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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER PRACTICES  
REGARDING HOMEWORK IN AN EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA RURAL  
COMMUNITY

By  
Anna Brooks

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2019

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Anna Brooks under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Abstract**

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHER PRACTICES REGARDING HOMEWORK IN AN EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA RURAL COMMUNITY.

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This study was an investigation of homework practices at the middle school level. For this phenomenological study, 48 certified middle school teachers in an eastern North Carolina rural community provided insight about homework at the middle school level by participating in a survey. The debate about homework is ongoing and often evokes a variety of passionate responses from those on both sides of the debate. The findings in this study revealed a spectrum of homework practices throughout the five middle schools. Homework is the most widely used instructional practice, yet one that is rarely reflected upon by teachers, administrators, and district leaders. In order to support learning, teachers need to make the time to review research-based practices in order to determine implications on their own classroom practices and then apply these practices to their current instruction to ensure homework plays a beneficial role in the learning process for students. Based on the findings, this study provided research for further studies and implication for practice for district leaders, administrators, and teachers.

*Keywords:* homework, teacher practices, middle school, administrators,  
instruction

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout the United States, there is a continuing debate surrounding the value of homework and the practice of teachers assigning homework to students. The topic of homework evokes a variety of emotional and passionate responses from those on both sides of the debate. Although research has remained inconsistent in describing the benefits of assigning homework (Snead & Burris, 2016), the assigning of homework is a widely used practice in education. While teachers feel that homework is an integral part of the learning process, students and their families argue that homework deprives them of much-needed family time (Hampshire, Butera, & Hourcade, 2014).

Harris Cooper (1989), a lead researcher in the field of homework, completed a meta-analysis study that included over 100 empirical studies and defined homework as “tasks that are assigned to students to be completed during non-instructional time” (p. 86). In 2017, the National Education Association defined homework as an instructional practice for assigning work outside the school day that allows students to be motivated, develop study skills, allow parents to be informed about student learning, and improve student achievement. Good and Brophy (2003) further defined homework as “extension of the in-school opportunities for students” (p. 393).

Additionally, Cooper (2007) further defined the “10-minute rule” in assigning homework as a way to gauge how long a student should spend on homework as supported by his research findings. Cooper (2007) stated a student’s grade level multiplied by 10 minutes is the amount of time that all daily homework assignments combined should take to be completed. Cooper’s (2007) research on this 10-minute rule has been widely adopted as policy by many school districts across the United States. Wake County Public School System (2017) in North Carolina cited Cooper’s (2007) research in

their Board Policy 3135, which provides the following time guidelines for regulations and procedures in assigning homework to students: Kindergarten-Grade 2, 20 minutes per day; Grades 3-5, 50 minutes per day; Grades 6-8, 90 minutes per day; and Grades 9-12: 120 minutes per day.

By contrast, Marzano and Pickering (2007) argued that the positive impact of homework correlates to the amount of homework that is completed rather than the amount of time that is spent on homework assigned. Furthermore, Marzano and Pickering cautioned that just assigning homework will not produce positive effects, and ill-structured homework can cause negative effects on student achievement. Marzano and Pickering suggested that teachers must *carefully* plan and assign homework that will maximize the potential for student success.

Historically, the research that supports homework is compelling; however, the case against homework has been increasingly popular among educational researchers and leaders. Over the past few years, the arguments against homework have been the topic of many books and editorials (Marzano & Pickering, 2007). In 2000, Etta Kralovec and John Buell published their work, *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*. Kralovec and Buell argued that all stakeholders need to take a new look at the homework debate. Kralovec and Buell challenged the notion that more homework leads to higher academic achievement. Kralovec and Buell's work further suggested that children being involved in leisure activities and pursuing extracurricular interests would support growth and development more than completing homework. One of the most compelling arguments in the book is the harm that homework causes to students who are from economically disadvantaged families. Kralovec and Buell pointed out that these students can be unintentionally

penalized in school for their home environments, which can make it almost impossible for students to complete assignments at home.

Similarly, in 2006, Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish teamed up to publish their work, *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do about It*. These authors looked closely at the quality and quantity of homework being assigned to students. Their work involved their own research, personal experiences, and interviews of all stakeholders to suggest that parents and teachers advocate for reducing the amount of homework students are assigned, to advocate for the more purposeful design of homework assignments, and to eliminate any homework over extended breaks from school. The authors stressed the negative effects of homework and the need for all stakeholders to advocate for change in the widely accepted practice of assigning homework.

Also in 2006, Alfie Kohn published *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*. Kohn argued that teachers are in the habit of assigning homework to meet policy expectations rather than assigning homework that benefits the learning of students. Kohn suggested that teachers involve students in the discussion in deciding what assignments should be assigned for homework and how much homework should be assigned. Kohn provided activities that should be completed at home rather than teacher assigned homework – activities such as cooking, experiments, game time with the family, quality television shows, or even reading for pleasure.

Most recently, Miller and Keeler (2017) published their work, *Ditch That Homework*. They shared research and insights from parents and teachers along with the pros and cons of assigning homework. Throughout their work, Miller and Keller provided various strategies for teachers to improve learning and, in doing so, reduce the

amount of homework for students to a minimum or to none.

A 2015 policy analysis by Saint Louis University completed an in-depth, thorough evaluation of the homework policies in 24 school districts throughout Kansas and Missouri (Glenn, Jones, Merritt, & Saratain, 2015). The researchers found that district leaders were careful in the language used in their policies that involved homework (Glenn et al., 2015). The team concluded that most districts allowed the assigning of homework to be a decision left up to the classroom teacher. For districts that had some sort of policy regarding homework, the team found that the policies were outdated and were not written to be inclusive of current research that is available. The team cited the work of Carbone (2009), in which he completed a homework policy analysis for the school districts in North Carolina. Carbone found that even though every district was involved in the practice of assigning homework, less than 50% of the districts had a policy regarding this practice. Carbone pointed out that a homework policy would be beneficial in assisting teachers in fostering and tracking student learning through the practice of homework.

The fact that research fails to make connections between homework and learning, coupled with the strong opinions of all stakeholders both for and against homework, it would behoove policy makers to take a closer look at the issue of homework. The Center for Public Education (2007) concluded that the greatest step policy makers can take to determine homework's role in student learning is to stay abreast of current research and then make the best decisions possible based on data in their own districts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Cooper and Valentine (2001) found that homework is more closely associated with student achievement in secondary grades than at the elementary level. Findings

from this study include shifts in student, teacher, and parent attitudes towards homework based on the pressure to produce more homework to impact student achievement at the secondary level. Miller and Keeler (2017), however, pointed out that much of the research on homework shows a *correlation* between homework and student achievement and not a *causation*. Miller and Keeler argued that due to other variables such as environment, compliance, parental involvement, and dishonest behaviors, being able to isolate the connection between homework and test scores is impossible. Furthermore, Miller and Keeler asserted that the studies do little to distinguish between poorly designed busywork assigned as homework versus the impact of quality academic work that can be assigned for homework.

In addition to the lack of consistency among research studies, Xu and Corno (2003) cited that in order to optimize learning opportunities for students in the homework process, research needs to provide studies that compare student viewpoints with those of adult viewpoints, such as parents and teachers. Explicitly comparing the attitudes and perceptions of students with those of their parents and teachers is lacking in many lines of research (Warton, 2001). As Cooper (1989) pointed out, a major issue associated with homework is the fact that the work is to be completed at home and thus school leaders must be cognitive of the variations in the home environment for students. Cooper (1989) cautioned that teachers should strongly determine the value of an assignment before sending it home. Cooper (1989) argued that homework, more than any other instructional strategy, involves more influences that play a role in a student's ability to discern when and how to complete an assignment.

Marzano and Pickering (2007) stated that the benefits of homework are tied to teachers who use homework appropriately since homework can allow learning to extend

beyond the regular school day. Marzano and Pickering supported the need to enact effective homework policies for schools and districts to ensure teachers assign homework properly. Although research can support the use of homework as a tool to enhance student understanding and achievement, research is unclear on specific recommendations to assist schools and districts in developing consistent homework policies. District leaders are called upon to use professional judgment and research-based generalizations to monitor the amount of homework assigned to students and its benefits to their achievement.

Many schools and districts rely on the research of Cooper and his colleagues as guidelines for promoting homework as a benefit for student achievement. In *The Battle over Homework*, Cooper (2007) used his meta-analysis to describe the purposes of homework at every level. Cooper (2007) pointed out that homework for students in the early elementary grade should be a tool to reinforce skills taught in class, allow for parent involvement, and build positive work habits. For students in the upper elementary grades, Cooper (2007) found that homework allows for improved student achievement, and students in sixth grade and beyond benefit from improved standardized test scores and grades due to homework.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As found in the study by Wilson and Rhodes (2010), many teachers are frustrated by the number of students who fail to complete homework assignments. Teachers are finding that students have a variety of reasons for not completing work outside of the noninstructional school day. Rosenberg (2004) interviewed a middle school principal about the demands of homework. Douglas Both was the principal of John Jay Middle School in the Katonah-Lewisboro school district in the state of New York and argued that

assigning homework is a necessary practice because teachers cannot cover all the standards required during the school day. Both believed that asking students to complete work at home allows for more active instruction during school hours. Both also believed that middle school students tend to struggle with the demands of homework since students must transition from a self-contained elementary setting to a middle school setting where they are responsible to five to six teachers daily. Many students in middle and high school refer to homework as their chief source of stress in their lives (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006).

The research of Sallee and Rigler (2008) further supported the arguments from Principal Both. Sallee and Rigler noted that educators are under more pressure than ever to perform. With time being a huge obstacle for educators to overcome in getting tasks completed, homework has become an acceptable practice in allowing students to acquire skills and read new material to prepare for class. Kohn (2006) argued that educators at all levels need to reflect on whether the homework being assigned allows students to think deeply; and if not, he advocated for teachers to reflect on if the practice of assigning homework to allow students to make meaning of their work. Kohn stated that homework should only be assigned when it is truly necessary, and students should be free to spend their after-school hours as they choose. Kohn believed that the answer does not lie in assigning students less or better homework but that schoolwork completed outside the classroom should only be assigned when it is essential to student learning.

Suskind (2012) admonished that questioning the practice of homework calls us all to be brave. She further states that by taking a closer look at homework practices means that we all step up as advocates for the children in our schools. Vatterott's (2009) work supported Suskind's proclamations, as she contended that since homework has been a

long-standing tradition in U.S. schools, the practice has remained unquestioned until recently. Homework has always been viewed as a positive part of a student's daily routine; but as our culture has changed, along with the dynamics of the American family, homework has caused an increase in problems for students, teachers, and parents. Just as Suskind recommended, Vatterott (2009) contended that in recent years, parents and teachers have begun to question the practice of homework and have demanded stakeholders to reexamine the beliefs behind the practice of assigning nightly homework.

While questioning the practice of homework and gathering information from both sides of the debate, Kohn (2006) advised that stakeholders take the conversation a step further. He argued it is not just about assigning less homework or working to redesign the homework, but the priority lies in setting forth the expectations that homework will only be required when it is necessary (Kohn, 2006). Supporting the thinking of Kohn, Suskind (2012) stated that our responsibility is not in meeting the political expectations and holding true to the precedent of "this is how it has always been done," but rather our responsibility is our students, first and foremost.

Suskind (2012) stated, "what if we paused and rethought the homework default based not on pressures and precedents, but on what research suggests about homework and achievement" (p. 53). The purpose of this study was to accomplish exactly that; to analyze current practices of middle school teachers in relation to homework to ensure current practices align with what research suggests is most beneficial for middle school students. Research includes the responses to open-ended questions from middle school teachers in a coastal, eastern school district in North Carolina. The research allows district leaders to hold conversations that, as Suskind stated, "makes us all sweat" (p. 53) because of the responsibility to the children in U.S. schools.

Although homework is usually assigned with the best of intentions, it can cause conflicts between school and home (Letterman, 2013). As cited by Warton in 2001 students can often develop more negative attitudes about homework as they progress through each grade level in school; and even with a desire to please, students find homework to be a meaningless, boring practice (Bryan, Nelson, & Mathru, 1995; Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Warton, 2001; Corno & Xu, 2004). Furthermore, Warton pointed out that few studies have examined the interest in homework for middle and secondary school students. Research indicates that student interest in homework is linked to the amount of homework they complete (Cooper et al., 2006); therefore, a need exists to examine current teacher perceptions and practices regarding the effectiveness and motivation of homework at the middle school level.

### **Research Question**

The intent of this research study was to collect qualitative data to answer the following research question: What are middle school teacher practices regarding homework?

This study was adapted from a similar study completed by Snead and Burriss (2016). By completing a similar study, the researcher was able to address the specific practices of middle school teachers in the demographic area where the survey was conducted.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings from the research on homework are mixed, which makes it imperative that school leaders closely examine current school demographics and carefully consider these factors in addressing homework policies and procedures (Bennett, 2017). Although evidence suggests that homework may benefit student achievement, a

one-size-fits-all approach does not support the needs of diverse students who make up the population of America's schools. Although assigning homework is a common practice by teachers, knowing the influence of homework on the achievement of students is controversial (Güven & Akcay, 2019). A student's ability level, motivation to complete homework, current grade level, and environment outside of school are all factors that must be considered when determining the effectiveness of homework, as cited by Cooper et al. (2006). With the recent explosion of books published with a myriad of attitudes about the value of homework, school leaders must find a way to balance both sides of the debate as the pendulum continues to swing in both ways on the topic of homework (Vatterott, 2009). The research on the benefits of homework is so mixed that school leaders and teachers must reflect on their own practices and perceptions in regard to student demographics and situations that students must face outside of school. Bennett (2017) posed the idea that research should not be focused on whether homework is effective, but research should center on how often the practices of assigning homework are routinely and purposely examined.

This study allows middle school teachers to reflect on their practices in assigning homework. Teacher perceptions and practices towards delivering solid instructional experiences for students and curriculum standards are key factors in the learning experiences for students (Brown, 2009). Rethinking homework is necessary for improving instructional practices. Having teachers reflect on their homework practices allows them to really prioritize what they want students to have learned and experienced in their classes (Sallee & Rigler, 2008). The findings of this study could potentially identify the need for more professional development opportunities for teachers on the topic of homework.

## **Context of the Study**

The research study was conducted in a coastal school district in eastern North Carolina. The district serves approximately 1,800 students in Grades 6-8 in five different middle school settings. The five middle schools range in population from 259 students to 653 students. Although none of the middle schools are classified as Title 1 schools, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students ranges from 30.93% to 58.05%, as indicated by the 2017-2018 testing data. Four of the five middle schools are classified as traditional middle schools, due to the fact that they serve students in Grades 6-8. One middle school, located in a remote area of the district, serves students in Grades Prekindergarten through 8, but the school is set up as two different schools within the same building: an elementary school serving students in Grades Prekindergarten through 5 and a middle school serving students in Grades 6-8.

