

THE INFLUENCE OF HOMEWORK ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES
OF SIXTH GRADE STUDENTS FROM LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC
BACKGROUNDS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

July 2014

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the influence homework has on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds at a middle school in a rural county located in the western region of North Carolina. Eight sixth grade students provided a visual narrative pertaining to homework, and participated in individual and focus group interviews. The major themes to emerge were (a) motivation: teacher policies and practices, (b) family interaction: time and attention, (c) self-efficacy: emotional aspect, and (d) educational effects: short- and long-term. Recommendations for future research include replication of the study in urban areas, the inclusion of seventh and eighth grade students, and increasing the number of male participants.

Keywords: homework, socio-economic status, self-efficacy, motivation

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for inspiring me to see this process through to completion. You taught me the value of hard work and instilled in me a desire to learn. You exemplified the best of teachers in the manner you lived, as your actions were consistent with your words. The love and support you provided until God took you home created the necessary foundation for me to accomplish this project and so, I thank you. I shall never forget.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell, my chairperson, for her continual guidance, support and encouragement throughout this dissertation. Her counsel at the beginning of the endeavor to be patient, as this is a process, and to enjoy life along the journey was sage advice indeed. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Amy McLemore and Dr. Joel Nkemakolam, for their participation and assistance. The energy and time of my committee members is much appreciated. Thanks, also, go to Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, my research consultant, for her interest, ideas, and support; she helped establish a firm foundation.

In addition, I would like to thank members of my family. My daughter, Caitlyn, encouraged me to return to school and begin this endeavor. My son, Richard, who returned to school at the same time; we shared this experience. My brother, Pete, whose continual interest and words of encouragement helped me move forward. Finally, my wife, Karen, who truly experienced this enterprise as only spouses are able; thank you for your sacrifice and devotion in allowing me to attain a doctoral degree. I could not have done it alone.

Of course, thank you to my Savior, Jesus Christ, for enabling me to begin and complete this degree. I owe all I have to you Lord, including the completion of my dissertation. As Solomon stated, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not unto your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths” (Proverbs 5: 3-5, NIV).

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

For over 75 years research pertaining to homework has been conducted to determine its effectiveness in increasing student achievement (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Its popularity as an educational tool has waxed and waned through the years (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). Unfortunately, according to Cooper, Robinson, and Patall (2006) the results are frequently contradictory. Cooper et al. believed this lack of consistency is due to the large number of variables affecting homework, such as parental involvement, teacher-student relationships, and socio-economic levels.

While the debate continues, most schools support the implementation of homework to advance the curriculum (Xu, 2011). Because not all students experience the same home environment, their experiences with homework vary as well (Harris & Goodall, 2008). According to Kellett (2009), “There is a substantial body of knowledge linking poverty to educational underachievement” (p. 395). Harris and Goodall (2008) contended economic factors limit some parents from becoming fully engaged in the education of their children, including at home where the largest potential to have a positive impact exists.

The interests of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the influence of homework on their educational experience are lacking (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011). While researchers debate homework, it is the students who are living through it. Cooper and Nye (1994) affirmed, “It can be argued that, like school, homework is not the great equalizer” (p. 472). The gap in the literature that currently exists for this group of students and their homework experience is what necessitated this study. If an educational policy could be having

negative repercussions on a group of students, it should be examined, so all students' educational experiences are positive.

Chapter one contains information related to the perceived importance, or lack thereof, homework has received from educational leaders throughout this nation's history. Considerations pertaining to socio-economic status, motivation, and self-efficacy, and the relation to homework will be included. The basis for choosing homework for a research topic will be discussed. The problem statement and significance of the study will be presented, leading to the developed research questions. Justification for choosing a transcendental phenomenological qualitative design will be submitted. Finally, the delimitations pertaining to this research conclude the chapter.

Background

Much research has been conducted pertaining to homework (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). Warton (2001) stated, "Homework is a widespread educational activity across cultures, ages, and ability levels" (p. 155). Because most adults experienced this educational device while in school it is accepted by many without question (Kohn, 2006). Others believe it is burdensome and interferes with family time with no apparent academic benefits (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Regardless, homework is a regular component of the educational experience of most students (Bempechat et al., 2011).

Even though homework is a common practice, it is described as a "multifaceted process that involves a complex interplay of factors in two contexts – home and school – and a range of participants from school-system-level employees to

individual students” (Warton, 2001, p. 156). This complexity can create tension between students and teachers. Although many teachers believe homework enhances the academic achievement of their students, others do not subscribe to the effectiveness of homework to improve student ability (Hong, Wan, & Peng, 2011). One area of agreement is between high- and low-achievers and the belief they share in the need for homework support (Bempechat et al., 2011; Watkins & Stevens, 2013).

The amount of homework and its relevance to a quality education has waxed and waned over the years (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Before the industrial revolution learning consisted primarily of listening to a lesson, memorizing it and reciting it the next day. Memorization was crucial and therefore much time was needed after school to accomplish this goal (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Homework was rarely given in the primary grades. However, much was assigned to those at the upper grades (Kralovec & Buell).

At the start of the twentieth century, a new field of medicine, pediatrics, began to provide evidence of the risk to emotional and physical health that homework caused (Gill & Schlossman, 2000). These doctors asserted children were being deprived of the necessary exercise, sleep and playtime required for healthy growth due to excessive homework. According to Gill and Schlossman, by the 1930s most schools had banned the practice of assigning homework at the primary level altogether and used it minimally at the secondary level.

This educational philosophy remained intact until the late fifties when the Soviets launched the first satellite, *Sputnik I* (Kohn, 2006). An alarm was sounded across the nation warning the Cold War was being lost, largely due to poor educational

practices. Homework policies in place for decades were quickly overturned and teachers began implementing assignments to be completed after school on a large scale basis at the middle and high school levels (Kohn).

By the late sixties the belief in the importance of homework as a critical educational tool began to change (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Two major educational organizations, the National Education Association and the American Educational Research Association presented their opposition to the excessive amounts of homework being required by most schools. Wildman (1968) stated, “Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents” (p. 203).

A new alarm was sounded in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. This report stated our entire economy was in peril unless our educational system was reformed (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). According to Kralovec and Buell (2000) this was the first time a direct correlation between the success of our nation’s economy (and thus our nation’s very existence) and the work of teachers and students was made. Unlike other periods when society demanded the need for more homework, this time most pro-homework advocates were doing so for business and political reasons (Danielson, Strom, & Kramer, 2011).

In recent years schools have operated under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NLCB) of 2001, and the Race To the Top (RTT) initiative of 2009. Schools are currently in the process of adopting the Common Core State Standards (2011). These federal acts and initiatives came into existence as the government’s solution to address

the perceived mediocrity in our nation's schools (Danielson et al., 2011). Mandates and goals were established. These goals would be measured through yearly standardized tests to demonstrate student content mastery and the annual yearly progress of all schools (Moses and Nanna, 2009). Some consider the instructional practice of homework to optimize success on these tests (Danielson et al.). For the first time, homework at the primary level was encouraged and implemented so students would be prepared to face the rigors of standardized testing (Kohn, 2006).

The U.S. Department of Education (2010), along with other educational organizations, considers homework to be a necessary tool in raising the academic level of the nation's youth (Cooper et al., 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). However, many students, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds, have a limited support structure at home (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Because of this, they often have difficulty completing homework assignments. Bang (2012) stated, "Some scholars contend that homework can be overwhelming for students, leading to frustration, disengagement from school, and low-academic self-efficacy" (p. 2).

Family economic status is an integral component when discussing education (Dumont, et al., 2012). Harris and Goodall (2008) observed, "There is evidence that parental engagement increases with social status, income, and the parent's level of education (p. 286). Of the many educational devices utilized by schools, homework is "probably the setting in which the influence of the family on children's school achievement is most directly visible" (Dumont et al., p. 55). While most families of low socio-economic backgrounds may value education, many are unable to provide

their children assistance with homework, whether it is of a financial nature or one-on-one time (Ifrazoglu & Hong, 2012).

The inability to provide students with essential resources is considered problematic (Martin, Anderson, Bobis, & Way, 2012). The home environment is a major part of a child's ecology and therefore exceedingly important in shaping the young person's attitude and engagement toward school (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). Research demonstrated positive academic outcomes increase with an increase in parental involvement (Mansour & Martin, 2009; Pomerantz & Moorman, 2007). According to Martin et al. (2012) resource provision in the form of computers, quiet spaces, and needed materials have a positive impact on engagement.

The inability to successfully complete homework assignments can have a cumulative negative effect on students, causing them to withdraw from the activity (Elliot, 1997). Goal theory focuses on the beliefs students attach to achievement situations. Pintrich (2000) posited avoidance goals spur one to cease attempting an activity to avoid negative implications and consequences. As avoidance toward homework increases, the motivation level of the student decreases. Bembenutty (2009) reported the practice of homework can serve to foster or diminish "achievement-related beliefs and motivational skills, including positive self-efficacy, self-regulation, and academic delay gratification" (p. 252).

Students with a high level of self-efficacy are apt to see homework as a challenge and implement different strategies to successfully complete assignments (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Those lacking efficacious beliefs in their ability to complete academic tasks such as homework tend to become disengaged from

academics (Bandura, 1997). Bandura stated, “The strength of people’s convictions in their own effectiveness is likely to affect whether they will even attempt to try to cope with given situations” (p. 193). This is particularly troubling in middle school because of the correlation between the disengagement of students and the likelihood of eventually dropping out of school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).

Although much literature exists pertaining to homework, the experience of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds is lacking. Research shows sixth grade has great predictive value on future drop-out rates (Balfanz, et al., 2007). Many researchers suggested qualitative studies pertaining to homework, in which the voices of students are allowed to be heard, are essential to this educational topic (Bang, 2007; Bempechat et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2006; Danielson et al., 2011; Hong et al., 2011). It is hoped research in this area can lead to a deeper understanding of the effect homework policies have on students living in low socio-economic environments.

Situation to Self

Having worked in education for 23 years as a classroom teacher, the subject and practice of assigning homework has provided an opportunity to witness the effects established and accepted educational practices have on students. As a Christian educator who believes the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God, it is essential to demonstrate the Christian faith in word and action. This includes advocating for students whose lives may be detrimentally affected by certain educational policies and practices.

Often in the world of education, policy decisions are based on limited research and implemented for political expediency. Little thought goes into the effect these decisions may have on underrepresented populations. Having spent a career in education as a classroom teacher, firsthand knowledge of the results of these decisions is witnessed. Building personal relationships with students has enabled the development of a unique perspective pertaining to procedures and standards those outside the classroom never witness.

As this author's teaching career has progressed, many utilized teaching practices have also. This author originally subscribed to the belief in the power of homework to enhance the educational opportunities of all students. Not only would this practice foster a deeper understanding of the concepts taught during the day, it would also develop student responsibility. If homework was assigned, it was expected to be fully completed, no excuses other than medical accepted. If students did not comply, consequences were delved out.

However, a disturbing pattern began to emerge. Far too often students from low socio-economic backgrounds tended to be over-represented in the group of students who did not complete homework assignments on a regular basis. The students whom this author believed additional academic practice would most benefit were too often being punished for incomplete work. It was not hard to acknowledge the daily confrontation with students would do nothing but discourage their educational experience. Modification of assignments and providing time during school for students to work on homework was implemented. While expectations and beliefs in the ability

of every student to succeed did not diminish, the simple realization not all students go home to similar environments was addressed.

Although unable to overrule school and district policies, endeavoring to compensate for misguided (although sometimes well-intentioned) policy decisions for those in this author's charge became a mission. This lived-experience has led to the topic of homework and the phenomenological research design. By examining the practice of homework through the lives of students living in low socio-economic conditions, this author discovered its influence on the educational experiences of eight sixth grade students who attend a public middle school in a western county of North Carolina.

Problem Statement

Perhaps no educational practice in the United States is as accepted as the requirement of homework (Bempechat et al., 2011). According to Danielson et al. (2011) the majority of parents and educators have a fundamental belief in the ability of homework to increase learning, improve academic achievement, and enhance personal responsibility. However, much of the research on homework is contradictory (Kohn, 2006; Rudman, 2014; Trautwein & Koller, 2003). For most it is simply an educational experience they endured while in school.

The problem is many students from low socio-economic backgrounds face greater challenges in completing homework assignments due to lack of resources and available parental assistance than their peers from higher socio-economic groups (Cooper & Nye, 1995; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Often neglected are the interests of those most affected by the practice of homework. Dumont et al. (2012) considered this

educational device to widen the divide between the have and have-nots. Bembenutty (2011) pointed out students who return home each afternoon to engage in the completion of assignments are not all experiencing the same phenomenon. The views, opinions, and experiences of middle school students from low socio-economic backgrounds regarding homework are apt to be far different than their classmates from more affluent families (Bempechat et al., 2011).

To ignore the differences in the homework experiences of students from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds does a disservice to the field of education and to the students served (Bempechat et al., 2011). If one subscribes to the belief that the most effective manner to increase the economic levels of students is to encourage them to graduate and attend institutions of higher learning, it would be remiss to blindly accept educational practices (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). The fact homework is one of the most common practices required by schools (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Trautwein, Schnyder, Niggli, Neumann, & Ludtke, 2009) demands it be examined closely.

Only through research can the impact of homework on all student populations be fully understood. Bempechat et al. (2011) stated, "Low-income students are particularly at risk for underachievement and school disengagement, and their voices in research have yet to be systematically examined" (p. 253). It is the desire of teachers to educate the whole child and promote life-long learners regardless of socio-economic levels (Bempechat, 2011) that necessitated this research. Listening to students from low socio-economic backgrounds demonstrated the need for this educational device to be reconsidered (Hong et al., 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds in a western county of North Carolina and the influence this practice has on their educational experiences. All participants are enrolled in public school and attended an after-school program hosted by a non-profit organization. For the purpose of this study homework is generally defined as a task assigned by teachers to be completed by students outside the confines of the school during non-instructional hours (Bembenutty, 2011; Cooper et al., 2006).

The purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to describe each phenomenon “in its totality, in a fresh and open way” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This includes, but is not limited to, “perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and the development of visual narratives it was hoped the co-researchers’ emotions and perceptions pertaining to homework would be revealed. The findings of the current research can assist schools and teachers when considering and developing homework policies

Significance of the Study

This transcendental phenomenological study is significant as it allowed an overlooked population to be represented in the body of research pertaining to homework (Bang, 2007; Cooper et al., 2006; Danielson et al., 2011; Hong et al., 2011). Since research has provided a link between one’s environment and human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it was critical to investigate how educational

practices affect different groups. Kralovec and Buell (2000) believe accepted institutional practices should be examined to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting lifelong learning.

Homework completion is considered mandatory in most schools. Non-compliance by students on a regular basis leads to confrontations with instructors (Galloway & Pope, 2007). Due to the fact most educators come from middle-class backgrounds (Kralovec & Buell, 2000), it is important to consider the home environment of their students. Exploring this topic can assist teachers in becoming more aware of the effects homework may have on education and encourage them to consider other methods for reinforcing lesson concepts when necessary (Bempechat et al., 2011; Strandberg, 2013).

The present study provides a valuable contribution to the body of research pertaining to homework and addresses a gap in the literature (Bempechat et al, 2011). The debate concerning the ability or inability of homework to enhance student achievement is sure to continue. This is why qualitative studies allowing the interests of those most affected by this practice to be heard are essential. The design of this author's research assists in bringing to life the experiences of students in critical need of being heard (Coutts, 2004) so as not to discourage their future educational endeavors.

Research Questions

The Self-Efficacy Theory developed by Albert Bandura (1997) demonstrated those who experience a high level of success with a task develop a belief in their ability to continue on a trajectory of success and face future greater challenges with

confidence. The reverse of positive experiences is also true. When individuals lack self-efficacy in their ability to accomplish a task or reach a goal, the motivation to succeed is diminished. In addition, low self-efficacy has an impact on individuals' future perceptions of what they can or cannot do (Bandura, 1997). This is true in the realm of education, as well.

Children are also directly affected by the environment in which they develop (Martin et al., 2011). The Social Ecology Theory proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasized "the processing and interaction with the environment by the individual" (Martin et al., 2011, p. 2). The socio-demographic characteristics of students and their families often affect the interactions in settings such as home and school (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Yoshikawa, Aber, and Beardslee (2012) stated, "Education, achievement, and family structure in one generation can therefore be determinants of family income poverty and then children's health and development in the next generation" (p. 273). The homes from which students come do much toward shaping their engagement and attitude toward school (Bronfenbrenner, 2001).

The goal of conducting this transcendental phenomenological research was to explore the influence homework has on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, the following questions were used to guide this study:

R1: How does homework influence the self-efficacy of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R2: How does homework influence the motivation of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R3: What influence does homework have on the perceptions toward education sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds hold?

R4: How does socio-economic status influence the lived homework experience of sixth grade students?

R5: How does gender influence the lived homework experience of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

Research Plan

The methodology chosen for the current study is qualitative. Simply using statistical methods of analysis to examine this issue ignores the human element. It is difficult to measure all the effects of homework on specific student populations in a quantitative study. Researchers have indicated the lack of qualitative research regarding homework from the perspective of students (Bempechat et al, 2011; Coutts, 2004). The majority of existing research pertaining to homework is “quantitative in nature, and is therefore somewhat limited in the insights it can provide into the meanings that students construct about homework...” (Bempechat et al., 2011, p. 253).

According to Creswell (2007), “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). Data was collected through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and visual narratives. Qualitative researchers attempt to understand the lived experiences as described by the participants (Creswell, 2007). This design aligns with the purpose of the author’s research since the desire was to illumine the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

A transcendental phenomenological research design was chosen so the interests of sixth grade students experiencing this phenomenon could be heard. Moustakas (1994) considered the Epoche to be of primary importance in transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas stated, “In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33). Due to the familiarity and acceptance of the practice of homework, examining it without presuppositions was critical. Transcendental phenomenology allows this educational practice to be seen in a manner not reflecting experience; rather freshly, openly, and deeply (Moustakas, 1994).

Definition of Terms

To clarify the keywords of the current qualitative study, the following definitions of terms are included.

Achievement Motivation – Achievement motivation is described as energization and competence-based affect, cognition, and behavior (Elliot, 1999). In this study it pertained to the beliefs students attach to achievement situations, such as homework.

Ecology/environment – A social model “focusing on the developing person, the environment, and the evolving interaction between the person and the environment” (Berry, 1995, p. 379). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) described ecological environment as a set of nested structures much like a set of Russian dolls.

Homework – An educational task assigned by teachers to be completed by students outside the confines of the school during non-instructional hours (Bembenuddy, 2011; Cooper et al., 2006).

Self-efficacy – In the realm of education self-efficacy refers to the beliefs students have in their ability to accomplish given tasks and the effect this has on motivation and achievement (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy mediates learning in that it encourages perseverance and confidence.

Socio-economic status – An economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social positions in relation to others. Status is based on income, education, and occupation. Studies repeatedly associated low socio-economic status with negative outcomes for children in areas of cognitive development, academic achievement, and educational attainment (Yoshikawa, et al., 2012).

Delimitations

The participants in the study were delimited to sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds, defined as those eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Some studies report a strong correlation between sixth grade failure and future dropout rates (Balfanz et al., 2007; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). Also, Harris and Goodall, (2008) reported students from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to receive the home support structures conducive to promoting homework success.

Assumptions

During this study the researcher worked closely with the co-researchers to understand their lived experiences pertaining to homework and it was assumed the answers provided to individual and focus group interview questions were truthful and accurate. An attempt to verify the accuracy and intent of the co-researchers' responses

was made by seeking follow-up interviews when necessary. Also, member checks were utilized during the study to ensure accuracy. Each co-researcher was provided a copy of their transcribed interviews to give them an opportunity to make sure what they said was their intent.

Summary

The assignment of homework to students is a common and accepted educational practice (Bempechat et al., 2011). Most parents and educators believe homework is a necessary and beneficial practice leading to an increase in learning and therefore, improved academic achievement (Danielson et al, 2011). However, much of the research on homework is contradictory (Kohn, 2006).

Economic factors limit some parents from becoming fully engaged in the education of their children, including at home where the largest potential to have a positive impact exists (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Although families of low socio-economic backgrounds may value education as much as others, there often is an inability to provide their children assistance with homework, due to financial or time constraints (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012). Students who return home each afternoon to engage in the completion of assignments are not all experiencing the same phenomenon (Bembenutty, 2011).

The lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds pertaining to homework are apt to be far different than their classmates from more affluent families (Bempechat et al, 2011). The socio-demographic characteristics of students and their families can also affect the interactions in settings such as home and school (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Bempechat et al. (2011) stated, “Low-income students

are particularly at risk for underachievement and school disengagement, and their voices in research have yet to be systematically examined” (p. 253). Many researchers suggested qualitative studies pertaining to homework are essential to this educational topic (Bempechat et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2006; Hong et al., 2011).

A transcendental phenomenological research design was chosen since the purpose of this study was to describe the essence of a lived experience. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds have a unique educational experience, one often overlooked by educators (Bempechat et al., 2011). Allowing their interests to be heard can provide much valuable information pertaining to this accepted practice. The results could also encourage teachers to evaluate their current homework practices and consider how they affect all students.

