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## Thoughtful Homework or Busy Work: Impact on Student Academic Success

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Thoughtful Homework or Busy Work: Impact on Student Academic Success

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Abstract

Over the years the amount of homework and what kind of homework students are completing on a nightly basis has changed dramatically. From the early 1900s when homework was abolished because it was considered a violation of child labor laws to today when after No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2002, the focus has moved to evaluating academic success from a standardized test. Teachers are expected to fit so much learning into a day of school, that homework is used to fit in what they could not get into the day at school.

Being one day behind can set teachers behind for the whole year and cause them even more stress about how their students will perform on the standardized test at the end of the school year. Teachers are given little or no training in the subject of homework. Some school districts dictate how much time students must spend on homework each night. However, teachers are on their own in regards to what they assign for homework each night.

This qualitative research using interview questions given to classroom teachers revealed that teachers are focusing on the quality of the homework they assign. Students are benefitting academically from this extra time that teachers are spending, making sure that their students are receiving and completing quality assignments.

Teachers need to understand the effectiveness of assigned homework. They must avoid giving busywork just to make sure that the students are completing a certain amount of homework each night.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Through student teaching I was constantly amazed at the lack of training that I received and the inconsistency that I saw in each classroom with regards to homework. I saw teachers who focused merely on the fact that they had to assign homework but did not give a thought to the content of what they were assigning. Other teachers I observed let their peers that taught in the same grade level pick the homework assignments. This followed the “one assignment fits all” mentality.

I spent so much time as a student teacher modifying my lessons to make sure that each learning style was touched upon, that it amazed me to see this “one assignment fits all” mentality. Did this mean that the teachers were not focused on whether or not the students were actually going to learn anything from this homework?

Every class in my experience had a different way of assigning homework. The focus mainly seemed to be on the fact that teachers had to assign homework. Little or no thought was given to the quality of assigned homework. This led me to want to know more about how teachers assigned homework and the guidelines that surrounded this process. More specifically, I wanted to examine the relationship between the kind of homework a child receives and academic achievement. Since not all homework is created equal, would it be better for teachers to give less homework but more thought provoking work versus more homework but busy work that just focuses on the quantity completed in a night?

#### Statement of Problem

Currently there are no standards regulating how or what kind of homework teachers assign to their students. Teachers are bombarded with content standards and high expectations for test

scores of their students, but are given no standards when it is in relation to assigned homework. Teachers are assigning this work for the students to complete at home without even knowing if there is any benefit to this work. For the most part teachers are told how much homework to assign but are not told what to actually assign for homework.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to determine if students benefit academically from the homework that they are given each night. It is to better understand the teacher's thought process behind how much and what kind of homework they assign the students.

### Research Question

How can teachers decide what kind of homework to assign that will increase the academic success of the students in their class? How can teachers assess if the homework that they are assigning is improving the academic success of their students?

### Theoretical Rationale

The basis for my research question stems from Piaget's theory of Cognitive Constructivism. Constructivism in the context of education is the theory that ideas are constructed and learned through a personal process. The main idea is that in order for a student to grasp a subject the learning must be constructed from experience and have a personal connection for the student (Powell & Kalina, 2009). This research is focused on homework design and the impact of this homework on a student's success. This theory applies to this research; because if students need to have a personal meaning in order to grasp the subject, how can teachers be following a one assignment fits all mentality when it comes to homework?

When teachers are designing lessons they are focusing on making sure that the students are able to connect with the material by differentiating the lessons to fit all the needs of the students. This research will look at homework and see that if teachers took the same care in assigning homework that they do with differentiating their lesson plans would this have a positive effect on the student's academic success.

### Assumptions

Students will benefit academically if the teacher assigns thought provoking homework. Now teachers focus more on the fact that they must give a certain amount of homework versus the academic benefits that the assignment will have for the student. We know that all students learn information in a different way so homework given should reflect that fact and be differentiated for different learning styles if homework is to be an effective learning tool. Teachers received little or no training on how to assign homework. Most school districts do not have a policy on how teachers are supposed to assign homework.

