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HOMEWORK CAN BE CHALLENGING FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING
DISABILITES

by
Regis A. Vitale Sr.

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
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Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved 5/9/06

ABSTRACT

Regis A. Vitale

Homework can be challenging for students with learning disabilities.

2005/2006

Dr. Joy Xin

Master of Arts in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to determine how homework affected students with learning disabilities and their parents. A total of 14 students with learning disabilities in a Learning Resource Center of a middle school, together with their parents participated in the study. A survey with 15 questions was provided to participating students and parents individually. The results showed that 57% of the students had difficulty in completing their homework and 24% of students' responded that homework was unimportant, because of the type, length, support and the grading system. In addition, 57% of the parents reported homework was important for their children and considered it as part of their children's education. Parents also indicated that supporting their children in completing homework is challenging because of their limited knowledge in the subject areas and time. Finally, both parents and students agreed that homework reviewed by the teacher and related to class work would be helpful to their learning.

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I would like to thank my wife, Renee' who has supported me since I re-entered college at the age of 46. Without her support, backing, and understanding I could have never achieved my dream of earning a master degree in special education. Next I'd like to thank my daughters, Nicole and Lisa who have always supported me and have been by my side throughout their lives. Their boundless support has taught me that nothing is impossible. Also, I would like to thank all the professors at Rowan University who enlighten me in the fine art of education. Special thanks go to Dr. Joy Xin. She was instrumental in completing this thesis. Without her diligence I could not have succeeded. Finally, I'd like to thank my mother and father who taught me that working hard was the key to success. Although my father could neither read nor write, he and my mother instilled in me that education was important. Their guidance taught me to never give up no matter what. Without all of you being there to support me, I would not be here. Thanks a lot to all of you.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement of Problems

Homework can be very challenging for students with learning disabilities (Epstein, Polloway, Foley & Patten 1993). It is found that those students experienced considerable difficulties with homework (Epstein, Polloway, Foley & Patten 1993). These include the areas of attention (being easily distracted), independence (doing homework without help), organization (failing to bring homework assignments and materials home or back to school), motivation (refusing to do homework assignments), and assignment difficulty (being frustrated). According to Bryan, Nelson and Mathur (1995), students with learning disabilities may misunderstand or misinterpret homework assignments. They may not be able to complete long or sometimes short homework assignments, in part, due to the distractions in the environment when doing homework (Bryan, Nelson & Mathur, 1995). Their listening and memory deficits may make assignments difficult to understand or remember. In addition, some students with hearing limitations may not obtain the entire homework assignment verbally given by teachers. Lack of organizational skills may also affect those students in collecting assignments, gathering materials to complete the work, and submitting assignments when they are due. (Bryan, Nelson & Mathur, 1995; Lenz, 1992; Polloway, Epstein, & Foley, 1992).

According to Polloway, Epstein and Foley (1992), 56% of students with learning disabilities had problems completing homework assignments. These problems include

difficulties with homework assignments especially when they are lengthy in scope and require multiple steps. It is also found that middle school students from ages 9 to 15 spent about 3 hours per week doing homework as compared to 13 hours per week watching TV at home (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000). The discrepancy of the hours in the study showed that students exhibited limited motivation for doing homework at home.

When investigating opinions of students with learning disabilities regarding their homework, McBeath (1996) indicated their responses, “You only learn things at school, and so what’s the point of doing it again at night”; “I’d prefer school to be in school two hours longer than to come home with homework”; “I don’t remember where I put it”; and “I won’t remember what I have to do, so why even have homework”. These responses represent some concerns of students with learning disabilities. Their concerns may reflect on the amount of homework and the type of homework assigned. It seems that class work for students is far more stimulating and interesting than typical homework, which makes homework monotonous for students, especially those with learning disabilities (McBeath 1996).

Homework for students with learning disabilities is seldom an isolated task. Caretakers can provide support at home to encourage students. This situation may be varied, because some students may not have home support due to their family financial or environmental conditions. These include home responsibilities, such as taking care of younger siblings or home environments where there is inadequate food and other basic comforts. Thus, students with learning disabilities may have to take

full responsibilities for their own success in completing homework or facing academic failure (Jorgensen, 1995).

In school, students with learning disabilities are supported to complete their assignments by teachers, however, such support may not be provided for completing their homework at home. Students may receive little or no support from their parents when no specific parent is designated to monitor if the child's homework is assigned, completed and returned to school on time. Another problem is parents' perceptions on the importance of homework and its completion and submission to school (Struyk, Cole & Bursuck, 1996).

Homework also presented challenges to educators and students as well as parents. The School Board in Piscataway, New Jersey, voted in 2000 to limit homework in the elementary grades to half an hour each night and high school homework to two hours a night as reported by the *New York Times* (Zernike, 2001). The questions regarding homework assignments are still being debated.

This present study evaluated how homework assignments affect students with learning disabilities. First, what was an appropriate amount of homework? Second, whether they received support for completing their homework? Third, how did parents perceive the value of homework? These questions were explored in the study. In addition, the support students with learning disabilities received at home or in school were examined. The purpose was to examine student and parent perceptions on homework assignments, homework completion, and home and school support to students with learning disabilities.

