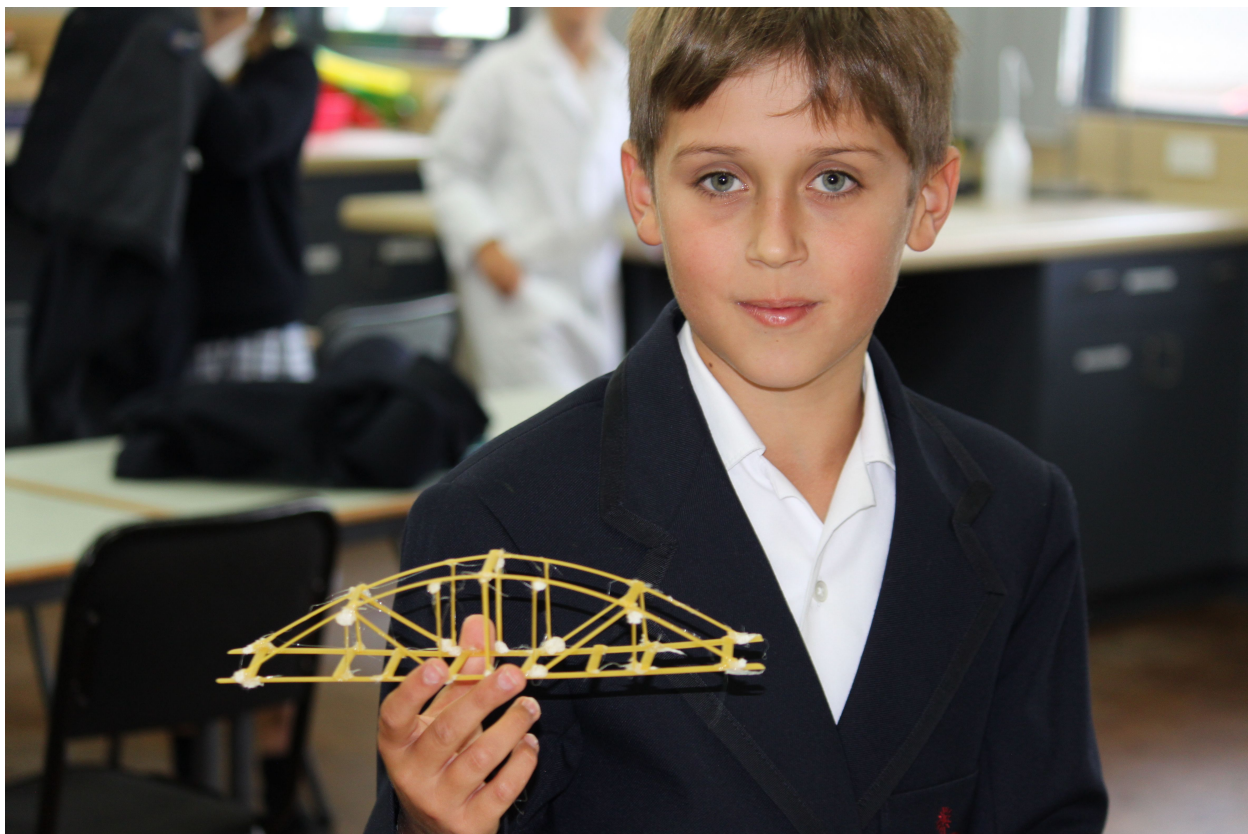


## The Homework Game – Is it worth playing?

Karen Chaur



For a rule of thumb, when learners feel that they have a choice about where they focus their attention and just how they proceed, they are more likely to show intrinsic motivation and, along with this, broader and deeper learning.

Perkins, Di (2009)

The belief that choice as an intrinsic motivator for learning has been a driving factor in the way I teach and present information to students for many years. From setting up learning centres which offer choice of activities, to offering individual research projects where students choose the questions they'd like to research, to numeracy groupings where students select whether they'd like 'help please', are 'ready for a challenge' or are 'perfecting their practice' and group themselves accordingly. I have pushed this belief with my colleagues and have advocated that choice makes students 'own their learning.'

This quotation from David Perkins is also the philosophy which has inspired 'Taking my learning further', which is the subject of this paper. In my Year 5

*Produced as part of the "From Practice to Publication" seminar sponsored by Independent Schools Victoria and supported by AGQTP © Karen Chaur, 2012*

classroom we don't have homework...instead, students are given the opportunity to research and investigate an area of interest. They make a choice about what they would like to learn more about and how they would like to share their findings.

