Elementary school students and homework: a study of best practices

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The purpose of this study was to analyze fourth grade teachers’ policies and opinions about homework in a southern New Jersey school and compare these findings with previously completed studies done by other researchers throughout the country. Through the methods of various surveys and discussions, five fourth-grade teachers, nineteen students, and sixteen parents were involved in this study. The researcher, who was student teaching in one of the fourth grade classrooms in this school where the majority of investigation took place, also kept a journal of observations relating to homework. The researcher found that although most students were spending an adequate amount of time on homework each night, homework was lacking both purpose and meaning to the students. The researcher also found that students would benefit if homework was modified according to their individual ability levels. This study is important to educators because it is a prime example of the typical homework practices that are taking place in elementary school classrooms.
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Chapter One

A Preface

Introduction

Homework has always been a part of American school culture and probably always will be. From as early on as kindergarten, students are expected to complete homework. Gone are the days of playing with your friends afterschool; most children are expected to complete their homework before they are able to do anything else. If they don’t do their homework afterschool, for some students this means they will be up late trying to complete it instead. This is especially true for students who participate in afterschool activities, such as sports and clubs. There simply isn’t enough time for students to complete their homework and be active outside of school without making additional sacrifices.

Homework isn’t just frustrating for the students; it is equally frustrating for the parents as well. Teachers may be the ones assigning the homework, but it is up to the parents to make sure that it gets done. They have to be the cheerleaders, whether it involves simply asking or at worst, begging, their children to complete their homework. Gone are the days of coming home from work and spending quality time with their family members and friends, children now have more homework than ever before that they need to complete. Even worse, if students don’t have the opportunity to complete their homework one evening, it could mean loss of recess time the next day, or even worse, a zero for a homework grade. So instead of relieving children from their hard day
at school, parents must instead resort to playing the role of the homework police so that their children don’t risk the chance of getting in trouble at school or grade reduction.

A major problem with homework is that although teachers find homework to be meaningful, they don’t actually have the time in the day to go over homework in school. It’s the story of a teacher’s life; there is simply never enough time to do everything that must get done. Unfortunately, with curriculum requirements expanding more every year, more teachers I have worked with have found it increasingly difficult to find time to review homework. This means that teachers cannot always correct any big mistakes that students are making on their homework or misunderstanding of learned material. Chances are, the only time teachers even look thoroughly at homework is when they are counting the assignments as grade, and by then it’s too late for students who had difficulty learning the skill. These students are already going to get punished for misunderstanding the lesson the homework was based on and it will be reflected in their grade. What is missing here is the opportunity for the student to be taught the material again and then not being graded on assignments relating to the learned material until after the student understands the content.

If homework is supposed to be the practice of learned skills, not mastery, is it fair for teachers to grade homework based on accuracy and not effort? In fact, is it fair at all for students to be graded for something that they completed outside of school? Is it fair for students to be forced to sacrifice afterschool and weekend activities because they must do homework instead? Ask the average parent, and I guarantee their immediate answer will be no. Unfortunately, this is not the reality we are seeing in public schools across the country. Teachers often have particular guidelines they must follow given by
their school district, and with all of the pressure of state testing and benchmarks that students must reach these days, the pressure for student achievement is on more than ever. But where’s the proof in this supposed truth? Does typical “drills on skills” homework make for higher student success rates?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers’ homework policies and practices and how their practices may affect student outcome in terms of grades. This study seeks to determine the amount of homework students are receiving on average each night, and how completion and accuracy of homework affects students individually, such as their overall average, if at all.

Some students have parents at home who will check over their students work (or worse, do it for them), to ensure that it is being done correctly. Corno (2000) believes that “homework is a bridge for knowledge to travel back and forth between school and home, (p. 533)” but what if there is no one at the other end of that bridge? More students are completing homework alone these days compared to the past, for various reasons (Corno, 2000). Students’ have two working parents, come from a single-parent home situation, live with other family members, the reasons are endless. Many students do not have anyone to check over their homework and help them through the misunderstanding of directions, clarification of assignments, or even anyone to ensure that assignments are completed. It has also been proven that distractions at home have obviously negative effects on student homework completion (Cooper, Jackson, Nye, & Lindsay, 2001). As a result, many students are returning largely-wrong or incomplete homework assignments. How then, is it fair to give these disadvantaged students poor grades for homework?
Although there are many examples of alternative ways to grade students and various ways to change homework, it is doubtful that many teachers will change their grading and homework practices. Some teachers will require their students to complete long out-of-class projects, but others will not. An out-of-class project is not really ideal for students who do not have anyone to help them get their homework done anyway, so it’s not really a good solution to the problem. Of course homework should be meaningful, and many teachers already view it that way. But what about homework that is not based on drilling skills learned in class? If this is not a part of homework, parents and students alike will probably fail to see the point of it then. Homework has to be related to the class in some way, and teachers should be taking the time to go over it. A problem with homework is that teachers are grading something that is done in an out-of-school environment which the teacher is assuming to be one where the students are capable of doing school-related things well in and are being encouraged to complete homework accurately, but this is simply not the reality of many home situations today. It seems that homework policies need to be redesigned to benefit students.

Statement of the Research Problem and Question

Based on the research about homework and its effect on grading and achievement, there is an obvious disagreement on the subject at hand. Opinions about homework are varied, from the amount of homework to grading homework to its actual necessity. Parents, students, and teachers across the nation are in disagreement over this topic. The question of this research study is thus, “What are the best methods for assigning homework and providing feedback?” The researcher is reminded to always compare other studies similar in nature to her own in an effort to hopefully generalize some basic
concepts about homework, possible relations to achievement, and grading. The ultimate
question will then be “What is an ideal way to handle homework for fourth-graders?”
One must keep in mind that this study will be based only on fourth-graders in one
particular school. A question that will arise is “How would the results compare to a
different school?” In comparing the results of this study to other previously completed
studies by other researchers, this question will be answered.
Story of the Question

It is two days before school begins and I am sitting in a classroom with desks too
small for the average adult, and I am surrounded by about 15 others in the same situation.
This is the first official in-service for the school year, and the entire district has come
together to talk about grading. Teachers from different schools have been grouped
together in an effort to build upon this large district’s learning community. An open
discussion begins about grading policies. I am at first shocked to hear that each teacher
appears to have her own grading policy and that there is no standard. The issue of grading
homework is soon brought to the center of the conversation, and it is quite clear that the
teachers have different opinions on the topic. The representative for the district who is
running this forum begins by clearly stating that homework takes place in a different
environment, and we cannot grade it and we are not grading it.

Teachers debate this for a while, some saying that they want to count at-home
projects because of the effort students put into them. Other teachers say that it is unfair
because some students will not have them done because no one at home will be there to
help them, and that there shouldn’t even be at-home projects to begin with. Others say
that they need to count homework as something simply because they need grades for the
marking period. One teacher finally says what I’ve been waiting to hear, “I count homework for completion. They get a check plus for doing a great job, a check if they simply complete it, and a check minus if it’s late.” When asked about how to transfer it numerically, she said that she would count check plusses as 100s, checks as 95s, and check minuses as ten points off for every day that it’s late. This is how I remember homework being graded when I was in elementary school too.

About a week later, I find myself at the first fourth-grade teachers meeting for the school year. All of the teachers appear to get along very well and are friendly towards each other. I’ve already gotten the sense that there is a strong learning community amongst these teachers, and having these weekly grade level meetings are a clear indicator of that. The teachers have decided to use the time this week to standardize their grading policies so that every student is being graded on the same scale, which I find to be fantastic. As expected, the issue of homework is brought up. The teacher that has drafted the first version of the grading policy has not accounted for homework anywhere. Her colleagues debate this, even when she defends her actions by saying that she chose not to include it because of the discussion at the in-service the week prior. It is finally concluded that every now and then, homework should be counted based on percentage correct because, like we heard at the in-service, sometimes you just need a grade to put on the report card.

While the teachers are having this debate, so many things come to my mind. Why are the teachers debating something that the district already made a statement about? Why didn’t the district make their opinion better known and understood? Why isn’t there a district policy on homework already in place so teachers won’t have to debate it
amongst themselves? Most importantly, why do teachers think it’s fair to grade homework for percentage correct? If students don’t understand something, maybe it’s a reflection on the teacher’s way of teaching that concept. Do the students who are going to receive constant 100s on their homework get help from home? Who is really doing homework anyway, the parents or the students? Teachers really have no way of knowing the answer to this question, so then why is grading homework considered a fair policy? What are grades supposed to reflect anyway, effort or achievement? Do the teachers even know the answer to this question either? It is only a week into the school year, and I believe I have found my research question.

