Homework in Elementary School: a Guide for Educators

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HOMEWORK IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:
A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

by
DeAnn Hoffman

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

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ABSTRACT

Homework in Elementary School: A Guide for Educators

Homework in elementary school has been the subject of much research and controversy. In this project, the author created an inservice designed with the intention of discussing both the positive and negative effects of homework in elementary school. The target audience was parents, elementary teachers and administrators. The presentation provided a brief history of homework, a synthesis of the theories of both the proponents and opponents of homework, best practices for the assigning of homework and examples of school districts’ homework guidelines and policies.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Homework has been a widely debated topic since the early years of the 20th C. (Simplicio, 2005). Although the practice of assigning homework on a daily basis has been deemed academically sound by most teachers and administrators in the educational community, on the opposing side, many parents with children in grades from kindergarten through college argue that students are expected to spend too much of their time out of school in completion of homework assignments that, often, are repetitious and meaningless (Simplicio). Children seem to be busier than ever and have to juggle many activities, whether it is sports, work, family obligations, extracurricular activities, and much more. All of this is in addition to the homework teachers assign on a daily basis. Yet, research (Goldstein, 1960; Epps, 1966; both cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004) conducted through surveys, interviews, and literature reviews, conducted by educators who work on all levels and in all areas of education, have concluded that there was a positive correlation between homework and higher levels of student achievement (Simplicio).

Statement of the Problem

Since the beginning of education, the assignment of homework has been a popular and consistent teacher strategy. When used properly, homework, from the elementary

1
through the university level, can be an effective method to reinforce educational learning goals. However, recently, a controversy has arisen as to the amount of time a student should be required to spend on homework, especially at the elementary level. In addition, the quality and usefulness of the assignments themselves have been called into question.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project will be to explore the theories and logic behind the assignment of homework at the elementary level. For this project, the author will review numerous studies and their findings in the literature about homework and student achievement. Also, this author will review both sides of the homework argument and its effect on the classroom today, as well as the current policies of comparable school districts. It is the researcher’s opinion that the staff, the community, and the students should have a clear understanding of what appropriate homework is at the elementary level. An inservice, to detail the findings of this research will be presented to members of the community, including parents, staff members, and administrators.

Chapter Summary

It is this researcher’s position that homework should be assigned with clear expectations for both student and parent. Also, educators must have a point and purpose for the assignment of homework. In Chapter 2, the Review of Literature, this researcher will present the history and background theories of homework, as well as the opposing and supporting views of homework. In addition, the homework policies of comparable school districts will be discussed. In Chapter 3, Methods, the procedures for the development of this project will be presented.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this project will be to develop an inservice presentation for members of the community including parents, teachers, and administrators. The presentation will include the findings from research about the appropriate levels of homework for elementary aged students, the best practices of assigning homework, as well as the roles of both the student and parent in regard to the completion of homework. Homework has been a widely debated topic since the early years of the 20th C. Many studies (Cook & Brown, 1935; DiNapoli, 1937; Teahan, 1935; all cited in Farrow, Tymnes, & Henderson, 1999) have been published which claim to support or refute the widely held popular belief that the assignment of homework improves academic performance (Farrow et al.). The assumptions about the value of homework are derived from what is known about homework at the secondary level. What about the homework philosophy at the primary level? Should it be assumed that whatever is appropriate for the older students will be effective for students in primary schools? According to Farrow et al., more serious consideration should be given to the nature and frequency of homework requirements in primary schools.

Definition of Homework

According to Mish (2006), editor of the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the definition of homework is an assignment given to a student to be completed outside the
regular class period. LaConte (1981, as cited in Eddy, 1984) defined homework as the out-of-class tasks that a student is assigned as an extension of classroom work. Also, LaConte added that there are three types of homework commonly assigned in the United States: (a) practice, (b) preparation, and (c) extension.

*Practice Assignments*

According to Eddy (1984), the use of practice assignments reinforce newly acquired skills or knowledge. For example, students, who have learned about a particular chemical reaction may be asked to find examples of the reaction in their own environment. These assignments are most effective when: (a) they are carefully evaluated by the teacher, (b) they are matched to the ability and background of the individual student, and (c) students are asked to apply recent learning directly and personally.

*Preparation Assignments*

Preparation assignments are intended to provide background information and can include readings in the class text, library research, collecting materials for a class demonstration, and other activities that require the gathering or organizing of information before a class discussion or demonstration (Eddy, 1984). According to Eddy, effective preparation includes guidelines on why and how the assignment should be completed. “In addition, accurately estimating a task’s level of difficulty and coordinating the assignment of difficult homework among various courses may help teachers avoid overburdening students” (pp. 1-2).
Extension Assignments

The purpose of extension assignments are to encourage individualized and creative learning by an emphasis on student initiative and research (Eddy, 1984). Frequently, with long term, continuing projects that parallel class work, extension assignments require students to apply previous learning.

History of Homework

In the literature on the topic of homework and its surrounding controversies, it is important to examine its history. How has homework changed over the last century? How much homework did students actually do? Four different time periods are discussed in this section: (a) the 19th C., (b) the era of progressive education, (c) the mid 20th C., and (d) the period that covers the last 25 years.

The 19th C.

In the 19th C., homework was rarely viewed as a problem. High school students were the only ones burdened with much homework; the common expectation was 2-3 hours per night, weekends included (Reese, 1995, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004). At that time, elementary school included Grades 1-4, and homework was rare and often impossible due to the irregular attendance patterns and the typically overcrowded and multiaged classrooms. According to Gill and Schlossman, often, the homework in grammar school, Grades 5-8, was burdensome, and the basic method of teaching subject matter was: (a) drill, (b) memorization, (c) recitation, and (d) required sustained preparation at home for classroom success. During this time period, in order for students
to demonstrate their academic abilities, they were required to orally recite their lessons in class. To do this, they had little choice but to say those lessons over and over at home the night before. Before a child could continue his or her schooling, a family had to decide that chores and other family obligations would not interfere with the nightly homework hours that would go into preparation for lessons the next day. Toward the end of the 19th C., the first systematic critique of homework arose as a result of a research project conducted by Dr Joseph Mayer Rice (1897, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004) a physician who was interested in children’s health and learning. Gill and Schlossman (1996, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004) reported that Rice focused on children’s spelling, which was the epitome of the drill/memorization/recitation pedagogy. Rice concluded that “children’s often arduous devotion to practicing spelling at home was unrelated to their later spelling ability” (as quoted in Gill & Schlossman, p. 175). According to Rice, spelling homework was ineffective; not only did it fatigue children and alienate them from school, but it did not translate into higher academic achievement. The emergence of homework as a widely debated, controversial issue in educational discourse was about to begin.

The Era of Progressive Education

According to Gill and Schlossman (1996, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004), the rise and rapid dissemination of the study of the child, child health, parent education, and progressive education movements fundamentally altered the context for educational discourse on homework in the first part of the 20th C. Since homework before Grade 4 was still uncommon and, thus, a non-issue, the major focus of concern was children in
Grades 4-8 in this era. The drill/memorization/recitation routine was denounced as a threat to preteens’ physical and mental health. Members of organizations, such as the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA), urged school boards to regulate and minimize how much homework teachers could assign. Authors of popular and professional educational periodicals joined the diatribes; homework forced on children, too young to bear its burdens, was seen as among the worst of school atrocities. According to Gill and Schlossman (1996), the attacks on homework continued to increase between the 1920s and the 1940s, the heyday of progressive education. In many communities, homework was eliminated in some or all grades. Virtually no one proposed that homework be formalized or regularized for children in the early elementary grades. According to Gill and Schlossman (2004), one of the most serious charges against homework was brought in 1930 by staff of the American Child Health Association, who associated homework with child labor as the “chief causes of the high death and morbidity rates from tuberculosis and heart disease among adolescents” (p. 175). Many critics of homework reported that it threatened children’s health because it deprived them of the outdoor play that was essential to healthy development. In the 1930s, a concern for the education of the whole child became the theme of the progressive education movement. School staff were responsible for not only a child’s intellectual growth but their physical and emotional growth as well.

