies addressed to parents in order to help and enrich their child there is an implicit assumption that parents need help, and that they welcome assistance and advice. Specifically parents need to learn how to become teachers at home.

The Agenda is one of several instruments that generate what Popkewitz (2003) calls a ‘pedagogicalization’ of the family/home (see also Aarsand, 2011; Newman, 2010), in which the home becomes the classroom and the parent becomes the teacher with the goal: “to help your child succeed in school and life”. This is a goal that is to be present at all times. Good, pedagogical parents should be thinking about making everything ‘a learning moment’ or a ‘teachable moment’. I find myself wondering when this became so normal that it has become part of our expected everyday way of talking and thinking? It has become part of everyday vernacular. A good example of this is in the Building Skills at Home section. Here the boundaries between work and play and between parent and teacher become blurred. Directed to the parent, it says: help your child explore the skills he or she needs to succeed in school and life. The moral
imperative to participate is made clear – these skills are not only for school, but for success in life. The implication is that this text, which holds the voice of the authoritative expert, understands the importance of this imperative and demands that parents understand it as well, yet, will serve to help the parent learn ways to become a teacher at home and incorporate teaching/learning these skills at home in a fun way. The Agenda instructs parents to: “use these pages to generate discussion, explore possibilities, talk about positive and negative choices, and have fun together”. In its emphasis of becoming a teacher at home, the messaging in the Agenda is discursively constructing a particular desirable subject position: “completing the Building Skills at Home activities together shows a commitment to your child’s education. You are saying: I want you to learn. I want you to have fun. I want to spend time with you”. In this way, through the Agenda we can see ‘the good, involved parent’ being spoken into existence, the tips and strategies, and ‘how to have fun together’, structures and delimits the possible field of action and begins to illustrate how those outside of this field of action are disciplined, or self-disciplined.

The persistent language used throughout the Agenda of ‘participating and getting involved, to ensure success’ is effective in that it both frames ‘what is best’ (which in effect, works to solidify the equation: being involved = doing homework = good parenting/doing best for your child) and it draws parents into doing ‘what is best’ for their children, so that parents will submit voluntarily, invoking notions of choice and freedom, to interventions that do not appear to infringe on the privacy and authority of the family. All of which is consistent with modes of neoliberal governance. The logic is not one of domination, but rather of empowerment. The moral incitement to make every moment a teachable moment is strong in its messaging of ‘doing best’ and as I will continue to explore in this thesis, is perhaps the basis to sustained
recruitment and participation in educational practices, even those practices that have questionable educational value.

This linking of desire and moral and ethical imperative, with the backdrop of a fear of failure, is another example of neoliberal governmentality. According to some scholars, in their current mutations, neoliberal strategies manage to penetrate deeper by working through the very desires, hearts and minds of well-intentioned change agents. Rose (1996), for example, describes this new reach as “governing through community” (p. 331), while Brown argues that neoliberal power inserts itself as moral imperatives into the most intimate aspects of our lives (Brown 2005). In my research, I suggest that these features are evident in the way parents are positioned to be responsible for children’s learning. Doing homework is one way this is exercised. As Baez and Talburt (2008) also showed in their study, to choose not to participate means accepting the risk of failure; to not do homework is viewed as irresponsible and perhaps even irrational in the face of the ‘truth’ of its benefits.

I argue that homework involves more than a friendly invitation for families’ participation in school matters; rather, it is an authoritative discourse from schools to families, and recruits mothers to become active subjects in the accomplishment of this work by working on our fears and desires - wanting to do best for our children. By working on what mobilizes parents with regard to their children, in this case, fear of failure and love, by which I mean here, doing what we feel is best in any given situation, enables what Foucault called the “art of government”, the creation of continuity between the ideals of the state and the actions of citizens so that all subjects govern themselves effectively, “which means that individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (Foucault, 1991b).
Through *the Agenda* parents are provided with tools and knowledge for helping themselves to help their children. Parents are being asked to work on themselves, in order to help their children work on themselves. This might be viewed as an example of parents learning reform; they are learning to become agents of change, in that a primary stated goal of ‘reform’ is to effect change in terms of increasing achievement levels. Similar to my suggestions of governmental reform discourses working on and through teachers, with homework practices operating as technologies of governing, we can see these same discourses working on and through parents – in this example, mobilized through a seemingly mundane homework organizer.

In addition to operating as a ‘how to’ manual for becoming a teacher at home, it is striking how this text reads as a ‘how to’ guide for students to work on becoming neoliberal subjects (individuals who are entrepreneurial, independent, rational, responsible and calculating) and it is clear that parents are being recruited in assisting in accomplishing this project. As I mentioned earlier in this section, something that I first observed with *the Agenda* was its similarity to an adult daytimer (in the pre-smart phone days), and I would add now that it strikes me as a combination of adult daytimer and self-improvement book. I find it an interesting phenomenon that students as young as 6 years old are being recruited to work on themselves in this way, and that parents should agree that this is a good idea. The section of *the Agenda* that outlines this most clearly is the description about how to “get on TRAC”, which is the acronym for Think, Record, Act and Check. On each page of *the Agenda* students are reminded “to get on TRAC” – to remember what their goals are, keep track of everything by recording it, plan time and act upon goals and then to reflect each week on what was accomplished and what requires improvement. All of this wrapped in and around getting homework completed.
The role of parents, and mothers in particular, in the development of ‘citizens of the future’ or human capital is not a new role. As I discussed in Chapter 2, in the late 19th and 20th century middle-class women came to play a central role on educational institutions both in creating the institutional forms schooling came to have, and in preparing their children for schooling (Dehli, 1988; Griffith and Smith, 2005). As Cairns (2011) discusses, this production of particular ideal student-subject “who skillfully navigates an uncertain world and produces his/her own future success” (p. 7) has become a common feature within contemporary articulations of schooling, so I shouldn’t be surprised to see young students targeted in this way. The educated person is imagined as one who is capable of independently navigating this uncertain terrain, having gained the personal “capacities” required to flexibly adapt to an ever-changing world (Bradford & Hey, 2007). Apparently cultivation of that ideal student-subject now begins when formal schooling begins and is encouraged and facilitated by texts such as the Agenda and the echoes of the self-improvement discourse might be viewed as part of the lifelong learning discourse that is prevalent in neoliberalism; always working to better ourselves to be/become the ideal citizen-subject. From the above discussion we can see that the Student Agenda is a tool that facilitates homework. But, just as important, it recruits parents into practices of government. It is an example of governing in the realm of the family and can be viewed as small parts of a greater pattern of governmentality. Enticing and educating parents to be partners and teachers at home works toward the broader governmental goal of raising student achievement, good citizenship and development of a particular neoliberal subject. In this way, families can be thought of as intense sites of regulation.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have used the notion of governmentality to enable me to think about education reform as one of several contemporary fields where discourses and practices (such as homework) of improvement, effectiveness and accountability shape general and everyday conditions of teachers’ work and thinking; how teachers are being governed by reform but also how they are mobilizing these discourses and governing parents through the practice of homework and its accompanying tools.

Through discourses of reform, broadly and locally articulated, homework has emerged as a practice to address concerns of accountability, parental involvement and achievement. It has been established as a necessary and expected practice that ‘good’ teachers will participate in and promote as part of ‘doing best’ for a child’s schooling success. This chapter illustrated how this notion of ‘doing best’ comes to operate as a moral imperative for both teachers and mothers and works to shape teacher and parent subjectivity and mobilize action. Fields of possible action for ‘good teachers’ and ‘good mothers’ come to be partially defined through norms, obligations and expectations generated around the practice of homework therefore creating the very conditions that allow homework to be promoted.

I proposed in this chapter that one way homework can be viewed is as acting as a tool for accountability, one that operates both ways between home and school. Because elementary homework demands participation, is not possible without parental involvement, parents are thus held to account to do their part, they are drawn in to share in the responsibility in raising student achievement levels. Then, on the flip side, teachers are accountable to parents in that their work is made visible through homework and (an appearance of) rigour is presented. This complicates the accountability discourse.
Homework may or may not be contributing to increasing student achievement and may or may not be working to increase other skills such as time management, organization, responsibility (which are viewed as building blocks to eventually contribute to achievement). However, in this chapter I show that homework is doing something. It acts as an accountability tool by both encouraging and ensuring parental participation and providing a window for parents to view teachers’ work. It is also working to shift more educational work onto families, thereby intensifying the government of families in new ways. In the next chapter I will focus on this shift and on the fact that it is women, mothers in particular, upon whom this work is being shifted.
Chapter 6 – How is Homework Working? The Daily-ness of Home-working

Thus far I have built upon existing literature and traced locally some of the ways that knowledges are produced about the ‘involved parent’ and how the involved parent becomes a population to be known. Through analysis of my interviews with teachers I outlined how parents are recruited to participate in homework through teacher directives about homework and accompanying tools such as the Agenda. I have suggested that overlapping discourses of accountability, partnership and involvement establish and normalize the expectation of parents’ participation around homework by framing it as ‘good’ parenting. I’ve suggested that homework can be viewed as a technology of government, a micro-practice of reform that works to ensure parents’ involvement and sharing of responsibility and accountability. At the same time homework also shapes teachers’ practices, relations and subjectivities. As teachers are being governed in various ways by homework, they in turn are putting these discourses to work in the direction of school to home through assigning homework.

In this chapter I shift my focus to the ‘home’ part of the home-school relationship and develop, through examples from my interviews with mothers, my argument that homework is a practice that operates in gendered ways. I examine how homework is being experienced by those who are its primary targets and vehicles in the home – mothers. My earlier review of scholarly literature at the intersection of mothering and schooling indicates that there are gendered expectations of actions, attitudes, particular ‘ways of being’ at the home-school site. Here I explore these gendered expectations in relation to homework. I delve into the daily-ness of home-working, especially as it is experienced and felt by mothers. I view homework as one site where mothers, more often than fathers, encounter implicit incitements to active participation in education and a site where mothers in particular experience the shift of educational work from
school to home. One of the results of contemporary education ‘reform’ is the shifting of pedagogical work to families (Ball, 2009; Dehli, 2004; Griffith & Smith, 2005). Through homework, schools, whether they intend to or not, are moving some of the burden and time of educational work onto mothers.

I use the following questions as an organizing framework for this chapter: What happens when schoolwork comes home? How are ‘doing homework’, ‘doing gender’ and ‘doing good mothering’ linked? How are mothers being positioned in the discourses and practices of homework and how do they understand themselves in this environment of education reform? How do the discourses surrounding reform broadly, and homework more specifically, shape images of the ‘good, involved mother’ and how are these notions woven into the mothers’ talk as they “account for themselves” in interviews? What does all of this tell us about homework as a site of gendered neoliberal governance? (informed by Dehli, 2008, citing MacLure, 1993).

I first focus on describing what it is that mothers are doing around homework. What happens when schoolwork comes home? Are mothers responding to the targeted recruitment, as described in Chapter 5? What is the actual ‘doing’ that is involved in the accomplishment of homework? I suggest that mothers’ work is one of the answers to the question, ‘how is homework working?’: homework is working because of the work mothers are doing. This descriptive section is followed by a discussion of the question of ‘how is homework working?’ from a different angle. What compels mothers to do, or not do, this work? How is it that mothers come to understand this work as their responsibility, as something ‘good mothers’ do? I look to my interviews with mothers to see how they draw upon and navigate diverse discourses and actively work to position themselves within or outside the dominant desired subjectivity of the good mother/involved parent/partner. In the last section of this chapter I discuss further how
homework is an example of an educational practice acting as a governing technology, this time in the daily lives of mothers through what I call the technologizing of the self. This happens in part through the stories we tell others and ourselves about who we are. I am curious to explore how we act upon ourselves in the narrative formulation of a self, of selves, for public consumption (Mimi Orner, p. 280, in Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998).

I would like to think along with Foucault’s examination of the ways that power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions. The notion of feminist governmentality allows me to understand how neoliberalism works through subjects in multiple and gendered ways. An important aspect of my investigation is therefore to uncover how neoliberalism works through mothers as they take up desirable discourses, such as partnership and the good, involved mother. In this chapter I show, through examples of the ways mothers talk about the practice of homework and about themselves in relation to the practice, that neoliberalism, as expressed in education reform discourse, can be seen as operating through mothers as they are ‘learning reform’ in the take up of specific subject positioning and consequent practices.

**The Doing of Homework**

“I’ve felt at times like going in and saying, OK, I want a paycheque here because I’m turning into the teacher.” (Mindy)

Mindy is not alone in feeling like she is being recruited into the role of teacher at home. Mindy, a mother of four children in grades kindergarten to six, relayed accounts of the time, effort and assistance she has spent in support of her children’s homework assignments. Many of the other mothers I spoke with echoed Mindy’s sentiments. I can relate to it from my own experience. Elementary students’ homework can only be accomplished with parental
involvement. Adult support, assistance or supervision is a crucial condition in the accomplishment of homework with young students; without it, homework would not be possible. It appears that mothers are doing, and are implicitly expected to be doing, this educational work that is being shifted from school to home. This work is received, understood, and for the most part, accepted (though not without tensions) by mothers as a directive coming from the teacher.

As I discussed in Chapter 5, schools and teachers view parents as integral to the homework process. In my discussion about the Agenda, I showed that homework is often construed as an ‘opportunity’ for parents to participate in an educative ‘partnership’. However, the mothers I spoke with told me that they experienced the ‘opportunity’ more as a one-way directive and much of what I heard in the mothers’ talk indicated that participating in homework is not optional. Parents are informed by teachers about what to expect for homework during Meet the Teacher night in the early fall or through a classroom newsletter at the beginning of the year. Mothers told me that they were not consulted about their participation, or asked whether they were willing or able to participate, which demonstrates the taken-for-grantedness and assumption of involvement present in the practice of elementary homework.

There is a normative and extensive expectation of parent-school cooperation, which includes the assumption that mothers will take on the role of teacher at home and participate in homework. I use the term ‘implicit expectation’ because the teachers I spoke with talked in gender neutral terms. This is important. An event like Meet the Teacher night is addressed to parents and the impression I got from both teacher and mothers was that both mothers and fathers attend this meeting. However, I suggest that at the site of homework, mothers are the implicit target of teachers’ one-way directives on homework; they are the target of discourses of involvement within the broader rationality of neoliberal reform and they are the target of
discourses of motherhood and pedagogicalization of home/family which set gendered expectations and demands particular ways of doing and being. I suggest that it is the strength of these surrounding discourses where gendered expectations infiltrate expectations around homework, though it goes unstated and is therefore implicit. I will continue to draw this idea out throughout this chapter recognizing that it is difficult to make concrete claims when dealing with what is not always explicitly stated.

All of the women I spoke with, regardless of their employment status, marital status and income levels talked about engaging in work specifically directed at supporting their children’s schooling. The mothers in my study all had children in the elementary grades and there was a consensus among them that their involvement was expected by the teachers.

Melinda describes typical homework assignments as consisting of reading, and recording the reading in a log book, weekly spelling exercises and some Math. She says it is usually assigned on a Monday and due back on Friday and communicated through an *Agenda*. Melinda says: “I don’t want to say necessarily that I’m opposed to homework, but in grades one to four, the expectation is very much on the parent.” In addition to describing her involvement in helping her girls organize time to do homework and to ‘stay on task’, she speaks to what she feels is the necessity of being involved with the reading assignments her daughters get. She says:

(one of my daughters) arrived home one day to tell me she did her reading on the bus … well, I know she struggles with some of the words, and just isn’t a strong reader yet, so I know it wasn’t read the way it needed to be.

She goes on to emphasize her perception of the expectation of the parent: “the parent absolutely has to sit down and read with a child at this age, I absolutely have to be a part of it for it to have any effect at all.” Melinda is invested in making sure that homework is done
‘properly.’ She feels that if it is going to be done, it is going to be done correctly. As Melinda continued telling me about what her typical day looks like, it became clear that she is engaging with homework beyond the surface mechanics of assisting with the academic assignment. She and her husband operate a farm, which requires her attention and labour, meaning ‘homework time’ needs to be produced amongst demands from other work.

‘Time’ emerged as a significant theme in my interviews. Mothers told me that involvement with homework involves a purposeful setting aside time to engage with completing homework or overseeing it. Schedules and ‘making time’ or ‘fitting in’ are not automatic, there is work involved. I will show that ‘homework time’ is produced (and sometimes fails to be produced) primarily through the work of mothers. What this means for women in terms of issues of participation in paid/unpaid work and negotiation with partners in terms of division of domestic work, I will come back to.

The nature of the homework assigned for this particular age group means that supervision at the very least is required. Among the mothers I spoke with this often took the form of direct involvement and assistance such as guiding and listening to the child read, assisting with math fact practice and exercises, assisting with spelling exercises, playing a homework game together, and though less concrete but no less important to the process, helping to organize a time, arranging space to do the work, helping to ‘stay on task’, managing emotions and keeping siblings out of the way.

Mothers told me that what needs to be done around homework is dependent on several variables, such as the type of assignment, the number of children in a family and on the child’s abilities and personality. Many mothers expressed that they encountered different experiences with each of their children. Homework, for the most part, is being assigned in a one-size-fits-all
manner (which is consistent with neoliberal reform rationalities of standards and norms). It is no surprise that students are at different academic ability levels, vary in their ability to ‘stay on task’ and vary in their motivation levels to engage with homework, so children are not one-size-fits-all and neither are home situations. All of these factors have a significant impact on what is required from the parent and how involved the parent is willing and able to be.

Alice, a mother of three elementary aged students in grades one, three and five describes her ‘doing’ of homework as being quite different with all three of her children. She stresses that all three require her assistance and supervision, but that her oldest requires regular significant assistance and time, while the youngest requires her participation as a ‘listener’ for daily reading and her middle child is “quite independent”. Her husband is frequently away during the school week on business travel. She is juggling her time to fit homework assistance in – to produce ‘homework time’. Alice says, “the first thing I ask when the kids get home is, what’s for homework?” She says she does this because she knows it takes management to organize both the homework time and everything else that goes on in a given day, such as extracurricular activities and preparing and cleaning up dinner and other domestic work. Her oldest child consistently struggles with the assigned homework and Alice feels that she is put in the position of being teacher at home (one that she admits is not always ideal in her relationship with her son). In addition, she assumes the roles of task master and advocate for her child who may have to go to class the next morning with incomplete homework.

