

**“Tell me one thing:”  
Exploring the role of parent/educators in  
the homeschool environment**

by

Karen E. Efford  
BA, Carleton University, 2011  
Diploma, IET, University of Victoria, 2014

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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University of Victoria

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**Supervisory Committee**

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Dr. Monica Prendergast Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Jason Price Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
**Departmental Member**

## **Abstract**

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Homeschooling can provide the opportunity for an inspiring educational journey facilitated by a parent/educator. Stepping away from social norms, and fostering strong relationships, influences and supports the negotiation of this dual role in this alternative learning environment. The line between parent and educator is often blurred and challenging to tease apart as parent/educators strive to support the unique learning interests and goals of their students. In this thesis I consider the negotiation between these roles by examining the lived experience of homeschool parent/educators through the themes of relationships, normalization and ‘We are teachers’. British Columbia, Canada (BC) is the context and influences analysis, findings and recommendations. The new BC Ministry of Education’s curriculum’s “transformational” focus is used to support the position taken in this thesis that parent/educators are teachers in their own right. The author’s unique experience as a homeschool parent/educator herself provides the opportunity for a greater understanding into this under researched pedagogy.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my children. Jennika, whose friendship and wise words keep me grounded. Meaghan, whose strength and love of academics led to many wonderful, insightful conversations. Siobhan, whose incredible loyalty and freespirt is inspiring (feffa). And finally, Ian who is one of the kindest most loving humans I know. I am extremely proud of you all. Without you this magical journey would never have begun.

“Tell me one thing.”

## **Introduction**

As seen through the life experiences of the participants, and myself this thesis focuses on the negotiation between the dual role of parent and teacher as a homeschool educator. Homeschooling can provide the opportunity for an inspiring educational journey facilitated by a parent/educator. As a parent/educator of seventeen years, my unique position provides the circumstances for a deeper understanding. Homeschooling is the process of educating one's children with "home" as the base and a parent as the main teacher. In North America, homeschooling is a growing practice, moving away from traditional institutional education and chosen for a variety of reasons (McDowell, 2000; Van Pelt, 2003). Each homeschool educator negotiates the duality of the role of parent/teacher on a continuous, in the moment, basis for which improvisation is a necessity. The fluid, continuous, movement between these two roles can be directed by the student(s); the parent/educator; external events; and/or the activity; with the intention of maximizing the opportunity for learning. The unique relationship between the child/student and the parent/educator in a homeschool environment affords a level of trust built over time and experience that supports the exchange of ideas and the fluidity of roles. Through studying the combined role of educator and parent and how it may be successfully navigated, educational research can expand its definition of the role of educator from a more non-traditional perspective. Through the analysis of data gathered through semi-structured interviews and stories of homeschool educators, this thesis investigates choices these educators made regarding role negotiation, daily structure, which curriculum to use, and teaching methods. The study also examines how the layered

role of parent and educator manifests itself in daily life. My personal journey negotiating the roles of parent and educator led to the research questions: How do parents navigate the combined role of parent and educator in the homeschool environment? How might research into this dual role influence the study of more traditional classroom-based education? In what ways might homeschool parent/educators' knowledge and experience influence curricular and pedagogical practice in the current context of curriculum change? The stories of my participant homeschoolers and myself can potentially inform the practices of classroom teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, and administrators.

There is a wide variety of excellent teachers in the public school system whose sole purpose is to provide an innovative, creative education for their students. The reality is that they are constrained by a system created to fulfill a need from a different era.

“The school staff is obligated to develop ways to ensure that what happens in their classroom is consistent with the school growth plan which is consistent with the district accountability contract which is consistent with the ministry service plan” (Kuehn, 2006, p. 137). The institutional layers constrict a teacher’s ability to effectively address each child’s learning needs. Large class sizes and integrated classrooms with limited teaching resources create an education system in which teachers are just doing their best to fulfill requirements to meet standards set out by government legislation. Public schools continue to have an economic objective. “Education has always been seen as having some economic objective, but not as dominant everywhere as they are now” (Kuehn, 2006, p. 138). I will discuss this issue further in the following chapters.

The goal of traditional education is to educate the next generation with the skills and social norms necessary to fit into society as active participants. All students learn the

same material at the same time through direct-instruction and lectures. This educational model was designed to address the economic need for industrial workers to perpetuate and reproduce the social structure. “Education is a result of numerous decisions taken in times past by policymakers as they reacted to social and economic environments very different to those of today” (Abbott, 2000, n.p).

The traditional parent-child and teacher-student relationships are intermingled. The matrix of this reality is complex because it incorporates elements that are related yet separate entities that overlap. The roles of parent and educator are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes you are a parent, sometimes educator and sometimes both. We all play multiple roles in our lives but few are more demanding, requiring the interplay of these two roles, than the homeschool parent/educator. The role of parent/educator is different in many ways than the parent who is also a teacher outside the home. These more traditional teaching roles have clearly defined boundaries and although one is a parent always, someone else is in charge of the care and education of your child if you are working outside the home. The role of a classroom teacher has clear boundaries set by the structure of the school day, the curriculum and the institution. Being a homeschool educator means living immersed in the reality of parenting and teaching simultaneously.

There is an emotional connection and responsibility to not only parent one’s child but to also meet her or his educational needs. This experience is unique in that the roles overlap on a continuous basis, moving back and forth sometimes in unison and sometimes at odds with each other. The dynamic reality allows for growth and understanding on the part of the parent; of themselves as both a parent and a teacher, but also of their children as their students. This role has historically been invisible and most

often seen as an extension of the role of motherhood (Cooper, 2005, p. ix). I propose that parent/educators are teachers and should be afforded the respect teachers receive. As the homeschooling community grows in size, so does the wealth of knowledge these parent/educators embody, creating opportunity for educators and administrators, to build curriculum and influence education policy to support the future of education in our society.

Homeschooling is an alternative form of education where children are taught at home with their parent(s), often the mother, as their primary educator (Ray, 2005). The word “home” in homeschooling is misleading, as it is often the base from which learning takes off. Learning happens everywhere, from beaches, to museums, grocery stores, hiking a trail and even in a vehicle on the way to an adventure. The modern practice of homeschooling started in the 1970s and is a pull away from traditional institutional education, which focuses on the “one-size-fits-all,” top-down, lecture-driven model (Ray, 2005). John Holt, an American educator who strongly influenced the modern homeschooling movement “envisioned an unschooling approach with unstructured curriculum in which children followed their own interest and learned at their own pace” (Bailey, 2010, p. 4). Homeschooling as an educational choice falls on a spectrum ranging from the “ultra religious” who only use the Bible as a form of curriculum, to the “unschooling hippy” whose children run free. Unschooling is a methodology derived from the teachings of John Holt. “It refers to a progressive form of growing without schooling and is based on the premise that the bureaucracy of schooling incorporates many impediments to learning” (Schubert, 2010, p.2). Parents who choose this form of schooling are often seen as irresponsible, choosing not to educate their children

(Schubert, 2010). Some families choose highly structured lives and purchase curriculum that they follow to the letter, and others unschool; a form of homeschooling without structure or formal curriculum. There are many variations of these choices. Lois (2013) discovered that “homeschoolers are extremely concerned about their children's education, and they homeschool because they see it as a way to be ultra-responsible parents” (p. 2). Homeschooling provides the environment and opportunity to allow students to be actively involved in their educational experience. When a student is given agency in their own learning they tend to be more engaged and motivated. The act of choice is in itself participation. “Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process” (Davis, 1993, p. 147).

Holistic Learning is a form of homeschooling that acknowledges the whole child and her or his environment. “It is in relationship - in the interaction of the inner person with the outer world - that experience occurs and it is in and through experience that people learn” (Jarvis, 2005, p. 1). The shared experience of homeschool educators and their students, often spanning years of growth, creates an environment where the student can be naturally supported in their learning. “It seems so very radical and scary to let learning take place in such a seemingly haphazard way. But that is really how all learning takes place - in an organic serendipitous fashion regardless of our attempts to contain and control it” (Layne, personal communication, April, 2015). Many homeschoolers connect with community programs and mentors to provide learning experiences that address the unique interest of their students.

Homeschooling is a growing form of education in the United States and Canada. The Centre for Education Statistics (2013) estimated that in 2012, 1.7 million children

from kindergarten to Grade 12, approximately 3% of school-age children, were educated at home. This percentage represents a growth rate of approximately 10% per year (Houston & Toma, 2003). In Canada, an increasing number of school aged children are educated primarily at home (Davies & Aurini, 2003). This increase in the popularity shows no sign of abating. Between the US and Canada, hundreds of thousands of parents are full-time educators of their children outside of institutionalized schools. These parent/educators represent an important demographic whose expertise may offer significant possibilities in the area of curriculum and instruction. Homeschool pedagogy is unique in its practices and approaches and so may provide a rich resource to alternative education discourse.

In BC there are two legal options for homeschooling. Section 12 (<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca>) provides parents with the opportunity to educate their children, construct their curriculum and follow their own schedule without the supervision of a government certified teacher. Distance Learning programs allow students to choose to learn at home and be registered in an online program led by a teacher certified by the Ministry of Education. In high school, a parent/educator may choose to register their child/student in one or two classes online while following their own curriculum for the other subjects. This provides support to parent in subjects where they do not feel adequately capable to be the primary educator.

### **Individualized Instruction**

Individualized instruction puts the child's education at the heart of the role of educator. Child-centred, individualized learning is at the centre of homeschooling

philosophy and can be traced back to educational theorists such as Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori and Vygotsky.

Rousseau's theory focused on the natural needs and predisposition of children and was the inspiration for freedom-based learning. This movement focused on the child's right to pursue their own interests with the aim that children becoming better able to know and trust themselves (Morrison, 2007). "We should not teach children the sciences; but give them a taste for them" (Rousseau, 2010, p. 101). Homeschool provides an opportunity for students to explore their own interests to a level and depth not afforded by the schedule constraints of a traditional learning environment.

John Dewey, an important figure in American education, was a philosopher and educator whose work focused on the ideals of learning through experiences and the relationship between education and democracy. "I believe that education is a process of living and not preparation for the future" (Dewey, 1897, n.p.). Dewey's "theory of experience" has two main principles: continuity and interaction. "Continuity is the principle that past experience influences future ones, while interaction represents the interplay between a present condition and the individual's past experience" (Hedeem, 2005, p. 191). The natural growth of a child and the years spent in a homeschool environment create a instinctive continuity and timeline on which a student can relate their learning.