A few weeks later, on a Thursday morning, I find myself doing my usual job: grading vocabulary homework and reading tests. As usual, the students either did perfectly on the homework or got no more than half of the questions wrong. The teacher told the students that morning before the test something along the lines of, “Take out your vocabulary homework from last night. OK, this is something I would like to grade so why don’t you take a minute to look it over and make any corrections and then hand it in.” This is a typical procedure for this teacher. She tends to spontaneously decide to grade homework without telling the students the day before. Some of the students thus immediately begin to erase the entire page in panic, while others just ignore the direction and hand their paper in immediately. Everything about this seems wrong to me. Students should know what assignments are going to be graded, and believe me, a minute is not long enough for a fourth-grader to really consider whether he wants to change anything on his paper or not.
After the papers are handed in, the students get started on their tests and I begin grading their homework and record the grades into the grade book. Next, I begin grading their reading comprehension tests. The first part of the test is multiple choice questions about the vocabulary definitions. Almost every student receives a 100 on this part of the test every week. Oddly enough, their vocabulary homework from the night before does not yield the same results. The homework and test are made by the same company, and thus should be on the same ability level, right? So what is the cause for this discrepancy?

Many possible solutions about the students who did poorly on the homework come to mind. Did the students understand the directions? Did the teacher go over the directions thoroughly in class the day before? Were there any sports on television last night that might have distracted the student (the Phillies were, at the time, on their way to the World Series after all)? Did the students have any activities the night before (i.e. soccer, bowling, karate, or dance)? Do these students have parents that help them with their homework, at least making sure they follow directions? There has to be some explanation as to why the students could do perfectly on the test and poorly on the homework.

It was at this point that I knew I had to research this topic. Something just didn’t seem right with this homework situation. Even more surprising was when I realized that the range of students who were performing poorly on their homework were from a variety of academic ability levels. Over the next few weeks, I saw this situation arise more and more. It wasn’t always with the same students, but sometimes it was. The same question kept coming to mind: “Why are we grading homework if it doesn’t seem to relate to student achievement? Is this fair? What can be done differently?” Of course, I still hear that district representative’s words going through my mind: we are not grading
homework, it’s a different environment; we cannot hold students accountable for something that is done outside of school.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter Two will contain a review of literature related to grading and homework policies, along with previous studies’ conclusions about the relation of these topics to student achievement. In Chapter Three, the context in which this study will take place along with the research methods will be explained. Chapters Four will report the findings of my research and Chapter Five will focus on a discussion of my data and the results and the conclusions that can be made from this study will be summarized.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Homework is a part of life. From the time students are in kindergarten until they graduate from high school, they are expected and often required to complete their homework. Homework is assigned more often than any other type of assessment (Corno & Xu 2004). Since homework is such an essential part of education, teachers are typically expected to grade it. However, homework and grading practices can and will vary amongst school districts and even teachers of the same grade within an individual school (Chatzopoulos, Erdmann, Tsormbatzoudis 2006). The question is whether or not this is in the best interest of students. There are many perspectives that must be considered to determine what the best practice is when it comes to assigning and grading homework.

Chapter Two focuses on a review of various articles and research regarding grading and homework practices of elementary school teachers. In order to understand how homework relates to student achievement, one must first look at how elementary teachers typically determine student achievement, which is through grading. Next, homework policies of the average teacher must be considered. After this, the relationship of grading and homework can be looked at with an improved sense of knowledge on the subject. Once the relationship can be seen clearly, the different perspectives on the topic must be considered. Teachers, students, and parents all view homework from a different viewpoint and it is essential to be aware of these differences (Cooper et al., 1998). Lastly,
there are some elementary schools that grade in untraditional manners, which may be a more beneficial way of grading student achievement with respect to the matter of homework. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the most ideal homework and grading practices for elementary school teachers.

Traditional Grading Practices

When studying teachers’ grading practices, it first must be determined what grading essentially means. Brookhart believes that teachers base their grades on the consequences the grades might entail. By this, she means that if students (and possibly their parents) view a “B” as a bad grade, then the student might put forth more effort the next time so that they may receive an “A,” a much better grade in their opinion (1993, p.124). Brookhart acknowledges that grading in this fashion requires students and parents to be able to relate grades to how students are truly performing from an academic standpoint. To evaluate how teachers calculate their grades, a study was conducted of 84 teachers and their grading practices. One of the most important results of this study concluded that teachers by and large associate effort with homework. If a student is borderline failing and did not turn in any homework in that grading period, teachers are more likely than not to give that student an “F” rather than a “D” (Brookhart, 1993, p.130). Students are graded based on the work that they do, and if they do not do it, they are penalized. Brookhart’s study is a prime example of the typical grading policies of teachers worldwide.

One study of seven urban school districts in the Richmond, Virginia area with 901 teachers of grades three to five has proven to be very telling as to how some teachers determine students’ grades. Things which were considered included “student effort,
improvement, academic performance, types of assessments used, and the cognitive level of the assessments” (McMillan, Myran, & Workman 2002, p.206). It was found, for example, that teachers within the same district will differ more on grading practices than teachers from other districts overall (Bonesronning, 2004, p. 161). This study also concluded that in this urban area, homework did not play a huge factor in grade determination. However, actual performance on assessments, effort, ability level, and improvement were largely detrimental of students’ final grades (McMillan, et al., 2002, p.209). Academic performance is typically expected to be the most important aspect in grading; however it is rare to find that teachers would consider improvement a large part of the grading process. But is this really the case? Do teachers really base their grades on the factors they claim?

Take for example a study of the grading practices of fifth and sixth grade teachers. In this study, it was concluded that teachers’ grading policies and actual distribution of grades is rather inconsistent (Chatzopoulos, Erdmann, & Tsormbatzoudis, 2006). Like in the previous study, teachers claimed that student effort was considered to be a very important aspect of grade determination, and academic performance and ability was considered less. But when the teachers submitted their grades, it was proven that effort had the least effect on students’ grades. Academic performance was indeed the most important factor in determining students’ grades. Clearly, despite what teachers may claim to inquiring researchers, they have the ultimate say in their students’ grades and how they wish to determine such grades.

Now it must be considered how teachers’ grading practices may actually effect student achievement. For example, if students are receiving lower grades than they
believe they deserve, is it possible that the individual effort of students may deflate? In a study of this very topic by Bonesronning (2004), the author writes that students perceive their academic achievement not only through their own eyes, but through the eyes of their teacher as well. If teachers want students to perceive themselves as capable learners, they must provide the context for students to do so. If their grading practices get in the way of students’ ability to see themselves as capable learners, this could be a major problem, especially for elementary school students. If they see themselves as low-achieving, or worse yet, incapable learners, it could set a terrible path for their educational future.

Although many teachers see high standards as essential to help pave the academic path for their students, higher standards have actually proven to have negative effects on high school graduation rates of Latino and African-American students (Bonesronning, 2004). When the standard is raised too high for certain students, these students would rather show less effort in school and thus receive poorer grades, then provide more effort in fear of still not being able to live up to the standards teachers’ expect of them (Bonesronning, 2004). It makes sense that students would rather do less if they think they will receive the same grade either way. This study concluded with that no matter what, “teacher behavior reflects student behavior,” meaning that how the teacher responds to student effort can decline or reinforce student effort (Bonesronning, 2004, p.162).

An interesting fact that was revealed from the Bonesronning study is that “easy grading” often takes place in classes consisting of students’ with above average academic performance (Bonesronning, 2004, p.164). This implies that when it comes to students who are typically average or low achieving, the teachers actually grade them on a tougher, unfair scale. There have been no positive effects identified for students’ with
whom easy grading is practiced, this process simply benefits the teachers in being able to eliminate the amount of time normal grading would take. Instead these students are negatively affected by their grades because they will put less effort into their work and not necessarily know when they should study harder for certain subjects (Bonesronning, 2004). This study clearly shows that student effort can play a large part in teachers’ grading practices, resulting in lower grades for students.