Staying focused here on discussing the ‘doing’ that is involved in the accomplishment of homework, we can see through Alice’s description that there are several ‘levels’ of doing: there is the most obvious ‘mechanics’ of assisting with the actual assigned work; there is the less obvious organizing and producing ‘homework time’; there is the encouraging, motivating and
cajoling (management of emotion); and finally the juggling of three children - how to occupy or keep track of two others while helping one (management of bodies). Alice described several sources of significant tension and conflict that were occurring at the homework site indicating the necessity of ‘coping’ strategies, however, I will focus on tensions, ambivalences and conflict and the ‘coping discourse’ in more detail in the next chapter.

The challenges of making space and time for more than one child are a significant part of the story. In some ways, this mirrors the challenge faced by teachers when they’re urged to focus on each child as an individual, yet they have 20 or more children in their class. Stella described how her younger son would get through his homework quickly, while her older son would take up to an hour or more requiring her help. Susan had a very similar story. She is also a single mother with two kids, one of whom required a great deal of engagement with the homework. Jackie talked about reading to one child while the other was in the tub. Katherine and Rhonda offer contrasting accounts. They each have one child and describe homework time as enjoyable.

Even before all of this, however, mothers are doing much work ‘behind the scenes’. Mothers do many things that influence and support their children’s experiences of schooling. They clothe and feed them and deliver them to school; they teach them many things before they enter school, and continue teaching them over the course of their school life. Mothers provide their children with educational resources – toys, books, computers, work space – and educational experiences that supplement and complement school experiences. They monitor and support students’ work in school by taking an interest in their children’s work, by requiring them to complete their homework, by regulating the time spent viewing television, and by reinforcing the importance of school success. They advocate on their children’s behalf in their dealings with the
school – asking for help, requesting particular placements, perhaps transferring their child from one school to another.

Mothers are taking up and engaging with targeted directives from teachers, they are taking up discourses of involvement that are circulated through government and school documents and texts, targeted to them at the site of homework. In addition, they take seriously their role as teachers at home, but not without tensions. However, it is important to note that despite some very significant tensions, all of the mothers I spoke with complied with what was expected of them in relation to homework.

My analysis of my interviews with mothers suggests that homework is an educational practice that takes time, structuring the day in particular ways and producing various effects and it is something that is actively and purposefully worked into the day. With elementary aged students it requires parental involvement, which the literature, my experience and my research indicates to be mostly mothers, to organize that time (it doesn’t just happen – whereas when students are older and more independent it may ‘just happen’, or at least, the student is expected to take responsibility for completion of homework). This is an example that shows the home-school partnership as discursively constructed and can be thought of as a space where a range of mechanisms, texts, and practices bring together, organize, and produce an assemblage of technologies. Analysis of mothers’ work around homework provides examples of this. Homework mobilizes, through mothers, particular arrangements for organizing and regulating the time and space, activity and bodies of families and schools in particular ways.

Making Homework Work - Being ‘Good’ in Relation to Homework

I have illustrated that mothers are responding to targeted recruitment and are participating in homework. As Chapter 5 illustrated, there is targeted recruitment of parents; it is the gendered
targeting that I argue is implicit. They are taking up the educational work that is being shifted from school to home. I showed that there are several layers of work involved in the completion of homework, and that mothers are an integral part of the process. Similar to the framing of the question in Chapter 5 where I asked, why is homework working and suggested that one of the answers is: because teachers are assigning it. I ask here, how is homework working? One of the answers is: because mothers are participating. Each of these answers is akin to stating the obvious, however, my work is to peel away what is behind the seemingly obvious to reveal the conditions of how the obvious comes to be and what it might tell us about neoliberal forms of governing.

To this point several conditions that allow homework to be promoted have already been described. A key cumulative effect that these conditions in combination with discourses of motherhood (as described in Chapter 2) is the successful linking of doing homework = doing good mothering, in effect constructing specific desired subjectivity and a moral imperative surrounding participation in homework. I explore this imperative further in this section. The daily-ness, the accomplishment of homework, depends upon mothers taking up the subject positioning of the ‘good’ mother.

I got the strong impression from mothers I spoke with that they felt compelled to participate in homework, that they felt there wasn’t really a choice to not participate, despite the lack of explicit homework policy. What compels mothers to participate? How has the assumption of participation in homework become so established and taken for granted? Drawing on feminist poststructural ideas, I consider several questions: who/what defines homework as one of the ‘good’ or correct things to do in terms of young students’ schooling? Through which discourses is this ‘goodness’ constituted? What patterns of desire are generated? Are these patterns of desire
potentially oppressive for mothers and if so, how might a different discourse be counter posed? (Davies, 2000).

A specific question that I addressed to the mothers I interviewed was: is your role in homework participation any different than that of your partner (if they told me they had a partner)? That it is mothers who are most often doing this educational work at home is backed up in what my interview participants told me and in my own personal experience. Each participant, including all of the teachers who were also mothers (and one father), claimed that they ‘took the lead’ on involvement with homework and that if partners were involved they were usually ‘directed’ in their involvement. In addition to direct involvement with actual homework assistance, all of the mothers were also taking the lead on signing school forms, organizing family timetables, communicating with teachers and responding to calls for assistance with fund-raising and other school activities.

Leanne, who works full-time says: “yeah, definitely more of the homework helping falls onto my plate.” She laughs and says, “I have no idea why that happens … but I think it’s just … I’m the one who is home first, you know?” I heard similar statements from many of the mothers. Taken individually, it appears to be chance that things have just worked out this way, and like Leanne laughing and saying she has “no idea” why it is her responsibility to take the lead on homework help when she and her husband both work full-time. Women themselves may not see what is a larger structural phenomenon and defined expectations of mothers and schooling. Perhaps I was particularly attuned to hearing statements like these, as I have experienced the same in my own life. I know from my own experience that homework is consistent work that needs to be accomplished everyday and someone has to do it, which often means making accommodations to do so. Someone is making accommodations, and that someone is usually the
mother. This is an example of a gendered effect of homework and I speculate that this effect is intensified within the context of neoliberalism, as expressed in education reform, as more educational work is being shifted from school to home. Although this is beyond the scope of my research, I find myself wondering if Leanne’s comment speaks to the debate about the so-called ‘opt-out revolution’ (Cossman, 2008; 2003). While Leanne is not ‘opting out’ of paid work completely, she is making decisions and structuring her day so that she is available to be home to help her children with their schoolwork.

Rhonda says that “she feels women are more likely to take on the work of homework assistance because of the emotional side, it’s the nurture.” That women are positioned as responsible and that they do a significantly higher amount of household work, including the care work associated with children’s schooling, is seen as natural - not just to others - but to the women doing this work, the mothers themselves. As I discussed earlier in the thesis, feminists have analyzed how deeply gendered dominant social understandings of caring are, as well as the ways in which discourse shapes the social organization of care-work, in both the paid and unpaid spheres (DeVault, 1991; Poole and Isaacs, 1997). Powerful cultural discourses construct mothers as responsible for their children’s education (David, 1980, 1989, 1998; David et al., 1993; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hutchison, 2007; Reay, 1998, 2000). As I discussed in Chapter 2, the mothering discourse is fundamental to the commitments that mothers, particularly middle-class mothers (Ball, 2006; Dehli, 1988, 2004; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Manicom, 1988; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989), make to educational work with and for their children. According to Griffith and Smith (2005) “the discourse of mothering mobilizes the work, care and worries of mothers in relation to their children’s schooling” (p. 33). Mothers are actively encouraged to view themselves in particular ways and to produce themselves as appropriately gendered subjects in
the home-school relationship. It is this notion of the ‘naturalness’ of women doing this work that compels women to engage in this activity. As I discussed earlier, it is one of the major ways of ‘doing’ gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). We see this playing out in Mindy’s experience. She is a “stay-at-home” mother and understands and takes up the expectation that homework is part of her job. She says: “oh yeah, 100%, I do it all. My husband will sit with the kids and help, but he’s not going to bed stressing or worrying if something didn’t get done.” She recounts once informing her child’s teacher that she would be away for a short period of time and saying: “I’m going to be away, the homework may not get done and this is why … if the kids come to school without a lunch, don’t blame me! (laughing).” She goes on, “it’s the accountability, you know, you’re accountable for it.”

What does this tell us? Embedded in this quote are notions of responsibility, worry, care and accountability, all of which are attached to Mindy and not her husband. Part of what this illustrates is that homework *is* a gendered practice. Mothers are actively encouraged to produce themselves as appropriately gendered subjects with gendered expectations around natural caring and they are taking themselves up as such. Mindy’s example illustrates how schoolwork is absorbed into the gendered division of labour within families; it becomes part of ‘doing’ mothering. We can see that homework rests on this normative discourse that assumes schoolwork to be a part of care work (which includes mothering) and is a practice that both produces, or constructs, gendered subjects but it is also dependent on women acting on this discursively constructed gendered desire ‘to do best’. Mindy is doing the work, and she is implying that her husband may not, and interestingly, that he should not be held accountable for it.
Invitations to participate in homework are implicitly and explicitly intermixed with statements about what good and responsible mothers are ‘naturally’ inclined to do, and with moral injunctions and judgments about what good mothers ought to do to enhance children’s enjoyment of, and achievement in school. My research suggests that families can be thought of as sites of intense regulation (see also Baez and Talburt 2008; Dehli 2004). A key characteristic of neoliberal governance is that ‘choices’ and ‘desires’ are aligned with political objectives, such as creating academically well-prepared students and economically rational individuals (Brown, 2005; Baez & Talburt, 2008).

**Completion/non-completion of homework as a marker/signifier of good/bad mothering.** For mothers to be recognized as competent, they must demonstrate their understanding of the importance of the role of education in their child’s life, particularly in these “uncertain times of increasing competition and change” as we are told over and over again in various education documents. I am not debating whether this is ‘true’ or exaggerated, but I point out that this discourse of uncertainty and risk has the effect of drawing parents in to ‘do their part’ in ensuring that children are prepared for their futures. For mothers this means that they must demonstrate the ability to both recognize and do what is ‘best’ for children. In this context, this requires a demonstration of valuing education, which I have suggested earlier in the thesis, has been discursively framed to include doing homework. To do best for one’s child equates doing good parenting, which equates valuing education, which in turn has come to include doing homework. To not do homework would be to risk one’s child’s chances. A competent mother understands that, or so goes the reasoning.

Here I consider how the mothers I spoke with are negotiating the subject positioning of the ideal, involved mother. I have shown that one of the practices linked to homework is that
mothers are actively doing work around ‘making up’ and presenting themselves as particular types of mothers. The accomplishment of the ‘good, involved mother’ who participates in homework requires that other actions need to be taken. Mothers must learn what is required to be recognized as the desired subject. To accomplish this time needs to be juggled, relations need to be adjusted. Part of the daily-ness of homework is that mothers are making decisions - choosing in their freedom (Rose, 1999) - to act, or not act, become or not become, in accordance with what homework demands; a characteristic of neoliberal governance. The best way for mothers to appear competent and recognizable as ‘good mothers’ to themselves, other mothers, their children and teachers in relation to homework, is to get it done, without complaint. I’ll show through several examples that this often requires that the mother make accommodations and work on herself in various ways.

Nadine experiences tensions around getting homework done, yet she prioritizes the fact that “teacher says”; the teacher has assigned this work, and therefore it will get done. While Nadine talks about her younger son she tells me that he says at one point that “he has no life” because he is so busy with scheduled activities in addition to homework. Between the scheduling of the kids’ activities and her own full-time work obligations the ‘fitting in’ of homework is a challenge for Nadine (and apparently the son). However, it is a challenge that Nadine feels must be prioritized. She says that there is often butting of heads when it comes time to doing homework and that there have been many tears and fights but our philosophy has been, no you’re not going to go in with it incomplete, we are going to, until the bitter end, we are going to get this done.

She goes on to say,
there are no excuses for not getting it done, and maybe the fact that we overscheduled them, or too much going on, too bad so sad, you’re going to get it done….so, it’s like a life lesson kind of thing.

This illustrates that Nadine is acting in a way that is in accordance with being a “good partner” with school. She recognizes what is required of her and she is actively playing a supporting role to what the teachers are asking for, despite the fact that it is causing difficulty on many levels for her and for her kids. Her supporting role is also made evident when she describes having to justify doing homework to her children. She describes saying to them:

you are learning to manage your time, learning to take responsibility and down the road you are going to have tests and you are going to have to learn good skills for how you are going to handle those as you move one.

She reflects on the message she is communicating to her children: “yeah, you really have to justify what the teachers are asking of them”. When I asked if she believed in the justification she was giving to her kids, she answered with a “yes, but…” response. The “but” revealed frustration and ambivalence as to how to actually achieve the qualities that she views as ‘good’ and that she justified to her children. So, despite the “juggling act”, the “butting of heads and many tears”, the “we don’t need another layer of stress in our lives” and the fact that she felt the setting of homework should “be a two –way street with the teacher”, she continues to take up the school defined subject of “good mother/’good partner” and act on herself and her children in a way that gets homework done. It is obvious however, that this ‘take up’ is requiring constant work on herself and her children, and with other competing realities of full-time work and scheduled children, it does not come without difficulty.
The justification that Nadine feels is necessary to keep her children motivated to do their homework might be viewed as a strategy for managing the daily work around homework that is now part of her busy life. She seems to only half believe it herself, although the strength of the directive from the teacher, “teacher says”, is enough to override her doubts about the practice. This might be thought of as a mask, a ‘happy face’ that she needs to get this work done. Nadine negotiates competing discourses and realities as she works on being a competent mother who gets homework done. I speculate that most mothers I spoke with were working with this ‘teacher directive’ implicitly. Power relations in the home-school space become evident as mothers govern themselves and their children as the teacher is upheld as the expert in the relationship. The mothers in my study are acting on the imperative of: if ‘teacher says’ then this must be important, it must be valuable, it is therefore ‘must-do’ work.

In the next section I suggest that it is important for Melinda to understand herself as a good mother and for others to see her this way. Within the discursive construction of ‘doing homework’ = ‘doing best for one’s child’, mothers will work at ‘doing best’, articulating and demonstrating that they value education and the role it plays for their children, and therefore understanding themselves in a way that matches up with inner desires and investments of motherhood and the preferred subject of neoliberal reform, the ideal involved parent.

In our interview Melinda struggled somewhat with the fact that she is finding this work and activity surrounding homework frustrating and at times overwhelming. It is as if a ‘good’ competent mother does not get upset. She describes a homework scene:

I try to get (my older daughter’s) homework done, try to get (my younger daughter’s) homework done and usually I’d be trying to get supper ready at the same time, which
was, you know, too much. And then they’d be struggling and then, in all honesty, I’d get upset.

Perhaps because she was feeling alone in what she seemed to perceive as incompetence to juggle the work of the farm, making dinner, sitting down to listen to one daughter’s reading while helping the other with other homework, she appeared to be hesitant to share her feelings of discomfort and perhaps not quite sure if she could trust me; that I would perhaps judge her as incompetent. As the interview went on and I shared some of my own frustrations, it seemed as though Melinda was relieved and then became more open about other frustrations with homework.

She said:

you know they say 20-30 minutes, but every parent knows the chances of it happening in that time are minimal, by the time they get home they don’t want to focus, I mean, I have had more battles with my oldest daughter over homework than anything else, there have been more times where she’s been in tears and I’ve been yelling, and I just think, ugh, you know? This is not making anything good, the homework isn’t good, the relationship isn’t good, it isn’t helping anything, anything positive anyway.

As she is telling me this, it is clear that she is feeling quite upset, and then there is a self-correction, a pulling back of sorts, perhaps a remembering of who she is supposed to be in relation to her children’s schooling as she tells me: “I feel very strongly they should do it, because I’m very into education.” She lets me know that both she and her husband have graduate degrees, perhaps as proof that education is something she takes seriously. Like Nadine, she appears to accept the expert status of the teacher, “if the teacher says do this, then we will do it –
even if it is difficult.” There is significant tension and contradiction, but Melinda falls into line in being the ‘good supportive mother/partner’.

Similarly, Leanne claims not to particularly enjoy doing homework with her kids and questions its academic value, yet she takes it upon herself to continue to engage with it and make sure it is done. She says:

he (son) doesn’t want to sit down, he’s an outdoor boy, loves to be outside doing stuff, so to sit down at the table doing homework is a challenge…it’s a parent battle, you know? I don’t particularly enjoy it, but I go through it with him.

Later she says:

I had this chat with a girlfriend the other day about the struggles of homework and I said, but at the end of the day, you know, we are parents and we have to support our kids. So, you know, if this is what the school is asking…well, you know, that’s my job as a parent….so, if I’m asked to do 15 minutes of spelling, then it’s like, come on kids get your homework done.

Through analysis of these examples it seems as though these mothers are experiencing homework as a moral imperative, a gendered moral imperative to be more precise. This is expressed in their articulations of “the teacher said” and “I value education” or “education is important to me”. I interpret these comments as mothers wanting to do best for their children, to do good parenting and consequently doing acceptable versions of gendered involvement. Doing homework has become a marker, a signifier, of ‘good’, competent mothering. The most obvious consequence of getting this take-up ‘right’, is to be successfully recognized as the ‘good’/involved mother in relation to homework, to be recognized as acting appropriately and in the child’s best interest. Taken a step further and in more governmental terms, these mothers are
seen as good partners in a very important and crucial project – developing citizens of the nation and securing national human capital – and thus, “the government of reason and of reasonable people is assured” (Walkerdine, 1988).

The above examples illustrate how mothers demonstrate their competence, which may also be seen as demonstrating accountability to the teacher. In contrast, the following example suggests that this subject positioning operates in another way, one that allows the parent more, perhaps privileged, access to the school and teacher. Along with the recognition of being the ‘good’/involved mother comes a degree of power that may show itself in the form of parent access to teachers. Katherine is a mother who mobilizes purposeful involvement with the expressed intent of increased access to teachers and a window to the classroom. It was my impression that Katherine, more than any of the mothers I spoke with, has taken up the positioning of ‘teacher at home’ with great enthusiasm. Interestingly, as compared to most of the other mothers whose primary complaint around homework was time pressure, Katherine saw her son as having too much free time and worked at structuring his time with academic activities, directed by her.

Katherine struck me as being very ‘proactive’ in relation to her son’s schooling. For example, she talked about e-mailing the teacher before the school year started in order to “begin communications” and to be able to preview the work so that her son would be better prepared (he is an English as an Additional Language student). She seemed very confident and clear and upfront about her work in relation to her son’s schooling and in saying this, I am implying that many of the other mothers in my study perhaps have similar motivations and ambitions for their children in relation to schooling, yet are less willing to admit it, name it or possibly even see it. Katherine explained that she chose to participate on the Home and School board so that Joey
could see that she was involved with the school. She added that it was “a way into the school” and said, “I also liked to know about the environment at school and if I met teachers in the hallway, we could exchange ideas”. Katherine talked about keeping a “constant communication between me and the teacher”. She seemed to expect a full and equal partnership between the teacher and herself. Unlike many of the other mothers, there was no talk of worrying about ‘rocking the boat’ or hesitance in communicating with the school.