Background

Over the last century in the United States “if homework has been essential to students” has been a topic to debate (Gill, & Schlossman 1996). The amount of homework or the type of homework is a question that seems to have no obvious answer. Historically, homework was rarely viewed as a problem in the 19th century. Only students in high school were burdened with too much homework (Reese, 1995). Between the 1890s and 1940s concerns on homework were raised. The local and state’s women organizations (e.g. the Parent and Teachers Association) pressed School Boards to regulate and minimize the amount of homework teachers could assign (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Several communities even abolished homework in some or all grades in their school districts. One of the most serious charges against homework was leveled in 1930 by the American Child Health Association, which coupled homework with child labor as the “chief causes of the high death and morbidity rates from tuberculosis and heart disease among adolescents” (American Child Health Association Report, 1930, p.14). During the 1930s, many critics indicated that homework was a health issue for children because it deprived them of outdoor play and thereby caused children to endure an unhealthy childhood (Gill & Schlossman, 1996).

Research started in the 1930s, with only a few exceptions concluded that homework in the pre-high school grades had no beneficial effect on the student’s school achievement. This belief persisted until the end of the 1950s (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). On the other hand, parents supported homework regardless of its negative aspects the experts insistently reported (Gill & Schlossman, 1996).

Homework remained a contentious issue during the 1950s and 1960s, especially, after the Soviets launched the Sputnik in 1957. Homework became an integral part of the Cold War strategies that made education central to meeting the threat of Soviet technological and military superiority (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). Schools around the country began to establish higher standards for classroom academics taught, supported by homework. A movement of Academic Excellence was facilitated.

This movement fell apart very suddenly between 1968 and 1972, because a broader challenge to political and cultural authority surrounded the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. The big concern was no longer what the best types of homework would enhance student achievement but whether students could be persuaded to attend school regularly, pay attention and focus on assignments. A “back to basics” approach was undertaken at this time (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This “return to the basics” included curricular that focused on reading, writing, math, science and to some degree of history and social studies. William Bennett’s publication “What Works” (1986) of the U.S. Department of Education cited the need to educate students both in the classroom and at home, and the homework assignment became high priority to raise the educational levels of school-aged children.

The debate over homework has been ongoing. A poll in 2000 found that 10% of parents believed their children had too much homework (Public Agenda, 2000). The poll also reported that parents believed the excessive homework caused, “homework overload” (too much homework) (Winerip, 1999), and “homework intensified students” (homework that is too difficult), (Hellmich, 2000, p.43).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) called for changes in the ways students with disabilities are educated. In addition to providing educational supports for children with disabilities, it called for an educational setting for disabled students in the Least Restricted Environment. Students with disabilities must be included in the mainstream (general education) whenever possible. The law also mandates an Individual Educational Program (IEP) developed for students with disabilities. Each IEP should include what a student will learn, how he will learn, where he will be educated and the amount of learning that should be expected over a predetermined period.

According to the Core Curriculum Content Standards of New Jersey (1997), goals and objectives should be established based on the standards in all subject areas. These standards are also adopted for students with disabilities to align with their IEP goals and objectives. Special educators and specialists may provide modifications and accommodations tailored to the student's needs. A multi-sensory approach, step by step instruction, extended testing time are examples for these students and listed in their IEPs. Although the IEP is comprehensive, it may not include homework requirements in measurable goals and objectives. It seems that homework appears to be additional learning experiences that are not required in IEPs.

Significance of the Study

Special education teachers are facing many challenges in today's classrooms. Preparing students for the standardized tests (e.g. ESPA, GEPA and HSPA) to meet the state requirements will be the most challenging. These standardized tests take valuable time in the classroom eliminating other areas of content students with learning disabilities could be engaged in. Teachers must teach students on a day-to-day basis so that they can pass these standardized tests. Students with disabilities are given less opportunity for learning because they have to spend time to learn skills for passing these tests (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000).

In addition to the testing challenge, teachers are dealing with homework assignments as extended learning in the classroom and at home. In the lower grades, homework contributes little or not at all to academic achievement (Wilderman, 1998). As research evidenced, academic achievement is positively related to homework completion in the higher grades, though. The time and effort teachers spend in preparing, assigning, and assessing homework could be overwhelming. It is also found that better prepared classroom instruction can improve test completion scores and promote future higher levels of learning. Homework supplements class instructors to improve academic achievement of students with learning disabilities (Cooper, Nye & Greathouse, 1998). The findings are mixed. This present study investigates the perceptions of a group of students with learning disabilities and their parents on homework assignments, and support needed for completing homework.

Statement of the Purpose

The purposes of this study were to: (a) obtain perceptions of students with learning disabilities on homework assignments through individual interviews; (b) evaluate if any support is needed to complete their homework at home; (c) investigate the perceptions of parents of students with learning disabilities on homework assignments through individual interviews.

In summary, this study would identify perceptions in providing appropriate types of homework and identify perceptions of students with learning disabilities on homework assignments. It attempted to assist teachers in providing appropriate homework to students with learning disabilities

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of students with learning disabilities on their homework assignments?
2. From the perceptions of students with learning disabilities, what support do they need at home or in school for completing homework?
3. What are the perceptions of parents of children with learning disabilities on their children's homework assignments?