Chapter two provides a literature review including theoretical research models pertaining to student self-efficacy, goals, and ecology/environment. Studies pertaining to the academic and non-academic benefits of homework are examined, as well as the effect homework has on student self-efficacy and motivation. Finally, an examination of how socio-economic factors can affect student academic achievement is included.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The study is significant because it allowed an overlooked population to be represented in the body of research pertaining to homework (Bang, 2007; Danielson et al., 2011; Hong et al., 2011). Chapter two contains discussions of theoretical frameworks influencing student self-efficacy, motivation, and environmental ecology and how these models relate to the topic of homework. The review of the literature examines purported academic and non-academic benefits of homework and provides results of title searches of peer reviewed journals and books pertaining to the phenomenon.

Homework is defined as a task assigned by teachers to be completed by students outside the confines of the school during non-instructional hours (Bembenutty, 2011; Cooper et al., 2006). Kitsantas and Zimmerman (2009) stated it is a practice considered by many educators to be of paramount importance in increasing academic achievement and character development. Bembenutty (2011) posited many educators and parents believe homework increases self-discipline, improves organizational skills, and increases levels of motivation. Others asserted it promotes parental involvement in the educational process, which in turn enhances student learning (Van Voorhis, 2011; Xu, 2011).

However, other researchers consider the practice to be intrusive of family time, overwhelming to students, and a factor in decreasing motivation to learn (Kohn, 2006;

Kralovec & Buell, 2000). The problem with the apparent benefits, according to Kohn (2006), is no studies or research has been conducted to support the claims. Some negative aspects concerning homework, according to Cooper et al. (2006), are loss of leisure time, boredom and parental confusion.

The number of studies done to determine if homework is effective in increasing student achievement is immense (Sidhu, Fook, & Singh, 2010). However, the results are often conflicting. According to Vatterott (2009), “For almost every specific result shown, another study can be found that contradicts the result” (p. 59).

Title Search

Research pertaining to homework has primarily focused on the academic benefits of this commonly practiced educational device (Bempechat et al., 2011). Most of the studies are of a quantitative nature. In addition, homework research addressing students of low income (those most at risk) is lacking (Bempechat et al.) Articles from 2008 to 2014 pertaining to this proposed research topic were examined. Homework and student achievement were highlighted and then the search narrowed to (a) academic benefits, (b) non-academic benefits, (c) motivation, (d) ecology, (f), student self-efficacy, (g) low socio-economic status, (h) student perception, and (i) middle school students of low socio-economic status. Table 1 shows the results from peer-reviewed database searches between the years 2008 and 2013.

Table 1

Title Search Table

Keyword or Phrase	EBSCOhost (Academic Search Complete)	ProQuest	ERIC
Homework and Student Achievement	127	219	327
Academic Benefits of Homework	25	33	2
Non-Academic Benefits of Homework	19	14	1
Homework and Student Motivation	80	96	137
Homework and the Effect of Student Ecology/Environment	3	2	3
Homework and Student Self-Efficacy	11	6	4
Students of Low Socio-Economic Status and Homework	14	11	5
Student Perception of Homework	4	2	5
Middle School Students of Low Socio-Economic Status and Homework	0	2	1

Hong et al. (2011) indicated most studies pertaining to homework examine the academic benefits, or lack thereof, and student achievement, but the interests and experiences of the students are missing from the research. Bempechat et al. (2011) considered this missing research component to be critical and suggested it be

addressed. The results illustrated in Table 1 also show the lack of research involving homework and middle school students.

Certain practices, whether educational or cultural, are often accepted at face value. If one is to examine the issue of homework, doing so without bias is essential. An examination of previous studies, dealing with both academic and non-academic benefits of homework was used to build background. Motivation, parental involvement, socio-economic status, and self-efficacy were examined in relation to homework. Looking at homework through an unbiased lens and listening to the voices of students who are experiencing this task is of paramount importance for educators and parents (Bempechat et al., 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Self-Efficacy Theory

The theoretical framework supporting this transcendental phenomenological research topic is referred to as self-efficacy theory. In order for people to experience high levels of success they must have self-efficacious tendencies (Bembenutty, 2011). A high degree of self-efficacy enhances academic performance (Bandura, 1977). Martin and Dowson (2009) indicated, “Self-efficacy theory is centrally relevant to individuals’ belief in their capacity to successfully carry out given tasks and the consequent impact of this self-belief on motivation and achievement” (p. 336). Conceptualized by Albert Bandura (1977), self-efficacy theory explains why certain individuals appear more adept at working through tasks or assignments while others seem to give up quickly. It is hypothesized students with a high sense of self-efficacy

are more likely to find alternative courses of action when challenges arise. High levels of self-efficacy also increase levels of effort and persistence (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy theory acknowledges the wide range of human capabilities and interests (Bandura, 1997). Because of this diversity, people differ both in what realms they develop self-efficacious tendencies and to what extent they develop them. Self-efficacy beliefs consider “not only the exercise of control over action, but also self-regulation of thought processes, motivation, and affective and physiological states” (Bandura, 1997, p. 36).

According to Bandura (1997) it takes only a minimal number of failures for someone to develop a lack of self-efficacy toward particular tasks which can lead to depression and a sense of helplessness. Bandura has shown when people doubt their capabilities to be successful in certain activities,

they find it hard to motivate themselves and they slacken their efforts or give up quickly in the face of obstacles. They have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. In taxing situations they dwell on their personal deficiencies, the formidableness of the task, and the adverse consequences of failure. Such perturbing thinking further undermines their efforts and their analytic thinking by diverting attention from how best to execute activities to concerns over personal deficiencies and possible calamities. (p. 39)

When research concerning self-efficacy is closely examined there is great consistency demonstrating the impact efficacy beliefs have on motivation and performance (Bandura, 1997; Bembenuddy, 2011; Lorschach & Jinks, 1999). Lorschach

and Jinks (1999) concluded low self-efficacy can become a downward spiral: less effort, less success, less self-efficacy. Although not irreversible, this spiral must be stopped by creating positive experiences.

Regarding education, Bandura (1997) demonstrated efficacy beliefs affect academic performance rather than just reflecting innate cognitive ability. When students of similar cognitive ability were administered a test, those with high self-efficacy performed at a higher level. The ramifications of these findings are critical for educators to consider. Bouffard-Bouchard (1990) manipulated the efficacy beliefs of students in one study. Students were compared to fictitious peers and either saturated with high or low self-efficacy beliefs. Their actual cognitive ability level was ignored. The results showed those whose efficacy was raised performed at a higher intellectual level than their peers of equal cognitive ability whose efficacy had been lowered (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990). Their efficacy beliefs affected their accomplishments.

A student's perceived self-efficacy is a better indicator of academic performance than the acquisition of skills alone (Bandura, 1997). A child's innate cognitive ability can be hidden from view when their level of efficacy is lacking. This provides much for educators to ponder when they reflect upon students of high cognitive ability who just don't seem to care. Negative academic experiences may have led to low efficacy (Bandura).

The self-efficacy of a child can be increased or decreased dependent upon the number of positive or negative educational interactions they experience (Bembenutty, 2011). When parents place unrealistic demands on their children to excel academically, the stress can affect their efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Teachers who

demonstrate displeasure over a child's work potentially affect their efficacy. As negative experiences multiply, efficacy toward education plummets (Bembenutty, 2011).

Homework contributes to a child's perceived efficacy (Bang, 2011). Those who complete it successfully on a regular basis develop higher self-efficacy. The perceived self-efficacy of those who do not complete assignments is apt to diminish (Bang). For some, "homework can be overwhelming...leading to frustration, disengagement from school, and low academic self-efficacy" (Bang, 2011, p. 2).

Goal Theory

Goal theory is another theoretical framework, working in tandem with self-efficacy theory, supporting the current research. The theory "focuses on the meaning students attach to achievement situations and the purpose for their actions" (Martin & Dowson, 2009, p. 334). There is an approach and avoidance component to this theory (Elliot, 1997) which demonstrates individual's motivation as being directed toward approach or avoidance.

Goal theorists describe three goals related to motivation; performance goals, mastery goals, and social goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Performance goals "focus on the demonstration of competence relative to others, whereas mastery goals focus on the development of competence or task mastery" (Elliot, 1997, p. 169). Social goals are those relating to achievement for social reasons (Martin & Dowson, 2009). All three can affect a student's motivation toward homework.

Mastery avoidance goals represent the hope of avoiding failure in a given task. A performance avoidance goal describes the fear of failing to demonstrate sufficient

ability (Elliot, 1997). Social avoidance goals are demonstrated when one does not want to let those held in high esteem down by failing to succeed. Approach goals describe the same situations, but in a positive direction (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

According to Pintrich (2000), students would rather not attempt a task they have experienced frustration and failure with than experience repeated negative emotions. Students do not want to appear dumb or inferior in front of their peers (Pintrich, 2000). Rather than allowing this to happen, they refrain from tasks such as homework altogether. If students hold parents and teachers in high regard, goal theorists postulated they would rather avoid a task than demonstrate failure (Elliot, 1999).

Negative confrontations with teachers over incomplete assignments exacerbate the decline in efficacy (Bang, Suarez-Orozco, O'Connor, 2011). Bandura (1997) posited, "People can give up trying because they lack a sense of self-efficacy in achieving the required behavior, or they may be assured of their capabilities but give up trying because they expect their behavior to have no effect on an unresponsive environment or to be consistently punished" (p. 205). If punitive measures become the norm, students are unlikely to believe in their ability to successfully navigate through school.

Goal theory shows the avoidance individuals demonstrate when the fear of failure exists (Elliot, 1997). Based on prior negative experiences, students will avoid certain educational activities rather than attempt them and experience further failure (Pintrich, 2000). Students who have experienced little homework success tend to demonstrate avoidance characteristics. Those who have given up on homework as an

avoidance mechanism are apt to fall farther behind, reducing motivation and self-efficacy levels (Bang, 2011).

Self-efficacy theory demonstrates why individuals of similar cognitive ability can perform at such distinct levels in school. When a child has experienced much success, they have a greater belief in their ability to achieve success and reach ever more difficult goals. As Bandura (1997) stated, it does not take many negative experiences to lower one's self-efficacy. The practice of homework can certainly affect a student's self-efficacy (Bembenutty, 2011). Sent home to households of varied socio-economic status, to parents of different educational levels, all are expected to attain similar results (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011).

Human Ecology Theory

Human Ecology Theory is another theory supporting this transcendental phenomenological study. The theory "focuses on the developing person, the environment, and the evolving interaction between the person and the environment" (Berry, 2001, p. 379). Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) the ecological model considers the effect socio-demographic characteristics of students and their families have on interactions with immediate and distant environments (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Student characteristics include age, ethnicity, and gender, while family characteristics include marital status, level of education, and financial resources (Hong & Eamon).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the ecological environment "as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). He developed the human ecological theory as a way to "define and understand human development

within the context of the system of relationships that form a person's environment" (Johnson, 2008, p. 2). Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained the environment as being comprised of four sets of systems interacting in complex manners. Each of the system layers can affect or be affected by the individual's development (Johnson, 2012).

The first system layer is referred by Bronfenbrenner (1995) as the microsystem and includes activities, roles and relationships experienced by the maturing individual. This layer comprises structures the developing person has direct contact with and can affect or be affected by the individual. The second layer is referred by Bronfenbrenner as the mesosystem. This layer "comprises the linkages between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 227). Just like microsystems, mesosystems are bi-directional. An example related to this proposed study is a school. The microsystems could be students and parents. Parental expectations, or lack thereof, concerning the academic success of their children can affect the climate of a school and alter student behavior (Johnson, 2008).

The third layer, the exosystem, includes social systems over which the developing child has no influence and is therefore unidirectional (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Exosystems include such structures as state and federal school regulations, school board policies, and the local economy. The macrosystem is also unidirectional and affects the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The macrosystem consists of the values, customs, and beliefs of a given culture (Berry, 1995). The macrosystem of a school moves from the local level to the national level.

Bronfenbrenner (1995) later included the chronosystem in his human ecology model. The chronosystem added the dimension of time, whether short- or long-term, to his model. At the school level the chronosystem refers to “developmental changes that occur in the student body, teaching staff, curricular choices, etc., as well as the overall number of years in operation” (Johnson, 2008, p. 3). The chronosystem added fluidity to the theory.

Research has demonstrated outcomes and processes related to education are influenced by myriad factors (Martin, Anderson, Bobis, & Way, 2012). Each of the ecological levels discussed add to the sets affecting the process of education. Students bring their prior achievements, and personal dispositions to school and these are combined with all the ecological layers (Hattie, 2009). The role of the home is one of these layers (Martin et al.) and is especially relevant when investigating the educational practice of homework.

Parental involvement in the educational experience of their children is of great relevance as it demonstrates their belief in the importance of attaining a quality education and the impact it will have on later life (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Those students receiving a high level of support from the home are shown to develop positive character traits and avoid negative behaviors (Peabody, 2012). Positive environmental interactions have a positive effect on students’ perceptions toward school (Hong & Eamon, 2012).

The converse of this dynamic relationship between a developing person and the environment is also true (Atkiss, Moyer, Desai, & Roland, 2011). The homework environment of students “can have considerable effects on whether students complete

the given tasks” (Bang et al., 2011). Many studies have identified an association between the demographic characteristics of families and student achievement (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Peabody, 2012). In fact, socio-economic status is one of the most critical demographic characteristics pertaining to student development (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2012).

Parents who are economically disadvantaged are often less able to assist their children with homework or to provide the resources required for successful completion (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Many parents of low socio-economic status do not possess the required knowledge base to assist their children with homework (Payne, 2013). Research has demonstrated teachers consistently report an essential character trait of students they consider capable is an ability to complete homework assignments (Bang, Suarez-Orozco, Pakes, & O’Connor, 2009). Those students whose ecological environments are not conducive to homework completion are placed “at a position of cumulative disadvantage – for failed opportunities to learn, negative teacher perceptions, lower academic self-efficacy, and academic disengagement” (Bang et al., 2011, p. 27).

The human ecology theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) illumines the effects either the completion or incomplection of homework can have on the self-efficacy of students. While the ability to complete homework may differ due to the effects of elements within a system it may also differ because of individual characteristics in several ecological layers (Bang et al., 2011). Since the ecology model considers the experiences and perceptions of individuals, Bronfenbrenner considered

phenomenological research to be critical when examining areas pertaining to human ecology.

Review of the Literature

Homework assignments taken home each night by students across this nation are a common sight. Most adults experienced the daily chore and simply consider the practice to be an integral strand in the educational process (Wharton, 2001). However, research is conflicting (Cooper et al., 2006). A debate among researchers exists as to the effectiveness of homework to increase academic and non-academic student achievement (Cooper & Valentine, 2001).

Cooper, Robinson, and Patall (2006) conducted a study to compare the effect of homework on younger and older students. They compared their ages with the amount of homework assigned, the amount completed, the corresponding test results and the grades achieved. Of the eight categories six had no significant relationship, one had a negative relationship, and one had a positive relationship; the effect on grades compared to homework done with older students (Cooper et al.). Homework is much more complex than most researchers of the topic have been willing to admit (Bembenutty, 2011). Cooper et al. asserted when all the research and studies are examined, the value of homework to increase academic achievement cannot be supported or denied.

One of the primary flaws of studies involving homework is the researcher's tendency to only look at one aspect of homework and ignore other factors involved (Trautwein, Niggli, & Schnyder, 2009; Van Voorhis, 2011). They often focus on time

spent on homework and then correlate it to results on a test. Xu (2011) stated factors such as teacher ability, student ability, and parental involvement are ignored.

Since homework is done outside of the classroom it becomes even harder to draw specific conclusions from the research (Hong et al., 2011). Because every household is unique and parental involvement varies dramatically, there is no way to ascertain how much was done by the student, how much was done with assistance, and how much was completed by the parents (Van Voorhis, 2011). Nor can it be truly determined how much time was actually spent on the assignment as individuals have their own perspectives of time on task. Even though these factors cannot be observed, neither should they be dismissed (Trautwein et al., 2009).

Background: Academic and Non-academic Considerations

Based on the changes in the belief of homework's effectiveness over the past century (Kralovec & Buell, 2000) one would expect to find much research in regard to this subject. Many quantitative studies have been done to correlate the effectiveness of homework to increase student achievement (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012). The results tend to vary with no concrete answer. Cooper et al. (2006) stated, "Homework probably involves more influences than any other instructional device" (p. 87). When one looks at the evidence research provides, the use of homework as a tool to improve student performance and increase academic ability come into serious question (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Kohn (2006) asserted, "The fact that there isn't anything even close to unanimity among experts belies the widespread assumption that homework helps" (p. 26).

One potential influence is the instructor. The teacher's role in homework completion and success is seldom addressed (Strahan, 2006). Teaching practices fostering the development of a personal relationship between student and teacher are not considered. When teachers take the time to understand and identify the personal aspects of their students, the motivation level of the students increases (Trautwein et al, 2009). According to Strahan, "Teachers that are successful at promoting academic momentum demonstrate warm, supportive relationships by showing a deep knowledge of individual students" (p. 6). This momentum carries over to homework, but is not a factor many researchers consider when correlating homework to achievement (Cooper et al., 2006). The positive correlation may have had more to do with the relationship than the homework.

The extreme variations in research findings point to the difficulty in designing accurate research studies (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Most are riddled with flaws that end up negating the reviewer's conclusions (Kohn, 2006). One the most common flaws is the reliance on self-reporting by students and parents in regard to how much time is spent on homework (Bempechat et al., 2011). It is difficult to honestly evaluate time on task as opposed to time not actually engaged on the homework assignment.

Even results from The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2009) cannot find a positive correlation between student achievement and time spent on homework. Students are required to complete a survey before beginning this test including questions as to how much time they spend on homework. Fourth grade results on the math test show no difference in the scores of those who reported doing

thirty minutes of homework and those who reported doing none. The achievement results decline as the number of self-reported minutes increase (NAEP, 2009).

In eighth grade the results were higher for those who reported doing less than an hour, but decreased after that period. In twelfth grade the results were not affected by the amount of time spent on homework (NAEP, 2009). While these results may be faulty due to being self-reported, they demonstrate the difficulty of identifying any discernible difference in the amount of time students spend doing homework and the academic results.

The most common reason for assigning homework is to continue the learning process going on in the classroom (Cooper et al., 2006). For most students, it means receiving homework assignments in the form of skill and drill (Kohn, 2006).

Homework given in this format is in direct contrast to what research shows enhances learning. Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, and Ludtke (2009) reported when students are given choices concerning homework their motivation to complete it successfully greatly increases. This method of homework is rarely applied. Trautwein et al. stated, "Drill and practice assignments were associated with comparatively negative developments in homework effort and achievement" (p. 184). Thus, the most oft stated reason for supporting homework, an increase of academic ability, is negated by the very style of homework usually assigned (Galloway & Pope, 2007).

Some research has been done to understand the stress homework creates in students' lives (Galloway & Pope, 2007). If a stated goal of homework is to improve academic levels, one would not want the goal offset by students experiencing academic failure because of this educational device. However, according to Galloway

and Pope, “67.8% of high school students reported homework as placing the most stress in their lives” (p. 27) and the majority report dropping out of an extra-curricular activity due to homework. Whereas the proponents of homework believe in its inherent ability to produce positive results, this study demonstrated homework may actually do more harm in instilling a desire to learn for many students (Galloway & Pope).

The widespread belief in the ability of homework to increase academic achievement encourages politicians and bureaucrats to demand more whenever they have the urge to blame schools for failing policies (Kralovec & Buell, 2001). However, recent studies showing U.S. students being outscored by 10-20% when compared to other nations report an interesting fact. Baines (2007) provided statistics showing U.S. students are in school about 1,100 hours per year as opposed to the 700 most other nations’ students attend. Also, students in this nation spend more time on homework each week than their counterparts from other countries regularly outperforming them on international tests. Baines indicated, “Time spent doing homework will be unconnected to academic achievement if the time is not spent productively” (p. 99).

Many educators and parents believe homework increases self-discipline, improves organizational skills, and increases levels of motivation (Danielson, Strom, & Kramer, 2011). Others assert it promotes parental involvement in the educational process which in turn enhances student learning (Van Voorhis, 2011; Xu, 2011). However, Kohn (2006) posited no studies or research can conclusively support these claims due to faulty research designs. Cooper et al. (2006) reported some of the

negative aspects of homework include boredom, confusion, and loss of after-school autonomy. .

Self-discipline and responsibility are traits parents wish their children to have and teachers try to encourage (Danielson et al., 2011). Many educational professionals and researchers claim homework fosters these traits and therefore is beneficial to student development (Sidhu, Fook, & Singh, 2010). However, some researchers refute this claim simply by pointing out the lack of empirical evidence to support it (Bembenutty, 2011). Trautwein et al. (2009) questioned exactly what children are responsible for in regard to homework. They do not, for the most part, decide if they will complete it since the teacher has declared it mandatory and many parents insist on its completion before other activities can be engaged in (Kohn, 2006). In most classrooms they are not even permitted to decide what type of homework they wish to complete (Suskind, 2012). Since self-discipline is defined as taking control of one's actions, the very nature of homework limits this ability to be realized (Danielson et al).

Organization and time-management skills are also considered a valuable by-product of homework (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Some researchers and authors question the promotion of these desired traits through homework completion (Hong, Wan, & Peng, 2011). Again, for most, the only time-management skill they learn is being told at what time they must begin or complete the assignment. Rather than increasing the ability of children to consider all they must do for the evening and deciding when to accomplish each goal, most are simply instructed to sit down and finish the homework (Galloway & Pope, 2007). Organization of a higher order is non-existent (Xu, 2008).

