The Homework Pendulum: Teachers’ Perspectives on the Costs and Benefits of Assigning Homework

By

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Abstract

This research paper outlines the ongoing debate over homework in elementary school grades. Since homework was first written about in the 1800’s there has been a polarizing debate about its usefulness and importance. A review of the literature suggests that two distinct schools of thought exist, those who see value in homework, and those who do not. This qualitative study involved interviews with three teachers who do not give homework to hear their perspectives on the benefits and consequences of homework in primary and junior aged classrooms. Teachers reported several areas where homework can be of great detriment to student development. Specifically, teachers addressed themes of inequality, a reduction of free and extracurricular time as well as the creation of negative home and school environments. Recommendations based on these findings underscore a need for more uniform homework policies across school boards, equitable homework policies, and more respect for extracurricular activities.

KEY WORDS: Homework, Inequality, home life, workload, Child Development
The Homework Pendulum:

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Imagine being subjected to a workplace where you were under the constant scrutiny and unavering eye of your supervisor. Now imagine that at the end of your day you were sent on your merry way with a bag full of work to complete in your free time to bring back to your workplace the next morning. Upon arrival, it would again be scrutinized by your supervisor. I assume you have made the connection based on the title of this study, but this is what children throughout Ontario, and the world, are subjected to on an everyday basis. This of course is the reality for many adults in the workforce, however this is the reality that many children, rightfully or wrongfully, face from the young age of five.

There are those who will scoff at this, and conjure ideas of children colouring, cutting crafts, and writing in journals as homework, however this is just scratching the surface of the issue of children doing homework. Regardless of what type of homework is being sent into residences, it has the potential to cause a disruption to the child’s family life (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006). The time that children spend with their family is already commonly limited, and taking more of that time away to complete further schoolwork may be doing a disservice to a child’s family structure. A staggering 75% of parents indicated students have “somewhat” or “much more” homework than they did as a child (Cameron & Bartel, 2008). Students are receiving more homework than their parents, and other areas of their lives could be taking a backseat to this practice. It could be loss of television time, sleep, playing outside or family dinners, but something else is being sacrificed (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).
It also must be noted that “homework” for the purposes of this study will be defined as: *assigned work given to students in addition to the work that students produce during school hours*. The reason this definition will be used is because of the general usage in research. Harris Cooper’s list of homework types comprise of practice, preparation, extension and integration (see appendix one). Other researchers define it as, “drill and practice, project, studying for tests, and completion” (Cameron & Bartel, 2008, 20). While completion work is a homework type given it is the least used type according to the most recent and extensive study of homework in Ontario (Cameron & Bartel, 2008). As a result, work that must be completed at home because a student did not use their school time effectively will not fall under the umbrella of homework for the purpose of this study. However, in the case that students are not given a reasonable amount of time to complete an in-class assignment and as a result must take the assignment home, this common practice would then fall under the definition of homework.

While very limited in quantity, existing studies have reported conflicting findings in regards to the effect that homework has on student success and stamina. Most indicate that homework does more harm than good (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). This has led a variety of scholars to question the very existence of homework (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). However, many educators uphold a very traditional stance on homework and still maintain that it can enhance student learning and be a way of involving the student’s families to participate in the education process (Cooper, 1989). While other educators continue to assign homework simply because parents “are demanding it” (Cameron & Bartel, 2010; 48).
1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn about teacher perspectives on the consequences and benefits of homework in primary and junior age classrooms. Homework, when assigned properly can be a supplement to student learning according to some homework researchers (Cooper, 2006; Vatterott, 2009). However, some schools and teachers have decided to implement a ban on homework, resulting in a confusing landscape for parents, teachers and students to navigate (Shingler, 2014).

Most recent research postulates that homework does not lead to greater student success, but instead leads to increased stress can create a dark cloud over the family life in student homes (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006). Some students bring home several hours of homework and need assistance to complete it, which can build homework into the very fabric of a family’s home-life. This can lead to conflict, confrontation and a stressful home environment (Kohn, 2006). For example, a study conducted by Cameron and Bartell (2008) found that when parents were questioned about homework stress they responded with, “I find homework to be extremely disruptive to building a strong family,” or “we as parents find our marital stress is based primarily on the rigors of school and academic marks” (Cameron & Bartel, 2008; 54). Research has also shown that fear and anxiety are immense barriers to learning, and a stressful home environment has the potential to cause both of these problems (O’Donnell, 2009).

This study will by no means put an end to the seemingly endless homework debate. The purpose is to shed more light on the issue, and add to the discussion within school boards and the Ministry of Education about the merits of children as young as five years old, bringing home assignments.
1.3 Research Questions

The research question that this study sought to answer is: What are the perspectives of a small sample of teachers on the costs and benefits of assigning homework? In order to answer this question, I interviewed three elementary school teachers about their homework policies. My subsidiary research questions are

1. What, if any, place does assigning of homework have in these teachers practice and why?
2. Based on their teaching experience, how do students typically respond to homework?
3. What range of positive and negative outcomes have these teachers observed from students?
4. What advice do these teachers have for other teachers regarding homework policies?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

My interest in this topic stems from my own experiences with having homework in my early days in elementary school. Regularly my classmates and I would receive homework that would take one to three hours of our nights to complete. The work we received was relevant to the curriculum and lined up with what we were learning in school, however it caused myself and I must presume others, a great deal of stress. The goal of the work from my perspective at the time was to receive praise and avoid shame from my teachers and classmates. This is not the ideal goal of homework. If it is beneficial in smaller doses, the goal, as previously mentioned, must be to enhance student learning.
There is no ill will towards my teachers in regards to this phenomenon, I simply believe that there was little thought put into the assignment of homework. It is an easy way to show parents what is going on in the school. The assignment of homework in elementary schools had never really struck me as a topic until a family that I am acquainted with described how much homework their child was given regularly. Upon first thought, it seemed like off-the-cuff complaining, however when I did a quick search I learned that in September 2014, several Quebec schools were piloting a year without homework (Shingler, 2014). This is a decision that has grounding in research and follows the model of several European nations (Finland, Germany etc.) that have banned or cut-down the maximum amount of homework children receive in elementary schools (“School bans homework for two years,” 2012). The idea of a homework-free school is only compounded by growing concern about the overwork and overstress of many fully employed adults leading to my interest in the topic.

Children tend to be the least valued members of our society in terms of their opinion. We often make decisions on their behalves without asking or valuing their opinions. The final question that must be examined is how the children themselves feel they are affected by homework. If children do not feel overwhelmed or overstressed by homework then there is no need to continue study in this area. It is my hope that through this research there can be a better understanding of how the attitudes of teachers and their students matter in regards to individual, board and provincial homework policies.

1.5 Overview

The rest of my research study will be organized as follows; chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in the areas of the potential consequences and benefits of
homework policies. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. In chapter 4 I report my research findings and discuss their significance in regards to the previously existing literature. In chapter 5 I make recommendations for practice, and suggest areas for further research and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine much of the currently existing research that has already been conducted in regards to homework effectiveness. The overall goal is to examine both sides of the homework debate to see if there is any common ground as well as searching for the most effective practices, according to leading scholars on the subject. First the history of homework will be discussed, followed by examining the intended purposes of the practice, and finally the known benefits as well as consequences of elementary school homework.

2.1 A Brief History of Homework

Homework over the entire course of the twentieth century has become so etched into our understanding of the school system that it has not often been questioned (Vatterott, 2009). Students even in the nineteenth century were commonly assigned homework as a way to practice their skills at home in subjects such as math and spelling (Schlossman & Gill, 2004). As Schlossman and Gill (2004) mention however, this work was usually given to students in the 5-8 grade range and not 1-4. In addition, students were often were guilty of unscheduled truancy making homework a difficult policy to enforce. So, as Vatterott (2009) rightly points out children had a vast number of chores that they would need to complete, which would lead to parents needing to chose what was more important. It was during this time that homework also gained one of its first opponents. In 1897, Dr. Joseph M. Rice wrote in his magazine Forum, that according to his research examining the spelling proficiency of students, their proficiency did not increase as a result of spending more time practicing at home. He instead advocated that the instruction given by teachers needed to improve in order for students to become more
proficient (Rice, 1897). During this period in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century homework was relegated predominantly to a secondary activity, after the child’s other responsibilities.

Throughout the early twentieth century as school became more established as an institution, parents began seeking the results of sending their children to school (Schlossman & Gill, 2004). The easiest way to identify results was through the assignment of teacher grades on student work, which, at the time, were based on the ability of the student to memorize and recite facts. As a result, parents began to see homework as more of a necessity because the generally accepted view was that the more practice memorizing dates, names, and equations the better grade the student would receive (Cooper, 1989). It was at this point that the homework pendulum began to swing.

Through the 1940s, pedagogy switched the focus on rote memorization to problem solving. Then as Cooper describes:

The trend towards less homework was reversed in the late 1950s, after the Russians launched the Sputnik satellite. Americans became concerned that the lack of rigor in the educational system was leaving children unprepared to face a complex technological future and to compete against out ideological adversaries. Sputnik precipitated a greater emphasis on knowledge of subject matter, and homework was viewed as a means for accelerating the pace of knowledge acquisition (Cooper, 1989, 4).

Of course Cooper is writing about the American system, however it is a significant example of how quickly and unexpectedly the general opinion on the topic can change.

Throughout the late twentieth century the homework pendulum continued to swing with worries about declining test scores reinvigorating the positives of homework and the fears of children losing their childhoods swinging the pendulum back away from homework (Schlossman & Gill, 1996).
At this point in time, there seems to be more of an academic debate than ever over the issue. In the past ten years books such as, *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting our Children and What we can do about it* (2006), *The Homework Myth: Why our Kids get too much of a Bad Thing* (2006), and *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents* (2007). This topic brings strong opinions from parents and educators and research has not stopped as scholars seek to further uncover the answer to the homework question.

Many experts such as Alfie Kohn (2006), Sara Bennett and Etta Kralovec (2006) believe that homework is not conducive to a healthy childhood because it interferes with their social and family development. Others believe that homework still has a place in schools and that it can lead to a better work ethic and can result in meaningful learning (Cooper, 2007; Vatterott, 2009). This is where we are left currently in regards to the homework debate. There are two rather distinct schools of thought around homework among scholars. The researchers who see benefits in homework seem to be the shrinking faction judging simply on the saturation of research supporting the abolition of homework many recent studies (Kohn, 2006; Bennett & Kravolec, 2006). Many parents have strong opinions of the topic but there is no general consensus that existed during previous eras (Vatterott, 2009).