At the time, critics argued that, not only did homework cause serious collateral damage to family and child, also, it failed in academic terms and did not improve children’s learning (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Gill and Schlossman reported that, during the 1930s,
school measurement experts conducted research on homework. Researchers, such as Cook and Brown (1935, as cited in Gill & Schlossman), concluded that homework in the prehigh school grades had no beneficial effect on school achievement.

*The Mid 20th C.*

Homework remained a controversial issue during the 1950s and 1960s but, in both substance and tone, the discourse changed in dramatic ways (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). According to Gill and Schlossman, progressivism was replaced by an academic excellence movement that required higher standards and grounded subject matter instruction in the conceptual approaches of the academic disciplines. Gill and Schlossman (2000, as quoted in Gill & Schlossman), stated that “Homework was integral to a new Cold War strategy that made education central to meeting the threat of Soviet technological and military superiority” (p. 177). After the Soviets launched *Sputnik* in 1957, the homework problem was thought to be part of a national crisis. It was thought that the U.S. was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter since they worked harder and achieved more in school. Progressive education was blamed as the cause for U.S. failures in space and for undermining its economic and military supremacy. Whereas, in the first half of the century, the perceived problem was the effect of too much homework on families and children, the new educational discourse pronounced too little homework an indicator of the dismal state of U.S. schooling.

According to Gill and Schlossman (2004), favorable views of homework began to appear in scholarly and popular educational periodicals in the 1950s and 1960s. One researcher, Goldstein (1960, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004), a professor at the
Stanford University Medical School, analyzed the data of scholars in the 1930s and showed that homework positively influenced student achievement in the elementary and high school grades. Research and politics led to the rehabilitation of homework as a normal and necessary tool in the teaching and learning process, although homework in the early elementary grades was still uncommon. In the 1950s, new, more positive attitudes toward homework began to circulate, and with the addition of higher and tougher standards introduced into school curricula, school board members across the country took steps to overturn long established policies, instituted between 1900 and 1940, to limit how much homework teachers could assign.

However, even with the changes in attitudes about homework, the discourse did not eliminate all elements of progressive education. Even as homework was rehabilitated, it was reinvented to increase student and parent buy-in to the movement for academic excellence (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Gill and Schlossman (2000, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004), reported that this homework reform movement was the first sustained effort in the 20th C. to seriously address issues of content and scheduling in homework.

The essential argument of the reformers was that homework was equally compatible with the principles of academic excellence and progressive education (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). They believed that the pursuit of academic excellence required alternatives to traditional textbooks and memorization. “They argued that teachers could raise the academic content of homework and make it more enjoyable for students by incorporating activity-based, hands on, individualized assignments that were equally compatible with the goals of academic excellence and progressive education” (p. 178).
In addition, according to the reformers, parents had a positive role to play in their children's formal as well as informal learning. Homework was a vital link in school/parent communication and, therefore, essential to building public support for higher educational standards.

*The Last 25 years (1970-2003)*

The ideas and structures of the academic excellence movement fell apart very suddenly during 1968-1972 (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). They could not stand up to the political and cultural authority that surrounded the Vietnam War and the late civil rights movement. During this time of unrest, student lack of discipline and respect for teacher authority was the major focus. The biggest concern was not what types of homework might best enhance student achievement, but whether students could be persuaded to attend school regularly, pay attention to their teachers, and study seriously.

Educational standards were in decline, and concern about this issue resulted in a new academic excellence movement that sought to move schools *back to basics* (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). The authors of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983, as cited in Gill & Schlossman), published a *Nation at Risk* in which there was a call for a new excellence movement and an emphasis on the level of mediocrity in the schools. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* brought homework back into the national discussion. Years later, Bennett of the U.S. Department of Education (1986, as cited in Gill & Schlossman) published *What Works*, which endorsed homework unequivocally and provided specific recommendations for educators. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, educators, parents, and policymakers endorsed the virtues of homework.
“Its value was touted both for academic and character building purposes, and for promoting America’s international competitiveness” (Gill & Schlossman p. 179).

Most recently, anecdotal reports of deep parental concern about excessive homework have appeared in the press with increasing frequency (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). For example, in USA Today, Winerip (1999, as cited in Gill & Schlossman) reported that the U.S. is in the midst of a period of “homework intensification” (p. 179). However, according to Public Agenda (2000, as cited in Gill & Schlossman), a nationwide poll in 2000 found that only 10% of parents reported that their children had too much homework, which indicated that, overwhelmingly, parents continued to support homework.

There is still a question about the amount of time children spend on homework. Is there some merit to what is being written about homework in the popular press articles? Gill and Schlossman (2003b, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004) cited the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2003), which indicated that, throughout the last two decades, the majority of students at all grade levels averaged less than 1 hour of homework nightly. According to Hofferth and Sandberg (2000, as cited in Gill & Schlossman) the only age group, where there has been a substantial increase in homework over the last two decades, is the youngest group, ages 6-8, for whom homework increased from 52 minutes weekly in 1981 to 128 minutes weekly in 1997. The academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has resulted in an increase of homework expectations only for the youngest children, for whom research suggests that homework has the fewest benefits (Cooper, 1989, 2001, as cited in Gill & Schlossman). According to Gill and
Schlossman, increases in homework in middle school and high school, where it is most likely to be most beneficial, have neither been substantial nor sustained over the last two decades.

Homework Theories

Homework is a controversial issue and has been for many years. Coulter (1979), an advocate of homework, claimed that it: (a) encourages student initiative, (b) develops independent learning skills, and (c) allows time for practice and application of what has been learned in school. Its critics, like Kralovec and Buell (1999, as cited in Bempechat, 2004) argue that it interrupts children's leisure time and denies them access to community activities. Coulter reported that critics see homework as an instrument of class discrimination, in the sense, that children from lower income homes do not have the resources appropriate for home study and must compete on unequal terms with their middle class peers. It is important to look at both sides of the homework argument in greater detail to understand all aspects of the controversy.

Proponents of Homework

Many people believe that, when homework is given with clear expectations and purpose and feedback is provided to the student, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. Bempechat (2004), who looked at the social/cognitive perspective of homework stated, “as a pedagogical practice, homework plays a critical, long-term role in the development of children’s achievement motivation” (p. 189). According to Bempechat, “homework assignments provide children with the time and experience they need to develop beliefs about achievement and study habits that are helpful for learning,
including the value and effort and the ability to cope with mistakes and difficulty” (p. 189). These skills do not develop overnight, rather they are fostered over time through daily interactions with parents and teachers, whose own beliefs and attitudes about learning and education have a fundamental influence on children’s developing beliefs about their own intellectual abilities (Sigel McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992, as cited in Bempechat). According to Bempechat, it is important to look beyond grades and test scores as a primary test of homework effectiveness. If the goal is to prepare children for the responsibilities of secondary school and beyond, it is necessary to pay as much attention to the development of skills which help children take initiative in their learning and maintain motivation.

Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, and Greenhouse (1998, as cited in Bempechat, 2004) pointed out that there is evidence that demonstrates that academic achievement is positively related to homework completion. For example, Keith and Cool (1992, as cited in Bempechat) found that, regardless of students’ ability or prior course work, the amount of time they devoted to homework increased their achievement. However, it is important to note that the positive association, between the amount of homework that students completed and their grades, was found for the middle and high school levels (e.g., grades 6-10). In the lower grades (e.g., grades 2-4), this relationship was negative.

