

WHEN CHILDREN STRUGGLE AT SCHOOL: THE IMPACT ON FAMILIES

WHEN CHILDREN STRUGGLE AT SCHOOL: THE IMPACT ON THEIR PARENTS
AND SIBLINGS

By

AGATHA BARANSKI-PATTINSON,
B.S.W. (McMaster University), B.A. (York University)

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Social Work

McMaster University

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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK
(2009)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: When Children Struggle At School: The Impact on their Parents
and Siblings

AUTHOR: Agatha Baranski-Pattinson, B.S.W. (McMaster University), B.A.
(York University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Christina Sinding

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 80

Abstract:

The goal of this research was to explore the implications for families when a child struggles at school. This study was designed to bring attention to the significant obstacles, sacrifices, and struggles that parents and families must face when a child experiences difficulties at school.

In order to gather data a focus group approach was utilized. Counselors who provide services to families with children who have school difficulties were recruited from a local counseling agency.

The data gathered through the focus group revealed many ways that a child's school struggles impact her or his family. General themes included the disruption to family routines and interactions, the drain on family resources, and the strained relationships between family members. Children's school difficulties were also seen to influence the perceptions that parents had of their abilities as advocates for their children.

Although the study was small in scale, these research findings have contributed to a better understanding of the complexities that school struggles add to family life and how families are forced to adapt, and ultimately change their lives, to support a child at school.

Findings from this study suggest that family members are affected emotionally, economically, and practically: that all aspects of their daily lives are affected by a child's school struggles.

It appears that the impact of a child's struggle at school is seldom recognized and acknowledged and therefore it appears that there is room for more research in this area. Parents, educators, as well as political representatives would benefit from more attention to these issues. Although this study did not focus specifically on foster families, findings suggest that a foster child's school struggles may affect the permanency and success of the foster placements; this is another area for future study.

I hope that by validating and acknowledging parents' lived experiences and struggles, they may feel less alone and that this knowledge will provide them with a little renewed energy to continue challenging the barriers that they face.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my parents for instilling in me a respect and value of education and for their unwavering support and encouragement during my years of study.

I would not have been able to complete this work without the support and encouragement of Kelly Lazure-Valconi. She has provided me with ongoing mentorship throughout my social work career and her commitment to the field of social work, as well as, the clients that she works with, never ceases to be an inspiration.

I also dedicate this work to my partner Cory and my son Lucas. Cory, I thank you for your many hours of proof reading and for your encouragement and patience as I spent endless hours writing. Lucas, you are a daily inspiration to me in all that I do. I hope that you will one day embrace education like I have.

Finally, I want extend my gratitude to Dr. Christina Sinding for her encouragement, knowledge, and most of all patience, as I found my way through writing this thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Educational systems around the world play many roles, ranging from socializing children to providing a venue where academic knowledge is taught and shared. Education also plays a significant role in a child's future as it influences career choices and opportunities (Warrington, 2008, Berns, 2001).

In Ontario alone, there are over two million children who attend school (Ministry of Education, 2009). Many of these children pack their lunches, take the bus to school, interact positively with their peers, and enjoy the learning process. These children's parents likely feel proud of their children's successes and are able to share their positive feelings with teachers and principals. Although every child is likely to struggle at school occasionally, for these families, children attending school is a taken for granted activity that gets accomplished positively five days a week.

However, for a minority of children attending school, it is a very different experience. For these children, attending school can be a daily struggle laced with stress, criticism, and hardship and is likely experienced as something negative.

In every elementary school system, a proportion of children will experience difficulties with academics, relating and getting along with peers, or adhering to school routines and rules. For some of these children their struggles stem from disabilities which affect their decision making abilities and other skills needed to adhere to rules and social norms. Yet, the supports and assistance provided by the school appear to be declining each year (Cupe Ontario, 2007), and parents appear to be left needing to take responsibility for the schools deficits in resources. In response to children who present with “challenging” behaviour, in 2004, school boards in Ontario suspended students 153,000 times in that one year alone. When a child is suspended, he or she is unable to come onto school property anytime from 1 to 20 consecutive days (Ministry of Education, 2009). Schools explain their actions by stating that sending students home who struggle at school is a way to provide “progressive discipline that promotes positive student behaviour” (Ministry of Education, 2009). Families however, are then called in to support that student in the home environment, perhaps attend meetings, or provide in-school support once the suspension is finished. For parents, this poses a number of difficulties of which could include a strain on finances, tensions in family relationships, and having to take time off work.

For the parents of these children, school often plays a large role in shaping their family life. Yet, the hardships these parents and children face due to their

struggles at school are often unnoticed and unacknowledged by others leaving the consequences on the entire family's life unexplored.

Through this research, I set out to provide information on the significant impact that the educational system has on families in general, but, specifically I want to acknowledge the impact it has on families where a child may be struggling at school. I believe the effect is significant and can be all encompassing in a family's daily life. Hence, my primary research question is: "When children and youth experience struggles at school, what is the impact on their parents and family?"

This thesis begins with a review of the literature. Although research on the topic was limited, a number of themes became evident. Feminist scholars, specifically Allison Griffith and Dorothy Smith, have focused some of their research on the impact that children's schooling has on mothers in particular, as well as, on the family system. Researchers such as Maeve O'Brien, and Kay Standing, have shown a link between a child's school experiences and social class, highlighting the role that family income and resources play.

I then discuss my methodology, explaining my choice to utilize a focus group with counsellors at a local counselling agency. In this section, I also discuss my rationale for selecting the sample, the recruitment process used, ethical considerations, and my location as a researcher. The process of data analysis is

also covered, explaining how I utilized a grounded theory approach to evaluate the information collected. In the findings section, I draw attention to key themes which emerged from the discussion. These include: the impact of children's school difficulties on the family's daily routines, the demands that school difficulties place on family resources, and the effect that school difficulties have on family relationships. Finally, in the discussion, I summarize the study and review its contribution to the literature, as well as a suggested direction for future research and possible changes in practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I will provide an overview of research and literature that speaks to the effects of children's school difficulties on their families.

Unfortunately, literature directly on this topic is relatively minimal; I discuss possible reasons for this towards the end of the chapter.

In the literature that does exist, feminist scholars have focused on the impact that the school system has on mothers, highlighting the need to be aware of the social and political contexts of educational institutions and the often hidden reasons the educational system has for encouraging parent and school collaboration. Feminist scholars have also captured the experiences of mothers, and to some degree, fathers as they relate to their children's school experiences.

Researchers in the field of education have also explored school difficulties but tend to focus on the practice aspect of behaviour management. Some educational scholars have utilized post-modern analysis to critique the construction of "problem behaviour" and in turn the construction of the "problem child" and their family.

In this chapter I will review the literature that highlights the experiences of mothers, fathers, and families as it relates to the school system especially when

difficulties arise for the children. I will also present how families and children who experience difficulties are socially constructed by schools and the impact this has on them.

The Emotional Impact on Mothers

Socially, in the family, mothers are still regarded as holding the role of the primary care to their children. When their children is ill or in need of their assistance, it is mothers who call in sick from work and it is mothers who report deep feelings connected to their children's struggles at school. This is not to say that fathers are not equally concerned, but, it is the mother's life that seems most affected by the school difficulties (Dudley-Marling, 2001, Warrington, 2008).

Through interviews with mothers whose children were experiencing struggles at school, Dudley-Marling (2001) was able to capture the emotional burden that these difficulties had on mothers. Mothers reported mixed feelings of deep sadness coupled with anxiety. Women reported that it was their sense of helplessness towards aiding their children that was often at the bases of these emotions. Despite their best efforts and motivation to help, they felt they were unable to do so, or were not allowed to do so by the schools policies.

Mothers also mentioned feeling fear about what will become of their children in the future if they do not succeed in school presently. Wanting the best

for their children, mothers feared the repercussions of school struggles for the future. Feelings of depression, not only impacted mothers emotionally, but also had an impact on their quality of life. Women reported that thinking about their children's difficulties at school affected their concentration, work performance, sleep, and appetite.

Although mothers worried about the future of their children, the consequences of school difficulties were however, very much present day realities. Mothers reported that the impact of school difficulties was very much part of their daily lives outside of the home. Mothers reported that they often take the stress they feel into the work place. One mother reported feeling worried about whether she would receive a phone call from her child's school. This phone call meant that she would potentially have to leave work to meet with the school or to take her child home due to some difficulty. This left the mother with few choices. If she did not attend to her child there would be consequences with the school, however, if she left work the disruption could potentially have an impact on her job and in turn her family's finances (190-191). Hence, school difficulties could have far reaching consequences on the lives of women and often extended beyond the emotional to affect a women's productivity at work, her employment security, and her income.

Mothers also reported worrying about the impact the difficulties at school were having on their children. A mother in Dudley-Marling study (2001, p 191) shared an experience of having to watch her child look and feel 'miserable' as he walked out the door each day to attend school. She noted that it had a significant emotional impact on her to witness this ritual and have to enforce his attendance. Again this mother felt saddened, worried, and angered by the experience.