At the time of this study, there were no district policies that laid out the expectations for homework at any level. The decision about how much homework to assign and what kind of homework to assign is a decision that was left up to each individual teacher in the district. Additionally, there were no district expectations for grading policies and again individual teachers had the liberty to determine the type of grades submitted and the weight of each assignment type. Each teacher had his/her own set of individual homework and grading policies throughout the district.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Grades.** In terms of grades when referring to student work, the following grade scale is referenced: 90-100=A, 80-89=B, 70-79=C, 60-69=D, and 59 and below=F.

**Homework.** Homework can be defined as any task assigned by schoolteachers intended for students to carry out during non-school hours (Cooper, 1989).

**Middle school.** A school between elementary and high school, usually consists of Grades 6-8 but may also be comprised of Grades 5-7, 6-7, 5-8, and 7-8 (North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the middle school referred to serves students in Grades 6, 7, and 8.

**Middle school teacher.** A certified staff member at a middle school who serves students in Grades 6-8 for 75% or more of the instructional day.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the research on both sides of the homework debate. Many school districts and organizations have adopted Cooper's (2007) 10-minute multiplied by the grade level rule in developing policies regarding homework. As advocated by Bennett (2017), schools and districts need to take a closer look at the individual needs of the students they serve and make a decision that does not foster the "one-size-fits-all" mentality in addressing the learning needs of our students.

The purpose of this study was to understand middle school teachers' homework practices to identify if current practices are consistent with research. Although homework has been a topic of research for many years, there still exists a great deal of uncertainty regarding the relationship between homework and student achievement (Trautwein & Koller, 2003); however, Mundy, Kupczynski, and Kee (2012) argued homework can be of value to educators and students, as homework has a place in the learning process as schools look to enhance that process for students. While homework can be assigned based on the best of intentions, Letterman (2013) argued that this practice is one that creates the most conflict for schools and students.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

“While diverse perspectives on objectives for particular assignments are understandable and even appreciated in education, isn’t homework something we should be somewhat clear and consistent on in terms of what is appropriate” (Sallee & Rigler, 2008, p. 46).

### Introduction

As the war on homework has gained momentum over the past few years, homework continues to be one of the most common educational activities for students. Regardless of grade level, homework is expected and is as much a part of a student’s daily routine as attending school itself. Homework is the root cause of complaints and poor school-to-home relationships (Cooper, 2001). Parents and families are trying to find homework’s place among a full and competitive after-school schedule for students. Researchers and leaders are trying to determine if homework is even necessary to the learning process, if banning homework works for all students, and if there are effective strategies to manage homework more responsibly by parents, teachers, and students.

This literature review provides a broad overview of work that has been focused on the topic of homework which continues to be the center of dispute in the world of education. This literature review covers the following seven topics: the current state of the homework debate, a brief history of homework, the purpose of homework, time spent on homework, grading practices and the role of feedback in the homework process, research studies about homework, and the role of technology in rethinking homework.

In recent years, the debate about the role of homework in being an integral factor in raising standards and student achievement as well as connecting schools with families

has received more media attention and has become a topic of controversy among stakeholders. The research and commentaries highlighting the impacts of homework offer more conflicting conclusions than definite answers (Center for Public Education, 2007). Researchers tend to take either a positive or negative stand on the value of homework, and there is little research that takes a more balanced approach to the homework debate (Cooper, 2001). Although the debate on homework continues, many researchers still value the role homework plays as a foundational piece of the learning process for all students (Coutts, 2004).

### **The Current State of the Homework Debate**

In August 2016, a second-grade teacher in Texas received national attention via major news networks and social media for a letter she sent home to the parents of her second-grade students. In the letter, she announced her no-homework policy for the 2016-2017 school year. Instead of completing homework assignments, she advocated for after-school time to be spent reading for enjoyment, eating meals with family members, and getting to bed earlier (May, 2016). Following suit, a month later, the principal of a K-8 elementary school in Holyoke, Massachusetts banned homework for all students in her school and opted to extend the school day instead. Principal Jackie Glasheen implemented the ban on homework to provide students the opportunity to go to bed early and engage in conversations and activities with their families (Williams, 2016).

In a similar measure, for the 2018-2019 school year, district leaders in Littleton Public Schools in Colorado delayed the start time for middle and high school students, while elementary students started school earlier. While the implementation of these start times was a priority, also a priority for district leaders was how homework loads for students would be impacted as a result of these new start times. The district sought the

assistance of Hanover Research group to look at the purpose of homework, how much homework is appropriate, and what type of homework should be assigned. The most important question for school leaders though was would start times affect the amount of time students would spend on homework. The research group's key findings indicated that delaying start times would only allow for more time to sleep for middle and high school students (Wahlstrom & Owens, 2017), and the start times had little impact on how students would spend time outside of school on homework assignments (Wheaton, Chapman, & Croft, 2016).

While educational leaders from all over the country struggle with the implementation of policies that support student learning, the topic of homework continues to emerge. School leaders must wrestle with the following questions: Does homework play a role in helping or hindering student learning? Which students does homework help or hinder? Parents are often left conjecturing if students have too little or too much homework to be successful, and teachers must accept not only the praise but criticism for the homework policies (Center for Public Education, 2007). The topic of homework can prompt passionate arguments for the pros and cons of often contradictory views about homework (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). In an interview for *Principal* in 1995, Michael Palardy from the University of Alabama stated that assigning homework is a "haphazard" practice in America's schools, a practice that must be rethought (p. 51). George Couros, author of *The Innovator's Mindset*, was interviewed for a 2018 article, "Homework is Broken," and his response reinforced Palardy's call to rethink homework in America's schools (Felicello, 2018). Couros indicated that if schools created policies that eradicated homework or even considered assigning homework differently, students would have the opportunity to develop their critical-thinking skills

and possibly students could hold on to that love for learning that tends to diminish as one progresses from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Felicello, 2018).

While the controversy surrounding homework has gained attention in the press over the past few years, the discussion about homework dates back to 1900. At the time, an article was published in the *Ladies Home Journal* that was written by the then Editor Edward Bok. In his article Bok, questioned the role of homework in harming students' mental and physical health. In 1927, Hagan was the first American researcher to look at the impact of homework on academic achievement in comparison to the impact on achievement when work was completed through study in school. Hagan found that for students who completed homework through a supervised study at school achieved higher achievement than those students who completed homework outside the school (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Nearly a century later, popular news magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *People* have published numerous articles questioning the amount of homework assigned to students and how homework causes stress to families (Parker, 2014). While all the media outlets tend to report about the uprising of stakeholders against homework, many parents, educators, and school leaders continue to support the practice of assigning homework and endorse the positive impacts surrounding such practice (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 180).

### **The History of Homework (1900-2000s)**

Over the past 100 years, the views surrounding homework have tended to reflect the cultural trends, historical events, and educational philosophies of the time period (Vatterott, 2003). Distinctive historical events in our nation and the emotions surrounding those events tended to drive the debate for or against homework. The rationalizations to support the movement to ban homework for students of the 21st

century have strong connections to the arguments that have been a part of history for the past 100 years. Additionally, advocates of assigning homework have justifications that are permeated throughout history as well (Vatterott, 2003).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, homework was rarely viewed as a problem, as the most common practice required that only high school students would be required to complete homework (Reese, 1995). This was due, in part, to the fact that students in the primary grades of first through fourth were enrolled in a multi-age classroom setting and the practice of assigning homework to primary students was rare (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). As students progressed through school past the fourth grade, homework became drills in order to be successful in memorization of facts and the reciting of facts in order to prepare for the next day's lessons. For many families, a child simply could not continue with schooling due to the role the child played in completing chores as a member of their family. Some families simply could not afford to have their child spend hours on homework, because completing chores was essential to the livelihood of the family (Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the leaders of the progressive movement from the 1920s to the 1940s began to question the demise of the physical and mental health of students due to the fact that the liability of completing homework was being forced on children at such a young age (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). The rise of the progressive movement meant that doctors who specialized in pediatric medical care grew as a respectable profession in which specialists highlighted the need for students to get fresh air and sunshine and play – all of which were being compromised due to the requirements of completing homework. In 1930, the American Child Health Association reported that homework and child labor were the causes of high death rates and illness among children.

The report asserted that homework did not allow for play for students which was essential to healthy development in children. As the progressive movement embraced the concept of the whole child approach to education, school was deemed responsible for the intellectual, emotional, and physical needs of their students (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Assigning homework was then viewed as a hindrance to the whole child approach and some even viewed the assigning of homework as a criminal act against children (Nash, 1930). Furthermore, the 1930s were a time in which union leaders for laborers were advocating for better working conditions for adults which included limiting workers to a 40-hour work week, and these labor laws were used to advocate for the protection of children being assigned excessive amounts of homework that required children to spend time after school to complete (Vatterott, 2003).

While many leaders in the 1930s argued the demise of children's health due to excessive homework, many began to contend that homework failed to improve learning for children. Due to these assertions, experts in the field of research and schools came to the forefront. In conducting their research, experts concluded that homework prior to the high school had no effect on school achievement. *The Encyclopedia of Educational Research* first published their findings, and the summary report became the fundamental basis for the anti-homework movement in the 1930s, which lasted until the 1950s (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). As Gill and Schlossman (2004) pointed out, the 1930s brought about such an anti-homework sentiment that many school districts voted to eliminate homework. Even in districts where homework was not eliminated, the practice of only assigning small amounts was a universal practice.

The work of the progressive education movement held ground for nearly 2 decades but quickly waned in the 1950s as America viewed education as a means to

combat the dominance of Russia in the fields of technology and military establishment (Gill & Schlossman, 2000). The Soviet Union launched the *Sputnik* satellite in 1957, and American leaders felt that students were unprepared to compete with Russian students as a result of the anti-homework views of school districts across the country (Vatterott, 2009). Russian students were regarded as smarter and better prepared than American students who were deemed as unprepared to compete in a future dominated by Russian military and technology (Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Vatterott, 2009). The progressive movement was blamed for the national crisis of the U.S losing the Cold War with the Soviet Union, due to the fact that Russian students were smarter and outachieving American students. In an effort to accelerate learning for students, the practice of assigning substantial amounts of homework began to emerge as a national defense policy, as districts overturned policies from the progressive movement that had abolished or limited homework (Vatterott, 2009). Homework became a favorable practice once again and research in the 1950s and 1960s began to focus on the positive impacts of homework (Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Vatterott, 2009).

The 1950s brought together research and politics that depicted the assigning and completion of homework as a commitment to the learning process. School curriculum and standards were rewritten to create higher and tougher standards. Homework was viewed as a means for teachers to transition from drill and memorization type assignments to more content-based assignments to make it more enjoyable for students. As educational practices were reformed, leaders were confident that activity-based, hands-on, and individualized homework for students would promote academic excellence. Additionally, the role of parents in the educational process became fundamental, and assigning homework was a way to link together schools and parents.

By getting buy-in from parents, school leaders could also build support for higher standards and the move to educational excellence that would require everyone working together (Gill & Schlossman, 2004).

As much momentum the Russian launch of the *Sputnik* bought to swinging the pendulum in favor of more homework in the U.S. race to academic excellence, the historical events in the late 1960s brought momentum to swing the pendulum back in the other direction (Wildman, 1968). The political and cultural views surrounding the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement caused leaders to question if student lack of respect for authority and lack of discipline was an indirect result of the push for academic excellence, putting too much pressure on students to achieve in the race to outsmart the Russians (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). School leaders were at a standstill in trying to swing the focus from homework to the best instructional practices that would engage students in attending school on a regular basis, to improve the apathetic attitude of students, and to actively engage students in the learning process (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). The publication of Postman and Weingartner's (1969) book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, brought to the forefront anti-homework views comparable to the progressive movement of the 1930s. Parents began to campaign for their children having a choice in how they would spend their time in the evenings, enjoying play or relaxation activities. The National Education Association (1966) and the American Educational Research Association (1968) issued statements in favor of opposing excessive homework for students (Wildman, 1968). Once again, historical events and pressure from society forced school leaders to decrease the amount of homework for students (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

While the launch of *Sputnik* stimulated a reform in educational practices due to

political pressures to compete in a growing technological and military world, the academic excellence movement of the 1980s was driven by the need for Americans to be competitive in economics with countries worldwide (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published the first report sponsored by the U.S. government, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, and the pendulum in education began to swing again. As Kralovec and Buell (2000) pointed out, the study admonished U.S. schools and students for the troubles within the U.S. economy and issued a warning about the “rise of mediocrity” in schools throughout the country. The study went on to state that economic success was directly connected to the success of U.S. schools and students. The study promoted the need for more testing to hold schools accountable, more homework to increase student learning, and more time spent in school. This would result in more success for students, so the idea of a longer year was introduced (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report fostered the topic of homework to emerge as a national issue and topic of discussion again.

As cited by Gill and Schlossman (2004), Cooper called the 1986 publication of *What Works* by the U.S Department of Education “one of the most popular government publications of all times” (p. 174). The publication called for more homework and provided educators and school leaders with specific recommendations to follow in assigning homework. Homework was highlighted as an effective learning strategy in the effort to raise the standard of academics for students. Once again, it seemed that the attack on public education would persuade leaders to reinstate policies to assign homework as the answer to promote academic excellence (Kohn, 2006, p. 120). The fact that more homework requires no extra funding and requires the *student*, not the teacher,

to work harder, meant more homework always seemed to emerge as the logical first step in reforming education. The 1980s and 1990s became a time when homework would be praised for its academic benefits, the capacity to build, and an opportunity to promote America as an international competitor (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Scholarly journal articles and books took a pro-homework stance and provided strategies for schools and families to assist students in completing homework (Trautwein & Koller, 2003). During this time period of pro-homework, Harris Cooper, who is today considered a leading expert and researcher in the field of homework, completed a meta-analysis on the positive relationship between homework and student achievement (Cooper, 1989).

