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"Doing school" and "having fun" : tensions between family and school conceptions of education

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“Doing School” and “Having Fun”: Tensions between Family and School Conceptions of Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology by Charlene Catherine Bredder

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2006
The dissertation of Charlene Catherine Bredder is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego
2006
DEDICATION

To all parents and teachers who strive to create the best educational experiences for their students. It is the toughest job in the world to raise a child. This dissertation is dedicated to all people who contribute to positive experiences for students. It is through our efforts that we grow.
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VITA

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PUBLICATIONS


ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Doing School” and “Having Fun”: Tensions between Family and School Conceptions of Education

by

Charlene Catherine Bredder

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, San Diego, 2006

Professor Hugh B. Mehan, Chair

Homeschooling is increasingly becoming an exercised option by parents for a variety of academic, religious, political, and social reasons. Currently, 2% of US school children are schooled at home. This project focuses on families who have chosen a city or county-sponsored homeschool program and compares them to parents who have chosen a traditional school. This comparison allows an exploration of how school structures and practices impact family-school relations. There are both external and internal pressures that ensure that homeschool families conform to traditional ideas of education. However, through defining activities, cracks in this reproduction appear. In defining practices as “doing school” or as “having fun,” families and homeschool programs delineate who is responsible and what expectations are placed on the activity. In arenas defined as “doing school,” the program has more control, whereas in arenas defined as “having fun,” families assume more responsibility. In homeschool programs, cross-generational and cross-peer interaction facilitates
authentic learning practices, which departs from traditional conceptions of education. However, parents can maintain traditional ideas because the project-based learning is defined as “having fun” and is not understood to be as serious as “doing school” which is done at home and involves book work and evaluation. Parents point to outcomes of higher self esteem and a personalized learning experience for their homeschooled students. The project uses interviews and participant observation to understand how meaning is created and how it informs practice. Examining how parents construct the meaning of education gives us further understanding of the place of education in families’ lives, the meaning people assign to education, and the practices that accompany this meaning-making activity. Understanding how people create meaning within social institutions can also be a stepping stone to understanding how practices and meanings change, and how schools can address the changing social demands of what education means.
Chapter 1

Understanding Homeschool Programs

Homeschooling mom: “Let’s say that tomorrow there was a rule that kids couldn’t have more than a half hour of homework anywhere in the world, no matter what school you picked, I’d never go back. You know, that’s what drove us here. That’s not what keeps us here.”

Author: “What keeps you here [at the homeschool program]?”

Homeschooling mom: “The idea that the kids are in mixed age groups, working at several different levels at the same time; the flexibility that we can be given the academic content, the curricular content for the whole academic year that the state has approved, and then we can do what we want with that. You know, making sure that our kids get it, but in a way that we feel suits them best.”

Private school dad: “I couldn’t do it [homeschool]. Me and my daughter are both too hard-headed. We’d butt heads all the time. It’s enough just with the sports that I do with her.”

The words “homeschooling” evoke images of children isolated at home, sitting at the kitchen table working through textbooks. The concept also conjures up notions of who homeschools their children; frequently people think either of strict religious families who emphasize morality or of liberal “hippy” families who are against formal schooling (Stevens, 2001). In any case, there is the idea that families make ideological choices and fall neatly into categories of “traditional schooling” or “homeschooling.”

Most people assume that “homeschooling” means that families have chosen to disassociate from the public school system (Lines, 1999). However, these dichotomies are not as clear-cut today as they were previously. Families move between choices, labeling their current form of education as “good for now” but they are generally open to change and other options. Furthermore, they are not necessarily ideologically committed to their current choice of schooling. In fact, a few mothers I interviewed had tried a secular private school, a religious private school, two local public schools
and a homeschool program over the course of their children’s education. Examining the interactions within these choices is therefore key because people’s experiences are not necessarily narrowly confined to one.

Homeschooling is legal in all 50 states, with some states encouraging school districts to develop programs for homeschool families, and other states making it more difficult for families to choose to homeschool. Homeschooling is no longer as contentious as it was in the 1980’s when families fought to legalize their right to choose homeschooling as an educational option. These liaisons between the state and families choosing to homeschool have produced a new type of relationship that families have to state school programs. This relationship offers new understandings of responsibilities, allegiances, and resistance by families to the state idea of education. This space is important to explore since homeschooling is no longer a marginal activity.

Just counting the number of “homeschoolers” is difficult because states define homeschooling differently. Lines (1999) estimates that by 1996, between 1 and 2% of the population used a homeschool option. Lines counts homeschoolers as those families who provide the majority of the education for their children at home, which therefore includes independent homeschoolers, people who associate with an “independent study” program and people who are in church or other groups that support their homeschool activities. Between 1990-91 and 1995-96 school year, the number of homeschooling families doubled, and possibly tripled (Lines, 1999). In California, nearly 40% of homeschooling families do not file paperwork, so it is suspected that around 2% of the population is engaged in homeschooling. One
researcher conducted an informal study of homeschool duration and found an average of two years (Dell Bella, cited in Lines, 1999). As Lines (1999) points out, this would mean that by age 18, between 6 and 12 percent of children would have had some homeschooling experience.

In addition, homeschool programs, as opposed to individualized homeschool efforts, negotiate the school-family relationship differently than traditional school programs do. This particular brand of homeschooling which utilizes state-sponsored materials provides insights into the negotiated space, relationships, and the impact of the institution of school on families. Families who educate their children at home are both inside and outside the institution of school, which gives them an unusual experience of combining both private family functions and public school functions in the same social space. Of the homeschooling options presented below, they are the most similar to traditional school experiences. Yet there are many differences. We gain insights into the interaction of families and the institution of school by comparing these families’ experiences to the experiences of families in more traditional school arrangements.

Previous research on homeschooling (Stevens, 2001, Holt, 1997; Mayberry, 1992; Knowles, 1989; Knowles et al, 1992; Mayberry et al, 1995; Pederson and O’Mara, 1990; Van Galen and Pitman, 1991) and parental involvement in traditional schools (Swick, 1988; Noddings, 2002; Epstein, 1986; Sheppard and Rose, 1995) does not take into account this new development that combines family and state responsibility for educating students. The research simplifies forms of resistance and cooperation that can occur between schools, families, and students. My research
examines the complex relationship that families have to schools and posits a new understanding of student reticence as shaped by traditional schools in contrast to homeschool programs. This research explores issues in three areas of inquiry: school-family relations, institutional understanding, and student reticence.

**Research Question**

My research examines families who have chosen to school their children at home through a state-sponsored program (at the city or local level) and compares their experiences and beliefs with families who have chosen a more traditional means of educating their children through either the local public school or a private school. I explore the question of the meaning of education that parents, teachers, and students create together. This comparison is interesting because all families have to interact with different forms of the institution of schooling. Families who have chosen a state-sponsored homeschool program are in an unusual position of seeking an alternative to traditional school, but then choosing to associate with the public school system while pursuing this alternative. These categories are fluid, as parents choose an option that seems right to them now, but could change later on.

The intersection of home and school is the primary place of change and redefinition of what counts as schooling. I examine parents’ notions of education, parenting, and their relationships with school programs. Their beliefs about education and parenting lead to practices that in turn influence their relationship with school programs. It is not only parents’ relationships with schools that are changed through homeschool programs, but also their families’ relationship to learning. All families have in common the need to negotiate with the institution of school. I explore how
these negotiations shape the understanding of education and educational practices in families.

The primary focus of this inquiry is to examine how the changed responsibility of parents and teachers in homeschool programs impacts the methods of education. I want to know how the experience of “doing school” through a homeschool program is similar to and different from traditional schools. As parents choose different types of schools, their relationship with the teachers and with their own students changes because of the institutional setting. I want to see how institutions influence beliefs and practices of participants.

**Institutional and Family Meanings and Interactions**

Neoinstitutionalist research (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Weick, 1976; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983) explores why organizations come to resemble each other and why there is little variation in fundamental aspects of organizations. However, an examination of city- or county- sponsored homeschool programs reveals many differences as well as similarities to traditional schools. This research contributes to understanding what type of change has occurred in the organization of homeschool programs, and what aspects are similar to traditional schools. Homeschool programs are beholden—just as traditional schools—to the state for funding, supplies, and buildings. Neoinstitutionalist literature explains the similarities that develop, but not the important differences that also develop. I explore both how homeschool programs resemble and challenge traditional concepts and organization of schooling.
Research on student resistance (Apple, 1993; Apple, 1982; Apple, 1979; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1981; Ogbu, 2003; Foley, 1990) suggests that students who do not perceive a future based on their educational studies disengage from the rules and roles associated with schooling. The research focuses on student actions. My research demonstrates the importance of parent-teacher-student relationships, institutional recognition of students as people, and student control over their schedule as an antidote to student resistance. I focus on the relationships surrounding the students and the messages about learning and responsibility that students receive. This research fills a gap in our understanding of alternative family-school relationships, as well as a gap in understanding student resistance.

**A Very Brief History of Homeschooling in the U.S.**

To understand how homeschooling came to be an option in the United States, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the formation of the idea for public schools. Thomas Jefferson saw education as a guardian of the new nation’s freedom and Republican form of government, stating that in fact, “no other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness” (Padover, 1943:87). Because the fledgling democratic form of government in the US was so fragile, Jefferson reasoned that citizens needed to be educated well to preserve it. However, even in pursing this dream of universal public education for all white, male children (and to a lesser extent, white females) there was a tension between the public good and family control over education. He did not want to create a conflict between the family and the state; he therefore advocated public education with the understanding that
some parents may opt not to send their children to public school. In 1817, Jefferson pointed out the potential conflict of families and the state,

> Is it a right or a duty in society to take care of their infant members in opposition to the will of the parent? How far does this right and duty extend? . . . public sentiment does not seem to have traced it precisely. . . . It is better to tolerate the rare instance of a parent refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings and ideas by the forcible asportation and education of the infant against the will of the father” (Padover, 1943:90).

Jefferson emphasized education as a public good, but one that is available, not compulsory. This acknowledgement of parental say in their child’s education continues to be a theme throughout the development of public schools.

By the 1840’s, reformers voiced a growing critique of the public schools, especially “charity schools” for poor students, which offered what most considered an inferior education compared to the private schools and private tutors that were common among the wealthy (Cremin, 1957:30). Education was spotty at best, and followed the needs of families to have the children helping on farms at home. Frequently, children would go to school for eight to ten weeks a year, as did the “Father of Public Education,” Horace Mann (Cremin, 1957). Some families simply lived too far from schools to send their children, so they learned to read and do simple math at home.

Mann advocated the establishment of the Common School, which would ensure both rich and poor students an education that would give them a good basis for participating as citizens in the Republic. He believed so firmly that Common Schools would ensure quality that he said if the schools failed to improve, parents had “not
only the right but the high obligation ‘to provide surer and better means for the education of their children’” (Cremin, 1957:24). Even in the earliest stages of garnering public support for public education, its leading champion recognized parental influence and responsibility for educational matters for their children.

The early founders’ understanding of parental say in educational choices predated the legal assurances for homeschooling rights, but certainly left the notion of responsibility for educating children open to parents (Stevens, 2001). In the 1980’s homeschooling advocates acted to ensure that homeschooling rights are protected in all fifty states. This brief history of education demonstrates the underlying ideas were already in place to support a move toward formal recognition of homeschooling as an option for families.

**Homeschooling Resources**

Books for parents considering homeschooling also reach back to this agrarian history. The books empower parents in different ways, either through naturalizing historical experiences of rural farm families and pioneers, or through naturalizing the developmental knowledge that parents of young children would have. Parents homeschool for a wide variety of reasons and the books supporting homeschooling naturalize parents’ responsibility for their children’s education, which is a direct challenge to the common assumption that parents should send their children to school.

Many homeschooling books (Holt, 1997; Pedersen and O’Mara, 1990) point to the pioneering origins of homeschooling, calling back to a time when parents were recognized as teachers of their children, and where learning was integrated into the family’s day. One book calls this a “learning lifestyle” that was lost and which
homeschoolers are “reinventing . . . from the past and making it appropriate for contemporary times” (Dobson, 2003, 22).

In addition to harking back to a simpler time when family life and learning were integrated, many homeschooling books also have a critique of schools, emphasizing others’ critiques about how schools mirrored factories and how children learned to be good employees (Dobson, 2003, 134; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Rist, 1977; Kozol, 1991; Kozol, 1967; Delpit, 1995). Homeschool books point out that schools have not “kept up with the times” (Dobson, 2003, 135; Holt, 1997) and still have antiquated methods and expectations, rather than individualizing instruction for students to pursue their own interests. This critique of the current state of education and the hidden purposes it serves is on the one hand Marxist (schools serve capitalists in creating compliant workers) and on the other hand, individualistic (education should serve the individual needs of students). Homeschooling is therefore both a call back and a move forward to a different type of education. Whether the outcomes and practices mirror the critique is an issue I explore later.

**California’s Homeschooling Options**

In California, there are five options for homeschooling. These options can be thought of on a continuum from little to large amounts of state oversight and support.

1. The option offering the most control to parents and the least state oversight is for parents to register themselves as a private school. The state regards this option as a loophole that homeschool families exploit, but it is nonetheless available. Parents wishing to be completely independent simply file a form with the state indicating that they have opened their own school, the number of students that they have (their own
children) and they are official. No one comes to check to see what curriculum is being used, no tests are required, and it is relatively free of government oversight. Up to 40% of homeschooling families don’t even to this minimum; they simply homeschool their children without informing the state.

2. The next option is to form an “umbrella school” with a group of homeschooling parents. One parent files the form as the school leader and checks work from other families, keeping some on file in case they are audited by the state. Again, the parents have formed the school, so there is relatively little oversight or support from the state. The state is not responsible for the education; it neither provides resources to parents, nor spends state resources to check on the parents’ school.

3. The third option is for students to sign up with a distance learning school. This school can be in another state or is simply not in the students’ neighborhood. The student is then considered a pupil of the school; they send in work, complete assignments, and follow the curriculum that the school has established. Students generally work from home and are supervised by their parents. The school is responsible for assessing student work and keeping student records. It must also comply with state regulations regarding accounting and curriculum.

4. Moving toward more traditional school-like options, there are charter schools, which are public schools. Their curriculum and mission has to be approved by the city—or in some states, by the state—in which they operate. They are exempt from certain state requirements but are held to the same accountability standards as other schools. There are homeschool charter programs that offer a myriad of forms for
homeschooling: combinations of homeschool and traditional school, distance learning, learning centers, various curricular choices, and other perks such as fee reimbursement for summer camp, music lessons, tutoring, or participation in sports teams. The format of the school depends on the charter that is approved by each school board. The homeschool charter school must adhere to the curriculum and goals that it set out in its charter, just as other types of charter schools. The school is responsible for the curriculum, assessing student work, keeping records, and for providing resources to families such as tutoring and parent-student-teacher meetings. Many homeschool charter school programs offer seminars, classes, plays, clubs, and field trips for families. Chartered homeschools employ teachers who meet with their assigned families, review work, and offer help and suggestions for challenges the family is encountering. Teachers are not part of the teachers union, but must be credentialed. There is an actual school building where families can come for activities and meetings.

5. The option for homeschooling in California that most resembles traditional school is to choose a local public school program sponsored by cities or counties. School districts in California and in a growing number of other states have created special programs for homeschool families, with separate facilities, teachers, and principals. This type of study is called “independent study” in California.

These programs follow the state-sponsored curriculum, use the state standards, and follow all state regulations for traditional schools. They employ teachers who meet with their assigned families and collect work samples once a month. The teachers are considered “traditional” teachers for the purposes of employment, union
membership, and benefits. These programs are located in buildings where there is space for parents to meet their assigned teachers, and where seminars and classes can be held. The school organizes field trips, guest speakers, and tutoring sessions. Although parents are the main teachers, programs provide a lot of support both for parents and students.

California state law says that students must make sufficient progress on their grade level work in order for the school to get credit for the student’s attendance. Various programs require different things of parents and students to satisfy this requirement. Most programs require parents to submit a sample of student work in each subject once a month. Generally, parent-student-teacher conferences are held three times a year. In most cases, the minimum contact a family could have with a program is once a month dropping off the work. Some families who travel or whose children are actors or participate in high level sports events send their monthly work in to the school through the mail. However, most families have much more contact with teachers and the program than the once-a-month work submission.

In my research, I have found that parents and teachers choosing each option state various reasons why the one they chose is the “best.” Independent homeschooling parents emphasize their freedom from the state. The charter schools emphasize their freedom of curriculum and ability to offer services and perks, such as summer camp money, that other schools can’t offer. The public school options emphasize their close association with public schools so that students can easily transition between the two.
Changing Choices, Shifting Identities

Although the options are easily explained and have specific features, the categorization of families into these choices is actually much more problematic today than it was in previous years. Previously, families were generally ideologically committed to their educational choice (Stevens, 2001). However, today families move between homeschooling and public school or private school choices more than they did in previous years. They can associate with a charter school specifically designed for homeschool families, or they can participate in many public school program offerings.

In fact, as I was interviewing parents who I had attempted to categorize as “homeschooling” or “traditional school” families based on their current practices and associations, I found myself discussing the other category part way through an interview. A “traditional school” parent might mention that they homeschooled their children for a year. Likewise, many homeschool families have chosen to take their child out of a traditional school in order to mitigate a social or academic problem they were having at school. The categories must be seen as fluid actions that parents take, not hard and fast categorical descriptors.

Research that asserts “homeschool parents think…” or “private school parents view education in this way” essentializes the identity of parents. Such statements fail to realize that these are categories that parents chose for educating their children at that point in time. It is very important to realize that these categories are choices of action, not identities. However, these choices have concrete results that can be seen in practices and interactions as well as beliefs. Although I do compare parents who have
chosen “traditional” school formats with parents who have chosen homeschooling, I view these choices as actions bounded in time. The beliefs, practices and interactions these parents demonstrate are influenced by their choice of the form of schooling. There are no neat labels I can use to demonstrate this time-bounded, action-bounded identity that would not be awkward for the reader. Writing “parents who have chosen [type of school] presently” would add little clarity and detract from categories of understanding that are necessary for comparison. Therefore, I do use “homeschool” and “traditional school” (both public and private) as categories to draw comparisons between families’ experiences in different school programs. The reader must remember that these identities can and do change over time and that parents make choices that move them from one to another school option.

This fluidity makes the study of institutional interactions that much more problematic: parents cannot be categorized easily into ideological niches, so their interactions with institutions and how they came to the decisions they made say more about their experience than an examination of their ideas alone would. The importance of ideological commitments is diminished, and the interactions within and between the institutions of school and family become more important to understanding the lived experiences of families and schools. The interaction between parents and schools is influenced by cultural expectations, structural constraints, and personal beliefs. These interactions both contribute to and result from these parameters. Sorting out the similarities and differences in parent expectations, interactions, and beliefs between these forms of school is important in this environment of change and options.
Given that parents are willing to change their choices if their children experience problems or if their circumstances change, a focus on how parents interact with the institution of school (in whatever format) provides lessons about the impact of school on families, and of families on school. Through comparing the experiences of homeschool families with traditional school families, we can come to conclusions about the impact of the format of institution of school on families.

This study examines homeschooling through city and county-sponsored programs because these are most similar to traditional school programs while still being an alternative to traditional schools. Families are choosing to homeschool their children through associating with a program that uses the curriculum and certified teachers of traditional schools. The combination of freedom and accountability is interesting in this era of choices. Why do parents choose this seemingly radical departure from traditional schools and educate their children at home, but still want to associate with a very traditional program that emphasizes state curriculum, standards, and expectations? How is this program, which touts its similarities to traditional school, different from traditional school? What institutional arrangements have been made to accommodate families in these programs?

**Understanding Homeschooling**

Previous research described homeschooling as a social movement encompassing two groups of people who hold two different ideologies: religious conservatives and liberal “unschoolers” (Stevens, 2001). While this portrayal accurately depicts the early history of the homeschooling movement, the situation is now more diverse. In fact, there could be debate about whether homeschooling is a
“social movement” anymore. All fifty states have some provision for families to educate their children at home. Many districts have specific policies supporting homeschool programs. Homeschooling is no longer contested legally; it is widely accepted as one education option among many that parents can choose. This new development is closely connected to the discourse of “choice” in education (Wells, 1993). The state’s acceptance of homeschooling as an option implies that the state has institutionalized this once deviant activity. This move makes the current condition of education a negotiated space, full of compromise and struggle, with evolving rules and expectations from teachers, parents, and the state.

I examine a growing subset of the homeschool population: people who associate with a school-sponsored program for support. These new homeschoolers differ from the two groups of people that Stevens (2001) examined: “unschoolers” who rebel against traditional concepts of “doing school” and “believers” who are educating their children at home for religious reasons. This new population has chosen to educate their children at home mainly for academic or social reasons, and the majority of parents have previously sent their children to public schools. These homeschoolers negotiate public school curriculum and pedagogy while choosing an alternative to the school. Of course, the two populations that Stevens (2001) found are also part of the population.

Choosing to associate with a program does not eliminate parents’ ideological beliefs. However, these parents must be willing to negotiate the program’s requirements in order to participate. I examine this unique combination of independence from and reliance on the public school system to understand how
parents construct the meaning of education and how their practices both challenge and reinforce various aspects of traditional conceptions of schooling. I compare this population to a population of public school parents.

Previous research on homeschooling compares subpopulations of homeschoolers and looks at beliefs and motivations for homeschooling (Lines, 1991; Mayberry, 1988; Van Galen, 1987, 1988; Knowles, Marlow, and Muchmore, 1992; Stevens, 2001). These studies are limited to an examination of the ideologies professed by homeschoolers. While gaining a good understanding of why people would independently homeschool their children, the studies are not necessarily applicable to today’s diverse population of homeschoolers. Many of the current homeschooling parents choose to associate with a state-sponsored program to get support, curriculum, and guidance. Comparing these homeschoolers to traditional public school parents demonstrates which conceptions and practices of education are consistent, which vary, and what impact parental understanding of education has on parent choices. Both populations associate with a state program to educate their children, so exploring the differences and similarities between the programs is also important in understanding the lived experience of school for each population.

**Investigating the Meaning of Education**

In San Diego County alone, there are 15 programs currently available for families to choose from to homeschool their children. Of these, 5 are city or county-sponsored. The other 10 are charter schools specifically designed for homeschooling families. This research is based on two years of observations and interviews primarily in two programs that serve three locations. I also conducted observations and
interviews in three other programs, two city- or county-sponsored ones and one charter school. A brief description of each of the two main programs follows.

While it is true that homeschooling generally requires one parent to be home full-time (although a few creative parents have made other arrangements), it is a mistake to believe that only white, middle class parents are homeschooling their children. There are more parents of color who are choosing to homeschool, as well as families who are poor not because they chose to homeschool, but because they have working class jobs. In fact, in the urban area I examined, the general county population is 60% White, 25% Latino, and 12% African American. One program had 75% White, 10% African American, and 11% Latino families, while the other had 76% White, 5% African American, and 14% Hispanic families. Of the three programs I was most intensely involved with, two have significant percentages of minority populations.

**Beech School**

Beech School serves a large, diverse city. It is located in a former local school building surrounded by a quiet neighborhood. The traditional school setting and activity at the school site belies the program’s homeschool focus. Parents drop students off, office personnel answer questions, students quietly talk in groups outside of classroom doors, while others play on the playground. There are teachers, curriculum, seminars, and parent-teacher conferences. However, there are no bells, no age-graded classes, nor any homework; families with younger siblings wander the campus, parents and students come for tutoring, teachers meet individually with students, and parents drop in to chat with teachers. There is an easy flow and
welcoming atmosphere to the campus. No one is rushing to beat the bell or close the
doors or start class. Students are somewhat timely for seminars and parents either work
with their students in the workshops and seminars or gather outside to talk to each
other or work on lesson plans. The social separation of parents, students, and teachers
is not an obvious form of organization for this school.

The homeschool program shares the space with other city programs, a special
pre-kindergarten for students needing developmental support, as well as other school
offices. The homeschool program serves students in Kindergarten through twelfth
grade. For high school, the focus of the program changes a bit from the parents
providing all of the education with support from teachers to teachers providing most of
the education through seminars and tutoring and parents playing a more supportive
role. In addition to a part-time tutor in math, 11 teachers work at the school. All the
teachers are experienced, with an average of 17 years teaching. The school population
has changed composition, and is less diverse than the overall district population: in
2002 there were 291 students, with 13.7% Hispanic, 76.3% White, 4.8% African
American and 2.1% Asian. In 2000, there were 361 students, with 11.1% Hispanic,
67.9% White, 13.9% African American and 4.2% Asian. The overall district
population is more diverse: in 2002 there were 41.9% Hispanic, 25.9% White, 16.2%
Asian, and 14.5% African American.

Instead of their own classrooms, teachers have a partitioned area in a
classroom with 4 or 5 other teachers, as most of their time is spent meeting
individually with families, conducting phone conversations and offering support, and
grading and tracking student work. Teachers’ workspaces have file cabinets, a desk
with a phone and computer, and a table for conferencing. Student art work, projects, and photos adorn the available space. In addition to the two or three teacher rooms, there are rooms for textbook storage, a library, a computer room, a science lab, an auditorium, and other rooms used for teaching small seminars. There is a playground that is frequently occupied by students either waiting for a class, hanging out after an activity, or waiting for a sibling to finish their class. Nearby picnic tables are occupied by waiting mothers talking with each other or reading or by siblings quietly working.

Although it is generally quiet, it is by no means desolate. Families drop in to see teachers, students come for extra help on tough assignments, the tutor holds regular sessions, teens gather before classes to chat, and sounds of musical instruments come from a workshop. The overall effect is one of purpose and friendliness. Sixty percent of the families come to workshops, fieldtrips, or group tutoring offered by teachers, so that teachers see most of their assigned families much more than the required three times a year for conferences. Some parents come each month to have their children read or show their work to their teacher. Teachers also talk on the phone with parents, especially when they are new to homeschooling, to reassure them in their efforts or to offer suggestions for solving problems. In fact, teachers feel that they are “at the beck and call” of parents, who think that they can just drop in unannounced. Efforts by teachers to schedule with parents are moderately successful, since many parents will just stop by if their child is on campus for a workshop or other event. This frequent contact fosters close ties between families and teachers, especially those who have been homeschooling for years. Teachers know each of the children in the
family, even before they are old enough to enroll in school, since all members of families frequently attend conferences together.

Parents are primarily responsible for the education of their children at home. However, the school provides a lot of “extra” activities that families can choose. Teachers conduct workshops and classes on topics of their own interest or in response to student or parent requests. Classes run the gamut from art, music, computer, PE, to play practice, science labs (dissecting frogs or pigs or squid), to crafts, reading circles, math tutoring, and chess. There are also seminars for parents on teaching a certain topic or dealing with a certain issue, such as math or reading or writing. Fieldtrips are also organized by the school and have included the opera, plays, the pumpkin patch, tide pools, bike tours and picnics.

In addition to classes and workshops, teachers also meet with parents three times a year for formal conferences, and much more frequently in informal settings. In the teachers’ rooms, there are toys for younger siblings to play with while parents and students converse about the students’ work. There are supplementary books that teachers consult for extra assignments or for a different approach to the curriculum if families need help. Since the teachers are all in the same room, there is not much space for private conversations; many said that this togetherness was an adjustment from being used to their own classrooms in traditional school.

There is a relaxed, friendly atmosphere as parents wait for their children to finish with an activity. Many times parents wait quietly without talking, while other times talk flows easily and centers on daily concerns, the latest buys at stores, gossip about teachers or other parents, or on crafts they are working on. Sometimes parents
share lesson plans or advice about their approach to a topic or field of study. These are by no means “nerds” who only think of how to educate their children. In fact, the focus of their conversation is frequently much more mundane, yet they chose to homeschool their children and teachers would say they are doing a good job in general.

Some parents use the time to plan lessons for their next week, spreading out books and sequestering themselves in an available empty room. Some parents have made friends through the school while others say they are frustrated by the lack of friends they find, since they thought there would be similarities between themselves and other homeschoolers that would foster an easy friendship. An automatic friendship is not necessarily developed; there are fundamental philosophical differences in parents that trump the lived experience of homeschooling as a basis for a bond. These diverse activities while waiting, and the variety of reasons and philosophies and ways of homeschooling demonstrate the heterogeneity of homeschooling parents who nonetheless attend the same school program.

**Foster School**

Foster School has two locations to serve the north and south ends of a large county. Both sites are in out-of-the-way buildings that look more like strip mall stores than schools. One site has 150 students and 5 teachers, while the other has a smaller but more diverse student population, with 50 students and two teachers. The teachers are all highly experienced, with a minimum of 10 years of teaching and many having taught in other forms of alternative education, such as the court schools or homeless shelters.
The physical buildings may be different than Beech school, but the energy and easy camaraderie between the teachers, students, and parents is similar. There is a care in the upkeep of the larger school that parents and students readily contribute to. It is quite common after class to see parents vacuuming scraps from crafts or crumbs from snacks that were shared. Many parents know where supplies are and help to stow things when classes are done.

The smaller school is in a dilapidated area of city. On Mondays, teachers frequently have to call to have the garbage hauled away that was dumped off in the parking lot dumpster over the weekend. However, the outside belies the warmth and welcoming inside. Each new student gets to put their handprint in paint on the wall, student work hangs from every nook, and there is a cozy library where parents and students sit between classes.

Each site has a computer lab with updated software, eager teaching aides to help students and parents with programs and games, and an adequate library with books at all levels. Both sites also have a large room used for teaching seminars. Teachers have their own offices with desks, filing cabinets, a computer, and a conference table used for tutoring and for parent-teacher-student conferences. Both schools also have a photocopier that parents can use for materials.

Foster School is for students in Kindergarten to 8th grade, so some attention is paid to transitioning students to high school, community college, charter schools, or other homeschooling programs with a high school component. Fifty percent of families attend some school activity each month, the majority attend many sessions, fieldtrips, tutoring, and clubs. The larger school produces a yearly play and sponsors
annual trips to Astro Camp for students in grades 4-8, a sea exploration camp for 4-8 grades, as well as other local field trips. For a review, the school made a list of all activities that it sponsored for the year, including both teacher and parent-sponsored seminars and clubs. There were 150 events that year. The large school is able to support such a diverse list of activities because parents are highly involved in conducting classes themselves: the newsletter for April, May, and June 2005 included 17 parent organized activities and seminars and 15 activities and classes conducted by teachers.

Students at the larger school have the option of taking classes at the local community college. It the student is under the age of 14, the parent has to sign up and attend with the student, which many parents do. Students take classes to pursue their interest in archeology or to advance their math skills, for example. The smaller school is located near a community college that does not offer younger students the opportunity to attend, so those students are more limited in the options they have outside of the homeschool program. Teachers at the smaller school attribute the lower parent involvement in seminars to the lower income and educational levels of the parents. Teachers feel that they may not have the confidence or time to conduct classes that the parents with masters and Ph.D. degrees have at the larger school site.

Program Features

The three sites that I studied represent the main part of the field work. However, the other programs I visited less frequently merit mention. All programs are very similar in that they provide state-sponsored curriculum, meet with parents a minimum of three times a year, collect work samples once a month from each family,
and offer some classes, tutoring, and field trips. Some sites provide a monthly planning log for families to follow for each subject, so that expectations and pacing are clear. Others do not offer that prescription or support and families have to figure out how to pace themselves through each subject.

Most programs will allow students to work at their own level in math, moving students ahead or behind a grade or more, depending on their needs. However, this flexibility is not afforded in other subjects because homeschool programs received complaints when students unexpectedly transitioned to traditional schools. The fourth grade student who had already read the 5th grade reading book did not fit easily into the traditional classroom.

Some programs require parents to bring in all the work from the month for each subject and the teacher chooses the work samples to keep on file at the school. Some organized parents come with crates of work, color-coded in notebooks for each subject. Less organized parents come and the teacher interviews the students about what they have done for the month and accepts disorganized work. For the teachers, the main objective is to meet the state requirement for dated, parent-graded student work that demonstrates appropriate grade level progress. They cannot accept only end-of-the-chapter tests, there has to be writing samples and examples of regular, daily work. Other programs require only the one work sample from each subject to be turned in and parents generally choose those. Although only three parent-teacher meetings are required each year, most parents see the teachers much more frequently than that. In fact, many prefer to turn their work in personally and get feedback on what they are doing at home.
Although there is clearly variety in how the programs operate within the state regulations—requiring more or less from parents, allowing deviation from the curriculum or not, allowing more or less parent control—they all work closely with parents. Each teacher knows the families they are assigned, not just the children or just the parents. Each program must decide how to handle parents who do not exactly fit the mold. Within this space, the meaning of education is negotiated, new forms experimented, and new outcomes evidenced.

**Outline of Chapters**

Chapter 2 delineates three strands of literature that contribute to understanding state-sponsored homeschool programs. First, I examine literature on school reform and reproduction, adding the role of culture to explain why certain structures and beliefs are perpetuated and why some do change the structure of schooling. Next, I explore institutional literature which explains why institutions come to resemble each other. Examining the similarities and differences between homeschool programs and traditional school programs sheds light on the process of institutional change, which is only lightly examined in this literature. The last branch of literature I examine is resistance theory. This literature offers a lens through which to understand the student outcomes in terms of self esteem in public schooling and the role that relationships between families and schools plays.

Chapter 3 details the methods of the project, the challenges faced, and the limitations of the study. I compare families that chose a homeschool program with families that chose a traditional school program to understand the impact of different organizations of school on families. This research is based on 40 interviews with
parents who have chosen a homeschool program to educate their children, 25 interviews of parents who have chosen a private or public school to educate their children, and 14 teachers in various homeschool programs.

The interviews with homeschool parents generally lasted 1.5 to 2 hours, and interviews with parents of children sent to a more traditional school lasted about 45 minutes. All interviews were generally unstructured, guided by basic questions and the interviewee’s experiences. In addition, I conducted participant observation at 3 area homeschool programs. The study limits its focus to parental understandings and practices of education.

Chapter 4 examines institutional similarities between homeschool programs and traditional school programs. Despite the freedom to create alternative conceptions of education, homeschool programs look very much like traditional school programs in many aspects (grading, book knowledge, curriculum, and reliance on a traditional teacher). There are social and cultural expectations that cause these similarities. Traditional school parents, homeschool parents, and homeschool teachers hold these expectations about schooling. These beliefs are reinforced by state requirements. I show how participants’ beliefs help to maintain the shape of alternative programs so that they resemble traditional school.

Chapter 5 examines the institutional and cultural differences between homeschool programs and traditional school programs. In the state-sponsored homeschool programs, caring relationships between parents, teachers, and students develop that are centered on student learning as well as the idea of having fun.
Participants report a high level of respect and sense of ownership at the school. Parents and students suggest classes, teach classes, and essentially have a voice in whether a class will be offered by whether they choose to participate. An apprenticeship type of learning develops in some seminars which contradicts the idea of “doing school” through bookwork at home.

Chapter 6 explores the hidden curriculum in the homeschool experience. Relationships between parents, teachers, and students shape the type of learning and the reticence that students can demonstrate. Because teachers and parents can work more closely together, the form that student reticence takes is different from the defiance seen in traditional schools. I explore the role of individualized learning and how parents actively resist the labels schools would impose on their students.

Chapter 7 concludes with what we learn from homeschool programs. I make connections to the structure of schooling and its impact on families, how the hidden curriculum is learned in both traditional school and homeschool programs, and the differences between the two types of institutions of school. I also explore the connections to parents’ actions within school programs and how they are both constrained and encouraged through the structure of the program. I explore what traditional programs can learn from the alternative homeschool programs.
Chapter 2

Understanding the Role of School in Society

Benjamin Franklin said that the only things that are certain in life are death and taxes. He could have added educational, medical, and financial institutions as well—all impact our lives and most people assume they do not come with an optional participation scheme. Is our participation in these institutions really so inevitable? And if we have an alternative, how much different is it from the original form?

The shape of our lives is molded by social structures, culture, our own agency, and our beliefs. Our most intimate connections in our families are formed through interactions with outside institutions, which either reinforce or collide with our family culture. Institutions are not monoliths producing neat, predictable outcomes. Interaction of people in different institutions creates fissures where individuals exercise their agencies and create cultures that do not necessarily support institutional goals.

Our capitalist, choice-driven society seemingly offers many options, but if the options are closely examined, the resemblances outweigh the differences. Ironically, choice doesn’t necessarily mean fundamentally different institutional forms. Some cases in which the alternative strives to alter the relationships between people, there are some institutional differences. Alternative school programs such as homeschooling and distance learning have shifted the responsibility of education from a bricks-and-mortar building to individual homes and computer connections. Alternative and experimental medical options are available outside of traditional hospitals and doctors’
offices, relying on a different conceptualization of disease and healing. Locally run financial alternatives such as “routine insurance” for everyday emergency room needs, and microcredit options for poor people to start a business have shifted finance decisions to a local level. Small organic farms move the focus from the grocery store to the land as a place to buy vegetables. Although these options exist, they are not widely advertised, accepted, or used. In addition, participants emphasize how their version of the accepted institution is better than the conventional offering. The creation of an alternative inherently legitimizes the original institution because the new option compares itself explicitly to the old. If the two options are inherently linked, are they really that different?

In order to be accepted as a legitimate option, how much must the alternative institution resemble the original form? Are there differences between participants’ and outsiders’ perceptions of the institutional offerings? And in what space are alternative understandings created? Insight into these questions allows us to understand how individual actors construct meaning, create new understandings, and do extraordinary things in their lives.

I explore the interactions, definitions, compromises, and outcomes of an alternative conception of a traditional institution. I try to understand what interactions occur between the individuals seeking the alternatives, the alternative institution, and the traditional form of the institution. An ideal site to investigate these issues is state-sponsored homeschooling programs because families are seeking an alternative to the traditional form of school, yet choose an institution that offers the same content that traditional schools offer.
Understanding Homeschooling: Three Approaches

I call upon three bodies of literature to understand the compromises, ideas, and lived experiences of homeschool families who use city- or county-sponsored programs. First, to understand how alternative ideas about education come to resemble traditional ideas, I use school reform literature. Going from the specific example of school choices resembling each other to a broader framework for understanding similarities between various institutions, I look at studies of organizational life. Last, to understand what these institutional similarities and differences can mean for participants, I look at literature addressing student resistance to examine the hidden messages of the school experience within the traditional structures of school.

These three bodies of literature are particularly useful to understanding homeschool programs. Homeschooling seems like a radical choice in which parents try to enact their own personal “reform” to create a different outcome for their students. The first two literatures help us understand the challenge parents face because both point to the tendency of institutions to resemble each other and to maintain previous conceptions of “doing school.” Just examining the challenges in creating a different kind of education is not enough, however. Parents embark on this mission because they want to positively impact their child’s outcomes. Literature on the hidden messages of schools uncovers unintended outcomes, enabling us to examine whether, in fact, new institutional arrangements create new outcomes, or new unstated messages.

These three bodies of literature contribute to understanding the contradictions in homeschooling: “doing school” at home despite the freedom to do anything; the
tension between the program and family understanding, as well as the tension between homeschool programs and traditional programs; and the changes we see in the student’s relationship to learning.

**Grammar of Schooling**

The option of homeschooling can be looked at as a family’s own “school reform” in which they get to “do school” as they envision it. Examining literature on traditional, larger school reforms can be useful in understanding the issues families face when enacting this choice. This literature demonstrates why reform and change are so difficult (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). I combine this examination of beliefs and habits with a look at the role of expertise. The notion of expert versus novice impacts who is allowed to speak on what topics in institutional settings. Homeschool programs actively use an understood “grammar of schooling” to model their programs on, but through experience, parents become “experts” in their children, resulting in a blend of understanding of what “doing school” means and what it looks like.

In a traditional school, there are normative structures that are understood by all participants to be essential, and make up the “stuff” of schooling. Tyack and Cuban (1995) refer to these structures as “the grammar of schooling.” They say that this grammar is the basic building block of how people understand what a “real school” is, and that if attempts are made to change the grammar, there is protest from teachers, parents, students, etc. They argue that reforms are difficult to implement because they are generally trying to change some of the grammar of schooling, and this challenges people’s basic conceptions of what school is.
Homeschooling can be seen as a challenge to the traditional institution of school, and to the understanding of what school “is.” However, despite the obvious differences between homeschool and traditional school programs, there are many similarities. Homeschooling programs are careful to emphasize their similarity to traditional school programs: they categorize students into grade levels, use public school curriculum, and have teachers to evaluate the work that the parents have corrected. In emphasizing similarities, they can be more easily classified by homeschoolers and outsiders as another form of school, not a radical departure.

Tyack and Cuban (1995:88) argue that the grammar of schooling persists because of “unexamined institutional habits and widespread cultural beliefs about what constitutes a ‘real school.’” Although their analysis is about how certain school practices came to be taken-for-granted and institutionalized, their “grammar of schooling” can be used to understand what aspects of traditional schooling continue into alternative programs set up by the state, such as homeschooling.

They argue that the grammar includes the basic components of the standardization of time, space, and numbers of students (Tyack and Cuban, 1995:87). This grammar is seen in such things as age-graded, self-contained classrooms with one teacher (1995:8); Carnegie Units in high school as a way of measuring student progress (1995:107); departments of teachers with specific subject knowledge (1995:8, 107); grading students through assignments and report cards (1995:8, 90); and the teaching of traditional subjects (1995:8). A specific culture develops and is expected in schools, where teachers maintain strict discipline, supervise and control students (1995:8), make the rules (1995:8), and determine the curriculum and
standards (1995:105), with students having little say. The hierarchy of decision-making is also part of the grammar of schooling, as it structures interactions and impacts participants’ relationships (1995:104-05).

If teachers or schools stray from this grammar, parents, other teachers, and students question the new practice because it calls into question the fundamental understanding of what school is. Most people have attended a traditional public school and “know” what it should look like. Changing the basic building blocks of that conception of their experience is difficult, as Tyack and Cuban (1995) point out, it would be asking them to develop a new grammar for their understanding. They add that reforms are generally able to change only a small part of the school experience because teachers, parents, and administrators have an ingrained grammar that they use to understand what school is.

In addition to Tyack and Cuban’s examination of the grammar of schooling, I would add that we must also consider additional aspects that comprise this grammar. State funding calculations are part of the understanding of schools, and shape what “counts” as schooling. Most states use a “seat time” calculation to determine how much money districts receive, and it is based on the number of children in school. This state grammar of what counts as schooling impacts where and how children can go to school. The traditional conception of schooling is a separate building where children who are students go, and they are separated from their families and from younger or older siblings who are either not included in the school space, or who are placed in separate classrooms according to their age. Education occurs in these separate buildings with students who are deemed appropriate participants because of their age.
Tyack and Cuban mention the regulation of time as part of the grammar of schooling. This point is worth elaborating, as there are many aspects of controlling time that impact schools. I will mention three aspects of time management that have become part of what schools do. First, schools are run by calendars, and school time occurs within a specific time frame each day and each year. As Tyack and Cuban (1995:7) point out, the grammar of schooling is generally based on tradition, with big changes occurring only if the right political, social, and economic forces line up to change people’s understanding. The development of the school calendar is a vivid example of the entrenchment of tradition. The calendar was developed around an agrarian schedule when children had to help on the farms. Although less than 2% of our population is currently farmers, we still cling to the summer vacation. Some research (Gandara, 2000) suggests that shorter breaks would benefit students more instead of one long break. However, changing the school calendar has been met with much resistance from parents, teachers, and sports participants.

Second, vacation schedules and holidays are determined by the local school board. This regulation of breaks ensures that most students are present for most of the designated instruction time. Families opting to take extended vacations during the school year are viewed by teachers as irresponsible because students are missing instruction time. Families typically plan vacations around the school schedule and this structuring of time is considered very normal.

Third, school occurs within a set period of time during the day. Within this time frame, subjects are broken down into hours and minutes. In fact, there are state regulations on how many minutes of each subject students should have per week.
Learning is seen as occurring within the bounded time of when children are at school. Our understanding of learning and the importance of school is bound to notions of how children spend time. Families structure their schedules to match those of the schools and parents are judged by how they conform to the time requirements of school: are their children on time, are their children present, are their children doing activities appropriate for the class schedule?

Tyack and Cuban (1995:25) mention that students who do not fit the conception of a “normal” student (meaning that they follow the rules, are cognitively able to meet basic academic standards, and who behave in a socially acceptable way) are separated in “cul de sac” classes apart from “regular” classes. Part of what makes this separation of students possible is the grammar of schooling that normalizes certain cultural behaviors, such as raising hands, following rules, and obeying authority. These expected behaviors are understood as signs of success and compliance within school. If students do not meet these basic cultural expectations, they are deemed deviant and either put in “cul de sac” classes out of the way, or labeled as needing special help, or medicated so that they can comply. The creation of these separate categories is only possible because school is understood both as an educational institution and as a sorting institution that rewards appropriate behavior and punishes those who do not fit. This grammar of behavior and subsequent labeling of students contributes to creating the overall understanding of what school is.

Tyack and Cuban’s point about separate classes as part of the grammar of schooling can be expanded to understand why some people are very dedicated to the notion of school being a place for every child. The grammar of expected behaviors and
abilities contributes to the formation of a grammar of understanding school as a place for everyone. Ironically, this idea is maintained through separating out students who do not fit the school’s conception of “normal.” The “normal” children then have little to do with these misfits and do not consider them in their view of schooling. In fact, school activities are geared towards children who possess the needed abilities that teacher practices determine are “normal.” The type of education that children receive is based on a grammar of understanding what “normal” is. The creation of the “special education” label is evidence of how schools use the category of “normalcy” to label and categorize children (Mercer, 1974; Mehan et al, 1986) and then separate them for special services and classes. Homeschooling threatens this “school is for everyone” idea because parents actively fight labels that the school imposes on their children.

Schooling not only occurs within a specific time frame during the day, there are also limits on when and how parents can visit this learning space. Teachers generally control the parents’ access to the classroom, to volunteer opportunities, to field trip times, and to conferences. Parents can request meetings with teachers, but teachers are the ones who arrange the times around the school schedule. In addition, parents are restricted in how they can talk to teachers, what actions are labeled appropriate interventions, and what is seen as inappropriate behavior in a school. These aspects of the grammar of schooling relate to organizational norms, and are challenged by homeschooling as well.

Teachers are the recognized “experts” and therefore have the power to label parents, who are on the periphery of the school. These labels can be damaging to parents and their students, but the labeled have little say about it. Heimer and Staffen
(1998) make this distinction of periphery and expert status in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). They make the case that expert doctors and nurses can label caretakers as irresponsible, and that that label can have institutional consequences for the parents. However, if parents—occupying the periphery of the NICU—label doctors or nurses, those labels will have little effect within the institution. The same phenomenon happens in schools as well: parents are expected to follow the prescribed behaviors for participating and are expected to appear on the school’s timetable. The institutional representatives can label the parents, which can have consequences for the parents and students. However, parents can label teachers, but few fellow parents will listen, and fewer teachers or administrators will take the parents’ remarks seriously enough to question practices or change routines. One’s position at the core or periphery of an organization determines whether that person has a recognized voice in the process.

Not only do teachers have institutional power, they are also viewed as “experts” because of training and the support of a certifying agency, a union, and education (Parsons, 1967). This training is grade- or subject-specific and constitutes “expertise” in pedagogy as well as ideas of “normative” student academic progress and skills. This grammar of teachers as “experts” is promoted through state requirements for teachers to take a certain number of continuing education credits. This idea supports the rhetoric of teachers being “lifelong learners” and supports the underlying assumption that knowledge about education is constantly evolving and practitioners must stay updated.
In addition, expert teachers are supported by a curriculum that is seen as developmentally and pedagogically appropriate and challenging. The textbooks are seen as containing information that is essential to education. Parents may not even expect to understand everything in the textbook because teachers have the training to understand the complex presentations. The grammar of schooling includes using texts in the classroom and at home as homework. The knowledge presented there should reflect the dominant values and be non-controversial (Shor, 1987; Peterson, 2003). The controversy that occurred with the New York rainbow series, which presented alternative conceptions of family, points out how devoted people are to the idea of a set curriculum that reflects a certain set of values (Viteritti, 1993). When something different is introduced, its quality and intent are questioned.

In addition to understanding schools as places that teach essential skills for success in life, they have also historically been seen as essential places of socialization of students (Spring, 1986; Parsons, 1967; Durkheim, 1956). Schools are where students learn to live as citizens with others (Dewey, 1936). This assumption is part of the grammar of schooling because people see school as a necessary part of growing up and view the school rules as necessary for successful socialization of students to the world. Not sending kids to school would be paramount to not socializing them correctly to society.

In sum, the grammar of school performs a dual function. It structures actual, daily interactions in schools and it informs people how they should understand schools. These practices and attitudes are deeply imbedded in schools, as are the interpretations of these experiences. Tyack and Cuban (1995) give a good account of
how the grammar impacts reforms and why schools remain the same. However, an examination of homeschool programs complicates the account of the intransigence of the grammar that Tyack and Cuban offer. The interaction of the institution of school with the institution of family in this new arena produces new grammars. Through understanding the dynamics of the changes and the staying power of certain aspects of the grammar of schooling, we can come to further understand institutional and individual change, as well as how institutions shape our lives. Chapter 4 addresses how the grammar of schooling shapes homeschool families’ understandings of “doing school” and Chapter 5 addresses how some of these grammars are challenged.

**Institutions, Culture, and Change**

The idea of a “grammar of school” helps us understand why schools continue to enact certain policies and procedures. Situating this grammar in a larger understanding of institutions may be helpful in understanding consistency across institutions. The examination of institutional processes adds to an understanding of how an institutional culture is perpetuated, as well as how it changes.

New institutional research (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Bacharach, 1995; Scott, 1995; Meyer, 1984) shows that participants use a set of habits to help them negotiate institutional demands and expectations. The institution of school has a set of practices, rules, routines, and scripts that are used to handle daily concerns. The institution of family also has rules, expectations and scripts that members follow. In the relationships of parents, teachers, and students, the two different sets of institutional scripts are enacted, resulting in conflict, acquiescence, or compromise. Much research (Epstein, 1986; Noddings, 2002; Lareau, 2000) examines how parent
actions either reinforce school goals or detract from them. The institution of family is seen as playing a supporting role to the institution of school. This traditional relationship is challenged in homeschooling, producing new institutional results which I will investigate in Chapter 5.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991:33) call for new institutional literature to examine how institutions incorporate historical logics into their rules and organizing logics. One way to examine these historical logics within institutions is to examine institutions that are being questioned to see what they emphasize in order to remain legitimate. “Organizations under attack in competitive environments…attempt to establish themselves as central to the cultural traditions of their societies in order to receive official protection” (Meyer and Rowan, 1991:49). Since Weber (1958), institutions are seen as acting to preserve themselves in the face of challenge and calls for change. However, this monolithic preservation of form is challenged by other studies.

Neoinstitutionalists don’t accept organizations as a given; they examine the form and function of the organization as a process. Institutions are contested spaces, which calls for an investigation of the cognitive and cultural aspects of them. This focus calls for attention to interaction, which leads the investigation to be an ethnomethodological approach that addresses the role of interaction as a constitutive process in social life (Mehan et al, 1986, Mills, 1959; Wittgenstein, 1958; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). New institutional theorists, like ethnomethodologists, show us how institutional practices are reproduced through interaction. People deploy standard operating procedures in the hurly-burly of
everyday institutional life; they are less likely to act in a comprehensively rational or even bounded rational way (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991:19; Datnow et al, 2002). Habit and the routines of institutional culture support institutional requirements because people expect to encounter certain interactions at specific institutions.