Similar to Rousseau and Dewey's theories, the Montessori Method focuses on the individual's interest and need. In the early 1900s, Maria Montessori, the first female physician in Italy, educator and creator of the Montessori Method, based her program on her observation of children. "The success of her interactive curriculum led her to question

the traditional classroom model of students immobilized at desks, trying and retrying rote tasks" (Hedeen, 2005, p. 186). The classrooms are multi-age open spaces with workstations from which each child is welcome to choose their work. The de-centralized role of the teacher works to support and facilitate children's active involvement in their own learning. Montessori believed the teacher/facilitator should help guide the children and provide learning opportunities as the individual child masters each level in turn. The role of the parent/educator in a homeschool environment varies greatly depending on the choices and values of the family, however, in my experience as a homeschool educator this role is often taken on as a facilitator much like in a Montessori classroom. Allowing children the agency of choice opens the door for the parent/educator to offer ideas, experiential learning opportunities, or mentors, and as such facilitates learning.

Like Montessori, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed observation was central to assessing a child's ability in creating individualized curriculum. Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist whose work focused on cognitive development, put great value on the education of children. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development built on Jean Piaget's theory that knowledge is created from experience. To be truly successful, learning happens when a student is met at the edge of their knowledge. "What a child can do today with assistance, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 87). The teacher is key in their role, in that they must recognize their student's place in learning and provide the opportunity for that student to step to the next level. By design the smaller teacher/student ratio, the continuity and the intimate relationship affords a parent/educator the ability to know where each of their student's knowledge ends and scaffold learning accordingly.

The structure, curriculum and teaching methods of schools today vary greatly. It is agreed that the education needs a change, a “reform”, to meet the needs of our children's futures. Change does not happen without questions. Critical pedagogy attempts to encourage students, and parent/educators, to question the current system. “Critical pedagogy seeks to explore and develop knowledge, rather than perpetuate a standardized testable measure of knowledge” (Gorlewski, 2011, p.88).

My goal in educating my children has always been to teach them to ask questions, problem solve, research answers, and delve deeper. “Education is about perceiving and developing our own searching questions, rather than being given answers” (Bolton, 2009, p. 4). Our children are asking for a different system, living as natives in a digital world, that we, as adults and digital immigrants, do not fully understand.

### **New BC Curriculum**

Currently, in British Columbia, Canada, there is a movement to reform the curriculum taught in public schools. This movement shifts the focus away from the ‘banking system’ (Freire, 1970) of education that deposits knowledge into children like pennies into a piggy bank, toward a more distributive, individualized instruction. “British Columbia’s curriculum is being redesigned to respond to the demanding world our students are entering” (<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca>).

It is very timely that, as I endeavour to make a case that homeschool parent/educators are teachers and should be regarded as such, BC has embarked on an overhaul of the curriculum taught in K-12 classrooms. The reason given for this transformation is that the education system is “modeled on the very different circumstances of an earlier century when change was much more gradual than it is today”

(<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca>). The new focus of the curriculum will be one that “better engages students in their own learning and fosters the skills and competencies students will need to succeed” (<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca>). The BC Ministry of Education's curriculum website goes on to explain that the new curriculum is centred on personalized learning, self-directed learning, place-based learning, active engagement of students, inquiry and question-based approaches, flexible learning environments and collaboration with community (<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca>). The differentiated instruction model will be taught with the goal of a “more personal, proactive learning environment, inclusive of a wide variety of learners” (2016, n.p.). These qualities of teaching and learning are well entrenched in homeschool education, as I will argue throughout this thesis.

Homeschooling allows for the support of learners’ unique interests with the objective of igniting and creating space for the students’ inner drive to learn. “We need to create the conditions under which our passions will flourish. These will be different for everyone” (Robinson, 2010).

## Literature Review

Research into homeschooling as a practice is growing, however many gaps still exist. The focus of research pertaining to homeschooling practice covers many topics, yet specific research into the experience of the parent/educators in homeschooling is lacking. In a survey of research on homeschooling published in 2013, Kunzman and Gaither list 354 articles of which 88 were published before 2000. Thus, 76% of research and subsequent publications with a focus on the practice of educating one's children in the home has been published within the last sixteen years. Articles focusing on homeschooling or alternative education touch on many topics including: religion (Bach, 2004; Balmer, 2007; Devins, 1984; Elliott-Engel, 2002); the possible connection between homeschoolers and public schools (Grob, 2000; Holt 1983); why people homeschool (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Arai, 2000; Aurini & Davies, 2005; Collum, 2005); cyber schooling (Cavanaugh, 2009; Huerta, Gonzalez & D'Entremont, 2006); homeschool students and college (specifically access, adaptability, and performance) (Jones & Gloeckner, 2004a, 2004b); reactions to and analysis of homeschool research studies (Chapman & O'Donoghue, 2000; Charvoz, 1998; Cizek & Ray, 1995; Dumas, Gates, & Schqarzer, 2010); government regulation (Alarcon, 2010; Batista & Hatfield, 2005; Baxter, 2010; Belfield, 2005); children with exceptionalities (Arora, 2006; Duvall, Delquadri, & Ward, 2004; Ensign, 2000); and homeschooling in specific countries (geographical) (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Blok & Karsten, 2011; Bynard, 2007; Campbell, 2001; Jung, 2008) to name a few. Research into homeschooling rarely includes a topical focus on the dual lived experience of the parent/teacher. Kunzman and Gaither's list

include just four articles touching on the experience of the homeschool educator, (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Lois, 2013; McDowell, 2000; Merry & Howell, 2009). The role of parent/educator and its valuation as a source of educational knowledge has not been acknowledged in homeschooling literature. This thesis adds to the body of academic knowledge by addressing this gap.

Kidd and Kaczmarek's (2010) article, "The Experience of Mothers Home Educating the Children with Autism," looks at the experience of mothers in Australia who choose to homeschool their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) using a phenomenological framework. The article acknowledges that "our knowledge about parent's experience of implementing such programmes is limited" (p. 270). The reasons for homeschooling their children given were: the limited school resources including individualized instruction and the inability for the school to meet their child's specific educational needs. This study identified that the mothers experienced an increased satisfaction from the improved educational outcome of their child/students, increased family time and a reduction of personal stress. Although this article does not touch directly on the experience of the participants, the motivation for homeschooling, such as individualized instruction and meeting their child's specific educational needs is relevant.

Jennifer Lois' 2013 book *Home is Where the School Is* looks at the role of the parent/educator from a critical sociological perspective. Lois offers the opinion that parent/educators are essentially "supermoms." "I present homeschoolers' experience against the backdrop of the cultural standards for good mothering and show how mothers used homeschooling as a way to live up to those standards" (p. 4). Lois describes four acts of emotional deviance: academically arrogant; socially overprotective; morally self-

righteous and extreme; relationally hyper-engaged; and how the parent/educators justify their choices in response. I will discuss this further below.

Susan McDowell's 2000 article "The Home Schooling Mother-Teacher: Toward a Theory of Social Integration," argues that homeschooling is a rapidly growing movement and that "research into the many aspects and facets of the home schooling movement is essential" (p. 205). This study focused on the impact of homeschooling on the mother-teacher. One finding was apparently unexpected. McDowell posits that parent/educators are feminists, defined as: "the doctrine advocating the same social, political, and economic rights for homeschooling mother-teachers as for the public and/or private educational system" (p. 187). This article is unique and relevant to my thesis in that it links the roles of mother and teacher in homeschooling as one and calls for the acknowledgment of this role in the education system.

The 2009 article by Michael Merry and Charles Howell, "Can Intimacy Justify Home Education," examines through the concept of 'attentive parenting' whether intimacy is a justification for the choice to homeschool. They argue that the intimacy argument may be compelling but also has its limitations. Merry and Howell acknowledges, "intimacy is a characteristic of relationships, not of individuals" (p. 365) which exhibits five characteristics: affection, mutual knowledge, shared experience, open communication and trust (p. 365). When related to homeschooling these characteristics define what they describe as "attentive parenting". By acknowledging that, just as there are "good" and "bad" parents there are "good" and "bad" homeschooling parents. This thesis uses Merry and Howell's definition of an "attentive parent" to define a "good" parent/educator.

It is important to consider why parents choose to homeschool. In his article “Reasons For Homeschooling in Canada,” Arai (2000) asks why Canadian homeschooling parents choose this form of education. Arai states that “very little has been written on the topic of learning at home in the Canadian context” (p. 204). As well, he points out that the number of families who do choose to homeschool are underrepresented because many families still do not register with a school board or Ministry of Education. This article summarizes four main reasons why parents choose to homeschool, using US data. These reasons are: family unity; alternative lifestyle; parents’ unpleasant memories of school; and parents asserting responsibility for their children’s education (pp. 206-208). Although there is no data to support this, Arai hypothesizes that these reasons are also true in Canada. The reasons listed in this article support the reasons given by the participants when asked why their family chose to homeschool.

Due to this lack of research into the role of homeschool educators, I am including research literature here on topics that touch of the experience of teachers, life as education or interest-led learning, choice, student engagement, learning readiness, and structure.

An area of research of relevance when examining the experience of homeschool parents is Teacher Practical Knowledge founded on the idea that traditional teacher’s knowledge and experience needs to be included in research. Historically, teachers’ stories were not included in educational research, although this practice is changing (Dibble & Rosiek, 2002). In their article, “White Out: A Case Study Introducing a New Citational Format for Teacher Practical Knowledge Research,” Dibble and Rosiek discuss how including teachers’ lived experience in a study looking at the science curriculum in

Fresno, California, adds a depth of knowledge which would not be found in a traditional study of curriculum. They point out that obstacles to including teachers' practical knowledge in research are "vocabulary, priorities, conception of salient details and desired educational effects" that are often very different in the two communities of academia and K-12 education (p. 2). In this article, the authors include the lived experience of the teachers, which adds important contextual information to the discussion. "We see teaching and teacher knowledge as expressions of embodied individual and social stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4). Teaching is a profession that does not happen in a vacuum. One does not arrive in the classroom shut the door, complete prescribed tasks and leave for home. Teaching takes place in intricate multi-faceted environment that is interactive on many levels, including cultural norms and family circumstances or both the students and the teacher. "What we mean by teachers' knowledge is that body of convictions and meaning, conscious or unconscious, that have arisen from experience (intimate, social, and traditional) and that are expressed in a person's practices" (Lemley & Mitchell, 2012, p. 224). A number or word cannot sum up the give-and-take between teacher and student. To better understand educational practices and students' needs we must include teachers' stories in academic research.