At the time of the study, Cooper received little attention; but his study in the late 1990s combined with the accessibility of online media sources allowed Cooper's (1989) work to become a launching pad for major news networks, talk shows, and magazines to create a national dialogue about homework. Cooper's (1989) meta-analysis of nearly 120 studies on the effects of homework led him to conclude that for high school students, homework can have positive effects on student achievement. Cooper (2007) found that the impact for middle school students is positive if they receive about half as much homework as a high school student; and by assigning too much homework, the negative impacts outweighed the positive. For elementary students, Cooper's (1989) meta-analysis supported previous findings that homework provided for little impact on student achievement. Once again, the nation witnessed the pendulum swing to the anti-homework movement (Vatterott, 2003). In 1998, *Newsweek* featured a cover story, "Does Your Child Need a Tutor" (Adler, 1998) and an additional article, "Homework Doesn't Help" (Begley, 1998) *Time* jumped on board in 1999 with a January cover story, "The Homework That Ate My Family" (Ratnesar, 1999) which revealed homework as

one more added stressor to the American family. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, school districts like one in Piscataway, New Jersey implemented policies to limit homework and banned homework as a grade; all actions that received national attention (Kohn, 2006). In the same year, Kralovec and Buell (2000) published their work, *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*, which brought impassioned responses from both sides of the homework debate.

### **The Purpose of Homework**

The Wake County Public School System is the largest school system in North Carolina. According to their board policy 3135, leaders have a two-fold approach to defining the purpose of homework (Wake County Public School System, 2017). The board policy states that homework should fulfill the purpose of enriching and extending school experiences through related home activities and to reinforce learning by providing practice and application (Wake County Public School System, 2017). Although the classroom teacher assigns and designs the homework for students, little research has focused on the teacher's role in the purpose, design, and assigning of homework. Most research on the topic of homework analyzes what students do with homework and how completing homework impacts student achievement (Cooper, 1989; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1984). In designing the homework, teachers must consider the purpose of the assignment that will allow success for their students. Additionally, teachers must have a strong knowledge of the curriculum and understand the needs of their students (Epstein & Van Vorhis, 2001). The purposes of homework are as varied and complex as the research on the connections of time on homework and student achievement (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

In a 2007 survey, MetLife completed *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* where students, teachers, and parents were asked to share their own perspectives on homework, the purpose of homework, the time involved in completing homework assignments, and the benefits of homework. MetLife wanted to get firsthand information from stakeholders in an effort to continue discussions across the nation on the topic of homework. Chapter 1 of the executive summary highlighted the purpose of homework (MetLife, 2007). In all three stakeholder groups, the majority of parents (89%), teachers (91%), and students (69%) reported that homework is important and completing homework allows for students to learn more in school. When drilled down further, the survey found that only 36% of teachers with 5 years or less experience believed that homework helps students to learn, as compared to 60% of teachers with 21 or more years of experience in the classroom; however, nearly a quarter (26%) of the students surveyed agreed that their homework is relevant to their current schoolwork.

Key findings of the survey found that teachers assign homework for a variety of purposes: to allow students to practice skills for current schoolwork, provide students with tasks in which the application of skills prepares them for future schoolwork, and allow students to develop personal skills to navigate life successfully. Secondary school teachers (Grades 6-12) were more than twice as likely as elementary teachers to assign homework for the purpose of covering material that was not addressed in class; 26% versus 10%. Eighty-nine percent of teachers cited the need to practice skills or prepare for tests as a purpose in assigning homework. Eighty percent of the teachers surveyed stated that the purpose of assigning homework was to try to help develop good work habits in students. Nearly two thirds of teachers use homework to develop critical thinking skills (67%) and to motivate students to learn (65%). Only 63% of teachers use

homework to assess student skills and knowledge. The conclusions of the survey indicated that teacher's years of service, the race/ethnicity of students, and the grade level of students were factors in the varied perceptions of homework. Experienced teachers (21 or more years) and less experienced teachers (5 years or less) differed on the value of homework and the purpose of homework. Elementary students had a more favorable view of homework than those students at the secondary level.

In a similar study, Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) completed a content analysis of surveys and interviews (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Cooper, 1989; Corno, 2000; Epstein, 1988; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2000; Muhlenbruck, Cooper, Nye, & Lindsey, 1999; Paschal et al., 1984) to highlight 10 broad purposes of homework. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) pointed out that it is important to begin with the information on *why* teachers assign homework before the role of homework can be understood. While Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) indicated that there are many reasons a teacher may assign homework, they narrowed the reasons down to 10: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child relations, parent-teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) noted that in assigning homework, teachers may have a variety of purposes in mind and thus the list of 10 purposes are not mutually exclusive.

In preparing for lessons, teachers may assign homework that allows students to complete unfinished classwork so they can move on to the next lesson or the teacher may assign homework that allows students to brainstorm ideas and generate thinking about an upcoming topic (Muhlenbruck et al., 1999; Paulu, 1995). Teachers recognize that some students may be reluctant to participate in class, so homework is assigned as a means to engage all students in the learning process (Corno, 2000; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

To help students develop the needed skills to assist students with time management, responsibility, study habits, and confidence, teachers will assign homework for the sole purpose of the personal development of the student (Muhlenbruck et al., 1999). Teachers recognize the need for students to work with their peers; therefore, they may assign short- and long-term projects for homework that promote peer interactions and collaboration (Corno, 2000; Paris, Yambor, & Packard, 1998).

In adhering to school and/or district policies, teachers may feel the pressure to assign a certain amount or type of homework (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Due to a feeling of obligation by teachers to maintain positive public relations, they feel the need to assign homework. Throughout research, it has been suggested that giving homework equates to good teaching and good schools. Although some teachers understand that assigning homework as punishment is not a valid purpose, homework may be assigned to correct student behavior or poor work habits.

For teachers, the main reason cited for assigning homework is to allow students to practice skills learned in the lesson. By practicing skills, students can increase their speed, retain new skills, review work, prepare for tests, and demonstrate mastery of skills taught (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Archer (2018) argued that homework involves practice which is inherent to the learning process. Throughout her study, Archer created comparisons of the need to practice skills at home with those practice requirements of talented musicians and athletes. While Archer and her colleague as cited by Archer (Palocsay & Stevens, 2008; Titard, DeFranceschi, & Knight, 2014) agreed that there is a need to assign homework as a means to practice, which is essential to learning, their opponents argued that homework can inflate grades, create superficial learning rather than mastery of content, and allow students to guess on what are the right and wrong

answers to their homework assignments (Fish, 2015; Rhodes & Sarbaum, 2015). In agreement with the opponents of assigning homework for the purpose of practice, Strauss (2016) wrote that practice is only beneficial when there is immediate, fast feedback which is not a part of the process that typically occurs in the home.

Although the most popular purpose is assigning homework is for practice so students can internalize content, homework can also bridge the gap between school and home (Letterman, 2013). While parents are available to work with their children, they help shape the study and work habits of their children (Gill & Schlossman, 2003). To bring the parent and child together in engaging in conversations about learning and ideas, teachers may design homework with this purpose in mind (Demo & Acock, 1996). Homework has been called the natural connector of school and home (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2012), thus homework has emerged as one of the most popular activities that brings together students, teachers, and parents (Rosário, Núñez, Vallejo, Cunha, Nunes, Mourão, & Pinto, 2015). One of the most prevalent practices in involving parents in the homework process is having the parent sign off on an agenda that the homework has been completed. This practice allows for parents to be aware of topics covered in class and the signing of the agenda becomes a component of parent-teacher communication (Epstein & Becker, 1982). Lenters and McTavish (2013) examined the use of student planners for elementary students in Canada. Lenters and McTavish found that teachers valued the role planners played in the school-to-home communication and the perception existed that the agenda was a tool to engage families in conversations about learning at school. In reality, most families reported that parents just signed the planner without checking to see if homework was completed fully or accurately. Although the planner was thought to be a tool to involve parents, the study found that students felt the pressure to make

parents responsible for signing the agenda. Lenters and McTavish concluded that their study begs to answer the question of “who’s managing whom when planners are circulated from home to school” (p. 86). It seemed that once again students were left with the responsibility of managing another component of homework on their own with little evidence that the planner impacted the completion of homework.

Assigning homework for the mere purpose of involving parents may not be beneficial without informing parents about the homework process, as some parents may interfere, causing their involvement to be stressful and not helpful (Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, & Nagengast, 2014). A Turkish study by Tas, Vural, and Öztekin (2014) found that communicating with parents about the homework process was as important as assigning the homework itself. In accordance with the team, Dumont et al.’s study of nearly 3,000 eighth graders found that the *quality* of parent involvement, rather than the *quantity* of parent involvement, was key to positive benefits for students. A more recent study as cited by Bempechat (2019) found that fifth and sixth graders had similar views about parent involvement as did the eighth graders from Dumont et al.’s study. The study of fifth and sixth graders found that students viewed parent involvement as providing support or being overly intrusive. Those students who perceived parent involvement as supportive achieved at higher rates than those students who perceived parent involvement as intrusive.

In a 2011 interview with Hefer Bembenutty for the *Journal for Advanced Academics*, Cooper suggested parents should take on the following roles in being involved in the homework process: stage manager, motivator, role model, monitor, and mentor. Throughout his description of these roles, Cooper cautioned parents to not become overinvolved which can lead a student to think that “when the going gets tough,

mom gets going” (Bembenutty, 2011, p. 344). Cooper cautioned that through over-involvement, parents can unintentionally pressure their children to meet unrealistic expectations or cause confusion for students trying to learn too many approaches and strategies to solve problems (Bembenutty, 2011). On the flip side, Cooper cited that homework can provide parents with the opportunity to learn about current topics covered in the classroom, model positive attitudes about achievement, and provide time together that is free from television and electronics (Bembenutty, 2011).

Cooper et al. (2006) pointed out that with the discussion surrounding homework, the greatest distinctions can be made when analyzing its purpose. Much like the work of Epstein and Van Voorhis (2012), Cooper et al. (2006) stated that homework can have multiple purposes that can be subdivided into instructional and noninstructional purposes. In his 1989 meta-analysis, Cooper found that homework assigned with the purpose of preparing for new material or practicing old material allowed for higher achievement scores on tests rather than homework assigned solely based on the lesson for the day.

Like the works of Cooper et al. (2006) and Epstein and Van Voorhis (2012), a 2017 study by Baş, Şentürk, and Cigerci cited that teachers commonly assign homework for a variety of instructional and noninstructional purposes. Bas et al. found that homework can be assigned for instructional purposes to provide the time needed to practice new skills; a way to introduce new topics; provide opportunities to apply previously learned skills; allow students to produce a product demonstrating mastery of skills; and allow students to explore skills using websites, social media, and books. Additionally, Bas et al. found that teachers assign homework to increase communication between home and school and to allow students the opportunity to

develop character traits such as responsibility, confidence, and self-discipline. The findings of Xu and Corno (1998) indicated that while students, teachers, and parents agreed that homework provides a time for practice, reinforcement, and review, student reasons for completing homework had little to do with developing responsibility and study skills but rather had more to do with the fact that students wanted parent and teacher approval.

Again in 2010, Xu and Corno conducted a study with eighth- and 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students. The work of Xu and Corno (2010) found that while students acknowledge the role homework played in helping them retain and increase their understanding of content material, the approval of their parents and teachers was the driving force in completing homework assignments. Additionally, while Xu and Corno (2010) studied student motivation in completing homework, students were motivated to participate in other after-school activities (sports, leisure activities, chores/jobs); and therefore, when homework competes with these activities, students just do not complete the work.

While researchers and educators can agree that homework promotes student learning and achievement, parents and anti-homework leaders argue that the benefits of homework continue to be unsubstantiated in the inconsistent research available (Weir, 2016). Although research tends to focus on the instructional purposes behind assigning homework, the Center for Public Education (2007) pointed out that little research has been completed that corroborates assigning homework for noninstructional purposes fulfills those purposes.

### **Time Spent on Homework**

Many studies have researched the correlation between student homework and achievement (Xu & Wu, 2013). Núñez et al. (2017) argued that what is lacking in

research is the correlation between student behaviors regarding time management, how much time is spent on homework, and how much homework is completed per day and student achievement. The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association's recommendations for the amount of time a student should spend on homework are in line with the general guidelines supported by Cooper et al. (2006). Cooper (2007) recommended the 10-minute rule as a guideline for homework where a first-grade student would receive 10 minutes of homework each night and an additional 10 minutes per grade level. For example, a third-grade student should expect 30 minutes of homework a night, and a maximum of 2 hours of homework per night should be expected for a student in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (National Education Association, 2017). In a 2010 article for the *New York Times*, "Homework's Diminishing Returns," Cooper acknowledged that the 10-minute rule adopted by many school districts across the U.S. was a balanced approach to assigning homework for students. Cooper (2010) again reiterated that the 10-minute rule is supported by his research and cautioned that assigning too much homework can have negative effects on students and their achievement.

Research conducted by Cooper et al. (2006) suggested that homework for students at the elementary level has little to no impact on student achievement. Cooper still recommends his 10-minute rule for elementary students to develop good habits and practice skills that can be mastered through additional practice at home (Cooper et al., 2006). Furthermore, Cooper's (1989) meta-analysis found that homework had a positive impact for middle school students if homework was confined to 1 hour per night, and negative impacts of homework occurred when middle school students had over 2 hours of homework a night. Cooper et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis which expanded the work and

research from Cooper's (1989) meta-analysis found that a high school student maximized the positive impact of homework when the high school student completed 7-12 hours of homework a week. In a 2016 interview with *Time Magazine* for a blog with Katie Reilly, "Homework? Is It Good for Kids? Here's What Research Says," Cooper is quoted as stating,

A good way to think about homework is the way you think about medications or dietary supplements. If you take too little, they'll have no effect. If you take too much, they can kill you. If you take the right amount, you'll get better. (para. 9)

The 2007 MetLife Survey examined the volume of homework students face, how often homework is assigned, and the amount of time students dedicate to homework each night. Right at three fourths of students (77%) are assigned homework for a minimum of three nights in a week with 42% of the students being assigned homework every night. For students in Grades 7-12, 46% of students are assigned nightly homework, whereas only 35% of third through sixth graders are assigned homework daily. Furthermore, the survey found that most students (77%) spend at least 30 minutes a night doing homework, regardless of grade level, while 45% of students stated that they spend at least 1 hour on homework. The survey found that the amount of time spent on homework each night increased with each grade level. Nearly 40% of the elementary students reported spending at least 1 hour per day on homework, including 9% who reported spending 2 hours or more on homework. For students in Grades 7-12, 50% reported spending at least 1 hour a day on homework, including 21% who reported spending 2 or more hours on homework a day.

In contrast to the 2007 MetLife Survey, the 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 1984-2012 found that the amount of time

students spend on homework is less than what was reported in 2007 (Loveless, 2014). NAEP data indicated that the homework loads for students who were 17 years old (high school) remained somewhat unchanged from 1984-2012; however, the amount of time spent on homework has fallen for 13-year-old students (middle school) and increased for students in the 9-year-old (elementary) demographic. In contrast, a 2014 University of Phoenix survey of 1,000 K-12 teachers found that teachers assign on average 2.9 hours of homework per week to students in Grades Kindergarten through 5, 3.2 hours of homework per week to students in Grades 6-8, and 3.5 hours per week to students in Grades 9-12. These data indicate that a student in Grades 6-8 who has four different classes can have 16 hours of homework per week or just over 3 hours of homework per day.