Traditional Homework Policies and Implications of Homework

Before homework policies can be looked at in depth, homework itself needs to be defined. Homework, commonly associated with individual student effort, has proven to play a significant part in students’ grades according to many teachers. Whether grades are determined based on homework is still questionable. However it cannot be denied that student effort is of great importance when considering students’ academic performance and therefore homework is of great importance in the academic world. Homework has always been a part of education. Students expect it, parents expect it, and teachers could not imagine not giving it. Homework, of course, is anything a student is expected to complete at home. Homework can be looked at in different ways. According to one researcher, “One unique role for homework in a modern day era is to provide social communication and contact among peers, especially peers who live beyond the neighborhood school, thereby increasing a sense of community” (Corno, 2000, p.529). Some students will complete homework at a babysitter’s house, a friend’s house, the local library, or even at afterschool programs that may or may not be affiliated with the school (Corno, 2000). Some students’ parents help them with their homework, some do not. What evidence is there that homework is actually being done solely by the individual
student it was assigned to (Corno, 2000)? Why then, is homework such a significant part of school life?

One reason why homework has become increasingly more important in elementary schools may be because of a series of educational studies and comparisons in the 1980s that showed that American students spend less time on homework compared to other nations around the world (Roderique, Polloway, Cumblad, Epstein, & Bursuck, 1994, p.481). Since then, many school districts have committed themselves to placing a greater emphasis on homework and have created various policies on the subject so that students and parents can clearly understand what is expected in terms of homework (Roderique, et al., 1994, p.482). One study concluded that 35.2% of school districts have a homework policy (Roderique, et al., 1994, p.482). However, 79.3% of these school districts simply recommend the homework policy be followed and do not actually require teachers to adhere to it. Therefore, even though there are a number of districts that have a clearly defined homework policy, this does not mean that the policies are being implemented.

In many school districts, policies about homework are usually left to the preference of individual teachers (Roderique, et al., 1994). If there is no consistency regarding homework, especially across grade levels, it is hard to justify why there is so much emphasis placed on homework. Every teacher a student has could have a different policy about homework, including how or if homework is graded. This does not seem fair to students. In general, homework policies recommend that parents support their students in homework completion but do not act as “tutors” (Roderique, et al., 1994, p.485). Surprisingly, only 47.8% of districts in this study have it listed in their policy that
homework should provide feedback for the students, despite what previous research has recommended (Roderique, et al., 1994).

Teachers typically assign homework on a nightly basis for every subject that was covered in school that day (Corno & Xu, 2004). They do this so that students will develop better work habits and, hopefully, to further their learning abilities. Research has shown that teachers do not believe their homework to be time consuming, indicating that they only assign between 15 and 30 minutes of homework each night, and in this study, students did in fact spend about 22 minutes a night on homework (Cooper, et al., 1998). This contradicts a different study of elementary school homework completion, where it was found that an average of 41.5 minutes of homework was assigned per night (Roderique, et al., 1994, p.484). If a student is spending more time on homework a teacher feels is necessary, either the amount of homework should be reduced or the teacher should indicate that she does not want students to spend a lot of time on it, but instead just do as much and as best as they can to eliminate stress and frustration.

Teachers should explain their policy to the parents as well as students from the beginning of the year, including how much time they want students to spend on homework (Knore, 1996). Another idea is for homework policies to be developed with the community, thus providing everyone involved with the framework for having such a policy (Coutts, 2004).

Problems Associated With Homework and Grading Homework

More homework is assigned as the years continue, despite any clear evidence that it is absolutely necessary for students to have homework to begin with. Kohn (2006, n.p.) has found through “decades of investigation” that homework does not even connect with standardized test scores in any way. He even goes far enough to say that there is no proof
that study skills are developed in students through the practice of homework and that this belief is based on “some fundamental misunderstandings about learning.” A correlation of 50 studies found that in grades three to five, there was no relation between the amount of homework completion and student achievement (Cooper, et al., 1998). The theory that homework equals practice and understanding is false- students will practice until they have temporarily memorized answers enough to do well on tests (Kohn, 2006). Since most homework is essentially drilling of knowledge, meaningful connections are not made, and therefore students are not inclined to retain the information for a long period of time. Kohn bases this off of the theories presented by behavior specialist John B. Watson (2006).

Sometimes, grading homework can inflate students’ grades and thus give the perception that students are higher achieving than standardized tests indicate (Knore, 1996). So although students are receiving better grades because their effort has been taken into account, putting such an emphasis on homework may detract from students and parents knowing ability to gage actual achievement levels. In these types of situations, grades are rather misleading. Despite this finding, Knore still believes that if “homework is important enough to be required, then it is important enough to be graded by the teacher” (1996, n.p.).

Another problem associated with homework is the increasing number of special education students who are spending more time in the general education classroom whose teachers’ are requiring them to complete the same homework as the other students (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001). After all, the “ability to keep up with classmates is a central issue in the success of mainstreaming” (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001, p.167).
Homework can be problematic enough for students with learning disabilities, and these problems have shown to only increase when these students are completing homework for general education teachers (Roderique, et al., 1994). Problems that often occur are mostly related to reading (decoding and comprehension), spelling, and writing (Bryan, et al., 2001). Only 18% of districts studied indicated that these students could use assistive devices to help them complete their homework (Roderique, et al., 1994). Such devices may include Braille, a tape recorder, and other communication devices. Not being able to do complete homework accurately is likely to have harmful effects on student success (Bryan, et al., 2001). It is believed that collaboration between general and special education teachers should take place so that students with disabilities will not only be able to complete the homework on their own with the proper assistance, but also be receiving homework that is based on their academic level, even if the homework is coming from a general education setting (Bryan, et al., 2001).

Homework is often time-consuming and can take away from the social aspect of childhood. Most homework requires students to work independently and spend more time away from their friends (Coutts, 2004). Some researchers are concerned with this because they believe that homework takes away from peer group involvement, and if a student has to choose, the student would choose peer group activities over completing homework. This may be because students fail to see the benefit of homework. Researchers suggest that homework may be more meaningful if it was teaching students study skills (Cooper, et al., 1998). If this should be the case, teachers should be sure to indicate this outcome when assigning the homework. Homework should always have a purpose, and students should be aware of that purpose.
Teacher, Student, and Parent Perceptions of Homework

Teachers typically view homework as a means to understand whether or not their students understand the material that was taught in class. Teachers think that homework helps students remember what they learned in school (Cooper, et al., 1998). Teachers believe that feedback on homework can help students gain a better understanding of material that they may not have fully understood the first time it was taught (Corno, 2000). In terms of parental involvement, teachers want parents to be cheerleaders, encouraging their children to complete their assignments but not do the homework for them. However, parents think that the teachers want them to help their children complete the homework as well as correct it (Bryan, et al., 2001). Again, it is important for teachers to explain the homework expectations from the beginning, such as in a letter sent home or at back to school night so that parents know exactly what their role is to be in their child’s academic life.

As expected, students do not view homework as important as teachers do (Cooper, et al., 1998). Students often base their perception on homework from that of their peers (Cooper, et al., 2001). One study revolving around student perception of homework amongst elementary school students also showed that students typically view homework as something they have to do to please their parents and their teacher (Corno, 2000). Contrary to popular assumption, student perception does not relate to student completion of homework nor does parents’ attitude relate to students’ attitude towards homework (Cooper, et al., 2001). Final grades do not play a role in determining students’ attitudes towards homework despite the fact that homework completion does play a factor in teachers’ determining the students’ final grades (Cooper, et al., 2001). Interestingly
enough, students who have lower achievement scores tend to hold more positive attitudes about homework (Cooper, et al., 1998). The researchers in that study could not explain this finding.

Research indicates that students who complete their homework on a regular basis will become better learners as they develop better study skills (Corno, 2000). At the same time, studies have also shown that students at this age level do not yet understand that homework is supposed to encourage study skills (Coutts, 2004). Homework is supposed to be somewhat challenging; if it is too easy students will fail to see the point of completing it. However, teachers must be careful when considering how complex to make homework. When homework is too complex or challenging, students can become very frustrated, especially if they view homework as something they must do and must do well on (Corno, 2000). Teachers must ensure that the homework they assign does not make students feel any less capable, lead to the feeling of lack of efficacy for a topic or subject (Corno, 2000). Just like frustration can occur, boredom may also prove itself to be problematic. If homework is too easy for some students, students may eventually take less time to complete homework and fail to complete it correctly (Corno, 2000). Thus, teachers must be very careful when determining the level of difficulty when assigning homework.