Generally speaking, the homeschool educator is not seen by academia as a teacher for a variety of reasons including the fact that the practice is usually very private and away from the public eye, it is often regarded as deviant and not always seen as a valid form of education (Cooper, 2005). The role of a homeschool educator is seen as an extension of parenting, overseen by a certified teacher (if the student is registered with a program). However, the parent/educator is responsible for building connections, meeting

each child's educational needs, building and implementing curriculum, and creating learning opportunities. As homeschool educators are not considered teachers by the academic community, the obstacles outlined in Dibble and Rosiek's (2002) research into the experience of parent educators is even more removed from academia. Excluding teachers' lived experience is problematic. Therefore excluding homeschool educators' lived experience from research into teaching and education in a home setting is also problematic.

In his paper, "Education, Schooling and Children's Rights: The Complexity of Homeschooling," Kunzman (2012) explains that traditionally schooling happens weekdays, between the hours of 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. Further to this "the whole of life provides educational opportunities, and oftentimes in more authentic and powerful contexts than what traditional schooling has to offer" (p. 75). Kunzman goes on to explain that parents, "instill values, monitor behavior, authorize play dates, and provide learning materials, books and games" on an ongoing basis. Kunzman uses the term '*Life as Education*' to represent this concept. He questions why, if *Life as Education* is included in the role of parenting, is homeschooling found somewhere in between parenting and formal schooling? Parents are their child's first educators and thus the role of a home educator can be seen as a natural extension of the role of parent (Dewey, 1897; Kuzman, 2012; Holt, 1970). We educate our children, and are educated by them, from the moment they are born; as the child grows, so does the parent. This shared experience does not stop because, as a society, we send children to a traditional school. Dr. Raymond Moore and his wife Dorothy (1975) support the idea of *Life as Education* in that they believe traditional education should not start until children are 8-10 years of age. Until

the approximate age of nine, they contend that a child's education should be comprised of parents engaging their children in family life.

The homeschool environment, and the close connection between a parent/educator and a child/students allows for teachable moments. Teachable moments are opportunities to notice a child's interest and take advantage of this unique moment to engage them in meaningful learning. "Teachable moments occur frequently, with the kids asking numerous questions or running to get a dictionary, an encyclopedia, or an atlas" (Holtrop, 1996, p. 74). Willingham (2009) explains that material must be relevant and of interest to a child; however it must also be offered at a level that balances the challenge with what is achievable. This concept supports Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which focuses on the relationship between instruction and development and that the best learning takes place just on the edge of a student's knowledge (Chaiklin, 2003, p. 39). To be truly successful, instruction meets a student just on the edge of prior knowledge and leads him or her into new knowledge by connections through that prior knowledge. Learning Readiness or Just-in-time learning are methods that apply these theories.

There has been much research in the area of student engagement, conversational learning, situational learning and formative feedback (Bellamy & Woolsey, 1998; Shute, 2008; McLaughlin & Blank, 2004; Rotgans & Schmidt, 2014). This research demonstrates that an essential component of learning is engaging a student in conversation, providing feedback and encouraging critical thinking. Student engagement goes hand in hand with "just-in-time" teaching as teachers have the ability to take advantage of a particular student's interest. While most parents would agree on the

importance of having their child engaged in learning, this engagement is also a key component to homeschooling as the teacher-student ratio is much lower and parent/educators are able to be aware of their child/student's interests more consistently than a traditional classroom teacher. Although the traditional classroom environment is changing and teachers are able to create opportunities for differentiated learning and project base instruction, the expectation in traditional classroom teaching is that students behave, sit through prefabricated lessons, and just get the work done. Due to time constraints, curriculum and the number of students in a classroom, rarely do students get to choose what and how they learn any given subject. Student engagement is an important element to homeschooling as there is more time and flexibility to allow students to spend a bit more time and delve a little deeper on a project or work with a mentor who they connect with.

How they feel - about themselves, about their teachers, about the curriculum and the whole experience of school - is crucially related to the quality of their learning. Richer thinking is more likely to occur in an atmosphere of exuberant discovery, in the kind of place where kids plunge into their projects and can't wait to pick up where they left off yesterday. (Kohn, 2004, p. 3)

Student engagement is key to educational success. McLaughlin and Blank (2004) explain that, "[s]chools confirm that students learn best when they are actively involved in understanding and helping to solve meaningful problems" (p. 1). However, McLaughlin and Blank go on to say that despite this knowledge, schools' focus remains on showing improved student performance. Situational interest positively affects student learning and knowledge attainment and is central to motivation, learning and performance (Rotgans & Schmidt, 2014, p. 38).

Chastain (1975), in his article examining individualized instruction, explains that the “objective of individualizing instruction is to match instructional programs and materials with individual interests, goals and styles in order to maximize efficiency of learning and achievement” (p. 344). Formative feedback increases confidence and leads to a greater and deeper understanding of the material being studied. It allows consideration of prior knowledge and context as well as giving student the opportunity to explore topics and share ideas. Formative feedback creates the learning environment that allows the mentor to scaffold learning and support the examination of ideas. “From Socrates to Dewey to Habermas, educative dialogue has represented a forum for learners to develop understanding by listening, reflecting, proposing, and incorporating alternative views” (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2008, p. 284). Dialogic teaching, or conversational learning, is a common way to teach in homeschooling. It focuses on a collaborative and inclusive way of learning with children of all ages. Discussions happen on a continuous flow from one topic to another often touching on an event in the past, a book commonly read or a conversation from earlier in the week. Another aspect of dialogic teaching, or conversational learning is storytelling. Storytelling has long been a way for humans to pass their cultural knowledge to the next generation. Willingham (2009), a cognitive scientist, in his book *Why Don’t Students Like School*, explains that stories are a natural way for the human mind to remember or learn and therefore “organizing a lesson plan like a story is an effective way to help students comprehend and remember” (p. 52).

I recognize that the role of teacher in an institutional setting varies greatly and is evolving. There are many different choices for schooling available to families from

Forest, Montessori, and Waldorf schools, to private and public school that follow a more traditional structure. I also recognize that there are many gifted teachers who are able to work within institutional structures to provide the best education for their students, using diverse teaching methods and modified curriculum. For clarity and for the purpose of this thesis I will define traditional education as a teacher-centered method focusing on teacher driven, rote-learning and memorization. The term “teacher” will refer to a classroom teacher certified by the Ministry of Education teaching in a public school environment. I use the term parent/educator, and homeschool parent interchangeably to refer to the homeschool educator.

## **Methodology**

*“Telling stories is one of the ways that we can begin the process of building community, whether inside or outside the classroom.”* (hooks, 2010, p. 49)

This study uses a multi-method framework of narrative inquiry and autoethnography. Narrative inquiry allows us to understand experience and the importance of relationships, through and over time in a multilayered context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the researcher a voice (Muncey, 2010, p. 2). By combining Narrative Inquiry with Autoethnography I will reinforce this understanding through my seventeen years of personal experiences of negotiating the roles of parent and educator.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

*“When we think of life as a whole we tend to think narratively.”*

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 377)

In choosing a methodological approach to guide my research it was clear early on that I would need a framework that provided the opportunity to include lived experience from the homeschooling community and provided me with the opportunity to share my story as an educator. “Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people’s lived experience, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 11).

It is important to me as a former homeschooler and an educator to treat these stories with honour and respect. They represent more than just a tale told around a camp fire but are rather the cherished, shared memories of parents and their children as they walk their journey of learning together. Telling stories is a way humans make sense of themselves and their surroundings. These stories are personal and I am grateful to have been entrusted with them. “Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that critically analyzes social and cultural contexts of human experience” (Lemley & Mitchell, 2012, p. 215). By using Narrative Inquiry to look at the experience of homeschool educators we are able to hear their stories in context and therefore gain a deeper understanding of this educational model. This method “detechicalizes the study of education and [links] it to other aspects of the study of human experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2008, p. 385). Through the collection of life stories, we can see how the nuances of relationships and shared experience influence the dual role of parent/educator or are in turn influenced by the negotiation of these roles. “For educators looking for personal experiences in actual school settings, narrative research offers practical, specific

insights” (Creswell, 1998, p. 502). These narratives provide an intimate account of the give and take a parent/educator experiences on a continuous, in the moment basis.

Narrative research allows for the understanding of complex interconnected stories and experiences found in homeschooling. Narrative inquiry is appropriate to study homeschool education due to the fact that it allows for “stories that traditionally had been excluded from mainstream educational research discourse” to be heard (Lemley & Mitchell, 2012, p. 237). The study of the practice of homeschool educators is limited mainly due to the fact that they have been seen as parents first, and educators second or not at all. By listening to their stories we are able to recognize their role as educators. They implore researchers to listen to people’s stories about everyday experience “with an eye to identifying new possibilities within that experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 55).

Using qualitative methods as a research tool in the field of education provides the opportunity to listen to and include teachers' lived experience and deepen the understanding of their role in educating students. This enhancement can provide a deeper understanding and a new perspective of the implementation of policies and classroom curriculum. Narrative Inquiry can also create space for teachers to express their concerns through telling their story. “When people tell stories to researchers, they feel listened to, and their information brings researchers closer to the actual practice of education” (Creswell, 1998, p. 501).

### **Autoethnography**

An autoethnography is a social sciences and humanities research method where the goal is to achieve cultural understanding through personal and professional reflection.

It is described by Roth (2009) as a “writing of the people where the writer is him or herself a member” (p. 4). This method turns the lens on oneself as researcher and participant and provides an opportunity for reflection. It is a cultural analysis with narrative details or experiences to be reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted (Chang, 2008, p. 49). The central criticism against autoethnography as a scholarly format is that it is too subjective, lacking objective critical analysis. Research shows that although it can be subjective, the autoethnographic method can provide a look into under-studied areas of education such as homeschooling (Chang, 2008, p. 49).

