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# The impact of peer support on homework completion

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**THE IMPACT OF PEER SUPPORT ON HOMEWORK COMPLETION**

by

Joshua N. Garcia

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Psychology  
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For the degree of  
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Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my family and my girlfriend for all of their patience and help throughout this process.

## **Acknowledgment**

I'd like to acknowledge my thesis chair, Dr. Roberta Dihoff, for assisting me throughout the completion of this thesis.

## **Abstract**

Joshua N. Garcia

THE IMPACT OF PEER SUPPORT ON HOMEWORK COMPLETION

2015-2016

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Master of Arts in School Psychology

It has been found that students of the elementary level can benefit from peer support in academics. The purpose of this case study was to further explore the effects that peers teaching peers may have on the quality of homework. The participant was at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level of education in a public elementary school. Using a goal setting tool, the participant and investigator were able to benchmark the correctness of work completed by the participant in relation to how many items the participant could have gotten correct. The quality of completed homework during the intervention was compared to the quality of homework completed before the intervention. In this case study, the participant showed a growth in the quality of homework. Implications for success in future studies are discussed.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	v
List of Figures .....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Need for Study .....	1
Purpose.....	1
Hypothesis.....	1
Assumptions.....	1
Limitations .....	1
Summary .....	2
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	3
What is Homework .....	3
Who is Involved With Homework Assistance.....	5
Effects of Parental Assistance.....	5
The Need for Outside Assistance.....	6
Alternative Option for Assistance.....	7
Peers .....	8
Results of Past Peer Based Interventions.....	9
Why Peer Based Assistance Works .....	9
Learn by Helping .....	10
Conclusion .....	11
Chapter 3: Methods.....	12

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Participants.....	12
Materials .....	12
Procedure .....	12
Chapter 4: Results .....	14
Pre and Post Intervention Score .....	14
Quality.....	15
Pre-Intervention .....	16
During Intervention.....	16
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	18
Limitations .....	18
Sample Size.....	18
Control Group.....	18
Peer .....	19
Future Research .....	19
References.....	21
Appendix A: Goal Setting Tool .....	27
Appendix B: Pre and Post Intervention Record Sheet .....	28



## List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Official homework scores for all relevant assignments .....	15
Figure 2. Correctness of relevant assignments converted into a percentage grade .....	17

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Need for Study**

This study pertains to educational processes and socialization outside of the classroom. Homework is a part of learning and is meant to give opportunity to learn in a way different from that in the classroom. There is research on this topic, but most do not compare data on the quality of work before something was implemented to change it.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine if teaching homework and lessons will raise the quality of homework assignments. Ideally, this study has the potential to provide more information about socialization and its effects on learning.

#### **Hypothesis**

The participant will display an increase in quality of homework throughout the intervention compared to the quality of homework prior to the intervention.

#### **Assumptions**

It can be assumed that while teaching the topics of the assignment and explaining problem solving processes, the participant will be able to correct mistakes since it is now being verbalized.

#### **Limitations**

This study will not have enough participants to have the results generalized into a population. This is merely a single student's results which creates the limitation.

Since this was modified to a case study, the traditional peer aspect was also altered, creating another limitation.

## **Summary**

Past research suggest that there is potential for success in this style of learning.

Research on this topic did not have a set amount of participants. It can be inferred that the process of teaching and learning has more affect than a peer role in this process.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

For decades homework has been a sensitive topic to almost every student. Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, Greathouse (1998) define homework "...as tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be performed during nonschool hours (Cooper, 1989, p. 7)...". Why does it feel like homework takes more hours to complete than the actual class itself? Walberg (1991) says the average time spent on homework was 1 hour daily. Studies show that over time this number has increased which raises more questions.

#### **What is Homework**

What does homework actually do? In the early 20th century people theorized the mind to be a muscle (Cooper et al., 1998). As like any other muscle, you need to work and exercise to achieve greater things. Memorization is perceived to lead to knowledge and this mental exercise is great for brain growth. Moore (2012) says homework has many purposes beyond learning the topic or a lesson for a class: "It teaches responsibility, helps develop independent work habits and increases skill levels." (Moore, 2012). Power, Karustis, & Habboushe (2001) say homework can be divided into four different groups: practice assignments for past lessons, preparation work for future lessons, extension homework to help generalize concepts, and creative assignments that require the use of knowledge and concepts to complete. Elementary level students are usually assigned practice or preparation style homework. Xu (2005), in a study of 920 students, found that:

"Three quarters of the students (75.2%-77.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that doing homework helped them (a) develop a sense of responsibility, (b) learn to

work independently, (c) learn study skills, and (d) reinforce school learning. Six out of 10 students (60.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that homework helped develop good discipline.”

