

sessions, not as the 'teacher' but more as the resource person whom students could access when the need arose. The students became more reliant upon themselves and their peers in terms of solving their writing problems.

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3

(P) What is it about homework?

Deborah Tranter

What grade did you get for the project?
I got an 'A', which was better than last time.
Oh! I only got a B+.

Surprisingly, this was not two students talking, but their parents. It was part of a conversation overheard at a local football training session. The conversation was between the parents of two Grade 5 students. They were discussing their children's homework.

INTRODUCTION

In my experience as a teacher, conversations like the one quoted above are not unusual. Reflecting on conversations of this nature has, over the years, led me to question the purpose and value of homework as a means of improving children's learning. How equitable is homework when teachers have: little influence over the home learning environment; lack an understanding of the home conditions

affecting many children; and know little of the quality of assistance that their students will receive? Should we even consider questions of equality when we live in a highly competitive society? Arguably, the well-educated and financially secure families have huge advantages in terms of access to resources, knowledge, private tutors and other assistance. Conversely, for some children, completing any schoolwork at home may not be possible, as they may be concerned with basic issues that most of us take for granted, such as personal safety, adequate sleep and food.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

When I began my career as a teacher in an English secondary school, I soon became aware of the problems associated with children having an unsupportive home environment for their learning. One day, one of my Year 7 students told me:

I can't take school books home. My Dad just rips them up and throws them on the fire.

My interest in homework as a research topic began four years ago when I was teaching a Grade 4 class. One of my students, whenever he was asked how he was getting along with his homework project, replied using the pronoun 'we'. For example, 'We have done the drawings' or 'We have started the writing'. On the due date, he came into the classroom with a superbly written and illustrated piece of work, immediately followed by his eager mother who asked: 'When are you displaying the projects?'

I asked her a number of questions, and her answers confirmed my suspicions that she had actually done *all* the project work herself. However, she was prepared to justify her input by stating that her son John had 'traced over the words and read a page of the encyclopedia'.

John had some learning difficulties and was not a good reader, but his mother had very high expectations of him. After further discussion, it appeared to me that John's mother's motive for doing his homework was linked to her own status in relation to other parents.

Later that term, another one of my students handed in his homework. It was in his mother's handwriting. When I asked her why she wanted homework set for her son, she replied that 'homework gives parents an insight into what their child is learning at school and, more importantly, how they are coping with that work'. It took me a long time to convince this parent that it was acceptable for her son to hand in work that was not *all* correct. I explained that it was *his* work that I needed to see so that I had an indication of where *he* needed assistance. It became apparent that she knew her son needed help but that she did not want other parents to notice—status again was important.

The prevailing public attitude of the wealthier Western nations towards homework has, over the last century, cycled from positive to negative, and back again (Cooper et al., 1998). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the memorisation of facts and information was an important learning strategy and, as this could easily be achieved at home, homework was seen as a high priority. In the 1940s, when problem-solving abilities and student interest and initiative were seen to underpin learning, homework was viewed as a punishment and as an intrusion on private home-based activities. This trend was reversed ten years later in the 1950s when knowledge acquisition again became important and then, in the mid-1960s, public opinion turned back away from homework, as it came to be seen as detrimental to students' health and a symptom of too much pressure to succeed. Today, homework is again seen as an important and necessary part of schooling.

Corno (1996) highlights five widespread, unsupported—but popular—misconceptions relating to homework:

- The best teachers give homework.
- More homework is better than less.
- Parents want their children to have homework.
- Homework supports what children learn in school.
- Homework fosters discipline and personal responsibility.

As part of my initial study into parents' and children's perceptions of homework, I had questioned my class as a whole and recorded their

responses. I felt, at this point, that I had some interesting information indicating that children had a clear idea as to the reasons for, and value of, homework but I also felt as though I was only dabbling in a field that, while it offered enormous potential for inquiry, was very complicated (Corno, 1996).

