# Middle School Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Motivation and Effectiveness of Homework

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*The purpose of this study was to understand middle school teachers' perspectives on the role of homework. Approximately 118 middle school teachers volunteered to complete open-ended surveys describing their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of homework. Qualitative analysis revealed teachers identified several instructional and non-instructional reasons for having to complete homework including: practice, reinforcement, review, responsible, and multiples of the aforementioned categories. Additional findings describe differences related with time spent on homework, assessing process and using homework for instructional and review. Implications describe both the ambiguous and inconsistent homework practices diminishing effective instruction. Further, findings identify the indecisiveness regarding homework assignments, and teacher motivation.*

## Introduction

Regardless of grade levels, throughout the U.S., teachers assigning students with homework is an unquestioned practice. Yet, the existing literature describing the benefits of assigning homework remain inconsistent and arbitrary (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011; Buell & Kralovec, 1991; Hong, Wan & Peng, 2011; Kohn, 2006). Cooper (1989) defines homework as teachers assigning tasks to students intending to be completed during non-instructional time. This definition does not include other events such as after-school tutoring or participation on academic teams, sports, or school-related study activities.

Varied stakeholder groups have different perceptions associated with the potential benefits or consequences for assigning homework. Most parents, educators, students, and the broader public believe the more homework assigned, the more beneficial for students' learning outcomes (Brock, Lapp, Flood, Fisher, & Han 2007). There is a lack of qualitative data in the existing literature describing perceptual differences among various stakeholders' views on when homework is or is not beneficial for students. This deficit may undermine teachers' understanding of homework and diminish their effectiveness in planning optimal homework

objectives. In turn, students may not maximize the potential learning benefits for completing their homework assignments. This concurrent mixed-method study provides both narrative and descriptive data. In order to satisfy the need for narrative data and to support the relationship between teachers' thinking about homework and students' commitment to complete tasks, this current research project explores middle-school teachers' perceptions of the purpose and processes for their assigning students with homework.

## Literature Review

Reflecting on past U.S. historical events, societal attitudes reflect changes when describing the importance of homework as associated with students' learning. For example, in addition to the current efforts to increase test scores, an emphasis on homework arose with the launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the publication of the "Nation at Risk" report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 (Cordoba, 2013; Corno, 1996). These historical events led to a heightened commitment to higher standards and increased accountability for educators. In turn, as is the case today, there was focused attention on the homework issue with respect to teachers' instruction and students' learning.

Proponents argue appropriate homework tasks help students develop academic skills and enhance academic achievement (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). Homework is associated with enriching improved study skills, supporting independent learners, and developing positive academic attitudes (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). Students rated educators who assigned daily homework as higher in teacher effectiveness as contrasted with teachers who assigned no homework (Dudley & Shawver, 1991; Hong, Wan & Peng, 2011). Homework assignments also benefit the development of positive study skills as well as the demonstration of responsibility (Eren & Henderson, 2007; Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Xu, 2007). Additionally, researchers argue homework allows transparency between class content and parents, and as well serves as a mechanism to judge how well teachers, students, and the school are functioning (Xu & Yuan, 2003). Finally, some data suggest homework assignments provide students with something to do after school closes for the day. Homework, as a preventative strategy, helps children to avoid trouble outside of the traditional school day (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Xu & Yuan, 2003).

In contrast, opponents of homework believe any potential benefits for assigning homework are outweighed by negative outcomes (Buell & Kralovec, 1991; Kohn, 2006;

Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011; Hong, Wan & Peng, 2011). For opponents, homework assignments are understood to be a burden and interfere with quality family time; homework limits students from engaging in community activities (Kohn, 2006).