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Homework is a challenge to students with learning disabilities and a hot topic to debate for many years (Bryan & Nelson, 1995). One argument is that if homework assignments are necessary to students with learning disabilities. Another argument is the amount and type of support students received in completing homework. A third argument is the importance of homework as perceived by parents of students with learning disabilities. This chapter reviews research articles related to homework and its impact on students and parents. The focus is on homework and students with learning disabilities.

Homework and students with learning disabilities

According to the 21st Report to Congress (2001), more than 2.7 million students (ages 6-21) have been identified with a specific learning disability and are receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Students with learning disabilities are more likely to have homework problems than their classmates (Bryan, Nelson & Mathur, 1995). Based on studies reporting the incidence of homework problems, Polloway, Epstein, and Foley (1992) estimate that more than one million students with learning disabilities have problems completing homework. These problems include forgetting to do homework, and having difficulty completing assignments that are too long or complicated, especially requiring materials such as computers or other outside resources, which many do not have an access at home. In addition, these students

misplace assignments before leaving or returning to school. It is found that homework deadlines are missed because many students lack organizational skills, management skills, motivation to work independently and prior knowledge required to complete assignments (Polloway, Epstein & Folley, 1992).

Students could have been successful in completing most homework assignments if they were to (a) write down the assignment, (b) ask questions to insure understanding, (c) set aside a regular time, (d) find a quiet and well-lit place to study, (e) complete the assignment following the requirements, (f) turn the assignment in by the specific due date (Butler, 2001). A concern is that students with learning disabilities lack learning strategies to follow a process for their homework completion. These students lack organizational skills, motivation, and support out of their classroom to be successful in completing homework assignments.

It is always a question if homework is necessary for students with learning disabilities. Generally, homework has been found to be necessary because it increases a student's responsibility, accountability, and academic performance (Butler, 2001). Completing homework can help students with learning disabilities grasp concepts more fully in all curriculum areas being taught. Also, homework assignments help students develop study skills and provide an opportunity for additional practice after school to increase the amount of learning time. This experience may increase their self-esteem and confidence in school. It is found that the amount of homework increases significantly as a student's grade level increases. If students were successful in the lower grade levels they would become confident in

learning when they are in higher grades. Homework may provide additional practice and reinforcement in their learning (Butler, 2001).

In contrast, Duckett (1983) reported traditional homework assignments in lower grades (grades 1st, 2nd, and 3rd) was not very effective, and should only be given in small amounts. The assignment should allow students to practice what they are learning in the classroom, focusing on study habits and learning skills.

In recent media, homework is a topic to debate. In 1988, an article was published by *Newsweek*. It was titled “Homework doesn’t help,” to tell a story of a student named Adam, whose “long and sad battle with homework” reached a crescendo of three hours per night for his fourth grade studies. The article commented that the “the trend among schools to pile on more homework, starting in kindergarten could back fire.” Subsequently, *Time* magazine published “The homework ate my family: Kids are dazed, parents are stressed”, and “Why piling it on is hurting students.” (1999), the articles presented the overwhelming stress on families because of homework. In 2003, *People* magazine produced “Overbooked, four hours of homework for a third grader? Exhausted kids (and parents) fight back.” Other newspapers have similar comments. Since 2001, feature stories about onerous amounts of homework have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Las Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Raleigh News and Observer*, the *Tennessean*, *Lexington, Herald Leader* and *Tampa Tribute* (Brown Center Report on American Education, 2000). These widely read publications have increased awareness to the general public and raised concerns on homework and the necessity of assigning homework.

The University of Michigan's Study (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000) as one of the most often cited reports, indicated homework has been out of control. In every age group, more time was spent doing homework in 1997 than in 1987. The biggest increase in time spent doing homework was in the 6-8 age group. (See chart below)

Chart 1

Weekly Time Spent on Homework by Age								
Ages	Ages 3-5		Ages 6-8		Ages 9-12		All Ages	
Years	1987	1997	1987	1997	1987	1997	1987	1997
Homework	0:25	0:36	0:52	2:08	3:22	3:41	1:53	2:18

Source of information: *The Brown Center Report on American Education, (1999) Part II*
Do students have too much homework?

The question of whether homework is necessary has many answers. Many factors may impact homework completion, but two factors are important to be considered. First, homework should be made necessary, useful, and appropriate to student ability and maturity. It should be well explained, motivational, and should be clearly understood by students. It is found that students are able to complete homework when teachers make it central to course work, collect it routinely and spend class time for review (Nicholls, McKenzie, & Shufro, 1994). Second, homework should be coupled to current subject matter, assigned in amount and levels of difficulty which students can complete successfully, and should be checked quickly to provide immediate feedback to students. Assigning homework on a regular basis may increase student achievement and improve their attitudes toward learning. Teachers

should review homework when it is turned in allowing students to view the assignment as necessary to their present and future learning (Duckett 1983).

According to Duckett (1983), the assignments should be modified to reach the student level of performance. Students with learning disabilities were successful in completing homework when (a) they understood the assignment, (b) the assignment was not lengthy, (c) the teacher graded and returned it quickly, (d) the assignment related to the subject matter currently being taught, and (e) it was reviewed in class. Thus, how the assignment is presented, explained, assigned, graded and reviewed is important. Each of these areas may make students difficult if the teacher's explanations are unclear and assignments are not reviewed, thereby students with learning disabilities may perceive these assignments unimportant (Duckett, 1993).