Even with definite specifications from Cooper's (1989) and Cooper et al.'s (2006) research on the amount of homework that should be assigned and many districts implementing homework policies based on Cooper's recommendations, there has been a surge in articles, blogs, and books on the topic of overloading students with homework. Vatterott (2011) argued that the answer lies not in the amount of homework that is assigned but the time it takes a student to complete a task. Vatterott (2011) argued that a task or assignment that should take the average student 15 minutes may take up to an hour for a student who struggles with the content. Vatterott (2011) encouraged schools to adopt the 10-minute rule for homework instead of providing a list of tasks that must be completed each night. For instance, a fifth grader would spend no more than 50 minutes on homework; so instead of being required to complete all 20 math problems and read all 30 pages, the student would complete as much as he/she could do in the 50 minutes; and the student is not expected to work anymore that night. Marzano and

Pickering (2007) supported Vatterott's (2011) recommendations as well in endorsing that teachers monitor homework assigned to ensure its appropriateness for the student's age and ability level, as to not restrict other home activities.

### **Homework Completion**

A 2004 empirical study by Corno and Xu labeled homework as “the quintessential job of childhood” (p. 1). Corno and Xu studied the homework completion habits for students across grade levels and found that completing homework is similar to having a job in the workforce, due to the completion of an assigned task with little to no supervision and little training on how to complete the task. Just like in the workforce, doing well means successful progression in school. Completing the homework assignments allowed students to become more responsible and better time managers; skills that Corno and Xu pointed out to be needed to be gainfully employed in the future.

Even if students find homework to be meaningful and beneficial, completing homework can still be a challenge for many students (Xu & Wu, 2013). Adequate workspace, the ability to manage time, and dealing with a wide array of distractions can shift homework from being an advantageous activity to a wearisome activity for students (Xu & Corno, 1998). Xu and Wu (2013) argued that student development of self-regulatory strategies would allow students to better navigate the demands of homework. In their work, Xu and Wu identified five challenges students face in the completion of homework: having a home environment conducive to learning, having the ability to manage time, navigating the distractions, staying motivated to complete tasks, and having the capacity to regulate emotions. The findings of Xu and Corno (1998) established a connection that included the role of teachers and families in working together to create a favorable homework environment coupled with allowing student choice in how

homework assignments should be completed, providing the motivation for the student to complete homework.

Xu and Yuan (2003) completed a research study for the 1996-1997 school year at a public middle school in New York City, *Doing Homework: Listening to Students', Parents', and Teachers' Voices in One Urban Middle School Community*, in which he analyzed student, parent, and teacher attitudes about homework. The study revealed contradicting views between students and adults (teachers and parents) in the study. As found in the previous work of Chen and Stevenson (1989) and Xu and Corno (1998), students ranked approval from teachers and parents and getting good grades as reasons for completing homework assignments. This is in sharp contrast to the adult viewpoints that homework is completed to review and reinforce skills. Additionally, parents and teachers viewed homework as a top priority for time after school, while students ranked completing homework as a middle or low priority task when compared to other after-school activities. Due to these varying viewpoints, Xu and Yuan (2003) agreed with the findings of Leone and Richards (1989) that the design of middle school homework should be developmentally appropriate for students and have a clear purpose to motivate students to complete the assignments.

The work of Xu and Yuan (2003) further explored the concept that parents can assist students in the completion of homework by assisting students in establishing routines as students work to prioritize their after-school schedules and that the positive attitude of parents regarding homework influences student attitude towards homework. The implications of the research by Xu and Yuan noted that by listening to student voices about homework and assisting students with the strategies to complete homework, students will begin to see homework not as something done *to* them, but *with* them.

## **Grading Practices and the Role of Feedback with Homework**

It would not be uncommon, given much wavering research on the topic of homework, to find a myriad of homework expectations within a district or even a school, especially in how homework is graded (O'Connor, 2002). When looking at the effectiveness of the homework, Vatterott (2011) argued that the grading of homework can make homework ineffective, as students and parents view the grade as a reward for completing the work, placing little value in connecting homework completion to academic achievement. Consistent with O'Connor (2002), Vatterott (2011) found that teachers gave varying reasons for why they grade homework: homework grades help to balance a final grade if students test poorly, completing homework should be rewarded with some sort of grade, and by attaching a grade to the completion of the work means the students will complete it. Vatterott (2011) cautioned that by combining homework grades with grades that demonstrate mastery, a final course grade may mask poor performance or the lack of learning by a student.

Vatterott (2011) further stated that teachers can utilize a standards-based approach to grading practices on homework where teachers assess and provide feedback on homework but do not count homework grades in the final course grade. Vatterott (2011) and Cushman (2010) classified homework as a type a formative assessment, and final course grades should reflect performance on summative assessments such as products and unit assessments that accurately reflect content mastery. Both Vatterott (2011) and Cushman concluded that teachers should instead focus student efforts on the fact that completing homework allows students to be better prepared to perform well on the graded assignments and assessments.

In comparing the grading practices of homework with teachers in the U.S., Japan,

Germany, and Canada, Bennet and Kalish (2006) and Suskind (2012) found that more teachers in the U.S. (70%) count homework towards a final course grade than the teachers in Japan (14%), Germany (6%), and Canada (28%). In providing a grade on homework, teachers cannot be sure that the work is solely that of the student, without any influences from parents or peers. Rick Wormeli (2006), a noted expert and researcher in the field of grading practices in America's schools, stated that a grade should reflect a student's mastery of learning standards and nothing more. Due to the fact that homework completion grades reflect work habits and behavior, utilizing these grades in the final course grade will distort the ability to provide appropriate feedback, accurately determine student progress towards mastery, and inform instruction (Wormeli, 2006).

Cushman (2010) interviewed students and allowed them to voice their concerns on why homework does not work and what changes can be made. A large number of students wanted feedback on assignments. Students voiced concerns about spending copious amounts of time on homework assignments only to never receive any feedback, which left students feeling a bit lost. The students went on further to state that when a teacher only assigns a grade to the homework, it forces students to engage in activities that may be dishonest, such as copying someone else's work or using internet resources to get the correct answers. Deliberate practice by students requires deliberate feedback as argued by Archer (2018) because improvement is only minimal when feedback is missing from the learning process for students.

In agreement with the students, Vatterott (2009) declared that when teachers provide specific feedback on homework, students are able to recognize the importance of the homework assignment. Feedback from teachers creates meaning and motivation for students in completing the assignment. Written feedback provides the opportunity for

transparent communication between the student and teacher, significant feedback that cannot be communicated with just a number grade (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012; O'Connor, 2002). In agreement with other researchers, Knore (1996) rationalized that in order for homework to be a part of the learning process, students should always receive some sort of corrective feedback. Feedback sends a strong message to the student that the homework was designed for a specific purpose and holds value for both the student and teacher.

### **The Role of Technology in Rethinking Homework**

Throughout research, studies have concluded that tasks students perceive as rewarding or valuable will engage them in the completion of the assignment (Kackar, Shumow, Schmidt, & Grzetic, 2011). As technology continues to gain popularity in schools with a 1:1 initiative and bring your own device days, technology could be the key to changing the face of homework (Chapman, Masters, & Pedulla, 2010). Although the movement of technology in education is rapidly evolving, there is limited research on the impact of technology on student homework completion (Hallatt, Huss, Unsbee, Al-Bataineh, & Chumpavan, 2017). As technology becomes more prevalent in America's schools and homes, schools must be able to meet students where they are with technology and prepare students to be successful in an interconnected world (Czerkowski & Hernandez, 2012).

Researchers over the past 2 decades have found that allowing students to use technology resources increases their motivation to complete the assignments (Hsu & Wang, 2011). Hallatt et al. (2017) completed a study of students in Grades 6-12 to determine the rate at which students submitted digital homework assignments versus the traditional paper and pencil submissions. The team found that there was a 13.55%

decrease in homework submitted by paper and pencil versus digital submissions. The study further found that teachers perceived the submission of paper-and-pencil homework to be more effective than digitally submitted homework. Furthermore, the team concluded that while students preferred paper-and-pencil homework over submitting homework digitally, students were not familiar with all the programs used to submit homework. Students also reported that digital homework required less time to complete, and that was a benefit to them. The study concluded that students slightly preferred paper-and-pencil homework over digitally submitted homework, at 54.5% over 45.9% respectively. Hallatt et al. acknowledged that the differences in the data could be due to the fact that participants in their study had the option to select how they would submit homework and the variables of power outages, access to the internet, access to technology, and socioeconomic status were not considered.

Portier, Peterson, Rambaran, and Tavares (2013) completed a year-long ethnographic study on how teachers use technology to teach writing to middle school students. The study revealed that 63% of parents viewed online homework as a positive way to motivate students to complete their assignments, and just over half of the parents reported that students have a more positive attitude when completing homework online. With the rise in technology, teachers have a myriad of tools to enhance student motivation to complete homework (Mendicino, Razzaa, & Heffnan, 2009). The use of technology programs allows students to receive immediate feedback on their work, which is a key motivator for students in motivating them to complete the assignments (Vatterott, 2009).

### **Research Studies on the Topic of Homework**

Research on the topic of homework is contradictory on the benefits it provides but

also in how much is too much. Since much of the research about homework tends to focus on how homework affects learning and how homework impacts achievement scores, today's researchers claim that this focus provides inconsistent results (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). In trying to define the link between student achievement and homework, researchers all agree that there are no clear results or answers (Cooper, 1989; Trautwein & Koller, 2003). Trautwein and Koller (2003) stated that despite all the research on homework, the relationship between homework and student achievement is as mysterious as ever. Kohn (2006), a lead researcher in the anti-homework movement, could not agree more as evidenced by his publication, "The Homework Myth," in which he consistently pointed out that evidence for the academic and nonacademic benefits are inconclusive.

Keith (1982) developed a model using path analysis in which he found that there was a causal relationship between the homework completion of high school students and their achievement. Keith's work only confirmed that a link was possible in the relationship, and his work did not successfully detail this link. Further research by Paschal et al. (1984) found that students at certain grade levels were impacted in a positive way by completing homework assignments. The meta-analysis of 15 studies found that homework that was assigned daily and was assigned a grade made the most impact on achievement for students in the fourth and fifth grades. One of the most notable research studies on the topic of homework was Cooper's (1989) meta-analysis that addressed the effects of homework on student achievement. Cooper (1989) argued that through the meta-analysis of the 120 studies on the effect of homework, the studies merely showed a correlation and not a causation relationship. The correlations throughout the studies could support the findings that homework provides academic benefits, but there was not the evidence needed to justify this affirmation. What Cooper

et al. (2006) and later researchers argued was that the correlation between homework and student achievement may be a positive correlation due to other factors that had not been studied that influenced both the completion of homework and higher student achievement (Kohn, 2006).

Another correlation study that showed a positive relationship between homework and achievement was that of Townsend (1995). Townsen found that third-grade students who were assigned homework in language acquisition skills did better on vocabulary tests than those students who were not assigned homework. In contrast, Swank (1999) completed a study of fourth graders who did homework and those who did not do the homework. The study revealed that there were no significant differences in the scores between the two groups.

In a similar study, DeJong, Westerhof, and Creemers (2010) completed a multi-level analysis in examining a variety of factors in the correlation of math homework and math achievement. DeJong et al.'s findings indicated that homework was the only factor related to the difference for achievement for the students who did homework versus those who did not do the homework. Frequency of assignments and time spent on homework were not factors that were determined to impact achievement. Contradicting this 2000 study was the work of Trautwein and Koller (2003) where they voiced concerns that the positive effects of homework could have been exaggerated since previous studies had been completed by educators and not third-party researchers. Additionally, Trautwein and Koller argued that in studies where long-term data were included in the research design, homework was found to have a negative effect on achievement.

## **Summary**

Over the past 120 years, the public's support for homework has remained a

cyclical pattern. It seems that public opinion about homework has been largely influenced by the cultural and societal issues at the time. What is not in question is the increased demands and accountability that are being placed on the public education system. With the homework debate gaining new ground in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one could argue that it is just again a part of the cycle, the pendulum swinging back and forth, or the recent debate can shed light on a larger issue in which students are bearing the weight of strict accountability standards and high stakes testing outcomes for today's schools.

Throughout the research on homework, there have been many factors identified that impact the effectiveness of homework. District leaders must stay informed of the most current research about this hot button topic and make the best decisions they can with the information they have in promoting learning for their students. As school leaders are faced with strategies to raise student achievement, homework does not appear to be the definitive answer.

This literature review has provided evidence that the research on the impacts of homework on student achievement is not clear. Some studies suggest that homework can have a direct impact on student learning, while other studies point out the flaws of homework which can have a negative impact on learning. Simply creating and implementing homework policies may not be the answer to the homework problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Pinsker (2019) suggested, since there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to homework, it may be best to gather a district or school-based team to review homework practices and perceptions and consider the best way to make homework work like it was intended, to be effective for all aspects of student learning.

Kohn (2006) admonished the role of the principal as the educational leader in reflecting on homework practices: "But of course, a principal's ultimate obligation is to

do what's right by the children, to protect them from harmful mandates and practices that persist not because they're valuable but merely because they're traditional" (p. 38).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

As found in the study by Wilson and Rhodes (2010), many teachers are frustrated by the number of students who fail to complete homework assignments. Teachers are finding that students have a variety of reasons for not completing work outside of the noninstructional school day. The purpose of this study was to research middle school teacher homework practices to determine if they are consistent with research. Research includes the responses to open-ended questions from middle school teachers in a rural, coastal school district in eastern North Carolina. Marzano and Pickering (2007) stated that the benefits of homework are tied to teachers who use homework appropriately since homework can allow learning to extend beyond the regular school day. Marzano and Pickering supported the need to enact effective homework policies for schools and districts to ensure teachers assign homework properly.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study followed the phenomenological design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the practices of middle school teachers on the topic of homework. The researcher was able to extract meaning from participant responses on the topic of homework in the district where the study was conducted. This study used a research question central to the phenomenological method with its purpose to critically analyze the practices of middle school teachers in an eastern North Carolina school district as they relate to the topic of homework. The central research question in a phenomenological study is often, “What are the lived experiences of a group around a specific phenomenon,” or “What are the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experience of the phenomenon by individuals” (Creswell, 2013)?

The intent of this research study was to collect qualitative data to answer the

following research question: What are middle school teacher practices regarding homework?

