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STUDENT REPORTED DISTRACTIONS IN HOMEWORK COMPLETION

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the distractions that keep 8th grade students from completing their homework. Much research exists about homework across all grade levels. The bulk of this research highlights high school and university students. Research on middle school students and what affects their academic performance is lacking. The participants were 8th grade reading students. Students filled out a survey detailing what subjects they forgot to complete homework in. The survey also listed various distractions that caused incomplete homework assignments and asked students to detail one specific incident when they did not complete their homework. Data was limited due to a small number of consent forms returned. The surveys revealed that there are multiple distractions that keep students from completing their homework. No student chose one single distraction. Having students explore homework distractions through the survey motivated them to reflect on their own responsibility in their learning and offered more insight to the teacher about distractions during homework. Future research should focus on middle school distractions at specific grade levels so that educators can make teaching strategies for academic success a priority in the classroom.

Introduction

As I teacher, I have a different view on homework than I did when I was in school myself. I never questioned the purpose of homework, I just completed it, usually, and turned it in. Sometimes the duration of the homework assignment was thirty minutes and sometimes, it was over an hour. My teenaged self never gave any thought to what helped me stay focused on my homework either. This proved to be a challenge with my students. I do not easily relate to the students who do not complete assignments and therefore do not understand what obstacles they are facing. This quandary led to my homework distraction survey so that I could better understand my students.

Homework assignments have been a part of education in America for many decades (Cooper, Patall, & Robinson, 2006). Educators use these assignments to meet academic standards, teach independent study skills, and enrich classroom curriculum. Despite positive intentions, homework has its controversial moments in history. The attitudes regarding homework have been influenced by social movements and the Red Scare (Snead & Burris, 2016). Parents, teachers, students, and researchers have weighed in, but the parties with a vested interest do not always come to the same conclusion regarding homework. There is no consensus on the effects of homework on students. Many informal discussions with my colleagues who assign homework to be completed outside of class time revealed that students do not always complete the assignment. What distracts students when they work on homework? As a teacher who assigns homework to reinforce curriculum, I became interested in homework distractions because the same students were not turning in the homework assignments and it was detrimental to their grade. I wasn't sure, however, what kept students from completing

their homework and how I could help them be successful in homework completion. Many teachers in my building contribute the incomplete assignments to laziness and carelessness. However, this may not always be the case. Students face many distractions at school and at home. Extracurricular activities, family obligations, technology, and sometimes unexpected issues are a part of a student's day. The purpose of this study is to explore students' self-reported homework distractions and how much they affect completion of homework assignments.

Literature Review

Much of the research revolves around the benefits and challenges of homework and teachers' theories about why students don't do it. Researcher Harris Cooper defines homework as assignments completed during non-instructional time (Cooper, 1989). For the purpose of this study, I define homework as assignments that are completed after instructional time has ended. Sometimes students are working on a homework assignment at the end of the instructional period or outside of the classroom. Homework has been a topic of research as opinions about its benefits and purpose have shifted throughout history. For my study, I began searching "homework distractions" on the ERIC data base. I stuck to articles published within the last ten years except for Harris Cooper because he was mentioned in so many articles. I also included Kohn's book *The Homework Myth* from 2006. When I exhausted those terms, I used the term "homework" then "purpose of homework". I also searched for "teens and homework" and "teens and media use". Various technology articles were explored because my initial hypothesis focused on technology and its role in homework distractions. These terms led to many articles focused on the rationale for homework, homework distractions, teacher experiments in tracking homework completion, the role of homework in building various skills for students, and technology in teens' lives. All of these articles gave me insight into various perspectives on homework. Those of teachers, parents, students, and researchers.

Many studies cite both academic and nonacademic benefits of homework. One popular reason for homework assignments is the reviewing and practicing concepts of specific curriculum (Amerine, Pender, & Schuler, 2009). Teachers also utilize

homework to meet numerous academic requirements (Pressman, Sugarman, Nemon, Desjarlais, Owens, & Schettini-Evans, 2015). State tests and limited class time can put teachers in a crunch to cover all the state standards. Teachers sometimes use homework assignments to prepare for future lessons and application of new skills and information (Theodore, Bracken, Root, Bray, & Kehle, 2016).