Lapp, Flood, Fisher, & Han (2007) investigated teachers' perceptions regarding homework practices. Researchers explored why teachers' assigned homework, the kinds of homework assigned, and the impact homework had on their students' successes at school. Using both survey and interview data, their findings indicated teachers assigned more homework in math, reading, and spelling than other subject areas. The participating teachers saw homework as a place to practice skills especially in math, reading, and spelling. Data described how teachers sent home weekly packets related to these areas. These findings indicated the focus for homework was on basic or literacy-related skills. These findings demonstrated teachers' perceived homework as a practice activity and indicated the belief that by practicing different skills, students' learning improved (Lapp, Flood, Fisher, & Han (2007). In order to determine discrepancies between students' and teachers' perceptions regarding homework, Hong, Wan, & Peng (2011) explored four homework behaviors (negligence, competency, attitude, and performance). Their data revealed student-teacher perceptions across multiple homework behavior measures were similar but showed significant differences in math and English subject areas. In math and English, the reasons for homework incompletion behavior were associated with the amount assigned and the difficulty level. Data also reported teachers' perceptions were gender driven. In English homework, teachers' perceptions were more favorable toward female students' behavior than male students on all four behavior measures. Findings (Eren & Henderson, 2008) described how giving more homework does not, in turn, result in corresponding beneficial effects on learning. Their data revealed only about 40% of students significantly benefitted from additional hours of homework. Researchers reported more homework is beneficial to higher ability and lower ability students, but evidenced minimal benefits for improving student achievement for average ability level students. Higher ability level students are challenged when pushed harder to perform while lower ability level students may show improvement in achievement because they are receiving attention to perform that they otherwise may have lacked.

Xu &Yuan (2003) described teachers', students', and parents' beliefs regarding homework. All three stakeholder groups agreed homework is a worthy tool for review, practice,

and reinforcement of past instruction; homework is perceived as a formative assessment. Findings revealed teachers believed grading homework to be important in assessing what students already know or to identify when students are having difficulty.

Further, their data described how homework influenced development of self-regulated learning skills. Teachers suggested students have to own their learning, manage their time and energy, and plan what they have to do to effectively complete homework assignments (Xu &Yuan, 2003).

The theoretical framework for the current study lies within the self-regulation learning theory (Bembenutty, 2011). The self-regulation framework highlights the importance of students assuming responsibility for their own learning. For the purposes of the current study, students were expected to manage their efforts to complete homework tasks while teachers were expected to inspire students to engage in the learning activity inherent within the tasks. Thus, teachers were required to frame the necessary relevance and motivation for students to engage and complete homework assignments. Thus, researchers believed, in order for students to maximize their efforts toward homework completion, teachers' perceptions of homework, to some degree, reflected an understanding of students' views about homework and the potential difficulties students could incur when completing homework assignments.

Self-regulation of learning involves the learners setting goals, selecting appropriate strategies, maintaining motivation, self-monitoring, and evaluating their own academic progress (Bembenutty, 2011; Zimmerman, 2000). Corno (2001) described how homework benefits students who take the initiative to manage learning strategies to achieve long-term learning outcomes. Yet, while students need to be self-regulated to effectively maximize the outcome of their homework efforts, this goal requires teachers to inspire students to engage them in their learning. Toward this end, it is critical for teachers to provide intrinsically rewarding and meaningful homework assignments. Equally important, the teachers' role is to motivate and support students' efforts and commitment to accept the ongoing homework process as their own.

In order to most effectively frame homework assignments to support students' learning, naturalistic data provide valuable insight into teachers' thinking and feelings regarding assigning homework.

## Design and Methodology

### *Overview and Purpose*

The intent of this concurrent mixed methods study was to collect both narrative and rationalistic data to contribute clarification to the ongoing discussion of whether or not homework assignments assist student learning. Two researchers conducted this study with the aid of a graduate assistant who was trained to code naturalistic data. Narrative data were initially collected and coded to identify and describe common themes and categories. Categories emerged from the participants' responses. After this qualitative analysis, the responses within the identified categories were then quantified to describe particular trends and thus derive a more complete understanding of the issues associated with assigning homework (Creswell, 2015). The concurrent mixed method design for this study collected both open-ended teacher survey data as well as quantified potential similarities and differences. Additionally, in an effort to more fully describe the findings, researchers quantified categories for clarification.

The following questions guided this exploratory research project:

1. Are middle-school teachers' perceptions congruent with the literature?
2. Are middle school teachers' perceptions regarding assigning homework consistent with "best practice?"
3. What grading and feedback practices are used by middle-school teachers that possibly support or undermine students' motivation to complete homework assignments?