The fact that all the mothers I spoke with complied with homework requirements (that are operating as expectations, not written in policy) is very interesting to me. Viewed from a governmentality perspective, homework at this level is successful to the extent that it engages individuals (mothers in this case) in practices of self-regulation or self-government (du Gay, 1996; Popkewitz, 1998). The examples I’ve given illustrate that, to varying degrees, mothers actively govern themselves so as to manage their children to accomplish the task of homework. However, while most mothers I spoke with were able to take on the repertoires that are available to them to be ‘good’ mothers, it is important to remember that this take-up is both complex and unpredictable. As several of the interviews show, homework is contested. Not all mothers recognize themselves in the terms laid out for the ‘good’ mother and participating partner, nor are these terms equally available to all mothers. As Walkerdine (1990) reminds us, the presence of a discourse and the subject positions it provides, neither guarantees its effectiveness nor its “take up.”

As increased levels and forms of involvement are asserted as what all ‘good parents’ should do, new forms of surveillance, regulation and judgment are imposed. At several points the excerpts above illustrate that mothers are concerned about judgment surrounding completion or non-completion of homework. As discussed earlier, part of the daily-ness of homework is that
mothers are making decisions, apparently choosing in their freedom to act, or not act, in accordance with what homework demands. However, homework is discursively framed in such a way that to choose not to participate means accepting the risk of failure and the production of another subject positioning at the site of homework, that of the ‘bad’ mother.

In Chapter 5, I discussed homework as a two-way accountability tool. The judgment that mothers feel in relation to homework, observed in comments such as “they are going to think I’m a poor parent,” acts effectively to keep mothers accountable to teachers. Mindy, for example, needs to justify her decision to not do homework. She says:

if it’s a nice sunny day they’re going outside and they are going to play, and I’m OK with that. I will be stressed about the fact that they have not done their homework, but I try really hard not to be and think, it’s OK, sometimes those things are more important.

Later she says:

I mean, you’re in school ‘till 3:00, then you’re raced off to horseback riding lessons, then you eat, have a bath and go to bed and the next night you’ve got to go to hockey with your brother and everyday is just so structured with activities and obligations that….it just doesn’t seem like there is enough time for play right now.

Mindy struggles with the time that homework takes, and thus takes away from free time and wonders about benefits:

so is there any benefit, I don’t know. If they can do it in school, why do more of it at home, unless it is enriched work, which it isn’t, so is it just a waste of time? Struggling at home is not going to help them.

It seems as though Mindy has fairly strong opinions about how she would like things to be, and yet, she is reluctant to share her opinions with her children’s teachers. In their minds she
wants to remain the supportive, compliant mother who does what is asked of her. Rather than bluntly declaring that it was a sunny day and therefore the kids did not do their homework, I got the impression that she hoped it would slide under the radar. Mindy is effectively being governed at a distance. She’s not going to ‘blow off’ homework, at least not without feeling very guilty about it. In this sense, mothers are ‘learning reform’ as they govern themselves and learn to organize time, space and relations in order to get homework done.

**Being nice: doing mothering, doing homework, doing gender, with expected feminized ways of being/doing.** As I stated early in this chapter, with the subject positions produced in home-school relations comes gendered expectations of actions, attitudes, particular ‘ways of being’ – the capacities for conduct – what is, or is not, ‘normal’ behavior for a mother in relation to schooling. This is what comes to be recognizable as the ‘good’ mother who falls in line with homework participation expectations, or those who do not, the ‘bad’ mother who requires intervention. Here I want to explore further what I suggest are the gendered ways of being and doing that are both framed and demonstrated at the site of homework.

I have shown that recognizability as a credible and competent ‘good’ mother in relation to children’s schooling depends on making the right choices, and being seen to be making the right choices. The behaviors that are required to ‘get it right’, to be the ‘good’ involved mother, are defined through discourse. They come to be understood by individuals in terms of what it means to be a mother (not just a parent) in relation to schooling. We see mothers acting as self-governing individuals who bring themselves in line with both what they feel is expected of them and what feels morally right, or natural, which I have suggested is deeply gendered. Similar to the teachers’ self-governing this is an example of how “reform” operates through self-reflexive practices and “labour of identity” (Adkins and Lury, 1999).
The following excerpts from the transcripts further illustrate how mothers are ‘doing gender’ while doing homework. Being nice, avoiding confrontation, doing relationship work, being compliant – all of these are expected ways of being feminine, or ‘doing gender’, and are expected of women generally in society. These examples show that feminine ways of being are present in homework practice. Many of the mothers I spoke to were reluctant to question the teacher’s approach to homework. There seemed to be a hesitance to undermine the teacher’s authority and I got the feeling that in questioning homework mothers were worried that they or their children might be seen as a problem, that they might be seen as a problem or that they, or their children, would potentially face negative consequences.

Melinda provided an example of an issue that is bothering her with her daughter’s homework. She feels that the spelling homework her daughter is receiving is not of much academic value, which is a seemingly mild issue, however on a deeper and more serious level, Melinda worries about the effect that bringing it up will have on her relationship with the teacher.

Melinda: I don't know...you see we're at a new school this year, so I feel like I'm flailing a little as to how much I can say … we missed the meet the teacher … (my daughter’s) teacher told us that she doesn't do any spelling in the class...

Nicky: Yeah, I think it's (spelling) a really easy thing for teachers to assign for homework.

Melinda: Yes, I can certainly see why they would assign it...I mean, there's a book...but, some of these exercises, they don't even relate...so, I'd like to know how I could take that up in the school....I don't know the school well enough yet to take this up.

Nicky: Sorry, take what up?
Melinda: Take up this, that (my daughter) is getting this homework that relates to nothing else at all...you know there have been things in the media saying this sort of thing shouldn't be happening, yet it's happening, so....I’d like to know, is the principal even aware? I don't know the teachers well enough to know if I can take that up with them...

Nicky: What's your worry? What's your hesitance about confronting them with this?

Melinda: I found her (the teacher) fairly stern.

Nicky: So are you worried that if you say something that your daughter will actually feel the repercussions?

Melinda: Well....maybe...not so much. I'm just not a... I just don't like confrontation myself, so maybe it's just my own hesitance not to get into a confrontational situation with anybody...I want to have an open, friendly relationship with this teacher. I'm not so much worried about the repercussions for (my daughter), rather than the damaged relationship between her and I....I didn't get the sense that she'd be open for change.

From this excerpt we can see that it is very important to Melinda that she maintains a good relationship with her child’s teacher and to do so she feels that she must remain ‘non-confrontational’. While Melinda says that “I just don’t like confrontation”, I speculate that this hesitance to speak up may go deeper. She is behaving in an expected feminine manner and that this hesitance highlights the power relations that are present in this gendered home-school moment. Who has the authority to speak and to decide what educational activities have ‘value’ and what the repercussions of being ‘confrontational’ may be?

Stella also worries about the effect that speaking up about issues around homework may have on her child. In our interview Stella recounted having significant difficulty with her son’s homework assignments causing much stress and anxiety for both she and her son. She attempted
to negotiate with her son’s teacher but felt that the teacher was not responsive enough to the situation, which prompted me to ask whether she spoke with the principal of the school.

Stella: you automatically assume that the principal is going to take the teachers point of view...you know, so then you've got two to deal with, you don't want to make things more difficult

Nicky: I do think that there is a hesitation to come forward…to have any sort of confrontation is seen as…very negative

Stella: yeah, like you’re going to ruin it for your kid for the rest of the year.

The concern that Stella is “going to ruin it for (her) kid” indicates what mothers feel is at stake if they are seen to be acting in a way that is outside of the expected gendered norms in home-school relations. Similarly in the next excerpt, Mindy is concerned about what may happen to relations if she is to be seen as ‘overstepping’ the expected norms of home-school relations.

Mindy: my son’s best friend's mother is at the school every day....a bit of a micro-manager … she drops him off almost every day, is there for lunch money or various things, is there 10 minutes before school ends inside in the lobby, she's there, they know her and she did say something to the principal (about a difficult situation with homework that was happening in Mindy’s child’s classroom) ...but, it's all taken in context, you know, so if this is a person always complaining about something that might not mean as much. I'm very non-confrontational so it's not so easy for me to do that, so I might have just ridden on her coattails a little bit. I'm trying to remember if I ever said anything, you know, I may have in a sort of round-about way. I am at the school a lot, but I don't want to be...to seem overbearing...like the micromanager

Nicky: right, mmmmm
Mindy: yeah, I worry a wall might go up there.

In these excerpts we see the mothers being non-confrontational, remaining ‘nice’ and doing relationship work to keep things as smooth as possible. In these examples we can see that gender is produced and operates in mothering talk and practices.

At first I read these narratives as the mothers just being nice. Theirs seemed like a feminized version of nice, mothers not wanting to rock the boat and avoiding confrontation. This was quite surprising to me. I didn’t expect mothers to be as tentative in their relations with teachers as many of them were. But as I analyzed my interviews more closely, I was struck by the apparent strength of homework as a site of surveillance of mothers. When I repeatedly observed that mothers worried about their mothering being judged, or were concerned about what the repercussions might be for their child, or for them if they were to speak up, I began to see this hesitance as representative of something more disconcerting. Indeed, it emerged as a point at which relations of power were made evident in women’s lives. In addition to illustrating how the mothers are ‘doing gender’ in their homework performance, these narratives reveal significant power relations at work. Moreover, the level of surveillance and judgment, and the fear of reprisals from teachers, bring the notion of ‘partnership’ into question. If one ‘partner’ (the mother) is submissive to the authority and expertise of the other (the teacher), then it really is no partnership at all. It is falsely and misleadingly named.

There is much official rhetoric in educational discourse emphasizing ‘good home-school relationships’, ‘strong partnership’ and the importance of homework for the common good of children/students, and yet these examples raise questions about the very nature of ‘partnership’, how ‘partners’ are to behave and the expected gendered roles within the partnership. The persistent repetition of these messages is part of the process of normalization, which makes this
particular ordering of social relations appear as the only possible or legitimate arrangement, and becoming a ‘regime of truth’. This ‘regime of truth’ has allowed for, and propagated the assumption and expectation of gendered parental participation in elementary homework. What is understood as possible and desirable is shaped by the persistent, yet seemingly benign, regulatory practices of government through public institutions.

**Homework as a Technology of Neoliberal Governance Working on and Through Mothers**

I have used governmentality to understand neoliberalism as working through subjects in multiple ways, in this case focusing on mothers and what compels them to participate in homework. I have shown that in homework we have an example of responsibilities for social risks being shifted onto the domain of the individual and that there is a restructuring of government techniques targeting “responsible” and “rational” subjects. In relation to education, parents are positioned to be responsible and rational, and doing homework is one way this responsibility is exercised. Chapters 5 and 6 have illustrated that the power of expectation and assumption operating on and through both teachers and mothers is strong and effective. Policy is apparently not needed to direct this educational practice. Baez and Talburt (2008) argued similarly in their study of ‘how to help your child with homework’ pamphlets. These non-coercive enticements enable what Foucault called the “art of government”, the creation of continuity between the ideals of the state and the action of citizens so that all subjects govern themselves effectively, “which means that individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (Foucault, 1991b).

I have shown that mothers are receiving messages of what it is to be an ideal ‘good’ mother in relation to their children’s schooling from various places. This subject positioning is simultaneously being constructed and recruited in documents surrounding homework such as
government documents, school websites, the Student Agenda, parenting magazines and the media. With the subject positionings produced come expectations of particular ways of being, or capacities for conduct. My research show that when mothers are solicited, primarily implicitly, to participate in homework, the appeal is made to them as gendered individuals who value education and want to do best for their child, who understand the importance of the partnership between home and school, who want their child to succeed, who understand the risk of failure and that it is a competitive environment ‘out there’. This ideal ‘good’ mother is available and willing to become the necessary teacher at home. We saw in this chapter that this involves setting aside time to help with homework, setting up a suitable physical space to do homework (one that is quiet, without interruption from siblings or other distractions). An important point to highlight is that this is a subject position not equally available to everyone. She also must be able to help – she must be literate, patient and a lifelong learner, someone who values education and incorporates ‘teachable moments’ into daily life. Through successful participation in homework mothers are able to present themselves as competent mothers, ‘good’ mothers – as partners who value education. The behaviors that are required to ‘get it right’, to be the ‘good’ mother/partner, are defined through discourse and come to be understood by individuals. ‘Normal’ versus ‘abnormal’ behavior is recognized. To be recognizable as a credible and competent ‘good’ mother in relation to children’s schooling depends on making the right choices, and on being seen to be making them.

Although my research showed that mothers are participating in homework and are, for the most part, achieving recognition as ‘good’ mothers, there is evidence of conflict and tension. The mothers I spoke with are working hard to make homework work. They are making adjustments in the daily scheduling of other family activities and they are giving up time that
they may choose to use in other ways, they are managing people and emotions. In these ways they are governing their own conduct as they negotiate competing discourses and directives from teachers.

As mothers work to ‘be good’ and recognized as competent in relation to homework we are able to see neoliberal governance working on and through mothers in gendered ways and homework can be viewed (again) as a governing technology. Through mothers as they mobilize what they take up to be ‘truth’ of homework being ‘best practice’ by facilitating the work that needs to be done in order for the child to complete homework; on mothers as they actively work to become the desired ‘good’ mother – one who successfully participates and completes homework. This provides another illustration of “governing at a distance”, a characteristic of neoliberal governance, targeting and operating through women’s normative and moral identification and nurturing roles as mothers. This description of self-management is thoroughly consistent with Foucault’s elaboration of the increasing invisibility of governmentality in modern society (Foucault, 1977a; Gore, 1998).

In the next chapter I continue to explore the gendered moral imperatives circulating at the site of homework and the construction of desire (to do best) that gets interwoven with doing good mothering and doing homework. Working with these theoretical ideas in the next chapter, and paying closer attention to tensions, conflicts and ambivalences in narratives from both teachers and mothers, I look to destabilize the obviousness of asserting that homework is necessary, parental involvement is always ‘good’ and that mothers are ‘naturally’ inclined to help children with homework. How successful homework as a governing technology is and what some of the effects of homework may be are addressed in Chapter 7.
Chapter 7 – How Homework Is not Working

Thus far I have examined several conditions (material, social and discursive) that allow homework to be promoted. I have suggested that homework is operating in such a way to position teachers and mothers in particular ways and that it has a governing effect on both mothers and teachers. I have discussed how the practice of homework can be viewed as one practice among many acting as a governing technology in neoliberal times of (ongoing) education reform. Moreover, I suggest that as a technology of reform it appears to be successful to the extent that rationalities of government, practices and desires have been interwoven and taken up as an integral aspect of teaching and parenting. I argue that my research illustrates that ‘doing homework’ and ‘doing’ good teaching and good mothering have been successfully linked, and for the most part, teachers and mothers are participating in accomplishing homework.

Up to this point, I have presented a fairly systematic and diagnostic application of governmentality as an analytical tool. In this chapter I complicate the idea of homework as a governing rationality and technology by examining the incompleteness of homework. I aim to complicate the ‘good’ mother, the ‘good’ teacher, the ‘goodness’ of homework, and the ‘goodness’ of parental involvement/partnership. Doing so, I point to gaps, tensions and ambivalences in the organization, impact and ‘take-up’ of this form of neoliberal government.

In Chapter 6 I touched upon some of the difficulties that mothers experienced in relation to getting homework done. The discussion about how mothers worked upon themselves to ensure homework completion certainly indicates that homework is not happening seamlessly. Here I will explore in greater detail some of these tensions. There were many ambivalences, mixed emotions and complications that both teachers and mothers conveyed in their narratives about homework in their everyday lives, indicating that although it appears that homework is getting
done, homework may not be working in ways that it is prescribed, and its effects may subvert some of the individual and social hopes vested in it. As well, individuals don’t always ‘fall into line’ with roles prescribed for them, or they do so with mixed feelings.

I argue that homework may, in fact, be working to undermine relations between schools and families, making people (particularly mothers) feel inadequate, frustrated and angry and it may be a practice that is operating in a way to further engender an already gendered space. The example I gave earlier was my interpretation of Leanne’s ‘choice’ about being the first one home and therefore the one to assist with homework completion. We might think of these examples of ambivalence and complexity as “messy actualities” (O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997, p. 507), that homework is not necessarily the simple, straightforward, harmless and beneficial practice that it is most often promoted as. I argue that attending to the “messy actualities” of “what actually happens” we can pay attention to the uncertainty, contradiction and doubt that is present in the practice of homework.

I begin this chapter with examples of tension, conflict, doubt and ambivalence that I heard in interviews with teachers and mothers. I take up the theme of time specifically as it emerged as a dominant theme, particularly for mothers. I look at what I have called the ‘coping discourse’ and suggest that an effect of this discourse is to frame and maintain homework as an individual problem. Next, I examine some of the unintended effects of homework revealing classed and gendered consequences at a broader societal level. I then look at contradictions and ambivalences revealed in teachers’ talk as they go back and forth between their teacher and mother perspectives and question the stability of expertise and authority in this home-school space.
Theoretically in this chapter I continue to work with the ideas about how contemporary neoliberal modes of government operate indirectly and “at a distance” (Dean, 1999). According to Rose (1996), neoliberal government is most effective when individuals are “recruited” into what he calls the exercise of “regulated freedom”. Modern forms of government individualize in such a way that subjects understand their actions as based in autonomous choice and freedom to act. “Freedom” thus becomes crucial to social administration, which in turn, appears to produce “freedom” (Popkewitz, 1999). I have worked to show that mothers and teachers ‘choose’ to participate in homework in their desire to be ‘good’ mothers and teachers. They desire to ‘do best’ and homework has been discursively constructed to be a part of that. I will explain this and illustrate with examples from my interviews further in this chapter, building on the discussions in chapters 5 and 6 that explore discourses that come to frame moral incitements to involvement with homework.