### Background and Need

Homework is a huge part of a child's education but is not often questioned to why certain assignments are given to the students. Homework design and the effectiveness of the given homework is not something that gets enough attention. Bennett and Kalish (2006) state, "After all, homework is such an enormous part of our children's education, we assume that teachers have studied how best to design worthwhile assignments that will truly promote learning. We assume that they wouldn't waste our family's limited time with anything less" (p.37). As many parents watch their children work their way through the seemingly endless homework each night,



they trust that their child's teacher knows the academic benefit that will arise from the assignment.

Unfortunately, homework is not assigned based on the research of its benefits but rather on the individual teacher's beliefs (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Every teacher is in charge of what homework is assigned each night. It is up to teachers to know what academic achievement will be gained by completing the assignment.

Often the academic benefit is not something that has proven to work but is decided on the teacher's beliefs, decided at a grade level meeting or something that is taken directly from the textbook. The blame cannot be put on the teachers but instead on the teaching training programs and the little attention that is given to homework in the program. Bennett and Kalish (2006) state in their book, "Most surprisingly, many teachers never learn about the myriad studies showing that homework has little correlation with academic success in elementary school and only moderate correlation in middle school" (p.41).

When *No Child Left Behind* was put into law in 2002 the success of schools was measured by test score results. Teachers are anxious to complete certain content in class. If they cannot accomplish this, they have a tendency to assign more homework. Teachers do not have the luxury of spending an extra day if the students are not grasping a concept because just being one day behind can cause the teacher to feel that they are not going to be able to fit everything in before it is time to take the yearly standardized test. So instead of spending extra time on the concept the teacher has to send what they could not get done in class home for the students to complete as homework.

For homework assignments to be thoughtful and differentiated for students, teachers need time to spend designing the homework assignment. With all the cuts that are put in place for

education teachers are asked to do more and more each day but no responsibilities are taken off their plate. A big issue with having time to design thoughtful homework is having time to prepare the assignment. So much prep time is taken from teachers that homework design is not high on the priority list with the little amount of prep time that the teacher gets each week.

More research needs to be done to look at the effectiveness of different types of homework to help teachers plan assignments that will help increase the academic success of their students.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

### Introduction

Previous research has focused on the purpose of homework and a wide range of aspects related to homework including the subject of homework and its link to achievement. For the purpose of this study the previous research that will be analyzed is the aspect of homework design and the importance of the quality of homework assigned.

### Historical Context

Homework has often been the subject of controversy over the years. “Homework has aroused strong passions pro and con for the last 100 years” (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p.180). Over time people’s ideas and perceptions of how homework should be given and if it should be given at all is a topic often found in educational news. Homework has gone through many changes over time. Starting in the early 1900s homework was outlawed because it was considered child labor. Doctors even tried to abolish it, saying that children needed to be outside and get at least five hours of sunshine each day (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

Many things changed for education in the 1950s including the amount of homework students were expected to complete. With the space race came a higher level of competitiveness among nations which meant kids were assigned more homework. The progressive education was seen as the cause for the United States losing to the Soviets in the Cold War. This led to a change in the way education would move forward in America (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

In the 1960s and 1970s parents were once again fighting for their child’s right to enjoy their time outside and away from school. During this time the amount of homework that was assigned decreased significantly.

By the 1980s people were looking for someone to blame for the nation's weakening economy and began to point the finger at education. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published, stating that poor education was the root of our economic problems. The report explicitly stated that children needed to be assigned more homework in order for our nation to rebuild its education system and give us the competitive edge over other nations.

In the 1990s the amount of homework kept increasing and is now at the highest level it has ever been. In 2002, when *No Child Left Behind* was put into action the focus on the education system turned to making sure students did well on the end of the year standardized tests. The assumption is that the more homework a student is assigned and completes will lead to better test scores. An important part of this assumption is that the student is not only being assigned more homework but also that the student is completing the given homework. This assumption has led to our current state of thinking that the more homework the better (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Students are more overwhelmed with homework than they have ever been in the history of homework.