### 2.2 Intended Purposes of Assigned Homework

Cathy Vatterott is one of the leading supporters of the continuation of homework practices in elementary schools. Her book, *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs* (2009), outlines how she believes homework needs to change in
order to be an effective teaching tool. Homework must fulfill these five criteria in order to be of use in elementary schools:

First, the task has a clear academic purpose, such as practice, checking for understanding, or applying knowledge or skills. Second, the task efficiently demonstrates student learning. Third, the task promotes ownership by offering choices and being personally relevant. Fourth, the task instills a sense of competence—the student can successfully complete it without help. Last, the task is aesthetically pleasing—it appears enjoyable and interesting (Vatterott, 2010, 10).

Now of course, this is not how homework is often assigned, but the prescription that Vatterott gives for proper homework is the ideal that homework strives to be. What she says ends up being the problem with the implementation, is that the work that students complete at home is then graded or when students are given copying and memorization exercises. This, she argues, is the old paradigm and teachers need to move away from this practice.

In theory teachers are meant to give meaningful homework exercises that fulfill Vatterott’s criteria and also are very clearly linked to the curriculum criteria that is being taught in the classroom. There now exist handbooks with different homework suggestions and techniques aimed to give teachers an idea of how to incorporate homework into their curriculum as a learning tool (Alleman, 2010). For example giving students a homework assignment where they are to research a global problem (such as deforestation, famine, poverty, endangered species etc) and read editorials and opinion pieces about their topic. Then they are to interview members of their family and community and record their opinions on the topic (Alleman, 2010). Another is to examine simple machines inside their homes and communities and sketch them to better understand how they work (Alleman, 2010). A final example, students were asked to choose a social concern or
issue and research symbols at home related to that issue and use an artistic medium (photography, sketching, painting, music etc.) to express the issue (Alleman, 2010).

The commonality amongst all of these homework assignments is a powerful one. All of them involve a number of principles of meaningful homework that Alleman identifies such as:

- Providing for expanded meaningfulness and life application of school learning, constructing meaning in natural ways and expanding a sense of self-efficacy,
- Extending education to the home and community by engaging adults in interesting and responsible ways, taking advantage of the students’ diversity by using it as a learning resource, personalizing the curriculum and reflecting on the here and now, and keeping the curriculum up to date (Alleman, 2010, 8-13).

In the above examples some of these principles are used and can be a good supplement to the criteria that Vatterott outlines in her work. For example the assignment about interviewing family members fulfills the criteria Alleman gives of giving meaningfulness and application, extending education to the home by engaging adults, and takes advantage of students’ diversity. If the assignment were further dissected, it would likely fulfill all the principles if the assignment was given in Alleman’s method. In addition it would fulfill all of Vatterott’s criteria in particular the third regarding offering choices and being personally relevant.

However, the ideal that Vatterott and Alleman promote is not always the way homework is assigned. Homework is often given that is simply an extension of schoolwork that could be completed during class time (Kohn, 2006). In the examples Alleman provided, all need to be completed at home with some to minimal assistance from the parents of the students. In reality what is assigned just as frequently are assignments such as spelling repetition, mathematics problems, and memorization tasks (Kohn, 2006). In addition, it is being assigned in larger doses with 34% of children aged 6-8 year old assigned
homework in 1981, 58% in 1997, and 64% in 2006 (Kohn, 2006). Alfie Kohn (2006) points to higher standards for the reason the time spent doing homework continues to rise. He writes that schools are called lousy and their students lazy and thus argues that homework is one way to combat the problem.

When homework is thoughtfully prepared as Vatterott and Alleman, believe it can be, they, and others, would argue that it can be a valuable instructional tool for teachers. Opponents of homework have a different reason to believe that homework is given. Alfie Kohn cites hopes of keeping parents informed about what is going on in the classroom, or to keep children practicing to learn skills and facts (Kohn, 2006). However there is a larger underlying problem that Kohn sees regarding the purpose of assigning homework:

Why homework continues to be assigned despite the absence of supporting evidence is almost never a topic of empirical investigation. But even more remarkable is an unwillingness to take seriously the possibility of rethinking homework, even by researchers who have reported evidence that would seem to invite such a reconsideration (Kohn, 2006, 93-94).

Kohn’s main concern with the assigning of homework is that the validity of the practice is not even questioned by those assigning it. Teachers throughout their lives have been given homework; parents, grandparents and every single person who went through Ontario’s public school system would have been assigned homework at some point. With this lens, it is unsurprising to see such a widely accepted practice go unquestioned for the most part.

The purpose and design of homework assignments is one of the most instrumental factors contributing to the discussion for or against homework. However, it is often overlooked in quantitative studies that look simply at the number of hours spent studying, the subject the student studies and the test scores that could increase or decrease as a
result (Cooper 1989). If this factor is overlooked, research on the topic holds a fundamental flaw. Cooper, in his revisiting of homework in 2001, outlined two categories, instructional and non-instructional with four purposes for each type, see appendix 1 (Cooper, 2001). If the purpose of the homework assignments is considered, the benefits and consequences can change significantly. The next two sections will focus on the possible benefits and consequences of homework, however we must keep in mind there is no way to perfectly measure the intent of the teacher. As a result, quantitative studies must instead focus on definite variables such as time spent and grade received. The following benefits and consequences exists without the influence of the purpose of homework.

2.3 Researched Benefits to School Homework

Before delving too deep into the proposed benefits and consequences of homework among scholars, it is worth noting that all of the researched effects cannot adequately be discussed in this chapter. Scholars have written about developmental benefits such as motivation, and parental involvement (Forster, 2000; Bempechat, 2004). The benefit of giving students responsibility for their own homework is also another cited benefit (Warton, 2001). Perhaps the most cited benefit is academic achievement, but many more exist, see figure 2 (Cooper, 1989). From this list, the benefit that will be addressed is the immediate achievement and learning effect. This is because it is the only one that can be measured with any accuracy. In addition, for the sake of this section, I must assume that the retention of factual knowledge can be accurately measured with a standardized or unit test. While this may not be the case in reality, in order to use a
quantitative tool to assist in evaluating research claims, some value must be placed on the results they produce. Furthermore it should be noted:

For almost every specific result shown, another study can be found that contradicts the result. Homework has generated enough research so that a study can be found to support almost any position, as long as conflicting studies are ignored (Vatterott, 2010, 59).

The amount of studies created attempting to measure homework effectiveness are vast and often have contradicting results. It is almost impossible to measure just how effective homework is because of the number of variables involved and flawed measurement tactics, however student achievement can be measured with some accuracy through standardized testing procedures. This is what will be focused on throughout the benefits section.

Harris Cooper’s 1989 study on homework included 17 quantitative studies that he based his findings on. The basic finding that Harris concluded was that homework does have an impact on student achievement. The research showed that about seventy percent of the comparisons that he has encountered have indicated a positive effect for homework (Cooper, 2001). The subject that was most influenced by mathematics, followed (in order) by reading, English, “multiple subjects,” science and finally social studies (Cooper, 1989). In addition Cooper’s summation of research also found a positive correlation between the amount of time spent on homework with student achievement. The outcome achievement was measured as either standardized tests, class grades or attitudes and interests (Cooper, 1989). This itself is a point of contention with many teachers, but standardization is required in order to create an objective quantitative study.

Generally, the work conducted by Cooper reaffirms the benefits of homework in strictly an achievement sense. Of course some studies have found some results to the
contrary such as a 2007 study conducted in German schools (Trautwein, 2007). They found homework to be an effective tool for students (grade 7-9), however the amount of time spent on homework was determined not to the “decisive- factor” when evaluating its effectiveness which was a tool Cooper relied upon, instead it was the quality of the assignments as Alleman advocates for (Trautwein, 2007). Another inconsistency that exists when looking at the benefits of homework is that the younger students are, the less effect that homework has on their achievement (Cooper, 1989). In grades 3-5 the correlation between homework and achievement was nearly zero, but increased with age (Cooper, 1989). As stated earlier, this does not take into consideration what type of homework was assigned, simply that a number of hours were completed by students in grades 3-5 during the study.

Finally, while addressing the benefits of homework there seems to be a “cliff” for all grades, which Cooper calls a “curvilinear relationship” (Vatterott, 2009, 62). When too much homework is given to students at too young an age, the benefits are all but negated. So how much homework should teachers give (presuming homework is a beneficial practice)? The generally accepted amount is 10-minutes multiplied by the grade level. So a grade one student should not receive more than 10-minutes while a grade eight student should not receive more than 80-minutes. This has been a long endorsed practice by the National Education Association and Parent Teacher Association of the United States (Vatterott, 2009). However, every school board in Ontario has its own homework policy. The York Catholic District School Board for example follows this policy (York Catholic District School Board, 2013), while the Toronto District School Board only mentions time (in regards to grades 1-6) with the phrase “time spent on
homework should be balanced with the importance of personal and family wellness and the wide array of family obligations experienced in our society today” (Toronto District School Board, 2008, 3). The Ontario Ministry of Education has allowed homework policies to be decided by each individual board resulting in slightly varying policies across Ontario.

It is worth noting before proceeding to the perceived consequences of homework that the amount of literature advocating less (or no) homework, far exceeds the amount of literature supporting its existence. As mentioned earlier, homework has become a part of the institution of the school system. While homework’s effectiveness has been questioned since the late 1800’s it still exists to this day.

2.4 Researched Consequences of School Homework

There are a number of researched consequences of school homework, such as student stress, loss of motivation to learn, and cheating (Cooper, 1989). However two that are most often cited by researchers against the practice of assigning homework include the argument that students should have time for their own activities or family time is being lost as a result of homework and that the results of research studies documenting the benefits of homework are not strong enough to warrant the continuation of the homework practice (Kravolec & Buell, 2000; Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006).

To begin this section, I will look briefly at a case study conducted by Etta Kralovec (2001) in which she taught a course in New England at an experimental school where all of the work assigned was completed in class. No homework assignments were given, and students, upon completion of the course, were asked what their opinions were on the class. This is one of the responses:
You know, the weird thing is that we don’t have any additional outside work, yet I feel like I actually think more. I really like working entirely in class because there are always people to converse with if you have questions and other people contribute ideas that you might not otherwise think of. Also, since I am a senior I have so much work to do like filling out applications and visiting colleges, that the less homework I have, the easier my life is (Kralovec & Buell, 2001, 60-61).

The reason this is quoted is because often when the homework policies come up, it is those who are completing the homework who are most often left out of the conversation. Most of the studies done examining the benefits and consequences of homework focus on achievement criteria such as grades or test scores, however in this case the student makes a strong point about the stress that homework put on students who have a plethora of other commitments (Cooper, 1989). Interestingly this is also one of the most common arguments against homework, it puts an unnecessary burden on students who should be spending their free time doing social or self-directed activities.