**Time**

In my discussions with mothers and teachers, there were numerous accounts suggesting that homework is not always working smoothly. There was much talk about tensions around time for various reasons, references to ‘stress’ and, outside of my discussions, my observations of the proliferation of the ‘coping’ with homework discourse. As I explained earlier, teachers prescribe homework according to a standard that is referred to as the ten-minute rule. This ‘rule’ states that, as children advance through school, homework should be assigned according to formula that multiplies grade level by ten minutes. Thus, homework assigned in grade one should take 10 minutes to complete, while homework in the second grade should be completed in 20 minutes. This is consistently stated and referred to in the wider homework literature and it is how the teachers I spoke with told me that they assigned homework. It seems that this has become
common sense among teachers and an accepted method for dealing with homework. However, mothers told me that this guideline very often does not work, and that it often takes longer than the prescribed amount of time for their children to complete assigned work. This emerged as one of the central points of tension around homework.

In my interview with Melinda she says: “you know they say 20-30 minutes, but every parent knows the chances of it happening in that time are minimal, by the time they get home, they don't want to focus.” I know from my own experience as a mother that assignments often take more, or sometimes less, than the prescribed time. Fatigue, general mood, lack of interest and/or focus and level of understanding of the task at hand have always been factors in how quickly or slowly homework gets completed with my own children.

Leanne describes her frustration in cajoling her son into settling in to get homework done; the homework time recommendation does not factor in this time. She says:

The oldest fella, he's a smart child, very intelligent, but will procrastinate.... beyond, you know?... he just doesn't want to sit down after being in school all day...he's an outdoor boy, doesn't want to sit down. He doesn't like video games, he's not into that kind of stuff but he loves to be outside doing stuff, so to sit down at the table doing homework is a challenge. I've been pointing out to him lately that he'll do 25 minutes of procrastination to do five minutes of work. It’s very frustrating.

Susan describes different circumstances for not being able to accomplish homework in the prescribed time guideline. She says:

(My son) he takes a lot more time because he struggles, he's got some learning difficulties so his attention span, just, it takes a lot longer for him to get things done than an average seven year old, so it's very stressful.
This was echoed by Alice, Mindy and Stella, all of whom had one child who was struggling with the academic work to some degree. Because homework for the most part, is assigned in a one-size-fits-all, standardized format, it is not at all surprising that students will complete the work in different timeframes. Moreover, even though many teachers have instructed parents to stop after the recommended time, many don’t do so, for various reasons: because kids don’t want to go back to school with unfinished homework and as discussed in the previous chapter, most mothers don’t want to be seen as not being able to get it done. Mindy illustrates how the time guideline for homework becomes problematic for her:

They say you shouldn't be spending more than 15 minutes (in grade one), well if I sit down with (my daughter) and she doesn't know the words, the book alone might take 15 minutes, so then what, do I tell her? Let's forget the rest, don't bother with the written stuff because we've already spent 15 minutes? Do I say, hurry, hurry, hurry.... when she's incapable of doing it quickly? Do I write in the spot (in the Agenda), we already spent the time just reading? I think the teacher might be fine with that, but I don't think (my daughter) would, so even though the teachers put that out there, she has to understand that it isn't only up to the parent, you know, the kids know. It's a tough call, it really is.

I argue that this widely accepted ten-minute rule can be viewed as one of a large number of ways that schools operate through standards and norms. It fits neatly into a host of other practices that are organized into standard units of time, space and ability. The method of assigning homework in terms of time gives the illusion of simplicity, straight-forwardness and harmlessness. In contrast, my research suggests that it masks the ‘messiness’ of students’ individual academic abilities, different household conditions, family organizations and so on. The ten-minute rule has the effect of mothers feeling unreasonable and perhaps inadequate if
they complain, which as discussed in the previous chapter is counter to expected actions of a ‘good’ mother in relation to homework. Later, I argue that it also has the effect of minimizing the space for resistance to homework, as the thinking seems to be: who can say no to 20 minutes (grade two recommendation) of homework? How bad can that be? Here it emerges that for some of the women who spoke with me it really can be very bad. In what follows mothers describe stress, conflict and difficulties arising through homework.

As a reminder, Stella is a single mother working full-time and has two elementary aged boys. She says,

As a single parent, by the time we get home and have our evening, you know you get home at 5:30 or 6:00 and make supper and everything else, we'd be sitting at the table for an hour, hour and a half trying to get this (extra) homework done, plus his regular homework on top, so it was pretty difficult…and the children are tired by 7:30….and…it wasn't fun…I work probably between 40 and 50 hours/per week and last year I had just started a new job so I had to put in extra hours, there was no way I couldn't and a lot of times I'd have to take work home…so, a typical day was come home at 5:30 or 6:00, cook dinner, and some people have said have your kids do their homework while you make dinner, but I can't, because you can't give them the attention that they need.

Stella went on to explain that her son was having “some emotional issues” and she says “then an extraordinary amount of homework. He would end up in tears almost every single night. There were many nights where both of us sat there and cried, because, you know, sometimes it was just overwhelming.”

The ‘fitting in’ of homework into the day was a reported source of stress for many of the mothers I spoke with, and clearly it was very difficult for Stella. For many of the women in full-
time paid employment time spent on homework with children was even more pressurized because it had to be concentrated into smaller amounts of contact time with their child; this seemed to be further exaggerated with single mothers working outside of the home. Stella represents an example in which tensions are high due to being a single parent working full-time outside of the home, and with a child struggling in terms of behavioral and academic performance. Stella’s situation reveals how in looking at the ‘everyday’ these tensions and conflicts are highlighted rather than swept under the carpet as they normally are in discussion of homework that focus on standardized norms and whether homework does or does not contribute to academic achievement.

Feminist poststructuralism proposes that subjectivity is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). Different discourses position people differently – as woman, wife, mother and so on. For these diverse, overlapping, co-existent discourses to become a “discourse of the real,” to gain coherence and be effective in the world, they must be organized and repeated in and through everyday talk and practices (Cullum, 2000, p. 65). Perhaps some of the struggle around time that is evident in Stella’s account is that there are competing discourses telling women what they should be doing, in combination with the economic reality of large numbers of women in the paid workforce.

Diane Reay has highlighted the importance of mothers’ emotional responses and investments in their children’s schooling and has established the gendered nature of this form of work (1998, 1998b, 1998c, 2004). Kirsten Hutchison, drawing upon Reay’s work, also identifies guilt, anxiety, frustration along with empathy and encouragement in mothers’ work with homework. As I analyzed my interviews with mothers, language of tension, conflict and
ambivalence was apparent and prolific, similar to the range of emotions experienced by the women in Reay’s and Hutchison’s studies as a consequence of their pedagogical work. Although my interviews were likely skewed somewhat in that the women who chose to participate in a research project about homework were more likely to have ‘issues’ with the topic, my research illustrates that narratives of ‘tears’, ‘battles’ and ‘stress’ are part of the everyday lived experience of homework for some women. The following excerpts from my interviews further echo these experiences:

Nadine says:

Oh, we’ve had tears, we’ve always had tears and fights. Part of our problem is that my husband works until 6:30, and I actually work until 5:30. I’m supposed to work until 5:45, so the timing of homework turns into a real challenge for us … we don’t need another layer of stress.

Mindy’s comments are similar: “Oh I’d cry, he’d cry. We’d be spending half an hour, or more, every night (in grade one)…and I’m not sure that’s the goal, to make kids cry at the table.”

Melinda describes the tensions surrounding homework:

I don’t think all our harping at the kitchen table has been helpful. I’ve had more battles with my oldest daughter than anything else, there have been more times where she’s been in tears and I’ve been yelling, and I just think, ugh, you know? This is not making anything good…the homework isn’t good, the relationship isn’t good, it isn’t helping anything….just the stress it puts on everyone in the household. The girls are picked up by bus at about 7:35 a.m. and they are home at about 3:50, it's just the time when the girls are coming home that the chores (on the farm) need to be done...which is part of the reason why homework has always been a bit of a struggle because if we leave it until
after supper...there's just not much time after supper if you want to get your kids to bed at a reasonable hour, and we do... I look at it like we've only got 3 and a half hours between the time they get home from school and bedtime, so in that time we're trying to do the barn work, have supper and get the homework done...it doesn't leave much time, it really doesn't...we often hurry through it. I really hate to make her sit down and do it, as I said, she's got this little block of time. So, I look at it as an hour of time. (My younger daughter’s) homework is supposed to take 20-30 minutes, I think, and (my older daughter’s) is 30-45, so to me that an hour to an hour and 15 of my time too.

For Leanne, too, homework is a source of tension, as she says:

It’s a parent battle, you know? I don’t enjoy it, but I go through it with him. Parents don’t wake up in the morning and think, OK, how can I fight with my kids today, right? That’s not why we had kids, but it’s like, sometimes over homework assignments, that’s what it becomes. No fun.

Janice says (referring to her son’s late project):

I didn’t want him to fail the project and at the same time I was angry with him for bringing it home so late and putting such a big stress upon us. With (my son), he’ll forget and forget, and then we have to get mad, and I just don’t want to battle.

At the time of the interview Janice was working 2/3 day with a one year old and three elementary aged children,

It is a big chunk of time, and I know they say it's only half an hour, but half an hour in a day is...it's a lot of time, really, when there are so many other things going on, yeah, to spend half an hour with each of them, trying to help them would be ridiculous, you can't do that and you've got dinner to make and laundry and all the other jobs in the house.
Finally, Susan, who is a single mother going to school full-time at the time of the interview, lamented:

it was too much homework. It's a sin. To sit down...you work a long day, the kids go to school, that's a long day for them, you come home, you cook, you eat, you tidy up, and then you have to do an hour (emphasis) of homework... that's a lot ...yeah, it was like this, this, this, this...I gotta get that done, so I can get that done, so that we can get this done. It’s so stressful….for me, for him, for his little sister.

As Griffith and Smith (2005) point out, the time available to families to complement the educational work of the school has been significantly reduced in recent years (p. 130). The Vanier Institute of the Family (2002) report that 78.6% of married mothers with children between 6-14 were employed. Paradoxically, parents (in practice mothers) are being asked to spend ever-increasing amounts of time supporting educational activities while ever-growing numbers of women are in the paid workforce. From the excerpts above it seems as though the realities of women’s lives are not taken into consideration when it is assumed they are available to monitor or participate in homework. Given this, the reports of stress, tension, tears and battles are not surprising. Griffith & Smith (2005) argue that there is no recognizable economy of women’s time as mothers. The mothering discourse presupposes that mothers’ time is indefinitely expandable and expendable. Hence, not having time is no excuse for failures to meet its expectations. As I discussed in Chapter 6 ‘homework time’ is produced (and sometimes fails to be produced) primarily through the work of mothers and it is largely unrecognized as work, rather it is enveloped into what is expected of mothers in their caring capacities. These are significant factors, with real effects, for women who are being asked to do the educational work that is being shifted to the home through the practice of homework. The excerpts above illustrate
that some of the effects are manifesting in narratives of tension, conflict, stress, tears and ‘battles’.

My interviews suggest similarities in the ways that notions of time and stress are discussed in relation to homework. I argue that ‘stress’ is a gendered emotional response produced in the power relations present at the site of the home-school intersection. As Mindy, Nadine and Leanne described in the previous chapter, it is them and not their husbands who experience ‘stress’ or ‘guilt’ over difficulties with homework. This was echoed by many of the other mothers I spoke with, including the teachers when speaking from their ‘mother perspective’. Jackie, a teacher speaking from her ‘mother perspective’ suggests that homework gets lumped in with what she sees as the “bucket of guilt” that accompanies being a mother:

I think that when you have a child, it is really born with a bucket of guilt. From the minute they are born, am I breast-feeding? Am I eating the right food? You are always second guessing, but my husband is soundly sleeping while I am lying awake listening for the baby. And it doesn’t end.

The notion of ‘stress’ and this idea of “bucket of guilt” implies felt responsibility amidst structural constraints and tells us something about women’s take up of the gendered subject positioning that targets them as being morally responsible for aspects of their children’s schooling. Reports of ‘stress’ reveals that mothers care, or are invested, otherwise it would not be experienced as stress, and there would not be this emotional response. It is helpful to think about the investment that mothers are making from a feminist poststructuralist perspective to consider the gendered discourses that produce the desires that are present in a given practice (Davies, 2000). What this personal investment means for women in other aspects of their lives, who this investment is available to and how we might detach ourselves from these personal investments
become central questions with this framework. My thinking about mothers and how they become invested in particular positions and discourses was further informed by Kristin Smith’s (2010) use of Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) idea of the ‘defended subject’. They explain that the concept of the defended subject allows a researcher to attend to how and where subjects may become invested in particular positions within discourses in order to protect vulnerable aspects of the self against the discomforts associated with contradictions that they encounter in their daily lives. I am suggesting that talk about ‘stress’ reveals the responsibility and accountability they feel and the investment mothers make in being/becoming the ‘good’ mother in relation to homework and it reveals some of the difficulties and contradictions that are present when we examine a practice like homework in its everyday context. In this and previous chapters we see examples of mothers and teachers ‘telling themselves’ in particular ways in order to protect vulnerable aspects of themselves at the site of homework, which I have illustrated and argued is a site of surveillance and accountability. I have shown that the moral imperative to be seen (by oneself and others) as a ‘good’ mother and/or a ‘good’ teacher is very strong and talk of stress, tears, tension and conflict reveals the emotion experienced when the desired subject positioning that homework demands is difficult to achieve.

My interviews demonstrate that there is significant emotion produced at the site of homework, something that is supported by several other researchers (Ball, 2006; David, 1998; Hutchison, 2006). As I discussed earlier, the tendency for both mothers and teachers is to deal with difficulties surrounding homework quite privately. Nobody wants to be viewed as incompetent, even in the face of very real structural constraints. It was only after I had conducted my interviews and analyzed them that I came to pay attention to what I now think of as a ‘coping
discourse’. Produced from the frequently reported ‘stress’ response is a proliferation of ‘ways to cope’ with that reported stress.

The number of sources for ‘how to help with homework’ are abundant. On many of the school websites I looked at, there was no stated policy on homework, but there were many links to ‘how to help your child with homework’ websites with ‘tips and strategies’ about how to avoid stress and be successful in helping with your child’s homework. The proliferation of these ‘how to help with homework’ sources suggests that this has come to be seen by education institutions as a ‘problem’ that needs to be addressed. It also suggests that learning to ‘do parenting’ is being transformed into its own educational project, one that is being promoted in schools through texts such as The Agenda, and one that is being marketed outside of schools as we can see through the proliferation of ‘how to’ books targeted to parents in the private marketplace. In these texts we can see parent pedagogies proliferating in popular culture.

Parents receive ‘help’ to mitigate the stress they experience as individuals helping children with homework. These tips and strategies, the coping discourse, do not approach parenting as a ‘group’ problem, rather tips and strategies are targeted to the individual in ways that she can work upon herself in self-improvement. Indeed, the term ‘coping’ implies individual action. The message seems to be that if we are struggling with homework, it is because of shortcomings inherent in each of us, and we are advised to better ourselves, as individuals, in order to measure up to the norm and do justice to our children. This serves as another example of how homework operates as a technology of neoliberal governance; a morally charged discourse that taps into vulnerable areas of ourselves. Mothers who spoke with me take it to be a reflection of their inadequate parenting if they are having difficulty, or perhaps they see it as something ‘wrong’ with their child. Either way, homework seems to operate in a way that is individual and
private, obscuring how experiences of frustration and stress are in fact quite common. The individualizing orientation of homework masks the collective nature of the problem, and it ignores that the problem may have more structural roots than simply “providing your child with a quiet and well-lit space to work” as some of the ‘coping’ literature would suggest. The extent to which parents keep this private and understand it as an individual ‘problem’ to be individually worked upon, in many ways speaks to the success of this mode of neoliberal governing strategies. And yet, I argue later in this chapter that its success is tenuous and that the term ‘coping’ certainly indicates that something isn’t working in a complete and uncomplicated way.

One strand of governmentality studies is concerned with the privatization of social problems and the proliferation of practices that recruit and compel individuals into practices of self-management and self-improvement (Cruikshank, 1996). These sources of ‘how to help’, whether they are in the form of websites, school, school board or Ministry of Education pamphlets or seminars can be thought of as technologies of homework, in the same way that I have proposed that we think of the Student Agenda. These websites, documents, seminars and books are working in pedagogical ways to construct particular subjectivities and work to prescribe specific kinds of conduct. Again, similar to the Student Agenda, we can see these technologies operating at a distance to achieve broader governmental goals of effective parental involvement, which presumably leads toward increased levels of achievement. In neoliberal regimes individuals become “experts of themselves”, as Rose (1996) says, adopting “an educated and knowledgeable relation of self-care in respect of their bodies, their minds, their forms of conduct and that of the members of their own families” (p. 59).

As these excerpts illustrate, when homework is problematic or if it doesn’t get done in the prescribed time, mothers feel inadequate for various reasons. Either they worry that their child
isn’t performing at par, or that their parenting skills are lacking. Or they feel they simply can’t help with the work. All of these are felt as intensely personal, which in turn has effects. Feelings of inadequacy and unreasonableness often have the effect of keeping an issue private. This, combined with the powerful discourses (imbued with morality) surrounding what mothers should be doing around their children’s schooling, and homework in particular, leaves very little room for resisting or questioning teachers. This is one of the ways that I see homework as a practice that further engenders an already gendered space. These ideas are captured by Cairns (2011). She writes that “critical studies of education show how discourses of neoliberal selfhood obscure enduring structural inequalities, presenting particular challenges for women, working class, and racialized individuals, who are encouraged to interpret structural constraints through the lens of individual agency” (p. 23).

**Homework as a Dividing Practice**

Continuing with my intention in this chapter to complicate the notion of homework as a complete governing rationality, I turn now to unintentional effects of homework in terms of gender and class. The previous section showed that there are definite indications from reports of stress, battles and tears and the responding proliferation of coping materials that homework has cracks. Despite tensions, mothers and teachers continue to engage in the work of homework with good intentions, yet here I show that these best intentions of both mothers and teachers may in fact have the unintentional effect of operating as a dividing practice, of exacerbating gender and class divides. As Foucault once asserted: “people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what they do does” (cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 187). Mothers have the potential to intensify both gender and class division through their participation in homework and teachers are producing knowledges about some of
the students they teach and their families based on what they imagine their everyday conditions to be. In this section I work to elaborate on Foucault’s ideas of ‘dividing practices’. He suggests new vocabularies of neoliberalism such as autonomy, freedom, choice and enterprise have established “dividing practices” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 208) within and between subjects.