The new institutional literature explains why institutions come to resemble each other and so it is not surprising that homeschool bears a strong resemblance to traditional school. However, there are differences between the two institutions that need to be explored as well. These differences did not naturally occur, and in fact struggles (some polite, some not so polite) are embodied in the changes made. “Some of the most important struggles between groups, organizations, and classes are over the appropriate relationships between institutions, and by which institutional logic different activities should be regulated and to which categories of persons they apply” (Friedland and Afford, 1991:256). These struggles can be seen in conflicts over who should be responsible for education, what that responsibility looks like, and how the institutions of family and school negotiate that issue.

Research has shown how schools differentially treat parents and students of different socioeconomic classes (Lareau, 2000; Addams, 1910). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that the school values middle class ways of seeing the world and so middle class students were rewarded for being able to act in the expected ways. Lower class parents and students do not have the same cultural capital as the school and hence find themselves alienated from the school (Lareau, 2003). If parents do not demonstrate sufficient respect in the expected format for school personnel and decisions, they will also be classified by the school as “difficult” or “unsupportive.”
This label then has the consequence of muting the effectiveness of parent efforts to help their children at school. This research focuses on the relationship between the parents/students and the school.

Other research demonstrates how the institution of school treats minority students as deficient (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Lee, 2001; Luttrell, 1997). The institution comes with an expected way of doing things which students and parents must conform to or be labeled as “troublemakers” or deficient. These treatments of the institution of school examine how the school culture and structures interact with the students and parents who associate with that school. Students and parents are subject to what the school demands.

There are also studies that look at schools and their internal workings. Reform literature focuses on changing aspects of the institution of schooling. Some view schools as “loosely coupled institutions” in which policies are determined at a level in the hierarchy above the school and the school is so disconnected from this line of authority that policies can be partially enacted (Weick, 1976). Understanding how these actions differ from the intent of the policymakers requires a close investigation of the daily interactions of the participants (Mehan et al, 1986; Hubbard et al, 2006). This view situates schools within an ineffective hierarchy (if the hierarchy were effective, schools would ‘do as they were told”).

Other work on reform sees this break with the intended policy as a normal adaptive response of local schools—or even individual teachers, principals, or departments—tailoring a blanket reform or idea to their individual needs (Mehan et al, 1986; Hubbard et al, 2006; Cuban, 1992; Hall and McGinty, 1997; McLaughlin,
1998). In these studies, context, power relations, and interaction become important foci where meanings and practices are negotiated. This literature highlights processes, beliefs, and traditions as powerful influences on outcomes. Structure and logic of institutions are also shaped by forces that the institution cannot control. Both purposeful and unintended consequences result when culture, structure, and agency meet at school. In exploring homeschooling, it is important to keep in mind the negotiations that regularly occur within organizations. Organizations are not consistent, rational, or stable (Binder, 2002). Instead, many policies that seem to be taken as a given are in fact changed through negotiation.

To explain why “bundles of procedures and practices that make up an institutional regime lose their coherence and develop internal contradictions” (Powell, 1991:201), it is necessary to look at intersection encounters between parents, teachers and students (Hubbard et al, 2006). Contradictions develop through interactions and are influenced also by historical, preconceived notions of how the institution should function. One explanation of the change is time-bounded and divided neatly into a before and after categories (Scott, 1995). Before the rules were implemented, they were not seen as the only option. After the rules became entrenched, they began to shape people’s expectations and behaviors when dealing with that institution (Scott, 1995). This account portrays a point in time as being key to how institutions change. It implies a period of instability and then afterwards a point of stability. However, there is another step that needs to be examined, and that is the possible reinterpretation of the rules at a point further in time after they have been taken for granted. As evidenced by the studies above, this questioning and subsequent changing of the assumed rules
must occur within institutional settings as well, implying a less-than-stable state. Homeschooling offers an opportunity to examine changes to set procedures that were formerly assumed to be essential aspects of how school is “done.” This is a space where institutional procedures are being questioned, challenged, and changed.

Literature on institutions provides an account of similarity between institutions and the importance of culture in developing parallel expectations in different institutional settings. Using this focus on culture and structure combined with a close examination of interactions within these structures will help us understand which definitions and practices are taken up in the new institutional form and which are challenged. Through this examination, we will come to understand how the interaction of institutions influences the outcomes and expectations of each institution.

An important aspect of struggles for control is the ability to define the meaning of the activity. Culture provides meaning, but institutions have different cultural logics and bases for relationships. Examining closely participants’ definitions and actions will add culture and agency to the structure of relations. Many emphasize the influence of culture on people’s actions (Mehan, 1979, 1986, 1992; Hubbard et al, 2006; Willis, 1981, Luttrell, 1997; Datnow, 2002; Hall, 1995; Hall and McGinty, 1997; McLaughlin, 1998). Institutional policy is not a straight-forward process of implementing the stated goal. Even institutional similarities asserted by neoinstitutionalist literature have to be subjected to close examination of actual interactions and understandings. It is possible that in combining a close examination of interactions within institutions (including cultural and political factors) with neoinstitutionalist concerns with similarities between institutions, that we will come to
understand better how similarities are understood on the ground, how they are enacted, and in the end how similar those similarities really are to each other.

**Class and Culture: Hidden Messages of Schooling and Student Resistance**

Understanding how culture, local context, and structure influence how institutional participants shape and understand policy is important. But it is also useful to go one step further to see what the impact of these arrangements is on the participants. To this end, I first examine a class critique of schooling and combine this with literature on student resistance. I divide literature on student resistance into two themes: class and culture. I explore each understanding and the subsequent student outcomes. Other work sees outcomes as student test scores or other performance-based, measurable outcomes (Word et al, 1990; Levine, 1988). Instead of this quantitative result, I include student behavior as an outcome of school experience. Theories on student resistance can help us understand the importance of this outcome as a result of school structures.

**Understanding Relations: Class**

Culturally, homeschool parents are creating an alternative to traditional schools, schedules, family time, and education. Many parents view homeschooling as a lifestyle choice that involves one parent (usually the mother) staying at home to be the educator. This choice may cause the family income to fall into the working class category, but the parents may have the values, beliefs, and actions of a middle class family. Lareau’s (2003) research demonstrated that the type of free time activities in which children engaged, as well as their schedules were highly correlated to their social class. Middle class children experienced little unstructured time. They spent
their time in school, and then their mothers chauffeured them to organized activities, such as music lessons, sports, tutoring, etc., that the parents believed would develop skills that would lead to success. Working class children had more unstructured time for activities they initiated on their own. They spent time in school, but then played in the neighborhood with friends, or started a pick-up game with nearby children. Parents did not view the purpose of these activities as helpful for later success; it was simply something the children did with their free time. These findings point to class as a formative influence in how parents view parenting and school (Lareau, 2003).

Homeschooling families enact practices between the two categories. Their children have highly structured learning time when they “do” school in the mornings, or when they participate in many organized sports, music, or art activities, and then they have unstructured free time in the afternoons when they play with neighborhood kids. Many homeschool parents view both types of activities as essential to childhood: the organized activities give their children skills, and the unstructured activities allow their children to “be kids.” Homeschoolers challenge the neat class and activity categories that Lareau proposes.

While Lareau demonstrated how families contribute to class reproduction, other studies have examined how schools contribute to class reproduction (Willis, 1981; MacLeod, 1987; Luttrell, 1997; Kozol, 1991). The Marxist critique of school is that school reproduces the class relations that the capitalist society structures. This critique was at first based on glossing the similarities between schools and the workplace (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). The actual lived experience of students was not a concern: students went to school as lower, middle, or upper class kids and came out
in the same order. Later studies (Wilcox, 1982, Mehan, 1979; Anyon, 1997) examined classroom practice and found differential social experiences for students of different class backgrounds. They argued that class reproduction occurred in the social interactions at schools.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) found school structures that prohibited students from forming social relations that could provide them with support and information necessary to attend college. Wilcox (1982) found that schools value middle class ways of talking and demonstrating knowledge, which alienates lower income students. This alienation and class reproduction contributes to student resistance to school messages and practices. Education is not always liberating or even encouraging to students; these studies on outcomes and school processes point to reasons why students may resist the school messages.

Willis’ (1981) study of working class youth in school demonstrated how the youth’s own reactions to the school culture contributed to class reproduction. Willis emphasized the agency of students, but no hope was found in their resistance—they effectively aided the system in slotting them into the working class jobs of their fathers. Willis also emphasized the form of the education as a reproductive tool. He pointed out that the content did not match the students’ experiences, thus causing resistance as well.

Apple (1982) calls for an emphasis on democratic processes and socialist lessons, essentially a reorganization of how school is done, to combat class reproduction. Current solutions proposed by the state and by neoconservatives involve using market logic to solve educational problems: allow parents to choose which
school their children attend. However, Apple (1982:126) is skeptical of whether the proposed solutions of vouchers and private schools would bring about change. He argues that it is possible that by essentially outsourcing the job of schooling to others, the state preserves its role in supporting capital accumulation and preserves the inequality in schools. This critique can be applied to homeschooling: it is the ultimate outsourcing of a public good to private responsibility. However, homeschool programs supported by public funds are an interesting site for potential democratic action.

Apple (1982:64) calls for the development of a more democratic administration of schools. He speculates that it is possible in alternative arrangements such as vouchers and private schools to allow “people to become more deeply involved in the democratic day to day planning and operation of the institutions that surround them” (1982:128). However, he also seems conflicted about the role that alternative programs can play, and warns against being too “utopian” in relying on these fixes that the state proposes (1982:128). He does not have much hope that a shift from state-sponsored to a private-choice mechanism for choosing schools will result in a more democratic school. Apple’s focus on developing democratic institutions seems to rely on the state and on institutions themselves for purposefully sponsoring such a form.

His voice against vouchers and private schools is joined by many others (Levy, 1986; Madsen, 1996) who also argue that state sponsorship of these market options essentially allows the state to continue providing inadequate and unequal education to low income and minority schools. In “solving” the education crisis through private means, the state masks its own mechanisms of producing inequality and pushes the
responsibility for finding a good education onto parents. If parents “choose” a bad school, then it is their own fault. Many (Apple, 1982; Levy, 1986; Madsen, 1996) have also argued that homeschooling falls into this category of privatizing education, thereby exacerbating the educational differences between white, middle class parents who have both the financial and cultural capital to homeschool their children and those families who do not have the financial or cultural capital necessary to homeschool their children. Parents are essentially taking over the responsibility of the state to educate their children.

The free market argument is that allowing parents to choose their children’s school is an individual choice, and is inherently already democratic, so there is no need to focus on developing more participation. Simply in choosing, parents are acting as democratic citizens. This consumer-oriented basis for democracy assumes that the act of choosing is equivalent to actual involvement in the institution.

Neither of these views accounts for the interactions that occur at the school sites. The school can market itself as a democratic site and develop processes to encourage parent involvement. However, parents may not participate as the school leaders planned. And simply choosing where to send their children does not make parents active in determining the processes of education or curriculum once their children are there. In exercising their choice, they are consumers of education, not creators. To understand the degree of democracy at a school site, it is necessary to examine the interactions and the definitions of the participants. Homeschooling is not as straightforward as critics would have us believe.
Apple (1982:105-108) talks about student resistance to the school’s ideology and its hidden curriculum. The most respected students were those who could get good grades but who did not have to work for them (1982:106). The successful students did not necessarily buy into the school’s agenda, but viewed that as a price to pay to be able to control some aspects of their own lives within the school.

The message seemed to be the following. In the daily routine of the school, one met the minimal demands of the institution-and tried to keep these demands as minimal as possible-and at the same time one’s group structured its own agenda as well. This agenda centered around resistance to the regularities of organized school life and creating oppositional forms that often contradicted the emphases of formal educational practice (Apple, 1982:105).

In order for students to have control over their day and over their actions, they had to resist the official school agenda. The culture of the school, which emphasized the conformity of students and teachers to a certain schedule and curriculum, and called for passive students to respond to teachers’ agendas, generated a student culture of resisting that. Apple (1982:105) argues that the school’s individuating practices also alienated students and caused them to adhere to their own group culture. It seems that the student’s choice was to either be bored most of the time and accept the school’s control or “find cracks in the organizational control and exploit them to maintain some sense of power over your daily life” (Apple, 1982:106).

However, these acts of resistance did not generate a critique of the system, but rather reinforced the “basic systems of social relations” (Apple, 1982:107). Students learned that resisting the system through oppositional behavior was the only response; no discussion or action ever took place that would empower students in changing the social relations that regulated their lives. As Everhart points out, this pattern will
repeat itself in the workplace as well (cited in Apple, 1982:107). The complex cultural response of students to the control of the school eventually reproduces the power structure.

Underlying these class-centered critiques of school (Willis, 1981; MacLeod, 1987; Apple, 1982) is the idea that resistance can be political, a statement against the larger labor relations that students see structuring their world. However, Apple’s account above also demonstrates a more common type of resistance, which is resistance to control over time, bodies, and minds.

**Understanding Relations: Culture**

Much research has been done on culturally-centered student resistance—resistance to the messages of the school about the students themselves. Luttrell’s (1997) account of Black women’s educational experiences as children portrays their lack of performance on school-imposed criteria as a way of preserving their inner selves against racist and classist classroom practices. Others (Kozol 1967, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Anyon, 1997; Ogbu, 2003; Sizer, 1992, 1996; Rist, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes et al, 2000; Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999) provide accounts of dysfunctional schools that do not address students as people; students resist this subhuman treatment by “checking out” and not participating in the formal goals of school. These accounts of resistance are not connected to a political critique, but rather are intimately tied to how students are treated as persons and as members of ethnic minority groups. It is a personal preservation that students fight for in the form of resisting school goals and messages.
Adding to ideas of resistance as a result of cultural practices of the school, Lee (2001) found that students were very responsive to alternative teaching methods and curriculum that included student cultural experiences. These modifications in the classroom culture reduced student resistance to learning, demonstrating how traditional practices lack necessary cultural sensitivity and relevance for many students. Students are resisting the message that their culture is inferior; this critique of school is not a political statement about labor-capital relations but rather an act of self preservation in the face of detrimental messages about themselves.

In fact, Au and Jordan’s (1981) research on a successful reading program in Hawaii demonstrated how schools can change the cultural emphasis, both in behavior and curricular content, to include marginalized students. Their reading program uses “talk story,” a Hawaiian cultural practice, to introduce students to reading. They are also asked for their own knowledge about the content of the book, which elevates their life experiences as important in the classroom. Student resistance to reading decreased and reading scores increased. According to the authors, recognizing student’s home culture and employing familiar cultural practices in the classroom bridged the gap for students. I would argue that this acceptance of student home culture also resulted in the elimination of the negative label attached to student behavior that deviated from the white middle class norm. The school became a place that recognized the children as people—as having a legitimate voice. The resistance to reading was not only because of cultural constructs but also because of the school’s labeling of the students.

Others complicate the understanding of resistance even further. Vigil (cited in Gibson et al, 2004:11) shows how gang members are made marginal in school, in their
communities and in their homes. Their resistance is not to the message of success associated with hard work in school, but rather is an expression of “all the gaps in their lives and a lack of knowledge of what they need to do in order to be successful in the school setting” (Gibson et al, 2004:11). Instead of resisting the idea of hard work and success, Gibson et al say that the boys are resisting the structures of the school and the uncertainties in their communities that produce their lack of success.

Stanton-Salazar (2004) understands resistance to be students’ distrust of school practices that devalue the students’ experiences. To remedy student resistance, he suggests that the “conflict and contradiction must be effectively addressed by those adults, policymakers, and educators who govern social life in the schools” (Stanton-Salazar, 2004:35). Ogbu (2003) found similar results with Black students in an affluent White suburb. Again, in both of these accounts, students are not resisting the message of hard work but rather they are resisting the messages of distrust and suspicion that the school imposes. The proposed solution does not try to change students but rather the environment in which they find themselves. Examining the relationships that surround students is key to understanding the forms of resistance that are enacted.

**Parents and Resistance**

In reconceptualizing student resistance as self-preservation and strength against disabling messages from the school, parallels can be drawn to parents’ actions within traditional and homeschool programs. Parents, like students, either accept or reject the messages about their children. Their parenting actions are then a response to the school’s label. In fact, parents’ actions can change depending on the school and
their child’s experience at the school. Either in providing education at home, or in other ways of supporting students in a traditional school, many parents actively resist the labels that they find debilitating to their students. They create a counter discourse about their child’s potential and worth that they hope will help the child. These actions also fall into the non-political and more personally oriented category of resistance.

The two groups of theories about student resistance offer two explanations: one is a political critique and the other is an individualized, cultural response to school messages. The first emphasizes class considerations and the second emphasizes cultural aspects that shape student resistance. All emphasize the environment and surroundings of students as factors that influence the type of resistance. These accounts are grounded in the lived experience of students in student-teacher-parent interactions. In looking at resistance to school messages by parents, I will add to the literature on resistance by seeing what parents do to resist messages about their students. I suspect that we can also learn more about student resistance through examining parental actions, as families are a part of the context surrounding students’ school experience.

**Conclusion**

I find these three strands of theory useful to examine the lived experiences of families with two contrasting organizations of school: traditionally organized programs and homeschool programs. We will come to see that although similarities exist between homeschool and traditional school programs, there are differences produced as well that cannot be explained only through institutional theories. I heed the call for an examination of culture within institutions and how culture shapes
people’s behaviors in regard to institutions. Families clearly view “involvement” as important, but the organization shapes the type of involvement in education that families can have. Teachers, parents, and students also come with cultural conceptions of what “education” is that contribute to their interactions as well. In addition, the structure of the school dictates certain expected behaviors. However, people’s understandings sometimes conflict with these structural demands, creating tension between the institution of family and the institution of school. These differences in understanding occur in part because of differences in culture. In addition to being a disruptive force, cultural understandings can bridge institutional and family requirements when participants create new understandings about an activity. I will further explore the intersection of culture, institutions, and beliefs and practices.

Just as with the interaction of culture and institutions, the understanding of behaviors that are shaped through class within the institution of school will be complicated, as some behaviors are reproductive and others offer hope of breaking the class reproduction cycle. The mixture of middle class and working class attributes in homeschooling schedules, the diversity of the population that is choosing to homeschool, and understanding of behavior shaped by class offer mixed results. These diverse class effects in combination with institutional and cultural understandings of school create different experiences for different families.

The grammar of schooling is only partially responsible for the form that homeschooling takes; participants come to define “school” in a more narrow way, thereby giving room to other activities that are traditionally understood as “school” to develop new meanings. The interaction of the structure and understanding of school
within and outside the programs produces new definitions of what counts as “doing school.” This process of creating new meanings both reinforces and challenges aspects of homeschool programs, contributing new understandings about how culture impacts institutions.

Lastly, student resistance in traditional programs can be understood within the context of the school: the roles of parents, teachers, and peers in relation to the institution interact to shape the resistance. In examining homeschool programs, which produce a different form of resistance, student resistance in traditional programs can be better understood through roles and labels that the institution uses to control students. It is productive to think of resistance as an aspect of the relations within a school program. It is not separate from the school, family, or peer group. In fact, conceiving of student resistance as formed by the larger context helps to recognize all participants’ roles in the intersection of two influential institutions: school and family.

Institutional consistency, change, and student outcomes are all a result of the messy interactions that parents, students, and teachers have within the context of the school program. Traditional school programs, homeschool programs, and participants enact different understandings of “doing school.” The cultural definitions people import to the new arena of homeschooling show which grammars are most salient and which are challenged when parents choose an alternative. Within similarities, differences emerge that have consequences for student outcomes.

The three strands of theory (the grammar of schooling, institutional understandings, and student resistance) will be used to understand how interactions and the participants’ meaning of the activities influence the outcome of school
practices. A comparison between parents who use homeschool and traditional school programs is used to understand the impact of the different type of institution on the meaning of education and on the practices that result.

Concepts from the three strands of literature parallel the chapters. Chapter 4 examines the similarities between homeschool programs and traditional schools and why they are similar. Chapter 5 examines the differences between the two school choices and how unintended “reforms” or changes can simultaneously maintain traditional concepts yet provide a different type of learning experience. Chapter 6 examines student outcomes and hidden messages structured into the relationships in both traditional and homeschool programs.
Chapter 3

Methods

**Beliefs and Practices**

Examining beliefs about education benefits from the use of both interviews and participant observation. Beliefs are expressed through words, and through those words, practices are defined. However, beliefs are not neat, easy-to-follow ideas that one simply implements. Beliefs are sometimes hard to articulate, vague, and can require large amount of effort to live by. Not only are beliefs sometimes unwieldy and messy, they sometimes conflict with each other, requiring the person to compromise one or the other beliefs in the practical pursuance of them. Beliefs can be articulated, but may not have an obvious impact on the practices of people. People are complex and are influenced by many ideas, and find some things hard to implement, or find that through attempting to live a life congruent with one belief, the other beliefs or habits that they have come into conflict.

For example, parents may believe that education should be individualized to fit the needs of their child. However, in practice they find themselves compromising some needs of their child to the need of the parent for structured teaching, for curriculum to follow, or for discipline. Curricular choices can stem from beliefs about knowledge and the need to fit into society or the trust that parents have in the school, or they can stem from the practical need of organizing the day around a specified task and knowledge set. The belief in an individualized education is then not articulated through curriculum, but then perhaps through adjustments to curriculum, or through
pedagogy in dealing with that curriculum. For instance, parents could have their child spell words out loud instead of writing them if their child doesn’t respond well to writing.

Interviewing is an appropriate method to understand the meaning that people build, and how they arrive at their beliefs. People can talk about their experiences, their hopes, and the educational path that they have taken with their children. People express their beliefs through their actions and speech; beliefs about education are expressed in how they construct the act of learning itself (McDermott, 1977). The language that people use does not just refer to their experiences; it actually constructs those experiences (Wittgenstein, 1958; Mehan, 1986; Wharf). Beliefs are articulated through language, and in fact some interviewees said that the interview process helped them clarify their own beliefs about education. People also construct meaning for past actions through present accounts, which lends insight into their beliefs (Mills, 1959).

Thoughts and actions are both structured through social interactions and structures.

Beginning from where the subject is actually located returns us to a social world arising in and known in and through the ongoing actual activities of actual people. Here there is no contrast between thought and practice. Thought, the social forms of consciousness, belief, knowledge, ideology, are as much actual socially organized practices as cutting the grass in the front yard, taking place in real time and in real places, and using definite material means under definite material conditions (Smith, 1999:49).

Interviews allowed me to understand people’s ideas about education and to trace how their experiences and assumptions about learning and parenting impacted their actions for their child’s education. However, how these beliefs relate to practice cannot be understood solely from interviews.
Observation of classes, social interactions, and conferences augment interviews so that practices can be understood and compared to how parents talk about their beliefs. Because human life is messy and contradictory, it is not surprising to find that practices do not always match stated beliefs. The interesting part is how the two differ, and then trying to explore why these variations between belief and practice happen.

Examining the relationship of families to schools involves each participant’s assumptions about school, education, and power. The institution of school impacts families in various ways, some of which are invisible to the school. The role of teachers and school officials is to ensure that students learn, and assumptions about this process include homework and a specified type of parent involvement. These institutional expectations impact family life, although the school never witnesses that impact unless there is a problem. The problem only occurs if the family is either unable to fulfill those expectations of support and time or if the family protests those obligations. Interviewing families unearths the conflicts they experience with school expectations.

To better understand these tensions and developments in education, I use a sociological approach that examines the interplay between structure, culture, and agency (Mehan et al, 1996; Datnow et al, 1998). The homeschool parents are exercising their agency in taking their children out of public school and educating them at home with the support of a school program. However, this agency is constrained by structures of the school system and state, such as testing, by requirements for high school graduation or college enrollment, and by the parents’
culturally influenced beliefs about “what counts” as schooling. The intersection of the 
family with the homeschool program provides a space where the structural and 
cultural influences on participant’s agency can be seen.

**Understanding the Comparison**

The organization of school plays a role in structuring families’ time, focusing 
their energies, and imposing performance obligations on them. Families organize daily 
schedules as well as yearly vacations to fit the school schedule. Research has shown 
that some families choose where to live based on considerations of the “quality” of the 
schools their children would attend in each neighborhood (Bulman, 1999). In order to 
understand how different types of school arrangements impact families, a comparison 
is necessary. Because the homeschool families I interviewed associate with a 
homeschool program, it is possible that the program has the same impact on the family 
that a school would have. It is also possible that all families hold and act on similar 
beliefs. Therefore, to look at impacts on families that different institutional 
arrangements have and to examine potential differences in beliefs, it is necessary to 
compare families that chose a homeschool program with families that chose a 
traditional school program. Comparing the two populations of parents gives us insight 
into the impact of the organization of school on both families who choose a traditional 
school and on families who opt for an alternative program of homeschool, or 
“independent study.”

The organization of school can have differentiated impacts on families 
depending on how tightly the school itself adheres to traditional grammars of 
schooling. Of course, since all the homeschool programs are public school programs,
some parts of the grammar of schooling cannot be changed. All programs must evaluate students using mandated standardized tests, they must take attendance, they conform to school calendars, and use the same curriculum. However, the organization of the family around school changes drastically when the family itself takes over the majority of the teaching responsibility for their children. The family is not tied to the physical place of school and is free to travel and send work back, so vacations are no longer directed by school calendars. The day is also structured differently in that school work can be done at any time, and families are not beholden to a schedule determined by the school. With this increased freedom from school scheduling, families can use their time as they choose while still completing the required work.

The question then becomes, how do families view this freedom that is restricted by work requirements and testing regimes? And how do they view the education they are providing their children? Are there any differences in beliefs about education between families who use a traditional school and families who opt for a homeschool program?

In starting this research, I imagined that I would easily place parents into “homeschooling” or “private school” or “traditional public school” categories and then interview them about their beliefs and compare them. However, these neat categories quickly fell apart when I talked to parents. Many parents who had chosen homeschool programs had had their children in a traditional public school previously. Some parents were homeschooling one child and sending the other to a traditional school. And some parents whose children were currently in a traditional school had homeschooled one or all of their children at some point.
These categories produced essentialized identities that did not work. It is not possible to find out what “homeschoolers” think, or what “public school parents” believe, because next year these same parents may move to another category based on their choices for school programs. And therein lies the key: instead of identities, these categories need to be understood as choices of actions that parents view as appropriate for now. Since parents cross categories from year to year, or even presently child to child, their beliefs about school may be inconsistent, changing, and not tied to their current school choice. However, their experiences with the school programs and their lived relationships with teachers and schools are influenced by their current choice of program. Instead of beliefs, this research became about interactions that parents have with school programs. No matter what type of school parents choose for their children, they have interactions with that program. These interactions will vary depending on the structure of the program and the parents’ perceptions and ability to negotiate with the school. The family-school relationship is shaped by how the school and family perceive each other. This research finds that the interaction is different depending on the type of school program parents choose.

Although I understand the categories to be choices of actions and not consistent identities, I could find no vocabulary to indicate this shift in conceptualization. I could write “parents who are currently homeschooling their children” or “parents who have currently chosen a traditional public school” to reflect the current choices, but these are awkward and still reify the categories. For purposes of research, I am using “homeschooling families” and “traditional school families” as categories but with the understanding that these are fluid choices, not identities that
people take on permanently. The label makes it easier to follow the types of interactions parents have with schools and gives us some handhold for understanding the lived interactions and experiences of families and schools.

In comparing parents who are using the alternative school program sponsored by the city or county with parents who are using the traditional schools, many factors are held constant. All students attending public schools are subject to testing, they have comparable budgets, curriculum, and serve a similar population. The relationships that develop between schools and parents are shaped by the same context of the larger school district. Parents who chose a private school add another dimension comparable to homeschool in that they chose an alternative to the one provided automatically by the state. The close similarities of both public and private schools allow me to explore the relationships between parents and schools that result from the program differences.

**Interviews**

This research is based on 40 interviews with parents who have chosen a homeschool program to educate their children, 25 interviews of parents who have chosen a private or public school to educate their children, and 14 teachers in various homeschool programs. The interviews with homeschool parents generally lasted 1.5 to 2 hours, and interviews with parents of children sent to a more traditional school lasted about 45 minutes. Teacher interviews were about 1 hour long. All interviews were generally unstructured, guided by basic questions and the interviewee’s experiences. For an interview guide, please see appendix.
There are 15 public school programs offered in San Diego County for homeschooling families, including a county-associated program, city-associated programs, and many independent charter schools specifically designed for homeschooling families. These programs have certified teachers that meet with parents at least three times a year. They oversee the students’ progress through state-sanctioned curriculum. I focused on two homeschool programs which were under the auspices of the local public school system or the county. Combined, the programs had three sites where parents and students could visit with teachers, turn work in, and attend seminars. Focusing on the city and county sponsored programs allowed me to use programs most similar to traditional school programs. In fact, teachers and staff at one of the programs consciously tells parents that they are not “homeschooling” but are doing “independent study” and that they are a public school program. Compared to charter school programs, programs under the city or county school system do not have as much curricular variation or discretion in how they use their monies for families.

The interviews are with parents who are associated with the county- and city-sponsored programs, focusing on three locations served by two programs. In addition, interviews with a few independent homeschoolers were conducted to test the waters and see if there were significant differences between their experiences and the experiences of families who associate with a program. I also interviewed parents from programs other than those I focused on, to check reliability across programs.

To understand how homeschool parents’ beliefs and practices compared to parents who chose a traditional school for their children, I recruited a similar sample of “involved parents” who chose a traditional school. I interviewed 25 parents, both
fathers and mothers, who considered themselves involved with their child’s education. Since homeschooling requires a definite time and energy commitment from parents, I wanted to be sure to compare these parents to ones who consider themselves to be involved in their child’s education as well. It is important to take parents’ definitions of “involved” instead of the traditional conceptions of an “involved” parent from the school’s perspective. At first, this may seem to add too much variety and does not provide a consistent “control” group. However, as I interviewed homeschooling parents, whom I assumed were “involved” in their child’s education in a traditional setting, I realized that frequently parents were not as “involved” as the schools would have wanted them. In fact, many homeschool parents said that they learned about their children’s learning styles and interests only after transitioning from a traditional program to a homeschool program. In addition, many homeschool parents said that they were involved in ways that the school would recognize as supportive (raising money, grading papers in classrooms, attending conferences, checking homework, etc.) but the parent found this involvement to be unsatisfactory, contentious, or school-driven, and not a choice they would make again.

Two assumptions were challenged: first, that taking the school’s definition of “involved” parents would give me similar populations across homeschool and traditional programs; and second, that homeschool parents are the “type” of people to be involved in their child’s education anyway in the way that the school wanted. There are many ways of being involved, many ways of being supportive, and within these actions there are many reasons parents would have for participating and many ways of understanding that participation. In the end, I think that comparing any parents across
programs would be fruitful, regardless of class, race, and “involvement” because the
different organizations of school impact families differently. Of course, getting
enough diversity in class, race, and “involvement” is important so that I can say how
different types of parents are impacted by the different organizations of school. But
after finding so much variety in parent “involvement” and so much cross-class
experience, it leads me to think of these categories as much more fluid than they
imply. It is important to remember that underneath these categories are parents trying
to raise children. The way that they demonstrate “involvement” may be different, and
that is what this research is partially about, finding out how the different programs
treat various parents and their actions when parents’ stated intentions are similar.

I transcribed most of the interviews myself and had a transcription service do
some as well. I have extensive field notes on the various events I attended. I used a
grounded theory approach to identify themes and issues as I collected data, conducting
interviews until I hear the same themes repeated, indicating that more interviews will
not yield significantly new insights (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995; Glaser and
Strauss, 1967; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The grounded theory approach demands
that the researcher come open to ideas that emerge as the observations and interviews
progress. In fact, shifting my focus from meaning to institutional practices and
relationships developed as I reflected on what parents were saying.

I used a coding program, Atlas Ti, to code themes in the interviews. The
program allows for developing and changing codes as my thinking progressed. I could
also sort quotes from many interviews under one theme and look for trends and
counter-trends in those ideas. In addition to allowing me to manage so many
interviews, the program also counted instances of codes, alerting me to emerging themes that I could investigate further.

Coding is part of the grounded theory approach because as I code, I am imposing structure on the interviews, but the structure comes from the topics and expressions of the interview participants. The codes changed over time to reflect changes in ideas that I had first assumed were exclusive and then discovered overlaps and layers as I went along. For example, at first I coded parents as “homeschool, private school, or public school” to reflect their choice. But these codes did not work because I would find parents who had many labels for their multiple choices. These individual codes became “school choice” followed by “reasons for choice,” categories that better reflected what I was hearing. The notion of seeing school choice as an action and not an identity came from this first stab at coding interviews. The transcript excerpts I present in Chapters 4-7 represent the above-mentioned coding categories.

These chapters reflect issues that emerged from the interviews. There are many codes for family time, gender, transitioning from different types of schools, parental involvement, learning, partnership, etc. The chapters that follow deal with the similarities and differences between homeschool and traditional school programs as well as the impact of these structures and relations on student behavior and self perception. The issues I chose to develop more intensely are ones that I heard repeated again and again. The quotes in the reader will read are representative of many people’s ideas and experiences. Coding enabled me to find trends, countertrends, and to develop new ideas as the analysis progressed.
**Participant Observation**

In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation intensely for a year and followed the two homeschool focus programs for over three years. I observed classes, helped at activities, testing days, and picnics, attended various school programs, plays, and music events, and observed conferences. I helped set up seminars and clean up afterward. One program was relocating to a different building, so I helped pack boxes and got to know parents that way too. I spent a lot of time just “hanging out” in the public spaces at the schools, helping, listening, and getting to know people.

One thing I had to learn how to do was to bake things that kids would like, which seems obvious but is surprisingly difficult. The first few things I did weren’t big hits, but eventually I learned that “vegetarian” does not actually mean vegetables necessarily—pasta and cheese are preferred! Cookies are good as long as they are not too healthy, and rice crispy treats go a long way. Integrating myself into seminars and picnics was difficult at first, as I have no children of my own to talk about and establish a bond. Some parents did not want to engage in interviews and politely refused. However, most parents were so welcoming and supportive, that I didn’t feel too awkward for very long. In fact, at my first “Beginning of the Year Picnic” for one program that had particularly active parent participation, I was standing around trying to be useful and make small talk when a parent found out that I was a researcher. Here I was trying to “blend” and she announces to everyone that I am researching homeschooling, and promptly introduces me all around. This one connection with a
very outgoing and friendly mom was the only “in” I needed to get ten interviews set up and for me to feel at ease with homeschoolers.

At another program I found it more difficult to socialize because parents seem more separated and involved with their own families. But they were still very open to talking about their experiences. Teachers introduced me around or I would be hanging out in the hallway and easily strike up a conversation with a family. The atmosphere of homeschool programs is generally welcoming and accepting, easily making room for visitors.

Generalizing about homeschool families who choose to use a state-sponsored program is difficult. Many families have only one wage-earner and earn a lower income, but have middle class backgrounds. Some families were middle class and had stay-at-home moms originally and they continued to stay home and homeschool the children, so that this choice was not an economic sacrifice for them. Others sacrifice heavily by driving older cars, living in more modest neighborhoods, shopping at thrift stores, and forgoing vacations and dinners out. There were also families who did not have a middle class background, and were lower income not by “choice.” Generalizing across all this variety is difficult, and homeschool families now are so diverse that a simple class classification cannot be easily made.

In addition, although the homeschooling population remains heavily white, some programs are closer to the population in race than expected. In 2000, one program had nearly 14% African American families, 11% Latino families and 68% White (the overall district enrolls 14.5% African American, 41.9% Latino, and 25.9% White).
My Role as Researcher

Social science researchers have increasingly become aware of the reflexive role of the researcher; that is, the observer is not the proverbial fly on the wall, passively taking in action unfolding in front of him or her. Instead, researchers influence the action in the scenes observed by their very presence. Furthermore, despite the claims of some research methods books, researchers cannot leave their preconceptions, schemas, and biases at the door of situations they observe. Recognizing the importance of making my standpoint explicit, I offer the following information about my role of researcher in this project.

I met parents by hanging out at the school sites, helping set up for classes, participating in clubs, supervising activity centers at gatherings and picnics, and generally integrating myself into the community. This close involvement with programs enabled me to experience both the joys and challenges of homeschooling. I witnessed mothers’ struggles with their children over school work and children’s negotiations over sleepovers and time with friends. I’ve seen a mother at the end of her rope and another mother offering to take both of her children for the afternoon. Teachers would shore up parents over the phone if they were having a rough time getting started with homeschooling. In addition to the struggles, I’ve seen eager students showing off work and teachers praising students and parents as they completed a project. I have been so welcomed into the programs that I am hugged as others are as we meet.

Homeschooling is a family and community endeavor, and I was drawn in. I have a teaching credential and have studied schooling in other projects, so parents
would discuss academic approaches with me and I could sometimes be helpful in suggesting a different idea for them to try. I became friends with several families, hanging out at the beach, having lunch with the moms, and generally sharing each other’s triumphs and challenges. I cannot claim to be impartial—the project of homeschooling itself is passionate, and in studying it, I find myself drawn in to the contradictions, challenges, and joys that the families experience. As someone without children of my own, I find that I immensely enjoy spending time with the homeschooling families and their children. I have become a tutor for one, a pen-pal to another. It is not possible to stay uninvolved, which is what parents say as well; they are drawn into the education of their children. Some parents even begin taking Algebra lessons from the teachers in order to relearn (or learn for the first time) something so that they can share their children’s learning.

My role as an outsider-insider mirrors the between-positions of the families I studied. They are the educators of their children, but they associate with a state program for the support and resources, which results in compromises on both sides. I think my research demonstrates the support that I feel for homeschoolers, and I hope also reflects the dilemmas they, and the programs that serve them, face. This betwixt-and-between position of the researcher who is both part and not part of the program grants a deep understanding of the contradictions inherent in homeschooling.

I believe that there is a relationship between beliefs and practices, although it is by no means a one-to-one correlation. People have habits and unquestioned understandings that contribute to their practices. These may not mesh easily with their beliefs, which many people are not asked to articulate on a daily basis. In fact, I found
that the interviews I conducted sometimes served as a space for people to reflect on their own education, their practices, and their aims and desires. These conversations do not regularly occur outside the realm of the unusual situation of a researcher asking about parents’ experiences.

Many parents, in both homeschool and traditional school programs, said that they had never been asked what they thought before and they welcomed the opportunity to have their voices heard. There was a lot of frustration and isolation that was expressed, with parents wishing that schools could be more responsive to them. The research was in a way a release of frustration and many felt a contribution to a body of knowledge they wished was referenced more by schools: parents’ experiences and knowledge.

In an insightful comment about research, Dorothy Smith emphasizes ways of knowing and experiences as a place to start inquiry.

The project of a sociology developed from women’s standpoint means beginning in the actualities of people’s lives as they experience them, and a sociology of people developed from this point d’appui orients to the social as it organizes people’s everyday/everynight living. It proposes to create a knowledge of the social grounded in people’s experience of their own lives. It does not treat experience as knowledge, but as a place to begin inquiry. The aim of inquiry is not, as in established sociologies, to explain people’s behavior, but to explain to people the social—or society—as it enters into and shapes their lives and activities (Smith, 1999:96).

Similar ideas about the relationship of researchers to their subjects have also been expressed by ethnomethodologists (Mehan, 1986, Mills, 1959; Wittgenstein, 1958; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Through interviews, I kept the lived experiences of my informants at the fore of the research. The interviews were an exchange of information in some cases, and in others, I remained the
“collector” of the parents’ experiences. In starting with their experiences, which is what they know, I can move from the individual level to a more general understanding about the school-family interaction and how institutions shape our lives. Parents want to be heard and they also want to understand their different experiences. I start with accounts and observations of parents’ and students’ experiences and use this experience to come to an understanding about how social ideas structure their experiences.

In this research, there is a closeness of the researcher to the actors involved, which may cause readers to question how much “objectivity” is possible. Of course there is the danger of “going native” and viewing homeschooling in terms that are too idealistic. When that happens, even homeschoolers themselves keep me accountable to the messiness of negotiating a complicated space. They bring me back to their reality, which is not as idealistic as I first painted. The main job of social science researcher is to “reflect and interpret” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995). As a researcher, I am able to observe, interview over a wide range of experiences, and pull common themes together. This research does not attempt to provide an over-arching narrative, but rather to explore the complex and varied relationships that develop between schools and families. I act as an interpreter “in order to facilitate a conversation between groups who do not have the same language” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995:173).

In interpreting people’s experiences, it is important to contribute back to the community and to situate myself as a knower and contributor instead of just as knowledge-gatherer. Just as Hubbard et al (2006) set out to contribute positively to the outcome of school reform, I set out to contribute to parent and teacher understanding
and practice of education. I am committed to giving knowledge back to the community that I study in and I have been able to do this in two concrete ways. First, I joined a WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) accreditation committee at one of the schools. This is a rigorous and long process, requiring teamwork to conceptualize and evaluate the program. I was able to lend my help as a writer for sections. This participation helped me to understand the teachers’ views better and allowed me to contribute in a concrete way to program teachers who have been very giving of themselves, their time and their energy to my project.

Second, parents and teachers are very interested to know what I have found; it is not possible to leave the community without sharing my ideas that I developed through conversation with participants. To meet the goal of sharing, I sent a page summary of the entire project’s findings to all the participants that I had contact information for (some people moved and others did not give me addresses or other means of contacting them). I offered them the opportunity to read rough drafts of chapters. Some parents served as close readers of what I wrote, offering critical feedback that has made this project stronger. Toward the end of my writing, I met with parents and teachers in order to share my findings and to see if what I was writing made sense to the participants, and accurately reflected their own experiences. Although I am the researcher and am responsible for the content of the work, the parents truly contributed their voices, understanding, and critique to the project. I didn’t just collect data and go away to draw conclusions. What is here has been an ongoing conversation.
This conversation has been difficult at times, especially when teachers revealed things to me that they don’t reveal to parents. The “public” and “private” faces we all employ in different spheres made my work more complicated. The extra access I gained by participating in an essential activity with the teachers also gained me access to their personal lives and opinions as well as leading me to share my own personal beliefs and life with them. I became friends with many of them, further complicating my relationship. It is difficult not to become an advocate under such circumstances. I am sure that in some cases, my conclusions are too obvious to them to be of much help in shaping their knowledge or the program. However, other insights hopefully will contribute to understanding the project of homeschooling in which they are engaged.

In becoming an outsider-insider participant, I necessarily rely on the good graces of the people whose world I entered. It is difficult to gain trust. It is even more difficult to carefully hold that trust in hand while also reporting shortcomings alongside strengths. This contradiction provided many sleepless nights, nervous conversations, and the final, nerve-wracking submission of the first draft of my observations. I hope what is here is a continuing conversation, the beginning of how to understand dilemmas faced by families and schools.

It is as hard to leave the field as it is to enter it. At the end of the year of intensive observation and interviews, I slowed down my participation and started only attending large events, such as picnics and graduations. I miss the parents and the buzz of the school, as well as the easy company that homeschool families provide. In contacting parents again with a summary and—if they wanted—the first draft of the
findings, I was reminded of my own nervousness when I first entered the field. I endeavored to capture parents’ experiences in traditional and homeschool programs. In imposing a sociological lens on participants’ experiences, the hope is that more can be understood about social relations. However, as I wrote in my cover letter to parents, this is only one way to view their reality. In getting feedback from participants, I will see how close to the mark I came in describing their worlds. The interpretation, however, may be disputed by them.

The following chapters explore variations in parents’ and students’ relationships to school and to learning. Although generalizations can be made about how relationships and interactions are influenced by the type of school program people operate within, people’s experiences are of course so diverse that a general narrative is not possible. Instead, my aim is to explore how relations are shaped within the larger context of the school program. Dorothy Smith (1999:97) celebrates the diversity of experiences and implores us not to impose an overarching narrative that erases the diversity.

A sociology beginning in people’s everyday/everynight experience takes for granted that experience is as various as people are. It does not seek to supersede this variety by constructing a version that overrides all others. Differences in experience arise in a matrix of everyday/everynight activities and through how they are entered into and coordinated with others’ activities. The project is to explore concerting and co-ordering and hence also the relations that generate the varieties of lived experience.

It is tempting to generalize to “all homeschool programs” or to “all public school programs” but this overlaying of consistency on the wide diversity that I found would
be a disservice to all people’s experience and what we can learn from this diversity. Surely there are trends and we can examine how relations are influenced by the context of the program, but there is still a great variety within these trends. I endeavor to explore the possibilities, the complexities, and the messy everyday experiences of the parents, students, and teachers as they construct education.
Chapter 4

Institutional Similarities between Homeschool and Traditional School Programs

“We kept asking the school to hold him back because he just wasn’t ready, but they pushed him on. Finally, we just said we’d do it [school] at home for a few years to catch him up. The homeschool program teacher didn’t like the idea of holding him back, but he said he’d try it with us and see how it goes. If he does well, he gets moved up where he is supposed to be anyway. We found a teacher who will listen to us.” (new homeschool parent)

“I volunteer a lot at the school, whatever they need. I help in the classroom. I think it is important to help out. I also go to see what is going on in the classroom, how does the teacher treat the kids, what is my child doing, how is she behaving, why is she behind. I saw she needed help in spelling and asked the teacher to send extra pages home to practice and so sometimes we do that now.” (parent who sends their child to traditional school)

Both of the parents above have similar relationships to the school programs their children attend. They want to be heard as parents and they negotiate with teachers to try to get their children the help that they feel they need. Like many middle class parents described elsewhere (Lareau, 2000, 2003), both are willing to sacrifice time, energy, and money to enable their child get the “best” education they can.

Despite the very different educational choices that these families have made, there are many similarities between their educational experiences. In fact, across interviews, parents had many similar concerns about their children and ways of handling those issues.

Meyer and Rowan explain these similarities through cultural conceptions of institutional myths, scripts, and social rules (1991:44). Schooling in general enacts
certain practices, ideals and roles that constitute the idea of “school.” Tyack and Cuban (1995) refer to these common expectations and practices as the “grammar of school.” They argue that school reforms that challenge some aspects of this grammar usually fail because participants have set expectations about what school “is” and reforms have to address this understanding. Others argue that reforms fail because they are absorbed into the standard operating procedures of school practice (Mehan et al, 1986; Sarason, 1982, 1986; McLaughlin, 1993, 1998; Cuban, 1992, 1998). They say previous institutional practices (also called ‘scripts’ by Vaughan, 1996) “win out” over the newer ideas of the reforms. These scripts, very much like an underlying grammar, remain largely unquestioned in daily interactions. People carry their assumptions about school into homeschool programs so that they do conform in large part to traditional school expectations. I will refer to these underlying assumptions as the scripts people employ, with the understanding that the grammar of schooling is a type of script that people use. These same pressures to conform to a cultural script of what constitutes school also come to bear on homeschooling programs.

This chapter explores how homeschooling, a seemingly radical departure from traditional school, oftentimes closely resembles traditional school conceptions and practices.

**External Forces Constraining Homeschooling to Conform to Traditional Schooling**

Political, cultural and institutional pressures ensure that homeschooling conforms to traditional conceptions of schooling. “Organizations such as schools and churches operate in relatively strong institutional but weak technical environments”
(Scott, 1991:168) which tend to emphasize cultural meanings and symbols. Schools as institutions are rewarded for “establishing correct structures and processes, not for the quantity and quality of their outputs” (Scott, 1991:167). Schools are expected to “produce students, not learning” (Meyer and Rowan, 1991:57), so that the goal of the school is vague and not measurable. Traditional schools conform to cultural ideas of what school “is” that are demonstrated through concrete forms such as grades, curriculum, buildings, standards, etc. In this institutional environment, measuring learning is difficult, as evidenced by the controversy surrounding NCLB’s emphasis on testing student achievement. Reforms that concentrate on student achievement struggle to shift the focus to the more technical aspects of schooling, with mixed success (Mehan et al, 2006, Glatthorn, 1992; Oakes, 2000; Rist, 1977). There is no consensus on the “right” way to teach and therefore even technical reforms in the way teachers teach or the way students learn end up fitting back into institutional requirements and expectations of students and teachers. The idea of learning is subsumed under the commonsense idea of “student” that schools produce—everyone can agree on what a student is and looks like, but not everyone can agree on what “learning” is or looks like.

The state has certain regulations that it requires of all public schools. A school with different and new ideas can be formed within the system of school already in place, but creating something radically different that challenges assumptions about participants’ roles or learning is quite difficult. Tyack and Cuban (1995) found that reforms can only impact a narrow set of behaviors because all schools need to conform to the expected “grammar of schooling.” If school formats become too wildly
different, they are resisted and reigned in by teachers, parents, and administrators to resemble traditional school:

The taken-for-granted (and legally regulated) quality of institutional rules makes dramatic instabilities in products, techniques, or policies unlikely. And legitimacy as accepted subunits of society protects organizations from immediate sanctions for variations in technical performance. Thus, American school districts (like other governmental units) have near monopolies and are very stable. They must conform to wider rules about proper classifications and credentials of teachers and students, and of topics of study. But they are protected by rules which make education as defined by these classifications compulsory. Alternative or private schools are possible, but must conform so closely to the required structures and classifications as to be able to generate little advantage (Meyer and Rowan, 1991, 52).

Some research challenges this assertion that change is minimal (Mehan and Alvarez, 2006; Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1996) and demonstrates that pockets of fundamental change do exist. These schools set out with purpose to change the way education is done. Homeschool programs purposefully offer an alternative delivery system but with similar content and standards as traditional programs. The programs aim to ensure a similar education to a traditional program, despite the obvious surface differences. Therefore, it is not surprising that homeschool programs look similar to traditional school programs, thus ensuring acceptance by parents, teachers, students, and the state as a legitimate form of school. By becoming essentially a modification of traditional school, sanctioned as well as held accountable by the state, homeschool programs slot easily into traditional understandings of what school is.

Internal and external pressures press homeschool programs into the mold of traditional school. Externally, if homeschool programs conform to many cultural norms and expectations of regular schools, as well as constraints imposed by the state,
then they will be understood to be similar enough to traditional school so as to be grudgingly accepted by outsiders. Homeschoolers who attend a local homeschool program do have the external constraints of a guiding teacher, submission of work to the school, conferences, optional seminars (which are seen as providing content and social opportunities), and a definite curriculum to be covered by the families. In comparison, independent homeschoolers are viewed quite differently by traditional school parents because the outward signs of “school” are missing: parents have full responsibility for their children’s education, there is no building, no clearly sanctioned social opportunities, and no definite curriculum.

Whereas the norms of the school are expected, accepted, and trusted by the general public, the norms of families are not accepted as trustworthy or as a legitimate base from which to educate children. The institution of family has a set of responsibilities that are particularistic and nurturing, whereas the school, situated between the family and the world of work, is responsible for moving youngsters from the safe haven of the family (Hays, 1996) to the universalistic demands of the work place (Parsons, 1967). Ironically, homeschool programs are accepted by mainstream parents if they feel that the programs can assure that children are receiving a “good education” and are not “damaged” by the parents’ delivery of the education. If homeschooling looks more like regular school, and less like the parents are fully responsible, then it is more readily understood as legitimate. It is no accident that homeschool programs resemble traditional school in many ways. Meyer and Rowan (1991:49) point out that institutions come to resemble each other because
a) They incorporate elements which are legitimated externally, rather than in terms of efficiency; b) they employ external or ceremonial assessment criteria to define the value of structural elements; and c) dependence on externally fixed institutions reduces turbulence and maintains stability.

