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Homework Perpetuating Inequalities for Low-Income Families in Education

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Abstract

This capstone project delves into the persistent issue of homework perpetuating inequalities among low-income families. Drawing on insights from North American public school teachers who have shared their perspectives and experiences, this research employs a combination of literature reviews, teacher interviews, and anonymous surveys. The collective evidence underscores the unsettling fact that homework drives educational disparities. Consequently, it calls for a broader acknowledgment among educators and schools that homework often hinders rather than enhances a student's academic achievements.

## **Introduction and Background**

The homework topic stirs debates and emotions. Homework given to students continues to drive a gap between people of differing socioeconomic status. Homework is a common practice ingrained into our educational system, aiming to reinforce what was taught in the classroom and foster independent learning. This research will explore how homework perpetuates inequalities for low-income families in education by becoming a breeding ground for inequality, contributing to social stratification, which “refers to a society’s categorization of its people into rankings based on factors like wealth, income, education, family background, and power” (Openstax, n.d.). By going into depth about homework and its relation to low-income families and their children, this research will showcase the socioeconomic disparities through traditionally assigned homework and hopefully move towards social transformation.

One study by Calarco (2022) found that “students from higher-SES families have advantages with homework over their lower-SES peers”(p. 518). They later say that “lower-SES students face a higher likelihood of distraction when doing homework and are less likely to have parents or other adults available to provide high levels of hands-on homework support” (p. 516). Another study by Calarco (2020) states that due to not completing homework, “lower-SES students receive harsher and more frequent homework-related penalties” (p. 516). The income and educational achievement gap can be narrowed by eliminating or finding another solution to create a more equitable and justified world.

As a mother to a kindergartener who attends a Title IX school and a prospective elementary school teacher, I intend to seek the answers to my primary research question of how homework helps students perpetuate inequalities in education for low-income families. Other secondary or related research questions I plan to seek the answers to are:

1. What is homework, and what does it entail? Are there pros and cons and other alternatives for students to gain knowledge?
2. What does the research say about homework perpetuating inequality in education for low-income families?
3. Do MPUSD (Monterey Peninsula Unified School District) teachers assign homework to students from K-5? If they do and do not, how does an assignment of tasks contribute to inequality in education?
4. Are there any alternatives to homework to close the inequality gap in education? If there is, what are they?
5. Finally, what can teachers do to support low-income students' learning in the classroom that will contribute to economic equality?

### **Literature Review**

The literature review examines why homework perpetuates inequality in education for low-income students and their families and how educational disparities contribute to enforcing the social stratification of status in the classroom and beyond as those children become adults. If traditional homework policies set in place by schools and teachers “reconfigure or eliminate homework, those steps alone are unlikely to solve inequalities in schools...but they can avoid making them worse (Calarco, 2022, p. 521).

What is homework, and how is this associated with determining student success, thus continuing the inequalities of low-income families in education? For the past century, homework has been used as a tool for students to practice what they have learned in classrooms at home. Teachers have used homework to measure each child's academic comprehension with positive

and negative views on homework by students, parents, and teachers. Results show in a study that there was a mixture of opinions. One side wanted homework to be assigned, while other parents and teachers believed homework should not be assigned (Cooper et al., 1998). It fails to show that most students can only complete homework and see an improvement with the assistance of private resources available outside of public school education. According to a principal in California, “They [school system] assume that children are growing up in affluent households, where parents stay at home, dutifully and dedicated teaching them [their kids] at home, on top of everything they’re learning at school” (personal communication, November 13, 2023). Each household lives in different varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Working parents and guardians come home exhausted from work; some do not have the educational knowledge to assist their children, and others do not have the patience or the interest in their child’s education. We also have to take into account the household is homeless or facing home insecurity or does not have enough funds to afford private tutoring, much less drive to these locations. According to the California PTA (California PTA, 2023), they list ten tips for parents on what they can do to prepare their child for school readiness. Several examples include “Set up a daily family routine, including healthy eating and sleeping habits.” (California PTA, 2023), “limit and monitor TV watching, gaming, social media, and computer time” (California PTA, 2023), “attend parent-teacher conferences, Open House, and Back-To-School events” (California PTA, 2023). On paper, this sounds doable and is assumed to happen in households, but it is unrealistic when facing the higher unduplicated people count. Unduplicated people count referencing “a pupil enrolled in a school district or a charter school who is either classified as an English learner, eligible for a free or reduced-price meal or is a foster youth” (California Code, Education Code - EDC § 42238.02, 2023, p. 1). According to America’s Partner for Equal Justice Legal Services

Corporation (2022), “about 50 million Americans have household incomes below 125% of poverty, including more than 15 million children” (p. 1).

