CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The research on distance education has acknowledged that parents play a significant role in the education of children (Louden & Rivalland, 1995; Taylor & Tomlinson 1984; Tomlinson; Coulter & Peacock, 1985; White, 1962). In most cases, parents themselves undertake to school their children. Generally they take on the role of home tutor amongst many other roles that constitute their lives. Their role is characterised by isolation but there are a range of other factors that need to be acknowledged. Also, there seems to have been little previous study of primary-aged children and how these parents manage their schooling in distance settings. The study that is reported in this thesis is one contribution to filling this gap.

The final chapter of this thesis contains five sections. What follows is a summary of the study, after which the generalisability of the research findings is discussed. Next the implications for other bodies of theoretical literature and for the development for policy in relation to the research findings are presented. The last section looks at the implications of the findings for practice. This final chapter also contains throughout recommendations of areas for future research.

SUMMARY

It will be recalled that the central aim of the study detailed in this thesis was to develop substantive theory regarding how parents in remote and rural locations

manage the schooling of the primary aged children in their care. The decision to focus on parents who undertake the role of home tutor in Western Australia was based on the observation that few studies to date have had as their focal point how parents manage the schooling of their primary school aged children in distance settings. Further, it is a requirement of the Department of Education Western Australia that a responsible adult supervise the schooling of primary-aged children who live in geographically isolated locations who cannot attend a conventional school. Undertaking the role of *responsible adult* is the reality of many families in rural and remote Western Australia and is a significant undertaking. With this in mind a study that aimed to develop theory about how parents 'manage' the role was undertaken. Pursuing research in this area was thought to be appropriate and significant for the immediate educational context of Western Australia and additionally as a contribution to the research literature on the field of 'distance education' nationally and internationally.

The study was qualitative by nature and the focus on how parents 'manage' their role as home tutor was consistent with a symbolic interactionist orientation, which was the theoretical orientation for the study. Grounded theory methods were utilised for data gathering and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Characteristically of this approach was that data gathering and analysis occurred concurrently throughout between 2000-2002.

The participants in the study were all parents in Western Australia acting in the role of home tutor and who had a child enrolled in a SOTA. Data were collected from parents and teachers from four (of the five) SOTAs and SIDE using multiple techniques, which included semi-structured interviews, *Seminar* observations, document study, informal interviews and telephone

interviews. A pilot study was conducted which enabled the researcher to trial and refine these data collection techniques.

There was considerable diversity among the parent group who were the focus of this study. They included from parents who had never been a home tutor before, to others who had schooled several children (siblings) over a long period of time. Each family had met criteria provided by the Education Department of Western Australia as eligible to enrol in correspondence schooling and SOTA. A range of socioeconomic backgrounds was represented. There were few male home tutors to include and therefore the home tutors were predominantly female. This, as it turned out, was not unusual.

The study was contextualised by incorporating a brief historical survey of the development of policy and correspondence schooling in Australia and more specifically Western Australia. The historical survey provided a basis for understanding the recent emergence of distance education as a concern of rural and remote Australia. The historical analysis contributes to an understanding of contemporary 'distance education' in one part of the world, the State of Western Australia, and thereby served to locate and define the boundaries of the study.

An overview of the literature that relates to distance education and the home tutor was also conducted. It was noted that there has been limited research in this area. The decision to present such an overview of the research on 'distance education and the home tutor' is consistent with grounded theory methods of data collection and a symbolic interactionist research approach. (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Punch, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

The main finding of the study is that 'individual perseverance' is the encompassing process through which parents 'manage' the role of home tutor in geographically isolated locations. This encompassing process is made up of four categories, namely, acknowledging, interacting, surviving and teaching. Each category contains a further set of specific processes, which are related in succession and intermittently. Parents at times follow the processes within the categories as if they are a set of stages although this is not always the case. As at the same time they also engage in the necessary processes, moving back and forth to manage aspects of the their home tutor role as the need arises.