These similarities enable institutions to survive challenges because the elements look familiar and are trusted. “The use of external assessment criteria—that is, moving toward the status of a subunit rather than an independent system—can enable an organization to remain successful by social definition, buffering it from failure” (Meyer and Rowan, 1991:49). If homeschooling is seen as a form of school, it can enjoy more recognition as a legitimate option than if it advertises itself as a complete break from traditional conceptions of school. In fact, if we look at the trend toward conformity that Tyack and Cuban (1995) point out, it will not be surprising if homeschool programs come to resemble traditional conceptions of education even more as time goes on.

Literature specifically on schools talks about how common understandings about roles and responsibilities are enacted in daily practice (Mehan et al, 1986; Mercer, 1974; Cuban, 1992, 1998; Hubbard et al, 2006; Hall, 1995, 1997; McLaughlin, 1993, 1998). These practices become understood and taken for granted, thereby shaping further interaction. People’s assumptions shape their own individual actions, as well as those of organizations. In homeschooling, we see that families’ agency is shaped through understandings of traditional school practices as well as through interactions with the school program.

Some school researchers challenge the idea of increasing similarities between institutions and in fact emphasize the difference between families and school.
Bourdieu’s (1977) idea of the school’s valuing the cultural capital—or ways of understanding the world—of middle class families rests on the separateness of school and family. In pointing out class differences in which students’ culture is valued in school, Bourdieu also shows how families differ from the institution of school, with middle class families at an advantage because their institutional understandings are similar to the school’s.

Lareau (2000, 2003) and Heath (1982) show how class differences impact student success in school. They demonstrate that family ways of being, understanding, talking, and acting can either mesh well with the institution of school or clash with it. On the surface, these studies seem to demonstrate that the very separate spheres of the two institutions reinforce differences between them. However, as we examine this notion of separate spheres closer, we see how the separateness actually can contribute to institutions becoming similar and to families supporting the status quo of the school’s expectations for behavior rather than challenging it. I examine this idea later.

Class differences in families’ experiences of school do impact both homeschool and traditional school programs in similar ways. The families in this study span poor working class to upper middle class in both homeschool and traditional school programs. Class differences play a part in how teachers interact with parents, which will be explored later.

The aspects of school that are mirrored in homeschool programs and assuage outsiders’ doubts about homeschooling are not only found in regular schools and in traditional understandings of the grammar of school, but are also evident in the realm of work. Researchers from functionalists (e.g., Parsons, 1967) to conflict theorists
(e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 1971) agree: The underlying structures of school and work are similar: there is a hierarchy of authority, performance is rated, there are accountability measures, there are schedules (mandatory seat time at both jobs and school), specified vacation time, work products that must be turned in and evaluated, and there are social rules with sanctions for not following them.

Forms of homeschooling that do not resemble traditional schools also do not resemble common forms of work. Since school is generally understood to be a necessary prerequisite to work, deviations from the usual form of school are seen by traditional school parents and teachers as a challenge to the cultural conceptions of both school and work (Ray and Wartes, 1991). Thus, social actors who reside in state agencies, school boards, school districts, and community groups pressure homeschool programs to conform to traditional scripts and procedures underpinning the idea of school.

**The Reproduction of School at Home: Internal Pressures to Conform to Traditional Ideas of School**

In addition to these external pressures for homeschooling programs to conform to prevalent ideas about school, there are also internal mechanisms that ensure striking similarities between this choice and traditional school programs. Homeschooling parents are given freedom to “do school” essentially however they see fit, but many of the practices they deploy resemble traditional school. Why, given all the freedom, do parents reproduce school at home?

Divorcing themselves from the traditional location of school does not necessarily mean that they are divorcing themselves from the culture of school.
Participants carry around scripts, expectations, and knowledge in their heads so that even when they are in a different environment, these expectations of what school “is” form what actions they will take. “Individuals do not approach the world in an instrumentally naïve way, but rather learn routines, [and] their individual strategies and behaviors contain within them certain institutional priors” (Friedland and Alford, 1991:251). Parents have experienced school as children and many homeschool children have had prior experience with school. These experiences ensure that all members of the new endeavor carry cultural expectations of what they should do for school at home.

Institutions contain not only the ends to which their behavior should be directed, but the means by which those ends are achieved. They provide individuals with vocabularies of motives and with a sense of self. They generate not only that which is valued, but the rules by which it is calibrated and distributed (Friedland and Alford, 1991:251).

Participants cannot independently define situations for themselves; they are influenced by cultural understandings of their actions, the institution’s purpose, and the means for achieving that purpose. In order to provide a “good education” for their children, parents conceptualize what they are doing in terms of the institution of school. That many parents are not critical of the underlying assumptions of school demonstrates the influence that the institution of schooling has on participants’ conceptions of what counts as “school.” Participants’ decisions are influenced by the “hold that institutions have on our processes of classifying and recognizing” (Douglas, 1986:3). As I will examine below, many homeschool parents are more assured that they are providing a “good education” if it conforms to traditional concepts of school, especially if they are
associating with a school program that reinforces these embedded cultural conceptions.

This chapter explores the external and internal pressures that cause homeschool programs to look much like a traditional school. I examine the scripts that are employed both externally and internally that ensure similarities between educational options. These scripts are generated by people in state agencies, traditional school parents, homeschool parents, and homeschool teachers. People in each arena exert pressures to ensure similarities between the alternative program of homeschooling and the traditional conceptions of school. Despite the freedom to do whatever they want, homeschool parents produce an education strikingly similar to traditional school programs. I will now look at the participants in each area and how participants’ beliefs and institutional forms help to maintain the shape of alternative programs so that they resemble traditional school.

**External Pressures: The Role of the State**

Town and county-sponsored homeschool programs are viewed by both the programs and the surrounding educational institutions as alternatives to traditional school. However, these alternatives provide a different delivery system of the same curriculum. The variation that is sanctioned still conforms to traditional conceptions of school. In fact, when some programs were newly formed, they were more student-centered in their curriculum choice. If students were advanced, they could complete work in a higher grade text book. However, other local schools complained about this practice because they would receive students who had been enrolled in the homeschool program and had completed text books in grades higher than the student
was assigned. The need for conformity to a set curriculum for a given age and grade level won out and now students in the homeschool program can supplement texts but can only work ahead in math and cannot work ahead in the textbooks in other areas.

**Accounting for Education**

When homeschool programs first developed, teachers tell of calling families for reports on how the family had spent the time that day. Traditional school attendance was calculated using “seat time,” or the amount of time that students spend in school each day. Homeschool children finish their work faster than traditional school children because of the one-on-one nature of instruction. Families were willing to conform to this accounting at first, but quickly became frustrated because they were getting work done faster and didn’t feel that they needed to spend as much time doing school activities. The state changed the accounting system for homeschool programs to accommodate this different way of viewing and doing school work. Students in homeschool turn in packets of work to teachers, who must keep samples of each subject in case they are inspected by the state.

However, this change comes with a counter pressure to conform to traditional school expectations and ideas about how students learn and who is qualified to teach. Teachers in general are the interpreters of state regulations and implement them as they are asked to by principals, or resist these requests in their classroom actions. There is a body of research that documents teacher compliance and resistance to school reforms (Hubbard et al, 2006). In the homeschool environment, teachers also play a pivotal role in interpreting state regulations.
California regulations require that teachers collect one sample of dated, graded work from each subject per month. This sample should not always be an end-of-the-chapter test, it should demonstrate normal student progress. Teachers then implement this regulation. Some teachers require that parents bring in all work done that month and they look through it and select samples that they want to keep. No photocopies are allowed and parents sometimes disagree on what samples they want the school to keep, especially if it is their child’s original writing. Teachers have privately said that exceptions to the “no photocopy” rule can be made because they view it as unlikely that the state will inspect their program samples. However, they rarely tell parents this and instead try to meet parent requests to keep certain samples for themselves or to select a different sample. Even a straight-forward requirement is interpreted by teachers.

Some programs require that students be at grade level in reading and math or they will not accept the student because of local school program requirements. For example, the large city where many homeschool families live has implemented a comprehensive literacy policy involving group work. Homeschooling is not conducive to that type of work and so students who are not at grade level in reading are not allowed to join the program. These students frequently go to the county program or a charter program specifically for homeschoolers. District level requirements have an impact on what type and whether students will be accepted into the program.

**Ensuring Quality: Teachers, Standards, and Curriculum**

There are state-level requirements for teachers’ credentials and continuing education. In California, teachers are now required to conform to teacher training in
teaching English as a second language. This requirement makes sense because California has a very diverse student population. However, homeschool programs require at least one fluent English-speaking parent at home. It is also recognized that students learning English need to interact with other students in order to develop English language skills. The state has determined that the homeschool environment is inappropriate for English language learners. Therefore, homeschool program teachers have an extremely limited number of students requiring language support. The program has no need for them to be certified in skills to teach English language learners but the state required all teachers to get updated training in this area. Of course, if these teachers wish to work in a traditional school later, they will be required to have the necessary training to teach English language learners.

The requirements of the state therefore impact homeschool program teachers’ need for additional training, although they do not need this training for their own programs. These extra requirements come out not only in certification needs, but also in curriculum needs.

Teachers feel pressured by state standards to keep families “in line” and doing the curriculum. Families expressed frustration at having to use different curriculum for each grade level in history. Previously, many families had decided on a theme for history for the year and would use the same content across the grade levels so that each child could participate at an appropriate level. The family could have discussions together about the content and ideas and do field trips that all of them would find interesting and relevant to what they were studying. With the introduction of grade level standards and content, homeschool programs find themselves giving parents
separate history books for each child covering different eras and themes. Many parents were frustrated by this demand which required a lot of extra work and planning and divided the family by topic instead of uniting them around one area of discussion.

Some parents devised ways around the requirement, such as choosing a theme for the year but having the child complete a worksheet each month from the grade level curriculum they were assigned. In this way, they fulfilled the requirement but have their unified theme for the family. One mother said, “Well, this is stupid, but if it lets us do what we want, then OK” (fieldnotes, 5.26.04). Others complained but reworked their entire schedules to accommodate all the different textbooks. Both responses recognize the state influence over families’ experiences. Families see the state as provider of rules and regulations—to be followed or subverted—with a role in education.

The county and many city school districts adopted programs to teach phonics. Of the two state-approved programs offered, neither was determined by homeschool program teachers to meet the needs of homeschool students. Both programs are highly interactive, involving group work, discussion, and prescribed interactions with the materials. Homeschooling parents, with their focus on their own individual students, have difficulty implementing such a standardized and group-oriented program. However, all schools were required to adopt one of the phonics programs and to have teachers trained in the program. Many homeschool teachers spent a weekend, and up to four days, learning how to administer the phonics programs.

However, none of the homeschool programs could purchase all of the materials to implement the program because it would require teacher editions for each parent, as
well as entire class sets for each student. Homeschool program teachers went through the training and some then wrote lesson plans modifying the programs to fit homeschool parents’ and students’ needs as well as matching the materials that they had purchased with the lesson plans. Teachers viewed this work as “busy work” and were frustrated by the lack of flexibility and relevance to their own experiences teaching in a homeschool program. They agreed that students could benefit from a phonics program, but that the two chosen programs were too intense and complicated for lay parents to implement and understand. In addition, the individual nature of the homeschool experience precluded group work or highly prescribed lessons.

The State of California determined that these programs were appropriate for all students, thereby causing alternative programs to try to conform as best they could to the mandates while working informally within their own programs to “tweak” the standard requests to match what they knew of their population. This customization to meet the requirements occurs frequently in loosely coupled organizations such as schools (Meyer and Rowan, 1991:43). The ultimate impact on parents and students is diminished because teachers act as a buffer between state mandates and actual implementation of these mandates.

Testing for Results

In addition to curriculum, the state also requires documentation of progress, traditionally through standardized tests. While all parents in California have the right to refuse to have their child take the standardized tests, homeschool parents in general are more well-informed about school policies and their rights. About half of the parents in each of the programs in my study refuse the testing. Even if all parents
allowed their children to take the tests, frequently the programs are so small that the statistics resulting from the tests does not have validity. In fact, at one school the teachers joked about their scores going down one year because a particular family was on vacation and did not participate.

Both homeschool programs went through the WASC accreditation process for their schools in order to receive recognition as a legitimate school program. At both sites, the WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) committee questioned why the programs had comparatively low percentages of students taking the tests. The committee was concerned about a potential state take-over of the programs, a possible consequence for noncompliance. The following fieldnote explores their concerns:

They asked again about the standardized testing and what can be done to get the participation rate up. I couldn’t help myself and asked if it was so bad that they didn’t participate—the state surely wouldn’t want to take over this program (or any for that matter). The principal said that 90 schools in [the] county had been designated underperforming and that if you extrapolate to [larger cities], there would be hundreds and even thousands of schools in the state that are underperforming. A WASC committee member said that there are not enough teachers to fill the needs as it is, how can the state find more teachers. He gave the example of a “lousy town” and how no one would want to move there to be a teacher, so what would the state do anyway if they took over? Another WASC committee member says that instead of taking over the program, the state could just not fund it and then the program would have to close and that that would be the real danger. In the same sentence she added that there would be no place for these kids to go, so she didn’t know what they would do. So therefore they had to take the tests in order to keep the program open (fieldnotes, 10.26.04).

The concern about testing seems to point toward a greater concern with conformity to state expectations. The participants all agree that students should take the tests so that the school could be in compliance with the requirements but that the real effect of
noncompliance was debatable given the graver educational situations in inner-city and rural schools with populations considered to be in need of more help. Although the non-test-taking behavior will likely have no real impact on the school, the WASC committee was concerned that the programs try to get more parents to have their children participate in testing. Some programs did use the state’s threat to strongly suggest to their parents that they have their children take the tests. And some parents complied out of loyalty to the school but not because they thought that the tests actually provided real information about their child’s learning.

**Summing Up**

Despite variations in implementing state regulations, the state still remains a large influence on homeschool programs. Teacher roles are reinforced through state requirements, the state chooses curriculum and mandates student progress. It orders standardized tests and has the ability to impose sanctions on districts or schools that do not meet standards or refuse to comply. These outside pressures from the state coupled with internal constraints help to maintain the “school-ness” of homeschool programs. In addition, parents use the state as an internal check on their own progress with their children. They are reassured that they are doing school “right” if their child passes the tests, covers the curriculum, and is assessed and supported by a credentialed teacher. The state’s traditional role in providing education serves to validate these parents’ efforts outside of the traditional school choices. In moving away from a traditional program, parents come to rely on the state to provide and shape their educational experiences in a different way.
External Pressures: Traditional School Parents

The “Stuff” of School: Schedules, Grades, and Performance

Traditional school parents may criticize the amount of time that their children spend on homework, or complain that they have to supplement music or gymnastics lessons that the school no longer gives, but they generally continue to send their children to the school and to support the school’s agenda. The school expects parents to be supportive, to help with homework, and to organize their schedules around the school’s schedule. One father, Bob, who sends his children to the local public school, commented that he finds his family life impinged by the accommodation that his family has to make to school.

Bob: It's big. Yeah, it's really too [controlling]. That's one of the things I don't like about public school is it's way too controlling. Your whole day is all set up on—based on school. Your life, you know, and school vacation ____ way more than I like to see it be. It doesn't seem necessary. …I'm not a big fan of homework. I think an hour would be the most. It's just way too much….You know, they're at school all day. I mean how much homework do they need to do? ... [They could be doing] fun things. Yeah, it creates tension (interview, 2.11.05).

Even though he finds the sacrifices that the school demands to have a high cost, he does not suggest to his children that they not do their homework. He has a certain relationship to the school and it cannot be changed without harming his children’s performance there. This accommodation to the school’s demands on the children’s time, energy, and sense of self esteem has not only cost the family time but money as well. His own enjoyment of time with his children is curtailed by homework and school responsibilities. However, challenging this relationship would not be productive in Bob’s eyes—his children need to function in that environment. His
actions and advice that he gives his children are constrained by the school’s requirements of homework, support, and progress through the curriculum.

When Bob’s child started having problems in school, he tried to help in several ways: he hired tutors, he went to talk to the teachers, and he talked to his son. This is a father who values learning activities outside of school and whose friends were involved with their children together building rockets, hiking, and doing other activities. However, when his son’s grades started plummeting, he felt he had to step in. He did not feel that grades were the only indicator of his child’s knowledge (he emphasized his son’s enthusiasm and discussions about rockets), but he used the grades as a way of gauging his child’s school experiences.

Bob: Well, the grade was reflective of his struggle. We could see the struggle. You know, he's giving up on the homework or on a particular assignment - just not reading at night, and then he was giving up on it. ...That he's frustrated. He's frustrated and he's giving up. ...We always tell him, we say as long as he's applying himself and he's going to class and he's doing his homework, if he gets a "C," then it's no big deal. If you get a "D" or an "F" then something's seriously wrong. Though I can tell him, "If you get a 'C', sometimes it's a very difficult class." And it was advanced; it was honors stuff. So you know, he'd do his homework every night, and I worked with him. So I really can't ask any more from him. ...I'm concerned because the grades are reflective of where he's at. You know, if they're not reflecting where he's at, then something's the matter. ...You know, if he's getting an "F" on an assignment, that means something's not right. ...That's the biggest thing: I don't want him to go to school and have an ache in his stomach because he's not getting it - he doesn't feel he's smart enough to get an "A" in a class or you know, those kinds of things (interview, 2.11.05).

Bob used the grades as an indication of his son’s struggles in school and was most concerned that his son feel confident. He had struggled himself in school and didn’t want his son to experience the sense of inadequacy that he had felt as a child. Grades were a way of showing Bob that he needed to support his son by hiring a tutor so that
he could have someone review the concepts in a way that his son could understand.

Bob’s actions to support his son all conform to the school’s expectations for parental behavior: Bob is not proposing changes in how learning and teaching are conducted at school. In fact, his main focus is to ensure his son’s positive experience within the environment of school. His linking of self esteem issues to his son’s performance in school also shows his concern for how the school sphere can impact his son’s confidence.

Another parent, who sent her child to a traditional school and later decided to homeschool, echoes Bob’s interpretation about grades. Lea’s son’s struggles appeared in fourth grade when his grades plummeted. She saw this change as an indicator of a larger problem:

Lea: Brian was the kind of kid who came home with very little homework, and somehow it got done and was—you know, I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to his grades and his -- not necessarily his grades because his grades would come back and they were always straight "A's." But his—you know, how he did his homework, when he did his homework, you know, we would just arrive at home, and I'd make dinner, and it was the end of the day, and we'd start it all over because I was always involved in some committee or raising funds or doing something at school. So, we didn't really realize that there was a problem until he was in fourth grade, and his grades went from "A's" to "F's" almost in a heartbeat, and we didn't understand. And it was because of the disease. It's neurological based. So he became slower. And he then was unable to finish tests on time. So when you finish six out of ten, it's a 60, and it's a "D," or you know. And it was in a heartbeat. I mean it was—and then it was, "What's wrong with you?"

When he was in fourth grade—he wasn't diagnosed until two months into his sixth grade year. So, we struggled for the last two years. You know, how can you become—go from a straight "A" student to becoming an idiot?

Interviewer: Right.

Lea: I mean, it was—I didn't accept it that he didn't—and oddly enough, he knew it; it was just the physicality of getting the information from his brain to a piece of paper. And it wasn't until we got here that he started
testing orally or, you know, in different ways that allowed him to do that. At [his school], they would make him go in and not have lunch to finish a test, and that would be only for one class, or he'd have to stay after school. And of course, they have like seven classes. So, he was always constantly one day or another missing lunch and staying after school late to accommodate these problems (interview, 3.22.04).

Lea realized there was a problem when she saw the radical change in her son’s grades. The grades were an indication of his struggle to finish the work. She trusted that he was a smart child because he had been getting A’s previously, so the reason for the poor grades couldn’t be that he wasn’t smart. She used the school’s rubric for measuring how smart her child was and concluded that did not “become an idiot” over night. The grades served as a call for attention that he needed help. Her interpretation of the grades is twofold: the change showed that he needed help and the previous grades demonstrated that he was smart. The evaluation and the problem occurred within the realm of the school; as a parent, she felt it was her job to support her son in that realm.

Her description of her son’s experience shows how separate the spheres of home and school were. Her previous experience with her son’s schoolwork is that he just finished it on his own and she rarely paid attention to it. It was his responsibility and he got it done. Only when problems in school started becoming apparent through his grades did she step in and start asking what was wrong with her son that he did not fit successfully into the school’s expectations for performance that he had previously managed on his own. The separate spheres of home and school overlapped only when there was a problem for her son in the school sphere. This separateness has other consequences as well, which I explore later.
Both Bob and Lea were very involved with the school. She volunteered on committees and raised money for the school. He volunteered for both his son and younger daughter’s elementary classrooms and started a father’s group that hosts fun events at the school once a month. He organized field trips and is very happy to have a community of parents that he knows at the school. But school learning is a separate sphere from the home even if Bob and Lea are the most supportive they can be. Despite all of these connections to the school, he values the report cards and conferences because they tell him about how his child is doing in school:

Bob: So...they [grades and report cards] give you a really outstanding understanding of where their level of understanding is. Particularly at [the elementary school], he [the teacher] gives really detailed reports when you go in and sit down with the teacher - find out what -- how she's doing, in terms of everything. He [looks at] participation, do you express yourself, do you stay on task with the assignments - you know, those kind of things. Author: Right. So you feel that you get to know more about her as a whole person.
Bob: Oh, yeah, you really do because you -- there are a lot of things you don't see. ...Like she's an absolute angel at school, and she's this phenomenal -- loves to help the teacher, never misbehaves, always on task, you know, just cooperates with the other kids. And at home she has tantrums and screams and -- you know, not all the time, but you know she has a lot of varied behavior at home, you know, but never at school - never disrespectful or things like that. So I would love to -- I mean we love going in and having conferences because it's, "Your kid's a dream kid, you know, the kid everybody want to have in their class." And at home...she's like that most of the time, but she has some times when she's horrible, I mean just off the wall. But they don't -- they don't see that (interview, 2.11.05).

The report card and conference provide Bob with a view of his daughter that he doesn’t see at home all of the time. The spheres of school and home are separate not only in what academic work is being done, and what the teacher notices about the child’s work habits and preferences, but also in how the child behaves. Participants in
the two spheres of home and school take on roles and behaviors that they perceive as appropriate to either sphere and perform differently in those spheres. That his daughter is an angel at school and a handful at home is not surprising because of the scripts that are enacted in the institution of family and of school. This separation of spheres and roles also applies to learning: the parent relies on the teacher for a report on the child’s progress through a set curriculum. Evaluation of learning is clearly the purview of school and the parent accepts the teacher’s insight. This separation of spheres can lead to evaluations on the school’s terms that the parent feels does not reflect their knowledge of their child as bright, curious, and able. But because the school defines “success” in that sphere based on its own criteria, the parents’ understanding of their child is not included in that evaluation. The school constrains the discussion to its own criteria, which the parents then try to help their children meet.

The experience of school as a separate sphere reinforces the idea that learning and evaluation are separate from the family as well. This understanding of education as something that occurs in school as the domain of teachers underlies the school-family relationship. Families are supposed to support the school’s efforts. These beliefs about the role of school and family and the type of relations that are appropriate are part of the cultural landscape that includes homeschool families. If families do not conform to these prevalent roles, they challenge the definitions and understanding of parenting and school.

One couple who decided to hold their child back in fourth grade and homeschool him said that they were very involved with the school but that they still felt left out of what was happening there:
Brett: Yeah, we were pretty involved with the class and with the school. Tanya: And you know what? I would get a story from him and then I would hear a story from somebody else and you know, something from the teacher, and you know, one of the philosophies is if it happens at school, let the consequences be at school. And he never got in like really major, big trouble. I mean he's just very playful and you know, he's got a great sense of humor, and he can control a room like that. …But yeah, I felt like I didn't know what was going on, and it was frustrating for me because I was working while he was at school so I could be home when he was home from school. And so I couldn't, you know, be in the classroom sometimes to see how things were going. And yeah…it stills feels like a mystery to me, a lot of things that happened (interview, 11.02.04).

Even though they were at the school volunteering and communicating with the teacher, they still felt that school was so separate from their home life that they didn’t really understand what was happening in school. They also felt pressure to keep it that way, with others telling them that what happens at school should only have consequences at school. They did not feel supported by the teachers in their concerns about their son’s academic and social performance.

Parents feel that the school has certain responsibilities and they as parents have others. Even when students struggle in school, parents feel that it is their responsibility to either help their child or to seek another school that can. This notion that the school provides a service that the child and family conform to is prevalent with the parents I interviewed. Parents—both homeschool and traditional school—continually emphasized the school structure as a limiting factor in how much teachers can be expected to do. In addition, they felt that as parents they were the ones that would have to problem-solve for their children if it was necessary because it was their responsibility. Niki, whose child was having trouble reading, said:

I mean we’ve only recently hired someone who works with parents of kids with disabilities to get some help. Before this, I’ve been trying to read a
bunch of books and do research on my own. I felt like I was floundering around, there really wasn’t any proactive assessment or activity with the teacher. But the teacher, it feels like, OK, still, this is my responsibility and there isn’t anyone out there that can tell me that this is what is going on with my kid. I read something on a … website about the relationship between parents and teachers and how oftentimes the teachers won’t even suggest when they think that there is something wrong with the child, because they are afraid, probably pretty justifiably, that the messenger is going to be shot. People don’t want to hear this, that there is something wrong with the kid (interview, 4.19.05).

She felt that the teachers were helpful and tried different methods with her son, but that none of them were going to do research or find the specialized help that he needed. She reported that she found an optometrist who does eye training exercises which made a positive impact on her son’s reading progress. She did not expect the school to provide such a service, although she lamented that she had to be the one to research and find it. She said that the school should offer these services but that it was simply too expensive. She had to seek a private solution while keeping her child in the school and helping him as best she could. She suggested to the school that he repeat second grade and the school agreed to allow him to have the same teacher again, which she was pleased with. This solution allowed her son to stay in school and to receive the help he needed. The separate spheres of home and school and her construction of her responsibilities as a parent allow the school to continue as a legitimate provider of education without having to address individual educational needs of students.

The readiness of parents to accept the school as a legitimate organization responsible for educating their children is evident in these parents’ interactions with the school. Their children each had various difficulties but the parents worked to help
their child conform to the school, not to change the school to help their child. This same compliance to social expectations comes out in how the parents I interviewed talked about standardized tests. If the child does not perform well, many parents will first want to know the circumstances of the test, their child’s emotional state, and then will question the school, or in the homeschool case, their own teaching. Many parents voiced the idea that testing is something that students have to do but that they don’t put much stock in the results. The willingness of the parents to go along with the testing even though they don’t agree with it is reinforced by the separate spheres: the school says that students need to take the tests and many parents won’t protest. They accept the school as an institution that children and families have to conform to; if a child fails, there is not automatic criticism of the school. The school enjoys a level of assumption in the community that it is not only legitimate, but also that it performs its functions well. This idea is in contrast to the parent protests in lower income schools where the school is not seen by the community as providing a quality education (Kohn, 2004; Kunst, 2004).

Many traditional school parents were appalled by the idea that homeschoolers were not required to take state standardized tests. As stated above, in California, any parent is allowed to opt out of testing their children, although most parents don’t realize that they could opt out. What is disturbing for traditional school parents is that if homeschoolers opt out of the tests, then there are no controls over what they are learning. Their frame of reference is that all children take tests and the school is held accountable for the performance of its students. They accept the school’s authority as the legitimate educator of children, and do not consider that many children “fall
through the cracks.” Attendance at school is seen not only as conforming to social expectations, but also somehow ensuring that the children are responsibly educated by the state. That the state could be lax in upholding its responsibility is not part of this picture.

**Socialization**

Traditional school parents view school as a natural place for children to learn social skills. Many parents talked about the importance of their children’s social success in school. Concerns about friendships, problem-solving, and peer pressures came out in the interviews. In fact, many parents connected the learning aspects of school with social consequences (as Bob did above with his concern for his son’s feelings of failure in comparison to others in the class). School is about learning and performance, but those have consequences for their child’s social status. These parents have normalized the social conditions of school so that student competition is normal and social struggles are par for the course in growing up. Bob’s concern over his son’s academic performance is linked to concerns about social performance in school:

Bob: He’s not an outgoing person. In fact, he's very much like my wife; he has his close little group of friends, and outside of that circle, he's very timid. So...high school is really tough for him. He's easily embarrassed. I mean fortunately he hasn't had any incidents, but it would be real typical to get picked on. And fortunately he's not real small or anything. He's not—I hope it won't happen. But he would definitely be vulnerable to all kinds of embarrassment.

Author: And so, has it made you nervous as a parent to send him off...?

Bob: Yeah. I feel uneasy sometimes and guilty.

Author: And do you wish there was another way that he could avoid that or -- should the school be doing something --

Bob: No. Ideally, I would love to be in a Christian school, you know, in a really small classroom, and all those kind of things, but we got into the public school system and feel strongly committed to staying with that now, because I feel that the public schools have really been skewed
totally unfairly. …Our American culture is so influenced by TV and the parents just not participating. In this neighborhood, you know, even problems with drugs and things like that.

Author: Right. And so, are you nervous sending your children into a school that is essentially reflecting the values of our broader society than clearly your family values reflect?

Bob: Yeah. Yeah. But that's the world they're going into. You can't avoid it. So they may as well learn how to deal with it and hopefully be an influence. …He's not a joiner; you know, he's not the type of guy that's going to say, "All the other kids are ___. Hey I'm going to go, too" (interview, 2.11.05).

Bob is very concerned for his son in the school environment and sends him off to school hoping that the experience will be positive. He feels that his son is strong enough to resist doing something that the family would view as inappropriate and finds comfort in his son’s independent nature. However, he is very worried about others picking on his son and his son being vulnerable to that. He went on to talk about his own challenges in staying true to himself and standing up for what he believes in as an adult. He feels that being an adult is different because he didn’t feel physically threatened for having different opinions, whereas his son faces physical threats in school. Despite this difference in the nature of the experiences, he feels that high school is good preparation for adulthood.

An alternative to the everyday problems that kids have at schools is seen by some traditional school parents as over-protective and unnecessary. Tara, the mother of two daughters in 6th and 8th grade, said that she has always viewed her children’s social issues as something for them to work out on their own.

I think with my oldest daughter, she's -- she had this little group of friends in elementary school, and sometimes they got along great and sometimes they didn't. And I kind of would hear about stuff, but you know, it was just like, you know what? They just got to work it out on their own. I really think that it's important for them (interview, 4.08.05).
Many parents said that their children came and talked to them about things in their lives, but that, as Tara points out below, they don’t need to know everything about their child’s day in order to be supportive.

They're like, "So how was your day, mom?" I’m like, "Yeah, it was pretty good. It was busy." And they're like, "What did you do?" (Laughter.) I'm like, "Yeah, I did this and this." I'm like, "So how was your day?" And they'll be like, "Yeah, I had this and I had that." And I’m like, "Okay. Great." And I'm sure that they have stuff going on. I'm sure that there's stuff going on in school, you know, between this friend and that friend. You know, there's little things that happen in the classroom, but you know, I feel like I don't have to know like every little detail. I don't tell them every little detail of my life (interview, 4.08.05).

This “reporting in” about their day is enough for this mother to feel that if her children need something, they will ask for her support. Otherwise, her children’s experiences are very independent and separate from the parents’ days. This view of separate lives that intersect at home is reinforced by school schedules, ways of communicating, and school roles. Tara felt that she knew her children’s teachers enough through the two Open Houses each year and the twice-yearly conferences about their work.

Other traditional school parents are critical of this limited communication from the school, but still operate within that structure. Some see the school as not responsive to particular needs, and like the parent who I described at the beginning of the chapter, feel the need to volunteer in the classroom in order to check up on their child. Niki’s experience with her son who didn’t read said that she was frustrated with the school saying

‘oh he’ll do better’ and they started getting some reading help. But by the end of second grade, he still wasn’t reading, and he wasn’t anywhere near reading. I’d do spelling words with him, he’d get the spelling words in his head, he’d know how to spell them, and two days after the test, he
couldn’t spell them and he couldn’t recognize them to read them (interview, 4.19.04).

Her solution to the school’s lack of response to her son’s needs was to research on her own and find vision therapy for him, which she paid for. She didn’t feel that she could take him out of school.

The thing is, when you are in a charter school like this that has such a high demand, if you pull your kid out, you can’t get him back in. So it’s really hard. So you end up feeling trapped. I think a lot of people feel that way. So that’s part of the reason why we didn’t pull him out (interview, 4.19.04).

The structures of the school choice were such that if she tried other programs or options, she would have lost his position in the school, which she liked because it matched her values. Instead of leaving school, she provided enough support and sought outside services to help him obtain the skills he needed. She had enough knowledge about the system that she shaped her choices to that system and worked within it to change the outcome of her son’s experience. Her actions as a parent were to ensure her child’s success within the school system.

These changes did not challenge the school’s practices in any way, and in fact made those practices easier to continue because she fixed a problem at the school and did so personally. She did not visibly challenge the school, nor did she create public problems for the school. Homeschooling visibly challenges the school, however, because parents remove their children from its control. Instead of the family and child conforming to the school, they offer a challenge to that system, which does not neatly fit within the school’s definitions of “involved parent.” All of Niki’s efforts, despite being time-consuming and resource-dependent, fit within the school’s construction of
“supportive parent” because she is helping her son to conform to the school, not insisting that the school conform to her son’s needs.

**School as Preparation**

In contrast to Lareau’s (2000, 2003) findings that middle class parents treat teachers as employees rather than experts, I find that traditional school parents feel that the teacher is the expert and that their children must follow the curriculum and state standards. They may critique it, they may demand accommodations or look for ways to help their children, but they still view teachers as actors that can potentially impact their children’s classroom experience. Many said that they didn’t want to “rock the boat” by complaining too much. They view the system as a series of steps that bring their children closer to the end goal of a job or college experience. One traditional school mother described why she feels her children need the experience of a confusing, large middle school.

Tara: But it's really like a jungle…You kind of drop your kids off, send them out the door, you know, they go to … their classes. They have multiple teachers for all the multiple subjects…But for me, personally, you know, I'm kind of okay with that. Because I think like when they get to college, it's not like I'm going to be calling their like college professors and saying, "Like how is Sharon doing?" … Even now, especially with Sharon, you know, she's having issues with her teacher, an issue with her class, and I'm like, "Well, you need to go talk to your teacher." … She's still just 13, and it has to come to me, but I try and actually encourage her to have that relationship with her teacher because ultimately they're the ones that have the relationship, and not necessarily me and the teacher…I’m getting her ready for high school because high school ultimately prepares you for you know, hopefully like some further education or a job or something … it's not like mom and dad are going to be advocating for you anymore; you have to advocate for yourself. So I feel that that's really important… I think the reason why I feel that is because when I came [to college], I had gone to a pretty small school… where everything was really laid out for you. You know, you didn't really have to fight or push to get the things
that you wanted, and when I came here... it took me like a while before I could figure stuff out... Where could I go to? Or what do I have to do to drop this class, or add this class, or... And [my friend who went to a large high school] figured it out so much faster because she was so used to just doing it... And so now, I think that maybe that's part of the reason why I'm glad that they're having that experience... But that was a skill unto itself - you know, being able to go out and like figure stuff out (interview, 4.8.05).

Handling social and academic issues at an early age is seen as critical to students’ further development as a participant in the political and economic system. Her children are learning how to negotiate a large system, something she feels she missed out on in the small, intimate Catholic school she attended as a child. She originally had her children in a small, Catholic school as well, which she enjoyed a lot and said that she knew the parents and students more. It felt more like a community that had clearer expectations for the children and families. She chose to leave when she disagreed with the new principal’s philosophy.

In contrast to homeschooling parents who say that their children needed more support and that they had to pull their children out of school because the school was not meeting their needs, she believes that her children need to adapt to the school’s rules and regulation. Her own struggles with college lead her to believe that a small and supportive school might actually be disabling later when skills are needed that weren’t necessary in a more intimate environment. She supports the school’s idea of student independence and self-advocacy. She went on to add that school for them is like their job:

Author: And so do you -- how -- do you feel that school impacts your family life?
Tara: Well, I think -- I mean in the same way that my job impacts my life. I mean I think it's just -- for them it's just work. It's work that they
have to do, and they know that it's important and that my husband and I think that it's important for them. But I don't think "impact" is the right word. I think that it's just a part of life - you know, that their education is just a part of life, just like my husband and I are our work is a part of our life. So, but I mean there's no like negative impact or anything like that; it's just what they do (interview, 4.8.05).

The equating of school with work is quite common among families I interviewed. This view of school learning as work separates it from being an integral part of family life. Each set of people (parents and children) have different “bosses” that they have to fulfill requirements for and they meet at home after those requirements are done. Tara also views homework as an independent thing that her daughters do and she checks to be sure it’s done correctly, but she does not view the school learning as an opportunity to explore concepts with her children. In fact, parallels to work continue with views of homework: it is just something that her children have to do, like taking some work home from the office at the end of the day.

This view of school as “just something [the kids] do” at first seems to imply that school is integrated into family life. However, in practice it is a separate activity that the children go off to do and come back to the family to report on. They may need some help on particular assignments but in general, they are responsible to outside experts for their performance. Echoing sociologists from Parsons (1967) to Bowles and Gintis (1976), school is a separate sphere. The separate sphere reinforces the roles that the school and family play, with the family supporting the school.

Families organize their time around school. The school schedule is a given, with vacations and free time fitting around that schedule. One homeschool parent reported that “my neighbors feel that I am cruel because we do school over the
summer too, but Sara loves reading and learning. What else shall we do over the summer? Homeschooling becomes a way of life” (interview, 3.29.04). The school vacation has become mythologized in American culture to the extent that not taking a vacation from school is seen as cruel and unusual. Clearly, school is seen as similar to a job, from which one needs a vacation, instead of as the pursuit of knowledge that one finds interesting.

Many traditional school parents view homeschool parents as overprotective. This idea shows that there are not only cultural meanings about school and what it should look like and what it should do, but that there are cultural meanings about the nature of childhood and the nature of reality. Many people realize that there are social problems at school but feel that kids need to learn how to handle themselves in a school setting with other children. One mother commented, “If he has trouble at school, first we think about what he could do, and we discuss that. Then if he still is not successful, I will step in” (interview, 3.3.05). This mother’s support is from home and she helps her son negotiate social situations by discussing the issue and providing advice for him to try out. She is not present at the social situation, but feels that this support is enough for him to feel that he can try a different solution. She views herself as a resource for her children if they need help.

Homeschool parents more readily point out that school is an unusual circumstance where children are age-grouped and directed by an authority. Traditional school parents accept the school arrangement as providing crucial experience that will help students deal with others later in life. They do not feel that children need to be protected or that the school situation is particularly stressful. They frequently say that
children need to learn to “deal with reality.” Homeschool parents are less likely to feel that there is a set reality for their children to deal with, and prefer to try to create their own reality.

**Constructing Success**

Many parents expressed the idea that they not only support their children in school, but that they were responsible to ensure that their child was in an acceptable environment. Parents told of changing schools in order to address learning or social needs of their children. Despite Niki’s troubles with her son’s reading, she explained that she was quite pleased with the public charter school her children attended because:

> The children are taught to be respectful to each other. [The school] has a social and emotional curriculum. The teachers take it very seriously, and they work on it, and they try to train the parents. It completely fits with the kind of parenting that we are trying to do, so we are really happy with it. … I am a very fortunate person, there are many ways that I could educate [my son], either homeschooling or private school. But I think that part of it too is that he is in a group of kids—I mean, he’s an odd duck. He probably misses a lot of the social cues, like a lot of autistic kids do. I think that he probably misses them more than the average oblivious 8-year-old. So I think [this school is good] in order for him to be in a social situation where he is more accepted and not just treated like the kid who gets rejected all the time. I think he is at a place [at this charter school] where he is more likely to succeed socially (interview, 4.19.05).

She is sensitive to her son’s emotional and social needs and is pleased that he is not being picked on at this school. She sees that he would normally not fit into a social situation at school and has carefully chosen a school that promotes tolerance of others as important. Many parents with the ability to afford different choices selected a school that they thought matched their philosophies. Picking an environment is very different from creating one, which is what homeschool parents are doing when they
leave the traditional school. The choice to leave school entirely, rather than help to fix it, challenges fundamental assumptions about schooling in US society because it goes against the idea that it is a parent’s responsibility to choose the school environment, not to reject it wholesale and create their own.

**Summing Up**

Parents who send their children to traditional school have beliefs reinforced by cultural meaning systems about school that help them understand what school is and how it should be done. They struggle with school and advocate for their children in that environment. It is important to note that many parents cited resources as a major influence on determining where their child went to school: if they had the knowledge and understanding of types of schools, they could choose a private school. Others chose charter schools with foci that matched their own philosophies, and others supported the local school. With all choices, the parents felt dedicated to their child’s success and well-being. However, this support occurs within the separate sphere of school. Traditional school parents operate within the school’s expectations of support, thereby making the school’s job easier. The separate spheres actually reinforce the differences between the family and school: parents accommodate the school in their schedules, expectations, roles, and support.

Parents who send their children to traditional school have all the fears and hopes for their child that they will be safe, that they will succeed, that they will be happy in that environment. Many referenced their own experiences in school as a place of understanding the challenges their child faced in school, as well as the assumptions they made about their experiences. They view school as preparation for
further work and schooling; even difficult social experiences are seen as part and parcel of growing up.

These ideas that home and school are separate, that parents’ responsibility lies in choosing an environment or in supporting the current environment, and that the school is where learning “is done” are the underlying grammars of school. On the surface, homeschooling parents seem to challenge these notions of school. However, these ideas also influence their “grammar of schooling” in surprising ways.

**Internal Pressures: Homeschool Parents**

New institutional literature sees participants as the primary carriers of the cultural belief systems of the institution (Scott, 1991:181). Parents and students are participants in both the institutions of school and family; they carry their experiences and beliefs from the traditional school system into homeschooling and combine these school ideas with their family beliefs as well. Homeschooling becomes a combination of school and family, with similarities between homeschool and traditional school coming into the family’s expectations of “doing school” at home. It is not surprising that many parents who participated in a traditional school have decided to homeschool for academic or social reasons. Many said that it was an easy transition because they had been helping their children so much with home work that they felt they may as well be the teacher.

**Involved Parents**

It is possible that the cultural beliefs about parent participation in their children’s education enable parents to more readily choose homeschooling when they determine that either the school is not providing what their child needs, or their child
needs what the school cannot provide. Many homeschooling parents talked about being “involved parents” at their children’s schools previous to their experiences homeschooling.

I became very involved with everything from PTA to the foundation -- I was on the D.A.C., which is District Advisory Council. I did, you know, the whole -- I was on school sites. I was on governance team. I did the whole thing, and I was involved every single year of his elementary school (interview, 3.22.04).

I was there as a parent volunteer, I was there every day, I was on the board. I mean, I didn’t like it, I wasn’t happy, but I was connected. I don’t think I would have my kids somewhere where I wasn’t sort of seeing what was going on, and how can I help and what can I do… (interview, 9.29.03).

This involvement at school and at home reinforces the general societal notion of parent responsibility toward their children. Some parents supported the school because they felt that it was important for their child to see that “education was important” and they felt that their presence in the classroom reinforced this view. Others wanted to ensure that their child’s experience was enriched at school and organized fundraisers to supply art lessons, computers, or music classes. Although the type of parent support at school sites is quite different from being the supplier of education for one’s child, the groundwork of involvement and expectations that parents would support learning was there. The assumption of parental responsibility for their child under girds both traditional school expectations for parent support and homeschool expectations of parent involvement.

**Constructing Success**

Even parents who were not at all involved in traditional schools had the notion of parental responsibility when their child started having problems in school. The
cultural understanding of what a parent does and how a parent cares supported the change from traditional to homeschool programs. Some parents felt they had “no choice” but to homeschool in order to fulfill their parental obligation to their child. This notion of responsibility is only the beginning of the story, as enacting parental support for the child is not as straight-forward as implied. Parents experience conflicts between their notion of parental responsibility and widely held cultural beliefs about education.

Monica, whose two children have attended public schools, private Catholic and private Protestant schools, charter schools, and one homeschool program, chose schools based on her perception of how they helped her children grow as complete people. She explained that her son started having problems in fifth grade and she decided to homeschool him for four months in order to “recover” from the devastating blows to his confidence that had occurred in the classroom. However, she experienced a conflict between the two notions of responsibility she was expected to enact as a homeschool parent and teacher. As a parent, she wanted her son to have a happy experience and to restore his self esteem through homeschooling. She felt responsible for his general well-being. As a teacher, she felt she should be concerned about his academic progress as measured by completion of the curriculum.

Monica: At the end of Jason's fifth grade... I think he was clinically depressed. The teacher wasn't working out. I think that was part of it. She was sarcastic and insulting. And here's a kid that's highly gifted and really sensitive, and he's not turning his work in, and she's, you know, berating him in front of the class. ...So I said, you know, "Let's get out of here." So—and homeschooling worked pretty well. I—and I guess the reason I stopped—I had friends that continued, but I guess the reason that I stopped is I didn't have the discipline. You know, I'd just as soon play with him or—you know, I wasn't spending enough attention. I felt like he
would get more education if he went somewhere else, because I wasn't doing the work. It takes a lot of work.

…Oh, but the difference between being both parent and teacher, I guess I thought the parent role was more important. So I think I let some of the academic stuff slide. …you know, with all the resources [of the homeschool program]. It was just wonderful. If I had had more discipline… (Laughter). But we had—every two weeks, I believe it was, we had to turn in a packet of work. And so I was letting that sort of drive my teaching, and that's not where it should have been. I should have—I mean we learned lots of things that we didn't turn in, but we needed like three math assignments every two weeks. So you know, we'd have to just sort of power them out. And I—it wasn't—I just felt like it wasn't true somehow. Although it was a good experience, but… I don't know if I'm making any sense.

Because you know, we were doing important things, you know, in terms of music. We were doing things—oh, exploring. We did lots of geology. We went and explored the earthquake faults around town. …It was cool. And those are really important for his development, but I felt like those are kind of mom things that we were doing, and not the math worksheets that you needed to have—so many math worksheets every week, and you needed to have book reports every week. We would read books endlessly, but we found that we needed to turn something in.

So you know, I'm not so good at that getting it together to turn in. You know, I think it's good for his development to turn something in or write—you know, write a poem or draw a picture or somehow produce some output, but I wasn't so good at eliciting that. Yeah, I think I was better at the experiential stuff (interview, 3.21.04).

She felt responsible for upholding the traditional notions of school to the point of not even counting all of the hands-on science, in-depth investigations, and sophisticated dialogues about books as “doing school.” These activities did not fit into the traditional concepts of completing work in a book, of being evaluated, and of being sanctioned by the state. She did them because both she and her son were interested.

The narrow, school-based, definition of learning did not capture these activities and therefore she viewed them as “mom things” to do. She even felt that the experience that she was creating at home “was not true” because it did not match what school “should” be. She discounted her emphasis on experiential learning as being a deficit
for homeschooling and was happy that she was only homeschooling for four months as a bridge to her son’s next traditional school experience with a teacher she was excited about. Ideas about school can be so ingrained that parents do not see their own efforts as valid unless they fit into the school mold. The school sphere is so separate from the home sphere that looking at earthquake faults becomes a “mom thing” to do.

Education is not associated with emotional well-being or with a student’s innate interests. Education is doing bookwork. These internal notions bring parents’ actions (or at least create dilemmas about not following these notions) into line with traditional concepts and practices. In the next chapter, I explore this notion of experiential learning as seen by parents as “fun” and not as “doing school.”

“Doing School”

Many homeschool parents find planning units and getting through textbooks to be daunting and some prefer a program that has lesson plans specifically delineated for each subject each week, thus mirroring traditional school conceptions of knowledge and progress through texts. Parents find it affirming and comforting that their children follow similar lessons that traditional school children are following because they rely on the expertise of the state and teachers to establish standards for each grade and to determine the necessary progress in order to be “successful” in each subject and grade level.

Many parents were relieved to have this similarity to school in the homeschool program. Lea’s comments affirm the need for support and demonstrate the role that the continuity of thinking about education plays in making the transition from traditional school to homeschool.
Lea: So when we came here, I was scared to death that I was not going to be prepared as a clinical classroom teacher, essentially, out of our dining room. And it was—you know, it was scary. But I knew there had to be a change … we tried it, and we loved it from the very beginning, because we received a syllabus and there are credentialed individuals here who had been in a classroom, at various sites in their careers, who, you know, if I fell would pick me up immediately. If you called them they were there - either come in or, "This is what you do for now. Let's meet tomorrow" kind of thing. … and they just supported me…they had those hands underneath you, so you really -- they were not going to let you fail, because if you fail, your student failed, and if the student failed, there wouldn't be a program, and they wouldn't have a job. So it was really in their benefit to make certain that you were on the right page from the very, very beginning. And it was absolutely phenomenal. And it was just the easiest transition. It was just phenomenal. I cannot say enough about the program instructors here. You know, it was just phenomenal (interview, 3.22.04).

Although her son had been having problems from fourth to sixth grade and she went through an epiphany about his learning styles and schedule needing to be different than the traditional school (and different from her own way of thinking and learning), she still expected their new homeschooling experience to be similar to traditional school. A larger concern at the beginning was that she was not as prepared for “doing school” in the role of a classroom teacher. She had these worries despite her own teaching credential as a physical education teacher. She viewed teaching physical education as different from a teacher in a classroom because she hadn’t had to make lesson plans and ensure student progress or give homework. The tangible artifacts of syllabi and plans and standards in the homeschool program comfort her unease about doing something wrong in educating her son. She feels that the teachers are qualified because they had experience in a traditional school program. In addition, they have their teaching credentials and are sanctioned by the state as experts in education. Of course, her experience of interacting with the teachers confirms on a more personal
level their caring and concern. But even this experience of support is understood in terms of the teachers’ best interest because the program explicitly depends on families choosing to participate.

Her understanding of her son’s educational needs and habits has changed, but instead of viewing education differently or developing different goals, she devises systems to help him fit the expectations of the program:

So, I could organize his day, shuffle his stuff around so that at the end of the day, he completed all of his assignments, so that we would stay on task for testing at the end of the month and to turn in his packets. So, it was never a problem (interview, 3.22.04).

The similarities of the program to traditional school enabled her to manage his day with the end goal of finishing the given amount of work that was expected from the school program. This type of education—meeting set work goals—is the system they were familiar with from the traditional school and also fit their model of what education is. The transition to doing homeschool was easy because of the similarities to traditional school. Both child and parent had an understanding of their roles and of the work that was expected to be accomplished. In addition, her beliefs about her parental responsibility is in line with traditional conceptions: she helps him fit into the school system (whatever format it takes) and even in the midst of creating a separate school experience at home, still conforms to this notion of helping her child fit the system. Although she is creating an environment at home, she is in essence assuring his success in the wider system of school, essentially importing those beliefs from her previous experience with schooling.
Even a parent whose educational beliefs and style contrast sharply with traditional school conceptions is relieved by the school’s guidance. Marnie explained that she appreciates the counseling aspect of the program’s teachers as well as the knowledge they have of district expectations for performance.