### *Participants and Instrument*

The current study intended to describe middle school teachers' perceptions regarding their motivation and perceived effectiveness for assigning homework. The target population consisted of sixth through eighth grade teachers. A total of 118 participants, who described themselves as middle level teachers, volunteered to complete an open-ended questionnaire. (Table 1: Teacher Demographics). Surveys were hand-delivered to building principals who elected to distribute the surveys. Upon completion, surveys were returned to the researchers.

Table 1:  Teacher Demographics

|  |  | 6th Grade | 7th Grade | 8th Grade | Multi-grades |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher |  | 31 | 25 | 46 | 16 |
| Gender | Females | 26 | 19 | 31 | 11 |
|  | Males | 5 | 4 | 12 | 3 |
|  | No-data |  | 2 | 3 | 2 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Degree | Bachelor | 20 | 13 | 21 | 7 |
|  | Master | 10 | 8 | 21 | 5 |
|  | Ed.S | 1 | 2 |  | 1 |
|  | Terminal | 0 |  |  |  |
|  | No data |  | 2 | 4 | 3 |
| Teaching Years (Mean) |  | 9.48 | 9.24 | 7.73 | 9.48 |

The instrument used was composed of a seven item, open-ended questionnaire.  The two researchers intentionally designed survey questions to most effectively explore teachers' perceptions associated with different aspects represented in the existing homework literature.  The design of the particular research questions also assisted researchers interpreting middle school teacher participants' thinking as they thought through assigning and grading homework (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).  Thus, in examining the data from each question, researchers interpreted the potential connections between the existing literature and practicing middle-school teachers' thinking and then again, between middle-school teachers' thinking and their potential students' motivation to complete homework assignments.  Content validity was determined by the multiple layers of Constant Comparative analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).  Reliability and validity of the survey process were determined in a previous study (Snead & Burriss, 2011).

## *Analysis*

With respect to the qualitative analysis, one researcher and graduate assistant, independently analyzed all surveys using the constant comparative method (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).  One researcher and the graduate assistant independently read through the narratives and coded each teacher-participant survey response. This process of the one researcher and graduate assistant reading through all participants' responses occurred multiple times and identified common themes/categories.  The different categories began to express the shared realities teachers were experiencing.  A second layer of constant comparative analysis allowed

the researcher and trained graduate student to, once again, read through all data, but this time, as a collaborative team. As a team, through an ongoing discussion and re-reading, data were delineated by jointly assigning category names. In the third layer of qualitative analysis, both the researcher and trained graduate student each identified particular responses most closely representing the category name. This was accomplished in a shared reading wherein the two coders jointly read through the narratives to identify participants' language that most accurately described the category. In this way, participants' narratives labeled the different categories. In the fourth and final layer of qualitative analysis, the two coders met and discussed consistency in theme identification and support text. This was accomplished after the initial three layers of analysis determined common themes, category names, and text examples. This final layer of analysis checked for consistent or incongruent patterns within individual participant's responses. For some categories, numeric values were determined. In this way, limited descriptive data could be analyzed. Through these several layers of qualitative analysis, the labels and categories emerged and shaped the additional quantitative analysis.

## Results

Prior to the quantitative analysis, questions one, five, and seven were coded for general themes and trends. Themes were derived based on responses made by the teachers. Finally, data were entered providing evidence as to whether or not a participant commented to an open-ended response for question seven.

All 118 middle school teachers, grades six through eighth, completed the homework survey designed to describe middle school teachers' perceptions regarding the motivation and effectiveness of assigning homework. For clarification purposes, a fourth level, referred to as "multi-grade," was identified for students because some teachers reported they taught students at all three middle school levels. The teachers' survey results are as follows:

### *Question 1: Why do you assign homework?*

Based on the 118 teachers' who responded to question one, the following reasons were derived as to why teachers assigned homework. Overall, twenty percent of teachers reported reinforcement, followed by 19% who indicated practice, as worthwhile reasons for assigning homework. In this case, reinforcement is defined as allowing students additional time to grasp

the meaning of what has been taught during the day in class. Practice is a method used to increase student's' effort to comprehend and memorize information through rehearsal. Only five % of teachers said homework was assigned for review and another five % stated homework was assigned for a combination of the above three reasons. There were variations across grade levels regarding reasons for assigning homework, but surprisingly, 37% of all teachers surveyed did not indicate any reason for assigning homework. Data that did not reveal any discernable designation for homework were placed in the category of "other" (Table 2, Why Homework,).

