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Reclaiming Childhood: Effects of Homework on Elementary Students

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### **Abstract**

The focus of this Capstone project is on homework and its effects on elementary students. This is an important issue because students are being placed under a great amount of pressure and are subject to unnecessary stress. An evidence based argument is offered that homework is not beneficial academically, mentally or emotionally for young students, and is therefore not justifiable for the stress and pressure it puts on them. The three primary stakeholder perspectives examined were those of teachers, students, and parents because of their relation to the issue and for the comparison of each participant's opinion. Scholarly literature was analyzed and data was collected from all participants to get their various points of view regarding the issue. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the data. Three action options are presented to assist this issue in a positive light.

### **Reclaiming Childhood: Effects of Homework on Elementary Students**

Each day after school, the very first thing that I would do when I walked through the door of my house was sit down at the desk that I had in my room and begin on my homework. I would put physical activity and free play time aside, as I remember thinking that playtime was not as important as getting my work done. I wanted to be able to relax after school, but felt that I could not until my assignments were done. I had the anxiety of being sure that I finished my homework each night, as well as anxiety that I would not complete it by the next day, which is why I would start immediately after school to ensure that I had plenty of time to complete it.

Sometimes I would finish before dinner time, other nights I would eat dinner and continue with homework. Sometimes if I were struggling with a problem, or if it happened to be a project assignment, I would not have enough time and would not finish before bed. With all of the extracurricular activities and family events going on, I often needed to figure out how to fit homework in. I remember the nights that I did not finish, I actually would make my bed that night and sleep on top of the covers so that I did not have to waste time making my bed the next morning and I could use that time to finish homework before school. I remember being so scared of showing up to school with incomplete homework, and either being viewed as the “bad kid” by my teacher, getting a bad report sent to my parents, or having my name being written on the board to stay in at recess. I tried so hard to please and was so scared not to. As an adult, I realize that this way of thinking was silly, but in my mind as a child, this situation seemed much bigger than it was because I was not developmentally mature enough to cope with stress and anxiety.

On one occasion in the 4th grade, I had gotten a failing grade on one of my homework assignments, and my teacher sent it back home and required that I had it signed by a parent so that they would be aware of my low grade. Little did my teacher know that assignment would cause me three days of anxiety and stress. I remember bringing home the assignment, hiding it in my dresser for three days, and trying to work up the courage to bring it to my mom to sign. Finally, I managed to show it to her, and I did with tears in my eyes, feeling like a failure. My mom hugged me and told me that it was okay, and that I did my best and that was all that mattered. I had no reason to be afraid to show my mom, as she did not have unrealistic expectations for me. She would often encourage me to relax and not stress so much about it, but as a child my need for self-validation and praise was so strong that I was afraid to disappoint her. The whole point of homework in my mind was to just get it done, and to be seen as a good student. I did not actually retain any information or reinforce my learning through homework. I would complete it because I had to, and would be relieved once I did; it was this way throughout all of my elementary school years. It made me view school in a negative way, and I would become frustrated that I had to be told what to do not only when I was in school, but when I got home as well. From my personal experience, I believe that homework resulted in more stress than benefit.

Today, years later and as a preschool teacher, I have seen that the cycle continues as stress and pressure have negative mental effects on students and diminish their willingness to learn. When I first started working at the preschool, the children were being taught basic skills such as counting, and letter recognition. More importantly, they were being taught social skills and how to appropriately interact with peers and handle conflict. That is what preschool is meant for, to form a social-self and instill children with good communication skills and awareness for

others before they go into kindergarten where the academics begin more formally. I thought that the program was age appropriate, and the children loved coming to school every day. They were given plenty of free play and art work time. They were filled with excitement when walking into the classroom each day, and they were making huge improvements in how they interacted with their peers.

Recently, the preschool has undergone a change in curriculum and much more of an academic emphasis has been placed on the program. As expectations for children to be prepared for kindergarten have risen, this pressure trickles down to the preschool level. Since children have been asked to sit for longer periods of time, complete worksheets, and know higher levels of content, I have seen a change in their attitude about school overall. As I sit with the students and help them with their assignments, they slouch in their chairs, having a difficult time focusing, and are asking me when it is time to play or if it is time to go home. They become frustrated and even begin to act out when they are asked to do their work, which is completely understandable coming from a child that is four or five years old. It saddens me to see them feel this way, and it makes me wish that I could change this issue for them. Children are supposed to be playing freely, and express themselves through play and creativity. Although this is the preschool level, and the in-class activities that are given are not homework, the concept remains constant and their reaction is the same as mine was. Too much work, and not enough play results in frustrated and stressed out kids who just want to “go home”.

From being a child that dealt with stress and frustration due to school work, and then seeing it happen with students of my own causes me to question why we continue to put pressure on students who do not need it, or deserve it. The pressure of achieving higher standards only hindered my self-esteem and ability to relax, and I am sure it has the same impact on many others. Children spend a majority of their day at school, they deserve to be carefree and unwind when they get home. Let kids be kids while they still can.

### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

Homework and the effect it has on students psychological health and stress levels has long been a controversial debate. The issue of homework and how it affects students not only academically, but psychologically, are crucial elements in determining whether the assigning of homework is necessary. Kohn (2007), explains that homework can put great pressure on students, especially in the younger elementary grades. He explains that homework may bring stress, unnecessary family conflict, can lead to a less interested attitude toward learning, and shows no evidence of providing academic benefits. Similarly, the Center for Public Education (2007) explains that the link between homework and academic achievement is supported by little evidence, and suggests that homework is not beneficial for elementary aged students, in fact, it has negative effects. We must ask ourselves, does homework rob elementary school students of having the ability to be carefree kids? More research must be done on this issue to properly determine how much homework, if any, should be assigned; and how to ensure that students' psychological health is being taken into consideration.