The degree of 'individual perseverance' varies amongst parents. Initially, all parents tend to initially focus on acknowledging the role of home tutor as significantly important amongst their many roles in life in general. Most parents establish routines for managing the role. Parents however, often feel inadequate and the impact of the role on family relationships is significant. This is especially evident between home tutor and child, and outside the schoolroom between mother and child. All parents negotiate schooling using a variety of strategies that suit their lifestyle and the learning needs of the child.

There is a link between the degree in which the parents 'individually persevere' with schooling and the amount of impact that the role of home tutor has on their lives and the other roles that they undertake generally. For parents who embrace the complexity of the role and seek support from their family, the SOTA teacher and friends the role is undertaken more successfully. Those parents who do not acknowledge the difficulties of the role tend to become more isolated as the home tutor.

In this thesis the theory of 'individual perseverance' was presented as a 'story line' and as a series of inter-related propositions. In the 'story line', the theory is presented as a summarising statement of the interrelationships between the categories, processes and concepts. While the propositions provide a careful and more detailed explanation of the emerging theory of 'individual perseverance'.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND THE MATTER OF GENERALISABILITY

The substantive theory of 'individual perseverance' does not claim to be generalisable beyond the defined locations of this study. The boundaries of this study were clearly identified and are consistent with the strategy of 'modified inductive analysis' as described by Schwartz & Jacobs (1979). The researcher deliberately limited the number of cases as it was not possible given the resources and enormous distances of the state of Western Australia to include all sites.

While it has been acknowledged that it was not feasible to include all possible sites beyond the "confines of the particular context in which the research was conducted" (Bryman, 2001, p.75) it should be remembered that this was not the purpose of this study. Judd, Smith and Kidder (1991) also emphasise that it is essential that the aim and purpose of the study is considered when assessing the value and the applicability of the generalisability of the findings.

Janesick (2000) also identified the struggle with which qualitative researchers have with the term generalisability as it is taken from a quantitative paradigm. She suggests that it may be more useful to consider whether the process has validity in a qualitative sense and argues that:

> validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation and whether or not the explanation fits the description. In other words is the explanation credible? In addition qualitative researchers do not claim that there is one way of interpreting an event. (p.393)

The suggestions of Lincoln and Guba (1985) are helpful and instructive on this matter as they suggest "member checks and audit trails" (p.393) can provide tangible evidence of how the theory has emerged. The researcher was cognisant of this and the theory in this study has been carefully presented with thick descriptions and explanation of the categories and processes grounded from the data, so it is possible for the reader to assess whether or not the explanation offered is credible and generalisable to other contexts.

So while this study does not claim generalisability in a strictly quantitative sense, it may 'ring true' as others read it (Burns, 1994) and may have pervasive applicability and relevance for other settings if conditions are similar (Bryman, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORY

The theory of 'individual perseverance', which was grounded in the actions and interactions of parents who undertook the role of home tutor was the central finding to emerge from the research reported in this thesis. The substantive theory developed in this study may have implications for the development of further theory in the encompassing field of distance education and in the development of formal theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1995). Glaser and Strauss (1967) propose that:

> Since substantive theory is grounded in research in one particular substantive area (work, juvenile delinquency, medical education, education, medical health) it might be taken to apply only to that specific area. A theory at such a conceptual level, however, may have general implications and relevance, and become almost automatically a springboard or steppingstone to the development of a grounded formal [or as is more usually said, "general"] theory. (p.79)

With this in mind the theory of 'individual perseverance' may provide others a place from which to 'step' or 'spring' when undertaking the development of theory in related areas of the educational phenomenon presented in this thesis.