Kohn writes, “adolescents are routinely and unapologetically described with sweeping generalizations that we wouldn’t think to applying to any other subset of the population” (Kohn, 2006, 151). Kohn sees some of the rhetoric regarding homework to be completely focused on a negative worldview of adolescents. As the student above described, he/she has things that he/she need to be doing in order to prepare for his/her future. Many students play organized sports, act in plays, play in bands, attend cultural learning classes etcetera. All of which have as significant a value as homework. However, homework assignments are often seen as positive tasks by parents who worry that their children would be engaged in dangerous or inappropriate activities if they have no assigned work.

“The first thing to go is often the family dinner hour,” (Bennett & Kalish, 2006, 23). The University of Michigan in 2006 did a study researching how often families were
allowed to eat dinner together, and 42% of families do not have that luxury and Bennett and Kalish believe it is a result of homework. Family dinners are a time when children learn to socialize, develop language, learn manners, and expand their vocabularies. Unfortunately this time is often lost because homework often takes precedence to family dinners. Students now spend approximately 33 percent less time playing than in 1981 (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). In the 1960’s the American Educational Research Association released an official policy stating that, “Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time that should be devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents” (Kohn, 2006, 16). The vast majority researchers who have dedicated time studying the adverse effects of homework point to the loss of childhood as one of the largest problems with the homework that teachers assign. The issue at the centre of this critique is; when will children have time to explore their own interests and activities? The average Canadian parent (aged 25-54) is working just under 38.6 hours per week, leaving few hours for “family time” (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). In addition it is recommended that school-aged youth should be involved in 60 minutes of continuous vigorous physical per day (Strong, 2005). When trying to fit in homework, family dinners, physical extracurricular activities and other hobbies it becomes almost impossible for students to fulfill all these tasks. It is a matter of personal opinion as to which are the most important, but the research supporting homework’s benefits is faulty according to anti-homework scholars.

While the work conducted by Cooper is highly touted by researchers, it also raises some questions about the perceived benefits of homework. Some of the issues have been
mentioned briefly, such as using achievement to gauge student success, and homework benefits being virtually non-existent in earlier grades. The largest issue that anti-homework researchers point to is the “profound indifference” to what studies have produced (Kohn, 2006, 73). Teachers cite “self-discipline” and “improving student achievement” as the top two reasons for assigning homework, but these claims are faulty at best (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, 35). In studies reporting positive effects of homework, the achievement gap has been so minimal that anti-homework researchers have reason to question their findings (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Teachers in their professional training are not required to learn about homework research leading Cooper to believe that “most teachers are winging it” (Bennett & Kalish, 2006, 159).

This is perhaps where the greatest problem exists, are teachers assigning homework because they believe the practice does enhance student learning, or because it is expected of them? Unfortunately large studies of teacher perspectives do not exist in great numbers. They have been anecdotally quoted in some studies claiming it is a result of parental pressure (Cameron & Bartel, 2010) or because they want to involve parents (Bempechat, 2004). Teachers are not afforded the luxury of time to become entirely informed on homework research leading to homework being assigned without question.

2.5 Conclusion

Through this chapter, the history, purpose as well as benefits and consequences of homework have been examined. Homework has been a conscientious topic throughout the twentieth and now into the twenty-first century. I used the metaphor of a pendulum to describe the ever-changing views on homework, however there is a possible resolution in sight. School boards are taking cues from other educational systems from across the
globe and using homework policies that are beginning to reflect new research (Sahlberg, 2014).

This study sought answers to the questions outlined in chapter one and importantly sought teacher perspectives on why they are assigning homework. Teachers are the ones who are responsible for homework programs, yet are underrepresented in the literature. Often asked for their responses are parents (Cameron & Bartel, 2008) or even students (Warton, 2001), but teachers are not represented as often. In the following chapter, the methodology of my research will be discussed.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I outline the methodological approach that I used to conduct my research, as well as the procedures I used in my data collection process. I describe the methods used to recruit participants of my research as well as the participant sampling required to be of value in this research study. I identify my data analysis procedures as well as the ethical procedures that were followed throughout the conducting of my research. I then discuss some of the various strengths and limitations of my methodology. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a summary of some of the key methodological decisions that were made and the reasons behind these decisions given my research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

My research was conducted using a qualitative approach using two methods of research collection, a review of existing literature on the topic, and two semi-structured interviews with educators on their personal experiences with my research topic. I believe that by using this qualitative approach I was able to gain a significant amount of insight into the topic of homework while allowing for academic research and field experiences to play a role in examining the data I gathered.

Qualitative research in the field of education is not a new phenomenon; it is often used to represent those who work in the field in academic research (Sherman & Webb, 1988). Where quantitative research “treats experiences as similar, adding or multiplying them together or quantifying them,” qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, 7). This is not to discount the value of quantitative research in the field of education, however in the
hopes of learning from the experiences of a select few educators, it is crucial to try to understand the lived experience of those educators and not to try to quantify their knowledge. In the field of educational research this has been a known and well-documented issue:

Many educational researchers came to feel that research activities structured through the logics of quantification leave out lots of interesting and potentially consequential things about the phenomenon (Freebody, 2003, 35).

This idea that quantification of lived experiences can have the unintentional result of removing important variables from the equation is one that I have taken into deep consideration. So, while investigating the best way to examine the value of homework in elementary classrooms, I find it absolutely necessary to use a qualitative approach to best represent my interview subjects.

While paying close attention to my own research purpose and questions, I have found it necessary to use a qualitative approach based on a few important factors, first being the sample size that I am using. With only a small sample of teachers, it is important to fully explore all of their experiences. To reduce such a small sample to a series of polar question would not grant the deeper understanding that these educators bring to the table. Secondly, in order to answer all of my main research questions, I require answers that delve deeper than polar questions. To garner an appropriate response to these questions a yes or no answer will not suffice, in fact the questions I have posed seek the “why” behind my interviewees teaching practices resulting in my use of a qualitative approach.
3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

For the purpose of this research the sole source of primary data collection is the three semi-structured interviews that I have held with my participants. Interviews in research fall into three general categories, structured or fixed response, semi-structured, and open-ended (Freebody, 2003). The first being closed ended questions with a fixed number of responses, the second with a set of questions that they participant may answer however they choose and room to inquire further into other areas that are revealed throughout the interview. The open-ended has a general theme or question discussed but the participant may choose to change the conversation throughout the interview.

The reason why a semi-structured interview is the method I have chosen to collect my data is to allow for my questions to be answered, but to also allow room for flexibility in case my background research or previous experiences have left me with a blind spot on this topic. Semi-structured interviews allow:

More leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee; as well, the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide (Brinkmann, 2014, 286).

My semi-structured interviews were meticulously prepared and organized beforehand so as not to fall into the unfortunately common mistake of seeing the interviews as having a conversation, and allows the interviewer to be an active participant in the interview rather than simply a recorder of information (Brinkmann, 2014). This is not to imply that myself as an interviewer am adding information to the interview, but rather allowing the dialogue between two people to be more than a series of unchanging preset questions.

With my research questions and purpose in mind, semi-structured interviews were the only way to properly address all of the themes that I foresaw and best allow those I
did foresee to come to light. The complexity of the issues surrounding homework are vast and complicated and through semi-structured interviews these issues had the best chance of being somewhat resolved (Cousin, 2009). Specifically, I created an interview protocol that includes all of the general questions that I would like to have answered by my participants (Appendix B). Using this protocol, I framed my understanding of the issues surrounding homework, but allowed participants to bring their own understandings into focus and become a part of my understanding.

3.3 Participants

In this study I have chosen my participants using a set of sampling criteria and recruitment methods that I deemed would result in the best candidates for interviews. Participants were considered in relation to their relation to the sampling criteria before they were selected for participation and multiple avenues for recruitment were used before final decisions for participants were made.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

When deciding what educators would be best qualified to answer my research questions, I had to determine what experience ideal candidates would possess to be of maximum value to my research. The criteria that I set out to fulfill were as follows:

1. Teaching in elementary school(s) for at least five years.

The reason I have this criterion is to ensure that my participants have been involved in an elementary school environment and have had time to experience and experiment with different homework policies. As a result, they were able to compare and contrast several different experiences they have had in order to give as much insight as possible into the topic.
2. Worked in a school that banned homework for a period, do not give homework in their classroom, or been involved in creating policy at a school or board level on homework.

This seemingly contradictory criterion is to address two schools of thought on the homework issue. It is unlikely that someone who has been involved in creating homework policy has also been in a school without homework, although not impossible. In order to provide a balance to my research I wanted my participants to have been in either one of these settings to allow the merits and problems with both systems to be expressed by my participants. If both/all participants meet only one of these criteria there could be a distinct bias, or having representatives from both could result in dichotomous analysis.

3. Have a definitive and purposeful homework program or complete absence of homework in their classroom as a result of their academic research or experiences.

This is to ensure that the participants that I recruited did not have a largely disinterested position on homework. I sought participants who deliberately used homework in their classroom or had a very clear policy against homework in their classroom.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures and Recruiting

The recruitment of my participants was done through mainly purposive sampling. Given the specific criteria that my participants must possess to be of value to my research they needed to be sought with these criteria in mind. In order to select my research participants properly, I needed to ensure my research purpose and questions could properly be answered by the people that I selected (deMarrais, 2004). It was unlikely that I would simply meet someone who had assisted with homework policies at a board/school level, or meet a teacher who was employed at a school with a homework
ban and as a result I needed to use purposive strategies. As researchers have made clear, participant selection is of the utmost importance in order for findings to be given credibility (Garaway, 2004). The recruitment strategies and selection of my participants could not rely solely on convenience sampling and I was required to seek participants that fit my criteria.

The recruitment strategies I used involved contacting school boards. For example, one school board had a school that banned homework for a year. Another board recently revised and published a homework policy for teachers to abide by. By reaching out to these specific boards I had a greater likelihood that my sampling criteria would be met than be contacting boards without knowing their history regarding homework policies and initiatives. Taking into consideration the breadth of my research topic, I opted to follow the “less is more” approach of limiting my participants to three educators (deMarrais, 2004). Adding more participants with similar experiences would not have allowed my interviews to be as in depth and experiential so I made the decision to limit my participants to three.

While recruiting, I needed to keep in mind different ethical considerations to allow participants to feel free to participate or decline without pressure. This is why I decided to contact school boards with the sampling criteria I was seeking, and not attempt to find participants in person. I allowed the school boards to disseminate the information and if any educators fit my criteria and were interested in participating the interested party could contact me. I also sought teachers in person at various professional conferences, school visits, and chance meetings. Teachers were again told what my criteria were and invited to contact me if they were interested in participating.
3.3.4 Participant Biographies

The following are biographies of the three participants that I selected to be a part of my research. They all come from the Ontario public school system and have had various experiences with homework, resulting in their interest in participating in my research study. Pseudonyms have been created for my three teachers, Rachel, Yvonne and Beverley.