#### Review of the Previous Literature

##### Purpose of Homework

Cooper and Gersten (2002) created this teacher's guide for parents with tips for helping children with homework for the Department of Education in 2002 after *No Child Left Behind* was enacted. It is a guide that helps teachers to assist parents and caregivers in understanding the importance of homework and the role that parents and their involvement plays in assigning homework. It states that homework has multiple purposes. The purposes that this document lists are practice, preparation, extension, and integration. This report includes a slideshow that gives homework tips to parents on reading and math. It also includes true/ false questions about

homework that teachers can answer that parents have asked. It states that the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) suggests that children in grades K-2 receive 10-20 minutes of homework each day and students in grades 3-6 receive 30-60 minutes of homework each day. Bempechat (2004) discusses the motivational benefits of homework. Bempechat argues that homework plays a long-term role in the development of children's achievement motivation. She states that homework assignments provide students with the experience and time they need to develop their beliefs about achievement and study habits that are helpful for learning, including the value of effort and the ability to cope with mistakes and difficulty. Completing homework on a regular basis and daily interaction with parents and teachers who value education and achievement, can foster these skills over time and have a profound impact on children's developing beliefs about their intellectual abilities. We should not only focus on the short term goals of grades and test scores but look into the future of preparing the students for secondary school and beyond, by paying as much "attention to the development of skills that help children take initiative in their learning and maintain or regain their motivation when it wanes" (Bempechat, 2004, p.190).

Corno and Xu (2004) focused on homework as the job of childhood. They found that by looking at homework as the job of the child casts a new light on the potential of homework to help develop a work ethic and important job management skills that are highly valued in the workplace. They found that when the child's experience with homework is positive it has the potential to further the student's school advancement both individually and part of the collective. By comparing homework to a job they found that children as well as adult workers must manage their time, space, attention, and motivational resources. Both children and adults must cope with common difficulties such as distractions, confusion, disinterest, and fatigue in their learning of

all subject matter or tasks. In order to maximize the benefits, educators need to be aware of several issues that arise when homework is seen as the job of childhood, including the nature of homework assignments, the quality of parental supervision, and the need for effective collaboration between teachers and parents.

#### Homework Linked to Achievement

Vatterott (2009) discusses the complexity of studying the impact of homework on a student's academic achievement. "It is difficult to separate where the effect of classroom teaching ends and the effect of homework begins" (Vatterott, 2009, p.57). Homework research can be particularly hard because we don't know if the students did well on the test because they did their homework or if they would have done just as well on the test without doing their homework. One component that also makes homework difficult to research is because we are attempting to study the effect of something that occurs out of the classroom and out of our control (Vatterott, 2009).

Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006) summarized the results of studies conducted on homework and its link to achievement that was conducted between the years 1987-2003. The authors searched ERIC, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and Dissertation Abstracts between January 1987 and December 2003 for articles that included the keywords "homework" and "empirical." They found 900 articles that included these keywords. They found design flaws in many of the studies but concluded that there was consistent evidence that there is a positive influence of homework on achievement. The authors found that there was a stronger correlation in grades 7-12 than in K-6 and when students rather than parents reported time spent on homework. The authors also found that the amount of time spent on homework positively correlated with achievement and that at each grade level there is an optimum amount of

homework for it to be effective. The authors suggested that homework is an important part of a student's life in school and that there should be more research conducted on it in the future.

### Homework Design

Corno (2000) wrote this article focusing on looking at homework from a different perspective.

Corno focused on the changing culture and that homework must change with the needs of today's families and students. The author discusses homework innovations that have been developed from teachers and researchers. The first innovation is called culture as a springboard.

This innovation was developed by classroom teachers that used home-based data to develop academically rigorous assignments that bridged the gaps between the home and classrooms for the students. The teachers used information that the children were familiar with at home to introduce them to new concepts. The next innovation was something that was not new but has had a revival in recent years and that is after school clubs and centers. These centers have staffs that are taught to use performances and games to link these activities with school curriculum. The students can see that these performances and games can serve intellectual purposes as well. The last concept of innovation that the author discusses is that of homework for understanding. The author says that we need to create assignments that focus on learning for understanding rather than that of memorization and recitation.

Kohn (2006) focuses on homework design and what kind of homework is being assigned. He discusses that the default thought is that homework has to be assigned each night and that the exception is the absence of homework. Kohn recommends that the default state be no homework. He says the educators should have to make a point of deciding to assign homework in a given instance versus the current state of homework where teachers assign homework by default. Kohn states that teachers should have to show the advantages of completing the assignment

before sending it home with the students. His suggestions for homework are: activities naturally suited for the home, family activities that we normally don't think of as homework, and reading. He also suggests that teachers should only assign homework that they have designed, understand that one assignment does not fit all and bring parents into the homework process. Making the assignment more tailored for each student's learning style and involving the parents will not only help the student to better understand the concepts but the student will be able to enjoy and relate to the work in a way that they have not experienced before.