One of the arguments of those opposed to homework is that students from low income and non English speaking families are at a disadvantage in their ability to complete homework. According to Kralovec and Buell (1991, as cited in Bempechat, 2004), homework “punishes students in poverty for being poor” (p. 5). However, Bempechat
stated that this “notion is disingenuous at best and would have us feel sorry for, rather than challenge, low income students to do their best” (p. 5). In fact, low/income parents and their students’ teachers want their children to be challenged and prepared for the increasingly competitive world of work. Homework is an integral part of this preparation. According to Bempechat, to decrease or eliminate homework on the well intentioned, but flawed assumption, that poor parents would be grateful to have less to do with their children’s education, is to do a great disservice to these parents and their children. A policy like this would communicate that teachers feel sorry for these parents and believe that they lack the competence to help their children. “The low expectations conveyed by this view would serve, ultimately to suppress academic achievement” (p. 5). Bempechat cited Catholic educators as an example of how homework can improve academic performance, regardless of social class. According to Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993, as cited in Bempechat), Catholic schools are institutions where the poorest children in the U.S. do exceptionally well, as evidenced by: (a) lower dropout rates, (b) higher grade point averages (GPAs) and Standard Academic Test (SAT) scores, and (c) greater college acceptance rates. In Catholic schools, poor students are helped to attain high levels of proficiency through demanding course work and consistently high expectations and standards for schoolwork and homework. Polite (1996, as cited in Bempechat), reported that Catholic school teachers of low income students reported feeling they felt responsible to demand hard work of their students, in part, because they are aware of the hurdles they will face in the future.
There are many positive advantages and effects of homework, and Cooper (1994) identified several. First, one of the most obvious effects, is that the use of homework will improve students' retention and understanding of the material that is covered. Also, with homework, students' study skills and attitudes toward school will improve, and students become aware that learning occurs outside as well as inside of school. According to Cooper, homework has many potential nonacademic outcomes as well; most of these involve student independence and responsibility. “Finally, homework can involve parents and the community in schooling, increasing their appreciation of education and allowing them to reinforce students’ achievement” (p. 3).

*Opponents of Homework*

Just as advocates have their arguments for the assignment of homework, critics have their reasons to oppose homework. Cooper (1994) identified the possible negative effects of homework. First, some educators believe that any activity can remain rewarding for only a limited time. Thus, if students are required to spend too much time on academic material, eventually, they will become bored with it. Second, homework limits the time students can spend on activities outside the school, such as sports, extracurricular activities, and community activities that can inspire important lessons, both academic and nonacademic. Third, parental involvement, however well intentioned, can and often becomes parental interference. Unwillingly, parents may confuse children if the methods that parents use to help them differ from that of the teacher. Fourth, homework can lead to undesirable behaviors such as cheating, either through copying of assignments or receiving assistance with homework that involves more than tutoring. Finally, Cooper
noted that the use of homework can promote existing inequalities. Students from lower socioeconomic homes are likely to have more difficulty in the completion of homework than their more well to do peers. In addition he stated that “poorer students are also more apt to work after school or may not have a quiet, well-lit place to do assignments” (p. 3).

According to Horowitz (2005), Director of Professional Services of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, although there are benefits to doing homework, there are a number of pitfalls as well. First, homework has been shown to provide different benefits at different stages and grade levels in school. A mismatch in homework assigned and student readiness can cause frustration and a student’s reluctance to do the work. Also, Horowitz stated that:

Assigning too much homework may result in disinterest and fatigue; students overburdened with homework assignments will also begin to view their assignments as punitive and will do what they can to either avoid doing it, and yes, even cheat to get it done. (p. 4)

Kralovec strongly opposed homework in education today. She was quoted in the Harvard University Gazette (2000), in which she stated that “Homework simply does not make sense in this brave new constructivist world of teaching and learning” (p. 1). Also, she stated:

When work goes home, teachers have little control over who does the work. Teachers are unable to scaffold new knowledge, and are unaware of each student’s true educational progress. American kids are crying out for some kind of intervention, and I think you only need to look at the tragedy at Columbine [in which 14 students and one teacher were killed at a Colorado high school] to say American kids are not very happy right now. (p. 1).

According to Simplicio (2005) “no matter which side of the debate one chooses to support, it is quite obvious that although the practice of assigning homework is part and
parcel of the daily educational experience for students, it has some major inherent systematic problems” (p. 5). One of the problems he mentioned is the lack of consistency. Some teachers assign little or no homework, while others require a great deal. This happens, not only between teachers, but among grade levels as well. Simplicio cited Hofferth and Sandberg (2000), who found that elementary aged students, especially aged 6-8, received more homework than their junior and senior high school counterparts. Frequently, this practice results in tedious, repetitious, and boring assignments that quickly cause students to lose interest.

Secondly, Simplicio (2005) observed that many homework assignments do not accomplish the educational goals they were designed to achieve. If a teacher, for example, assigns mathematics problems for a student to work on at home to build upon certain skills learned in class, and the student did not acquire a basic understanding of how to solve those problems, the end result is frustration, not development of mathematics skills. On the other hand, if a student grasps the basic mastery of a mathematics concept, the requirement to complete several similar problems is repetitious and a waste of time, which can lead to boredom and dislike for the subject. Both practices can negatively effect the enthusiasm a student might have for the subject.

According to Simplicio (2005), a third problem in regard to homework is the fact that, because daily schedules are so overcrowded, often, students complete their assignments in haste. This is compounded by the fact that many teachers grade homework based upon whether or not it was completed, not on the quality of the work itself. Also,
Simplicio stated that “sadly, some teachers did not even collect the work and their students soon get the message that homework is not as important as everyone says” (p. 4).

**Homework at the Elementary Level**

Homework has been a source of controversy among parents, teachers, and students for years. Is there such a thing as too much homework? Too little? How early should students be responsible for the completion of large amounts of homework? Does homework affect classroom performance? Cooper (1989, as cited in Farrow et al., 1999) reported that research that involved thousands of students showed little correlation between homework and test scores in elementary school, but the relationship was positive and strong in secondary school.

This section is focused on what the researchers have found about homework at the elementary level. Does it affect student achievement at this level? What are the roles of teacher, student, and parent? At the elementary level, what is the purpose of homework and what makes it effective? Finally, what is an appropriate amount of homework at the elementary level?

**Effectiveness on Student Achievement**

Many researchers (Cooper, 1989; Coulter, 1979; Holmes & Croll, 1989; all cited in Farrow et al., 1999) have examined the effect of homework on student achievement. In some studies (Cook & Brown, 1935; Di Napoli, 1937; Teahan, 1935; all cited in Farrow et al.), the authors concluded that homework had no effect on performance, particularly at the elementary level.
There is some evidence about the effects of homework on academic attainment for primary students. Cooper (1989, as cited in Farrow et al., 1999) reviewed a number of homework studies and, although Cooper cited 14 studies where interventions showed a positive relationship between homework and attainment, the author described “no gains being found” (p. 2) in elementary schools. This finding is important because Cooper concentrated on experimental studies rather than the more usual, and less decisive, correlation studies. Cooper stated that “the small number of studies of the effect of homework on the attainment of primary or elementary school students have generally concluded that no effect is observable” (as quoted in Farrow et al., p. 7).

*The Purpose of Homework in Elementary School*

So, if researchers, such as Farrow et al. (1999), concluded that homework at the elementary level does not increase student achievement, then what is the purpose of homework at this level? One thing most proponents of homework agree on is that homework must have a purpose, and teachers should share that purpose with their students. Educational consultant, McGarvey (2003, as cited in Checkley, 2003) stated that educators should “be clear about the knowledge you want students to get from the homework” (p. 1). According to Bempechat (2004), a careful examination of the benefits of homework for elementary school students suggests that a much more complex interplay of factors is at work. Younger children are limited in their cognitive capacity, tend to have less effective study habits, and are less able to focus and avoid distraction than older children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, as cited in Bempechat). Awareness of these factors should inform teachers to use homework differently at different levels of schooling.
Bempechat cited Muhlenbruck, Cooper, Nye, and Lindsey (2000) and stated that:

A 2000 survey found that both elementary and secondary school teachers report that they assign homework in order to foster study and time management skills. However, elementary school teachers believe more strongly in homework’s value for the purpose of training students on how to study and use their time well. This implies that for elementary level teachers, the content of homework may be less important than the opportunity it provides to foster long-term management skills, the effects of which would not be evident in younger children’s school grades. (p. 191)

The Role of the Teacher

According to Butler (1987), there are several actions a teacher must take in order for homework to be effective. The first is to be consistent and to assign homework regularly. Teachers should never give homework as a punishment, nor should its omission be a reward. Also, teachers should give importance to homework by the provision of oral feedback and grade homework regularly. If students do not have the concepts and skills necessary to do the assignment, they will experience higher levels of frustration and discouragement.

Another action for homework effectiveness, according to Butler (1987), is to give clear instructions. Teachers need to be clear when they inform students that they are responsible for the work and that it is important that they complete the assignments. Also, students must understand the reasons for the assignment and how it is related to classroom work.