3.3.4.1 Participant One: Rachel

At the time of the research, Rachel had been teaching in the same Ontario public school for the past 13 years. She was teaching at a school of about 300 students, but the population was transient, resulting in frequent additions and subtractions of students to classrooms. Her school was in a rural area with predominantly immigrants from South Asia. At the beginning of her career, Rachel gave homework without too much thought into the process, but the longer she taught, the stronger her conviction against homework became, resulting in very little homework given. When she does assign homework, it is often only completion work for students who were unable to complete their work during class time.

3.3.4.2 Participant Two: Yvonne

Yvonne was a public school teacher with 15-years of experience under her belt, who had taught in two different school boards. This resulted in her seeing homework done in various contexts. While in a Greater Toronto Area board, she gave homework and saw parents wanting their child doing as much as possible. When she changed boards she saw how socio-economic factors could greatly change the way homework is planned and actually carried out. Through this experience she decided her homework policy was
not adequately fulfilling its goal and vastly changed it, removing homework from her classroom.

3.3.4.3 Participant Three: Beverley

Beverley had been teaching for over twenty years outside of the GTA and worked at a school with a population that commonly struggle to put food on their family dinner table. She saw how complex children’s lives are and decided homework was not beneficial enough a practice to have a lasting place in her classroom.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data that I have collected through the interview process was done through the use of semi-structured interviews. Upon completion of the interviews the next step was to transcribe the interviews in their entirety. In doing so I had a medium that was appropriate for coding the data once it was finished being compiled (Dey, 1993). After my data was transcribed it could then be analyzed and coded to try to make meaning from the data.

I then used a coding method to try to identify the themes that existed throughout the data that I had collected. A theme, broadly speaking is, “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience” (Beck, 2003). So while compiling and analyzing the data I sought to find themes that brought meaning to the information and experiences that my participants presented. In order to do so I had to take into consideration that somewhere in the interviews and transcriptions, some form of comprehensive themes existed. This was difficult to do because there is no singular way to code qualitative data (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). There are themes that did not arise that I thought would, and there was null data that I had not expected to discuss that
figured prominently in the interviews. Through the data analysis process I needed to make many key decisions when choosing themes to focus on.

Through the synthesizing process I had to seek to find meaning between the various interviews, which required meticulous analyzing of all transcripts. I then needed to make meaning from these themes to present the data, after analyzing it, as findings.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedure

Before conducting interviews there were a number of ethical considerations that were made. In order to create an environment where participants were free to share openly, and not be subject to any negative repercussions several policies were set in place. The first consideration is the right to confidentiality. Throughout my written research, there are no references to actual names of teachers, schools or school boards. Pseudonyms were used, and there are no identifying details given about teachers or students. This is a policy that keeps participants comfortable sharing whatever information they feel is relevant without fear of consequences. Also at any point during the process from the time that a participant agreed, until the time my research was released, my participants had the right to withdraw from this study. In addition to these terms, an unedited transcript of the interview with the participant was made available if the participant requested before data analysis was begun. Participants were told of their right to refuse to answer any questions without needing to explain why. To see a copy of the consent letters given to participants, please refer to Appendix A.

To maintain confidentiality, all data was stored on my personal computer, accessed only by myself and my course instructor, not uploaded to the Internet, and all
primary data from the participants will be destroyed five years after the release of my research. There are no known risks to participation in this study.

3.6 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The choice of using a qualitative process combined with the use of semi-structured interviews was a decision that was made in compliance with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education’s Master’s of Teaching program. While there is flexibility in the methodological approach if requested by the student, I feel like this methodology is able to adequately answer my research questions and fulfill my research purpose.

The methodological strengths of my research come from several topics that I have touched upon earlier. Significantly, the strength of semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to express themselves in the fullest sense of the term (Brinkmann, 2014). Educators are able to answer without restraint of only having a few options and can open avenues of exploration that I did not foresee during the preparation of my interviews. Also taking a qualitative approach is the most efficient way to make meaning out of a limited number of interviews. With a sample size this small it is almost necessary to use a qualitative approach when attempting to analyze the data drawn from semi-structured interviews. It also allows the personal experiences learned from interview data to be much more in depth than a series of numbers adding experiences together because of commonalities (Freebody, 2003).

The greatest limitations that arose using this methodological approach is likely the scope of participants that were involved in my research, and the specifications on the participants. There are few participants as a result of the procedural guidelines set out by
the Masters of Teaching program and in accordance with the procedural guidelines participants must be educators. This excludes speaking with students who experience homework on a day-to-day basis and parents who oversee the homework being completed nightly. This is a problematic omission because those who are doing the homework are not adequately represented in my research. It is a top-down approach that is a clear limitation on this methodological approach, but nonetheless getting educator perspectives in itself has great value. The findings I make are not generalizable for use in all circumstances but can be a tool for teachers interested in critically analyzing their homework policies.

3.7 Conclusion

In summary, the research approach that I have used to best answer my research questions is a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. I explained how the data would be analyzed using said qualitative approach and how meaning would be made from the data. I outlined who the participants are and how they were recruited as well as the ethical and procedural considerations that were made for participants. Finally, I addressed the strengths and limitations that exist as a result of the methodological decisions that I made. In the next chapter I will outline the findings of my research.
Chapter Four: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the findings of my research as a result of the three interviews I did with Ontario teachers. These interviews were done during the months of October and November as teachers were solidifying their homework policies for the year, and as a result teachers had strong opinions on the topic. I organized my findings into six overarching themes, with sub-themes listed as they applied to the six main themes. 1) Teachers identified a range of external factors that influenced their homework policies, including school based pressure and students’ personal circumstances, 2) Participants advise new teachers to explore options when creating their homework programs, but use experiences to refine their practice 3) Participants believed that homework can impede academic and non-academic growth, 4) Participants believed that homework leads to inequality in a variety of ways, 5) A tension these teachers experience is the question of who is responsible for after-school time, 6) Teachers have observed that homework can have a negative impact on the students’ environments. These themes and the sub-themes of each will be discussed, and it must be noted that as a result of similarities between themes and sub-themes there is overlap that was addressed in more than one section.

4.1 Teachers identified a range of external factors that influenced their homework policies, including school based pressure and students’ personal circumstances.

When teachers begin their practice, they are relying on the influences that they have come into contact with in the teaching profession to inform their practice. The four main influences that teachers mentioned that impact their homework practices included administration policies, parental pressure, self-pressure, and time constraints. These
factors all have different impacts on a teacher’s decision to give homework or not give homework. As such, they will be discussed separately.

4.1.1 Administration policies have an impact on the homework policies that teachers use

The generally accepted rule advocated from the National Education Association and Parent Teacher Association of the United States is that 10 minutes of homework be given to students per night multiplied by their grade (Vatterott, 2009). This rule is commonly used by Canadian school boards as well (Halton District School Board, 2016; York Catholic District School Board, 2013). This was a guideline that was mentioned by two of the teachers that I spoke with. Yvonne, a teacher for 15 years in Ontario felt unsure as to who was in charge of the homework policies of Ontario school boards,

I feel like somewhere it says five or ten minutes for every grade you are in, but that might be a provincial policy… Homework never gets discussed. I never hear anyone asking anything about it. So I know it is very unbalanced, I know depending on the school you are in, [that is what] decides the amount of homework you get.

The way that homework is often decided is through board policies that are without much guidance from the Ministry of Education. The Ontario Ministry does not have a guideline for teachers, but rather allows individual boards to make their own policies. As a result, every teacher I spoke with had a different policy (or none) governing their homework practice. One commonality was that their administration had an effect on their decision, but not in an active sense. Their administration allowed the teachers to use their professional judgment to create their classroom homework policy. This is an indication that the Ministry of Education in Ontario is achieving its goal of allowing school boards to make their own decisions surrounding homework. The only Ministry policy regarding homework comes from their Growing Success (2010) document that describes homework
as, “work that students do at home to practice skills, consolidate knowledge and skills, and/or prepare for the next class” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). So the Ontario Ministry has identified it’s definition of homework, but does not put a numerical or value judgment on its uses.

As a result of the ambiguity of the Ontario Ministry’s stance on homework, boards and even school administrators, end up making the final decision on homework in the classroom. This can manifest itself in a positive way as it did with Rachel, another experienced teacher, 12 years into her teaching career. Rachel explained, “I have had administrators who have said as long as your classroom is working we don’t really care what your policies are. So I’ve never really had to fight for what I believe in.” She had the support of her administration to use her professional judgment, but she worries about the alternative. She worried that without the support of the administration she may be forced to give into the pressure of parents. She continued, “There is a little blurb in their planners, but no one talks about it… and if you don’t have them backing you up then what? Then sometimes it’s easier to give in and say okay fine I’ll do homework.”

The ambiguity of the Ontario and even Board policies cuts both ways, it allows teachers to make professional judgments based on what they believe is best for their students, but results, as Yvonne rightly pointed out, in very different policies from board to board, school to school and even classroom to classroom. Standardization may not be the best solution to the homework question, but it results in great disparity across Ontario schools.
4.1.2 Parent pressure on teachers can have a great impact on their homework policies.

One of the top cited factors that the teachers I interviewed reported as an influence on their policy was parental pressure and influence. Without a doubt parents will have an opinion on the issue of homework because they are often the ones saddled with helping the child complete it. Unfortunately, just as there is a wide array of opinions on homework among experts, there is a wide opinion on homework among parents (Cameron & Bartel, 2008). Some parents want more time to spend with their family, others want their child to participate in sports, arts, religion, or social groups, others want their children engaged in academic homework at all times. There really is no accounting for how parents will feel their child’s time in best spent without asking them. Parental pressure therefore can have varied results on a teacher’s homework program. In some cases, it may be complementary. Rachel, for example, noted, “I think most parents are relieved frankly, to not have homework hanging over them all of the time.” Parents may be happy that their child will not be bogged down with nightly homework, a suggestion supported by several researchers (Kravolec & Buell 2000; Kohn, 2006; Cameron & Bartel, 2008).

However, there are of course those who want their child doing homework as often as possible. It may be the parent wants to express to their child’s teacher that they are very committed to their education as Rachel experienced, or so they have things to work on with tutors as Beverley suggested. As Yvonne pointed out, it may just be a matter of wanting their children to be working so that the parent/guardian can get a few chores done. When these parents came them, they often used different tactics to quell parent desire for more homework. Some of the tactics they reported included, independent study
units, creating individual homework packages, and even encouraging parents to read with their children. Yvonne summed it up perfectly however when explaining to parents why homework does not fit into her teaching pedagogy when parents asked for more worksheets. She tells them, “enough is enough more worksheets are not going to teach your kids.” This is where teachers would use their professional experience to explain to parents why they had the policy they did.

While it is clear that parents can influence teacher’s homework programs in both directions, pleading for less homework or pleading for more, the teachers I spoke with who had a strong pedagogy against homework did not allow parent pressure to change their policy.

