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# **A Research into the Problems of Students Not Completing Homework Assignments in the Middle School: The Case of Weaver Middle School in Bibb County, Georgia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

I have been teaching middle school students for three years and one of the most discouraging problems I face is that my students do not consistently complete homework assignments. In this Action Research report, I am attempting to uncover reasons why my students do not complete homework regularly. I also look at ways to motivate them to do their homework, and possible teaching strategies to implement that will encourage more consistent completion of homework. I conclude that students do not do or complete their homework for the most part because they are not organized due to lack of motivation. I also found out that many parents do not help their children with homework either because they do not know or do not care.

## **CONTEXT**

Weaver Middle School is a public, suburban middle school located in Bibb County, Georgia. The school opened in 1996 and serves a population of approximately 1,000 students. Weaver is a Title I school in which 56% of its students receive free or reduced lunches. Because of its Title I status, Weaver receives extra funding from the Federal Government, which supports its students academically through the purchase of an abundance of technology resources and books. In addition, several free tutoring programs are provided through Title I funds and are offered to those students who qualify based on certain financial criteria. Weaver is on the state of Georgia's Needs Improvement list because the school did not make Adequate Yearly Progress

(AYP) in 2004-2005 according to the guidelines of *No Child Left Behind*. Based on the results of the state of Georgia's standardized test (Criterion-Referenced Competency Test), Weaver's regular education students have exceeded state requirements in each of the previous two academic years; however other factors such as student attendance and low performance by the Special Education population have kept Weaver on the *Needs Improvement* list.

Weaver's student body is 82% African-American, 16% Caucasian, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% other nationalities. 15% of Weaver's student population is enrolled in special programs, with 11% receiving services in special education classes and 4% being served in gifted classes. The school's overall population has recently decreased due to a new middle school opening during the 2004-2005 School Year and a large number of Majority-to-Minority transfers, which occurred after Weaver was labeled as a failing school.

One problem that can be directly attributed to academic performance at Weaver is student discipline. A large percentage of students have at least one office referral during the current school year, which means they have missed instructional time due to being in the office or worse; they are being placed in In-School Suspension or getting suspended from school. In addition to student discipline, another problem Weaver faces in relation to academic performance is student mobility. Based on statistics from the 2003-2004 School Year, Weaver had a student mobility rate of 52%. This percentage is based on a student population of 1,040, in which 348 students transferred in and 189 students transferred out.

## **DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

I have taught at Weaver Middle School for three years. I am currently teaching eighth grade Georgia History, but I have also taught seventh and eighth grade math and pre-algebra. During my time at Weaver, I have noticed that my students do not consistently complete homework when it is assigned. I have come to change my beliefs about the nature and importance of homework and how it relates to student achievement.

At first, I was extremely angry at my students, and could not understand why they were not doing homework when it was assigned. I especially could

not understand why they did not complete homework when they knew that failure to complete these assignments would have a negative impact on their grades. I tried everything I could possibly think of to motivate them to do their homework. I lectured them several times and even had them calculate their grades with 0's and 100's for their homework averages so that they could see the difference this made.

After my first year of teaching was completed, I attended a workshop entitled *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. This workshop helped me to better understand the situation in which many of my students were living, and going into my second year of teaching I felt that maybe I should not give my students as much homework. I also felt that when I did assign homework that I could not actually expect my students to complete the assignment because of the situations they were going through at home. It became obvious to me that homework was low on my students' priority list, and I became even more discouraged when I assigned it. This led me to question whether homework was even important in the first place. I would often ask myself questions like, "Does completing homework improve student achievement" or "Will this homework help my students better understand the concept?"

These types of questions have led me to where I am today, wondering about the nature of homework, what research says to support the assigning of homework, and where homework fits into my own teaching philosophy. Often my homework assignments, whether I am teaching math or social studies, consists of having students complete work that was begun in class but could not be finished due to time constraints. Ultimately, I am seeking to understand why my students do not complete homework and if there is anything I can do in my teaching to facilitate more consistent completion rates by all of my students.