Is this homework actually serving the students any good? This brings up a controversial topic that goes back as far as the 1930’s. There has always been a trend in records that show concern in the area of homework and the amount given to students. For about a decade the supported theory was to embrace homework. In the 1940’s, this theory was reversed by saying we should not be teaching students by drills and repetition, but rather encourage problem solving abilities (Cooper et al., 1998).

The tug of war on the public's perception of homework was again shifted ten years later after the launch of the Sputnik satellite from Russia in the 1950’s. This caused America to revisit the issue with feelings of concern about the children being prepared for the changes in technology in the future (Cooper et al., 1998). It was in the 1960’s when children’s mental health became more of a concern. “Homework came to be seen as a symptom of too much pressure on students to achieve (Wildman, 1968).” (Cooper et al., 1998).

Nonetheless, research shows the amount of homework completed is a better predictor of academic outcomes compared to the amount of time spent doing homework (Cooper et al., 1998, Power et al., 2001). Aside from the hopeful trade of homework completion for good grades, homework can help students develop and keep good study habits (Keith & Degraff, 1997, Power et al., 2001).

## **Who is Involved with Homework Assistance**

Parents have a very big role in how homework is completed and how their child views it. Not many studies examine the influence family has on how the child perceives homework. Xu (2005) grouped a few studies and concluded that parents have more of an influence on the completion of homework than the teachers. Overall, studies show that family involvement with assignments improve self-regulated students and completion of homework (Xu & Corno, 2003).

Cooper (1989) studies the relationships affected by homework. It was found that homework caused friction between all parties: "...teacher and student, child and parent, and teacher and parent." (Cooper, 1989). Power et al. (2001) tell how important communication between the teacher and parents is in helping the student. The writers are striving to improve the parent-child relationship as it is proven "that combined parent- and child-training components are more effective than either the parent- or child-training components administered alone (Kazdin et al., 1992; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997)." (Power et al., 2001, p. 102-103). Cooper (1991) found a correlation between children's medical needs and the parties involved with the homework process. It became important to note what the parent, teacher, and student's feelings and attitudes were towards homework. Writers believe homework can provide many opportunities for parents to become involved in school and spark a home-school collaboration (Olympia, Sheridan, and Jenson, 1994, Power et al., 2001).

**Effects of parent assistance.** Since parents are assumed to be with their child when not in school, it can also be assumed that parents are around when their child is doing homework. It has been said that parental involvement with homework not only

helps with the assignment at hand, but increases motivation in children and, indirectly, increases academic performance (Silinskas, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2013). Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) found, in a meta-analysis, that there is a positive relation to children's performance and direct aid by parents. Note, the reverse relationship of a child's academic success and the likelihood of parental help has not been investigated much. However, the common assumption is parents become involved with assistance when the child's performance is poor academically (Pomerantz and Eaton, 2001).

Studies show that parents are very receptive to children who are not doing well and are very likely to intervene and adopt teaching behaviors to help their child do better with grades and in class (Chen and Stevenson, 1989, Levin, Levy-Shiff, Applebaum-Peled, Katz, Komar, and Meiran, 1997, Silinskas, Leppänen, Aunola, Parrila, and Nurmi, 2010). In Silinskas et al. (2013), the study on two types of parental intervention, monitoring and helping, "results suggest, overall, that children's academic performance has an 'evocative impact' on their parents' behavior". One common limitation is the lack of measurements taken on quality of assistance provided by the parents to the child. Forehand and McMahon (1981) say parent training is very effective in changing the parent's behaviors to achieve more for their child (as cited in Power et al., 2001). The parenting programs consist of trainings for the use of tools such as useful knowledge on when to reinforce productive behaviors and ignore opposing behaviors in their child (McMahon, Forehand, & Griest, 1981).