### **An Idea Is Born**

*"You are limited only by your imagination."*

When discussing homework with my 2011 class, a student commented 'I don't think of it as homework; this year we always seem to have tasks which aim to 'take our learning further'. I was always telling students to 'impress me', 'challenge themselves' and to 'take your learning further...research that for homework.' Realising that this shift in terminology was changing their attitude, I resolved to re-name 'homework' 'Taking my learning further'. The cultural force of 'language' as described in Making Thinking Visible<sup>ii</sup> Ritchhart, Church & Morrison (p240), was having a strong impact on student attitude and I wanted to harness this to create a positive shift in the way students viewed learning beyond the classroom.

As this is the first year, I decided to document the process for purposes of refinement, reflection and as a way of gauging who our children are becoming as thinkers and learners.

When students were initially told of this shift in their homework expectations, I was met with cheers and comments of 'Cool, I can do homework about footy' from one student, and then a list of questions such as 'But what do I have to do?' from another.

Opening up choice and disbanding the weekly 'homework sheet' with a set number of questions and tasks each week, seemed a welcome relief to some and a daunting challenge to others. The student who had previously needed to be chased up for homework was suddenly enthusiastic and asking if he could research Vikings, while the student whose work was always neatly completed and signed by mum, was full of questions and doubts, wondering how she could possibly know what was expected. 'You are limited only by your imagination', I challenged. 'If you want to read a book and then write a review, then do it. If you want to create a PowerPoint or Prezi presenting research you have completed, then do that. I am interested in the skills you develop and how far you push yourself. I want you to be motivated and enthusiastic to learn more about whatever it is that interests you.'

Erica McWilliam (2009), Professor at Queensland University of Technology, states, 'that students need low threat-high challenge and high expectation-high support classrooms<sup>iii</sup>.' I believed that 'Taking My Learning Further,' with its

*Produced as part of the "From Practice to Publication" seminar sponsored by Independent Schools Victoria and supported by AGQTP © Karen Chaur, 2012*

flexibility of choice, was low threat and that my expectation of presentation was giving them high expectations. I also believed that this type of homework would allow them to put into practice the research and presentation skills we were learning at school. Note-taking and critical literacy skills would be used and tested in an environment beyond the classroom. Busy work, or 'shut up sheets', as I fondly refer to them, would give way to engaged, meaningful research. The parents would be thrilled!

### **Baby Steps**

*"We continued to have to reschedule lesson time to honour their research and keep them motivated."*

#### Week 1

During this time the class had been inquiring into a unit How We Express Ourselves. Our focus had been media and advertising with the central idea that 'The media is a powerful tool that can shape beliefs, ideas and opinions.' It had been decided that our 'Taking our learning further' tasks would be due once a week. At the end of week one I offered students the opportunity to share what they had done. I had posters about media, PowerPoints of favourite ads, graphs of survey results of the favourite ads of people known by the student, quizzes of slogans and logos for classmates to guess, crosswords and word searches of spelling words, explanations and strategy lessons for numeracy work we were doing at the time....this was obviously working! I had so many students wanting to present their work that I had to forego a planned lesson. I had 'made the game worth playing!'

If the students were going to continue to be motivated to research and challenge themselves to 'take their learning further', I had to show them I valued what they had done and prioritise their opportunity to share their findings. This meant that if the presentation time ate into my lesson time, I had to be willing to reschedule the lesson in favour of students being heard.

Weeks 2, 3, 4 and 5 gave me an even broader range of topics and presentations. Students were creating presentations of topics that interested them. The footy fan proved his expertise and wowed us with his knowledge of players, awards and his tips for the season ahead. A student who had recently travelled, presented facts and deep understanding of the culture and traditions of Cambodia. The maths wiz continued to coach us with tips and strategies.....and we continued to have to reschedule lesson time to honour their research and keep them motivated.

### **Teething Problems**

*" 'We have a problem,' I said, 'I am open to suggestions of how we can solve this.' "*

*Produced as part of the "From Practice to Publication" seminar sponsored by Independent Schools Victoria and supported by AGQTP © Karen Chaur, 2012*

A class meeting decided that we all liked the concept of 'Taking our learning further', but it was becoming a challenge to each have presentation time. Some students shared that they wanted more time than one week to complete their chosen task. 'I spend a few nights researching and then I am rushing to finish by Friday,' said Georgia. 'I haven't finished mine this week,' said Meg. 'We have a problem,' I said, 'I am open to suggestions of how we can solve this. I don't want to stop 'Taking our learning further' because we all agree that we are enjoying the challenge, and I am really pleased with the research skills you are developing. I would like us to think of a solution that ensures our sharing time is still prioritised but also allows you enough time to complete the task you set out to do.'