## **RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW**

Before I delve into this problem of why my students do not consistently complete homework assignments, I feel I must justify the reasons for assigning homework in the first place. I know why I think I assign homework; to extend learning about what I have been teaching in class or because students simply do not have enough time to complete an assignment in class. I believe these are valid reasons for assigning homework, but where do my beliefs

about homework fall in with what literature on the topic has to say?

According to Cooper (1989), homework is the "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are intended to be carried out during non-school hours." There has been much debate and research done over the past 75 years on the subject of homework. There is research to support the positive effects of homework on student achievement, as well as the negative impact it can have on families. It is not difficult to find research to support one's case either for or against homework. Unfortunately, there is not conclusive evidence to support the benefits or limitations of homework. Several factors such as the structure of homework assignments, student differences, home environments, and the community in which one lives all play an important role in homework completion. "Thus it is unreasonable to assume that a simple, general finding about homework applicable to all children is likely to emerge" (Cooper 2001). With this statement, it seems a daunting task to uncover the silver bullet method for solving my homework problems. It still behooves me, however, to find out more about the nature of homework and how it benefits my students in some way in spite of their home circumstances.

The most obvious reason for assigning homework is "that it will have an immediate effect on the retention and understanding of the material it covers. More indirectly, homework will improve students' study skills, improve their attitudes toward school, and teach them that learning can take place anywhere" (Cooper 2001). Teachers who assign homework and grade it on a regular basis are able to move through their curriculum more quickly, thus allowing for increased student learning. Additionally, Butler (1987) points out that schools in which homework is routinely assigned and graded tend to have higher achieving students overall. Butler (1987) also states that homework involves parents in the schooling process, and Cooper (2001) agrees when he states that involving parents in the schooling process will enhance "their appreciation of education and allowing them to express positive attitudes toward their children's achievement."

The major argument against homework is that it consumes too much family time after school hours are over. According to a Public Agenda survey in 1998, almost half of parents reported having a serious argument with their children over homework, and a third of the parents reported that homework was a source of stress and struggle (Public Agenda, 1998). Recent trends show that the amount of homework students are given varies, depending on

the state of our nation's position within the global marketplace. "Accordingly, the number of hours of homework during the century appears to have varied in response to changing opinions and exigencies such as Sputnik; and the amount of homework done by students also varies considerably and depends on their motivation, family encouragement, and teacher assignments" (Paschal, 2001). After the amount of homework was increased in the 1950's "For accelerating the pace of knowledge acquisition" (Cooper, 2001), the trend reversed itself again in the 1960's, when contemporary learning theorists suggested that homework put too much pressure on students. Wildman (1968) wrote, "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."

Beliefs about homework again underwent major change in the 1980's when student achievement-test scores began to decline. With America again concerned about its ability to compete in the global marketplace, the amount of homework assigned began to steadily increase. This leads educators to the present day, still unable to answer many questions about homework's effectiveness or the appropriate level of homework to assign. Based on the history of homework, it is evident that, "Public attitudes toward homework have been more closely tied to the prevailing broader social philosophy and to national and international economic trends than they have to the research on homework's effectiveness" (Cooper, 2001).

Even with this negative outlook toward homework, research indicates that only 10 percent of parents believe that their children receive too much homework. Nearly two-thirds of all parents think their children receive the right amount of homework, and 25 percent do not think their children have enough homework (Davis, 2000). Most parents and teachers will agree that homework serves a purpose in that it reinforces school learning and helps to develop self-regulatory attributes. However, elementary-aged children that were surveyed on the topic revealed that their primary reason for completing homework was to win approval from their parents and teachers. (Xu 2005).