Bembenutty (2011) interviewed Harris Cooper, a professor at Duke, about homework. Cooper discusses the results of a study that reveals that when students receive a choice of homework options the students reported higher intrinsic motivation to do homework, felt more competent in completing the assignment, completed more homework, had higher homework grade averages, and performed better on tests. Giving students options when it comes to homework appears to be one way to improve intrinsic motivation, which in turn leads to better homework performance and higher completion rates.

Coutts (2004) considers the most important issue to consider when it comes to homework is in the design of the assignment. With teachers facing the problem of overcrowding curriculum it is tempting to make completion of sets of work begun in the classroom as part of homework, but this practice can be viewed as a penalty for lack of performance by less able students. In this situation the students are required to complete the work without both the academic and social support found in a classroom, which can lead the students to feel resentment and hatred towards homework. The author suggests that what effective homework assignments have in common is the view that social context, as well as the physical environment, is important for learning.



Vatterott (2009) focuses on homework design and that most of the traditional ways of assigning homework are not supporting learning for all students. The new homework paradigm that is suggested in this book focuses on designing quality assignments, differentiating those tasks, deemphasizing grading, improving homework completion, and providing homework support programs. Teachers should view homework as formative assessment- to check for understanding before practice is designed, to determine how much practice is needed to perfect a skill, and to judge the student's depth of understanding and ability to apply learning.

#### Homework Design Innovation

Vatterott (2010) finds that the best homework tasks exhibit five characteristics. First, the assignment must have a clear academic purpose, such as practice, checking for understanding, or applying knowledge or skills. Second, the assignment should efficiently demonstrate student learning. Third, the assignment should promote ownership by offering choices and being personally relevant. Fourth, the assignment instills a sense of competence- the student can successfully complete the assignment without help. Last, the assignment should be aesthetically pleasing- it appears enjoyable and interesting.

Hong, Milgram and Rowell (2004) created The Homework Motivation and Preference Model based on the findings of numerous studies. They compared in-school learning style to out-of-school homework style, whether children's preferred and actual ways of studying at home are similar or different, and the relationship of homework motivation and preferences to achievement and attitude towards homework. They also compared the homework preferences of gifted children, highly creative thinkers, children from different ethnic backgrounds, and age groups. The results from these studies helped the authors to create the Homework Motivation and Preference Model which is broken into two conceptual concepts, motivation and preference.

Both sections include questions about the learner to help the teacher better understand the learner's motivation to complete the homework and the learner's preference in homework assignment. The authors find that there are educational benefits of understanding the wide range of individual differences among learners in how they prefer to complete homework and encouraging them to match their preferences. The authors conclude that homework, if properly used, may be the most cost-efficient way to solve some of the most difficult educational problems.

Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) address the teacher's role in the homework process and their reason behind assigning homework. They listed the ten purposes of homework as: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child relations, parent-teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, public relations and punishment. The article suggests some new ways of designing homework. One is the TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) which are interactive assignments that include the participation of the parents of the student and is designed to fit a specific purpose or learning goal. The authors found that when teachers design homework with a specific purpose and goals, more students complete the assignment, benefit from completing it, and the parents stay more involved in their children's education through the middle grades.

Van Voorhis (2004) focuses on interactive homework. The author looks at TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) and the benefits of a program like this that involves the parents in the homework process. The TIPS homework assignments are created to start conversations among families about the subject. From this conversation with the family the student is able to connect their schoolwork with the world around them. By connecting their school subjects to the real world they will have deeper and longer term knowledge of the subject.

Voorhis states the too little attention is paid to the homework design process and that teachers should be given professional development time to focus on this integral part of the school curriculum.