Across research studies, mothers tended to internalize and take personally their children's struggle at school. Again, this is likely due to the social and cultural messages that mothers receive clearly stating that it is they who are responsible for their children (Dudley-Marling, 2001, O'Brien, 2007, Standing, 1999). Hence, the theme of maternal guilt was overwhelmingly present in the literature.

In interviews, mothers of children who struggled at school continuously questioned their own qualities, not only as parents but also as people, and how they had contributed to their children's difficulties. Mothers wondered if it was the way that they spoke to their children, if they encouraged them enough, or if they push them too hard, that may have contributed to their children's struggles at school. One mother even commented that she felt that if she had only been stronger during childbirth then her child would have needed less intervention and perhaps done better at school (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Another mother

commented that she felt badly after meeting with the school as she did not agree with the school's position and felt that she was labelled as a 'trouble maker' for voicing her views (O'Brien, 2007). The common thread between all the interviews was that mothers lay the blame on themselves. They didn't question if they, with their partners, or if they, with the schools, had made the right decisions. They simply questioned if they alone were adequate mothers, taking on the responsibility for their children's hardships solely upon themselves. Yet, it is not surprising that women felt this way as the message that mothers are responsible for their children was reinforced over and over in their everyday lives by social standards (Dudley-Marling, 2001, O'Brien, 2007).

Even fathers supported the social stereotype that childrearing is a women's job. Fathers admitted to making comments such as, 'why can't you help him read?' or 'it's your field'. One father implied that his child's school difficulties were due to his wife's 'coddling' behaviour (Dudley-Marling, 2001, 191-192). Hence, clear implications were made by fathers that schooling was a mother's responsibility and it appears little effort was made to alleviate the guilt mothers felt or to share in the burden. Despite some fathers being primary caregivers to their children, social norms dictate that it is mothers who are responsible and it seems women have internalized this message.

These norms are reinforced by the North American culture, its people, and its institutions as well. The cultural belief that women are responsible for the home and children, despite their family structure or work situation, holds strong. These notions are reinforced by husbands, friends, and especially the school. “Within the dominant patriarchal discourse, a child’s success in school is proof of a woman’s success as a mother while a child’s problems in school demonstrate a mother’s deficiencies (Smith, 1987, 1998, in Dudley-Marling, 2001, p. 192).” Hence, the culture and its stereotyping of women’s roles portray mothers, whose children struggle at school, as inadequate in some way. These norms are accepted consciously and unconsciously by mothers having a significant impact on their relationship with their children, their enjoyment of motherhood, and their self esteem.

The Role of Fathers

In the realm of child rearing, in which education often falls, traditional norms and practices dictate that it is women who are responsible for their children. The work that mothers do is often regarded as ‘caring’ and is taken for granted as an act of love rather than a productive effort or task. In heterosexual families, males often do not take on the role of caring for children, although this has somewhat changed in the past decade where fathers are taking a more active

role (Tan & Goldberg, 2008). However, typically fathers take on a 'helper' role to that of the mother.

Mothers felt that they did on average more school related work and that they did it better than their partners, even if partners were available (O'Brien, 2007). Besides making themselves available to confirm important decisions, fathers tended to defer other tasks associated with their children's education to their female partners. Fathers often present as 'bit players in a drama whose key actors are the mothers, the female carers and the children' (Vincent and Ball, 2001, p. 642). Griffith and Smith (2005) found similar results in their research. They noted that although fathers sometimes did play a role in their children's education, it tended to be more limited than that of the mother. Sometimes women reported that their male partners would assist with homework assignments or would read with their children. However, the breadwinner role tended to fall to the male and therefore due to work schedules fathers were often not available to help with school tasks or simply chose to spend time with their children playing or having fun (p.98). Therefore, it often fell to mothers to work with schools on the problems that their children were facing rather than share that role with their partners.

Although many families endorse traditional gender roles, schools also appear to play a significant role in establishing roles for both men and women.

Research also suggests that the limited involvement of male parents may be due to feeling unwelcome to participate by the school. Fathers commented on feeling unwelcome and scrutinized when they stood on school property, to pick up their children (Warrington, 2008). If fathers feel uncomfortable simply walking onto school property they may likely feel excluded and unwelcome from participating in more personal interactions with school staff such as attending school meetings or volunteering in the classroom to support their struggling children.

Given that the research suggests that fathers tend not to have as large a role in managing children's schooling, one has to question if the impact of school difficulties is as significant on fathers as it is for mothers. Likely, fathers do not feel the same feelings of guilt or failure that mothers often reported (Dudley-Marling, 2001) when their children were struggling at school. However, more research is required to explore this aspect of fatherhood.

Tension at Home

When a child experiences school difficulties, these struggles tend to follow that child outside of the school into various environments. It is the home environment that appears to be the most affected by the stress that difficulty at school causes, not only for the child, but the child's parents and siblings as well. When a child is experiencing problems at school there is pressure from the school, that this be remedied. Parents are often left with the responsibility of finding a

solution to the problems. These solutions not only take a toll on parents emotionally, but, they also require a significant dedication of resources, such as a parent's time, attention, and finances. Hence there is often an impact on the siblings of the struggling child. Mothers report that they feel badly as they tend to devote significant time and attention to helping their sons, or daughters, who is struggling at school with homework or reading, meanwhile leaving their other children to manage without as much support (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Although research has not been done on siblings of children who struggle at school, one can assume that an impact is felt by them as well.

Marital relationships or life partnerships are also impacted by school difficulties. Although the research in this area is also very limited, research has shown that stress has a negative impact on relationships in general (Randall and Bodenmann, 2009, McCubbin et al, 1980). In Dudley-Marling's (2001) research study, one parent did comment on the impact school difficulties had on her partner. She reported that she felt her partner was resentful of all the time she had to spend with her child on homework and that this drain on resources elevated the level of stress in the home and caused a rift in their relationship (p. 193). Based on other interviews where women commented that they were the ones who were responsible for managing and dealing with their children's school struggles, it can be questioned, if they felt resentment towards their partners for this. Women

expressed feeling alone and often blamed by their partners for the difficulties their children experienced (p.187). Although not stated explicitly in interviews, it is likely that they could have felt frustrated at having to manage the difficult situation on their own and this may have lead to strain on their marriages and partnerships.

The child who is experiencing the school difficulties tends to face the most challenges and consequences. Not only is that child often labelled as a “troublemaker” or “difficult student” by the school and his peers, his relationship with his family are also impacted. Mothers report that they often begin to feel frustrated or resentful towards their struggling children. They note that this resentment stems from the amount of energy the children require of them, whether that energy is for attending school meetings, picking the children up from school in the middle of the day, or simply spending hours each day assisting with homework. In interviews, mothers noted that when they got frustrated with the children’s struggles they could raise their voices in frustration, or when stress was very high they would simply give up helping their children. They noted that school difficulties would often become the center of their relationship taking away from the positive time that could have been spent together if these struggles did not exist (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Given how struggling children are constructed and labelled by the school as “special” or “problematic”, parents are

with an enormous challenge of staying positive for their child and seeing them beyond their presenting problems at school (Reid & Valle, 2004).

A family's life in general appears to be greatly affected by schooling and even more so when a child experiences struggles. It is often the taken for granted tasks of everyday life that are impacted by educational institutions. The impact schools have on families becomes deeply rooted in family life. For example, households typically operate around the children's school day. The school day often dictates when family members wake up, who needs to be available after school hours to pick up the children, and to how evening activities are arranged due to homework (Griffith and Smith, 2005; O'Brien, 2007). These routines imposed by schools allow parents and children to plan and predict their day, assisting parents in organizing their employment hours, child care, and recreational activities (Warrington, 2008). However, when a child experiences school difficulties these routines may become interrupted by early dismissals, suspensions, detentions, and endless school meetings during the day. The disruption that is caused by school difficulties to the everyday lives of families can result in significant stress and struggles.

The Educational System's Drain on Family Resources

The school's push for *parental involvement* makes the assumption that families, and in particular mothers, have a number of resources at their disposal.

parental involvement means helping with homework, helping in the classroom assistants, reading with your child, taking part in the activities and outings, and doing 'extra curricular activities'. It entails providing time, space and equipment (books, computers, etc.) for children to work at home, and supporting the school in various ways—attending meetings and school events as well as supporting the philosophy of the school (Standing, 1999, p.58).

The draw on family resources is indeed significant, but, it is even more demanding for parents whose children experience struggles at school. In cases where a child is struggling behaviourally or academically, parents are called in to assist the school and problem solve, as well as, carry out solutions which may help the child. When the school feels that it is time for parents to become more involved, the same demands are made on all families, despite that families are quite different, and able to offer varying amounts of support. These solutions require a lot from parents such as knowledge of the school system, extra time and energy, as well as increased monitoring of their child's school work (Dudley-Marling, 2001, Griffith & Smith, 1990). Ironically, although parents of students who present with school struggles tend to dedicate more of their resources to their children, they are often blamed by the school for not being involved enough or being somehow the cause of their children's struggles (Lareau, 1989). Single mothers, or mother's with low income levels, were further faulted for their children's learning struggles as they failed to fit into white, middle class standards of good parenting (Standing, 1999). Indeed, it was the mothers who had the least

material and emotional resources that felt the greatest impact on their emotional health (O'Brien, 2007).