For homework to be effective, Butler (1987) reported that teachers need to correct homework quickly and provide feedback. It is important for a teacher to “grade the homework quickly and routinely so each student will be aware of individual progress:
without feedback, homework may result in repetition of errors” (p. 3). In feedback, teachers should highlight improvements and successes indicated by completed homework assignments. If some homework is not graded, at least, teachers, should recognize its completion. This could be especially important in elementary school, when the grade is not as important as the responsibility to complete the task.

Lastly, teachers should involve the parents. According to Butler (1987), teachers should provide parents, especially of elementary students, with study guides to help them help their children learn. For example, if there is a major change in a curriculum, the parents should be alerted and provided with information. This will avoid parental frustration that can lead to student frustration and disinterest. It is very important for a teacher to let parents know they are partners in their child’s education and that the sooner a good pattern of study is established, the better.

*The Parent Role*

Cooper, Jackson, Nye, and Lindsay (2001) detailed several findings that are important to educators. Most important was the critical role of parents in both the homework process and in the success of elementary school students. According to Cooper et al., positive parental involvement in homework was the strongest predictor of grades. Parental support for independent student behavior showed a positive relationship to achievement, whereas direct instructional involvement showed a negative relationship (Cooper et al.). It appears that parents tend to modify their type of involvement with homework depending on the ability level of their child. Positive parental attitudes toward homework directly relate to the student’s attitude toward homework.
There are some specific ways parents can help with homework in order for it to be effective. Parents should set a regular study time each day that is not interrupted by family plans, school activities, or television and with a definite beginning and ending time (Butler, 1987). The parents should help the student find the answer rather than do the work themselves, just to get the assignment done. Also, parents can be supportive and offer assistance when students are frustrated with a particularly challenging assignment.

According to Butler, parents should not hesitate to contact the teacher to: (a) clarify any misunderstandings, (b) figure out problems, and (c) be better informed about the student’s learning progress.

*The Role of the Student*

According to Butler (1987), there are several ways a student can make homework more effective. First, students should write down all assignments, especially students in the upper grade levels. Also, students should be sure all assignments are clear. They should never hesitate to ask questions of the teachers when necessary. Finally, it is important for students to set aside a regular time and find a quiet, well lighted place to study.

*Amount of Homework at the Elementary Level*

Another important concern is the optimum amount of homework. What is an appropriate amount of homework for an elementary student? The focus of many homework studies were on the middle and high school levels. However, according to Eddy (1984), “a recent survey conducted by the United States Bureau of the Census (1984) reports that public elementary school students spend 4.9 hours and private school
elementary students spend 5.5 hours a week on homework” (p. 2). Cooper (1994) looked at hours spent on homework and its effect on student achievement. Cooper found that elementary students’ performance did not improve when they spent more time on homework.

There are a number of reasons why older students benefit more from homework than younger students (Cooper, 2006). First, younger children are less able than older children to tune out distractions in their environment. Also, younger children have less effective study habits; however, this could be the reason that elementary teachers assign homework. Most often, the purpose of homework is to help younger students develop better time management and study skills, not to immediately affect their achievement in particular subject areas. According to Cooper:

Kids burn out. The bottom line really is all kids should be doing homework, but the amount and type should vary according to their developmental level and home circumstances. Homework for young students should be short, lead to success without much struggle, occasionally involve parents and, when possible, use out-of-school activities that kids enjoy, such as their sports teams or high-interest reading. (p. 2)

Cooper (2006) suggested that the research is consistent with the 10 minute rule, that is, the optimum amount of homework that teachers ought to assign. The 10 minute rule is an accepted practice in which teachers add 10 minutes of homework as students progress in grade levels. For instance, a fourth grade student would be assigned 40 minutes of homework a night, while a senior in high school would receive about 2 hours.

Also, Cooper (1994) made a more specific recommendation. The frequency and duration of mandatory assignments per week should be one to three assignments that take
15 minutes or less for students in Grades 1-3. In Grades 4-6, there should be two to four assignments that last 15-45 minutes.

Examples of Homework Policies

Provided in this section are examples of homework policies from school districts in the Denver metro area. It is important to review these policies to gain a better understanding of the philosophy and ideas that surround homework in regard to elementary education.

*Cherry Creek School District*

Cherry Creek School District (CCSD; 1994) is located in Englewood, Colorado, and is a well-reputed school district in the state. The district homework policy is stated as:

Homework which is properly designed, carefully planned and geared to the development of the individual student meets a real need and as a definite place in the educational program. It is assigned to help the student become more self-reliant, learn to work independently, improve the skills that have been taught and complete certain projects such as the reading or worthwhile books and the preparation of research papers. The goal of this work should be to improve student performance on proficiencies and increase achievement toward high standards of school performance. (p. 1)

According to CCSD (1994), homework assignments afford a way for parents to acquaint themselves with the school program and their own children's educational process. The purposes for homework in Cherry Creek Schools are to:

1. reinforce concepts and skills learned during the class period.
2. provide practice with newly learned skills.
3. develop independent study habits.
4. develop positive study habits in planning for and meeting deadlines.
5. teach efficient use of time.
6. learn to use home and community resources.
7. make up work missed because of absence.
8. provide enrichment beyond what is possible in the classroom.
9. provide additional practice in research skills.
10. review material learned earlier in preparation for tests and other class work. (p. 1)

The obligations of teacher, student, and parent are specific (CCSD, 1994). The teachers have an obligation to: (a) plan homework assignments which are meaningful with directions that are readily understood by students and are realistic in terms of time, facilities, and resources (i.e., meaningful assignments should include those which improve student performance on proficiencies); (b) evaluate and return homework promptly; (c) motivate students to excel individually by a judicious choice of assignments; and (d) provide a classroom atmosphere which is conducive to the development of good study habits. Students have an obligation to: (a) attend class regularly in order to receive homework assignments, (b) ask for clarification if they do not understand the assignment, (c) complete homework assignments and turn them in on time, (d) check with the teacher if the assignment has not been graded and returned within a reasonable amount of time.

Parents are expected to: (a) emphasize the importance of homework, (b) supervise the homework tasks of younger students, (c) provide an adequate place for students to study, (d) assist in the location of reference materials and resources, (e) encourage students to return assignments on time, and (f) plan with the teacher if necessary.

According to CCSD (1994) policy, the amount, length, and type of homework will vary according to: (a) age, (b) individual needs of the student, and (c) the class or course selected. Also, the amount of homework will be less in the primary grades and increase as students progress through the grades under the professional direction of the classroom teacher.
Any problems of homework overload for individual students should be discussed with the teacher and/or counselor.

*Denver Public School District*

The Denver Public School District (DPSD; 1993) is a large metropolitan district located in Denver, Colorado, and its population is a diverse mix of cultures. The administrators of this school district laid their homework policy out in more specific terms. In the elementary portion of the policy it was stated:

The amount, length and type of homework at the elementary level may vary according to individual needs and the classes and courses selected, but the minimum amount shall be as follows:

- Kindergarten and grade 1 - 10-15 minutes, one to two days/week
- Grade 2 - 15 - 20 minutes two - three days/week
- Grade 3 - 15 - 25 minutes two - three days/week
- Grade 4 - 15 - 30 minutes two - three days/week
- Grade 5 - 20 - 30 minutes three - four days/week. (p. 1)

*Littleton Public Schools*

The Littleton Public School District (LPSD) is located in Littleton, Colorado. It too, is a well-reputed school district in the Denver Metro area. In this policy, it is stated that “the purposes of homework shall be to improve the learning processes, to aid in the mastery of skills, and to create and stimulate interest on the part of the student” (p. 1). The administrators indicated that homework is a learning activity which should increase in complexity with the maturity of the student, and with increased maturity, learning should become an independent activity. The information for any homework assignment should be clear and specific so that the student can complete the assignment.

Homework assignments may take into consideration individual differences of students such as health, ability, and educational resources at home.
should not require the use of reference materials not readily available in most homes, school libraries, or the public library and should require the use of those materials only when the student had instruction in the use of them. (LPSD p. 1)

The administrators of LPSD (1993) pointed out that there are many other learning activities in the life of a student besides homework. Such things as participation in school activities, pursuit of cultural interests, participation in family living, and exploration of personal interests should be considered by teachers when they plan assignments. In addition, homework should not be used as a form of punishment under any circumstances.