He [the homeschool teacher] is a really good audience, and he's just been really encouraging about, you know, don't panic so much. It's developmental… [skills] mature at different rates and stuff. So that's been really reassuring. And when I get so scared that I'm shortchanging her because we're not, you know, exactly where the city schools are, or we're at such and such, and he says, "No. You know, she's like off the chart—miles ahead out there." And so, you know, it's—just because it's not on paper all the time doesn't mean that it's not real (interview, 3.29.04).

In the next breath Marnie went on to explain how her daughter makes up games and plays for hours, how she puts on plays to interpret texts instead of writing book reports, how they do hands-on math based on sorting, conceptualizing, and spatially working with lentils. She doesn’t do most of the worksheets and instead has intense explorations of themes in books, lots of conversations, science experiments, etc.

Like Monica, she sometimes finds herself having to “do school” the day before the meeting with the teacher in order to produce the required one page of work evidence in each subject. This mother—who constructs activities far richer and individually tailored to her 3rd grade daughter’s interests than what a traditional school experience would be—is concerned with whether she is short-changing her daughter. Despite her own experience with her child, the progress she sees, and her Ph.D. in English Literature, she feels the need to conform to a school’s idea of curriculum and progress. Marnie, who has reached the pinnacle of academic success herself, still needs reassurance about her efforts with her daughter.
Despite all obvious progress and growth, if it is not on paper, she feels insecure about the progress. The school requires work to be shown in the form of producing paper, and she accepts that idea, which is evident in her own assertion—an assurance to herself—that progress can be seen even if it’s not on paper. In order to venture from traditional means of educating, Marnie needed the reassurance of a knowledgeable teacher that she is doing a good job.

The ideas of school are so ingrained and the act of going outside the traditional system is seen as so risky that parents really appreciate the school’s guidance in ensuring their students’ progress. Even though she is pursuing an alternative educational experience for her daughter, she needs assurance that the progress her daughter makes parallels the state’s ideas of educational progress. The means may be different, but the end result should be at least as good as what the state would provide.

Our expectations about learning and school are based on the tasks traditionally found in schools. Alternatives are inevitably compared to these traditional ones. The tension between being parent and teacher occurs because members of society hold different understandings of responsibility and different definitions of education. Parents educate their small children, but they don’t necessarily view it as a formal process. Once children are sent to school or become school age, ideas from the sphere of schooling influence parents’ thinking about what “should be learned.” Even parents who practiced alternatives to bookwork oscillated back and forth between the alternative and the books. This tension is created by the combination of homeschool program policies requiring bookwork and people’s internal ideas about what school is.
Parents do not only take on the role of teacher, they acquire the understanding of education that they perceive a teacher brings.

Homeschool parents still look to teachers to legitimize their teaching ability and progress with their children. Perhaps the pedagogy is slightly different, or they go faster through the work because of the individualized nature of homeschooling, or they modify some of the assignments to better address their children’s strength, or they supplement the traditional curriculum with other books, trips, and projects. But the means to the end result of an educated child are measured on the same rubric as that of traditional school. Although the parents are moving away from the state’s provision of education for their children, they are in another way moving toward the state to provide content, structure, and evaluation of their child’s learning. In becoming responsible for delivering their child’s education, the parents employ the state’s guidelines to shape their educational experiences.

**Testing as Reassurance**

Not only are the means similar, but the result is measured using the same criteria as the state: standardized tests. While many homeschool parents expressed skepticism about standardized tests, and many exercised the option of not having their students tested, others used them as confirmation that they were doing a “good job” teaching. One couple who was unhappy with the traditional school’s continual promotion of their son into the next grade despite what they saw as a lack of performance decided to have their son repeat fourth grade at home:

Tanya: And I felt like also - like the pressure of teaching him well was lifted because he's already successfully passing fourth grade. So we have all this freedom of focusing on geography and history and whatever
These parents see their freedom in curricular choice as a positive influence in their homeschooling experience. They were building a mission when I interviewed them and they said they enjoyed watching history videos together as a family, so they were pursuing activities that did not fit in the traditional conception of “doing school.” However, they needed the reassurance that they were “doing school right” and they would know they were if their son passed the standardized tests at the end of the grade. They did not reconceptualize their son’s educational progress; in fact they reproduced the school’s requirements at home, using it as a support to validate their efforts.

Another mother mentioned that she compared all the local schools’ test scores when she moved to the area. She wanted to find a “good school” for her children and the test scores were one way of looking.

To me the standardized tests are for the school, not the student. You can get a ballpark [idea about the school]. But do I put a lot of stock in them? No, not really. I think you have to look at the whole, you can see if the whole school is getting straight A’s or high test scores. Yes, they are good for that, for taking a pulse. . . . I did look at the test scores, but it doesn’t really matter. I saw how crowded it was. That told me more than a standardized test. It tells you something about the ability of the population, but that’s it (interview, 11.03.04).

Although she says that she doesn’t value the test scores, she still used them to get a feeling about the schools available. She tried to get her children into schools that had higher scores and when that didn’t work, she decided to homeschool them through a program. Her daughter has been diagnosed with learning disabilities and so she
doesn’t value the test scores as an indicator of individual student progress. However, in the aggregate, she says that the test scores tell parents something about the type of student that attends the school.

Barbara, who chose to homeschool one of her three daughters for a few years said that she

. . . never strayed too far from the teacher’s manual book. I wanted to make sure that she could test at the end of the year and keep up the levels. We did both. So when I went off the program, it was extracurricular time. I kept her right to the program and the teachers kept saying ‘you don’t have to do that, it’s going to be boring’ (interview, 4.20.05).

For Barbara, ensuring that her daughter received the same education as children in traditional school was extremely important. They worked through all the books and then did extra things if they had time. The standardized tests were important for demonstrating her progress with her daughter; they “proved” that she was a good homeschool parent. This same mother had to teach her other daughter to read because the school did not, but she did not see the contradiction in judging her own teaching by the tests and in compensating for the school’s lack of help with her other daughter.

One homeschool mother, who had been a teacher in a traditional school, was very pleased that the homeschool program provided standards and an evaluation of progress toward meeting those grade level expectations:

I taught high school. I didn’t know what the 5th grade standards were, or the 3rd grade. I didn’t know how quickly they should be moving through. This is before we . . . found [the homeschool program]. And we weren’t exactly sure how we would KNOW that we were on the mark. We wanted to make sure we were on the mark, had the right curriculum, and sort of by mid-year, we were at the mid-year mark (interview, 9.29.03).
These parents expect the state to provide benchmarks for measuring their ‘progress’ toward grade level standards. There is the idea that there is a ‘curriculum’—something that they are ‘supposed’ to learn—and that the state standards are things that should be followed. They recognize the authority of the state to think out the educational milestones and they want to be sure to do those. Not only do they want to cover the material, they want assurance that their alternative education will result in the same educational progress along the state’s benchmarks.

Despite this reliance on tests and standards, many homeschool parents choose not to have their students take the standardized tests. One teacher said that on the one hand, they want to know how their children are doing but on the other hand, it is as if the parents feel they are the ones being tested. “But the testing, I think that’s why we get a lot of waivers. They think that if the child doesn’t do well, it’s a reflection on them. We don’t think that, but that’s a perception” (interview, 10.23.01). Equating learning with test taking makes some parents nervous that their child won’t perform well.

**Curriculum as Reassurance**

In addition to conforming to the means of educating, generally through use of texts and tests, homeschool parents express similar goals as do traditional school parents for their educational endeavors. Foremost, they want their children to be happy doing whatever job they will do, and to feel that they have the necessary skills to pursue their plans. Many parents view the curriculum as important as a means of teaching a particular skill that is viewed as essential for later success in life.
Author: And so in the end, you are hoping for, what?
Cynthia: To be able to make their own decisions. That is the most important. When [my son] said that it [education] is preparing you for adulthood, I mean that is a very wide thing. Are you preparing to be an employee, soldier, what are you preparing for? I think I want to prepare them for making their own decisions that don’t rely on other people to tell them what they should do. . . . And one thing you have to learn is you have to learn how to work. You have to learn how to get things done (interview, 9.23.03).

This mother feels that in loosely following the curriculum and in pursuing her children’s interests, they will have the skills to make their own decisions. Although she wants to produce independent thinkers, she also wants them to have the skill of getting their work done, which is a form of independence but also a form of conforming to expectations that requires self-management. She combines following her children’s interests with the bookwork and units of school so that her children have both experiences.

Another mother who emigrated from Europe as a young adult and had homeschooled her children since birth (they were now in 7th and 9th grade) followed the curriculum quite closely when I interviewed her, but she had a year when she did not do a lot of “book work.” She also feels that it provides skills that are essential for her children’s future:

You know that year when I said we did mainly workshops and fieldtrips and it was great, but I don’t know it was sufficient. You need to know how to read textbooks, and learn the vocabulary, and know what is important in a paragraph, the outline and how it works. You need to be able to write answers to questions. I do believe in traditional education, that way. You know what I mean. Like in math, I do believe that you have to do like thirty problems the same way so you really grasp it and you have to cover every single thing (interview, 9.23.03a).
Although the year was fun when they did more hands-on education, she feels that you need a combination of book work and fieldtrips to reinforce each other. She likes the structure of the books and feels that the things outside of the book are fun “extra” things that solidify the concepts they learned in the book. Underlying this emphasis on book work is also the idea that students need to repeat a lot of tasks and practice because those skills build on previous efforts at practicing. She only had one year “off” from doing regular school work, but feels that maybe that was not an adequate education because they didn’t practice what the main idea of a paragraph was, etc. Her children regularly test high, she gets compliments from teachers and community members frequently, and her children have participated in national programs for gifted students, yet she still feels that skills are built through practice and that missing the practice could be harmful to their progress. Even homeschool teachers will encourage parents to not have their children do all the math problems, and to move on to the next concept if they understand the previous one. But this notion of building on curriculum year after year is ingrained in many parents, who do not want to take “shortcuts” if they are not sure that it will produce the same result as the tried and true method of repeated exposure to concepts each year at a traditional school.

There are many ways of pursuing the goal of students acquiring skills, but parents in the homeschool programs tend to reproduce school at home probably in part because they come with cultural beliefs about the expertise of teachers, trust in textbooks, and the belief in the necessity of skill building. The process of education could look very different. It could be project-based and child-centered so that children learn the necessary skills as they develop and complete a project that they are
interested in. It could be an apprentice system whereby skills are developed through practice. These other possibilities are outside traditional conceptions of school, practiced by a few alternative programs such as Montessori and Waldorf. Parents recognize that there are other ways of educating their children, but express the idea that they are already taking on so much responsibility and they are so unsure, that they cannot afford to use what they consider a riskier route. Many like that it is laid out for them and appreciate the structure.

I think it’s important to learn both. The book is kind of—everything is laid out in a more structured way, so that they have this foundation. And then without the book, they participate in a lot of the activities here, and also we do activities at home as well, and we make up our own fieldtrips like we went to see ...the Science Center, you know, we go to different places. So I think it is important because it makes more of an impression on them and it is more real to them sometimes. But I think it is important to have this foundation so that they can relate it to other events, historical events or something they learned in science (interview, 10.3.03).

Those parents who themselves have an unusual educational background or who have some other experience with nontraditional programs are more willing to create their own “grammar of schooling” that does not resemble traditional conceptions. However, even these parents find it difficult to implement their ideas when they are confronted by the homeschool program demands for using texts, proceeding in grade-level progress, and for producing the necessary work. One mother, a recent immigrant from Israel, commented that she likes the resources of [the homeschool program], but not the paperwork and the necessary curriculum that they have to finish. She said “I know a lot of Americans who had a spelling list every week and they still can’t spell, that doesn’t help to learn spelling.” So she doesn’t have a spelling list. She heavily modifies the curriculum. For her youngest daughter in 1st grade, she is supposed to have a reader for English, but she doesn’t like the stories in it. She used one with a pig as an example. The pig goes to
town and tries on all these clothes in the store and gets in all kinds of trouble. It’s supposed to be funny, but she found it bordering on delinquency and didn’t want her daughter thinking that that kind of behavior would be ‘cute’ and so she didn’t have her read it. She gets books from the library because “there are so many rich children’s books,” why should she use the reader. . . . She says that she likes the resources, but that she doesn’t like having to spend part of their time “providing proof, manufacturing proof that we read these books and did these things.” She thinks that she should be believed and not have to show all their work and not have to do all the work (fieldnotes, 3.29.04).

This parent manages to combine her own ideas of curriculum with what the school requires, but still finds herself doing many things that she would prefer not to do, in order to document that they learned a particular subject. She recognizes the authority of the teachers and the school to require her to produce certain things that show that her children are doing the work. In fact, many times I would call for an interview or to chat with families and the mom would say, “Oh, we have our meeting this week at school, so we are really doing a lot of school this week.” The idea that the work had to be done as proof to turn in was a common theme and something that families structured some of their weeks around producing. Other families that had more consistent schedules did not find the production of school work to be too burdensome because they had this as part of their routine. Ideas about work and school influence families’ ability and willingness to produce the necessary work for the school.

Teachers as Reassurance

In recognizing the power that teachers have over parents to require certain demonstrable work products, homeschool parents are ceding some control to the school. In addition to this compliance component of the relationship between teachers and parents, this recognition of teachers as authorities also has a supportive component
as well. Parents are comforted by the homeschool programs that confirm their efforts with their children. “I heard a teacher say to me that I am the best teacher for my children. Do you know how affirming it was to hear a credentialed teacher say that I am doing a good job?” (fieldnotes, 2.16.03). This mother values the judgment of the teacher and feels supported in her efforts by the teachers. Other mothers said that the school provides essential support that they need in order to continue.

It takes a lot of energy and it is stressful . . . you are just ready to give up. And you’re like ‘am I doing the right thing’ and you know, this is just too much. And someone is there saying ‘yes, keep on going’ and stuff, and then eventually you see the result and the kids are really happy and they got compliments (interview, 9.23.03a).

I mean, I have sat in this room and cried and cried and cried with various homeschoolers, like ‘why am I doing this’ . . . It’s just, um, you don’t feel like you are doing a good job sometimes. And your kids are driving you crazy (interview, 9.24.03).

The struggles these parents face are affirmed by other homeschool parents as well as by the teachers. The program provides significant support for parents as they educate their children. Many teachers said that reassuring is a lot of what they do in their job. The cultural beliefs about expertise make these reassurances even more meaningful: parents are being confirmed as good educators by teachers who are certified and therefore qualified to make that judgment. Their experience of homeschooling is not a radical rejection of school by any means. Instead, it is a modification of where and how education is done, and a continuation of what is done.

**Summing Up**

The choice of homeschool seems at first to be a move into an enterprise that is a radical departure from traditional conceptions of schooling. However, the outward
appearance masks the ideas and underlying assumptions that parents transport from their own experiences with school that cause homeschooling to look very much like a traditional school experience. In addition to these similar cultures, parents in homeschool programs face similar institutional requirements to enact the “doing” of school in producing work samples and following the expected curriculum. These two pressures, from inside and outside, come to bear on homeschooling families, thus encouraging practices similar to traditional school programs.

**External and Internal Pressures: Homeschool Program Teachers**

As we saw above, cultural conceptions of what “counts” as education influence how homeschool parents educate their children. These cultural beliefs also influence what policies teachers emphasize, how they present information to parents, and what their expectations are for various parents.

**Relations with Parents**

While some programs require all work from all parents, others are more flexible and allow teachers to determine what they will require. These teachers are using cultural conceptions of what a “good parent” is in order to determine how many restrictions to place on parents. Some parents essentially “unschool” while in a homeschool program because they are allowed to turn in only one work sample per subject per month. It was not uncommon for me to call some parents before a monthly deadline to turn in the school work samples and have them say “oh we are doing work today. We need to get these things done for tomorrow.” They make sure that their kids produce the required work, but then spend the rest of their time enacting education as they want, following their children’s lead at the library, exploring subjects that interest
the child, or immersing themselves in a project. These parents have the appropriate cultural capital to frame their activities in the school language. Making butter relates to the social studies curriculum, building a structure relates to math, a field trip relates to science. If teachers can see that the children are active, involved participants and that they are developing skills, then they are supportive of these alternative actions.

I don’t mind them not being on the book so much as long as you can make it come alive. Textbooks have just gotten less and less and less interesting it seems to me. I don’t know if that’s really true. They may never have been that interesting, but. Certainly in today’s world, there’s lots of stimulation and the textbook is not at the top of the list. So they need some structure and some discipline and some enthusiasm in order to make it [homeschooling] work. And that’s where I worry about people that homeschool (interview, 10.01.04).

This teacher is more concerned about students being interested in the subject than in making sure that they follow every last item in the textbook. He added that he likes to give support and direction to a family’s exploration, but that the main point is to follow their interests. He said that if they aren’t out doing other things after a month of homeschooling, he pushes them to do less ‘book work’ and more ‘fun’ things. He emphasizes a combination of book work and pursuing the student’s own interests. His main concern is that the parents feel they have to “cover” all the material in the textbook and they lose the “enthusiasm” for learning. While the parents push themselves to do more book work, the teachers push them to do things that are not traditionally recognized as “school.”

The meetings to turn in work and meet with teachers are normalized through previous cultural understandings of the role of teachers as supportive participants in the child’s education, as well as inspectors of quality. Although teachers run the gamut
from encouraging variation and “enrichment” activities to strictly enforcing standards and completion of all the expected work, the similarities across programs are the relationships that parents establish with teachers. The teacher is the mediator between state requirements for work and family needs for exploration and free time.

Some teachers admit that they don’t trust parents to do all of the work with their children, and so they assign more worksheet requirements for homeschool families than they themselves ever used in the classroom. “At least I know that kids are getting through the material and learning concepts in the book if I have them do the worksheets. It’s boring and I was more creative in my own classroom, but at least I know they have the basics” (fieldnotes, 3.15.04). This teacher’s actions are influenced more by her conception of parents and their abilities rather than her expertise as a teacher. She knows that worksheets are not the best way to learn, but views the homeschool program as insurance that the kids are being exposed to knowledge that the parents might not necessarily do at home on their own. In fact, some of the worksheets that were supposed to help students develop writing skills—something that many homeschool teachers noted as a lack in homeschooled children—were so confusing that it is doubtful whether that goal was fulfilled, as the following fieldnote indicates.

The writing packet is interesting, because it has a culturally specific story (and seems to recall the 1950’s, old-fashioned ideas about school and prizes, not something that would happen today) as an example for students to write about. The story itself demonstrates poor writing, and I would think it is confusing to students because they will have never experienced this school event with clowns and prizes. They are supposed to write a summary on it. It seems formulaic and not critical at all (fieldnotes, 4.10.04).
However, parents dutifully took the packets home for their children to do. The teacher’s authority on curricular choice and in ensuring compliance was respected by parents. The traditional authority of the school continues in these relations with parents. Teachers suggest and provide curriculum that parents have to demonstrate sufficient compliance with in order to receive credit for the month’s work. This particular program requires parents to bring in all work from the month instead of just a sample from each subject, so parents are under more pressure to have their children produce the school products.

Parents had different ways of dealing with this requirement. At one visit to the program mentioned above, a mother came in for her monthly meeting with two crates, one for each child, and color-coded notebooks for each subject with all of the work arranged by date. The teacher was quite pleased with her organization and her oversight of the children’s education. The teacher explained that with more disorganized parents, the meeting is spent finding papers in backpacks, talking about experiences they’ve had that month, and trying to fit that into the school curriculum (fieldnotes, 4.10.04). While different personalities and approaches enter the process, the end result is conformity to the school’s goal of documenting work in a more or less traditional way.

This interaction of the teacher assigning curriculum to families to do is influenced by cultural expectations of the participants. Parents are familiar with parent-teacher conferences in traditional school and are willing to accept the authority and support of homeschool teachers because they are used to this structure.

“Institutional patterns shape behavior such that some courses of action are perceived
as natural and legitimate... [participants] may never think about the institutional arrangements (of power, control, status, etc.) that these work roles and settings imply’’ (Powell, 1991:192). The power of teachers to define, evaluate, and control expectations is masked by the cultural assumptions of legitimacy of the institution of education and those sanctioned by it (teachers). The parent-teacher meeting occurs in a supportive context that also masks the power that is being enacted. Most parents do not feel challenged at these meetings; they feel supported in their efforts.

While some teachers are very concerned with controlling parents, albeit in a way that is palatable, others are more comfortable with giving parents power to educate their children within the broader framework of the curriculum goals. These teachers view themselves as experts in lesson planning and in understanding the larger goal (usually skills-based). They have more trust in parents and actively encourage parents to leave some of the textbooks behind on the kitchen table and go out to explore the world. One teacher said of a new homeschooling family,

Well, I am letting them get away with this [emphasizing text book work] now for the first month so that they get comfortable. But soon I am going to start telling them that they need to go to the museums, they need to get out and do things. That is the best part of homeschooling. They shouldn’t be spending all their time on book work (fieldnotes, 10.01.04).

This teacher recognizes that not only are parents imparting a curriculum, but that they are constructing educational learning experiences with their children. He is concerned that the parents turn in the necessary work, but does not sit and go through each month’s work and select samples himself. He has the parents submit work samples and feels that he gets to know enough of what the parents are doing by talking to them and their children, and through the limited work that he sees.
**Limits to Freedom**

However, if parents are not able to articulate how their experiences relate to the formal goals of school, or if the work samples do not demonstrate student progress, or are incomplete, not graded by the parent, or are missing, then teachers are reluctant to view the activities of the family as educational. The teachers in the homeschool programs believe that students must develop skills through interaction with knowledgeable adults and using appropriate curriculum. If these are not obviously present in the experiences of the families, teachers enact sanctions to get families to conform to expectations of the school. They may require more frequent work samples, tutoring sessions, extra visits and conferences, or in an extreme case, recommend that the family return to traditional school because the homeschool program is not the best match for them.

When the teachers trust the parents, then the parents can really get away with doing other work or less ‘book work’ for the teachers. If the parents cannot produce the necessary paperwork every week at the beginning, they will be closely monitored. It helps to know how to play the game and you can have more freedom. One fieldnote from a visit to a school demonstrates this flexibility for some parents and rigidity for others in following the school requirements:

The teachers have parents come in once a week until they are satisfied that they are doing all the work and know how to fill out the lesson plans. One teacher said that sometimes they are lucky to get the parents coming in at all, and that if the parents don’t keep their appointments or turn in all the work, they will kick them out of the program and tell them that they have to go back to traditional school. Of course, they could choose a myriad of other programs, but many don’t know that. Most parents do not use the numerous notebooks of supplemental ideas for themed lessons because
“many of them are doing well just to do the regular work, they don’t have
time to do the extras” (fieldnotes, 5.26.04).

Teachers are not only requiring certain behaviors from parents, they also withhold
information as a way of controlling parents. The judgment of the teacher about parents
not doing the supplemental, and to her, more interesting work also demonstrates
conceptions of what parents should be doing in the homeschool program. She
lamented the fact that most of the “really great ideas” for adding to the lessons were in
books that were not even being pulled off the shelves. Parents either didn’t have the
resources or the understanding about how to do the “extra” that homeschooling
allowed. Her experience with homeschooling her own children was filled with these
extra activities, which she viewed as most meaningful.

She said that one year the family drove around the country in their camper
for the whole year. They had saved $5,000 and her husband was a
carpenter so if they needed to, they could stop and he could work. They
spent three months working with Habitat for Humanity and had a great
time. She would send the work back each month as they toured the
country. She seems to view the work as necessary for learning, but was
very flexible in her approach. She would teach a themed unit of American
History and would teach all her kids at various levels that theme. She said
that once parents do homeschooling for a little while, you can figure out
how to “beat the system” and would have done something else that month,
but would have the kids fill out the two necessary science worksheets for
turning them in to the teachers. She said that the curriculum was more
flexible then, and there were no standards to be met. After the first year of
homeschooling, her daughter took the standardized tests and she did fine,
so that was confirmation to her that she was doing a good job and to
continue (fieldnotes, 5.26.04).

For her own experiences, she appreciated the flexibility of the program. Now
as a teacher, she finds that some parents are not as interested in the “extras” that were
so important to her. Her unorthodox approach was justified when her children did well
on the standardized tests. This traditional mode of testing reassured her that the
“extras” weren’t harming her daughter’s progress through concepts. Even within an alternative idea about education, she relied on the state to provide evidence of sufficient progress. If parents demonstrate that they are giving their children a similar educational experience that goes beyond the curriculum, then she is quite supportive.

**The Role of Class**

However, this support is limited to certain types of parents. In many cases, the social class of the parents plays a large role in teachers’ perceptions of parents’ abilities. Some homeschool programs have a large percentage of lower income minority parents. If these parents do not have the vocabulary to frame their activities as meeting school goals, they can be open to criticism. At one program I visited,

One African American mom came in when I was there and she had missed the appointment yesterday and the week before and was there late today. [The teacher] talked to her like scolding a child, “You have to bring the work in, all of the work….” The teacher mentioned that she has to turn in the books soon, so she said that the parent needs to write the lesson plans out for the rest of the year (through June) and that at the end, she can only be doing worksheets because the books will not be at home. [The teacher] said that if it were her, she’d have the daughter work the whole summer as well. The mom spent most of the time asking clarifying questions about the procedures or getting dates straight about assessments her daughter had to take, and reassuring [the teacher] that the work would be in. In the end, the teacher even said that it’s the end of the year and she has lots of appointments and the mom had to make sure it was done, and on time (fieldnotes, 5.26.04).

This interaction demonstrates the power of the teacher over a parent who is not recognized as an equal partner in the education process: this parent is expected to comply with the teacher’s demands. This type of relationship is not very different from what minority and poor parents regularly experience in traditional schools (Fine and Weiss, 2003). Other programs that had minority parents were not as blatant in
exercising their power and I was frequently impressed with how the teachers treated parents with respect and as partners. However, it is important to keep in mind that this power dynamic is not erased just because the program has a different format than traditional schools.

The teacher mentioned that the participants in the program have changed over time:

Some parents like the structure. Previously they had attracted families that wanted to be more creative in their homeschooling, but now they attract people who are there because their kids were having trouble in school, so they are interested in doing the work, but have no time or inclination to do extra stuff. She emphasized that she believes parents have the best interests of their children at heart, but that some of them are dealing with so much more that they can’t always do the schooling the way it needs to be done. She said that some parents think it’s just getting the book and letting their child work, but that that is not what it’s about. Some parents are trying to work and homeschool and that is hard. The parents who are doing it because their kids had trouble in school are not coming in with the mindset about doing homeschooling and are happy for the structure and assignments, because it tells them what to do (fieldnotes, 5.26.04).

It is easier for her to allow parents “like her” the same freedom she enjoyed as a homeschooling parent. She values the experience for providing enrichment activities to students but finds that the current population using the program is poorer and is homeschooling for different reasons than she was. She has definite ideas about how schooling is “supposed” to be done and if parents cannot meet those expectations, it is her responsibility to see that the students at least get the minimum education she views as necessary. These differences in her eyes then require her to push the parents to fit the traditional mold of a school. She will use her power as a teacher to cajole parents into compliance. This idea of a type of education that is necessary was quite common among teachers and they had many different ways of requiring work from families in
order to demonstrate this progress. If the progress wasn’t being made, some would offer tutoring, remedial sessions, or in a more extreme move, force the family out of the program. However, since programs need to keep the number of participants up in order to keep their funding, many tried alternatives before suggesting that the family leave.

The impact of class on student support at home has direct consequences for the type of education that they receive at home. One teacher explained that she couldn’t imagine how the lower income children were learning algebra at home without help:

I think, I don’t know, if the kids, I guess they are using the teacher manuals at home, the kids, I don’t know how they teach. That just boggles me. I think the kids are kind of just doing it on their own and they get frustrated with the teacher manual, and then that’s it. Until they stop and we tell them they have to show their work, and now they put a question mark. There’s no way I could teach myself algebra. And we make it as non-threatening as possible. And I think they’ve gotten that part of it, that they are allowed to ask questions. But I have not had any of these kids call for help—I did have one kid call for help, and she’s doing pretty well… (interview, 1.15.04).

If the child takes initiative to call the teacher, they get the help they need to learn complex math concepts. If they don’t have the help at home, it makes it very difficult for them to learn at a level beyond most of their parents’ education. The teachers at this homeschool program noticed that many of their low income middle school students were not asking questions and were unable to do the work, so they started tutoring students at the school site. They clearly see a difference between the resources of college-educated and non-college-educated parents in what they can provide to their children. The teachers acted to compensate for the parents’ lack of knowledge and for the students’ unwillingness to call for help. Many of the middle school grade students
had backgrounds in traditional schools; their first time in homeschool was for sixth, seventh or eighth grade, after experiencing problems in a traditional school. The teachers were not only filling in for parents’ lack of background in algebra, but also for the students’ cultural ideas about not calling teachers for help.

Teachers in homeschool programs have histories with families from other local schools. If they have a few unsuccessful experiences with families from certain schools, they become more reluctant to accept new families into the program from those sending schools. The “problem” schools frequently have high percentages of minority children or are poorer. These parents may not have the cultural capital to frame their activities in the language of school, or they may be impacted by economic issues that make it more difficult to homeschool. Sometimes families look to homeschooling as a last resort to handling the problems their children encounter at school, but do not have the family resources to support homeschooling, such as an adult at home full-time, or proficiency in English. These requirements demonstrate that homeschooling programs also serve to reproduce social expectations of who is a qualified parent.

The impact of race and class is felt even in the alternative programs. Many teachers have a white, middle class idea of what type of schooling is necessary and what skills children need to acquire. If parents can demonstrate that they are meeting those ideals, they are granted more freedom within the homeschool program. Parents who cannot demonstrate their compliance with these ideals are more closely monitored and controlled. The ability of a parent to conform to the school’s demands is class and race-related, so that even in alternative programs, the reproduction of class
and race inequality occurs. Of course, teachers’ ideas about what “counts” as school have had to change as they encounter parents who do not “do school” the way the teacher was taught to expect. These changes are explored in the next chapter.

Teachers in homeschool programs point to differences in parents that they see:

Cara: And so… I do advocate against testing and I’ve always hated testing because essentially what happens is that the more you push it, the more we teach to it. And that’s the whole NCLB …. But also if you think about, like the grammar school called Summerhill and all that, the thing is that those kids come from socioeconomic and educational levels where admit, they are going to do well no matter how they start off. That’s just how it is. … There is not a panacea, there is no formula that is going to work for everyone. And in the classroom I could adjust for that. And here the parents do what they do (interview, 10.25.04).

Sarah: There’s a huge difference between the college graduate who is homeschooling and the high school graduate who is homeschooling and what is expected of that child. I think you will see that in any setting of a school. I really do. I think the more education a parent has, the more, and I am not saying that someone with a high school education doesn’t value education, but someone who has a college degree whose children are in school, and statistics show that, that those children always do better in school. And it’s the same here. And I just think it’s a value. I’ve had parents over the years tell me that all they need is a 10th grade education. And we’re talking this day in age. Where they felt that as long as their child had a 10th grade education, that was all they needed. They didn’t really need any more schooling. And they believed that. It’s like, ‘well, they can get a GED’ and school isn’t important after that (interview, 1.15.04).

John: I can’t imagine [the students] do well in science without them having a teacher. There are some kids who would do well. But the teacher makes the subject come alive, for those that need that. … I don’t see a lot of that happening, a lot of motivated kids who really go ahead in the lesson and seeing what it would be like. There are some families who do that brilliantly and then others who have yet to do that. So that’s not a trend either (interview, 10.01.04).

These statements are from homeschool program teachers, but could just as easily be from teachers in a traditional program. The class differences that the teachers point out
are replicated in the homeschool programs as well. The students may or may not be getting a better educational experience than they would have had in a traditional program, but if the family culture does not support going to college, then the chances that a child will go are smaller.

**Defining “good” homeschool families**

Although teachers enact these cultural scripts with parents, they are in many cases very flexible with students. The homeschool programs are seen by the districts as an alternative to traditional programs, and districts will sometimes use these alternatives as a way of siphoning “problem parents” or “problem students” out of the traditional school setting. Some homeschool programs have accepted students who would have been suspended from their traditional assigned school and have students come sit at the homeschool program all day and do their work. Essentially, these teachers have an informal “independent study” program for students they feel need the extra help and are not supported at home. One teacher said, “if we didn’t take this student here, he would not be in school” (fieldnotes, 5.26.04). This program was unusual, as most other programs refuse to take such needy students who are not supported from home.

In fact, the process of applying to a homeschool program entails producing records on student’s previous school history and performance. Homeschool teachers regularly contact the former schools of the applicants to see what teachers say who have had the student. Former teachers of students will tell the homeschool program teachers of issues, problems, and histories of families. Families suspected of child abuse or who have a contentious history with the school system are not accepted into
homeschool programs. Two teachers explained their good relationship to a school district that many of their families come from:

Sarah: When we work with this district, they are very very good at letting us know, ‘this child has been truant X amount of times or this child has too many absences or this child… so you really kind of know a little bit about their history before they come in. And then we send out the applications before we enroll them and they have to send them back before they enroll and you get some insight there too. And the phone, you get some insight.

Teresa: When I first came, I would ask Sarah because she was the expert because she has been here since it started. And I would just say, ‘well how do you KNOW that it’s a good candidate or not’. And her answer was ‘you just know’. And after about two or three phone calls—you know.

Sarah: If there is a lot of anger, they are doing it for the wrong reasons.

Teresa: We also ask things, like if we contact the school because they need to check if there is any suspicion of child abuse. And I actually had a parent tell me, ‘oh well, I have to talk to my husband then’ and I never heard from them again. . . .

Sarah: If someone is very angry with the school, then we need to find out what is going on. If their story doesn’t make sense (interview, 1.15.04).

The program has many parents who are not middle class, who are homeschooling for academic reasons, not because they are committed to homeschooling, but because the traditional school was not meeting the student’s needs. There are a lot of struggles for the families to do homeschooling, but the teachers are quite supportive. From many teachers, I heard something similar to the following for requirements for what makes a ‘good’ homeschooling candidate:

Sarah: I tell the parents when I have initial contact, ‘have you talked this over with your child’. I don’t care if the child is in kindergarten or 8th grade. ‘Have you talked this over with your child? Do you have your child’s support? Does your child want to do this?’ And if the answer is always yes, then you have 50% of the road paved. If the answer is ‘well, I’m doing this because he’s having trouble in school, he’s been suspended, and you know he’s not listening to the teachers (pause). It’s not going to work at home (1.15.04).
Cara: Parents have to be up for it, really feel that they can stay. A lot of times, I will say, you know ‘do you have a good relationship with your child, can you switch your mommy hat to the teacher hat and not have a resentful child? Do you work well together? Do you enjoy being around one another? And does your child want to be a participant?’ because if all of those things are not the case, it’s not going to work for you. So I think homeschool parents who are supportive, involved, interested, enjoy being with the child, are those that benefit … (interview, 10.25.04).

These requirements are clearly not class-based. Teachers frequently emphasized the relationship that parents had to their child as being the primary factor for a successful homeschooling experience. Both of these programs have a range of parent incomes and ethnicities. In fact, some teachers mentioned “too much parent involvement” as an issue.

Cara: The parent that does the work for the child is not doing his service to the child. Now, we do have some of those you see in the workshop, they’ll answer for the child, or do the work, do the project, for the child while the child kind of sits there looking. And I think, ‘uh-oh, this is not working’ (interview, 10.25.04).

John: In having taught in a traditional environment for so long, I just loved the parent support. I thought that there could be nothing that could go wrong because the kids have the parent support and that’s what I see missing in so many problems in regular school. So it turns out of course that there are problems that come with parent support. The parents can be supporting some stuff that doesn’t necessarily, isn’t in the best interest of the kids. In terms of pushing them, or letting them get off with something, or whatever (interview, 10.01.04).

Program teachers were critical of both lower-income parents and upper-income parents, but for different reasons. There is a fine balance in the teachers’ minds for what types of relationships parents have to kids that make them successful candidates for homeschooling. Both parties have to respect each other. Many parents echoed the same beliefs about “ideal” candidates for homeschooling: the parent-child relationship is seen as key.
Covering the Curriculum

Many teachers see that parents of all classes are interested in finishing the curriculum and in “doing school.” On the one end, the parents who are willing to let go of trying to finish every last bit of the curriculum are those who are ideologically committed to homeschooling and are not those who are doing it to “fix” something that the traditional school couldn’t do. They have the cultural capital to broaden their children’s experiences beyond the curriculum and to do the “special” things that in many teachers’ eyes make homeschooling the unique experience it is. On the other end of the spectrum are parents who are not confident in their own abilities, who have not thought out what the alternative of homeschooling can be for them. The parents who come from traditional school experience have more of those cultural scripts from the school in their routines and understanding of what school is. They rely on their notions of school as completing work to shape their homeschooling experiences.

Cara: Sometimes I will tell people who are just wigged out—they take the kids and have them doing every single page—I’ll say, ‘look, if they grasp the concept, you don’t have to beat them over the head with it. They need to understand the concept and then you can go on from there. Otherwise you are going to burn them out and you take all the love of learning out of it’ (interview, 10.25.04).

Sarah: Because…at the same time, you’ve got that real over-achieving parent who wants their children to be just top notch. And so they try to do absolutely everything. And it’s overload on everybody. It’s overload on the parent, it’s overload on the kid, it’s 10 phone calls a day—look at this, look at this. And the kid is doing well. But I don’t know if it’s a perfectionist thing or what, but you have maybe 1 or 2 percent who are at the (gestures top). And there are some who are just insecure if they are doing enough. And they are probably doing more than the parent who never called us. You look at our teacher manuals and you couldn’t in a million years do everything that they’ve asked to do in there. And some of these parents, they have nothing to compare it to, and so they think they have to do—and until you get them in here after that initial enrollment, we
get them back within a month, and you can just see the frustration. It’s like they are homeschooling 12 hours a day and still not getting it all done. And you have to show them how to pull back and let go and not do it. It’s real hard. They are so afraid they are going to miss something. …(interview, 1.15.04).

The parents’ perception of teachers as professionals helps them to overcome their perceptions of the textbook as something that they need to “cover.” Many parents in their interviews also confirmed this pressure to know that they are doing school “right” and recognized the need to pull back and not insist on doing everything in each lesson in the book. Teachers call on their own expertise to explain to parents that classroom teachers are not doing everything in the books. In the parents’ rush to keep up with what they perceive traditional schools doing, many will attempt to do all the pages and concepts in a textbook. Parents are insecure about taking on a role traditionally held by the school but they are supported by teachers who enact traditional conceptions of teacher knowledge, power, and expertise to support them in their new roles.

**Summing Up**

The teachers have a balanced view of what they would ideally like to see parents do: meeting many of the standards in the textbooks but through other means such as field trips and projects. Some teachers trust parents to provide these experiences and encourage their families to go beyond the textbook. Other teachers feel the need to control parents more, providing more worksheets and rote activities so that they can feel that the child is at least receiving the minimum education the teacher feels necessary. Teachers call on cultural understandings of different types of parents to form how they will manage the parents’ actions within the program. These cultural
scripts come from their own experiences teaching and their interactions with parents. Homeschool programs do not differ much from the traditional conceptions of parents. However, despite this similarity, differences do come out in practices, which will be explored in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

There are a variety of both external and internal influences on homeschool programs that ensure many similarities between this alternative and traditional school. External elements, such as the state and traditional parents pressure homeschool programs to look like traditional school. The state influences programs to adhere to curricular and professional standards. Traditional school parents view the programs as “keeping tabs” on otherwise radical parents and thus ensure that students receive a “good education” through the school program. Internal pressures develop from homeschool parents themselves to “do school” at home. They share cultural beliefs about what school is, the structures of school, behaviors and norms that are expected, and thus conform to the traditional demands of the homeschool program to see and evaluate student work, and to ensure that parents conform to certain expectations. They view the credentialed teachers as ‘expert’ which inclines them to value the teachers’ advice. Homeschool teachers exert both internal and external pressure on families to have them conform to traditional school expectations. Teachers enact cultural beliefs about parents and education in how they implement state requirements. Depending on the parents’ economic and racial status, teachers require more or less conformity to the school program demands.
Although a large number of traditional schools have been found to lack actual accountability for student performance, the institution of schooling has been accepted as a legitimate institution where education occurs because school policies and practices match other institutional forms of “professionalization, state regulation, [and] requirements for trust . . .” (Friedland and Alford, 1991:243). It is therefore not surprising that homeschool programs need to look like the traditional school format and understanding of what school “is,” and that they adopt traditionally expected formats to do that.

Participants and observers carry around ideas about the institution of school in their heads and enact scripts that they have come to expect, thereby reinforcing through cultural mechanisms the traditional structure and relations of school. Traditional ideas about education combined with expected school practices keep participants from employing a radical educational form. The same social, political, and cultural processes that shape large-scale reforms (Mehan et al, 1986; Mercer, 1974; Cuban, 1992, 1998; Hubbard et al, 2006; Hall, 1995, 1997; McLaughlin, 1993, 1998) also shape parents’ actions at home, even when they are “free” to choose any form of educating their children.

Ironically, when parents agree to take on the responsibility of teaching their children at home—a task traditionally delegated to the state—they come to rely on the state to provide structure and practices to guide them. New Institutional literature talks about how institutions come to resemble each other; clearly these pressures are exerted on homeschool programs. But the experience of homeschool parents also points to another dynamic that is occurring. Parents’ perceptions of their responsibility as
parents, to not harm their child, to consider the whole child, and to do as much as they can to help their child, influence the outcome of “doing school.” In fulfilling their duty as parents, they turn to the state for guidance on how to best “do school” as teachers.

Parents, in assuming a new role as the recognized educators of their children, import cultural practices of what constitutes “school” in order to juggle family and educational responsibility. Parents should not harm their children, and in enacting state conceptions of education, parents are assured that they are doing school “right,” thus resulting in a positive future outcome for their children. It is ironic that a parent who feels driven to homeschool because the traditional school was not providing enough support for their student then reproduces school at home. However, in light of New Institutional literature and literature on organizations, this result is not surprising. The goals of the parent remain the same: to raise a happy, productive adult who has the tools to function in the wider society. Their way of getting to this end may be different as far as individualizing the curriculum or schedule, but the end result conforms to traditional conceptions of schooling, thus reassuring parents who took the risk of being fully responsible for their child’s education.

The separate spheres of family and school actually contribute to reinforcing traditional ideas of “doing school” because families view the activity as the purview of the school to define. They attribute expertise and legitimacy in the educational realm to the school. In taking on the responsibility of schooling their children, many homeschool parents are happy to have that expertise backing their endeavors. The
separateness of school and family encourages this dependence on the school for advice and guidance in educational matters.

Of course, even within this reproduction there is variation. Despite the presence of these school elements in the programs, families implement them on a continuum from conforming to school expectations completely to barely fulfilling the minimum requirements of the programs. The program itself helps homeschool parents appear as if they are conforming to the grammar of school, even if many liberties are taken in actual practice.

What is not examined in this account of how and why homeschool programs are similar to traditional school programs is the differences that are found. The next chapter explores the subtle differences between a homeschool program experience and the traditional school experience.
Chapter 5

Institutional Differences between Homeschool and Traditional School Programs

In the last chapter we saw how internal and external forces exerted on a variety of participants act to keep homeschool programs in line with traditional school concepts and practices. While these educational understandings and practices present powerful trends towards conformity, there are cracks and fissures where homeschool programs develop different ways of educating children, different ways of considering parents as partners in the educational process, and in the end do produce different relations between participants.

This chapter explores the differences between homeschool and traditional school programs. These differences are enacted in the relationships between people and can be seen in how teachers, students, and parents interact. They are also seen in how people conceive of “doing school.” In the last chapter, we saw how ideas about “doing school” bind families to traditional concepts of curriculum, learning, and teacher-parent-student relations. This chapter extends the notion of “doing school” and explores how this idea simultaneously creates spaces of freedom from “doing school.” How people define an activity becomes central to what regulations govern it, who evaluates it, and how much freedom students have within it.

Traditional school programs expect certain roles from parents, teachers, and students. These roles are reinforced by people’s past experiences with schooling and by structures, rules, and cultural norms in place. Changing these norms is difficult—it can even be seen as threatening to parents, teachers, and students—so that reforms
frequently result in incremental change (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). It is worth quoting Oakes et al at length to demonstrate the structures that perpetuate this hierarchy of power, with parents and students at the bottom:

Most schools remain today locked into hierarchical and bureaucratic principles. Administrators have more responsibility and power than teachers; teachers have more responsibility and power than students. Parents have responsibility and power over their children, but they have very little capacity to affect the school directly, especially if they are not among the community’s elite. Compartmentalizing administrators, teachers, students, and parents into well-defined roles sustains these norms of authority. . . . Teachers normally have little official voice in coordinating activities or enforcing changes, but once the classroom door is shut they exercise significant control over what gets taught. Although granted some avenues for power, parents are normally considered outsiders, especially if they come bearing complaints. “Parental participation” nearly always means that parents support the schools’ work or that schools teach parents knowledge, skills, and home routines that foster school success. Finally, students have virtually no official voice in their education, though reactions to this prescribed passivity often surface in quite active forms of resistance (Oakes, et al, 1999:56).

The result of this hierarchy of power on the relationships of teachers, parents, and students is well-documented (Apple, 1982; Anyon, 1997; Wilcox, 1982; Kozol, 1991; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Different groups have attempted to disrupt this hierarchy in different ways. School reformers in New York (documented by Bensen, Hearst) and Chicago (documented by Bryk, 1998 and Fiske, 1991) have attempted to decentralize authority to local schools such that they have control over school budgets, and the hiring and firing of faculty.

There are powerful examples of empowerment of parents and students that result in change in schools (Sarason, 1982) and pockets of effective alternative models (Mehan, 1996; Meier, 1995, Kluver and Rosenstock, 2002; Oakes, 2000). These were deliberate alterations of parts of the system to generate change. However, in
homeschool programs, many of the changes that have been instituted have not been
the result of deliberate system-wide or top-down efforts. Instead, the change has been
initiated from below and involves the change in roles and responsibilities within the
organization of the school. This shift of power within the school hierarchy raises
interesting questions: What happens to responsibility? How does this affect the culture
of the school? Homeschool programs enable us to examine these changes.

Other researchers (Noddings, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999) have noted the
importance of developing a caring culture in the school. Hubbard et al (2006:9)
understand the school culture to be made of interactions and assumptions of the
participants, hence culturally constructed. They argue that everyday routines guide
decisions, while assumptions that participants hold can challenge these everyday
routines. Conflict can arise if participants feel their ideas are not being respected in the
school. This research documents what happened to reform ideas when participants’
underlying cultural assumptions were challenged by a school reform that was imposed
by school district leaders. I explore how underlying assumptions remain intact even in
the midst of participants enacting a very different educational approach.

In state-sponsored homeschool programs, there is a wide variety of acts, some
of which reinforce state control over curriculum and create recognized “experts” in
education who are not the parents. This tendency was explored in the last chapter.
Other practices contradict traditional school processes, thereby challenging state
control and increasing the democratic control of parents, which will be explored in this
chapter. Practices and definitions are intricately linked. I have found that the definition
of the activity delineates who is recognized as responsible for it. The responsibility
and definition also impact how the activity is enacted. By defining some acts as “doing school” and others as “free time,” parents, teachers, and students expand the influence of parents and limit the influence of the state on their lives. How parents, teachers, and students define “school” and what activities “count” as “school” impacts how much and what type of control they have over the educational process.

First I will explore observable differences in relationships between participants in homeschool programs. Then I explore the role of teachers and how they have changed in the homeschool programs. I examine different forms of learning that occur at the homeschool programs, and the varying results this apprenticeship type of learning entails. Lastly, I explore the role of program expectations on ensuring an environment of respect for each of the participants.

**Parents’ and Students’ Attitudes toward the Programs**

In the city and county-sponsored homeschool programs, there seems to be areas of more democratic control of the school activities by parents and students, and certainly by teachers than is usually seen in traditional schools in the U.S. Parents and students suggest classes, teach classes, and essentially have a voice in whether a class will be offered by whether they choose to participate. If a small number of students attend a class, a teacher will have to rethink whether to offer it again. Of course, this flexibility is easier and more common in the elementary grades. In high school, students need to take certain courses to meet college and state requirements. Ironically, one homeschool program that has a high school component has the highest dropout rate in the city: students drop out, get a GED and attend community college. The courses that focus on fun are mainly in the lower grades.
One parent mentioned that she likes the respect that teachers have for students, and that she has the feeling that students in seminars believe that they have valuable ideas.

The seminars that they offer . . . the kids here are treated like they really have good ideas, . . . and the teacher here who senses an interest in a student will go all out to help the student develop that interest to whatever level they want. If there is somebody here with some area of expertise, they are more than happy to help a student. They just come with it (interview, 9.29.03).

Not only does this parent feel that students are treated as though their thoughts are valued, she feels that they are also looked at as individuals with educational interests and abilities. She went on to say that her 5\textsuperscript{th} grade student is doing 7\textsuperscript{th} grade math because a teacher noticed his ability to do algebra although he wasn’t supposed to be at that level yet. She said that traditional schools would perhaps allow a student to go up one grade level, but not two grade levels because of bureaucratic problems later on. She appreciates the homeschool program’s flexibility to see her child’s needs and act on them. This individualization allows her child to develop and participate in the program as his skills allow. Children are not confined to grade levels in math and instead experience an education that is intended to meet their skills and needs. In fact, students who are “behind” grade level expectations work at their level until they master that skill. The pressure to conform to grade level expectations is less because parents can address the individual learning needs of their children.

Parents, students, and teachers reported to me that they have a sense of ownership of the school program. They work together with the focus of each child’s learning at the center, and with parents and teachers ensuring student progress through
state curriculum. The difference between the homeschool program arrangement and traditional school program arrangement is that parents feel they are in charge of their child’s education and that the teachers have taken on a support role. The traditional hierarchy of relations has been flattened in homeschool programs so that teachers support parents, even if they think they are not doing a good job at homeschooling. This contradiction is explored later.

One homeschool program-sponsored survey designed to get program feedback from 5th through 8th grade students and their parents reflects these feelings of ownership and partnership (Foster School WASC survey, 1.04). Fifty-eight parents responded. The survey asked participants if they “strongly agree,” “agree,” “somewhat agree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with the statements. There were also questions requiring short written answers. The WASC committee categorized the first two responses—strongly agree and agree—as “agreeing” and the last three categories as “disagree” even though the middle comment “somewhat agree” is more positive than disagreeing. Responses were generally positive, so this categorization gave a more accurate portrayal of just how positive participants’ responses were.

Parents feel teachers really work with them to educate their children. They said that they feel trusted by teachers to be the educators and that they appreciated the flexibility that the teachers offer: if a parent feels that they can educate on their own, the teachers allow the parent to make the choice of complete independence from them (with exception of the mandatory requirements) or dependence upon them. I’m comfortable with educating most of the time, but when I’m not, I can lean on them” (survey, 1.04).
The parents note a feeling of respect and trust by teachers. In fact, 98% of the parents surveyed responded that they agree that “staff treats students and parents with respect” and the same percentage agreed that “staff members are responsive to the needs of students and parents” (survey, 1.04). This respect and trust about their own children also spills over into their evaluation of the program as a whole, with glowing reports about how much the school offers and how qualified the teachers are.