Why do some students simply not do their homework on a consistent basis? Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) note:

A sizeable number of students didn't really know how to do the homework, or at least how to do it well enough to get any satisfaction from it. A smaller number truly didn't have time, and we needed a whole-family

conference to tackle the issues of jobs, baby-sitting, etc. A third group just couldn't or didn't plan, so we tried having a brief meeting at the end of each day to plan for homework. Some students were just expressing their general despair this way.

Another suggestion as to why students do not complete homework is to protect their self-esteem. This is a belief in which students feel they are better off portraying an attitude of not caring, rather than trying and failing, which would prove them to be incompetent. In other words, "Accepting failure has become a strategy for not having to try" (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Student differences play a major role in solving the homework completion problem. Cooper (2001) explains that homework allows students considerable discretion about whether, when, and how to complete assignments. The home environment influences the process by creating an atmosphere that fosters or inhibits study. Finally, the broader community plays a role by providing other leisure activities that compete for the student's time. Based on this explanation, it is evident that the primary factor in students' ability and willingness to complete homework lies within a particular students' level of motivation and in his or her attitude about school.

Interestingly enough, researchers have found that only about 35% of school districts have a uniform homework policy. This leaves classroom teachers responsible for identifying the amount and type of homework to assign. Unfortunately, this type of homework assigning is more often based on a teacher's personal beliefs rather than on research-based best practices (Bryan, 2004). This is where researchers on the subject of homework have identified several proven strategies to support better homework completion and more efficient use of homework to reinforce classroom learning.

Simplicio (2005) has identified three problem areas in relation to assigning homework that must be addressed before recommendations can be made to improve student homework completion. The first problem area is with consistency. Some teachers give little or no homework, and others give entirely too much. It is important that teachers collaborate with one another about the amount and type of homework they are assigning. A suggestion to solve this problem is that teachers work in concert with one another, and focus more on creating inter-disciplinary homework assignments that reinforce classroom lessons.

A second problem is that many homework assignments do not accomplish

the educational objective they set out to achieve. Many homework assignments are intended to reinforce basic concepts; however, if a student did not grasp the concept in class, they may be reinforcing bad habits rather than doing the assignment correctly. In addition, parents often complete homework for their children because of time constraints, completely undermining the purpose of assigning homework.

Finally, because of busy schedules, “Students often complete their assignments in haste. The result is that the quality of work is often poor, especially when students rely on easily accessible Internet sources that at times are less than credible” (Simplicio, 2005). Students come to believe that turning in poor work is better than turning no work at all, and when teachers do not collect or check homework on a regular basis, students come to believe that it is not important.

There are several research-proven strategies that, if used properly and effectively, will help make sure that students complete homework when assigned. These strategies will also ensure that homework meets clear learning objectives, and hopefully will ease the homework burden placed on parents and families. Shockley (1964) provides a list of suggested strategies for teachers to use when creating and assigning homework. First, teachers should assign work that can be completed in a reasonable time limit. Also, homework should be an extension of the work that was completed in class that day. It is important for teachers to pay attention to students’ differences in interests and learning styles. The same homework assignment will not necessarily meet the needs of all learners; therefore alternate assignments should be available if needed. Shockley suggests that homework be checked daily, or at least every time it is assigned. This shows students that the teacher is serious about homework, and that he or she carries high standards when it comes to homework completion. Finally, Shockley suggests that teachers put the emphasis on homework quality rather than quantity. This will encourage students to take their time and do the assignment correctly rather than rushing through it and not learning what is intended.

Darling-Hammond (2006) makes several suggestions when it comes to encouraging students to complete their homework. First she suggests that the work that is assigned is viewed as worthy of effort by the students involved. She suggests that, “Homework tasks are authentic and engaging – that students have a reason to do them (other than avoiding a zero)” (Darling-



Hammond, 2006). Students will be more willing to complete homework if they see it as valuable to their own life. It is also important that students believe the homework is useful in some way. For example, if students know the assignment will be used in class the next day, they will be more inclined to make sure it gets done.