Students shared thoughts and ideas. We brainstormed solutions and listed these on the whiteboard. We split the thoughts into two columns titled 'Problems' and 'Possible Solutions.' Our brainstormed list was

'Problems'	Possible Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of time to present</li> <li>• stress to complete our work each week</li> <li>• thinking of new ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make a timetable</li> <li>• give more than 1 week</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wanting to work with a partner</li> <li>• Mum thinks I have no homework and is worried</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a suggestion list. Work on improving our understanding in an area we think we need help</li> <li>• This is allowed if students can arrange to work together out of school</li> <li>• Information night or note to go home</li> </ul>

Eventually we came up with a timetable that would give each student a fortnightly time to share his or her work. This would mean they had more time to complete their work and we had fewer students presenting each day. Fridays would no longer become a big block of sharing time. We created the timetable below and were ready to continue honouring and following our homework free philosophy!

#### 'Taking My Learning Further' roster for presentations

Day	Time	Week A	Week B
Tues	8.30	Ella	Issy
	8.37	April	Alice
Wed	8.30	Bridget	Sarah

	8.37	Chloe	Grace
	12.30	Justin	Robyn
	12.37	Billy	John
Thurs	8.30	Henry	Molly
	8.37	Meg	Max
	12.30	Noah	Ned
	12.37	Barney	Jacob
Fri	12.30	Harrison	Sam
	12.37	Tahnee	Lucy

The discussion had also raised some issues that hadn't been brought to my attention. I didn't realize that parents were challenged by the concept of 'Taking my learning further.' 'I'll address that I thought....' Before I acted on this I received the following email.

"Hello Karen,

Would you please confirm your position on homework? Sarah seems to have no direction regarding set tasks. Is this correct?....."

(Received via email 29<sup>th</sup> April 2012.)

And so began the next challenge....parental expectation. I had wiped out homework and was giving no guidelines for expectations. There were no easily completed work sheets or requirement for parents to check and sign work. While I believed I was opening up their opportunity for learning and promoting engagement and independence, some parents believed I was not providing enough disciplined tasks. Choice?...who ever heard of such a thing?!

I replied to the above email...

"Hello Michelle,

In response to the query re homework...we do have homework, we have just structured it differently which is a way of motivating students and developing independence. Rather than calling it homework, we call it 'Taking My Learning Further'. Students are timetabled on a fortnightly roster to present their work. They are under no limits for what they decide to do. The idea is that they research and inquire into something that interests them. Some students have chosen to work on Maths concepts they are having difficulty with, others have chosen to research Vikings....the choice is theirs. The high motivation has led to some great in depth research by the students and their presentations have ranged from models, to powerpoints, to word searches, to advertisements, to posters...they are limited only by their imagination.

As well as this free choice work, they have weekly spelling words to learn and

are expected to read and to go on Athletics.

The philosophy of this homework concept is based on an educational academic named David Perkins who says "For a rule of thumb, when learners feel that they have a choice about where they focus their attention and just how they proceed, they are more likely to show intrinsic motivation and, along with this, broader and deeper learning." 'Make the Game Worth Playing' Ch. 2 Making Learning Whole Perkins, D (2009)

I have a philosophical aversion to homework sheets. I see them as time fillers and unless they are clearly linked to work being done at school they can be disjointed and unrelated to student learning. Also...they often become a chore for the parents rather than work for the students!

I hope this clarifies things for you. If you still have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,  
Karen"

It was a lengthy reply, but I was so sure that what I was doing was right, that I needed to educate the parents and try to make them see that there was thought behind what I was doing. I really needed them to see the rich learning that was occurring.

Following this email, I took down all the work displayed in the corridor outside my room and made a display board dedicated entirely to 'Taking my learning further'. I needed to give some PR to students' work. I needed the wider school community to realise that this wasn't about having 'no homework expectations' but rather about raising expectations of independent student learning.



Produced as part of the "From Practice to Publication" seminar sponsored by Independent Schools Victoria and supported by AGTP © Karen Chaur, 2012



My teaching partner was also committed to implementing this homework alternative. Within days of my email correspondence, she received this from a parent in her class.