When a household does not have the means or resources to facilitate a learning environment appropriate for the student, students have difficulty completing assignments from traditional homework. The research shows us that homework perpetuates inequalities in education for low-income families.

When comparing the School Accountability Report Card (SARC) of two public schools from the same area but different school districts, there is a noticeable difference between the two schools of their socioeconomically disadvantaged students. At Robert Down Elementary in Pacific Grove, CA, 56% of their 92.59% socioeconomically underprivileged students met or exceeded the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) tests. Compared to Del Rey Woods Elementary School in Seaside, CA, 26.17% out of the 99.07 socioeconomically disadvantaged students met or exceeded the CAASPP tests. What sets these schools apart is that Robert Down Elementary is part of the Pacific Grove Unified School District (PGUSD), a basic aid district. In contrast, Del Rey Woods Elementary School is not a basic aid district because the Monterey Peninsula Unified School (MPUSD) district receives funding from income and property taxes. On their SARC reports, Robert Down Elementary School spent \$15,215.35 per student in 2020-2021, whereas Del Rey Woods Elementary School spent \$6,695.00 per student in 2020-2021 based on their SARC report. This SARC connects to parental involvement in these schools. Robert Down Elementary School (Robert Down Elementary SARC) has more opportunities for parents to be involved in their child’s education. In contrast, Del Rey Woods Elementary School (Del Rey Woods Elementary School SARC) has significantly less parental involvement despite encouraging parents to volunteer.

Looking at these schools, wealthier schools do much better when there is sufficient funding and more parental involvement. This inequality further widens the gap between families of differing socioeconomic backgrounds. Given the level of funding between the two schools, the research shows us that homework perpetuates inequalities in education for low-income families. This senior capstone research project examines the impacts of the homework gap, the socioeconomic status disparities in homework completion of students in elementary school, the availability or lack of access to resources for students, their understanding of the curriculums affecting their academic achievement, and alternatives and solutions that contribute to social stratification. In an educational system, public schools cannot provide the financial, social, or cultural capital to low SES students compared to their peers from wealthy families (Waltz, 2023).

### **Methods and Procedures**

To support that homework perpetuates inequalities in low-income families, teacher interviews (See Appendix A ~ Teacher Interview Questions) were conducted, and anonymous surveys (See Appendix B ~ Anonymous Adult Survey Questions) were collected using social media. These were used to understand the connection between homework and income inequality and better to understand homework's impacts on students from low SES. The teacher criteria to participate in this interview were that they had to be teachers in the North American region, this also included that they are qualified and credentialed, located within North America, at least one teacher from the State of California, have students that come from a low socioeconomic background, and open to research participation. These five teachers allow for a non-biased and diverse opinion on the subject matter. The anonymous surveys allow adults to reflect on their elementary experience without interviewing minors in elementary school. Through these



methods and procedures, we could use this information to connect to my results, findings, and discussion. A series of subquestions were used in my teacher interview to support my understanding of my primary and secondary research questions.

Teacher A teaches in Santa Rosa, California, while Teacher B teaches in Modesto, California. Teacher C teaches in Ogden, Utah; Teacher D teaches in Saskatchewan, Canada; and Teacher E teaches in Atlanta, Georgia. This pool of teachers offers insight into the classrooms of schools in the North American region. Their students consist of children in elementary school, with a portion coming from different SES demographics. This interview consisted of five questions. It allowed enough room for them to expand as much as they would like. Comparing and analyzing these findings will indicate if homework perpetuates inequalities in low-income students and their families.

An anonymous survey was collected through social media (See Appendix B ~ Anonymous Adult Survey Questions). The purpose was to collect 20 adult responses about their experience in elementary school. This survey bypasses the need to survey minors with parental consent, which is more time-efficient. It consisted of four questions, which, depending on how they answered, led them to only having to answer three questions. This anonymous survey allows for non-biased data and insight into whether this has affected them now as adults.

## **Results and Discussion**

The following paragraphs are the questions from these interviews (See Appendix A ~ Teacher Interview Questions) and surveys (See Appendix B ~ Anonymous Adult Survey Questions) to determine how homework perpetuates inequalities in low-income families in education. The study centered around homework and their stance/beliefs on homework from five

credentialed teachers in the North American region. The results indicate that most teachers lean toward a no-homework policy, with some exceptions.