I have discussed earlier in the thesis that homework is deeply implicated in, and contributes to, a gendered set of relations where women (elementary teachers and mothers) are made responsible for students’ school performance in new ways and I’ve argued that one of the unintended effects of elementary homework is a furthering, an entrenchment of an already existing gendered set of relations. Through continued participation in homework mothers are experiencing reinforcement of gendered responsibility, and although many mothers are experiencing stress and conflict, they are justifying their participation as part of what ‘good’ mothering demands, as was illustrated in the previous chapters. Mothers are justifying their participation by drawing upon notions of maternal love, feminine morality and pedagogicalization of family and home so that these notions are taken up, not just as discursive categories, but as organizing principles for structuring time and activity. All of this operates in a way that maintains any difficulties that may arise as a private problem, something to be dealt with individually. We see from the excerpts above that doing homework and doing gender is hard work and in some ways it is never quite good enough. This idea of a subject that is just out of reach is captured by Rose (1999) in his work on governmentality when he suggests that we are urged to work on ourselves by incorporating the advice of experts in order to effect ourselves as “certain sorts of subjects”.

I next consider how all the ‘doing’ of middle class mothering contributes to another unintended effect of homework. Ball (2009) describes the frantic pace of “total mothering” or
“intensive mothering” prevalent among the middle classes as “the heavy investment of the mother’s time, energy, money and emotional commitment into enhancing the child’s intellectual, physical, social and emotional development” (p. 207). The reports I heard from mothers of stress, tension and tears were given in the context of needing to ‘push through’ with something that mothers felt they were instructed to do and/or felt morally obligated to participate in and for one reason or another, were having difficulty with. The notion of parental boundary setting around homework, in particular the mothers’ framing of homework completion as a priority regardless of the level of learner resistance, has been identified by Walkerdine, Melody and Lucey (2001) as an aspect of mothering more likely to be evident in middle-class mothering practices. In their work they argued that middle-class mothers prioritized discipline and getting the homework done, and were motivated by their fears of the consequences of educational failure. Hutchison (2006) also shows in her research that middle class parents in particular insist on getting school work done and she highlights the ways in which mothering work in support of children’s schooling is central to social reproduction (see also Griffith and Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998). Another aspect of all the ‘doing’ of middle class mothers is made visible through a Foucauldian and feminist poststructural perspective that helps us to think about mothers’ investments in this ‘doing’, and their complicity in producing class divisions, however unintentional it may be. While we may experience ‘stress’ as a personal emotional response it, and our talk about it, also has the effect of masking our own complicity in an educational practice that is structurally inequitable. The notion of ‘stress’ removes attention from middle-class mothers’ choices - the “doing at all costs”, the frantic running to/from extra-curricular activities, the necessity to make every moment a teachable one. In convincing ourselves that all of this ‘doing’ is part of ‘doing
best’, it allows mothers to ignore our/their complicity in neoliberal practice of reform with the effect of maintenance/entrenchment of class inequities.

According to Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) ideologies of ‘good mothering’ and parental involvement are infused with a white, middle-class conception of mothering which encompasses a strong pedagogical function and the expectation that mothers will teach children in ways that accord with school. Generally, the practices of middle-class parents tend to complement the work expectations of teachers, while the demands of child-care, employment, and meeting basic needs with which poorer families must struggle often conflict with the demands of teachers (see also Griffith, 1995; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Manicom, 1988; Reay, 1998). This is important to consider when thinking of homework as a dividing practice and in considering some of the unintended effects of homework. The ‘goodness’ of homework becomes complicated when viewed in this light.

In my suggestion that homework is operating as a dividing practice, it is important to emphasize that families are not homogenous and that subject positions are neither uniformly available nor consistently taken up. Not surprisingly, this has consequences and effects both for individuals and more broadly. Here I come back to Susan, as her narrative raises important questions of power and participation: which parents are being involved, on whose terms and in what areas of school life, and with what intended and actual outcomes for which students (deCarvalho, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 2005)? This example illustrates that power relations, whatever their form, continue to render subjects differently able to perform or to be recognized as ‘empowered’ (Cruikshank, 1996; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Valverde, 1996).

Susan is trying to be a ‘good mother’ in relation to her son’s schooling. She sets aside quiet time (providing an alternative place or activity for her younger daughter) and sits
sometimes for an hour at a time with her grade one son working on homework. Yet she feels like she is failing: “it is so stressful and often he ends up in tears and then I end up in tears.” She feels judged by the teacher:

she felt it was a lack on my part; I felt like she kinda looked at me as a young, young mother rather than a young adult with children, so I think she might have thought that my parenting skills were the reason that (my son) wasn’t doing so well.

Susan alternately seems to feel angry for feeling blamed for her son’s apparent difficulties:

You know, for all the children, regardless of their situation, it was too much homework. It’s a sin. To sit down, you work a long day, the kids go to school, that’s a long day for them, you come home, you cook, you eat, you tidy up, and then you have to do an hour (emphasis) of homework.

Susan is on the verge of tears as she tells me this, perhaps feeling guilty and anxious – “like, maybe it really is my fault”.

With Susan, it seems impossible for her to become the subject she is supposed to be and that she wants to be. Although she is putting in the time and effort to be the ‘good-involved mother’, her youth, and I speculate her socio-economic status, prevent her from being seen this way. In turn, Susan appears to have internalized this rejection in her actions surrounding her son’s homework difficulties when she chooses not to push the teacher to reduce or change the homework, for fear of having the teacher deem her an unfit mother and call social services saying “I don’t want to cause problems … I don’t want to bring problems on to me … I think it would go somewhere further where it doesn’t need to go”. Once again, this example highlights the potential homework has to operate as a site of surveillance.
How are different bodies situated in relation to the ‘mother as teacher’ identity? The mother who has the time, ability and willingness to make the home a pedagogical space, to encourage ‘teachable moments’ in everyday life, to create time and space to assist with homework. Is this subject position available to everyone, or just some? Was Susan allowed to be a ‘partner’? Not in the same way as many of the other mothers I spoke with. Stella, like Susan, as a single mother working full-time also struggles to take up the ideal subject position made available through the involvement or partnership discourse. Susan is struggling to be recognized as competent as was Stella.

With respect to representation, policy-documents and practices such as homework frequently address ‘the parent’ in ways that presume heterosexual, two parent families and middle-class conditions and aspirations as the norm (Deem, Brehony & Heath, 1995; Dehli, 2003; Fine, 1993). As I discussed earlier, there are also assumed standardized norms around student ability. The experiences of the individuals I interviewed suggest that ‘families’ and ‘parents’ cannot be treated as a monolithic mass with a common set of characteristics, as I suggested earlier. While being responsible for children, families vary markedly in terms of material circumstances, internal structure, and cultural location. I would suggest that the prevalence of reports of stress, tears, battles and tensions and conflict with time and fitting homework into a day are all indications that these assumed standardized norms about families and students are creating difficulties and have significant consequences, one of which is that many forms of involvement become rendered invisible or irrelevant while many students and families are marginalized (Walkerdine, 1990). This resonates with Bullen’s (2011) discussion about ‘involvement’ being most often framed as a public performance. The accounts of Susan, Stella, Alice and Mindy all illustrate this. While not always finding ‘success’ in homework, they
were spending significant amounts of time and energy participating in its completion. Such techniques (or technologies, such as homework) privilege kinds and terms of knowledge and learning and recognize certain groups of parents, and thus their children, as competent.

Next I work with excerpts from my interviews with teachers to illustrate how power/knowledge is operating and to further illustrate how parent and teacher subject positions are produced. We saw with Susan above, that she felt that homework was a site of surveillance and potential judgment. In these next examples we see teachers doing some of the judging of a home situation that may be similar to Susan’s. Here I have examples of teachers who are making decisions about their homework assignments according to what they perceive ‘home life’ to be. Kelly says:

A lot of kids are just trying to .....ummm.....they're just trying to...survive....you know......like, is there going to be supper? What is home going to be like tonight? Is there going to be heat? Is there going to be food? Is there going to be fighting? Is there going to be anybody home? That is the reality of a lot of students...and I don't want to add to that stress.....like, oh oh Ms. Kelly is expecting this homework tomorrow...

And yet, Kelly maintains a minimal homework practice citing accountability of the student as her primary justification: “I do think there has to be something … just to get the student accountable and independent, so it’s not so much the homework, it’s the routine and it’s the accountability and the responsibility.” Kelly appears to be caught up in a difficult situation that manifests itself in contradiction and ambivalence. She is commenting on what she imagines and assumes the home situations of some students to be, and yet continues to assign homework in a general, across-the-board manner. While she is creating her assignments in a way that she feels should be manageable with minimal parental involvement, she is not prepared to abandon
the practice altogether, or to publicly protest homework, even within the team of grade four teachers she works with.

Power/knowledge relations are being produced in the decisions and actions Kelly makes around homework based on what she ‘knows’ to be true of the families she is dealing with. Meaning well, Kelly is attempting to balance ‘shoulds’ surrounding institutional expectations of homework and knowledges produced about families that are outside of the standardized norm. Kelly goes on to tell me:

In my class this year I have two situations where Mom or Dad can't read the grade level four books that are coming home and they cannot help those students with homework whatsoever; I have moms or dads who are not home and the kids are home on their own; I have moms and dads that just aren't interested in helping out with homework and for one reason or another are just too busy; whatever the reasons, it doesn't matter to me, many of these kids just don't have support for homework at home and I don't believe it is fair to add that stress on a child, or a family...to have this homework...to spend time on homework.

One thing that’s very interesting here is that even when teachers mean well and try to understand those students and families, they produce students and their families as different, as other, and less than the norm (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989).

Kelly also raises the very important issue of literacy as a barrier to getting homework done. This is a concrete and significant factor, when considering who is able to help with homework at home. This would be an instance of a parent not being able to take up the subject positioning of ‘the good/involved parent’ in relation to homework, serving as a reminder that the presence of a discourse and the subject positions it provides neither guarantees its effectiveness
nor its ‘take up’ (Walkerdine, 1990). However, it also raises questions about how knowledges of families are produced and what is to be done with this knowledge. In choosing to ‘fly under the radar’ with her modified homework practices Kelly, again, while meaning well and taking concrete factors such as parent literacy into account, is inadvertently producing division (thus showing homework to be acting as a dividing practice) in her different expectations. My speculation is that in Kelly’s understandable desire to be viewed as a ‘good’ teacher by her school administration has chosen what she sees to be the ‘path of least resistance’ when it comes to homework practice; attempting to remain accountable on all fronts without seeing critically what may be produced on a broader societal scale from these differing expectations and practices.

The next excerpts from Joan and Hannah also reveal tensions and ambivalences toward homework, and they demonstrate the production of knowledges of ‘problematic’ families; problematic in that they are not fitting the norm of expectations in relation to homework.

Joan, a retired teacher, says:

Really, that was one of my big things, to know the families, and some families could not cope. They'd just be so stressed. I remember one year it was 70% of the kids had families with single parents. I think it just puts so much pressure for parents, you know there is so much pressure anyway, financial and time. Rush home from work and there's laundry to do and there's dinner to get and ugh, there's homework. I mean if Mom's home, a stay at home mom, then she might enjoy a nice sit down with the kids, but to me it's just not worth it. There needs to be a parent involved in most cases at this level and again I say, and I've always said it, if the child knows this work, why do more of the same thing? Let him go outside.
Hannah shares Joan’s questions about homework:

What is the benefit of it? It seems to be stressful to the kids that night trying to get it done, and stressful to the kids in the morning when I am walking around checking to see if it is done. There is definitely a place for reviewing some work at night or when, you know, you’re in older grades and studying, but I am always just kind of wondering what exactly we are trying to do with sending homework home. I don’t mean to make sweeping generalizations, but you know, for the most part you can kind of look at the situation and you know that if a single mom is looking for work and living in an apartment downtown because she doesn’t have a car, she doesn’t have a lot of time to sit after school to do homework.

Several other teachers mentioned ‘knowing’ the home situation and if it was known to be ‘problematic’ the teachers would adjust homework for the whole class based on their perception of the classroom or school demographics and perceived parental willingness and ability. Individual teachers appear to be quietly and privately making the decision about what and how much homework is appropriate for their own classrooms, navigating their own beliefs around homework, balancing what they think they are supposed to do and what they think the parents want and are capable of. This serves as another illustration of how homework may be acting as a dividing practice with unintended effects or consequences that should be paid attention to. As Spencer (2006) says in her work concerning the effects of standardized testing:

We must pay attention to the subtle ways in which our schools are organized – the practices and performances that are worked out ‘on the ground’ and worked up into the social forms and relations that can be uneven and inequitable and are always complex and complicated (p. 315).
In this section I have highlighted some of the unintended effects of homework and to do so I focused on how mothers’ and teachers’ participation in homework may or may not be constrained by gendered and classed divisions but also may have classed and gendered effects. I illustrated that some groups of parents and students are being constructed as outside the norm and discourses of inadequate families and poor parenting are being mobilized. My research confirms Hutchison’s (2006) argument that “homework is one site where techniques of educational advantage and disadvantage are produced” (p. 51).

Ambivalent Expertise

An unexpected source of ambivalence emerged in my discussions with teachers. All of the teachers I interviewed were also mothers so were able to speak about homework from both a teacher perspective and a mother perspective. There were several examples of contradiction between ‘mother experience’ and ‘teacher action’ and it was within this contradiction that ambivalence toward homework was revealed.

Jenna (introduced earlier) is a grade one teacher and a mother of three elementary aged children. In this excerpt her ambivalence toward homework is made evident. As we spoke my impression was that Jenna takes the issue of homework seriously and has given it significant consideration, yet continues to feel conflicted as her ‘mother experience’ does not necessarily correspond to the directives she feels obliged to follow regarding assigning homework. She says:

yeah, as a mom I can understand the importance of homework setting routines and some structure and some self discipline and there are lots of great things there. I think for early readers, the home reading is really, really important. I do have a problem as kids go on in their grade levels. I think there is important homework, or there is practice, practicing skills that need to be done. But I think there is a lot of homework that is unnecessary.
We hear Jenna touting some of the ‘soft’ benefits of homework that were discussed earlier in this thesis, but she critiques “unnecessary” homework. She goes on here in a way that seems to contradict part of what she just said:

I fight with the issue that they (the students) are so tiny and young…I feel kids don’t get enough time to play and families don’t get enough time to be families. I look at my little ones in this class who are here for such a big part of their day. They are with me more than they are with their parents all week. My own children are with other people so that when they go home at the end of the day I feel like it is such a task to ask them to do these things. I really do. My (own) kids who go to school everyday until 2:30, they go home and it’s supper and you know they have the homework and bed and the weekends are busy with activities. Noah is getting homework now and he is five and all he wants to do is play when he gets home.

In this we hear some of the tensions that were taken up at the beginning of this chapter about ‘time’ but there is also the presence of a discourse of childhood being mobilized here and held in contrast to what the demands of homework present. Jenna tells me that she has struggled with the issue of what to do around homework in her teaching practice and that her mother experience has influenced her teaching practice to a certain degree. She says: “I have had this issue (with homework) for a long time and I think that’s part of the reason I changed things up (in her classroom practice).”

What stands out within the excerpt above is that there are competing discourses circulating around and through the site of homework. Discourses of reform (though not specifically articulated here, it is still present in the obligation Jenna experiences to assign homework), homework, motherhood, and childhood all exist alongside and in competition with
each other. This serves as an example of how discourses provide a range of often-contradictory identities, positioning people within messy combinations of knowledge/power. These quotes from Jenna illustrate how people’s engagement with or ‘take up’ of identities can be complex and ambivalent.

Jackie is a grade two teacher with three children in grades two, six and eight. She says:

I know as a parent, I don’t want to be sitting there at the table for hours and hours with a crying child. So I just … that’s enough really, fifteen minutes, anything past that forget it. Because beyond that it is not helping anyone, everyone is just getting frustrated.

Jackie continues to reflect on changes in her homework practice as a teacher after she experienced it as a mother:

I probably would have given tons of homework (before) because I wouldn’t have had a clue. I would have thought, oh yeah a parent should sit there with their children, absolutely, homework comes first…well that is fine, but if you have this, this and this to do and you may have other children….I never would have thought about it (before having kids of my own).

Jackie has taken her mother experience into consideration and incorporated that experience into her teaching practice, and yet what she frames as minimal, or low-impact homework, “just 15 minutes” I heard from other mothers as being problematic in its generic, standardized method of assignment.

Carrie, a grade one teacher and mother of three elementary aged children discusses her involvement and management of homework with her children and says “it was often taxing ... enough to make me think, ok, homework, let me think whether or not there should be any...” but then in the remainder of the interview, Carrie puts on her teacher hat and quite passionately
emphasizes that she feels homework is a valuable and important practice in her teaching. (I gave examples in Chapter 5 of Carrie’s strong belief that homework is an important tool in encouraging and ensuring parental involvement).

This contradiction and ambivalence between ‘mother experience’ and ‘teacher action’ suggests that directives to teachers about homework, and what teachers feel they should be doing (held out as ‘doing best’) override their personal experience. It may also suggest that teachers perhaps are experiencing homework in the same private, individualized way as mothers who are not teachers therefore viewing any tension or difficulty with homework as an isolated, individual problem not a broader sociological issue.

Amidst these examples of contradiction and ambivalence and competing discourse and multiple subject positioning is evidence of a questioning of the practice of homework, revealing that teachers are not convinced of the absolute ‘goodness’ of homework. This in itself reveals an instability of expertise and authority. There’s something very interesting in the teachers’ talk when they question the expert knowledge around homework. In many ways they seem unsure about its merits, yet at the same time, teachers do assert authority and retain the right to assign homework (or not), how much and what sort. Despite some teachers’ apparent mixed feelings about homework and despite rhetoric about home/school partnership, teachers continue to hold ‘expert status’ and power, reaching into homes to direct how time is spent, and importantly, have the means for surveillance and discipline if families do not comply with teachers’ direction. Mothers commented on this as a source of tension, conflict and ambivalence.

Among the mothers I spoke with there were variations on this theme: one was along the lines of mothers feeling that they knew better what types of activities would benefit their child academically; another was in the vein of invocations of ‘childhood’, such as: “they’ve worked
hard enough, kids shouldn’t have to come home and work more, they should go outside and play.” Another revolved around ‘family time’ and complaints that with demands of homework there is no time ‘to be a family’. Then among the teachers, I illustrate a contrast with a couple of examples of teachers seeming annoyed at families who were perhaps not prioritizing homework.

Several mothers told me that a point of tension around homework is that they dislike being dictated to about what should be done and feel they are in a better position to know what areas of learning would be best to focus on with their child. For example, Alice comments about how she’d like to spend the (dedicated homework) time “more wisely”, she says:

I know what (my son’s) weaknesses are. I feel that the spelling exercises are a complete waste of time and that doing some reading comprehension would be a much better use of time for him. And yet, this is what we’re supposed to do, so I make him do it.