### **How Did Homework Become an Issue?**

The need for homework was not always considered as crucial as it is today. According to Clemmitt (2007), in 1901, California legislators prohibited homework for students who were under the age of 15. Lawmakers decided that it would be better for children to be active and play outdoors, rather than to be doing homework after school, and that “the benefits of homework are too small to counterbalance the disadvantages” (Clemmitt, 2007, p. 589). Children have a full time job at school as it is, and the time that they get to be active and spend time with family should not be over-ruled by the worry of completing work during after-school hours. In the decades following the California legislators decision regarding homework, the idea that homework was unnecessary remained constant, with only 8% of U.S. high school students reporting that they had more than two hours of homework each day in 1948 (Clemmitt, 2007).

However, in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, worry arose that students were not being challenged enough and were not being prepared by schools to compete against the American Cold-War rivals. The period of Sputnik 1 launching while being in the midst of the Cold War sent many Americans into panic. As a result of this, in 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which supported and provided aid for subjects such as math, science, and foreign language (Clemmitt, 2007). Since these events have occurred, the homework expectations have remained the same despite the country and our society changing and progressing.

The need for homework stems from the idea that it will benefit the student academically, help them to retain the information, and to do well on standardized tests. Homework is given because it is believed to support and improve academic achievement, because parents expect it, school districts require it, and because teachers are under a great amount of pressure for their students to perform well (Brock, Lapp, Flood, Fisher, & Hahn, 2007).

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was put into effect by President Bush. This required that all states test their students in grades three through eight in math and english proficiency. The quality of the school depended on those test scores, as every year each student was expected to show improvement in their scores from the previous year. If this was not the case, then the school would receive a degree of punishment, the worst scenario being the dismissal of administrators and/or teachers. Test results of each school are available to the public, allowing parents to view them and use those scores to determine whether they would send their child to that school or not (Marshall, 2002). Since the stability of a teacher's job depends on his/her students test scores, and students are a reflection of their teacher, it is no wonder why teachers want to ensure that their students are learning the content of their subjects, and therefore assigning more homework. In 2015, this act was replaced by the Every Students Succeeds Act, which still maintains the requirements of NCLB and standardized testing, but shifts accountability from the federal level to the state level, and allows individual states and districts to determine the standards for which their students should be tested on (Dynarski, 2015). Although this act does give a sense of personalization regarding the standards by allowing districts to alter the curriculum to their students needs, it still leaves teachers in the same situation as test scores are still the determining factor in how their quality of teaching is viewed. However, one must ask, is homework the answer? Specifically concerning elementary students, is homework helping or hindering their academic efforts? Kohn (2007), Marshall (2002), Clemmitt (2007), and Katz, I., Buzukashvili, T., & Feingold, L. (2012) report that it does not only have no effect of their academic achievement, but it actually has a negative impact.

## Homework and Psychological Effects on Students

In recent decades research shows that the amount of homework assigned at the elementary level has been raised significantly compared to middle school and high school grades. Clemmitt (2007), explains that “the average homework load for first through third grade has doubled over the past two decades, even though research shows that homework does not benefit such young children....Parents say that the added pressure robs children of needed play and family time and can cause stress, sleep deprivation, depression, and family strife” (p. 577). The increase in homework is the result of a vicious cycle of teachers fearing that their students will not meet the required achievement levels, and pass standardized tests. As a result, each teacher is relying on the student’s teachers of the previous grades to teach them the subjects efficiently so that they are ready to learn when they come into their classroom, and these expectations and pressure to perform are trickled down to begin in the lower grades. Clemmitt gives an example of a scenario in which “If a school is getting pressure for students to perform on tests in third grade, then the third grade teacher is looking to the second grade teacher and the first grade teacher to help make that happen....pushing teachers of younger children into teaching content that children in their classes are not ready to master” (p. 586).

If homework is a stressful situation for a student, it is not a short-term issue. It becomes an issue that can cause negative health effects if the stress levels of a child remain high over a long period of time, which is typically the case with homework unless the student receives assistance quickly. Middlebrooks and Audage (2008), describe the various types of stress that The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has reported. Of these, toxic stress is described as an unpleasant experience that occurs over a long period of time, and the prolonged stress of homework throughout the school year may certainly cause this, resulting in high levels of cortisol being released throughout the body, and suppression of the body's immune system. Katz, Buzukashvili, and Feingold (2012), further support these findings as they explain that although homework may be considered a small source of stress, its daily occurrence can accumulate into greater emotional and mental problems. Some reactions that can stem from psychological stress include “tension, irritability, the inability to concentrate, and a variety of physical symptoms that include headache and a fast heartbeat” (Katz, Buzukashvili, and Feingold, 2012, p. 407).

According to Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development, during the 4th stage when children are between the ages of five and twelve they are developing their ideas of Competency v.s. Inferiority. McLeod (2013), explains that within this frame of development, “the child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competencies that are valued by society, and begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments” (p. 3). Academics is a component of society that is valued, and children tend to seek the approval of their teachers and parents. If children do not receive praise or continuously struggle with homework, they may begin to feel inferior, hindering their self-esteem and causing doubt of their own abilities (McLeod, 2013). This is especially troublesome for students who are struggling and may not be able to get support at home to help them with homework, which may cause the child to feel hopeless or like there is no point in trying. All of this could perhaps be avoided if the

homework load was lessened. The additional stress would be avoided and student self-esteem would not be hindered by it.

### **Homework and Academic achievement**

Is the stress worth it? Although homework is stressful for middle and high school students, research shows that it does provide academic benefit (Marshall, 2002). For elementary school students homework is shown to cause stress and bring no academic benefit- it actually brings negative effects, is not developmentally age appropriate, and this idea is reiterated multiple times in the research compiled from the sources listed. Brock, et al. (2007) report that there is a low and negative correlation between homework and the achievement of elementary school students, while there is a strong and positive correlation when referring to high school students and homework; they found that homework in younger grades may lead to poor attitudes in students and a disinterest in learning. Clemmitt (2007), also explains that between 1997 and 2002, the number of students between the ages of 6 and 8 that received homework daily rose from 34% to 64%, despite that there is no evidence that proves that homework helps children.

