CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study that is reported in this thesis was to develop substantive theory regarding how parents in remote and rural locations manage the education of the primary aged children in their care. There have been very few studies to date which focus on how parents manage the schooling of their primary school aged children in distance settings. This is in need of addressing since the schooling of students through distance education modes rather than in conventional schools is the reality of many families in rural and remote Western Australia. It is therefore important, for education practitioners, students and their parents, that the practice of distance education be informed by research.

The research literature on distance education contains a wide range of issues and concerns. However, given the limited number of empirical studies undertaken which have had, as their focus 'home tutors', there is scope for the undertaking of further research studies. The qualitative study that is reported in this thesis is concerned with how parents 'manage' their schoolroom work as 'home tutors' and as such is one contribution to this call. It is located within the symbolic interaction tradition and used 'grounded theory' techniques for gathering and analysing data.

This introductory chapter presents an overview of the thesis and is organized into four sections. First it defines the terms 'distance education' and 'home tutor'. Second, a brief overview of the background to the study and literature regarding the field of distance education is presented. Thirdly the

theoretical framework of the study and the research methods used are outlined. Finally the research setting is described and an overview of the structure of the thesis is outlined.

DEFINING DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education in the United States of America has been reported to date from the enrolment of four students in correspondence courses in Baltimore, Maryland in 1906. Distance education was established in Australia in 1914 and followed by Canada in 1918. In Western Australia the first mention of correspondence schooling was in response to a letter from Robert Sandon to the then Minister for Education, Cecil Andrews in 1917 (White, 1962).

At the start of the twentieth century distance education was comprised of written correspondence materials for students in locations beyond a conventional school. More recently Moore (1990) defined the term 'distance education' as being:

> a program of study or lessons in which the main characteristic of the relationship between the instructor and the student is their geographic separation. Communication between learners and teachers is through print material, electronic media and this profoundly affects instructional design, teaching and the organisation of the educational institution and the responsibilities of the learner. (p.1665)

Similarly, Keegan (1983) found in an analysis of four representative definitions of distance education that there were points common to all. These included:

separation of teacher and student, influence of an educational organization especially in the planning and preparation of learning materials, the use of technical media, provision of two-way communication, and the possibility of occasional seminars.

A definition of distance education by Varney (1996), focused on the method of study through which students who are isolated for whatever reason gain an education without the need to attend a conventional school. This definition is outlined in Table 1 below as follows:

Table 1: Defining Distance Education

- Living too far from school to travel each day
- Students who are handicapped or invalids and cannot travel to the local school
- Students whose parents are itinerant workers
- Mature age students who cannot gain access to a secondary finishing college
- Students who have been excluded from school for behavioural problems
- Students who wish to study a particular subject that is not offered at their school for whatever reason

Source: Adapted from Varney, R. (1996). *Music in Distance Education*. Thesis presented in accordance with the requirements of the Degree of Master of Music Education, University of Western Australia.

Currently within the specific Western Australia context, the Department of Education Western Australia (DEWA) regulations state that students and their families must meet certain criteria before they can gain access to education through distance modes. These criteria include:

- Full time students unable to attend a conventional school due to geographical isolation

- WA students travelling Australia or the world, on a long-term basis, with their parents

- WA students whose local high school does not offer the subjects they wish to study, or where the timetable does not allow them to join the class

- Students suffering from long term illnesses

- Part time adults undertaking courses to improve their education and employment options.

Each of the definitions within considerations so far has included geographical distance as essential to distance education although there are demonstrated exclusions to this such as sickness and retraining. For the purpose of this study, distance education will be defined as *schooling for students who have no reasonable access to an appropriate school for reasons of remoteness, sickness or employment and that they rely on the regular exchange of learning materials between themselves and their correspondence teacher using a range of technologies.*

The home tutor

The schooling of primary-aged students through distance education modes rather than in conventional schools is the reality of many families who live in rural and remote Australia. Since the inception of correspondence schooling in Western Australian in 1917, parents have played a vital role in the education of their children. An increased number of parents have taken on the role of supervisor in rural and remote locations of Western Australia since the introduction of 'on air' lessons in Meekatharra in 1959 (Calzoni, 1991).