Table 2:  Why Homework

|  | 6th Grade | 7th Grade | 8th Grade | Multi-Grades | Overall Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Practice | 23% (7) | 28% (7) | 15% (7) | 13% (2) | 19% (23) |
| Reinforcement | 26 % (8) | 28% (7) | 15% (7) | 13% (2) | 20% (24) |
| Review | 3% (1) | 8% (2) | 4% (2) | 6% (1) | 5% (6) |
| Combination | 3% (1) |  | 9% (4) |  | 4% (5) |
| Other | 13% (4) | 12% (3) | 13% (6) | 19% (3) | 14% (16) |
| Not indicated | 32% (10) | 24% (6) | 43% (20) | 50% (8) | 37% (44) |

## Question 2: If homework is mandatory, who requires it?

Of the 118 teachers responding to this question, more than 80 % of the teachers stated homework was not mandatory. When building principals, district administrators, parents, or other entities were combined, less than four percent of the teachers indicated any of these groups required assigning homework to their middle school students.

## Question 3: How much time do you anticipate students spend on homework per week?

Time spent on homework per week varied widely among participating middle school teachers. Time was coded as lower level and upper level to compensate for the range of responses provided by participants. Across all three grades and multi-grades, time reported per week for completing homework ranged from zero hours (not assigning homework) to seven hours per week for completing homework. However, the average amount of time for all grade levels ranged from 0.77 hours per week to 1.78 hours per week to complete homework. Grade level was not a significant factor in the amount of time required to complete homework.

## Question 4:  Do you assign homework that requires technology (internet, word processing, spreadsheets)?

In the survey, teachers were asked if they assigned homework that required the use of technology, referring specifically to the internet and computer programs.  Teacher responses indicated no specific use of technology.  There was evidence of a general understanding students were free to use whatever tools necessary to assist them in the completion of the homework task.  While some indicated the need for specific use of the Internet as a resource for finding information, most indicated homework was directly related to knowledge presented in class.  Teacher-participants reported most often the time provided in class was sufficient to complete assigned tasks.  Generally, the results implied students needed writing tools, paper, worksheets, and the textbook.  A few teachers mention the possibility some students lacked computers/technology in the home and would be unable to complete the homework tasks if technology was required for the assignment.

## Question 5:  How do you assess homework?

Evaluation of the responses to this question revealed the following categories of who graded homework:  a) teacher, b) the student, c) teacher-student combination, d) not graded, and e) not indicated.  "Teacher" indicated the teacher as the sole grader of homework and it placed emphasis on grading homework as evidence of student participation and completion, but no description was given to explain how assignments were actually graded.  "Student" indicated the student as the responsible party for grading homework.  Student grading most often meant students switching papers with each other so that no one student graded his/her own assignment and answers were provided by the teacher.  "Combination" indicated both the teacher and student graded homework assignments. An example of combination grading would be the teacher called out the correct answer or the student is called on to give his or her answer to the class.  Some teachers described combination grading as a student holding up a homework paper, which allowed the teacher to visibly determine if the assignment was adequately completed.  This enabled the teacher to mark a check in the grade book.  The categories of "not graded" and "not indicated" did not provide enough information to determine a method for grading.

Across all grade levels, 21% of teachers said homework was graded as a combined effort, 10% indicated students solely graded homework while only six % of the grading was solely a teacher's effort.  Surprisingly, 63% of all middle grade teachers surveyed did not grade or provided no indication as to how homework was graded.  There were variations among grade levels with six grade teachers indicating most often grading homework was a combined effort. (Table 3, Assessing Homework).

Table 3:  Evaluating Homework

|  | 6th Grade | 7th Grade | 8th Grade | Multi-Grades | Overall Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher | 3% (1) | 8% (2) | 7% (3) | 6% (1) | 6% (7) |
| Student |  | 20% (5) | 9% (4) | 19 (3) | 10% (12) |
| Combination | 55% (17) | 4% (1) | 15% (7) |  | 21% (25) |
| Not graded | 10% (3) | 32% (8) | 37 (17) | 50% (8) | 31% (36) |
| Not indicated | 32% (10) | 36% (9) | 33 (15) | 25% (4) | 32% (28) |

## Question 6:  To what degree (percentage is homework included in overall grades?

The researchers were interested whether or not students were penalized for not completing homework tasks.  Overall, 29% of teachers stated homework counted up to as much as 25% of students' final grade; 16% reported counting homework more than 25% of a student's final grade.  Data indicated wide ambivalence among middle school teachers with respect to utilizing homework in evaluating students.  (Table 4, Homework and Final Grade).