In Support of Middle Class Values

In recent years, British researchers have begun to pay attention to how class differences and sociocultural inequalities are experienced by mothers and families in general as they apply to schooling. Noting that class and racial identities play a significant role in how parents are able to manage their children's difficulties often experiencing far more difficulty in advocating for their children if they are outside of the middle class margins (David et al., 1994; Gewirtz et al.; 1994, Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Reay & Ball, 1997, 1998 in O'Brien, 2007). Studies further suggest that '...poor, working class, lone-parents, and mothers from minority ethnic backgrounds, endure emotional, as well as material and cultural inequalities, in doing educational care work' (O'Brien, 2007, p 161).

Most literature that has emerged over the past decade that links children's struggles at school to how it impacts the family has been focused on women, particularly mothers. The literature speaks to the invisible, private, and unpaid work that mothers do in order for their children to manage at school, and indeed by helping their child they also make significant unrecognized contributions to the running of the school system itself (Griffith & Smith, 1990; O'Brien, 2007).

The standard and expectations for parental involvement and support remain the same for everyone. Standards that several scholars have argued are biased toward middle class values and resources, failed to take into account individual family situations (Griffith and Smith 2005, Reay, 1998, O'Brien, 2007, Standing, 1999). "The traditional nuclear family, with a stay-at-home wife and mother and breadwinner father best suits the organisation of the school." (Griffith & Smith, 1990, in K. Standing, 1999). An assumption is made by the school that all parents have the same access to social, economic, and cultural resources and hold all mothers equally responsible for their children's school failures (Dudley-Marling, 2001).

Through his research, Dudley-Marling (2001) was able to exemplify the types of material resources that parents dedicated to the school and their struggling children. Economic resources were mentioned by a number of families he interviewed. Parents who were financially able had an advantage when caring for their struggling children. They were able to purchase educational testing, private tutoring, and private schooling which minimized their children's difficulties (p. 187). Hence middle and upper class families who had more disposable income were able to purchase assistance for their children and in so doing supported the belief that families who were in lower income brackets did less for their children.

Families also faced a potential loss of income when parents had to give up or limit their employment so that they could devote more time to their children. In recent years, school boards have embraced a 'zero tolerance' philosophy for students who they view are "trouble makers", special needs students, and utilize suspensions and expulsions to exclude them from school, minimizing the strain on their own resources (James & Freeze, 2006). The exclusion from school forces parents to be available for their children during work hours, or purchase child care for them, which can have significant financial repercussions for the entire family.

Other drains on material resources include having to arrange and provide transportation from tutoring, as well as parents having to reschedule their work day to attend school meetings or to pick their children up from school when they are having difficulties (Dudley-Marling, 2001.)

A Case for Parental Involvement

In the past decade, schools in Canada, the U.S. and in Britain have made very public statements declaring that parental involvement is needed to make children successful at school and to boost educational standards in general. Implying, that if parents care about their children they will be available both at home and at school to meet any educational demands that present themselves (Dudley-Marling, 2001, Standing, 1999). The strong push for increased parental support discreetly allows the school to utilize parents as resources, but, also

provides them with the opportunity to judge whether parents are involved enough and to shift the blame for a children's school difficulties onto families and individual children (Dudley-Marling, 2001, Smith, 1998, Reid & Valle, 2004). Hence, the recent push for parental involvement is more complicated than it may seem, as the implications of this new policy can have much more of a significant impact on parents, especially mothers, whose children struggle at school.

The idea of parental involvement is presented as a neutral unproblematic, ungendered concept, without class and cultural bias (Standing, 1999). By the educational system using gender neutral language, such as *parental involvement* and *parent-school collaboration*, an illusion is created that suggests both mothers and fathers are equally involved in their children's schooling. Yet, in practice, research indicates that it is mothers who have unequivocally taken up the responsibility for their children's schooling, regardless of family structure, class, employment demands or marital status, and it is therefore, no surprise that the literature illustrates that children's school difficulties have the most significant impacts on mothers (Smith, 1987, Griffith and Smith, 1990, Dudley-Marling, 2001, Brooks, 2003, O'Brien, 2007, Standing 1999).

Gaps and Limitations in the Literature

As noted earlier, few research studies have been conducted on the impact that parents and siblings feel when a children experience struggles at school.

Perhaps this gap in the literature exists because in North American culture, children attending school is legally mandated and sending a child off to school is a daily task which is often taken for granted (Smith & Griffith, 1990). The minority of children, who refuse to attend school, are on modified school days, or who are sent home from school or expelled for “behaviour problems” may be easily overlooked. Although education is a public institution, a child’s school problems are often dealt with quietly involving only the parents, often only the mother, and tend to be viewed as a private affair to be taken care of in the home rather than at the school (O’Brien, 2007). Hence, the child’s struggle becomes private with parents being told that their child’s trouble is their burden rather than the schools.

Another explanation as to why this topic is not often researched could be related to the issue of school difficulties overlapping in various fields. For example, a child’s school difficulties may be considered to be in the educational realm, yet, the impact of the difficulties on the family, is considered outside of education and falls into the categories of sociology and psychology. Hence, not surprisingly, each discipline has given attention to particular aspects of children’s school struggles yet most paying little attention to the impact on the family.

The study undertaken for this thesis was prompted in part by these gaps and limitations in the literature. My aim was to bring more awareness of how

when a child experiences struggles at school the entire family is ultimately effected and to highlight how these experiences influence family life to the point that family relationships become altered.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose and Design of the Study

The goal of my research study is to illuminate the experiences of parents and siblings who have supported children through school difficulties. I had planned to meet with parents to gain a better understanding of their experiences first hand, however, I found recruiting parents to participate in the study to be a significant obstacle. Initially, I had wanted to interview parents who received service at a children's mental health agency where I had previously been employed. The factor of my having worked at the agency previously presented a challenge in being granted ethics approval. Therefore, I needed to alter my study where recruitment of participants would take place through another agency. Due to the delay in ethics approval, my timing for recruitment was altered to being in early summer when school was in recess and many of the parents and children were on holidays and therefore no longer directly having to manage issues with schools. Hence, the response was limited and in order to avoid having to further alter my study, I chose to speak with professional counsellors who worked closely with parents to explore their opinions and understanding of the impact children's school difficulties had on families. In so doing, my hope was that the reader

would be provided with narratives which would illustrate how professionals believed parents, as well as other family members, are impacted by children's difficulties at school.

With this goal in mind, I choose a qualitative and interpretive research method to guide the study. A qualitative methodology allowed me to explore the subjective meanings, interpretations, and realities of the professionals who shared their perspectives in the research study (Strega, 2005). In so doing, I aimed to gain a better understanding of the viewpoints and lived experiences of counsellors, and insight into the experiences of the families that they have worked with.

The Focus Group

In order to gather data, I decided on a focus group approach. By conducting an exploratory focus group, I hoped to create, collect, identify, explain, as well as generate thoughts, feelings, and behaviours on the topic of how families experience children's struggles at school (Utsey, 2005). There were a number of factors that prompted my choice of conducting a focus group. My time line was something I needed to consider given the unanticipated difficulty with ethics approval and then, furthermore, with the recruitment of parents to interview. A focus group allowed me to interview a number of participants at the same time, therefore minimizing the time needed for the data collection. Also, using a focus group approach provided me the opportunity to gather a unique set

example, the use of a focus group allowed me to explore through discussion “the conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious psychological and social cultural processes” that occurred for the participants as they engaged in conversation (Agar & MacDonald, 1995). The use of group dynamics to stimulate the discussion allowed participants to share ideas that they may not normally have shared if they were not responding to a comment made, or an idea presented, by another group member (Morgan, 1997, Kitzinger, 1994).

The composition of participants added to the discussion as the group was familiar with the struggles of families, understood theories related to therapy, and had a good knowledge of the school system. Therefore, they could relate to each other’s comments, could trigger memories of shared situations, and had a comfort with each other. Hence, having chosen to conduct a focus group made choosing the right sample an important factor in the research.

The Sample

The sample of participants I worked with was specific rather than representative. I sought to interview counsellors a) who all worked with parents of school aged children, b) that the families they worked with had children who were currently experiencing significant difficulties at school, c) the counsellors all held social work or child and youth work degrees and all had over three years of experience and finally, d) they all provided therapeutic services for children and

families at a local counselling agency which services the Hamilton, Brantford and surrounding area.