“Autoethnography is both process and product, a way of doing and representing research” (Adams & Ellis, 2008, p. 189). Throughout the process of interviewing the participants in this study, I was acutely aware of my own experience. Each story reminded me of an event or feeling from my homeschooling years. Lived experience can be a vehicle for teachers to understand themselves, their relationship with their students and their role in the community. “In addition, the researcher may interweave his or her personal story into the final report” (Creswell, 1998, p. 507). Through telling my story, and through my knowledge of the community, I hope to bring a deeper understanding of the homeschooling parent’s role to educational research.

[Autoethnographers] turn the analytic lens fully and specifically on themselves as they write, interpret, or perform narratives about their own culturally significant experiences...The goal of autoethnography, and of many performance narratives, is to show rather than to tell. (Chase, 2008, p. 423)

Carl Leggo (2010), in his article “Narrative Inquiry: Honouring the Complexity of the Stories We Live” stresses the importance of recognizing that “narrative does not stand alone and that as researchers we need to recognize this and be willing to listen to

the context of a story” (p. 98). As a parent/educator myself, I have an ability to connect with participants on a level and with an understanding that outsiders would not have.

Homeschooling is by nature separate or removed from the public eye. This reality does not often afford the opportunity for study into its practices. I am in a unique position to write about alternative learning spaces as a homeschool educator. The combination of Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry is an effective method to research this educational model, as each homeschooling situation is by nature distinctive.

### **Methods/Procedures**

This study analyzed the data collected from one-on-one semi-structured interviews to gain a broader understanding of the essence of the internal negotiation of homeschool parent/educators. Interviews with six homeschooling mothers were conducted in a location of their choice including coffee shops, living rooms, and libraries. These participants were recruited through connections in the community and letters of introduction were provided with the opportunity to connect with the researcher directly through email. Each interview was approximately 90 minutes in length. All of these participants live in lower Vancouver Island, BC. Initially the desired demographic was participants who had homeschooled for more than 5 years and had 2 or more children. These criteria were determined necessary to allow for the experience need to have an understanding of the negotiation of the dual role of parent and educator. Due to limited responses, these criteria were modified slightly. Of the six participants, two had homeschooled four children each through K-12. One of these participants had been homeschooled herself and this added perspective is included in the findings. This particular participant also self-identified as religious and her beliefs did play a part in her

homeschooling choices. Three participants have one or two children between the ages of 8-13. One participant has three children and is the only participant whose children were enrolled in a Distance Learning program. Data gathered was through note taking and audio recording. The researcher transcribed all interviews. Coding and analysis of the data was done by the researcher and focused on the themes of role play, improvisation, relationships, and normalizing with the possibility of others being identified during the analysis process. Narrative excerpts from research participants are included in this paper to illustrate the lived experience of homeschool educators. All participants have been given a pseudonym. When including stories from my own experience as a homeschool educator, I introduce them with “KEE.” The following forms can be found in the appendices: Appendix A: Participant Question and Appendix B: HREB certificate.

The pedagogical choices of these participants varied. The most striking contrast was between the two long term homeschoolers who had four children each. One of these participants unschooled and employed very little structure on their day. The other participant stuck to a strict structure. It became clear during our interview that this structure was for her personal benefit as much as an educational choice for her children. Of the other four participants, three followed an interest-led or unschooling approach and the other participant followed a more structured approach. One of the six participants was also a certified high school teacher.

## **Analysis**

The process of analyzing the data for this thesis started with the first question in the first interview. I didn't realize it right away but during our conversation I was overwhelmed by my own experiences replaying in my mind. My observation of the interview process was that I felt a real connection with each of the participants. After each interview, I realized that I needed to step back and hear what my participants were saying before allowing my inner dialogue to reflect on my own experience. I needed to also consider how my experiences as a parent/educator effected how I was hearing my participants. Transcribing the interviews was a long process but it allowed me to revisit the interviews and listen as a researcher rather than a parent/educator. Slowing myself down I was able to hear their experiences and points of views.

After transcribing the interviews, I printed them out as full interviews and read over them highlighting anything that jumped out at me. For the secondary analysis, I printed them sorted by questions rather than participants and review them again looking for possible connections. This was not as successful as many of the answers ran between and through the previous or next question as the conversation took its natural course, so I was only getting a portion of the participant's narrative. At this point I decided to take a step back and consider the dominant discourse. The three main themes which rose to the surface are: normalization; relationships; we are teachers. Normalization is seen through the constant inner dialogue of these parent/educators being pulled to meet the expectations of society. The powerful relationships between parent/educators and their child/students, and how that relationship supported learning, were clear in the voices and stories of all the participants. Two sub-themes emerged, role play and improvisation, that

each express how the negotiation between the roles of parent and educator was accomplished. Finally, each parent/educator was able to demonstrate how they fulfilled the role of teachers.

Below I have summarized the three main themes by participant, using a short quote from their interviews. Using a summary table allowed for the thematic narrative derived from the interview data to be clearly documented (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014. p. 159).

#### Summary of Participants/Themes

##### **Theme – Relationship**

<b>Paula</b>	<u>Family:</u> <i>“We fall into the unschooling camp. Our school day is full life immersion; they are just involved in our lives.”</i>
<b>Martha</b>	<u>24/7 Parenting/Educator:</u> <i>“It is learning how to negotiate how to find space for yourself as well as needing to take care of your children.”</i>
<b>Clara</b>	<u>Sharing time:</u> <i>“I can focus on my son and I love that he wakes up and says he loves his life.”</i> <u>Democracy:</u> <i>“You were talking to each other like you were friends having a nice day out. You were explaining things you weren’t holding things back.”</i>
<b>Denise</b>	<u>Together:</u> <i>“If we are going to do this, we have to do it together. We are going to do this right and we are going to make it fun”</i> <u>Family pressure:</u> <i>“I’ll say my husband wasn’t on board. He asked if I was sure I knew what I was doing.”</i>
<b>Susan</b>	<u>Family:</u> <i>“It builds closer family and family is very important.”</i>

##### **Theme - Normalization**

<b>Paula</b>	<u>Push back:</u> <i>“I was supposed to put him on a bus to school when he was 3 and say goodbye for the day.”</i> <u>Control:</u> <i>As a teacher “my job really was to control these young people in ways they didn’t enjoy being controlled.”</i>
<b>Martha</b>	<u>Internal negotiation:</u> <i>“I would have these internal debates. What if my son didn’t learn to read”</i>

- Clara** Push back: *“This isn’t what I wanted and it isn’t what I wanted for my son.”*  
Expectations: *“I had to re-evaluate everything I had ever thought was learning and school and what was valuable.”*
- Denise** Judgement: *Reasons for homeschooling for us include “the confines of the classroom and the judgement about being passionate about certain things.”*
- Susan** Expectation: *“A lot of people were concerned about the socialization.”*

**Theme – We are teachers.**

- Paula** Facilitator: *“I am trying to facilitate, guiding them in life while they need guidance.”*  
No distinction: *“My goal is not to have a distinction between parent and teacher.”*
- Martha** Facilitator: *“One of the great benefits of homeschooling is that children have the freedom to see the way they see rather than being told that it’s wrong.”*  
Learning timeline: *“My children would have been considered learning disabled because none of them could read before 8 years old.”*  
Being a teacher: *“It means having the opportunity to observe my children and see what’s going on for them and how maybe I can stretch their interests or support what it is they are trying to do right now.”*
- Clara** Facilitator: *“I try and wrap my head around the word teach because I feel that everything is learning.”*  
Student centred: *“So whatever my son is interested in, even if I am not interested in it, I find things out about it and try to follow along.”*
- Denise** Student centred: *“[In school,] at the beginning of grade 5 I started to see the fizzle go out of her excitement and her passion for learning.”*  
Project based: *“It was a total re-enactment of the War of 1812. We worked on it for 2 days. Our entire living room floor was covered.”*
- Susan** Student centred: *“You can focus your attention on your child and in a normal situation a teacher has 30 kids and the class has to go at the pace of the one that is least able to go quickly, right?”*

After reading the participant interviews with the questions in mind, I allowed my observations from these interviews to react with my personal experience as a homeschool parent/educator. The interplay between observing and reacting allowed themes to emerge. “For assertions, [observations], we draw from understandings deep within us, understanding whose derivation may be some hidden mix of personal experience, scholarship, assertions of other researchers” (Stake, 1995, p.12). By observing the fact that the themes of relationships, normalization and ‘we are teachers’ spoke strongly to me I was able to connect my experience with that of the participants. I identified each theme throughout each individual interview by tagging segments of text (Creswell, 1998). I then identified short quotes that might be used to clearly illustrate themes as shown in the table above. Longer quotes are used to convey a more complex understanding of the participant’s story and included in the following Interpretation chapter (Creswell, 1998). Through this process my own stories came to the surface and I included them to offer a deeper interpretation.

### **Limitations**

Due to the personal nature of homeschooling as well as the limitations in the number of participants interviewed for this thesis, I acknowledge that the participants in this research are from a limited pool. Not all participants will fit the criteria of having more than one child or homeschooling for more than five years. All are from a white middle class background. All participants come from two parent families, which is representative of the majority of homeschooled children in Canada (Ray, 2005, p. 3).

## Interpretation

In discussing the role of parent/educators in the homeschool environment and the findings of this study, I start with my own story. Next, three main themes that emerged from this study, namely ‘relationships’, ‘normalization’, and ‘we are teachers’ are discussed supported by the voices of participants and interwoven with interpretive discussion.

### Themes

The analysis of interviews from participant parent/educators revealed three main themes: the importance of relationships; the pull of normalization and we are teachers. The next section discusses these themes supported by excerpts from the interviews and my own story.