Table 4:  Homework and Final Grade

|  | 6th Grade | 7th Grade | 8th Grade | Multi-Grades | Overall Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0>10% | 3% (1) | 12% (3) | 26% (12) | 6% (1) | 14% (17) |
| 11% >15% |  | 4% (1) | 2% (1) | 6% (1) | 3%(3) |
| 16% > 20% | 7% (2) | 4% (1) | 4% (2) |  | 4% (5) |
| 21% > 25% | 13% (4) |  | 9% (4) | 6% (1) | 8% (9) |
| others | 13% (4) | 20% (5) | 9% (4) | 38% (6) | 16% (19) |
| Not counted | 39% (12) | 4% (1) | 17% (8) | 6% (1) | 19% (22) |
| Not indicated | 26% (8) | 56% (14) | 33% (15) | 38% (6) | 36% (43) |

Thirty-nine percent of participating six grade teachers indicated homework did not count toward a final grade. Seventh (56%), eighth (33%), and multi-grade (38%) teachers failed to indicate how homework was included in the final grade. This lack of data allows researchers to speculate whether or not homework was considered as part of the final grade.

### Question 7: Anything else you would like to tell us about homework?

Question seven provided middle school teachers with an opportunity to respond and describe their personal perceptions about assigning homework. Some teachers indicated homework should not be that important but conversely they counted homework heavily toward the students' overall grade. One seventh grade teacher said, "I do not give a lot of homework but it is just about every day. It helps me assess what they learned and tells me what I need to reteach. Usually it takes about 10 minutes to complete homework." The teacher stated the amount of homework was limited to minimize the time spent, but reported counting homework 30% of a student's final grade. A sixth grade teacher responded, "Homework is essential in math. Students need to independently practice each math skill for mastery." This teacher indicated homework counted 80% of a student's final grade. Another sixth grade teacher stated, "I think homework is needed." This teacher indicated homework counted 70% of the final grade. Several teachers, across all grade levels, indicated homework is necessary and serves as an excellent mechanism for review, reinforcement, and practice of the materials taught in class.

In contrast, one sixth grade teacher wrote, "Teachers depend too heavily on homework to teach the material" and from a mother's point of view, is homework most often is described as read Chapter 7 and do the questions at the end of the chapter is not teaching." A second teacher stated, "You don't know who is doing the work when it leaves the classrooms." Finally in support of an ambivalent attitude toward homework, a teacher wrote, "Dry book teaching (homework given for the sake of giving it) is horrible and a total waste. Homework that produces deep thinking and problem solving is beneficial and it should be limited to a short time frame." However, at the same time, this teacher indicated homework counted as much as 50-60 percent of a students' final grade.

## Discussion and Implications

Current findings indicate middle school teachers perceive assigning homework as important. Participants describe homework as reaffirming learning through practice, review, and reinforcement. Additionally, middle school teachers indicate homework enhances students' academic performance as well as informs teachers' instruction.

In an effort to study the homework issue, this concurrent mixed-method study begins with an exploration of middle school teachers' perceptions regarding different aspects relative to the homework process.  Recalling the theoretical framework for this study, espousing the importance of students assuming responsibility for their learning, current data do not support middle school teacher participants understand relevant issues associated with designing the most effective homework assignments. Current data do not identify efforts to differentiate for a range of students' needs, provide individual feedback, or design lessons to be integrated, engaging, or innovative.  Middle school teacher-participants viewed homework primarily as practice, reinforcement, and review.  This is not to suggest practice, reinforcement, and review are unimportant, but participants did not report implementing instructional "best practice" strategies when assigning homework (Vatterott, 2010). For example, if review, practice, and reinforcement are important, the particular skill sets would be differentiated to support individual student learning.  Typically, high-achieving students are self-motivated. Low ability students who struggled during the day will require additional time for homework.  The time and effort for high, average, or low ability students will vary.  Furthermore, an indicator of an effective homework assignment cannot be determined by time allotments.