Searching for research papers about homework consumed many weekends, as formal published results seemed relatively few and far between. It was clear to me that if I wanted to draw significant conclusions from my work, the importance of a research method and a structured approach to the collection of data was crucial. I felt that I needed to extend my research to include a larger group of children and parents. Therefore, with the support of other teachers, I presented my survey to all the children in Grades 3 to 6 at my school and collated the results.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I have come to see homework as a very complex and contentious issue. Questions about the purpose and value of homework generally elicit a wide range of opinions. The subject tends to raise questions related more to the home environment, resources and ability to access information and the range of students' abilities than to the homework *per se*. I embarked on a research project to explore:

- the attitudes of students, parents and teachers to homework—in terms of its value in promoting learning; and,
- whether these attitudes were supported by research evidence.

In researching these questions, I also examined the type of homework tasks set, the support in terms of assistance at home with homework and the perceived importance of homework.

As a teacher interested in improving my practice, I asked the students for their opinions on the homework tasks they had experienced and their suggestions for tasks that they would find interesting and worthwhile in relation to learning. Their suggestions were incorporated into the grade's homework assignments.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data collection involved conducting individual interviews and discussions with teachers at staff and weekly planning meetings and with parents individually and at School Council Education Committee meetings. In addition, I also distributed formal written surveys to the twelve class teachers and 200 families (parents) at my school. (See appendixes 3.1 and 3.2.)

I later collected data on the students' attitudes to homework. I individually interviewed small groups of students, conducted class discussions with my own grade, and presented a written survey, which was completed in class time, to all the students in Grades 3 to 6 (183 students).

TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMEWORK

From my interviews, discussions and surveys of teachers and parents, the main purposes of homework were articulated as follows:

- to assist learning;
- as revision, consolidation and reinforcement of class work;
- to communicate what is being taught at school;
- to provide parents with an opportunity to work with their child;
- to prepare students for further study/secondary college;
- to complete work that there is not time for in school;
- to develop study habits/routines, and time management/organisational skills; and,
- to develop students' responsibility for their own learning.

Our parent information evenings, held at the beginning of every school year to explain our work and educational aims, generally include a significant number of questions from parents relating to homework. Many parents have articulated in these forums—quite strongly—their support for substantial homework, especially in the middle and upper grades. Teachers' comments indicate how these

parental attitudes affect not only the teachers' behaviour, but school policies.

If a school is in competition with a private school then they have to set homework. It is a reality, a fact of life, because of parent perceptions and judgements on the quality of education. They relate it to homework and the quantity of homework. Teachers just play the game.

Secondary school teacher

There is an expectation from parents that there is homework, but it is clearly discriminatory. Homework favours those children whose parents are willing/able to provide the necessary help.

Teacher (Grade 6)

I would rather not set homework as it is a lot of work for the teacher and some children never do it, but parents expect it. A few years ago our school policy was none, or very little homework. We would not get away with that now.

Teacher (Grade 3/4)

If these are some of the attitudes influencing teachers when they set homework tasks, how much effort do they put into devising interesting, useful or valuable tasks in terms of the aims outlined above? Parents promoting homework may be motivated by their interest in maximising the educational opportunities for their children in a competitive society, but in so doing they may not be able to discern 'busy work' from a genuine learning activity.

The renewed emphasis on homework was a concern for some of the teachers I surveyed, as they noted that several children in their grades never, or rarely, completed homework.

Why is it that I never get homework in from the kids who really need to do it, only from the ones who don't need it?

Teacher (Grade 3/4)

This response raises several important issues. For example, what is the value of common homework tasks set for students with a wide range of abilities, interests and home backgrounds, and why is homework being set for children who do not appear to require it?

If it is true that children who need to do, or practise, extra work are the main ones not completing homework, then there may well be other factors in those children's lives which influence their learning. More homework may not be the answer!

Clearly, the reasons why some students consistently fail to complete homework are complex. Some students are simply not interested, it's not 'cool', some find it too difficult, others may lack an appropriately supportive learning environment at home.

Homework is boring. I never do it.

Grade 5 student

Homework? I'm a 10-year-old boy! 10-year-old boys never do homework.

Grade 5 student

Interestingly, much of the research on homework—mine included—relies on voluntary participation by families and students. It may be that the parents who support homework are those most likely to reply to such a survey. A large American study, which included a review of 120 studies on homework, stated that:

this study, along with many conducted before it, relied on the voluntary participation of parents. Voluntary response rates are low, suggesting that parents who do respond are more likely to be positively involved in their children's education. Responding parents are also more likely to be white and less likely to represent low-income families (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 82).