Some parents are under the impression that they must correct their child’s homework in fear that the child is going to be graded on it. However, when parents do this, the teacher has no way of judging how much the student does or does not understand (Corno, 2000). This is not to say that parents helping on homework are not acting in the best interest of children, because plenty of good can come of this as well. Parents can
show their children that they want to be involved in their lives, can demonstrate good modeling and work ethic, clarify directions, and make sure that they complete all of their homework (Corno, 2000). In fact, it appears that parents’ involvement in homework is the strongest predictor of students’ grades (Cooper, et al., 2001). The more a parent is involved, the higher the students’ grades. Studies also show that parents are willing to adjust their involvement depending on the ability of the individual child, thus allowing more capable students to do more work on their own.

But what happens when parents want to be involved but cannot? Just as students can become frustrated with homework, so too can parents if they do not fully understand what their children are supposed to do (Corno, 2000). A prime example of this is the Everyday Math series. Parents did not learn math the same way many of their children are learning it now and therefore may attempt to help their children with their homework, and find themselves incapable of doing so. Seeing their parents frustrated with their homework may cause the students to become frustrated as well. Says Corno, “Parents as well as children can experience psychological distress- crying and yelling and other angry outbursts- as a direct result of elementary school homework” (2000, p. 535). It has also been found that parents of students with disabilities are more likely to become frustrated when helping their children with homework, thus making the homework experience all that more unpleasant for these students (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001).

It was beneficial to consider the different perceptions of homework so that the issue at hand could be tackled with certain considerations in mind. Based on these studies, it has become evident that although teachers understand the importance in giving homework (which of course they should), many students are failing to see the point. This
needs to be made clear to them. Even more important is that many studies are lacking evidence to support that homework completion can even lead to higher achievement. So why is homework being assigned? Why is it being included in students’ grades in a negative way if it does not even accurately show their achievement? If students do not understand it, why are teachers giving it? Yet again, it is also clear that parents are unaware of their role in their children’s homework. When determining possible solutions to fix the problem with homework, all of these things must be kept it mind.

Alternatives to Traditional Homework and Grading Policies

According to Hartman (1975), teachers continue to award grades simply because that is what students expect teachers to do, and that students will not work as hard if grades are not awarded. But what if this is simply not true? What if there were other ways to reward students for hard work and achievement? One idea is to set objectives for lessons, which teachers are supposed to do anyway, and then rate the student on how well his behavior was at meeting the objectives throughout each lesson (Hartman, 1975). This would allow for written feedback for students, which could be just as beneficial if not more because it would be in written explanation form. It sounds like an interesting concept however it would be unrealistic for teachers to do this for every lesson, every day, for every student. It would become very tedious very quickly. Instead, other forms of altering the grading system must be considered.

It has been suggested that by putting such an emphasis on grades and homework, students are no longer being motivated to learn, rather instead motivated to receive good grades on assessments (Winger, 2005). It is unrealistic to rule out homework completion entirely, as it is just as unrealistic for homework not to count as something measureable
since students are required to do it. To counter this growing epidemic, one teacher decided that he was going to provide his students with separate grades: one based on their academic performance and the other on their “willingness to cooperate and work hard rather than their understanding” of the subject matter (Winger, 2005). This was a result of his colleague’s problem: when she asked her students what they’d like to improve on, the students said they’d like to get better grades on tests and homework (Winger, 2005). Her students were more interested in getting good grades than actually learning. Winger suggests that when teachers place too much graded emphasis on homework, then the grade is a reflection of effort rather than learning. By separating the two grades, teachers can thus look at academic and non-academic factors separately and gain a clear picture of the student’s academic ability and his efforts.

There are other ideas surrounding the issue of homework in addition to Winder’s proposal. Corno believes that homework should not be “drills on skills” but rather it should provide opportunities for students to gain more meaning out of the material they learned in class (Corno, 2000, p.542). One such example of this idea is to use students’ culture and social contacts to build upon the knowledge they gained in school. Projects like these can often take weeks and can integrate many subjects, and are generally more interesting to students (Corno, 2000). A similar idea is to base homework around activities, topics, and tasks that students enjoy so that they are more intrinsically motivated to complete their assignments (Corno & Xu, 2004). An example of this would be for students to research their favorite animal or sport for a writing assignment.
Where to Go From Here

There is an obvious disagreement between teachers, students, and parents surrounding the topic of homework. Some teachers feel that homework is a necessary part of a quality education, whereas others feel that whether or not students complete homework is insignificant to their actual achievement levels. Teachers also disagree when it comes to grading homework. As far as students' opinions on homework, it appears that they do not find homework to be important, leading one to assume that they probably do not take it seriously. If students are not taking homework seriously, then what is the point? Parents in these studies seem to think that it is important because of the negative consequences associated with their children not completing their homework. In the remaining chapters, the researcher seeks to find out how local teachers, students, and their parents feel about homework and how their opinions relate to the previous research. Chapter Three will explain the methodology of this study, including the context and instruments to be used.
Chapter Three

Research Content and Design

Introduction

In exploring the available literature about the topic of homework and grading, it is clear that there are a variety of opinions surrounding the assignment and grading of homework. This study is aimed at discovering the best method for assigning homework so that it will benefit students academically, and determining the way in which it should be graded, if at all.

This study will consist of quantitative research, which is an inquiry-based approach that is useful for describing trends and explaining the relationships among variables. This type of research was chosen because I am student teaching in the classroom where the study is taking place and will be purposefully collecting data and using it to improve practice. I will be collecting data in a variety of ways, including surveys, focus groups with students, and a journal. Surveys will help determine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of homework. Discussing aspects of homework with students in a small focus group will allow for deeper insights into student perceptions of homework and will allow the researcher to have direct interaction with the participants. Through journaling, critical events that take place in the classroom that relate to homework which may stimulate further questions or lead to conclusions will be noted. My goal is to develop a plan in which teachers may be able to assign and handle
homework in a fair manner that will benefit all students academically, despite the various
differences in ability and home-life experiences.

Context

This study will be taking place in a fourth-grade classroom in a suburban
township in southern New Jersey. The school’s average 4th grade class size for the
academic year of 2007-2008 was above that of the state average, being approximately
27.8 students as opposed to 20.4 (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008). This
year’s class consists of 23 students of varying abilities, 19 of whom will be participating
in this study. Their identities, including abilities will be kept anonymous; however the
whole class information will be provided. Four of the students participate in the school’s
Excel program, which is the school’s gifted and talented program. Four of the students in
the class have IEPs and are classified as having either a communication disorder or other
health impairment, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Two of these
students receive speech and language therapy, and one of them receives occupational
therapy. Two of them also have regular group counseling sessions to encourage
socialization skills. There is also one English as a Learned Language student. Three of
the students are currently receiving additional help from the corrective reading teacher,
and one of these students also receives services from the Basic Skills Instruction Program
teacher for mathematics.

There are also two more students in this class that present unique circumstances:
one student whose parents denied him to receive additional services or the opportunity to
be tested for a learning impairment, and another student who is struggling with math, but
who does not qualify for additional support because she received high marks on her
NJASK mathematics assessment last year. In addition, when this class took the NJASK3 during the previous school year, 36.3% of the entire grade level scored advanced proficient in mathematics (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008). This student, along with two of the classified students, participates in the school’s “Homework Club” afterschool program twice a week to receive additional help in homework completion.

My role in this fourth-grade classroom is as a student teacher, for all subjects except math, when I work outside of this classroom. This classroom is an in-class-support classroom for two hours of the day, an hour each for language arts literacy and mathematics instruction. There are two separate special education classroom teachers that come in during this time. The teacher that comes in for mathematics instruction has a student teacher as well. There is also a one-on-one aide in the room for one of the classified students, and she also assists the teacher when appropriate. This classroom presents great challenges given because of the wide variety of students to teach. In addition to the support the students receive while in school, the parents are also very supportive and involved with their children.

Research Design and Methodology

In conducting this study, several data collection methods will be used. Four types of surveys will be used. The first survey, which is shown in Table 1, will ask all of the fourth-grade teachers in the school questions about their homework policies and their personal opinions of homework.
Table 1: Teacher Survey

1) On average, how often do you assign homework?
   a. 5 nights a week  b. 4 nights a week  c. 3 nights or less a week

2) Why do you assign homework? (Circle all that apply.)
   a. To reinforce skills/material learned in that day’s lessons
   b. To teach new skills/material not covered in that day’s lessons
   c. There is a school district policy that mandates homework be given.