The belief in homework to increase good work habits is also questioned by researchers (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Some insist a child's ability to handle a full day at school and then continue the work after arriving home develops the work habits that are required to become a good employee some day. Others question the number of adults who would be willing to bring home assignments their bosses insisted they complete during the evening hours and if, in fact, this would truly promote better job performance (Kohn, 2006).

The cognitive level of students should also be considered when assigning homework (Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2006). There is a potential for psychological damage to be inflicted on children who are not yet cognitively developed to handle the stress homework creates (Pomerantz et al.). Until recently primary grade students were not given homework as it was understood they were not at the proper cognitive level. Kralovec and Buell (2000) wondered if a primary grade child should be asked to handle the stress of an adult and whether this stress truly improves a student's work ethic.

Motivation

Another non-academic benefit of homework often given as a primary reason for its implementation is motivation (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012). Some believe when one is required on a daily basis to bring work home from school, mastery of the content increases and therefore so does motivation (Suskind, 2012). Research has been conducted that refutes this claim (Kohn, 2006). According to Gewertz (2006), lack of motivation is often due to unchallenging and repetitive assignments, a fair description of that which is usually given for homework. Instead of motivating students,

homework often bores academically gifted students and frustrates those of lower academic ability (Xu, 2008).

Student engagement in the learning process must be encouraged (Danielson et al., 2011). When students believe they have a voice in what they are learning and how this learning will be assessed they are much more apt to demonstrate high levels of motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009). When homework assignments are given with no thought to self-efficacy, it is no wonder teachers complain about the quality of the work and the lack of effort being displayed. Danielson et al. pointed out allowing students to have a voice in how they will apply the principles they are learning increases a sense of self-determination which leads to increased motivation. Most students are seldom afforded this opportunity.

For motivation to be effective it has to be at an intrinsic level (Pintrich, 2000). In order for homework to reach this level much thought must be put into its application (Galloway & Pope, 2007). Students' ability levels must be addressed, along with their strengths and weaknesses. Students' interests should be considered to make the homework assignment relevant to them on a personal level (Sidhu et al., 2010). Unfortunately, according to Witzel and Riccomini (1992) in the area of mathematics, 75% of classroom and homework activities are taken from the textbook being used. Therefore, no thought is going into the homework assigned, it is simply dictated by whatever page is being used (Witzel & Riccomini). This style of homework does not even motivate at the extrinsic level.

Iflazoglu and Hong (2012) found for students' motivation towards homework to be positive they needed organized homework routines. While most would consider

this to be the norm, many students arrive home to chaos and confusion (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012). The motivation to complete homework becomes secondary to survival. Students' motivation to complete homework assignments lessens as negative experiences concerning homework increase (Bempechat et al., 2011). According to Pintrich (2000), avoidance goals spur one to withdraw from an activity to avoid negative implications and experiences. For many students a daily confrontation with their teacher is preferable to attempting an assignment they have little belief in their ability to complete (Bempechat et al.).

Students who struggle with the content of homework assignments, or lack the home environment to complete them need an instructor who is genuinely concerned for them (Strahan, 2008). If motivation is lacking, it is imperative for teachers to build the relationships necessary to inspire their students (Martin & Dowson, 2009). "The literature consistently notes the substantial role that relationships play in students' success at school" (Martin & Dowson, p. 327). Not all educators reflect this understanding.

Another factor pertaining to motivation is parental involvement (Pomerantz et al, 2006). Parents play a major role in enhancing their children's opportunity for academic success and increasing the likelihood they will continue on to higher education (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Dumont et al. (2011) stated, "It is well documented that family plays a major role in children's academic achievement" (p. 55).

One area of academia in which parents play a vital role is in assisting their children in homework completion (Dumont et al., 2011). Nowhere is the parental influence on academic achievement more evident than on homework assignments. In

fact, Harris and Goodall (2008) posited, “Parental engagement in children’s learning in the home makes the greatest difference to student achievement” (p. 277). Middle school students, who reported their parents were supportive of their education, including homework assignments, were less likely to exhibit behavior problems (Van Voorhis, 2011). While beneficial to those whose parents are willing or able to be supportive, this finding is problematic for students whose parents are unable or unwilling.

Some believe when homework is assigned it gives parents an opportunity to discover what their child is learning and how they are performing (Dumont et al., 2012). It provides an opportunity for bonding to occur. While this may have been the case when most children came from two-parent families in which the mother stayed home, today it is the exception rather than the rule (Dumont et al.). By the end of the day, when parents arrive home from work they are exhausted from their job requirements. After completing the necessary household tasks, rather than enjoying a relaxing evening with their family it is instead time for homework. Most are not in a calm mental state which is conducive to learning (Kohn, 2006).

Research shows when a parent is stressed, the child becomes stressed as well and this has a negative effect on the learning process (Else, Hyde, & Hejmadi, 2008). Rather than students and parents deriving a sense of pleasure from spending time together, an adversarial atmosphere is present. When students are continually placed under stress due to conflicts with their parents over homework, the sense of wonder in the learning process that once existed quickly evaporates (Else et al.).

Patall, Cooper and Robinson (2008) showed the probability of this negative interaction increases in single-family homes where many low socio-economic students reside. Children being raised in homes with both parents “tend to have better developmental and academic outcomes than their peers living in single-adult households” (Bang et al., 2011). Living with two adults increases the opportunity for children to receive the time and attention essential to successful homework completion (Bang et al.).

Children are attuned to the emotions and beliefs of their parents (Simplicio, 2005). If they hear them complaining (perhaps justifiably) about homework, they will complain as well. By middle school students are attuned to whether or not their parents are able to assist them with homework in comparison to their peers (Van Voorhis, 2011). This knowledge does much to increase or diminish the motivation level of students. Research shows parental engagement increases with social status and income level (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Therefore, certain parents are more apt to be actively involved with their children and their homework assignments.

Since most teachers consider homework completion to be a student trait essential to academic success, those students who do not are apt to suffer academically (Bang et al., 2011). This is especially troubling at the middle school level (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Research has shown a high relationship between failing a core subject in sixth grade and eventually dropping out of school (Balfanz et al.). Avoidance motivation, which is based on prior negative experience, encourages students to avoid certain educational activities, rather than attempting them and experiencing further failure (Elliot, 1977).

While it is possible for some students of low socio-economic status to overcome the lack of parental involvement and remain positively motivated to succeed, it is challenging (Bembenutty, 2011). “It is well established that socioeconomic status is one of the most important demographic characteristics related to children’s development (Bang, et al. 2011, p. 31). A negative set of emotions translates to education in general and the hope homework will improve academics is unlikely to be realized (Xu, 2011).

Socio-Economic Discrepancies

Some researchers believe the number one reason not to assign homework has to do with the socio-economic aspects of students (Bempechat et al., 2011; Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Kohn, 2006). One of the principle reasons for the establishment of a free public education being declared mandatory for all students was to level the economic playing field (Kohn, 2006). Education for most of history was reserved for the wealthy; since poor families could not afford to send their children to school there was little chance for economic advancement (Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

The creation of public schools was meant to address this negative aspect of our society and give everyone a chance to move up the economic ladder (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). By requiring all children to attend school until reaching a certain age it was hoped even more children would reap the benefits of an education. Since parents of low-economic status had never gone to school, some may not have understood its benefits (Peabody, 2012). So, a free education for every citizen was provided to enable all people to realize the opportunity for economic prosperity.

Approximately 39% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty in the United States (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Unfortunately, “children who experience poverty are more likely than their more advantaged peers to experience lower levels of educational attainment and there is evidence that poverty during early childhood and persistent poverty may be particularly deleterious” (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011, p. 317). Poverty, as defined by the U.S. government, is reported as a family of four with an income at or below \$23, 050 per year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Other definitions of poverty include (a) absolute poverty - the inability to meet the cost of basic needs, (b) relative poverty – falling below 50% of the national median income, and (c) subjective poverty – falling below a subjective of required income (Yoshikawa et al.). In education poverty generally is determined by student eligibility for free or reduced lunches. Those students qualifying for free lunch fall below 130% of the poverty line, while those qualifying for reduced lunches fall below 185% of the poverty line (Yoshikawa et al.).

Socio-economic diversity not only has a major impact on student learning, but can also create barriers for access to higher standards of living (Peabody, 2012). Parents who work as low-wage employees have much higher rates of job instability and job loss (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Losing one’s job can have long-lasting detrimental effects on the educational experience of children (Kellett, 2009). Lack of income limits the ability to purchase resources and food, attend first-rate schools, and reside in safe neighborhoods (Yoshikawa et al.).

In addition, limited income increases the likelihood of behavior problems in children because of “parenting stress and reduced ability to provide effective

caregiving” (Yoshikawa et al., 2012, p. 275). When the psychological resources of parents are taxed due to income concerns, the probability of marital problems and breakup increase, which in turn lead to an increase in mental – emotional – behavioral traits of affected children (Kalil, 2009). These factors lead to disengagement from learning and the eventual actuality of leaving school before graduating (Balfanz et al., 2007). When one considers how “families differ in the resources and knowledge they bring to their children’s education, it seems reasonable to expect systematic differences in parents’ educational involvement depending on family background” (Dumont et al., 2012, p. 56).

Much research shows “parental engagement in children’s learning *in the home* makes the greatest difference to students’ achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 277). The task of homework completion is generally carried out in the homes of students. Evidence exists demonstrating parental engagement increases with income and educational level (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2012). Therefore, “certain parents are more likely to engage in learning, while others face certain barriers, influenced by context and culture, which can be wrongly interpreted as resistance or intransigence” (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 286).

A disparity in parental ability or desire to assist children on homework assignments can have lasting effects (Pomerantz et al., 2006). In some households parents are better able to help their children with homework (Kohn, 2006). Harris and Goodall (2008) asserted, “A major factor mediating parental engagement is socio-economic status, whether indexed by occupational class or parental level of education”

(p. 279). This includes the inability to provide the necessary environment, resources, or academic assistance (Bang et al. 2011).

Parental assistance is especially beneficial in promoting student self-efficacy toward learning (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Research demonstrates homework can increase achievement-related beliefs and motivational skills if positive experiences are had concerning homework completion (Bempechat et al., 2011). In concurrence, students who have negative views about their abilities often work below their potential. These negative perceptions create challenges in homework achievement (Pomerantz et al., 2006). The ability of parents to affect the beliefs of their children is large (Dumont et al, 2011).

Many researchers believe homework does much to diminish an “equal” education for all (Bempechat et al., 2011; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Marzano and Pickering (2007) stated homework widens the rift between the advantaged and disadvantaged and does much harm to those at-risk. Since most teachers come from a middle-class background (Kralovec & Buell, 2000) they assume parents appreciate the value of a good education and will provide whatever is necessary to ensure their children receive one.

The reality of the situation is those who do come from similar backgrounds will most likely receive the encouragement on homework to complete it or the required materials to finish a project (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011). They probably have parents who are educated and therefore able to provide academic assistance (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2011). For those whose parents did not graduate or attend college the story is often very different (Bempechat et al., 2011; Pipho, 1999). The value of an education

may not exist in some households and even when it does parents may be unable to assist the child (Bembenutty, 2011). Their ability to provide their child with materials to finish homework assignments or hire a private tutor is out of the question, as all income is needed to purchase essentials (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2012). According to Vatterott (2009) this disparity widens the achievement gap between those who have and those who don't, fostering demotivation and leading to a general dislike of school.

Kralovec and Buell (2000) contended "detailed studies of economic mobility conducted over the last decade suggest that equality of opportunity in this nation is at best a long shot" (p. 70). If true, schools should not exacerbate the situation by sending work home with students and turning a blind eye to the fact for many students there is little possibility of completing it (Kellett, 2009). Any learning taking place in school should not be sent home to complete as this creates a class divide that leads many students to fall farther and farther behind (Kralovec & Buell). If nowhere else, at least at school all students should feel equal to their peers and not be punished for situations beyond their control.

Alternatives to assignments being required outside of normal school hours exist (Cosden, Morrison, Albenese, & Macias, 2001; Kellett, 2009). Extending school hours to provide time in class for lesson practice is one idea. After-school programs led by teachers, developed to assist students in assignments is another possibility (Cosden et al., 2001). If all students are to be motivated to become lifelong learners one's socio-economic status should not interfere (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). The self-efficacy of each student must be a priority in educational decisions.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). People with a strong sense of self-efficacy have a belief in their ability to complete a required task successfully. In addition, as tasks become more challenging they rise to the challenge because of the previous positive experiences (Bandura, 1997). The same holds true for students. Research shows “that perceived efficacy beliefs contribute independently to intellectual performance rather than simply reflecting cognitive skills” (Bandura, 1997, p. 214). As students’ self-efficacy increases, the ability to perform to their full academic potential is realized.

Three components interact in contributing to the self-efficacy level of students; students’ beliefs in their ability to succeed, teachers’ beliefs in their ability to motivate and instruct, and faculties’ belief in the ability of their schools to inspire students (Bandura, 1997). These three contributors work together to encourage and develop student self-efficacy, or to discourage and reduce self-efficacy. If these components are lacking, as is often the case in low socio-economic schools, a child is unlikely to have school experiences that are efficacious in nature (Bembenutty, 2011).

Students must be led to experience success in school and shown they are able to attain higher goals (Elliot, 1999). Research demonstrates the “strength of people’s convictions in their own effectiveness is likely to affect whether they will even attempt to try to cope with given situations” (Bandura, 1997, p. 205). Children’s beliefs in their ability must be supported and encouraged in all areas of education if they are to succeed. Some current educational practices compromise this support (Bempechat, 2011).

Presently, year-end standardized testing is a cornerstone of education. Perhaps the biggest injustice of high stakes standardized testing is to those in our nation who are most in need (Dodge, 2009). Au (2007) stated research has shown standardized tests “reproduce race-based and economic class-based inequalities that generally correlate with those present in society at large” (p. 639). According to Popham (2001) many items presented on standardized tests are more likely to be answered correctly by middle- or upper-class students simply due to their surroundings and experiences. Those of lower socioeconomic status are penalized for circumstances beyond their control. Dodge (2009) stated, “The correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement is astonishingly strong” (p. 15). To penalize students and condemn schools due to external circumstances is unconscionable.

Test scores are probably more reflective of a parent’s income than a school’s quality (Dodge, 2009). Sadly, Moses and Nanna (2007) reported states with high levels of minorities enact strict accountability procedures further increasing the pressure inherent to high stakes testing and exacerbate problems associated with the tests. Instead of making education relevant, interesting and exciting for those most in need of continuing on to escape the cycle of poverty, states penalize them and make them feel inadequate, a sure recipe for the promotion of drop-outs (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Such practices promote low self-efficacy in students, teachers, and schools (Bandura, 1997). A culture of failure, based on testing, diminishes the belief in ability to meet and overcome challenges (Dodge, 2009). All three components of developing

school related self-efficacy are negated. Quality teachers often leave such schools in search of more positive environments; students cannot (Moses & Nanna, 2007).

Homework can contribute to a student's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The different types of self-efficacy beliefs previously mentioned apply to homework (Bembenutty, 2011). Self-efficacy for performance and self-efficacy for learning refer to the beliefs students have in their capability to complete an assignment and their capability to learn a new skill respectively (Bembenutty). Collective self-efficacy, teacher self-efficacy, and collective teacher self-efficacy consider the dynamics of different school groups and their combined influence on the efficacy of individuals (Bembenutty).

Bembenutty (2011) asserted, "Self-efficacious students who receive a homework assignment have a capability belief that influences them to have thought patterns, emotions, and actions that drive them to successful homework completion" (p. 458). For those with low self-efficacy, homework becomes another educational device that demotivates and frustrates (Bembenutty). Teachers continually convey evaluations of their students, whether directly or indirectly, and when these evaluations are repeatedly negative concerning homework, the self-efficacy of the affected students suffer (Bandura, 1997).

Low self-efficacy leads to avoidance behaviors. When students fear they will fail, they often avoid the task or assignment altogether (Elliot, 1997). By presenting an apathetical or confrontational demeanor they hide the sense of failure they are feeling rather than demonstrating an inability to be successful in front of their peers (Elliot,

1999). This pattern simply contributes to the deterioration of self-efficacy and a downward spiraling effect (Lorsbach & Jinks, 1999).

Some researchers believe self-efficacious tendencies toward homework completion are affected by the gender of students (Lindberg, Hyde, & Hirsch, 2008). Although gender stereotypes have shifted Lindberg et al., opined, "...researchers now believe that the process is much less explicit and that children develop their understanding of gender roles through observation of adults' subtle, implicit, behaviors" (p. 233). Because of the apparent self-regulatory nature of homework, those lacking such skills can become overwhelmed or discouraged (Lindberg et al.). Girls tend to more accurately report the time utilized to complete homework than their male peers (Kackar, Shumow, Schmidt, & Grzetich, 2011) and employ self-regulatory strategies more effectively (Hong et al., 2009).

However, the solitary nature of homework seems to produce greater stress for girls than boys (Kackar et al., 2011). Kackar et al. reported, "...companions such as friends seemed to reduce girls' stress levels" (p. 76). This finding is troublesome when one considers the difficulty of families from low-income backgrounds lacking the resources to involve classmates (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012).

Other research demonstrated the gender of students to be a negligible factor when considering homework issues (Hong, Peng, & Rowell, 2009). Hong et al. reported non-significant gender differences in homework regulation, contrary to other studies. Lindberg et al. (2008) found no significant difference in the amount of time spent on homework. While such contradictions are not uncommon concerning homework research (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006), the need to listen to low

socio-economic students is apparent if the desired effect of this practice is to be realized.

Common impediments to homework completion are lack of resources, parental support, and conducive learning environments (Bang, 2011). These obstacles describe the situation common to most low socio-economic students (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011). The components are beyond the control of children and contribute to the lack of self-efficacy they demonstrate (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2012). Although cases exist of students overcoming such barriers and excelling academically, not all are so fortunate. Homework simply becomes another impediment to positive educational experiences and contributes to a lack of efficacious beliefs in students (Bandura, 1997).

No studies have examined the influence homework has on sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Those who experience failure at this grade level often drop out of high school (Balfanz et al., 2007). Warton (2001) asserted, “The possibility of a negative effect of homework on the achievement of some subgroups of the student population also needs to be considered” (p. 163). The current transcendental phenomenological study adds to a critical area of educational research by providing educators with a unique perspective on how this daily educational task influences a specific population and the perception toward education they hold.

Summary

Homework is an integral component of the educational program of this nation (Xu, 2011). People hold strong beliefs in its effectiveness, or lack thereof, to enhance academic achievement (Bempechat et al., 2011). Research studies are often conflicting in the results they present (Cooper et al., 2006; Danielson et al., 2011). However, the

efficacy beliefs of students to successfully complete homework assignments can have a positive or negative influence on academic achievement and motivation (Bandura, 1997).

Although a plethora of homework-related research is currently available (Bang, 2011; Danielson et al., 2011; Goetz, Nett, Martiny, Hall, Pekrun, Dettmers, et al. 2012), gaps in the research still exist, especially research of a qualitative nature (Bembenutty, 2011). Most research pertaining to homework is of a quantitative design (Bempechat et al., 2011). Bempechat et al. opined, “Low-income students are particularly at risk for underachievement and school disengagement, and their voices in research have yet to be systematically examined” (p. 253).

Economic factors often limit the ability of parents from providing the necessary encouragement and resources vital to their children’s education. This includes the home, where the largest potential to have a positive impact exists (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Although a premium may be placed on education, those of low socio-economic backgrounds may have an inability to provide their children assistance with homework, due to monetary or time restrictions (Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012). The homework experience of students from various socio-economic levels is apt to be vastly different (Bembenutty, 2011).

Socio-demographic characteristics of family units can also affect the interactions of home and school settings (Hong & Eamon, 2012). These interactions, whether positive or negative, have lasting effects and can alter the course of a child’s educational aspirations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All educational practices should be evaluated to ensure their effects are encouraging life-long learning. Many researchers

suggested qualitative studies pertaining to homework are essential to this educational topic for this reason (Cooper et al., 2006; Hong et al., 2011).

The need for qualitative studies pertaining to homework is evident based upon the literature review. Since the purpose of this study was to fill a research gap by allowing those most affected to describe their lived homework experiences, a transcendental phenomenological research design was chosen. The unique educational experiences of children from low socio-economic backgrounds are often ignored or overlooked by those in education (Bempechat et al. 2011). Enabling their voices to be heard will add much to the discussion of homework.

Chapter three will provide the methodology involved in the current transcendental phenomenological study. This design and its rationale will be explained. The primary research questions will be introduced, along with the co-researchers and the site of the study. Data collection and analysis procedures will be discussed. Finally, the manner of ensuring the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the present study will be included.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the influence this practice has on their educational experience. While numerous studies have been conducted pertaining to homework, many researchers note a lack of qualitative studies exist (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011). Further, research shows sixth grade has a high predictive value in determining students most likely to drop out of high school (Balfanz, 2008). Phenomenological studies pertaining to homework are necessary so the interests of those most influenced by this common educational practice can be heard (Bang, 2007; Cooper, 2006; Danielson, Strom, & Kramer, 2011; Hong, Wan, & Peng, 2011). A non-profit after-school program serving one middle school in a western county of North Carolina was the research setting.

Chapter three includes information related to the selected research method and the procedures necessary to support the research. This chapter presents the research design and research questions. In addition, information pertaining to the population, research site, data collection, and analysis procedures are included. Issues related to trustworthiness, confidentiality, ethics, and the role of the researcher are also presented.