Van Voorhis (2011) conducted three 2-year longitudinal studies using the TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) homework program in elementary mathematics, middle school language arts, and middle school science. Each weekly TIPS assignment required the students to involve a family partner in a discussion, interview, experiment or other interaction. “Depending on the subject and grade level, TIPS students returned 72% to 91% of Tips activities, and families signed between 55% and 83% of TIPS assignments” (Van Voorhis, 2011, p.221). When asked about their attitudes about the homework experience the TIPS students and families responded significantly more positively than controls, and the TIPS families and students reported higher levels of family involvement in the TIPS subjects. There was no difference in the amount of time students spent on homework across the homework groups, but students using TIPS for two years earned significantly higher standardized test scores than the control groups received. This research suggests that the benefits of the TIPS intervention in terms of emotion and achievement outweigh its associated costs.

### Historical Information

Studies have indicated a positive relationship between educational outcomes and homework.

This relationship of homework and student achievement is influenced by such factors as differences in students' grade level and the frequency of and amount of time allocated for homework. Homework can be used to reinforce learning by giving students the opportunity to practice material that has been presented in class or to prepare for new material. Homework can

also be used for non-instructional purposes to promote parent-child interaction or facilitate parent-teacher communication. The needs of homework will depend on the characteristics of the students, teachers and the schools. Data for this analysis are taken from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science's National Center for Education Statistics (Warkentien, Fenster, Hampden-Thompson & Walston, 2008).

The amount of mathematics and reading homework that students' teachers expected them to complete on a typical evening increased from first to fifth grade. Twenty one percent of first graders had teachers who expected their students to complete at least 30 minutes of reading homework, compared to 31 percent of third graders and 53 percent of fifth graders. In both mathematics and reading, in all grades, differences were found by the minority enrollment of the school. Children in schools with higher percentages of minority enrollment had teachers who expected more homework on a typical evening, whereas generally students in lower minority schools had teachers who expected less homework (Warkentien, Fenster, Hampden-Thompson & Walston, 2008).

Parents of children in public schools reported that 38 percent of their first graders did homework 5 or more times a week and this number increased to 47 percent among children in third grade. By fifth grade, 51 percent of children had parents who reported that their child was completing homework 5 or more times a week. In first, third and fifth grades, larger percentages of Black, Asian and Hispanic children than White children had parents who reported that their child did homework 5 or more times a week (Warkentien, Fenster, Hampden-Thompson & Walston, 2008).

## Special Collections

Cushman (2010) interviewed students to find out what they felt about homework. Students told her that they believe homework should target areas of weakness and push them to reach a new place just within their capability. Students said that too often teachers issue the same homework to all students without making the purpose of the homework clear. For a homework assignment to be effective students wanted teachers tell them the purpose of the homework, teachers to follow up with feedback on the assignment, and evaluate the homework for diagnostic purposes but not grade the assignment. The students “understood the need for sustained practice at the heart of the homework enterprise” (Cushman, 2010, p.78). To the students when the curriculum was framed in involving ways, they realized that academic subjects could elicit the kind of absorbed attention they gave to their favorite activities outside of school. “With teachers’ help their practice outside class could be deliberate-aimed at acquiring new knowledge, applying new skills, and creating their best work” (Cushman, 2010, p.78). The chart below shows creative suggestions that the students made about how assignments could be redesigned.

Figure 1. Students Suggest Homework Alternatives

In This Learning Situation. ..	Instead of This	Try This
You introduced new material in class.	Assigning a question set so we will remember the material.	Ask us to think up a homework task that follows up on this material and to explain our choices.
You want us to read an article before a class discussion.	Making us answer questions that prove we read it.	Ask us to write down two or three questions we have after reading the article.
You want to see whether we understand a key concept (such as literary irony).	Making us complete a worksheet.	Ask us to demonstrate the concept for the class in small groups, using any medium.
You want us to see how a math procedure applies in various situations.	Assigning 10 word problems that involve this procedure.	Ask small groups to choose <i>one</i> word problem that applies this procedure in a real-world situation, solve it, and present it to the class.
You want us to memorize facts (such as dates in history).	Handing out a list that we will be tested on.	Ask each student to share with the class a memorization trick (such as a visual cue) that works with one item on this list.
You want us to remember what you taught last month.	Assigning a review sheet.	Give frequent <i>short</i> pop quizzes about earlier material. Go over each quiz, but don't count the grade.