3) Do you grade homework for completion?
   a. Everyday  b. Sometimes  c. Never

4) If you answered a or b to the previous question, why?
   a. I am required to have a certain number of grades per marking period and I
don’t have time to collect enough grades during the regular school day.
   b. I believe that homework should be taken seriously so the students who put
   the effort out deserve to be rewarded.
   c. Other: ______________________________________
   d. N/A

5) Do you grade homework for accuracy? (i.e. 85% correct, student gets an 85 for
   that assignment)
   a. Everyday  b. Sometimes  c. Never

6) If you answered a or b to the previous question, why?
   a. I am required to have a certain number of grades per marking period and I
   don’t have time to collect enough grades during the regular school day.
   b. I believe that homework should be taken seriously so the students who put
   the effort out deserve to be rewarded.
   c. Other: ______________________________________
   d. N/A

7) On average, how many homework assignments do you assign each night?
   a. 1-2  b. 3-4  c. 5 or more

8) About how much time do you think your students spend on each homework
   assignment?
   a. 10 minutes or less  b. 10-20 minutes  c. 20-30 minutes  d. 30 minutes or more

9) Do you think it is absolutely necessary for homework to be assigned?
   a. Yes  b. No
   Please explain your answer:

Please share any additional information you think will be relevant to this study:

A second survey, which is shown in Table 2, will ask the students their opinions of
homework, such as if they find it difficult to complete alone and if they normally ask
their parents for help. This survey will be simple and direct, appropriate for students of
all abilities to answer on their own.
Table 2: Student Survey

Circle the answer that you agree with.

Remember, always be honest! Your name is not on this paper, no one will know how you answered! Don’t forget to fold the paper in half when you are done and place it in the shoebox.

1) Do you like homework?
   a. Yes  b. No

2) Do you think homework helps you do well in school?
   a. Yes  b. No

3) Do you ever ask someone else to help you with your homework (parent, sister, brother, grandparent)?
   a. Yes  b. No

4) How often do you ask for help with your homework?
   a. Everyday  b. Most of the time
   c. Sometimes  d. Never

5) Do you think your teacher gives you too much homework?
   a. Yes  b. No

6) If you were given no homework, would you still study for tests?
   a. Yes  b. No

A third survey, which is shown in Table 3, will be conducted of the parents, asking similar questions, such as if they feel too much homework is assigned, how long it takes their child to complete homework assignments, and if they often feel it is necessary to help their child complete homework due to difficulty level.
Table 3: Parent Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Does your child participate in any after-school activities (sports, dance, girl scouts, etc.)?</td>
<td>a. Yes          b. No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) How many nights a week is your child involved in after-school activities?</td>
<td>a. 0           b. 1          c. 2          d. 3          e. 4          f. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Do you find it difficult for your child to complete his/her homework on the nights he/she has an after-school activity?</td>
<td>a. Always  b. Sometimes  c. Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) In your opinion, does your child receive too much homework each night?</td>
<td>a. Yes          b. No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Was there ever a time you thought your child had too much homework? (Circle all that apply.)</td>
<td>a. Kindergarten  b. 1st grade  c. 2nd grade  d. 3rd grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) In your opinion, how much time would you say that your child spends on homework each night?</td>
<td>a. 20 minutes or less  b. 20-30 minutes  c. 30-40 minutes  d. 40-50 minutes  e. 50-60 minutes  f. More than an hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Do you think your child’s homework is too time-consuming?</td>
<td>a. All of the time  b. Usually  c. Sometimes  d. Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) If you think your child spends too much time on homework, how much time would you rather see your child spend on homework each night?</td>
<td>a. 20 minutes or less  b. 20-30 minutes  c. 30-40 minutes  d. 40-50 minutes  e. 50-60 minutes  f. More than an hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Do you think that your child does not spend enough time on homework each night?</td>
<td>a. Yes          b. No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) If you think your child does not spend enough time on homework each night, how much time would you rather see your child spend on homework each night?</td>
<td>a. 20-30 minutes  b. 30-40 minutes  c. 40-50 minutes  d. 50-60 minutes  e. More than an hour  f. N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12) If your child complains about homework, why do you think that is? (Circle all that apply.)</td>
<td>a. My child just doesn’t like homework.  b. My child is uninterested in school.  c. The homework is too difficult for my child.  d. Other:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please write any additional comments in the space below that you have on the subject of homework that you think would be relevant to this study.
All participants will remain anonymous and parents will be constantly reminded of this in hopes to receive honest answers.

Finally, a fourth survey, which is shown in Table 4, will be used in which students will be asked, after completing their homework each night, to note the level of difficulty of the assignments, if they had to ask for help, and how long it took them to complete the assignments. It is important that students time how long their homework assignments take them to complete to see if homework is taking longer to complete than the teachers and parents believed based on the other surveys.

Table 4: Student Nightly Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>This assignment was easy for me.</th>
<th>This assignment was hard, but I did it myself.</th>
<th>I asked for help with this assignment.</th>
<th>I did not complete this assignment.</th>
<th>I did not have homework in this subject.</th>
<th>How long did this assignment take you to complete?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another type of data will be collected through a discussion with students in a focus group setting. The questions that the conversation will build around are shown in Table 5. These students will be chosen by the researcher based on their personalities and general approach to homework and school. Students will be asked a variety of questions similar to the ones asked in the surveys. They will be asked these questions verbally within a small group setting and be reminded to be honest, and the trust and respect that
these students have towards the researcher will hopefully allow honestly to prevail so that further insights about homework will develop.

Table 5: Focus Group Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Do you like homework? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Why do you do homework?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Do you think your teachers should grade your homework?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Do you think homework helps you do better in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do you think homework helps you do better on tests?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Would you do homework even if the teacher made it optional?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Do you ever do homework with a friend? Do you find that it helps both of you learn more?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data will also be collected through a researcher’s journal. In this journal, the researcher will keep a log of homework assignments and how they related to the day’s lessons and activities. It will also have notes about the teacher-assigned homework, whether it was textbook-created or teacher-created and will be used to keep track of which homework assignments were eventually added into the students’ final averages. The researcher will also be looking through homework as students hand it in each day, looking at the accuracy and completion of the homework in relation to how that student typically performs on informal and formal assessments in the classroom setting to see if any discrepancies exist.

Through these planned means of data collection, the researcher will analyze the data and determine any correlations and connections between the surveys, discussions, grades in relation to homework, as well as any connections to the observations made in the journal. From these results, the researcher will then determine what she would like to implement in the classroom as how to make homework more practical, appropriate,
effective, and/or meaningful for the students. It is important to note that not all of these issues will probably have to be addressed, but they will all be considered.

Analyzing the Data

In analyzing the data, the researcher will first analyze all of the different surveys, finding the average for each question as well as any opinions that are significantly different than the average. After teacher, student, and parent surveys have been considered separately, they will be compared to each other to note any positive or negative correlations. It will be especially interesting to see how much time students claim to put into their homework as opposed to parent and teacher perceptions.

Observations, noted in the teacher’s journal, will also be included in analyzing the data so that a whole picture of the classroom and student achievement and ability in relation to homework can be presented in the most accurate way possible.

Chapter Four will consist of the data results, and Chapter Five will summarize the conclusions that resulted from and the significance of this study.
Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

This chapter will present the findings of the data collected by the researcher during her student teaching experience in the fourth-grade classroom.

Teachers’ Opinions

When researching homework and grading practices, the researcher must first do the obvious: find out how teachers view homework. In a survey of five fourth-grade teachers from the same school, the following data was reported. Each teacher said that she assigns homework four nights a week to reinforce skills and concepts taught in school. One of the teachers indicated that there is a school district policy that mandates homework be given. The other teachers failed to make notice of this, which raises the question of how well the district has made their policies clear. It is important to remember that in the beginning of the school year, at the district in-service, the supervisor of curriculum himself declared that homework should not be graded because it is completed in an environment outside of school. On that note, three of the teachers noted that they sometimes grade homework for completion, where as two others said that they never do so. Two of the teachers who grade homework for completion say that this is because students who put forth effort should be rewarded through the means of an academic grade whereas the other said that she only grades science and social studies because she needs to acquire sufficient grades for those subjects. Those who choose not
to grade homework for completion did however indicate that if students do not complete
their homework assignments, they will have to complete the assignment(s) during recess.
This is a grade-level agreement for all of the fourth-grade teachers.