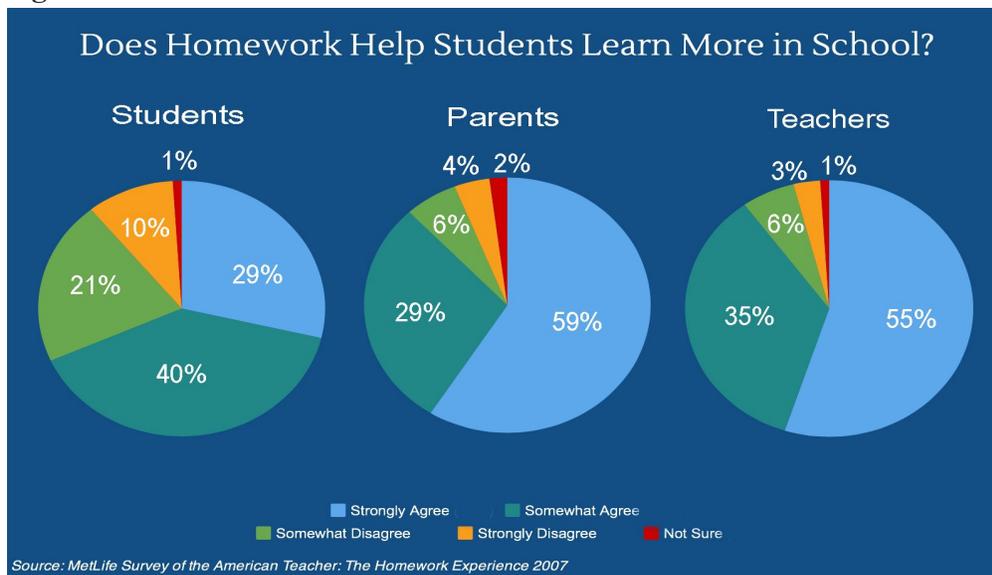
For no logical reason, homework has been increasing within the age level in which it is the least appropriate. Marshall (2002), describes how homework advocates even agree that homework is not effective until at least 5th grade, and is unnecessary in grades one through four. Marshall (2002) explains that if homework is assigned in grades lower than grade five, it will result in lower test scores, a lack of interest, and frustrated students. If a young student is being pushed to do work past their limit of exhaustion, they will begin to become fatigued and frustrated. This can lead to a lack of interest and motivation in school work, physical and psychological health effects- such as a drop in competence as described in the 4th stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development as mentioned previously, and a drop in self esteem, as they "begin to question their interest and ability in academics" (Marshall, 2002, p. 998). Elementary school students do not have the attention span or the ability to resist distraction to focus for more than a short period of time. This is developmentally typical and are not skills that children possess until they are older, which is why homework seems to be successful for older students. However, younger students have not acquired these skills and they should not be expected to (Marshall, 2002). Furthermore, Brock, et al. (2007), explain that a study found that young students are unaware of the intended intentions of homework, and only complete it to attain approval of teachers and parents, as well as to avoid getting in trouble.

One may try to argue that aside from academic benefits, homework may offer students other types of advantages, such as perseverance and good study habits. Kohn (2007) suggests that it seems that the current question in educators minds is "What reasons can we come up with to justify homework, which we're determined to assign in any case?" (p. 50). Instead of evaluating whether homework is actually effective, it is common to defend homework just to give a reason to assign it. Kohn (2007), explains that there are two common non academic justifications to homework: to keep parents involved and informed about what students are working on in class, and to promote good study habits, responsibility, and self-discipline. As for parent involvement, there are various other ways in which parents can be informed about what their child is learning at school without compromising the child's free time. When referring to the effect of improved study habits, Kohn (2007), reports that there is no evidence to support this claim, it is rather an idea that sounds appealing to teachers and parents and has been used to

justify homework for years. When considering the research mentioned previously that homework may cause frustration and lack of interest, it is unlikely that good study habits may emerge from the completion of homework at the elementary level.

Shown below in Figure 1 is a chart from the National Education Association, showing the results of a national homework survey that was taken by the MetLife Foundation. They found that “3 out of 5 parents said their kids are getting just the right amount of homework. One said too much and one said too little” (The Great Homework Debate, 2015). When surveys are given about homework, they typically report similar results as this one. It is unfair to say that every single family dislikes homework, because that is not the case. Homework influences each child differently, and while research may say that homework does not bring elementary students any type of benefit, the actual completion of it may not stress some students out as much as it does others. Opinions may differ because homework standards and policies greatly differ between different districts and schools. One child's school may not be expected to complete as much homework as another, causing parent opinion to differ (Marshall, 2002). Another reason that parents may report that they are okay with homework is because they feel that they are suppose to be okay with it, or that they may look like a bad parent if they say otherwise. Some parents may “accept the status quo because they don’t realize the evidence fails to defend the assumptions on which their support is based” (Kohn, 2007, p. 163). In other words, parents may be accepting homework because they do not know any different, they trust their child’s teacher and overall society’s opinion, and they believe it will help their child academically without even doing any research to confirm if that is true. In fact, the National Education Association, who provided this chart, explains within the same article that this chart was derived from that they do not believe that younger grades benefit from homework. While they explain that it does make a positive difference, strictly academically in upper grades, in lower grades it does not show value (The Great Homework Debate, 2015).

**Figure 1**



(The Great Homework Debate, 2015).