Research Design

This study was designed to be qualitative with a transcendental phenomenological approach. The research design is classified as qualitative because it attempts to examine people in their natural settings and investigate the meaning they

create from their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The design is properly classified as phenomenological as it seeks to understand the voices and perspectives of the participants concerning the lived phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the design is transcendental because the researcher “set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated in order to launch a study as far as possible free of preconceived beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies...” (Moustakas, p. 22).

Research Method

M. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) posited the qualitative research method enables the researcher to explore, examine and assist in understanding a phenomenon and the lived experiences of a group of people within the context of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research is more suitable than quantitative research when a study requires a detailed understanding of a phenomenon and these needed details can best be attained through interviews and observations of participants in their natural environment (Moustakas, 1994). The qualitative method is also consistent with human ecology, motivation, and self-efficacy theories which form the theoretical framework supporting this study. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) indicated, “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). Truly understanding the participants is impossible if removed from the environment.

Quantitative research methods rely on statistical analyses to describe the connection between variables, but fail to capture the voices, essence, and lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). While investigating homework, Bempechat et al. (2011) opined:

...most of the existing research on the motivational benefits of homework is quantitative in nature, and is therefore somewhat limited in the insights it can provide into the meanings that students construct about homework and the ways in which these may be anchored in motivation theory. (p. 253)

Therefore, a qualitative rather than quantitative approach was appropriate for this research because understanding the essence of a lived experience was the goal of the current study.

Research Strategy

A transcendental phenomenological research strategy for the present study was chosen so the homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds could be examined and the essence of the phenomenon explored. This research method allowed the interests of those most affected by homework to be heard (Van Manen, 1990). Their shared experiences added a critical component to homework research (Bempechat, et al., 2011; Cooper & Patall, 2006).

Phenomenology. The goal of phenomenological research is to study the phenomenon of human experience and then explain and interpret the experiences, thus identifying how the subjects under investigation construct meaning to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated, "The term *experienced* highlights the importance of the phenomenological field in ecological research" (p. 29). Van Manen (1990) described the phenomenological process as the study of the world as we currently experience it and the attempt to achieve a deeper, richer understanding of the meanings of these everyday experiences. Moustakas (1994) asserted, "Phenomenology

is the *first* method of knowledge because it begins with ‘things themselves’; it is also the final court of appeal” (p. 41).

Van Manen (1990) believed lived experiences are the starting and ending points in phenomenological research. Individuals cannot reflect upon current experiences while living through them (Van Manen). It becomes the responsibility of the researcher to encourage participant reflection on the phenomenon under investigation and to attain detailed descriptions of their perceptions and emotions (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher must examine these lived experiences and the essence of the phenomenon to connect the details to the whole (Van Manen).

It is the responsibility of the researcher in a phenomenological study to identify the essence of the lived experience by combining participant descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is identified by carefully examining what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas). The current study was designed to identify the essence of the phenomenon of homework through the eyes of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Transcendental application. The transcendental phenomenological approach is deemed appropriate when the essence of a shared experience is sought. Seeking to illumine the essence of a shared experience helps to clarify and explain everyday situations (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas stated,

The researcher following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the Epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and

knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies... (p. 22)

Transcendental phenomenology is the study of how things appear or are perceived by a specific population (Moustakas, 1994). An attempt is made to provide insight into the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The challenge is to “explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings...thus arriving at an understanding of the essence of the experience” (Moustakas, p. 49).

Having spent over 20 years in the classroom, working directly with students from myriad ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, dictated the necessity to utilize this approach. While never having experienced homework as those from low socio-economic backgrounds have, the author has witnessed its influence on the educational process. The Epoche stage allows judgments and understandings to be set aside (Moustakas, 1994). The goal was to describe rather than interpret the phenomenon.

Research Questions

It was the author’s hope this phenomenological study would identify the influence homework has on the educational experience of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, the following questions were developed, based on the theoretical framework and literature review presented in chapter two, to guide the study:

R1: How does homework influence the self-efficacy of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R2: How does homework influence the motivation of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R3: What influence does homework have on the perception toward education sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds hold?

R4: How does socio-economic status influence the lived homework experience of sixth grade students?

R5: How does gender influence the lived homework experience of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

Co-researchers

While those being studied in most forms of research are simply considered participants, the nature of phenomenological research considers participants to be *co-researchers* (Moustakas, 1994). This is because co-researchers are encouraged to join in the research and bring truth to the topic being investigated (Moustakas). Not only were co-researchers asked to engage “in an open-ended investigation...willing to commit to the necessary time and work” (Moustakas, p. 108), but also immerse themselves in the research with a willingness to provide critical feedback at different stages.

Co-researchers were purposefully selected for this study. Criterion typology was used as the purposeful sampling strategy because it ensured “all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128). All the students who volunteered to join in this study were in sixth grade and came from low socio-economic backgrounds, defined as students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Approximately 39% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty

in the United States (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011). The poverty level of students determines which are eligible for free or reduced lunches. Those students qualifying for free lunch fall below 130% of the poverty line, while those qualifying for reduced lunches fall below 185% of the poverty line (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). The non-profit after-school program from which all co-researchers were selected serves students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds as defined above.

Eight co-researchers were selected from the after-school program (see Table 2). This number fits within the prescribed number of co-researchers when conducting phenomenological studies (Polkinghorne, 1989). The selection of the eight co-researchers was based upon their willingness to participate, meeting the delimitations, and attaining parental permission. A balance between male and female students was sought, but not attained due to lack of male respondents. The ethnicity of the co-researchers was not purposeful due to the limited number of co-researchers.

Table 2

Co-researcher Description

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Family Unit
Amy	Female	12	Mother and Father
Kaley	Female	12	Grandparents
Haley	Female	12	Mother and Father
Angela	Female	12	Mother
Gary	Male	12	Mother and Father
Mary	Female	11	Mother
Andy	Male	11	Mother and Father
Ari	Female	12	Mother and Father

In addition, an attempt was made to select co-researchers from each of the four elementary schools operating in the county. These four schools send their fifth grade graduates to the middle school selected as the research site. Although all eight co-researchers came from the same middle school, their attendance at different elementary schools should have lessened the inherent culture a specific school might have brought to the study regarding homework.

Site

The site of this transcendental phenomenological research was Alpha Middle School (pseudonyms will be used for all locations) located in a western county of North Carolina. Co-researchers attended After-School Academy, a non-profit after-school program operating at Alpha Middle School. The objective of this academy is to provide a safe, educational atmosphere for students in grades six through eight who attend Alpha Middle School. While any students may enroll in the program, many come from low socio-economic backgrounds. The program receives funding from a state grant coordinated by a community non-profit organization. Because After-School Academy serves any students, the sample was representative of the school. Seeking co-researchers from the after-school program simply ensured no participants would lose instructional time during regular school hours and would be available for interviews.

After-School Academy provides a small snack to members immediately after the school day ends. Students are then separated by grade level and proceed to a classroom to complete homework assignments. One adult monitors student progress and assists students when requests are made. The student to adult ratio is approximately 15:1. Students then proceed to a different area of the building and engage in activities such as art, crafts, or athletics. Parents or guardians are required to provide transportation and may pick up students any time before six o'clock.

The county chosen for this study is located in the western foothill region of North Carolina. According to data reported from the U.S Census Bureau (2012) approximately 20,500 people reside in the county (6 % Hispanic, 5% Black, 88%

White). Nineteen percent of the residents are 18 years old or younger. The median household income is \$43,000. About 14% live below the poverty level as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau). Although all co-researchers attend Alpha Middle School, included are demographics from the four elementary schools sending fifth grade graduates to the middle school.

Alpha Middle School

This school serves the entire middle school student population, grades six through eight, of the county. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported the student population as 545 students (187 sixth graders) with a 14:1 student-teacher ratio. Approximately 82% of the students are White, 8% are Hispanic, and 11% are Black. Fifty-three percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics).

Dewey Elementary School

The first elementary school is located in the suburban area of the county. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), the student population is 460 students with a 15:1 student-teacher ratio. About 70% of the students are White, 18% are Hispanic, and 11% are Black. Sixty percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics).

Eugene Elementary School

The second elementary school is located in a more rural region of the county. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported the student population is 450 students with a 14:1 student-teacher ratio. Seventy-four percent of the students are

White, 13% are Hispanic, and 13% are Black. Those eligible for free or reduced lunch represent 71% of the students (National Center for Education Statistics).

Agnes Elementary School

The third elementary school is located in an isolated, rural area of the county. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported the population to be 158 students. The student-teacher ratio is 13:1. Ninety-one percent of the students are White, 5% Black, and 4% Hispanic. Students eligible for free or reduced lunch comprise 53% of the student body (National Center for Education Statistics).

Jacqueline Elementary School

The fourth elementary school which sends students to Alpha Middle School is also in a rural setting. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported the school population as 197 with a 15:1 student-teacher ratio. Ninety-two percent of students are White, 2% Black, and 6% Hispanic. Seventy-three percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics).

Procedures

Sampling

A letter was submitted to the principal of Alpha Middle School formally describing the proposed study and requesting permission to conduct the research at the after-school site (see Appendix C). The administrator replied affirmatively. After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix B) the author contacted the principal and arrangements were made to meet with all sixth grade students who currently attend the after-school program to discuss the research. The author is currently a teacher at this school. However, each grade level consists of two separate teams. Only students from

the team not instructed by the author were included in the meeting, eliminating any potential for conflicts of interest or authoritative influence.

Purposeful sampling was used to select co-researchers in the study. Due to the necessity of insuring co-researchers shared a common bond concerning the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990), purposeful sampling was deemed appropriate. Co-researchers selected for the current study shared the following characteristics: (a) sixth grade level, (b) eligible for free/reduced lunch, and (c) include both male and female students. The author met with the eligible students and read from the recruitment script (see Appendix G). Questions proffered by the students in attendance were answered and students were thanked for their attentiveness and dismissed.

Those in attendance who demonstrated an interest in participating in the study were presented with two forms. Out of the initial pool of twenty-three students in attendance fourteen sought the information packet. An introductory letter and a letter of consent were sent to parents of potential co-researchers via the students presenting the proposed study and describing the importance (see Appendices D and E). The letters included the delimitations of the study, thereby eliminating students who did not qualify for free/reduced lunches.

Eight of these fourteen students' parents consented to their children's participation in the study and replied affirmatively to their children being digitally recorded during the interview sessions. According to Seidman (2006), the number of participants in a qualitative study should range from five to twenty-five. Seidman indicated participants should share common and appropriate characteristics in regard to the research being conducted.

Although the intent was to have an equal number of male and female co-researchers, the actual number was six females and two males. The limited number of students did not detract from the goal of having each elementary school in the county represented. Three students previously attended Franklin Elementary, two each attended Isabelle and Jacqueline Elementary Schools, and one co-researcher attended Henry Elementary School.

As students returned the letters of consent, each was given a letter of assent (see Appendix F). The letters were read aloud and the students were instructed to reread them at their homes and make their final decisions as to participating in the research. Once the assent letters were signed and returned, the co-researchers were scheduled for an individual interview session to be held during after-school hours. The co-researchers were also asked to choose a song, picture, or poem reflecting their emotions when they considered homework, a component of phenomenological research considered especially effective when working with children (Thomson, 2008). The visual narrative could be self-produced. Van Manen (1990) stated, “Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations” (p. 74).

Instrumentation

At the predetermined time, individual interviews were conducted at the site and the visual narratives collected with explanations provided by the co-researchers as to their relevancy. These explanations were recorded during the interview process and served as a means to begin the dialogue and increase the comfort level of the co-

researchers. A focus group interview comprised of all co-researchers was scheduled after completion of individual interviews providing co-researchers with multiple opportunities to express their homework experiences. Follow-up interviews were conducted as needed to clarify or expound upon statements given initially and to allow for member checking.

Permission to digitally record during interview sessions was included in the letters of consent and assent. The digital recording device utilized was an Olympus VN-7200 digital recorder having computer connectivity capability to download the recordings into a dictation software program. The digital recordings were transcribed by the author using Dragon Naturally Speaking Premium 11 software. A significant statement list was developed while analyzing the transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). Upon careful and deliberate examination of the significant statements, the emerging themes were recorded. Textural and structural descriptions were provided, based upon the themes. Finally, a rich, thick description of the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas) was included in chapter five of the study.

The Researcher's Role

My role as researcher in this transcendental phenomenological study was to function as a human instrument. While quantitative methods of inquiry seek to identify variables and measure relationships, qualitative phenomenology seeks to describe a shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). I immersed myself in the experiences of my co-researchers through interviews and careful examination of the interview transcripts. Moustakas stated, "Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not

explanations or analyses” (p. 58). To become a human instrument was essential if the phenomenon was to be described accurately.

I have been a teacher at the elementary and middle school levels throughout my 23 years as an educator. During this time I have witnessed the effects of mandated curricular and instructional practices. While some are effective, many are not research-based and are simply implemented for the sake of change, convenience, or political expediency. Some are considered established components of education and go unquestioned.

As my career has progressed, I have come to question some of these practices and requirements. I have witnessed the unintentional or negative consequences on students. For example, the focus on year-end standardized testing has taken on a life of its own. Originally implemented in most states to measure the academic growth of a student, the results were but one of many measurements used to determine student proficiency. Now, they have been increased in duration, frequency, and intensity. The pressure placed on students to perform has caused some to lose interest and others to rebel.

Homework is another example. I originally assigned it and accepted no excuses for incompleteness. Most teachers I worked with also considered it of paramount importance. As my career progressed I began to consider other factors, such as students’ home-lives, extra-curricular activities, and parental engagement. I began to wonder if this tool was having the desired effect on increasing academic achievement for all students or just some. This caused me to examine and modify some teaching practices. It also prompted my curiosity as to why some in the

profession never considered any deleterious effects of common teaching practices regardless of their level of experience. This inspired me to become an advocate for students and discuss issues such as these with colleagues.

Due to my teaching experience it was essential for me to bracket myself out of the study so my research would remain unbiased. Moustakas (1994) refers to this process as Epoche, a process in which researchers “set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p. 85). It is a conscientious process in which, by admitting and identifying one’s beliefs, one is able to look at something again, “as if for the first time” (Moustakas, p. 85). I attempted to accomplish this process through journaling and reflective writing.

My Christian faith inspires me to be more like Christ and to consider and assist those whose voices are ignored. This is what led me to this research topic. However, it was only accomplished successfully by truly suspending my assumptions and allowing the voices of my co-researchers to be heard. The goal of phenomenology is to describe, not interpret which is why the Epoche process is so critical.

Data Collection

Since the purpose of the phenomenological research design is to describe a shared experience (Moustakas, 1994), the primary source of data collection was through interviews, both individual and group, with the co-researchers. This interview process “involves an informal, interactive, process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Probing questions were used to gain more insight to the phenomenon and a follow-up interview was scheduled when the author deemed it necessary.

In addition, co-researchers were asked to bring a visual narrative to the interview session depicting their emotional connection to homework. Van Manen (1990) pointed out, “Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts – texts consisting of not a verbal language, but a language nevertheless...” (p. 74). Examples might include a song, poem, or drawing. These visual narratives were used to enhance the interview process.

All interview questions were grounded in the research (Moustakas, 1994). Probing questions were included only to draw out richer details, not to steer responses in a particular direction. In order to avoid this potential negative, much time and thought went into the Epoche process. This process was essential to avoid allowing preconceived ideas concerning the phenomenon to affect the study and to examine it through an unfettered lens (Husserl, 1977).

Visual Narrative

While the long interview is the most common form of data collection in phenomenological studies, many researchers suggest incorporating innovative collection methods, such as visual narratives (Kirova & Emme, 2006). Van Manen (1990) opined there are limitations to the spoken language in phenomenological descriptions. This is especially true when the participants of a study are children or young adults (Thomson, 2008). Collecting data from depictions of the phenomenon chosen or developed by the co-researchers added another dimension to the research (Polkinghorne, 1989).

According to Thomson (2008), “The incorporation of drawings in research...is to sustain engagement with the child or young person in order to ascertain in-depth

understandings of their experiences of particular phenomena” (p. 39). The use of visual narratives with children has been recognized as an effective method of extracting their unique perspectives on a variety of topics which may have otherwise been latent or less conscious (Thomson). Since the co-researchers in this study were sixth graders, incorporating a visual narrative was justified.

Before the individual interview sessions occurred, co-researchers were asked to create or choose a visual narrative representing their emotions when considering homework. These narratives could include, but were not limited to, a drawing, a picture, a song, or a poem representing how they felt about homework. Regardless if self-created or simply selected, the co-researchers were asked to explain their visual narrative during the individual interview session.

The purpose of these visual narratives was to add a deeper, richer component to the data collection. First, they served as a method to enhance opening conversation and assist in establishing rapport. Second, since the co-researchers were students, some may have found it difficult to clearly articulate their homework experiences. Having this auditory, visual, or tactile component assisted them in describing their homework experiences (Thompson, 2008).

Interviews

The method of data collection most common to phenomenological research is the long interview (Moustakas, 1994). The interview serves two important functions. First, it is used to explore and collect the “narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 66). Second, it assists in the development of rapport and trust

between the researcher and co-researchers considered essential to detailed phenomenon descriptions (Van Manen).

Polkinghorne (1994) recommended in-depth, multiple interviews. Although the interview process is of a conversational nature, it must be disciplined and structured (Van Manen, 1990) ensuring co-researchers the opportunity to tell their story.

Moustakas (1994) indicated the researcher should “develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of a person’s experience of the phenomenon...” (p. 114).

The phenomenological interview often begins with an activity to create a relaxed atmosphere. Van Manen (1990) suggested including a visual narrative to encourage dialogue and elicit deeper meaning of the phenomenon under investigation. Creswell (2007) indicated focus group interviews have the potential to add additional data because listening to others can focus and remind fellow co-researchers of their own experiences. Individual interviews, focus group interviews, and visual narratives were all used as methods of data collection in this study.

Individual interviews. Individual interviews with each co-researcher were conducted at Alpha Middle School between the hours of 3:30 and 4:30 p.m. This is the time in which After-School Academy has an adult supervise students completing school work. All interviews, both individual and focus group, took place during the month of February. Interviews were conducted in an available classroom.

The interviews began with broad, general questions and moved to specific co-researcher experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Prepared questions, supported by the literature review and the theoretical framework were asked. Co-researchers were

prompted to elaborate their answers or comments when necessary. Since the researcher is “responsible for creating a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable” (Moustakas, p. 114), this author began each interview by having co-researchers describe their visual narratives and then continued with the interview protocol (see Appendix A).

The interview questions were as follows:

1. Can you please describe your visual narrative?
2. Why did you choose this visual narrative to represent your homework experience?
3. What have been your experiences regarding homework?
4. Describe your home workspace where you do homework.
5. Describe the home environment you experience while working on homework.
6. How has homework influenced the way in which you feel about yourself?
7. What influence has homework had on your motivation?
8. How often do you complete required homework assignments?
9. When you have not completed a homework assignment, what was the primary reason?
10. What emotions come to mind when you consider homework?
11. In what ways, if any, has homework assisted you in experiencing academic success?
12. How would you feel if the practice of homework was eliminated?
13. How has homework influenced your feelings toward school in general?

The first two questions were used to enhance the comfort level of co-researchers, establish rapport, and stimulate conversation regarding homework (Moustakas, 1994; Thomson, 2008)). Questions three, eight, nine, and ten are derived from literature review findings (Bembenutty, 2011; Danielson et al., 2011; Dumont, Trautwein, Ludtke, Neumann, Niggli, & Schnyder, 2011; Xu, 2011). Questions four through seven pertain to theoretical background (Bandura, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The final three individual interview questions were developed from areas of future research and to illumine the experiences of students pertaining to the research questions (Bang, 2007; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Coutts, 2004). While the questions were structured to enable relevant data to be gathered from each co-researcher, they were also designed to encourage detailed, individual responses.

Focus group interviews. All eight co-researchers were interviewed together (following individual interviews) to garner further descriptions of the experience. Although caution was necessary to avoid the dominance of one member in a group interview setting, the purpose was to draw out more memories and emotions from the co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). Listening to others who share a common experience sometimes enhances communication and produces discussion of other phenomenon aspects (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2010).

Techniques were utilized to ensure all co-researchers were provided with an opportunity to speak. One such method was to allow a different co-researcher to provide the first response each time a question was asked. Another technique was asking each individual to respond before going back to a group member who had already spoken.

The focus group interview questions were as follows:

1. Describe your homework experiences.
2. When you think of homework, what emotions come to mind?
3. Has homework made you a better student?
4. Describe how you feel when your teacher asks for your homework.
5. Should homework be optional or mandatory?
6. Is homework truly beneficial or just an academic requirement?
7. What recommendations would you offer to teachers concerning homework?

Question one was derived from literature review findings pertaining to the perceptions students have concerning homework (Bempechat et al., 2011; Sidhu, Fook, & Singh, 2010)). Questions two, three, and four concerned theoretical background issues pertaining to homework (Bandura, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Pintrich, 2000). Questions five, six, and seven were developed to address future potential research and answer literature review issues (Hong et al., 2011; Xu, 2011). Table three illustrates which research question were specifically addressed in the interview protocol, during both the individual and focus group interviews.