*1. What is your definition and stance on homework?*

When I first posed this question during the interview, Teacher A said, “If it is assigned, it should be meaningful. Also, not something students could just copy” (Teacher A, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher B said, “I don’t usually assign homework. Occasionally, my students need to finish something for homework if they didn’t finish in class” (Teacher B, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher C said, “Homework is any work that is assigned to be done at home. I think students should be given homework that they can complete by themselves and it should be relevant to students’ interests” (Teacher C, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher D said, “I don’t assign homework outside of the work done in class. I give ample time during class to finish required work and am available at lunch and after school, if a student needs extra help to complete an assignment. If they still don’t finish enough material for me to assess, then I will ask them to finish it outside of class. But this is usually because they aren’t using their class time wisely. But I don’t assign homework to assign homework. It is unrealistic to ask a student who’s been in class for 6 hours already to spend more of their time on school work outside of school” (Teacher D, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher E said, “If homework is assigned, it should be to practice master or nearly mastered the material (review)” (Teacher E, personal communication, November 16, 2023).

*2. Do you give homework to your students?*

All five teachers responded to this question. Teacher A said, “No. They can complete unfinished classwork at home, otherwise just encouraged to practice Spanish outside of class”

(Teacher A, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher B said, “I don't give much homework. Review and studying for tests are the majority of the homework. Students typically don't complete the homework that I give them. When they do, it doesn't usually enhance their learning. They get more from the class work than from the homework” (Teacher B, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher C said, “I only have students read for at least 20 min. I don't care what, or what level. Students who like reading do read, others read cuz their parents make them, etc. a lot of students read but don't return the logs” (Teacher C, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher D said, “No homework. I make sure I use every minute of my class to work and learn” (Teacher D, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher E said, “No. I give the expectation that students should be reading at least 20 minutes per night and options (activities/ games) for practicing reading skills and math fluency” (Teacher E, personal communication, November 16, 2023).

3. *Have you ever noticed if students required to do homework (in your or other classes) come from low-income households?*

When this question was posed, four teachers responded to this question. Due to the anonymity of this interview, it was difficult to pinpoint which teacher did not answer this question. As a result, the following quotes will be provided without indicating who answered them. “In my school most are” (Teacher Survey personal communication, November 16, 2023). “Almost every student at my school is from a low income household” (Teacher Survey personal communication, November 16, 2023). “Not in my experience” (Teacher Survey personal communication, November 16, 2023). “Not sure, but many of my students are from low-income households. I'm not sure how much homework they get from other teachers” (Teacher Survey personal communication, November 16, 2023).

4. *Do you know if your students have parental involvement or face obstacles in their education when completing homework assignments?*

Five teachers responded to this question. Teacher A said, “Most of mine do not have parent involvement or help” (Teacher A, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher B said, “Many of my students have to do homework alone. There are few that have parental involvement, and many do face obstacles in completing assignments” (Teacher B, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher C said, “Yes. I’d say at least half my class lacks parental involvement in homework” (Teacher C, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher D said, “Many of my students “couch surf,” so sometimes they don’t know where they’re sleeping from night to night. Many parents are working. Many parents have trust issues with public education (stemming from residential schools for Indigenous people in Canada), so they don’t value education. Many of them don’t have enough education to help. Many have multiple children at home or live in multi-generational/family homes, so getting one-on-one attention is hard for some students” (Teacher D, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher E said, “In [m]y current setting, most students have parental support in completing homework. Many have multiple extracurricular activities that impact the amount of time they can dedicate to homework” (Teacher E, personal communication, November 16, 2023).

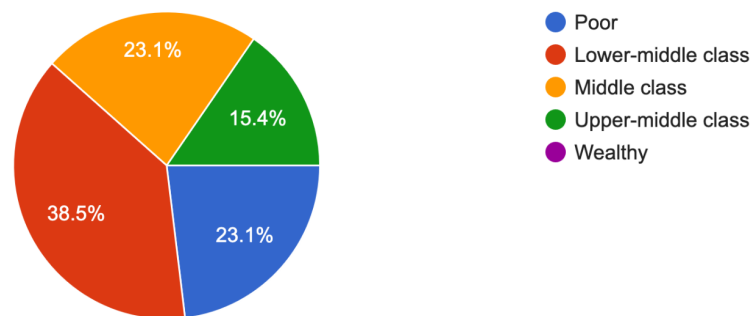
5. *When students are given homework, do they understand the material before beginning the assignment?*