### **The Need for Outside Assistance**

Every situation is different and not all parents can help their child with assignments every day after school. However, it has become a legal obligation to ensure

all students are provided attention when struggling. With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, schools are constantly being monitored and pressured to make sure students are learning properly and can perform to the proficient level, or above, for their yearly assessment (Albay, 2013). Olympia et al. (1994) tailored and specified the definition of homework to mean “academic work assigned in school that is designed to extend the practice of academic skills into other environments during non-school hours”.

### **Alternative Option for Assistance**

Since parents can have such an influence on homework, parents may also need help if their child’s grades continue to diminish. The Homework Success Program is proven to be an effective program that incorporates children and parents to help the student with homework trouble (Power et al., 2001, p. 103). As mentioned earlier, programs that combine both parent and child are more likely to be effective than if administered for one or the other (Kazdin, Siegel, & Bass, 1992; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997, Power et al., 2001). This program is for students in elementary level grades with significant difficulties with homework. However, the program will solely depend on the leader’s experience and capabilities to lead groups in a proper manner.

When the student is still suffering and cannot complete work or needs assistance, many schools offer an after school program. These programs vary in what is offered from tutors to simply providing a set time to work on assignments and catch up. “Before- and after-school tutoring programs have been identified as having the potential to turn academic failure into academic success” (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, and Schumaker, 2001).

Some after school programs are very strict in what the focus of the program is. Some programs, like enrichment programs, focus on social aspects of learning and



physical activity and in turn, students obtain knowledge and language skills (Neuman, 2010). Others focus on teaching and instructional tutoring. Instructional tutoring focuses on curricular topics and lessons (Albay, 2013). “Label tutoring or assignment-assistance tutoring is where there is individual tutoring or a small group of students receiving assistance” (Albay, 2013). Hock et al. (2001) recognizes that there are multiple functions an after school program can serve effectively.

### **Peers**

The purpose of the current study is to incorporate a peer supported after-school program to increase the homework grade in elementary level students. Latino and Unite (2012) support the statement that peer collaboration gives a robust effect to educational outcomes. The same authors quoted: “McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1986, 63) concluded ‘the best answer to the question of what is the most effective method of teaching is that it depends on the goal, the student, the content, and the teachers . . . but the next best answer is students teaching other students.’” (Latino and Unite, 2012). Nelson (2013) agrees that a person gives meaning to a situation which sparks motivation within an individual to give more effort on a task. “There is a wealth of evidence that peer teaching is extremely effective for a wide range of goals, content, and students of different levels and personalities (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon 1981)” (McKeachie et al., 1986).

A peer-assisted learning (PAL) approach is supported by Ehly and Topping (1998) because, as they wrote, education is not only knowledge and skill, but it should also be noted that motivation and confidence from interaction with peers can have a profound effect on academics. In comparison to teacher instructed approaches, peer level

instructions like PAL approach showed higher achievement in academics, improvements in interpersonal relationships, enhanced social development, and motivation (Ehly and Topping, 1998). The same writers explained that the advantages of PAL gave a “greater transfer of learning across time...” and an “increased amounts of active student engagement” (Ehly and Topping, 1998).

### **Results of Past Peer Based Assistance**

Past experiments in the educational realm show that students who participate in small groups formed to facilitate conversation on class topics without a teacher do just as well as students who were in the lecture with the teacher (Gruber and Weitman, 1962). These students were involved in more question asking behavior which made them superior in levels of curiosity. To further provide truth in these findings, Webb and Grib (1967) compared six studies of student facilitated discussions to instructor lectured discussions. Achievement tests showed that the student facilitated discussions were more favorable than the instructor lectured discussions. “Both students and instructors reported that the student-led discussions increased student motivation; and students who had been exposed to student-led discussions tended to favor them over instructor-led discussions as a supplement to lectures.” (McKeachie et al., 1986).

### **Why Peer Based Assistance Works**

The researchers believe this happens because the students have a sense of freedom which provides support to ask questions freely, express opinions, and compare them to those of their peers. This is not likely to happen in a lecture style class. Students also feel peer support is better than staff because peers are more likely to relate to problems and are not as authoritarian (Moust and Schmidt, 1994, Topping, 1996). Looking at the

overall picture, traditionally, this holds truth. A small group of students who are able to express opinions and expose misconceptions of relevant topics should work as previous studies have shown. McKeachie et al. (1986) did note, however, that peers encouraging each other's bias may not be effective in learning. To make sure peer discussion groups are efficient and effective, Gruber and Weltman (1962) suggest the use of "sufficient resources" to help "less knowledgeable students reconstruct their understanding".