Student perceptions

When investigating students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom it is found that they want the same homework assignments as their non-disabled peers (Vaughn, 1993). They felt inferior or incompetent if their assignments were different from their peers. They also felt that they would be kept back in the same grade or excluded and singled out by peers. The same opportunity to do the similar assignment as their classmates allows them to "fit in" the classroom and permits equality with their peers (Vaughn, 1993).

Another perception of students was the increased amounts and complexities of homework they received. Students can become frustrated when there was a lot of assigned homework and multiple tasks were required (Hoffenth & Sandberg, 2000; Klinger & Vaughn, 1999). In addition, the complex assignments made students

become unable to maintain attention and sustain acceptable levels of motivation because they lack effective study skills to solve problems. Thus, they would present negative attitudes toward homework assignments. Other factors were also related to homework completion. These included the process of assignment delivery and appropriate communication between students and teachers. Students indicated the better communication with their teachers the better understanding of the assignment. Comparing with their non-disabled peers, these students spent 3 to 4 times longer to finish their homework. Their knowledge of subject areas seemed insufficient of the assignment, which made them frustrated, and eventually they would give up (Hoffenth & Sandberg, 2000: Klinger, & Vaughn, 1999).

According to Sawyer, Nelson, Jayanthi, Bursuch, and Epstein (1996), homework is difficult for high school students with learning disabilities if they have no home support, lack understanding of the assignment, have a poor attitude towards assignments, and lack intrinsic motivation. Students complained that teachers made homework difficult when they: (a) used inconsistent language, (b) explained homework too quickly or not at all, (c) did not answer questions about the assignment, (d) did not specify the time, and (e) assigned several assignments at the same time.

In Bryan and Nelson's study (1995), 113 elementary and middle school students in general education classrooms, resource and self-contained special education classrooms reported their experience doing homework and their opinions regarding the difficulty of homework assignments. Students with learning disabilities reported that homework was difficult because it was not reviewed in school or it was a new

concept they did not learn in class. These students felt they were unable to finish long assignments or assignments and required research due to limited support. Further, they could not finish homework without assistance or reminders. Of the participating students, those in resource room programs performed the worst and expressed the highest incidence of negative feelings and opinions about homework. These students felt ostracized because of being taught in resource rooms, away from their non-disabled peers, without learning in the general classroom for the entire school days (Bryan & Nelson 1995).

Nicholls, McKenzie, and Shufro (1994) reported first to fourth grade students with and without learning disabilities about homework, out of school projects and support they received in completing assignments. Many non-disabled students described homework as fulfilling, while making personal connections requiring little or no assistance in completing homework. In contrast, students with learning disabilities described almost all experiences to be difficult, especially doing homework without support. These students indicated that the assignments were not presented in a clear, step-by-step manner and difficult to understand and complete. They also reported that steps in completing assignments should be repeated as often as necessary. Repeating important steps in a slow pace when assigning homework would be suggested to support these students (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001).

Another area of importance is that students with learning disabilities must learn to manage their own learning. The old excuse of, "The dog ate my homework," was often used as an excuse in students with learning disabilities as to why homework was not completed. These excuses can be viewed, in part, as the frustration students

exhibit in completing the lengthy assignments especially with limited support. A two-fold problem was that students took a long time for lengthy assignments making them virtually impossible to complete without support (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1997).

Students with learning disabilities expressed a higher incidence of negative feelings and perceived themselves as less competent than their peers when doing homework without adequate support. This was due to assignments that lacked appropriate modifications. In addition, when assignments were forgotten or misplaced, students expressed that they were considered as inferior by their peers and teachers according to Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1997). It is found that support for these students both at home and in school may improve the success rate of homework completion (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein 1997).

O'Melia and Rosenberg (1994) suggested that teachers support students by making homework easier in (a) assigning homework toward the beginning of class, (b) explaining how to do homework by providing examples and directions on the chalkboard, (c) giving students time to begin the homework in class and checking for understanding and/or providing assistance, (d) assigning small amount of homework, (e) relating homework to class work and/or informing students how they can use the content of the homework in real life, (f) checking homework and giving students immediate feedback, (g) establishing a routine of homework assignment at the beginning of the year, and (h) allowing students to work together. Students would be successful when teachers followed an ongoing, repetitive daily pattern in assigning and reviewing homework (O'Melia & Rosenberg, 1994).

In addition, teacher's support may come from the differential standards and criteria for different students when grading or assigning homework (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991). For example, adaptive assignments at the level of individual students with learning disabilities and adapted grading systems would encourage those students in doing homework. Individual assistance is also needed to support those students. This support can be provided both in and out of school. If the homework assignments meet students' needs they will feel positive toward the assignment (Schumaker & Deshler 1988).

Parent perceptions

Parents of students with learning disabilities were not satisfied with their children's homework assignments (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). They reported that they lacked background knowledge in the subject area, and the time to assist their child to complete homework, especially, when more than one child brought an assignment home. Parents also doubted if they had the capability to monitor and check their child's homework.