Suggestions for what other investigations could focus might include how parents manage their role as home tutor in other states of Australia through other Schools of the Air or how teachers at Schools of the Air manage

particular aspects of correspondence schooling such as collaborative and cooperative teaching strategies. It may also be useful to explore other roles that impact on this role and vice versa. While the theory of 'individual perseverance' concerns a specific set of parents in the role of home tutor, further related areas for theory development could be parents who are home schooling their children by choice and do not seek the support structures of the Western Australia Education Department. Another related group could be those 'home schoolers' who live in geographically remote locations and do not have access to SOTA.

The findings of this study also have relevance for the theoretical literature on 'curriculum'. While the study focused specifically on parents in the role of home tutor, the theory of 'individual perseverance' might be of some use in providing insight into how materials are developed and used. In particular, the major categories and processes which emerged from this study might provide insight into the development of curriculum materials.

The theory of 'individual perseverance' also contributes to the theoretical literature on 'distance education', particularly in relation to the processes that parents use to manage their role as home tutor. Such a contribution is significant when one considers the call for increased collaboration, participation and consultation, for example, between curriculum writers and key interest groups in order to meet the unique circumstances of rural and remote students (Queensland School Curriculum Council [QSCC], 1999). Further, research into the role of home tutor is needed to inform initiatives and practice in general for rural and remote education.

The overview of the literature which was presented in Chapter Three of this thesis highlighted that few studies have been conducted which focus on parents as home tutors. Even fewer studies have provided parents with a place where their 'voice' contributed to development of substantive theory. Previously, parents have told their stories anecdotally through non-refereed journals, newsletters and conferences. This study is a contribution towards addressing this deficit and the findings may serve as a catalyst for further research that is inclusive of the parental 'voice' in this particular area of 'distance education'.

The development of theory in other areas may be influenced by the findings of this study. While the theory of 'individual perseverance' has been acknowledged as not being directly applicable to situations other than 'other home tutors', it might similarly present new understandings for others who are interested in the role of a 'significant' supervisor of schooling in other levels of the education sector such as early childhood, secondary, home schooling, migrant or remand education. The concept of 'individual perseverance' might also be applicable to workers in fields other than education such as remote nursing stations and home carers for disabled or chronically ill people.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICY

There are few studies that describe or explain the role of the home tutor in rural and remote settings that policy makers can draw upon. The substantive theory which has emerged in this study and which is grounded in the actions and

interactions of parents who undertake that role could be relevant and possibly significant for policy-makers who seek to understand and act on the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The theory of 'individual perseverance' presented in this study may therefore, contribute to future policy development by policy-makers of how parents manage their role as home tutors in geographically remote locations.

Much of the policy that has informed developments in distance education in Australia was derived from dissatisfaction with the servicing of education to rural and remote Australia. Indeed, the abundance of reports commissioned to provide detailed analysis of the concerns of rural and remote Australia is evidence of ongoing concern. The implication being made here is that policy makers may consider the theory of 'individual perseverance' as useful in drawing their attention to the impact that the role of home tutor is having in the setting and thereby inform future policy directions.

The theory of 'individual perseverance' can also contribute to education policy development in the West Australian context. It will be remembered that the *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council Western Australia, 1998) is to be implemented by 2005. The theory of 'individual perseverance' will be instructive for assisting teachers, curriculum writers and the policy-makers who have responsibility for introducing the KLAs into distance education curriculum. Or even simply in helping home tutors cope with the paradigm shift to outcomes based education.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR PRACTICE

The previous section focused on the implications of the research findings for the development of policy. The theory of 'individual perseverance' that emerged from this study may also be relevant for practice. In Chapter One it was noted that the implementation of all aspects of the *Curriculum Framework* (CCWA, 1998) remains a Western Australian Education Department directive. This is likely to be of ongoing concern, for example, to an increasing number of home tutors who will directly experience the reality of including all KLAs in the schoolroom. The theory could therefore, be useful for parents, teachers, principals and educational administrators as each develop processes involved in this particular mode of distance education. Next, the implications of the theory of 'individual perseverance' are discussed in relation to the four areas, curriculum, teaching, SIDE and teacher education.