(Cushman, 2010, p.77)

### Interview with an Expert

#### Sample and Site

John Runner (personal communication, March 3, 2011) is a second grade teacher at an elementary teacher in Northern California. He has taught at the same elementary school for the past eleven years. He has been a part of the committee that defines the curriculum and homework policies for the district that he works in.

## Access and Permissions

I had access to interview this teacher based on my current substitute teaching employment within this elementary school. I asked Mr. Runner for permission to interview him via email and followed up in person. I gave him full disclosure of the study and let him know that he was not required to participate. He agreed to the interview.

John states that he defines homework as work that he expects his students to complete at home to reinforce what they have been learning in class or to promote a higher level of thinking. John works in a district that requires second graders to complete twenty minutes of homework and read twenty minutes each night. He assigns the students a packet of homework to complete on Wednesday and it is to be returned by the next Wednesday. John hopes that the students will feel less pressure to rush through the homework assignments if they have one whole week to complete the packet of homework. He recognizes that his students work at different paces and wants them to have the time to work at a pace that is comfortable to them. John does make sure to reinforce the fact that even though they have a weekly packet they must be reading each night. John thinks of homework and reading each night as the job of the student.

John does state that there is a fine line between what assignments are busywork and what assignments will be academically beneficial for the students to complete and struggles with this on a weekly basis. John says that with less preparation time given to teachers it can be harder to take time to assign the students thoughtful homework assignments. He said that he can often get into a routine of assigning a packet of worksheets from textbooks and sources that he has used for years because of the lack of time he has to work on creating homework assignments. John believes for homework to be beneficial it has to be a mixture of not only worksheets but projects and assignments that promote higher level thinking for the students. John believes that

teachers must focus on the quality versus the quantity of homework that they assign to make the homework beneficial and in order to prevent the students from being “turned off” from homework and school. John is a firm believer that homework is academically beneficial to students if it is quality driven and relevant to the information that the students are learning in class.

John has used different incentives for the students for completing homework assignments and has tried different styles of designing homework. He has seen changes in the expectations of parents in regards to homework as well as the expectations change from the school district as the focus has moved heavily to scores on standardized tests.

John believes that giving the students incentives to completing their homework is an important piece of making it beneficial. If the student is not completing the homework then there is no reason to assign it. For the past two years John uses an incentive program called “Homeworkopoly.” It is a giant game board that he made and if the student completes their homework for the whole week they get to roll the dice and move around the game board. As the students land in different spots they can win various prizes including stickers, a free homework pass or a pencil. Since adopting this program John has had an average of 90% of his students return their homework each week. The students are proud of their work and are excited to receive a prize each week.

When designing a homework assignment the first thing that John thinks about is what concepts are the students grasping and what concepts can the students use a little more work on. John states that for him an important aspect that goes into what he assigns for homework is “parent buy in.” John knows that it will not be easy to get all of the parents in his class onboard in taking an active role in their child’s homework but he tries to make it as interactive as possible



so the parents can have a chance to take an active role in the homework as much as possible. He takes into consideration that each child has different situations at home and tries to find a balance of independent work and work that involves parents or caregivers to take part in the assignment. Each year, depending on the students in his class, he has to think about what he assigns for homework in a different way. In the past he has had classes that have such varying skill levels he had to highly differentiate the homework to meet the needs of the different skill levels in his class. Even though it is time consuming John makes sure to grade the homework assignments that the students turn in. He thinks that this is important to truly know which concepts the students do not understand and he needs to spend more time focusing on in class.

When asked if John ever received training on creating an effective homework assignment he stated that he never received any training in assigning homework. He said that after you graduate from a credential program you hope that you get a job at a school with a strong team to help you by showing you what homework assignments have worked for them in the past. He stated that in his eleven years at the same school there is never even discussion about what the teachers are assigning for homework outside of his second grade team that he works with. John states that he thinks that a course on creating effective and creative homework assignments would be beneficial to teachers.

### *Ethical Standards*

This study adheres to the ethical standards in conducting research using human subjects as set forth in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2009). Additionally the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, number 8235.