I chose to recruit through a local counselling agency for several reasons. The counsellors that are employed there provide service to families likely to have children who had experiences with some school difficulties. Therefore, the counsellors would have a variety of cases they could reflect on during the discussion. Counsellors would also be involved in advocating for families and consequently would likely have a good understanding of the stresses and obstacles that parents faced in relation to working with schools.

Recruiting through an agency allowed me to reach the specific population that I needed for participants. Hence, the participants were part of a pre-existing group and were all familiar with the topic being discussed. The advantage of utilizing a pre-existing group was that the focus group conversation was a topic that would naturally be discussed amongst the participants in every day conversation. Therefore, the scenarios and ideas that were discussed during the focus group were easy for everyone to relate to and no further explanations were required. The group also seemed to 'collectively remember' (Middleton and Edwards, 1990 in Kitzinger, 1994, Berg, 1998) the experiences being discussed. Nevertheless, some draw backs to working with pre-existing groups also need to be acknowledged. For example, because participants shared assumptions about what others were referring to in their comments, some of the ideas presented were

not always elaborated on as meanings were assumed (Kitzinger, 1994, Finch & Lewis, 2003, Krueger, 1988). Hence, it was important to get the participants consent to contact them for clarification afterwards should any of their statements need further explanation or clarification.

Recruitment

I began the recruitment process by contacting a manager at the agency from which I wished to attain participants from. Once the executive director of the agency reviewed the letter of information and consent (please see appendix A) and approval was granted, I was able to proceed. I provided a manager at the agency an email (please see appendix B) to send out to all agency staff. The email was sent to over 50 staff members so as much anonymity as possible would remain. The letter of information and consent was also attached for potential participants to read. Through the email I requested that interested parties contact me directly. In so doing, agency staff would be unaware of who participated in the study and confidentiality would remain. Once potential participants contacted me via email, I was able to follow up by providing more detail about the time and place of the focus group.

The Focus Group Interview Process

Based on the number of participants that responded (six in total), I choose to run a focus group on a single date in a convenient location for the staff group. Given the familiarity between participants, data was generated by participants

sharing their individual views and experiences as well by comments and providing feedback to other members of the group (Finch & Lewis, 2003, Kitzinger, 1994). The discussion in turn provided a rich set of data on how counsellors perceive that families experience their children's school difficulties and the effects that they had on family members, both emotionally and practically.

To begin the focus group discussion, a brief outline and explanation of the study, as well as some general guidelines for discussion were introduced. I explained to the participants that a recording device would be used to capture the discussion which would later be transcribed for ease of the analysis. The need for confidentiality was also readdressed and participants were requested to sign confidentiality agreements (please see appendix A).

I chose to organize the focus group by utilizing a semi-structured interview guide with open ended questions (please see appendix C). This allowed some structure to the sequencing of topics and prompted participants to focus on certain areas of interest.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected it was transcribed and analysed. Analysis was begun by reading and rereading the transcript thoroughly. A grounded theory approach was utilized to guide the data analysis. In essence, themes were identified from the material and further evidence, which confirmed or disqualified the main themes, was identified through coding. Initially, themes were difficult to

isolate as the participants shared many examples of obstacles that families they had worked with had to overcome, each presenting unique challenges. Yet, when each participant's statement was reconsidered, general themes began to emerge. For example, it became evident by the number of references by various participants that parents felt a great deal of stress when their children struggled. From this general theme I was able to look even more closely at what the effect stress had on family functioning and also what situations contributed most to the feelings of stress. Finally, all data relevant to the theme identified was examined by constant comparison and key themes were then confirmed with supporting data (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2007). Once themes were identified, verified respondent quotes were then chosen from the material to support my interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Minimal risks were identified in the study however, as participants voiced their opinions in a group context they made their views known to the group. Group members may have worried that their views would be shared with others outside of the group.

Steps to ensure confidentiality were therefore taken. As previously mentioned, prior to beginning the discussion in the focus group the purpose of the group and guidelines associated with confidentiality were verbally reviewed. I

also reviewed the research outline with the participants and drew their attention to the risks and benefits section and then requested that participants sign an agreement asking them to keep what is said in the focus group confidential.

The participants were also informed that their confidentiality would be carefully maintained. No actual names of the participants or the families that they worked with were used for recording and transcribing purposes. No names, and or facts that could identify them, were recorded in any written material about the project. All project material was kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home. However, given the nature of a focus group setting, other participants would be made aware of each other's views.

Location of the Researcher

I feel that it is relevant to acknowledge that I have clinical experiences similar to that of the participants. Therefore, interviewing a group of participants that I have had similar experiences to was both helpful and limiting. It was helpful in the sense that I could relate to the participants' experiences. I also have a good understanding of the school system and the processes inherent to it. I was familiar with the vocabulary used by the participants and had experience providing clinical support to families with similar struggles to the ones the counsellors interviewed were working with and referring to. I feel that knowing the issues that the counsellors faced in their practice gave me an advantage in the

formulation of my interview questions as I had a clearer idea of what information I was seeking (Staples, 1979; Zinn, 1979 in LaSala, 2003).

The limitations of being an “insider” when conducting research may include failing to pay attention to unique experiences that varied from my own, taking the information that participants are presenting for granted due to my familiarity and not exploring the participant’s perceptions further (LaSala, 2003). However, being aware of the limitations is an important first step to minimizing the drawbacks. I attempted to be as self aware as I could, regarding the issues mentioned above, while interviewing and analysing the data. I also had ongoing conversations with my thesis supervisor to clarify and critique my interpretation of the data. I feel that these measures assisted in minimizing potential ‘insider’ limitations, while maximizing the benefits of my position.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

The data gathered through the focus group held with service providers reflected a number of themes on how a child's school struggles impact their families. General themes included the impact that school difficulties had on family routines and interactions, family resources, and the relationship between family members as well as influencing the perceptions that parents had of their abilities as advocates for their children.

Throughout the focus group discussion, the counsellors expressed the belief that school difficulties had significant implications on home life. Based on the descriptions of the direct effect that school troubles had on a child and family it was almost impossible to separate the public sphere (school) and the private sphere (home). The school and home appeared to become enmeshed for the child and family and therefore altered the way the family members interacted, functioned and the beliefs that they held about one another. School difficulties penetrated both the child's home routines, but also the parent's daily routines, having significant impact on the parent's finances, emotional wellbeing, and resource of time.

The Task of Teaching at Home

Children who the school identified as experiencing behavioural or academic difficulties were reported to often be excluded from school due to their struggles. The periods of time that children did not attend school had significant impact on families. When the school made claims that they did not have the “expertise” or the “resources” to support a child, the responsibility for the problem was forced onto the family. Although the school initiated the decreased amount of time the child spent on academic work in the classroom, the parent would ultimately be left with the task of, not only assisting their child with the academic work that was missed, but also with supervising the child during school hours at home. The counsellors interviewed gave many examples of how parent’s lives were dictated by the school’s demands. Parents were often asked to pick up their children spontaneously during the day, to provide academic teaching, and to solve the school’s issues of resources by “volunteering” their time. For the child and family, missed time in class resulted in a significant amount of work that needed to be caught up at home by utilizing the parent as a teaching resource. In short, the deficit of resources or time restraints that the school claimed to be faced with, translated into the family having to dedicate their own time and resources to make up for what the school did not provide. One participant noted the frustration that parents felt when they are left with having to sit with their child for hours at a time as they attempt to tackle work that the school was suppose to

support the child through.

I think a lot of it does go back to the supports in the classroom and you know how much work does he do in the classroom and how much goes home. It's frustrating that he doesn't accomplish anything, there's 3 to 4 hours of work that they expect their parents to do every single night so that's one of the frustrations.

Similarly, it was noted that parents made attempts to broaden their children's positive experiences by building community activities or groups where the children could excel in their daily routines. However, given that school work completion in the evenings is expected to take priority, this left very little room in the child's day for such activities. Not only was there decreased time for community activities, there was also significant pressure on the parent to accommodate and assist the child with schoolwork, as well as, carry out the taken for granted tasks associated with parenthood and childcare.

I think they expect a lot of work... a lot of these kids have groups that they go to in the evening or they have programs they do and really they only have a 3 hour gap in the evening to do dinner, routines, and these kids are having difficulties settling in... on top of that how do you manage your laundry, the dishes, the dinner and the other kids in the home? And... your child is bringing all this work home.

Hence, it was difficult for parents to focus on anything else than school work that need to be completed at home. The family's routines and evenings appeared to be very much influenced by the expectation that the parent teach their

child the school work that teachers were unable to support the child through at school.

Parents Being Tested

The school prioritizes academic work as of high value and expresses this by assigning marks for completed work. What this meant for families with children, who were often told that they could not attend school due to difficulties, was that the parent was expected to be knowledgeable in the subjects taught. The school's assumptions that parents are able to teach their children at home often lead to stress and frustration for those parents that could not do this.

So (the child is) bringing all this work home. Some of the parents don't know what and how it's being taught, they don't know how to do the work and it's a lot of work coming home sometimes. I don't know what this says. I don't know how to do this.' So you have these poor parents who have to say 'I'd love to help you with your homework but I don't know how to do it.' And then you've got these kids looking at their parents in a different light going, 'what do you mean you can't do my homework?' And so they are having issues with that.