Chapter Summary

As demonstrated in this review of literature, homework was and continues to be a source of controversy among members of the educational community including administrators, teachers, and parents. Homework has aroused strong passions, both for and against it, during the past 100 years. As Gill and Schlossman (2004) stated:

Unfortunately these passions have inspired views that lack nuance and pedagogical sensibility, and that sometimes reflect ideological bias as well. While the opponents of homework exaggerate its harms, the supporters overstate its benefits. Voices advocating a more moderate and reformist position on the uses of homework are too often drowned out by the din. (p. 180)

The more recent movement to raise standards has made homework a standard part of the educational experience of elementary aged children for perhaps the first time in history (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). It is known from the research that homework has the fewest benefits for elementary aged students in regard to academic achievement, yet, according to Cooper (1989, 2000, as cited in Gill & Schlossman), the academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has succeeded in increased work expectations for only the youngest children. There have been very little increases over the last 2 decades in the
amount of homework in middle and high school, where it is likely to be more beneficial.

This researcher shares the opinion of Gill and Schlossman (2004) who reported that these trends suggest the need for a fresh discussion among teachers, parents, students, and scholars about how to make homework more integral and vital to the pursuit of high academic standards for all students. In Chapter 3, this researcher will describe the method, target audience, goals, and procedures for the development of this project.
Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project was to develop an inservice presentation for members of the community including parents, teachers, and administrators. The presentation included the findings from research about the appropriate levels of homework for elementary aged students, the best practices of assigning homework, as well as the roles of both the student and parent in regard to the completion of homework. The homework controversy came to the attention of this researcher when she attended many parent/teacher association (PTA) and cooperative decision making (CDM) meetings. The need to make homework more consistent and meaningful became apparent as frustrated parents and teachers struggled to make sense out of it and tried to come to an understanding as to the appropriate amount of homework for elementary aged students. It was through this experience that this researcher saw the need to provide members of the school community a guideline of what homework should be at the elementary level as well as the tools needed to form a school homework policy.

Target Audience

This project was designed as an informational inservice for members of the school community including, but not limited to, parents, teachers, and administrators.
Students, other members of the community, school board members, and parents of prospective students were interested in this topic.

Goals and Procedures

The goal of this project was to present an informative inservice presentation in Power Point about homework at the elementary level. The presentation included a brief review of literature that detailed the findings from the research about the appropriate levels of homework for elementary aged students. Additionally, best practices of assigning homework, as well as the roles of both student and parent in regard to the completion of homework were presented.

Peer Assessment

Assessment of the Power Point presentation was obtained from four colleagues through informal feedback, recommendations, and suggestions for further research. Each colleague was given a copy of the document and asked to review it for relevancy, the way the presentation flows, and timeliness of the presentation. Each reviewer provided comments, and suggestions on the hard copy.

Chapter Summary

Homework in elementary school has been the subject of much research and controversy. Through this project, this researcher used knowledge gained from an extensive review of literature and personal experience to help educate and inform other teachers, parents, and administrators about homework at the elementary level. In Chapter 4, she provides informative information as to the best practices in the assignment of homework, roles of teacher, parent, and student in regard to the completion of homework,
and guidelines for districts and individual schools on the appropriate amount of homework for elementary students. Discussion and colleague reviews will be presented in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The movement to raise standards has made homework a standard part of the educational experience of elementary aged children for perhaps the first time in history (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Research has shown that homework has the fewest benefits for elementary aged students in regard to academic achievement, yet, according to Cooper (1989, 2000, as cited in Gill & Schlossman), the academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has succeeded in increased work expectations for only the youngest children. According to Gill & Schlossman, there have been very little increases over the last two decades in the amount of homework in middle and high school, where it is more likely to be more beneficial. The goal of this inservice was to provide members of the school community a guideline of what homework should be at the elementary level as well as the tools needed to form a school homework policy. It is this author’s hope that the need for a fresh discussion among teachers, parents, and administrators about how to make homework more integral and vital to the pursuit of high academic standards for all students becomes apparent.

Prior to the presentation, this author asked those in attendance to complete a short survey to activate schema and welcome participation in the presentation. A copy of that survey is in the Appendix.
Homework in Elementary School

A Guide for Educators

It is a Tuesday night after your ten-year-old son’s baseball game. The time is approximately 8:30 pm when your son informs you that he has homework. “Why didn’t you get it done before your game?” “I forgot.” Your son replies nonchalantly. You, on the other hand, are ready to pull out your hair. Finally, a couple hours later, the kids are in bed and you’re not sure who is more stressed out, you or your child. You fall into bed dreaming of multiplication problems and this week’s spelling word list.

Does this sound familiar? How many nights has something like this happened in your home? Or, are you the parent who wishes their child had more to do? Do you struggle with a lack of homework? As a teacher, I am constantly trying to decide what is the proper amount of homework to give the students in my class. I feel that with all the activities kids are involved in these days, homework should not be given as busy work. On the other hand, it is important for kids to learn responsibility and the consequences that go along with not being responsible. As a parent, I sometimes get frustrated with the kind
of homework given and the purpose for which it is given. It is my hope that the need for a fresh discussion among teachers, parents, and administrators about how to make homework more integral and vital to the pursuit of high academic standards for all students becomes apparent. The goal of this inservice is to provide members of the school community a guideline of what homework should be at the elementary level as well as the tools needed to form a school homework policy. (The presenter will move to the next slide.)
Definition of Homework

- Three Types of Homework
  - Practice Assignments
  - Preparation Assignments
  - Extension Assignments

According to Mish (2006), editor of the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the definition of homework is an assignment given to a student to be completed outside the regular class period. Homework is also defined as the out-of-class tasks that a student is assigned as an extension of classroom work (LaConte, 1981, as cited in Eddy, 1984). There are three types of homework commonly assigned in the United States: (a) practice, (b) preparation, and (c) extension.

The use of practice assignments reinforces newly acquired skills or knowledge. For example, students, who have learned about a particular chemical reaction may be asked to find examples of the reaction in their own environment. These assignments are most effective when: (a) they are carefully evaluated by the teacher, (b) they are matched to the ability and background of the individual student, and (c) students are asked to apply recent learning directly and personally. Preparation assignments are intended to provide background information and can include readings in the class text, library research,
collecting materials for a class demonstration, and other activities that require the
gathering or organizing of information before a class discussion or demonstration (Eddy, 1984). What is important to note about preparation assignments is that they should be
given with guidelines for the student on why and how the assignment should be completed.

The purpose of extension assignments is to encourage individualized and creative
learning by an emphasis on student initiative and research (Eddy, 1984). Frequently, with
long term, continuing projects that parallel class work, extension assignments require
students to apply previous learning. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Historical Background

- The 19th Century
- The Era of Progressive Education

We will now begin with a historical overview of homework and its changes through the years. In the 19th Century, homework was rarely viewed as a problem. High school students were the only ones burdened with much homework; the common expectation was 2-3 hours per night, weekends included (Reese, 1995, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004). At that time, elementary school included Grades 1-4, and homework was rare and often impossible due to the irregular attendance patterns and the typically overcrowded and multiaged classrooms. The homework in grammar school, Grades 5-8, was often seen as burdensome, and the basic method of teaching subject matter was: (a) drill, (b) memorization, (c) recitation, and (d) required sustained preparation at home for classroom success. Toward the end of the 19th Century, the first systematic critique of homework arose as a result of a research project conducted by Dr. Joseph Mayer Rice (1897, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004), a physician who was interested in children’s health and learning. Rice focused on children’s spelling, which was the epitome of the
drill/memorization/recitation pedagogy. Rice concluded and was quoted saying, “children’s often arduous devotion to practicing spelling at home was unrelated to their spelling ability” (as quoted in Gill & Schlossman, p. 175). According to Rice, spelling homework was ineffective and not only did it fatigue children and alienate them from school, but it did not translate into higher academic achievement. Because of the work and research of Rice, the emergence of homework as a widely debated, controversial issue in educational discourse began at the end of the 19th Century.