In order to stimulate and create critical thinking, higher ability students require a different level of challenge.  As reported in these data, students who struggled during the day were expected to complete the same homework assignment as other students. Why?  Rather than one homework assignment for all students, for challenged students, homework tasks might include less work, but target the area for their particular review.

Participating teachers describe homework as influencing student learning by increasing intellectual capacity.  Conversely, participating teachers' responses suggest homework as an accepted practice that is generic, fairly routine, and non-reflective. Data suggest effective homework appears to be defined by the amount of time and not the level of critical thought or reflection. Corno (2009) described how homework only supports learning when it is specifically

assigned with the intent to reinforce what has been taught in school and prompts students to engage self-regulation strategies to learn from different perspectives.

In particular, some participating middle school teachers claim they did not assess homework while others simply checked to determine if the homework was completed. This finding is perplexing when considering 10% of the data reveal homework counts more than 50% of students' final grade. At the same time, middle school teacher participants failed to identify how homework was assessed. In reviewing the data, if teachers significantly weigh homework assignments into the final grade, it appears reasonable to conclude teachers as well would be more involved in the evaluation process. Current data reveal this is not the case. The arbitrary nature of evaluating homework may support the argument homework is abusive.

Cooper (1989) suggested students who do homework are likely to achieve higher grades and improve achievement test scores. Likewise, Jones (2002) associated the best learning practices with students who have several opportunities in repetition of information, which enhances learning new material. However, despite this link between homework completion and increased grades or higher achievement test scores, the current data demonstrate this population of middle school teachers are disconnected with this principle. This incongruence is especially demonstrated when reviewing how teacher participants randomly assigned and graded homework.

In addition to the inconsistency with respect to grading, middle school teachers did not show support for any one particular reason for assigning homework. One teacher wrote; "Don't give it unless they don't finish in class." A second teacher stated; "I am from the old school. I see absolutely nothing wrong with assigning homework as long as the assignments are reasonable and I do not give it every night nor on Wednesday or the weekends." With these statements in mind, researchers question the reliability for middle school teachers assigning homework. The arbitrary nature of participating teachers' responses suggest they assign homework because "this is just what teachers are expected to do."

Advocates who strongly support homework argue it is intended to increase study time; therefore, increasing achievement (Trautwein & Koller, 2003; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1984). Study time is regarded as a combination of time in school and outside of school. Carroll (1984) linked achievement to study time. Not overlooking other variables associated with study time, these current data show a lack of understanding regarding the link between times spent on

meaningful learning and "just having something related with school to do outside of the classroom. Homework assignments were not differentiated. Therefore, data show no relationship between the time a student spends on completing a homework assignment and the potential academic benefit. The time reported for students completing homework was somewhat questionable. The range described less than one hour per week to seven hours per week. In most middle schools, there is an assertive effort for teams to be more unified in teaching practices, including homework. Unfortunately, for the current study, measuring time for completion was unreliable. The researchers had no way of confirming how teachers calculated the actual time extended for homework and had to accept, as accurate, what teachers reported as time students extended to complete homework. Despite teachers reporting homework was not mandatory, participants' overwhelmingly assigned homework. The lack of differentiation, the expansive range of time teachers believed students spent on homework, and the incongruent plans for evaluation and feedback indicate middle school teacher participants' ambiguity and inconsistency regarding assigning homework.

There were some teacher participants who linked time spent on homework with math or science. Additionally, the teacher participants describe the importance of assigning homework in these two content areas. Brock *et. al* (2007) reported that teachers linked assigning homework in literacy-related areas such as math, reading and spelling. But, without evidence homework allows opportunities to integrate curriculum and apply learning in different contexts, homework, as described by participants, cannot be considered as promoting reflection, critical or higher-order thinking.

Acknowledging there is no systematic data describing the most effective homework format and understanding the vast range of differences reported among teachers, homework remains a confounding issue. Homework may lead to enhance teachers' instruction and improve students' learning, but first, teachers consider how different assignments benefit particular students. McMillian (2011) described the primary purpose for homework as providing extra practice in applying knowledge and skills taught during instructional time. In the current study, 23 teachers described homework as an effective practice tool to help students learn. One teacher wrote; "Homework is essential in math. Students need to independently practice each math skill for mastery." A second teacher stated homework is "Necessary for practice. We don't have

enough time in class; I think it also helps students develop self-discipline." Two teachers described homework as "a great practice tool" and "for certain lessons."