The diversity of the activities offered by both parents and teachers: workshops, clubs, play, newspaper, crafts, field trip, exposure to culture (operas, plays, …) and wonderful science camps we could not go to as individuals. The flexibility and the support of the program teachers, which makes them enhance my child’s education immensely instead of getting in the way” (survey, 1.04).

There is an implicit comparison to traditional school experiences in this response, with homeschool program teachers praised for “not getting in the way” and for being supportive. The parents feel that they are in charge of their child’s education, but that they are also very integrated into the program. There is a sense of the program providing essential “extras” that the parents appreciate and could not do on their own.

Other parents not only appreciate the resources, but also laud the closeness of teachers to families, citing the program as a “big extended family.” The supportiveness of the programs is key to families’ satisfaction. Supportiveness is measured in how parents feel as educators of their children: do they feel that the teachers are on their side. The parents’ comments also highlight the knowledge that they have of the teachers, courses offered, and individual teachers’ strengths and personalities. Caring and personal relationships were frequently mentioned in the survey as strengths of the program. Research has also demonstrated the importance of
caring relationships (Noddings, 2002). The feeling of caring, and responsibility is evident in these quotes.

I like the flexibility homeschooling provides. I like the fact that each of the teachers has something different and unique to offer the students. They care about all of us and I feel like we (parents, teacher and students) are a big extended family (survey, 1.04).

We feel the program works for us because the teachers are so experienced with the homeschooling process. They are capable, flexible, and supportive of both parents and students, creating a memorable homeschooling journey. What a fantastic ‘team’ of teachers (survey, 1.04).

Parents have the sense that they are all in this experience together: that the team that teaches their children is a combination of themselves and teachers. In fact, 95% of the parents responded that they felt that “parents and staff work together to create an appropriate educational plan” and 100% said that they “were able to schedule necessary appointments, handle problems and ask questions via phone” (survey, 1.04).

The availability of homeschool program teachers to their families is impressive. These relationships cannot be over-emphasized. Many parents feel that their assigned teacher is their friend, partner, and advisor when they encounter difficult lessons or difficult relations with their children. The school has developed a sense of caring relationships between parents and teachers.

The fifty students who responded to the survey also had a positive report on their homeschool program experiences:

Everyone knows one another and everyone is nice, and if I don’t understand something, [the teacher] or my mom can help me (girl, age 12, survey 1.04).

Everyone is generally very polite and isn’t very excluding towards me (boy, age 13, survey 1.04).
The teachers are friendly and encourage student participation. The parents and other students are kind and nice, and there are lots of activities that I am interested in (girl, age 13, survey 1.04).

The classes are great and a lot of fun and the teachers are nice and helpful (girl, age 12, survey, 1.04).

Students also report enjoying the time at the school, citing seeing friends and looking forward to the activities provided. One boy explicitly states that he is glad that others do not exclude him, leaving the impression that he feels he might usually be excluded. Students also enjoyed helping in classes, a common experience for older students who want to help out in classes for the younger ones.

Students feel comfortable coming to school and feel that their voices are heard. In the survey, 96% of the students felt that the homeschool program teachers help them with problems, 93% felt that the teachers cared about them, and 82% felt that their teacher listens to their ideas. They also felt safe at school with 88% reporting that they felt that other students treated them with respect.

A 1993 survey given by the National Center for Educational Statistics provides a comparison to parents and students in traditional schools (Chandler, 1993). The National Household Education Survey involved phone interviews with 12,680 parents of students in grades 3-12 and 6,504 students in grades 6-12 (Chandler, 1993). The results of this survey are a bit more sobering. Eight-four percent of parents at least somewhat agree that there is respect between teachers and students, with 24% strongly agreeing (in comparison to the homeschool survey, which showed 84% strongly agreeing, 14% agreeing, and 2% somewhat agreeing). Sixty-four percent of students at least somewhat agree that there is respect between teachers and students, with only
14% strongly agreeing. Of the homeschool students, 63% strongly agree that their teachers treat them with respect, 30% agree, 7% somewhat agree, and 1% disagree. In traditional school programs, a full third of the students disagree that there is respect.

If we examine the “strongly agree” that there is respect between students and teachers according to school type, the results are 13% in an assigned public school, 15% in a chosen public school, and 26% in a private school. Size also plays a role: 20% of students in schools of less than 300 pupils report “strongly agreeing” about respect, 14% of students in schools enrolling between 300 and 1,000 students strongly agree and 12% of students in schools of over 1,000 strongly agree.

Eighty percent of students surveyed in traditional school programs agree at least somewhat that they are challenged in school, with only 15% strongly agreeing. Eighty-three percent agree at least somewhat that school is enjoyable, with 17% strongly agreeing. In the homeschool survey, 100% at least somewhat agree that school is challenging, with 37% strongly agreeing. Ninety-one percent of the homeschool students agreed with the statement “I like my school,” with 74% strongly agreeing.

Some conclusions can be drawn about the relationships at the homeschool program. The overall responses to the program are very positive. Given that the survey was of 5th through 8th grade students, the positive comments about school are impressive. Students felt that the school was a supportive place for them to be. They did not have major complaints. In fact, some suggestions for improvement included getting a hamster, painting the walls with pictures of horses, and getting more computers. The most suggestions for improvement included more activities (survey,
Homeschool programs are smaller and of course more intimate than a traditional school setting, which may also be a reason why students are positive about their homeschool program experience. Teachers and parents know each student as an individual.

**Classes and Seminars as “Fun”**

Many homeschool programs provide classes and seminars that parents and students can choose to attend. Some programs do not have as large an offering as two of the three main programs I examined. One program offered only a few academically oriented seminars and had a lower income population of parents who did not volunteer to teach seminars, organize fieldtrips, or help at the school. The teachers at this program asserted that they never saw friendships formed at the homeschool program between parents who didn’t know each other from a previous association. “And we don’t have that strong parent group. They aren’t involved. We have a plan[ning] meeting and an art day. But the parents don’t connect here. They never have. They have no connection with each other” (interview, 1.15.04). Some parents also said that they find making friendships hard, as homeschooling is not necessarily done for similar reasons or in similar ways. Other parents who had experienced volunteering at both traditional and homeschool programs said that they feel closer to the homeschool parents because the program is smaller (fieldnotes, 10.01.04). Clearly, the offerings and the experience of homeschooling varies with the programs. However, looking at how parents who do belong to an active homeschool program culture view their experiences sheds light on important definitions that may impact homeschoolers with more limited program associations.
“Going to school” takes on a different meaning in homeschool programs. In traditional school programs, the primary purpose of “going to school” is to learn. In homeschool programs, the primary purpose of “going to school” is to have fun and see friends. Since parents are responsible for the bulk of the “schooling,” teachers are freed to do more “fun” things in seminars. As I discuss shortly, this emphasis on “fun” can enable homeschool programs to engage in project or activity-based learning that differs from traditional individually-oriented learning tasks. All the participants have developed this view of the activities at school as fun. Parents comment:

They not only have a wonderful staff and curriculum, they also offer a number of educational workshops that we attend. The workshops also provide social interaction for my child (survey, 1.04).

We wanted to do homeschooling and at the same time we wanted to have a group where we do activities. [The program] offers a wonderful atmosphere for the children to meet their peers and participate in educational activities and field trips (survey, 1.04).

Both my child and myself enjoy the breadth of the activities offered and the incredible rapport, respect and cooperation between children, parents, and staff (survey, 1.04).

Parents valued the social atmosphere and the respect they felt for themselves and their children at the school. They view “going to school” as a place for their children to socialize and have fun, as well as learn interesting things. Students echoed their parents about why they like to go to program activities:

I really like being homeschooled. And I LOVE being able to see my friends regularly at the workshops and fieldtrips (girl, age 11, survey, 1.04).

What I like most about [the program] is attending activities (boy, age 11, survey, 1.04).
It is fun. I get to see my friends, do interesting activities like beading, and I get to see and talk to the teachers (boy, age 12, survey, 1.04).

The classes are great and a lot of fun and the teachers are nice and helpful (girl, age 12, survey, 1.04).

The idea of fun is a demonstrable focus of the experiences students and parents have at the school program.

Even the offerings of the school are determined by the desires and abilities of students and parents. Many programs have meetings open to parents—sometimes run by a team of parents and teachers—to determine the seminar and class offerings for the semester. Parents offer to teach classes or hold book clubs, or conduct field trips. Teachers contribute in their area of expertise as well. These courses are viewed by teachers, parents, and students as something that should be fun and educational, and as something to be shared together. The programs are shaped by parents and teachers together. This democratic collaboration is limited by state rules, as the fieldnote about teachers’ concerns with parent-led classes demonstrates:

Teresa comments that the program keeps saying that they need more parent participation, but how much is too much? Other teachers go on about how the parents want something, and it gets out of control. Some mention having parents teach more classes, but Mike says that a teacher always has to be there, and they need to follow the rules of [the state], which means have a teacher there or have the parent finger-printed, and all that stuff. The others agree that parent teachers are great, but that they need to take responsibility for them (fieldnotes, 6.07.04).

Despite these limitations in democratic participation of parents in the teaching of seminars, the participants in the school still feel that the school is “theirs.” They do have to keep in mind the state regulations, but operating within that framework still gives them a lot of freedom to offer classes if they want to.
One program was going through an accreditation process while I was there, and outside teachers were asking homeschool program teachers what they liked. One teacher responded, “the best part is the kids and parents and getting to do fun projects, like beading, with the kids” (fieldnotes, 10.26.04). Others echoed the idea that having fun with families was something they enjoyed. The emphasis on fun is evident in most classes offered.

This view of classes is very different from the traditional view of schooling. Whereas in traditional school, class is where the “real” learning occurs and “fun” is supplementary, in homeschool programs these classes are “supplementary” and the “real” education occurs at home with parents. Teachers act freer to have students do interesting things that do meet some state standards, but are not taken as seriously by students and parents as would be a traditional course in a school. Teachers offer courses, but students are not required to attend, so teachers must respond to student demand and preferences. In addition, teachers can offer very complex classes because it may be once a year or once a week, not every day. Parents also help in the complicated classes, contributing to their own student’s success, as well as others’.

This partnership is quite evident in the geology series that is offered at one of the programs. They have an ongoing class each week called “micro lab” where they examine bacteria, cells, and microscopic fossils through a microscope. Older students come back to help younger ones, and parents circulate to help students. In their travels and trips, parents keep an eye out for relevant historical materials and related objects to supplement the teacher’s vast collection. The fieldnote below is from when the accreditation team came to visit. I chose it to show how others are easily incorporated
into the activities and to show the concerns that teachers and parents have of presenting a “face” to others. However, despite the presence of the “special visitors,” the fieldnote captures a very typical scene at this school.

This week, students build on their examination of microscopic fossils and learn how to extract, clean, and identify larger fossils that are embedded in large chunks of mud that the veteran teacher has gathered from deserts he likes to explore.

Before the class starts, parents cover the tables with paper that is taped down so that students don’t accidentally spill the mud block and pieces on the floor as they get engrossed with their work. About 25 students sit at the tables, either in family groups, mixed age groups, or at the teenage table, some with friends and others next to students they clearly don’t know, but are soon talking quietly with. The teacher adjusts the large monitor so that students can see what he is doing with his pick and brush. The teacher calls for attention and students quickly focus on the monitor as he explains how to clean the fossils and how to support them to clean them. He has a camera set up above his fossil and it is connected to the TV screen, so the students can watch and see exactly what he is doing. One mom asks how old the fossils are. He responds, “from the Pleistocene age,” but no one knows what that is. He goes on to explain that it is about 1 million years ago, but that he got in trouble one year for saying 1 million years, so now he uses Pleistocene and that’s a term everyone can agree on. The parents present look quizzically at him, but nod and he moves on.

He passes out hunks of dirt/mud with embedded fossils. Parents are scattered around the room helping kids, while others pass things out. Each kid gets their own pick to pick at the fossils with. The mud chunk distribution is quiet and orderly, with students waiting to be called to come get their tools and rock. Once students have their materials, they get right to work on their fossils. Students concentrate as they look for fossils to carefully scrape out of the sediment. They help each other and chat as they work, with parents circulating to help, or gathering on the side to converse once the kids settle into the task.

There are observers from traditional school programs there that day. One later says that he couldn’t do this type of workshop at the school where he teaches because kids would have stabbed each other within five minutes. He is also amazed that the kids know what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what a fossil is and why it is interesting. Students explain to him that these were found where no water is now, and that there had been water there before because the fossils are of shells. He said the junior high kids knew more than the little kids, who answered that they were doing it “because it was fun.” The teacher says that he is hoping to plant seeds now and that they will understand later. He has students come
back every year for the same workshop and learn more each year. He says it is important to him that the kids have fun, learn something, and then take something home from the class.

One parent sits at a table with two students (not her own child, who sits with new friends at a different table) and works on her own sample. She chats with the students at the table and comments that perhaps she should be helping but that this is so much fun, she hopes the other parents don’t mind her doing her own. She extracts the fossils from the mud enough so that she has two sculpture-like pieces that she wants to bring home and put on the bookshelf. Others compliment her on her work.

Parents help their kids if they need it, but most of the kids talk with each other and do the fossil cleaning themselves. Frequently, parents greet others’ kids with concern and welcome, asking questions and conversing about recent events. Parents and two older students who had graduated came back to help wandered around and helped or watched kids with their fossils. They had a great time coming back and being “experts.” Everyone is welcome here, no matter what age. Visitors are easily accommodated and siblings who are not part of the homeschool program are also integrated into the activities. One mother brought both of her sons to the fossil activity, but only one is schooled at home through the program. The other son is on break from the traditional school he regularly attends. He easily mixes with the other students, chatting and busily unearthing fossils.

One mom sits in the back of the fossil room and tries to get the micro fossil pictures on her computer to function correctly. These pictures are of micro fossils that they had looked at the previous week in the microscope. She is fascinated herself with what they had found and is trying to get it to work so that others could take the pictures home and so that they could go in the year book later on. Several moms work on their own things in the smaller room away from the large room where the fossils take place. They talk with each other, or work on lessons, or sewing.

Just shortly after the kids had started getting the fossils out of the mud, the teacher announces that there has been a “birth” and that they all had to come outside to release the butterfly that had come out of its cocoon. All of the kids and parents go outside and sort of automatically stand in a circle holding hands and the teacher says that we should make a wish for mother earth or Nature or good feelings or whatever we wanted. A girl, who the teacher had picked on the way out, stands in the middle of the circle with the butterfly. The teacher shows her how to release it once he counts to 3. He does, and she lets it go. It flies towards the sun (which had come out, thank heavens), just as he said it would. We walk back inside and work on the fossils again. The teacher jokes to another teacher on the side that he was really putting on a show (for the observers there from the traditional schools that day), but the release of the newly hatched butterflies is a regular event. Students watch the development of the
caterpillars as they feed on milkweed stalks enclosed in mesh and hung from the ceiling in the common area. Each year, they mark the progress through the life cycle until they become butterflies. Parents and students knew exactly what they had to do for this ritual when the developed butterfly is ready to be released.

Three times, the teacher shouts “are we having fun yet?” and the kids shout back “yes!” Some parents cover their ears when the teacher first shouts, because they know what is coming—this call and response is a regular occurrence for these classes. An autistic student loves that part and his mom has to stop him from shouting longer and louder than everyone else. He is accepted by other students and parents, who watch out for him and help him. I talked to him towards the end, and he was able to talk about the shells he found and cleaned and was very detail-oriented about cleaning them.

One girl shares her very large shell with a younger boy. He places it carefully in his display box, to be glued before students leave. Parents set up the gluing station, and I help knot strings through holes so that students can hang their display boxes with the fossils they uncovered.

All the parents help clean up, rolling the butcher paper that had been taped to the tables so that the dirt didn’t go everywhere. Two parents get sponges and paper towels and wipe down all the tables and chairs. Another parent just goes and gets the vacuum and starts vacuuming the rug. I help move chairs to make the vacuuming easier. When we are nearly done cleaning, the teacher starts a lottery and gives out bags to what ended up being each kid. This process takes a while, but kids and parents sit patiently as students claim their “prize.” In the end, students get to take home their fossils mounted on a cardboard lid with title paper glued in that tells what the fossils are, and they get a “surprise bag” of another fossil as well. When there isn’t much cleaning left to do and people are leaving, another teacher comes through and tells me ‘let the parents finish.’ Most teachers except the one in charge of that class come to the front room for lunch (fieldnotes, 10.26.04).

The atmosphere of the class is one of fun and cooperation between students, teachers, and parents. The teacher of the class has the goal of having fun while learning. He shares information, aimed at both parents and students. There is no textbook or traditional means of measuring before- and after-class comprehension of the material. Instead, many conversations occur between all participants; it is obvious the concentration and learning that occur. The yardstick for success is continued
student and parent involvement, feedback from participants about how much fun they had, and how interesting it was. The class supplements what students are doing at home in science and the teacher plans that lesson as a stand-alone topic; students will not necessarily come to the next class, so all the information has to be presented in the 3-hour block.

Although the participants understand the class goals to be learning, social time, and fun, the teachers still felt the need to “perform” for outsiders who were observing. The teacher’s comment about putting on a show with the butterfly demonstrates that even in this alternative school site, the pressure is present to conform to traditional expectations. Significantly, the outside observers were impressed with the knowledge, learning, work, collaboration, and easy conversations that make up an everyday activity at the homeschool program. They also remarked on the different levels of learning that were integrated easily into the K-8 activity. They were surprised at how smoothly things went, and how well students followed directions. Many kept repeating how unbelievable they found the cooperation and quiet work.

When I first observed in homeschool programs, I was also amazed at how well everyone worked together. After more than a year of attending courses, conferences, and field trips, I would be shocked if it were any other way. Any disciplinary issues that arise are dealt with quickly, and parents find such rare occurrences as a fight or back talk to be upsetting. The expectation for students is simply to be polite and pleasant; parents and teachers support these expectations by working with students. In addition to the expectations, teachers also know students and families intimately and can head off crises through counseling and compromise before anything escalates. The
expectation for parents and students in attending classes is that they will be fun, safe, and informative. Teachers work with parents to produce the safe environment where students are known as individuals and helped.

The hum of work and the easy integration of different interests and ability levels into the lesson is typical of homeschool seminars and courses. Parents sometimes joke that they are more excited about the project than the kids are. In craft-oriented classes, parents will join in, learning alongside their children and producing their own project. The mother who got engrossed in her own exploration of the subject is, in fact, not atypical. Parents and students attend the classes to have fun, experience something new, and to enjoy themselves. The focus is on fun. Learning occurs within that context, of course, but it is not the first thing that people mention when they talk about the classes.

The form that the classes take (cross-generational, many skill levels, subject or theme-based, non-evaluative) enhances the idea that classes are “fun” and not “serious.” However, the classes are actually a form of learning that has been argued to be quite successful, project or activity-based learning (Dewey, 1938). Some alternative schools employ this type of learning, causing some discussion among parents as to whether this is “school learning” (Kluver and Rosenstock, 2002; Meier, 1995; Moses, 2001). Embedded in activities seen as “fun,” traditional notions of school are not challenged and this alternative form of learning can be used in homeschool programs without parent questioning.

The emphasis on “fun” in a school context is ironic given the current emphasis on standards and quantifying student knowledge through tests. The “fun” aspect of
homeschool classes serves the purpose of socialization, which many homeschool parents find they have to justify to others, and it allows teachers to take an apprenticeship approach to learning that is otherwise sometimes suspect in traditional school. Most traditional schools do not view teamwork as the centerpiece of learning or have many ungraded learning opportunities. This emphasis on fun allows teachers to provide this very different way of learning but in a way that does not threaten traditional concepts of learning. In fact, teachers proudly showed me how their report cards and all their classes met state standards, with demonstrated benchmarks all written out. Teachers bring this unusual type of learning into line with traditional conceptions in two ways: by treating it as “fun” with parents and students and by ensuring that they have written standards that apply to the classes to show the state.

**Authentic Learning**

Learning across generations and less capable peers from more capable peers in an organic way has been called apprenticeship learning (Rogoff et al, 2001; Trumbull et al, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Moses and Cobb, 2001). Researchers have argued that this collaboration around a specific project is a more authentic and natural way to learn, rather than traditional instruction in a classroom (Rogoff et al, 2001; Trumbull et al, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Moses and Cobb, 2001). Teachers in the homeschool programs have been traditionally trained and do conduct some classes and seminars in a traditional way. However, the presence of parents, younger siblings, and guests at seminars, as well as parent-initiated classes, shifts the focus of knowledge-holder from only teachers (as in a traditional school setting) to a wider circle of participants. Frequently, older students return to help in classes, or parents step in as authorities on
a topic. Students even mentioned that helping to set up a class or to teach it with the teacher were highlights of their homeschool experience (program survey, 1.04).

The homeschool programs did not set out to incorporate “authentic learning” opportunities in their programs, however, the structure of participation in the programs enables the incorporation of this practice. Passing knowledge from one person to the next is a fluid, organic event, especially when the class is something new for everyone. Parents figure out a step and help their children and others’ children. Older kids learn a trick and teach it to parents, teachers, and younger students. Older siblings help younger ones. Parents finish young children’s projects or do the difficult parts so that the children are not frustrated. These aspects of meeting students where their abilities are, recognizing different knowledge holders, and allowing for changes and “tricks” are all part of authentic learning.

Homeschool programs are a site where this apprenticeship type of learning can easily occur because there are adults, various aged children, and all levels of ability focused on a clear project. The lack of grading and the need to compare or rank student outcomes, coupled with authentic learning tasks, also contributes to this collaboration. Students and parents are recognized for ability and sharing, not for being the “best” or “worst.” Students requiring more help receive it and the class is able to still focus on the project since everyone is going at their own pace and is supported by the others present. A traditional school with age-specific classes, limited numbers of adults, and a rigid timeline would be less able to employ the authentic learning experiences that homeschoolers routinely have.
The form of these experiences is quite different from traditional school in that they foster different interactions among students. Students are rarely grouped according to grade or age, because many of the programs I observed have relatively small numbers of students in each grade, and because many parents have more than one child and prefer to come to the school program for all of their children, not just for one class for one student. Older students frequently help younger ones. Parents interact with their own and others’ children. Gender divisions traditionally seen in regular schools are rarely seen in homeschool programs.

One homeschool program has a steady supply of scheduled beading, weaving, sewing, and crocheting classes that are popular with girls. Parents encourage (or force) their boys to come, and once they are there, they readily take part in basket making, beading, or whatever the project is. One fieldnote from the program with more limited seminars shows the lack of gender differences in the behaviors of students:

At a beading class, the students have a choice of beading patterns of animals. While girls choose rabbits and boys choose skunks, that is the only gender difference. Boys are complimented on their projects, ask for help from the teacher or parents (who are enthusiastically participating and talking with each other and with students), and help other students as well. Boys and girls sit with each other at various tables in the room, and all students talk and work easily together. Parents are able to work on beading animals and many help their own children as well as others. Younger siblings read books from the library, located in the hallway next to the classroom where we do the beading, or play on the computers in the room next door. Sometimes they come and want to do beading too, and a parent will help them get started but then the child gets bored and the parent finishes the animal. There is an ease of interaction, and everyone seems to enjoy themselves (fieldnotes, 1.20.04).

Parents, teachers, and students view these seminars as fun “extras” that do not necessarily fall under a specific curricular goal. The curriculum may differ or be the
same as a traditional school, but the participation structure is quite different in that it is voluntary.

Another class I attended at a site with more seminars was a basket making class involving yarn and rope.

Students wrap the yarn around rope and coil it, wrapping and coiling to produce a basket. The project is so involved that it will take two days of three hours each day to complete. Mothers and students sit around an L-shaped arrangement of tables, which makes conversation easy and allows the teacher to walk in front of and behind students to offer help. Boys and girls sit next to parents and everyone talks with each other, having conversations about movies, books, the latest recipes, or sports. Boys do not complain about basket making being “for girls” and they fit easily into the project. Students are obviously respected by each other and the adults, with questions about their lives and adventures a regular part of conversation (fieldnotes, 1.26.04).

Parents regularly make the most complex projects; an apprentice relationship sometimes develops, with parents demonstrating to other parents and students how they did a particular technique. All students are incorporated into the activity, and teachers do not publicly label students as a routine practice. Students with obvious disabilities or social awkwardness are included easily. One mother makes a gorgeous basket and others compliment her on her work. She is shy and awkward around people but accepts the compliments. She helps her son and others with techniques (fieldnotes, 1.26.04). Students also helped each other, with some trading projects to work on each other’s for a little while.

Just as in a traditional school setting, some friendships develop from school and children and parents visit each other on their free time. What is different from traditional school is that the students who are different are welcomed in the homeschool programs and are supported by other students, parents and staff. Although
friendships outside of school may not form, they are at least accepted within the school and not made to feel awkward or labeled.

One weekly science class has older girls in charge of helping the teacher and demonstrating the projects to other students. I overheard conversations between girls about how “cool” the science project was. Students did not hesitate to express their interest in topics and did not seem overly concerned about “fitting in” to a set of interests.

One mother, Janice, talked about her nervousness as her nine-year-old daughter joined the homeschool program. She was socially awkward and very involved in what she was learning, generally not interested in the popular things that kids were talking about.

Melissa didn’t fit in in school, … she didn’t have very many friends in school…She was pretty shy then, she’s not now, but she hadn’t blossomed yet, and she was kind of shy and she was interested in things that weren’t the norm. She just had weird interests. So I remember the very first thing she came to here, there was a workshop, and she met two girls who were best friends. And I can remember thinking, ‘Oh God, just let her fit in a little more’. I loved and embraced her differences, but just FELT for her. I would never have told her, ‘oh Melissa, don’t tell people that you like this or that or the other thing because they’ll think that’s weird.’ You know what I mean? I didn’t tell her that, but there was a part of me that just wished that she could just sort of get it, or –you know what I mean? I wished that she could play the game. Or I wished she had a public persona. She didn’t have that at all. Man, I wish she knew how to go from one mask to another. I mean, I really didn’t, but there was just part of me, that thought, ‘Oh God, she’s so raw out there, and if she opens herself up and some people think it’s very nerdy, her likes.’ And that’s how it was like for her at school up until fourth grade. So she came here and the first thing she met these girls…and one little girl said ‘oh hi I’m Olivia and what are you interested in?’” And Melissa said, what sounds to me to be the most freakish thing, and I can remember just thinking, ‘oh God—uh, uh.” She said, ‘well right now I am working on writing my own opera.’ And I just thought, ‘oh what a freak.’ You know what I mean? And Olivia, the little girl, said ‘oh I love the opera, can I help?’” And that was just sort
of wow—oh man. And the other girl said ‘yeah, we all just went to the opera last year and we’re going to go this year, I hope you sign up.’ And it was so wonderful—some of the kids here really are just out there in terms of—you know, they’d probably get squashed in school, when they’re younger. Even here, as they grow older, like the girls in 7th grade now, they learn that snarl (laugh) you know what I mean. Even here they know to be cool. But I think the public school kids start to be ‘cool’ younger than anybody here does (interview, 9.29.03).

Janice said that this was the only place where her daughter would feel that she really belonged and was accepted for who she was. Going to a traditional school had been difficult because she was just too “nerdy.” Her daughter didn’t fit in and suffered socially for that. Janice recognized that there were norms that her daughter didn’t fit and the homeschool program allowed her to choose an environment that would support her daughter’s unique way of being.

Acceptance through Adult-Child Interactions

A school picnic at a different program offers another glimpse at the issue of social acceptance of “different” children.

It’s a sunny day and I find my way to the grassy enclosure between two buildings. There are long tables set up for the potluck items that families bring. One teacher is busy grilling hotdogs, chicken and burgers. Parents and students wander around to various booths that teachers and parents have set up. There is one for making sand paperweights, another for blowing bubbles (complete with recipe and scientific explanation for how bubbles work), a karaoke machine, and various games. Parents lead younger students around, while older students roam in groups of three or so. Some boys start playing with sticks under a tree. Parents hang out with the teachers or in family groups. There doesn’t seem to be much socializing between parents, except through their children. Many family groups simply eat together and talk amongst themselves. One little girl with thick glasses and a helmet on interacts with teachers and other parents. No one remarks on her odd appearance. Teachers reach out to several students, asking about their lives and ensuring that they participate in the activities (fieldnotes, 5.26.05).
I frequently felt awkward at this program’s events, and noticed that it wasn’t only me that wasn’t interacting with others. Teachers complained that parents wouldn’t let kids eat first and that they didn’t bring enough for the potlucks. The socializing in the program seemed to be confined to small groups of parents who knew each other. This feeling of participating in an event but still being isolated was echoed by other mothers who said it was difficult to make friends. The intergenerational aspect of the events and the family orientation allows students to be themselves, even if they are socially awkward. However, the lack of a need to conform may be because the program serves to bring families into the same space but this sharing of space does not guarantee an actual interaction beyond pleasantries. Parents are pleased that their children are not bullied but this minimal requirement does not automatically generate interaction. Acceptance does not guarantee a community.

Teachers also commented on kids in homeschool programs being a little “different” than kids in traditional programs. John said that he can see differences between the kids he teaches now in the homeschool program and those he taught in traditional school programs:

It seems that these kids are more gentle in a way. You know, they are good kids, they do the right thing, they tend to have a lot of values influence...in terms of, for the most part, being curious and polite...And there is quite a range but there are some very unusual kids, there are some very quiet and shy kids, more than you would see in a regular classroom. But they get to have their way a little bit more, at least they don’t get harassed or anything. Some have personalities that you can see shouldn’t be in the classroom at this point, let them grow over this, because it’s going to be nothing but disrupting the classroom. There aren’t too many anti-social behaviors, just inappropriate behaviors. Too pushy, or not pushy enough, or weird. We certainly have a number of those, and they get a chance to grow, and see that that behavior won’t quite work, and
hopefully by the time they go back to a traditional school, they’ve got a new set of behaviors they can do (interview, 10.01.04).

Homeschool programs provide a space for students to be “different” and not be socially stigmatized because of their nonconformity to social expectations. Other teachers emphasized that homeschool programs give students a space to mature a bit more before entering (or re-entering) a traditional program. They echoed the idea that behaviors that are different are accepted in homeschool programs that would not be accepted in traditional schools. One fieldnote captures teachers’ concerns about one boy that they are frequently frustrated with:

One teacher looked back in the cumulative file after Adam got in a fist fight with another kid, and found a lot of instances where he had fought other kids in the traditional school program he had come from. Two other teachers said it is a love-hate relationship between him and other kids. He is a bright kid, who doesn’t know how to control himself and will hang on other kids and not listen to them when they say to stop, and then they get frustrated with him. They say that in a public school, he wouldn’t last because of that (fieldnotes, 6.07.04).

The only standard of behavior required is treating each other with respect. When that basic requirement is breached—as in the case of the child above who had a lot of self control issues—parents and teachers are there to counsel and to provide alternatives. Even social aspects of schooling have apprenticeship qualities in homeschool programs. Students are learning how to behave by observing those around them, trying out behaviors, and being rewarded or corrected from a multi-age peer group and teachers and parents. The censoring of kids for being “different” doesn’t occur as often in homeschool programs because of the intimate contact of parents and teachers and students, who all observe and are a part of the social situation.
Many homeschool parents view this integration of age groups as a major strength that their children get to experience. One homeschool mother said that her husband sees a lot of people who are highly technical and highly intelligent people and high level of knowledge and they can’t interact with others in a team setting. And that’s how everything is in the corporate world. So we started thinking, like right now, in the [craft class], there are 2nd graders, 8th graders, 5th graders, and it’s adapted to all of their levels. … And they’re used to not just being a homogeneous group. And they are used to seeing all sorts of levels and ideas…The assignment is so general: come with something to share . . . They get to see all the different learning styles and—something that’s not the same in a normal classroom where you are told ‘everyone will do a report on such and such’. So I suspect—I guess that a lot of kids who have been brought up in a program like [this] will have an easier time going into the workforce and working with others and accepting different ways of looking at things, and just getting used to dealing with different styles. That’s my guess (interview, 9.29.03).

This interaction of various ages and abilities is viewed as preparation for the ‘real world’ of work. The traditional classroom is viewed as a strange creation that does not mirror future expectations for performance. The variations in understanding, interpretation, ability, and ideas are valued as a learning experience in itself: students learn to appreciate different perspectives and ways of approaching material.

**The Downside of Authentic Learning**

This multi-age and multi-generational interaction also has a downside as far as maintaining standards. There is little authority for enforcing a certain standard of expectations: there are so many ages and levels present for one activity; it is viewed as a ‘fun’ thing that is in addition to the book work the students do at home; some clubs and seminars are run by parents who may not know or enforce standards and who may not have the social capital to enforce them; and participation is voluntary. The
diversity of interests, preparation, and ability adds to the richness of the experience but can also detract from aiming to produce “quality” in the work product.

One field note from a world geography club demonstrates the variation of the preparation of students:

Geography Club meets once a month for students and parents to discuss a focus country. Today’s country is New Zealand. It is a small gathering today: 13 students, 6 parents. There was an accident on the freeway, potentially keeping people away. The organizer mentions that people were saying it was too close to the holidays and they were too busy. There is a brief introduction of the country, and the leader has a student come and find New Zealand on a world map. Students then volunteer to present their reports. The reports are brief this time. One student reviews the major cities, 3 have something to say about the “Kiwi” bird and other ancient wildlife. One gives general facts about New Zealand (population 3.8 million). After each speaker, people can ask questions. This time, students don’t ask many questions (only 2 students have questions), but 4 parents have questions of the speakers. One boy printed out his information from a website and highlighted it. He has trouble reading and he stumbles a lot. We all sit patiently through this. Some students in front of me made fun of the presenter’s reading under their breath, but sit through it and don’t mention this opinion to him or others. Then there is a student who hadn’t prepared for the meeting, but who is concerned to know if New Zealand had one or two islands that made up the country because he doesn’t want to look completely stupid in front of everyone, even though he isn’t presenting. He sits and listens. In fact, 3 or 4 students who were at a class held before this meeting just stay to see the presentations, to be with friends and listen. One student does read an old New Zealand legend and it is clear that she had practiced her presentation beforehand, but that is not the norm (fieldnotes, 12.12.03).

This activity is purposefully designed so that students at all levels can participate and be accepted at their level. However, there is a tension between acceptance of different abilities and allowing students to do sub-standard work that they didn’t prepare for. Many students—perhaps families—don’t treat this seriously and so some projects are last-minute. The result is that on the one hand there is this acceptance of everyone, and on the other, many students don’t seem to try. It seems
that it would be more beneficial for the student who had difficulty reading his information if he had written it in his own words and read something that was meaningful to him that he could understand. It would improve his reading, his presentation, and his understanding.

Yet, this is an “informal” learning activity that is seen as “fun.” Perhaps this classification and the way that the club is run contribute to a lack of standards that would be seen in a traditional classroom. The standards cannot be enforced at a voluntary club. This experience does point out the coercive force that grading students can sometimes have: an external motivation for preparing for the presentations. Of course, if parents decided that presenting was just as important as participating, they could do many things to encourage that behavior, such as evaluating and commenting on presentations, awarding prizes for the best speaker or researcher in a particular age range, etc. But parents and students alike viewed this activity as fun and educational, no matter how prepared student presenters were.

Following the presentations, the casual social time that accompanies the samples of food from the focus country is valued by parents and students as a time to talk. One mother joked that the eating was the favorite part of the club for the parents. This club demonstrates the different function that school takes on when students are doing the bulk of their officially recognized book learning at home. School becomes a social place that emphasizes fun.

Families are able to view the clubs and seminars differently and fit them into their own plan as they wish. Judy said that you need both the informal learning of field trips and clubs as well as book work because
one creates excitement but the knowledge in the book also creates excitement. Knowing things and then seeing it again and saying ‘oh, I know what it means, and I know that’ . . . like when we do Geography Club, for example, and they study a country, they don’t learn much about the country. In that case maybe it created an interest. I remember we studied China and my daughter saw something on Discovery Channel, and she was like ‘oh, look it’s about China, and remember we saw the lady from China and we had this Geography club.’ So it creates excitement but you also need the part where you need to learn dates and numbers and question and think. Like in social studies for example—and I know they like their social studies book—there is a lot of thinking about why does a culture do that, or why did that happen, what were the consequences, what were the causes. And just being in a workshop is not going to be enough. I mean it will help also because you will approach it . . . (parent interview with author, 9.23.03a).

The informal learning in the club was viewed as a step in the learning process. Judy wanted her children to be passionate about what they learned; she thought that the clubs and activities would create that passion that would be supported by more formal learning at home. As a homeschooler, she knew what her children were learning at home and at school as well as with others, and she could use that knowledge to integrate and build on experiences. In her opinion, not having a high standard for a club did not hinder her experience of the club. She also valued the community feeling that the clubs and seminars fostered among parents and students. The club served multiple purposes for her family; she ensured high academic standards on her own and in conjunction with turning in the children’s more formal school work.

**Standards and “Fun”**

Families enjoy the interactions and value the diverse offerings at the homeschool programs but they view the “serious” learning as occurring at home. Ironically, the focus on “fun” fosters acceptance of different levels as well as a laissez-faire attitude about being prepared. The school cannot enforce a work ethic through
formal means of grading so it is up to the families whether to take this alternative form of learning seriously. The integration of various student levels and the intergenerational interaction supports a less judgmental atmosphere for students who are not as capable in reading or presenting. However, it may also contribute to accepting work that is not reflective of the student’s best efforts.

The balance between freedom and standards is hard to negotiate in classes and clubs because these activities are all voluntary. It’s really up to the family to determine the effort that they will put into a project and the community accepts that effort. However, where the standards are more obviously enforced is in the students’ individual book work that they turn in to their assigned teachers. Teachers have to ensure that students are making progress on meeting state standards. The view that this book work is more serious is reinforced through this evaluation process and through the state oversight of the school.

The division between informal and formal (or book) learning impacts how families and the formal institution of school view the activity. Informal learning is fun first, with students learning alongside peers and parents. Evaluation is minimal or informal, occurring mostly through conversation. Formal learning occurs with the use of books, requires the production of projects or worksheets and is evaluated to ensure student progress on state standards. How seriously each family takes each activity is up to that family. The school only enforces a minimum standard of work for the formal things that students hand in.
Understanding Authentic Learning and Fun

Parents, students, and teachers separate learning into “doing school” and “fun” depending on the qualities of the experience. If the learning involves book work, it is “doing school” and if it involves hands-on activities, it is “fun.” This division allows parents to control their family time themselves and to see that as free time, even if it involves learning. One teacher was incredulous about a family’s idea that they had to “make up” the time they were not “doing school”:

And sometimes they would be doing some things and they didn’t count it as homeschool because it wasn’t seat time. “Well, we didn’t homeschool because we went to the mission and took the tour.” (pause, laugh) They didn’t see that as school because it wasn’t seat time… I took 30 kids on [an oceanography field trip]. Some of those parents were saying, “how are we going to make up this time?” And I was saying, “they were in school 6 hours! We had three hour labs. (laugh) It was a great deal…” (interview, 10.05.00).

These learning experiences were valued by the families, but they were concerned about making up the time that they spent doing something they saw as fun, not as “doing school.” No matter how educational or how much their children learned, this type of learning did not fit their ideas of what “school” should be like. Therefore, it had to be something else, and would not count as learning.

Although the teacher found the distinction between book work and hands-on activities to be quite funny, the same distinction allows the teachers to view their classes more as “fun” than as measurable steps in children’s educational progress. Since parents are responsible for the education of the children at home, the classes can become more informal and less evaluative.
The seminars, crafts, music classes, book discussions and fieldtrips all involve an apprentice type of learning. Parents’ ideas about “doing school” are not challenged because they view these as fun and educational, although the educational experience at school doesn’t “count” as school. Since it is categorized differently, their traditional beliefs about book work and seeing school as “work” remain intact. Ironically, although homeschool students experience a different type of learning, one that has been argued (Rogoff et al, 2001; Trumbull et al, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Moses and Cobb, 2001) to be very effective, parents do not see it as a different way of doing school. It is simply fun and educational.

In conjunction with the freedom to make their own schedule, definitions of what “counts” as school also impact how students, parents, and teachers view certain activities. For example, many parents feel that it is not “doing school” if there are no texts, assessments, and if the concept is not in a book or on the list of standards. If a child wants to pursue an area of interest that is not within the confines of the given curriculum, then that activity is viewed as “extra” and does not “count” as school. Judy really valued this aspect of homeschooling, finding others who were good at something and then arranging for her children to learn from them:

I always liked the idea of a village raising a kid, and like, I’m not good at everything and I’m not passionate about everything. There are some subjects that I like better than others. And I like the idea that some people could be really passionate about something and could communicate that passion to the kids, you know, like having other people around me (interview, 9.23.03a).

This type of learning is separate from the highly structured book learning that she does with her children as well.
This narrow view of learning and school has two effects. One is that parents who pursue other interests with their children see that as their arena of expertise and will work to make connections for their child to learn from someone. They view this apprenticeship model of learning as “fun” and good for their children, but it is not “doing school.” The other effect is that the school program then has a clearer interest and understood control over the official curriculum and expectations. Parents have all kinds of ways of subverting that control; only doing one work sample instead of the entire chapter to turn in to the assigned teacher, or choosing a different curriculum to “supplement” the state curriculum. But even in this resistance to the state, they are recognizing the state’s power and negotiating that control through their resistance. There is no political discussion of changing the system, but rather parents develop resistances that reinforce the notion of the state’s control. However, in the areas that the parents do not define as “doing school,” they are less likely to concede control and recognition of expertise to the state.

In defining other interests as “free time” they effectively take control over it, because it is recognized by both the school and families that families should have control over their free time. This logic leads to interesting definitions. For example, Monica, whose experience I mentioned in the last chapter, homeschooled her son so he could “recover” from a bad experience in a traditional school, described herself as a “bad homeschooling mom” because she liked to do “mom things” with her son instead of the prescribed curriculum. These “mom things” included examining the earthquake fault lines and doing geology. Because her son’s interest in geology was not in a textbook, and because there were no chapters to follow, questions to answer, or tests to
take, Monica viewed the research and exploration that she did with her child as a “mom thing” and not as a serious inquiry into knowledge. The format of the knowledge has a major influence over how people view it. She kept these activities separate from “doing school” and thereby maintained control over the definition, and hence, the actual experience of doing geology. She didn’t feel she needed to find books or texts or test her child because finding fault lines was not “doing school,” it was fun. And for fun, you don’t need to conform to using the school’s tools for learning.

**Defining Activities and the Role of Responsibility**

Classes can be viewed by home-school participants as fun because parents bear the main brunt of educating their children using state-approved textbooks. Teachers ensure that parents and students are progressing at a rate which will have them finishing the material in the year. They check to see what concepts students are studying and comprehending, and where students may need additional support. But formal classes are “extra,” not the bread and butter of education in the program. Teachers act more as coaches for parents than as educators only of children. Many teachers say that one of the more rewarding aspects of the homeschooling program is that they have close ties to parents and are able to tell parents things that they wouldn’t otherwise be able to say in a traditional setting where they wouldn’t have as close contact. Most parents trust teachers as guides for curriculum, pedagogy, and sometimes for more intimate family or developmental issues.

Some teachers in homeschool programs accept altered assignments from families. One parent of a child with Asberger’s who is particularly attached to her
work regularly hands in color copies: “if I didn’t do that, the school would never see any work. She just won’t let me give it away” (interview, 10.6.05). Parents view this flexibility as key to their success. However, it’s not only the flexibility that allows families to negotiate these alternative assignments. The school’s willingness to view parents as experts in educating their children also contributes to parents’ abilities to adjust assignments to address children’s learning behaviors, abilities, and interests. Teachers say that they are sometimes more like staff developers than teachers: they give parents ideas, work on skills, and act as counselors to support parents’ efforts to educate their children.

Teachers see themselves as coaches to parents; one teacher summarized her relationship to parents as a “mentor and coach. I am a trainer of teachers, because that’s what parents are—teachers to their children. The more I can help them be better teachers, the more that helps the kids too” (fieldnotes, 4.10.04). Many teachers said that they enjoy working with the whole family. Especially as students progress toward algebra in the 7th or 8th grade, some parents find that they need a “refresher course” in algebra. Several programs had teachers that taught both parents and students. Many parents said that they enjoyed learning algebra again, both because it was interesting, and because it showed their children that it is important and that they can learn together. One program had a rule that teachers would not tutor students alone if the parent was unable to teach the concept; parents had to learn with their students. The teacher said that she didn’t want to give parents the idea that they could just “drop the kid off and we would teach. They chose to do this and it is important that they develop
the confidence to teach all subjects. . . Most parents like to learn with their student, once they find out they don’t have to know everything” (fieldnotes, 4.10.04).

The homeschool programs blended traditional teaching of students with what would normally be considered staff development of teachers. The teachers in these programs have backgrounds in traditional public school or in alternative programs, all of which required staff development. They have a shared cultural understanding of what it means to teach and to attend staff development. They easily incorporate these understandings into creating a support for parents who are teaching new subjects for the first time. Sometimes teachers get frustrated with parents who are hesitant to take responsibility for evaluating and teaching. On the other hand, one teacher worked very closely with a new parent for weeks until the parent was willing to grade her first grader’s work with stars and happy faces instead of being seriously critical and wanting to assign actual grades.

Teachers provide the child development knowledge to parents, helping them understand different learning styles and ways of teaching. Teresa, a veteran homeschool teacher, mentioned that parents sometimes need help in understanding that everyone, including their child, does not learn the same way the parent learns.

I think that it’s exposure, finding different ways—we talk about learning styles. And I think that’s a real plus if the parent finds that. Instinctively I think they would know how that child has learned from age one and a half up, they would know what kinds of things stimulate that child and motivate that child to learn … [and they need to] look at how they learn and [see] if it’s different. And interestingly enough, I have families whose kids’ learning styles are completely opposite and the parent really has to zero in and understand, ‘yes, I am going to expose them to these other things even though it’s not his brightest way of learning because I think we need to use both sides of our brain…but at the same time I am going to
Parents are told that they need to learn about their child and present material in a way that the child can understand and learn. Many parents mentioned that they “individualize” their teaching to each of their children’s learning styles.

In the last chapter, we saw that a parent, Lea, had taken her son out of traditional school because he was having lots of learning difficulties. She went to a seminar for parents organized by her homeschool program and learned about different learning styles:

…the school had received a grant before we had gotten here, to do workshops on how you take notes, on how you study for a test, how you take a test, etc., etc. So we went to one on how you learn, and I was supposed to take a test on what my answers were for him [her son], and he was supposed to take a test. And then at the end, the parents and the child - the student - compared notes. And then I remember sitting there, and she said, "How does your student test on blah, blah, blah?" and I raised my hand, and it was this way, and my son said, "No, it's not." And I said, "Yes, it is." He said, "No. No, it's not." And it was, “I'm the parent. I'm going to tell you how you learn.” And she [the teacher] said, "No. Did you ever know that?" And it was the first time in my life when I went, “oh, my gosh.” And it was just like light bulbs went on. They were "aha moments." … And then I thought, "Oh, my gosh, what have I been doing to my kid?" because I had been funneling him down a path that worked for me. And I never— I never noticed. I never bothered to ask. I never bothered to do anything differently to see if an outcome was better or not. And since then, we have restructured how he does his work, because he learns visually in some subjects but not it others, is conceptual in some areas but is not in others. So, rather than being completely visual or completely conceptual, or completely whatever - tactile - he is sort of a grab bag, and it matches up with specific subjects. So that was incredible to me because that's not how I learned at all. I'm the same way for every subject. I don't—I don't understand why that is, but that's how my brain is wired (interview, 3.22.04).

This class taught her more about herself and her son so that she could structure lessons to meet his attention span and the way he thinks. She was amazed that she didn’t know
her child as she thought he did. Many parents report finding out about their child’s interests and ways of thinking only after being confronted with having to teach them at home and needing to know how they understand things.

Teachers are very keen that parents become knowledgeable about their child’s learning. The act of taking responsibility for one’s own child’s education can be daunting at first, even for parents who were unhappy with the traditional school. Homeschool program teachers do expect parents to develop as teachers and will provide the support to enable this development. Lea’s own thinking changed, not only about her son and how he learns, but also about her own responsibility to be sensitive to his needs. She changed her way of teaching and started asking him what he wanted and how he wanted the information presented to him. He became a partner with his mother in his own learning processes. And Lea gained the “teacher skills” of changing the lesson to see if the new way of presenting material changes the outcome for her student. She became a “researcher” of her own child’s way of understanding the world.

Teachers adjust curriculum, research units that parents are interested in, provide extra books, videos, and field trips to supplement and even replace the state-sanctioned curriculum. They have a clear understanding of state as well as local standards for each grade, but they also have a strong connection to, and understanding of, the families and students they serve. One fieldnote demonstrates how teachers view themselves in relation to the parents:

The staff really seems to like working here, and for them, it is more like being a “teacher trainer” because they see themselves as teaching the teachers (parents). They also like being researchers for parents who call
and say that they are having a problem with something, or that they want to do this theme, and the teachers will gather materials and either fax it or put it in the family’s mailbox. Each family has a mailbox in the front office (fieldnotes, 4.10.04).

They see themselves as a resource for parents and will ferret out information, creating units of study tailored to the family’s interests. Many teachers mentioned that they liked being “staff developers” of parents, teaching them how to teach their children concepts.

Parents view teachers as resources for helping them to do what they want to do. In addition to the specific curricular needs that they fill, they help support the family in many other ways. They have helped resolve disputes between parents and children; they have acted as counselors for parents and children; and they have dealt with death, marriages, and graduations. Because of the close contact and frequent visits, many teachers are viewed as close partners in the lives of homeschoolers.

Parents frequently open up to teachers and teachers are able to do more than what they could do in a traditional school. Many teachers reiterated what one said about her role with homeschool families: “a lot of times it’s more like the parents’ coach” (interview, 10.25.04).

In comparing their teaching experience in traditional schools to their experience in homeschool programs, many teachers echoed Nancy’s comment about the amount of contact:

But many of us get very involved with the parents. Samantha has some parents that she’s been to a book club with. So. You do become more involved. In a regular classroom, the kids come in the morning and they go after school and you might talk to the parents a little bit before or after school and that’s pretty much it. But with us you really do get involved.
They’ve been around for so many years. … It’s just a different closeness and obligation that you feel (interview, 10.23.01).

In traditional schools, teachers may find out information about a student’s family from Open House, from reports by the student, brief morning or afternoon encounters and from 15-minute conferences twice a year. The homeschool program demands a different type of relationship from teachers. Many teachers said that this close contact took some time to adjust to when they first started teaching in a homeschool program. “And being so close to the parents, I really didn’t have that experience. But now, it’s not a problem, and it’s wonderful, and all that, but at first it was really really difficult for me” (interview, 10.23.01). Another teacher added that she does better with “little people” than she does with the parents; homeschooling was a big shift for her to have such close contact with parents.

Teachers in homeschool programs have extended contact before the family signs up for the program. During the first two to three weeks of homeschooling, most teachers call the families to see how they are doing, and have them come in more frequently at first because many view the beginning of homeschooling as a difficult transition time. The teachers’ job is to make sure that the family is successful in this new way of educating the children. Their focus is not only on one child, but on the whole family. They view it as a commitment by the family to the children and they say that they endeavor to provide the most support possible. Two teachers noted the closeness that develops:

Sarah: I’ve had families over the years that I have had from kindergarten to 9th grade, so you have that same kid for 9 years.
Teresa: And if you have siblings, you have them longer than that.
Sarah: I’ve had one family probably 16 years, the same family, with different children. So you do—I have dreams that they call me...One thing I can say about our families is that they are very comfortable here. [We are] very non-threatening. A lot of times we are seen as like their psychologist or their counselor or something.