**4.1.3 Personal experiences had by teachers in their childhood or in their teaching career impact their homework policies.**

If a teacher struggles constantly with their homework in their childhood, it can be expected that when they begin teaching themselves, they will have an opinion on the benefits of homework as a result. While the teachers I interviewed all had different experiences with homework, they did identify their childhood experience as having an impact on what they believed about homework when they began teaching. Beverley and Yvonne enjoyed homework and both had no problem completing it in their childhood. However Rachel struggled with homework and when she got into high school she says she rushed through homework and did not have the time management skills to do homework properly. Just as every student learns differently, every student reacts to homework differently (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). In the case of the teachers I interviewed, their childhood impacted their initial homework policy as they began teaching. Yvonne and Beverley both had favourable experiences and began giving
homework as they began their practice, where Rachel, from the start of her career gave homework but noted that she was not very committed to it. It was as a result of their teacher education programs and teaching placements that they began assigning homework when they began their careers. Beverley said, "I think that a lot of teachers feel that they (have) to give homework." When we examine teacher practices in the field of homework we see that most Ontario teachers give homework starting from early grades, with 70% of children in grade one receiving more than 10 minutes per night of homework (Cameron & Bartell, 2008). So new teachers are seeing this practice through their teacher placements. Their childhood experience and their experience of teacher education, thus informed their homework policy when they begin teaching.

Once they begin teaching, the teachers I spoke with saw the actual outcomes of their homework policy. For some students it worked, and for some it did not. Yvonne for example explained, “the only kids who ever did their homework were kids who didn’t need to do the homework.” Specific reasons why this was the case will be explored in further findings. Rachel was finding homework to be a very difficult standard for her students to achieve in her classroom until, as she explained here, “I realized maybe the problem was the homework, not the students.” It was a result of their experiences in the classroom dealing with homework every day that allowed them to reflect on their practice and make a change for the benefit of their students. Through their childhood, teacher education, and professional experience, teachers created and refined their homework policies and practices.
4.1.4 Personal time commitments have an impact on the homework policies that teachers create.

Teachers need to be constantly creating engaging lessons, assessing student achievement in various subjects, evaluating learning goals, and managing behaviour, amongst a myriad of other responsibilities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). If we also expect them to create the type of meaningful homework that Vatterott advocates for, their workload becomes even more unbearable (Vatterott, 2010). As soon as the school day begins teachers begin circulating to see who has completed their homework and who has not. Then they need to begin issuing consequences for those who did not complete their homework or at least keep track of who has, and has not completed their homework. For this reason, Rachel explained:

I started off being stressed out because I was always tracking down kids to get their homework done. I was phoning parents and saying well your child is not finishing their homework and getting frustrated because it wasn’t happening.

Then as the day continued it remains a responsibility of the teacher to find and assign more homework. The cycle was draining for all three of the teachers I spoke with who cited the pointlessness of the entire process. As they continued with this homework cycle, the time constraints that it put on their planning time, and free time became a significant enough factor that they decided to do away with their intensive homework programs.

4.2 Participants advise new teachers to explore options when creating their homework programs, but use experiences to refine their practice.

When new teachers are forming their homework policies, as mentioned, they need to take into consideration their childhood experience and experience in teacher education. However teacher education programs do not discuss the convoluted nature of the homework problem enough to challenge the practice (Kohn, 2006). There are varied
opinions from the teachers I interviewed with regards to their advice for new teachers, it ranged from ‘do not go anywhere near homework,’ to ‘try homework,’ to just doing whatever is common in the school/board. So when trying to decipher what the best advice for new teachers would be, it is that they should do what they would prefer, but make sure they use their experiences to inform their future practices.

Beverley advocated trying a few different methods when entering the teaching profession and seeing what works for your class. Similar to how each student reacts differently to homework, each class will do differently with homework plans and policies. She believed that teachers must be cognizant of their students, and adapt their policies accordingly. Yvonne on the other hand advocated not doing any kind of homework saying, “I would never advise someone to do a homework program.” Rachel would advise new teachers to see what their school policy is before making their own decision to avoid muddying the waters in the school. What they all agreed on however, was using personal experiences to inform and refine their policies. Yvonne changed her policy because she found it to be ineffective, saying it was not accomplishing what she wanted to accomplish. Rachel found students to be resentful of her homework policy, and Beverley says she was not seeing substantial results from her students that compelled her to continue her homework program. Though they had different experiences, they all reformed their programs based on the responses of the students.

While all teachers have different ideas for what new teachers should be doing in the classroom, they all made note of the importance of reflection in teaching practices. The benefits of reflection in teaching have been thoroughly researched and the general consensus is, when done in meaningful ways, it is essential and beneficial to the teaching
practise (Bengtsson, 2003). Teachers should be using whatever homework policy they feel is best for their practice, but should adapt that method in response to students and their own self-reflection.

4.3 Participants believed that homework can impede academic and non-academic growth.

Healthy child development was an area that all three teachers made very clear was a strong reason for not using rigorous homework programs. Research has shown repeatedly that extracurricular activities can be of great benefit to student’s social and academic achievements (Lagacé-Séguin & Case, 2010). This was a sentiment that was echoed by teachers. They all verbalized that taking student’s extra-curricular activities away from them, whether it be physical activities, artistic, religious, or otherwise would be ultimately doing a disservice to the child. Rachel lamented:

They will have to give up things that they like before they are ready to do that because their parents say that it is school or gymnastics, and school is too important to give up on, so gymnastics needs to fall by the wayside.

Children may have other interests that they completely lose out on because their parents (and perhaps themselves) see homework as being more important, while in reality teachers are “winging it” (Bennett & Kalish, 2006, 38). There is a false belief that homework is entirely beneficial, where as mentioned in the literature review, most homework is ‘drill and kill’ type work that does not result in enduring understandings (Kohn, 2006; Cameron & Bartell, 2008). Students may lose out on sports, drama, painting, dancing, and a platitude of other social-building activities because homework is held in such high esteem by parents. Without homework showing any measurable positive outcomes in terms of academic achievement in grades under 6, removing children from extracurriculars for this reason is not substantiated by research (Cooper,
1989; Kravolec & Buell, 2000). Furthermore, there is a strong correlation found between children who do extracurricular activities and higher test scores (Lagacé-Séguin & Case, 2010). Extracurriculars teach values that do not get taught as frequently in school such as physical literacy, emotional intelligence, artistic skills etc. It is important not to undervalue these skills and teachers have noted this is what stands to be lost by homework.

Participants reported that even students who are not participating in extracurricular activities are suffering from the effects of homework. It does not need to be an organized activity; children need to socialize with their peers, older children, younger children, their parents and other adults. Yvonne told me:

I think that they should be able to go outside and ride their bikes with their friends, or go to a hockey practice or whatever without the stress of having to bring homework and do it in the car on the way.

Bennett and Kalish (2006) write that the first thing to go when it comes to homework is the family dinner, and with it go a number of beneficial experiences for children. They may lose social time with their family, they lose discussion of current events, they lose manners, and they lose conversations that help expand their vocabulary (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). All of these things were identified by my participants as things being lost to daily homework.

The other aspect teachers identified as a part of what children lose when doing an excessive amount of homework is reading for pleasure. When homework is being piled on students, they lose time to do reading that aligns with their interests. The decline in reading for pleasure has been noted by scholars, and there are many reasons that could explain this (Murphy & Fink, 2012). Technology, less family time, or other factors could
be involved, but homework is an area that has not been examined to be a factor. Teachers said things like, “We kind of encourage them to read every night… I don’t even call that homework, that is just something you should do,” and, “I say to all families and kids that I would love it if they read every day.” This is something that has been lost in the shuffle. If students are doing homework every night, they are given less time to read for pleasure. These teachers, by not giving homework (or very little homework), are allowing students to have more free time and are encouraging them to read. More research needs to be done in this area to see if there is a correlation between time spent on homework and time spent reading for pleasure.

4.4 Participants believed that homework leads to inequality in a variety of ways.

This is perhaps the most recurring theme that was expressed by teachers, in a variety of ways homework ends up failing the students who need more support. There are the socio-economic barriers, such as access to resources or technology, environmental factors such as a negative home environment as well as others. The teachers I spoke with found a variety of ways in which common homework practices fail students across Ontario on a nightly basis.

4.4.1 Teachers believed that a lack of differentiation in homework practice is leading to greater inequality among students.

In teacher education programs and in school boards across Ontario, there are pages written about the value of differentiating instruction to the needs of the students of the province. Teachers must do IEP’s, teach to various learning styles, and accommodate learning needs, but when it comes to homework, differentiation falls by the wayside. The same homework is often given to all students regardless of their learning style and needs (Lauria, 2010). Where there is great inequality in the learning needs of a group of
students, Yvonne does not even attempt to try, “If I give 3 kids homework and the other 3 kids I don’t give any homework to, then I got a bunch of livid 10 year-olds.” The reality is that the children who are not being given homework in this scenario likely need assistance to complete it. So it may be equitable to not give them homework if they will not receive assistance in the home. The issue of equality and equity is at play here, students go to different playing fields at home and already come with different learning styles and needs. This is not something to take lightly. Rachel says, “It has the potential to widen the gap between kids who are kind of academically privileged, for whatever reason, and kids who aren’t.” When homework is assigned the to all students the Ministry’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is not being followed:

The resulting equity and inclusive education strategy calls for each school to create and support a positive school climate that fosters and promotes equity, inclusive education, and diversity (Ministry of Education, 2009, 11).

There is no true equity when family support comes into play; every parent/guardian has a different parenting style with different value systems in place with in the home. In the school equity can be achieved, but it is not possible to guarantee that it will extend into student’s home environments.

When we have different learning styles and abilities in the classroom there is a requirement that students are catered to in a way most supportive to their needs. So Beverley asks the question, “The kids who like homework are the kids who do well in school, but they are already doing well so why do they need homework?” If homework is being given for the sake of giving homework, it is not fulfilling its primary purpose, which is to improve student learning (Vatterott, 2009; Alleman, 2010). Teachers I spoke with at some point in their careers asked this question and decided that they would not
give homework any longer. Beverley noted that some students would be completing homework every night without fail, but others would never complete it, “There is a lot going on in kid's lives that I think really impacts the point or use or ability to even do homework.” This is the next area where inequality exhibited itself through homework.

**4.4.2 Socio-Economic factors have a great impact on student’s ability to complete and gain from homework.**

There are differences in the households of every student in every class, and as a result when homework is sent into these households, each student will have different support and barriers to their learning. Here, Rachel describes the problem:

> Whether it’s because they are more or less independent in getting their work done, whether the have more or less family support. You’ve got one kid who goes to all these after school academic things and has parents who are PhD’s and devote two hours to helping him improve. The kid sitting next to him will be by himself for several hours and when Mom and Dad come home they are tired or they don’t have the education themselves to help their child with homework.