Next, Darling-Hammond (2006) suggests that teachers make homework assignments doable. "Even if the work is engaging, students won't do it if they don't know how." She also suggests that teachers make sure homework is a clear continuation of well-taught classwork, and that teachers should perhaps give students an opportunity to begin homework in class. This will give the teacher an opportunity to assess whether or not students understand the assignment. It is also important to point out that students who have parents that understand the homework have an advantage over students whose parents are unable to help. "Parent involvement in homework led to higher homework completion, which in turn produced higher achievement" (Bryan, 2005). Additionally, "Students said that they were most attentive to homework when they completed it with a parent, rather than with a peer or on their own" (Xu, 2005).

A final suggestion Darling-Hammond makes to encourage homework completion is that teachers and schools create space and time for homework completion. She points out that some schools have added time at the beginning or end of the school day to allow students the opportunity for homework completion. Other options are Saturday sessions, after-school programs, or simply allowing students to go to a teacher's classroom during lunch or a free period to get the extra help they need. "The school needs to make it harder *not* to do the work than to do it!" This sounds like an unrealistic picture; however schools with high achieving students have teachers who are willing to give extra time to see that students succeed.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

To collect the data needed to conduct my action research, I used the approach of triangulation, which included student surveys, interviews, and my own classroom observations. By using three separate instruments to collect my data, I was able to cross check the types of information I gleaned from each one. Each one of these data collection methods offered unique insight

into reasons students may or may not complete homework assignments. The data gathered from each method also helped to prove or disprove ideas that I believed were causing poor completion of homework.

The first data collection approach I used was a student survey (see Appendix 1). The survey included ten questions and was completely anonymous. Fifty-Eight students responded to the survey and the following is what I learned from the results:

1. 72% of students feel they disappoint their teachers if they don't do their homework.
2. 43% of students said that liking their teacher had little to do with completing homework assignments.
3. 89% of students said they feel good about themselves when they do their homework.
4. Only 48% of students feel that cheating or copying off of someone else's homework is bad.
5. 66% of students say that they are more willing to do homework if some kind of reward is involved.
6. 67% of students say that they have strong parental support with their homework.
7. 86% of students say that their parents care if they don't do their homework.
8. 43% were neutral on understanding their homework assignments.
9. 54% of students indicated that organization was not a factor in whether or not they turned in their homework.
10. Lastly, 48% of students said that they will still do their homework if they don't finish it at school.

I feel like the results from this anonymous survey are probably the best indicator of where my students stand on the issue of homework completion. The results were a bit surprising to me; however I feel that the answers were honest and that students were not putting down answers just because they thought I wanted to hear it.

The next method I used for data collection was individual student interviews. This strategy was a little more difficult to employ because of time constraints. After all, I did have to continue teaching my classes, though I would have liked to have stopped teaching in order to focus on my research. Due to these time constraints, I limited the student interviews to four questions on

the topics of organization, level of understanding on assignments, parental support, and the types of assignments students preferred. The students interviewed were chosen at random by class period and time of day, yet they were all students that I knew did not consistently turn in homework. I compiled the responses from all interviews conducted (a total of 18 students were interviewed), and the following is what I gleaned from talking with my students.

Most of the students interviewed claimed to be very organized and did not attribute this to being a factor in not completing or turning in homework assignments. Second, several of the students interviewed indicated that at times, not understanding their homework assignments was a factor in whether they did the work or not. All respondents claimed to have strong parental support when it came to completing homework. This was surprising to me because this was one of the theories I had about why my students do not complete their homework. The final question centered on the types of homework assignments students prefer. I asked them if they would rather have long-term projects or daily assignments. All but one student responded that they prefer daily assignments because, as one student put it, "It is quicker and I can get it over with."