## Summary

John Runner is a second grade public school teacher that believes that homework can be a highly effective tool to reinforce subjects that are taught in class and be used to promote a higher level of thinking for students. In order for homework to be effective it needs to be a quality driven assignment that is relevant to what the students are learning in class. John believes that teachers would benefit from a class on creating an effective homework assignment and that more focus should be given to the quality of assignments that teachers are assigning to students

## Chapter 3 Method

### Description of Method

The purpose of this research is to better understand the teacher's thought process behind what kind of homework they assign the students. To obtain information on the teacher's thought process when assigning homework I interviewed elementary teachers. I conducted this qualitative research from elementary teachers using a sample of convenience.

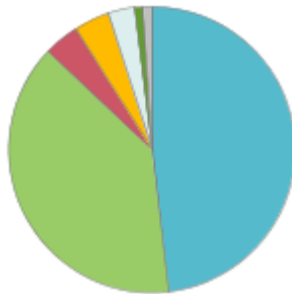
### Sample and Site

For this research on gaining knowledge on the teacher's thought process behind what kind of homework they assign to students I interviewed six teachers from two different schools in Northern California. These teachers were chosen because I wanted to gain information from teachers in different grades throughout elementary school.

I was able to interview teachers in kindergarten, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade. This gave me an overview of the teacher's thought process on assigning homework over a span of grade levels in elementary school. The two schools are both located in northern California but consist of different student populations. The following graphs illustrate the differences in student populations. My interest in interviewing teachers from schools with different student populations was to see if the teacher's thought process in designing homework assignments differed based on the diversity of the student population of their school.

School #1

Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Average
Hispanic or Latino	48%	49%
White	39%	28%
Asian	4%	8%
Multiple or No Response	4%	3%
African American	3%	7%
Pacific Islander	1%	<1%
Filipino	<1%	3%

Source: CA Dept. of Education, 2008-2009

The population of this school is 48% Hispanic which is only 1% lower than the state of California average of 49%. The White population of this school is 39% which is 11% above the state average of 28%.

Student Subgroups

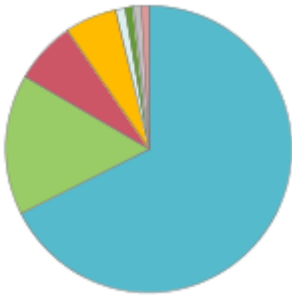
	This School	State Average
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program <sup>1</sup>	53%	52%
English language learners <sup>2</sup>	50%	24%

Source: <sup>1</sup>NCES, 2008-2009  
<sup>2</sup>CA Dept. of Education, 2008-2009

This school has 53% of their student population eligible for free or reduced lunch which is 1% greater than the state average of 52%. 50% of the students at this school are English language learners which is 26% greater than the state average of 24% (greatschools, Inc.,2011)

School #2

Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Average
White	68%	28%
Hispanic or Latino	16%	49%
Multiple or No Response	7%	3%
Asian	6%	8%
African American	1%	7%
Filipino	<1%	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	<1%
Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%

Source: CA Dept. of Education, 2008-2009

The population of this school is 16% Hispanic which is 33% lower than the state of California average of 49%. The White population of this school is 68% which is 40% above the state average of 28%.

Student Subgroups

	This School	State Average
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program <sup>1</sup>	9%	52%
English language learners <sup>2</sup>	16%	24%

Source: <sup>1</sup>NCES, 2008-2009  
<sup>2</sup>CA Dept. of Education, 2008-2009

This school has 9% of their student population eligible for free or reduced lunch which is 43% lower than the state average of 52%. 16% of the students at this school are English language learners which is 8% lower than the state average of 24% (greatschools, Inc., 2011).

Access and Permissions

Each of the teachers that I interviewed gave me permission to use the information that I obtained in my paper. They are teachers at schools that I work with regularly through substitute work that

I have been doing this past year. One of the schools is the school that I student taught at last year through my teaching credential program. Both of the schools are located in Northern California. Both of the schools hold the title of being “California Distinguished Schools” which is awarded to schools with academic excellence. One of the schools is a Title 1 schools, having 40% or more of their students requiring free or reduced fee lunch, which enables the schools to receive funds to improve curriculum, instructional activities, counseling, parental involvement, increase staff and program improvement

#### Data Gathering Strategies

To obtain this data I took notes during the interview as well as using a tape recorder during the interview. During each interview I used a check sheet to keep track of recurring themes to organize the information that I was obtaining from each teacher during the interviews.