**Learn by helping.** Aside from being able to ask questions freely amongst peers without judgment, theories state that peer help is not only for the less knowledgeable students but also benefits the higher knowledge level student. Topping (1996) says the perception of peer tutoring has changed over time. Throughout the use of peer tutoring, it was assumed that the effectiveness came from knowledge trickling down from a teaching professional, to higher knowledge students, and lastly to the lower knowledge leveled students. To simplify, "...more able students helping less able students to learn in co-operative working pairs or small groups carefully organized by a professional teacher" (Topping, 1996). New definitions are similar to, students "...from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching" (Topping, 1996). Note, new definitions incorporate the element that something happens cognitively when a student teaches a topic.

There is an inherent cognitive process in peer structured tutoring sessions where the value of learning derives from verbalizing and inquiring (Gartner, Kohler and Riessman 1971, Durling and Schick 1976, Bargh and Schul 1980, Webb 1982, Foot, Shute, Morgan and Barron 1990, Forman 1994). This claim supports one of the many advantages in PAL programs that find "higher levels of cognitive reasoning" in students

(Ehly and Topping, 1998). Topping (1996) uses phrases such as “Learning by Teaching” and “to teach is to learn twice” to express that not only is the tutoree learning in the sessions, but the peer tutor teaching the lesson is learning as well. The same writer infers that the mere preparation to explain a topic or lesson to a peer is proposed to enhance processes in cognition “by increasing attention to and motivation for the task, and necessitating review of existing knowledge and skills.” (Topping, 1996). Cognition is going to be challenged to simplify and clarify information being portrayed. To do this, new associations are made while existing information is being reorganized.

Annis (1983) provides proof for this theory. In this study, there were three groups with the same study material but different tasks as to what to do with this material. One group only read the material, the other group read material anticipating teaching the material to a peer, and the last group read the material with anticipation to teach to a peer and then did so. The group that only read the material did not do as good as the group that anticipated to teach the material. The group that actually taught the material to a peer did the best of all three groups. Peer focused groups have the potential to be an all-around learning experience, not a one way lesson.

## **Conclusion**

The current study wishes to add to the literature and explore deeper into the peer educating phenomenon. In addition, the author would like to combine peer education and add in an element to guide and drive motivation further. Goal setting is hypothesized to add an edge to further motivate the students to complete and learn material.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Participant**

The selected participant in this study returned the consent form in a timely manner and was able to start immediately. The participant was in the third grade in a public school and also enrolled in the after school program. The participant was recruited by a letter that was sent home informing the parent/guardian about the potential benefit the study can have for the student. The recruitment letter ensured that the parent/guardian understood that the study is separate from the school and is after regular school hours. The parent/guardian of the participant returned the consent form and understood there were no guarantees, incentives, or compensation for their participation in the study.

#### **Materials**

Items used for collecting data included a goal setting tool and a chart for recording pre and post intervention grades and scores. The goal setting tool, located in Appendix A, recorded how many items were to be completed on the selected homework assignment and how many items that were completed were completed correctly. These recordings represented the quantity and quality of the selected assignment. The pre and post intervention records sheet, located in Appendix B, was given to the participant's teacher on the first and last day of the intervention to complete. Homework assignments given by the teacher to complete were also required.

#### **Procedures**

Once the letter of consent was received from the parent/guardian of the participant, the study began the following week. The investigator informed the

participant's teacher of the study and the Pre/Post Intervention sheet that needed to be completed and returned. The first meeting with the participant started by informing the participant that this was not a tutoring session or a punishment. The participant was informed of the process for each meeting for the next three weeks. The investigator encouraged questions at any point from the participant. The participant was asked to be available two times per week for a 1 hour session and to bring homework assignments given by the teacher, a writing utensil, and anything needed to complete the assignment.