Although the teachers do not agree on grading homework for completion, they do
all agree that sometimes homework should be graded for accuracy. Their reasons for this
vary; two said that effort should be rewarded (but are effort and understanding really the
same thing), two said that they only grade science and social studies, and one said that
she grades homework because she is required to have a certain number of grades per
subject each marking period. It appears that these teachers grade homework because they
feel that they must for one reason or another. Some teachers are trying to factor student
effort into their grading system, a way of rewarding those they view as hard-working,
whereas others feel that they have no other choice because of school policies.

On average, teachers indicated that they assign approximately two assignments
each night. Two teachers surveyed said that they only give one to two homework
assignments per night, two teachers said two to three, and the last said that she
consistently gives three homework assignments each night. The data indicates that the
teachers in this grade-level do not view the assignment of homework the same way.
When asked how long each teacher believes their students spend on each individual
homework assignment, the answers were less varied. Three teachers believe each
assignment takes less than ten minutes and two assume the assignments are each between
ten and fifteen minutes in length. The general rule of thumb is that students should spend
ten minutes times their grade level on homework each night, so in this case no more than
forty minutes, and so far, that is what these teachers believe is taking place for their
students.

When asked if assigning homework is absolutely necessary, four of the teachers agreed that it is absolutely necessary to assign homework for academic purposes. Their reasoning was that there is too much curriculum and not enough time to fit it all in, homework is necessary to reinforce skills, it helps students understand how and what to study, and that it promotes reinforcement and responsibility. One teacher said that homework promotes responsibility more than academics, since homework has been proven not to be effective at this grade level. Overall, the teachers agree that homework is a necessary part of school; however they all have their own reasons for assigning it.

Parents’ Opinions

Research has shown that homework can be difficult for students to complete when they have activities outside of school. The researcher surveyed parents to find out about their children’s involvement in after-school activities as well as their opinions on homework and what they think their children’s opinions are about homework. Sixteen parents of the twenty-three students in the fourth-grade classroom that the researcher was student teaching agreed to participate in this study.

Of these sixteen parents, fifteen indicated that their child was involved in at least one after-school activity. On average, these activities take up about two school nights a week, with five parents indicating more nights and four parents indicating less. It is important to note that a few of the parents also said that their children would be more involved once spring sports began, thus taking up more nights a week. Despite being so involved, ten of the parents said that their children never have difficulty completing their homework on the nights that they have after-school activities. Six of the parents said that
it can be difficult sometimes, but no parent said that it was consistently a problem. So although almost all of the parents surveyed said that their child was involved in after-school activities, none of their children appear to have a problem when it comes to homework completion.

When asked if, in their opinion, their children received too much homework, fourteen parents said that they don’t believe this is an existent problem. One said that she sometimes feels that her child has too much homework, and another said that yes, she always feels that her child has too many homework assignments to complete each night. Although it is important to take notice that the parents are not all in absolute agreement, it is just as important to note that an overwhelming majority of the parents are in agreement: their children do not receive too much homework. The next thing that must be looked at is the amount of time their children are spending on homework and their feelings about that.

About half of the parents surveyed believe that, on a typical school night when homework is assigned, their fourth-grade children spend about twenty to thirty minutes completing assignments. The other eight indicated that their children spent more than thirty minutes each night, with two parents indicating that their children spend over an hour on homework. When asked if they believe that the homework is too time consuming, eight said never (including one parent who said her child spends over an hour on homework), seven said sometimes, and one said usually. In comparison to the previous questions about the amount of homework, the two yielded very different opinions from the parents. Although the parents are mostly in agreement that their
children are not assigned too much homework, they are quite divided when it comes to their opinions of the time that homework is consuming in their children’s lives.

Those parents who believed that their children spent too much time on homework were then asked to indicate how much time they would like to see their children spend on homework each night. Only five parents believed that their children frequently spent too much time on homework, and three of those parents said that they would like to only see their children spend twenty to thirty minutes on homework each night. One parent said only twenty minutes or less, and another said thirty to forty minutes would be sufficient.

When asked if any of the parents believed that their children do not spend enough time on homework each night, fourteen of the parents said no, that their children spent plenty of time on homework every night. Two parents said that they sometimes believed that their children should spend more time on homework. Interestingly, when asked if their children complain about completing homework, only two usually complain, nine sometimes complain, and five never complain about homework. The parents believed that mostly, their children don’t like homework, they’d rather be doing something else like play or another activity, and that they are just being kids. Only three parents found that their children complain about homework because it is too difficult. This indicates that for most of the teacher’s students, homework assignments are believed to be on the correct level for her students.

One of the most significant findings from the parent surveys, as presented in Tables 6 and 7, is that parents see an obvious disagreement between how much time they believe their children spend on homework and how much time they would like to see their children spend on homework.
Students' Opinions

After surveying teachers’ and parents’ opinions on homework, it was time to see how the students felt. Nineteen students were surveyed for the next part of data collection. The first question was a simple one: do you like homework? Surprisingly, seven students admitted to liking homework whereas eleven students said that they do not like it. One student chose to write in his own answer, indicating that he sometimes likes homework. Despite the majority of students claiming not to like homework, eighteen of the nineteen answered that they do in fact believe that homework helps them do better in school. Even more surprising, these same eighteen students also said that they would still study for tests even if they had no homework at all. However, only five students believe
that their teacher assigns too much homework on a regular basis. When asked about completing homework, sixteen students said that they sometimes have to ask family members for help with their homework, and one student said that he asks for help most of the time. Two students claim that they never ask for help with their homework.

The next instrument of data collection consisted of a focus group discussion of five students openly talking to their student teacher about their feelings on homework. Many of the same questions were asked to check for accuracy and consistency. When the question was brought up once again about whether or not students liked homework, three students said that yes, they like homework, and two said no. When asked why they do homework, the three that said yes said that they complete homework because they think that it helps them do better in school, whereas the other two said that they do homework because their teachers and parents make them. They were also asked if they would still do homework if the teacher made it optional, and as expected, four of them said no and one said yes. All of the students said that they like to do homework with friends when their parents let them. One student even said that on test mornings, her friend’s mom always quizzes them before going to school.

When asked, like in the previous survey, if they believe that homework helps them do better in school, the students had again had different answers. Three of the students said that it doesn’t because it can be hard to find answers or because they don’t understand the directions, which is what the question in the survey about asking for help was leading to. Two of the students said that yes, homework does help them do better in school. When asked if homework helps them do better particularly on tests, two students
said yes because the questions are usually the same and three said no. One of these students said that he doesn’t like homework and he never studies anyway.

The students in this focus group were also asked if they believe that their homework should be graded. Three students said sometimes, depending on how hard the assignment is. They said that if it’s easy, it should be graded, but not if it is difficult. Another student said that homework should not be graded because the science questions can be really hard and he can’t always find the answers. The last student said yes because all of the answers can be found in their books.

Two of the same questions were asked both in the focus group and in the student survey and the results were not the same. The two instruments are compared on the following page.

Chart 1: Comparison of Survey and Focus Groups
Nightly Student Homework Logs

For two weeks, totaling eight nights of homework, students were asked to fill in homework logs as shown in Chapter Three. Students indicated what homework assignments they had, how long each assignment took them to complete, and the difficulty of each assignment. Students were instructed to have their parents help them with timing if possible to keep the results as accurate as could be. The number of student participants varied on each night, depending on absences and if the student had a “homework pass” for the night. The following table is based on the average amount of time students spent on homework each night.

Table 8: Time Students Indicate They Spent on Homework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Day 7</th>
<th>Day 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The assignments that took students the longest amount of time to complete were a spelling assignment in which they have to rewrite twenty-five words in a style that the teacher likes to call “shark fin.” For example, the student would write the word “fish” like so: f, fi, fis, fish. The other assignment that took the longest was a reading assignment in which students had to read part of a novel and complete a short-answer worksheet. Studying for science on Day 3 also took students a long time.
As the table shows, no student indicates that he spent more than forty minutes on homework on a given night during these two weeks. It must be reminded that the amount of homework was not modified at all during the two weeks that data was being collected, and that students were never told how long an assignment should take them. This chart yields drastically different data compared to how much the parents believed their children were spending on homework each night. Students, on average, spend less time on homework than their parents believed. The differences can be seen below.