Table 3

Interview Question Outline

Guiding Questions	Interview Questions
R1: How does homework influence the self-efficacy of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How has homework influenced the way in which you feel about yourself? 2. How often do you complete required homework assignments? 3. In what ways, if any, has homework assisted you in experiencing academic success? 4. When you think of homework, what emotions come to mind? 5. Describe how you feel when your teacher asks for your homework.
R2: How does homework influence the motivation of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What influence has homework had on your motivation? 2. When you have not completed a homework assignment, what was the primary reason? 3. What recommendations would you offer to teachers concerning homework? 4. How would you feel if the practice of homework was eliminated? 5. Should homework be optional or mandatory?
R3: What influence does homework have on the perception toward education sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds hold?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you please describe your visual narrative? 2. Why did you choose this visual narrative to represent your homework experience? 3. How has homework influenced your feelings toward school in general? 4. Has homework made you a better student?

R4: How does socio-economic status influence the lived homework experience of sixth grade students?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What have been your experiences regarding homework? 2. Describe your home workspace where you do homework. 3. Describe the home environment you experience while working on homework. 4. Is homework truly beneficial or just another academic requirement?
R5: How does gender influence the lived homework experience of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe your homework experiences. 2. How often do you complete required homework assignments? 3. How has homework influenced the way in which you feel about yourself? 4. How has homework influenced your feelings toward school in general?

Data Analysis

The influence homework has on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds was the phenomenon explored by conducting a transcendental phenomenological process. The transcendental phenomenological method garnered rich data pertaining to such experiences. Co-researchers consisted of sixth grade students attending the same western North Carolina middle school and the study sought to explore the influence of homework on their perceptions concerning education. Recognizing the importance of confidentiality, the author assigned a pseudonym to each co-researcher throughout the data analysis process.

A major component in phenomenological research is the Epoche or bracketing process (Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen asserted these processes can work interchangeably. Moustakas (1994) considers the Epoche an essential first step, while bracketing continues throughout the study by expanding the process. Due to this researcher's classroom experience, the Epoche stage was conducted with great deliberation. Journaling was incorporated to illumine personal beliefs and convictions pertaining to homework and this process continued throughout the study.

To increase the credibility of this research a pilot study was conducted to determine the sufficiency of the interview protocol questions. The author recruited two veteran faculty members, both with advanced degrees in education, and presented them with the letters of consent, assent, and protocols for both individual and focus group interviews. Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) posited the importance of conducting a pilot study prior to engaging in the actual interviews to uncover potential problems with the research and to improve the credibility of the study. The intent was to ensure the questions were clear for sixth grade students to understand and sufficient to answer the research questions.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author using an Olympus VN-7200 digital recorder having computer connectivity capability to download the recordings into a dictation software program. The digital recordings were transcribed using Dragon Naturally Speaking Premium 11 software into Microsoft Word format. This included the co-researchers' descriptions of their visual narratives and their basis for choosing them.

The visual narratives contributed to the richness of the phenomenon by providing a component moving beyond linguistic. Examining the co-researcher creations or selections assisted in building a background foundation. Combined with their responses, the voices of the co-researchers became much more real and meaningful. An overall picture of the level of self-efficacy these students have concerning homework provided valuable information on the influence homework has on their educational experiences.

A systematic technique was adhered to in order to analyze the data. During phenomenological reduction a significant statement list was developed while analyzing the transcripts from individual and group interviews (Moustakas, 1994). While thoughtfully exploring the co-researchers experiences, each statement was treated “with equal worth” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This process, known as horizontalization, ensured a list of non-overlapping statements (Moustakas).

Upon careful and deliberate examination of the significant statements, emerging themes or meaning units were recorded. This process is referred to as imaginative variation by Moustakas (1994) and requires the researcher to vary the frames of reference and perspectives so as to derive themes. Rereading the transcripts was essential during this process. Textural and structural descriptions of the emerging themes are provided. Textural descriptions refer to what the co-researchers experienced and include verbatim examples (Creswell, 2007). Structural descriptions refer to how the setting influenced the phenomenon experienced by the co-researchers (Moustakas). This required the author to consider and describe the school and home environment of the co-researchers.

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested utilizing data collection grouping in which the researcher identifies repetitive statements or themes throughout the transcripts. After creating groups for sub-themes, each was assigned a code for co-researcher responses to compare to other co-researcher answers. This assisted in identifying repetitive or similar responses. After identifying the repetitive statements and themes the process was repeated several times to ensure the analysis was thorough and accurate (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcribing the interviews into Microsoft Word format also enabled the data to be entered into the NVivo 9 data analysis program. NVivo 9 allowed for computer assisted analysis and coding of unstructured information (QSR International, 2007). Using this software further assisted in bracketing personal subjectivity and bias from the study. Incorporating a thematic analysis method, in conjunction with NVivo software, uncovered emerging themes and enabled the comparison of co-researchers' responses. Combining the computer software data analysis with the author's thematic analysis increased the level of credibility and confirmability of the current phenomenological study.

Finally, a rich, thick description of the essence of the phenomenon was written. This last step in phenomenological research "is the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The description provided should enable others to "experience" the phenomenon through the eyes of those participating in the study.

Trustworthiness

A vital component of qualitative research is to demonstrate its trustworthiness. To accomplish this, researchers must consider several components, including (a) credibility; the confidence in the truth of the findings, (b) confirmability; the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the participants and not by the bias, interest, or motivation of the researcher, (c) transferability; demonstrating the findings have applicability in other contexts; and (d) dependability; demonstrating the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To do otherwise is to compromise the research.

Credibility was established through the triangulation of data, including individual interviews, focus group interviews, and visual narratives. Multiple methods for data organization, coding, and analysis were included to increase credibility. Two educators, one with an Ed.D. in Education and one with a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction reviewed and piloted the interview protocol. These educators also reviewed the data analysis procedures and findings of this research.

Member checks, in which co-researchers can examine the “analyses, interpretations, and conclusions” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208) made by the researcher, were included. This process occurred twice. Co-researchers were asked to read the transcripts after the individual interviews and the focus group interview to verify accuracy. Once the author identified emerging themes, co-researchers were asked to examine them. This was done during after-school hours.

Thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon being studied are provided to ensure transferability and to bring the research to life. Creswell (2007) stated a

detailed description of the phenomenon “enables readers to transfer information to other settings and determine whether the findings can be transferred” (p. 209). An audit trail has been implemented so others can conduct the study in the same manner, albeit different participants and settings. This process establishes confirmability and dependability. As stated above, an expert review was conducted to verify reported conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

One ethical consideration pertains to the privacy of the co-researchers. No participants were sought nor any research conducted until Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received. Due to the age of the co-researchers, letters of consent were sent to their parents and signatures granting permission to participate in the study were required. Students who received permission were given a letter of assent to sign, demonstrating the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time.

The anonymity of each participant was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. The after-school site, as well as school names also received pseudonyms to enhance the trust of administrators and the privacy of employees. The use of pseudonyms “for the protection of individuals has a central place in the design and conduct of ethical research and there are many instances in which the guarantee of anonymity to research participants is of paramount importance” (Gringer, 2002, p. 4).

Collected data are being kept in a locked file cabinet at the author’s home. Pseudonym identities are stored in a separate locked file cabinet, also kept at the researcher’s home. Electronic data is stored on the author’s personal computer and is

password protected. Only the co-researchers and author will be allowed access to the data. Transcriptions will be shredded, digital recordings erased, and computer files deleted after three years have elapsed (Kalichman, 2001).

Finally, because the co-researchers are middle school students, and a certain level of rapport was established, debriefing was considered necessary. When the research and analysis were completed, the author returned to the site to have the co-researchers partake in member checking. At this time an explanation regarding the rest of the research process was provided. To minimize any negative emotional reactions pertaining to the end of research interactions, co-researchers were given permission to contact the author through the after-school program director if they wished (Thomson, 2008). While it is unlikely they will seek contact, having the knowledge they could, lessened the emotional aspect of concluding the study.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The voices of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the influence of homework on their educational experience are lacking (Bempechat et al., 2011). The qualitative research method using a phenomenological approach is considered appropriate for this research. Interviewing co-researchers both individually and in a focus group was the primary method of data collection. Phenomenological data analysis was conducted to illumine the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of the current transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds in a western county of North Carolina and the influence this practice has on their educational experiences. Research data was collected through visual narratives, structured interviews, and focus group interviews over a six week period during the months of February and March. Co-researchers were purposefully selected. Due to the necessity of insuring co-researchers shared a common bond concerning the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990), purposeful sampling was deemed appropriate. A thematic analysis method was utilized to uncover themes related to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The data analysis identified recurrent themes related to the influence of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Chapter one presented the problem statement, the significance of the study, and the basis for the proposed research questions. Justification for choosing a transcendental phenomenological qualitative design was also submitted. Chapter two contained a discussion of theoretical frameworks influencing student self-efficacy, motivation, and environmental ecology and how these models related to the topic of homework. The review of the literature examined purported academic and non-academic benefits of homework. Chapter three included the justification for the selected research method and the procedures necessary to support the research. It also presented the research design and research questions. Information pertaining to the

population, research site, data collection, and analysis procedures were also included. Chapter four includes the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study.

Research Questions

The current transcendental phenomenological research study examined the phenomenon of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The goal of this study was to answer several pertinent questions regarding the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds attending the same middle school in a western county of North Carolina. Therefore, the following questions framed this study:

R1: How does homework influence the self-efficacy of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R2: How does homework influence the motivation of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R3: What influence does homework have on the perceptions toward education sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds hold?

R4: How does socio-economic status influence the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students?

R5: How does gender influence the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

These five research questions were constructed from the literature review and theoretical framework presented in chapter two. They provided focus throughout the study. Appendix A presents the Interview Protocol questions developed to uncover answers to the research questions.

Co-researchers

The co-researchers for the current transcendental phenomenological research were selected using purposeful sampling. This form of sampling is often used in qualitative studies to ensure co-researchers have shared a common phenomenon which affords a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (M. Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This method of sampling resulted in the selection of eight qualified co-researchers. Three methods of data collection were included to investigate the phenomenon. The methods included were co-researcher created or selected visual narratives, individual interviews, and a focus group interview.

Co-researcher Summary

The co-researchers participating in the current study included eight sixth grade students who all attended the same middle school located in western North Carolina. The co-researchers included six females and two male students. Their ages ranged from 11 to 12 years old. Seven of the co-researchers were White and one was Hispanic. All of the participants attended an after-school program offered at the middle school. Each co-researcher was considered to live in low socio-economic households based upon their eligibility to receive free or reduced lunches. Five of the co-researchers lived with both their biological parents, two lived only with their mothers, and one lived with her maternal grandparents.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collected in this transcendental phenomenological study derived from a pilot study, visual narratives, individual face-to-face interviews, a group interview, and follow-up interviews. Although participants in the pilot study were representative

of those interviewed in the actual study, the data obtained were not included in the data collection or analysis sections of the study. Data collection began after receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University.

Students attending an after-school program were invited to a meeting to learn about the study. Those interested in participating in the research were given a letter of introduction (see Appendix D) and a letter of consent (see Appendix E) to deliver to their parents. The delimitations for co-researcher selection were: (a) sixth grade student, and (b) from low socio-economic backgrounds. Of those demonstrating an interest in participating, eight returned signed consent letters. These students were given a letter of assent (see Appendix F) which was read aloud. All eight students signed the assent letters.

Visual narratives were collected from each of the co-researchers at the beginning of each individual interview. The individual interview protocol consisted of 13 open-ended questions developed to support the five guiding questions. The focus group interview consisted of seven questions. Data was collected over a six week period spanning the months of February and March during the 2013-2014 school year. Data was collected in a classroom at the middle school site during after-school hours of operation.

Pilot Study Session

Before the formal interview sessions with co-researchers began, a pilot study was conducted. The basis for the pilot study was to examine the research instrumentation and critique the instruments and interview protocol. Duma (2009) asserted the necessity of pilot studies to validate testing instruments designed by the

researcher. Two faculty members with advanced degrees agreed to examine the instruments and conduct pilot interviews with student volunteers not associated with the study. Both were veteran faculty with 22 years and 29 years of experience. The first has a Doctoral Degree in Education and the second has a Doctoral Degree in Curriculum and Instruction.

The goal of the pilot study was to ensure the interview protocol be clearly understood by the co-researchers thus improving the richness of the data and accurately uncovering the answers to the guiding research questions. Students involved in the pilot study were told not to answer the questions, but simply indicate if the questions were clear. After the pilot study interviews slight modifications were suggested and an additional two questions were included in the interview protocol. Both faculty members believed this would assist in discovering the phenomenon under investigation.

Co-researcher Visual Narratives

After receiving signed parental consent letters and signed letters of assent from those who agreed to partake in the study, co-researchers were asked to create or simply find a visual narrative representative of their homework experiences. The co-researchers were told these could be pictures, drawings, poems, songs, or any other artistic medium they considered appropriate. Co-researchers were informed the first two questions asked at the individual interview sessions would pertain to their visual narratives. Six of the co-researchers drew pictures, one selected a picture from a magazine, and one wrote a poem (see Table 4). The visual narratives were beneficial

in uncovering the initial perceptions of the co-researchers concerning homework and
in increasing the level of dialogue at the start of each interview session.

Table 4

Visual Narrative Summary

Co-researcher	Gender	Format	Perception
Amy	Female	Picture	Neutral
Kaley	Female	Drawing	Positive
Haley	Female	Drawing	Both
Angela	Female	Poem	Negative
Gary	Male	Drawing	Both
Mary	Female	Drawing	Negative
Andy	Male	Drawing	Both
Ari	Female	Drawing	Neutral
<i>Note:</i>	Both: Elements positive and negative		Neutral: Unable to discern

Co-researcher Interviews: Initial and Follow-up

The individual interview protocol used in the present study contained thirteen questions, beginning with broad opening questions and proceeding to specific homework questions developed to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000;

Moustakas, 1994). Follow-up or probing questions were employed when striving for clarity in responses or to elucidate richer details. Each interview session was scheduled after regular school hours and lasted approximately 45 minutes, with the shortest lasting 27 minutes and the longest covering 56 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed by the author with Dragon Naturally Speaking 11 voice recognition software into Microsoft Word format. After transcription was completed, every co-researcher was provided a copy of their personal interview; all were asked to read them carefully to ensure accuracy of the transcription and of their intended responses. Upon receiving their approval, individual interviews were coded to begin uncovering emergent themes related to the phenomenon. Co-researchers were scheduled for follow-up interviews when additional answers or clarity was deemed necessary.

Focus Group Interviews

After each co-researcher was interviewed individually and follow-up interviews completed, a focus group interview was scheduled. This interview session took place after regular school hours and began at 3:30 P.M. All eight co-researchers were in attendance. Basic ground rules were discussed to ensure each co-researcher had an equal opportunity to share personal experiences and answer each question. A reminder was given to treat fellow co-researchers with dignity and to respect the privacy of responses. Seven questions were developed, supported by the theoretical framework and literature review, to discover the shared phenomenon. While some questions were similar to individual protocol questions, in group format co-researchers sometimes recall pertinent details previously overlooked. The interview spanned

approximately 70 minutes. The audio recording was transcribed in similar fashion, and each co-researcher received a copy to perform member checks. Upon co-researcher approval, the focus group interview was incorporated into the theme development.

Data Analysis Procedures

The current phenomenological study sought to explore the influence homework has on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds using visual narratives, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. A transcendental phenomenological approach requires the researcher to abstain from judging the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). The co-researchers who agreed to join in this study did so on a voluntary basis, knowing they could withdraw at any time and understood their confidentiality would be protected. All co-researchers were sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds defined as being eligible for free or reduced lunches.

After interview sessions were completed the data was transcribed by the author into Microsoft Word. Preparing the data in this manner enabled a data analysis software program, NVivo9, to be utilized in assisting with coding and uncovering themes. The features of this software program include autocoding, and word frequency and comparison, which allowed manual data analysis to be strengthened. Personal interpretive analysis played the primary role in data analysis since this method is fundamental to phenomenological research. The initial themes that began to emerge were uncovered through researcher data analysis, the use of NVivo9 software and thematic analysis. The initial themes emerging from the data analysis were as follows:

1. Motivation: Teacher policies and practices

2. Family interaction: Time and attention
3. Self-efficacy: Emotional aspect
4. Educational effects: Short- and long-term

As the themes emerged, an examination and analysis of the collected data continued.

Data was reduced and coded to enable its placement in specific categories and to formulate interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Data reduction and coding was attained by comparing and contrasting co-researcher interview answers so the emergence of themes would begin to be uncovered. As coded data was further analyzed, major themes based on frequency, direction, and intensity were discovered (Neuman, 2006).

Coding Procedures

The data coding procedure utilized in this study included (a) development of thematic labels, (b) delineation of key issues constituting each theme, (c) generation of qualifications to identify themes, and (d) development of descriptors to identify the occurrence of each theme (H. Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Implementing these steps assisted in attaining and examining rich data related to the phenomenon of the influence of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Following this fixed framework for coding data increased the dependability of the current transcendental phenomenological study. The procedure also enabled the emergence of broad themes to be uncovered, leading to the major and minor themes (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing this coding process also established an audit trail which increased the credibility of the current study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Themes

As data collection and data analysis progressed, four primary themes emerged. The emergence of these themes was evident in each form of data collection and during the data analysis procedures. The four emergent themes were:

1. Motivation: Teacher policies and practices
2. Family interaction: Time and attention
3. Self-efficacy: Emotional aspect
4. Educational effects: Short- and long-term

Due to the detailed analysis of the data, the emergent themes identified were considered reflective of the co-researchers' responses. The investigation into the influence of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds was enhanced through the use of systematic coding and categorizing themes. Although the response of each co-researcher did not always reflect the emergent themes, the vast majority of co-researcher answers and comments formed the solid basis for these themes.

Motivation: Teacher Policies and Practices

The homework policies and practices of teachers was a theme derived from every co-researcher's responses. Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, and Ludtke (2009) posited most teachers assign homework to improve student academic achievement levels, increase motivation, and establish a link between home and school. Warton (2001) opined most students do not realize the objective of increasing motivation, and therefore the practice may have the opposite effect. An investigation into the influence

of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds uncovered much data pertaining to teacher homework policies.

Amount of homework assigned. One often repeated teacher practice that diminished motivation was the amount of homework assigned on a daily basis. Many co-researchers believe some homework assignments are beneficial and should be completed. Gary stated, “It’s like whenever I do homework and stuff I would have to remember what we did that day so I can make my mind review that work and hopefully remember it better.” However, there was a repeated complaint as to the length of the assignments. Mary, when contemplating the effect of homework on motivation stated:

It usually makes me not too motivated because all the tests and quizzes they stress me out. If I don’t finish in school, on my way home I’m dreading having to keep doing so much at home. I’m thinking I don’t want to do it and it really sucks. I sometimes think I’d rather be doing something I’d like to, not more schoolwork. It bothers me that I don’t get to sometimes. Maybe a little is sometimes okay, but when it takes most of your time away, how does that motivate me to do better?

Andy, one of the two male co-researchers, agreed with this motivational assessment. He stated. “I’m sometimes tired from being in school and sometimes at night I still have to finish the homework. Sometimes when I’m tired I resent having to do so much more work after school. I wish I could do something that interests me.” This reasoning aligns with a belief shared by many social psychologists who consider developing a social self to be the first priority of adolescents (Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

Haley agrees as she considers the importance of “being able to have time for other interests. If all my time is spent in school and then doing homework outside of school, when do I have time for my own interests?” Amy believes the amount of homework assigned has a detrimental effect on her motivation as she opined, “We’re told we should only have about twenty minutes of homework, but I usually spend about sixty minutes each night trying to get it done.” Andy opined, “Sometimes I don’t really like it because they give a whole bunch of problems and then they make you read and do a reading log. They don’t let us have enough time to do what we want at home.”

Repetition of assignments. Another factor co-researchers frequently mentioned having a negative effect on motivation was the redundancy of assignments. Previous research demonstrated most teachers assign “practice-based exercises based on exercises taken either from text books or revision books” (Sidhu, Fook, & Singh, 2010). According to Sidhu, Chan, and Parmjit (2009) most students prefer project type assignments, those requiring higher-order thinking skills rather than memorization activities. The co-researchers in the current study overwhelmingly agree with this assessment.

Mary complained of the inherent redundancy she experiences regarding homework as follows:

I kind of think it’s a waste of time. Because when I get home, I usually get home about six o’clock, and I really don’t have free time. Like never! Homework takes up most of my time. It’s been that way since I started school. It’s not just the time it takes away; it’s how it is so repetitious. I’m having to give up my own free time to keep doing something I already get over and over. It doesn’t seem fair.

Amy agrees with this view because “homework becomes a waste of time when you have to keep repeating the same action a whole bunch of times.” She continued, “Doing twenty things on the same assignment when you already understand it doesn’t make sense to me. Why not just have a couple of problems assigned to show you understand. Then if you need more practice, you can do more.”

Concerning higher-order thinking assignments Gary summarized the majority of co-researcher views succinctly:

I don’t mind doing homework so much when it’s like a project. Mrs. Jones gives us assignments like this. She tells us what the project must include and then tells us the due date. We get to work on it with partners during advocate. Creativity is a big part of it and we’re supposed to be original. I get a lot more out of assignments like this than just doing the same thing repeatedly. It’s a lot more motivating to me and funner at the same time.

Haley considers this to be true:

Homework that allows us to be creative and work with others is more motivating. When I have to complete an assignment that requires more than just doing the same thing over and over, I get more out of it. When I can work with a partner on it, or several partners, it allows us to talk through our ideas. Sometimes this leads us to realize we didn’t understand something, but our partners explain it. That’s a good feeling.