This study was adapted from a similar study completed by Snead and Burriss (2016). By completing a similar study, the researcher was able to address the specific practices of middle school teachers in the demographic area where the survey was conducted. The instrument developed by Snead and Burriss (2016) allowed the researcher to gather data to answer the research question. The following table aligns the instrument questions with the research questions.

Table 1

*Alignment of Research Questions with Instrument Questions*

Research Question	Instrument Question
What are middle school teacher practices regarding homework?	3,4,5,6,7,8, 9, 10 These questions allowed the participant to establish current experiences about individual practices in assigning homework.

The design allowed for the collection of qualitative data as teachers responded to open-ended questions and were analyzed as such. The researcher reviewed various research designs to complete this study and used the phenomenological theory as a framework for conducting this particular study. This study focused on the research design of transcendental phenomenology as the researcher collected data from 48 middle school teachers, analyzed the data to drill down to significant statements and quotes, developed clusters of meanings, and then combined these statements and clusters into themes (Creswell, 2013). Through horizontalization, the overall essence of middle school teacher practices in assigning homework was coded and described through narrative, textual descriptions. Giorgi (as cited by Groenewald, 2004) affirmed that a

researcher completing a phenomenological study should focus on using data collected to describe as accurately as possible the event, staying true to the facts. The researcher used the responses from participants to clearly outline the current practices regarding homework at the middle school level and used those factual accounts to determine if current practices align with research.

### **Instrument**

The Homework Teacher Survey developed by Snead and Burriss (2016) contains 10 questions, eight of which are open-ended responses and the remaining two are designed to collect demographic data (Appendix A). The intent of the study for which the survey was created was to collect data to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the practices of homework in the student learning process. Two researchers from Middle Tennessee State University, along with a graduate assistant, all who were trained on coding, conducted an analysis of the data collected. Qualitative responses were analyzed, and categories were quantified to describe particular trends in responses to gain an understanding of issues associated with assigning homework (Snead & Burriss, 2016).

The researchers intentionally designed the survey questions to effectively collect data on teacher perceptions and practices associated with various aspects of literature regarding homework. Furthermore, the instrument design assisted the researchers in interpreting participant thinking in regard to assigning and grading homework. Content validity for this instrument was determined by multiple layers of constant comparative analysis. Additionally, Snead and Burriss used this instrument in a previous 2011 study and further tested the reliability and validity of the survey process.

The researcher requested and secured permission from Snead and Burriss to use

and adapt their instrument in the study of the middle school teachers in the coastal school district in eastern North Carolina. The email transcripts (Appendix B) between the researcher and Snead and Burriss indicate that permission was granted to use their instrument in the study under certain terms and conditions.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

The participants for this study were sixth- through eighth-grade teachers in a coastal, eastern school district in North Carolina. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Gardner-Webb University, her dissertation committee, and the superintendent of the school district in which the study was conducted (Appendix C).

Creswell (2007) identified criterion sampling as purposeful sampling in a qualitative study. This method of purposeful sampling involves searching for individuals who or cases that involve a specific criterion (Palys, 2008). The purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select individuals who could purposefully inform the researcher about the research problem and phenomenon of the study. Additionally, Creswell (2007) advocated for purposeful sampling since it allows for the researcher to gather responses from participants that can show different perspectives of the phenomenon.

The researcher invited all 87 middle school teachers in the district to participate in the voluntary, anonymous study. The certified staff at the five middle schools in an eastern district in North Carolina were surveyed for this study. The researcher had a goal of obtaining responses from at least 35% of the middle school teachers. The researcher acknowledges that participants may have been hesitant to respond to the survey due to its qualitative design and that responses must have been written accounts of current practices. The middle schools range in population from 272 to 653 students. The percent

of students who receive free/reduced lunch range from 31% to 58% of the students. Due to the unique setting of each middle school in the district, the researcher gained a variety of perspectives and practices from middle school teachers on the instructional activity of assigning homework.

An email was sent to all middle school administrators stating the purpose of the study; and a week later, a formal request was sent to all middle school teachers in the district to participate in the study (Appendix D). The participants had 14 calendar days to complete the survey. After 4 days, a follow-up email reminder was sent; and at day seven, a final email reminder was sent out to participants (Appendix D). The survey link was no longer active after 5:00 p.m. on day 14 of the study.

In this research design, the researcher examined and analyzed the answers provided on the anonymous, voluntary survey. The responses to the survey questions allowed the researcher to gather demographic data as well as qualitative data about teacher practices surrounding homework at the middle school level. The researcher utilized the software program NVivo and hand coding to code and develop clusters of meaning based on the responses from the participants to the open-ended survey questions. Horizontalization was used to gather clusters of meaning and to create a narrative, descriptive analysis of the survey results.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the survey responses were analyzed through NVivo and through hand coding to develop and compare themes and clusters of meaning from all participants through a thematic analysis approach. Through coding, data were organized within a structured framework to identify common themes from the responses of the participants. Tables were used to display the common themes from the responses from the participants

in the study as they related to the research question and to present demographic data.

### **Summary**

By conducting a survey to analyze middle school teacher practices regarding homework, the researcher was able to interpret the findings with possible potential connections to current literature on best practices for assigning homework. With high stakes testing, intense teacher accountability, and limited time, educators must be willing to implement best practices that have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Snead & Burriss, 2017). As a school district, homework is acknowledged and accepted as a means to improve student achievement, grades, and test scores. This study allowed for educators and school leaders to reflect on the practice of homework in order for students to reap the benefits of their homework experience at the middle school level.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

In order to meet the demands of high stakes testing coupled with high accountability for teachers and school districts, school leaders must find time to reflect on current instructional practices and only implement the best, most effective practices for improving learning outcomes for students (Snead & Burris, 2017). In order to meet the demands of testing and accountability, implementing homework is a long-standing tradition and accepted practice in schools all across the United States (Snead & Burris, 2017). Although homework is a widely accepted practice that requires a great deal of time, it often plays a starring role in the learning experiences for middle school teachers, students, and parents (Letterman, 2013). Carr (2013) affirmed that teachers can increase the quality of homework they assign by utilizing research-based practices but cautioned that teachers lack the time needed to read through research, reflect on implications of the research, and make the needed adjustments to implement the research-based practices with fidelity.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain insight into the current homework practices of middle school teachers in an eastern North Carolina rural community. The study sought to answer the following research question: What are middle school teacher practices regarding homework?

This study was adapted, with permission, from a similar study completed by Snead and Burriss (2016). By completing a similar study, the researcher was able to identify the specific practices of middle school teachers in the demographic area where the survey was conducted.

### **Participants and Response Rate**

Based on information received from the district's human resource department, it was determined that the district employs a total of 87 certified teachers in the five middle schools. These teachers were assigned to teach students in Grades 6-8 in the areas of science, social studies, English/language arts (ELA), math, and elective courses for the 2018-2019 school year. Due to maintaining the confidentiality of participants, limited demographic data were collected through the survey instrument. The unique geographic makeup of the district and its five middle schools limited the demographic data that could be collected to assure participants of the anonymity in responding to the survey. In an increased effort to support participation in the study, participants were given the option to opt out of answering any questions on the survey. The goal was to have at least 35% of the possible 87 teachers participate in the study; and in the end, 48 teachers (55%) participated in the study. It is important to note that all data presented throughout this chapter are based on the total number of participants of 48. Participants were informed that they could opt out of or skip any questions they felt uncomfortable in answering. Some question responses do not add up to exactly 100% due to the participants' right to opt out of any questions and yet still have their other responses recorded as part of the study.

### **Data Collection Process**

In this phenomenological study, the researcher collected data utilizing a teacher survey. The use of a survey allowed the researcher to collect data that can be generalized. The survey was created using Google forms, as all middle school teachers in the district have been Google certified and the researcher felt confident in their abilities to be able to navigate the survey. The survey consisted of two closed-ended questions and

eight open-ended questions.

To begin with, the researcher met with the district superintendent, explained the purpose of the study, and requested permission to conduct the study at all middle schools in the district. Permission was granted by the superintendent and all five middle school administrators. The researcher then received permission from the IRB committee at Gardner-Webb University in March 2019 to conduct the study. Once permission was granted by the superintendent and the IRB committee, the researcher outlined a timeline that was presented to the superintendent and the middle school administrators. Included in the timeline were beginning and end dates for the survey and the purpose for the timing of the survey. Middle school teachers were asked to respond to the survey about their current homework practices from mid-March to the end of March. The researcher believed that by utilizing this timeline, the responses from the participants would allow for more accurate feedback since, by the end of the third 9 weeks, teachers would have consistently implemented homework practices for the 2018-2019 school year.

The middle school administrators received an email a week prior to the survey window opening for the middle school teachers. This email explained the purpose of the study and guaranteed confidentiality of the responses from participants. Seven days after the email was sent to the administrators, an email was sent to all eligible middle school teachers in the district (Appendix D). In the original email to teachers, the purpose of the study was explained as well as the data collection process and how the data would be used by the researcher. Participants were also provided a copy on the Informed Consent Form (Appendix E) and reminded that they could opt out of any questions on the survey they felt uncomfortable in answering. The survey window was opened at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, March 15 and ended at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, March 29, 2019. Throughout the

survey window, a reminder email was sent to participants after 7 days (Appendix D) to inform the participants of the closing date of March 29, 2019. Each time an email was sent, the purpose of the survey was stated and a copy of the Informed Consent Form was included.

The data collection began with the participants responding to the survey questions through Google forms. Once the survey window ended, the researcher downloaded all responses from the form into an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher then imported the Excel file in Nvivo to begin coding the open-ended responses from the participants. Through the use of Nvivo, the researcher was able to code and sort data based on the creation of nodes within the program, and Nvivo even auto coded some responses. The researcher found that the auto code features of Nvivo created broad categories and themes; however, the researcher utilized the features of the program to create analyzable nodes using the verbatim statements and quotes from participants to make clusters of meaning and then find common themes. Nvivo served as a digital log of responses and allowed the researcher to organize the data based on patterns and themes. Creswell (2013) identified coding as a means of labeling data to drill down to concrete meaning and themes. By utilizing Nvivo and hand-coding techniques the researcher was able to effectively use data to answer the research question.

### **Discussions of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research question: What are middle school teacher practices regarding homework? This study used a research question central to the phenomenological method with its purpose to critically analyze the practices of middle school teachers in an eastern North Carolina school district as they relate to the topic of homework. The central research question in a phenomenological

study is often, “What are the lived experiences of a group around a specific phenomenon,” or “What are the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experience of the phenomenon by individuals” (Creswell, 2013)? For this study, the responses for teacher questions 3-10 were used in answering the research question, while questions 1 and 2 provided demographic data.

Table 2 displays the demographic data of the participants. On survey question 1, participants were asked to select what grade level they currently teach; for question 2, participants selected their subject area for the current school year. Questions 1 and 2 were the only close-ended questions on the survey. Due to the unique makeup of the district where the study was completed, the researcher purposely sought to limit the number of demographic questions to increase the likelihood of participation in the survey.

Table 2

*Demographic Data of Respondents*

Demographic Category	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Sixth-Grade Teacher	8	16.70%
Seventh-Grade Teacher	10	20.80%
Eighth-Grade Teacher	17	35.40%
Teacher of Multiple Grades 6-8	11	23.00%
ELA Teacher	10	20.80%
Math Teacher	7	14.60%
Social Studies Teacher	9	18.80%
Science Teacher	6	12.50%
Elective Teacher	8	16.70%
Teacher of Multiple Subjects	7	14.60%

A majority of the participants were eighth-grade teachers at 35.40%, followed by teachers of multiple grades in the grade-level span of 6-8 with 23%; 20.80% of the participants were teachers of seventh-grade students; and the least represented group at

16.70% were teachers in Grade 6. In regard to subject areas taught, there was more of a balance in the variety of subject areas represented with 20.80% of participants as teachers of ELA; 18.80% were social studies teachers; 16.70% of the participants identified as elective teachers which would include classes such as band, art, health/PE, and various CTE courses; and both math teachers and teachers who teach more than one subject area were at 14.60% of the participants.

**Teacher Question 3: How would you define homework?** Table 3 displays the themes that were derived from coding the responses from the participants as they created their own definition of homework.

Table 3

*Definition of Homework*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Work assigned to be completed for extra practice	17	35.40%
Work assigned that was not completed during the regular class time	11	23.00%
Work assigned to reinforce current lesson and skills	7	14.60%
Studying for upcoming assessments	3	6.30%
Work assigned to reteach and review previously taught content and skills	3	6.30%
Reading that needs to be done outside the class time	2	4.20%
Projects for the 9 weeks	1	2.10%

The most prevalent theme at 35.40% was homework is defined as work assigned beyond class time for extra practice. One participant's response seemed to capture the

essence of the other participants who defined homework in terms of work needed to provide extra practice. Teacher 10 stated, “I would define homework as additional practice for a concept. Practice that is completed outside the classroom but is used to provide extra support for the curriculum to assist in preparing students for upcoming lessons, class activities, and assessments.”

The next most common theme, of nearly a quarter of the participants (23.00%), that emerged from the responses from participants was that homework could be defined as work that is assigned to be completed at home because it was not completed during the regular class time. Teacher 22 stated that homework is “normally work that they (students) do not complete in class.” Teacher 39 went on to elaborate the response a bit further in defining homework as “an opportunity for students to complete tasks that require more thought and deliberate responses which cannot happen in a 55-minute class.”

Nearly 15% of the participants (14.60%) are cited as defining homework as work that is assigned to students to give them time to reinforce current lessons and skills.

Both the themes of homework being defined as work that is studying for tests and work assigned to reteach or review previously taught content and skills received equal responses from participants at 6.30%. One participant (2.10%) defined homework as “work that is completed outside of class but is work consistently completed to meet the requirements of a 9-weeks project.” Two participants did respond to question 1, but their responses were not identifiable to any of themes listed in Table 3, as the responses were simply “unaccountable” (Teacher 28) and “unnecessary” (Teacher 29).

**Teacher Question 4: Why do you assign homework?** The common themes found during the coding of the responses for question 4 are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

*Why Homework is Assigned*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Students need to complete work that is not completed during class due to not enough time	14	29.17%
Students need time to practice current skills	13	27.10%
Students need to study for upcoming assessments	6	12.50%
Do not assign homework	5	10.40%
Students need to complete reading outside of the class time to be prepared for upcoming lesson	2	4.20%
Students need to study current vocabulary	2	4.20%

Much like a common theme found for question 1, the most prevalent theme found from the responses of participants, 29.17%, found that teachers assign homework because students need to complete work that they could not complete in class due to lack of time. Teacher 7 stated, I assign homework “because there isn’t enough time in class to get everything done.” Teacher 17 provided a response as well that indicated that homework is assigned due to lack of time but more so because students do not manage their time well: “Work is not done in class because they (students) aren’t using class time wisely.” Teacher 24’s response supports Teacher 17: “I simply do not have time in my class to get everything done.” Teacher 38 stated that when homework is assigned, it is because “sometimes students need a little more time to think in depth about a problem or problems, time that they do not have during the scheduled class time.”