During the first part of the 20th Century, there was a movement for the study of the child, child health, parent education, and progressive education, which fundamentally altered the educational discourse on homework. The major focus of concern, in this era were children in Grades 4-8. The drill/memorization/recitation routine was denounced as a threat to preteens’ physical and mental health. Members of organizations, such as the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA), urged school boards to regulate and minimize how much homework teachers could assign. During this time, homework forced on children, too young to bear its burdens, was seen as among the worst of school atrocities. The attacks on homework continued to increase between the 1920s and the 1940s, the heyday of progressive education (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). In many communities, homework was eliminated in some or all grades. Many critics of homework reported that it threatened children’s health because it deprived them of outdoor play that was essential to healthy development. In the 1930's a concern for the education of the whole child became the theme of the progressive education movement. School staff was responsible for not only a child’s intellectual growth but their physical and emotional growth as well. Critics
at that time also argued that homework failed in academic terms and did not improve children’s learning. During the 1930s, school measurement experts conducted research on homework. Researchers such as Cook and Brown (1935, as cited in Gill & Schlossman), concluded that homework in pre-high school grades had no beneficial effect. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Homework remained a controversial issue during the 1950s and 1960s, however its discourse changed in a dramatic way. Progressivism was replaced by an academic excellence movement that required higher standards and grounded subject matter instruction. After the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, the homework problem was thought to be part of a national crisis. It was thought that the U.S. was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter since they worked harder and achieved more in school. Progressive education was blamed as the cause for U.S. failures in space and for undermining its economic and military supremacy. Whereas, in the first half of the century, the perceived problem was the effect of too much homework on families and children, the new educational discourse pronounced too little homework an indicator for the dismal state of U.S. schooling. In the 1950s and 1960s, homework gained more favorable reviews. One researcher, Goldstein (1960, as cited in Gill & Schlossman, 2004), a professor at the Stanford University Medical School, analyzed the data of scholars in the
1930s and showed that homework positively influenced student achievement in the elementary and high school grades. Research and politics led to the rehabilitation of homework as a normal and necessary tool in the teaching and learning process. Not all elements of progressive education were eliminated from the discourse. Even as homework was rehabilitated, it was reinvented to increase student and parent buy-in to the movement for academic excellence. Reformers wanted to make sure that homework was equally compatible with the principles of academic excellence and progressive education. They believed that the pursuit of academic excellence required alternatives to traditional textbooks and memorization. In addition, according to reformers, parents had a positive role to play in their children’s formal as well as informal learning. Homework was a vital link in school/parent communication and, therefore, essential to building public support for higher educational standards.

This brings us to the last 25 years. The ideas and structures of the academic excellence movement fell apart very suddenly during 1968-1972 due to the Vietnam War and the Civil rights movement. During this time of unrest, the biggest concern was not what types of homework might best enhance student achievement, but whether students could be persuaded to attend school regularly, pay attention to their teachers, and study seriously. Educational standards were in decline, and concern about this issue resulted in a new academic excellence movement that sought to move schools back to basics. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, educators, parents, and policymakers endorsed the virtues of homework. Most recently, anecdotal reports of deep parental concern about excessive homework have appeared in the press with increasing frequency. For example
in 1999, USA Today reported that the U.S. was in the midst of a period of “homework intensification”. However, according to a nationwide poll in 2000, only 10% of parents reported that their children had too much homework, which indicated that, overwhelmingly, parents continued to support homework. There is still a question about the amount of time children spend on homework. According to the research of Hofferth and Sandberg (2000, as cited in Gill & Schlossman) the only age group, where there had been a substantial increase in homework over the last two decades, is the youngest group, ages 6-8, for whom homework increased from 52 minutes weekly in 1981 to 128 minutes weekly in 1997. The academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has resulted in an increase of homework expectations only for our youngest children, for whom research suggests that homework has the fewest benefits (Cooper, 1989, 2001, as cited in Gill & Schlossman). Increases in homework in middle and high school, where it is most likely to be beneficial, have neither been substantial nor sustained over the last two decades. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
So, now that we have looked into the history of homework, it has probably become obvious to you that homework is a controversial issue and has been for many years. It is important to look at both sides of the homework argument in greater detail to understand all aspects of the controversy.

We will start with the proponents of homework. We will look at a few of the researchers who are proponents of homework and their arguments for the assigning of homework. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Bempechat (2004), who looked at the social/cognitive perspective of homework of homework stated, “as a pedagogical practice, homework plays a critical, long-term role in the development of children’s achievement motivation.” Bempechat also stated that, “homework assignments provide children with the time and experience they need to develop beliefs about achievement and study habits that are helpful for learning, including the value and effort and the ability to cope with mistakes and difficulty.” According to Bempechat, it is important to look beyond grades and test scores as a primary test of homework effectiveness. If the goal is to prepare children for the responsibilities of secondary school and beyond, it is necessary to pay as much attention to the development of skills which help children take initiative in their learning and maintain motivation. One of the arguments of those opposed to homework, which will be discussed further in the next slide, is that students from low income and non English speaking families are at a disadvantage in their ability to complete homework. According to Bempechat, to decrease or eliminate homework on the well intentioned, but flawed assumption, that poor
parents would be grateful to have less to do with their children’s education, is to do a
great disservice to these parents and their children. A policy like this would communicate
that teachers feel sorry for these parents and believe that they lack the competence to help
their children. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
According to Brk, Lee, and Holland (1993), Catholic schools where the poorest children in the U.S. do exceptionally well, as evidenced by: (a) lower dropout rates, (b) higher grade point averages and Standard Academic Test (SAT) scores, and (c) greater college acceptance rates. In Catholic schools, poor students are helped to attain high levels of proficiency through demanding coursework and consistently high expectations and standards for schoolwork and homework. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Cooper (1994) identified several positive advantages and effects of homework. First, one of the most obvious effects is that the use of homework will improve students’ retention and understanding of the material that is covered. Also, with homework, students’ study skills and attitudes toward school will improve, and students become aware that learning occurs outside as well as inside of school. According to Cooper, homework has many potential nonacademic outcomes as well; most of these involve student independence and responsibility. Cooper stated, “Homework can involve parents and the community in schooling, increasing their appreciation of education and allowing them to reinforce students’ achievement.” Again, in order to understand any controversial issue, it is important to look at both sides of the issue, which brings us to our next slide.
We will now talk about the opponents of homework. We will look at a few of the researchers who are opponents of homework and their arguments for not assigning homework. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Cooper was mentioned as a researcher who identified several positive effects of homework. Well, here he is again as someone who also identifies the possible negative effects of homework. First, some educators believe that any activity can remain rewarding for only a limited time. So, if students are required to spend too much time on academic material, eventually, they will become bored with it. Second, homework limits the time students can spend on activities outside the school, such as sports, extracurricular activities, and community activities that can inspire important lessons, both academic and nonacademic. Third, parental involvement, however well intentioned, can and often becomes parental interference. What he means is that, unwillingly, parents may confuse children if the methods that parents use to help them differ from that of the teacher. Fourth, homework can lead to undesirable behaviors such as cheating, either through copying of assignments or receiving assistance with homework that involves more than tutoring. Finally, Cooper noted that the use of homework can promote existing inequalities.
Students from lower socioeconomic homes are likely to have more difficulty in the completion of homework than their more well to do peers. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Horowitz (2005), the Director of Professional Services of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, states that although there are benefits to doing homework, there are a number of pitfalls as well. First, homework has been shown to provide different benefits at different stages and grade levels in school. A mismatch in homework assigned and student readiness can cause frustration and a student’s reluctance to do the work. Horowitz also stated that: “Assigning too much homework may result in disinterest and fatigue; students overburdened with homework assignments will also begin to view their assignments as punitive and will do what they can to either avoid doing it, and yes, even cheat to get it done.” (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Simplicio (2005) mentions that although homework is and probably will be a part of daily educational experience for students, it has some major inherent systematic problems that should be addressed. One of the problems is the lack of consistency among teachers. Some assign little or no homework, while others require a great deal. This happens, not only among teachers, but among grade levels as well. Simplicio cited other researchers, Hofferth and Sandberg (2000), who found that elementary aged students, especially aged 6-8, received more homework than their junior and senior counterparts. Secondly, Simplicio (2005) observed that many homework assignments do not accomplish the educational goals they were designed to achieve. If a teacher, for example, assigns mathematics problems for a student to work on at home to build upon certain skills learned in class, and the student did not acquire a basic understanding of how to solve those problems, the end result is frustration, not development of mathematics skills. On the other hand, if a student grasps the basic mastery of a mathematics concept, the
requirement to complete several similar problems is repetitious and a waste of time, which can lead to boredom and dislike for the subject. Both practices can negatively affect the enthusiasm a student might have for the subject. Third, Simplicio says that because daily schedules are so overcrowded, often students complete their assignments in haste. This is compounded by the fact that many teachers grade homework based upon whether or not it was completed, not on the quality of the work itself. Now that we have a better idea of the controversy from both sides, let us take a closer look more specifically at homework in elementary school. (The presenter now moves to the next slide).
This slide will focus on what researchers have found about homework at the elementary level. Does it affect student achievement at this level? At the elementary level, what is the purpose of homework and what makes it effective? What are the roles of teacher, student, and parent? Finally, we will discuss what is an appropriate amount of homework at the elementary level.