*"You, the parent, are your child's first teacher and his best teacher. It's an awesome responsibility, but one that brings immeasurable rewards" (McTaggart, 2003).*

### My Story

*I did not set out to homeschool four children. If circumstance had not put our family in California for what was thought to be one year, I would never have considered taking on the job. When we arrived, I realized that I was uncomfortable sending my three daughters to a large impersonal American school where I couldn't protect them. Just looking at the massive campus and literally thousands of students made me want to hold them tighter. Even then, I started down the homeschooling path tentatively, unsure of where it might lead. Thankfully, it led to a beautiful journey and I have never looked back. It has been an exciting experience walking this path together, unfolding our lives,*

*exploring the world, and seeking answers. My negotiation between parent and educator was never formal. Sometimes it was a case of surviving the day. Having four children meant some were doing schoolwork while others were doing housework, playing, reading, walking the dogs, among other activities. This meant that my movement from parent to educator and back was influenced by many factors, both internal and external. Every day was a fluid process of being present and negotiating what needed to be done with what the children wanted to do. After ten years of living a life as an educator, I decided to return to my own education. This too became a part of our homeschooling journey as my daughters and I have spent many hours discussing papers and even attending class together at the University of Victoria. My expanded role as parent, educator and now student was a natural progression in our homeschool culture. I am acutely aware of the role of parent and educator and how they are navigated. However, at the same time I am aware that these roles are forever intertwined and sometimes difficult to tease out. Before enrolling in a Master's program and being questioned by my advisor, I took the navigation between these two roles for granted.*

### **Power of Relationships**

*“To teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibility for the production or construction of knowledge.” (Freire, 1998, p. 30)*

Findings in this study support the understanding that the intimacy between parent/educators and their child/students is an important component to the choice to homeschool as well as its success. “The emotional bond between students and teachers - for better or worse - accounts for whether students learn. They are able to connect personally with the students and they organize the material in a way that makes it

interesting and easy to understand" (Willingham, 2009, p. 52). There is an intimate bond between a homeschool parent/educators and their children, which is built on the natural bond within a family.

*Clara: The dynamic between parent and educator is all together wrapped up in the same thing.*

The parent/educators are able to capitalize on intuition, close relationships and experience to build a strong basis for learning. In Lois' study, she found that "Mothers anchored their confidence in their intimate knowledge of their children's interests and motivational currencies; they argued that it truly did place them in the best position to advance their children's education" (Lois, 2013, p. 73). By drawing on the culturally accepted norm of good mothering, homeschoolers are able to defend themselves against social criticism.

Traditional, institutionalized schooling can put parents in difficult situations of making a choice between what they believe to be right for their child and social norms of going to school. What emerged from participant interviews is a question arguably asked of all homeschoolers: "What about socialization?" "Socialization questions are asked of nearly every homeschool parent and every homeschool teenager" (Ray, 2005, p. 4). The misconception that homeschoolers are locked away without the opportunity to learn how to conduct themselves in society is common. Parent/educators are sometimes seen as socially overprotective, preventing children from experiences that would develop their skills necessary to function in society. "They feared she was robbing them of their chance to learn how to navigate social life" (Lois, 2013, p. 76). Parent/educators respond to these criticisms by admitting they feel protective but pointing out they are protecting their

children from dangers of traditional school such as bullying, ridicule, ostracism and labeling, all of which can damage self-esteem. Lois claims this response is upholding the “good mom” role (p. 76).

Before she had children, Paula was a high school teacher in Ontario. For her, part of deschooling was realizing that being a traditional teacher was all about control which went against what she believed was right for her students.

*Paula: What I noticed is that the role I used to play as a highschool teacher, is actually a controller. I felt like a warden in a jail often because I had this big necklace thing of keys and I would walk around with my big wad of keys jingling in these hallways full of young people who didn't actually want to be there...and my job really was to be controlling these young people in ways they didn't enjoy being controlled.*

The requirement to control the students' took away from her ability to connect with these students as an educator and support their individualized learning. Paula's experience as a highschool teacher influenced her choice to educate her children at home.

In his book *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (2000) explains “that although the teachers or the students are not the same, the person in charge of education is being formed or re-formed as he/she teaches and the person who is being taught forms him/herself in this process” (p. 31). Teaching requires learning; there is a give and take and a sharing of roles. Being a parent/educator is an exhausting job, however it is also extremely rewarding. It is not necessary to have all the answers as long as a teacher is willing to facilitate finding the answers though discussions, reading, research and

problem solving. “It is the process of learning that makes teaching possible. To teach is part of the very fabric of learning” (p. 31).

*KEE: One of my favourite memories of homeschooling is taking them to a museum homeschooling class in California. These classes were designed with the understanding that a parent would arrive with a student, but may also arrive with several children in tow. Connie, the educator, jumped at the chance to include all the children who arrived to share stories in a tent, in a field. The stories Connie told were stories from the American Indians of the area and she engaged all the children and parents in discussions about the meanings behind the stories. After class we would pile into the van and discuss what we each thought of that day's story. The fact that we were all a part of the learning meant that we were able to support each other's understanding and build on that knowledge another day. For example: while studying another culture I would remind the student of the story Connie had told about the creation of earth and ask them how this new culture we were studying might have answered their own questions about the same topic.*

It is important to recognize that many teachers have a transformational way of being with young people. Their unique relationship of parent/educators builds respect, strong values and provides a quality of education. The role of parent/educator is intertwined and interwoven requiring negotiation, time management and interplay. However, it is also in the moment, free flowing and immediate. Being “in the moment,” noticing learning chances and taking the time to offer a small piece of knowledge is one of the great gifts of teaching. As parent/educators we are so busy responding, providing

opportunity, sharing stories and experiences that we don't always feel the movement or exchange between roles of parent and educator.

When we think of improvisation, we generally think of music or theatre. "In Jazz, improvisation isn't a matter of just making any ol' thing up. Jazz, like any language, has its own grammar and vocabulary. There's no right or wrong, just some choices that are better than others" (Marsallis, n.d., para. 4). Time, meals, appointments, sports and expectations structure everyday life. This structure creates a baseline, a set of chords by which life is kept from becoming too difficult to manage. Homeschooling moves with and between these "chords" giving the parent/educator and student the opportunity to improvise in the moment to create an individualized learning path. "Improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing material grows for scene and plays" (Spolin, 1983, p.10). This is also true for improvisation in homeschooling. There is no parent/educator without the student. The students validate the parent's chosen role, even if by silently acknowledging it. Being a homeschool educator is a role you cannot be taught. There is no class. The homeschool environment and the give-and-take between the parent/educator and their child/student create the role itself. By engaging in a role you "are not receiving knowledge or acquiring knowledge but making it" (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999, p. 58).

*Paula:...our life now is similar to when you are pregnant, in your pregnancy your body is adjusting, and stretching and that tangible physical thing happening you might not want to have your body stretched out and develop stretch marks, that might not be your choice but this is how it is, this is what is happening and you just go with it as best you can.*

Paula describes rhythm, the give-and-take, using the analogy of the stretching of a pregnant belly. There is still the need for some structure, which builds on the idea of improvisation and rooting it in framework of chords, or the rhythm of the day. The parent/educator is like a conductor of a piece of music written by and with their students.

In his book *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peters discusses what counts as improvisation. He explains that improvisation is “situated on the edge between the absence and the presence of the work” (Peters, 2009, p. 1). It constitutes being “in the moment”. I asked my participants what “being in the moment” meant to them.

*Martha: It just means paying attention to what's going on and the great thing about homeschooling is that you can be in the moment. You can see that child and sometimes you can see “ah” here is a little space I can inject something that might just fit.*

*Paula:...it's liberating. I find home learning liberating in that you can be more in the moment and what we are getting into, we can with a little bit of stretching... .*

For me, being “in the moment” sometimes meant letting go of preconceived notions of what “should” get done. It meant trusting in their ability to learn, putting aside the to-do list and letting the children share the experience of learning without my guidance.

*KEE: I would often have a plan in my head as to how the week would run and what I thought could be accomplished on any given day. Living in California meant that much of the year, the outdoors was part of our home. I knew that if I didn't get myself downstairs quickly enough my girls would be outside and I would have lost the moment to guide them into the learning plan for that day. One morning, I was too late and they were all outside playing. So I gathered my best "teacher voice" and went outside to refocus their activities. As I went around the corner I could hear them but they couldn't see me and I listened. They were playing Barbies in the dirt. They had created a ancient burial site and were discussing Egyptian burial. We had been studying ancient civilizations and here they were applying their knowledge, sharing stories and scaffolding learning. This, to me was "in the moment" learning.*

For Clara, being in the moment and allowing her son the freedom to follow his interests provides the opportunity for a broad knowledge base and deep understanding of a topic. Not responding to a learning moment can potentially result in a missed opportunity.

*Clara: He can understand that this is something we could conceivably do later but I guarantee you that if you go back to that later he's not going to have the same interest in it that he had right at that moment.*

Martha describes being in the moment as not lecturing but letting it happen naturally through interest. It can be compared to creating a path or a beginning. Provide an entrance to a path and just step back and see where the child leads you, be there to help open doors or if necessary redirect, but always by opening another door.

*Martha: It just means paying attention to what's going on and the great thing about homeschooling is that you can be in the moment, you can see that child and sometimes you can see 'ah' here is a little here is a little space I can inject something that might just fit and it just means that it all sort of works and it is so exciting to watch.*

Grabbing teachable moments on a continuous basis is difficult for any teacher. In homeschooling it becomes a part of the fabric of your life. Every trip the store, every holiday, every afternoon on the beach, or just an evening walk to the park becomes a chance to meet your child where they are and answering their questions. For Paula, one opportunity came while they were driving to theatre class:

*Paula: In the moment driving here we saw the Alliance van. He was curious how to read that. He wanted to know. He didn't quite get it right and he attempted, asked for some guidance, got it and he'll probably remember that.*

*"The most important role is that of teacher."* (Morgan & Saxton, 2006, p. 38)

Role Play is often thought of as taking on a role in a theatrical setting, however it can also be used as an educational tool. A teacher using role play might take on a

particular role and invite their students to fill in and develop the storyline and scene. The role is used as a jumping off point for exploring a subject. Through the performance and reflection it is possible to introduce a subject and explore its contours and potentially build on each other's knowledge. "This shift from the 'normal' passing on of knowledge to the 'making' of it calls on one's humanness in a way not normally associated with an instructional context. It is both challenging and exposing" (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999, p. 58). There is an intuitive give-and-take, exchange of roles and ideas, that propels learning forward to the next task. I propose that homeschool educators use role-play informally and naturally. One way we do this is through modeling.