#### Ethical Standards

This study adheres to the ethical standards in conducting research using human subjects as set forth in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2009). Additionally the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, number 8235.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The data for this research was collected from the researcher's personal contacts with six teachers in two different elementary schools in the Northern California area. The teachers were chosen because the researcher wanted to gain information from teachers in different grades throughout elementary school. The researcher was able to interview teachers in kindergarten, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade. This gave the researcher an overview of the teacher's thought process on assigning homework over a span of grade levels in elementary school. The two schools are both located in Northern California but consist of different student populations. The researcher's interest in interviewing teachers from schools with different student populations was to see if the teacher's thought process in designing homework assignments differed based on the diversity of the student population of their school. The researcher also wanted to interview the teachers from these schools to see if the attitudes of the teachers towards homework as being beneficial to the success of their students differed based on the diversity of their student population.

### Analysis of Themes

Each of the six teachers that were interviewed had a similar definition of homework as being supplemental work that is done at home and should be used to reinforce the lessons that were taught in class. Only one of the teachers that were interviewed felt that homework can be used to introduce new concepts. Every one of the teachers thought that homework given should be focused more on the quality of the assignment first and then thinks about the quantity that you are assigning. All six of the teachers touched upon that fact that preparing homework assignments each week is time consuming and with less paid preparation time each week it is

harder to create quality assignments for the students to complete but all six of them saw an academic benefit to assigning these quality assignments to their students. All of the teachers knew that their district had a homework policy but only one actually knew what that policy consisted of. Not one of the teachers ever received any formal training in homework and what to assign as an effective homework assignment. Five of the teachers thought that some training on how to assign an effective assignment would be a worthwhile class.



## Chapter 5 Discussion

### How Present Study Compares to Previous Research

This study challenges previous research that states that teachers are not assigning quality homework and that homework is not academically beneficial to students in elementary school. All of the teachers that I interviewed saw a correlation between higher academic performance and students who regularly completed their homework assignments. This study does concur with the previous research that for a homework assignment to be effective it must focus on the quality of the assignment versus focusing on the quantity that is assigned.

### Summary of Major Findings

Teachers have an incredible amount of work to complete on a daily basis in the classroom and assigning homework is one part of that job. Van Voorhis (2004) found that when teachers design homework with a specific purpose and goals, more students complete the assignment, benefit from completing it, and the parents stay more involved in their children's education through the middle grades. Using this knowledge can help teachers to rethink their policy on assigning homework and not just assign busywork but to think through the assignment and its benefit before passing it on to their students. In my research I found this information in the article by Van Voorhis to be true. The teachers that I interviewed spent a lot of time thinking about the homework assignment they were going to assign. The teachers took into account the purpose of the assignment, the skill levels of the students in their class, the home environment that these students were working in, and the academic benefit that the students would receive from completing this assignment.

### Limitations/Gaps in the Literature

While the literature discusses the changing involvement of parents in their child's schoolwork and how busy the lives of the students and the parents are after school it does not discuss the impact of homework on immigrant children. It does not address the issue of the changing population and that the parents of these children having a hard time being involved in the homework of their children because of the language barrier that exists. This is an issue that teachers must face when assigning homework each night.

### Implications for Future Research

The effectiveness of homework and the quality of homework assigned can be further researched by looking at how effective homework is in both urban versus rural schools, large versus small schools and schools with diverse student populations. These studies have not been completed and would provide valuable information to teachers who are focused on assigning an effective homework assignment for their student population.

### Overall Significance of the Study

Overall, this study shows that creating a homework assignment that is engaging and creative will keep the student interested in the assignment and the student will more likely finish the assignment. The homework assignment must have a clear purpose. If the student does not understand why they are completing the assignment they will be less likely to complete the assignment. Teachers should spend time focusing on the students and their needs when assigning homework because the time they spend on creating a quality assignment will be worth it when they see their students perform well in class. Teachers should be given more time to prepare homework assignments and have the option to attend classes and/or workshops on what

a quality homework assignment consists of. School districts should focus more on the quality of the homework their teachers are assigning versus giving the schools and teachers a certain quantity of time they want the students spending on homework each night. Making this change will improve the attitude that students have about homework and will increase the performance of the students in their schools.

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