Although these parents perceived homework as being important, they generally felt homework should not be assigned every night or in large quantity. Their children are challenged enough in the classroom and do not need to be frustrated at home with difficult homework. If homework is short, and all the materials for the assignment are available from school, their child would be able to complete. Without proper materials, the assignments would be difficult (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993). Many parents believed that their children should be able to complete most or all homework without their assistance. They also believed that the teacher should

assign homework that students understand and should have been reviewed by the teacher with the student before being assigned (Cooper, Lindsey, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998).

Homework was regarded by parents as to be important to their children's success. It is found that with parental support students could be successful in their efforts to complete the assignment. It is interesting to find that if parents believe that homework is unimportant their children would have the same perception. Children are less successful in completing assignments if their parents do not relay to their children the importance of homework (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993).

It is unclear to parents that homework grading was part of their child's overall grade. Homework completion as an important part of the student's grade may motivate parents to take an additional support role in assisting their children. On the other hand, if homework were not a part of the student's overall grade or if the teacher upgrades assignments, parents would feel that their support is unimportant. The role of parental support in their child's homework seems to be varied from parents' view, and further studies may be needed (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993).

Summary

Homework is a challenge especially for students with learning disabilities. These students receive assistance in school from teachers, instructional aides, specialists and peers, while they may not receive the same support at home. The inappropriate homework such as long assignments including multiple tasks makes difficulties for students to complete at home independently. If the student lacks study skills and

prior knowledge of the subject it would make the assignment more difficult.

Therefore, they become easily frustrated and give up.

Students with learning disabilities need assistance to complete their homework. Additional support in school and at home permits higher success rates for homework completion, which may encourage students to do well in school.

Parental support is another important factor. It is found that children had similar perceptions as their parents on the importance of homework completion. When parents exhibited interest in their children's homework, their children had similar attitudes, thus, the assignments were more likely to be completed and returned on time. Parents play an important role to support their child at home. Their assistance and monitoring process will help their child complete homework assignments.

In conclusion, homework assignments need to be motivating and connecting to student's class work, with an appropriate length. Teachers play an important role in assigning homework. Their attitude and support would encourage students to complete homework and to promote their academic success.

CHAPTER III

Method

This study provided an interview to both students with learning disabilities and their parents to examine their perceptions of homework and to address how homework affected students with learning disabilities, and the support these students received in completing their homework.

Participants

Students Fourteen 7th and 8th graders attending a middle school in a small rural school district in the northeastern region of the United States participated in the study. The students were identified as being specific learning disabled and multiply disabled by the school district personnel using the state eligibility standards. All students had IEPs requiring their education in a resource room learning language arts and mathematics. The researcher was their resource teacher. Table 1 presents the general information of the participating students.

Table 1:

General information of participating students

Group	Grade		Gender	
	7 th Grade	8 th Grade	Female	Male
Mathematics	2	4	1	5
Language Arts	8	0	1	7
Total	10	4	2	12

Parents A total of 14 parents, whose children participated in this study, also participated. Of those parents, 9 were mothers, 3 were fathers and 2 were

grandmothers. The parents and guardians were responsible for the care and education of the students. Table 2 presents the general information of participating parents.

Table 2:

General information of participating parents

Number Of Parents	Age Range	Male	Female	Completed or attended High School	Completed College (Earned Associates or Bachelors Degree)	Average siblings living in the home
5	30-35	0	5	4	1	2.2
5	36-40	3	2	5	0	2.4
1	41-50	0	1	2	0	2
3	51-65	0	3	1	0	2.5
Total 14	*	3	11	12*	1	*

*2 parents did not complete high school

Research Design

Quantitative research is used in this study through interviews to both students and their parents. Individual interviews were conducted to each student and parent respectively at the Learning Resource Center located in school. Of the 14 participating parents, 4 were interviewed at school, while, 10 were interviewed by telephone. All interview questions were asked following the interview protocol.

Materials

Student interview The student interview consisted of 10 open-ended questions addressing students' views of homework. This interview protocol was developed by the researcher following the study presented by Nicholls, McKenzie, and Shufro (1994). In addition, follow up questions were developed to obtain details for clear

understanding of each of the 10 questions. Figure 1 presents the protocol (See Figure 1 in Appendix 1).

Parent interviews The parent interview consisted of 10 open ended questions addressing their view of the importance of their child completing homework and the overall importance of homework assignments. The parent interview protocol was developed based on research by Nicholls, McKenzie, and Shufro (1994). Subsequently, a follow up question was used to obtain details for clear understanding of the question. Figure 2 presents the interview protocol (See Appendix 1, figure 2).

Procedure

Student Interview The student interview was conducted at the Learning Resource Center in the school where students are educated. Each student orally answered interview questions at the different time over two consecutive days according to their schedule in the Resource Center. The teacher recorded student's responses by writing on each student's copy of the interview protocol. The teacher spent five minutes to explain the purpose of the interview, and, then, delivered a copy of the interview to the student sitting at a desk. The teacher read each question. Each student was allowed two minutes to respond to the question. When the student had completed his/her response, the teacher read the next question. The teacher concluded the interview when all the questions were answered. Each interview was completed in a 15 – 20 minute period.