Alice is frustrated as she tells me about this because homework is a constant source of conflict with her son with tensions running high. It is interesting that she feels strongly about what type of work would benefit him more, yet she feels compelled to defer to what the teacher demands of homework time. She is deferring to the expert status and authority of the teacher.

Next I present an example that captures the idea that homework is fitted in to an already busy schedule, which is cause for tension. Here we see that there seems to be a feeling that time taken for homework is taking away from something else – either ‘family time’, or ‘down time’ or ‘kids being kids’ time.

Greg says:

You know, if each kid is in hockey and each kid is in dance and both parents are working and getting home at 5 and leaving the house at 7:30...you need time to just be a kid and to just be a family. Life is different now than when we were in school, because there are all
these other activities, even families without a lot of resources, time is still an issue. Time is the biggest resource that anybody can have and everyone is just so busy. As a teacher, I thought it (homework) made the kids crazy, pressurized and therefore it made the parents crazy and the academic use out of it was almost nil, unless there was ownership from the kid, unless it was something they chose to do.

Stella, a mother working full-time with two children says: “I'd rather sit and read a book, watch TV together, play a game, something fun, so that they don't think that Mommy is always the taskmaster.” This notion of being positioned as the ‘taskmaster’ came up with several of the mothers I spoke with. The notion of taskmaster carries a negative connotation, and it was clear in my conversations that these mothers resented this positioning and the effect that was carried over in their relations with their children.

Mothers and teachers both invoke discourses of childhood which value ‘downtime’ or ‘free time’ or suggest that time ‘to be a family’ is needed and should take precedence over homework. This was heard in the excerpt above from Jenna, speaking from both her mother and teacher perspective. However, in contrast, some teachers felt it was their role to limit family extra-curricular ‘busy-ness’ so that homework could be prioritized, demonstrating the reach of teachers’ authority into the homes of families.

Mary tells about the frustration she feels about excuses of ‘no time’. She says: Depending what the excuse is...you know, if it's ‘because I had hockey’, and I say, well what time was hockey?, ‘well around 8, oh that would have been too late to do homework afterward then’, so then I would say maybe you could have taken 5 minutes from your TV or play, you know, we all need to make choices.

Similarly, Christine laments:
The parents would like to make you think it (hockey) took the whole day, but being a parent I know there is still time for homework. Especially when as a teacher you are giving homework that is non-stress. It’s a book at their level, you know, it’s spelling words and sentences. And the sentence is practically laid out for you. It is very non-intrusive. I’m expecting it will take twenty minutes. They will tell me they went to hockey and I’ll think yeah you went to hockey at four o’clock, you were home at six or six thirty and you didn’t go to bed until nine thirty. Right.

Then imitating a student, she says,

Yeah but I was tired and I broke my hockey stick, so I got sent to bed. I think your parents would let you do your homework in bed even if you did, you know? There is always an excuse and it seems to be hockey is the big thing around here. Another big thing that seems to be interfering is trips in to Charlottetown (an hour away).

Carrie (a grade one teacher) gives her opinion on the management of time and how she feels priorities should be adjusted to make time for homework. She says:

Often when I’m hearing about homework struggles, it’s a time crunch thing, you know, hurry, hurry, hurry, and kids are getting stressed out and moms are getting stressed out. So, as far as homework goes, I say to parents, I understand you’re busy. But if you’re busy every school night then you really need to reevaluate, you know, for your own stress level, never mind your kids' stress level. I do try to suggest a website or two along the theme of ‘don't overburden your kids’.

Carrie goes on to discuss what she feels to be the importance of time-management:

What I find as a parent, is trying to get your kids to think ahead, to organize themselves to say, OK, tonight I need to do more because tomorrow night I've got something on. So,
you really have to get them to look ahead, and that's a lot for kids … you, like to get them organized with a routine, never mind the different nights for hockey or whatever else, that's a struggle for kids. It's a real time management exercise for kids, and you know, adults aren't always that great at time management. It takes a lot of planning and kids are not big planners, they're more for the here and now.

These excerpts from teachers stand in contrast to, and connect with, mothers’ expressions of tensions about this very intervention/intrusion/activity (depending on your perspective) of ‘teacher reach’ into home or family time. As I analyzed transcripts from the interviews I found myself to be surprised and somewhat taken aback by the way teachers extended their reach into families and how they moralized about children’s time outside of school. They made strong judgments about how time is being spent and it strikes me that assumptions are being made that parents may not be trusted to make appropriate decisions on their own or determine their own priorities for ‘family/home time’. What can I make of this disconnect that is so jarringly far from what the notion of ‘partnership’ conjures up?

**Incompleteness of Homework as a Governing Technology**

In the sections above moments of conflict, tension, anger, stress and ambivalence are made visible. Paying attention to this ‘messiness’ highlights that homework is not always, for everyone, a neat, tidy, contained and mundane event in daily life. These examples show that for some, in some circumstances, homework is a time consuming, emotion laden, uncontained and contested practice. It also makes visible that homework has unintended effects on those who are invested in it and made to feel responsible for it. Through discussion and examples I have suggested that homework might in fact, be working to undermine relations between schools and families, making people (particularly mothers) feel inadequate, frustrated and angry. If relations
between schools and families are being undermined through the practice of elementary homework, this then points to gaps in neoliberal governance as it plays out in this micro-practice and brings into question the completeness of homework as a governing technology.

In bringing these tensions to light, my research reveals some of the many ways that mothers and teachers work on themselves to both produce and sustain a compelling sense of who they are. Mothers and teachers are working hard to govern themselves to accomplish this work. In this we see that neoliberal ‘reform’ is shaping the work and identities of both mothers and teachers, even when they may be experiencing conflict and tension. Feelings of ambivalence highlighted that, for some, there was difficulty in producing a coherent account of themselves and what they were doing and wanted to do with homework.

Scholars such as Dehli (2004), Larner (2000), and O’Malley et al. (1997) have opened up space in studies of governmentality to draw attention to political contestation and struggle, and to see that contemporary forms of rule are perhaps not as totalizing or determining as is suggested by some versions of advanced or neoliberal mentalities and programs of rule. While recognizing, and largely agreeing with scholars that question the coherence and totality of neoliberalism (Cairns 2011; Dehli, 1996; Smith; 2010), I find myself somewhat surprised at the many ways homework is working quite effectively as a governing technology. Despite reports of conflict and stress, particularly from mothers, the hesitance to speak up about this conflict and tension appears to be stronger, and mothers and teachers continue to participate. I have shown that time for both mothers and teachers is being regulated and activity is being directed. Various relations (mother and teacher; mother and child; teacher and teacher; mother and mother) are affected. Mothers and teachers are self-governing to work toward becoming the specific desired types of mothers and teachers who accomplish homework. In all of these ways homework is operating
successfully as a neoliberal governing strategy of indirect social regulation. It is tapping into our desire to ‘do best’ for our children and appears to prevent us from making too much fuss; it works to keep it a private issue. In these ways homework as a governing technology is effective.

I speculate that as long as homework and other aspects of involvement are successfully linked with notions of ‘good mothering’ and framed as a moral imperative, in a climate of “increasing global and competitiveness”, mothers will continue to govern themselves, as much as is possible (I have discussed that this is not available and possible for everyone), in a way that allows for getting this work done. And as long as ‘involvement’ is viewed as an important component in reform discourse, specifically the rationality of accountability, and again in this ‘risk’ climate, then teachers and parents will seek out tools and techniques to support and accomplish these objectives.

The strength of these imperatives to be seen as a ‘good’ mother or a ‘good’ teacher and to be seen as ‘accountable’ are illustrative of new forms of government, and, as I will discuss in the next chapter, it is the point of possible resistance. With a focus on the recruitment of women’s work in the accomplishment of homework we see something important about the ways we are being governed. Wendy Brown (2005), Bronwyn Davies (2005) and Nikolas Rose (1999) suggest that in order to understand the deeply personal features of neoliberal forms of power, we need to attend to questions of desire and the everyday, and set these in relation to broader political, social and cultural transformations. In this study, therefore I focus on the micro-practice of homework, within the larger discourses and practices of education reform. By doing so, I bring into view one example of neoliberalism working in gendered ways to reach into the intimate parts of ourselves, into our very sense of ourselves and how these discourses come to work on our desires.
Although in many ways homework does appear to be working as a governing technology, the messiness and these ‘cracks’ and the proliferation of the ‘how to help your child with homework’ material and coping discourse tells us something important. Perhaps this suggests that homework as a governing technology is not totally complete.
Chapter 8 – Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that elementary homework is a gendered practice that has been intensified within the context of neoliberal educational reform. Although this is a study about homework, more broadly it is also a study of governmentality (Dean 1999; Rose 1999). The concept of feminist governmentality has enabled me to think about education reform as one of several contemporary fields where discourses and practices of ‘improvement’, ‘effectiveness’ and ‘accountability’ shape general and everyday conditions of working and thinking. Through this lens I have considered homework as a gendered practice emerging through rationalities of neoliberalism, acting in multiple ways as a technology of government that recruits and positions women in particular, but not always consistent, ways. Viewing homework in this way illustrates how neoliberalism has penetrated many aspects of everyday life, though as I have argued, not always smoothly or completely.

Studies of governmentality involve an exploration of “how we conduct ourselves and others, and how we think about ourselves and others when we are doing this. It is thus an attempt to gain clarity about the conditions under which we think and act in the present” (Dean, 1999, p. 36). Framing my work as a study of governmentality has provided a means of opening up spaces to consider how an educational practice that is considered as taken-for-granted, routine, mundane, just-the-way-it-is and (perhaps) necessary, may be considered otherwise. The spaces that emerged from this analyses bring into view how different ways of thinking about and understanding what we do and who we are in relation to practices of educational reform have emerged. As Tamboukou (1999) writes, “genealogy is attempting to go further by tracing possible ways of thinking differently” (p. 203). One of my primary objectives in this thesis has been to apply some of Foucault’s conceptual and analytic ‘tools’ and ways of thinking to the
practice of homework and the home and school space. My goal has been to disrupt the taken-for-granted ‘truth’ that elementary homework is a ‘good’ and ‘sensible’ educational practice and perhaps find other ways to think about it.

Through this exploration, I have raised questions about homework that highlight relations of gender, class and power. In many ways homework for elementary students has been framed as a practice that is vital to individual education achievement and social progress, particularly in times of increased globalization and rapid technological change. However, I have argued that it is important to be attentive to the circumstances and discourses through which homework’s ‘vital’ place has been produced. As Rose (1999) says, “it is necessary to think through the contingent conditions under which that which is so dear to us has taken shape” (p. 60). Utilizing genealogical methods, I have drawn attention to possibilities for thinking about the present differently, pointing to the contingent and the often-precarious nature of the truths surrounding homework. One of the contributions of this thesis, therefore, is to open these knowledges to challenge. I have asked how it may be made possible to disrupt the established taken-for-granted truths around elementary homework. By investigating homework as a technology of governance, I explored how homework mobilizes particular arrangements for organizing and regulating the time, space, activity and bodies of families and schools in particular ways. Supplementing governmentality with ideas from feminist poststructuralist theory I probed more deeply into mothers’ and teachers’ subject-making processes. This was important in order to reveal how it is that our emotions and feelings interact with forms of self-governing produced under the neoliberal restructuring of educational reform and how neoliberalism generates policies and practices that facilitate the governing of individuals ‘from a distance’.
I have shown that homework is a site at which new forms and techniques of neoliberal governance unfold, though not always smoothly or completely. A key insight and contribution of my work is that elementary homework, and mothers’ and teachers’ involvement with it, serves as an example of contemporary governance. My thesis illustrates that activities of government are not limited to the state, nor do all governing forms and practices originate there (Foucault, 1991b). As Foucault suggests, the state relies on a diversity of actors to shape and administer the lives of individuals in pursuit of particular ends; that is, state interests. However, my intention in my research and writing for this thesis was to go beyond providing another illustration and example of neoliberal governmentality. I have been mindful of the suggestions of Dehli (2004), Larner (2000) and O’Malley et al. (1997) that studies of governmentality allow, and call for, a sociological investigation of the complexities and contingencies of the practices, relations, and arrangements of the spaces of governing and intervention. So, while I suggest that one of the contributions of my research is to show that elementary homework can be viewed as an example of gendered governmentality, I have also examined the social relations and complexities surrounding homework in order to identify points of resistance and potential political action.

Possibilities for Resistance

Employing a genealogical inquiry has felt difficult to me at times because Foucault’s genealogies do not offer methodological certainties. As Bronwyn Davies (2005) observes about researching the discursive, this is a “realm not readily pinned down with words, not readily amenable to logic and rationality” (p. 13). Foucault (1994a) insists that, in order to undertake genealogical inquiries, it is necessary to abandon a desire to “get to the bottom of things”. In this study it has been very difficult to resist being drawn into the binary terms through which homework is most often discussed: ‘does it work?, does it not work?’ It is difficult for me to
resist making cause-effect claims and I have had to remind myself to focus on an examination of the discourses at work at the site of homework and home-school relations and to examine how they operate and how they shape power relations and subjectivities. However, taking up Foucault’s notion that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, 2000b) and feminist poststructural theorists’ insistence that contestation are integral to relations of power, I look for possibilities for doing and thinking otherwise. Dehli (2004), Larner (2000) and O’Malley et al. (1997) suggest that sites of governance must be examined for the many ways in which they are also sites of resistance. In Chapter 7 I discussed tensions, ambivalences and conflict surrounding homework and argued that this ‘messiness’ suggests that homework as a governing technology may be incomplete. Here I suggest that these narratives of conflict, stress and ambivalence may also be viewed as points of resistance and moments of ‘discontinuities.’ It is these moments of discontinuity that reveal the potential ways to slow down or perhaps even interrupt neoliberal processes.

I venture that perhaps the ‘cracks’ in the stories of homework that I heard from mothers and teachers are the beginnings of the personal and private process of becoming public and potentially political. Feminists have insisted that the ‘personal is political’ and this notion has been important in raising awareness of issues that have structural societal roots, but are framed as personal problems. I have shown in this thesis that homework operates in this way. However, as I have also shown, this is not something that is simply happening to women. While homework is working on mothers and teachers, it is also working through them, making them complicit in its accomplishment. In this sense, individuals are not merely the subjects of power, they also play an active role in its practice.
While my research turned up much about what was messy, complicated and difficult in accomplishing homework, there appeared to be little explicit resistance to it, either by the mothers or teachers I spoke with. I have speculated throughout this thesis that this is due to the conjoining of participating in homework to ‘doing best’ in relation to mothering and teaching. My interviews with mothers and teachers illustrated that the crux of their participation in elementary homework is the ‘ought’ and the ‘should’, the sense of moral and ethical responsibility to ‘do best’ for students/children, and ultimately for the nation as parents and teachers are recruited as partners in the goals of neoliberal educational reform. The interviews made visible the constitutive force of discourses surrounding homework and ‘doing best’ for one’s children as a pattern of desire (Davies, 2000) that hold women involved with homework in place. As the invisible is rendered visible (the work and tensions involved with homework and the unfair positioning and assumptions made about women’s time and work) it is therefore opened up to disruption and revision. Perhaps, as Bronwyn Davies suggests in her writing about neoliberal discourse, we can develop alternative storylines. She says: “a necessary step in refusing these new conditions of our existence is to be aware of the discourses through which we are spoken and speak ourselves into existence. We must find the lines of fault in and fracture those discourses. And then, in those spaces of fracture, speak new discourses, new subject positions, into existence” (Davies 2005, p. 1).

I argue that the complications with homework that I highlight in this thesis are points of resistance. Even if they are felt as only moments of discomfort and frustration, I venture that they are significant. They can be taken up not only as problems, but also as points for interruption and problematization, as the places to stop and ask: What is going on here? How is
this present of ours taking shape? What does this reform allow, and what is not possible under these conditions?

I have worked with many of these questions throughout this thesis. Such moments are points of intervention, places from which to think and to work differently for difference. Paying attention to the tensions present in the space of homework opens up the possibility to better understand, to challenge and perhaps to destabilize the forms of power/knowledge that make up and govern home/school relations, and to interrupt the rules of reason by which normalization, division, and exclusion are reproduced (Popkewitz, 1998, 2000; Rose, 1999). The examples of tensions, conflicts and ambivalences that I have laid out can be thought of as ‘lines of fault’. I would like to think that my research and writing is aiding the ‘fracturing of those discourses’ and is working to bring to light some of the ways that homework is not working so that we might consider change.

Contributions, Surprises and Discoveries

Some of the conceptual contributions that I make in this thesis include the way I combine and draw from feminists and Foucault as I consider homework as a site of gendered neoliberal governance. That is, I argue that this form of governance operates through persuasion, incitement and engagement, rather than through explicit policies or through domination. Also, I argue that homework as a technology of governmentality is gendered in the ways that it targets and operates through women's normative and moral identification with nurturing roles of teachers and mothers. As Wendy Brown (2005) argues, one of the main features of neoliberal forms of government is that it insinuates itself into the most intimate relations, in the everyday and the mundane. Yet, I also suggest that it is not completely effective, and that women are quite ambivalent about homework. Teachers are not sure it is useful and mothers sometimes do it
grudgingly and resent its intrusion. Therefore my research contributes to overlapping, interdisciplinary fields of study, including feminist scholarship addressing the intersection of mothering and schooling, governmentality studies and the examination of contemporary forms of government and neoliberalism, and home-school relations and homework.

My work offers one way of asking: if homework isn’t doing much to improve students’ school achievement, then what is it doing? Through this thesis I have suggested that one of the answers is that it is ‘delegating’ new educational responsibilities to teachers and families recruiting parents into pedagogical work and therefore seeking to intensify the government of families in new ways. At the same time, it is a way of making teachers’ work visible to parents. Viewing homework in this way, outside of an ‘achievement frame’ is a conceptual contribution my research makes. I have suggested in this thesis that homework might be understood as a ‘dual-use’ accountability tool, making both parents and teachers accountable. This contributes to understanding something more general about the ways that we are governed, and the ways we govern ourselves, through practices of accountability today.

Framing my study with a focus on gender has raised questions about whether this practice is working for women who are primary targets and agents of accomplishing homework – mothers and teachers. My research indicates that it isn’t working well for all women. I show that mothers are managing and coping with homework privately, on their own, without creating a fuss, which I have argued reinforces the gendered and classed nature of this work - keeping it individual, keeping it private – which in effect, keeps it non-political. My hope is that my work has exposed some of the work and tensions that is being done and managed privately, to bring it into the open and make it more public and make the personal political. It is important to consider the gendered organization and effects of homework and the gendered discourses that rationalize
it, at a time at which large numbers of mothers with young children are working outside of the home. Along with other feminist scholars writing at this intersection, I question whether this reality is taken into consideration by education policy makers who continue to push for increased levels of involvement and partnership and the shift of school work to home.