Implications for Curriculum

The first major area that has implications for practice and which is discussed in this section is curriculum. The study reported in this thesis has found that home tutors made changes to the *Sets* in response to the perceived importance and value of both the learning area and the specific task. Home tutors also made changes in accordance to their child's interests or learning needs. While it was found that many home tutors did not always feel comfortable about adapting, changing or leaving out schoolwork in the *Sets,* they undertook to do so. As well, home tutors reported that many activities were uninteresting and noted that some subject areas often did not change from year to year.

It will be important for curriculum writers to be concerned with the varied needs of the home tutor and the circumstances within which they operate. Further, if curriculum writers are cognisant of how home tutors manage this role, they may gain a fuller picture of what occurs during schooling in the school room. The implications for home tutors could possibly be increased confidence in selecting and adjusting material and interest in participating in a wider range of learning areas that include the Arts, Physical Education, LOTE and Computing. For curriculum writers the implications of understanding what home tutors manage may well result in *Sets* that are more flexible and which contain relevant, purposeful and interesting learning tasks in all subject areas.

Curriculum writers should also consider collaborating more closely with teachers of the SOTA and subject specialists when developing curriculum materials. While this study found that the *Sets* were generally well accepted by home tutors they expressed some frustration with repetitive or tasks that required skills that they did not have. Similarly, teachers at SIDE and SOTAs were not always consulted about the appropriateness of school work. It would be worth curriculum writers' time to pursue a consultative approach when developing curriculum in subject areas such as the Arts and Physical Education which some home tutors found to be problematic in delivery.

Implications for Teaching

A further area for which the findings have implications for practice is teaching. In particular, the first of the propositions relating to the overall theory of 'individual perseverance' has relevance for our understanding of how home tutors go about their work in the schoolroom. The argument of this proposition

is that home tutors tend to develop strategies for managing both their lives in general and teaching in the schoolroom. They develop strategies to manage the role of home tutor. Strategies included routines that support the home tutor and which develop independence in children. The significance of this particular aspect of the theory of 'individual perseverance' lies in accepting that the role of home tutor is one amongst many in busy station life and that management of all aspects of life is necessary to be effective in the school room.

Other facets of the theory have implications for teaching and include the discovery that these home tutors tended to move back and forth between the four categories indicated that the approach taken by home tutors to manage the role is somewhat dynamic. Home tutors are engaged with teaching from the moment in which their children were enrolled and schooling was not necessarily separated from other aspects of life. This study found that effective teaching depended on the successful management of life in all areas.

Generally, teaching was a significant concern and where home tutors had developed networks amongst other home tutors and teachers, they were mostly successful. This has implications for SOTAs who encourage home tutor networks. The findings of the present study suggested that teachers could engage more in these networks and that home tutors should be able to rely on teachers' support and advice more readily. Otherwise, as was revealed in this study home tutors tend to disregard teacher advice and relied on their peers. Improved interactions with the teacher may decrease home tutor anxiety and effect improved teaching and learning in the schoolroom.

The study also highlighted that home tutors tended to focus on the requirements of the *Sets* and selected which tasks would be included or left out.

Several curriculum areas tended to be overlooked and for different reasons. Home tutors indicated that they did not have enough time to include all aspects of the curriculum and others did not feel confident that they had adequate skills in areas like the Arts or Physical Education. Teachers at SOTAs should, therefore, be more aware of the decisions that home tutors are making about what is included in schooling and how those decisions are made.

Implications for the School of Isolated and Distance Education
The third area for which the findings of the present study have practical implications is in relation to SIDE and SOTAs. In particular, the theory of 'individual perseverance' is instructive for principals, curriculum writers and other school administrators.

An understanding of the four categories and processes contained within each category can assist principals, curriculum writers and other school administrators to support home tutors. Supporting home tutors has been clearly established in this and other studies and as important for successful schooling (Louden & Rivalland, 1995; Newland, 1999; Taylor, 2000; White, 1962;).