### **Homework is Not Only a Student Problem**

Although one would think that homework is a school based issue, it tends to cross over into the student's family and home life as well. Of course at the elementary age, a student's problem becomes the parent's problem. Although many parents would argue that they have a duty as parents to take on these problems, research has shown that parents feel as though homework is negatively affecting overall family dynamics. Clemmitt (2007), explains that parents feel as though "the added pressure of homework robs children of needed play and family time and can cause stress, sleep deprivation, depression and family strife" (p. 577). Additionally, Brock, et al. (2007), suggest that homework can be a reason for burnout for students as well as their parents when it comes to the struggles that students face night after night. Kohn (2007) supports these claims as he determines that some parents feel that homework is not only academically stressful, but physically, emotionally, and psychologically stressful as well. Some parents believe that the responsibility and accountability that comes with homework is too much too soon for children who were used to taking daily naps not long ago. Children do not have the attention span or endurance to do more worksheets after a full day at school. Kohn (2007), explains that homework after school is similar to an adult who works a double shift at work. The stress that children bring into the house about homework is passed on to parents, who are then frustrated if they cannot appropriately or effectively help their child, or even have the time to. Parents who work full time jobs are concerned after work with getting their child to extracurricular activities, preparing dinner, completing various other chores that need to be done, and more importantly, squeeze in family time all before bedtime. Homework is viewed as a burden by some parents and is even referred to as "a curse put on parents"(Kohn, 2007, p. 10). It is viewed as another thing on the checklist to complete. It is reported that sometimes teachers may underestimate how long it may take a student to complete an assignment. The National Education Association recommends between 10 and 20 minutes of homework each day in first grade, 30 minutes in second grade, 40 minutes in third grade, and adds ten more minutes for each rising grade level. Although that may not seem like much, it becomes a great amount for students who are exhausted and who may take longer if they are struggling (Brock, et al. 2007). For example, an assignment that is meant to take 20 minutes actually may take the student 40 minutes to complete.

Due to this added stress, the pressure of homework may lead to family conflict, and this is more likely to happen when students are struggling, or if there is more than one child in the household with the same issue. By assigning parents the role of teacher at home, it is likely that they will begin reprimanding and nagging their children to complete their homework and to make sure it is done before they go to bed, leading to conflict within the parent-child relationship. Typically these interactions consist of "homework being viewed by parent and child alike as something to be gotten over. Conversations typically deal with what kind of assignments the child has, how long it will take to do, and ways in which activities will be scheduled around them" (Kohn, 2007, p. 15). Children begin to resent not only their homework assignments, but their parents for being the ones who have to reinforce it. Typically the first question a parent asks

a child after school is, “Do you have homework?” and the pressure and stress begins there as they figure out a time frame in which both student and parent are able to get it done (Kohn, 2007). Physical activity, quality family time, free play, and the time to just be a child are extremely important components in children’s lives and their well-being, so why are these things so easily disregarded and put aside, only to be replaced with a more stressful situation? Why allow possible strain to be put on family relationships, and make it difficult for families to have an agenda of their own after school? Is it possible that a line is being crossed?

### **What Should Be Done About Homework?**

Our education system must question what should be done about the homework issue, and explore alternative options that will not place a burden on children’s psychological health, their self-esteem, their family life, and prevents them from being a child and enjoy the stress free life that children are suppose to have. Research proposes various suggestions that could potentially help better these issues. The ultimate goal would be to get to the root of the problem, and change the way the education system puts pressure on teachers and students. This would begin by removing standardized testing, and stop the cycle that it causes between teachers being pressured and the expectations that students must meet. This kind of system does not benefit either party, with teachers feeling like they are not able to teach the way that they prefer, an incredible amount of pressure is on their shoulders, and that pressure is then passed on to students and parents. Therefore, the goal that schools should try to achieve is to design a system that does not apply these pressures and that measures a student by more than just a test score- because ultimately it affects every realm of their lives, mentally, physically, and emotionally (Marshall, 2002).

While that is a large scale solution, modifications can be made to the present requirements by changing the way homework is assigned that may allow for a more pleasant experience, and not be a source of stress for students. Kohn (2007), describes the current default in most schools is the assumption that there is homework to be assigned every night, with the exception being the absence of homework. Homework is assigned just because it is school policy, not because teachers are considering if it has any true value or not. One must question, will students truly learn and grow from this assignment? Is this assignment worth taking away free time from students? Or is this just busy work to satisfy a policy? Kohn (2007) suggests that these ideas should be reversed. It should be assumed that students have no homework unless it is absolutely necessary. The default should be no homework, with an occasional assignment being the exception. If the teacher truly feels that an assignment will benefit students, extend their learning, or apply it to real world situation at home, then homework should be assigned when those occasions arise. Otherwise, 6-7 hours of academic work per day seems like enough for an elementary aged student. Schools must think of quality when it comes to homework, not quantity. If a teacher only assigns homework when he/she feels necessary, then those few assignments will surely be of better quality, rather than countless nightly assignments that are completed by the student just to get them out of the way. By lowering the quantity of assignments, and raising the quality of them, students will also begin to view homework as a more genuine experience, and may take it more seriously. If they are given homework only when the teacher feels they need it, they will see it as an important occasion, and are more likely to do their best work (Kohn, 2007).

What homework assignments consist of are important as well. Often homework assignments consist of problems out of a textbook, or worksheets from a workbook. Young students are less likely going to be excited about these type of assignments that require them to sit at a desk and repeat what they had just done all day in class. Kohn (2007) suggests that teachers assign homework that students do not usually view as homework. Create a fun learning experience in which they do not even realize they are technically doing homework. For example, a teacher may ask students to cook with their parents- this can encourage math and science concepts, do puzzles or play an educational game, read a book of choice with their parents, do a type of physical activity, etc. Students will be spending quality time with their parents in a situation that is non-stressful, the student will be having fun, and what they are learning about in class would be reinforced. However, if a teacher does feel it is necessary to assign bookwork, Clemmitt (2007), suggests that educators keep the students developmental abilities in mind. The assignment should be hard enough to reinforce what they have already learned in class, but not so hard that they feel like they are trying to learn something new. The amount must also be taken into consideration. About five math problems are a sufficient amount in order to tell if a student understands a concept, there is no need to assign thirty (Clemmitt, 2007).