It is important for all students, but particularly middle school students, to refine their communication skills, learn to collaborate with diverse others toward a shared goal, and develop the ability to collect, analyze, and interpret data. In this era of data-informed decision-making, students' marketability toward career goals and extended education depends on their ability to problem-solve. This learning goal includes using data, interacting with diverse populations, and identifying multiple resources. These skill sets are not learned in the traditional format of work sheets or assigning the end of chapter tests. It is argued the effectiveness of the homework task is undermined by the continued process of drill and practice. Furthermore, it is believed, a traditional review and practice format decreases student motivation.

## Conclusions

Most research on homework has relied on its outcome in test scores and grades as the measure of reliability. As the literature suggests, the benefits of developing valuable homework habits in early grades will more likely help students develop study habits that will influence academic outcomes as students advance in the educational system. However, based on the data from the current study, authors conclude exploring alternatives for assigning homework are warranted. For example, in an effort to nurture responsibility, study skills, and critical thinking, particular content and skill sets could be integrated in more conceptual and long-range homework assignments. Instead of nightly drills, students could build learning into broader projects. This curriculum integration and learner differentiation could be accomplished individually or as a group. Collaborating and contributing to a broader project would ensure not only practice and review, but provide interpretive and adaptive strategies as well. Such long-term homework projects would enhance students' intellectual, social, and academic learning.

Allowing middle school students to collaborate in creating assessment rubrics also raises the level of academic expectations. If students are going to spend after-school time, then it should represent the highest opportunities for academic, intellectual, and social growth. Insuring flexible time for students to complete homework assignments provides opportunities to learn how to monitor schedules, network, and gather data from multiple sources. When a teacher

reports homework only takes ten minutes or so to complete, what possible benefit is gained? Deep and reflective thinking takes time to brainstorm and reflect.

Reflecting back upon the relevant literature and theoretical framework, the most effective teachers do not give homework for the sake of homework but vary the use of homework according to students' interest and capability. Homework may be perceived as abusive if teachers assign tasks without an understanding of individual students' abilities, lives, and stressors. Considering the variation in time required to complete homework, who grades the assignment, coupled with how much homework counts toward final grade, it is reasonable to conclude the participating middle school teachers did not utilize "best practice" when creating homework assignments. If homework is only created to allow time for review, reinforcement, and reflection, it is limited in scope. Homework tasks are not intended to stress, devalue or undermine students' self-evaluation. In assigning homework, are teachers building on students' self-esteem and competence? Homework tasks that mismatch a student's learning style, instead of enhancing, may decrease the motivation for students to well perform such assignments. The time required for completion of homework may reduce student's motivation and lead to physical or mental exhaustion. Are teachers assigning homework with an awareness of time constraints and ability? Do students believe homework contributes to their school learning? Are students able to balance their homework assignments with extracurricular activities?

In addition to cognitive differences, middle school students represent a diverse range of emotional and social abilities. Differentiating assignments takes time and effort on the part of the classroom teacher, but the benefits for students' learning may be significant. Time is a precious commodity for teachers, parents, and students. In planning homework assignments, target the task with the individual learner and think "less may be more". Despite the extraordinary time and effort students, parents, and teachers contribute toward the homework process, the question remains whether or not the means justify an effective end?

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## Homework:  Teacher Survey

**Circle One:**

Grade Level            6     7      8   or   Other

Gender                Male       Female

Degree              BA       MA        Ed. S       Other

**Answer the following:**

Years of Teaching:        _____

1.  Why do you give homework?

2.  If homework is mandatory, who requires it?
    ____principal ____district office    ____parents   ___other
    ____ not mandatory but a teacher's choice

3.  How much time do you anticipate students spending on homework per week?

4.  Do you assign homework that requires technology (internet, word processing, spreadsheets)?  Please explain.

5.  How do you assess homework?

6.  To what degree (percentage is homework included in overall grades?

7:  Additional thoughts on homework