There are a few key points made by Rachel. First there are students who receive a great deal of parental support when they get home from school and they are more likely to get what they need to be successful. Then there are those who do not receive that type of support in their household. Parents may be unable to help because of their own literacy or math skills, they may be unable to help because they work at night, but whatever the reason, the children without the parental support at home will likely be less able to complete their homework. In order for students to make homework meaningful, parents need to be available when help is needed or else the task will be abandoned or done incorrectly, furthering misconceptions. This support has a great impact on students gaining from homework experiences (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Of course not every child has this benefit. So as a result, the gap that Rachel described will continue to widen
between those students with parents/guardians who have PhD’s and those who have parents/guardians who are unwilling or unable to help them with homework. 

There are then further factors that may prevent a student from finishing their homework. There are sibling dynamics that can prevent a child from doing their homework as Beverley described a situation where, “siblings get in the way of their learning experience at home.” There can also be parental barriers where little value is placed on homework such is Yvonne’s situation, “there is so much generational poverty in my school. The parents never did their homework, so a lot of them say I’m fine look at me so, that’s a tough thing to overcome.” There is just too much going on in a child’s home life with regards to socio-economic challenges to continue to ‘widen the gap’ with homework. Teachers through homework are bringing the barriers that they are unable to fix right into their classroom. 

Ideally, as Vatterott (2010) explained, homework should be able to be completed independently. Unfortunately, just as in the classroom, some students will need assistance with new concepts that were taught in the past week. Beverley said that some kids, “will fly through it and want some extension activities,” but others, “will get maybe one side of the page done.” This is a strong indication that the students who are doing significantly less work in the classroom will need support. She felt that it was consequently unfair for teachers to send this work home expecting students to all complete the same amount on an unequal playing field. The students who struggle in class will continue to struggle at home.
4.4.3 Teachers believed that students in households where English or French language and literacy are weak commonly do not receive adequate homework support.

In Canada of the 260,000 permanent resident immigrants the country accepted in 2014 just over 26,000 reported English as their mother tongue (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). In Ontario, the number of Ontarians who do not speak English as a first language is 26.6% and the children of these new Canadians are in schools (Ministry of Finance, 2011). In Ontario the top eight languages, following English and French, account for 1.4 million Ontarians (Government of Canada, 2011). Ontario has a diverse language background and students who did not grow up speaking English are already at a disadvantage in an English/French education system. When these students are sent home to do homework, already being disadvantaged, they will likely not receive the same level of support that English or French speaking students would in the household.

This plays out in several ways, in terms of households where English is not spoken students who need assistance with their homework may not receive it as is the case that Yvonne describes, “They were home with grandma who only spoke Hindi, so who’s going to help them?” The other way this can impact the student is if their parent/guardian (even if they spoke English) was illiterate, “at my school I have kids whose parents are illiterate. So how can they ever help? They just can’t so you’re just setting everyone up for failure.” The language barrier is challenging in classrooms where students are learning English for the first time and if there is a lack of language support at home. Students will often get frustrated with homework or simply not do it. With students, it is often unclear what the exact barrier is that stops them from completing
homework. All the teacher will see is that the student is not completing the homework, “I have kids right now and I could send homework and there is no way it would be done,” Beverley says. The reasons may be language based and by continuing to assign homework students can fall further and further behind the other students in the class.

4.4.4 Homework that requires the use of technology or other resources leads to greater inequality.

This sub-theme can be linked to socio-economic factors but it is not always, so it is in a separate category. Teachers I spoke with identified technology as an unequal barrier between student households. While this is something many educators identify as a barrier at home, it is still commonly used for homework. Some households may not have access to a computer, or a printer, or the Internet. Teachers identify these barriers, but homework can and does still require some technology in the home. Beverley indicated the desire to use technology at home for an, “opportunity for kids to do research that they don't have time to do at school,” but also said, “I can't assign that because all of the kids do not have technology access.” 77% of Ontarians have Internet access at home, leaving the other 23% without (Statistics Canada, 2009).

As a result of these statistics, teachers should be aware of the technology gap within households and not assign homework that requires technology. Rachel was in a situation where she was assigning work that required technology, “I have been giving them stuff to do at home that requires computers because they all have access to the Internet and to a computer.” While this is a temporary measure as her school solves technological problems, there can still be issues that arise from requiring technology in the home. Students can lose Internet connections, computers can break etc, leading to homework not being completed.
4.4.5 Homework cannot be assessed

“Homework cannot be assessed,” this is a well-known saying amongst teachers and teacher educators. It is written very clearly in the Growing Success document that explains the assessment process, “Assignments for evaluation must not include ongoing homework” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 39). When homework is sent into a household some students will work diligently to complete the work. Some students will rush through it, as they get ready to attend extracurricular activities or to get in front of a television or tablet. Some will sit and get assistance from a parent or guardian to complete the homework, while others will leave it on the kitchen table for a family member to complete. This is what teachers must be aware of when homework goes into the home.

Rachel told me, “You always know the students who are going to come in with everything done perfectly by them and the students who would come back with everything perfectly done by their parents.” In a sense, this is not a barrier because Ontario’s Growing Success document says that homework should not be assessed by teachers (Growing Success, 2010). When Beverley did give homework, when it came back she said, “I don't grade it, I don't even look at it.” This is because when it is returned it can only be checked for completion, but then what really is the point? If students are meant to benefit from the homework, then it should not be the type of “drill and kill” that Yvonne experienced in her childhood. Instead it should be the type of homework that brings deeper understanding and a connection to the child’s life (Vatterott, 2009).
4.5. A tension these teachers experience is the question of who is responsible for after-school time.

At the end of the school day, when the bell rings, there is a strange transfer of authority that not everyone agrees on. Who is now responsible for these children’s time? Does the school day end at the bell or not? Yvonne found this to be a problem with parents wanting the school day to continue into the evening. Beverley found the same thing, “I create programming and structure their lives from 8:30-3:30 and now I'm being, are people wanting me to now create work for them outside them and is that really my role?” There is an ultimate judgment decision required to be made by teachers, sometimes in conjunction with parents as discussed in theme one, as to who is responsible for programming the student’s evening. Some parents believe it should be the teacher’s responsibility, one that imposes further constraints on teacher’s time also as discussed in theme one.

4.5.1 Teachers believed that the teacher’s responsibility for the students’ time should end at the end of the day

At some point, the responsibility over the child’s time is no longer belonging to the teacher. Whether that is the second the bell rings, or after an “appropriate” amount of homework is where the debate exists. Rachel explains the problem as such:

We as adults would not be okay with a job that saddle us with that much work after we left the office if we chose to do it so be it, but being forced to do that much outside of our work hours wouldn’t be something we would stand for. Using this framework, most adults would not willfully do copious amounts of work outside of their workplace as discussed in the introduction. It is a value judgment that all of the teachers I spoke with made. They decided they did not have a monopoly on
student’s time, but other teachers make different decisions. Rachel shared an anecdote when her thinking on the subject changed:

There was very (young teacher), she must have been in her first or second year of teaching, a very young high school math teacher that, and we were talking about homework policies. She assigned her students one hour of homework every night… I thought about the arrogance of that. If she can do that then their other four teachers can and suddenly that’s four hours of homework.

This is not an uncommon story, more than 25% of grade six students are receiving more than 60 minutes of homework per day across Canada (Cameron & Bartell, 2008). This is above the recommended guidelines of many school boards (York Catholic District School Board, 2013; Halton District School Board, 2015). It is a matter personal ideology that can result in teachers overstepping their boundaries, such as the experience Rachel describes, or teachers who decide that after school is time that belongs to the students. Some believe that homework is simply an extension of the school day and is a part of the curriculum. Others, such as Beverley believed, “it is my responsibility to cover the curriculum during school.” During the school day teachers are covering curriculum. After-school should they still be covering curriculum? This is where one of the pillars of the homework debate lies, when does the school day end?

**4.5.2 Teachers believed that children need time to pursue interests, relax, and socialize after focusing on academics throughout the day**

This is different than theme three in the sense that theme three focused on extracurricular activities, teachers also identified the need for students to have time to relax regardless of how they chose to relax. There is research that shows allowing the brain time to rest between learning cycles allows it to store information more effectively (Jensen, 2008). As a result teachers should be allowing students to have time to rest after school. If students have homework, soccer practice, then go to pray at a mosque, they
have essentially no down time in their night. Beverley, Rachel, and Yvonne all spoke of the importance of down time in their interviews, saying students need a break and they need time to be children. The research exists to support their beliefs, however homework remains a staple in many classrooms. It goes back to the way that teachers were educated as was discussed in theme one, personal experiences with homework encourage teachers to teach as they were taught. Yvonne said, “I think they should be having a snack, sitting down maybe, if they want to watch TV for a while, relaxing, because school is more demanding than it used to be.” Schools may or may not have become more difficult, but factually the amount of homework students are receiving is increasing (Kohn, 2006). As more homework is given to students there is less down time.

4.6 Teachers have observed that homework can have a negative impact on the students’ environments.

When homework is given to a child, there is an implied expectation from the teacher that it is to be completed by an agreed upon date. This social contract between student and teacher creates a power dynamic. This power dynamic enters the home and must be dealt with by the family members of the student. In addition, the next day students either fulfill that contract or break it, leading to negativity if the contract is not fulfilled.

4.6.1 Homework has a negative impact on the home environment of the student

The children who bring homework home with the right tools to be successful, can still fall victim to the negativity that homework can bring. Whether it be difficulty completing the assignment, prior commitments needing to be cancelled, or other factors. The learning environment in the classroom, the teacher can control, however the environment at home is another question. Yvonne relayed:
If a kid is crying while he is doing homework and a kid needs a time out to cool off, they are not getting anything out of it. I would be a little ticked off if I was getting that amount of homework sent home for a little kid every night.

This type of a learning environment is not uncommon in households across the province. Parents/guardians often report homework as an area of conflict in the home Kohn says he has heard from “countless people across the country about the frustration they feel over homework” (Kohn, 2007, 36). The negativity in the home can create a power dynamic with the teacher and parent as well. If the child is struggling, the teacher has given homework that is too challenging and did not fall within the standards for meaningful homework (Vatterott, 2010). However, this is relatively unsurprising as a result of homework when kids struggle in the class, they will continue to struggle at home as Beverley questioned, “If it's the kids that are struggling that it is such a negative experience for, then why?” This cycle of homework can result in a negative home environment when the child gets frustrated and the parents/guardians in turn get frustrated. Yvonne described, "My mom and I used to fight over math homework.” When the child is frustrated and the parent is frustrated, learning is not likely to happen (O’Donnell, 2009).