Review and grading. Homework review and grading policies were frequently mentioned by co-researchers pertaining to the motivational aspect of this educational practice. Previous studies demonstrated the importance of homework

being collected and truly reviewed to avoid the perception of it being an exercise with no actual merit (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011). The findings from the current study illumine the perceptions evident among the co-researchers.

All eight co-researchers considered it imperative for teachers to demonstrate a willingness to help students with homework questions they did not understand and to provide an opportunity for review before turning in assignments. Each co-researcher had experienced teachers who were unwilling to assist with difficult problems and never reviewed completed assignments and all were bothered by these practices. When asked about teachers reviewing homework assignments Haley had this to say:

I don't mind it [homework] so much this year because it's helped me because when I'm struggling with something, like this year I can talk with my teacher about it and all that and they don't get mad at me for asking questions. And, um, they help me a lot! And it just helps me get where I am because I haven't failed any grades.

Gary considers the review to be essential because, "You can see where you went wrong and learn from any mistakes." He continued:

Our teachers this year let us start in class in case we have any questions. They don't give us any answers, but they'll kind of guide us. That way we have to do most the thinking. The next day she'll go over any that someone didn't understand or know how to do. She doesn't make us feel bad.

Some previous research stressed the importance of grading homework on a right/wrong percentage basis to encourage students to take it seriously (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). However, the current research found the majority of co-researchers preferred it be graded on the basis of completion and effort. Most co-researchers shared experiences in which they received low homework grades even though they had attempted to complete it to their best ability. Ari expressed this sentiment when remembering some earlier elementary experiences:

In elementary school, I sometimes struggled. Homework could take me forever, but I had to finish it. I had some teachers who graded it, and sometimes I didn't do so good even though I had really tried. It made me really upset; it made me hate school. I didn't even want to try sometimes.

Amy added:

Trying your hardest on something and then getting a bad grade doesn't motivate me. Homework is supposed to be practice, but if you make a mistake some teachers penalize you. Sometimes my parents don't even get it, so what am I supposed to do?

The vast majority of co-researchers believed grading policies based on completion and effort were more apt to have a motivating influence. Gary represented most when saying:

The way teachers grade is important. The way she grades this year, like, if you try she doesn't grade the number that you get right. She grades if you tried. If you don't follow all the directions she'll take some points off, but when you

finally do it the way she wanted, she'll add them back to the assignment. She wants you to be successful.

Kaley continued:

Some years I think my teachers want me to be a success. They encourage me to do the best I can on homework and at least try to do them all. If I do, I get a good homework grade. But sometimes teachers punish me when I didn't do a good job on homework. Then my grades go down.

Mary agreed when "...homework is graded and I do bad even though I did my best it stinks. When you're graded on how hard you work it makes me want to work harder."

Consequences for incomplete homework. Another teacher practice frequently discussed having an impact on the motivation of the co-researchers in the current study pertained to consequences of incomplete homework assignments or incorrect answers on a given assignment. Seven of the co-researchers agreed consequences for simply not doing a homework assignment were justified. Ari summarized the most common view of fellow co-researchers when she stated, "If a teacher gives an assignment and you don't even try to get it done, you should have a silent lunch." Haley appreciates teachers who understand when special circumstances arise. While remembering a time she didn't complete an assignment because her grandfather was ill she stated, "As soon as I walked into class I explained it to my teachers and they said that was fine, just make it up when everything settles down. So I made it up that night because I appreciated their understanding."

However, all co-researchers considered punitive actions doled out by teachers to those who completed a homework assignment to the best of their ability or who had

a legitimate reason for its incompleteness to be unfair and demotivational. According to Mary, when she was younger she “used to have meltdowns because I didn’t know how to do my homework. My mom would try to help, but I knew I would be in trouble when I got to school.”

Ari described the consequences for not completing homework assignments as follows:

If we didn’t finish an assignment last year we’d have to walk laps or your recess might be taken away or you might get some lunch and recess taken away. I was sad because my friend Debbie, if she didn’t finish her homework I’d walk laps with her, walk around the thing with her. She was pretty much my only friend back then.

Some co-researchers described more disturbing consequences related to homework. When Kaley thought back to times she did not turn in an assignment she became visibly upset. She vividly recalled:

On days I didn’t finish homework I’d get scared because I knew I was in trouble. In elementary school you get a lot of laps from my fifth grade teacher. She was horrible! She made a student cry. She made her walk all recess because of her homework.

When asked to clarify her remarks she continued:

It happened a lot in fifth grade. Sometimes the teacher, she would, if we get answers wrong, because we would check our answers altogether, and if we got an answer wrong we would have to put our names up on the board for a lap. If

we got an answer right we would get a sticker. I didn't like school. I didn't want to go.

When questioned, three other co-researchers (who attended two separate elementary schools) experienced similar circumstances to those of Kaley. Angela confirmed:

Yeah, when I was in second grade we used to have to walk around the track if we made mistakes on homework. We had two playgrounds; a big one and a little one and we used to have to walk around the track even if we did it. If we made mistakes, we got in trouble.

Mary concurred:

About the track thing, for me that was like the whole entire elementary school except pre-K and kindergarten because like, I didn't do well in homework.

They would punish me for not doing good. I would have to walk the track if I didn't do my homework and even when I did it if I made mistakes I still had to.

That's why I hated school!

Family Interaction: Time and Attention

Many research studies indicated the importance of parental support pertaining to the academic success of students (Dumont, Trautwein, Ludtke, Neumann, Niggli, & Schnyder, 2012). Some posited homework is the area in which a family's influence on education is most evident (Warton, 2001). Whether it is assistance on assignments, ensuring a workspace conducive to learning, or providing required materials, parents become a major component in homework completion.

Human ecology theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), considers the relationship between the socio-demographic characteristics of children and their parents and their interactions with local and distant environments (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Each ecological level has an impact on the process of a child's education. Martin, Anderson, Bobis, and Way (2012) indicated a child's home is extremely relevant when investigating homework. The current transcendental phenomenological study found parental interaction to be a major theme throughout data collection and analysis.

Parental assistance. The majority, or five co-researchers in the current study live with both their biological parents. Two co-researchers reside with their mothers, and one with her maternal grandparents. In every interview, the co-researchers' immediate caregivers were the people sought first for homework assistance. Kaley, when unable to solve a problem on a homework assignment said, "I would ask for help. My grandparents like to help me with my homework. They think it's important."

Four of the co-researchers believe each of their parents has a particular academic strength, so the one they go to for help is dependent on the subject. Haley stated, "I'd probably go to my dad because he's more book-smart. But my mom sometimes works with me, but she's more of an English person than math." Ari agreed when she gets stuck she'll, "go to Daddy for math or Mom for ELA." When considering lack of parental assistance Mary believes those "who don't have support from their family won't put as much effort into their homework." Gary summed up the beliefs of all the co-researchers in the current study regarding parents: "My parents support me in homework; it's important to them that I do well."

The need for parental assistance indicates a potential dilemma for those having only one parent in the home who may be preoccupied, but the co-researchers also indicated seeking homework assistance from older siblings. Most stated these siblings were receptive to providing help. In fact, when discussing this issue Amy asserted, “I normally ask my sister, and if she doesn’t want to help I ask my mom or dad.” Angela normally asks her sister for assistance first “because she remembers doing the work and understands it better.” Andy summarizes this sentiment when he states, “I usually ask my older sister for help. She is in high school. She’s pretty smart and doesn’t mind helping me, usually.”

Homework environment. Previous research indicated the importance of having a quiet place to work on homework to assist in concentration (Xu, 2011). The majority of co-researchers in this study agreed with this point. Four reported having their own bedroom, while the other four stated they share a bedroom with one other sibling. All co-researchers have a desk in their bedrooms, although some share it, to complete their assignments. Most consider having a quiet environment to which they can remove themselves to be an important factor when completing homework. This is due to a home environmental issue consistently brought up during the interview sessions pertaining to noise and distractions.

Amy was not unique when reporting:

It’s really rowdy because you have a two year-old baby that is running through the house and we shut the door and she’s screaming she wants in. And you got a nine year-old which is watching television and yelling and everything so it’s not very quiet.

Kaley, when describing her home environment while completing assignments expressed the following:

I'm distracted by noises. My grandmother talks on the phone a lot to my aunt. Then there's the dogs and she has to yell at them. And then she talks to her Chihuahua about if she has to go outside. And then the dogs howl and it's dinner time. All that!

These factors led the co-researchers to express the importance of having a quiet atmosphere available, even if it is just a separate room. Although a bedroom did not always eliminate noise according to co-researchers, it reduced distractions. Haley reported:

I usually do it in my bedroom because it's quiet and I'm the only one in there. My little sister's doing her homework in the living room because she's been struggling this year, so I do it in the bedroom because it's nice and quiet. I'll usually have a little music playing.

Ari provided a similar description:

Pretty much nothing is going on around me because I'll enclose myself in my room. Like I'll shut the door so I can't hear what's going on out there and we've got a sign that says Do Not Disturb. So if we get angry or anxious or something like that we'll go in and turn the sign around, close the door which means you can't come in there without a permission. So I'll just turn that and do my homework in there.

Even though seven of co-researchers reported the positive aspect of having the ability to work in an isolated setting, removed from the distractions inherent to most

homes, an interesting subtheme pertaining to family interaction emerged. During interview sessions several co-researchers reported they sometimes choose to do their homework in an area closer to their parents, such as the kitchen or living room. This decision was not due to the need for assistance; rather simply for parental attention. Kaley reported choosing the living room at times because, “I like to read to my grandparents.” Although Mary described her household as noisy due to an old washing machine, she stated she leaves her bedroom door open while doing homework so she can see and hear her mother. Gary shared:

I would probably do it [homework] sitting on my couch upstairs in the living room with the TV on. But I work better with that. If I worked in my room I would get distracted. I get distracted easier in my room because no one is there to tell me to keep working. My mom can see me from the kitchen and she’ll remind me.

Angela stated she sometimes does her homework in her bedroom, but at other times completes her homework in the kitchen. She described her home environment as “Definitely noisy! My brother, he talks a lot. He has a hard time concentrating, so my mom makes him read out loud.” When asked if the noise level of the house determines the location she chooses she responded negatively. Rather, she succinctly stated the feelings of other co-researchers, “Sometimes I just want to be around other people.”

Loss of family time. The loss of family time emerged as a theme during interview sessions. The need for parental time and attention was frequently brought up, and the loss of this time was directly or indirectly ascribed to homework. While all co-researchers appreciated the support they receive from family members on

homework assignments, the majority resent the amount of time it takes away from activities they would prefer to be engaged in with family. While some became angry when discussing this topic, others appeared saddened.

Gary expressed his emotions concerning lost time as follows:

Uh, it's not a waste of time, just a time that I have to do homework and the work I have to do, like doing my homework and stuff, it's really taken away time that I could've gone outside and thrown a baseball with my cousin because he's always asking me, but I tell him that I have to stay in and do homework.

Amy described many "times at night when I wish I could do something less stressful with my mom and dad. But when I finally get home and finish my homework there's no time. It doesn't seem fair." Ari relayed the following experience:

One of the things that was like most annoying [about homework] in fifth grade, because I hadn't played softball in a couple years, but I got back into it. I would have practices starting real early and real late. I wouldn't have time to do my homework and it really got in the way of sports. I'd sometimes miss practice because of homework and then I wouldn't be in the lineup. I had to stop playing because of homework and my mom and dad really liked watching me play.

Andy summed up the emotions of many of his fellow co-researchers when he expressed this occurrence:

Sometimes I don't really like it because they give you a whole bunch of homework and then they make you do the reading log. They don't let us have enough time to do stuff, like, that we want to at home.

When asked what kind of things he would do if he had more free time and less homework he replied:

Um, sometimes my dad calls me to go outside to help him and sometimes I'd watch a little TV. Sometimes when my dad wants me to come outside to help feed the chickens I tell him I can't because I have to do my homework.

Sometimes after I finish it there still is time to help him, but not always. He doesn't make me do it afterwards, but sometimes I would've liked to have done it with him.

Almost every co-researcher had experienced numerous times when a family event was changed or cancelled due to homework assignments. Most were fully aware of the importance their parents placed on completing homework correctly. They understood and appreciated this support because they knew classmates who did not receive similar support. Their concern was simply related to the perspectives they held of lost opportunities to do activities with their parents and family not related to school. While time spent on homework assignments was appreciated and the attention they received was remembered, they expressed a common desire for different shared family activities.

Self-efficacy: Emotional Aspects

According to Albert Bandura (1997) one's belief in their ability to accomplish a task successfully is often based on prior experiences. If past experiences were

positive the confidence of individuals to be successful increase. If those experiences were frustrating, overwhelming, or ended in failure most people perceive their ability to be successful the next time they are similarly challenged to be marginal (Bandura, 1997). Bembenutty (2012) posited, “Self-efficacious students who receive a homework assignment have a capability belief that influences them to have thought patterns, emotions, and actions that drive them to successful homework completion” (p. 458).

Achievement goal theory focuses on the beliefs students attach to achievement situations. In addition, achievement goal theory includes an approach and avoidance distinction. Approach goals are those enticing an individual to participate. Avoidance goals spur one to withdraw from an activity to avoid negative implications or consequences. In a school setting a performance avoidance goal would be the desire of an individual to not demonstrate a lack of ability in front of peers.

Throughout the structured individual and focus group interviews the co-researchers alluded to both of these theories. Co-researchers gave many examples of the emotional aspect of homework and the way this educational device influenced their self-efficacy. When experiencing success on homework, most enjoyed school and felt proud. When difficulty with homework became evident, most co-researchers expressed disappointment or frustration and recalled disliking school.

Positive self-efficacy. When considering her homework experiences Haley stated she usually feels “happy that we have homework, because we’re learning something and I’ll make good grades while I’m going to the next grade.” Kaley enjoys school this year partially because she is having more success with homework. She

said, “This year my teachers are working with me to help me get it done. I’m happy. I like sixth grade.” Gary expressed these sentiments:

It makes me feel good because since I’m doing good on homework, I’m doing good in school and that makes me feel like I’m going to be successful in life. I’ll be able to accomplish the life goals that I want to, like the jobs I want to have.

When asked to expound on this Gary explained:

Doing homework on my own makes me feel I can get it into my mind like what we’re learning. It lets me show how smart I am by myself. Like, I’m glad we have homework because when you do it right it makes you stand out and be noticed.

Mary related a change of attitude for the better this year based on her homework experience. She has very strong negative recollections of past experiences concerning homework, but this year she has been successfully completing her assignments and has received assistance when unable to answer questions. She shared:

This year I’m usually an A/B honor roll student, so I think homework helps me because...it gives me extra work that I can do with my friends and I will be stress-free because I got more practice. I usually don’t mind it this year.

Negative self-efficacy. When co-researchers recalled struggling with homework the effects on their self-efficacy were just as powerful. Amy, while remembering times she experienced difficulties with homework and was unable to complete it, said it affects her “because when I get homework, I don’t like going to school. Because when I go to school I get all this homework and it’s hard on me. It

overwhelms me.” When asked to describe how this makes her feel she stated, “I don’t like it, it’s upsetting. It makes me enjoy school a lot less and feel less likely to go to school.”

Some common emotional responses pertaining to homework coming from the co-researchers were fear, frustration, and self-doubt. All of those relaying such emotional responses also demonstrated a dislike for school. Their feelings toward school and about themselves could change on a yearly basis. Ari recalled:

Sometimes, back then [first and second grade] I didn’t have a temper, but I had a short fuse with like getting...if I couldn’t do it I’d think, ‘Man, I failed!’ I don’t like failing. I knew no one would be happy.

When asked to elaborate she continued:

Like I failed! I’d blame myself thinking I hadn’t listened to the teacher and that’s why I couldn’t figure it out. I felt like a failure. I’d blame myself! It was tough because I’d start to wonder if I was smart enough to be in school.

This emotional response supports previous research pertaining to a person’s belief in their ability to succeed (Bembenuddy, 2011). Ari’s statement points out her feelings about withdrawing from school to avoid her perceived failure. She felt it would be better for her to remove herself from a situation she was struggling with than to demonstrate her inability to succeed on homework assignments.

Andy, who currently is enjoying school, could relate to Ari’s emotional response. Although he is presently experiencing success with his homework assignments he recalled times in his past when he was not. While describing his emotions concerned with homework he shared his feelings of frustration:

I'd get upset probably if I had a lot of problems or some problems that I didn't know. Or I didn't understand it. That slowed me down. I keep working until I thought I had done the best I could, but still couldn't figure it out. It hasn't happened a lot lately, but it makes me feel like I have less power to do the homework. It makes me feel like, I was more lazier now. It makes me feel like I have less power. It makes me frustrated when I'm trying my hardest but I still can't figure it out.

Angela recalled times during her school years when her disorganization rather than her academic ability caused her to feel like a failure in school. She describes living in a single parent home with siblings as sometimes chaotic. She believes this, combined with her lack of organizational skills, frequently causes her to leave completed homework assignments at her house. In previous years the ensuing conflict with her teacher made her feel less than adequate. She shared:

My experiences have been not so good because sometimes I don't, like turn in my homework. I've done it and I understood it, but I accidentally forgot to bring it with me. Then I get a note in my agenda, or have silent lunch, or I have to walk the track. I hate it when I do that, but it's upsetting every time it happens.

When asked what about this situation is most upsetting she stated:

What makes it the worst, especially when I was younger, is that all the other kids in the class think I'm not smart. They don't know I actually finished it. All they see is my name on the board or me sitting in silent lunch. It makes me feel like a failure, like I can't succeed.

Impact on Education: Short- and Long-Term Effects

The final emergent theme uncovered in the current transcendental phenomenological study pertained to co-researchers' perceptions of the impact of homework on their educational experiences. Some studies indicated homework is a successful method to improve academic achievement (Bang, 2011; Danielson, Strom, & Kramer, 2011). Other research contended homework can be overwhelming to students and eventually lead to school disengagement (Bennett & Kalish, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). Because of these conflicting findings, listening to the students themselves is critical. The co-researchers in the present study offered their beliefs when it came to this topic.

Gender. Research exists pertaining to gender differences in the perception of homework. Kackar, Shumow, Schmidt, and Janel (2011) reported several gender differences such as perceived stress levels and ability to complete assignments. While this was an area the current study hoped to illumine, the lack of male co-researchers limited the ability to do so. No apparent gender differences were identified. Most co-researchers had similar assessments in the effect of homework on their educational perception.

Academic benefits. The most recurrent discussion topic concerning homework had to do with its necessity. Most teachers and parents consider homework to be a tool to increase academic achievement and responsibility (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). Seven of the co-researchers in the current study simply believed it to be one of many mandatory tasks required by schools having to be completed to maintain acceptable grades. While some co-researchers supported its use and others did not, for

the most part the majority, or seven, saw it as a means to an end; simply earning an acceptable homework grade to maintain an acceptable average.

Six of the co-researchers believe homework can sometimes be beneficial. Homework assigned to assist in preparing for quizzes and tests was the most frequent example. Haley explained:

Well, like on tests and everything, if you don't have a little extra practice, like these worksheets we have for homework before tests they help us. If we only had work in class and still didn't get it and then have a test the next day, then, you know, you're kind of in the hole with that one.

Angela concurred, "If we do have homework after what we learned in class we can review it before the next day just in case we have a test or something." Mary believes her test and quiz grades would suffer if no homework assignments specifically designed to prepare for them were provided.

Secondary benefits ascribed to homework. Other than reviewing for a quiz or a test, the majority of co-researchers provided few reasons for becoming more academically proficient ascribed to homework. All discussed secondary benefits such as being allowed to play sports or partake in extra-curricular activities for explanations as to perceived benefits. Seven co-researchers believe the most important benefit of homework is simply to maintain a passing grade in a subject, not because it assists their understanding; rather to do otherwise would be to receive low homework grades which would be detrimental to their overall averages. Surprisingly, most responses provided were to avoid punitive consequences, not to enhance one's academic prowess.

Haley considered completing homework assignments important when she considered playing sports in seventh grade. She reflected upon the school rule concerning students with D or F averages and the reality of not being allowed to play on the middle school team. She stated:

Uh, I guess...oh gosh...I think it helps me a lot because I want to play sports in seventh grade, but they won't let you if you have F's, so homework really, like if you don't do it you get bad grades. Since I'm planning to play sports I'm, like, I've got to do my best so I can do sports and that's what pushes me forward.

Andy agreed with her assessment:

I know we can't play sports in sixth grade, but like on progress reports recently they mentioned on the intercom that you had to show your progress report to your coach and if you made bad grades you'd be kicked off the team. So if you really want to be on a sports team, you can't get bad homework grades.

Amy added this similar example:

I have a friend that got kicked off Math Counts because she wasn't finishing her homework. So if she had tried better and really done her homework, because she wasn't really doing her homework, she would still be on there. She just needed to start getting it done.

As stated previously, seven of the co-researchers believe the primary purpose for completing homework assignments is to maintain acceptable grades. Ari complained of the repetitiveness of homework, but stated she almost always does it so her grades don't go down. When asked to explain she replied, "It's not that my test

grades would go down if I didn't do my homework, it's just that not doing homework would, like lower the average in a subject." Kaley agreed with this explanation. She described the necessity of doing homework is due to it being averaged with quiz, project, or tests scores. She stated, "Low homework grades will hurt the total average in a class."