The participant was told that a key part of this study depended on the participant teaching the homework and its' lesson to the investigator. This included the directions, the topic, and thought processes while completing the assignment. During the sessions, the investigator and participant used the goal setting tool. Before starting the assignment, participant recorded the number of items that were desired to be completed. The participant then recorded how many of these completed items were going to be correct. After completing the assignment, the participant compared the results to the goals set prior to beginning the assignment.

Each assignment was graded strictly for the study and not for official academic records. The correctness of each assignment was converted into a percent to unify and compare results.

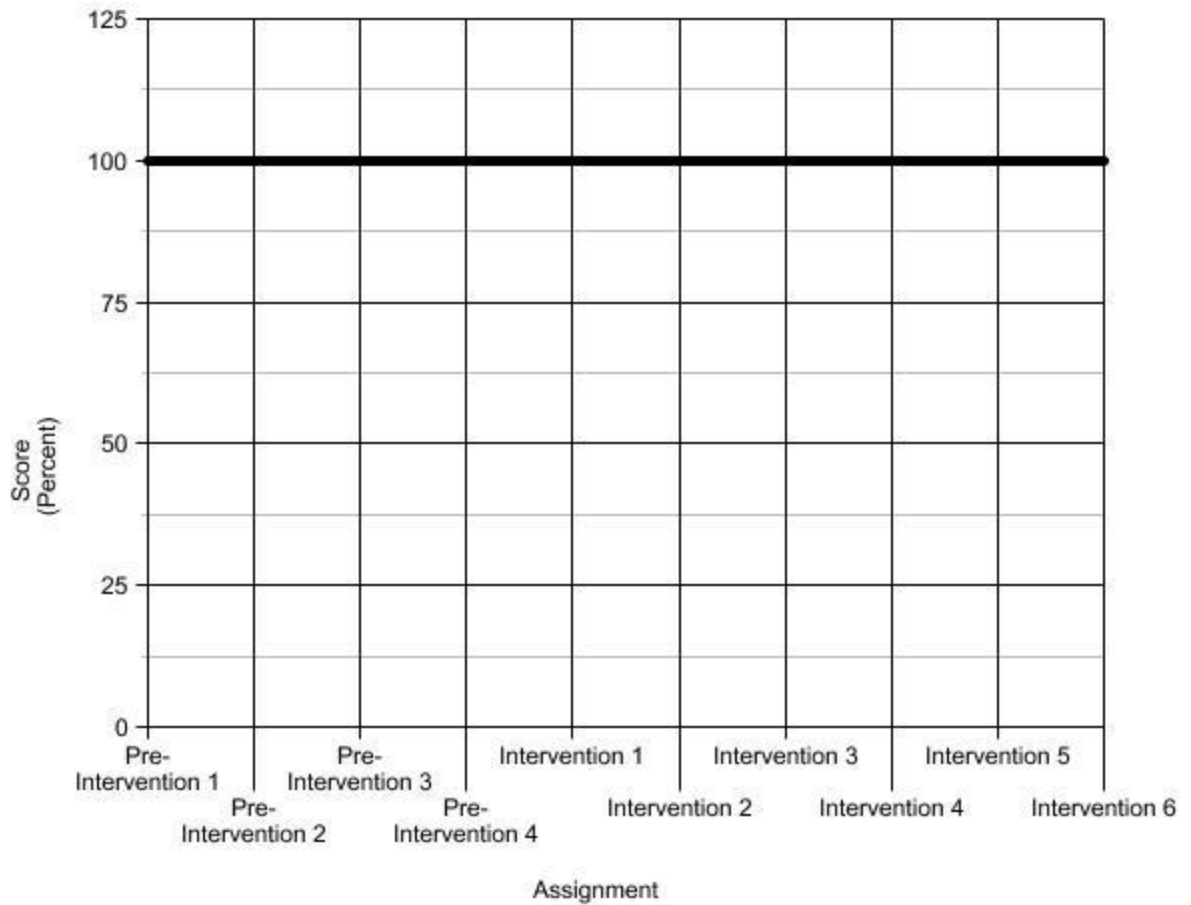
## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This study took a look into the quality and completion of homework. Findings show that the participant's history for completion was not a problematic area; however, the quality of the completed work did not match the grade given to each assignment on academic records. In class, homework was given grades for completion and not correctness.