To a certain extent my work responds to the public concern about homework around the stress that it places on students and their families. A report by the Canadian Council on Learning (2009) suggests that “substantive research verifying and uncovering the levels and nuances of reported parent concerns over homework, especially at the lower grades, would help decision-makers separate ‘real’ public concern from perceptions filtered through the media” (p. 50). The Council suggests that further study into non-academic outcomes is also warranted. I argue that homework, as work for women and as a regulator of women’s time, is unrecognized as work and is a source of what is reported as stress. The work that women do around homework disappears in the child’s success or failures. Homework is unrecognized as work because it is folded into what is expected of mothers around their children’s schooling – wrapped up into expectations of mothering, involving notions of caring and duty. Mothers who love their children should do this work. The work women do in support of their children’s education is often hidden behind assumptions of mothering as a natural, easy process, far removed from what counts as ‘real’ work. The problem I have identified is that maintaining this version of order can only be accomplished at a significant cost to the women who are held responsible, seemingly always falling short.

I have also shown that in addition to having potential negative consequences for individual women, there may also be wider societal negative consequences. The dividing and exclusionary effects of homework have the potential to add to the many other ways in which our
schools and our educational systems continue to be sites of social stratification. My research supports Dehli’s (1988), Hutchison’s (2006), Reay’s (1998), and Griffith and Smith’s (2005) argument that the availability of women’s unpaid work amongst the middle classes contributes to the ways in which public schools come to operate as an engine of inequality. Considering the normalizing assumptions and effects of homework has allowed me to focus on the production of differences that continue to organize and construct what Popkewitz calls the ‘racialized’ and ‘classified’ spaces and subjectivities of reform, and to show how such reform “may actually reinscribe the very rules of the unequal field that educators sought to change” (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 199).

Two of the most surprising results of my research emerged as I listened, first, to the hesitance that mothers feel to speak up when they or their child is having difficulty, and, second, to the ambivalent feelings teachers have about the ‘value’ of homework. The hesitance suggests something important of the power relations present at the site of homework, most simply, and bluntly, that this is not a partnership, and it suggests that there is uncertainty in the expert knowledge surrounding homework. There is surely something ironic going on when the practice of homework is seen as somewhat dubious even by teachers as they continue to assign it.

I was initially curious about the hesitance of mothers to speak up when there was a problem with homework and their deference to teachers about homework when it was something that so obviously was not working for children or mothers. It seemed ironic to me that the teachers apparently exercise authority in this circumstance (homework) even as they were indicating their own hesitance with homework. As I explored the surrounding and overlapping discourses, and the strength of the moral incitement to parent participation and what it means to be 'good', and more specifically feminized 'good', it became less of a puzzle to see how mothers
are deferring to teachers in this practice. Also, to discover that homework was clearly a site of surveillance and judgment helped me to understand how teachers continue to maintain authority/expert positioning.

While parents may receive, usually via the student, a steady flow of communication from schools, this is generally a one-way flow of information that is far more likely to address basic administrative matters or public relations than it is to invite dialogue with parents on instructional issues. Report cards and parent-teacher conferences, while offering the possibility of actual information sharing and two-way communication about central issues of individual student learning, often fail to live up to this promise. Rarely are parents asked for input about homework or other curricular issues. Rather, parents are asked to take on the role of assistant.

Why then is the relationship framed as a ‘partnership’? What is achieved by this framing? Partnership, and in particular parents’ involvement in homework, is a directive from the school, not an invitation. It is not really optional to turn down this ‘invitation.’ If one does, there are consequences, some quite serious.

A barrier to parent-teacher collaboration is created by teachers’ status of being ‘the professional’, being the possessors of a unique and specialized body of knowledge that is unavailable to others. This creates a power imbalance that makes collaboration sometimes difficult. Much of what I heard in my interviews is echoed by Bennett and Kalish (2006), who write: “Few parents would call what we have with our kids’ schools a ‘partnership’ when we rarely have a say about our ‘part’ or whether we want to turn our homes into second classrooms at night. Yet many of us feel we don’t have a choice” (p. 58). As parents are positioned more and more as consumers in the education market they have been encouraged to take up the subject position of ‘partner’, demanding accountability of teachers, demanding 'results' in
achievement and standardized test scores. Yet, despite this shift in power relations between parents and teachers, my interviews showed that, in relation to homework at least, teachers continue to be the authority/expert, even as they are unsure about the practice. It seems as though teachers are feeling uncertainty in their role as expert in some circumstances and situations and not others. I find myself wondering if these feelings of uncertainty have increased with the rhetoric of ‘partnership’ and as parents have become more demanding in some situations and circumstances.

My work contributes to conversation among feminist scholars about the challenges posed by the way neoliberalism has penetrated so many aspects of everyday life. My work and other feminist writing in this area consider the relationship between a political philosophy and people’s lives and explores the ways that neoliberalism come to infiltrate social relations. I share the critique of neoliberalism by Braedley and Luxton (2010), who write that “neoliberalism is not advancing social justice and equality, but is instead reinscribing, intensifying and creating injustices and inequality” (p. 6). I agree with their suggestion that a critical perspective on neoliberalism offers insight to how neoliberalism works in local situations and our own implications in shaping politics through day-to-day activities and practices of living; this draws attention to practices that support and enable neoliberalism.

What does this tell us about the coherence and totality of neoliberal governance and homework as a governing technology? I would suggest that it shows that, for the time being, this particular reform practice is working to the extent that teachers are still assigning it and mothers are still participating in it. At the same time, the tensions and ambivalences suggest that homework as a technology of governmentality is precarious and insecure. Finally, it also
illustrates how neoliberal governance operates, rather shockingly and effectively, by reaching into our innermost desires and our sense of self (Brown, 2005).

**Future Research**

As my work proceeded, the focus of my thesis became less about details of homework *per se* than about seeing homework as an example of an educational practice operating as a governing technology in neoliberal times. I came to see that an analysis of homework could provide insight to the broader workings of neoliberal governance. There is still much work to be done in attempting to sort through the mixed messages surrounding homework in the various places it appears. We have much ‘empirical’ research saying that, from an achievement standpoint, homework shows no benefit in the educational performance of elementary students. Yet homework continues to be assigned, and families struggle to complete it. This paradox raises important questions that could be studied in various ways. What would focus group discussion(s) among teachers and parents generate in relation to this paradox? I am also curious about what a study that focused on fewer participants over a longer period could help to discover about the experiences with and effects of homework. I am interested in whether and how a deliberate focus on representative sampling in terms of socio-economic class could generate more substantial evidence of the social differences that, I believe, homework produces.

Including fathers’ perspectives in a future study of homework would provide further insight to the workings and effects of homework. Andrea Doucet (2000, 2006) has explored fathers’ participation in caregiving and notes the changing demographics of who is doing the primary caregiving and how it is being carried out. There would be many avenues of inquiry with the inclusion of fathers. Continuing in the vein of exploring effects of neoliberal governance, one area of exploration might be to examine the ways that fathers feel drawn in to
participating in their children’s educational work. Other researchers have noted that fathers are often drawn in to more public roles of participation, such as being asked to do the finances for the local home and school association. It would also be interesting and informative to speak with mothers and fathers together to hear more about how the work around homework is negotiated, and what else needs to be negotiated as time/space is made for homework.

Prince Edward Island is a rural place. This is not something I focused on in my analysis and writing. Rurality has many unique aspects and there is a rich body of research on rurality and education that I have not discussed in this thesis. A minor but significant and concrete example in reference to rurality in relation to homework is bussing. Some students are spending up to eight or nine hours a day dedicated to schooling when you take into consideration their 'commute.' This raises questions about available time left for schoolwork at home and also suggests differences among students, those on the bus and those who can walk to school. Michael Corbett (see his 2007 book Learning to Leave) researches and writes at the intersection of rurality and structures and processes of schooling. Kate Cairns also takes up issues of rurality with a focus on gender, identity formation and subjectivity in her (2011) dissertation: Mapping Futures, Making Selves: Subjectivity, Schooling and Rural Youth. Both of these studies would provide interesting and important insights and starting points to exploring the ways in which an educational practice such as homework intersects with particularities of rurality.

There are many research questions that could be pursued surrounding the educational buzzword of ‘partnership’. Is partnership desirable for anyone? Is partnership – as we think of it in layman’s terms – something parents and teachers actually want? How do we go about teasing this out and while doing so, accounting for the fact that there is no singular ‘parent’ or ‘teacher’? In 2011 the organization People for Education released a report titled Doing What Matters Most:
How Parents Can Help Their Children Succeed in School. In this report they identify four key ‘tips’ for parents: 1. Have high expectations, 2. Talk about school with your children, 3. Help children develop a positive attitude toward learning and good work habits and 4. Read together (in any language). In the report they say “the evidence is clear that parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or reading them a story, than by “drill and skill” homework sessions.” All of these recommendations suggest the importance of developing a culture of learning, yet how is this promoted? In many areas of PEI literacy is a significant barrier to parental involvement (notes from discussion with Carrie St. Jean, then President of the Prince Edward Island Teacher’s Federation, May 2011). How is policy, public messaging and practice advanced around the development of something like a ‘culture of learning’. How do we go about working with something so vague, elusive and intangible in an inclusive and equitable approach? Over the course of researching and writing this thesis I have had several informal discussions with those in positions of knowledge, authority and influence in education on PEI and I have worked as a sessional instructor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island giving me access to faculty meetings, discussions and information/development sessions. These discussions with the head of the PEI Teacher’s Federation, the head of the PEI Home and School Federation, the Deputy Minister of Education, the head of curriculum development at the (former) Eastern School District and discussions with Faculty of Education members have alerted me to the significant discourse around the importance of developing a ‘culture of learning’ amongst families. This is a phrase that has become a common touch point when discussing ‘involvement’ and ‘partnership’. It is a discourse that needs problematizing as there remains much ambiguity about what is even meant by the term and many questions as to how to go about developing this. My research points
out that caution needs to be exercised with any home-school practice to ensure that inequities are not being exacerbated in the name of good intentions.

SAS (Student Achieve System) is an electronic provincial (PEI) wide system available to teachers, administrators, parents and students. Each student has an electronic SAS file that they, the teacher and parents have a password and access to at any time. Teachers enter assessment information (marks) as well as information about outstanding assignments and attendance. Parents are encouraged to check in frequently to monitor their child’s progress and students are encouraged to check SAS regularly to monitor their marks and assignments. This is having all sorts of very interesting effects on parents, teachers and students in terms of measures and practices of accountability and relations between teachers and parents, and parents and students. Similar to homework, SAS seems to be operating in a way that holds both teachers and parents to account and raises questions about shifting relations, responsibilities, expectations and roles. Related to this are changes in communication and technology such as the use of e-mail, blogs and websites.

Finally

The theoretical framework I bring to this problem is something that is new and helpful in aiding further understanding about how particular educational practices operate in governmental ways; playing out in daily lives, but also reproducing what I see as societal inequities. The conceptual tools of Foucault’s governmentality and feminist post-structural theory and the analytical tool of genealogy make visible how relations of power operate in daily lives and subjectivities and the ways in which individuals’ actions are regulated. This has been important research to undertake because through a critique of elementary homework, the assumptions at work enabling homework to operate and what these assumptions mean for different people have
become more apparent. My initial hunch that elementary homework is a practice that has unequal and gendered subject-effects has been confirmed in my research. This is problematic on its own, but is exacerbated by the fact that research about homework linked to achievement indicates that it is perhaps a practice being perpetuated for reasons other than what educators suggest.

This study only gives a partial piece of a much larger picture. This piece of the picture should be connected with, and interpreted against studies that explore other experiences and processes of homework. It is my hope that this research prompts others to question not only the ‘value’ of homework at the elementary level, but also overall goals of education and its role in society and the role that mothers are expected to play in education. Perhaps we can reconsider whether doing homework really is ‘doing best’.
Appendix A – Invitation to Participate/Recruitment Letter

Call for participants: Mothers

Are you a mother of a child or children in grades 1 – 4?

My name is Nicky Hyndman and I am a PhD student in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT); however I live in Charlottetown, PEI. My thesis research examines homework at the elementary level with a particular emphasis on mothers’ and teachers’ experiences/engagements/interactions with homework at this level. If you are interested in participating in an interview, please contact me at nickyhyndman@gmail.com.

Call for participants: Teachers

Are you a teacher for grades 1 – 4?

My name is Nicky Hyndman and I am a PhD student in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT); however I live in Charlottetown, PEI. My thesis research examines homework at the elementary level with a particular emphasis on mothers’ and teachers’ experiences/engagements/interactions with homework at this level. If you are interested in participating in an interview, please contact me at nickyhyndman@gmail.com.
Appendix B – Letter of Consent for Interview Participants [teachers]

[on letterhead]

I, ________________________________, agree to participate in an interview with Nicole Deneau Hyndman to discuss teachers’ experiences with homework for young students. I understand that the interviews will be individual semi-structured interviews conducted at a place of my choosing and that these interviews will be used to generate research data of Nicole’s planned study of homework at the elementary level on Prince Edward Island.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time. If I choose to withdraw, no reference will be made to me in any papers or reports that Nicole writes. I understand that I will choose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

The interviews will take place at a time and place of my choosing. I understand that the interview will be approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours in length. The interview will be audio recorded and a transcript of the interview will be prepared.

I understand the nature and purpose of this study, and I hereby agree to participate on the terms outlined in this letter.

____________________________________

__________________________
Name/Signature

______________________________
Date
Nicole/Signature

Date

If you have questions, please contact Nicole by email: nickyhyndman@gmail.com or by telephone: 902-367-6050.

Supervisor contact information: kari.dehli@utoronto.ca

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or about providing consent to participate, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, 416-946-3273 or e-mail: ethics.review@utoronto.ca.
Appendix C – Letter of Consent for Interview Participants [mothers]

[on letterhead]

I, ______________________________, agree to participate in an interview with Nicole Deneau Hyndman to discuss mothers’ experiences with homework for young students. I understand that the interviews will be individual semi-structured interviews conducted at a place of my choosing and that these interviews will be used to generate research data of Nicole’s planned study of homework for young students on Prince Edward Island.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time. If I choose to withdraw, no reference will be made to me in any papers or reports that Nicole writes. I understand that I will choose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

The interviews will take place at a time and place of my choosing. I understand that the interview will be approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours in length. The interview will be audio recorded and a transcript of the interview will be prepared.

I understand the nature and purpose of this study, and I hereby agree to participate on the terms outlined in this letter.

____________________________________

_______________________________

Name/Signature

Date

____________________________________

____________________________________
If you have questions, please contact Nicole by email: nickyhyndman@gmail.com or by telephone: 902-367-6050.

Supervisor contact information: kari.dehli@utoronto.ca

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or about providing consent to participate, you may contact the **Office of Research Ethics** at the University of Toronto, 416-946-3273 or e-mail: ethics.review@utoronto.ca.
Appendix D – Interview Guide - Mothers

The following guide is meant to be an outline of questions I will attempt to get at; it is not meant to be a script. As per the discussion earlier in ‘thinking about interviewing’, following a feminist methodological approach to interviewing, I expect that my interviews will unfold more as discussion with my role being ‘prompter’, rather than rigid interviewer. I will begin each interview with ‘warm up’ questions that also will serve to provide demographic information such as name, age, education level, household members, number of children, employment details. From there I will be prompting for rich description of homework practices and routines, understandings of homework, feelings about homework and effects on individual lives in daily life.

Introductions

- What does a typical day’s schedule look like for you? Do you work outside the home?
- What does a typical week’s schedule look like for the family (info on outside activities)?
- Single or with partner?

Knowledge of homework policy

- Are you aware of a school policy on homework or a classroom policy? Did you have any ‘say’ in creating this policy?

Description of homework (perhaps in a typical week)

- What types of homework? How often?
- How does the homework get done?
- Do you have a routine in place? Rules?

Mother’s Role in child’s homework

- how is your child’s homework assignment communicated to you?
- Are you required to participate in your child’s homework?
- (if with partner) Is your role in homework participation any different than that of your partner?
- Does the presence of homework shape your time/schedule in any way?
Attitude toward homework

- How do you feel about homework for young children? Do you see any benefits to this practice? Do you see any disadvantages/penalties (?) to this practice?
- Why do you think that teachers assign homework for young children?
- What was your personal experience with homework as a young student? Has anything changed from when you were an elementary student? If so, why do you think this is?

Regulation/Discipline

- What happens if your child does not complete his/her homework?
- (If required to sign a homework journal) What happens if you do not/forget/choose not to sign your child’s homework journal?
- Do you have the option of not completing homework?

Relations with child

- Does homework cause any positive/negative dynamics/relations/interactions between you and your child?

Being a ‘good’ mother

- What does it mean to you to be a ‘good mother’ in relation to your child’s education?
- Are you involved in other aspects of your child’s school/education?

Home/school

- With regard to your child’s education, what role do you see the school playing and what role do you see ‘home’ playing?
Appendix E – Interview Guide – Teachers

Introductions

- How long have you worked as a teacher?
- What grades have you taught?
- Where have you taught?

Knowledge of homework policy

- Are you aware of a school policy on homework?
- Do you have a classroom policy on homework?
- Did you have any ‘say’ in creating this policy?

Description of homework (perhaps in a typical week)

- What types of homework? How often?
- Do you have a routine in place? Rules?
- How are homework assignments communicated to students? To parents?
- Are parents required/expected to participate in homework?

Attitude toward homework

- How do you feel about homework for young children? Do you see any benefits to this practice? Do you see any disadvantages/penalties (??) to this practice?
- What was your personal experience with homework as a young student? Has anything changed from when you were an elementary student? If so, why do you think this is?
- What do you think parents expect regarding homework at the elementary level?

Regulation/Discipline

- What happens if a student does not complete his/her homework?
- (If parent is required to sign a homework journal) What happens if a parent does not/forgets/chooses not to sign their child’s homework journal?
- Do parents/students have the option of not completing homework?
Relations with student and parent

- Does homework cause any positive/negative dynamics/relations/interactions between you and your student?
- Does homework cause any positive/negative dynamics/relations/interactions between you and parents?