Teresa: Oh, we are best friends.

Sarah: They’ll come in and say ‘we need to shut the door’ and they’ll come in and cry for an hour. And they just need that to just sort of—

Teresa: A release. A lot of times I feel that these parents who are homeschooling don’t have much contact with their fears because they are spending so much time concentrating on their child’s education.

(interview, 1.15.04).

The teachers view their job as supporting the parents to do the best that they can.

Parents come to rely on teachers for emotional support as well as for practical advice, sometimes to an extent that exasperates teachers, as evidenced above in Teresa’s ironic comment about being ‘best friends.’

For both parents and teachers, the relationship they establish in the homeschool program differs from ones in traditional public schools. There is more frequent contact, more complete contact (teachers get to know whole families, not just one student), and the type of contact is different. One teacher explained, “You really become a part of that family, so when you do your conference, you do a conference for all of the children and you can take the time because you don’t have as many conferences and so you can take a little bit more time with one family” (interview, 1.15.04). Teachers are relied on for suggestions and they see more of the family dynamics, even in an in-school meeting, than they would regularly see at a traditional school. Ironically, homeschool programs bring teachers and parents closer together than traditional programs because of the focus and structure of the programs.
Homeschooling, by its nature, requires parents and teachers to have close contact. Many families take advantage of courses and seminars offered by the programs, and parents frequently spend time at the program site while their children take a seminar. Parents either help with the class or congregate in the library, work rooms, or halls, sharing ideas with each other, preparing materials for their children, or stopping in to talk to teachers. Teachers all say that their doors must be kept open (if they even have doors—many programs have several teachers in one room, separated by partitions) because parents will “barge in anyway.”

Teachers feel that parents must be the main providers of education for the children and they will generally not allow parents to push that responsibility on to the teachers, even if some pushy parents try to abdicate the responsibility. At conferences, parents or teachers may note weaknesses in a student’s skills or understanding and the teacher will provide individual tutoring. If teachers notice several students struggling with the same concepts, they may hold a small group to review the concept. Teachers are generally flexible in providing help to individual students, parents, and groups of students or parents.

This responsiveness stems from the focus on family success as well as flexibility in time use. Teachers have some seminars they are responsible for, but otherwise are available for parents and students to call, to make appointments, or (to the consternation of teachers trying to schedule things) to drop in. This contact is also supported by the high involvement of parents in their child’s education: parents will frequently attend and participate in workshops and seminars with their children.
Although the homeschool program fosters this cooperation and close work of parents and teachers, the result is not always free of conflict. Teachers do not always agree with parents’ approaches, ideas, or values. However, they realize that there is no alternative but to work with the parents or to have the parents leave the program. There is no avoiding the parents, hoping they don’t call, or ignoring them, which are strategies available to traditional teachers who do not rely on parents for providing the basis for the education. Homeschool program teachers must work with parents, no matter how much they feel that the parent is not “doing a good job.” Of course, in cases in which the teachers feel that homeschooling is not working or in which they suspect that children are not doing the work, they recommend placement in a traditional program and the families leave the program.

But in cases in which the teachers just do not agree with the parents’ approach or demands, they see the only option is to build a relationship and make it work in the interests of the child. One more liberal teacher found some parents’ philosophies a bit difficult to deal with: “Sometimes I get a little, you know the politics with the parents, …There are some that are ultra-conservative, fundamentalist in their philosophy… having it up close and personal makes it hard” (interview, 10.25.04). When teachers are alone, they complain about over controlling parents, as seen in the last chapter when Cara complained about a parent doing the child’s work at a seminar, or about parents that have unrealistic expectations. Teresa mentioned a family who homeschooled their daughter with special needs and now wanted to homeschool their son who has ADHD. The family doesn’t have a stable schedule and both parents work. “They have their hands full. I think homeschooling is a full time job. I truly believe it
is a full time job. And I think that if you are here and here and here you can’t give homeschooling what it needs” (interview 1.15.04). Despite these reservations, she said she’d help the family do what they thought best, even if it was to homeschool their son.

When these parents participate in a seminar or pick up their child after a class, there is usually no evidence of teachers’ true opinions in their interactions. Teachers are very careful to respect parents’ decisions and then to do their best to help the child in whatever situation it is. The focus on the family as a unit of interaction demands a good working relationship with parents. This focus takes a lot of effort on teachers’ part and at lunch they frequently brainstorm solutions to difficult situations.

This support among teachers in helping each other deal with difficult parents works because each teacher knows many of the parents who are assigned other teachers as primary contacts. They meet and work closely with parents at seminars and in small groups. The informal spaces also allow more interaction between various teachers and parents as they wait for classes to finish. The structure of the school day is built around intense parent-teacher-student contact, in visits and in optional classes.

**Role of Teachers in Challenging Conceptions of School**

As we saw in the last chapter, many teachers see themselves as providing guidance to parents to help students progress through the necessary texts, thereby reinforcing state control over what is to be learned. However, many teachers encourage parents not to spend all day doing textbook work, instead to attend seminars and offerings through the homeschool program, and to use community resources to explore interests that the family has developed. Teachers say that if parents are
spending all day “doing school,” they are missing the point and opportunities that homeschooling offers families. One teacher, Mike, said that he encourages his new homeschooling parents to integrate “school” into their day:

And I tell them, when you are sorting laundry and you have a kindergarten, first grader, you are sorting by size, by color, which one is larger, which one has the most, measuring soap detergent. All that. Same thing going shopping. You have this coupon, you run around and match up the name with whatever product there is, and you do comparison, you talk about nutrition. And they do get into that sort of full day of school wherever they are. They learn how to ask probing questions, and make it a learning experience (interview, 10.05.00).

He sees daily activities of life as a learning experience that he encourages his homeschool families to “count” as school. Textbook learning is only one aspect of education. Like many teachers, he pushes parents to see education as integrated and not separate from “real life” activities.

Many teachers readily say that the courses they teach students—ranging from guitar to art to radio building to pig dissection—are fun. They do not talk of state standards first, or even learning first, they talk of having a good time with students, and making the experience something that the students, parents, and the teachers themselves enjoy. “It’s fun. Look at how well some of these are coming out. It’s great to see them working on something and having fun” (teacher, fieldnotes, 1.16.04). This type of comment was stated over and over from teachers talking about the classes and seminars that they teach.

Despite the focus on fun during the courses, teachers do have an understanding of the standards and what needs to be completed by students. They are able to say what standards their seminars meet and do feel pressure to justify seminars in terms of
standards. In addition, they will tell parents that they need to do more book work at home if they see that the families are not producing the desired work.

It’s kind of like there is a happy medium for when it comes to paperwork and what the state would say. You’re always going to have parents who go way beyond that. And you have people who you have to encourage, “let’s get that sample work in.” And “well, where is your science?” “Oh we—science isn’t one of our favorite subjects.” “Well, you still have to teach it. Everybody has their favorites and then you have things that you do just so you can get the best education” and that’s the bottom line. They want the best education as possible for their children (interview, 10.05.00).

This work serves as a baseline, and teachers encourage parents to see beyond that work to other things that are interesting for the students and families to do. The first focus is meeting this baseline and encouraging families to bring in the necessary work to demonstrate a minimum output.

If families do not meet that baseline, teachers will have frank discussions with them to try to solve the problem or to move them out of the homeschool program. One teacher in a city-sponsored program said that she can rely on the city’s requirements as a reason to tell families that homeschooling is not the best option for them:

…and so if it’s not working for them, that’s a part of finding something that will work for them. That was hard in the beginning but now that it is taken care of at the [city] level, it’s not so bad. Because…here’s the test in place now…and if your student doesn’t score at whatever, then they need to take these courses and we don’t have that here. So now it’s easy for me to say, ‘well my hands are tied and so they need to go to a traditional school.’ That’s been really nice. I think that was really scary when I first came here because I had the feeling that this wasn’t the place for them, but I didn’t really know that [and now the tests show that] (interview, 10.23.01).

Meeting the minimum work requirements at home is important to teachers and when they see families struggling to do the work, they will offer help. If the family still cannot meet those standards, the teachers use that as a reason to tell the family to seek
other educational options. Teachers are flexible as long as parents make progress towards meeting state standards.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how an alternative learning experience is accepted in the program because of the different understanding of the meaning of the activity (what “counts” as school). While participants experience an adaptation of apprentice learning, they do not view it as an alternative to traditional means of learning through book work. They keep their original definition of “doing school” and see these alternative learning experiences as “fun.” It is fun if it is hands-on, not graded, intergenerational, and project-oriented. It is “school” if it involves evaluation, officially sanctioned curriculum, and reading and writing.

Curriculum is held constant in the homeschool programs because they conform to state requirements and texts. However, a distinct culture develops that is supportive of students and parents, is not competitive, and respects individual progress in learning. The partitioning of learning activities into “doing school” and “fun” allows families and teachers in the seminars to ignore traditional school tools of evaluation, writing answers, and meeting standards. These traditional tools are saved for when families “do school” at home with the textbooks. If families cannot “do school” at home to an extent that meets the school’s expectations, teachers try to work with them or tell them that they have to leave the program.

The framework of standards is used differently by teachers in applying it to school and home experiences. Teachers justify seminars at school by showing how they address state standards but then do not measure student progress toward those
standards during the seminar. Teachers expect parents to meet the standards through their work at home and evaluate the progress each month. Standards are evoked in both arenas, but in school it is only to say how each seminar fits the standards whereas at home it is to evaluate student progress.

In the last chapter, we saw how concepts of “doing school” reinforce traditional notions and practices of school. However, at closer look, the role of the school has changed through this definition. The school has become a place for comfortable socialization, fun activities, and development of community. Parents, teachers, and students all expect the seminars, clubs, and classes to be fun and enjoyable, as well as educational. The focus of “school” is on an enjoyable experience. Through defining the school as fun, the relationship between the school and parents has changed as well.

The roles of the separate spheres have been reversed in homeschool programs. Home is responsible for “doing school” and school is for “fun.” These separate spheres are similar to the traditional logic explored in the last chapter. However, the logics of the separation of “fun” and “doing school” actually serve to indirectly challenge the traditional idea of education. Yes, families are producing a lot of traditional school practices at home during the time that they “do school.” But homeschooling families have more “free” time after “doing school” than families who attend traditional school programs. This extra time is spent differently because homeschool students do not have homework. The informal fun learning and “hanging out” time the students have is not viewed as “doing school” and not subject to the same restrictions as that practice. The families can claim that time for themselves. In
carefully prescribing the roles of the different spheres, they maintain more freedom from the school practices than other families can. They spend less time on “doing school” and more time doing “other” things that may involve authentic ways of learning. The experience of the families ends up being more alternative than the families themselves realize because they have defined this alternative as “free time” and “fun” rather than challenging their ingrained beliefs about “doing school.” The separate spheres actually challenges traditional ideas but in such a way as to leave all of the accoutrements of traditional school in place.

Teachers support parents in the education of their children. Instead of the school requiring certain supportive behaviors from parents, as examined at the beginning of the chapter (Oakes et al, 1999), homeschool programs are supportive of parents. Even when teachers do not agree with parents, they still support their efforts if they are meeting the minimum benchmarks for progress through the curriculum. This dynamic has flattened the hierarchy that is traditionally found in schools and has made parents and teachers more like partners in the education of the child. Instead of school being the center of the focus and the family providing the necessary support for students to succeed in that environment, the family has now become the focus of the school. This change in responsibility for the education of the child, with all participants recognizing the parents’ pivotal role, has led traditional roles of the school to be challenged. Parents and teachers claim their time together as fun and educational and enjoyable. The hard work of “doing school” using textbooks is left to families with teachers supporting their efforts, thus constructing a space of support, equality,
and fun at the schools. The courses open a space for alternative forms of learning in the guise of “fun.”

Defining school time as “fun” shifts the focus of “school” from achieving standards in learning to being a pleasant learning experience, but participants don’t see this as too much of a problem because the main educational activities—the “doing” of school—occur at home. Reproducing school at home frees families and teachers to concentrate on activities that they define as “fun.” They do not have to worry about standards, ranking, grading, and evaluating because that process occurs at home on an individual level with the parents and student and the texts. Students experience their official learning as an individual process and experience “extra” activities as a group time which involves socializing and fun. As long as families are making enough progress through the books, teachers can construct seminars along their interests and the interests of the families. They are not overly concerned with evaluating students’ progress toward meeting standards in the classes because the standards are being addressed in the formal educational activities of the families. Teachers do demonstrate how classes meet official state standards, reining in the alternatives to look on paper as if they are more traditional. And some classes are more traditional: reviewing material that is in textbooks or providing math tutoring. But the classes that are interest-focused are not taught in a traditional way, but rather in a project-based way that parents view as “fun.”

The type of learning that takes place in the schools resembles an apprenticeship model, both for the subject of the seminar and for the social rules that students learn. Again, this atmosphere is one of a flattened hierarchy where all levels
of learning are welcomed and people learn from each other. Knowledge is not viewed as the possession of one person to give to another in a hierarchical manner, but is rather formed and shared through the experience, with “natural” experts having a voice in the lesson. Although this is a very different way of learning, it does not challenge traditional ideas of individual learning from a book because these experiences are categorized as “fun,” not as “doing school.” These relationships also contribute to the formation of a student culture that is accepting of “different” people because there are so many levels of ability anyway and because parents and teachers ensure a level of respect among participants.

Homeschool parents report feeling very supported by the school program and teachers. Even parents who disagree with the amount of work or type of evidence that they have to produce are quite happy with the support and friendship that they find from teachers. The positive feedback from parents is quite different from the mixed feedback in the interviews of traditional school parents. The homeschool programs have shifted their treatment of parents to one of support and respect, something many parents wished for in traditional schools. The homeschool program teachers know more about each family than traditional schools typically know because of the structure of the program and the necessary close ties of teachers and parents. These ties also contribute to the change in viewing families as the object to be supported instead of the school.

The focus of the family experience at the homeschool programs also opens a space for accepting “different” students who would have potentially experienced social difficulties in a traditional school. However, this focus on family experience can
also be quite isolating, with families attending the same event but not interacting with other families or forming friendships through their shared experience of homeschooling. The social acceptance of children by other students is ensured because of the presence of teachers and parents who interact with the children. But acceptance does not necessarily translate into friendships.

The next chapter explores the consequences of this homeschooling experience for student resistance, identity, and learning.
Chapter 6

School Structures, Changing Roles, and Resistance: How Practices Shape Outcomes

Introduction

Chapter 4 explored the similarities between homeschool programs and traditional school programs and the pressures that caused the seemingly radical choice of homeschool to align itself closely with traditional school concepts. “Doing school” at home is in many respects quite similar to traditional concepts of school. Chapter 5 found cracks in that account, showing how participants’ definitions of an activity can change the meaning of it as well as who is regarded as “in charge.” This shift allows families to focus on “fun” at school and on meeting school requirements through book work at home. The structure surrounding “doing school” is quite different in homeschool programs. Chapter 6 explores the importance of this difference in school structure for student identity and parent-teacher relations as well as the unintended consequences and hidden messages of school interactions.

Previously, schools were viewed as fair places of socialization which prepared students for their place in life based on their dispositions and skills. Students who did not fit were thought to not possess the skills for better positions in society and were slotted to lower skilled jobs, which they could handle. This functionalist account (represented mainly by Parsons, 1967; Davis and Moore, 1945; Turner, 1960; Dreeben, 1968) of schools was challenged by scholars who demonstrated differential
treatment of students based on class and race, which reproduced class outcomes (represented mainly by Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985).

This neo-Marxist critique of schools was supplemented by scholars who examined student agency within these structures (Apple, 1982; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1981; Wilcox, 1982). This account of student resistance as a political critique sees school structures as mirroring larger societal structures and demonstrates the consequences for student placement. The focus is on student actions. However, this account does not look at the impact of structures on individual student learning processes.

Others examined student resistance and attributed it to the school’s dismissal of student home cultures (Kozol 1967, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Anyon, 1997; Ogbu, 2003; Sizer, 1992, 1996; Rist, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes et al, 2000; Delpit, 1995; bell hooks, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). This understanding of student resistance does not involve a political critique, but is rather one of self- and cultural preservation. These researchers delve deep into the lived experiences of students, looking closely at interactions at school.

These accounts, while emphasizing the students’ agency, do not address how families can resist or support school messages. Families are part of the context surrounding student learning and can be important sources of understanding student reactions to school practices (as seen in Lareau’s work, 2000, 2003). Parents’ work with the school is shaped by school structures too. Parental concerns about their students are also a lens into the impact of school structures on student self confidence and learning. It is to these concerns that this chapter turns.
I start by first relating one mother’s experiences with her three daughters. She chose a local public school, a private Christian school, homeschooling, and a private secular school in the course of their education. Her story demonstrates how family-school relations impact parenting actions as well as student learning. I then explore the consequences of the traditional school practice of labeling students. I examine interaction between labeling practices and student and parent resistance. I then explore how homeschool programs mitigate parent and student resistance through different school practices. To conclude, I examine the results of this different practice, which is a rhetoric of student responsibility for their learning.

**Barbara’s Story: three children and four types of schools**

Parental support changes with the type of institution and type of problems that their students have in school. One parent’s experience with her three daughters, each spaced about 8 years apart in age, demonstrates the different types of support she provided as her daughters encountered different institutions. The hidden messages of the school experience are dealt with in different ways as Barbara tries to find the best way to support her daughters.

**Oldest Child: Public School**

Barbara’s first daughter spent her school years in a traditional public school program. She had trouble reading in first grade and the teachers wanted to hold her back. Barbara worked full-time and wasn’t in the classroom much. She was called at home by another parent who refused to give her name but said that she volunteered in the classroom and noticed that the teacher was not addressing her daughter’s learning issues. She felt Barbara’s daughter was smart and had a large vocabulary but just
couldn’t read. She said that the teacher was sending her daughter to special classes without her permission because she didn’t know what to do with her.

So I quit my job, came home, and they gave me the summer to teach her how to read and pass all the reading tests or they would hold her back. This was the end of first grade. And she was already the size of a third-grader. I knew I had to get her reading. So a friend of mine who was a principal at a private school…she gave me a private school program, so I used it, got her reading, she was doing beautifully, and she was able to go into 2nd grade and never look back. . . . And I pushed her through—it was like pushing an elephant. I pushed her through everything. I got her through college. But it was not easy.

Author: Did you think it was important for her to read or did you do it because of the school pressure?
Barbara: I felt like she would really fall behind, and with her confidence in her learning ability if the other kids could do something that she wasn’t able to do. And she’s smart. She got it. But I had to do a lot excesses but I won’t go into that. We got her through... (interview, 4.20.05).

Her performance on the reading tests and her reading skills are linked to social consequences in the classroom. Barbara felt that if she did not meet the reading benchmarks on the school’s timeline, her daughter’s confidence would suffer. The ability to read at a certain time became a proxy for her daughter’s progress through school. Education became what the school assignments were. She was unwilling to let the school define her daughter as lacking and so she worked hard to catch her up to the traditional benchmark of reading by the end of first grade.

In fact, several homeschool teachers mentioned reading troubles as a reason many parents decide to homeschool. One teacher said, “there’s a span, especially with reading. And first grade is the hold back year for reading but a lot of children don’t read until end of 2nd or 3rd grade” (interview, 10.23.01). The social pressure to keep up with expectations and grade level progress is more present in traditional programs than
in homeschool. One teacher said that her focus changed when she joined the homeschool program:

I think we really look at things over a spectrum. If you are in a first grade classroom [in a traditional school], you look at what those second grade teachers will need and what those kindergarten teachers did. And that’s pretty much your realm. But when you are teaching in our program, you realize, ‘gee, they get you in 5th and 8th and 11th grade’ and you have a broader spectrum. And too if they don’t get it all that year, that there’s time down the road for them to get it (interview, 10.23.01).

She added that she “calmed down” a lot about student progress through benchmarks when she started teaching in the homeschool program because of the broader perspective that she gained about grade level progress.

With Barbara’s first daughter, the school said that she was not learning and would have to be held back because she “didn’t want to” hand in her homework or pay attention. She knew her daughter was trying very hard, so she did not accept that diagnosis from the school.

I fought the labels. They just didn’t know. I would go home with my child and I would know that nobody is wanting to do well as much as my child is. So when they were telling me that your child is just, she just doesn’t want to pay attention, she doesn’t want to do this, doesn’t want to do that. She doesn’t want to turn her homework in. I’m thinking ‘doesn’t want to’?!! No. Nobody wants it more. There’s something wrong here (interview, 4.20.05).

She said that the focus of her parenting was to ensure that her child did not internalize what the school’s message was about her. She was upset that the school could not handle her child’s needs.

They would not help me. I would tell them, put her in the front of the classroom please. I worked in the classroom, I helped trying to get her on target. And they all thought, ‘she’s not trying, you’re just giving her excuses.’ Later, they discovered such a thing as ADD. And she had cried her eyes out, and said ‘mom, nobody had tried harder than me, what’s
wrong with me.’ I tried to talk to the teachers, and they hadn’t had training on it, and if it was outside their model, then it was not real, something they couldn’t deal with (interview, 4.20.05).

Through her own efforts she helped her child succeed in the classroom despite what she saw as a lack of support from the teachers. But she also saw that her daughter was internalizing the label of poor performer that the teachers were saying was the problem. The self esteem consequences were quite evident to her despite her efforts to support her daughter within that environment. She did not feel that she had other choices; she assumed that children went to the school down the street and that her job was to make the situation work for her daughter.

Barbara: I feel that we got the worst because I was a young mom and I didn’t know.
Author: What didn’t you know?
Barbara: I didn’t know to find a good private school and get her in it no matter what to get her the support she needed. Now, I did do homework with her and I supported her at home and I got her through and I met with the teachers on a regular basis. Oh I put systems together where the teacher would write the homework down and I would have to sign that paper to make sure that I knew the homework. She would have to take that back in the morning. We had—I rigged up systems. You wouldn’t believe the stuff I had to do to make sure that she got through. So as a mom I gave her the support, the only support I knew was available to me (interview, 4.20.05).

The support she provided was to help her daughter meet the school’s expectations. She did a lot of hidden work inventing systems to ensure her daughter’s success. Her frustration and effort are evident in her account, while she emphasizes that she didn’t know that she had a choice of schools. Their economic circumstances were not such that she could have afforded an elite private school, but she regrets her acceptance of the public school system’s demands on her daughter.
Barbara’s efforts to help her daughter conformed to the school’s expectations and benchmarks. Even if she did not agree with the teachers’ diagnosis of her daughter, she still helped her conform to the system’s demands as best she could. Her account of the struggle that it was shows the amount of frustration for both her and her daughter as well as the teachers that her daughter could not easily meet school expectations.

**Middle Child: Public, Private, and Homeschool**

Seven and a half years later, with her next child, she volunteered in the classroom just so that her daughter could see that school was important. She had read that parental support was important; she decided that this form of parental support would allow her to see how her child was doing in the classroom as well as demonstrate her commitment to education. Her support came in the form of volunteering, which fits the school’s model of parent involvement. Her experience with her first daughter helped her see other students’ struggles in the classroom. However, despite this valuable knowledge, she found her efforts at volunteering were shaped by classroom expectations of teachers.

But once I got in there I saw all kinds of kids. I saw ADD kids that weren’t getting serviced, weren’t even getting recognized. And I would take those kids in the back and do the quick little lesson with them because they weren’t getting it in the main class. The teacher would think that they were the problem kids and she would think it was behavioral. And I would pick up really quickly, ‘no they’re trying to get it, they’re embarrassed. Let me go back and reinforce the lesson with this one and that one.’ And the teacher would see results with what I was doing. Because the first thing I would do is just talk to them and say ‘have you noticed that you were trying to do this but that it seems like other kids were getting it and you were having a hard time’ and they would look up at me like they’d seen a ghost. And I would say ‘you know that’s ok, my daughter does the
same thing and we found a way to do this. Do you want to know how to do this?” and they were like ‘yes’ (interview, 4.20.05).

Barbara started volunteering in a support role for the teacher but quickly realized that many children were like her first daughter with ADD and were being labeled as ‘problem kids.’ She helped them to meet the classroom goals and standards by giving them different systems that she had learned through her work with her daughter. The focus was on helping the students to conform to the classroom. She mentioned that famous people like Marie Curie or Albert Einstein or Henri Matisse probably did not fit the school’s mold either and that children should be looked at for their gifts and the way they see the world, not only as to whether they fit the mold of the school. However, her volunteering necessarily took on the role of helping kids to conform in order to be successful in the school system. She was painfully aware of her own older daughter’s struggles to meet the expectations and formats of the school.

She had begun working full time again when the teachers started telling her that her middle daughter was having difficulty getting the work done, and she thought “here we go again.” But instead of not being able to pay attention, it turned out that her daughter would just get settled into a book when she was told that they were moving on to the next subject and she would want to concentrate on what she had started. As she became aware of her second daughter’s ways of learning, she tried a private Christian school, hoping for more time for projects.

Unfortunately, her daughter experienced racism in the Christian school and was sent out of the classroom, “the teacher was prejudiced and any kids of color, she put them outside the classroom. Something that would have never been allowed in the
public school. So that is an interesting twist of events. But in a private school, all kinds of things go on. So she had a miserable time” (interview, 4.20.05).

She was very concerned about her daughter’s bad experience and her possibly internalizing messages about herself that were harmful. In addition, the private school brought another layer of complexity to schooling because the school was bound symbolically to the religion. If the school did not live up to the religion’s tenets, then the child would associate the bad experience of school with the whole religion. This symbolic relationship worried Barbara:

Because the Christian school, I had the biggest risk of them turning against God…You know, it’s like going to Church. When you go to a Christian school and you put Christ up on the name of your school, boy, you’d better do it right. Because you are an example to those kids. And if the integrity isn’t there and the honesty isn’t there, they are going to think it’s a farce. I almost lost [my daughter] to God. I almost lost her. She had such a miserable experience. Just because of ineptness. People in positions that shouldn’t have been. A group of overzealous Christians at this church wanting to have their own school, putting it together before they were ready (interview, 4.20.05).

Her comment about the connection of her child’s religious perspective with what the school was imposing is insightful. The institution comes to represent something bigger than only the book learning that takes place. She is pointing to the social role that schools play. In this case, the school was tied to religion. However, the same can be said of a school’s association to learning. If a school equates learning with comparisons of children and whether the child does what the teacher expects, then the child comes to see that as learning. As we saw in the last chapter, definitions shape practices. Students who understand this practice to be attached to learning see it as either a positive or negative experience and tailor their reactions accordingly.
Resistance can be one way of protecting themselves from this categorization and the school’s messages about themselves.

The private school was not only disastrous for her daughter’s self esteem; it also did not match her learning style. It used the same “grab and go” pacing that was required in a public school classroom. Her daughter

. . . would finally get her head down into the subject, then 20 minutes later, ‘ok put that book away, and get ready for the next book,’ and she was just ready to really get into that. So I noticed that she was frustrated with the public school system of grab this and go grab this and go. . . . she learns vertically, not horizontally. She’ll go deep. And the teacher was telling me that there are kids that have this style of learning. They’re almost the ones that become doctors, where you have to learn a lot of material. You have to be responsible for a lot of detail. These are the kids who won’t put the books down and the teachers get mad at them in school because they are just reading. They aren’t ready to go do this—it’s like ‘don’t make me do this’ (interview, 4.20.05).

She learned from another mother that she could homeschool and quit her job to do that so that she could help her child learn more. Her parenting and interaction with the school system changed from ensuring that her first daughter met the school requirements to personalizing the educational style of her second daughter so that she could meet her own learning needs.

She emphasized the way that they “did school” allowed her daughter to have time to go deeper into subjects and still pass the standardized tests and meet school expectations. After homeschooling for three years, her daughter went back to public school, and then on to high school. She felt she couldn’t continue homeschooling in the middle school grades in addition to having a new baby at home. She added that her daughter treasures the three years of homeschooling as a time when they could get close and she could develop her own interests. Barbara said that she was excited to
learn along side her daughter; these learning behaviors carried into high school. She described her daughter’s high school experience:

And then she went to [the local] high [school] and she just suffered through the years. She would get out of school and she would just drop her head down. And she was depressed all of her high school. She was depressed. It was tough. It was tough. But she would come home and her world would begin when she came home. And she would read and study and get excited about—you know, whatever. Greek mythology. Latin. Things that weren’t even taught there. Her senior project was on Egyptian language and she discussed four or five different languages and shared the speaking. …She did this presentation, and they clapped and . . . when it was finally over, they were saying ‘we don’t want this to end we want this to go on’. So I really think that some day she needs to teach, she has that desire to do that. I don’t know if she will or not. But she has a desire. And that came from those three years [of homeschooling]. I would have lost her. She would have fallen through the cracks (interview, 4.20.05).

When her middle daughter went to a public high school, her parenting responsibility was to create a safe haven at home to foster her daughter’s interest in learning. She says that her daughter spent time in school, but really learned when she came home and was able to research on her own using the internet and bouncing ideas off of her mother. Her daughter was engaged with learning outside of school but still had to perform on the school’s criteria as well. Her experience was different than her older sibling’s because she had alternative criteria for learning provided at home. Whereas her older sister’s learning occurred within the boundaries of the school’s expectations, her learning encompassed both school experiences (which she found to be as disheartening as her older sister) and home experiences. Learning on her own at home mirrored her experience of learning in homeschool: she was responsible for learning the material herself and directed her learning in response to her own understanding of the material, not in comparison to others.
Barbara’s support changed to create a safe space at home to counter the school’s messages and policies. The goal of homeschooling was to tailor the learning style to her daughter’s needs, thereby creating an alternative learning structure. It was important to meet the school standards, but they did this work in a different way than the school demanded. Her parenting was to resist having her daughter conform to the ways of learning that the school structures imposed.

**Youngest Child: Public and Private School**

Barbara’s youngest daughter first went to the local public school that was well-known for having the support of parents and for being a “quality” school. She was very involved there as a homeroom mother and also volunteered to do many projects, “I’ve been team mom, homeroom mom, I’ve put on the musical, I put on the plays, I made costumes, I do whatever is needed” (interview, 4.20.05).

The type of support she provided to the school also fit within the school’s culture and expectations for parents:

The parents step in, raise money like crazy, work in those classrooms and support. So I was there from the beginning. I was in almost every classroom. I worked in the classroom once or twice a week. Me with others. I’d be there with four or 5 other moms. That’s the support they have at that school. It’s unbelievable. Any event that went on, the parents put it on. It wasn’t even through the Parent’s Association. It was just through home rooms (interview, 4.20.05).

The school was the local public elementary school but was supported by a lot of involved parents. The type of involvement was to support whatever teachers and the school wanted done. The school was very lively and had a lot of events. However, she mentioned that involved parents were upper-middle-class white parents who lived in the neighborhood. There were also students of color who were bussed in from poorer
neighborhoods and the wealthier parents resented them and whispered about the non-involvement of their parents. The participating parents themselves reinforced the type and amount of involvement that was expected at the school.

As her daughter neared middle school age, she started to think differently about where to send her, especially since she already had the experience of her two older daughters who attended the middle and high schools that her third daughter was expected to attend.

I knew there were problems. And you can’t go in and work in the classroom over there. They don’t want you in there. They don’t want you down the hall to smell the pot smoke in the bathroom in high school, seeing the girls running out putting their clothes on out of the boys’ bathroom. I mean, I was on that campus because I found a way by doing some projects. Senior projects, stuff like that. So I got to see. The teachers can’t even—they don’t try any more (interview, 4.20.05).

The school’s policies kept parents on the periphery of the school experience where she felt unwelcome. She had been happy with the elementary school but like many parents, felt nervous about sending her child on to the associated middle and high schools. By this point, she knew that she had choices about where to send her children to school. In addition, her economic circumstances had changed and she could afford to send her youngest daughter to an elite private school. She values the experiences her youngest daughter is having because she is so impressed with how the school treats its students.

This is unbelievable what this has for these children. They are treated with respect. . . And I see this absolute haven for education. The teachers, most of them have their PhDs, even if they are teaching kindergarten, the children are from nice families, but most of all they are loved. They are wanted. They are treated really well so they are happy kids. You see little boys hugging other little boys and they don’t say anything about it. And you walk through the classroom and there are 13 or 14 little kids on the
edge of their seats, ‘pick me, pick me’. Whereas in public school, it’s more like ‘blah-I have to answer this. Give me a break. I don’t want to do this. This isn’t cool.’ The atmosphere in the public school now is that it’s not cool to be smart. It’s a problem if you’re smart. It’s like who are you trying to impress, are you trying to be a goodie too-shoes or what. The more effort you put into something, the more criticized you are. In the private school, at least in this private school, the more you put into something, the more good, positive reinforcement you get for that. . . .

(interview, 4.20.05).

In this instance, she is able to afford the atmosphere that she finds best for her child and can extract her from a less-than-friendly environment. She said that parents need to be aware of what their children experience.

Although she is wildly enthusiastic about her daughter’s school, she also realizes that it is a privilege to be able to afford it. She is working to make this experience available to low-income kids by fundraising.

I am doing fundraising for the school now. I started a booster boutique. I just raised enough money to offer tuition for a kid. Full tuition. I am so excited. I am going to volunteer to make a corporate connection for the school. To get some corporations to give some scholarships for inner city kids, mentor them through the process, and offer a work study program as they become of age. I am just driven to do that for the school because they deserve it (interview, 4.20.05).

Her own initiative is to fund low-income kids to be able to attend the school that “treats students with respect.” She talks of this school as if it is a learning paradise; she has finally found a place that matches her own philosophy of treating her daughters as individuals.

At first she questioned paying so much money for a private school when they had a good public school down the street, but once she went to Open House and saw how the students were working and how they were treated, she became convinced that she should send her daughter there. Her decision was not so much an “escape from” as
a “move toward” a type of education. She says that even her oldest daughter, who first thought the private school would be filled with “snobs” is now enthusiastic about her sister’s attendance. “And now that they see it, they’re like, ‘oh mom, this is where I should have gone. I would have loved the opportunity.’…. [My oldest] thought that with her ADD that would just be a harder school. But it’s just the opposite, they really meet the needs of kids that are challenged in any way” (interview, 4.20.05). Barbara’s experiences with different types of schools challenges the easy labeling of parent choices. Her goal was that her children be respected at school.

She uses a rhetoric of individualism and “personhood” when she talks about her kids. This way of understanding them is contrasted to the school demands that the kids fit into the normal boxes that the teachers expect. The one exception that she has found is this elite private school. She feels that this learning and respect should be an experience that all children have. She regrets that her first two children did not have this school experience and she realizes it is a privilege that her third daughter can have it. Her frustration with the school system developed over time as her critique and her awareness of the differences in learning styles of her children developed too. She likes the private school her daughter is in because she sees that they treat the kids like people, like adults, and not like automatons that need to fit the box or be a label. Her help fits the traditional support role for parents and she is comfortable with that because she found an environment that matches her philosophy. She is not there to “check up on” the school or her daughter’s progress.
Hidden Messages and School

Parents struggle with the tension between what they know about their children (that they are smart and good learners) and what the school says about their children (that they don’t hand in homework, or aren’t trying, or have a ‘problem’). The way that the parents negotiate that tension is determined in the first place if parents have access to resources that enable them to challenge the schools’ definitional process and in large part by how the school responds to parents’ input. Barbara tried several strategies: helping her child to fit the mold and meet expectations; finding alternative schools; being involved at the school to see what was going on; homeschooling to escape the labels and emphasize her child’s own learning proclivities; and choosing (and being able to afford) a school that matched her ideas of how children should be treated. Her experiences with the different institutions demonstrate how her parenting and support changed with each new environment.

Throughout her account is a struggle of the school’s views of her children versus what she knows about them. In providing help to her first daughter, she “proved” that she was not stupid and was able to learn. With her second daughter, she created an environment that addressed her learning style. She supported her when she was in high school by providing an alternative at home that countered the school’s messages about learning. With her last daughter, she found an agreeable environment that treats her daughter with respect and supports learning. This notion of respecting individuals and empowering students is a theme in many parents’ accounts of their students’ struggles in school. What should be the basis for learning turns out to be difficult to find because students need to meet grade level expectations and are ranked
in comparison to others, creating a hierarchy of “successful” and “unsuccessful” students. Parents may not agree with the labels that schools use to “help” students and indeed, as Barbara’s experience shows us, may actively resist those labels.

How she resisted the school labels and practices changed over time because of the knowledge that she gained with each experience, as well as her changing economic circumstances. Her first child struggled so much because she thought that she had no options. In addition to these beliefs about school, she also had less financial resources that would make an escape possible. Without financial resources and the knowledge that things could be different, her “resistance” became hidden work to bolster her daughter’s confidence and performance on school criteria. With her second daughter and homeschooling, she had the resource of time. And with her third daughter, she had financial resources to choose an environment. With all three daughters, she was resisting what she saw as detrimental school messages. But the resistance is expressed in different ways.

**Traditional School Program Structures: Parent Efforts**

Barbara’s story reflects her encounter with an important aspect of schooling: labeling. Her first two daughters’ learning styles did not conform to traditional school practices, thus causing them to struggle and to then become labeled as “not trying” or as “incapable” of doing the work. Labeling practices result in public and private consequences: publicly, students are evaluated in comparison to others; privately, their self esteem is attached to the label. We saw both consequences in Barbara’s story. She was also concerned with the lack of respect with which her daughters were treated, which could be understood as a consequence of labeling. A person’s individual worth
and capabilities are not being respected if they are being labeled “lazy” for not meeting set expectations.

Clearly, Barbara saw her daughters differently than the school did. The structure of separate spheres for “school” and “home” more easily allows the dissonance between home and family perceptions of students. This separation also contributes to producing family resistance to the school, or teacher resistance to parent interventions. The two parties work separately to further their own goals, more easily blaming the other for shortcomings. This section explores traditional school structures and families’ experiences within those structures.

Parent Involvement: Supporting the School

Barbara started with the idea that she should support the school, which was a very common idea amongst parents I interviewed whose children attend a traditional school. One middle class father who grew up in a rough neighborhood was very pleased with his daughter’s public elementary school, which had a reputation for being a “good school.”

Roy: There are so many parents that help there too, that’s half the battle. I mean they have so many parents helping that they can’t use them all. Versus I have a friend that teaches in [a poorer area of town], they get no parent help. You know, you can only do so much… [I] helped teachers grade. Whatever they wanted me to do, I did. Odd jobs, help with their craft. Things that I’m qualified for. (laugh)

Author: Why is it important to volunteer?
Roy: For one thing, you get that bonding with your child and you get hands on to see what’s going on and you know, they need the help. Whatever you can do to make things easier for the teachers (interview, 4.12.05).

Roy emphasized the role of parental involvement in the success of the school, as did another father, Jeff. Both saw parental involvement as being important because they
were an example to their children and as a way that they could check on the school to see how their children was doing. Their help is in the support of the teachers, doing things that the teachers and the school finds useful. Parents did not talk about inventing new ways of teaching or changing things in the school. They saw that they were there to support the school’s mission.

Jeff also understood parent involvement as a form of civic participation, which he values. He was frustrated by the lack of parent participation in the lower middle class public school his children attend. He went to an Open House for a magnet school and found that more parents were involved there.

The plus side of a magnet school, the resources are huge, there is a lot of money. And you are with a group of parents who really care about how their kids do in school. That is probably the biggest factor in how well they score at that school because so many parents are so involved and so committed to getting a good education for their kids (4.08.05).

Jeff emphasized that student performance is linked to how involved parents were with their child’s school. He feels that people volunteering is a key in student success. In linking student performance to parental involvement, the underlying message is that it’s the parent’s responsibility to ensure that their child meets the school’s expectations and fits into the school’s format.

One mother, who started an art program for her child’s entire school, still felt that her volunteering and comments had to fit into the teacher’s expectations. “I didn’t want to rock the boat too much because my son would be affected in the classroom” (interview, 3.24.04). While parental involvement is important, parents understand it to take acceptable forms of support for teachers. This upper middle class mother’s
comment about needing to fit in points to the pressure parents feel to support their students and the school’s goals.

Even parents who wish the school would support them in providing their students with curriculum that would address their student’s learning issues in an inclusive way find that they are still in a supporting role. Niki, who got her child vision therapy and did not push the school to solve her son’s reading problems said that she didn’t “think that the school could function without volunteers. Part of it is that I think that the teachers—what I am doing largely is trying to support the teachers and the staff. And I think that they give so much to the students…” (interview, 4.19.05). Jeff, too, is highly involved in a “Dad’s Club” that he co-founded with five other members. His son is facing struggles in school, but he feels that it’s important to be involved and to support the school, even if his family is experiencing some difficulties.

For me it’s to make the school, to give the sense of community. It is an institution, it has a very strict set of rules, with order that has to get by. That alone is kind of cold. The people aren’t cold, but it’s—it makes it more fun. It makes it more enjoyable place to go if the parents are involved and doing things around (4.08.05).

This support for the school conforms to the school’s expectations and leaves the hierarchy intact. Teachers ask parents for help in certain areas and parents provide that support in an expected way. The school does not change its expectations through these interactions.

Labels, Expertise, and Respect

As we saw in Barbara’s account, parents as well as children are expected to conform to school expectations. However, this pressure contributes both to finding
help for students as well as to labeling students. Some parents accepted this process as a natural outcome of their child’s struggles in school. Jeff’s account of his son’s struggles demonstrates how parents can view the school as ‘child expert’:

Ryan is struggling a little bit this year, but it's hard to know whether it's his relationship with his current teacher or whether it's other issues. They're actually doing an assessment on him because his fine motor control is really poor. His writing is -- it's legible but just barely. But his intelligence and his eagerness and his -- he's exceptional in every way except that, really. And we took him…to see a pediatric specialist … and he didn't think there was anything wrong with him at all. He said that fine motor control, it's a problem in your school, when you're forced to learn how to write longhand. But as you become an adult, it doesn't matter anymore because there's keyboards, and whether you can write well just doesn't matter.

So my concern is that if he falls behind the other school [mates] while he's being forced to learn longhand … that he'll get frustrated… I go into it knowing that Sam is a wonderful boy. I know he is. I know he's smart…You know, of course, he's fine. But his current teacher—I know she's thoroughly committed to teaching children. She's not a teacher that just goes to work to get a paycheck. She participates in a lot of the after school programs that aren't mandatory. She's one of our [exceptional public teachers]. So I respect her opinion, and we agreed to pursue her view of what would be done… I think that the problem that the teacher had …is that in elementary school, when they send a student on to the next grade, all the teachers know this, they are responsible for that student being up to the right level so that the next grade doesn’t have to play catch up. So she has a professional responsibility to her peers to get Ryan up to that level, even if his natural flow isn’t there. So she has a personal interest in the relationship to her peers (interview, 4.08,05).

Ryan’s “problems” in school were not obvious to Jeff, but he was willing to have his son evaluated because the teacher suggested that he could be having some learning deficits. Jeff hadn’t thought that investigating whether his child should be labeled as having a ‘learning disability’ was strange, and in fact until our conversation, hadn’t considered how the school’s view of his child was impacting how he thought of his child. It was taken for granted that there are standards, developmental milestones, and
set progress that must be made if his child is to function in the school system. He would like to Ryan to be able to work at his own pace without the label, but doesn’t see how that can happen in a school. He is very concerned that Ryan keep up with his peers so that he does not experience negative social consequences. Jeff and his wife wanted to be careful not to have him officially labeled because they felt that that label would follow Ryan for his school career. The labeling of a student can occur officially or unofficially if children realize that others “don’t make the grade.”

This extra pressure to conform to expectations set for a group of children does not allow for the individual developmental trajectory that Jeff described when his child was younger. He said that children learn to crawl at different times and some children just get up and walk; there are all kinds of ways of developing as a person, but when the kids are older, they have to meet the school’s expectations and time schedule. For Jeff, it is not so important that his son meet those criteria for the criteria’s sake, but rather for the social ramifications that come with not meeting the mark. He doesn’t want his son to feel inferior to the group. In fact, many parents mentioned “keeping up with their grade” as being a very important part of school. The notion of comparing their individual child to a group of children and to norm-referenced tests was very evident.

Other parents feel that they need to intervene on their child’s behalf in school. Mary, a lower income mother, had her daughter call the teacher at home to clarify the homework assignment. When the teacher refused to give her the homework, saying that it was not her responsibility to talk to students when she was home, the mother decided to homeschool her child. “How can she do that? Here you have a student so
interested to learn that she calls, and the teacher says she can’t help? That’s not right.” (fieldnotes, 1.15.04). This mother felt frustrated in her efforts to help her child in school, and also realized that her child was not receiving the respect from the teacher that the mother felt was necessary in supporting her. She was instead viewed as a “troublemaker.” She said that her hasty decision to homeschool her daughter has proven to be the best thing for them as a family, a benefit she didn’t consider when she took her child out of school as a protest to the treatment she had received. “Now we spend more time together and we are a lot closer as a family” (fieldnotes, 1.15.04).

Most parents said that they want a school that respects their children as people. Mary’s financial circumstances only allowed her to resist the school’s labels and lack of respect by pulling out altogether and homeschooling. She had the resource of time to be able to devote to this choice. Private school was not a viable option for her family. However, she was able to find the homeschool program with an atmosphere that would be supportive of her children and of her values.

Other parents with more means also said that they did not want to fight the culture of the school. Roy moved his daughter from the public elementary school to an elite private school because he was worried about the influences he saw at the public middle and high schools.

Part of it was the social interaction too. I know a lot of the kids that go here to the local high school and junior high and there are so many problems with the kids there. And I told other people that even the boys at this school, the private school, are probably two years less mature than these kids around here. So (laugh). But I know the junior high kids here are into gangs, drugs, alcohol. You know we play our softball games at the field there and there are beer bottles laying all over the place. I hear that kids at the high school are taking water bottles with vodka in them and are drinking in class. Just hearing all the problems, I just didn’t want her to
have to deal with that, yet. You know, you can’t protect them forever, but they don’t need to be exposed to that right now. You know, you don’t know what’s right or wrong. I see a lot of parents who are so overprotective too, and I’m glad I’m not that way with her (interview, 4.12.05).

He was not seeking an exclusive education for his child per se, and he struggled with the idea of sending his child to private school. Like Barbara, he felt that he couldn’t control the school atmosphere, but he could choose one that he found supportive. Each used the limited knowledge they could gain from their involvement in activities that were at the school—sports and the prom planning—they each concluded that it was an environment that they did not want their children to be in. They were not protesting the culture of the families who sent their kids to the school (Roy mentioned that he grew up in a rough neighborhood running the streets as a kid), but rather the social outcomes that they saw in the school as evidence that they needed to choose a safer environment for their children.

Ironically, Roy now worried that his child was not ‘street smart’ and that sending her to a private school where the students were all polite and nice would lengthen the time that she is ‘protected’ and sheltered against the realities of life. He didn’t know how to resolve this tension, but said that he would rather she be a bit more naïve about the world than to experience the drugs and alcohol and sex that was evident on the local high school campus. He felt it was his responsibility to choose the environment for his daughter’s education. The choice he made would have a large impact on the outcome in safety, education, and self-image that his daughter developed.
All three of these outcomes (Jeff’s decision to have his son tested, Mary’s decision to homeschool, and Roy’s decision to send his daughter to a private school) reflect different reactions to traditional school participation structures of keeping school and family separate. Jeff was happy with the environment, so his parenting takes the form of helping his child fit the environment. Mary provided her daughter support to help her “overcome” the school’s messages and experiences but then realized that she was being labeled a troublemaker and decided to create her own environment. Roy decided to choose the culture he wanted his daughter to experience and had the means to do so. He did not try to change the school but rather chose to leave. These parents, from different economic circumstances, all wanted their children to be respected and supported as individuals. They resisted the labels of the school in different ways, depending on their resources and understanding, but their efforts were to resist the school’s labels and the attendant social and private consequences.

Some accounts of parent involvement contradict these interview findings, demonstrating how middle class parents can be confrontational and demanding in the school setting, while lower class parents don’t challenge the school as much (Lareau, 2000). However, both sets of parents experience separate spheres of “school” and “home”; one group may be more effective in getting what they want, but they are both resisting the school’s labels and social consequences for their children. In each case, the school still maintains its authority over the “doing school” part: scheduling, books, standards, and expectations. Parents can try to negotiate for their children, but they are negotiating within that framework and understanding of what school is. The relations are not changed; the school does not turn around to support the family. At best, the
family or the school “wins” some concessions but do not become partners in the education of their child. At worst, the two sides dismiss or avoid each other.

**Traditional School Program Structures: Comparing Students**

By examining families’ experiences with traditional schools, we can come to understand what they saw as problems for their children, both socially and individually. Many families chose alternative programs and homeschooling to combat the school messages when they saw how it was impacting their children.

One mother who took her daughter out of a traditional school said that it took 2 years after she started homeschooling before her daughter would believe that she wasn’t stupid. When she went to school, she would come home and say that she was stupid and ask her mom if she was retarded, and her mom would tell her no, that people just learn differently. Even in presenting an alternative explanation, she felt her efforts were inadequate to fight the label that her daughter was experiencing in school. She said that because her son has had no experience in the traditional school, he has no idea that he is behind grade level expectations and is quite happy with himself. He doesn’t have the experience of comparison to others that her daughter experienced (fieldnotes, 5.26.04).

Ironically, she had her son tested and labeled as learning disabled because her program teacher wanted the testing done. And now she says it’s good because it’s official and in his file, and everyone can see that even though he is behind in reading and math (by two grades), she is working with him and he is making progress. If he weren’t diagnosed, then perhaps someone could say something about that (fieldnotes, 5.26.04). This teacher’s recommendation demonstrates the need to either keep up with
state standards or demonstrate a reason why students are behind. But this mother’s willingness to have her son labeled is dependent on her homeschooling him.

This mother saw how her daughter had internalized her slower progress compared to other students and concluded that she was stupid. Her daughter had been in a learning disabled class but her mother saw how she was so miserable and decided to homeschool. The lack of comparison to others has allowed her son to avoid the bad feelings about his own slower learning process. However, because they have chosen a homeschool program, she is happy to have the evidence of the “learning disabled” label on her son so that she can avoid potential problems with the state saying that she didn’t do a good job with her son. The label is kept in the realm of paperwork and does not have any social consequences for her son’s lived experience of learning.

Messages from the school about performance are also about fitting in. Nicole sent her oldest child to public school for kindergarten and for first grade. She discovered that she was not happy with the hidden lessons the school was teaching:

Nicole: And I was just shocked . . . that’s when you start realizing, when they are in those younger grades, where the problems begin. How the conforming and how ‘let’s mold these students.’ You know, she would go to the office because she would ask too many questions.

Author: Wow.

Nicole: That was just—‘what?’ Well, she was disrupting the class. The teachers are so busy, and they have so much that they need to accomplish so there is no way that they can stop when a kid has a question every five minutes. So I found another school, and it was a private school, but it was not academically focused. It was an outdoor experiential school that really took from all systems, from Waldorf and Montessori, and so the girls both went there for 2 years. It was amazing. It was beautiful—16 acres of land, orchards, and animals they had to take care of. There were 50 kids in K-6. . . .Now, since I have been out of that school, I am seeing some of the problems that they have. They were almost not enough academic. Kids that are transitioning out of that school into a public school are very behind. But behind in what? You know. They can’t do their arithmetic as
well as everybody else can. Their reading is not up to snuff. But they can communicate, and empathize and cooperate and—so there was a trade off. But we went from that, you know, 16 acres, trees everywhere. I mean, physics was ‘OK, it’s raining, so let’s build dams out of the puddles that are starting to develop. That sort of thing. Then they came here [to the local public school]. . . which was 600 kids, chain link fences, concrete, modular buildings, one teacher. Oh yeah—at the other school they had single subject teachers, you know math teacher, science teacher, that kind of thing (interview, 6.8.04).