Even when the homework is done in a meaningful, independent, developmental way, it can still create negativity. It takes time away from parents/guardians, it takes time away from students and that in itself can create a negative environment as discussed in theme five. Canadians live very busy lives and losing the small amount of free time can add a great deal of tension to the household (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). In Rachel’s view:
With the commute time, from the time that they get home and when their kids go to bed, that time can be really short. If they are trying to fit two hours of homework in there, nothing fun will happen.

When free or family time is frequently lost as a result of homework there is bound to be upset people in the household. It can create a negative relationship between the parent/guardian and the teacher. Yvonne said, “I would be livid” in regards to doing excessive amounts of homework with her child every night, and Beverley said, "It's not my role to do this… every day." Parents/guardians can become frustrated with the tedious nature of helping their children with homework. Being cavalier with parent’s/guardian’s time can lead to negativity in the home.

4.6.2 Homework has a negative impact on the school environment of the student

The first thing that students commonly do as they see their teacher for the first time in the morning is hand in, or show the teacher their homework. Yvonne noted that, "the rapport you build up with the kids is as important as the content you teach them." When the work trumps the positive relationship and instead there is an adversarial relationship, there is more negativity. As the student enters the classroom for the first time that day and they likely have more important issues on their mind if they are unable to do their homework Yvonne says:

So you are hungry, you probably didn’t get a lot of sleep last night, and your clothes are dirty. You don’t need me starting your day yelling at you because you didn’t do a math page… So to me, there’s the value right there, so maybe you are a little behind in math, but you didn’t leave one negative environment and step into another one.

From the moment students enter the classroom it is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that “students should feel safe at school and deserve a positive school climate” (Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012). When the student is immediately confronted with
not completing their homework, there is already an unsafe situation for that student in the classroom. Teachers may seek to find out why the student has not completed their work, but in reality many will not disclose information that could be potentially embarrassing with other students, teachers, and adults around. Students should not be expected to disclose information like this either, if a child is unable to do their homework because their sibling was ill and needed to be looked after, a student may choose to share or not to share that information with their teacher.

Alternatively, all of the teachers that I spoke with listed many benefits when homework was taken out of the classroom. With, “relief on the part of kids who struggle,” “they cheer” and “they are pleased” being different reactions that teachers saw. Without homework over the heads of students, they have a less stressful working environment that Kravolec and Buell advocate for (Kravolec & Buell, 2001). As a result of not assigning homework, there is a consequence, students must be on task in the classroom. Without homework teachers need to be using every minute they have in class to get through the curriculum. Rachel uses a simple motto in her classroom, “I try to instill that kind of work hard, play hard mentality in the class, and that is in fact our classroom rule number one.” Children in homework-free classrooms enter into a contract, willingly or unwillingly, that because the teacher will respect their free time at home, that they will be on task and working hard in the classroom. All teachers I spoke with said as a result of the implementation of this policy, their classrooms have become more focused. Rachel, for example, explained, “In general they work hard in class because they know that if they get it done in class, it won’t go home with them.” “I expect (them) to be
responsible in class,” Yvonne noted, and Beverley says that, “between 8:30 and 3:30 they are totally, they know they have to work their tails off in that time.”

Without homework, curriculum is not lost, because anything sent home has to have already been covered in class. It just creates a more positive environment because learning is done all together as a group. Yvonne said of her past homework program, “I don’t think it really helped that much to be honest with you because you can’t send home things you hadn’t done in class anyways.” Teachers still need to teach the entire curriculum as best they can, and homework is not an acceptable way to cover more, so they need to use their classroom time as best they can.

4.7 Conclusion

The six main themes that I found through my interviews were discussed as well as some implications for those findings. 1) External factors influence teacher’s homework policies, 2) New teachers should explore options when creating their homework programs but use experiences to refine their practice 3) Children develop outside of school, and homework can impede academic and non-academic growth, 4) Homework leads to inequality in a variety of ways, 5) Teachers must make a judgment on who is responsible for after-school time, 6) Teachers see how homework has a negative impact on the environments of the student. Teachers who do employ homework programs could be doing a disservice to their students in a number of ways, and teachers who choose not to may be helping to remove some of the inequities caused by homework.

Through my research, I believe that these educators have given a unique insight into this debate over homework. Most research has focused upon the lack of academic impact of homework, however, these educators pointed out the very real inequity of
homework policies. I believe that the issue of inequity is one that has not been properly raised and through my research a glimpse into this theme is a novelty.
Chapter Five: IMPLICATIONS

My interaction with this topic is one that stemmed from my own childhood with homework, and many adults that I have spoken to had similar experiences in their own childhood. This is an educational issue that teachers give very little consideration to; it is simply considered a necessary part of the educational system. However, recent research, including my own, has shown this not to be the case. In fact, the practice of homework is a continuation of inequality, negativity and futility. In this chapter, a summary of my key research findings will be discussed, some implications and recommendations for teachers and pre-service teacher educators will be given, and areas for further research in the field of homework research will be discussed.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

There were many key findings to my research that have important implications in the education system, and to teachers in general. Perhaps the most important being that homework is a continuation of inequality. Just as students enter the public school system with an uneven playing field from a combination of socio-economic factors, they return to homes with uneven playing fields. As the teachers I interviewed explained, they could send homework to a home with no technology, with an unsupportive parent or guardian, or to a home where the only language is Punjabi. This is not equitable to the students across the province. As per Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive strategy, teachers strive to:

Promote inclusive education, as well as to understand, identify, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit our students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society (Ministry of Education, 2009, 11).

Homework, simply put, does not achieve this goal. It in fact undermines it. Students enter tremendously diverse and complex homes and it is unfair for educators to assume that
they are able to complete homework to the best of their abilities. Furthermore, it accentuates the barriers that exist when homework is expected in class the next day.

Another important finding was the way that homework can lead to a negative environment for the student. This can be at home as a result of a battle between child and parent over homework, or a negative environment within the classroom if the homework from the previous night is not finished. Both of these environments have tremendous effects on the student. Their home and school are the two places they spend the most time, and if either or both are negative places the well being of the student is put at risk.

Similar to Ontario’s Equity and Diversity policy referenced above, the Ontario Safe Schools Act strives to create a safe environment for all students. When the first interaction when the student enters the class is a negative one with the teacher, it sets a negative tone for the day. This is one of the strong factors that teachers identified as a reason for their no-homework policies.

The final important finding I learned from these teachers was that the most fundamental framework piece of the homework puzzle is, the question of who is responsible for the student’s time after they leave the school. This is the underlying disagreement that exists between pro-homework educators and anti-homework educators. The teachers that I interviewed believe that the student’s time is their own when they leave; it is time for them to pursue other interests, play with friends or simply relax, but all of these activities are up to the discretion of the child and the parent. As an extension, the child may lose out on their own interests that they enjoy outside of the classroom as a result of having homework commitments and from a child development standpoint this
can be damaging (Kohn, 2006). The teacher’s role is to give the curriculum within school hours, and not to be extending the school day into the evening as Beverley put it.

5.2 Implications

As a result of research like this, there can be implications to be made in regards to the teaching profession and for the education system. Homework, as mentioned before, is something that is often taken for a given in schools across the country and there is a growing amount of research suggesting it is not a beneficial practice. The implications of my research can be categorized into broad implications, and narrow implications and will be examined below.

5.2.1 Broad Implications: The Educational Research Community

The broad implications of my findings relate to the entire Ontario education system, Ontario school boards, and individual schools. Policy decisions regarding homework practices all should be a part of the surrounding considerations. More specifically, I believe that previous research has shown there is no correlation between homework and academic success before the Grade 6 (Kohn, 2006). In addition, my research found areas where homework becomes a detriment to the well-being of the child such as inequality, negative environments, and removing them from their own interests. With this in mind, when policies are being made, these factors should be taken into account. When homework is seen as simply not beneficial by researchers, it can be easily brushed aside for it’s non-academic value (see figure 2), but when there are clear negatives, the absence of academic outcomes becomes further highlighted. When there is evidence that we are doing a disservice to students who are already disadvantaged by
socio-economic factors, education administrators must take a hard look at the policies that they have in place surrounding homework.

When the Ontario Ministry of Education, and individual school boards, are making policy decisions, the findings of other researchers such as Cooper (1989), Kohn (2006), Kralovec and Buell (2000), and my own should be considered. Findings of inequality should be addressed when creating homework policies. The Ministry of Education should consider giving school boards more guidance on what the goals of homework are, and how to assign equitable homework to students. School boards should consider moving past the surface level, students should receive a minute amount of homework, but instead to an equitable homework policy. This could take the form of requiring teachers to differentiate their assignments, or perhaps restrict homework requiring any technology, or require extracurriculars take priority over homework.

Educational research has come to find homework to have no effect on academic performance and it can cause negative effects in children, as a result of these two findings, all policy decisions should take this information into account.

5.2.2 Narrow Implications: My Professional Practice and Identity

I have made it no secret that homework is a topic of personal significance to me as a result of my negative experience with it throughout my elementary school education. The research that I have done has reinforced my philosophy of homework in some ways but also challenged them. Where in my own experience I had a number of extracurriculars that influenced how I spent my time, however, it is the inequity that my participants expressed that showed a different lens to view the topic. As a result of the work of a number of educational researchers, I began looking with a critical eye upon
homework policies and assignments. My own research has further solidified and focused my own ideology as I prepare to enter the field of education as a practitioner. I have come to respect that this is a topic that is inherently loaded in the teaching profession and educators all have their own convictions either for or against homework based on their own experiences.

In a practical sense, the implications of my findings will shape the way my own classroom interacts with homework. I will continue advocate for homework-free schools and policies and explain the reasoning behind my ideology to my students. It will not be a part of my classroom as a result of my own findings, and furthermore I will continue to be an advocate of less homework in elementary schools to my colleagues and other educators. This being said, I am very cognizant that circumstances can change and differentiation is important. I plan on using my own experiences to inform my own practice as the teachers I interviewed suggested. As I continue to teach, I expect my own opinions on this subject to develop as well.

5.3 Recommendations

As a result of my research, I have laid out four recommendations for various stake-holders in the education system. There is some overlap between the recommendations as stake-holders such as teachers, the Ministry of Education, and parents all have similar interests. All parties have the same goals of creating educated, responsible citizens, but have slightly different perspectives in regards to their scope.