Beyond the academic benefits, homework is used to foster many other skills that students need. Ramdass and Zimmerman found that independent assignments help develop self-regulation skills such as planning, overcoming emotions, persisting at difficult tasks, and finding a good environment for homework (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). Cooper also found that homework improves individual and character traits (Cooper, 2001). Are most students attaining these benefits? In today's world of advanced technology, students face sophisticated technology that provides instant gratification. The Pew Internet and American life project found that 73% of US teens who have access to internet use some sort of social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhuhr, 2010). As the use of technology grows, research on the effects of communication and social media apps and academic success increases. More and more students are distracted due to growing technology (Xu, Fan, & Du, 2016). Another study found that these distractions occur because students are used to the instant gratification that social media brings and the inability to delay gratification has a negative effect on student use of time and performance. That same study found that social media negatively affected students' academic self-efficacy as students may give up on difficult academic tasks (Hassell & Sukalich, 2016).

Then there is the homework itself to consider. Is the assignment possible for students to do on their own, what is the duration of the homework assignment and what is the purpose of the assignment? Cooper found that homework is most beneficial if its duration is ten minutes multiplied by a student's grade level. This means that it is most beneficial for an 8th grade student to have no more than eighty minutes of homework a night (Cooper, 2001). Kohn is one researcher who has questioned the need for homework. His research looked at five themes of homework covering stress to parents, student stress, family conflict over homework, loss of family time, and less interest in learning (Kohn, 2006). This research focuses on the effects of homework on student and family and explores other causes of homework distraction that a teacher may not consider.

There is still a gap in the research though. What are the students' reports on what distractions keep them from completing their homework? Junior high is a time of transition from elementary school to high school. Educators will need to help their students navigate through all these obstacles to homework completion and to do this, student reported data is most helpful. One researcher has called for more focus on homework management and more attention to students' self-regulatory capabilities (Xu, 2013). Parents and teachers can help students to be more cognitively aware of distractions. Demonstrating how to create a quiet distraction free environment for homework and studying purposes and turning off electronics can aid in students' focus. The abundance of research suggests that there are multiple factors that affect student success with homework completion. The purpose of the homework assignments, the duration of completion time, and technology can all work for or against the students.

Educators need to be aware of how these factors impact the academic success of their students. A student survey similar to the one used in this study would be helpful for educators to gain more understanding about their students and their academic habits. Educating students about organization and quiet study spots at the beginning of the year before assigning homework is a proactive way for all teachers to start the year. With my experience as a classroom teacher and this research in mind, what are student reported distractions in homework completion?

Methods

Participants and Setting

This study took place at a suburban junior high school located in central Oklahoma. The school district itself is located between an urban hub and a college town and serves over 23,000 students. According to the school website, the junior high has 673 7th and 8th grade students and is one of six junior high schools. Students are mostly white and come from working class families. From past interactions with parents and the list for the Federal Connection program, I've deduced that the school has many military students. The school district's handbook does not have any official rules on homework assignments but does require a minimum of twenty-four grades per semester and a minimum of one grade per week (Moore Public Schools Handbook, 2017). Homework is one type of grade that teachers can take in the gradebook, but there is no information about district regulation on homework. Teachers have the flexibility with homework assignments including type, length, and due date. Students therefore must acquaint themselves with multiple policies and procedures that change per teacher.

The class in which this study took place was my 8th grade reading class. As the teacher, my goal of the class was to attain an 8th grade proficient reading level through the analysis of various novels, short stories, articles, and other multi-modal content. Each class had a duration of 55 minutes and began with independent reading and an analysis paper or a dialectical journal entry. After 10-15 minutes of independent reading, students would come together to read and discuss the class novel. Occasionally, part of the class period was used for various assessments. Homework assignments in this class were made up of vocabulary and independent reading

assignments that were not completed during the allotted class time. Students were also assigned various book projects throughout the year that they worked on during instructional time and outside of instructional time.

There were approximately thirty-three 8th graders in each reading class. Students engaged in many independent reading assignments as well as whole class assignments. As the school year began, I noticed that many of my 8th graders were making low grades due to missing assignments. Towards the middle of the first semester, I had my students filled out a survey (see Appendix A) about missed homework assignments, so that I could get a better understanding of my students and their self-reported reasons why they were not turning in homework assignments or were turning them in partially complete.

My observation of students revealed a lot of phone use before and after class. There was also talk about extracurricular activities and staying up late. Many students also commented about forgetting to do homework assignments for math, science, or social studies. This helped with the creation of the distractions list on the survey.

Students were briefed on the purpose of the surveys before they were handed out. All students answered the questions on the survey during reading class. Students first answered the question asking them if they had ever missed a homework assignment and then asked to check off which subjects they had missed an assignment in. Those who said yes then continued to a list of possible distractions that may have played a role in the incomplete homework assignment. The distractions listed were extracurricular activities, social media/phone use, a lack of understanding of the assignment, taking care of a sibling or family member, forgetting that homework was assigned, I don't

know, and other. In addition to checking off all the distractions that applied to their situation, students were also asked to give details about one specific incident in which they failed to complete a homework assignment.