“Hi Kate

I wanted to touch base with you in regards to homework. It seems that Emma has not had any homework given to her this year. Is that correct? I didn't get a chance to talk to you about homework at the parent teacher meeting .... The problem is that Emma has always been a reluctant homework/planning ahead person. So thinking that the homework would step up in Year 5, I cleared her activities so that Tues, Wed and Thurs were free for her to concentrate on a homework routine. I have 2 other children who both have weekly worksheets to be done.....”

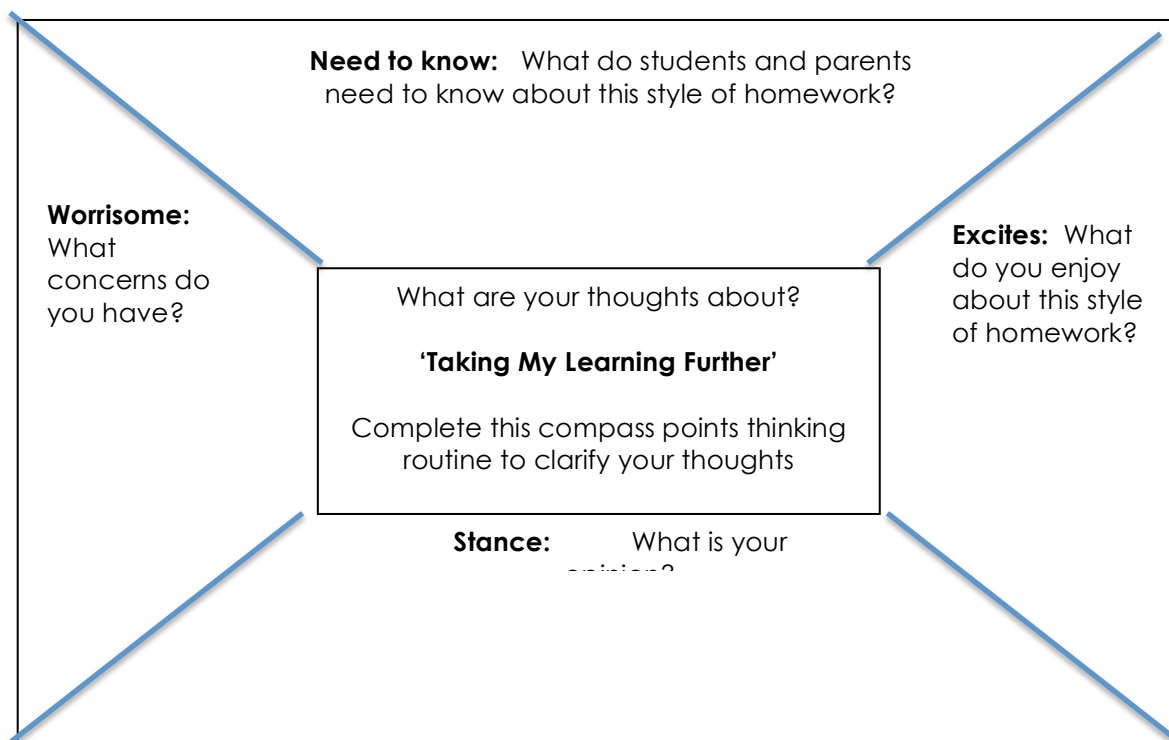
The worksheet scenario we were trying to avoid seemed to be the safety net that parents desired. Clearly the issue of educating parents about what we were doing and raising the profile of 'Taking our learning further' needed to become a priority. How would I do this?

### **Growing Pains**

*“My opinion is that it is a wonderful way of learning and possesses the mind while having fun.”*

I decided to ask the students to complete a *Compass Points Thinking Routine*<sup>iv</sup> ([www.pz.harvard.edu/vt](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/vt)) to gather their thoughts and opinions about 'Taking our learning further'. The idea being, that these would produce some quotations we could use to support our thinking and to explain to parents why we were doing this. I wasn't sure whether to use them on the display boards, in a newsletter going home to parents or whether to hold another information night. The full picture hadn't yet been decided. First I needed to find out what my students were thinking.

The *Compass Points* asked the students to respond to the following provocation.



Their responses were unanimously in favour of 'Taking my learning further'. Comments such as *'it's awesome'* and *'All students should do this style of homework'* were common.

v

There were some insightful comments to type up and display around our 'Taking my learning further' display board that I was certain would convince the most discerning of parents.