Essential to the success of students who studied in this mode was the support of a supervisor. Supervisors were more than likely to be family members. Typically, as White puts it:

> supervisors were required to see that any instructions of the correspondence teachers were carried out, that timetables were followed that mail deliveries were made and to ensure that working conditions were comfortable. In addition they tested oral work in subjects such as reading, spelling and storytelling, a brief report on these being included with sets returned to Perth. (White, 1962, pp.90-91)

The term home tutor has emerged over a considerable period of time and is used to describe the critical role that a responsible supervisor undertakes in coordinating the education of children in geographically isolated circumstances. It is a term used by parents who have children enrolled in state School of the Air programs and who also identify with the role of responsible supervisor. While there are differences between the Schools of the Air, the parents are each expected to be the home tutor unless a governess is hired to act as the responsible supervisor and become the home tutor.

In all cases the parent has a child in a class group similar to age-based groups found in conventional school settings. The child is allocated a class teacher from the School of the Air and the parent role is one of 'teacher' or home tutor in the home setting. The parent is expected to supervise the schooling and completion of correspondence materials as directed by the

School of Isolated and Distance Education and their class teacher at the School of the Air.

The term home tutor in this study refers to the responsible person who is delegated as 'in charge' of the education of the child in remote and rural locations. In this study the term home tutor is used to describe parents and governesses who have this responsibility.

THE BACKGROUND: AN OVERVIEW

There has been an increasing focus on the education of children in remote and rural locations in Australia over the past decade (Collins, 1999; Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990, 1993, 1994; Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Department of Primary Industries and Energy, 1998; Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000a; Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999). Recurrent issues that feature in this debate include availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability.

Although each of the Australian States (New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia and Australian Capital Territory) have developed distance education options at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels for the past 100 years, issues regarding isolation have impeded a high level of satisfaction. Community atmosphere and cultural heterogeneity continue to face educators of people located in sparsely populated areas of Australia. Regarding this, Lowe (1993) recorded that distance education has always been a poor relation within the education system:

At every level, it has been given inadequate resources, it is often staffed by conscripts rather than volunteers, and as a consequence it has until relatively recently often not been targeted most effectively towards the particular needs of the distance learner. (Lowe, 1993, p.7)

Bowden (1993) also identified a high degree of dissatisfaction, despite intensive efforts to provide primary students and their families in remote and isolated areas of Western Australia with this mode of education. Students often lacked adequate social interaction with their peers and teachers and parents struggled with the curriculum content.

Schooling in Western Australia as in other states of Australia occurs mainly in conventional school settings. Conventional schooling in this instance can be defined as schooling whereby students attend school buildings and receive instruction in class groups usually grouped by age. Students across Australia follow State managed curricula such as the *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998) (hereafter CCWA, 1998) found in Western Australia. Independent, Catholic and schools of other religious groups in Western Australia are also required to follow the CCWA (1998), but they often devise additional student outcome statements that reflect their special character. Increasing numbers of students are also following an alternative education path where parents assume primary responsibility for the education of their children and choose *home-schooling*.

Children who are geographically isolated in Western Australia have several options in regard to schooling. Parents may choose between *home-*

schooling, sending their children to boarding schools, or correspondence schooling with the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), a subsidiary of the Department of Education Western Australia (DEWA). SIDE provides correspondence materials for children from K-12 as part of the DEWA Distance Education strategy. In the case of primary-aged students complementary School of the Air (SOTA) lessons are available. The responsibility for schooling, however, is ultimately the task of the parent and, given that the alternative of boarding schools or country hostels which is financially prohibitive for some families, becoming the home tutor is, for some, the only choice.

SOTAs traditionally have delivered a range of curricula to students in zoned geographical locations. The SOTAs work in partnership with the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) for radio/voice communications. Until computer mediated communications are established, High Frequency radio will remain the main mode of teaching. For children who participate in SOTA 'air lessons' and receive correspondence materials from SIDE, parental support is essential for quality learning outcomes. However, many parents do not have specific training, experience or expertise in curriculum areas and are anxious about whether they are doing the job well enough (Condon & Edmondson, 1998; Kopke, 1983).