For Paula, she was acutely aware that when she was a schoolteacher, many of her colleagues taught one way of being and lived another, something she strives not to do herself. Here she describes something one of her professor's at teacher's college told her.

*Paula: He was great. He did suggest that curriculum doesn't matter, what you are going to teach your students more than anything else is the person you are. That really stuck with me. Now I have my own children and we are on this homelearning path, I really see that as a core element of just humanity. That is what we do in all our relationships, whether we mean to or not. I really noticed when I was still teaching in school that a lot of my colleagues either didn't know or forgot. They would be preaching these ways of doing thing but then in their own lives they would be completely disorganized, and dysfunctional. They would be completely insensitive to a lot of people's feelings.*

For Clara, modeling strong family values means providing the opportunity for her son to build a strong sense of self, means he can grow as a person.

*Clara: You know, that is the crux of what I see as my role as a parent. To provide a sense of not just safety but a sense of self so he has a place this time in his life when he builds that little core of himself inside. That core has to serve him for the rest of his life. I feel my job is to provide my son with that environment so that he can fill up that little core. Those are the kind of things that make you who you are.*

For myself, I believe that volunteering is a cornerstone of a strong society and as such I have always volunteered in one role or another. Teaching through the philosophy of serving opens the door to discussions on the social implications of the economy, food shortages, respect for others and the concept of ‘need vs. want’. Each year my children and I volunteer at a local Christmas lunch for the homeless. This shared experience, working in a restaurant for a day and supporting those who are in-need, builds family values, creates teachable moments and leads to discussions around community and supporting others less fortunate.

Developing a student’s moral self is the responsibility of parents and teachers. Lois (2013) finds that moral self-righteousness was one of the emotional deviances for which homeschooling mothers were criticized. The mothers were driven to homeschool by “feeling that led them to teach their children values that would forever position them at the margins of society” (p. 78). The response to this is to focus on the societal norm that “responsible mothers cultivate their children’s oral development and raise upstanding, productive citizens” (p. 79).

## Normalization

*“I never let schooling interfere with my education.”*

Mark Twain

As a society we are all acutely aware when someone steps away from being ‘normal’. Having a cell phone or television, clothing choices and attending school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday; these are considered to be social norms (at least in much of the developed world). Homeschooling, although becoming more commonplace, is still considered abnormal, or different. The control of society is achieved through the individual’s need to be normal. “The new methods of power are not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus” (Fillingham, 1993, p. 141). Homeschoolers challenge educational norms, they push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable. It was evident through the interviews that all participants in this study felt some degree of pull toward normal regarding their decision to educate their children at home. Lois (2013) refers to this pull toward normal as a “stigma”. “Homeschooling is widely misunderstood by the non-homeschooling public, and homeschooling parents themselves feel the stigma sharply each time they are asked whether they are worried about destroying their children socially and academically” (p. 1).

*KEE: During the first few years as a homeschool educator I was always questioning the decision to homeschool and whether it was the right thing to do. Was I capable of educating my children? What if I mess it up? This was magnified by the constant questions and concerned comments by family members, friends, as well as total strangers. Once, after a day at the beach, I was in COSTCO with my children and an elderly gentleman stopped one of my daughters and asked why they were not in school. This was a common question so the children were used to it. She responded that we homeschooled. The gentleman proceeded to loudly criticize her and then me for the ridiculousness of such a claim. "The children should be in a real school." This was a common response and I had a constant feeling that I had to justify the path I had chosen for my children's education.*

This view, that children should be in a real school, reflect society's need to be normal, not only for ourselves but for those around us. We are all pushed and pulled by societal norms on a daily basis. This push-pull can be felt internally as the memory of our own schooling colours our homeschooling lives. Clara was recently given boxes filled with her school mementoes.

*Clara: I had gone through the school system and I just went through some boxes of stuff my parents gave me of all my old school report cards and stuff. It was awful to go through that. I spent yesterday just being blah. I couldn't do anything to get it off me because I remembered how I never had any choice. You are told all your life that there is only one way. It is like having giant thorns stuck in you.*

Laws governing educating children set expectations that all children should be in a building, in a classroom, with a 'qualified' teacher who adheres to a set curriculum. Expectations of families govern decisions we make around parenting and education. We try to live up to what is expected of us. This reality creates a tension within parents who make the decision to homeschool. Lois claims that in defence of this stigma or normalization, parent/educators use justification to not only avow their decision to homeschool but also deny the responsibility (p. 73). In taking this stance they take on the role of hyper-responsive mothers, which is culturally acceptable.

*Paula: We were in Ontario and my son was born in December so I was supposed to put him on a bus when he was 3, still in diapers, still nursing and say goodbye for the day...this didn't really work for our family. So then when we began that kind of not just following along with what it seemed everyone else just does without really thinking of it, that just kind of opened the door to just pausing and deciding what is going to work for us...Kind of navigating our way.*

School rules, policies and required curriculum take power away from the parent and the child and exert undue power over normal situations. In a public school environment, parents are seen as interfering in a child's education if they disagree with their child's teachers. The relinquishment of power over what parents feel is best for their child causes conflict within themselves. Martha reflects on her experience as a teacher's aid before homeschooling her children.

*Martha: Some teachers try different things and of course the parents were concerned and it was that thing that teacher's know better than parents what is right for their children and in some cases they did and in some they didn't.*

Parent/educators are often criticized for their choice to homeschool. Lois explains how mothers who choose to educate their children are accused of being excessively emotional. "Mothers were cast as deviant not for homeschooling per se but for allegedly letting their maternal emotions spin out of control, which led to the irresponsible behaviour of homeschooling" (p. 71). Clara's son struggled with anxiety around attending school. She did not plan to homeschool and before making the decision she tried to involve the school in her son's transition and was willing to work with them.

*Clara: [My son has] anxiety, it happens to lots of people and everybody deals with it differently you know and so I can see why they [the teachers] kind of had to leave that in my hands and uhm so I suggesting he go back the next day. He went back and I said to the teachers: Well I'll stay. I'll just stay in the classroom and they said no, you can only stay the first hour, and I said no, I can stay. I can stay the whole day if I want to. My son heard this conversation...the hour came and went and by the end of the hour...I could sense that he [her son] was starting to get anxious....When that hour was up, one teacher came and grabbed him from behind and one teacher came and grabbed me from behind, pulled me out of the room and pulled him in.*

In a traditional school, classroom control is paramount and sometimes works to directly undermine the needs of a child. The internal struggle homeschool parents experience goes beyond the decision to homeschool and extends to daily struggle on what to teach and whether their children are learning ‘what they need to know’ to succeed as adults.

*KEE: Homeschooling one of my children challenged me to step outside what I had been taught was “the right” way to teach and learn. Working with her was both extremely challenging and rewarding at the same time. She did not fit in a box or follow a “normal” path to learning, but at the same time she is one of the most fascinating people I have ever met. Family members commented that children should sit at a table to do their school work. My daughter regularly did her math in a tree. The challenge came with my internal struggle to let go of what I had been taught and what society was telling me was the appropriate way to teach, with set milestones and an expected outcome. I knew she was learning but I was constantly questioning if I was providing the “right” education for her. I am thankful everyday that we homeschooled because it allowed her to have the freedom to see the world in her own way and not be constrained by how society expected her to see it.*

Deschooling is a term commonly used in the homeschooling community to describe the time it takes to transition from traditional schooling to an alternative educational environment such as homeschooling. It is a time of adjustment involving decompression and disconnection to really get the benefits of homeschooling. This process can be as important for the parent/educator as for the children. Clara found there

was a process of deschooling for herself, more than for her son. There is a constant self-evaluation and questioning based on one's own expectations and experience.

*Clara: It was a big change, not just a change for [my son] but a much bigger change for me because I had to re-evaluate everything I had ever thought was learning and school and what was valuable and I still find myself doing that all the time."*

Before having children, Martha worked as a teacher's assistant. Here she describes her frustration with the constraint of what, as a teacher she was 'allowed' to teach and what could potentially have helped the children in her class learn to read.

*Martha:...like in any culture there are certain words that you are not supposed to say as a child so for them it was "ghost" and "piggy" but she [the teacher] saw that they could all read those words but she couldn't use them and I saw the same thing, that all the children in our classroom could read all the graffiti that was on the wall but of course we couldn't use those words to help them learn how to read...*

Albert Bandura (1997), a psychologist known for his social learning theory explains that there are four primary sources of feelings or expectations of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the level to which a person perceives their ability to influence events that might change their lives. The four primary sources of feelings are: performance accomplishment, or experiencing mastery in a task leads to the belief that one will be successful in that or a similar task; vicarious experience, believing one will be successful due to the observed success of others; social or verbal persuasion, being led through suggestion that one will be successful; and emotional arousal, success is more likely when one is not adversely aroused (p.198). In her paper "The Courage to Let Them Play:

## Factors Influencing and Limiting Feelings of Self-efficacy in Unschooling Mothers”

Morrison (2007) analyses the experience of homeschooling mothers and the level to which they believe they will be successful in this role through Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. Overall, her study found that “Bandura’s theory on the sources of self-efficacy has seemed to play out well as relates to unschooling mothers” (p. 77) with some limitations. The findings relevant to my own research were that feelings of self-efficacy of unschooling mothers’ were supported by “performance accomplishments in other areas of lifestyle deviancy” (p. 60). Paula believed that it was the right choice to homeschool because putting her son on a bus at age three and sending him off to school did not fit her family’s values. Clara shared how the experience of Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) testing made her son feel “stupid” and how she had decided not to allow his participation in standardized testing in the future. All of the participants felt an internal struggle between what was expected of them as parents with regard to educating their children and what they knew was the right path for their families. Clara describes how she struggled with the FSA testing and how it impacted her son.