Emerging second was the theme that homework is assigned as a means for students to practice current skills; 27.10% of the participants felt the homework was

needed to give students the time to practice. Nearly 12% of the participants assign homework as a means for students to study for tests. Teacher 10 took a more long-term view in assigning homework, stating,

I give homework to help students prepare for end-of-the-year assessments. The homework I give is on USA Test Prep, so besides helping to support class content, the questions are worded using standardized vocabulary which I think helps prepares students for the end-of-grade tests.

Teacher 29 gave a similar reason why homework is assigned, but the response was more about developing the study skills of students on a consistent basis for classroom assessments rather than standardized testing:

My students rarely study, some do not know how, and most will not unless they are held accountable for producing some sort of output. At this age, I have found that they do not get the relationship between studying and reviewing material on their own and getting high test grades. My homework is generally intended to help them learn to study.

Of the 48 participants, five (10.40%) responded that they do not assign homework, but no one elaborated on why they do not assign homework. Two participants (4.20%) cited outside reading to prepare for upcoming lessons as to why homework is assigned, along with two (4.20%) other participants who reported that they assign homework that involves the studying or learning of new vocabulary. One teacher (2.10%) assigns homework for the purpose of completing a 9-weeks project.

**Teacher Question 5: What type of homework assignments do you assign?**

Table 5 displays responses from participants regarding question 5. The dominant theme that developed in question 5 was, interestingly enough, one of the least common themes

found in question 4.

Table 5

*Type of Homework Assigned*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Reading to prepare for upcoming lesson	11	22.90%
Definitions of current vocabulary	6	12.50%
Practice on computer program: IXL or USA Test Prep	6	12.50%
Work that was not completed during class time	5	10.40%
Enrichment activities, such as project-based learning activities	4	8.30%
Work to practice current skills	3	6.30%
Studying for upcoming tests	1	2.10%
Watch a video for the flipped classroom model	1	2.10%

The most common type of homework assigned was reading that needed to be completed outside of class to prepare for an upcoming lesson. Eleven of the participants (22.90%) cited assigning this type of homework; whereas, in question 4, 4.20% cited reading as a purpose to assigning homework. Additionally, six of the 48 participants (12.50%) reported that they assign definitions of current vocabulary as homework, but only two of the participants cited learning new vocabulary as a reason why they assign homework in question 4. It is interesting to the researcher how these two themes flipped from being least prevailing in one question to most prevailing in the next question. Utilizing the computer programs of IXL or USA Test Prep limits the type of homework assigned by six of the 48 teachers (12.50%). Teacher 18 responded that while a computer

program is used, “students must turn in their scrap paper to get credit for the homework assigned.” Teacher 44 responded, “the homework that I assign must be completed and turned in online.” Another theme that emerged was one that was seen throughout the first three questions, that the type of homework assigned is whatever work was not completed during the class time (10.40%). Four of the teachers responded that they assign homework which includes enrichment activities such as problem-based learning activities. Teacher 20 stated, “the only true homework that I give is independent research projects. The projects are assigned at the beginning of a unit and are due at the end of the unit.”

Approximately 6% of the teachers (6.30%) assign homework of varying types, but the homework is considered to be work needed to practice current skills being taught in the classroom. One teacher assigns homework that involves students studying for upcoming tests, and one teacher has a flipped classroom setup, so the homework is always to watch a video in preparation for the next day’s class.

**Teacher Question 6: How much time do you anticipate a student spends on homework for your class(es) per week?** Table 6 reflects the time teachers anticipate students spend on homework in their individual classes per week.

Table 6

*Amount of Time Student Spends on Homework Per Class Per Week*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Less than 1 hour	23	47.90%
Between 1 and 2 hours	13	27.10%
Between 2 and 3 hours	2	4.20%
Between 3 and 5 hours	1	2.10%

Almost half of the teachers (47.90%) reported time as less than 1 hour per week.

Nearly a quarter of teachers (27.10%) responded that students should spend between 1 and 2 hours on homework for their class; two (4.20%) teachers indicated that students spend between 2 and 3 hours on homework per week; and one teacher (2.10%) specified that students should spend between 3 and 5 hours per week on homework per week. Five teachers reported that students do not spend any time on homework for their classes, because they do not assign the homework. The responses from these teachers are not listed in the less than 1-hour interval in Table 6. Additionally, one teacher (Teacher 44) reported that students spend zero time on homework, not because homework is not assigned, but because around “95% of the students just don’t complete the homework assignments.” This response from the participant was not included in the table.

**Teacher Question 7: What kind of feedback do you provide on homework?**

Table 7 lists the type of feedback that teachers provide on homework assignments.

Table 7

*Feedback on Homework Assigned*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Numeric grade	21	43.80%
Whole class review and feedback	9	18.80%
Verbal feedback	8	16.70%
Peer feedback from discussion groups	3	6.30%
Individual feedback	2	4.20%
No feedback is given	2	4.20%
Candy	1	2.10%

As indicated in Table 7, nearly half of the teachers (43.80%) provided feedback on homework in the form of a numeric grade as the teacher collects and grades the assignment. Nine teachers (18.80%) specified that students utilize self-assessment strategies through a whole-class review of the homework. Eight of the teachers (16.70%)

confirmed that they provide some sort of verbal feedback to students which may require a next step for the student. For example, Teacher 33 stated, “if I know a student is struggling, then I will go over the homework and then have the student re-do the homework for a better grade.” Three teachers (6.30%) encourage peer feedback through the review of homework through peer or discussion groups. Two teachers (4.20%) reported that there is no feedback given on homework and two (4.20%) indicated that individual feedback is given, but one (Teacher 10) of the two teachers reported that individual feedback comes from a computer program as indicated in the response, “I do not personally give feedback, but the USA Test Prep program provides the student with an explanation for each incorrect response.” One teacher (2.10%) indicated that candy was given as feedback and positive reinforcement for completing the weekly ELA homework assignments: “In ELA, we reward kids with candy if they complete homework assignments before the deadline.”

**Teacher Question 8: How do you assess homework?** Table 8 lists the common themes that were coded when teachers responded to how homework was assessed in their classes.

Table 8

*Assessing Homework*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Teacher collects and grades the homework	22	45.80%
Student self-assessment through whole class review and then collect for a grade	8	16.70%
Teacher checks for completion only and not accuracy of the work	5	10.40%
Not graded, the assessment grade indicates that homework prepared student	4	8.30%
Computer program grades and that grade is entered	3	6.30%

Nearly half of the responses (45.80%) were coded as having the theme of the assessment of homework coming from the fact that a teacher collects the homework and grades the work for accuracy. For eight participants, while the end result was still a numeric grade, students were allowed to self-assess their work and then turn the work in for a grade. Five teachers (10.40%) reported that homework is checked for completion only and the accuracy of the responses are not considered, while four teachers (8.30%) indicated that they do not grade homework at all but that the assessment grade reflects the effectiveness of homework. Teacher 41 stated, “assessing homework, which is to be considered practice, is impossible. Students are held accountable through weekly tests.” Three teachers (6.30%) stated that the computer program provides the assessment grade and that grade is entered for the student. Teacher 23 stated,

Both of my weekly homework assignments are computer based and graded. Each student completes a 30-minute Moby Max assignment on their level and they

receive a completion grade based on percent done. The other assignment is EOG practice questions and it is graded by the computer in which the program gives them the correct answer. If data indicates a need, we go over in class.

**Teacher Question 9: To what degree is homework included in a student's 9 weeks' grade (percentage)?** For the researcher, question 9 revealed a myriad of responses from participants as evidenced in Table 9.

Table 9

*Percentage of Final Grade that Homework is Counted Every 9 Weeks*

Theme	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
None	3	6.30%
Homework is averaged and counted as a classwork grade	7	15.60%
Homework completion counts as one quiz grade for the 9 weeks	1	2.10%
5% of final grade	1	2.10%
10% of final grade	11	23.00%
15% of final grade	4	8.30%
20% of final grade	4	8.30%
25% of final grade	3	6.30%
30% of final grade	1	2.10%
33% of final grade	1	2.10%
50% of final grade	2	4.20%

While the researcher indicated the response to be given as a percentage, some participants did not respond with a percentage, as reflected in Table 8. Of the teachers

who responded, three (6.30%) reported that homework is not included as part of a student's final average in the class. Seven teachers (15.60%) designated homework as one classwork grade for the 9 weeks, a grade derived from an average of homework grades throughout the 9 weeks. One teacher (2.10%) had a similar approach, but the homework average for the 9 weeks counted as a quiz grade, which the researcher inferred may be weighted more than a classwork grade. The responses from teachers about a specific percentage that homework was included in the final 9 weeks' grade ranged from 5% to 50% as indicated on the table. A majority of the teachers include homework as 10% of a student's final grade.

**Teacher Question 10: Provide any additional thoughts on homework.** For the researcher, question 10 gave more detailed insights into the individualized experiences with homework from those who responded. Of the 48 participants, 27 responded to the question. Although the responses varied in length from one sentence to a paragraph, the researcher was able to analyze responses to question 10 to create meaning and essences of homework as experienced by the teachers in the district where the study was completed. Through the use of Nvivo and the program's ability to code sentiments as positive or negative, the researcher was able to code responses as they related to positive sentiments about the practice of homework and the negative sentiments around the practice of homework.

Some teachers alluded to the shift in homework expectations due to a shift in support at home. Teacher 5 stated,

I am very torn. I don't think it is fair to give students homework and let it be a big grade when some of them have comfortable houses to go home to and parents to help them with their homework, while other kids go home to unstable

environments.

Teacher 6 agreed that the home environment has played a role in altering homework practices:

I believe that we have a different population now. Most kids don't have family at home to help them or hold them accountable for completion of homework. It is really unfair to these students who have no support to require homework. Plus, with many assignments being required on-line, our low-income students often don't have a computer or internet service.

Teacher 2 agreed with colleagues, stating,

A lack of support for special needs students and not having that support from home in being able to complete the homework impacts not only their grade but confidence, homework stresses out my special needs students and many of them do not have support at home to complete it. I do not believe it helps them in any way and actually hurts their confidence because grades suffer as a result.

In alignment with research, the participants in the study had opposing views about homework and the need to assign homework at the middle school level. Teacher 3 believed that “homework needs to be used correctly to be a great tool in the learning process.” Teacher 7 went on to state that while homework is a needed part of education, there needs a balance for students:

I think homework is an integral part of the educational discipline, but it needs to be balanced. Assigning homework for hours every night can burn students out, but not assigning any homework does not build stamina and responsibility for further educational/work and career endeavors. Homework needs to be a study or practice to retain information or sharpen skills like reading or practicing a few

math problems that were presented in class, fixing note cards for content vocabulary, or note-taking on content for understanding. It should not be busy work and should not take away from evening extra-curricular activities. It needs to balance into the daily schedule.

In agreement with Teacher 7, Teacher 19 advocates for homework as practice but also reiterates the need to find balance for the student:

I believe on certain topics students need to review and practice skills and concepts for mastery and understanding. However, I do not believe students should be spending hours upon hours on homework. Homework should be a completion of unfinished classwork and/or a quick review and practice and previously taught skills and concepts.

Many times, homework has been called just “busy work” for students, but teacher 23 disagreed with that statement:

Homework is not busywork, it is a chance to practice the day's work. If a student has not grasped the concept, additional teaching and practice is needed for that student, not the whole class. If homework is meaningful, either for reinforcement or preparation for class discussion, it is important.

Teacher 29 simply stated, “I believe that homework is a valuable asset to teachers. Students need to work on things outside of school. It extends their learning.”

Conversely, there were just as many participants just as passionate about the need to not assign homework. Teacher 4 cited the need for time after school for the student to have time for extracurricular events, relaxation, and family:

For the middle school levels, I believe students should not receive additional assignments beyond reading a longer passage (such as a novel). Students and

teachers should be able to cover everything in class, and after school should be reserved for extracurriculars, relaxation, and family time.

Teacher 9 agreed:

In our middle school, students usually have independent practice for math and are asked to read for pleasure nightly. I think that the 30-60 minutes it takes to do this is enough on a child's schedule. There needs to be time in the evening for other events: family time, physical exercise, and to pursue personal interests as well as to unwind/destress.

Some participants felt strongly that the time in the school day was sufficient time for the student to master concepts. Teacher 16 stated, "I do not think traditional homework is effective. If students are intensely engaged throughout the entire day then they should be learning and growing sufficiently." Teacher 10 agreed, believing that the most learning should and does happen in the classroom: "Homework has its merits for sure and I believe in giving homework. But more than that, I think the students I teach for the most part do not have enough support at home for homework to be done.

### **Summary**

The analysis of the qualitative data from the 48 participants in the study allowed the researcher to gain a broad overview of homework practices of middle school teachers throughout the district in which the study was completed. A survey of the middle school teachers allowed the researcher to answer the research question.

This study investigated the current practices middle school teachers have in place regarding homework. The responses from the participants provided easily codable themes in finding similar trends throughout the responses from participants. The responses were gathered from all five middle schools in the district where the study was

completed. The responses from participants allowed the researcher to get an indication of current practices surrounding the assigning of homework, the grading practices surrounding homework assignments, and the purpose of assigning homework as determined by teachers.

In Chapter 5, the researcher further discusses how the results in Chapter 4 align with research-based practices as presented in the Chapter 2 literature review. Further discussions of the results, recommendations to impact teacher practices, implications for change, and limitations of the study also are presented.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

When teachers believe in the importance of their work enough to apply research-based strategies and truly facilitate effective homework practice, they will create a classroom of learners who also believe in the importance of the work and, ultimately, of themselves. (Carr, 2013, p. 179)

### Introduction

Findings throughout research continue to be mixed, and therefore it is imperative that school leaders closely look at their own demographics and district-wide practices and consider this information in addressing homework policies (Bennett, 2017). Brown (2009) further stated that the teacher's ability to deliver solid instructional experiences for students is key in the learning process. Sallee and Rigor (2008) encouraged teachers to reflect on their homework practices on a regular basis so they can prioritize what they want students to learn and experience in their classes.

The purpose of this phenomenological approach to qualitative research study was to gather the needed information to allow the researcher to gain insight into the homework practices of current middle school teachers. The survey provided them the needed opportunity to reflect on their own homework practices. The researcher sought to answer the following research question: What are middle school teacher practices regarding homework?