This study reported in this thesis is significant because the Curriculum Council introduced a new model of education for all schools K-10 in the state of Western Australia. The *Curriculum Framework* (CCWA, 1998) is to be fully implemented by 2005. There are eight specified Key Learning Areas (KLAs). The *Curriculum Framework* contains prescribed learning outcomes

for all students, but decisions of curriculum design and implementation are to be site based.

Since the introduction of correspondence schooling parents have played an increasingly significant role in the education of their children. They have become in many instances the teacher that their children see on a daily basis in geographically remote locations. The 'real' teacher is often a few hundred kilometers away at the nearest town. The role that parents undertake as the teacher or, as they call themselves, *home tutor*, is one of full responsibility for the supervision of schooling in a range of curriculum areas and is far more complex than might first appear. The next section of this Introduction reveals that very little research has been undertaken regarding this phenomenon to date.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For the past five years little research has been undertaken in the field of distance education in the area of primary aged children and their home tutors. The field of distance education has been dominated by research in the areas of technology, increased interactivity and design issues (Berge & Mrozowski, 2001). Distance education encompasses a wider range of students who, through the use of new technologies, have become distance learners. The new students are not necessarily at a 'geographical distance', but rather are using flexible modes of delivery such as Email and the World Wide Web. The research literature has had an increasing focus in recent years on the introduction, design and evaluation of new technologies and the proliferation of e-journals

regarding these issues is a source of evidence for this (Brennan, McFadden, & Law, 2001).

Literature concerned with the development of policy regarding distance education in Australia is not fully explored in this brief overview, but is discussed in the following chapter. However, since 1975 no less than 16 significant reports and inquiries have been undertaken in relation to educational provision in rural and remote Australia. Despite the fact that there is a large body of information about distance education, very little has focused on how parents 'manage' their role as home tutor. More recently one report recommended research be undertaken to understand the role of the home tutor (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999).

The existing research base has a focus on areas such as curriculum development, learner characteristics, comparative country studies and the use of new technologies such as email and the World Wide Web. The research reported in distance education is primarily descriptive, often being case studies regarding the implementation of strategies that have been successful with tertiary level students (Berge & Mrowzowski, 2001). Very little is reported of the issues that face teachers or students at secondary, or primary level education (Penhalver cited in Moore, 1990).

As a further example, *Distance Education: An International Journal* a refereed journal that has international coverage contained between 1991-2001, 420 articles of which only five relate specifically to secondary and primary aged children (Edwards & Rennie, 1991; Falck, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 1982, 1984; Nyirenda, 1983). Only two of these papers draw attention to parental involvement and primary-aged students. Fitzpatrick's (1982) research revolved

around the Carnarvon School of the Air and he examined the question of who 'teaches' children in the Australian School of the Air. In a second article Fitzpatrick (1984) looked at the development, role, nature and function of the distance education pressure group.

In Australia the main journal for reported research is *Education in Rural Australia.* The publication started as a project of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). *Education in Rural Australia* was introduced in order to enable issues regarding rural and remote education in Australia to be raised and discussed. Since 1991 there have been two refereed volumes per year of mostly national content. The range of research in this journal is more relevant to the study presented in this thesis. Between 1991-2001 the focus of the journal has been primarily on schooling in rural and remote areas of Australia. A considerable number of papers discuss the schooling of children in a range of curriculum areas such as mathematics and literacy. Issues regarding the retention of teachers in geographical locations and the experiences of new teachers are also widely reported. However, only three articles relate to primary-aged children or preschool-aged children.

Clyde (1991) discussed the needs of preschool-aged children in rural areas whilst Bailey, Riley & Knight (1995) explored ways to address the needs of gifted children from K-12. Hard (1997) detailed the preparation of teachers who will work with young children and drew attention to the differences that the teachers will encounter between rural and urban teaching environments. She concluded that "while the parent/teacher relationship is not without its hurdles, it would seem that teachers may need to more actively work towards facilitating its establishment" (Hard, 1997, p.28).