To combat the message that her daughter should be quiet and unquestioning, she found (and could afford) another school that fit her ideas of integrated learning better. Although she sees that her children were behind traditionally schooled children in academics, she finds the experiential school to match her values of cooperation and empathy. She feels that that school supported her daughters’ self confidence and learning, whereas a traditional school required her to conform to expectations of being quiet and not asking questions.

They had to move and after a year in the local school, she realized that her children were unhappy and beginning to doubt themselves. She decided to homeschool them.

Nicole: I feel that if the teacher is good, they will be able to bring the kids up to where they need to be. My concern is with math because I saw how hard it was for them to transition into the public school. You know, it was devastating and they were really really stressed and I just want to help them so that that doesn’t happen again. What are the expectations, ‘am I gonna get labeled, am I gonna be smart or the dummy, am I gonna make friends’. . . . I guess I’m the type of parent who wants to help them ease into things versus just plunking them in and going ‘deal with it.’

Author: So it’s more of a self image transition that you are worried about rather than do they know all the material? . . . If they had stayed at the outdoor school, you wouldn’t have worried about them. But you went to the public school and you got worried about them academically.

Nicole: Absolutely. The whole thing is about ‘where are you in conjunction to everybody else.’ You know, are you at the right place for the right grade. It’s intense. It’s rigorous—you know. And the damage
you do to the kids. [My oldest daughter] got damaged in fourth grade from this teacher. She is—she truly believes that she is not skilled in math whatsoever and that she’s a dummy. Which is completely absurd. She just hasn’t got her division facts down. But she’s spatially very advanced, you know she’ll look at a geometric situation and figure it out (interview, 6.8.04).

Nicole spent a lot of time just doing fun lessons at first with her daughters to try to mitigate what she saw as her daughter’s math phobia. She feels that she was kind of forced into homeschooling because of the issues her daughters had at the local school. Her motivation for homeschooling was the negative change that she saw in their self confidence because of the comparisons to other children that occurred in the traditional classroom. Her philosophy of learning and life that had been supported by the alternative school that her children attended before moving was now threatened by the traditional program that she saw was negatively impacting her daughter’s self esteem and confidence.

In comparing herself to others, her daughter began to internalize a math phobia in addition to emphasizing the social significance of her work in the classroom. One dimension of the hidden curriculum of school—ranking of students—is evident in her feelings of inadequacy. Her mother said that she’d never had these issues before when she attended the alternative school. Even constructing alternative views about her daughter’s math abilities did not help her daughter feel more empowered. The school’s label on her math abilities “won out” over the mother’s attempts to shore her up. In the end, she pulled them out of school to homeschool and try to repair the damage that she saw done in the traditional school.
Monica, who we met in Chapter 4, give an account of her son’s struggles which also demonstrates the social context of learning and the messages being given to students about themselves in relation to the work they produce and the comparison to others. Her son’s self-confidence rose after finding others like him and getting individual attention because up until then, he felt that there was something wrong with himself because he couldn’t conform to expectations.

Monica: So you see this kid …[who] scores off the charts - in all the IQ things. But then when he would turn in his book report, it would be a couple of sentences that were scrawled funny. And because of this dysgraphia or this difference between what's going on in his brain and what comes out of his hands… He's thinking big ideas, but his output would be like "the car is blue" - it is funny - even though he's thinking at a way different level. So that's frustrating. …And that frustration caused him not to do the work.

…One thing we did - and this was really helpful - for Grades 7 and 8 …they had a special seminar program for learning disabled kids… so, although Jason’s learning …difficulty was slight compared with some of the others - some of these kids couldn't read, even though they were near genius IQ. They couldn't read. They couldn't write. But -- so there was a very small class. Gosh, in his seventh grade, he had one class with three people in it…this was his elective. Rather than taking Spanish or band or something, he took this. …But he was with other kids like himself. You know, they had varying degrees of genius and of difficulty. But they related to each other, so he's not alone; he's not the only one. A very caring teacher - you know, big heart. …I think that helped him feel better about himself, you know, that he's not alone. And you know, partly it's maturing. [The teacher] gave him some strategies in just getting work done…breaking it into small steps. He got to use computers, rather than handwriting. (interview, 3.21.04).

In a traditional classroom, Monica’s son saw that he could not perform to the other students’ levels. The teacher was also frustrated by his lack of performance, which came across as a lack of effort in writing his reports. As we saw in Chapter 4, Monica homeschooled Jason for six months in 5th grade to help him recover from the negative opinion that the teacher voiced to him and the class about his work. The smaller,
specialized class allowed him the space to grow and to see others like himself and to help him realize that he is not stupid. The experience of being compared to others was detrimental to his learning. Monica emphasized the need for acceptance and that the teacher with a “big heart” helped her son gain confidence in himself.

Just as Barbara found herself creating systems for her daughter to function in the traditional classroom, Monica did the same thing. Both fought the labels of “being lazy” that the school imposed on their children. Their own understanding of their children was different from the school’s and fighting those detrimental labels became key to bolstering their children’s self esteem. In Barbara’s case, only years later did her daughter accept that she was different but not less intelligent than the other students. In Monica’s case, her son saw other students with similar learning differences and was able to believe in his own ability and learn coping mechanisms to function in the traditional classroom. The effect of the comparison to others for both students was negative.

These parents saw the negative impact of school practices of labeling on their children’s social standing at school and on their self esteem. At first, the parents tried to help their child conform to the school’s expectations. However, creating a different understanding of their children’s difficulties and trying to employ that alternative at home was not effective; parents had to get their children out of the situation. As we see with these examples, parents with resources can resist by helping to create special programs for their children, homeschooling, or finding a private school. Parents with more limited resources can create alternative explanations and support their children at
home, but as we saw in Barbara’s oldest daughter’s case, the home explanation is not necessarily enough to combat detrimental school messages.

**Labeling “Difficult” Students: Homeschool Program Exceptions**

Some students do not exhibit behaviors that the school deems necessary and appropriate and are labeled as “difficult” students. Because most program policies prohibit the homeschool program from accepting students who have been expelled or whose parents are not willing to be involved, the programs generally cannot take these students, although some do. These students’ experiences point to the powerful and detrimental effects of labeling on student social acceptance and self esteem.

As we saw in Chapter 4, some homeschool programs accept students who technically do not qualify for homeschooling: their parents are not home, or they are facing expulsion in their traditional school. This support for students who would be considered marginal in the school district allows students to continue within the public school format.

School districts sometimes attempt to use homeschool programs as last-ditch efforts to educate “difficult” children. While the official requirements of homeschooling are to have a parent responsible for taking on the education of the child, one program reported that the district sent families to them who were clearly not qualified to do homeschooling. The flexible teacher who has a reputation for a “soft heart” took them under her wing. When I visited, there were two children sitting at a table quietly working on their book work. They would come over to one of the teachers if they needed help, and she would help them. She explained that the two boys had had a lot of trouble in the traditional school program with fighting and not
getting work done, and that this solution is their last chance at a regular school, the only other alternative would be a juvenile center. She also said that there is one kid whose mom drops him off and he spends three days a week working in the corner, and his supervising teacher checks up on him. Sometimes the parent will call before 8:30 to say that he is coming and they can order a lunch for him from the school that is on site there (fieldnotes, 5.26.04). For these children, this arrangement offers a haven from the traditional school experience, in addition to providing the support that should come from the parents.

The homeschool program is being used by the district to sequester “problem students” from regular schools; these students would have been labeled in the traditional classroom. They don’t get the benefit of the “extras” of homeschooling, like more time with their parents doing fun things, or pursuing their own interests with the support of a parent, but they are also out of the social and academic situation that caused them problems. In the homeschool program they can be seen as students who sit quietly and do their work at the school. In not publicly categorizing students, the homeschool program offers a place where students do not have to resist labels that the school imposes.

Although these kids are labeled by the greater school system as troublemakers, the homeschool teachers don’t find them to fit that label. There is more flexibility for students to do individual work in the homeschool program. The teachers acknowledge that this type of student is not what the program was designed for, but they also say that it is the last chance before reform school for these students.
These students acted out in class before, but are now conforming to the demand of quietly working. It seems that the homeschool environment does not produce the same type of student resistance as the traditional school environment. These students are uncommon in homeschool programs and represent an extreme relative to the traditional school setting. They present an interesting contrast in behavior in both arenas. What is it about the homeschool program that allows them to perform successfully there?

**Homeschool Program Structures: Individualized Learning**

Families who tried homeschooling to combat what they saw as detrimental messages about their students experience different structures that surround the school experience. These structures foster different social and internal experiences in relation to learning.

**Parent Involvement: Being Supported**

In contrast to adapting to the school, homeschool parents expect the program to support their notions of education, within the bounds of the program. Some programs are more flexible than others, and parents may choose a program because of its flexibility within the given structure. One parent said that she shopped around for a program that would support a more integrated approach to education, which entailed reading novels instead of the grade level anthology called for in the town school curriculum. One program she looked at was even more rigid in its requirements than a traditional public school would be:

I checked out the [other program] about four years ago—it was very assignment driven. The teacher gave you assignments and you went home and did them. And we were really trying to avoid that. So we liked the
freedom of [this program]. We have this calendar and we see where we should be every day. But we have the freedom—we don’t use the literature program at school, we always do novel units and tie them into social studies. And we are not worksheet people… At [the other program]…I could still do novel units, but we’d still have to do in addition the worksheets to satisfy that they’ve [done the work] and we don’t do that here. Instead of handing in a literature worksheet, the kids hand in a project that they’ve tied in to social studies with the literature. We just have that kind of freedom (interview, 9.23.03).

In this more flexible program, the family has control over meeting state standards and is not tied to specific worksheets. The calendar of assignments and work flow that the school provides does have a hidden curriculum of self responsibility for getting certain tasks done. The onus of responsibility for learning is on the parents, who use their judgment along with a teacher’s about the progress of their children. The message to the parent is quite different than a traditional school program where the parent and student are expected to conform to the school.

The parents’ role has changed from being one of supporting the school to one of creation of how they would like the education of their children to be. In fact, many homeschool parents said that they were very active in the school when their children attended a traditional school. Their involvement in their child’s education took on a different focus when they started homeschooling. This contrast of what it means to be an “active parent” in a traditional school setting versus in a homeschool setting can be seen in the following observations from parents who have had both experiences:

When they were in public school, I really didn’t have much of an idea of how they are performing because you know, you get this conference, and it is like at the end of the semester. And then I see them, you know, bringing home work, doing their homework, but I don’t really know if this is the complete homework, or just a part of the homework. And many times it turned out that they had to do more assignments and more homework than they were actually doing. But I didn’t know what they
were supposed to do... So that was a real big discrepancy. And in many of the subjects I didn’t really have much of an idea of what they were studying actually. In social studies in 4th and 5th grade they actually had textbooks that they brought home with them. So I knew what they were studying. But ... I didn’t know exactly where they are or what they are studying or what level. In some ways in math, I had more of an idea what they were doing in math, because they were bringing the homework. But with English, not so much. I mean, they bring the homework where we need to build something. But then you don’t know exactly what are they studying—are they studying adjectives, sentence structure or what. ...[Now] I spend more time with the kids and you know I learn what they really like and their interests.

...Because before they were in school all day and then they went to the Boys and Girls Club and they were gone from like 9 [in the morning] to 6 at night. And then you know we would just gather in the evening. And you don’t really know that much about them, you just ask how your day was (interview, 10.3.03).

In a traditional school setting, this parent focused on supporting her kids when they did their homework. She learned a little about what they were studying by gleaning it from the books or assignments, but she was not involved as a learner or teacher with her kids. She was more of a supervisor of work to ensure that her children did the assignments. The lives of her children in school were very separate from their lives at home, as evidenced by the “report” of the day when they finally gathered together in the evening.

As a homeschool mother, she now knows what their interests are, how they react to the curriculum, how they work. Not only the time together, but the structure of learning has changed so that her role is now one of involvement in the learning process of her children. The hidden message in homeschooling is responsibility for the learning, whereas the hidden message in traditional programs is for the parents to be “cheerleaders” for the school, as one mother commented, “teachers that I know say that they like it that their moms can just be cheerleaders and be in the background”
(interview, 11.06.00). She compared this expectation to her experience homeschooling and said that she likes the responsibility of being teacher and mom, of being the one they come to if they have questions.

Janice was very active in her children’s education before homeschooling, but found the role of supportive parent hard to play:

Janice: So when we had children we were going to put them in Catholic because it’s our religion . . . and we did put them in catholic school. And they were not happy. My daughter went through 4th grade and my son through 1st. We were really unhappy with the amount of homework. Several hours for my daughter in 4th grade. And a good few for my son in first grade, about an hour and a half.

Author: Oh no. I can’t imagine what they’d be doing in first grade that would take an hour and a half.

Mom: Practicing writing, reading. Writing, math problems, spelling words—copying out your spelling words five times each. So we spoke to the school, spoke to the teachers and said—I’ll just go with spelling. For every grade, on Monday there’s a pretest, and on Friday a final test. So I said to those teachers, ‘they took the pretest on Monday, why do they have to write every word 5 times. Why not just the ones they missed?’ But she couldn’t give me a good answer, she said, ‘well that’s the way it’s done, and it’s good practice for their handwriting.’ And I said, ‘well, I don’t mind the practice with handwriting.’ You know, I can see the point. Could they not do a paragraph of creative writing. This is so mindless and boring, and there’s no point to this. And it takes so much time. But no, they had to write all the words 5 times, they had to do all the math problems on the page, even though the concept was the same on the page, and they got the concept, but they had to do them all simply because that’s what’s done. So we found ourselves really stressed out at dinner time. And it was a big problem. . . . We had considered taking them out of scouting, something they both loved, because we had no time. We really truly believed that it was the case that our family life was pretty driven from the outside. . . . My daughter spent a ton of the day reading novels. She would finish her work, and she’d have to sit there while everyone else caught up. And she wasn’t allowed to get a head start on her homework, so she would read a novel. The kids were sitting in school sort of twiddling their thumbs all day when they didn’t have access to their mom and dad. And then when they did have access to their mom and dad, we couldn’t interact with them because they were so busy. So that’s why we left. . . . I guess it doesn’t really answer why we went to homeschooling. At the time I guess it was just that we felt that it was the only option. Now they’re delighted.
But we didn’t really consider ourselves sort of homeschool advocates. We were more just ‘escaping from’ and we didn’t know all the benefits of homeschooling.

Her son didn’t want to do homeschooling at first, but later changed his mind.

He wanted to stay where he was, because he loved all his friends, he loved his teacher. And he was going to have that teacher again next year because she was moving on with the class. . . If the homework increased, he would have just done a sloppier, quicker job, and that would have been OK with us. It wasn’t ideal. But I wouldn’t have, you know—he would have gotten it done quicker. So we said, ‘alright, you can stay’. . .

I like [the homeschool program] more, but I was very connected to the school they used to go to. I was there as a parent volunteer, I was there every day, I was on the board. I mean, I didn’t like it, I wasn’t happy, but I was connected. I don’t think I would have my kids somewhere where I wasn’t sort of seeing what was going on, and how can I help and what can I do, and—you know, how can I assist or whatever. . . So I am probably as connected, but there I felt I was trying to problem-solve or troubleshoot or put out fires or whatever. Trying to FIX what I saw as a dysfunctional setting. And I don’t feel that here at all. So, timewise, I’d say my time commitment is the same… (interview, 09.29.03).

Janice assumed that the children would go to Catholic school because that is what their religion is. Similar to Bulman’s (1999) finding that parental choice in schools is frequently not an active choice but an assumption, Janice’s ‘choice’ of Catholic school was not a deliberated decision. When they started having conflicts with the Catholic school over homework, they talked to their friends with children in public schools but found that those families were struggling with the same types of homework loads and school policies. The school rules impacted the ability of their family to have time together. The structures and requirements of school could not be negotiated and the parent found the teachers to be unreasonable and unresponsive. The seemingly unnecessary requirement that her children do homework at home
exasperated her. However, all the negotiations she engaged in to change these requirements were met with rigid responses.

When trying to change the requirements didn’t work, she decided to take her children out of that school. If her son had ended up staying, her support for his education would have been to subvert the importance of homework and allow him to hand in sloppy assignments instead of forcing him to take so much time away from their family time at home to produce a good product. Of course, this ‘support’ would not have been viewed favorably by the school because parents are supposed to support the school’s interpretation, not undermine the requirements of a good education. Her role as a parent changed over time. At first, she supported her children, then she advocated for change so that their education would have been, in her eyes, more meaningful and less boring, and then she started homeschooling them, taking the creation of their education into her own hands. Many parents who have experiences in both traditional and homeschool programs felt that they were somehow “forced” into homeschooling because they did not feel supported by the school in pursuing what they thought was a ‘good education’ for their children.

Despite these conflicts with the school, she was a very active parent who tried to change what she didn’t like at the school. Her role was to try to improve the school for her children, as well as to check up on the school and ensure that her children were having a good experience while they were there. Ironically, this very involved parent says that her time commitment to each program—the Catholic school and the homeschool—is similar, but that her goals are different. At the traditional school, she
felt she was trying to ‘fix’ the school, whereas in the homeschool program, she feels supported in her own ideas and does not need to ‘fix’ anything.

Her children’s homeschool program recruits parents to be involved in teaching classes in their area of expertise. It also allows for a wide range of parenting, teaching, and learning styles, as well as varying family goals. This flexibility allows families to pursue their own interests and purposes without having to meet strict requirements or conform to the school’s ideas of education. Part of this freedom is because families are the main providers of education and they come to school to socialize or for events for the children. In fact, families can stay quite separate even in the shared space, as seen in Chapter 5 at school picnics. The family’s responsibility counters the school’s potential for labeling their students. And parents are very adamant about pursing their own ideas about educating their children.

This freedom allows and requires parents to take on other roles in their children’s education besides just supporting what the school wants. Parents expect the program to support their ideas about their child’s education. Because of this expectation, the role of the parent has to do with shaping their children’s experiences more than they can in a traditional program. In addition, neither parent nor teacher can hope that the problem is solved in the other sphere. The structure of homeschooling provides a common space for families and teachers to work together.

One couple put their son in kindergarten as one of the youngest children in the class and the teachers said that he had discipline issues and that he would grow out of it once he matured.
So right away there was some discipline problems with him - not anything really negative but just more of a self-discipline - you know, trying to entertain the class. And that's been the case every year. And they always said, "Well, you know, he's immature. It's a maturity thing; he's going to mature." And the truth is, he's a bit of a clown, and that's who he is and that's who he's going to be. And I also think that I want him in public schools for middle school and high school. So I'd rather he be the oldest, strongest kid in his grade and not the youngest kid in his grade. So we decided to homeschool him and hold him back a year (interview, 11.02.04).

Although they advocated for their son to be held back each year, kindergarten, first, second, third, and fourth grade, the teachers would never agree to that. After trying for so long, they decided to hold him back themselves. Although the homeschool program teacher also did not agree with their decision, he nonetheless supported them. They said the one thing that would have kept them in the school was

If they would have been receptive to my concerns and let me hold him back in kindergarten, then this probably wouldn't be going on at all. We would have just supplemented his math and English. But I've wanted to do this for a long time, and they just didn't give me an option (interview, 11.02.04).

When conforming to the school’s expectations, advocating for their child, voicing their concerns within the school’s framework didn’t work, they decided to homeschool their son. Many parents expressed the frustration of not being listened to. This underlying message of needing to support and conform to school expectations did not affirm the parents as knowledgeable, caring partners in their child’s education.

These parents were all involved with their children’s education in the traditional school system but felt that they were not being listened to and that the school would not address their needs. Their support had to conform to the teachers’ expectations and to the school structures; the school would not change for them. These
sentiments are not uncommon: many parents view themselves as “forced into” homeschooling because of the school’s unresponsiveness to their requests.

The traditional structures of parent support reinforce separate spheres, whereas homeschool program structures reinforce bonds between families and programs. The responsibility for educating the children is shared, creating an overlap in family-school spheres and enabling a partnership to form. This arrangement mitigates resistance because parents and students feel respected and supported.

**Shared Social Space**

The structures of homeschooling enable parents and students to share experiences, thus contributing to the shared conversation about how each understands the experience. I will now examine how homeschooling families have bridged the separate spheres of adult and child—and school and home—experiences to create shared experiences.

As we saw in Chapter 5, parents are frequently present at homeschool program seminars, fieldtrips, and other learning experiences, which impacts interactions in a few ways. First, students receive a lot of individual attention in classes and seminars, with parents helping their own and others’ children. Second, students are frequently helped by parents through a social interaction. One mom said, “I like to be around to help him if he needs it, or to explain that maybe one of the other boys didn’t want to play with him now but they can do something later.” At a “Park Day,” one boy with Turrets Syndrome comes over to complain about the other kids bossing him around and not listening to him. His mother is able to help him through it by asking him questions and reasoning the situation out (“is he the boss of you? Does it matter that
they want to do something else …”). She said that he had been picked on a lot in school before, and now he was doing well (fieldnotes, 3.2.04). The adult support is nearby if students are having difficulty in a social situation. Many homeschooling parents feel that allowing children to negotiate a social situation alone is less than ideal. “They are with all 10 year olds, what skills can they learn from someone their own age? They reinforce a lower standard together” (interview, 11.04.00).

Homeschool parents are with their children most of the time and can decide when to intervene; their children are integrated into their day and share their experiences together, so parents don’t need to wait for a report from their children. This togetherness creates a very different social and learning situation than the traditional school setting, which has an impact on parent, student, teacher relations. As we saw in Chapter 5, teachers feel that some parents do too much for their child or try to get the answer instead of letting the child work on their own. Togetherness can prove to be problematic, and teachers are quick to point out that these overbearing relationships are not helpful for student learning and growth. They view families with these types of relationships as poor homeschool candidates who are unlikely to homeschool for long. They are, however, very supportive of parents who use the closeness to further their understanding of how their child processes and understands situations.

Parents see how their children process the experience. One mother explained:

They know that adults, you know, parents and children, are involved together, there is nothing wrong with it. And that’s really special too. It’s not like, ‘hey, what are you doing here, you shouldn’t be there’. It’s like, ‘yeah we are sharing that together and it’s fun,’ and everybody is doing that at the homeschool program. Like even with my daughter when she
started in high school and she had a basketball game and I sat down at the practices and I was the only one doing that and I was kind of. And she didn’t mind because she was used to that before and because I started right away. At first it was a little uncomfortable for me because it’s high school and people are not used to that. And that was the best thing I did, because it was something extremely important in her life, and then we would come back from practice and we would talk about it and how her practice went, and this and that, and I learned a lot about basketball and was able to play with her outside and practice with her and it really brought us so close because most of the time she was gone every other day in high school (interview, 9.23.03a).

This parent saw her participation in her daughter’s basketball games as something to share with her daughter. She stayed for the practice and watched, something so unusual that she was the only parent there. But because of their homeschooling experience, her daughter did not feel that this was unusual to have her mother in her sphere and this brought them even closer together. She went on to say that her daughter is going to college now and is older, but that she treasures that closeness they had through the shared experiences. They shared the experience and their thoughts about it. She did not wait for a report from them about a separate experience.

She contrasted her own experience with the experience of others in a traditional school program. When the children were younger, she went with the homeschool program parents and children to a play:

. . . I saw these kids, they were little kids, young kids were there. In our group, each kid was with their parent, pretty much, or friends, or you know. And then I saw these 30 or 40 kids with . . . one teacher here and there. And these kids were like in first or second grade. . . . For the first day it hit me. I was like, ‘this is really sad. These kids are all day long there with people that really don’t care about them.’ Well, they care, but they can’t care about these 30 kids individually that much. I used to be a teacher and I cared about the kids. But it’s really different. And all these kids are there and experiencing something, and they really can’t share it.
They are going to come home, it will be [over], they won’t be able to talk about it, talk about what they did, and discuss ‘was it fun, was it sad, was it this or that.’ . . . And then you have our group there, and the kids were with their parents, and there’s all this love, I mean you know, nobody can love your kids more than you do, and then we talk about it, and we say ‘oh yeah, this was sad, and’ –Like [my son] was almost crying at the end—it was like a little princess type thin—and I said, ‘oh, me too’ and we talked about how we felt about the play and all that (interview, 9.23.03a).

She emphasized experiencing the event together so that the parents and children can process it together. For her, reporting on the experience is nowhere near as meaningful as experiencing it firsthand together. The emphasis is on spending time together; the timing of the interaction is influential in the parent’s ability to see how the child processed the information from the play. She emphasized how the experience of life is shaped differently because of this timing issue. If students can only report on something that the parents didn’t see, the reporting will be partial and the parents will not really understand their child’s interpretation of life. The structure of homeschooling allows this intimate sharing of experiences, whereas the structure of the traditional school does not. Of course, this is an account of a special event—seeing a play—but it can also apply to social situations, learning encounters, or any other event that parents and children share during the day. This sharing is not only about reporting on experiences, but on interpreting, on providing guidance for difficult situations, and on validating each other’s opinions about the event. The underlying message is not one of comparison to a group but of acceptance of individual understandings.

The structure of homeschooling is such that parents and children share a great deal of their time together. This structural shift is in contrast to traditional school
programs where parents and students are separated for most of the day. In sharing experiences, parents can provide support that otherwise would not be available to students who are usually isolated from family during school hours.

**Labels are Transformed**

Not only are the spheres of home and school shared, the roles of parents in homeschool programs change from being supporters of the child’s education to being the primary providers of their child’s education. With this role change a change also occurs in the necessity of labels: parents can provide individual attention to students who need it without the school pointing out that the student has “special needs.” In a traditionally organized school, funding and services are attached to labels, so labeling a child insures certain services are provided. For example, if a student has a speech impediment, tests are administered, the student is found to have a speech problem and labeled with this term and is then eligible for special services. Services are limited, so without the label and testing procedures, this child could not receive services.

By contrast, in homeschool programs, the parents many times simply notice that their child needs extra help with something, or teachers will suggest ways of helping students with an issue. The complex machinery of a traditional school is not needed to produce a label. The same issue is viewed as something that needs to be addressed and may be given a label by parents or teachers, but the label is not part of the public identity of the child. Nor is the label something that is consciously held up as part of the child’s learning experiences, as was the case with Barbara’s and Monica’s “lazy” children.
Marnie talked about seeing how her daughter was becoming quiet and nonverbal in preschool because she found the chaotic, active atmosphere to be too overwhelming:

And so, by the second year, her teachers were saying, "You know, we don't know if she's going to make it in kindergarten because we're trying to get her to dictate a story. She doesn't want to dictate a story." Well, at home, she dictated seven pages to me. You know, I typed it out on the computer. And they said she doesn't want to use the bathroom. Well, there were no doors on them, and she was very private. You know? And they are not used to thinking of three- and four-year-olds as having privacy needs and stuff.

So -- but okay. I loved the school. I thought it was a great school. I loved the teachers. I thought the kindergarten looked great, but clearly she wasn't going to be happy. You know? And I thought, well, she could adjust; everybody adjusts, you know, but what's the loss here? And if the loss was going to be her verbal nature, and if she was going to start keeping things secret, which she was starting to not want to tell me things that had happened. You know? And I thought, well, I don't want that. So, it was sort of a last resort, and I really didn't want to keep her home because I was teaching, you know, and I had assumed I was going to go back to work more and stuff. It was very, very hard to sort of accept the switch to [providing] childcare, which at that age is basically what it is (interview, 3.29.04).

On the surface, the educational outcome of providing services to a student is the same: the student’s learning needs are addressed. However, the difference in the process creates a difference in the meaning. In the traditional school, the teachers noticed that Marnie’s daughter was having problems with skill development because of the social arena. If she continued in the traditional school, Marnie was afraid that her daughter’s confidence would suffer. In homeschooling, parents accept that their child needs extra help in one area but has strengths in other areas. Labels employed in an overt manner that students would be aware of are not necessarily part of the process of helping the student. In fact, some parents view this help, which would be
considered “extra” in traditional programs, as just part of what they do to ensure their child’s success. One mother said that she views this tailoring of educational experiences to her child’s needs as addressing the child’s learning style.

That has helped me so much—to know the material to pick, that neither of them can handle a lot of writing, so we do more oral things. We do activities that don’t require much [writing], and then I only focus on the writing process instead of worksheets that focus on other skills that don’t matter” (interview, 11.13.00).

She is still using predetermined curriculum, but feels that allowing her son to spell words out loud or have a conversation about the history book he read instead of writing it down “allows him to get the concepts without getting bogged down in the writing he finds difficult.”

While not personalizing education to the extent of addressing her child’s interests through curriculum adjustments, she is still providing a more individualized education by altering the requirements of the assignments. Having a conversation instead of writing the answer out allows her son to cover the same amount of curriculum as the schools but without the frustration he would usually experience with writing. This mother alters assignments to address her child’s weakness in writing while providing him focus and support when he tackles a larger—and to her, more meaningful—writing assignment, such as writing a report. The public process of labeling her son with an attention deficit problem or with a writing problem is not part of her solution, she revises while taking into account her perceptions of his needs.

Many homeschool moms say that they use videos to supplement history, and don’t require their children to do “all the busy work” of worksheets. One mother said, “We do a ton of stuff orally. We do it, but we just wiz through it. A lot of it. Even like
social studies worksheets, sometimes we do orally. Sometimes I have them write it out so that I can have a half hour away to get my stuff done. But if I’m caught up, we’ll just do that orally” (interview, 9.23.03). In the homeschool setting with fewer children, there is no need for the children to have a record of everything they learned if they can discuss it with their parent and move on. In a traditional setting, the “busy work” of worksheets allows the teacher to check in with her students to see what they know. If students have reading or writing troubles, the evidence emphasized in school is not evidence of their learning the content, but evidence of their struggles with reading or writing. Thus, the demands of the structure of a classroom environment may reinforce the labeling of students as not understanding the content when they in fact have a good understanding of the content but cannot express it in the way it is evaluated (generally in writing). In fact, many homeschool teachers encourage their parents to have discussions with their children and not to do every worksheet; each “student” has the opportunity to talk, enabling the parent to quickly assess student progress.

The grading aspect of school occurs at home, away from competition with others. Parents see whether their children understand the concept and either review, rework, or ask for help from teachers. In fact, report cards in many homeschool programs reflect progress toward acquiring skills; grades are not assigned. The notion of grading student performance starts in the middle school or high school grade levels, with teachers assessing student work and administering tests, essays, and projects. Up until then, students are evaluated on their progress toward attaining certain state standards for each grade level.
The assessment of student progress is made individually and against a benchmark set by the school, not against other children in a public manner. Homeschool students who do not grasp a concept can come back and do it again without the public consequence of a label of needing remediation or being “stupid.” These different structures contribute to different outcomes for students.

**Hidden Messages of Homeschool Experiences**

In homeschool programs, the vicious interaction between labels and resistance that we saw above largely disappears. The structures of homeschool foster a different lesson about learning than the lesson of comparison that students in traditional programs receive. I turn now to an examination of homeschool families’ experiences and the hidden messages underlying that experience.

**Schedules: Choice and Responsibility**

Beth, who has been homeschooling for about 10 years, summarized her schedule, with the caveat that it is hard to describe a “typical day” because they have a lot of activities outside the home, such as seminars at the school, sports practices, and community programs that change their schedule:

…if it’s a day at home, we try to get everybody up and out of bed by 8. I have kids that love to sleep in, if they had to be at school at 8, they would be miserable. I am sure they would adjust, but their biological clock doesn’t work that way. …Seth has a routine of working out, a day on his arms, a day on his legs… and trying to build up strength. Samantha will do stretching, and she can do the splits, and that type of thing. So we put on a little music and do that for 15 or 20 minutes and kind of get going. Usually when they are finishing up, I am making breakfast and finish breakfast and get going. We typically would start with math. We tried last year… starting our morning with writing a little poem just to try to get the creative juices flowing, and then once they are done with that, they just kind of move on to—they kind of know what needs to be done. It’s going on to vocabulary and reading and they have stuff to do on the computer.
Here’s one … We don’t have the outline—what it was called, but it was one word, two words, three words, four words, one word, is how it would go. So it was:

Bridge
Golden Gate
Suspension, cable, wires
Took four years build
San Francisco

We went to San Francisco…So that is how we got our creative juices going. But Seth’s creations were a little—here’s his:

Money
Big cash
Give me checks
I’ll never be poor
Wallet

(laughing) Yeah. So they were just kind of fun to get us going, I thought, before we set right into math. This year I’ve kind of given them a choice, they know what needs to be done and they can do it in any order. Typically they both want to get going with their math, so that is where we start… It’s just kind of fun. And we do that. And we do vocabulary and I try to keep them going and we can plateau at the same spot. Samantha is typically done first, and like I said, she sits down, and she doesn’t look up, she gets hers done so she can go do something. They can practice typing on the computer, they have the Amazon Trail, and some reading type games on the computer that they can do… But then we get to the point where we are doing Lewis and Clark, it might be 10 or 11, typically toward 11. We do “Which Way USA.” We’ll try to do one of those every couple of weeks. So we take time for doing stuff together. Then we break for lunch. And then typically after lunch, they’ll have something they are working on. A writing project we are revising on the computer, or their own individual reading… (interview, 11.16.01).

This schedule is very similar to a traditional school schedule in that subjects are taught or reviewed and there is a routine. The children know what is expected of them as they progress through their work. However, in some ways these similarities mask important differences as well. They start their day in a leisurely way by stretching and exercising, each child doing something that he/she chooses to do. Then
they ease into academic work by doing fun poems. They proceed to math, something the kids chose to do first. The unstated message of their educational experience is the children’s control of their schedule and the meshing of fun with responsibility. Life and learning should be enjoyable, they have control over their schedule within the boundaries of needing to get a certain amount done and they are not forced to be someplace early morning, when they would be tired.

This type of negotiation over the schedule and the kids’ ability to organize their day within certain expectations of finishing work is typical it seems of families using the structured programs. Many parents described similar schedules and rationales for their schedules. The work needs to be done, but it can be done on a schedule that the family devises. The school dictates the amount of work and the family has the flexibility to say when and how that will be done. Students are learning to be responsible for their own work and are independent within the context of the structure of the assignments and curriculum.

**Time and Interest**

Another aspect of the control over their own schedules is that students have time to explore a topic for as long as they want. Many families said that they develop an interest in something and do a unit on it, going to the library for extra books, messing around with science concepts, or doing other research that they find interesting. Since there is no schedule imposed from the outside, the family can decide how much time to spend on each topic.
Beth’s son participates in community activities. She draws a comparison between what he is able to do in his homeschool experience and what occurs at other educational programs:

…He appreciates what we are doing and the time we have and the fact that we can get what we have to do in a short amount of time. He’s an avid baseball fan, and so he knows that if we are done by 2:00, he can practice or do whatever. He has also gone to [a science program for children]…they have an after school program. And a couple years ago he went to that. It’s from three to five, two days a week. And they had four different classes and so one day they would do two and the other day they would do two different ones. And he really liked it. But he had a problem with the fact that there was always someone or another messing around in the class disturbing it. He was there because he was really interested in science. A lot of the kids were there because their parents worked and they needed them somewhere. And so that bothered him. And the other thing that bothered him is that he was in the electronics, and the hour was up and it was time to go to biology, but he wasn’t done with the electronics project. Sorry, you’re going to biology. And he is accustomed to being able to have the time to finish his projects. And so that became frustrating for him. I think he was able to connect with that, that that is how it would be like in a school situation. So he appreciates it (interview, 11.16.01).

Seth’s participation in an after school program points to differences between homeschool and traditional school experiences in the messages about learning, time, and interest. In his homeschooling experience, Seth learned to be focused on the object of inquiry. He learned how to sustain a project and his interest. He sees from his mother’s support and interest that his learning is important and engaging. Since they can determine their own schedule, they can spend as much time as they need or want investigating and working on something. In contrast, in a traditional school setting, he had to conform to a timetable set by the school. The underlying message is not to get too involved because the time commitment is episodic.
In addition, the level of interest was different. Seth has to do things that he is not particularly interested in, but then he has free time to pursue his own interests. His mother supplements the curriculum with projects that she sees spark her children’s curiosity. For Seth, this after school science activity was something he chose out of interest. He was enthusiastic to be there and viewed it as his “free time.” The other students were not all there because they found the topic interesting—as Beth pointed out, many parents used the program as a babysitting service—so focused interest was not guaranteed. Some students resisted being there by disrupting the class. Seth’s experience reinforced the idea that he was responsible for his choices and learning and could take as much time as he wanted to explore a topic. In contrast, the traditional structures allowed only limited time for exploration and limited choice in activities.

**Curriculum: Learning as Individuals**

Ironically, parents say that they like the support of teachers because they want to know how their child compares to other children of the same age. While trying to escape debilitating categories and labels and seeing their children as individuals, parents need the assurance that their child is making the “correct” amount of progress through the curriculum. The normative controls over individuals are not eliminated, but they are displaced in homeschooling. The norms become background knowledge, not something that is held up for students to internalize about themselves. Students work through the curriculum and teachers may categorize students as slow or fast. Students’ experience of doing school work is not in comparison to others; it is in comparison to the teacher’s perception of each students’ potential. For example, Beth said that her son
is a good reader and loves to read and my daughter is a good reader and hates to read. And I never liked to read. I love to read now, but I didn’t as a kid. We still read to her, and we try to encourage that. But it’s definitely not her thing (interview, 11.16.01).

She is comparing her children’s propensity to read, but accepts these behaviors from them, works to have her daughter read, and then in her teaching, emphasizes each child’s strengths. The daughter is not compared to “others” who like to read, and no value judgment is placed on how she should like to read.

In the homeschool programs, these labels of conforming or not to a set of expectations aren’t demonstrated in the public sphere. There are no groups of students who are all one age who are under the specific control of one teacher, so direct comparison between students is not possible in a public arena. Instead of a public labeling process and public results, the labels in homeschool are private and used by the parents and teachers to tailor the education. The book work is individually done, so the only witness to learning difficulties is the parent and teacher. In fact, on several occasions, teachers and parents told me that they readjusted curriculum to have a student essentially repeat a grade without telling the student, saying that the student seemed more confident because he/she was able to handle the work at that level.

The close relationship between parent and child is valued by parents, but can be both rewarding and quite difficult. Barbara, who I discussed earlier, reported that her middle daughter “said that she doesn’t know that she will ever be able to match those three years [of homeschooling]. She said to have your mom as your teacher, the one you can trust the most in the world, she said that she could risk in learning. And the greater the risk, the greater the reward” (interview, 4.20.05). Many parents talked
about the trust that develops between them and their children and see that trust as essential for learning. However, this new type of relationship of the family to the school work also generates a lot of work for parents. One mother who decided to homeschool her fifth grade boy because he was falling behind and not bringing home assignments said that she had to struggle through the first few months because he was not taking responsibility for his work. If he didn’t understand a concept, he would not want to work more on it, he wanted to just move on to something else. His experience in school was that if he waited long enough, the class would move on to something else and he wouldn’t have to worry about learning that concept. Uncompleted work was forgotten and he didn’t have to work on it. However, in homeschooling, his mother noticed if he didn’t get the answers correct and he had to work until he understood it. She said that finally, after months, he was beginning to internalize the idea that he is responsible for doing the work. He is beginning to care about whether he actually understands the problem (fieldnotes, 1.15.04).

This student has control over his schedule, and he has free time when he finishes his book work for school. He has no home work at night, and the family reports spending more time together. However, he is resentful of his mother’s checking on his work, and he misses the social aspect of school. His mother has had to learn how to balance her support for two children, as an older sister is also being homeschooled. She says that after one year of homeschooling, she may place her son back in the traditional school because he wants to go and she is tired of the battles to finish the school work. Her daughter says that her brother may be ready to go back since he has shown that he cares about the work he does and that he will be
responsible for it. If he does go back to school, his mother says that he will be more successful because he has learned what it means to be responsible for his work (fieldnotes, 1.15.04).

The shift of responsibility to the parents for the official provision of the education of their children generates an individual relationship of students to the curriculum, which is not always a smooth transition. The lack of comparison of the student to others during their learning generates a one-on-one relationship to the tasks of learning, which can be difficult for both parents and students.

**Student Resistance of a Different Kind**

Many parents report a tug-of-war as far as doing the work. One mom commented,

"If they get all their bookwork done during the week—they have a set amount of math problems and spelling sheets and what have you. If that is all done by Friday, they get Friday off. That has never happened yet, but that’s their choice. They know that they have that freedom, and—but actually it doesn’t happen because—they’re not fooling around, they’ve just signed up for a ton of stuff here [at the homeschool program], they’re just involved this year (interview, 9.29.03)."

She said that when they first took their children out of the private Catholic school they had chosen and started to homeschool that her son would rebel against doing the school work.

"Janice: He wasn’t as self-motivated….I would say, ‘as if you would be sitting up on Miss Smith’s lap crying because she told you to go do math’ and he would just laugh because he could picture—so you know, they know. Or they would argue with me, and I’d say, ‘say the same thing but put Miss Smith at the beginning of the sentence’ and he would—it would dawn on him. Author: So [the private Catholic] school helped you deal with that. Janice: I think so, because he had an idea of what he did the year before….Now that isn’t a problem, but that first year, oh he was so lazy, ‘we’re home’ and he wanted to play with the baby, anything, to interrupt his
school day. He liked school, but he didn’t have the concept that he was supposed to be schooling…. (interview, 9.29.03).

Janice used the traditional school experiences of her children to reinforce the idea that learning is work and that there are things that need to be done. She then gave her children more freedom—and responsibility for completing their work—by allowing them to ‘choose’ to complete things before Friday. Internalizing the idea that they had to finish their work did not come easy, but now that they have, she doesn’t have issues with them not doing their work.

Another mother also said that she just expects the work of school to be done and that her children, being children, try to get out of doing it. She said that she tells her son,

. . . if you want to do certain things, depending on what your lifestyle is, you have to be able to support that. If you have a family, you have to be able to take care of your family. . . . There are always going to be things that you don’t want to do. I always tell him, ‘do you think that I love to do the laundry or the dishes?’ ‘No,’ but they have to be done, so you do them. And you just do them and get them out of the way, so you can do things that you want to do. So I try to go at it that way. And he’s pretty smart, I mean he fights, they fight, he’s 10 years old, but—you try to impress upon them that they have certain responsibilities and you have to fulfill those responsibilities. You know, ‘daddy goes to work every day, and your job is to be a student and learn all this stuff.’ He was trying to ask me the answer, and I said, ‘look, I was already in 6th grade. I already know this, it’s not for me. You’re trying to learn it’ (interview, 9.24.03).

This expectation of work is combined with freedom to choose when to do the work within the structure of the day. Many parents said that they started with math first because their children like to do that first. The choice is many times limited to what is in the curriculum or what the parent feels is important, so students are more constrained than I expected they would be.
One mother said that her children sometimes complained that she was “running over their creativity like a steam roller” (interview, 9.23.03) and so I became curious about how their choices were constrained:

Author: Are they having choices, if I ask them do they have a choice in their education, what would they say? . . .
Cynthia: No, not really. My youngest one is in 7th grade now, and I have chosen for him to do biology this year so that he can do physics in 8th grade. So we follow the book. And he will complain, and we will try to work out a mid—I mean, we can do this instead, how about that. They would probably say that they don’t have a choice. I would say that they have a lot more compromising, more of a say than public school. They know that they have more of a choice than in public school. And they can drag it out, they can manipulate me much more than they could manipulate the teacher, even though they know that in the end, they have to turn something in, it could be lousy, but it has to be something” (interview, 9.23.03).

Homeschool students try to get out of doing work, just as students who attend traditional programs. However, the parents can rely on traditional school ideas of “doing school” to cajole their kids into producing the work. Beth, who we met above and who has been homeschooling for 10 years, struggled with her daughter’s lack of desire to doing the work that needed to be done.

Samantha is a little tougher and is a little more stubborn. She is quicker to say ‘I don’t want to do that’. My famous phrase is that ‘it’s not an option.’ This is what we are doing. Actually, we are off to a better start than we ended with last year. Last year I was thinking ‘forget it, she is off to traditional school. I am not going to deal with it.’ This year she has definitely toned down a bit. Maybe last year seemed too long to her, or we were doing too much. But she seems more eager to do what needs to be done, which is good (interview, 11.16.01).

She would sometimes rely on the homeschool program teacher to talk to Samantha or to tell her what work had to be done. This function of cajoling and counseling is not uncommon for homeschool teachers. The customization and individualization of
education is limited because students do have to do some school curriculum, and “doing school” even on their own schedule, is sometimes an onerous task.

The couple who decided to homeschool and have their son repeat fourth grade really struggled with him over the school work. They had had problems with him when he was in the public school over the homework, and felt really bad. “We were nagging him all the time, and we hated ourselves” (interview, 11.02.04). But the first few months of homeschooling were taking a toll as well.

Yeah, and he fights with us a lot, which is frustrating, but… But I mean I still feel like he's doing well. When we met with [the teacher] and he looked over Mike's work, you know, he said it looks like he's doing well, and he acted like we should be doing a larger volume of work, but you know, who wants to fight constantly? …So we set some goals and… He got an 88 on a chapter test and did a lot of worksheets; we did some reading together, and it was pretty productive, but it was like one fight and that's it. But I mean some days it doesn't go very well. Some days he fights with us and we're like, "Uh-oh, here's a worksheet; you've got to go do a worksheet before we can continue with what we're doing." …There are good and bad days (interview, 11.02.04).

Homeschooling does not automatically create eager students. Like Tanya and Brett, many parents described a tough transition time. As seen in Chapter 4, teachers say that a student has to buy into the homeschooling idea if the family is to be successful. At this point, 2 months into their experience, Mike still resented his parents’ decision. However, they did say that they were closer as a family and that he was starting to become more responsible for his tasks.

Tanya: And I usually don't say, "Look, this has to be done right here," unless he really causes a lot of like distractions and he's just not focused. Then I say, "Okay. Well, you know, I'm done today, but you have to finish this for me for tomorrow."

Brett: Yeah, the getting-thing-done-early thing works both ways, too. If he goofs and he's just having hard day, whatever is planned for that day, he has to get it done before he goes out to play.
Tanya: Right. And that's his responsibility. It's like we can -- you know, we're putting in a lot of time and effort to plan and schedule and figure out what worksheets or you know, what -- where our focus is going to be, and it's his responsibility to meet our expectations, and if he doesn't, then you know, the consequences are extra worksheets and homework, which -- I mean he shouldn't have any homework. I mean if we focus, we can be done surely before his friends get out, and they get out at 2:15 every day and noon on Thursdays (interview, 11.02.04).

In addition to holding Mike accountable for his work, they are taking a parenting class that teaches them how to balance choices and power with their child. They now have discussions with Mike about what he needs to do and then allow him to schedule himself. This process of transferring responsibility to students for their own work is daunting and frustrating. In homeschooling, students cannot hide their lack of performance and the parents have to find ways to address both learning and responsibility. In traditional school, the learning is geared toward the group so students can more easily hide their struggles as well as reject the responsibility for doing their work.

In homeschooling, the parents and child must find a way to work with one another because the majority of the school time is spent together. One consequence of homeschooling is the time parents spend together with their children. Some parents, like Tanya and Brett, try to develop new ways of exerting power and allowing choice, while others I observed at homeschool programs have a very traditional power dynamic with their child. It seems that in both traditional school programs and in families, this type of control produces resistance.

The individualized instruction, the evaluation of whether the student understands the concept, and the lack of comparison between other students leaves the
students with little alternative than to take ownership of their own performance. The student can resist for a long time, but if the parent persists, there is no place for the student to hide. Some families do find the struggle to “do school” and produce the work to be too much and leave homeschooling. However, the families that stay seem to use the negotiation of “doing school” and “free time” to foster student responsibility for their own learning. The parent (or the teacher) is not going to move on to the next concept and allow the child to flounder, so the learning difficulties are confronted and worked around, and students cannot hide in the crowd.

**Conclusion**

This chapter traced some parents’ negative experiences and outcomes with traditional school structures. Parents experience prescribed forms of parent participation and expectations of support at school. These expectations sometimes clash with how parents perceive their children at home. This separation of family and school causes parents and teachers to be able to blame each other and to work at odds. Students experience a separate sphere of schooling which can cause tension between how learning potential is understood at home and school. They also experience labeling practices which have both social and internal consequences.

In comparison to these traditional structures, homeschool families have shared school-family space which provides an opportunity for individualized learning that does not involve a public labeling process. Of course, these relations are not always friction-free, as spending a lot of time together can be difficult and draining. As seen in Chapter 5, teachers oftentimes serve as counselors for parents to help them through tough times. This support from teachers for families puts the family at the
center of the parent-teacher relationship. Families are supported by the homeschool program, creating different parent-teacher-student relations.

These differences result in a different hidden curriculum of self responsibility for learning and more student control over their schedule.

**Structures and Outcomes**

Families experience the institution of school differently depending on their choice of school for their children. Parents of children in traditional schools—whether private or public—have to operate within the constraints of the institution of school in providing support to their children. If the parents find the school to be supportive of their goals and values, or they find that the school reinforces their ideas about education and their impression of their child, then their support consists of helping their student meet the social and academic expectations of the school. On the other hand, if the parents find that the school does not support their values or perhaps not the view they have of their children, and they feel they have no choice of sending their child to another school, their support comes in the form of helping their child through the school system. In both cases, the parents are adjusting their support to the school. The school is not responding by structurally changing its expectations placed on the parents.

In addition to the relations of the family being shaped by school program structures, students’ relations to school peers are also shaped by the school. In traditional schools, students are compared both informally and formally to others in their grade. They are well aware of where they stand in comparison to others in academic and social performance. Homeschooled children experience learning as an
activity between themselves and the book and their parents in which their current performance is judged in comparison to their potential for learning. This stands in contrast to the normative evaluations of traditional schools in which students are compared to each other as part of the learning process. They may be aware that they are behind a grade in a subject or not as able to fluently read as others in their grade, but the process of learning does not involve highlighting this difference publicly.

The types of relationships that develop within each environment influence the inherent messages that people receive. Traditional school programs expect parents to support the school’s goals, whereas homeschool programs support the families’ goals. Parent-student-school relations impact student learning and the messages about learning that students receive. In traditional programs, learning is tied to social meanings, whereas in homeschool programs, students learn individually, not in comparison to a group. Of course, this reliance on the family could be counterproductive if parents do not support their children’s learning and self esteem. However, the same can be said of a bad teacher in the school. I argue instead of looking at individual proclivities toward support, we need to examine the social relations that surround learning. Student resistance or buy-in is shaped through those interactions.

There is a complex relationship between student culture and the culture of the school. In homeschool programs, the curriculum is maintained, but students gain control over their schedules and generally have more free time than students in a traditional school program. Homeschool students do not have homework, and can take breaks or get a snack whenever they wish. One homeschool boy said that he hadn’t
thought of that until his friend pointed out to him that in his traditional school program, he is starving by lunch time because there is no designated time for snacks (fieldnotes, 10.16.04). It is possible that in their ability to control their own schedules and to do things outside of school time that they are interested in, that working on the curriculum is not as laborious. This alternative environment, which allows for more student control at least over their time, and does not involve comparing them to others, may allow alternative student cultures to develop that do not require conforming but that do require acceptance of others.