Students completed the surveys at their own pace. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were given. After students filled out the surveys, they were given parent consent and student consent forms. Students on individualized education plans and 504 plans were not included in the study. Five forms were returned signed.

Data Analysis

To begin my analysis, I pulled those surveys from their respective classes and removed the name of the student for anonymity. I then read through each of the survey's close-ended questions one by one and kept track of the distractions that each student chose on a post-it note. I then reread the surveys and noted the specific classes that the students indicated they had missed a homework assignment in and tracked what specific subjects students chose. I read through the surveys again and grouped the specific incidents of homework incompletion, the open-ended questions into four categories of forgetfulness, extracurricular activities, never getting the assignment, and unclear incident due to lack of details. As I had a small number of surveys, I did not put the surveys in any particular order.

Findings

The surveys revealed that students are faced with a variety of distractions when they are working on homework assignments. Some of the closed-ended questions had the same distractions and specific subjects marked. The closed ended questions had a variety of answers that contained various levels of detail.

All five students checked lack of understanding as a distraction that keeps them from completing their homework. The second most common distraction was forgetting that homework was assigned. Extracurricular activities, social media/phone use, and taking care of a sibling or family member tied with the third most responses. The "I don't know" choice did not have any responses. The "other" choice had diverse responses such as "music", "soccer", and "annoying family". The "other" responses lacked any specific detail but did suggest a connection to the other listed distractions such as "extracurricular activities" or "taking care of a sibling or family member".

The fifth question on the survey asked students to detail one specific incident in which they did not complete homework. The answers to this question varied. Two students wrote that they always forget. Another student wrote that they were never given the assignment. Another wrote that they were at a soccer tournament and did not complete a narrative for Language Arts class. The last survey just said "two-column note" with no other details.

The variety of responses on the five surveys suggests that 8th grade students have multiple distractions that keep them from completing their homework. The diverse responses to the distraction list suggest that 8th grade students need help with time-

management and organizational skills if they are to be successful with missing assignments. The responses to the distractions list also tell me that students know what distractions in their life affect their completion of homework assignments in various classes, but may not know how to overcome the distractions. The specific incidents that students detailed suggest a deflection of responsibility regarding the incomplete homework. Every incident that the students described in their survey failed to mention their own role in the incomplete homework. Extracurricular activities, the teacher, and the assignment were mentioned, but the blame was deflected to others. Previous research found that students need help developing various skills such as time-management, organization, emotional control, and avoiding distractions. Homework assignments foster these skills as well as reinforcing curriculum. But if homework is not being completed, then these skills are not improving for the student.

Discussion

Homework is but one factor in education, but it impacts the student in many ways. Homework affects grades, mastery of curriculum, stress level of the student and relationships between student, teacher, and parent.

This survey caused students to reflect on specific distractions that keep them from completing their homework. This will help students to see the specific reasons for incomplete homework so that they can create a homework plan outside of instructional time or adjust how they allocate their time outside of the classroom. Students have more responsibility and must make some independent decisions in school without a teacher or parent hovering over them. But students do not always reflect on their responsibility when assignments are not completed. If students are to become independent citizens, then they must begin making those decisions now and learning from their mistakes. They must also be able to foresee the positive and negative consequences from their actions.

Parents will also benefit from this study. If students and teachers work together to create a plan to improve homework completion outside of instructional time, then there will be less missing assignments and low grades. This will also alleviate the frustration and finger pointing between teachers and parents as students will be more successful in class. There will also be less stress at home. Alfie Kohn's research shed light on the stress that homework causes at home between parent and student. (Kohn, 2006). He stresses that parents and students work all day and then come home to more work as parents become homework monitors and fight with their children over assignments

(Kohn, 2006). Students will need help in creating an afternoon homework routine so that parents are not facilitating all the work.

This survey will benefit teachers as well because it will enable them to provide a better education to their students. Teachers should always be reflecting on their practices especially their homework curriculum and methods. Cooper's research found that younger students do not benefit as much from homework as high school students do (Cooper, 2001). Teachers should take this into consideration when creating homework assignments especially if their assignments take more than two hours to complete each night. This survey will also help teachers know the specific distractions that keep their students from completing their homework, they can aid in the alleviation of those distractions and foster more success in the classroom. As junior high school is a stressful transition, teachers need to be consistent with their academic, assignment turn-in, and late work policies and procedures. Teacher should also model how to turn on-time and late assignments in so that students have a visual. Reinforcing teacher expectations will allow students to commit them to memory.