Another significant piece of research (although undertaken in the mid-1980's) by Tomlinson, Coulter and Peacock (1985), reported directly on issues surrounding distance education in Western Australia. It is one of a few sources that contain details of the role that parents undertake as home tutor. Tomlinson, et al. observed that for many geographically isolated children in Australia most of their primary schooling is undertaken at home. None have schools at an accessible distance. Some have access to the SOTA programs and all rely on the regular delivery of correspondence materials from SIDE. The researchers draw attention to how the home tutors (parents and governesses) guide children through the materials provided:

It may be assumed that the development of learning strategies depends very much upon the quality of parent input and upon the incidental or explicit teaching of those strategies through the materials developed by the distance teaching unit. (Tomlinson et al., 1985, p.2)

Tomlinson, et al. (1985) implied that little was known of the remote learner, but acknowledged, like White (1962), that distance education depended on the involvement of parents as supervisors.

Central to the research of Tomlinson, et al. (1985) was the way in which pupils and their home tutors managed the distance education materials, correspondence lessons, SOTA lessons and audio-visual learning aids. This topic had not been previously or since subjected to detailed analysis. Their research stated that home tutors did not merely 'supervise' study, but played an active part in all stages of the child's learning. In fact they felt strongly that the

child depended upon a responsible adult to mediate between the materials and the child for effective learning. Whilst the sample was small (36 families of the SOTAs in Western Australia, Queensland and Northern Territory) it was felt by the principals of the SOTAs that the sample represented the typical families enrolled in distance education.

In a more recent Rural and Remote Forum conducted by the Queensland School Curriculum Council (1999) it was found that further research was required into the role of the home tutor. The study reported in this thesis goes some way toward addressing this deficit.

The brief overview of the relevant literature presented here and explored more fully in Chapter 3 acknowledges the important role that the home tutor plays, but only slight research attention has been given to parents who in effect are the 'home-teacher' and how they manage this process. The undeveloped nature of the area suggests a case for further research.

The study that is reported in this thesis is a contribution to the field of distance education in the area of how parents as home tutors manage the schooling of their children. This qualitative study is positioned within the symbolic interaction tradition. Data gathering and analysis methods proposed by 'grounded theorists' were used. The focus of the study is with how parents in rural and remote locations 'manage' their schoolroom work as home tutors. The following section provides an overview of the theoretical framework and the research approach taken.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The research has a theoretical foundation in interpretivism and thus, it moves beyond being merely a descriptive or speculative study. It is exploratory and interpretative by nature as the phenomenon being studied has had little research attention. This study is also a qualitative one and relies on data collection techniques such as semi-structured interviews, group interviews and document analysis.

As a research approach intepretivism provides an orientation towards action and process. Consistent with this framework is the central research question, which became clearer as the study developed. The question is:

How do parents who have had no specific training as teachers of

children as home tutors in remote and rural locations 'manage'

the schooling of the children in their care?

The research has been framed in terms of how parents 'manage' their schoolroom work in the role of home tutor. The researcher wanted to explore parents' understandings and ways of knowing the phenomenon of home tutor. In focusing the research on how parents understand the role of home tutor, how they act towards others in relation to it, and how their understandings and actions change over time locates the study within the symbolic interaction tradition, a major sub-school within interpretivism. The term 'symbolic interactionism' was first used by Herbert Blumer (1969), who a put forward that this theoretical approach is based on three principles:

individuals tend to react to things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them; the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of social interaction that one has with others; and meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered. (Blumer, 1969, p.2)

In selecting this position as the theoretical approach to underpin the research, substantive theory was developed based on an understanding of the basic social processes of the phenomenon of home tutor.

Central to this study is the notion of parents 'managing' their schoolroom work as home tutor. A variety of frameworks exist which describe and explain the processes, which represent the schoolroom work of parents. However, it would have been inconsistent with the theoretical approach chosen to underpin the present research by adopting a framework from the start of the study. Therefore, in the study reported here the decision was made not to use an existing framework of parents' schoolroom work as home tutor as this may have directed the research in a direction which did not capture the phenomenon as it actually existed. In order to capture how parents view the way they deal with their day-to-day work in the schoolroom in geographically isolated situations the term 'managing their schoolroom work' was used as an *in-vivo* code (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). Another way to phrase this is to be aware that in this study 'managing' schoolroom work was a term regularly used by the parents.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODS

This is a qualitative study and data were collected and analysed concurrently between 1999 and 2002. 'Grounded theory' procedures were used for collecting data. This involved ongoing interplay between data collection and analysis. It was intended that these processes be intimately connected, with each phase of analysis guiding the next stage of data collection. Using grounded theory procedures is consistent with the symbolic interactionist view of human behaviour (Chenitz, 1986). Strauss and Corbin (1990) offer a systematic framework for inductively building theory which in this study led to the identification and development of the substantive theory of 'individual perseverance'.