Participants in the focus group described the challenges parents faced because they were unable to assist their children in the completion of the work assigned by the school. In the quote above, we can see how the parent's own sense of self, as well as her or his relationship to the child, is affected. Parents are forced to acknowledge a lack of competence—they have to say, "I don't know how to do this." Their desire to help the child is set against the reality that the work

work assigned by the school is beyond their capacity and, of course, this reality does not go unnoticed by their children. The parent's lack of competence with the work assigned by the school means their children see them 'in a different light' – that their status as effective, capable people is undermined. While we think of school work as testing children, we can see here that the parent is also very much tested by the school, and for some, failure is clear in their own eyes and in their eyes of the children.

Another participant described how parents feel stress, worry and frustration as they anticipate their evening being spent trying to figure out their children's school work.

...I think they go through huge stresses because that parent's going, 'oh my gosh there's more homework coming home the next day that I'm not going to know how to do this and they start to feel like 'I can't help, how am I going to help? Who's going to help, right?

Another participant noted that the school appears to be ignorant of the parents' struggles with the task of teaching:

The school does not understand that the parents don't know how to do it and they're not making the time available for their kid to have that extra support time for the education that they needed.

At the same time, parents felt sensitive to what the schools' perceptions of them would be if they could not assist with homework due to a lack of knowledge on the subject. Parents want to present themselves as supportive of their children

and often wonder how the school may interpret their inability to assist their children with schoolwork.

The school holds a tremendous amount of power over parents, as principals can enforce whether their children will be allowed to attend school. For parents, the consequences of this are great and can invoke feelings of fear that they are perceived as not working with the school and being “unsupportive.” The consequence of having a bad reputation with the school because parents disagree about a matter or feel like they cannot support their children with school work, could impact how quickly their child is suspended or excluded and how willing the school will be to work through problems that might arise in the future.

... families are really torn, I can't get this work done, there's not enough time in the evening. How do they let the school know that? Is the school forgiving?...they don't want to second guess what the school does because they want to be sure that the child and everyone's working together so it's kind of hard.

Parents want to support their children and be seen in a positive light by the school. Hence, it is quite stressful when they suspect that the school does not view them as competent parents. One counsellor recalls:

...the school can kind of give the message to the parents of 'what are you doing at home? Why is this kid like this? Why can't you parent this kid?' So I think it really makes the parents feel like failures... And I think too a lot of parents we work with they're great advocates for the kids...they try to bring that to meetings and try to really advocate but it still comes down

the school making that phone call and expecting the parents to drop everything.

Although school difficulties occur in the context of the classroom, parents still appear to receive messages that their children's struggles are somehow their fault. They are left with the responsibility of teaching their children academics that they often struggle with themselves. The school system appears to be unaware of the pressure this places on parents and how parents struggle to be seen as supportive and cooperative. Parents appear to be acutely aware of how the school perceives them and do their best to measure up to the schools expectations.

The School Forces Its Way into Daily Family Interactions

The counsellors felt that the pressures of homework certainly added an element of stress to the daily routines of families. They also commented on how pervasive school difficulties are for the child. It was felt that the school's expectations, and even the language used at school, had woven its way into family life and routines virtually unnoticed. Much of the conversation that took place between the child and parent at home was felt to be school focused. Often activities were dictated by the amount of homework due or whether the child had a successful school day or not.

...it just becomes a part of everyday conversation, its pervasive right in the same way that baseball's part of their day so is dealing with the school.

Did we hear from the school today? How was school today? Everybody's focussed on it.

The school would often communicate the child's difficulties via telephone calls, or through a written note, and would simply expect the parent was going to follow the incident up which occurred at school, by setting out consequences in the home. The counsellors interviewed felt that this set up a difficult dynamic between a parent and child. Parents were being asked to alter their interaction with their child and alter their child's home routines as a result of something that happened outside the home that they had little influence over and had not witnessed themselves. In the following quote, a counsellor shares how a child experiences a difficult day at school. "If I don't have a good day at school I don't want to go home because the school's calling and saying how awful I was all day. What's that going to look like when I go home? No TV, no dessert, no..."

Another participant adds how the constant pressure from the school on parents to follow up with school incidents can envelop the parent's and child's entire day and evening.

...the child has a bad day...it's always negative for the parent to come and get the kid early and then the parent with the child is trying to manage on their own with no supports...and then the whole night is set up for failure so there's not a lot of positives.

The School's Demands over the Parent's Day

Although the parent's day is clearly entwined with the child's home life, the effects of their child's school struggles find their way into the parent's work life as well. As parents are asked to assist the school with "managing" their children, they are also told to give up time at work or to give time out of their day. The consequences of this were viewed as significant by the service providers. One service provider commented on how single parent families are especially affected by the school's demands to pick up their children early from school. The loss of income or in some cases the potential loss of employment, significantly increased a parents stress level.

I think that speaks to the frustrations of when kids get suspended, it's come get them. I don't think that parents feel supported. They may have to find day care or somebody to look after this child all day if they're working or take the time off.

Similar experiences are echoed by other participants as well:

...they make that phone call and expect the parents to drop everything. And I find too that some of the parents are able to get there but they want to work with the teacher...to try to keep him there. She'll come and help calm him down, but, she expects the school to understand that I've calmed him down. I should be able to go back to my job and I shouldn't have to take him (home).

How many times have we seen kids who get 3 strikes by 9:30 in the morning, they're sent home... So by 9:30 their day's ruined, so is their parents who now has to come and pick them up from school, leave work or home or whatever it is that they're doing

The expectation that parents come immediately to the aid of the school despite the parent's own commitments appears to be a common experience for families. Families are then forced to adjust their lives around the expectations of the school. One participant shares how one of her clients has to find employment outside of school hours in case the school calls telling her that she has to come and pick up her child in the middle of the day; "...a lot of single parents work...some of them wouldn't be able to work. And I've got one mom who has two jobs working in the afternoon and the evening..."

Another participant illustrates how during the parent's work day they often feel a significant amount of stress as they anticipate the possibility that they are going to receive a phone call from the school telling them to leave work and pick up their child.

If you're a parent, if you're a mom getting a call home every day it's likely that you're sitting there wondering when the phone rings... If you're use to it every day, then you anticipate it. It just becomes the focal point...

The service providers clearly believed that when a child attends school and faces struggles their parents are quickly called to aid the school. Although schools are funded through the parent's tax dollars, when resources are tight for the school the parent is called in and forced to give up their own resources. Parents are asked to leave paying employment to support their children's school

by taking them home. This often translates to loss of income (through missed days at work or by purchasing childcare), an increase in stress levels, and a significant dedication of time. Even if the parent is not asked to physically take their child home, they are often told to assume responsibility in assisting their child with schoolwork.

For many parents, feelings that the school had given up or shifted the responsibility for educating their children on them were identified. One counsellor recalls a situation where she was working with a foster family and the school told the parent that her child is unwelcome there during the lunch hour:

I had a kid certainly who was having a hard time getting through lunch hours...the school's solution to that was for mom, foster mom who doesn't drive, to pick her up every day at lunch and take her home and then bring her back. So foster mom is about 60 (years old) and is also parenting a 4 year old whose not in school, is walking back and forth with a 4 year old to pick this kid up every day for lunch to bring her home so that she can go back to school in the afternoon without getting her 3 strikes over lunch...if we're just talking about the parents' experiences I think they often feel like this is my problem, because this is my child, it's my problem and that's why I need to be the solution. And I think that they feel very often that the school ...is giving them that responsibility. This is your child so you need to come up with a solution if you want them to come to school.

Hence, for this parent there doesn't really seem to be a choice as to whether or not to get involved and take on the responsibility of supporting her child. The school has the upper hand in this situation and is essentially forcing

the parent to support the child at lunch otherwise the school may feel that the child has earned “3 strikes”. This would then result in a suspension to be served at home, possibly for a number of days. Therefore, for the parent the choice is between supporting the child daily for an hour and having the child sent home for days at a time. The power balance is clearly in the hands of the school. Not only does this situation pose a physical burden on the parent, but, also an emotional one and presents a clear example of how parent’s lives and routines are influenced by their children’s schools.

Family Relationships Altered

Whether a child experiences school difficulties in the context of a foster family or their birth family, the impact of stress related to school issues appears to be significant and has far reaching consequences. The relationship between a parent and a child has great influence over the quality of life for a family. Service providers felt that this important relationship was significantly influenced by feelings of stress, negativity, hopelessness, frustration, and helplessness that parents and children often felt when difficulties at school arose.

Although children attending school is often viewed as a taken for granted activity, for some it poses a significant challenge. The difficulties that children face at school often spill over to affect life at home. The service providers interviewed for this study were able to identify that children’s school difficulties

often intruded on family routines as well as on the ability of parents to carry out their own tasks. Service providers believed that children's school problems often resulted in significant stress for parents. The consequences of the situation also appeared to impact the relationships that family members had with each other.