All five teachers responded to this question. Teacher A said, “Sometimes” (Teacher A, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher B said, “In my class, I try to ensure that my students understand the material if I intend to assign homework. The homework is for review or to reinforce concepts” (Teacher B, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher C

said, “Probably not as half my class reads below grade level” (Teacher C, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher D said, “I teach mainly math. Student's level of unfinished learning has reached an all time high with so many students missing foundational knowledge because of the pandemic. Their ability to problem solve is diminished. The biggest thing I've found is they're unwilling to take risks and be wrong. So they stare at a page rather than give it a chance” (Teacher D, personal communication, November 16, 2023). Teacher E said, “They should. No new material is sent home for homework” (Teacher E, personal communication, November 16, 2023).

#### What was your economic status during elementary school?

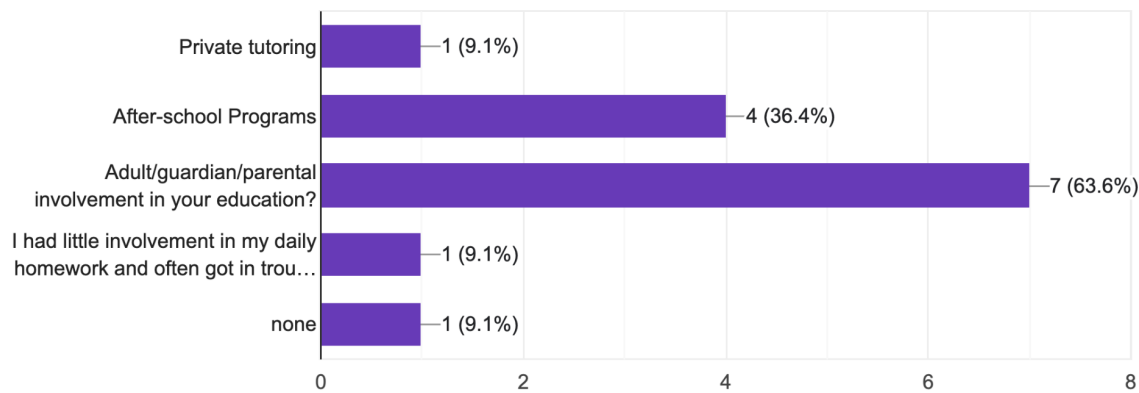
13 responses



This section focuses on questions that anonymous participants answered. This study focused on adults ages 18 and up and on asking them about their experience as a child in elementary school. The results showed a mix of participants from different SES. 23.1% indicated that they came from a poor socioeconomic background, 38.5% stated that they came from a lower-middle class, 23.1% indicated that participants came from a middle-class background, 15.4% said that they came from an upper-middle class background, 0% came from a wealthy background.

Were you ever provided with the following:

11 responses



When asked if they were ever provided with any of the following: one said that they received private tutoring; four went to after-school programs; seven had an adult/guardian/parental involvement in their education; one said that “I had little involvement in my daily homework and often got in trouble for not turning it in.” (Anonymous Adult Survey Questions ~ personal communication, November 16, 2013); and one said that they themselves were not provided with any help.

These are their responses on what they had to say when asked if those, as mentioned earlier, helped them prepare for completing homework assignments; ten responded. “Yes;” “Not once I got into advanced subjects;” “My mom was fantastic. She helped me all the way through high school. Usually, she would help me with one or two questions and then I would be able to finish it myself;” “I occasionally required assistance from my older sister or mom with some of my homework assignments, and they were generally able to provide the guidance I needed. My dad would try to help with subjects they were unfamiliar with, but otherwise I'd try to complete them to the best of my abilities;” “Not really;” “No. The only help I had was from my dad occasionally when I was struggling with math. All he did was yell at me for not understanding

the problems;” “It was a club called homework club and it helped students with their homework if they had any muddy points in any of the assignments that we had that was given to us by our teachers;” and “n/a.” (Anonymous Adult Survey Questions ~ personal communication, November 16, 2013).