The goal in making these changes is to take pressure off of students and to make learning an enjoyable experience. Additional suggestions to improve this issue would be to not only give homework on occasion, but further make that assignment to fit each student's individual needs. One may argue that teachers do not have the time to do this, which is understandable, but if homework is only given on occasion and when necessary, teachers can use that additional time to create more individualized and quality assignments. It is important to remember that not one size fits all. If the same assignment is given to an entire class, some students may struggle with it- causing frustration at home, and some may find it too easy- making the assignment invaluable. This is an opportunity for educators to communicate with parents and their students. It is helpful to keep open communication with students and parents and hear from both parties what they believe their homework should consist of, and how much should be assigned. This will create a more pleasant and realistic experience for the student. If they have a homework assignment, the student will know that they had a voice in determining that assignment, and the level of difficulty will be appropriate, alleviating stress from the child as well as their parents (Kohn, 2007). Lastly, it is suggested that educators do not count homework as part of the student's overall grade. By giving the student the idea that their work will be graded and possibly marked down only allows students to be focused on getting the correct answer, and not embracing the learning process. If a student gets an answer wrong, it should be an opportunity for the student to work the problem out with their teacher and clarify their mistake, not be disciplined for it. Kohn (2007), further explains "To grade homework is especially destructive because this tells students that the point of the exercise isn't to help them learn; it's to evaluate them on whether they've already succeeded (p. 186). Students should not be afraid to be wrong, the learning process must be embraced, and students should not be subject to the amount of pressure that comes with homework assignments.

In the process of completing this research, there was a great emphasis on the question- why is homework being given? As well as- why are we allowing it to put stress on our children, and limit their ability to just be kids? A portion of every party involved, being teachers, parents and students, have an issue with homework, so why are we not striving to make a change? I

believe our school systems as a whole would benefit if additional research was done on this issue, and a solution was derived in how to improve it nationally. Our students deserve to have a love for learning, free from stress and additional pressure.

### **Method**

For this capstone project the researcher will investigate how homework affects students psychological health. Students and parents agree that this is an issue that can cause unnecessary stress for an elementary student. The researcher will investigate how two parents, two students, and each of their teachers feel about this issue and document suggestions that they may have. Based on the teachers, parents, and students input, combined with research literature, the researcher will use the data collected to determine if homework is impacting the students positively or negatively. From the information collected, a potential action will be developed that responds to this issue in a way that could impact the participants positively.

### **Context**

This research took place in Sunnyrose\*, California at Green Tree Elementary School\*. Green Tree Elementary, founded in 1891 (2016-17 Student Demographic Data), is a beautiful school sitting atop a hill of Green Tree looking out over the bay. It neighbors the downtown area, the police department, and the town's middle and high schools. The sense of community is strong as they consider their school to be a "Community of Caring" with a focus on each student's individual character.

Green Tree has 469 students enrolled as of 2016, with 14% of students being english language learners as of 2016. Their K-5 program follows the California standards-aligned curriculum, and average class sizes hold 23 students as of 2015 (2016-17 Student Demographic Data). They greatly encourage a strong relationship between teachers, parents, and students, and view their school and the community surrounding as various components to the bigger picture and goals they strive to achieve.

The third grade classrooms at Green Tree Elementary mirror the sense of community. The classrooms are bright, colorful and organized, and display various work from each student on the walls. Each student has his/her own desk, and supplies to complete their work. It is apparent that the teachers care about their students, as their classrooms are a reflection of that. The environment in each classroom is welcoming, warm, and what one would hope to see in an elementary setting.

\*Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

For this project, six participants were interviewed about their views and opinions about homework. Two third grade teachers, two students (one student from each teacher's class), and two parents (one parent from each student) were interviewed. The following participants from Green Tree Elementary School include:

**Mrs. Sally\*:** A white female, third grade teacher at Green Tree Elementary. She has been teaching for 30 years, and has taught grades 1, 3, and 5. She also spent 11 years in administration as a vice principal and Director of Curriculum.

**Mrs. Penny\*:** A white female, third grade teacher at Green Tree Elementary. She has been teaching for 20 years and has taught kindergarten, and grades 1-4.

**Kevin\*:** A male, third grade student in Mrs. Sally's class.

**Susie\*:** A female, third grade student in Mrs. Penny's class.

**Betsy\*:** Kevin's mom.

**Shelly\*:** Susie's mom.

\*Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

## Researcher

The concern of this issue also comes from a personal standpoint, and is what encouraged me to research this issue further. This issue is meaningful to me because I had experienced this same issue as a child, and experienced frustration and stress as a result of my homework. More importantly, I am going to become a teacher myself, and want my future students to receive the proper workload to satisfy their mental, emotional, and personal needs. In doing this research, I would like to explore ways that I could solve this issue for future students.

My experience and knowledge as a college student, being a Liberal Studies major and a Human Development minor have provided me with the necessary tools to complete this research. My experience as a preschool teacher, and my experience as a service learner in various classrooms have also provided me with additional information surrounding the issue, and qualify me to carry out this project.

I believe my education and work experience can impact my perspective because I am familiar with the background research in terms of homework in elementary schools. As a liberal studies major studying teaching, I have been exposed to information that others may not have been. My work experience may affect my perspective as well because I have seen from personal experience how too much work can have negative effects on a child. Regardless of this, I am open to any result that comes from this project, and do not have any prior assumptions.

## Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

### Teacher Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your views on homework.
  - a. What is your school's policy on homework?
  - b. Do you believe it is too much homework is given, just the right amount, or not enough?
  - c. In your experience, do you believe the benefits of homework outweigh the negative aspects? Or vice versa?
  - d. Have you changed the way you assign homework throughout the years? Why?
2. What do you see as the problem with homework?
  - a. Is there frustration that comes with homework?
  - b. How do you think homework impacts family time, extracurricular activities, etc?
  - c. How do you think homework affects a student's mental/emotional health?
3. What is currently being done to improve the issue of homework?
  - a. By who?
  - b. How effective do you think these efforts are and why?
4. What do you think should be done about homework in the elementary school grades?
5. What do you think are the obstacles/drawbacks/disadvantages to lessening homework?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about this issue?

### Parent Interview Questions:

1. What are your views on homework?
  - a. Do you believe your child has too much, too little, or the right amount of homework?
  - b. How do you feel about the amount of time your child has to get their homework done?
2. How does homework affect your child?
  - a. What about mentally/emotionally?
  - b. How do you think homework affects family time/extracurricular activities?
3. Do you think the benefits of homework outweigh the negative aspects? Or vice versa?
4. What do you see as the problem with homework (if any)?
5. Do you know if anything is currently being done to improve the homework situation?

6. How could the homework situation be improved?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to say about this issue?

#### Student Interview Questions:

1. How do you feel about homework?
2. Do you have homework every night?
3. How often is homework due?
4. Do you feel like you have too much, too little, or just the right amount of homework?
5. How do you feel about the amount of time you have to get your homework done?
6. When do you usually do your homework?
7. How does homework help you?
  - a. Does doing homework help you understand what you learned in class?
8. When do you feel stressed about homework? Or do you have an easy time with it?
9. How do you think homework affects the things you would like to do after school?
10. Would you change anything about homework?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

#### **Procedure<sup>1</sup>**

Two teachers and two parents were first contacted to determine if they would be willing to participate in this project. After both teachers and parents agreed to participate in interviews, parents were then asked if they would be willing to allow their children to participate and be interviewed as well, to which they agreed. I scheduled a convenient interview time with each parent and spoke with Mrs. Sally and Mrs. Penny to decide on a good time in which the children could be interviewed in class, as well as when I would interview the teachers themselves.

Before the interviews, I asked the teachers to sign consent forms, as well as parents for themselves and their children. I reiterated that their identity and their school would remain anonymous, and that their responses would be solely for research purposes. All interviews were audio-recorded, with prior participant consent, and took place at Green Tree Elementary School in Sunnyrose, California. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses.

Each parent was interviewed individually at a convenient time after school for a duration of about 20 minutes and were asked the interview questions stated above. Both teachers happened to be available at the same time one day after school, so I sat with them both for about 30 minutes in Mrs. Sally's classroom and discussed the teacher interview questions. Each student was then met with in their class and were interviewed for approximately 20 minutes, using the student interview questions. Each of the teachers, students, and parents responses were compared with one another to identify an emergent theme. After the interviews were complete, the data

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<sup>1</sup> <http://my.ilstu.edu/~jkhahn/>

was evaluated, analyzed, and compared with literary research.

### Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews will be coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

## Results

For this Capstone Project, two parents, two teachers, and two students were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve the amount of stress that comes with homework. From the data collected during these interviews, it was apparent that all participants were frustrated with the homework issue, and their responses greatly reflected the scholarly literature referenced. Both parents explained that they would prefer if their child did not have homework, that it is repetitious, is a burden on family time and after school activities, and causes their child unnecessary pressure and stress. Students expressed the same feelings but emphasized their want for more active time after school, and teachers explained that they could see the parents viewpoint in the struggle to fit homework in to their busy schedules, but still believed that homework provided academic benefit to students.

### Participants Responses

<b>Does Homework Result In...</b>	Parents	Students	Teachers
Academic benefit?	No	No	Yes
Stress/Family Conflict?	Yes	Yes	Yes, but solvable.
Students Get Enough Free Time?	No	No	Yes (with time management)
Positive Psychological Well-Being?	No	No	Yes
Is Homework Worth it?	No	No	Yes

Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: potency, sustainability, and reach. Based on the

evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Potency	Sustainability	Reach
Inform parents and teachers about pros and cons of homework.	Medium	Low	Medium
Lessen homework for students or make it on an “only necessary” basis.	High	High	High
Make assignments fun, something that students enjoy and do not realize they are learning.	High	High	High

### **Inform Teachers and Parents**

The initial step in the resolution of this issue is for all teachers, parents, and students to have the same understanding of the frustrations that students are experiencing. Throughout this research, the theme of miscommunication and misunderstanding was continuously raised. It was evident that teachers were having trouble communicating with parents. Additionally, it seemed as though parents were frustrated with the homework issue, but felt as though they should not question the teacher. If all participants were properly informed about the truth about homework, perhaps teachers and schools would consider lessening the homework load.

One instance in which this was brought to light was when Kevin’s mom, Betsy, explained that “homework is repetitious, interrupts extracurricular activities, and is not necessary when Kevin sits at school for 6-7 hours a day already. It is a struggle to fit homework into his schedule each night.” On the same note, both teachers, Ms. Penny and Ms. Sally, argued that although homework may be hard to fit into student schedules, they urged that “students must develop

good time management skills and a level of responsibility”. Both of these ideas are common and are also discussed in the literature. As Kohn (2007) states, some parents may “accept the status quo because they don’t realize the evidence fails to defend the assumptions on which their support is based” (p. 163). Parents feel as though their child is the only one struggling with homework, and may be embarrassed or feel it is not their place to question the teacher. Susie’s mom, Shelly, explained that “homework does not make a difference for Susie academically. She is a good student, but homework is just a burden every night for our family and I would be okay with it if she did not have any.” The theme among the parents was that it was difficult for their children to fit homework into their schedules, while teachers were stressing that this was not an appropriate excuse, as homework was also meant to instill responsibility and time management within students. However, this idea conflicts with the literature as Kohn (2007) explains that when referring to the effect of improved study habits, there is no evidence to support this claim. It is rather an idea that sounds appealing to teachers and parents and has been used to justify homework for years. Since it has been shown that frustration and exhaustion comes from homework when considering elementary students, it is unlikely that good study habits would emerge from it as well. In the elementary grades, especially third grade as discussed here, students are too young to appropriately grasp the concept of why good study habits are beneficial long term. Additionally, Susie’s mom mentioned that she “understands why her daughter in sixth grade has homework, and sees the academic benefit of it. But for Susie, it only takes away from the free time and play time she should have as a child.”