Research tells us that teachers assign homework for academic and nonacademic benefits. But for students to benefit from various homework assignments, students must complete the homework assignment. Xu's research with young students found that they need help with setting up a distraction free space and regulating themselves during homework. He also found that students would benefit from teacher and parent aid in this (Xu, 2013). These academic success skills should be taught at the beginning of the school year before diving in to the curriculum and reinforced frequently throughout the year. Helping students learn how to be successful will also teach them that their actions

have consequences and by taking responsibility during homework time, those consequences can be positive ones.

Limitations to this study

There are several limitations to this study. This study was conducted in three reading classes with a total of ninety-nine students. Only five of the surveys were pulled due to a low return of consent forms from students and parents. This is not a representative sample of my 8th grade reading classes or all the other 8th grade students in reading class. The lack of incentive may have played a role in the low turn-out of surveys. Or perhaps the students viewed the consent forms as another thing to complete on top of all the other work they have to do after school.

The results of this survey may look different if the survey was given in a Pre-AP class or in a high school credit class. Pre-AP students may have less missed homework assignments do to a stricter late work policy and more self-control. High school student responses to this survey may also be vastly different because of the age and maturity level.

The amount of time at school that students have to work on an assignment could affect the number of students who answer all the questions on the survey because more class time to work on an assignment may allow more students to finish the assignment. This may lead to more surveys with the question have you ever missed a homework assignment answered with a no.

Conclusion

Homework has had a long history in American schools be they public, private, or charter. Researchers, teachers, parents, and students have all weighed in on the topic. Homework has been praised for its many benefits both academic and nonacademic. Its downsides for students and parents have also been discussed. The mass of amounts of research have yet to tell how to create a perfect homework assignment. This survey given to 8th grade reading students allowed their voice to be added to the debate about homework and why it is not completed. Researchers, parents, and teachers have their theories and findings regarding incomplete assignments, but it is also vital that students also have a voice. The survey used in this study asked students to answer several multiple-choice questions and an open-ended question. The questions asked if the students had ever missed a homework assignment, what class or classes they had missed an assignment in and what specific distractions kept them from completing their homework assignment. The last question asked students to detail one specific incident in which they failed to complete a homework assignment. I found that there are multiple reasons why students do not complete their homework. The most frequent distractions were lack of understanding the assignment and forgetting that there was homework to complete. These findings may be opposite of the belief that many teachers hold about lack of homework completion. This survey also gives vital data to consider when designing homework assignments. Teachers could consider method, length, and consistency to help make more effective homework assignments. Research has found that younger students do not benefit from homework as much as high school students and that homework duration should coincide with the student's grade level.

Surveys such as the one used in this study are good tools for teachers to better understand how to help their students be more successful.

Project Personal Impact

This research allowed my students to reflect on their personal responsibility in their academic success. It also allowed me to reflect on the way I structure my assignments especially homework. It has also allowed me to reflect on the role of homework in my class. I give homework to introduce students to new concepts before we begin them. I avoid giving busy work because that is not the purpose of homework. But does homework have to be a part of my classroom curriculum?

As a social studies teacher, I have much autonomy in my classroom. But I don't always take advantage of this autonomy because I am worried about teaching something wrong. Sometimes, I rely too much on how the other teachers structure their homework assignments. I sometimes try to match my assignment structure with theirs. I also rely on other teachers' ways of approaching students about missing assignments. This research has allowed me to discover what works best for my students and parents. I know my students better than any other social studies teacher because I am in class with them every day. I need to trust myself to create a solution to help my students be more successful in my classroom.

I also need to risk vulnerability in my classroom and discuss with my students if homework is helping them to understand and apply specific concepts in the curriculum. Not many teachers may want to appear vulnerable in front of their students, but students need to know that their teachers are human and that they care. This will be a difficult action for me but a vital one to help me grow as an educator. This growth is how I will better educate, mentor, and build better relationships with my students.

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Appendix A

Name:

Homework Survey

1.) Have you missed in any assignments this semester?

Circle Yes or No

2.) Which of the following classes of have you missed homework assignments.

(Circle all that apply): Geography

Language Arts

Math

Reading

Science

3.) If you answered yes, continue on with the next question. If you answered no, you are finished. Thank you for your participation.

4.) Which of the following distractions keep you from completing homework

(Check all that apply)

o Extracurricular Activities

o Social Media/Phone Use

o Lack of understanding the assignment

o Taking care of a sibling/Family member

o Forgetting that homework was assigned

o I don't know what keeps me from completing my homework

o Other _____

5.) Please provide details to ONE specific incident in which you did not complete homework. Please give the reason why you did not complete the homework.

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