5.3.1 It is important that the Ministry of Education create a document that outlines equitable homework policies.

Across Ontario, there are boards with homework policies, but they come in various forms, some simply tell the teachers to use their best judgment, such as the Peel
District School Board (2015). Others use time guidelines such as the Halton District School Board or York Catholic District School Board (York Catholic District School Board, 2013; Halton District School Board, 2015). While I do believe that teachers do try to use homework as a tool to improve student learning, this is a practice that can result in inequality from classroom to classroom. Teachers that I spoke to did not give homework, but teachers across the hall could be assigning up to an hour per night to Grade 6 students. There is inequality regardless of the potential benefits and consequences of homework. This needs to be remedied as one-way or another some students are being advantaged/disadvantaged regardless or which side of the homework one finds them self on. The Ministry of Education should guide the discussion more than they are doing currently and create some literature regarding guidelines for homework assignments. This is an area where the Ministry has stayed quiet and it is time for them to provide some guidelines for Ontario School Boards.

These guidelines should include mention to respecting the after-school time of the students, creating equitable homework guidelines as I outlined above in my broad implications, and ensuring classroom and home environments do not become negative spaces for the child. The Ministry should be providing more guidance for school boards and these foundational frameworks can give support to school boards when they create their own policies.

5.3.2 Parents should explain their child’s mitigating circumstances to their teachers to allow them to pursue non-academic activities.

Parents are often the most powerful advocates for their children in primary and junior classrooms. Students of this age generally accept their teacher’s assignments as requirements and do their best to complete it. As described in my findings, some cannot
do this for a variety of reasons, but generally students want to complete their homework to gain approval from their teachers. There are not often students who question the validity and importance of homework at these young ages. Parents have ultimate control over their children and should feel free to tell educators that their extracurricular, sleep, or even a family meal was more important to their child then some homework. No one knows their child better than their parents. The teachers I interviewed made note of things students were losing out on because of homework assigned and these things have great value. Whether it be a student being unable to attend dance classes, soccer practice, or attend a religious service as a result of homework. These experiences should not be taking a back seat to a teacher’s homework policy that may or may not be helpful for the student’s development. It is the responsibility of the parent to advocate for their child and allow their child to participate in other activities.

5.3.3 Teachers should not have daily, prescribed homework policies.

This likely will have the most profound effect on the homework problem, which I believe exists across Canada and other countries. The buck begins and stops with the teacher. It is the teacher’s decision to give the homework every night and there is no legitimate pressure for them to do so. As discussed, there are Board guidelines, parental pressure, and self-pressure, but these are all perceived pressures that do not have actual measurable impacts on teacher’s performance appraisals, or other indications of teacher success or failure. I do believe that homework, if given infrequently with distinct learning goals can be an effective practice, but this is not how it is often given. I do not advocated for a complete banning of homework because after compiling previous research and analyzing my own data, I am not equipped to answer if there are no actual benefits to
homework (figure 2). I do believe however that every-night homework is creating negative classrooms, discouraging students from following their interests and furthering inequality in the classroom. With these negative effects in mind, teachers should not be assigning homework every night to students, and furthermore, there should be no consequences for not having completed the homework. If teachers wish to send suggestions for reinforcing learning home with the students they have the choice to work on it or not instead of being obliged to complete homework. The issues that I have found in my research become rather negligible if homework is a choice rather than a requirement. I strongly recommend that teachers consider using this approach to their homework.

5.3.4 If homework is ever given, it should be differentiated

This is in direct relation to the finding that homework leads to inequality. Just as teachers have many different learners with learning styles, skill levels, motivation levels, and socio-economic statuses, these do not disappear when the child leaves the school. If teachers refuse to confront the evidence before them regarding the lack of academic value to homework, and ignore the negative effects, at least they must acknowledge that when they send things home inequality continues to exist. As a result they should be aware of this inequality and address it. This could be in the form of a survey at the beginning of the year, or asking the parents during parent-teacher interviews, but they should collect this data before assigning homework.

Work sent home should be more individualized to the skills and needs of each student. This is not to say every student should have a different plan, but similar to an IEP, students who need clear differentiation of content, process, or product should be
accommodated. If teachers continue to give homework, they should be respecting differences within the home of the child.

5.4 Areas for further research

Through my research, I came to three issues that I have noticed to be lacking research on. The first I have alluded to several times throughout but is the recurring theme that homework has non-academic value for students. This is an idea that has no backing in research, but is an area that would significantly change the field of educational research surrounding homework. Studies regarding responsibility and homework are difficult to create because it is hard to distinguish whether the homework teaches a child responsibility or the child is responsible so they complete their homework. Whatever the methodology for such research may be, it could be vastly useful to scholars who have researched the area of homework.

Another area that I believe could use further research in this field is the conception and validity of the 10-minute rule. This rule was mentioned by all of the teachers I spoke with and has even found it’s way into board homework policies such as York Catholic and Halton. This idea is advocated by the most prolific of homework researchers, Harris Cooper, but has not been examined through the lens of child development or neuroscience. Researchers should seek to answer, does this number fit, and how can we be sure are two questions that would be of great use to the field of homework research.

The final issue is the issue of reading. Through my interviews teachers did not include reading into the category of homework. However they all mentioned they did want children to read every night. Is reading for pleasure being impacted by the growing
amount of homework that students are receiving. Statistics have shown that students are receiving more homework than ever before, and reading for pleasure could be lost as a result (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). There could be an important relationship between these to factors that warrants further research.

5.5 Concluding Comments

Through my research I have learned a great deal about this topic of homework, however the more I read, and the more I talk about the topic, the more convoluted it gets. Educators, parents, and children all have strong views on the topic and the majority of these opinions are grounded in their experience and not in the overwhelming amount of research that does not show academic outcomes before Grade 7 (Cooper, 1989). I hope that educators choose to spend a small amount of time learning a bit more about what negative effects homework can have on a child and make meaningful, careful decisions if they choose to assign homework. As I conclude, I would like to say a final goodbye to this research, my own homework, I hope it leads to a greater discussion regarding Ontario school board’s homework policies and practices.
References


Cameron, L. and Bartel, L. (2010). *The researchers ate the homework! Perspectives of parents and teachers*. *Education Canada 49* (1), 48-51.


Appendices

Appendix A – Consent Letter

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

My Name is Spencer Davis and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on teacher perspectives on the benefits and limitations on homework in elementary school grades. I am interested in interviewing teachers who either do not give homework or who have a structured homework programme in their elementary classroom. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Spencer Davis
647-213-3654
spencerg.davis@mail.utoronto.ca
Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Contact Info: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by _____________ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B – Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this interview. The aim of my research is to learn more about teacher perspectives on the benefits and limitations of using homework in elementary school grades. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. I will ask you a series of questions focused on your practice and experience in the field of homework. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question without explanation. I also would like to remind you that you will remain anonymous in my research and all identifiers will be removed from any publication.

As per the letter of consent that you signed, I will be audio-recording this interview through the use of a digital recorder. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Main Research Question:

What are elementary teachers’ perspectives on the benefits and costs of assigning homework?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

1. What, if any, place does assigning of homework have in these teachers practice and why?

2. Based on their teaching experience, how do students respond to homework?

3. What range of positive and negative outcomes have these teachers observed from students?

4. What would be their advice to other teachers regarding homework policies?

Interview Questions:

Section I - Introductory Questions:

1. Can you please state your first and last name for the recorder?

2. What is your current position?
a. What grade(s) do you teach?
b. In addition to being a classroom teacher do you have any other roles in your school?

3. How long have you been teaching?
a. At your current school?
   i. Can you tell me more about the school? Size, demographics, program priorities, culture?

4. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
a. Can you tell me some specifics about your philosophy of teaching?

Section II – Teacher Beliefs: Attitude Towards Homework

1. What was your experience with homework during your childhood?
   a. How much homework were you assigned?
   b. What types of homework did you most commonly receive? (Reading, spelling, memorization, essays, etc.)

2. As a student, what did you think about being assigned homework (or not)? What were some things you did not like about it?

3. Is your view on homework the same today? Why/Why not? How, if at all, has your opinion of homework changed through adulthood and your work in the teaching profession?

4. Many school boards have considered/have piloted homework free schools. What is your opinion on this?
   a. From your perspective as an educator?
   b. Personally?

5. How would you summarize key areas of disagreement in arguments for and against homework?

6. What, if anything, do you believe are the benefits in assigning homework?
   a. What benefits, if any, do you see in assigning homework to students in primary/junior aged classrooms specifically?

7. What, if anything, do you believe are the limitations and/or costs of assigning homework?
a. What limitations and/or costs (if any) do you see in assigning homework to students in primary/junior aged classrooms specifically?

8. In your experience, what differences do you see from students in a classroom without homework in comparison to one with homework (if a participant has experienced both)?

Section III – Professional Practice

1. Do you assign homework? Why or Why not?

2. What considerations did you make when you set this policy?
   a. School board, personal, students, school culture?

3. Have you been involved in setting policy decisions surrounding homework in your school or board? What was the process like? What factors were considered?

4. If teacher assigns homework:
   a. What is the purpose behind the homework that you give?
   b. How often do you assign homework?
   c. What does homework look like in your classroom?
   d. Why do you give these types of assignments?
   e. Generally speaking, how do your students respond to your assigning of homework? How do they feel about it? What outcomes have you observed from them in terms of assignment quality? Can you provide an example of a time that positive and negative impacts were observed?
   f. What positive/negative impacts do you think your decision to assign homework has on parents?
   g. How (if at all) do you hold students accountable for their homework completion?
   h. Have you observed any outcomes in terms of classroom community/classroom climate that you attribute to your assigning of homework? If yes, what have you observed?

5. If teacher is working or has worked in a school with a no-homework policy?
   a. When you were first told that your school would be operating without a homework policy what was your reaction? What did you think of this policy?
   b. Since that time have your views changed? If yes, how? If not, why not?
   c. How does the no-homework policy affect your teaching practice, if at all?
d. In your view what are some of the costs and benefits of the no homework policy to students?

e. Typically, in your estimation, what do parents think of the no homework policy? What are some of the costs and benefits for them?

f. Have you observed any outcomes in terms of your classroom community/classroom climate that you attribute to your no homework policy? If yes, what have you observed?

6. What aspect related to your professional practice around homework do you most firmly stand by and why?

7. What advice, if any do you have for beginning teachers around assigning homework?

8. Do you have anything you would like to add?

Reminder: Your participation in my research is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw or change a response at any time. Neither your name nor identifying information will be used in the study.

Your participation is sincerely appreciated
Figures

Figure 1 – Cooper, 2001, 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Purpose</th>
<th>Non-Instructional Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Parent-child Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Fulfilling Directives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extension</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Community Relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 – Cooper, 1989, 12.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate achievement and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better retention of factual knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better critical thinking, concept formation, information-processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term Academic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraging learning during leisure time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved attitude towards school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better study habits and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonacademic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater self-direction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater self-discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better time organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>More inquisitiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>More independent problem-solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satiation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss of interest in academic material</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical and emotional fatigue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denial of access to leisure-time and community activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental interference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressure to complete assignments and perform well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion of instructional techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copying from other students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help beyond tutoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased differences between high and low achievers</td>
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