Chart 2: Parents’ and Students’ Indication of Time Spent on Homework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Time Parents Believe the Students Spend on Homework Each Night</th>
<th>Amount of Time Students Spent on Homework Each Night for 8 Nights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 min. or less</td>
<td>20 min. or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30 min.</td>
<td>20-30 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40 min.</td>
<td>30-40 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50 min.</td>
<td>40-50 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60 min.</td>
<td>50-60 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hr. or more</td>
<td>1 hr. or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were also asked to indicate the difficulty they had with each subject. The levels ranged from easy to hard, as well as a place to fill in if students had to ask for help completing the assignment. All assignments for each subject are combined on the following page to show, during the course of two weeks, the number of times each level of difficulty occurred.
Chart 3: Difficulty Level of Homework Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>90%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Reading**
  - Easy for the student to complete independently
  - Hard, but the student completed it independently
  - Student asked for help

- **Language Arts**
  - Easy for the student to complete independently
  - Hard, but the student completed it independently
  - Student asked for help

- **Spelling**
  - Easy for the student to complete independently
  - Hard, but the student completed it independently
  - Student asked for help

- **Math**
  - Easy for the student to complete independently
  - Hard, but the student completed it independently
  - Student asked for help

- **Science**
  - Easy for the student to complete independently
  - Hard, but the student completed it independently
  - Student asked for help
Overall, most students found that homework assignments were easy for them to complete. Some students found some assignments harder to complete, but still felt that they could complete the homework on their own. Occasionally students also felt the need to ask someone at home for help. The subject that this occurred most in was language arts. Language arts homework assignments are always textbook created worksheets based on the correct grammatical skill being taught in class that week, such as subject and object pronouns. In this class of students, grammar appears to be their hardest subject, both in and out of the school setting. It comes as no surprise that the students would have difficulty completing these homework assignments.

Important Notes from the Research Journal

During the researcher’s time as the student teacher in the fourth-grade classroom in which this study took place, some issues revolving around homework were noticed and then logged in a research journal. One of the most important things that she noticed was that homework was rarely, if ever gone over in class. Students would hand in their homework each day, and if they failed to do so, would have to stay in during recess that day to complete it. The teacher would glance through the homework but then just throw it away, unless she decided to use it as a grade. Science and social studies assignments were always graded because the teacher needed a sufficient amount of grades for each subject, just as the teachers indicated in their surveys. Occasionally, language arts homework assignments would be graded, but only when the students did really well. The teacher felt that she had enough language grades for the marking period, so that counting some homework assignments could only work to benefit the students. On the other hand, there was one situation involving math where the students did terribly and clearly did not
understand the lesson material of which the assignment was based, even the most advanced students, but the assignment was graded anyway. However, the teacher felt that she needed more grades so she counted it. In this situation, grading a homework assignment did not work to the benefit of any of the students.

On quite a few occasions, students would show on homework assignments that they either did not understand the content of the lesson the assignment was based on or failed to follow directions. Students with high averages often failed to follow directions, thus lowering their grades when assignments were graded without prior notice to the students. The teacher felt that there just simply was not enough time to go over homework in class, even when these misunderstandings occurred. Sometimes, the teacher would address these problems to the class as a whole, but with the original student work in the trash, how were individual students to know that they were the ones having problems with the material? As a result, many mistakes were left uncorrected on individual student levels, and these same mistakes would appear on tests.

Chapter Five will consist of a discussion of these findings and the relevant literature, as well as the importance of this study to educators. It will also contain any final conclusions and recommendations surrounding the issue of assigning and grading homework.
Chapter Five

Conclusions

Introduction

The researcher found that the major problem with assigning homework in this fourth-grade classroom was that homework lacked any real meaning to the students. Since homework was rarely gone over in class and only occasionally graded, homework was essentially lacking any purpose. Although the adults in the study could see that the purpose of homework was to encourage studying and practice of newly learned skills and knowledge, there is no evidence that indicates that the students could see this purpose. Those who completed their homework did so because they wanted to please parents and teachers, not for what they could see as their own benefit.

Perhaps if teachers took the time to go over homework in class then students would be able to understand the benefits and purpose of completing homework, but that simply was not the case here. Going over homework in class or even pulling students aside for a moment so that mistakes could be gone over with the teacher would be beneficial for students. Some sort of constructive feedback should be provided for students instead of homework just being tossed aside. To the researcher, grading homework assignments is not considered constructive feedback because it does not help the students understand the material any better. Grading homework simply indicates to students that they did not understand the material, but it does not provide any additional means for the student to understand. Homework in this classroom was always based on
newly acquired material that they students had not yet mastered and therefore it should not be graded.

Many students would fail to complete their homework assignments and seemed to accept the fact that they would have to stay in during recess to make up their homework. If it’s called “homework” then shouldn’t the essential part of it have to be completed at home? If the purpose of homework is to practice skills and knowledge gained in the classroom in a different environment then why is it acceptable to be completed at school? This is sending the message to students that it’s ok if they did not do their homework assignments because it can just be done during recess. So then where does the promotion of responsibility that homework is supposed to entail factor in here?

It was also found that some students should have received modified homework assignments. The only student who received modifications was a classified student whose parents requested it. However, it was clear that other students in the class were spending far too long on homework each night, and others were not spending enough time. Some students needed homework assignments to be modified to their level of understanding whereas others would probably benefit from a more advanced level of assignments. This would not only allow students to each spend a fair amount of time on homework each night, but it would also allow students to work according to their individual ability levels. Differentiated instruction is just as important for assignments completed in the classroom as well as assignments completed outside of the classroom.

To answer the original research question, “What are the best methods for assigning homework and providing feedback?” the answer is very simple: assign homework with the individual student ability level in mind so that students are spending
an adequate, but not overwhelming, amount of time on homework, and find a way in your busy schedule to provide constructive feedback to students but do not grade such homework under any circumstances. Modifying homework assignments should not become any more complicated for teachers because many textbook series used in classrooms come with different levels of assignments to accommodate students. It is important for teachers to provide constructive feedback to students so that students can benefit from and see the purpose of homework completion. Students who see homework as being too easy or too difficult will especially benefit from modified homework.

Discussion

Many of the findings in this study are correlation with that of which the literature discussed in Chapter Two. In the Brookhart study, students were graded based on all of the work that they do, homework included. If students did not complete assignments, their grades were penalized (1993). Homework was in fact graded on occasion in the fourth-grade classroom that this study took place in so students were being penalized or rewarded based on their homework completion. However, since homework was not always graded on a consistent basis, it is unknown whether or not homework played a truly significant role in grade determination. This is similar to the 2006 study that showed that although teachers claimed that students’ grades were based in part on student effort, for example homework, this was actually not the case and students’ grades were based mostly on assessments that took place in the classroom (Chatzopoulos, Erdmann, & Tsormbatzoudis).

It was found that in a study by Bonesronning that teachers may grade students with higher academic performance levels easier than other students, leading to
inconsistent grading practices (2004). This was not the case in this classroom. In observing the teacher’s grading practices relating to homework, it was found that this teacher graded every student fairly, despite ability level. In fact, she may have been even harder on the above average students because she knew that they were capable of more than their effort showed. When grading science homework for example, which involved short answer questions that related directly to the text, the teacher would often consider the question, the answer, and the student in determining the amount of points awarded when an answer was in the vicinity of the correct answer but not exactly what she was looking for. This largely contradicts the Bonesronning study.

Sometimes, grading homework can inflate students’ grades and thus give the perception that students are higher achieving than standardized tests indicate (Knore, 1996). So although students are receiving better grades because their effort has been taken into account, putting such an emphasis on homework may detract from students and parents knowing ability to judge actual achievement levels. In these types of situations, grades are rather misleading. Despite this finding, Knore still believes that if “homework is important enough to be required, then it is important enough to be graded by the teacher” (1996, n.p.).

Corno believes that homework should be a basis of connecting home, school, and the community (2000). In order for this to occur, there needs to be some logical connection between the three entities. However, none of the homework involved in this study showed that homework could be related to home or the community, as it mostly consisted of skill practice. According to Kohn, if most homework consists of drilling of knowledge, meaningful connections are not made and therefore students are not inclined
to retain the information for a long period of time (2006). If this is such the case, then what is the purpose of homework? Most curriculums in the elementary grades repeat year after year because students are not expected nor do they have the mechanisms to entirely retain everything that is taught to them each year. This supports the idea that homework that is based on drilling of skills really has no long-term, positive consequences.