Lower academic averages. Four of the co-researchers elaborated more and considered homework to be the cause of low averages they have in school. Rather than having a positive or neutral effect, to these co-researchers it is primarily negative. Andy, when asked if homework has assisted him academically explained, "I would think it's [homework] made my grades kind of worse because if I don't finish it I would get a low grade. Like, if I don't finish a homework assignment it brings down my average." When asked for clarification he continued, "I think it hasn't really helped me with my grades; like I would do as well or better without the homework."

Amy believes she would be doing better in school without homework. She explains she is making good grades on tests and quizzes. She opined, "Homework is more or less something I have to do, but I don't really see any benefit. In fact, it usually hurts my average." Angela strongly affirmed this belief. She presented the following:

Well, I don't think homework makes me a better student. I often leave my homework at home. I've actually done it but since I forgot to bring it, it brings down my grade. In all honesty I do as well on quizzes and tests even when I don't do my homework. I just don't see any real benefit in doing it. To me, you're forced to do it. Teachers assign it so you're supposed to do it and you're

told since kindergarten that it's really important to do it, but I don't really see any true benefits. To me you do it so that your grades don't go down. I've been told since I was little that homework would make me a better student, but I don't believe that anymore.

Optional and self-directed. The lack of belief in the ability of homework to improve academic achievement led several sixth grade co-researchers to a common idea; homework should be optional and more self-directed. Six co-researchers believe if homework were optional they would be more likely to work on areas they consider their weaknesses. Andy summed up this sentiment by stating, "If given the choice [on homework assignments] then I would probably feel more confident because then I would have more time to study for tests or read." When asked to expound he continued, "I would like to decide what I know I have to work on instead of working on things that I already understand. That would help me become more confident in school."

Ari believed choosing what to work on would help her become a better student. She tires of the repetitiveness of homework assignments given on objectives she already understands. Her frustration comes through as she opines:

If your students have got it don't change it, like don't do it again, don't do it again! Like if one person doesn't get it have them get a tutor or tutor them after school maybe instead of making the whole class do the whole thing again. Because then some people are like, 'We just did this, why are we doing this again?' And that we have to wait another week until we can do something new

because of that one person or that one side. Even students could help the students who don't get it, you know, tutor them.

Having the opportunity to select areas to work on excites her. She states, “Yes, I would like that because I could use more of my time to review things I struggled with or do things I'm interested in, like learning new subjects.”

Future educational aspirations. Seven of co-researchers in the current study considered homework to have no effect on their future academic aspirations. Those who found some benefit in homework did not consider it to be the underlying source of their belief in the ability to continue successfully in future academic endeavors. Those who considered the practice of homework to have adverse effects on their current academics did not believe it would dissuade their future plans. Angela summarized her beliefs when she said:

I don't think it's had an effect either way. It's not discouraging my future plans, but it's not why I want to continue either. I'm not letting it change my goals. To me it's just one of those things you have to do even if it's a waste of time. But even though I don't like it, I won't let it affect me.

Mary concurred and summed up the feelings of fellow co-researchers as she considered her future:

I hope to get a successful job someday. I'd like to be a lawyer. That means I'll have to go to college. I feel that homework will help a little bit. But, I think even if we didn't have homework my plans would be the same and I would make sure to keep doing as good in school as I have been doing. Homework is not the main reason I am successful. I think it's just something that's inside me.

Summary

The purpose of the current transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds in a western county of North Carolina and the influence this practice has on their educational experiences. Data was collected and triangulated through visual narratives, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. A total of eight sixth grade students, ages 11 and 12, agreed to participate as co-researchers in the present study and received parental consent. They provided insight into their homework experiences and their perceptions toward this educational device.

Four primary themes emerged from the collected data and through thematic analysis. These four themes were: Motivation: Teacher Policies and Practices; Family Interaction: Time and Attention; Self-Efficacy: Emotional Aspect; and Impact on Education: Short- and Long-Term Effects. Verbatim responses from co-researchers were included and left unedited to provide a deeper level of understanding of their lived homework experiences.

Chapter five will discuss the findings of the current transcendental phenomenological study. The chapter will include a summary of the findings, limitations, and delimitations. Theoretical, research, and educational implications of the study will be discussed. Recommendations for future research and researcher reflections and will be included.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The requirement of homework assignments is one of the most accepted educational practices in the United States (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011). According to Danielson, Strom, and Kramer (2011) the majority of parents and educators have a fundamental belief the practice of completing homework will increase learning, improve academic achievement, and enhance personal responsibility. Previous homework research is often contradictory (Kohn, 2006). For many adults it is an educational rite-of-passage they endured while in school.

A concern is many students from low socio-economic backgrounds face greater challenges in completing homework assignments due to lack of resources and available parental assistance than their peers from higher socio-economic groups (Cooper & Nye, 1995; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Frequently neglected are the experiences and perceptions of those most affected by the practice of homework. Dumont et al. (2012) considered homework to widen the divide between the have and have-nots. Bembenutty (2011) pointed out not all students who return home each afternoon to engage in the completion of assignments are experiencing the same phenomenon. The views, opinions, and experiences of middle school students from low socio-economic backgrounds regarding homework are apt to be far different from their classmates from more affluent families (Bempechat et al., 2011).

To ignore the differences in homework experiences of students from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds is a disservice to the field of education and to the students served (Bempechat et al., 2011). If one concurs the most effective manner to increase the economic levels of students is to encourage them to graduate from high

school and attend college, it would be remiss to blindly accept any educational practice (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). The fact homework is one of the most common practices required by schools (Cooper & Nye, 1994) demands it be examined closely. With this in mind, the goal of the current transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds in a western county of North Carolina and the influence this practice has on their educational experiences.

Themes

The themes related to the lived experiences of the sixth grade students who participated in this study emerged during data collection and analysis. Four primary themes were identified during this process and through the systematic coding of data. The emergent themes were apparent in each form of data collection. The four themes are:

1. Motivation: Teacher Policies and Practices
2. Family Interaction: Time and Attention
3. Self-efficacy: Emotional Aspect
4. Educational Effects: Short- and Long-Term

Motivation: Teacher Policies and Practices

Co-researchers considered the homework policies of their teachers to have a major influence on motivation. The amount of homework assigned and its perceived level of redundancy were frequently cited as motivational factors. All co-researchers considered the manner in which a teacher reviewed homework to be important. They agreed simply handing an assignment in the next day with no time provided for

questions on assignments to be detrimental. The most common idea pertaining to motivation concerned grading policies. Students reported being more motivated in school when teachers gave credit on homework for completing an assignment to the best of one's ability. They also agreed their motivation was diminished when homework was graded on a right/wrong basis with punitive measures doled out by teachers to students who did not successfully complete homework assignments.

Family Interaction: Time and Attention

The co-researchers in the current study believed family support to be a critical factor when considering homework. Most reported their parent(s) to be the primary source for assistance. Those with older siblings also sought their assistance at times. Every co-researcher either had their own bedroom or shared one with one other sibling. Each reported this was important so a quiet environment could be attained when the need arose during homework completion. Interestingly, five of the co-researchers reported sometimes choosing to work in a noisier location of their home simply to be closer to their parents. The desire for attention was evident. One hundred percent of co-researchers opined of lost family time due to homework and the desire to be able to choose family activities after school hours.

Self-efficacy: Emotional Aspect

The effects homework had on co-researcher self-efficacy were largely determined by the levels of success on assignments. Pride was mentioned by co-researchers who were able to complete homework assignments and earn acceptable grades. Frustration was the common emotion for co-researchers when they were having difficulty completing homework to a level their teachers deemed acceptable. These emotions

seemed to change only as co-researcher grade levels changed and different teachers were involved. Fear of failure was reported by six of the co-researchers when a school-year was progressing and little progress was being made with homework grades. A lack of trust in one's ability to succeed was reported by the same number of co-researchers in particular grade levels and this emotion often led to self-condemnation as they thought they should have listened more carefully or worked harder. Their interest in school was reflective of their self-efficacy level pertaining to homework.

Educational Effects: Short- and Long-term

The majority of co-researchers, or six, seldom ascribed academic success to homework unless it was directly related to test preparation. Seven simply reported completing assignments because it was a requirement of their teachers and their parents believed it was an important aspect of education. Seven of the co-researchers who described a perceived benefit of homework other than test preparation described a secondary benefit, such as being able to play sports or participate in extra-curricular activities. They explained low homework grades would negatively affect their averages and keep them from being able to participate in such activities. Interestingly, four of the co-researchers in the present phenomenological study considered homework to be the reason for poor grades. They described being successful on quizzes, tests, or projects, but their homework grades seemed to lower their average. All the co-researchers stated their homework experiences, whether positive or negative, had little effect on their future educational aspirations.

Research Questions

The current transcendental phenomenological research study examined the phenomenon of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The goal of the present study was to answer several pertinent questions regarding the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds attending the same middle school in a western county of North Carolina. These five research questions were constructed from the literature review and theoretical framework.

Therefore, the following questions framed the current study:

R1: How does homework influence the self-efficacy of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R2: How does homework influence the motivation of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

R3: What influence does homework have on the perceptions toward education sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds hold?

R4: How does socio-economic status influence the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students?

R5: How does gender influence the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

Research Question One

Co-researcher responses indicated the perception of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds in relation to their self-efficacy was influenced by

homework. A wide range of emotional experiences were relayed during interviews, but the most vivid accounts concerned negative experiences. When negative experiences were described, the self-efficacy of the co-researchers also declined. Seven of the co-researchers described their current homework experience as positive. They expressed confidence in their abilities to not only complete assignments, but to do so accurately. The majority of co-researchers felt up to the challenge of middle school and attributed some of this optimism to success on homework assignments.

All co-researchers recalled past grade levels with charged emotions. When some experienced a lack of success on homework a common reported emotion was frustration. Fear of failure was mentioned by some and sadness by others. While some were able to reflect back and perceive their negative emotions were due to punitive homework policies and being embarrassed in front of their peers, they could still recall feeling helpless, weak, and like failures. Their self-efficacy was at a low and the desire to withdraw from school was described by some. The influence of homework on the self-efficacy of these co-researchers was decidedly powerful.

Research Question Two

Co-researcher responses demonstrated their level of motivation is closely related to the homework policies and practices of their teachers. All agreed the amount, type, and review of homework assigned by teachers affected their motivation. None of these sixth grade co-researchers described homework motivating them for intrinsic reasons as reported by some studies. Six of the co-researchers were motivated to complete assignments if they believed their teachers were fair in their grading policies, meaning looking at completion and effort rather than simply accuracy. They

concurrent the amount assigned also had a motivating influence. They lacked motivation when the assignments were purely repetitious. Mastering an objective, but being forced to practice it over and over was reported as boring and therefore demotivating.

Also, being given some discretion to choose what to study was found to be a motivating factor by six of the co-researchers. They reported having a teacher clearly explain a homework assignment and then answer questions on it the following day helped improve motivation. Those who experienced teachers with punitive homework policies remembered a decided lack of motivation. Being punished for incorrect answers, a practice some co-researchers recalled, had the most deleterious effect on motivation.

Research Question Three

The co-researcher responses concerning the effect homework has on their perception of education were varied. When discussing short-term influences regarding homework, seven simply considered it a means to an end. Only two conveyed a belief in the ability of homework to assist them in becoming academically stronger. While assignments to prepare them for an imminent test were deemed helpful, seven co-researchers completed their homework to maintain acceptable grades realizing incomplete assignments would lower averages.

Similarly, six considered homework a necessary component to enable them to partake in athletics or extra-curricular activities. Interestingly, three of the co-researchers who described few educational benefits pertaining to homework indicated they believed homework would enable them to eventually go to college. As mentioned

earlier, seven of the co-researchers vividly recalled negative experiences concerning homework and its effect on their immediate educational emotions. However, none of the co-researchers believed their perceptions of homework would alter their long range educational plans; rather they believed they would pursue their goals regardless of the way they were currently experiencing homework.

Research Question Four

All of the co-researchers participating in the current study came from low socio-economic households, as defined by being eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Four co-researchers lived with both biological parents, two with their mothers and one with maternal grandparents. No co-researchers described being unable to complete an assignment due to the lack of required materials. Perhaps teacher awareness of the hardships some families are experiencing keeps them from expecting families to furnish extra supplies. Four reported having their own bedroom, a space generally reported as quiet.

All co-researchers consider their family members, primarily parents, to be the first people to seek assistance on homework assignments when difficulties arise. All expressed appreciation for the time provided and concern demonstrated by their parents towards their homework. In fact, five reported their parents' beliefs in completing homework assignments successfully to be a primary reason for its completion. The positive influence parents can have on their children's education regardless of socio-economic status is demonstrated by these findings.

Research Question Five

Due to the delimitations of the current study and the lack of male volunteers willing to participate, the influence of gender on the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds is unable to be discerned. Of the eight co-researchers who participated in the study only two were male. No discernible differences between male and female responses were evident during the interviews and data analysis. The male participant responses and the perceptions they shared concerning their homework experiences were similar to their female counterparts.

Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of the current transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived homework experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds in a western county of North Carolina and the influence this practice has on their educational experiences. The current study sought to illumine the unique experiences of these students and enable their voices to be heard, thus allowing a neglected population with a unique perspective concerning homework to be shared. The current investigation into the perceptions co-researchers hold pertaining to their homework encounters revealed the lived experiences shared by these students.

The objective of the current study was to reduce the data collected through co-researcher visual narratives, in-depth individual interviews, and focus group interviews in order to uncover the essence of the phenomenon. The lived experiences of co-researchers were examined through horizontal and vertical data analysis. This

process provided a detailed examination of the phenomenon which enabled emergent themes to be identified.

Literature Review

The literature review continued throughout the current study and was designed to examine issues pertaining to homework. In particular, the literature review sought to examine scholarly research from various viewpoints involving students in grades kindergarten through twelve. Primary sources included many scholarly works examining homework issues in educational settings and various factors pertaining to homework. Many sources reported conflicting findings and attributed the lack of consistency to the myriad factors involved in homework (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Sidhu, Fook, & Singh, 2010). While both qualitative and quantitative studies were included in the review, the overwhelming majority of studies were quantitative, thus examining the issue from a numerical perspective (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, & Holloway, 2011; Goetz, Nett, Martiny, Hall, Pekrun, Detmers, et al., 2012). The individual experiences and perceptions of middle school students regarding homework were sorely lacking, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore the current study was designed to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of a group of middle school students, specifically those in sixth grade. The co-researchers included males and females, varying ethnicities and different familial structures. Although all attended the same middle school, they came from four different elementary schools. All co-researchers were in sixth grade and came from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Relationship of literature review to emergent themes. The emergence of four themes identified through this transcendental phenomenological study was consistent with some research findings and inconsistent with other findings. The review of the literature found multiple studies reporting the motivational benefits of homework (Dumont, Ludtke, Neumann, Niggli, & Schnyder, 2011; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Iflazoglu & Hong, 2012; Suskind, 2012). Suskind reported many parents and educators believe when students bring home assignments from school, mastery of the objectives increases and therefore an increase in motivation follows. This in turn leads to an intrinsic level of motivation, the type of motivation considered most beneficial. Elliot (1999) referred to this as approach motivation.

The current study found the motivation of most co-researchers was more dependent on teacher policies and practices than intrinsic beliefs in improving academic ability. Co-researchers overwhelmingly reported an over-abundance of homework leads to demotivation. They also perceived the redundancy of assignments to decrease their motivational levels. The practice of reviewing homework was deemed an essential element, along with grading effort and completion, rather than just accuracy. Perhaps considered most important to the motivational aspect of homework are punitive rules. While six of the co-researchers could identify positive aspects of homework and the necessity of completing homework to the best of their abilities, all found some punitive actions to negatively affect their motivation. Being punished for incorrect answers on homework assignments was the most frequently cited example causing motivation to diminish.

Previous studies indicated the importance of having a quiet area for students to complete homework assignments (Sidhu, Fook, & Singh, 2010; Cooper & Nye, 1994). The ability of all parents to provide a comfortable, quiet, well-lit environment for their children to work was considered problematic by some researchers because of low socio-economic status (Bempechat et al., 2011). While all the co-researchers in this study were from low income backgrounds most had their own bedroom or shared it with one sibling. Seven of the co-researchers concurred when considering the importance of having a quiet environment in which to retreat to complete homework assignments. Having this space was appreciated and those with siblings found it to be especially beneficial. Still, this study also revealed the co-researchers felt it equally important to have the option to choose a location to work on assignments. At times, some found the background noises and interruptions of typical family life to make the chore of homework more enjoyable.

Those unable to provide individual workspaces for their children should feel encouraged by this finding. The co-researchers in the present study considered parental support and encouragement to be more important than simply providing a quiet atmosphere. All of the co-researchers felt more confident in their ability to complete assignments when they knew their care-givers were there to offer assistance when required. In fact, their simple presence was cited frequently to be of great importance. This is partially attributed by co-researchers to make up for the lost family time homework is considered to take away.

Some previous research reported the correlation between homework and academic success (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). Such studies demonstrated

when an appropriate level of homework is assigned students gain confidence and perform to higher academic levels (Goetz, Nett, Martiny, Hall, Pekrun, Dettmers, et al., 2012). Other researchers, while agreeing many teachers and parents believe this to be true, opined most students are uninformed or unaware of these apparent academic benefits (Bembenutty, 2011; Warton, 2001). The present phenomenological study into the homework beliefs of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds found both previous findings to be true to an extent.

Among the co-researchers, six considered homework pertaining to test preparation to be beneficial. They saw benefits in having assignments to complete at home directly related to an upcoming quiz or exam. Importantly, this study found almost all other perceived benefits of homework to be ascribed for secondary reasons. Rather than pertaining to academic improvement, most pertained to maintaining an acceptable homework average so as not to diminish an overall average in a given subject. Thus, the implication presented by seven co-researchers was the importance of doing homework solely for the sake of a homework grade. Other secondary benefits ascribed to homework by the co-researchers of this study were for the opportunity to play sports, participate in clubs, or engage in extra-curricular activities with a stated stipulation of maintaining acceptable grades. Again, seven co-researchers did not consider completing homework assignments to help them succeed more effectively in their academic endeavors; they believed completing homework in various subjects ensured their averages would be upheld.

Some previous research maintained the importance of allowing students to choose homework assignments (Hong, Peng, & Rowell, 2009). Giving students a

certain level of autonomy could enhance the homework experience (Danielson, Strom, & Kramer, 2011). Six of the co-researchers in the current study concurred with these findings. Having the ability to self-regulate assignments completed after school was perceived as beneficial. Rather than practicing objectives already mastered or demonstrating understanding on objectives multiple times, most co-researchers preferred being allowed to work on areas they considered weaknesses. Choosing to engage in areas of academic interests outside the typical confines of school was considered important.

Although homework sometimes diminished the educational experiences of all co-researchers for a short time, none perceived it to have long-term negative effects. Seven of the co-researchers relayed experiences in various grade levels in which homework contributed to a negative academic experience. They vividly recalled the emotional toil they experienced and their dislike for school because of homework. However, when their level of success on homework assignments increased in subsequent years, their perceptions of education also increased. Regardless of the homework experiences reported by co-researchers, all stated homework would not change their future educational goals.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework of the current transcendental phenomenological study was based on three primary philosophical theories. These theories are (a) self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), (b) human ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and (c) goal (Elliot, 1999). These theories provide the following implications for educators and administrators to consider when contemplating homework policies and procedures:

1. One must experience success to believe in the ability to succeed.
2. Prior success predicts future success.
3. Avoidance mechanisms can override achievement mechanisms when frustration in task completion occurs regularly.
4. Avoidance is preferable to the demonstration of failure in front of one's peers.
5. Personality formation is influenced through social exposure.
6. Socio-economic characteristics interact with immediate and distant environments.

All these factors have the potential to create an environment or experience conducive to academic achievement or the potential to disrupt the learning process. Each factor can interact with others and should be carefully explored by those involved with student education. Research concerned with homework suggested educators look beyond the confines of the immediate school setting when developing homework policies to ensure the desired outcome of homework assignments is realized by all students (Bembenutty, 2011). A thorough examination of these three theories and the associated implications was imperative before research began to enable a deeper appreciation and understanding of the lived homework experiences of the co-researchers.

Relationship of theoretical implications to emergent themes. Bembenutty (2011) indicated examining and analyzing educational and psychological theories can assist in understanding the perceptions and beliefs students hold concerning homework. Many researchers provided theoretical links between certain theories and

the homework practices of students (Bandura, 1977; Bembenutty, 2011; Elliot, 1997; Lorschach & Jinks, 1999; Pintrich, 2000). Some of these attributes were evident in the emergent themes of the current study. In particular, many of the co-researchers discussed the frustration of not being able to complete homework assignments successfully. Many relayed the effect this frustration had on their belief in themselves to be successful. Emotions such as fear, helplessness, and disenfranchisement from school and friends were presented during interviews. These beliefs in an inability to succeed are in tandem with goal theory as some stated they dreaded going to school.

When seven co-researchers discussed their homework experiences, their belief in the ability to complete assignments successfully often changed from year to year. While not overtly stated by any co-researcher, many of their answers during interview sessions implied the significance of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977). Those in classrooms with supportive teachers willing to assist on assignments and provide feedback tended to feel more empowered and self-confident. When in a class in which the teacher engaged in punitive measures concerning homework, the belief levels of co-researchers declined.