My own survey of parental attitudes elicited responses from less than half of our school's families. Of the 90 families (parents) who replied to the survey, 93 per cent thought that children should have homework. Those who did not support homework cited the following reasons—at similar rates of frequency:

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- Children should learn other things at home (life skills).
- They do enough work at school.
- Children should be free to play at home.
- Homework is not necessary at primary (elementary) school.
- Homework could cause children to develop a negative attitude to schoolwork.
- Homework causes problems and disruptions at home especially if the child does not want to do it.

Harris Cooper, an educational psychologist who has reviewed and completed extensive research on homework in America, reported (in 1994) that homework often causes considerable friction between children, parents and teachers. In addition, many pediatricians and family doctors indicated that when children reported medical problems, issues with homework were also a frequent cause of concern. The perception by some parents that homework can contribute to the development of a negative attitude in children towards school is also supported in specific cases by research which found that lengthy homework assignments could lead to fatigue, and the extinction of interest in the relevant topic (Cooper et al., 1998). On this basis, it can be argued that, for some children, homework is at best a pointless exercise, at worst, counterproductive.

The majority of parents who participated in my survey stated that homework should begin in the infant grades and concurred with the reasons given by teachers as to its importance.

A minority of parents wanted teachers to assign homework in order to keep their children away from the television, as indicated by these responses from two families of Grade 4 children:

They [children] should have 30 minutes [homework] every night of the week so they don't watch TV.

Give them something challenging every night so as to keep them away from TV when they get home.

Naturally, the teachers at our school were not impressed by this type of response and some were resentful of these parents' 'unrealistic' expectations of the school.

Only 8 per cent of the parents who responded to my survey did not help their children with homework. Sixty-three per cent of parents helped with their children's homework when needed or occasionally and 21 per cent gave help on a regular basis. This is interesting when compared with children's perceptions that 77 per cent of the help given by parents occurs only when needed.

Most parents thought that children should spend from one to three hours per week on homework which should consist of reading, basic literacy and mathematical skills, revision of class work and research projects. These are also the tasks most often assigned as homework.

In one family's response to my parent survey, opposing attitudes to homework were articulated from each parent of one child. The mother fully supported regular academic homework tasks that consisted of reading, mathematics and spelling revision exercises. The father, conversely, was opposed to homework and thought children should be exploring their environment and learning about 'life skills' at home. It had not occurred to me to survey parents separately.

It is interesting to ponder the diversity in teachers' approaches to, and the type and quantity of, homework tasks they set for children. Some teachers also impose lengthy lunchtime detentions on children who fail to complete work, whilst others do not impose any consequences. It therefore seems to me that a teacher's attitude and expectations towards homework, and the type of tasks set, could influence children's attitudes and feelings considerably. In fact, it has been found in American studies that 'more positive teacher attitudes towards homework were associated with more assigned homework' (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 81).

More, or lengthy, homework assignments may also cause lower completion rates and then lower achievement levels for students. Cooper et al. (1998) reviewed nearly 120 studies of homework and also completed research on attitudes to homework and student academic achievement. The conclusions are summarised as follows:

- Homework for older students (mainly secondary school) plays an important role in improving their grades and achievement scores.
- Homework for younger, elementary school students (primary school) has very little effect on achievement gains (however, it may

have long-term benefits in developing study/time management skills which impact on academic achievement in later years).

- Very lengthy homework assignments, for some children, can lead to fatigue and/or unfavourable attitudes towards homework, and can have a negative impact on the interest level of the child in the topic studied.
- Parents' attitudes about homework have direct, positive effects on their children's attitudes which, at upper grades, impact on their children's academic achievements. Therefore, efforts to improve parent attitudes to homework are likely to pay off in terms of improved learning.
- Clear communication of homework goals and involvement of parents in the homework process can improve parents' attitudes towards homework.
- Positive teacher attitudes towards homework may affect children's achievements negatively, but indirectly, as longer homework assignments may be set which cause lower completion rates, in turn resulting in poorer grades.

However, this research only investigated the relationship between attitudes and the effectiveness of homework as expressed by academic outcomes. There is a need to broaden the criteria in gauging the effectiveness of homework to include the development of cognitive strategies, study habits and improved motivation. Homework, it appears, does improve academic performance in older students, at least for those families willing to participate in the research projects. As Cooper et al. (1998) conclude, though: 'Further investigators need to find ways to involve families that are typically under represented in homework studies.' (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 81).

STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS: STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO HOMEWORK

Of the 183 students who completed the survey, 60 per cent liked homework or felt that it was OK and 40 per cent did not like, or hated, homework. Interestingly, when the results were differentiated into

middle school (Grades 3/4) and upper school (Grades 5/6) responses, there was a marked difference in attitudes, with 75 per cent of the younger students having a positive attitude to homework, compared with only 44 per cent of the older children.

Of those students in Grades 5/6 who said they did not like homework, and who provided a reason, 50 per cent said it was boring and 50 per cent said it was either 'a waste of time' or that it 'takes up too much of their time'. Importantly, 15 per cent of those who had a positive attitude to homework also added that it 'took up too much of their time'.

There are children who see benefits in homework, despite believing it to be a waste of time, and there also some children who do not like homework, but who still think that they should have it! A significant issue with children appears to be that homework impacts on their out-of-school free time and that they do enough work whilst they are at school. Discussing this with children further uncovers resentment of the 'hijacking' of their free time:

They (children) get a lot of work at school and they should have some time to themselves.

We do work at school. We should be able to play with our friends.

Homework takes away our home time.

Because home is for fun and 'us' time.

Grade 5 and 6 students

The majority of children, like their parents, appear to prefer the types of homework tasks that are actually most often assigned by teachers. These include projects, and Maths and English tasks. However, though more children preferred research projects to Maths tasks, when asked which homework was the most useful, most respondents identified Maths over projects.

The most common homework that is set for children at our school involves project research, Maths and English tasks (number facts,

spelling, grammar, etc.). The children's responses must be viewed in the context of their own experiences of homework. I found that, in my Grade 4 class, when I first began to look at designing more interesting homework tasks (and providing a wide variety of homework tasks, such as construction, cooking and Science experiments), I received a much greater variety of suggestions and ideas from the children as to their preferred type of homework. The children's opinions may therefore be more a reflection of the school's approach to homework than of homework as an intrinsically valuable exercise. Of the children who stated that they should have homework, the majority preferred it only once per week, beginning from Grades 1 to 4.

On reflection, I should have confidentially noted the names of the children on each survey form in order to ascertain possible correlations between attitude and gender or ability. I certainly noticed that many, but not all, of the very negative written responses also were completed in poor handwriting and with many spelling mistakes. This would be interesting to follow up as, originally, I had encouraged anonymity in order to promote honest responses. However, I have found that children are very keen to express their opinions if they believe something positive may result. They tend to trust the teacher and often only require assurances that they are not going to get into trouble for being honest!

On collating the survey responses, I did find it sad to read statements from children as young as nine or ten who explained that homework made them feel:

Dumb.

Like someone who can't do it.

Terrible.

Nervous, terrified, dumb.

These were a minority of children, but I suspected that they included those who needed a great deal of extra help with their work. Homework appeared to be just another area of failure for them,

probably reinforcing their low self-esteem. It would seem that children do not all benefit equally from homework. Notwithstanding these types of comments, many children did find homework assignments to be 'great' or 'fun'. This could be related to home or teacher attitudes, ability or type of homework tasks given.

MY INTERVENTION

As part of my initial study into parents' and children's perceptions of homework, I had questioned my grade as a whole and recorded their responses.

Grade 4 students' perceptions of homework

Negative points

- Some is too hard—don't understand it—the whole family has to help.
- Too easy/too hard.
- It is boring.
- Don't like working at home—we do enough at school.
- We miss out on the TV/computer.
- Takes up our play/free time.
- Don't have time.

Positive points

- It helps us to learn.
- Mums and Dads get to help.
- We don't forget things we learn at school.
- It keeps us busy.
- We can't copy people.

I then asked the grade about the reasons they thought they were given homework and wrote their replies on the board.

Why do you think teachers give out homework?

- To make your brain think after school.
- So that we can learn.
- Parents like homework.
- So we aren't just working at school.
- I don't know—it helps us learn but I don't know how.
- Because it's a school and that is what schools get paid for. I'm here to learn.
- Homework does help you to learn but I never do it anyway. Homework is boring.

Why do you think parents like homework?