Home/school

- In your experience, do you communicate more often with mothers or fathers about homework? (If there is signing of journals) Who communicates more often with you—mothers or fathers?
- Does the presence of homework shape your teaching time/schedule in any way?
- With regard to your students’ education, what role do you see you/the school playing and what role do you see ‘home’ playing?
Appendix F – Participant Profiles [Mothers]

These profiles are meant to be a brief introduction to the participants and a general idea of ‘where they are coming from’ on homework.

**Melinda** is married and has two daughters. One daughter is in grade 5 and the other is in grade 2. She and her husband work together on a farm in rural PEI. Both girls are involved with extra-curricular activities outside of school time.

This became the dominant theme of our discussion: “I don’t want to say that I’m opposed to homework, but in grades 1-4, the expectation is very much on the parent”. She talked about the constant juggle that was required with her own paid work on the farm and this unpaid work surrounding the girls’ schooling. She described typical homework assignments as consisting of reading and recording the reading in a log book, weekly spelling exercises and some Math. It is typically assigned on a Monday and due back on Friday and communicated through an Agenda. Overall, Melinda feels that homework should be limited and that very clear communication and direction is required if it is to be assigned. Melinda described stress that has resulted from too much time required from homework and frustration with being put in the position of teacher at home.

**Leanne** is married and has two boys. One is in grade 6 and the other is in grade 2. She and her family live in a small town in Eastern PEI and she works full-time as teacher. Leanne describes a busy life with her husband working as a full-time educator and the boys each involved with hockey and music lessons.

Leanne says that typically homework has been assigned on Mondays and is due back on Fridays, which she says she has come to appreciate so that they can fit homework into their weekly schedule. Overall, Leanne describes homework as something she doesn’t enjoy, but does
anyway and her involvement in helping with homework is apparent in her use of the word “we” in describing various aspects of the homework routine at home. “In grades 1, 2, 3 it was mainly just reading that would come home. Over the course of a week, a selection of books would come home and my son would read to me and there is a little log in which the parent indicates that they read the book and a little comment space. In grade 3 some spelling started for my oldest son. In gr. 4, 5 and now 6, it’s pretty structured I’d say. I like that it is typically given on a Monday and due on Friday. Very rarely is there much math sent home”. Leanne says homework is communicated through the Agenda: “big fancy agendas to go in their big backpacks”.

Leanne emphasizes that she feels homework needs to be purposeful: “I can’t criticize the elementary system, but some of the stuff he does for homework, it’s not purposeful or meaningful, it’s just…busy work”. She describes homework as sometimes being a challenge and a “parent battle” but feels that if the teachers are assigning homework, then it is her job as a parent to make sure it gets done. Leanne describes a change in the homework that she assigns in her teaching practice since becoming a parent: “it used to be, OK here’s your 25 problems after we’ve already done so many in class...which, what was the point of that really? So, what I do now, they’ve got three problems that they have to do and so tomorrow they can hand them in to me and I can do a quick check and see, well, did they understand this part, what do I need to revisit….so, you know, a change of philosophy”.

Katherine is a married mother of two boys, one is in grade 12 and the other is in grade 5. She and her family emigrated to PEI recently from Taiwan. Katherine is enrolled as a full-time student. Her husband is often away, travelling back and forth between PEI and Taiwan. Katherine’s description of her role in her sons’ schooling indicates that she is very involved (less so now with her older son), sitting down daily with her younger son (grade 5) to review both his
regular classroom homework and to do additional reading and writing in Taiwanese. Katherine says she volunteers in her younger son’s school so that she can see what is going on and so that she can develop relationships with the teachers at the school.

Katherine describes the homework that her younger son receives as being “not much at all” and feels that he could benefit from having more, especially as compared to the five or six hours that her older son had in Taiwan at the same age. Interestingly, and in contrast to most of the other mothers I spoke with, Katherine talks about a surplus of time and the challenge that this presents in the management of her family.

Katherine views homework as a way to see what her son is doing at school and she uses the Agenda as a way to communicate with her son’s teacher: “I will write to the teacher in the agenda, so we keep a constant communication between me and the teacher and we have e-mail exchanges as well. I use this as an example for my son too…if you don’t understand something you need to ask about it”.

Stella is a single mother of two boys and describes her ex-husband as being “out of the picture”. One of her sons is in grade 4 and the other is in grade 2. Both boys are in French Immersion. Stella works full-time and says she is not a francophone which she feels makes helping with homework difficult at times. Stella described her older son as having some behavioral issues at school and difficulty in getting his work done in class. She described “an extraordinary amount of homework” that was resulting in she and her son experiencing a great deal of stress. Stella appeared to be finding the demands of her paid work and the unpaid work around her children’s schooling to be very demanding, telling several stories of tears and sitting at the table doing homework for an hour or hour and a half on a regular basis. When asked about her ideal homework scenario, she says: “I think any more than 30 minutes, I don’t see the value
in it. I think reading is good. There needs to be a time limit and I don’t think it needs to be done everyday. If it were given on a weekly basis, instead of daily, that would be better because a lot of people are active during the week”.

Susan is a single mother of a son in grade 2 and a daughter in kindergarten. Like Stella, she says that the father of her children is very uninvolved in their lives. At the time of the interview Susan was attending a full-time course at a technical college. Her description of an average day conveyed that fitting everything that she felt needed to be done in a day was a challenge.

Like Stella, Susan (describing the previous academic year when her son was in grade 1) describes a difficult academic year with overwhelming amounts of homework and a strained relationship with her son’s teacher. Susan says she felt that she was judged by the teacher for being a young mother and felt that the teacher was blaming her to a certain extent for her son’s difficulties.

Also similar to Stella, Susan said that homework was assigned nightly and not by the week. She said it was usually the same thing everyday: “just different sheets of the same thing: math, spelling, sight words, reading and then there might be additional things for me to do with him, things the other children didn’t have to do….because he wasn’t catching on”.

Susan said that she suspects that her son struggles with some learning difficulties but that his needs were not being addressed and he continued to receive the same homework assignment as everyone else in the class.

Mindy is a married mother of four children and does not work outside of the home, describing herself as a stay-at-home mom. Her son is in grade 6 and she has three daughters in grades 4, 1 and kindergarten. All four of her children attend a French Immersion program. As
she described homework routines over the years that her children have been in elementary years, the variance in homework practices among the different teachers is evident. There has also been variance between her children and how easily they are able to complete homework. Mindy describes homework as being “a big issue” with her son and she says that he has just recently been diagnosed with a learning disability. She says that this came as a relief as she suspected for many years that “something was wrong” and she says that at times it felt like something was wrong with her and the way she was doing things because homework time was so difficult. This played out in the amount of homework he brought home, often needing to finish up work that wasn’t completed in class, and the lengthy sessions they would spend together finishing ‘regular’ homework.

Mindy says that her oldest daughter has always been quite independent but that the younger two girls need to have reading listened to and help given so that with her son requiring a great deal of help, she feels it is a dedicated amount of her time that needs to be set aside and a constant juggle to be sure that each of the kids are receiving the assistance they need. As a ‘stay-at-home’ mother Mindy indicated that she felt that this was her work to do, but said that her husband did help in the evenings. Mindy seemed frustrated by the amount of work she was required to do around her children’s schoolwork.

Overall, Mindy is not positive about homework although she seems to be uncertain about it. She says: “is there any benefit? I don’t know, I really don’t know. If they can do it in school, why do more of it at home, unless it is enriched work, which it isn’t, so is it just a waste of time? I do know that struggling at home is not going to help anyone”.

Janice is a married mother of four children and works in a 2/3 (almost full-time) paid position. Her children are in grade 6, 4, kindergarten and her youngest is one and a half years.
Homework is “not a huge issue” in her kids’ daily life or hers, although it is present and time is set aside on a daily basis for getting homework done. Janice’s husband helps when needed but Janice describes the role she plays as manager or director, so that she takes it upon herself to know what needs to be done, sign Agendas and school slips, and makes sure that homework is being done when it is supposed to be done.

Janice says there has been variance in the ways that teachers assign homework and this is an irritant to her: “when it’s not consistent, that’s what I don’t like. For (one of her sons) sometimes he’s got it and sometimes it seems they have the option of finishing at school and when I ask him, sometimes I just don’t know if he is telling me the truth”. She says that this often results in conflict. Reflecting on her own experience: “I don’t remember my parents ever getting on my back about homework. I think it’s because we got it when we were older and we just took ownership. It’s different now”.

Janice says that although homework can be a frustration when it is busy-work without much apparent value, she feels that ideally homework could be used as a means of enrichment and development of personal interests. She also feels strongly about the value of reading: “I get the kids to read every night, whether it is part of their homework or not, which sometimes it is and sometimes it isn’t. There have been years when they have had to record everything they read and other years where it is more like a guideline”.

Nadine is a married mother of 2 boys. One in grade 7 and the other in grade 5. Both boys have attended French immersion since grade 1. Nadine and her husband both work full-time.

Overall, although Nadine described daily life as being very busy and homework often being “one more thing that needs to fit in”, often having what she calls “battles” around it, she emphasized the importance of getting it done if that was what the teacher had asked and she
talked about the value of learning skills like time management and responsibility through doing homework. She complains of the inconsistency between teachers as her sons have moved through elementary school: “it’s the unevenness as you go through and how from one teacher to another it is just crazy the range of times” (I assume this to mean time expected to be spent on daily homework).

Over the years Nadine says that the reading homework has been most consistent, that 15-20 minutes per night has been assigned and that usually a reading log book was kept and a parent signature has been required. Weekly spelling exercises have been common, “little bits of math” and projects for Science and the Heritage Fair. Nadine says that she has appreciated the teachers that have sent home weekly newsletters letting her know what is being worked on in class.

Rhonda has one son in grade 2. She is married but her husband has a significant amount of travel for his work. Rhonda works part-time. They live in a small community in rural PEI. Rhonda enjoys the time that she spends doing homework with her son. Overall, Rhonda’s experience with homework has been positive: “I actually really like the homework this year. Last year was fine, I mean he doesn’t really have a problem with homework. He is really quick to do it. It doesn’t take him any time at all, he’s good at it. The routine this year is that we get the homework sent home on Monday and then on Wednesday. Monday and Wednesday we get his folder and it is different. She actually gives him a little extra because he likes a bit of a challenge so he gets an extra book. So, he reads his book aloud and then we go through the questions. There hasn’t been any math yet….and I do a kind of spelling bee with him, but he knows them all already”. Rhonda contrasts this with her neighbor and good friend who has four children one of whom is a peer of Rhonda’s son who has trouble reading – “it’s a big struggle, I mean BIG.
Her husband is out West working and she needs to juggle doing this homework while also taking care of the other three”.

Alice is married and has three children. She has a son in grade 5, a daughter in grade 3 and another daughter in grade 1. She works part-time and her husband often travels for work. Homework has been a negative part of Alice’s life since her son started school. She describes him as being very resistant to doing homework, that often the procrastination and cajoling to get at it takes almost as long as the homework itself, and that it has been the cause of much distress for her son and for herself and husband. She says thus far her daughter in grade 4 has been quite independent and has not had any issues and she says with her younger daughter, her involvement has been primarily around listening to reading.

Alice talked about the time management around homework that is required of her. She says on Mondays when the kids get home from school, it is the first thing she asks them: “what’s the homework for the week?” She then balances what needs to be done for homework with the other activities of the week – which are significant, hockey, swimming, piano lessons.

Alice says that over the years that her children have been in school, the homework routine has varied from teacher to teacher, but she says that generally spelling has been done completely at home and often math sheets. “So much of it is useless and pointless. I know (my son’s) weaknesses and we’d be so much better doing ½ hour of what I know he needs, rather than fighting about this stuff”.

Appendix G – Participant Profiles [Teachers]

Kelly is a grade four teacher at an elementary school in Charlottetown with a demographic of lower socio-economic status. She is a single mother of three children aged 10, 12 and 14. Kelly describes her classroom homework routine as follows: “to me homework should be just a little review. It depends on the grade, but at grade four, it should be reading and maybe a little one sentence response of what they are thinking in relation to that reading; maybe a review of math facts and spelling words…and that’s it for homework for me. It should be a review of the skills they’ve learned in the day. It should be 15-20 minutes max”.

Mary is a French Immersion grade three teacher in Charlottetown. She is married and has two grown daughters. Mary describes her classroom homework routine as follows: “I certainly do assign homework, but I attempt to make the most of what we do in class. I have a 30 minute rule – it should never take more than 30 minutes. If it does, I tell parents to contact me and I am sure to give out my phone number and e-mail address at the beginning of the year. I give a math question every night and it shouldn’t take more than five minutes. I always give a short reading based on something we’ve been working on that day and I give a weekly spelling list.

Carrie is a grade one teacher at a rural school in the central part of the Island. She is married and has three children aged 5, 8 and 12. Carrie’s opinion that homework is a connector and means of communication with parents comes across very strongly in the interview. It is clear that she believes that homework is a valuable practice in her teaching, however she expresses ambivalent feelings when discussing homework for her own children. She describes her classroom homework routine as follows: Homework is sent home as a package on Monday and is returned, with the expectation of a parent signature, on Friday. Within this package are 4
books, math problems, printing exercises and site words. She gives the guideline of 20 minutes per night and says that the reason she gives all the homework on Monday is to accommodate families who are busy with extra-curricular activities.

**Joan** has been retired from teaching for 10 years. She taught grades one and four for 33 years at a “downtown” school in Charlottetown. She has two grown daughters and is a grandmother of two elementary aged children. She describes herself as “never having been a proponent of homework” and spoke of the debates she got into over this topic with other staff members over the years. Joan says “there was never daily homework the way there is now. I think now they have a homework book? And it’s all written out? That just startles me, you know, that in grade three, there’s this, this, and this….and I think, what did they do all day? My homework consisted of spelling and I would always encourage them to read”.

**Jenna** is a grade one teacher at a rural school on the Eastern part of the Island. She is married and has three children aged 5, 8 and 9 years. Jenna describes her classroom homework routine as follows: “I assign homework on a weekly basis. I don’t give it on weekends. They have their book bag which has 4 books in it for the week and they are all sent home on Monday. They have a choice of doing them one each evening or some of the other readers that choose to might do all of them or half of them. They also have their site words that they have to recognize by the end of grade one so I assign a certain number of those each week. And they just have a little tiny game to play with their words. In the second part of the year I introduce a little math assignment. My recommendation is that they spend no more than 15 or 20 minutes and if it is more that parents should let me know.”

**Jackie** is a grade two teacher at a rural school in the Western part of the Island. She is a married mother of three children ages 7, 11 and 13. She describes her homework routine as
follows: “I assign a book a day and new site words once a week. They have a pre-test on Monday and a test on Friday and that’s it. I know as a parent, especially if the child is struggling, I know I don’t want to be sitting there at the table for hours and hours with a crying child. So, that’s enough really, 15 minutes, anything past that, forget it. Because beyond that it is not helping anyone, everyone is just getting frustrated.”

Christine is a grade three teacher at a rural school in the Eastern part of the Island. She is married and the mother of 4 teenagers. She describes her classroom homework routine as follows: “I have a routine I follow every week and it will change for the children depending what their needs are. I have two higher needs kids who, one is not assigned the homework, one is assigned less, and the expectation for both of them will vary. They (students) have a zipper bag and inside there is a spelling portfolio or a spelling duo-tang and there is a letter to the parents on the front as to how they proceed with it. The spelling program is very basic so it doesn’t really need to happen at school. I also give reading, one book per night. I give newsletters and would do an outline. Typical homework is 15 minutes of reading, 10 minutes of spelling and maybe five minutes of math. Sometimes I might throw in: “today I want you to find a recipe, or today I would like you to count all the clocks in your house”. You send home a game and that is not really homework to me, because there shouldn’t be a fight over it.

Sally is a grade 2 teacher at a rural school in the Western part of the Island. She is married and is step-mother to one 10 year old daughter. Sally describes her classroom homework routine as follows: “I’ve always gone by the grade times 10 and that’s how many minutes it should be. I’m not too heavy with the homework, I think every teacher kind of gauges it on how they teach and if you are organized enough and get your outcomes covered, there is not a necessity to send home oodles of homework every night. If I see kids in my class that are
goofing off or not sitting down and doing the work and they are falling behind, I do send it home. For reading, I have two books every night that they have to read with their parents and then do cut up sentences, like rearranging. With math I might send home flash cards and I generally send home one math page on Monday and expect it back on Friday”.

**Hannah** is a grade 4 teacher at a “downtown” school in Charlottetown. She is married and has one daughter in grade six. Hannah described herself as “kind of anti-homework” when I talked to her about doing this interview, and said, “so, I don’t know if you really want to talk to me”. She mentions several times through the interview that the demographic of parents at her school does not allow for the assumption of support and she talks about “not wanting to put extra stress on her students” by assigning too much homework. Describing her classroom routine, she says: I tell the parents that we don’t have a lot of written homework. I will use the spelling books because it gives them a bit of independent work. The way I set it up is that, really, they could get it done at school, or they can take some home. I look at the curriculum outcomes and what I have to achieve and there are some things that we can do here at school and some things that they are responsible for getting done at home, like practicing their reading and studying spelling.

**Greg** is a retired elementary teacher. He is married and is a father of two sons in their 20s. He starts our conversation by saying: “I hate homework. I feel like writing apology letters to the parents and kids that I taught in the early part of my career. I don’t see it as serving a useful purpose if it is teacher homework. When I taught grade 1, the homework that made sense was a book sent home to read and maybe to do a line of printing or something like that, and nothing else made sense.”
Appendix H – Ethics Approval

University of Toronto
Office of the Vice-President, Research
Office of Research Ethics

PROTOCOL REFERENCE #:24413

September 15, 2009

Dr. Karl Dehli
OISE/University of Toronto
252 Bloor St. W., 12th Floor
Toronto, ON M5S 1V8

Ms. Nicole Desseau Hyndman
OISE/University of Toronto
252 Bloor St. W., 12th Floor
Toronto, ON M5S 1V8

Dear Dr. Dehli and Ms. Hyndman,

Re: Your research protocol entitled “Exploring Elementary Homework Practices on Prince Edward Island”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: September 15, 2009
Expiry Date: September 14, 2010
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that a member of the Social Sciences, Humanities & Education Research Ethics Board has granted approval to the above-named research study, for a period of one year, under the REB’s expedited review process. Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report at least 30 days prior to the expiry date of your study.

The following consent documents (Revised September 9, 2009) have been approved for use in this study:
- Call for Participants
- Letter of Consent for Interview Participants

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

If your research has funding attached, please contact the relevant Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel Gyewu
Research Ethics Coordinator
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