This study did show that students occasionally ask for help with their homework, thus keeping those who take care of the students (parents, siblings, babysitters) informed about what the children are learning in school, however this brings up another important question: Who’s doing the homework? In general, homework policies recommend that parents support their students in homework completion but do not act as “tutors” (Roderique et al., 1994, p.485), but where is the proof that this is how parents handle homework? Corno believes that there is no way to prove who actually completes the homework assignments, so how are educators to know (2000)? If a student is getting a large amount of help completing his homework so much to the point of a parent looking up every answer or correcting her child’s mistakes, then what means do the teachers have to grade these assignments? That is a lingering question of which the researcher would still like to know the answer.

A 1994 study suggested that more school districts have created homework policies as the result of studies that showed that American students spend less time on homework than students in other countries (Roderique, et al.). The researcher of the study in this particular school found that only one teacher even seemed remotely aware of a district policy requiring homework. So even though the district has a policy, it has not been made clear to the teachers that such a policy exists. However, according to
Roderique, et al., even when such a policy exists, it is a mere suggestion and the final say in homework is still left up to the individual teacher, leading to inconsistency across grade levels (1994). In this study, that is what appeared to be the case. Each teacher had their own way of handling homework assignments, from the manner in which it was graded to the amount assigned each night.

Corno and Xu found in their 2004 study that teachers typically assign homework in every subject that was covered in school that day. In this study, the researcher would have to agree that homework was never assigned in a subject that was not taught in school that day. However, due to the amount of subjects that the teacher would teach in a day, the teacher would never assign homework in every subject each night. This would lead to too much homework and too much time spent on homework. One study showed that students spent about 22 minutes on homework each night, consistent with the teachers’ belief that homework took about 15-30 minutes to complete (Copper, et al., 1998). Another study showed that the average elementary school student took 41.5 minutes to complete homework every night (Roderique, et al., 1994). My research of fourth-grade homework completion found that the average student spent no more than 30 minutes on homework each night, thus agreeing with the first study.

Currently, there are more inclusion classroom settings, in which students with disabilities are learning side-by-side with their peers in a general educational setting. The concern here is that the amount of homework assigned in this setting may not be appropriate for the student with disabilities. A 2001 study found that homework should be modified for students so that each student is receiving homework on his academic ability level that can be completed by the student himself without any additional
assistance (Bryan, et al., 2001). In this classroom, it was found that math homework was always modified for one of the students with disabilities as per the parents’ request.

Parents of students with disabilities are more likely to become frustrated when helping their children with homework, thus making the homework experience all that more unpleasant for these students (Bryan, et al., 2001). Frequently, the student’s parents would write notes complaining about the amount of homework that was assigned, and sometimes the homework would be returned written completely in one of the parents’ handwriting. Even though math was modified for this student, science, social studies, reading, spelling, and language arts were not. Perhaps all subjects should have been modified, when appropriate, so that the student would not have to write as much and could complete the homework entirely on his own without his parents having to get involved, as research suggests.

This study found that generally, students do not like homework, even though the majority of them think that it helps them do better in school. This relates to a 1998 study which found that students fail to see homework as important as their teachers do (Cooper, et al.). These fourth-grade students appear to see homework as an important part of school life, perhaps because of parent, teacher, or peer influence. A 2001 study suggested that students’ opinions of homework are based on that of their peers, so certainly, that is a possibility (Cooper, et al.). Studies have also shown that even if students do not like homework, it does not imply that they will not complete it, especially because homework completion is something that students can do to please their teachers and parents (Cooper, et al., 2001 & Corno, 2000). The fourth-grade students involved in this study, despite
their dislike of homework, frequently completed their homework on time. Whether they completed the assignments to please someone other than themselves is unknown.

A 2000 study found that elementary school students who complete homework assignments on a regular basis will develop stronger study skills in the long run (Corno). Although this cannot be measured in this study, which took place over a short period of time, this study did find that the majority of students felt that homework helps them do better in school. Even though students believe that homework is helping them, this may not always be the case. Coutts’ studies showed that students at the elementary school level do not understand that homework is supposed to encourage study skills, and in fact they may not be completing homework correctly, and thus homework is detrimental to their learning (2004). Frequently, these fourth-grade students would fail to follow directions and complete homework incorrectly. Corno includes a possible reason as to why this phenomena occurred: because the students were bored. When students find homework assignments to be boring, they may take less time to complete the homework by rushing through it and possibly fail to follow directions (2000).

Significance and Importance of Study to Educators

This study is important to educators because homework is a central part of school. It is important that teachers assign homework in ways that benefit their students in the best ways possible. It is equally important that school administrators who choose to mandate homework policies know how to make their policies fair for all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

If further research was to be done in this area, there are a few things that the researcher would recommend. When surveying parents, it should be asked if the parents
honestly have a lot of time to sit down with their children every night and help them complete their homework assignments. Varying family structures and tougher economical situations than ever before could very well be impeding on the idea that parents are able to help or even merely supervise homework completion each night. Researchers may also want to consider how homework may change as students move from grade level to grade level within the same school. It may also be beneficial to see how schools within the same district compare when it comes to homework practices.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this study was that it was only able to take place in one school with a small amount of teachers, students, and parents participating. Completing this study on a larger scale would have yielded more accurate results and perhaps very different findings. Another problem was that research was only able to be collected for a brief period of time, which was during the researcher’s student teaching experience. More time to complete the study would have allowed more focus group discussions and more observation data. A final limitation of this study was that the researcher did not have the ability to change homework assignments or policies in order to see how the results might have changed. There was simply not enough time to do so.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Teachers

The conclusions that can be made in this study of elementary school students and the best practices for assigning homework are the following. The most important thing to remember is that homework needs to have meaning. In this study, it was found that homework was assigned on a nightly basis; however students failed to take away any real meaning from their assignments. Even though they believed that homework helped them
do better in school, they weren't even completing the assignments correctly, so any meaning that they could be taking away from their homework did not happen. Students in this study were simply completing assignments because they had to, and studying teacher-made study guides because they wanted to memorize the material that they would be tested on. But where was the meaning behind these assignments? What is the meaning of memorizing material to students? Why is this material important for them to know? Were these things ever made clear to them?

Teachers should strive to make homework meaningful, for example by emphasizing good study skills. Instead of sending home tedious worksheets every night, teachers could explain to students that the material on the worksheet is what they will be tested on. Teachers could also find ways to expand students' knowledge of material by connecting it to the community or asking students to do something creative with the material. For example, instead of completing a worksheet on present tense verb forms, ask the students to search for present tense verbs in a newspaper or magazine, or have them write a creative story using present tense verbs. These types of homework assignments will not only promote connections but may provoke interest in the students to do something different than the normal homework assignments.

Secondly, homework should not be counted as a grade in terms of accuracy. The purpose of homework assignments is for students to practice learned skills, not to test for mastery. Grades should reflect student knowledge, and when students are tackling a homework assignment for the first time after just learning the material in school that day, there has been no opportunity for the students to master the material yet. If teachers grade homework, then they are grading their students on material that they have not yet
mastered. When these homework grades are thus factored into students grades for the marking period, it is not a fair representation of how well students have mastered the subject area.

Some teachers grade homework based on assignment completion. The reason why most teachers do this is because they want to reward students who show effort in school and because they only feel as if it is fair to count homework in some way so that students are not completing these assignments with no purpose. This basically means that students who complete their homework get As factored into their grades and students who do not get Fs factored in. This way, students who put forth the effort can have such effort reflected positively in their grades, regardless of whether or not they have mastered the material. Students who do not complete their homework and thus did not put forth any effort, will see this negatively reflected in their grades.

On the surface, this seems like a fair practice, but when you get down to it, it truly is not. Something that could not be measured in this study was the amount of encouragement students were receiving at home in homework completion. Encouragement could have a large effect on student effort. One has to wonder if the students who consistently did not turn in assignments were not doing so because they were not being motivated to at home in that there was no one there watching to make sure assignments got done. Likewise, were the students who were completing homework on a consistent basis being monitored closely at home to make sure it was done? Are these students motivated to do well? Are their parents always there to help them with homework when they need it? This is the problem with homework- teachers have no real
way of knowing the individual environments that their students go home to each night. So on this note, is it really fair to grade students on homework at all?

Even with all of these findings related to homework, one simple truth still remains. We live in a society where teachers will always assign homework and there is probably nothing we can do to stop that. In this society where teachers will always be expected to assign homework (and in some cases, grade it), the most important thing that teachers can do is find ways to make homework assignments meaningful and design them so that they could be completed independently. When considering independence, teachers should also keep in mind student ability levels and modify homework when necessary, so that students are each spending a fair amount of time on meaningful and beneficial homework assignments each night.
REFERENCES