- We don't get everything done at school.
- Parents like to see our work and see what we are doing at school.
- So that parents can have a rest (while their children work).
- To practise for secondary school.
- To help us remember the answers (Maths).
- To help us to learn.
- So we are working at home, not playing all the time.
- We learn different things than at school.
- So we don't do it all in one day.

Additionally, I surveyed and interviewed the children in my grade (Grade 4) on their perceptions, attitudes and the types of homework that they preferred. My aim was to develop homework tasks that were relevant to their interests and abilities as well as to inspire and motivate learning. However, though I was not prepared to cancel homework altogether—partly due to perceived parental pressure—I did allow for some 'homework-free' weeks on request from the children. As a class, we negotiated the term's homework, based on the current unit of work and the children's interests. The children were given a choice of tasks and activities. This was a successful exercise, as evidenced by very positive feedback from a large majority of parents and students and an increase in the homework completion rate (up to 100 per cent for many children). I found the children's perceptions very interesting. For example, many of the homework

tasks suggested by the children involved their special interests. This could mean making models and finding out information, writing stories or researching their football team. Suggestions included:

- Making a model of an animal and finding out a little about it.
- Making a model of a tadpole changing into a frog.
- Building a model ship and explaining how it works.
- Picking a football player and finding out his history.
- Writing a mythical story about dragons, witches and wizards.
- Inventing an insect and writing about it.
- Designing a Tamagotchi and writing about how it works.
- Drawing your favourite football team, colouring it and writing some of the player's names.
- Building an animal house and writing about how you made it.
- Getting a caterpillar and seeing how it grows.
- Sewing.

I later extended my homework investigations to the other grades in my area of the middle primary school. The success rate in terms of all homework being completed, and satisfaction expressed by parents and children, was excellent when we set a choice of homework tasks that catered for a variety of interests, abilities and learning styles. For example, we used tasks based on Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy and Gardiner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences from which children selected two or three preferred activities to be completed over a period of two weeks. The completed work was then displayed in the class, or was presented to the other children in the case of musical, oral or theatrical tasks. This provided immediate feedback and recognition of the work completed.

To cater for a few children whose home situations appeared less supportive, as stated by the children or from my own observations of non-completion of previous homework assignments, I provided some time in class as catch-up or homework sessions. I also provided construction materials for the homework to assist those children who may not have been able to access such materials at home.

When presenting their finished tasks to the grade, parental help

was acknowledged. From my discussions, I ascertained that many children felt that homework should be completed without much help from others. Those children who presented fantastic models that obviously demonstrated significant adult input were questioned in detail by the others as to exactly what their own contribution had been. Model-making, especially those where cutting and power tools were needed, provided some valuable insights. Several children (boys and girls) stated that their fathers had enjoyed being involved—usually it was the children's mothers who checked or helped with homework. The issue of gender-based parental support in homework is a largely unexplored area. The extent to which children can access the support of both parents may be of some significance. Similarly, the attitudes of fathers and mothers may vary and, in a society with a significant number of single-parent families, this is an issue worthy of further study.

CONCLUSION

Most of the parents and students I surveyed and interviewed had strong opinions about homework and its value to learning. Their opinions seemed to be grounded in tradition and perception rather than specific personal experiences. The majority of parents were in favour of a substantial amount of homework (up to three hours per week at primary school), consisting of consolidation in basic skills in Maths and English. They provided help mainly in explaining the work to their children and articulated the purposes of homework as assisting in improving learning, developing time management and study skills, preparation for the future (e.g. secondary school) and communicating the school's programs to parents.

It is my concern that homework, given the wide diversity of attitudes and resources available in the home, is not an equitable exercise for children in that it can promote disadvantage or advantage, depending on family circumstances. If education is concerned with providing a 'level playing field' of opportunity for children, how does homework contribute equally to the education of all children? Which families benefit most from homework, in terms of broad educational

achievement, and to what extent does homework currently reinforce, rather than redress, the link between academic achievement and socio-economic background?

I believe that the topic of homework provides a wide range of research possibilities. These include studies on families generally under-represented in homework studies to date, and the relationship, if any, between attitude and success in homework and socio-economic status. I have found few research findings linking student attitudes, and the volume of homework completed, to improved study habits.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In terms of personal growth, one of the most important things that I have learnt is that, in trying to find the answers to what I initially believed were fairly basic questions—for example, 'What is a valuable homework task?'—I have mainly succeeded in raising a great many more questions.