This research project used three main approaches to gather data. This included semi-structured individual interviews, group interviews and document analysis. Each SOTA was treated as a case study 'site' and data were collected through group interviews of parents at *Seminar* (annual camp for home tutors) and through individual interviews with selected parents who were identified through the group interviews. In order to achieve triangulation, further data were collected from significant others. These included teachers of SOTA, curriculum writers and teachers of SIDE, in order to provide rich and detailed perceptions of how parents go about managing their role as home tutor.

The documents sought included support materials for parents, curriculum packages and other SIDE/SOTA policy documents. Other informal interviews and small-scale surveys were also used as data gathering techniques. A combination of these techniques enabled the researcher to investigate the

meanings which parents attribute to being a home tutor, the interactions of parents in the role of home tutor, and parents' interpretations in relation to these interactions. It was intended that the variety of data collection techniques would provide the researcher with an 'in-depth' view of how parents manage the role of home tutor.

The analysis of data in this study involved open coding which has been described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data" (p.61). Coding becomes the route by which the inquiry is *opened up* to reveal the meaning and motives of the interviewee (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.62). Categories emerged from the data, which were then developed and integrated into theory. Data was verified and the emerging theory tested with the participants during the analysis process.

THE RESEARCH SETTING AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Western Australia is the largest of the Australian States and SIDE manages a variety of programs to ensure that all children in Western Australia can gain access to formal education. The parents who formed the group for this study are the home tutors of the five SOTAs, which fall under the jurisdiction of the School of Isolated and Distance Education and under the direction of the Department of Education Western Australia.

The Schools of Isolated and Distance Education are located on six campuses. In addition to the Preparatory [P-5], Middle [6-10] and Post Compulsory (Wolcott, 1975) Schools on the Leederville site, there are five

SOTAs located at Kalgoorlie, Port Headland, Meekatharra, Carnarvon and the Kimberley [Derby]. A director leads the School.

The study was undertaken with the families of the five SOTAs. While there are differences between the SOTAs, the parents are expected act as the home tutor or employ someone in this role to supervise the schooling and completion of correspondence materials as directed by SIDE. A more detailed profile of each school and the number of families enrolled at SOTAs in Western Australia is outlined later in this thesis.

The study focused on the teachers of the individual SOTAs involved with the parents. Most of these teachers are trained Primary School Teachers. Each teacher is expected to promote a curriculum that embraces all of KLAs as prescribed by DEWA. There is an expectation that teachers employed at SOTAs will provide support and guidance to the parents who act as the home tutor in all KLAs. The range of expertise and familiarity with the curriculum areas vary from school to school and is a source of diversity for the study. Including the teachers in the sample provided an opportunity to collect a contrasting perspective in order to understand the parents role as home tutor.

The research was conducted at a time of intense media discussion with the release of the recommendations of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (2000a) (HREOC) regarding education for children located in rural and remote locations. In Western Australia *Country Roads* (Rural and Remote Education Advisory Service, 2000), the strategic plan for developing rural and remote education in Western Australia was also released in 2000. The Department of Education in Western Australia was also in the

process of implementing various aspects of the Curriculum Framework for all children in the state.

CONCLUSION

This introductory chapter aimed to present an overview of the thesis. A further aim is to introduce the chapters, which account for the theory of 'individual perseverance'. The thesis is made up of eight chapters. In Chapter Two an historical overview of distance education is provided, with a focus on developments in Western Australia. Chapter Three contains a review of the literature on distance education and the main research question is outlined. In Chapter Four the methodology and design of the study is detailed. Chapter Five contains the cases studied, while Chapter Six contains a cross-site analysis. Chapter Seven details the theory of 'individual perseverance'. Chapter Eight consists of a summary and conclusion.

It should be noted that the academic conventions used throughout the thesis are based on the most recent recommendations of the American Psychological Association (2001) and modified where appropriate. Of further note is the use of new e-citation standards and particularly the symbol '¶' followed by a number (¶3) to reference a paragraph being cited from a World Wide Web source.