Co-researchers provided numerous examples as to the importance of their home environment pertaining to homework. They discussed the atmosphere of their homes and what environment was most conducive to learning. Having parents or caregivers who strongly support them in their efforts was deemed essential. Parental concern for academic success was often cited as a primary reason they completed homework assignments. Even when help was not needed, all co-researchers appreciated the fact their care-givers were willing to extend their assistance when

needed. The link between home and school pertaining to homework was evident. Again, while never explicitly stated by any co-researcher, human ecology theory was clearly evident.

Conceptual Framework

The goal of phenomenological research is to study the phenomenon of human experience and then explain and interpret the experiences, thus identifying how the subjects under investigation construct meaning to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated, "The term *experienced* highlights the importance of the phenomenological field in ecological research" (p. 29). Van Manen (1990) described the phenomenological process as the study of the world as we currently experience it and the attempt to achieve a deeper, richer understanding of the meanings of these everyday experiences.

A major responsibility of the researcher in a phenomenological study is to identify the essence of the lived experience by combining participant descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is identified by carefully examining what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas). Transcendental phenomenology is the study of how things appear or are perceived by a specific population (Moustakas, 1994). An attempt is made to provide insight into the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The transcendental phenomenological approach is deemed appropriate when the essence of a shared experience is sought. Seeking to illumine the essence of a shared experience helps to clarify and explain everyday situations (Moustakas, 1994). The current study was

designed to identify the essence of the phenomenon of homework through the eyes of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Implications for Educational Practice

Teachers

The purpose of the current transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the influence of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The research findings illuminated many substantial implications for those in education. One finding pertained to the role the classroom teacher has in developing homework policies to support their students' education. The amount of homework assigned needs to be considered. Simply requiring a level daily amount to meet artificial criteria diminishes the role of homework. Instead, teachers need to truly gauge the mastery of an objective and then decide if homework would be beneficial.

Likewise, the findings made apparent the need for educators in the classroom to ensure homework assignments are more than just repetition. Six co-researchers expressed their appreciation for assignments requiring upper-level thinking, or creativity. Allowing students to sometimes make choices in the type of homework they engage in was found to be important. Even the simple choice of what to study was seen as affirming by some co-researchers. Research findings from the current study show a lack of interest in simply completing assignments for the sake of completion. The relevance of an assignment was crucial if students were to believe in its importance.

Findings from this research also demonstrated the need of classroom educators to carefully and deliberately develop homework policies and procedures. The co-researchers in this study overwhelmingly expressed the importance of reviewing assignments and answering questions from the homework. Some previous studies showed the need to grade assignments to assist students' understanding of its importance. The current research found a class review of assignments to be more crucial. The current study found if students are expected to give of their own time to work on homework, they expect a return on their effort and appreciate teachers who afford an opportunity to ask questions.

The critical role of grading policies is not negated by this finding. According to the current study, the majority of co-researchers do not support the policy of grading homework solely based on whether the answer is right or wrong. Six of the co-researchers expressed dismay when recalling experiences in which they had completed an assignment, working to the best of their ability, but then receiving little or no credit due to incorrect answers. While grading of this nature is understood when pertaining to quizzes and tests, the co-researchers had trouble understanding it when applied to homework. The findings show when a grade is attached to the percent correct on homework, motivation to continue working hard on future assignments diminishes. Rather the current research findings support grading based on completion and effort. This policy reaffirms effort according to the co-researchers. Since homework is done away from the guidance of a teacher, these co-researchers expressed the belief mistakes on assignments should not be punished.

Another research finding for educators to consider pertains to consequences doled out because of homework. The findings of the current research demonstrated the negative emotional and motivational effects punishments for homework create. Since some researchers consider homework to have a positive correlation to student academic ability, many teachers consider it vital to the educational process. However, according to these co-researchers, when they experienced punitive consequences for incomplete or incorrect homework assignments, the opposite effect occurred. At times the co-researchers recalled experiences when they were ridiculed or ostracized because of homework. They recalled feeling weak, embarrassed, helpless, and unintelligent; emotions most educators would not want to foster in their students. If homework is considered a necessity, teachers must avoid policies, whether inadvertent or not, contributing to the lowering of student self-efficacy.

The findings of the current study demonstrated the importance of self-efficacy in the practice of homework. Whether the co-researchers considered homework to currently be helpful or not, many recalled experiences when their self-efficacy plummeted due to homework. The importance of carefully examining homework as an educational tool is evident. The current study shows the power of homework to both motivate and demotivate students. The co-researchers who shared negative experiences described wanting to withdraw from school. Adverbs such as pride and satisfaction were provided when homework experiences were positive; words such as frustration and fear were expressed when the homework experiences were negative. Self-efficacy changed accordingly. Educators would do well to examine the students

in their charge as individuals and consider the inherent self-efficacy issues pertaining to homework.

Findings from the current study show co-researchers do not consider homework to be a major determinant of their future educational plans. Seven of the co-researchers described plans to continue their education to the college level. All were of the opinion homework would neither help nor hinder these aspirations. They consider their personal drive to succeed to be most important. As encouraging as this appears on the surface, educators would do well to consider the previous motivational and self-efficacy issues the current study illuminated. The co-researchers involved in the current study still have approximately half their education to complete before graduating from high school. One would be wise to consider their own adult circumstances and contemplate the likelihood of attaining a far-off goal if years of failure and discouragement were possible beforehand. Considering the findings of the current study based on co-researcher experiences is important. If those in education are to enable and foster the dreams of their students, an appreciation of the importance of homework and its role in the self-efficacy of these students must be considered.

Educational Leaders

The findings of the current study also have important implications for those in educational leadership positions, such as administrators or directors of curriculum and instruction. Oftentimes faculty discussions pertaining to homework simply revolve around the amount assigned at each grade level (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). The discussions should go much deeper. As is true in so many realms of education, simply deciding on an acceptable average is not sound policy when the present and future

experiences of students are at stake. Students are unique individuals with unique needs. Conscientious decisions must be made by educational stakeholders to ensure all students are fairly represented.

Educational leaders should support such discussions and develop homework policies representative of all student situations. Considerations such as the necessity of homework, the type of assignments, and grading policies should be included in discussions. Based on the current study, circumstances of students should also be considered. Educational leaders should not allow any students to be alienated from education due to homework.

Those in leadership positions should investigate the current research pertaining to homework and student self-efficacy. They should encourage their faculty and staff members to do likewise. School leaders should seek staff development workshops designed to assist teachers in examining homework issues from multiple perspectives. These workshops should include methods and ideas pertaining to homework in which all students are considered. Homework related workshops could be a precursor to examining and perhaps modifying existing policies.

Parents

Findings from the current research also illumine the vital role of parents in their children's education. The home environment was shown to be important regarding homework. All described a somewhat noisy and chaotic home-life typical to most children. Co-researchers described having a place to move to when seeking a quiet atmosphere as important. However, the findings also illumine more important than a quiet space is the support of their parents or care-givers. Expressing

appreciation for parental assistance, guidance, and support were commonly shared by all co-researchers. Many doubted the success they currently experience would be evident without their parents' encouragement. This should encourage parents experiencing financial difficulties and the inherent guilt of not meeting all the needs of their children. Their simple presence and concern are shown to be the most critical elements they can provide to their children according to the findings.

Teachers could assist in this area by allowing students to develop educational activities for homework involving family members. These assignments should not be of a traditional nature; rather creative so family members can enjoy time spent together. Ideas as simple as choosing an area of family interest and delving into it would be acceptable. The important component would be simply to explore, investigate, and discover while spending time together. Monetary resources would not be required so as to enable any who wanted to participate. This would support the findings of the current research in which many co-researchers lamented the loss of family time and wished for opportunities to share in family activities.

Delimitations

Delimitations are defined as boundaries used to establish the parameters of a study in order to clearly delineate what is not being examined (Creswell, 2005). The current study sought to examine the influence of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The current study was delimited so only sixth grade students from the public school chosen as the site of the current study were included; this eliminated sixth grade students attending private schools or being home-schooled. Students in grades seven and eight

were excluded. A further delimitation was sixth grade students were recruited from an after-school program operating at the research site so students would not lose instructional time during normal school hours. Another delimitation was the necessity of co-researchers to come from low socio-economic backgrounds. For the current study low socio-economic status was defined as being eligible for free or reduced lunches. Therefore, students interested in participating in the study, but not qualifying for free or reduced lunches were excluded from the study.

Limitations

Limitations are considered conditions the researcher has limited or no control over (Creswell, 2005). One limitation to this study was utilizing a convenience sample of sixth grade students from one middle school in western North Carolina. The students were self-selecting and participation in the study was strictly voluntary. The limited sample size may not have been indicative of the total population of the middle school or district. The school district in which the middle school operates is considered rural and therefore the findings may not be transferable to other populations located in urban settings. The decision of sixth grade students to participate in the study may have been influenced by individual interests and time availability. Answers to interview questions were based on the recollections of the co-researchers and their ability to accurately describe them.

Recommendations for Further Research

When considering the findings of the current study and the identified limitations, several recommendations for further research become apparent. The current study was limited to one middle school located in a rural setting. Replicating

this study in suburban or urban districts is suggested to determine if the findings are similar. The current study sought to examine if there was any difference between male and female co-researcher homework experiences. The lack of qualified or interested male participants prohibited gender differences from being examined. Conducting similar studies in larger districts with more potential participants could allow an examination of specific gender experiences to be explored. This is important to explore due to the powerful effect homework has on motivation and self-efficacy.

Third, although the current study delimited participants to only students currently in sixth grade, expanding the research pool to include seventh and eighth grade students might be advisable. It would be worth examining whether or not students continue to have a positive outlook on future educational plans even when homework has an adverse effect on some students. Due to the dearth of qualitative studies examining homework issues, another recommendation would be to design more qualitative studies. This would allow students to offer their appraisals and experiences of homework for educators to consider. A final recommendation for future research addresses the comments of some of the co-researchers who considered withdrawing from school due to frustration pertaining to homework. Conducting a quantitative, or longitudinal study, to determine if negative attitudes toward homework correlate or predict dropping out of high school is advisable.

Summary

The current study was designed to explore the influence of homework on the educational experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The site of the study was a middle school located in a rural district of

western North Carolina. Using self-efficacy, human ecology, and goal theories as the foundations of this study, a transcendental phenomenological design was utilized to conduct the research. Data was collected through visual narratives, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. The data collected was analyzed to illumine the unique experiences of the co-researchers. The meaning co-researchers ascribed to their experiences allowed emergent themes to be revealed.

The four themes to emerge included: (a) motivation: teacher policies and practices, (b) family interaction: time and attention, (c) self-efficacy: emotional aspect, and (d) educational effects: short- and long-term. Recommendations for future research included replicating the present study in suburban and urban locations, and including more male students to examine whether differences in gender experiences exist. A recommendation to expand the study to include seventh and eighth grade students was suggested, along with the need for more qualitative research studies pertaining to the examination of homework.

In conclusion, this research had an impact on the author as a professional educator with 23 years of classroom experience. As the co-researchers' answers to research questions and the recollections of their personal homework experiences were carefully and thoughtfully listened to and examined, the researcher was humbled by the immense responsibility placed upon those working directly with students. The role of teachers goes far beyond the simple transference of information and knowledge. Again and again the co-researchers reminded this author of the emotional and psychological impact teachers have on their students. The decisions educators make concerning a practice as common and accepted as homework can assist students in

reaching their academic potential or frustrate them to the point of disengagement.

While the short-term effects on their perceptions toward education were clearly related, the long-term effects must also be considered. With this responsibility in mind the author will strive to continually examine current teaching practices to ensure he is having a positive impact on the educational experiences of his students, as well as their lives.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Interview Protocol

Individual

1. Can you please describe your visual narrative?
2. Why did you choose this visual narrative to represent your homework experience?
3. What have been your experiences regarding homework?
4. Describe your home workspace where you do homework.
5. Describe the home environment you experience while working on homework.
6. How has homework influenced the way in which you feel about yourself?
7. What influence has homework had on your motivation?
8. How often do you complete required homework assignments?
9. When you have not completed a homework assignment, what was the primary reason?
10. In what ways, if any, has homework assisted you in experiencing academic success?
11. How has homework influenced your feelings toward school in general?
12. How would you feel if the practice of homework was eliminated?
13. How has homework influenced your feelings toward school in general?

Focus Group

1. Describe your homework experiences.

2. When you think of homework, what emotions come to mind?
3. Has homework made you a better student?
4. Describe how you feel when your teacher asks for your homework.
5. Should homework be optional or mandatory?
6. Is homework truly beneficial or just an academic requirement?
7. What recommendations would you offer to teachers concerning homework?

Appendix B –IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 22, 2014

Richard McCormick

IRB Approval 1754.012214: The Influence of Homework on the Educational Experience Of Sixth Grade Students from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Richard,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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Appendix C – Permission to Conduct Research at Site

Richard McCormick
2067 Ken Miller Road
Rutherfordton, NC 28139
(828) 817-4402
ramccormick@liberty.edu

██████████, Principal
██████████ County Middle School
██████████ Trail
██████████, NC ██████████

Dear Mr. ██████████,

I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. I am pursuing an Ed.D. Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. As part of the degree requirements I must conduct original research on a topic relevant to education. I am seeking your permission to use your school as the site of my research and to attain participants enrolled in your after-school program.

The purpose of this study is to understand how homework affects sixth grade students and their desire to learn. In particular, this study hopes to shed light on the unique experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds regarding their homework experiences. This is an area of education many researchers feel has been neglected.

If you grant permission, I will schedule a time to speak with your students and explain my dissertation topic and its relevancy to them. Those demonstrating an interest in participating will be provided letters to take home to their parents/guardians explaining the purpose and expectations involved in the research.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to discussing my research topic with you in person. Feel free to contact me by phone or email if I can provide further clarification or answer any questions.

Respectfully yours,

Richard A. McCormick

Appendix D - Letter of Introduction to Parents

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

My name is Richard McCormick and I am a doctoral candidate with Liberty University. As part of the doctoral process I am conducting research in the field of education concerning homework. I have been a teacher for twenty-three years and during this time I have witnessed the different homework experiences of my students.

The purpose of this study is to understand how homework affects sixth grade students and their desire to learn. In particular, this study hopes to shed light on the unique experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds regarding homework. This is an area of education many researchers feel has been neglected.

After speaking with the students at After-School Academy and explaining the purpose and expectations of becoming a research participant, your child expressed an interest in participating in the study. This will include one individual interview and one focus group interview. A follow-up individual interview may also be required. All interviews will take place at ██████ County Middle School during After-School Academy hours of operation.

Please consider allowing your child to participate. If you agree, a letter of consent has also been sent home with your child for you to review and sign. If I can answer any questions, please do not hesitate to email (ramccormick@liberty.edu) or call me (828-817-4402).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely

Richard McCormick

Appendix E – Letter of Consent

The Influence of Homework On The Educational Experiences Of Sixth Grade Students From Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds: A Phenomenological Study

Richard McCormick
Liberty University
School of Education

Greetings,

Your child is invited to participate in a research study pertaining to homework and the effects it has on sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Your child was selected as a possible participant because (a) she/he is a sixth grade student, (b) she/he is eligible for free/reduced school lunch, and (c) she/he attends a predetermined middle school. I am conducting this study as part of the doctoral program in Curriculum and Instruction at Liberty University. I ask you to read this form and ask any questions you may have before allowing your child to participate in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Richard McCormick, Liberty University, Education Department

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand how homework affects sixth grade students and their desire to learn. In particular, this study hopes to shed light on the unique experiences of sixth grade students from low socio-economic backgrounds regarding homework.

Procedures:

If you grant permission for your child to participate in this study, I would ask her/him to do the following:

- Agree to be an active and honest participant.
- Participate in a minimum of two interviews, including individual and group, in which responses and comments will be digitally recorded. The individual and focus group interviews should each last approximately 60 minutes.
- Provide artifacts detailing the perception of homework.
- Read and listen to the report written by researcher to discern accuracy of report.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has several risks: (a) divulging personal responses concerning homework, (b) friends will know of your participation, (c) personal time will be necessary; and (d)

interviews may sometimes lead to emotional responses. Although none of these risks presents danger, each should be considered.

There are no direct benefits for being in this study. The benefits to society include assisting those in charge of homework policies and procedures to become more aware of difficulties and frustrations created by this practice on many students. An increased level of empathy could lead to other methods being developed to assist in academic achievement.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Pseudonyms will replace actual names throughout all stages of research.

Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the information. All data collected will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's private office. Only the researcher and his advisor will have access to the data. Transcripts and audio recordings will be securely maintained for a period of three years, after which they will be disposed of properly.

Although every attempt will be made to ensure complete confidentiality, the nature of focus group interviews precludes the ability to guarantee confidentiality. However, all participants will be urged to keep what is discussed in group interviews to themselves in order to encourage fellow participants to be forthcoming with responses.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect her current or future relations with Liberty University or with ██████ County Middle School. If you decide she/he may participate, your child is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. Should you decide to withdraw your child from the study after interviews have taken place, the individual interview recordings will be erased and no information will be included in the research.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Richard McCormick. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him by phone (828-817-4402), or e-mail (ramccormick@liberty.edu). You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell, by e-mail (sdmichaelchadwell@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional

Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study and to be audio recorded during the individual and focus group interviews.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____ Date:

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date:

Appendix F – Letter of Assent

What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?

The Influence of Homework on the Educational Experiences of Sixth Grade Students from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds: A Phenomenological Study
Richard McCormick

Why am I doing this study?

I am interested in studying the influence of homework on sixth grade students and how homework makes students feel about school. There have been many studies done regarding homework, but few ask students to express their opinions and feelings towards homework. Also, the experience of sixth grade students concerning homework is lacking. Listening to what sixth grade students have to share about their homework experiences could help teachers understand challenges we may have not considered.

Why am I asking you to be in this study?

I am asking you to be in this study because I believe you could answer many of the questions I have concerning homework and because you are in the sixth grade. Your individual experiences toward homework would help me in understanding this topic from a sixth grade student point of view.

If you agree, what will happen?

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to be interviewed by me to share your experiences and feelings about homework. There will be two interviews; one just with me, and one in a group with other students who wanted to participate. Each of the interview sessions should take no longer than 60 minutes. Before the individual interview, I will ask you to bring in some form of art, such as a picture, poem, or song that shows how homework makes you feel. We will talk about your selection. I will also ask you to be as honest as you can when answering questions and to not discuss any of the information presented during the group interview.

Do you have to be in this study?

No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

Do you have any questions?

You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

Signature of Child: _____

Date: _____

Richard McCormick
ramccormick@liberty.edu
Dr Sharon Michael-Chadwell
sdmichaelchadwell@liberty.edu
Liberty University Institutional Review Board,
1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515
or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Appendix G – Recruitment Script

I. Greetings and Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Mr. Richard McCormick. I have been a teacher at both the elementary and middle school levels for the past 23 years. About four years ago I decided to continue my education and enrolled at Liberty University to earn a doctoral degree in education. One of the requirements of the degree is to conduct original research. I'm here today to tell you about my research topic and to see if any of you would like to participate in the study.

II. Description of Research Topic

The title of my research is *The Influence of Homework on the Educational Experiences of Sixth Grade Students from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds*. I am hoping to interview those of you who wish to participate and are chosen for the study, to listen to your homework experiences and learn how it affects your feelings about school. There will be one individual interview and one group interview where you will be able to describe your homework experiences.

III. Relevancy to Students

I know you all have been given homework assignments during your time in school. Even though you are given the same assignments as your classmates, some of you may have a more difficult time trying to get them done right and on time. It is differences such as these I am trying to find

out about. This information is important to learn about so teachers can make good decisions when it comes to homework.

IV. Participant Expectations

If you want to participate and are chosen to participate you will be interviewed twice; once by yourself, and once in a small group. Each time the interview probably won't take more than an hour. I will also ask you to make or bring in a picture, song, or poem showing or describing what comes to mind when you think of homework. We'll talk about these during the individual interview. Both interviews will take place during after-school in the building. If you do want to participate it is very important for you to be honest when answering questions. There is no right or wrong answer to any question I ask. I just want to hear about your own experiences.

V. Parental Consent

If you think you might be interested in being a participant, I will give you two letters to take home to your parents. After they read them and discuss the study with you, if you still want to participate they will need to sign the consent letter. Please return it to the after-school director and I'll get them from him.

VI. Questions

Does anyone have any questions? Is there anything you didn't understand and you'd like me to explain?

VII. Distribution of Letter to Parents/Guardians

Okay, if there are no more questions, I'm about done. If any of you think you would like to participate in my study please raise your hand or see me on your way out and I'll give you the letters to take home. Please return the one needing your parent's signature as soon as possible if you are hoping to participate.

Thank you all very much for listening. Have a great afternoon.

Appendix H – Debriefing Letter

Dear (Co-researcher Name),

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research project. I could not have completed it without your help. I appreciate the time you spent answering questions and talking about your emotions about homework. I also thank you for listening to the copy of our interviews and my final results. We are finally done! You should be very proud of yourself for participating in this study. Your answers to my questions will hopefully help other students. Teachers will now understand how you feel about homework and how it affects your feelings toward school. The decisions they make concerning homework may be changed.

I have enjoyed our time working together and greatly appreciate all your hard work. If I can ever help you regarding school, please let me know. Just ask the director of After-School Academy to tell me you want to talk to me.

Again, thank you and may God bless you.

Sincerely,

Mr. Richard McCormick