**Shaping Resistance**

Homeschool student reticence to doing work sometimes occurs in the form of procrastination or discussions about the work, which is a form of resisting the work demands. However, compared to traditional school, homeschool students have more control over their own time and have less group rules to follow. Therefore, their reticence is a protest about the work, not about labels that the school imposes on them.

In traditional school programs, learning is linked to social status as well as a hierarchy of labels. This connection between labels, power, and learning can cause students to resist learning in order to assert their own control over their schedule and over their self-concept.

As we saw in this chapter, parents also resisted what they saw as detrimental labels by removing the student from the unsupportive school environment if they had means to or by trying at home to establish an alternative understanding of student progress. This different vision of student capacities was not as effective in combating the negative messages; parents reported students had to “recover” from their negative
experiences or suffered the labels in school. Labeling students as “lazy” inherently involves a lack of understanding or respect, which many parents of struggling students said they felt from traditional school programs. Many researchers (Au and Jordan, 1981; Willis, 1981; hooks, 1994; Delpit, 1995) have shown the connection between student resistance and the school’s lack of response to the student’s family culture. This lack of response is also seen in the lack of respect that parents complained about.

Parents in both traditional and homeschool settings fight the detrimental labels that the traditional school practices impose on their students. The actions of parents need to be considered when addressing student behavior and performance in school. These connections point to a possible way for schools to engage students through engaging and supporting families in their goals. Unless close collaboration is possible in schools, parents and teachers will continue to talk across a divide, sometimes in support of each other, but sometimes at odds. Student resistance is oftentimes parent resistance as well.

**Self Responsibility**

I argue that these different relations that families have to schools and the different relations that students have to the group of students in schools create different ways of experiencing and understanding what learning is. Traditionally schooled children experience learning in comparison to others. Their parents work to support the school’s objectives or work to ensure their child’s success in the school. Parents and students are both aware of the potential social consequences of the evaluation of their learning progress. Homeschooled students experience learning in
comparison to their own progress. Their parents support their learning directly and are in turn supported by the school.

Parents in traditional programs are compared to other parents and are expected to conform to the school’s expectations, just as their students are compared to a group of students and are expected to conform. The pressure to conform to a norm occurs for both. In homeschooling programs, parents may be compared to others but are not expected (nor do they come with that understanding) to conform to a set way of being. The school sees its role as supporting parents in their education with their children. Homeschooled students also do not experience a direct comparison to a group. These two different experiences in relating to the group created by the school produce different outcomes for learning.

In Chapter 4, we saw how many homeschool families import traditional ideas about school to the home, but the messages of comparison and the symbolic attachment of learning to social standing amongst peers and in relation to a hierarchical teacher’s power have not migrated with the school practices. Although the family’s actions look like school, the consequences for student learning and resistance are different. Homeschool students experience a different model of comparison to others; they are compared to developmental progress whereas traditional schools employ a normative comparison between students. The homeschool experience is more individualized than the traditional school experience.

The structure of traditional schools, which involves ranking and comparing students in one particular grade, limits both teachers and students to a snap-shot view of progress. This narrow view produces anxiety if students do not fit the prescribed
developmental stages for that grade. Traditional teachers have limited contact with students over a shorter time span, so that ensuring progress on standards becomes more important. They will not have another chance to support that student’s progress or to witness their development.

Homeschooling, with a broader focus on standards that can be met across time and with an individualized approach, can more easily create confidence in students because they are competing against their own understanding and progress, rather than against other students in a classroom. Learning becomes an individual task instead of a social contest. Homeschool programs offer teachers a broader perspective, thus causing them to exert less pressure on families to have students meet all grade level criteria. If they see students making progress over time, teachers feel that families are on the right track.

Because of the different structure, the act of learning in a homeschool program has the potential to be a combination of required book work and the student’s own interests. Families have more free time to pursue areas that are not part of the formal curriculum and they have access to knowledgeable teachers who can provide support for these interests. It is not enough to only change the structure—families do need to pursue this form of learning—but it is more easily developed within an environment that shares and requires responsibility from parents and teachers and treats students as individuals.
Chapter 7

Concluding: “Doing School” and “Having Fun”

Introduction

Throughout this work, I deliberately stayed away from the oft-asked question “is homeschooling good or bad?” When people hear about my study, they want to know “what do you think about homeschooling?” This question demands a judgment. However, a simple answer is not possible. People’s experiences vary and there are complex social and institutional processes that shape those experiences. In addition, there are many ways to homeschool, with varying relations to the state. An evaluative judgment of that sort is not the responsibility of a sociologist studying interaction in everyday life. Instead, I attempted to portray accurately the dilemmas, decisions, and experiences of families as they negotiate educational solutions in different school settings.

This study examined families who chose a public school homeschool program and compared their experiences to families who chose more traditional forms of education, either public or private school. Independent homeschool families may have some of the same ideas about education but have a different experience because they do not have an explicit relationship to official, state-sanctioned programs. This study of an alternative form of education points to our own underlying assumptions and understanding about education.

Just like a traditional school, homeschooling is good for some students who thrive in such an environment, and not as good for those who don’t. Some families use
homeschooling as a bridge to help struggling students for a year or more and then transition them back into a traditional program. Other families are dedicated to homeschooling their children as their first choice for all or most grades. Some families feel they chose homeschooling and others feel forced into it to rectify some problem of the traditional school. Some families can afford the time and money for the “extras” that homeschooling allows, while others cannot. Some families “do a lot of school” and others barely follow the prescribed curriculum. Some families who were quite dedicated to homeschooling for all years of their children’s experience found themselves sending their children to a traditional program for various reasons. Many families said that they re-evaluate each year and see whether they will continue.

The changing choices families make cannot be stressed enough. No family can be categorized into “private school family,” “public school family” or “homeschooling family.” As I explained in Chapter 1, I view the current school choices made by families as a time-bounded decision that is not an identity. The premise of this research is that families and schools interact in certain ways which are influenced by the organization of the school and the meanings that the participants give to certain activities. Families can change categories of schools which then changes how their interactions are shaped. The label of “homeschooler” indicates a type of relationship that the family has to a program but cannot be viewed as a permanent identity.

During the course of this research, many mothers found themselves home alone after their high school age children opted to attend a traditional school. They joked that my next project should be to examine how mothers make the transition from homeschooling all day (they use this word as a verb, ‘homeschooling’ is what
they do) to having time for themselves again. Each family’s choice of schooling impact all members of the family differently, although in the case of homeschooling, it is mainly the mothers who shoulder the main responsibility. As Stevens (2001) found, nurturing a child and attending to their individual needs takes a lot of time, work, and dedication that is usually but not always delegated to women.

This work examined home-school relationships and how institutional expectations shape those relations and shape the meaning of practices. It examined an alternative form of education, finding similarities and differences between it and traditional concepts of school. As explored in Chapter 4, the similarities between homeschool and traditional school programs are shaped by external and internal pressures that cause the alternative to look very much like traditional school. Delving deeper beneath the surface similarities, Chapter 5 explored significant differences in the lived experiences of schooling between homeschool and traditional school programs. Some differences were unintentional and even unrecognized by the participants as alternative forms of education. Definitions of activities become key to understanding participants’ actions. Participants’ internal cultural conceptions of “doing school” allow them to embrace new forms of learning if the new form is categorized as “fun,” thereby not challenging their preconceived notions. Finally, Chapter 6 explored the social aspects of learning and the hidden messages that the alternative and traditional forms of school structures supported. It revealed the parenting work that goes into resisting labels that they found detrimental to their children. I turn now to the themes and lessons learned from each chapter.
This project started as an examination of what parents thought of as the meaning of education. I then realized that the meaning people make is shaped in large ways through the interactions they have with institutions and relies heavily on cultural conceptions of roles, responsibilities, and power. The negotiations between parents and school programs became a focus because that is where the meaning was being shaped. The framework I laid out in chapter 2 details how researchers have understood the perpetuation, consistency, and even transferal from one realm to another of cultural scripts. These scripts also contribute to student, teacher, and parent roles in schools. These relations shape outcomes, which parents and students either accept or resist. Student resistance can be understood as resisting the school’s messages—both in curriculum and in procedures—about the student’s culture and class. Linking these literatures is the idea that scripts are consistent, learned, and reinforced by the school.

However, in comparing homeschool programs to traditional programs, we can see that this consistency falls apart in different organizational structures. I argue that the change in explicit (organizationally recognized) responsibility from teacher to parent for the education of the child results in different practices and understandings of education, responsibility, respect, and power. Even the meaning of activities changes across programs, with families claiming the more informal learning opportunities as not “doing school” and therefore not under the purview of the teachers. And, coincidentally, teachers in homeschool programs recognize their programs as providing the “extras” that students need, so the activity becomes oriented towards the twin goals of having fun and being educational. The first part is emphasized more than
the second because the shift in responsibility of educating the child goes from the teacher to the parent.

In traditional school programs, parents still claim after school, before school, and weekend time as their own time, away from tests and books and more focused on the child’s and parents’ interests. In fact, families are quite similar in claiming this informal space for themselves. With homeschool programs, there is more opportunity for this informal time. Teachers in homeschool programs even encourage parents to have more of that time and less time on the book learning. Parents sometimes get caught up in “doing school right” that many teachers feel they may miss the aspects of homeschooling they feel make it a special experience if they do not encourage them not to do every page in the book.

The informal learning space that homeschool programs offer through seminars and fieldtrips is not viewed by participants as primarily a learning activity. Rather, it is “fun” and an opportunity to socialize. Seeing these seminars as “enrichment” or “extra”—something that occurs in addition to the book work done at home, where the “real” learning occurs—enables participants to experience an authentic way of learning without challenging their traditional ideas about education. Instead of a direct change in how education is viewed, these “extras” import a new way of understanding education, but in the guise of a fun activity. Even the homeschool program can advertise itself as providing the “same” education as a traditional school because it uses the same textbooks but then say that it offers “enrichment” activities that involve parents, students, and teachers learning together. Keeping these two definitions separate both reinforces the idea of “doing school” at home as well as posits the idea
that education can be something more than just book work. While reproducing school at home, families and programs challenge the traditional concepts of “doing school” at the school site.

Especially in defining certain activities as “free time” or “fun time,” families and programs inadvertently support experimenting with an apprenticeship model of learning. Although not seen as “doing school,” this apprenticeship model is a different way of learning than is traditionally enacted in schools. The change in teaching and learning that has occurred in some homeschooling programs was not a purposeful shift directed from higher authorities in the school. Rather, it was a development by the participants, possible because of the mental division between “doing school” and “having fun.” In defining the seminars as “fun,” participants allow themselves to enact different ways of learning. The learning that “counts” as school is still very traditional in many families but these same families experience a different type of learning through the “fun” seminars. People’s ideas about education and doing school may not change, but their lived experience includes both traditional and non-traditional forms of learning.

Neoinstitutionalism literature points to how cultural scripts reinforce similarities between institutions. School reform literature offers a similar point about how difficult it is to implement changes that challenge participants’ basic assumptions about education, their “grammar” of school. These underlying assumptions and propensity to produce similar expectations and experiences are evident in homeschool programs. Chapter 4 explored these similarities. However, the idea that shared cultural assumptions automatically lead to reproducing the original institutional form needs to
be examined. Families in homeschool programs experience an alternative form of education—authentic learning (involving cooperation and learning between generations and between more and less able peers)—yet retain their traditional ideas that school involves book work because they do not count these fun activities as “doing school.” Families experience a radical departure from the traditional teacher-as-knowledge-holder form of education when they attend certain seminars. However, they are able to adhere to this traditional idea of education because they have shifted this school activity into the sphere of “fun” or “free time” because they are voluntarily there. Yes, their traditional assumptions contribute to perpetuating ideas about education, but defining the activity as “not school” also allows them to ignore this challenge to their conceptions of education. The participants’ meaning of the activity simultaneously reinforces traditional understandings while allowing them to experience a departure from those understandings without experiencing dissonance.

In reproducing school at home, they are not simply importing understandings from school. Rather, they enact complex social processes of defining boundaries between “school” and “free time” or “fun.” Creating separate spheres of “school” and “home” allows homeschool families to claim the informal learning time as their own and allows them to develop different ways of learning, all the while preserving traditional concepts of “doing school.” In focusing on families’ concepts of “doing school,” it seems that no “reform” has taken place at all and that neoinstitutionalists are frighteningly right, it is difficult to get away from old ideas and implement something fundamentally different. However, if we venture into families’ concepts of “free time” we see that in this sphere (that they regard as something other than “doing
school”) in fact many forms of learning are occurring that do challenge traditional ideas. In looking at similarities of institutional form, it is important to also consider practices and experiences of participants. Although the participants themselves might not all define “education” as including their free time, this separate sphere, kept separate so that they can maintain control over it, does allow for very different educational practices to develop. This division would not have been seen if a study were only done within the institution. Participants carry scripts in their heads, so following participants and observing closely their interactions enabled me to capture this definitional work that they did. Ironically, the understanding about what education “is” can remain in place while the actual experience employs challenges to that definition.

Traditionally, schools account for student learning in terms of seat time, or the number of hours that students are in school. When homeschool programs first started, teachers said that they had to call each of their families and ask how they spent the day and how long they had done each subject or activity. People felt that homeschool students had to stay essentially “in school” for the same amount of time as other students. However, it became apparent quite soon that homeschool students could finish things quicker and were going through grade level books at a much faster pace if they “did school” all day. Parents complained that it seemed unnatural to keep their children sitting for so long, and eventually the program changed to accommodate a different accounting system of getting work done. Many homeschool programs now only require a work sample to show student progress through the books, and attendance is based on this demonstrated progress. Time is no longer an issue to be
counted. New institutional literature cannot explain this reverse change: it explains the original situation of similarity between the homeschool program and traditional programs because of cultural processes that encourage similarities between institutions. However, understanding this change in conceptualizing “school” is important because it points to cultural change within institutions as well.

I believe this questioning and subsequent change of taken-for-granted procedures occurred because the usual arrangement of schools dominating the logic of families has been reversed in homeschooling. To be sure, there are many procedures and rules that families must still follow in the homeschool programs. But the homeschool programs have accepted that the logic of the family is placed at the forefront of the interactions and expectations at school. This change in focus has significantly impacted the types of relations families have at school and has changed school procedures to accommodate family logics.

Neoinstitutionalist literature also needs to account for changing definitions of responsibilities. If a new party is responsible for implementing traditional ideas, it does not automatically mean that they will enact a replica of the idea. Enacting their new role may be a combination of their previous sphere (parenting) and the added sphere (education) so that they do not just import educational ideas, but use parenting ideas to interpret the new role. Different interpretations of responsibilities and meanings develop through this combination. Recalling literature on organizations (Mehan et al, 1986; Mercer, 1974; Cuban, 1992, 1998; Hubbard et al, 2006; Hall, 1995, 1997; McLaughlin, 1993, 1998), participants do not simply import ideas from
another realm into their current situation. They use skills from their area of knowledge to interpret their new responsibilities.

In short, this examination of homeschool programs shows how institutions can develop new practices through changing the definition of the practice or through changing who is viewed as responsible. Both aspects of the change involve people’s perceptions and definitions. Neoinstitutional literature needs to grapple with how definitions influence practice, thus creating difference or similarities. Definitions migrate to new institutions, potentially changing or redefining old practices.

**The Social Construction of Reality**

How people define an activity impacts the roles they take, how they act, their expectations, and their goals. The same educational activity can take on two meanings: “doing school” or “free time,” with consequences for what scripts people apply to that time. If the activity is defined as “doing school,” then the school is recognized as having a say in the requirements for it. Families “do school” in the morning, producing paperwork and evidence of learning because they need to demonstrate progress to the school. Many families pursue their own interests in the afternoon, defining these activities as “free time” and therefore not constrained by the need to produce appropriate evidence for the school. Even in the school, the activities can be defined as “fun” seminars where students and teachers take on an apprenticeship relationship and learn together. No one is publicly evaluated in comparison to others and all progress is lauded. Of course, this definition of “fun” for the activity can impact learning in a negative way in that standards are not upheld and shoddy effort is
accepted. On the other hand, students can be themselves, can help each other, and are valued for their contributions.

These separate spheres of home and school both reinforce traditional ideas about “doing school” and leave space open for defining activities as “free time” and therefore not under the control of the school. The separateness of learning for school and learning for one’s own interest is profound. Families learning out of interest count those activities as “free time” and not “doing school.” No book work, tests, or records are needed for this learning. In defining the learning as something other than “doing school,” families are able to take control of the activity. If the activity is defined as “doing school,” then the school has more say in what happens, how it is evaluated, what the requirements are. Recognizing parents as the primary educators of their children also allows teachers more freedom to do “fun” things for extracurricular seminars and to only focus on student progress in conferences and monthly work progress.

The definition of the activity determines which rules apply to it. In defining something as fun, families free themselves up from the school requirements and pursue their interests through projects. If they define the activity as “doing school” then they feel that they should produce evidence of learning, follow a text, and chart progress. This separation of meanings reinforces traditional concepts of school (book work, tests, worksheets) but also leaves room for other forms of learning even in the school building. In taking on the responsibility of educating their children, parents participate in other spaces that normally would have been evaluative but are now “fun
and educational,” thus freeing students from ranking and comparison to others for grades.

The definitions of the activities, which determines which sphere applies—home or school—is socially constructed. The same activity, defined differently, will require participants to at least consider applying different rules. They can choose to break the “doing school” rules that constitute their understanding but they still sense that tension between the definition and practice. In defining activities, families and teachers construct their reality of “doing school” and “having fun” and in doing so, determine through the definitions which rules apply. This definition is not necessarily conscious but it undergirds the practices participants enact. Defining the meaning of the activity also shapes the activity’s boundaries and determines which sphere will influence the interaction.

**Hidden Curriculum of Schooling**

School practices shape student identity; learning is attached to social and evaluative consequences in traditional school. Students who enter homeschool programs from traditional school experience a different way, or practice, of learning at home. They compete against their own progress, not that of other students. Their evaluation is private, not public, and is self-referential, not other-oriented. The separate sphere of learning at home impacts the definition of learning. Students cannot just ignore the concepts that they don’t understand, because parents and teachers will see and react to their misunderstandings. They cannot wait until the class moves on to another concept. They have to confront their own learning. But that learning is not attached to a social hierarchy in school or to a grade comparison among peers, it is
simply something to be learned. Ironically, because the learning is more focused on the individual’s needs, parents want to know how their child compares to others in their grade level because they do not have that as a base to see how their child is progressing. Homeschool learning becomes a combination of parent awareness of their student’s progress as well as teacher assurance and evaluation of it.

Student identity is also impacted by constructing a learning that is not directly comparative to others. Many parents said that their surely students “became themselves again” after a few months of homeschooling because the pressure to conform to school pressures was alleviated. This change points to evidence for questioning what causes student resistance, what students are resisting, and how to construct programs that students don’t need to resist. It seems that student resistance in homeschooling situations points to the unwillingness to do work and to boredom; neither of these is a political critique. It is possible that students are resisting traditional structures of control and the labeling processes in traditional programs so that resistance is a means for gaining control over time and identity and is not necessarily connected to larger societal critiques. The fact that the parent stepped in to change the environment for their child also reveals the role parents play in shaping student resistance. As we saw in Chapter 6, parents play a large role in resisting or perpetuating labels that the school assigns to their children.

However, this change also points to how to control students even more. If students are given control over their schedules and time, they are more conducive to the school’s messages in the curriculum. The message about themselves is not connected to their behavior or performance but is now limited to the curriculum. It is
possible then that messages that value one culture over another or that rely on class conceptions of ways of being are more easily accepted by students if they are not confronted by the lived experience of being labeled because of race or class traits. The combination of the lived experience and the curriculum that is usually experienced in traditional schools is argued to produce a potential critique in the guise of student resistance (Apple, 1982, 1993; Willis, 1981; MacLeod, 1987). But if students are only confronted with curriculum and do not experience the lack of respect that goes along with the curriculum, they might be more willing to accept those messages.

Homeschooling and attending to individual student learning needs has the potential to be liberating and empowering or to be a conduit of further inequality.

Of course, in separating “school” and “free time” even in the various learning activities that they experience, it is possible that students could read culturally irrelevant material while “doing school” and then learn culturally relevant things during their free time that would counter the messages in the school texts. This division of free time and “doing school” can be a space of resistance not only to labels but to the curriculum as well. A study of messages presented in alternative learning spaces is necessary, as well as an examination of how children negotiate dissonance between informal cultural knowledge and formal curricular knowledge in alternative settings.

**Challenges to Traditional Ideas**

Homeschooling is threatening to the conception that school is for everyone and that everyone fits in without any trouble because many parents emphasize their child’s unique needs that schools cannot meet. Parents working at home with their children
sometimes manage to avoid labels that the school would impose on their students. They can support their children’s growth in areas that exceed typical students, while acknowledging their child’s struggles in other areas that would be considered crucial to making any kind of academic progress in a traditional school. These parents are challenging the idea of school’s inclusiveness as well as the method by which school accomplished this illusion.

Homeschool parents of children that would have been labeled and categorized as misfits show that not only did traditional schools never adequately accommodate the variations students bring to class, they also unfairly labeled and categorized misfit students as inept. These families are showing that nontraditional students can succeed if given different supports, activities, methods of instruction, and different ways of demonstrating knowledge and skills. Of course, this success is defined differently than traditional schools would conceive of it. Students are not magically producing correct assignments, but instead are doing other activities that could be seen as educational or as alternative ways of demonstrating competence. Homeschooling pushes on definitions of “success” in ways that challenge schools because students are not required to produce the knowledge in the same way that schools require. Students in homeschool studying history can reenact events, have a discussion, or make models instead of writing a report. Parents and teachers in homeschool programs recognize the alternative activities as demonstrating knowledge, but traditional schools have no place for these interpretations of assignments. In a traditional school, knowledge is measured in a very limited and prescribed way. With the emphasis on testing, the ability to demonstrate knowledge in different ways is even more truncated than
previously. Homeschooling families, by accepting and emphasizing other forms of demonstrating knowledge, challenge the legitimacy of testing as a way of knowing what students know. This challenge can make the general public uneasy.

Traditionally, parents have accepted public school values, norms, and ideals. Homeschooling challenges this acceptance. These parents are displaying extraordinary agency in homeschooling. However, their actions are constrained by the structures of the state, and by their own values and educational histories, which have been shaped by school structures. Cultural traditions also constrain what is meant by education: parents have their own mental model of the education they had as children. They are constrained by a broader culture of beliefs about school, practices, and schedules. However, they are also actively creating their own culture through adopting practices from the schools and from developing their own practices and understandings separate from the school’s.

**Parenting and Schools**

Many parents, both from homeschool and traditional school environments, told me that the research was important because they did not feel listened to in a traditional school. Many also felt that their children were not respected as people in the traditional school. The level of frustration I encountered was sobering. Even capable middle class parents, who other researchers characterize as empowered in the school environment (Lareau, 2000, 2003; Delpit, 1995) and who were devoted to their children’s school, were afraid of the teacher’s power and afraid of “rocking the boat” too much, lest their child be punished in school. This dance of trying to meet school
requirements for support while trying to get what they felt they needed for their child required compromise and choice.

Some parents in a traditional school setting chose to compromise what the school wanted in order to address issues they saw their child facing, while others took at face value what the school requirements were and emphasized those to their children, sometimes helping their child fit those requirements. Homework battles can be seen in light of the compromise that parents make in highlighting school requirements. Many parents complained that the homework didn’t seem necessary and that school rules requiring homework were absurd but they tried to ensure that their children did the homework just the same. The social consequences of failure seem to have as much weight as the academic concerns.

Parents also complained about the one-way communication from the school to the parent about the child. One mother said that she didn’t understand her children’s assignments and overall educational goals until she started homeschooling; before that, she had an incomplete picture of what they were doing and how they were doing. Many parents complained about not hearing about their child’s lackluster performance until it was essentially too late—at report card time. These complaints point to the issue of ownership of information. Teachers own the information on the child’s performance in school, with parents using methods of guessing, assessing, and intuiting what their children are learning by looking at assignments and performance. If the parents are unable to correctly assess what help is needed, the consequences are felt in school. Teachers have to intuit what happens in the home, but if they get it wrong or don’t bother to learn about the student in their home environment, the
consequences are felt in school in the evaluation of the student. The worlds of school and home are kept very separate in terms of information flow in either direction, with students negotiating the ground between the two. Each sphere has different requirements that do not necessarily recognize the assets in the other sphere.

The structure of school programs also dictates what type of skills students are primarily evaluated on: with many children’s progress to keep track of, the teacher needs written evidence. Students who are not strong in writing and reading skills in school are labeled as deficient. These same students in a homeschool program will be praised for their insights, supported in their struggles, and have assignments modified to accommodate their learning needs. This tailoring of the education to meet the child’s needs is possible because of different structures in the homeschool program. Enormous parental efforts and support of the teachers is needed to individualize the education and evaluation of student performance.

Traditional schools keep parents’ knowledge segregated by grade, which perhaps reflects the teachers’ own concentration and aims. This piecemeal knowledge of each grade focuses families on meeting the school’s goals for that grade, contributing to the “doing school” mentality of making sure students produce the appropriate work for each grade. A larger understanding of students’ progress through school and development of their interests and skills is more difficult to project in a traditional school environment where students change teachers every year.

In contrast to this segmented way of looking at students, homeschool programs try to ensure that parents have an understanding of the larger aims of the curriculum so that the parents can build on their students’ skills. There is an emphasis on grade level
standards precisely because the children are not experiencing a classroom where parents can directly compare their progress to other students’. However, parents can meet the standards in various ways with their students. Assessment is not only based on writing and reading, but on conversation and projects. Parents observe how their children are learning and what they are learning and can modify lessons to accommodate children’s interests and skill levels.

Homeschool parents frequently used teachers as coaches and counselors in educating their children. Teachers said that they filled that role for parents because parents needed the support for such a large undertaking. It seems that parenting itself is a large undertaking and that much can be learned from the non-judgmental way in which teachers in the homeschool programs generally acted towards parents. Even parents that teachers disagreed with were generally treated well. The responsibility of teaching fell mainly on the parents and the schools recognized this role. Because of this shift in responsibility, a partnership was more possible in the homeschool programs than in a traditional school. Parents and teachers were able to say what their observations of the child’s learning and behavior were and design projects around the curriculum to address those issues. This shared responsibility enables each side to work together because neither can blame the other. Responsibility is not negotiated in homeschool programs, it is shared. In traditional programs, responsibility for student struggles and learning is seen as negotiable. Parents want schools to address issues and schools want parents to address those same issues. In redefining—both practically and definitionally—school as a partnership, homeschool programs have the potential to escape the traditional conflicts of the separate spheres of home and school. Each
seems to recognize the tough job of the other, as well as the expertise of the other, so that collaboration is possible. In changing roles, parents and teachers rely on each other’s good intentions and expertise to help the student. Neither can remain in their own separate sphere, insisting that the other “do something” because by definition, there is a partnership.

Ideas about education play into how schools structure and evaluate work. Teachers were keen to see that parents did more than “just the book work” because they had more time home with their children. The changing population of people homeschooling because of difficulties in the traditional school program also requires different support from homeschool teachers. Some parents now homeschooling feel pushed out of the traditional system and are not ideologically committed to the choice of homeschooling. They do not fit the traditional middle class, one parent working, educated mom. Many have lower incomes, work two jobs and have a high school diploma. Teachers see these families as needing more support and pressure to get the book work done and they don’t have time for the “extras” that homeschooling offers. However, despite this very big difference in populations, the teachers’ jobs and the programs still keep the parents at the center of their focus. They say it might not be the best education the child could get but it is better than what the child was experiencing in a traditional school program. Teachers are very willing to work with parents who they determine to have a good relationship with their child. In fact, teachers frequently disagree with a family’s philosophy or way of educating their children, but they still work with that family.
Class Reproduction and Homeschooling

Lareau (2003) explored how parents organize their children's schedules and found that middle class students have more structured time spent doing activities that are organized by adults. Lower class students have more unstructured time spent doing activities that they themselves arrange. Lareau found that the organization of children’s schedules and the activities that they do impacts their performance in school. She drew class distinctions in the family experiences of children, with middle class experiences supporting the school’s mission more than lower class families’ experiences.

This class difference is salient in homeschool programs as well. As we saw in Chapter 4, some teachers’ stereotypes were challenged by homeschool parents and teachers for the most part emphasize family relations instead of class or race conceptions in their evaluation of what families make a “good” homeschool candidate. However, while poor families are educating their children at home, they don’t necessarily challenge the expected class outcome: many anticipate their children leading working class lives; the university is not their goal. Akin to student resistance in Willis’ study (1981) of working class youth, these working class parents resist the school’s dismissal of their children’s needs but in the end reproduce class affiliation. Many teachers remarked on how lower income parents in general did not envision college for their children. Some talked about how they tried to counter the notion that 10th grade was enough schooling by mentioning “when you go to college” at the seminars they taught. Although some actions will challenge the class reproduction, it seems that homeschool programs are also fighting family and class structures.
The similarities in activities to Lareau’s study are prevalent in homeschooling programs as well. However, there is one important difference that should be noted. In Lareau’s study, both sets of parents (middle income and lower income) rely on reports from their children about their activities. Although the middle class children have their activities arranged by their parents, they do not spend time with their parents doing these activities. Lower class children arrange their own activities separate from their parents as well. Homeschool families differ from Lareau’s findings in that they experience many activities together. There is a bridge between the generations, both parent-child and older peer-younger peer, in homeschool experiences. Many parents commented on knowing their child better and sharing experiences that brought them closer together as a family.

This intergenerational interaction must be commented on as a normal part of the homeschooling experience, but something that seems very foreign to traditional school family experiences. Although the families themselves do not recognize cross-generational learning as “doing school” (or as “serious” as the book learning that they do at home), it is a different approach to learning. Many researchers have pointed out that this type of apprentice learning is a valuable way to learn (Rogoff et al, 2001; Trumbull et al, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Moses and Cobb, 2001). It is ironic that homeschool programs regularly employ such learning styles but that the parents do not consider that as important as the traditional form of book work that they do at home. Their ideas of learning are kept intact by the separate definitions that they employ for activities: “doing school” is supervised by the school, involves formal textbooks, and
evaluation, whereas the seminars at school are viewed as “fun” and are not as serious because they involve an alternative form of learning.

The findings about homeschool families sharing more experiences than families who choose traditional school complicate Lareau’s account of class differences and the associated school outcomes for children. Both poor and rich homeschooling families share experiences together, thus creating an apprenticeship type learning in their everyday interactions. The “success” of students is therefore not dependent on whether their activities match the school’s values because the family has taken on the school’s function. A cultural mismatch is therefore not responsible for the class reproduction we see in homeschool programs. Instead, family goals and background determine whether students will attend college. Parents with more resources and higher educational levels have an easier time imparting school curriculum than parents with less resources and educational levels.

As we have seen, homeschool teachers support families that they do not agree with, and family requests that they find questionable. As teachers, their idea of education has had to broaden as their exposure to different families challenges their beliefs. They support parents in helping the students meet state standards, but they are open to different approaches and timelines for this goal. Many commented on the broader perspective that they gained in dealing with all grade levels of children across time. It is possible that the traditional school divisions of grade levels limits teachers and parents to evaluating and trying to ensure that students fit into “developmental” boxes that might not be appropriate for every learner.
The close relationship that parents and teachers establish challenges both parties’ preconceived notions. Homeschool program teachers commented on the challenge of interacting intimately with parents. Many said that this closeness was a big adjustment for them, as they did not have as much or as close contact with parents in a traditional school setting. Becoming involved with parents and families at a closer level gives teachers insight into issues parents face. In addition, many homeschool program teachers said that parents who try homeschooling for a few months or a year frequently say that they have a new respect for teachers.

This relationship necessarily breaks down the separate spheres of school and family that are found in traditional school settings. There is the potential for many labels to be broken in this collaboration, not only student labels, but labels that schools have about families and what it means to provide “support” as well as parent labels about teachers being uncaring or uninterested. The hierarchy of power that Oakes et al. (2000) delineate has been flattened in homeschool programs to a large extent. Not because of a top-down reform or because of efforts to change by those in charge, but because of a change in roles. How the teacher’s power in the school is enacted is changed in homeschool programs, and it may be more “pleasant” or appear more equal, but teachers still wield power over parents. Homeschool parents, however, are charged with the majority of the responsibility for educating their children, which does change the power relationship in important ways. The family becomes the focus of the program, with the school supporting the family, which is a reversal of what happens in a traditional school.
Including Others and Community Support

Students in homeschool programs generally do not encounter a political understanding of power and the sorting of people into categories in their curriculum. However, they do develop a lived experience of themselves as learners that is not in comparison to others. The question arises, whether this development is enough to counter the tendency at school to produce conformity or deviance. Many students who have been homeschooled their entire student careers do not understand the need to conform, to fit into the student culture at schools. One young woman who was homeschooled from kindergarten through high school said that talking to friends who went to a regular school is like talking to someone from another culture. She was amazed that the division of students into strict social groups that she saw in movies was really the case in schools. “Why wouldn’t you talk to someone if you were a ‘nerd’ and they were a ‘jock’?” She didn’t understand the strong need of students to react against the school and she felt that her focus on knowledge and learning was a result of her freedom at home to pursue her own interests and schedule (fieldnotes, 8.22.04). It seems that homeschooling provides an environment that does not publicly label students and that supports a type of individuality that is stronger than the sorting and individualization created in a traditional school.

The difference between individualizing and individualization deserves mention here. Homeschool processes support individualizing the experience to meet each student’s particular needs. Even in reproducing school curriculum and book work at home, parents tailor the learning toward their child’s strengths, styles, and ways of
processing. Traditional school programs produce individualization of students, a ranking and sorting that reveals which students performed well on assessments.

Stevens (2001; 185) traces a growing cultural trend of parents expecting individualization, a “clientele” approach toward education which emphasizes choice, flexibility, and individual solutions. Alternative educational approaches, such as Montessori and Waldorf fit this notion, as well as Individual Education Plans (IEPs) commonly used by traditional programs for children with special needs (Stevens, 2001; 183-185). Homeschooling explicitly addresses individual student needs without publicly ranking the student in comparison to others. Instead, students are compared to their own learning progress toward meeting school standards, which is a more developmental approach than the normative one employed in traditional schools.

It is important to note, however, that these deliberate choices of individualization are not the only areas in which this belief is evident. Parents whose children attend traditional programs also spend a great deal of time and energy trying to individualize their child’s education, from inventing systems of support (Barbara’s efforts with her oldest daughter), to advocating for changes (Janice’s volunteering at her child’s Catholic school), to searching out and paying for solutions (Bob’s expenditures on tutoring). Parents in traditional programs fight the individualizing practices of the schools, acting on concerns for addressing their child’s individual needs.

Uncovering the similarities in how homeschool and traditional school families view school educational practices is important. When homeschooling first became popular in the 1960’s and through the 1980’s it was a struggle and a more radical
choice. As Stevens (2001) found, some long-time homeschool families look back on that time with nostalgia because families supported each other and they relied on what they thought were similarities between themselves and clearly demarcated differences of those choosing a traditional school. Today, however, those distinctions are harder to make, especially because families frequently view homeschooling as an option among many possibilities to address a particular need that their child has. The variety of the population and availability of formal school-based support programs are evidence that homeschooling has become more mainstream.

In becoming more accepted, more resources and formats are available. One mother said that where she was in Colorado previously, her children could attend traditional school for part of the day and come home early for the other part of the day. Charter school programs offer a combination of part-time school and part-time homeschool components. This project examined school district homeschool programs that offer assistance and seminars at a site while the main education takes place at home. These resources make homeschooling an easier choice and provide parents reassurance that they are “doing school right.” In providing resources and support, which parents lauded over and over again, the programs simultaneously diminish the need for families to rely on each other for support in homeschooling.

Families can rely on the program to provide not only curricular choices and guidance, but “extra” enrichment seminars as well. Programs also organize social events, with varying participation from families. One program had a particularly active and supportive group of parents who seemed to socialize together and initiate outside activities. While other programs had parents involved in courses and committees, they
did not seem to foster as many social connections between families. All the programs welcome and include newcomers, but they have different degrees of social attachment and engagement. Stevens’ (2001) account of two types of close-knit homeschooling communities in the early 1990’s may still apply to independent homeschoolers. But the practice of homeschooling is now open to more mainstream options that include official support from programs instead of informal support from like-minded families.

Homeschool programs can be accepting of so many types of families, who homeschool for a myriad of reasons, precisely because interactions between families are mediated through the program. Families who otherwise have nothing in common with each other are able to share social space, focus on their children’s growth and needs, and participate in the “extras” that the school offers without having to work together to organize or support the event. Paid professional teachers orchestrate the bulk of the homeschool program offerings and structure the experience at the school. This mediation contrasts starkly with Stevens’ (2001) account of the struggles of “believers” and “inclusives” to construct homeschool support groups for themselves. The boundary work of who is included in each group and how to work together becomes less salient when parents associate with a school program. Who is “in” the group or not is clear: whoever signs up to attend the school is “in.”

This simple answer is of course not the case for independent homeschoolers who do struggle with how to interpret these new types of homeschooling families. A more inclusive group meeting I attended in Northern California stressed the need to accept all families who chose the various options for homeschooling, including associating with a “state” sponsored program. The Homeschool Legal Defense
Association (HSLDA), a Christian-oriented advocacy group that is the strongest voice in homeschooling legal issues, does not recognize families who associate with a public homeschool program or a charter school program as “homeschoolers.” Only independent homeschooling families count as “homeschoolers” in their definition.

HSLDA’s concern about families associating with a state-sponsored program lies with families needing to meet certain benchmarks, adhering to certain curricula, and to state control over what they view as a private family choice. As we see in families’ negotiations with state-sponsored programs, HSLDA’s concerns are valid: the hierarchy is flattened, not erased. Families are not free to do whatever they want; the school system does have power over parents to require certain acts (such as using certain curricula and they turning in a certain amount of work each month to “prove” the progress they are making).

In fact, this power is exactly why there is a debate in the homeschool community on whether to accept families as homeschoolers who homeschool through a town or county-sponsored program or a charter school program. If the sticking point is state influence, then certainly homeschool families in a program experience more regulation than those who are not. However, if the point is the relationships that parents and students develop, the type of learning they experience, and the shared experiences that families have, then the school-sponsored homeschool programs offer a homeschool experience similar to independent homeschoolers. The difference, which many view as large, is in the support and requirements that the programs entail.
Lessons from Homeschooling

The question remains, how can larger schools learn from this small subset of families choosing an alternative program? Now I turn my attention to how we can use this information from this study.

To be sure, there were many parents who were very happy with the relationships and education provided in a traditional program. They talked of supporting their children and being pleased with the school. Many had sought a specific school philosophy for their children, while others were dedicated to the local public school. As in homeschool programs, many had friendships through their involvement at the school, while others were disappointed in their ability to connect with other parents. Traditional programs work well for many families.

However, we can learn a lot about the underlying assumptions we have about education and relationships by listening to parents and students who struggled with the traditional school. Parents’ frustration with traditional programs was palatable in many interviews. All students’ educational needs cannot be met in the traditional structure of classrooms, with one teacher being responsible for many students and the concentration on normed developmental goals that do not fit each student’s natural proclivities. Not meeting school expectations produces social and academic stress on students and families.

Even homeschool teachers substantiated this view, essentially saying that traditional programs cannot meet the needs of all students.

Nancy: A lot of [parents] come here and are frustrated with system. And they come here and they think they have died and gone to heaven because they have teachers here who are really concerned and helpful…. 
Michelle: I think there is so much we can offer them that’s there. When a child is in the classroom, the parent doesn’t get all that information. They just can’t. We’ve been in the classroom and we know you just can’t individualize and you know one [student] is sitting there falling through the cracks. They can’t take it all in and there are too many kids and the teacher is going on to the next thing even though they don’t have it. All that kind of stuff. It’s not good. It really isn’t. But there’s not other way to do that, the self-contained classroom thing. …

Nancy: And some of them who come in feel so helpless, you know they want to help their kid and they just don’t know how or they can’t so much. You know, they are bringing the homework [home], you can help with that, but you don’t really know what’s going on.

Michelle: Some people are spending hours and hours on homework. Maybe their child is not a real successful student so they are spending 4-6 hours on homework.

Nancy: They are doing 4 hours of homework, and they were in school for 7, and they aren’t doing well….In homeschool, if they aren’t doing well, they can stop and say, ‘let’s go back and fix and reteach, and get you caught up here instead of going further and further’ (interview, 10.23.01).

These comments point to the impact of structures on participants. Nancy and Michelle imply a comparison between the caring that parents experience in the homeschool program and their experience of feeling isolated and helpless in a traditional program. They are quick to point out the structural constraints they faced in traditional classrooms, knowing that a student was falling through the cracks and not being able to help because the class had to move on. They also say that parents cannot understand what their child is experiencing in school all day, and hence cannot fully grapple with the educational problems even by doing homework for 4 hours. The separate spheres of school and home impact the amount of understanding that is possible.

Changing the structures of school to include flexible responses to individual learners is difficult. At Stevens’ (2001) work emphasizes, the amount of effort and time needed to nurture individuals is immense. However, some small schools have overcome traditional constraints to provide for individual tutoring relationships.
between teachers and students. Meiers’ (1995) work demonstrates how flexible scheduling and consideration of families’ experiences and perspectives leads to successful outcomes for students, developing students’ academic, social, and personal arenas. The push for Small Schools (Feldman et al, 2006) and schools that purposefully develop relationships between the school and family (Sizer, 1996) also recognize the importance of caring, supportive relationships.

School funding is being cut, resulting in larger classes and reduced offerings of courses, compounding the structural constraints that already exist in traditional programs. The type of individualized education available to homeschool and some private school students should not be a luxury. If anything, homeschool programs demonstrate the necessity of investing time, effort, and money into individualizing student learning. Students who were not successful in traditional programs frequently experience success in homeschool programs. Therefore, it is not the student who must change to fit the school expectations in order to ensure success. Instead, the program changed and the student was able to find a footing to make progress. As a society, we have to decide whether we can afford to continue offering education in a large-scale fashion or whether we need to rethink how we “do school” in order to provide for more individualized approaches. “Falling through the cracks” cannot be an acceptable educational outcome.

The connection of learning to social consequences also needs to be examined. Homeschool students are still accountable to standards, but have a broader time horizon in order to meet them. The act of learning is a confrontation of one’s own ways of understanding, thinking, and seeing the world, not a ranking of ability in
comparison to others. Using normed ideas of grade level progress is useful to a degree, but these comparisons can become detrimental to students’ own identity as a learner if they continually do not meet the standards. Instead of ranking and labeling, frank conversations about how each student learns would be more productive. As demonstrated in Chapter 5 by Lea’s surprise at her son’s ways of processing information and learning, many teachers and schools could benefit by listening to students. They are the experts on themselves.

The recognition of children’s expertise leads to the final point about flattening the hierarchy and putting partnership with parents, teachers, and students at the center of learning. Homeschooling demonstrates the power and impact of relationships on student learning. The safe environment in homeschool programs is in large part a result of intergenerational social and learning opportunities where each participant is respected. Parents who have little in common with each other except that they are homeschooling their children are still able to interact in a productive and respectful way because of the social assumptions that all are accepted at the school. Having parents, students, teachers, and mentors in the same environment concentrating on a project allows apprentice learning to occur in the subject area as well as in the social arena. Students can try out behaviors but not be socially ostracized if the behavior is “different.”

Even if homeschoolers do not generally recognize this type of learning as “doing school,” their enthusiasm for the classes and the experience of school offerings demonstrates a viable option for rethinking how we view learning. If it is “fun” and involves authentic learning between less capable and more capable peers and between
adults, it does not mean that it is not valuable. We need to examine our assumptions about the need for repetition of skills and the need to view school as “work” that is not productive unless it is not fun. Learning—real authentic learning that involves demonstrable progress—can still be “fun.”

Non-homeschoolers are frequently concerned about socialization if students do not attend a traditional school. However, we should be concerned with the content of that socialization. Are students learning to accept themselves, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to accept others’ idiosyncrasies, or are they learning to measure themselves against others, to find the “right” answer, to try to just get by and to rank others based on how well they fit in the classroom? Social messages are connected to messages about learning, as Barbara’s story highlighted in Chapter 6. If we view learning as only instrumental in getting a job and not as a way of thinking, then the latter outcomes are perhaps acceptable—practical, even. If, however, we view learning as something that impacts a person’s self perception and ability to be participating citizens in a community, then we have to question the value of the latter outcomes. It is possible that acceptance of others and of one’s self starts with the removal of ranked comparisons to others and the removal of hierarchies among students.

The unstated messages of education are passed through the structures we have created. Homeschooling opens an opportunity for us to question the organizing categories by which we view learning and socialization. What do we reproduce and what do we challenge if given the opportunity to create our own personal school “reform”? 
Epilogue

Throughout this research, I have been very aware that identities are not permanent labels that we can place on people. Families’ choices and circumstances change, instigating a change in educational choices as well. Families emphasized their choices as “good for now” and were willing to consider other options if they felt that they needed to. Families move fluidly in and out of various educational choices. This sense of impermanence also permeates the programs I investigated. Teachers talked of times when the program was either much larger or much smaller than its current state. They talked of tough times with an unsupportive or vindictive principal whose agenda was to close the homeschooling program. They talked of struggles with parents that resulted in a policy shift. What comes out in these accounts is the constant change that programs undergo. Even the existence of the programs is never assured because of changes in budgets, requirements, and district and principal expectations. The option of a homeschool program is still an “alternative” to traditional schools, an alternative that has to prove itself when challenges to its legitimacy arise.

The dedication and appreciation of parents was striking. Many felt overwhelmed by their new role of being the main person responsible for educating their children. But many said that the program teachers were their lifeline. The enthusiasm for the relationship they have to their partner teacher demonstrates the importance of caring relationships (Noddings, 2002). However, there are outside factors that curb the influence of parents.

Ironically, despite the strong sense of community among the parents, students, and teachers, the county program struggles for student enrollment. The county
education rules that govern the county programs prohibit county programs from competing with town-sponsored programs. In fact, the county teachers helped towns establish programs, providing support, suggestions, and even an opportunity for town teachers to train with the county program before opening their own program. The county program is not well-advertised and is hard to find on the county website. While other programs actively recruit families at local events such as Earth Day, town picnics, and town celebrations, the county program finds itself made invisible through strict policies prohibiting advertising or competing with town programs.

Teachers have taken on “independent study” students to fulfill enrollment requirements. These students have been expelled from traditional schools for a period of time and are assigned a teacher to oversee their work. The teacher who works with them says that although she likes her job and feels she is helping her students, the parents are very different from homeschooling parents in that they are not necessarily involved in their child’s education. This arrangement was not a choice they made, but one that was made by the school. The enrollment numbers at both sites continue to drop and the new principal does not seem interested in the program; her focus is more on the court schools, for which she is also responsible.

Teachers also said that as the population of homeschooling families changes to a more transitory one of choosing homeschooling for a few years (usually the middle school years), the sense of community that buoyed the program is eroding. They are struggling with lack of participation in program events because families have other priorities than focusing only on homeschooling. One teacher said that “families who were not brought up in this system [of homeschooling] don’t realize what it can be and
aren’t as connected so they don’t come to stuff” (interview, 2.9.06). Many said that they are facing competition from charter programs that can offer money for activities and that families choose that over the county program. “It’s like a market, and we can’t offer what others can, so we lose” (interview, 2.09.06). Teachers are preparing for when the program will close.

The town program has undergone a change in principal leadership as well that has teachers and parents concerned about the focus and flavor of the program. While it is an alternative program, it is still subject to district policies of assigning principals, determining curriculum and maintaining standards. These outside influences can severely impact teachers’ options and ways of conducting their daily interactions with parents and students. An unsupportive or disinterested principal can undermine these alternative programs, which the teachers feel need special advocacy in order to continue.

As this research has demonstrated, there are both internal and external pressures for homeschooling programs to conform to traditional expectations about “doing school.” Others have shown how hard it is for school reform to actually change the daily experience of students (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Hubbard et al, 2006). In purposefully presenting an alternative to traditional conceptions of school, the programs are open to bureaucratic policies and procedures that force the alternative into a form resembling the traditional concept of schooling. Homeschool programs create spaces where education can be redefined despite adherence to state and local educational policy. However, the programs themselves are subject to bureaucratic regulations that may in the end spell the demise of this alternative. In conforming to
county and city school policies that govern schools, the programs suffer. It is possible
that even in this alternative environment, Weber’s (1947) iron cage of bureaucracy
cannot be escaped: the alternative will be reigned in until it closely resembles the other
schools.
Appendix

Sample Questions for Homeschool Parents

Background
Why do you home school your children?
What is your family’s educational background?
When did you decide to home school? How was this decided?
What is your philosophy of education? How has this changed over time?

Organizational
How do you home school?
What does a typical day look like?
How does your organization of the day reflect your educational goals?
Do you individualize the curriculum to your child? If so, how?

Impact of Home Schooling
Has your relationship to your child changed through home schooling? If so, how?
How do you deal with the roles of being both parent and teacher?
How did your extended family and friends respond to your decision to home school?
What sacrifices have you had to make in order to home school your children?
What supports do you have?

School Program
Why did you choose to associate with a public school for your home school experience?
What school services do you use?
What is helpful about the school association? What is not so helpful?
Does your child take the standardized tests? How does this influence your teaching?
Sample Questions for Parents who Chose a Traditional School

1. Background
2. How did it happen that your child is in the school that they attend?
3. Does the school your child is in match your kid’s needs?
5. Who initiates participation in school? Do you feel you can have an impact on the school independent of what the teacher wants or says? Or is it one direction (school tells you what to do)?
6. Describe your typical day.
7. Purpose of education: what do you hope for your child?
8. What social activities is your child involved in?
9. Describe your community.
10. Describe your attachment to your child’s school—do you know parents, teachers, your child’s friends?
11. What are the benefits of attending public school? What are the disadvantages?
12. What challenges has your child faced in school? How have you solved them?
13. What is your role as a parent in your child’s education?
14. Does your child associate with a diverse group of people? (explain)
15. What activities or modes of learning does your child learn best from? Why?
16. How are you ensuring that your children are prepared for experiences they have?
17. What makes a good school?
18. Are there things you wish the school did? Do you compensate in some way for this?
19. What do you think of the push for national standards? How do you interpret standardized test scores?
Sample Questions for Homeschool Program Teachers

Background
How long have you been involved with this home school program?
How did you hear about the program?
What is your teaching experience?
What prompted you to enter the teaching field?

Organizational
How many families do you work with?
What types of interactions do you have with families?
What classes do you teach? How often? How many children typically participate?
What types of services does the school offer to families?

Impact of home schooling
What challenges do parents face as home schoolers?
How do you help them with these challenges?
Do home schooled children differ from other children in any way?
Are there characteristics of families that you view as essential in order for them to be successful at home schooling?

School program
How much flexibility do parents have with curriculum, pacing, and projects?
What school services are most used?
What is helpful to parents about the school association? What is not so helpful?
How do standardized tests impact your expectations of students? How do they impact the school?
Bibliography