The theory of 'individual perseverance' may serve to increase the level of understanding of school principals and administrators at SIDE and SOTAs about the important issues which are faced by home tutors in geographically remote locations. In particular, principals can gain an appreciation of the different ways in which home tutors respond to and interact with teachers. They can also gain an understanding of the variable impact that being a home tutor can have on life in general. Furthermore, the theory of 'individual perseverance' may also alert principals to the importance of ensuring that

teachers at SOTAs, curriculum writers and other school administrators communicate effectively with home tutors and each other.

The observation made in this study that home tutors appreciate and prioritise attendance at the Annual Seminar at the start of the school year can also be instructive for the SIDE. This finding can be used to alert principals, teachers and educational administrators to the importance of providing adequate and appropriate support to home tutors, not only at this time of the year but in an ongoing way. There is opportunity to develop in-service training opportunities for home tutors. In particular, the focus should be on developing training opportunities identified from the needs of home tutors.

Implications for Teacher Education

The final area for consideration is how the theory of 'individual perseverance' has implications for pre-service teacher education and professional development (in-service) of teachers in rural and remote locations. There is limited research on how parents 'manage' the role of home tutor generally and even less research that has been undertaken in curriculum areas such as the Arts, Physical Education, LOTE, Science or Computing within the field of distance education. Therefore, the theory of 'individual perseverance' which has been presented in this study, may be useful when considering the development of teacher education programmes and professional development opportunities for pre-service teachers and teachers already teaching in rural and remote contexts.

Pre- service teacher training programs are designed to educate students in readiness for a range of teaching environments that include rural and remote

schools. However, this study notes the complexity of managing teaching through SOTAs. The preparation of teachers for this unique environment is important. The findings of the present study may contribute to addressing issues that are specific to home tutors for teachers who may engage in teaching through SOTAs. Teachers require preparation specifically targeting the unique role of the home tutor. Further, they need to understand how interactions between the home tutor and teacher can be managed for more effective learning outcomes for children.

Teacher preparation in the KLAs is included in all primary teacher education courses in Western Australia. Consideration needs to be given to the possible teaching and learning environment that will impact on the success of all KLAs. It will be important for teachers to be prepared for what is possible and how the various subject areas, with their individual complexities, could be managed. This study showed that home tutors value a breadth of curriculum, but that they have attached little importance to some areas in comparison to the print-based materials and the focus on literacy. This is significant for teachers who need to be prepared for the attitudes, beliefs and practices of home tutors in other curriculum areas.

In the area of professional development opportunities (in-service training) the theory of 'individual perseverance' may also make a contribution. While it may be economically inappropriate to focus resources at the pre-service teacher education level for an indefinite number of intending teachers, it may be prudent and more pragmatic to develop professional development opportunities to address the specific issues that will arise for teachers. The development of appropriate development programs should be based on relevant

research and analysis of home tutors needs. The theory that is developed here is grounded in the actions and interactions of home tutors, such as 'individual perseverance', and may be considered. The findings of the present study may therefore make a contribution towards widening the existing professional development agenda.

The findings of the present study support the notion that teachers, once immersed in the SOTA environment, are more able to consider the specific needs of home tutors. Professional development opportunities are already an avenue for the development of specific support in KLAs such as the Arts, Physical Education, LOTE, Science and Computing and could contribute to increased teacher confidence.

CONCLUSION

The theory of 'individual perseverance' has emerged as the central finding of the study. This study provides detailed description and explanation of the ways home tutors manage the schooling of their children in rural and remote locations. While some who read this contribution may find some transferability in recognising a similar context the theory of 'individual perseverance' is only generalisable to the phenomena of this study. This chapter also provided detail of the implications of the study for curriculum, teaching, SIDE and teacher education. Given that few studies have been undertaken regarding how parents manage their role as home tutor, this study is a contribution to the field of 'distance education'.