The assigning of homework does not insinuate that teachers do not have the best intentions for their students, because they certainly do. It just seems that teachers and parents have different wants, needs, and expectations of students, yet neither parents or teachers communicate with one another to express their feelings. One solution to this issue would be to inform parents and teachers about the pros and cons of homework, and how it has been shown to have negative effects on elementary students. Teachers and parents will receive the same information about homework, and tips will be provided to parents about ways they can help their child to cope with the stress, pressure, and anxiety that homework brings. By providing this information to everyone, perhaps it will level the expectations parents and teachers have of students.

### **Assign on Need-By-Need Basis**

An additional action that would be extremely beneficial in assisting this issue would be to only assign homework on a strictly need-by-need basis. When interviewing both students and both parents, they stressed how homework was not beneficial, and that they considered it just “busy work”. I was surprised when the parents and students all had the same opinion when it came to homework, as I was expecting mixed responses. Yet, Kevin explained that he often gets frustrated when he comes home after school and wants to play his favorite sport, basketball, but

is told to come inside by his mother so that he can do his homework. He further explained, “I love to play basketball and practice my throws after school. It has happened a few times where my mom forgot to call me in and I forgot to do my homework that day. We didn’t realize that I forgot until it was almost my bedtime. I was already really tired, but I had to stay up and finish my homework and stay up past my bedtime.” His mother, Betsy, explained “I do not like telling him to come inside to do more work after he was in school all day, but unfortunately I have to. I think physical activity is extremely important, especially for kids this age. Not to mention, it causes conflict when I have to nag at him to do his homework, and sometimes puts a negative tone on our afternoon”. Shelly, Susie’s mom, similarly explained that “extracurricular activities, family time, and just the need for her to relax seems that it is not a priority. My daughter is the type to stress, she cares about her grades and has been up many nights stressing over a homework problem she doesn’t understand, which leads me to feeling helpless if I am not sure how to do the problem either.” Susie’s response was similar to her mother’s as she explained, “I don’t mind doing homework, but I wish I had more free time. I do my homework right away so I can go play. Sometimes it does get in the way of time with my family. Sometimes if I don’t do my homework right after school then I have to do it after dinner and then I can’t play games with my mom and dad.”

With students being stressed and losing their free time to be active, conflict arising between families, no academic benefit coming from homework, and even the parents themselves calling homework “busywork”, then why do schools feel the need to assign it? Who does it satisfy? Schools may argue that students need additional practice other than when they learn lessons at school, but this should be on a need-by-need basis. Students deserve to be free and relax after school, and parents are often not equipped to properly help their students with a homework problem when they need it. Instead of causing this unnecessary stress, it would be helpful to have it be assumed that there is no homework each night, with the exception being that homework is assigned when it is absolutely needed or necessary (Kohn, 2007). Marshall (2002), explains that homework ultimately affects every realm of a student’s life, whether it be mentally, emotionally, or physically. Children are in school for 6-7 hours a day, there is no need to assign additional work when they get me if no benefits are proven. If homework is assigned, teachers must prepare parents to assist their child if needed.

### **No Worksheets- Make Homework Fun**

Lastly, a third action that can be taken in solving the issue of homework could pertain to changing the way that homework is assigned. If it is not possible to eliminate homework, the assignments it consists of can be modified to make homework a more pleasurable experience. Shelly and Betsy both spoke about the same teacher at Green Tree Elementary that they had heard about. Both of the mothers explained that this particular teacher would assign homework

that required her students to have down time, play time, and family time. She required the parents to sign off on a paper that stated that the students had completed all three. No worksheets, no textbooks, no frustrations. The things that children and parents wanted to do after school, like play and spend time together, was actually their homework, so there was no frustration or conflict.

Since students typically sit at their desks for a majority of the school day, and are working on worksheets or problems out of a textbook, sitting at their kitchen table to complete more worksheets is the last thing that they want to do. Both Susie and Kevin are assigned a packet of worksheets per week that are due each Friday. However, it would be more enjoyable, age appropriate, and developmentally acceptable to create homework assignments that meet each child's physical, mental, and emotional needs instead of considering solely academic needs. An assignment can be fun for the student and simultaneously contain educational lessons. Kohn (2007) suggests that educators create a fun learning experience in which they do not even realize they are technically doing homework. This can consist of educational activities or games, or applying school lessons to real life experiences. Clemmitt (2007) adds that the assignment should be hard enough to reinforce what they have already learned in class, but not so hard that they feel like they are trying to learn something new. It should be exciting for the student, and not place any kind of frustration, pressure, or stress on the child. If homework has to be given, it should be only for reinforcement and only when appropriate, it should never be to challenge them, especially without the help of a teacher being nearby.

## **Conclusion**

Of these three actions, the first action would reach a larger audience without requiring schools to make any changes immediately. More educators are more likely to hear information and listen to an idea rather than change their school policy. Informing the participants is the first step, and a strong foundation in moving the homework issue in a positive direction. By providing evidence from the scholarly literature and data collected, schools can reconsider their homework policy themselves without feeling pressured or criticized. Of course, it is a possibility that educators may decide to continue assigning worksheet and bookwork assignments regardless of this data or they may not even take the time to read it, but there is no harm in providing this information to strive for a positive change. Ideally, a change in the system is desired, in which teachers are not judged by student test scores, and teachers are not pressured to give students more homework to practice lessons, which leads to student stress. In a perfect world, this system and toxic cycle would be put to an end and homework would not be a large issue. However, we must start somewhere, and the first start in doing so is to educate teachers and parents about the negative effects of homework on students. If everyone realized that kids are not being able to be

kids anymore, perhaps schools would begin to make a positive change, and assist in reclaiming their childhood.