The researcher sent the survey to all 87 eligible middle school teachers in the district in which the study was completed. Teachers were given a 2-week time period to respond to the survey questions. The researcher then used a combination of hand coding and utilizing the features of Nvivo to code responses into identifiable themes. The themes that emerged with each survey question allowed the researcher to draw

conclusions related to the various practices around homework at the middle school level in the eastern North Carolina rural community.

As Kohn (2006) suggested, maybe the question lies in not assigning less homework or better homework, but in looking at the expectations and current practices that surround homework. Suskind (2012) supported Kohn's argument as she admonished school districts in tailoring homework practices due to politics and precedents rather than on *rich, provocative* conversations aimed at standardized homework practices. In this chapter, the researcher uses the findings and discusses the interpretation of the findings to make recommendations regarding teacher practices and implications for change.

### **Interpretations of the Findings**

**Defining homework.** To date, the most noted expert in the field of homework is Harris Cooper. Through his research beginning in 1989, he coined the most widely used definition for homework as tasks that are assigned to students to be completed during noninstructional time. In 2017, the National Education Association defined homework as an instructional practice for assigning work outside the school day that allows students to be motivated and develop study skills, allows parents to be informed about student learning, and improves student achievement. Good and Brophy (2003) further defined homework as an "extension of the in-school opportunities for students" (p. 393). In agreement with Cooper (1989), 23% of the participants cited that homework is defined as work that was not completed during the regular class time and therefore must be completed outside of the instructional class time. The 2015 definition by the National Education Association is most similar to those responses by the participants in regard to homework being defined as work that improves student achievement, as 35.40% of participants defined homework as work assigned for extra practice; 14.60% defined

homework as work assigned to reinforce skills; and 6.30% defined homework as the need to study for upcoming tests. The researcher concluded that teachers believe that by having students complete homework as a means for practice and reinforcement and to review material before a test would lead to increased student achievement as indicated by the National Education Association.

In contrast to the survey data, Marzano and Pickering (2007) stated that the benefits of homework are tied to teachers who use homework appropriately since homework can allow learning to extend beyond the regular school day. Marzano and Pickering supported the need to enact effective homework policies for schools and districts to ensure teachers assign homework properly.

Although research can support the use of homework as a tool to enhance student understanding and achievement, research is unclear on specific recommendations to assist schools and districts in developing consistent homework policies. According to Miller and Keeler (2017), research does little to actually define homework. Miller and Keeler argued that research clumps together all homework: word searches and worksheets with assignments that give students the opportunity to think critically, discuss, and be creative. Furthermore, Miller and Keeler ascertained that the debate about homework really becomes a debate over the actual term *homework*, which does not describe the quality or quantity of the task. Throughout research, there is little differentiation to poorly designed homework, busywork versus quality academic work. With this study, while participants listed their own definition of homework, not one participant defined homework in regard to the quality of the work assigned.

**The purpose of homework.** Many parents and students believe that homework is simply busywork as cited by Cordoba (2013). Cordoba defined busywork as work that

is general in nature with little regard to individual student needs, and there seems to be little evidence the task promotes mastery learning. One participant (Teacher 25) in the study believed that homework should never be classified as busywork:

Homework is not busywork. It is a chance to practice the day's work. If a student has not grasped the concept, additional teaching and practice are needed for that student, not the whole class. If homework is meaningful, either for reinforcement or preparation for class discussion, it is important.

McMillian (2011) ascertained that the main purpose of homework should be the extra practice of skills taught to extend student learning. In agreement with McMillian, approximately a quarter of the participants (27.10%) cited that they assign homework for the purpose of providing students with the needed time to practice current skills. Almost a third of the participants (33.37%) cited they assign homework due to the fact that there is not enough time for a student to complete the required work or reading during the allotted class time. Sallee and Rigler (2008) supported this purpose of homework as they noted that educators are under more pressure than ever to perform. With time being a huge obstacle for educators to overcome in getting tasks completed, homework has become an acceptable practice in allowing students to acquire skills and read new material to prepare for class.

Snead and Burriss (2017) pointed out that while researchers and teachers understand that extra practice is to be the main purpose of homework, *students* must understand the relationship of how practice supports their needs and abilities for it to benefit them. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) affirmed that teachers must begin to understand why they assign homework before the role of homework can be understood.

Like the work of Cooper et al. (2006) and Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001), a

2017 study by Bas et al. cited that teachers commonly assign homework for a variety of instructional and noninstructional purposes. Bas et al. found that homework can be assigned for instructional purposes to provide the time needed to practice new skills; a way to introduce new topics; provide opportunities to apply previously learned skills; allow students to produce a product demonstrating mastery of skills; and allow students to explore skills using websites, social media, and books. Additionally, Bas et al. found that teachers assign homework to increase communication between home and school and to allow students the opportunity to develop character traits such as responsibility, confidence, and self-discipline.

For the open-ended responses to question 10, where participants were asked to share their own thoughts about homework, the researcher felt sure that some participant responses would revolve around the need for homework for noninstructional purposes such as the need to teach responsibility, time management skills, and self-regulation strategies and to prepare students for real-life work that requires deadlines. The data analysis through hand coding and auto coding through Nvivo indicated that only one of the participant's (Teacher 7) responses revolved around the nonacademic benefits of homework: "Assigning homework for hours every night can burn students out, but not assigning any homework does not build stamina and responsibility for further educational/work and career endeavors." The limited responses of the participants on the purpose of homework for nonacademic benefits did not support the anticipated outcome the researcher had originally thought.

In adhering to school and/or district policies, teachers may feel the pressure to assign a certain amount or type of homework (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Due to a feeling of obligation by teachers to maintain positive public relations, they feel the

need to assign homework. Throughout research, it has been suggested that giving homework equates to good teaching and good schools. Another surprising finding for the researcher was the fact that not one participant cited the need to assign homework to support district and/or school expectations. The researcher felt sure that the responses on question 10 would support the findings of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), but that was not the case.

Miller and Keeler (2017) challenged educators to consider the following questions before assigning homework to students; and if an educator cannot answer yes to all of the following questions, it is time to rethink the purpose of the homework assignment:

1. Does it significantly increase a student's love of learning?
2. Does it significantly increase learning?
3. Does it stimulate student's interest in the subject and make them want to delve deeper?
4. Are students able to complete the assignment without help?
5. Is it differentiated for ability or interest?
6. If the students did not have to do it, would they want to do it anyway?
7. Is it fair to all students, especially those from poorer families and less-educated households?
8. Does it avoid causing fights, parent/child division, and a lack of harmony in the home? (p. xvi)

**Type of homework assigned.** In preparing for lessons, teachers may assign homework that allows students to complete unfinished classwork so they can move on to the next lesson or the teacher may assign homework that allows students to brainstorm ideas and generate thinking about an upcoming topic (Muhlenbruck et al., 1999; Paulu,

1995). To further support the research of Muhlenbruck et al. (1999) and Paulu (1995), 22.90% of the participants assign reading to prepare for an upcoming lesson as homework, while 8.30% of the participants provide the students with project-based learning opportunities at home. One participant utilized the flipped classroom model requiring students to watch the video for homework to be prepared for the next day's lesson.

By practicing skills, students can increase their speed, retain new skills, review work, prepare for tests, and demonstrate mastery of skills taught (Epstein & Becker, 1982). Archer (2108) argued in her quantitative study that homework involves practice which is inherent to the learning process. Throughout her study, Archer created comparisons of the need to practice skills at home with those practice requirements of talented musicians and athletes. For this study, only 10.40% assigned the type of homework that would allow the student to practice by completing work that was not completed in class. In addition, 12.50% assigned practice via an online program. Miller and Keeler (2017) argued that independent practice for a student has the greatest benefit when the student can access their *highly skilled teacher* throughout their practice (p. 25). A student's ability to access their teacher throughout the process allows for strengthened teacher-student relationships, a personalized learning focus in the classroom, and feedback that is crucial to sustaining the success of the student (Miller & Keeler, 2017).

**Time spent on homework.** While Núñez et al. (2017) argued that research lacks the data to prove a correlation between how much time is spent on homework per day and student achievement, the National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association's recommendation for an acceptable amount of time a student should spend on homework aligns with Cooper et al.'s (2006) recommendation of the 10-

minute rule. This guideline suggests that students should be able to adhere to 10 minutes of homework per grade level of the student. For example, a student in middle school, Grades 6-8, should be able to effectively complete 60-80 minutes of homework per night. The typical middle schooler in the district where this study was conducted takes four core classes a day and two elective courses per day. In order to stay within the recommendations of Cooper et al. (2006), a middle school teacher should limit homework to that which takes 15-20 minutes a night to account for a balance of the homework among the six classes. According to the participants, nearly half, 47.90%, indicated that students should spend less than 1 hour a week on homework for their classes. So, given a student takes six classes a day, a teacher who limits homework to 1 hour or less per week creates the balance needed as indicated by Cooper et al. (2006). Interestingly enough, a third (33.40%) assign homework that should take a student between 1 and 5 hours per week. This means that a typical middle school student in the district in which the study was completed could expect between 6 and 30 hours of homework per week! Vatterott (2009) cautioned that with a one-size-fits-all approach to homework, educators fail to account for the different “working speeds” of students (p. 88). While time is a factor in homework, Vatterott (2009) contended that educators create homework that is task based with little regard to how long it takes an individual learner to complete the assignment, meaning that students who are slow learners are expected to take the time to complete the task when other students can finish the task more quickly.

**Feedback on homework.** Hattie (2012) stated that feedback can be one of the most powerful strategies in the teaching and learning process. Hattie further affirmed that for feedback to be effective, it should be “just in time, just for me, just where I am in

my learning process, and just what I need to help me move forward” (p. 137). Cushman (2010) interviewed students and allowed them to voice their concerns on why homework does not work and what changes can be made. A large number of students wanted feedback on assignments. Students voiced concerns about spending copious amounts of time on homework assignments only to never receive any feedback, which left students feeling a bit lost.

Deliberate practice by students requires deliberate feedback, as argued by Archer (2018) because improvement is only minimal when feedback is missing from the learning process for students. In contrast to the research, this particular study found that almost half of the participants (43.80%) provided feedback in the form of a numeric grade, while 4.20% provided no feedback to the student on the homework. Although 18.80% provided students the opportunity to receive feedback as part of a whole class review of the homework assignment, Carless (as cited by Hattie, 2012) insisted that whole-class feedback is ineffective, because individual students cannot discern that the feedback is specifically for him or her.

Furthermore, 6.30% of the participants depend on student discussion groups to provide the needed feedback to students. Hattie and Gan (2011) identified that peer feedback can be problematic, due to the fact that much of the feedback is incorrect. Through Hattie and Gan’s study, they advocated for the facilitation of teachers during these peer discussions to assist students in gaining the needed skills to provide effective feedback. Hattie and Gan suggested providing students with sentence starters and guiding questions as a strategy. Hattie and Gan (2011) worked with middle school students and found that while many could set mastery goals for their sport and social lives based on feedback, their academic goals stemmed around completing work, being

on time for class, and putting forth more effort; and the goals focused less on actual academic outcomes. For homework to have maximum benefits, the role of feedback for the student cannot be ignored in the learning process.

**Assessing and grading homework.** Archer and her colleagues (Palocsay & Stevens, 2008; Titard et al., 2014) agreed that there is a need to assign homework as a means to practice, yet their opponents argued that homework can inflate grades, create superficial learning rather than mastery of content, and allow students to guess on what are the right and wrong answers to their homework assignments (Fish, 2015; Rhodes & Sarbaum, 2015). Vatterott (2009) asserted that the grading plays the largest role in the completion of homework and that grading becomes the reward or punishment for the student. Vatterott (2009) argued that many teachers get stuck in their *reward/punishment box* (p. 88); and while we know that it is ineffective, we try to “punish” students into completing homework by attaching a grade to the assignment.

In this particular study, 45.80% of the participants assessed homework by collecting the homework and grading the homework for accuracy; 6.70% took up the homework to grade but only after the student was able to review answers through a whole class review; and 6.30% allowed the computer program to assess the homework and attach a grade to the work. All in all, 58.80% of participants assessed homework in a way that resulted in a numeric grade that was recorded in the grade book. This supports the work of Suskind (2012) who found approximately 70% of teachers in the United States grade homework. In contrast to the responses from teachers, Wormeli (2006) pointed out that teachers should not grade daily homework assignments but should provide feedback. Wormeli argued that only by grading summative assessments can the student’s grade reflect mastery of content.

Vatterott (2011) cautioned that by combining homework grades with grades that demonstrate mastery, a final course grade may mask poor performance or the lack of learning by a student. This study found almost 60% of the participants (58.80%) assign a numeric grade to homework, yet how that grade is reflected in a final course grade for the 9 weeks has varying impact on the student. While a majority of the participants in the study included homework as 10% of the student's final grade, the range of responses on how homework was weighted in the 9 weeks' average ranged from 5% to 50% of the student's course grade! The researcher found this data to be most alarming in that grading practices should be consistent in reporting the extent to which the student has mastered standards-based content and not homework completion grades that reflect work habits and compliance behaviors. While no participants alluded to grading practices as a punitive practice, the researcher concluded that due to the fact that nearly half of the participants counted homework as a grade and all but three participants included homework in the student's final 9 weeks' average, failing to do the homework and doing the homework incorrectly can have negative impacts on a student's final grade. Dueck (2014) claimed that educators use punitive grading practices for the poor decisions and behaviors of students in the completion of homework. While research does not support that grading as punishment works, educators still rely on this practice to force compliance and the school of thought that students will perform better if they know it counts (Guskey, 2011). Vatterott (2009) argued that when homework is graded, students are often punished for their home life. Vatterott (2009) further pointed out that the reward and punishment system of grading homework may "reward" a student with a passing grade for the homework tasks, but how can one know who truly completed the assignment? She admonishes that effort on homework should never be considered in a

student's grade if the student fails to demonstrate the content knowledge while performing classroom tasks.

As indicated in question 10 of the survey, teachers are a mixed bag when it comes to the topic of homework. The myriad of responses range from educators praising the importance of homework and its impact on allowing students the needed practice to be successful to other teachers feeling frustrated by homework, yet they are not sure what to do about it. Although the research on homework can leave educators with more questions than answers and opinions are so contradictory, homework is still considered a core part of middle school student learning experiences.