Parent Interview The parent interview protocol was mailed to each child's home, or hand carried by students to their parents. Fourteen parents received the interview protocol. Parent interviews were completed at the different time over five

consecutive days. Four of the parents were interviewed in the Learning Resource Center. The teacher spent five minutes to explain the purpose of the interview then, delivered a copy of the interview to the parent sitting at a desk. The teacher read each question. Each parent was allowed two minutes to respond in writing to each question. The teacher collected the interview when the parent completed all questions. Each interview was completed in a 15 – 20 minute period. The rest of ten parents were interviewed by a phone call. Parents answered each question on the interview protocol when asked. The teacher recorded parent answers on the copy of the interview. Each interview was completed in 10 – 20 minutes.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter presents the interview results of parent and student responses. Table 3 presents responses of both parent and student in percentages regarding their perceptions of the importance of homework, support for homework and consideration of grades included in overall performance. A summary of their responses in themes was presented as well.

Table 3:

Student/Parent Perceptions of Homework

14 Students						14 Parents					
Importance		Support		Grades		Importance		Support		Grades	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
21%	77%	57%	43%	29%	71%	57%	43%	51%	49%	57%	42%

Student Interview

The teacher (researcher) asked each question listed in the student interview protocol and each student responded in writing to the questions. The responses were summarized in the following themes:

Importance of homework. The student responses to the importance of homework varied. Responses ranged from “to torture us”, “there is no reason for homework”, to “to get better grades.” Specifically in the areas of math and social studies, student perceptions were contradictory. They responded that homework assignments in math and social studies, respectively, were either the easiest or the most difficult to

complete and these assignments either related to class work or were unrelated to class work.

Eleven out of fourteen students (78%) responded that homework was not important and the rest of three (22%) reported that homework was important to them. Those who responded that homework was unimportant stated that most assignments were never returned by the teacher and no noticeable consequences (other than grades) were given by the teacher for failure to return homework. Further, they stated that homework assignments did not connect to what they were doing in the classroom. They felt that there was no connection of classroom assignments to homework, thus, homework assignments seemed to become “just extra work to do at home.” Those who stated that homework was important responded that it provided them with extra practice. Their responses included a question, “is homework a part of learning?” Students felt that because their older and younger siblings were bringing home assigned homework, they should also be assigned homework to complete at home. A differential treatment should not be given. Overall the results gathered in this thesis represented that almost four fifths (78%) of the students interviewed felt that completing homework was not important to them.

Homework support. When students were asked if they required home support to complete homework assignments, six out of fourteen (43%) responded that they needed assistance to complete assignments, three (21%) reported they did not need and five (36%) indicated that they needed help sometimes. These results were based on the type and length of the assignment. In addition, the subject area was also a factor for requesting assistance at home. In the areas of math and spelling little

assistance was required as reported by students, however, assignments that required research or written reports, assistance was required most of the time in order to complete these types of assignments successfully.

Additionally, student responses to the support they needed to complete homework varied. They stated that forgetting to do homework or forgetting to return it to school was due to the lack of home support (parental reminders). These excuses included “I didn’t know we had homework”, “My brother took it”, and “I just forgot to do it”.

Other responses assisting in completing and returning homework were school rewards, such as, free time, computer time and homework passes as reported by three students (21%). Additional reinforcement including money, candy, or good grades was indicated by nine students (64%). On the other hand, two students stated that “nothing would help” in completing homework (14%).

Homework grades. Ten out of fourteen students (71%) responded that homework should not be a part of their overall grade while four students (29%) responded that it should be a part of their grade. When asked if choosing their own style of homework assignments would improve their grades, four students (29%) agreed. Three students (21%) replied that homework assignments should be less difficult and shorter in length, which would help improve their grades. One indicated as a preference to have a longer time to complete and return assignments.

Twelve out of fourteen (88%) students reported that there was no difference in receiving a B, C or D’s on their report card. Students’ reported that the only grades that counted were A’s or F’s. In addition, good conduct noted by the teacher on

report cards was important to all participating students. They concern about poor conduct reports because their parents would provide consequences as they reported.

Parent Interview

Parents responded to a ten-question interview related to their perceptions of the different aspects of homework assigned to their children with learning disabilities. Parental responses included the importance of homework, homework related or unrelated to the classroom practice, the amount and type of homework assigned, the method used by teachers to grade homework, and the amount of assistance required by parents to support their children in completing homework assignments.

Importance of homework. There was a disagreement of all fourteen parents on the importance of homework. Eight parents out of fourteen (57%) reported that homework was important to their child's success in school, while six parents (43%) reported that homework was not as important as other aspects of their children's development.

Those viewed homework unimportant stated that homework assignments deprived their children of recreational time or time with their families. They felt that their children failed to do homework because they wanted to play prior to doing homework or to spend family time with other siblings or parents, which may make their homework incomplete. The family time included making dinner, eating dinner with family, and taking care of younger siblings. Thus, their children had limited time to complete long or complex homework assignments. These parents reported that their children returned to school with partially completed or incomplete homework due to lack of time at home to do the assignments.

The eight parents who stated that homework was important indicated that homework created an opportunity for their children to do assignments independently. Homework was relevant and important to their children's learning. Although they felt homework was important, these parents also reported that homework assignments should not be too difficult, but should reinforce what their children were learning in the classroom.