Some of the positive comments were:

*"It is not repetitive so children are engaged in doing it and I love choosing a different topic each time."* Tahnee

*"It teaches you that you are only limited by your imagination."* Henry

*"It is interesting to find out what other people are interested in."* April

*"It is a style of homework that can be done on anything, whether it relates to the topic or not, although it doesn't have to relate, it needs to show your learning."* Chloe

*"My opinion is that it is a wonderful way of learning and possesses the mind while having fun." Alice*

*"You get to be creative but still do work." Ella*

*"It is different to normal homework because you have to be independent." Issy*

*"We have to use more skills like research and we learn how to make an imovie or Prezi." Robyn*

*"No boring worksheets." Meg*

*"I can choose what I want to do." Noah*

*"I can choose what I want to do! Sometimes my mum may give me an idea of what to do for 'Taking my learning further.' It is fun because it shows your personality and the things you're interested in." Lucy*

*"It has improved my presentation skills." Sam*

*"I like doing 'Taking my learning further' better than normal homework because it is more exciting." Bridget*

*"You can present something with confidence. It can be done in any exciting way and you can put effort into it." Molly*

*"I love how you take your knowledge further. You are able to find out about a lot more different things and share it with your class, not just hand it up to your teacher." Jacob*

*"We have a free choice of what we want to do but other classes can't use their imagination." Justin*

*"Learning about what you're interested in makes you put much more of your heart into it, but if you have boring homework sheets you won't want to engage in your work." Billy*

*"You have no limit on how much you do, there are endless opportunities." John*

*"It is more fun because you can inquire into what you enjoy. If you want a traditional homework sheet then take your learning further and make your own!" Barney*

*"I have discovered I am getting better research and creativity skills because of 'Taking my learning further.'" Harrison*

*"I enjoy the freedom that you get. You don't have to write down what 7X7 is.....you could but then you'd need to write a comment and explain it. It's much more detailed." Max*

*"It is way better because each child can show the class what they have learnt. They could teach the class facts that they already know or just teach them rules or background information on their favourite hobbies. I get to show the class what I have learnt and they get to learn more about me." Sarah*

*"It broadens the child's mind. It gives imagination to students and helps them accomplish more things." Ned*

*"It lets you have your own learning style. Only your imagination can limit you." Grace*

The greatest advocates were the students themselves. I continued to search for ways to promote their learning and the great achievements they were having.

Worrisome comments were few. Many students had written, *"I have none."* The few concerns raised that I thought I needed to address were:

1. *"I worry about what to do." Ella, Justin, Robyn, Max, Ned, Sam, Tahnee and Grace*
2. *"I get nervous before my presentations." Henry*
3. *"Getting the research done on time." Bridget, Chloe, John, Max, Henry, Issy and Lucy*
4. *"It may not be educational enough or the right kind of topic." Molly, Sarah*
5. *"We won't want to do homework sheets if we have to do them again." Chloe*
6. *"People are stretching the time limits and we may not get through everyone we planned." April*
7. *"I might forget as there are no sheets of paper in my bag to remind me." Meg*

When we had collated the concerns, we addressed these one by one to see if we could overcome any worries the students had.

The first was easily fixed. We brainstormed all the possibilities for taking my learning further. The students seemed to trigger ideas in each other, so we broke into groups and completed a 'chalkboard' brainstorm. The students wrote ideas on large pieces of paper and then moved to the next table to read what other groups had listed. If these triggered new ideas, they added these to the list. The eight different groups then shared their final list of ideas with the rest of the class. These were then collated and made into an extensive reference list which was then printed and placed in plastic pockets as an 'ideas book.'

The suggestions ranged from 'Collate all your spelling errors and create a personal dictionary' and 'Revise the area of mathematics you haven't mastered' through to 'Make an iMovie teaching the class a problem solving strategy you like to use' and 'Write a script for a play which is linked to our Unit of Inquiry' to 'make a model of your house' and 'make a poster about your favourite hobby.' It seemed that the lack of ideas was a temporary concern!

We reassured students that being nervous before a presentation was fine. The idea of presenting regularly to the class would make presenting to an audience seem less and less daunting.

*"I don't get nervous at all anymore," said Lucy, "I love presenting 'Taking my learning further' and actually look forward to it."*

*"So do I" said Alice.*

Many others started to express how this process had actually already started to make them feel more confident when presenting in front of their peers. I agreed that this was one of the benefits of presenting, rather than handing up work but I also recognised that for some people, public speaking would always be a challenge. I wanted the students to acknowledge that they were achieving a life skill by being confident in doing this and I also wanted students who were still struggling with this, to know that that was OK.