Throughout my teaching career, I have always been interested in the value of academic research; however, from my observations, this is not a view widely shared by many of my colleagues in primary schools. Teachers are busy practitioners with an increasing workload related to new teaching directions and welfare issues. I have, however, found that, without overloading oneself, some reflective classroom research can be a means of broadening horizons and inspiring one's own learning. This learning becomes much more valuable if it can then be shared with others and used to improve teaching practice.

What started initially as a broad and general topic on the value of homework in relation to learning generally became more focused on issues of equity as I progressed through my study. With hindsight, my study should have been refined to small areas that were easier to research. In fact, my main findings have been to highlight gaps in the homework research generally, thus creating more questions than answers for me.

On reflection, as a teacher-researcher, I may be—initially—just like my younger students who, when asked to complete a project, choose a topic such as 'The Sea' or 'Space'. The role of the teacher

then is to narrow down the study to a practical and manageable size. Similarly, I chose a wide-ranging topic and set out to follow up a few interesting leads—not always in an organised and systematic fashion. Discussion of my ideas, plans and findings with researchers who are experienced in this area has been of great benefit. In retrospect, as a full-time teacher and leader at my school, I did not have enough time to fully plan and implement my research method and this is something I would like to better develop in the future.

This year, as an assistant principal in a new school, I do not teach in the classroom nor assign homework personally. However, my leadership position enables me to influence other teachers directly and via the school's policies. In encouraging my colleagues to reflect on the quality, and quantity, of homework tasks set in our school, I share my ideas and model a range of assignments that I have found to be relevant to students' learning, successful and enjoyable for both parents and children. I actively promote a teaching style and, where homework is set, home tasks that cater for a range of students' talents and abilities within each grade, in addition to those which are interesting, practical and linked to the curriculum. By articulating my research findings, promoting educational discussion and raising questions, I hope to raise school and community awareness of the problematic nature of homework tasks.

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APPENDIX 3.1: PARENT SURVEY

Name (optional)

Child's Grade level

1. Do you think children should have homework?
Why/why not?
2. What do you think is the importance of homework?
3. At which grade level do you think homework should start?
4. How much help do you give your child/children with homework?
5. What type of help do you provide?
6. How much time per week do you think should be spent on homework?
7. What kind of homework do you think is the most useful?
8. Any other comments.

APPENDIX 3.2: TEACHER SURVEY

Name (optional)

Grade level

1. Do you think that students in your grade should have homework?
2. If so, why?
3. At what levels of schooling do you think homework is valuable and why?
4. What kind and quantity of homework do you set for your grade (and how often)?
5. What sort of feedback do you receive from parents regarding homework?
6. Do some students have problems with homework, or with handing it in on time, etc. in your grade? If so, what and how do you deal with these problems?

7. Do you set different homework tasks for students with different interests or abilities? (Why or why not?)
8. How much input/help from parents regarding their child's homework do you expect?
9. Do you have any problems regarding too much or not enough help or support from parents regarding their child's homework?
10. Any other comments.

APPENDIX 3.3: STUDENT HOMEWORK SURVEY

Grade level

1. How do you feel about homework?
2. Do you think children should have homework? Why?
3. What homework do you think is the most useful?
4. What homework do you like best?
5. If you could choose anything for homework what would you choose? Why?
6. How much do your parents help you with homework?
7. How much time each week should children have homework?
8. At what grade level should homework start?
9. Any other comments.

'I don't want to be here': Engaging reluctant students in learning

Meaghan Walsh with Marilyn Smith

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the experiences of an action research project that was conducted by Meaghan Walsh and Marilyn Smith, a Year 11 English teacher at Colyton College, a senior secondary college (Years 11 and 12) in Geelong (Victoria's second largest city) and of a socioeconomically diverse population.

Marilyn aimed to adapt the Year 11 English curriculum to the needs of a group of 20 male students, characterised by low academic achievement. She hoped that tailoring the subject matter to the interests of this group of students would help engage them and assist them in succeeding in this complex task.

The main data collection was conducted by Meaghan through interviews with a sample of students from the class. The initial interviews were conducted early in the school year to obtain baseline information about the students' attitudes towards school, learning and English. A follow-up interview was carried out towards the end of