I think because we work in foster care we see families who are impacted by it and it impacts them with placement because they can't afford to be missing work all the time. You know it's easier to consider different options when it's foster care because you have the opportunity to say, 'this placement's not working but we can work with another kid who doesn't have school issues.' You know so it's not like they're saying I don't want to be foster parents they're just saying this issue is too big to deal with.

– in some cases, it was so significant that one counsellor who worked with foster parents commented on the stress related to issues at school could potentially influence the breakup of foster families.

When difficulties at school were an ongoing issue for a child, discussions about the child between adults in a family, or between parents and school personnel, would often center on the struggles rather than the successes the child was experiencing. Meetings or conversations would be focused on the negative aspects of the child's behaviour rather than the positive ones. Participants felt that over time this could begin to adversely influence the bond between parent and child as the parent's focus is redirected to the child's characteristics that are

challenging. For instance, one service provider felt that the struggles faced at school had an overall effect on the child's life at home:

...it (difficulties at school) impacts your relationship with your child. You don't want to be on their case all the time necessarily.

Life at home with a child who experiences difficulties at school was often described by service providers as quite stressful. The home environment would often be turned into an extension of the school where parents needed to hold children accountable for missed work, negative feedback from the school, and inappropriate behaviour at school. Service providers working with foster families noted that foster parents morally struggled with the course of action that they should take. On the one hand, feeling pressure from the school to provide consequences for negative behaviour and on the other, wanting to help their foster child transition into their home and feel supported and safe.

Parents are saying, 'how much can I fight with them about this,' and 'I'm trying to help this kid settle into a new life, a new environment, a new everything and yet I've got a school asking me to be asking this kid to be accountable for school stuff now all day'. You know they're done school, they're home, parents are trying to kind of set up a routine and a life at home, connecting to this kid, but, they're feeling like they need to be a responsible parent and be on top of all the school stuff too. But then it's a battle all the time. I hear parents saying 'I just really want to pick my battles and this isn't the battle I'd be having right now. I want to be talking to this kid about how they feel in my home. Are they safe with my family? That kind of stuff, but, what I really have to focus on is the school issues that we're having.'

Another service provider described how the stress of a child having trouble at school can lead to conflict between children and parents. This is especially significant for children in foster care situations as family conflict can impact feelings of belonging and hinder the building of positive relationships with foster parents:

...and that creates that tension. You've got kids who are, fighting about this whole issue and you've got a really negative dynamic set up at home, if you haven't got a family that's been together for a duration of time and when you (the foster child) don't know that these people are going to ride out problems with you it's hard to feel like they're secure in this home where lots of the time they spend is arguing or in conflict with their...

Given the negative dynamics that are created between the parent and child when parents are left to carry out the consequences for misbehaviour or struggles at school, the relationship between the parent and child can become strained. Emotionally, caregivers are left with a variety of feelings. Service providers believed that parents often felt worn out by the constant stress. Negative feelings and resentment towards the situation, as well as acceptance that the school will not support their child can leave a parent feeling quite drained and tired. Hence focusing and spending time on building a positive and strong relationship with the struggling child often takes a back seat to just managing to make it through the day. A counsellor who's worked with parents in these situations believed that at

manage on their own without supports...then the whole night is set up for failure so there's not a lot of positives. I find a lot of the schools don't consider the other children in the home have school work too...

As a parent's stress level increases, their energy for being able to continuously support and advocate for their child decreases. Service providers felt that parents were often the only advocates their children had to receive fair treatment at school and proper academic teaching, despite their struggles. However, even parents appeared to reach a point where it became too much for them. Parents' feelings that they are the only ones holding out hope for their child's academic future can become tiring and if a child has struggled for many years parents may be left hopeless and feeling defeated. A counsellor recalls how over time the stress of school difficulties takes its toll on parents to the point where they may find they no longer have the energy to continue to fight for their child's success at school:

...even in high school you know if they get caught not going to school the conflict starts and they can see their parents getting stressed and sometimes the parents give up, they sometimes give up on their child. I think they kind of feel like it's a lost battle so they kind of give up in the end.

Ultimately, feelings of stress, hopelessness, defeat, frustration and uncertainty linked to their child's struggles at school leave parents feeling differently about their child. Parents struggle to understand why the difficulties at school are happening and without having adequate knowledge of the educational

Ultimately, feelings of stress, hopelessness, defeat, frustration and uncertainty linked to their child's struggles at school leave parents feeling differently about their child. Parents struggle to understand why the difficulties at school are happening and without having adequate knowledge of the educational system and prioritization of resources, the parent may ultimately question the relationship with the child and what has taken place at home as a result of school issues.

...I can think of families who truly have been (affected), where I do wonder if the relationship with the child would be different, and more positive if that child did better at school or didn't have the school troubles that they have because it's just, its pervasive for a family that's not got the skills necessarily to deal with it well, who don't have the background in understanding why their kids are having the troubles that they're having and when it really does feel like 'I don't know this kid'. Like this is not, this is not the child I thought I would be parenting, you know? It's a really desperate place to see parents and you really want to see them getting some help and intervention, but, really where do they go?

Through this statement, this counsellor illustrates how the confusion that often surrounds parents when dealing with the school and trying to understand why struggles are occurring was significant. This participant pointed out how stress not only impacts the parent themselves, but, also the relationship that the parent has with their child, leading the parent to question the satisfaction they get from parenting and how well they understand their child.

The Impact on the Child's Relationship with His or Her Siblings

When a child faces school difficulties it is the parent who takes on the responsibility for advocating and supporting their child through the struggles. However, through dialogue with the counsellors it became evident that school struggles have far greater effects on the family than may be originally assumed. Indeed, counsellors felt that the consequences of one child's issues at school affected not only themselves and their parents, but, also their siblings. Two participants identified that parents worried about the negative attention that one child received which influenced how their other children were treated by school staff anticipating that they may be unfairly judged due to their siblings reputation as being "difficult to manage".

...because now they (siblings) have a bad reputation cause this kid acted up, something happened so then you've got the parents trying to navigate the sibling relationship because of what's going on at school...Their siblings sometimes get a bad reputation.

This participant points out that the school difficulties do not happen in isolation but instead become known across the school and community ultimately causing the entire family to be judged. Families, therefore, struggle with how to navigate and manage the reputation they unfairly receive. All the while, the school system maintains the power to label students without being perceived as flawed in the processes and continues to implement policies that allow children with unique learning needs to be discounted as serious students. The reputation

that the child who is struggling at school is “troubled” even reaches their young siblings who are unsure how to navigate the relationship. Thus, several participants spoke of how their work has alerted them to the struggles that siblings have relating to one another as the affects of school difficulties find their way into family life.

...you know they’ll (the siblings will) be embarrassed by something that the kid did. Or you know one does really well, one does really poorly and so they get back home and fight.

For this counsellor it became evident that siblings were affected emotionally in complex ways. Despite the child’s struggles being due to the school environment, the conflict and tension appeared to find its way home.

I think the sibling that isn’t getting...any kind of attention because they’re doing well enough that you know the parent could focus their attention on the kid with the issues. So I think that, with some there’s a lot of resentment or feelings that they’re not as worthy as the other child.

The conflict appears to be deepened by the drain on parental resources that the school pressures demand as parents spend endless hours attending school meetings, advocating, and directly supporting the child who is struggling. One counsellor points out that it is not only the parents who are asked to donate their time and resources, but siblings also appear to be recruited by the school to provide that extra bit of support that the school doesn’t have time or resource for.

...they'll (a teacher will) go and get the older sibling. Or actually in a foster family where you have a fairly well functioning natural child whose older and the foster child is having a hard time, often they'll get that child and bring them down to this child to help them in that situation. Which I think is a nice immediate solution...but, I don't think they (the school) always look at how it might be experienced from the other child's perspective...and I don't think they (the siblings) necessarily have the skills to manage it either because when they're at home their parent would manage it...

Through the counsellors' recollection of a particular situation which involved the school relying on a child's sibling to provide support at school, the participant highlights the complexity that the sibling relationships can take on. Although a sibling may have the skills to assist their struggling brother or sister having the task assigned to them by the school can place a strain on the relationship which can become evident in the home environment. In another example, a counsellor illustrates how parents are then left to try and manage the conflict or resentment that arises from the situation. This in turn once again adds another source of stress for parents:

...I had one sibling who was younger, his older sister is in the same school and she takes it upon herself to actually go and talk to her brother's teacher every day. He never gets a day where she doesn't go home and rat on him...so it's that relationship that really suffers and it's really hard for the parents to deal with.