In addition, these parents stated homework helped prepare children for classroom assignments such as tests and independent worksheets. All parents who supported homework agreed that for their children to be successful in academics it was important to complete homework assignments.

Homework related to the classroom practice. All parents reported that homework should be connected to what their children were doing in the classroom. Homework that was unrelated to learning in the classroom made the assignments difficult to complete, due to the lack of basic knowledge of the subject or review of the assignment by the teacher.

Parents who reported that homework was unimportant indicated that all schoolwork should be completed in school. If assignments were not completed in school, teachers should allow students to continue to study in school during proceeding school day, but not assign as homework.

Homework, parents stated, that directly related to classroom work was easier to complete, because their children had a basic understanding of the assignment. Parents found that their children returned home with a "grasp" of what was expected. This made assignments easier and more enjoyable. If assignments were unrelated to

school work, they were a waste of their time and their children's time as reported by parents in interviews.

Amount and type of homework assignments. All parents reported that they preferred shorter homework assignments. They stated that short assignments would allow their children to complete successfully and leave time for recreation and other activities at home. They reported that shorter assignments were easier and more enjoyable for their children.

All parents found that their children had the most trouble in assignments that required creativity, abstract thinking, and needed a longer time to complete without being reviewed or explained by the teacher. Parents stated that assignments which included lengthy research, internet engagement or outside sources were the most difficult for their children.

In contrast, assignments deemed by parents as being the easiest to complete were spelling and math. These types of assignments as reported by parents required clear and specific thinking and accurate answers.

Parents also reported, their children had difficulty if homework includes more than two subjects (e.g. science, language arts and social studies). Their children were "overwhelmed" and gave up without a try. They would become frustrated, returning to school without the completed homework.

Homework grades. Eight out of fourteen parents (56%) stated that homework should not count as part of their children's overall grade while six (44%) stated that it should be counted as part of their child's grade. Even though six parents reported that homework was important, three out of the six felt that it should not be a part of their

children's grade. These parents stated that homework was "extra" assignments, it should not be counted as part of the overall grade, but should be counted as an extra credit. Other parents reported that homework should be counted as much as twenty-five percent of the overall grades. These parents felt that without grading, their children would perceive homework being unimportant.

Additionally, all parents stated that all teachers should use the same grading system for homework. The parents found that homework seemed to be either graded critically, moderately or not at all. They felt that timing of grading was important. Unless homework was graded quickly and returned within one or two days, the importance of homework would be ignored by their children. Parents stated that they should be given answers to homework assignments. Parents felt if they had answers they would be able to check for accuracy of their child's work. This would assist them in supporting their children and help them achieve better grades.

Homework support. In response to the questions in supporting their children with homework assignments, parent responses were varied. Some indicated their children did not need their assistance, others indicated that their entire assistance was required to help their children with homework. Parents felt that homework which was reviewed by the teacher in class required less of their assistance, however, homework that was not reviewed or unrelated to what their children were doing in the classroom required a great deal of their assistance.

Parents stated that rewards would serve as part of the support at home. Some parents reported that their children were given rewards such as food or money while others stated that appropriate grades or verbal praise were sufficient rewards. Parents

who provided no tangible rewards stated that homework was part of school achievement and learning process. These parents felt that their children should learn that completing homework could benefit their future assignments and school achievement.

Parents felt that homework should be assigned on specific days as opposed to everyday or alternating days. All parents suggested that a homework schedule set by the teacher and given to parents at the beginning of the school year would be helpful in supporting their children in successfully completing their homework.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this present study was to examine the affects of homework on students with learning disabilities and their parents. The findings are limited by the number of participating students and parents (14 students and 14 parents). This small number of sample included only students in 7th and 8th grade in a Learning Resource Center of a rural middle school, and their parents. This geographically limited the results of the study. In addition, a survey was the only method used to gather information. The self-reported survey data may also limit the results reported in this study.

The first research question was related to the student's perceptions of the importance of homework. The results showed that over 78% of students with learning disabilities responded that homework was not important to them. In the survey, students stated that if homework did not relate to what they were doing in school, it was not important to them. Homework that had little connection to classroom assignments might be difficult for those students. Difficulties, in part, were due to the student's lack of basic understanding of assigned work, thus, they were unable to complete homework. In addition, these students perceived homework unrelated to their class work because it did not increase their knowledge of learning in the classroom. Homework, which was not reviewed in class prior to assigning to students, was perceived as unimportant. The results indicate that teachers should thoroughly review homework so that students can be better prepared to complete the

assignment at home. In the survey, 71% of students believed that homework was not important because it was not part of their grades, but extra work. Teachers, who consider homework as part of the student's total grade and inform students of the importance of the homework grade, may obtain a better homework return rate. Further, excuses given by students for not completing homework were based upon perceptions that homework was unimportant. Unless homework assignments can be directly related to their learning in class, reviewed before assigning and short in length, these students may continue to think that homework is not important.