#### **Pre and Post Intervention score**

The teacher of the participant's class did not grade homework for correctness. Rather, the grade was based strictly for completion. This allowed the participant to maintain a score of 100% for homework. With this information, the investigator was supplied with the last 4 homework assignments to compare quality. The teacher's records indicate that all 4 assignments were consistent at 100%, contributing to the matching overall homework score. After the investigator graded these assignments, the quality did not match the official grade given to the assignments. After the intervention was complete, the homework score remained the same at 100%. This can be seen in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Official homework scores for all relevant assignments.

## Quality

The homework assignments completed during the intervention maintained a full completion status. After assignments were completed in each session, the investigator graded them for correctness. Overtime, the participant learned to look at the details of the assignment while teaching the investigator. This had an effect on the quality of the completed homework. These results can be seen in Figure 2. The goal setting tool,



located in Appendix A, could have possibly had an effect on how the participant completed the assignments.

**Pre-intervention.** The pre-intervention assignments were of lower quality ranging from 0% to 85.71% correctness within the 4 assignments. These assignments were completed 2 weeks prior to the intervention. The assignments were also completed in the schools after school program that the participant was enrolled in. Similar to the current study, this program, provided by the school, had a designated time for students to work on homework for 1 hour.

**During intervention.** There were 6 assignments fully completed during the intervention. The quality of the completed homework ranged from 81.25% to 100%. The correctness of these assignments did not affect the grade the participant has in the class since the homework was graded based on completion. The participant spoke through each assignment. This promoted verbalization of thought processes and a better understanding of the assignment. When charted, results from these graded assignments showed an increase in quality compared to the pre-intervention assignments.