*Clara: The FSA test is one of those things that reminds me of the school system and reminds me how boring it is. My son goes through the reading comprehension and says why do they do such boring stories? For math, he can come up with the answer but e can't tell you how he came up with it and that's what they want. After the whole day he was so tired and I asked him how he was feeling and he said, to be honest I feel stupid. This is the harm! So I made up another test based on his curriculum. [For example] I asked him to name ten mushrooms, which ones you can eat, where you can find them on Vancouver Island, and how you might cook them.*

Standardized testing is a controversial topic for homeschoolers as well as traditional schoolers. Standardized tests are seen “to provide information needed to hold schools accountable for providing equal education for all” (Taylor, 2016, para. 2). Jonathan Wolfer<sup>1</sup>, Principal in the Boulder Valley School District posted an online article on LinkedIn pointing out that an annual review of standardized testing which is required by the US *No Child Left Behind Law*, show a persistent gap in performance (in general) between “wealthier white students and poorer students of colour” (Wolfer, 2016). Efforts to eliminate this achievement gap, such as converting schools to charter schools and changing laws to allow for early dismissal of teachers whose students do not meet expected levels, have not succeeded. The gap remains “persistent and “unchanging”. Wolfer reports that over the past few years “a form of civil disobedience began to grow” as an increasing number of families chose to opt out of testing. “More and more families are now seeing this as a problem and...families of all backgrounds are pushing back by refusing permission for their children to be subjected to these annual test” (Wolfer,

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<sup>1</sup> Through email correspondence Jonathan Wolfer has informed the author that this article will be embedded in a book being published fall of 2016.

2016). Standardized testing is an accountability system that places value on learning that can be measured. “The ministry of education plan places its focus on achievement. The focus is not on the broader category of learning that might have many elements that cannot be measured but rather specifically on achievement that can be measured” (Kuehn, 2006, p. 136). Another article in the *New York Times*, “Race and the Standardized Testing Wars,” (Taylor, 2016) expresses concern “when the parents of more than 200,000 pupils in the 3rd and 8th grades in New York chose to have their children sit out standardized state tests last spring, major civil rights organizations were quick to condemn their decisions” (para. 1). The use of the word “war” in the title of the article is provocative. Parents who are making decisions which they feel are in the best interest of their child(ren) are considered to be at “war” with society, committing acts of civil disobedience. One mother was quoted in the article as saying: “what we end up doing is creating a bunch of soldiers that in order to pass, in order to get out of whatever their situation is they will follow directions. And we will have a community of people that merely follow directions” (para. 10). We, as members of society, are expected to follow along unquestioningly and be a part of the ‘norm’. This expectation, this pull, is a constant strain on families who choose to homeschool.

### **We are teachers.**

Being a teacher is often considered a calling and speaks directly to our humanity. As teachers we pass knowledge down to the next generation providing them with the tools they need to survive. Unfortunately the institutionalized layers in the public school system, of government legislation, control, accountability, rules, assessments and expectations both public and governmental create an environment that can limit teachers’

in doing their job to the best of their ability. “To get back to the principles and ideals of public education, it is important to redefine and reinforce the purposes of public education in the current context and projected future. What should a public education system for the 21 Century look like?” (Kuehn, 2006, p. 140). As discussed above, the Ministry of Education in British Columbia has recently overhauled their curriculum in an effort to answer this question. Through a focus on mentorships, differentiated learning, project based learning and student led learning, the Ministry is attempting to meet the varied needs of students. The new “transformational” curriculum echoes the focus and values of homeschooling curriculum. Through personalized, self-directed learning parent/educators co-construct knowledge with their students. “To know how to teach is to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge” (Freire, 1998, p. 49).

Parent/educators are in tune with their child/students’ interests and are able to capitalize on that by reaching out into the community. For example, homeschool educators often find exhibits, mentors or workshops that address specific interests of their child/student. Through inviting mentors in the community to work with their students and actively engaging learners, parent/educators provide a rich curriculum that readies their students to succeed. “Why not establish an ‘intimate’ connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals?” (p. 36).

*Paula: We go to classes, my son is in his drama class now. We did swimming lessons for a while and archery. We do a lot of classes. As far as our school day it's just life. Full life immersion. They come grocery shopping with me, they are just involved in our life.*

Many students who are homeschooled throughout their educational journey have benefited from the educational model of decentralized teaching established by feminist theory, conflict resolution practice and Montessori's method. The structure of the homeschool environment supported by the natural role of parenting is conducive to a parent/educator taking the role of facilitator. By allowing their students to drive their own learning with flexible schedules, learning spaces and differentiated learning models, parent/educators respectfully step back and allow their students to engage in their own learning journey. Vygotsky's (1985) theory of education supports the role of facilitator. "The teacher must adopt the role of facilitator not content provider" (p. 447). This is echoed by Hedeem (2005) when he says: "When the instructor consciously removes herself or himself from the 'center' of the room, students are empowered to exercise their volition and engage in learning activities that meet their interests. Further, the responsibility of learning falls to the student" (p. 188).

Both Martha and Paula felt their role as an educator was that of facilitator.

*Martha: So being a teacher in homeschooling means having the opportunity to observe my children and seeing what's going on for them and how maybe I can stretch their interests or support what it is they are trying to do right now.*

*Paula: In my view teaching ought to be of facilitating. Supporting them where they are, nurturing them, helping them. Like the idea of gardeners. You can create an environment that allows the plant to realize it's potential or you can do things that can stunt the growth or harm it in some way. So, I'm taking that approach.*

“The whole of life provides educational opportunities, and oftentimes in more authentic and powerful contexts than what traditional schooling has to offer” (Kunzman, 2012, p. 75). The day-to-day connections and experiences in the homeschooling environment create the possibilities of mastering concepts before moving on or delving deeper simply because there is time. Parent/educators can scaffold learning from one day to the next, one conversation to the next building on a co-constructed knowledge base.

*Martha: You can use this to support his learning and I think that's one of the real gems about being home, is that you can see what's fascinating to your child and use that to support their learning.*

Many parent/educators are not certified teachers and are often questioned as to why they think they are capable of teaching. “Strangers seemed to feel unusually free to questions mothers’ ability to teach their children” (Lois, 2013, p. 72). The criticism seems claim the mother is dismissing teachers, schools and by extension society’s ability to teach her children and to question the mother role as a parent and by extension her ability to make rational decisions for her children. “Many policy makers, educators, school administrators and parents wonder whether ordinary mothers and fathers, who are not government-certified teachers, are capable of teaching their children after age five” (Ray, 2005, p. 4). In reality, homeschooled children often excel in academics as seen in many studies. “In study after study, the homeschooled have scored, on average, at the

65th to 80th percentile on standardized academic achievement tests in the US and Canada, compared to the public school average of the 50th percentile” (p. 4).

By creating a culture of learning and being open to their student’s interests, parent/educators can let learning happen. After describing how she and her son had spent the morning examining the passport office carpet, Clara explains that:

*Clara: It is like the way our whole life is. You find things and those things lead to bigger things and then you kind of hook onto them and that finds something you are interested in and you follow down that path and most of the time I am just running to keep up with him...what’s he doing next?*

Martha’s unschooling allowed her to follow her children’s interests and use that as the basis for their curriculum.

*Martha: Following their interests. It wasn’t as much teaching them a particular skill because they didn’t necessarily ask me to learn a skill but it was finding skills that they were interested in. I had them learn with reading. We did writing. They told me stories. One of the great benefits of homeschooling is that children have the freedom to see the way they see rather than being told that it’s wrong.*

Project based learning is a hands-on learning style that creates the opportunity to, follow a child’s interests, delve into a topic and look at it from many points of view. Multiple subjects can be wrapped up into one project providing differentiated learning.

*Denise: We were studying the War of 1812 and I went online and ordered some stuff. It came in a huge box that was the size of the wall. It was a total reenactment of the whole thing. We spent two days. Our entire living room floor was covered with a timeline of everybody's lives. I think it is fun to have the freedom to sit for three hours if we want to and really follow the subject where it leads."*

*Martha: If you can see what's fascinating to your child and use that to support their learning. If they are fascinated by horses, you read lots of books about horses, you go somewhere and look at horses and you do all these things and then that interest might wane and that's fine. They've learned a lot of different things, some of which they do retain and some which they might not. I think one of the most amazing things is that what they [her children] learned, they retained, whereas for me, I learned in school to forget.*

Each participant was asked what a typical homeschooling day looked like for her family. It was clear that the flexible schedule of a homeschooling day supported the needs of each unique family. For Susan, more structure supported her own needs as well as one of her student who suffers from anxiety. Martha's homeschooling day was free flowing and organic.

*Susan: For me? I am a very organized person so I get stressed out if [the day] is not organized. So we would start the day at 9 and they would get down to work. Some activities we would do together, such as social studies and science. We had some activities in the afternoon. I was probably a task master. [One son] did better if he knew the routine. [Disruption to the schedule] really affected him.*

*Martha: It just flowed. It was organic. It was whatever was going on. If it was a rainy day we probably did some dancing in the house.”*

*Clara: He [her son] has recently started to sleep in. In the morning he usually goes online and he plays games, he has a lot of stuff he does each day on the computer. He doesn't mind if you are interrupting him but he doesn't like you to plan things to make him go away in the morning. And then usually about 11 o'clock we start thinking about lunch.*

*Martha: As a homeschooling mum it is total immersion in both jobs [mum and educator] and I see that children are always learning. You can't stop them from learning.*

*Paula: My goal is to not really have a distinction.*

*Clara: I don't really think of him as a student. In fact if I get too teachy about things he gets really turned off so it is kind of a delicate balance. If there is something I want to impart to him I recognize that I have to approach it in a way that doesn't sound like a lecture because his eyes literally glaze over and fair enough. Who wants to be lectured to right?*

When asked how the roles of parent and educator manifest themselves in their homeschooling, it became evident that the participants did not see it as a role sharing but as one fluid role.

*KEE: Nothing has attracted my son's attention as much as a computer. As a homeschool educator I have struggled with this reality, making sure he is involved in sports, music, and in regular outdoor activities. I believe in balance. I understand the common argument and concern that people who play computer games are disconnected from reality, or lack social skills. Also, that computer games perpetuate violence. In coming to terms with the magnetic online world of gaming and deciding to work with his interest, rather than fight it, I have determined through critical reflection, that there is educational value in this online world. Through observation I have had to acknowledge and support his development of skills he has acquired including problem solving, critical thinking, business skills, programming skills, and technical literacy.*

Tailoring curriculum, instruction, and pace to each individual child is a key element in homeschooling. Traditional, institutional classroom teachers control their classrooms through wall, desks, bells, and set curriculum.