Many researchers have examined the effect of homework on student achievement. In some studies, the authors concluded that homework had no effect on performance, particularly at the elementary level. Cooper (1989) reviewed a number of homework studies and cited 14 studies where interventions showed a positive relationship between homework and attainment. However, Cooper stated that “the small number of studies of the effect of homework on the academic attainment of primary or elementary school students have generally concluded that no effect is observable” (as quoted in Farrow et al., p. 7).
So, if researchers concluded that homework at the elementary level does not increase student achievement, then what is the purpose of homework at this level? One thing most proponents of homework agree on is that homework must have a purpose, and teachers should share that purpose with their students. Teachers should be very clear about the knowledge they want students to get from the homework they assign. Younger children tend to be limited in their cognitive capacity, tend to have less effective study habits, and are less able to focus and avoid distraction than older children. Awareness of these factors should inform teachers to use homework differently at different levels of schooling. Bempechat, a researcher in this area, stated that “A 2000 survey found that both elementary and secondary school teachers report that they assign homework in order to foster study and time management skills. However, elementary school teachers believe more strongly in homework’s value for the purpose of training students on how to study and use their time well. This implies that for elementary level teachers, the content of homework may be less important than the opportunity it provides to foster long-term management skills, the effects of which would not be evident in younger children’s school grades.”

The role of the teacher is very important in the assigning of homework and there are several actions a teacher must take in order for homework to be effective. The first is to be consistent and to assign homework regularly. Teachers should never give homework as a punishment, nor should its omission be a reward. Also, teachers show the importance of homework by giving feedback and grading homework regularly. If homework is not graded, at least, teachers should recognize its completion. This could be
especially important in elementary school, when the grade is not as important as the responsibility to complete the task. If students do not have the concepts and skills necessary to do the assignment, they will experience higher levels of frustration and discouragement. Another action for homework effectiveness is for teachers to give clear instructions. In other words, teachers need to be clear when they inform students that they are responsible for the work and that it is important that they complete the assignments. Also, students must understand the reasons for the assignment and how it is related to classroom work. Lastly, teachers should involve the parents. Research has shown that teachers should provide parents, especially of elementary students, with study guides to help them help their children learn. For example, if there is a major change in a curriculum, the parents should be alerted and provided with information. This will avoid parental frustration that can lead to student frustration and disinterest. It is very important for a teacher to let parents know they are partners in their child’s education and that the sooner a good pattern of study is established, the better. (The presenter now moves to the next slide).
This moves us to the next point for the success of homework in elementary school. Researchers detailed several findings that are important to educators. Most important was the critical role of parents in both the homework process and in the success of elementary school students. Positive parental involvement in homework was the strongest predictor of grades. More specifically, parental support for independent student behavior showed a positive relationship to achievement, whereas, direct instructional involvement showed a negative relationship. There are some specific ways parents can help with homework in order for it to be effective. For example, parents should set a regular study time each day that is not interrupted by family plans, school activities or television and with a definite beginning and ending time. Parents should help the student find the answer rather then do the work themselves, just to get the assignment done. Finally, parents can be supportive and offer assistance when students are frustrated with a particularly challenging assignment. Parents should never hesitate to contact the teacher if they need to clarify any
misunderstandings, figure out problems, or be better informed about the student’s learning progress.

Students also play an important role in the completion of homework and although this may seem very obvious, there are specific ways students can make it easier for themselves to complete the task. First students should write down all assignments, especially students in the upper grade levels. Also, students should be sure all assignments are clear and should never hesitate to ask questions of the teachers when necessary. Finally, it is important for students to set aside a regular time and find a quiet, well lighted place to study. (Presenter will move to the next slide).
Our last point on the slide is the amount of homework for the elementary student. What is the optimum amount of homework for an elementary school student? Most of the studies done were focused on the middle and high school levels. However, Cooper (1994) looked at hours spent on and its effect on student achievement in elementary school. Cooper found that elementary students’ performance did not improve when they spent more time on homework. There are number of reasons as to why this is. First, younger children are less able than older children to tune out distractions in their environment. Also, younger children have less effective study habits. Cooper suggested that the research is consistent with the 10 minute rule, that is the optimum amount of homework that teachers ought to assign. This is a rule in which teachers add 10 minutes of homework as students progress in grade levels. For instance, a fourth grade student would be assigned 40 minutes of homework a night, while a senior in high school would receive about 2 hours. A more specific recommendation, according to research, is the
frequency and duration of mandatory assignments per week should be one to three assignments that take 15 minutes or less for students in Grades 1-3. In Grades 4-6, there should be two to four assignments that last 15-45 minutes. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
In this next slide, I thought it might be interesting to look closely at the homework policies of some of the surrounding school districts. The first one is the Cherry Creek School District located in Englewood, Colorado. According to CCSD (1994), homework assignments afford a way for parents to acquaint themselves with the school program and their own children’s educational process. Written in their policy are the purposes of homework in Cherry Creek Schools. A couple of them are, for example, to reinforce concepts and skills learned in the class period, develop independent study habits, and teach efficient use of time. Also written in their policy are the specific obligations of the teacher, student and parent in regards to successful homework completion. For example, the teachers have an obligation to plan homework assignments which are meaningful with directions that are readily understood by students and are realistic in terms of time, facilities, and resources. They are also obligated to evaluate and return homework promptly. Students have an obligation to ask for clarification should they not understand
the assignment and complete homework assignments and turn them in on time. Parents are expected to emphasize the importance of homework and supervise the homework tasks of younger students. There were several other obligations listed for each, but this gives you an idea of the specificity of this homework policy. According to the CCSD policy, the amount, length, and type of homework will vary according to age, the individual needs of the student, and the class or course selected. Also, the amount of homework will be less in the primary grades and increase as students progress through the grades under the professional direction of the classroom teacher. (Presenter will move to the next slide).
Examples of Homework Policies

- Denver Public Schools

The Denver Public School District is next on our list and their policy is laid out in more specific terms. In the elementary portion of the policy it was stated:

The amount, length and type of homework at the elementary level may vary according to individual needs and the classes and courses selected, but the minimum amount shall be as follows:

- Kindergarten and Grade 1 - 10-15 minutes, one to two days/week
- Grade 2 - 15 - 20 minutes two - three days/week
- Grade 3 - 15 - 25 minutes two - three days/week
- Grade 4 - 15 - 30 minutes two - three days/week
- Grade 5 - 20 - 30 minutes three - four days/week. (p.1)