*"Time management is also one of our learning goals and a life skill we all need to develop." I explained. "If you are worried that your work isn't ready, then you still need to present to the class and show the work completed so far. Let them know that the completed presentation will be shown during your next session."* Students agreed that this would keep everyone on track and would mean students weren't excused for not being finished. *"It's like we'd get a sneak preview," said Grace. "Exactly," I agreed.*

The other worries were all discussed. We decided that if they considered a topic 'not educational enough' then it was OK to question the student as to why they

had chosen that topic and to ask them to articulate their learning. We added, "What new learning occurred during your research?" to our 'Good questions' board so that we could remember to ask this after presentations.

Time limits were originally set at 5 – 7mins and we decided to retain this. I was conscious that we were dedicating enough class time to this and knew that we were at our limit. Suggestions were made about sharing the best parts and not reading every word on a poster. Solutions were easily offered. It was now up to the students to make sure they referred to these and respected that time was a constraint we had to honour.

### **Maturity**

*"Taking My Learning Further has grown from being an interest based homework option, to a valuable peer teaching time."*

We had a laugh at Chloe's worry of not wanting to ever go back to homework sheets and at Meg's worry of 'forgetting she had any work to do.' *"I'd never forget because I look forward to doing it too much," said Bridget.*

This discussion triggered another idea....*"Why don't we film some of you presenting your 'Taking my learning further,' so that we can show other teachers how much you have learnt and how beneficial this type of homework is? Then maybe you'll never have to see another homework sheet again!"* The students agreed. We also decided it would be great to share this with parents so that they could also see the variety of work. We filmed a couple of students each day for the next few days. Many other students still want to share their presentations, so there may have to be a sequel! My information night presentation for next year is now organised!...I have solved the issue of parents being able to see and understand what I am trying to achieve. This will also prevent the lengthy explanations I have had to give this year.

The iMovie we created can be viewed at <http://youtu.be/ZfPh4l0xTlc> - we hope we can convince you to give 'Taking my learning further' a try!

When reflecting on each other's work, students began picking up mistakes or areas where they noticed their classmates had mis-spelt words and made grammatical errors. We decided to add an extra dimension to the reflection time and began a 'Teaching Points' discussion. Typically this was filled with correct use of capital letters for proper nouns, spelling errors and incorrect use of grammar and punctuation. As students became more confident with their 'teaching points' discussions, the items identified grew in complexity. Sentence phrasing, IT skills, all types of suggestions were being given. One student noticed

that another had written 'companies' and 'company's' throughout her presentation. This resulted in an inquiry into 'when was the correct time to use these two different versions of the word?'

The result of 'Teaching Points' has been two-fold. Students are paying more attention to their own work and are making an effort to prevent any unnecessary errors and they are also looking at ways to help improve each other's work.

Taking My Learning Further has grown from being an interest based homework option, to a valuable peer teaching time. The children of today value independent thinking and are self-motivated learners. These are the qualities that will make them valuable adults of the future.

I'd like to leave you with a comment from one of the Year 5 students. Under 'worrysome' on our compass points reflection sheet she wrote, "What is homework for? Is it a catch up because you didn't finish all your school work? Is it for giving mum and dad a break from you? Is homework really helping? Why not try 'Taking my learning further'? That's for helping kids to think more!"

*Karen Chaur is a teacher at Wardle House, Toorak College. She has worked in education for twenty of the past twenty six years with roles as an Art teacher, Teacher Librarian and Classroom Teacher. The career change adventures filling the missing six years include: working as a copywriter with the Austereo network, running her own homewares importing and distribution company, and becoming a parent. She is a qualified Primary Teacher, Teacher-Librarian, Copywriter and Forklift driver! Fulfilling a life-long ambition to be a circus performer, she is now a juggler of a full time teaching role, part time study of her Masters of Education – PYP at the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, freelance copywriter and mother of two teenage girls. She has enjoyed the opportunity to combine her love of writing with her career as a teacher when creating this Story of Learning.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Perkins, D (2009) Making Learning Whole 'Make the Game Worth Playing' Ch. 2

<sup>ii</sup> Ritchhart, R; Church, M; & Morrison, K (2011) Making Thinking Visible p240

<sup>iii</sup> McWilliam, E (2009) The 21st Century Teacher: From Sage to Guide to Meddler

<sup>iv</sup> Thinking Routines ([www.pz.harvard.edu/vt](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/vt))