As a teacher, Paula experienced the role of controller.

*Paula: Well, with hindsight now I am able to see that what I was taught [during her Bachelor of Education, Queens University] and what I think is normal is very separating. This idea that we are at school we are here to be learning as though when you are not at school you are not learning. I mean that's ridiculous right? But there is this kind of mainstream belief that seems to be had and even in teacher training. There is this idea of not losing control. That was a key tenet of what I was taught. The classroom management, the different styles of what you need to know to effectively control your classroom. It is hierarchical. I've got the keys, I am the teacher.*

In contrast, parent/educators 'hold back' society's need for control allowing their students to find their own way. Homeschool children are taught the rules of society, but also why the rules are there and why they might choose to follow them, or not. They are taught to think critically, problem solve and ask questions. "A critical approach to education explores diversity, challenges existing power relations, and embraces difference as a pedagogical medium" (Gorlewski, 2011, p. 88).

## Conclusion

*KEE: Upon reflection over the years of homeschooling and through returning to the academic world myself, I am staggered by the sheer number of educational choices we have today. Homeschooling is not for every parent or every child. It is hard, rewarding work that takes an enormous amount of dedication. The role of a parent/educator is a tangle of constantly changing needs, wants, desires and interests which is compounded by the number of children involved. I remember having to say "stop, we are done for today" and shoo them off to bed, usually at 10pm. Seeing yourself as a parent and as an educator in the mirror of your children's eyes means being aware of, and questioning, your choices on a continuous sometimes in-the-moment basis. "What values am I teaching them now?" "Am I embodying what I am teaching?" Connecting with each child, taking their interests into account, sharing and scaffolding learning allows them the freedom and strength to explore their potential and discover themselves. I have had the opportunity to be in a university class with one of my daughters, which made me both excited and nervous. I enjoy sharing time and experiences with all my children but this situation had me stepping away from the educator and parent roles, put me squarely beside my daughter as a learner. My work would be judged by the professor equally to my daughter's. I relaxed a little at the first class when she introduced herself as my daughter. Homeschooling, for me personally, has instilled a love of learning that I never had as a young person. My goal as a parent/educator was to foster a love of learning in each my children.*

Geoffrey Canada, in his 2010 TED talk *Our Failing Schools, Enough is Enough* makes the claim that our education system is failing due to what he calls a failed business plan. “We’re clinging to a business model that clearly doesn’t work. One size fits all, and if you get it fine and if you don’t touch luck” (Canada, 2010). International advisor on education Sir Ken Robinson (2010), in his TED Talk *Changing Education Paradigms*, echoes this concern when he says “every country on earth is reforming public education”. Robinson points out that this reform is due to two reasons: economic and cultural. How can an education system that was “based on conformity and driven by economics.” Anyone approximately forty-five or older can tell you that they grew up without a computer in their homes, and now we carry them around in our pockets or hands. Our world changes quickly and as educators, we need to educate children to be successful in a world that we have difficulty even imagining. “How do we educate our children to take their place in the economies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Given that we can’t anticipate what the economy will look like at the end of next week?” (Robinson, 2010).

There is an educational shift happening in British Columbia public school curriculum moving the focus away from the banking system of education where knowledge is deposited into students. Student centered teaching methods such as question-based approaches, self-directed learning, flexibility and differentiated instruction are being implemented with the goal to provide a more inclusive and individualized educational system. Homeschool parent/educators have a great deal of knowledge and experience in these methods.

This study looked at the experience of parent/educators in the homeschool environment with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of this key role in

alternative education. The results of this study points to a distinct possibility that, during this time of educational reform, homeschoolers have vast amounts of experience that can potentially inform teacher practices in classroom-based education. Miller (1997) argues “holistic educators offer a profound philosophy that may be a genuine solution to the educational and cultural crisis” (p. 4).

It is important to acknowledge that not all parent/educators are ‘good’ at their job; this study makes the assumption that the majority are “attentive parents” as described by Merry and Howell (2009). This definition follows the five characteristics they lay out in their study on intimacy: affection, mutual knowledge, shared experience, open communication and trust (p. 365). It was evident to me in all interviews that the participants (and I) met the requirements for being attentive parents.

Through the themes of relationships, normalization, and We are teachers, I was able to better see how homeschool parent/educators are in a position to support current changes in educational practice. These themes were informed by seminal theorists such as Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori and Vygotsky and supporting by the interview excerpts from study participants. The motivations of parents who choose to educate their children are varied and include, “improved academic performance, the transmission of personal beliefs, special needs accommodation or adapting instruction to a child’s learning style (p. 364). The participants in this study admitted to a variety of motivations driving their reasons to homeschool. For Martha, she had always planned to homeschool as it supported her beliefs that education should be student-centred and organic. Susan revealed that she was homeschooled with her siblings and therefore understood the dedication required by a parent/educator. Her choice to homeschool included religious

reasons. Although the majority of parent/educators are not certified teachers, they are able to create individualized, creative learning programs, which allow their students to (on average) surpass their peers in standardized tests (Ray, 2005, p. 4). Paula is a certified teacher and shared how control was a key element to her teaching in a public school. She chose to homeschool and ‘push back’ when facing the reality of her three year old getting on a bus alone to go to school for the day.

Educational reform in general and British Columbia’s current curriculum transformation make the claim that public education needs to refocus, putting the student at the centre of their own learning path. Parent/educators who choose to homeschool create a de-centralized environment where their children/students are given the agency to create their own educational journey driven by interest, choices and opportunity. They have the flexibility to provide project-based curriculum focusing on critical thinking and problem solving to ensure their child/student’s present and future success.

The theme of normalization looks at the push and pull experienced by the participants as parent/educators. The pressure from family and community felt by parent/educators magnifies their internal struggle. All participants expressed an innate knowledge that homeschooling was the right decision for their family even though they often questioned what curriculum they were using and if their student was learning enough.

*Martha: I think that is one of the hardest things as a mum is you know, I would have these internal debates, well if he doesn't learn to read he would be able to hire someone to read to him or something will happen and just to trust that eventually it might happen. ...I guess I do that at various times inside of my head, thinking about what it is that an adult needs to know.*

This study set out to clarify the two distinct roles of parent and educator in the homeschool environment. However, what I discovered from my participant interviews as well as reflecting on my own practice is that this dualism of roles was not actually the case. The roles are in fact more fluid and shift seemingly without effort on a continuous basis as parent/educators grab teachable moments and encourage their child/student's individuality and creativity. This alternative environment requires improvisation and flexibility. "The work of the improviser is to stretch out those momentary flashes, extend them until they merge into the activity of daily life" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 19). Lois (2013) describes this role as "supermom". The intimate relationship between a homeschool parent/educator and her students is powerful. It provides the safe space to scaffold learning, co-create knowledge and exchange ideas.

*Clara: The crux of what my role as a parent is to provide this sense of not just safety but a sense of self. He is in a place this time in his life when he builds that little core of himself inside and that core has to serve him for the rest of his life.*

*Paula: My goal at the moment is to not really have a distinction between being a teacher and a parent because I am here alone and no matter what role I think I am playing they are not really making a distinction. I am trying to facilitate, guide them in life while they are needing guidance.*

Further research into the practice and lived experiences of parent/educators, with a larger more diverse participant cohort, would be needed to possibly inform future curriculum development and teacher training. Including fathers who choose to homeschool their children as well as the experience of the children would provide a deeper understanding of homeschooling in general and negotiation of roles in particular. Research into the pedagogical knowledge of educators in alternative forms of education such as Indigenous Education and homeschooling may support the movement toward a more individualized, holistic approach to teaching and learning recently launched by British Columbia's Ministry of Education.

Ken Robinson (2006) points out that "education is meant to take us into this future that we can't yet grasp. If you think of it, children starting school this year will be retiring in 2065. Nobody has a clue what the world will look like in five years time and yet we are meant to be educating them for it" (n.p.). The goal of all parents is to do what's best for their children and provide all they need to be successful. The goal of teachers is to spark creativity and excite their students. If we as educators, in this age of change, are going to support our students on their journey we need to promote critical thinking, problem solving and build self-confidence. The innate need for a child to learn

is natural and if given the support and freedom to following one's own path, as seen in the practices of homeschooling, this process can be magical.

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## Appendix A

### Interview questions

1. Please describe what prompted your family to choose to homeschool.
2. What would a typical day of homeschooling look like for your family?
3. Can you describe for me how you might go about choosing what to teach?
4. Please describe how structure might fit into your homeschooling day.
5. How would you explain your relationship with your children as students?
6. What does the phrase or concept “in the moment” mean to you in relation to homeschooling?
7. My children say I have a “teacher voice”, which might signify the switch between my role of mother and teacher. Can you describe a behaviour of yours which your children might notice as a switching between the roles of teacher and parent?
8. Please share with me a story which you feel touches on what being a homeschooling teacher means to you.
9. As a homeschool educator you have to be both parent and teacher. How does this role sharing manifest itself in your homeschooling?
10. Did homeschooling, and your role as a teacher, lead you to understand aspects of being a parent that you might have been unaware of?
11. Do you feel that homeschooling was the right choice for your family and why?
12. Is there anything you would like to add?
13. Do you have any questions/concerns that I can address?

## Appendix B



University  
of Victoria

**Human Research Ethics Board**  
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### Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: <b>Karen Efford</b>	<b>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER</b> <b>15-036</b>
UVic STATUS: <b>Master's Student</b>	Minimal Risk - Delegated
UVic DEPARTMENT: <b>EDCI</b>	ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: <b>19-Mar-15</b>
SUPERVISOR: <b>Dr. Monica Prendergast</b>	APPROVED ON: <b>19-Mar-15</b>
	APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE: <b>18-Mar-16</b>
PROJECT TITLE: <b>The Negotiation of Teacher and Parent in a Homeschool Environment</b>	
RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER: <b>None</b>	
DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: <b>None</b>	
<b>CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL</b>	
This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.	
<b>Modifications</b> To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.	
<b>Renewals</b> Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.	
<b>Project Closures</b> When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.	
<b>Certification</b>	
This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.	
 <small>Dr. Karen Efford</small> <b>Associate Vice-President Research Operations</b>	
Certificate Issued On: <b>19-Mar-15</b>	

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