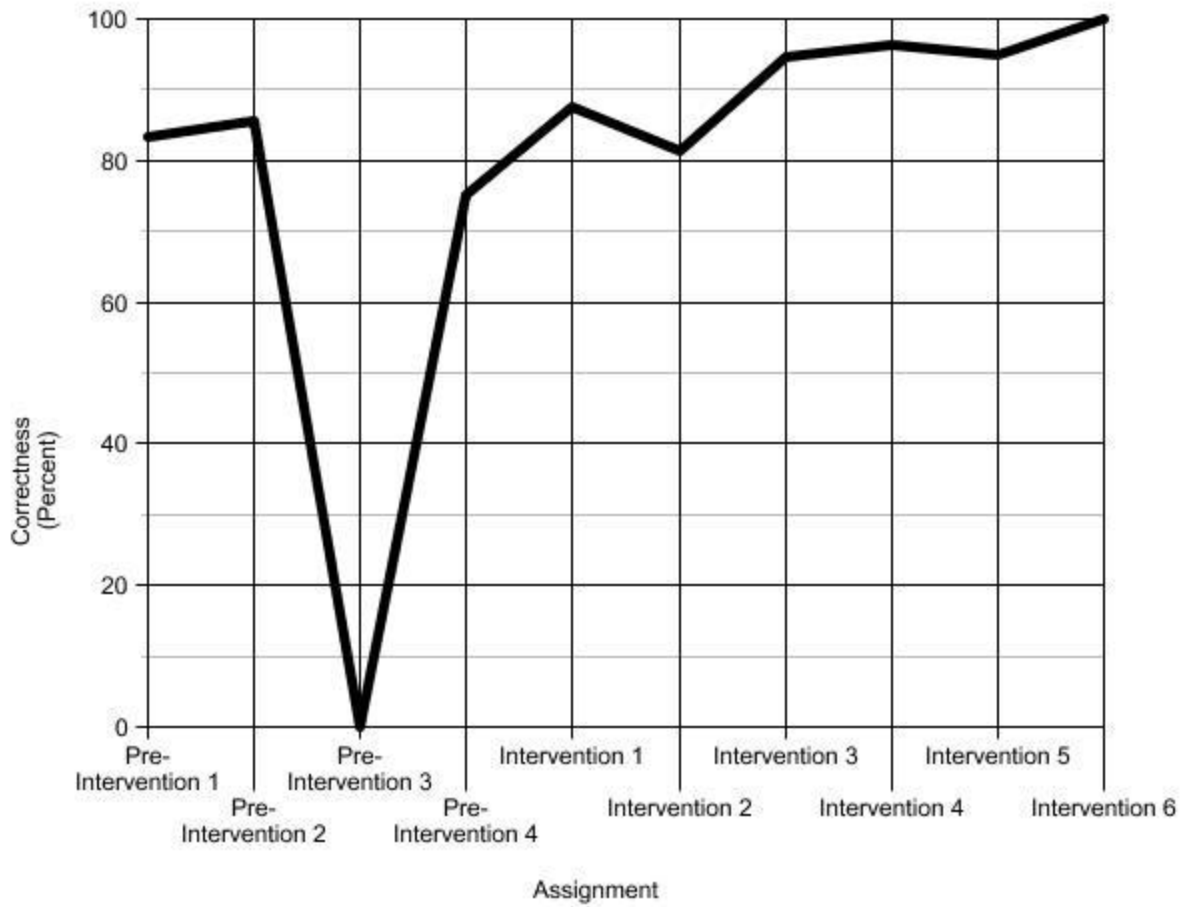


Figure 2. Correctness of relevant assignments converted into a percentage grade.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Limitations

This study came across a list of limitations that had a major effect on the outcome and ability to get reliable results. In the first chapter, we hypothesized that the participant would show a higher quality in completed homework when comparing to the quality of homework before the intervention. Although this was found to be true, the following limitations give reason not to consider this study a complete success. Due to time constraints and revisions during the approval process, the study had to be modified within its boundaries. The researcher needed a few levels of approval from the principal of the site that the study took place in. Getting approval letters took a majority of the time before being able to send the study to be approved to the eIRB. After revisions were made and officially approved, the investigator started immediately.

**Sample size.** The investigator sent letters for recruitment immediately after receiving approval for the study to every 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student in the school. There was only 1 participant who returned the letter of consent signed in a timely manner. There were no other participants who volunteered to participate in the study. Due to a lack of time, the study had to continue as a case study instead of the original plan. This had a major effect on the process and outcome of the study. The modifications made to the study were minor, however, the original plan for the study depended heavily on peer relations.

**Control group.** The original desired population was 8 or more student participants in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The investigator planned to have an experimental

group and a control group. The control group would have done homework quietly as they would normally if in a classroom. Most importantly, this group would not have facilitated conversation. The experimental group would have had facilitated conversations and the same length of time to do their homework as the control group. In the experimental group, participants would have taught others about their homework topic, the directions, and their goals. This group would have also had the luxury to discuss concerns about relevant homework and work together with others to solve problems.

**Peer.** Due to the need for modification to the study because of a lack of participants, the role of the peer needed to be filled. To continue the study, the investigator needed to step into the peer role. The investigator had to keep in mind how the participant viewed the filled role. The investigator had to be mindful not to give off vibes of authority or being of higher importance. It was repeated that in these sessions, both the investigator and participant are doing homework and that the participation was not for punishment or for tutoring and extra assistance.

The participant experienced feelings of being forced to participate off of the assumption of having bad grades, even though this was a known unreasonable assumption.

### **Future Research**

Although this study had major limitations, the findings were interesting. In the future, there should be a longer study that allows students to utilize the time in after school programs to do homework in this facilitated manner. Future research should consider sample sizes, and if possible, having a control group. Both groups should still have data on the quality of completed assignments before the intervention. This will

supply investigators with a solid foundation on how well the participants do in either group. To help generalize findings, investigators may want to recruit participants from different settings.

These findings could potentially help others figure out how students prefer to learn and what environments students thrive in. Future research should keep in mind the content of work and possibly keep the subject unified across all participants. This will assist in keeping conversation on topic while facilitation discussions in sessions. Another part of the study could measure levels of participation in sessions and compare results to other participants within the same group. Although participants are in sessions, their participation is needed for the intervention to be effective.

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## Appendix B

### Pre and Post Intervention Record Sheet



## Pre-Intervention Records

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name (For office use only. Remove at completion of study.)	Student Identifier for researcher	Homework Percentage	Reading Score	Math Score	Grade	Group (1 or 2)
	1					
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					

Version # 1  
Version Date: 2/9/16



## Post-Intervention Records

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name (For office use only. Remove at completion of study.)	Student (Identifier for researcher)	Homework Percentage	Reading Score	Math Score	Grade	Group (1 or 2)
	1					
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					

Version #: 1  
Version Date: 2/9/16