The Impact of School Struggles on Relationships between Parents

The stress that is generated for parents by one of their children experiencing school difficulties is multifaceted. The problems that arise from a

school situation begin to wear on a number of relationships in the family including those between the parent and child, the child and their siblings and finally, between the children's parents themselves. One counsellor describes how she witnessed the tension that can arise between parents:

I think it often impacts the parental marital relationship depending on how each parent sees the situation. If one parent isn't in the picture and sees the child on weekends then maybe the parent who's the primary caregiver feels like the other parent isn't helping enough... if they are parenting together and one parent feels that the kid's behaviour is ok and maybe the other parent disagrees...so it puts a strain on the whole marital relationship as well.

Another counsellor adds a similar observation:

I see it with one of my families quite a bit because the dad does go to work and it's the mom that's dealing with all of the issues all the time, so, I do see quite a strain there.

It is not surprising that the relationship between the child's parents is affected by the tensions that are produced when a child is deemed to be struggling. When one parent ends up being primarily responsible for managing conflict with the school, parents can end up divided in their opinions. The issue of school was reported by counsellors to be important to parents as it provides their children with a foundation for the future. With the threat of that foundation potentially being taken away, or the opportunity for education to be scaled back, parents can become emotional. Just as stress wears parents down individually, it also has the potential to wear down parental partnerships.

The Impact of Parents' Work as Advocates

The negative messages that parents are given by schools regarding their children's struggles and their abilities as parents can become internalized. A number of counsellors interviewed shared examples of how the emotional impact attempting to advocate for their children with schools has on parents. The following example identifies how parents question themselves and how hard they need to advocate when their pleas for assistance are not supported:

... in my experience it felt like they (parents) want this relationship with the school...but, then they kind of bump up against feeling that they're not being a very good advocate for their child if they're not putting pressure on the school when their child's needs are not being met. So they feel stress. Especially if they've got other kids going to school because they start to feel like they're being that parent, you know that nobody wants to deal with, and it's for one child but the rest of them are going to suffer too..for some of these parents I think it takes up a lot of their time, a lot of their time. And they're trying to find a way to do it and to balance getting the kid's needs met and doing it in a way that doesn't turn the school off them.

As this participant points out, parents are caught between wanting to be strong and good advocates for their children, but, at the same time recognize that their advocacy may give them a negative reputation as "trouble makers" at the school level. Parents worry about how this negative reputation will impact not only themselves, but their children, who attend that school every day and question if it will indeed bring more support to the child who is struggling. Unfortunately, parents appear to be put in a place where they need to challenge the school to

assist them rather than feeling like they are working alongside the school.

Although some parents find advocating stressful, other parents appear to struggle with understanding even how to begin working within the school system due to the culture of education being unfamiliar and intimidating to them.

... Some of the parents I know couldn't go to those meetings in the school because they just couldn't understand a lot of what the teachers and the principal were saying and they just don't understand a lot (of the system) themselves.

For the parents, the task of attending school meetings and speaking in opposition to a group of school representatives can be very daunting. The school as an institution has its own culture, language, and processes and this is rarely explained to parents. Not only are parents in unfamiliar territory, but, they are also often in a situation where they feel they are in an adverse position to a school team. Given this context, it is not surprising that parents can feel overwhelmed by the task of advocating for their children in the school system. Emotionally, this journey of advocacy that parents undertake requires time, energy, and commitment. It also has an emotional toll on parents and on the relationships within the family. Without looking at a broader perspective and realizing that the educational system can be oppressive, parents can begin to blame themselves for what intrinsically is a systematic issue.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The goal of this research study was to explore the implications for families when children experiences struggles at school. The research findings have helped provide a better understanding of the complexities that school struggles add to family life and how families are forced to adapt, and ultimately change their life styles, to support children at school. These findings contribute to the already existing literature and reinforce many of the themes. However, as the participants were service providers, who were able to rely on their unique experiences of working with both families and schools when giving their accounts, added a further dimension to the information already available on the topic. Findings from this study suggest that family members are affected emotionally, economically, and practically all aspects of their daily lives by a child's school struggles.

In support of the literature, the counsellors interviewed were able to elaborate on how intrinsically the home environment is affected by a child's struggles at school. The home is a place where family comes together to spend time with one another, build relationships, and carry out the tasks of everyday. When a child experiences school difficulties, it therefore appears to impact all

these areas of family life, "...it's pervasive right in the same way that baseball's part of their day so is dealing with the school..."

One of the areas that has received considerable attention in the literature available is the emotional impact that this issue has on family members, as well as the child. Through their research, feminist scholars have provided insight into the emotional experiences of mothers. Mothers are reported to feel significant emotions of anxiety, sadness, and most of all, guilt (Dudley-Marling, 2001, O'Brien, 2007, Standing 1999). Although fathers were also noted to be affected by the stress of their children's school struggles, it did not seem to be to the extent that mothers have been affected (Vincent and Ball, 2001).

The counsellors interviewed for this study also tended to focus on mothers in their reflections, although they did not explicitly identify that they felt this was solely a female issue. However, it was a mothers' stress that they described when someone had to pick up the children from school or attend a school meeting, "...because the dad does go to work and it's the mom that's dealing with all of the issues all the time...", which ultimately has an impact on the relationship between the parents. Therefore, although both parents maybe emotionally affected, the female caregiver faces unique challenges.

The participants also drew attention to the stress that siblings often feel when struggles occur for their brother or sister. The counsellors felt that in some

cases siblings felt resentful, as they did not get the same amount of attention from their parents as the child who needed extra support did. In other cases, siblings received too much attention as the school would attempt to engage them in “helping” out their brother or sister in class when they were struggling or use them to relay messages to their parents about how the school day was for their sibling. Parents in return, needed to alter how they parented each child, and focus on the relationship that they wished to foster between their children.

In summary, this study confirms that the way families behave and interact with one another is indeed affected by children’s difficulties at school. It appears that mothers in particular face the most challenges, as child rearing is still socially viewed as a woman’s role. One has to wonder how far reaching the consequences of familial stress, linked with school struggles really are, as well as, what the long term implications on both the parents’ and child’s relationships with each other as are.

Some of the counsellors interviewed for this study had the role of supporting foster families, and in many cases, the examples offered by the counsellors related to foster families. In these examples participants felt that school struggles could impact the stability of placements. When emotional bonds are just beginning to form between foster parents and their foster child, the affects of school stress was felt to be detrimental. Research has shown that youth in care

are identified as having significant problems with high rates of absenteeism. This trend was found in both British and North American studies. Youth in care were far less likely to attend school regularly, and had high rates of suspensions and expulsions due to behaviour related offenses (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, Francis, 2000, George et al, 2003). Hence, the affects of foster children's school difficulties may produce stressors that are unique to foster families. This study did not focus on foster care as it relates to education, but, it did generate insights on this specific topic; further research in this area maybe beneficial.

Another general theme that the participants identified was the economic impact that school difficulties had on families. As mothers disproportionately tend to be the primary care givers for their children the lives of women appear to be affected beyond that of emotional health as their children's school struggles also entered into their work lives. This could potentially have far reaching consequences in a woman's job stability, income, and advancement in her career. The counsellors interviewed gave a number of examples where parents, most often mothers, had to assume the responsibility for supporting their children so that they could remain in school. This might include; mother's receiving phone calls at work asking them to leave and pick up their children in the middle of their work day, and to taking time off to attend school meetings during day time hours. One participant noted the importance of her role as a counsellor for a family as

she was able to take on some of the tasks related to supporting a struggling child at school. Otherwise, this child's mother would likely not be able to work at all, "...we can cover a lot of that (support) but if that wasn't the case some of them (parents) wouldn't be able to work. And I've got one mom who has two jobs working in the afternoon and the evening..." As the participant points out, in order to work, as well as provide support for her struggling child, this parent had to drastically compromise her own work life. Thus, when children struggle at school, parent's work lives are also affected with the potential of significant economic consequences for families.

These examples of disruptions to parent's work lives support the literature that suggests that schools are favourable towards middle class values and makes the assumption that all parents have the same resources that they can devote to supporting the school (Griffith and Smith, 2005, Reay, 1998, O'Brien, 2007, Standing, 1999). Unfortunately, it is the parents that do not have the resources available that may be perceived as "unsupportive" as they cannot be present for school meetings or to provide assistance. When parents are unable to accommodate the school's request for their time, they may be perceived as not having an investment in their children's success and avoiding responsibility. As a consequence, of this perception their children may be much more likely to be sent home or suspended due to their struggles. Left with few choices, parents are

ultimately forced into giving up their paid work or finding themselves needing to pay for childcare. Hence, the impact of a child's school struggles tends to become the responsibility of the parent and have economic consequences for them.