Eight answered the last anonymous survey and asked if they needed help completing their homework assignments. “Sometimes.” “Yes.” “Not really, I was self-motivated, but my siblings did struggle;” “Yes, sometimes;” “With the help of homework club, I didn’t struggle as much to complete my assignments;” “In fifth grade, I had turned in almost zero homework assignments to the point where I was not allowed to go on the field trip to the museum of natural history;” “yes, especially since my parents didn't know English.” “I did. I lied to my mom when she asked if I had homework because I wanted to play video games. Wish she'd been more active in calling my bluff; I could have used the help” (Anonymous Adult Survey Questions ~ personal communication, November 16, 2013).

Based on the final results from the teacher interviews and anonymous surveys both showcase that homework assignments do more harm than good. While one teacher did assign homework, the task required 20 minutes of reading liberty as to what the student chose to read at any level. Mostly, they do not give out homework assignments. My findings determined that most of these teachers’ students come from low-income households. While some anonymous survey participants answered that they did not struggle with homework, a significant majority responded that they did struggle with completing homework assignments. My findings also showed a growing trend of teachers in the North American region that forego giving students traditional homework and instead find alternatives.

### **Problems and Limitations**

The study on homework perpetuating inequalities for low-income families in education faced several challenges that limited its effectiveness. Even though I could obtain the answers needed from all five teachers, the interview method had to change. I had hoped to interview teachers in person, but due to time constraints and financial means to travel to these teacher's home locations, we had to initiate this interview through a Google form. This study made it difficult to distinguish which teacher answered which question if one teacher decided not to answer one of the questions asked.

I could not answer the question, Do MPUSD (Monterey Peninsula Unified School District) teachers assign homework to students from K-5? If they do and do not, how does an assignment of tasks contribute to inequality in education? As no teacher from MPUSD would respond to my request for an interview.

I hoped to receive at least twenty responses to the anonymous survey. Thirteen responses were obtained from participants. The approach was to post a link to the survey through social media instead of going out in person and asking people to participate. Despite the setback, I could analyze the responses I received to help come up with an answer to my research topic.

### **Recommendations**

When researching my fourth secondary research question, is there any alternative to homework to close the inequality gap in education? If there is, what are they? My findings showed that there are many ways to combat the traditional homework public schools in the United States can do as an alternative. According to Jeanne Sager of TeachStarter, they recommend the following: storytelling, which involves students' stories to their guardians, or



parents about what inspires them; learning a new word of the student's choosing; have students play board games with their families as this gets them to read and critically think; having students do free reading, which entails students "checking out books" from the classroom to read to their families; complete any unfinished in-school assignments; and create their own work, which means that "kids get to choose what they want to do on their own and log the time spent" (Sager, 2021, p. 1).

### **Conclusion**

Homework is essential for teachers to gauge students' comprehension of the lesson and their capacity for independent problem-solving. It provides an avenue for reinforcing learned material. However, it's crucial to recognize that assigning homework can exacerbate educational disparities, disproportionately affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and is not a one-size-fits-all method.

To answer my primary question, how does homework help students perpetuate inequalities in education for low-income families? These issues perpetuate a widening gap in educational access and opportunity. The current model of assigning homework, especially to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, inadvertently contributes to inequality by limiting their access to resources essential for academic success. The lack of parental or parental involvement in their children's education is one reason. Barriers such as immigration status, language barriers, or academic achievement from parents prevent them from supporting their children academically. Parents who work long hours often come home too tired to help their children. Finally, the implication of social stratification is that financial capital, social capital, and sometimes cultural capital are not accessible to low-income families. To address and strive

for an equitable education system, it's imperative to reconsider traditional homework practices. By exploring alternative methods that are universally accessible to students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, we can pave the way for a fairer educational landscape that fosters equal opportunities for all learners

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Appendix A

Teacher interview questions

1. What is your definition and stance on homework?
2. Do you give homework to your students?
  - If yes, what has been your experience with students completing and understanding the material?
  - If not, what do you do in its place? Do students still gain the equivalent amount of knowledge from not doing homework, whereas they may or may not from doing homework?
3. Have you noticed if students required to do homework (in your or other classes) come from low-income households?
4. Do you know if your students have parental involvement or face obstacles in their education when completing homework assignments?
5. When students are given homework, do they understand the material before beginning the assignment?

Appendix B

Anonymous Adult Survey Questions

1. What was your economic status during elementary school?
  - Poor
  - Lower-middle class
  - Middle-class
  - Upper-middle class
  - Wealthy
2. Were you ever provided with the following:
  - Private Tutoring
  - After-school programs
  - Adult/guardian/parental involvement in your education?
3. If yes, did this help prepare you for completing homework assignments?
4. If not, did you struggle to complete your homework assignments?