### **Action Documentation and Reflection**

The focus issue of this capstone project is the amount of homework that is assigned to elementary school students, and how the stress and pressure that results from homework impacts their ability to be a carefree child. In order to investigate this issue, two teachers, two parents, and two students were interviewed to get their perspective on homework, and what should be done about it. From the interviews, three emergent themes and potential action options emerged. These themes consisted of informing teachers and parents about the consequences of homework, only having homework assigned on a need-by-need basis or strictly when necessary, and/or to change the content of homework by making assignments require students to be active, have fun, or spend time with family instead of doing a worksheet or a packet. The action chosen and implemented was the first option- to inform parents and teachers. This action is the most effective when trying to reach the desired audience, and allows parents and teachers to receive the information without being pressured or forced to change their beliefs or school policy. Without asking the school to make any changes right away, and by just offering evidence based information, the staff will be more likely to listen and consider this research, which could lead to a positive change.

To inform parents and teachers, an informational flyer was posted on the school's bulletin board and a copy of this capstone project was provided to the school.

Informational Flyer:

## Effects of Homework on Elementary Students

### Too Much Too Young? Reclaiming a Care-Free Childhood

Homework and the effect it has on student's psychological health and stress levels has long been a controversial debate. The issue of homework and how it affects students not only academically, but psychologically, are crucial elements that cause one to question if the assigning of homework is necessary.

#### Research Finds No Academic Benefits of Homework at Elementary Level

- Academics is a component of society that is valued, and children tend to seek the approval of their teachers and parents. If children do not receive praise or continuously struggle with homework, they may begin to feel inferior, hindering their self-esteem and causing doubt of their own abilities.
- For elementary school student's, homework is shown to cause stress and bring no academic benefit- it actually brings negative effects and is not developmentally age appropriate.
- Elementary school students do not have an attention span to focus for more than a short period of time. This is developmentally typical and are not skills that children possess until they are older, which is why homework *is* successful for older students. However, younger students have not acquired these skills and they should not be expected to. Homework becomes busy work.

#### Less Family Time & Being Active, More Stress

- Homework has been found to be not only academically stressful, but physically, emotionally, and psychologically stressful.
- Children are more vulnerable to stress because they have not yet to develop appropriate coping mechanisms.
- After completing a 6-7 hour day at school, children should be able to have active time, family time, and participate in extracurricular activities without the worry of completing more packets or worksheets.
- Added stress of completing homework can cause family conflict and sleep deprivation.
- Some parents believe that the responsibility and accountability that comes with homework is too much too soon for children who were used to taking daily naps not long ago.
- Physical activity, quality family time, free play, and the time to just be a child are extremely important components in children's lives and their well-being, so why are these things so easily disregarded and put aside, only to be replaced with a more stressful situation that brings no benefit?

#### What School Districts, Teachers, and Parents Can Do

- Homework should only be assigned on a need-by-need basis. The default should be no homework, with an occasional assignment being the exception when necessary.
- If assignment is necessary, it should not be a worksheet. Make assignments fun, active, include family or be applicable to a real world experience.
- If child is struggling with homework, parents can encourage the student to take a break and allow their mind to rest. Parents can communicate with teacher if problem persists. Make active time just as important as homework time.

#### Helpful Resources

- Helping Children Cope with Stress: <http://parenting-ed.org/pdf/kidstress.pdf>
- *The Homework Myth*, by Alfie Kohn: <http://www.alfiekohn.org/homework-myth/>
- Helping Children with Anxiety: <https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious/>
- Time Management for Children: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/growing-friendships/201403/time-management-kids>

### **Critical Reflection**

From this capstone project and its required coursework, I have gained hands on experience in an educational setting and as a researcher. I feel prepared to begin the next step in my journey toward my goal in becoming an elementary school teacher, and recognize the responsibilities that come with it, relating to MLO1: Developing Educator, which refers to students critically thinking about the responsibilities of a California public educator in the classroom. I have learned about myself not only as a student, but as a member of society who strived to make a difference. As a student, I have grown in terms of maintaining a positive work ethic, ensuring all of my literary research was consistently organized, and compiling meaningful data in order to analyze potential solutions to this issue.

MLO5: Subject Matter Generalist, which refers to the achievement of competency in subject area content, was greatly satisfied as I spent countless hours researching about this issue, and becoming familiar with the issue in a real-life setting within the classroom. I have had the opportunity to work with teachers, parents, and students of different backgrounds, and recognized that every student is unique and is truly an individual. MLO 2: Diversity and Multicultural Scholar discusses the ability to evaluate the experience of others as influenced by social identities. In working with participants of diverse age groups, professions, and ethnicities, it was emphasized that educators must take all factors into account when considering an issue regarding a student. Issues cannot be analyzed in an educational setting solely from an academic standpoint- emotional, socioeconomic, physical, and mental components must be considered as well. As teachers, we are suppose to be present in all of these realms in a child's life. As the data was collected for this project and through working with the participants, I was rewarding to know that I could possibly make a difference, or provide information to educators that was not known before in order to make a positive change. I have realized that I, along with any other individual with the right intentions, has the power to make a positive difference when an issue is present through research and data collection.

Following the completion of this project, I feel prepared to take the necessary next step toward my future career and the professional that I envision being. Using the knowledge I have acquired from this project, and my undergraduate education as a Liberal Studies major, I will enter the California public education system with confidence. The next step in my journey toward becoming an elementary school teacher is to further my education and apply to the multiple subject credential program at CSUMB, where I can apply the skills I have learned throughout this course to a real classroom setting. I am excited to continue on this path in achieving my goals, and become the teacher that I have always dreamed of.

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