Although parents faced economic challenges, it did not appear from the input provided by the counsellors, that parents did not want to help instead, it seemed that parents became frustrated with a school system as they were perceived as not taking on their fair share of the responsibility and therefore being judged as uncommitted if they were unable to provide the kind of participation that the school was asking of them. Counsellors all spoke to the frustration that parents felt when school processes got in the way of providing support for their child, "...just to get them an identification so that they can get the support that they might need in the classroom. And parents are feeling that they can't be in the school 24/7 to support and then they can't access testing that might get them supports otherwise." Without an "identification" indicating that a child is struggling (often provided by psychological testing) the school board is unable to access additional resources. This school imposed a process of "identification", which typically takes a significant amount of time to complete, leaves parents taking on the responsibility for support. Furthermore, the school states that until the child is "identified" they are not able to provide further assistance. For some parents, who have more resources available to them, or for parents who could

financially afford to stay at home, the task of taking on the responsibility for their children is not as burdensome. As for others, their family's financial stability is placed on the line. Despite parents making sacrifices in their lives to support the school, their efforts were often left unacknowledged.

Finally, for the counsellors interviewed, school difficulties translated into stress that was associated with everyday practical tasks. These tasks ranged from having to dedicate resources of time and energy into completing school work which was not done at school or managing the power dynamics that often took place between families and schools. Examples provided focused on the school having control over the amount of time that a child spent at school, the amount of school work assigned to be done at home, and the type of support that parents were requested to offer. The perceived lack of influence on the part of the parent was believed to contribute to high stress levels, strained relationship between family members, and tension in the parent's work places. Griffith and Smith (2005) explored how families organized their lives to accommodate the school and how significant and inflexible these demands really were. Policies around conduct, academic tasks, home work, hours that school takes place at, and the time of school meetings are just a few example of what parents need to cope with. Participants drew attention to how parents often needed to make daily changes to their lives. This dedication on the parents' part is evidenced by stories where

parents are called at work to pick up their children at 9:30am on a weekly, or even daily basis, or by parents coming to provide support every lunch hour. Although in these examples, the school and child do benefit from the parent's actions, however, the parent themselves face significant disruption in their daily tasks.

Therefore, children's difficulties at school not only present challenges in the private sphere of home life, but also have implications socially whether it be economically due to days missed at work by parents having to take time off or foster families that face a "break down" in placements due to the stress that struggles at school cause to the entire family. Hence, it may be important to consider the issue of school struggles for children in a larger political context. The scholarly literature available points to larger political and social forces at work which help shape the dynamics between educational institutions and the family. These dynamics appear to be deeply embedded in North American culture and are often biased to favour the success of children who are white, middle to upper class, living with two married parents where the mother has the resources to stay at home and who is "involved" on the school level (Smith 1987, Griffith and Smith, 1990, Dudley-Marling, 2001, Brooks, 2003, O'Brien, 2007, Standing 1999). These biases are even more problematic as they are unacknowledged and taken for granted leaving parents and children who do not fit

into these categories with a sense of guilt or failure and ultimately with less resources/support to manage the issue.

As these biases tend to be tightly ingrained in the institution of education, counsellors did not acknowledge their awareness of these issues in their responses and did not indicate that the families they worked with were fully aware of these power relations. For parents, not recognizing the larger issues of power at work can potentially contribute to the feeling of isolation in their struggles and responsibility (Dudley Marling, 2001). Hence, assisting families in locating their children's struggle in a larger political context may provide parents with a sense of not being alone in their struggles and perhaps encourage them to take action not only on an interpersonal level, but also a political one. One way that this may be done is by counsellors providing parents that they are working with information on how the school system operates and how funding is allocated and accessed to when a child is experiencing difficulties at school. Without this information the parent is at a disadvantage when meeting with schools and advocating for their children for a number of reasons. If parents are unaware of the larger political structures and how they impact their child's access to resources and support parents are likely to feel guilty and assign themselves much of the blame for their child's struggles (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Without the knowledge that other families experience similar struggles under the current political and funding

practices parents may feel isolated in their struggles. Finally, equipped with information parents are likely to feel more confident in having discussions with school representatives as they may feel more comfortable with the language used and know where or who to appeal to should they feel their child's needs are not being met.

Hence the goal of this research, although small in scale, has been to bring attention to the significant obstacles, sacrifices, and struggles that parents and siblings must face when children experience difficulties at school. Unfortunately, based on the accounts of the service providers interviewed, it appears that the impact of these issues is seldom recognized and acknowledged. There appears to be room for more research in this area. I feel that parents, educators, as well as political representatives would benefit from reading such work. It would also be interesting for further research to be done in the area of foster families who support children who experience school struggles and the impact it has on the permanency and success of the foster placements.

I hope to share this information with the parents at a local children's mental health agency. I hope that by validating and acknowledging their lived experiences and struggles, they may feel less alone and provide them with a little renewed energy to continue challenging the barriers that they face.

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Appendix A: Letter of Information and Consent

November 11, 2008

Children's struggles in the school system: Service Providers' Perspectives

Student Investigator: Agatha Baranski Pattinson
Master of Social Work Candidate
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 807-4127
agathapattinson@gmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Christina Sinding
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 22740
sinding@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

I am a student at McMaster University. I am doing this study as part of the requirements for a Masters degree in Social Work.

In this study, I would like to hear from service providers about their experiences of working with parents whose children have experienced struggles at school. This research will focus on the impact a child's school difficulties have on family routines, parental stress, and family relationships through the perspective of service providers. In addition, I will briefly explore how service providers feel they impact these issues through their involvement with families.

I would like to acknowledge and write about these experiences and share them with professionals (like counsellors, teachers, school social workers, or principals) so that they can better understand the impact of a child's struggle at school on families.

What will happen during the study?

If you decide you would like to be involved in this study, you would be a part of a five person focus group. The focus group will be meeting for approximately one hour and during the meeting I facilitate the discussion by asking some questions. Following the focus group I may also call you for a brief follow up interview, about 15 minutes, to clarify or expand on your comments.

Participants will be asked not to use their real names or the real names of their clients for confidentiality purposes. The interview will be recorded on audiotape and later transcribed into a written record by a professional transcriptionist. This information is being recorded so that I can understand your statements as accurately as possible.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

It is not likely that there will be any harm to you during your involvement with this study. You may however, feel worried that one of the other group members may share something you have said outside of group. I will review the importance of group confidentiality prior to the group meeting. If you do decide to participate, I will ask that in signing the consent, you agree to keep what is said confidential. At the same time, in a focus group I cannot guarantee that each participant will in fact maintain confidentiality, so you should take this into account in your comments.

You do not need to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer, or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may choose to withdraw from this study at any time, no questions asked.

Potential Benefits

Participating in a research study will allow you to contribute to the production of knowledge which may benefit others. Participating in the focus group will also allow you the opportunity to discuss and share your experiences with fellow counsellors working with similar populations, something that you may not often have the opportunity to do.

Confidentiality:

I will do everything I can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. The information obtained will be locked in a cabinet and will be destroyed when the study is finished. No identifying information (your name or personal information) will be included in any of the written information or in the final report.

Limits of Confidentiality:

Information obtained will be kept confidential unless the law requires that confidentiality be breached, for example if you should disclose child abuse. As well, in a focus group I cannot guarantee that all participants will respect confidentiality, so you should take this into account in your comments.

What if I change my mind about participating in the study?

If you decide to participate, you can decide to stop at any time, even after signing the consent form. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences. I will make every effort to extract your comments, from the focus group transcript.

Information about the Study Results:

If you are interested in the results of the study you can either provide your contact information and I will send you a summary of the results at the end of the study or you can contact me later to request a summary of the results. If you wish to read the full thesis, I can arrange for you to see a copy.

Additional Information about Participating:

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I appreciate your interest,

Agatha Baranski Pattinson (905)807-4127 or agathapattinson@gmail.com)

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact: McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat, Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142, c/o Office of Research Services, E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Consent to Participate

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Agatha Baranski Pattinson, of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, if I choose to do so, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix B: Recruitment Email from Agency Manager

As some of you may know Agatha is completing her MSW and has requested that I circulate this to all staff. Please find attached a request from her for staff to participate in her research. Please reply directly to her if you are interested in learning more.

Agatha says,

Hi ,

Thanks for taking the time to read this. I know you're all very busy but I was wondering if I could entice anyone to meet with me and four of your colleagues for some lunch and discussion (where you get to express your thoughts and opinions!)

My hope is to meet with professionals that work with parents whose children have experienced difficulties at school. I plan to ask a couple of questions relating to what you as a professional feel parents go through, and encourage you to talk about this with one another. We would do this in a group discussion while we have lunch (which I will happily provide).

I have attached a formal letter of information for you to read over. If you might be willing to participate please email me (agathapattinson@gmail.com or call (905) 690-1880). I haven't set a date yet so I can be flexible but I am hoping to meet before Christmas.

Thanks, I appreciate you considering this!

Agatha

Appendix C: Group Discussion Guide

Please think back about 6 months and remember the kids that you worked with:

Warm up question:

Let's start by just reviewing the difficulties that kids experienced at school.

Based on the experiences families have shared with you,

How do you feel a child's school difficulties affect parents

: emotionally?

: in their home life (family routines)?

: in general, their relationship with other family members for example, the

:marital/life partner relationship, relationship with that child, relationship with other children.

How do you see parents attempting to support their children?

What do they do that 'works', and why does it work?