(Presenter will move to the next slide).
The final district on our list is Littleton Public Schools located here in Littleton, Colorado. In this policy, it is stated that “the purposes of homework shall be to improve the learning processes, to aid in the mastery of skills, and to create and stimulate interest on the part of the student” (p. 1). The administrators indicated that homework is a learning activity which should increase in complexity with the maturity of the student, and with increased maturity, learning should become an independent activity. The information for any homework assignment should be clear and specific so that the student can complete the assignment. The administrators of LPSSD (1993) pointed out that there are many other learning activities in the life of a student besides homework. Such things as participation in school activities, pursuit of cultural interests, participation in family living, and exploration of personal interests should be considered by teachers when they plan assignments. In addition, they state that homework should not be used as a form of punishment under any circumstances.
As demonstrated in this presentation, homework was and continues to be a source of controversy among members of the educational community including, administrators, teachers, and parents. As my presentation has shown, the arguments both for and against homework are valid and evoke strong passions and opinions. However, research has shown that homework has the fewest benefits for elementary aged students in regard to academic achievement, yet, the academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has succeeded in increased work expectations for only the youngest children. There have been very little increases over the last 2 decades in the amount of homework in middle and high school, where it is likely to be more beneficial. My hope, through this presentation, is that by understanding these trends people see the need for a fresh discussion among teachers, parents, students, and scholars about how to make homework more integral and vital to the pursuit of high academic standards for all students. (The presenter will move to the next slide).
Does anyone have any questions or comments about anything I have covered today? (Allow time to call on anyone with questions or comments). Thank you all for coming today. I have provided a handout to take with you today of the references I have used for this presentation. I will be up front if you have any more comments or questions. Again, thank you for attending and have a wonderful afternoon.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, this author presented the inservice, which was designed with the intention of discussing both the positive and negative effects of homework in elementary school. The chapter included the set up for the inservice, as well as a copy of the PowerPoint slide show presentation, complete with detailed notes and a survey given to teachers, administrators, and students. In Chapter 5, the author offers a discussion of the project, including limitations, as well as recommendations for future development. Also, colleagues’ reviews and critiques will be discussed.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to develop an in-service presentation to explore the theories and practices behind the assigning of homework at the elementary level. As the current educational climate continues to place a greater emphasis on standardized assessments of students, educators are reacting by increasing the amount of homework on students who may not be developmentally ready for the onslaught. This author experienced many parent/teacher meetings in which the need to make homework more consistent and meaningful became apparent. Frustrated parents and teachers struggled to make sense out of it and tried to come to an understanding as to the appropriate amount of homework for elementary aged students. There is a need for continued discussion among teachers, parents, and administrators about how to make homework more integral and vital to the pursuit of high academic standards.

The goal of this in-service was to provide members of the school community a guideline of what homework should be at the elementary level as well as the tools needed to form a school homework policy. The presentation synthesized the history, theories of both the proponents and opponents of homework, as well as examples of other districts' homework guidelines and policies.
Assessment of the Project

The inservice presentation was evaluated by three elementary level educators. Each of the educators was given a copy of the presentation and asked to write down their responses to the following questions: (a) What would you change or add to this presentation?; (b) Which, if any, part(s) of the presentation were unclear or needed more information?; (c) How was the length of the presentation? Were there any parts that were too lengthy or needed more information?; and, (d) Please write down any other comments about this presentation. Overall, the evaluators were very positive in their feedback regarding the presentation. According to their responses, the evaluators felt that the presentation gave a good overview of the homework controversy and its effect on elementary aged students. They also agreed that the length of the presentation was appropriate.

Limitations of the Project

A possible limitation to the potential contribution of this project is that parents, teachers and school administrators are going to want to know how homework affects their particular school and students. If the presentation is given, for example, at a low-income school in which there is a high population of English as a second language and low parental involvement, what can they do to help their students succeed when given homework? How does their homework policy differ from a school who has high parental support? Because of this, this author suggests that it be made clear that this presentation is meant to be an overview of the homework controversy. Each school needs to have
meaningful discussion among teachers, parents, and school administrators as to how homework affects their students’ learning.

One of the evaluators suggested that a more substantial pre-presentation survey to find out the effects of homework at that particular school. Some of the questions posed could be: (a) What are the implications on homework and parental involvement?; (b) What is the role of the parent in the student’s educational success?; (c) How does parent education on homework’s purpose and the parent’s role in regards to homework help student success?

Another evaluator suggested the addition of examples of the specific kinds of homework (practice, preparation, and extension) so the audience has a better understanding of what these assignments would entail. This author agrees that both of these suggestions would improve the inservice presentation and would work to include them in the presentation.

Finally, another evaluator suggested looking at the current curriculum of the school where the presentation is being offered to see how it either supports or deters from homework. This author agrees that this suggestion would be very interesting and add more to the presentation for that school, however probably goes beyond what the presentation is offering, which is a more generic presentation of homework in elementary school.

Suggestions for Further Study

First, this project was limited by the fact that the amount of quantitative studies on elementary aged students was substantially less than the amount of studies on their
counterparts in middle and high school. Through the Review of Literature this researcher found many articles by practitioners who either oppose or propose the giving of homework for elementary aged students. The majority of these articles were based on anecdotal experiences and/or qualitative studies. This is not to say that these experiences were not valid, but that the claims that many authors have made should be substantiated by further research. Some studies this author found were just a review of other studies and failed to give enough information as to the sample size or demographics and were based on opinion. In this author’s opinion, homework should be an integral part of an elementary student’s education as long as it’s given in a clear, concise, and consistent manner and the amount given makes sense to the student’s developmental level. There is still a need for more research about what that amount should be and to the effects of homework in regards to today’s current education trends and more specifically standardized testing.

Project Summary

This project provided a general overview of the theories and practices behind the assigning of homework at the elementary level. It was designed in the hopes that parents, teachers, and administrators begin to have purposeful discussion on how to make homework more consistent and meaningful for our elementary aged students.

The success of this project was determined by the three elementary colleagues who evaluated it. According to these evaluators, the inservice presentation was an informative overview of the homework controversy. They felt that the length of the presentation was appropriate and that each of the areas was covered sufficiently. The three suggestions for
improvement of the presentation were to include a more substantial pre-presentation survey as to the effect of homework at a particular school, include examples of the three different kinds of homework (practice, preparation and extension), and to include the current curriculum of the school and how it either supports or deters from homework.

The main limitation of this presentation is the scarcity of quantitative studies that have been done on the effects of homework at the elementary level. Although many quantitative studies have been done at the secondary level, the vast majority of research articles on homework in elementary school are based on qualitative and/or anecdotal evidence. This made it difficult to find qualitative evidence that either supports or opposed the notion that homework at the elementary level is productive and meaningful.

The second limitation of the contribution of this presentation, is that while the content may be interesting to many people; depending upon where this presentation is given, teachers, parents and administrators want to know how it’s going to affect their students at their school. This is a very generalized presentation of the homework controversy and its possible limitations. While the information is good, more discussion is necessary at individual schools as to the effect of homework on their particular students and what kind of policy makes sense for them.

This project synthesized the available research on homework and its effects at the elementary level. It is this author’s hope that more research will be done, targeting elementary school students. Also, this author hopes that thorough and meaningful discussion happens among teachers, parents, and administrators at individual schools to make homework policies based on the needs of their students. In the future, this inservice
presentation could be modified to include the findings of new research studies on homework and its effects on elementary aged students.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Homework Surveys
Teacher Homework Survey

1. How long have you been a teacher at the elementary school level?

2. What grade do you teach?

3. How often do you assign homework?
   □ Everyday
   □ 3-4 times/week
   □ 1-2 times/week
   □ Never
   □ Other explain: ___________________________
      ___________________________
      ___________________________

4. For what subjects do you assign homework?

5. What is your main purpose for assigning homework?

6. Do you and your teammates assign the same homework and amount of homework?

7. Do you grade homework?

8. How do you provide feedback to students on homework?

9. How many minutes do you expect your students to actively engage in homework assignments: nightly ________ weekly________ ?
Parent Homework Survey

1. How many children do you have? What are their grade levels?

2. How much time on an average, do your children spend doing homework each evening?

3. Would you rather your child, have more or less homework? Explain.

4. Do you know if your school has a homework policy?

5. What is your involvement on a regular basis with your child’s homework?

6. Does your child have an established homework routine?
   
   Set time _____________
   
   Set place _____________
   
   Set assistance as needed _____________
Principal Homework Survey

1. Does your school have a homework policy?

2. If yes, what is it and do you know if teachers are consistently following it throughout the school?

3. If your answer was no, why?

4. How important is it to you that teachers in your school assign homework?

5. Do you have conversations regularly, as a staff, on the assigning of homework? For example: Why? For what purpose? How much? Is there consistency throughout the grade levels?

6. How important do you feel the need is for further conversation?
APPENDIX B

Reference Handout
List of References on Homework