The second research question asked about student needs for support in completing homework assignments. Of the survey responses, over half stated that homework assistance was needed. Students stated that support in completing assignments and reminders to complete homework could contribute to their successful completion of homework. In addition, they stated that having a family member check homework accuracy would assist them in completing homework. Other examples included having access to computers for research and using word processing programs to complete assignments to assist them at home. Students indicated resources such as pencils, pens and paper as important supports. Furthermore, a regular time schedule and a designated place at home to complete homework were viewed as important support as well.

The third question was related to parent perceptions of homework assigned to their children. In the parent survey, 57% of parents indicated that homework was important. Parents who communicated with teachers throughout the year realized the importance of homework to their children, while over 42% of parents viewed that

homework was not important. Parents stated that homework was not important for them when they were students in school. This opinion is still kept in their minds. A communication link between teacher and parent could enhance the understanding of homework and its importance.

In the survey responses regarding parental support, half of the participating parents supported their children in completing homework, while another half stated that they did not have time to assist their children. They also indicated that it should be a teacher's responsibility to assign and review homework in school, but not parents, because teachers were paid to educate their children.

Finally, 57% of parents stated that homework should be a part of their children's grades. Parents stated that homework took a great deal of time for their children to complete. In addition, a great deal of effort was required for their children to complete complex assignments. Because of the time and effort it took their children to complete assignments, parents suggested including homework grades into their children's total grade.

The findings of the present study are consistent with the research by Bryan, Nelson and Mathur (1995), and Polloway, Epstein, and Foley (1992). Both studies indicated that students with learning disabilities perceive homework as unimportant and due to lack of supports they have difficulty in completing homework. Gill and Schlossman (1996) found parents of children with learning disabilities were not satisfied with their children's homework assignments. They reported that they did not have sufficient background knowledge in the subject area and the time to assist

their child at home. Parents in this present study also doubted if they had the capability to monitor and check their child's homework as indicated in their survey.

Although parents perceived homework as being important, they generally felt homework should not be assigned every night or in large quantity. Their children are challenged enough in the classroom and do not need to be frustrated at home with difficult homework. If homework is short, and all the materials for the assignment are available from school, their child would be able to complete. Without proper materials, the assignments would be difficult for children with learning disabilities (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton 1993). Similar findings were obtained by this study.

Considering that the limited sample participants in the study, future research including a larger number of students, different grades in various school districts may be suggested. In addition, different areas of the curricula (such as science, social studies, etc.) may be considered to determine the degree of difficulty in completing homework for students with learning disabilities. Findings could be valid if different measurement instruments are considered to further examine student homework achievement, rather than using self-reported survey only in this present study.

By studying how homework affects students with learning disabilities I hope to better understand the homework challenges for those students and their parents. I think teachers can develop a homework policy at the beginning of the school year to clearly outline requirements, so that students will understand their responsibilities of completing homework. The assignment should be short and motivating, reviewed by the teacher in class before assigning, and graded and returned immediately to

students. Teachers may also consider giving incentives for completing homework. Intangible rewards such as extra computer time or no homework passes could motivate students. I strongly believe that teacher and parent communication concerning all aspects of homework throughout the year will support students with learning disabilities to successfully complete their homework.

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Appendix A, figure 1

Student Interview Protocol

1. What do you feel is the importance of homework? (Explain)
2. Why do you think homework is unimportant?
3. What type of homework gives you the most trouble to complete? (Explain)
4. What type of homework is the easiest to complete? (Explain)
5. What type of homework is boring to you?
6. When you forget to do homework what excuses do you tell your teacher?
7. What rewards do you think you should get when you complete your homework?
8. Do you think your homework should be incorporated into your overall grade? Why or why not?
9. Do you think you need someone (e.g. parent, brother or sister) to help you with your homework? (Explain)
10. If you could change homework assignments what changes would you make?

Appendix B, figure 1

Parent Interview Protocol

1. What do you feel is important in a homework assignment?
2. Why do you think that homework is unimportant?
3. What type of homework gives your child the most trouble to complete?
4. What type of homework is the easiest to complete by your child?
5. What type of homework does your child complain about?
6. What reasons does your child give for forgetting to do homework?
7. What rewards do you think your child should get in completing homework?
8. How do you think homework should be incorporated into your child's overall grade?
9. Do you think your child needs someone (e.g. parent, brother or sister) to help them with their homework?
10. If you could change homework assignments what changes would you make?

Appendix C, figure 1

A letter to parents

November 22, 2005

To the Parent/Guardian of:

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your child will participate in a homework study with me until approximately March 2006. This study will assist children in learning how to better remember, complete and return homework and help students better understand the importance of homework assignments. It will be conducted in your child's regular communication arts and math classrooms without any interruption of the existing schedule and routine. During the program, I will collect the homework data for this project. The data will be used for evaluating the effectiveness of instruction and student's progress in many facets of homework. Meanwhile, I will interpret the data as an entire group without exposing any individual child's name and performance in my master thesis. All the information regarding the program will be confidential, and the data will be destroyed when the semester is over. If you permit your child to participate in the study, please kindly sign the permission form. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please feel free to contact me at my school number. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Mr. Vitale

- Child's name: _____ **will participate**
in the homework program.
- Parent/Guardian
Signature: _____ Date: _____

- Child's name: _____ **will not**
participate in the homework program.
- Parent/Guardian
Signature: _____ Date: _____