### **Implications of Practice**

**Investigate the current grading practices of middle school teachers.** In keeping with the myriad of responses that were reported by the participants in the study, the researcher recommends conducting a study of grading practices within the middle schools in the district in which this study was completed. This study found that the percentage that homework counts towards a student's final grade ranges from 0% up to 50%. Wormeli (2006) argued that a student's grade should come from a student's mastery of content over time. Wormeli further contended that teachers should not grade the practice of students as they come to master a concept or skill. A grade that demonstrates accurate mastery is one that is summative in nature, and teachers should not include work habits and effort in the academic grade. The findings in this study indicate that a student's grade can reflect compliance behaviors in completing homework rather than mastery of content. School and district leaders should look at various models that would de-emphasize homework grades. Among these models are prohibiting teachers from including homework grades in the final course average for the 9 weeks, limiting

homework to count as 10% or less of the final grade, creating Zeros Aren't Permissible Clubs to provide assistance to students in completing homework, valuing the completion of homework over accuracy, or allowing teachers to only count homework as extra credit (Vatterott, 2009).

**District-wide professional development on homework practices.** District leaders and middle school administrators should utilize this study and its findings as a foundation to begin a two-phase professional development plan. The researcher believes that a district-wide professional development plan for middle school teachers should begin with a book study. To date, the district does not have a homework policy, and schools are allowed to have their own site-based plans for homework practices. As supported by the findings, the middle school students have to be in a state of “instructional schizophrenia” in trying to meet the varying expectations surrounding homework throughout their day as they face six varying practices from class to class. The purpose of the book study would not be to take a pro-homework stance vs. an anti-homework stance, but rather to give middle school teachers across the district a common starting place as we begin to hold those conversations that make us *sweat* (Suskind, 2012, p. 53). The researcher believes that the book study would be a platform in which to launch the need for further professional development on the topic of homework. The book study could encourage teachers to learn and implement modern teaching techniques to create optimal learning in the classroom and make homework less of a need in the future. By creating classes that are efficient and effective through personalized learning, homework becomes less of a focus and relationships and learning take their rightful place in the life of a middle school student.

The researcher also recommends phase 2 of a professional development plan that

is centered around the work of Vatterott (2009). Phase 2 moves teachers, school leaders, and district leaders continually to evaluate and reflect on homework practices within the district. Conversations should shift from the quantity of homework and focus more on the quality of homework – homework that keeps mastery of essential standards and concepts at the forefront.

Vatterott (2009) contended that designing quality homework includes academic purpose, competence, ownership, and aesthetics. Through academic purpose, Vatterott (2009) supported the idea that students will be more inclined to complete homework that is meaningful. For homework to be meaningful, the goal of the assignment should be clearly communicated to the student: pre-learning, checking for understanding, practice, or processing. While elements of these components emerged as themes throughout the study, it is unclear how often the purpose of the homework assignment is actually communicated to the student.

Vatterott (2009) further stated that homework must encompass a competency component for students. Homework should be designed as a means to support classroom learning but also support a sense of competence in the minds of the students. Vatterott (2009) stated, “homework that cannot be done without help is not good homework” (p. 102). If a student perceives a task as one that will result in them feeling unsuccessful, many students just avoid the task altogether (Past, 2006, as cited by Vatterott, 2009).

Ownership in the learning process is key to students viewing homework as relevant and important (Vatterott, 2009). In Vatterott’s earlier 2007 work, she found that students who feel as if homework is something “done to them rather than for them” fail to complete the assignments because they do not view the tasks as a means to meet their academic goals.

Finally, Vatterott (2009) pointed out the need for aesthetically pleasing homework for students. Students need to see the task assigned as enjoyable or engaging. Additionally, in an effort to create a personalized learning environment for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students respond to homework based on their own personal preferences as well. By personalizing the homework tasks of students, teachers can meet the individual needs of the students. Vatterott (2009) encouraged educators to adapt homework assignments to the learning styles and interests of students, allowing students to have a voice in their choice of homework tasks.

**Investigate middle school student perceptions.** This study only focused on middle school teacher practices regarding homework. While homework remains a core part of the learning experience of middle school students, gaining the perspectives of the middle school students may allow for a better understanding of how homework can truly enhance their learning. Letterman (2013) conducted a study to better understand the perspectives of middle school students and found that students felt favorable about homework when the assignments were not too difficult or time-consuming. Deveci and Önder (2015) conducted research to better understand middle school student views about science homework. Deveci and Önder found that students who spent the most time completing homework had a more favorable view of its impact on their coursework. A 2016 study conducted by Snead and Burriss found differing views from students on the topic of homework. While some students felt that homework is designed to support their learning, others did not see the benefit of homework. Some students believed that homework allowed them to be in more control of their own learning experience, while others believed current homework practices at the middle school level were punitive and not relevant to their learning. The researcher recommends a future study in the eastern

North Carolina rural community that focuses on the views of students by utilizing the instrument created by Snead and Burriss for their 2016 study.

**Investigate district leader perceptions.** As research on the topic of homework emerges as a hot topic among stakeholders, district leaders should review and revise current policies on homework. For the district in which this study was completed, there are currently no district policies on homework, the grading of homework, or the role of homework in the learning process of students. Quite possibly, district leaders can look at developing a policy about homework and set a review committee to review the policy and practices within the district on a 3- to 5-year cycle. District leaders may be cautious in mandating homework in any capacity, yet district leaders can support their students by creating homework policies that focus on the individual learner, ensure feedback for the learner, and involve families when possible. Suskind (2012) admonished district leaders who fail to address the debate over homework due to the old adage “We have always done it this way” and cave to the political pressures rather than base decisions on research-based practices.

**Investigate administrator perceptions.** In the district in which this study was completed, homework and grading practices are site-based decisions. As indicated in the data, more than just a lack of consistency in the district, the researcher concluded that there is a lack of consistency within each middle school. School administrators must be willing to address parent concerns about excessive homework, teacher concerns about too many students not completing homework, and student concerns about how homework grades impact their overall grades in courses. Kohn (2006) admonished the role of the principal as the educational leader in reflecting on homework practices: “But of course, a principal’s ultimate obligation is to do what’s right by the children, to protect them from

harmful mandates and practices that persist not because they're valuable but merely because they're traditional" (p. 38).

**Investigate teachers perspectives.** In this study, participant responses to question 10, "please provide any additional thoughts about homework practices," revealed the frustration of teachers in trying to find a rightful place for homework in the learning process. Carr (2013) contended homework can support the learning taking place in the classroom when used properly. Carr further contended that teachers must try to define the work "properly" through the implementation of research-based practices, yet most teachers do not have the time to read through research articles, analyze the research in order to determine implications on their classroom practices, and then apply those practices to their current instruction. Carr further encouraged teachers to make time needed to review research-based practices in order to support higher levels of learning for all their students. The researcher suggests that middle school teachers utilize the research and findings of this study to reflect on their own practices.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Based on the findings of this research study, the researcher has the following recommendations to further study the practices of homework:

1. Replicate this study at the elementary and high schools within the district.  
Researchers could further identify common trends and themes within all three grade-level spans.
2. Replicate this study with the middle school teachers and include a focus group to engage participants in a focused discussion based on results from the qualitative survey results.

3. Replicate this study to get the perceptions of students in regard to homework and the role it plays on their academic achievement, extracurricular activities, and perceptions of school.
4. Replicate this study to gain insight into parent perceptions about homework in regard to its effect on student achievement, its impact on family time, and its role in the learning process for their student.
5. Complete a study that determines how homework impacts student achievement in regard to EOG/EOC scores, quarterly grades, and EVAAS growth.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Potential limitations of this study include the inherent challenges of completing narrative research as participants responded to open-ended questions. Furthermore, utilizing an online survey to collect information from participants with individual experiences and interpretations of the questions will have an effect on the responses received from the participants (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1992). The researcher would provide the participants a list of options to select for each question as to create responses that are consistent with each survey question and limit the impact of participant interpretations of the question and the type of responses provided.

A second limitation is that the researcher serves as the administrator of a school in the district where the study was conducted and served as assistant principal of one of the middle schools that participated in the study for the 2018-2019 school year. The researcher's employment within the same district and relationships with colleagues throughout the middle schools in the district may have affected participation in the survey.

## Summary

The findings in this study have revealed a spectrum of homework practices throughout an eastern North Carolina rural community. What continues to complicate the debate on homework and how to utilize current research to implement change is the diversity of practices surrounding homework as indicated throughout this study. The diversity of responses in this study further requires that stakeholders complete a critical examination of homework practices. Throughout the research, homework is viewed as a necessity by teachers, an expectation from parents, an agent of change by administrators looking to increase student achievement, and an intrusion to their lives by students (Watkins & Stevens, 2013).

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze current homework practices of middle school teachers. A total of 48 teachers participated in the anonymous, online survey. The findings of this study were organized to answer the research question and used narrative and descriptive analyses to “paint” a picture of the current practices within the five middle schools in the district. Based on the conclusions from the data, there is a wide spectrum of practices within the district which all contribute to the picture of homework practices that impact nearly 1,500 students in middle schools in the eastern North Carolina rural community. The findings indicated that many of the same debates that exist in the literature were consistent with the themes that emerged throughout the coding of the data. The homework debate will continue.

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Appendix A  
Homework Teacher Survey

## Homework Teacher Survey

1. Grade Level You Teach:

\_\_\_\_\_ 6th    \_\_\_\_\_ 7th    \_\_\_\_\_ 8th    \_\_\_\_\_ combination of 6th - 8th

2. Content Area You Teach:

\_\_\_\_\_ Math    \_\_\_\_\_ Science    \_\_\_\_\_ ELA    \_\_\_\_\_ Social Studies

\_\_\_\_\_ multiple content areas

3..How would you define homework?

4. Why do you assign homework?

5. What type of homework do you assign?

6. How much time do you anticipate that a student spends on homework in your class, per week?

7. What type of feedback do you provide on homework?

8. How do you assess homework?

9. To what degree is homework counted in a student's nine-week grade?

10.. Please provide any additional thoughts about homework practices?

Appendix B

Permission to Use Survey Instrument

2016 Published Study - Journal of Inquiry &amp; Action on Education

1 message

Sat, Feb 2, 2019 at 11:47 AM

Mr. Snead and Mrs. Burris,

My name is Anna Brooks and I am a principal with the [REDACTED] in North Carolina. I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Gardner-Webb University. I am writing my dissertation on the topic of homework, with my focus to explore the perceptions and practices of teachers at the middle school level. My plan is to administer questionnaires via an on-line format to every middle school teacher in our district. I am writing in hopes that you would grant me permission to use your instrument from your 2011 and 2016 studies, specifically the instrument associated with your 2016 journal publication, *Middle School Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Motivation and Effectiveness of Homework*. In addition to using the instrument, I also ask your permission to reproduce it in my dissertation appendix. The dissertation will be published through Gardner-Webb University and deposited in the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. I would like to use your instrument under the following conditions:

- I will use the instrument only for my research study and will not sell or use it for any other purposes.
- I will include a statement of attribution and copyright on all copies of the instrument. If you have a specific statement of attribution that you would like for me to include, please provide it in your response.
- At your request, I will send a copy of my completed research study to you upon completion of the study and/or provide a hyperlink to the final manuscript.

If these are acceptable terms and conditions, please indicate so by replying to me through e-mail at [REDACTED]. I appreciate your time and assistance as I continue my research study.



Donald Snead

Feb 4, 2019, 5:29 PM (4 days ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮

to me ▾

Attention: Anna Brooks:

I am Donald Snead, co-author with Dr. Burris on published article on Middle School Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Motivation and Effectiveness of Homework. I gladly grant you my permission to use this instrument by the conditions stated below.

I wish you the very best with your dissertation and completion of your doctoral program.

Donald Snead, Professor of Education  
Middle Tennessee State University

*FW: mondayFW: 2016 Published Study - Journal of Inquiry & Action on Education*

Inbox



Wed, Feb 13,

Kathleen Burriss XXXXXXXX [via mtmailmtsu.onmicrosoft.com](mailto:XXXXXXX@mtmailmtsu.onmicrosoft.com) 1:43 PM

to me

Hello Anna,

Of course, we are honored that you wish to use or adapt our instrument. And yes, in the future, we would love to read your dissertation. Thanks, to my wonderful graduate assistant, Brandy, she will provide you with a clean version of the survey. Please, if you need any further assistance, do not hesitate.

All my very best of wishes,

Kathy

Appendix C

Permission to Conduct Study

February 25, 2019

Anna Brooks  
[REDACTED]

Dear Anna:

I am glad you are working your doctorate and seeking to write your dissertation using research from our school system. I fully support your research and grant my permission for you to use participants from the middle schools within the [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Good luck on your research. I look forward to seeing your results upon completion.

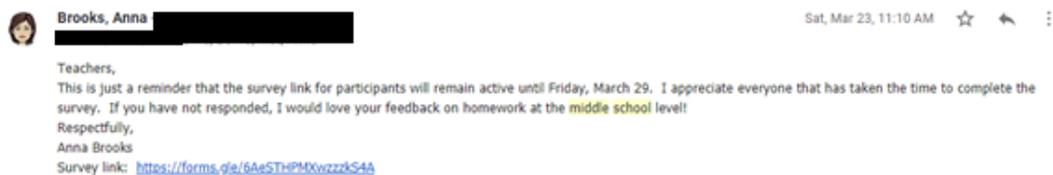
Sincerely,

Appendix D

Email to Middle School Teachers



### Middle School Survey on Homework >



Appendix E  
Informed Consent

**Gardner-Webb University IRB  
Informed Consent Form**

**Title of Study:** Phenomenological Study of Teacher Practices Regarding Homework in an Eastern NC Rural Community

**Researcher:** Anna Brooks, School of Education

**Purpose**

The purpose of the research study is to analyze current practices of middle school teachers in relation to homework to ensure current practices align with what research suggests is most beneficial for middle school students. This study will allow middle school teachers to reflect on their practices in assigning homework.

**Procedure**

The participation in the study is voluntary and all responses will be anonymous. Responses will be collected via an on-line survey format through google forms. Additionally, due to the unique setting of the middle schools in the district, any demographic questions that could have the potential to easily identify the participant have been removed from the survey instrument. Participants may skip any question(s) that they feel uncomfortable in answering.

**Time Required**

It is anticipated that the study will require about 30 minutes of your time.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

**Confidentiality**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data.

**Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand the current practices of middle school teachers regarding homework. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

**Payment**

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**How to Withdraw From the Study**

Due to this collection of the data being an online, anonymous format there is not a way to withdraw your responses.

**If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals.**

Anna Brooks  
School of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

Dr. Stephen Laws  
Department  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

**If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.**

Dr. Sydney K. Brown  
IRB Institutional Administrator  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
Telephone: 704-406-3019  
Email: [skbrown@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:skbrown@gardner-webb.edu)

**Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me. By clicking the link to the survey, <https://goo.gl/forms/MiA5v1ToDk5WGm0A3>, I consent to participate in the research study.