The third method I used to collect data for my research was daily classroom observations. I used a two week period of time to complete my observations, and the results definitely supported my reasons for choosing to attempt this action research in the first place. The following is an excellent example of the level of poor homework completion in my classes. As I began to conduct my action research, I assigned as homework for students to get their parental consent forms signed. Students were told that if they had them signed and returned the next day, they would get a free 100 as a homework grade. I am disappointed to report that only 53% of my students brought back the signed form. Many of them shouted out that they had forgotten, or that it was sitting on their kitchen table. During the two week period that followed, I focused on observing students in my classes interacting with their peers and how they reacted to homework assignments. One of the trends I noticed was what seemed to be a lack of organization. I collected homework four times during that two week period and each time I did, students in all of my classes reacted similarly. First, several students would dig through stacks of papers, open their books and notebooks, and look all around their desks.

Then, as I would collect the work on one side of the room, I would glance back at the students on the other side and watch them frantically copying someone else's work that had already been passed up. On other occasions I would give students the opportunity to begin their homework in class. This way I could move about the room and answer any questions students might have about the assignment. Students that chronically do not turn in their homework would choose to begin talking, playing, or even sleeping when they could have been doing their homework. Only students that already hand in homework regularly would begin the assignment as instructed.

Many of my students that do not regularly complete their homework are chronic behavior problems, are often absent from class, and have a difficult time making it to class on time. It is obvious from this list of negative attributes that there are several issues that need addressing with these students before homework completion will improve. Students who regularly complete homework are diligent about getting me to sign their planner, which shows me that they are organized and that they have parents who care about monitoring their child's academic progress. Students who do not complete homework do not get a planner signed, leading me to believe that these students do not have anyone at home checking on their assignments. I attempted to contact different parents seven times during my observation period to inform them of their child's failure to complete homework. Of those seven phone calls, three numbers had been disconnected, two parents sounded concerned and said they would talk to their child, and the other two parents thanked me for calling but did not seem concerned about addressing this problem.

Students who regularly complete homework were observed helping other students with class assignments, encouraging other students to get their work done, and were always quick to volunteer in class to answer questions and pass out papers. Those students that do not complete homework assignments often avoided tasks and activities, talked or passed notes while instructions were given, and were reluctant to join groups during cooperative learning activities. It became apparent to me through observations that higher-achieving students (those that did their homework) were more social overall, as these students are more willing to participate in class activities and work cooperatively with others. Additionally, students that do not complete homework on a regular basis are more consistently out of dress code (shirts untucked, pants sagging, etc.). This contributes to the overall negative per-

sona these students portray, which relates to their inconsistent homework completion and poor academic performance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based upon my literature review and data collection methods, I have come to several conclusions about the reasons my students do not complete their homework. First, I believe that my students are not organized even if they claim to be. Responses to both the survey and the interview questions indicate that my students feel they are very organized, and believe this is not a factor in them completing and turning in homework. Based on my observations, I have to disagree with them. I noticed throughout the observation period that many students did not write down their homework assignments in any sort of planner or other section of their notebook. I also witnessed time and again, the mad scramble through stacks of crumpled pages in an attempt to find the homework that they supposedly had done. It also appears to me that most students have all subject areas crammed into the same notebook with no dividers to separate the different classes.

A second conclusion that I have made is that many of my students are not motivated to succeed. In addition, many of them have subscribed to the philosophy of "if I don't try, I can't fail." Such apathetic attitudes are prevalent among some of the students in all of my classes, and it is discouraging to watch so many students sitting in class doing nothing. Another conclusion that I have drawn is that many students do, in fact, have an emotional response to homework completion. In other words, most students feel a sense of accomplishment when they do complete homework assignments and feel like they have let their teacher down when they do not complete their homework. This was refreshing news to me, as I was beginning to think that many of my students did not care at all. Finally, I have concluded that parental support does not seem to be as much of a factor as I had originally believed. According to all student responses to the survey and interview questions, my students believe that they have the support they need at home to complete homework. In addition, my students indicated that their parents expect them to complete homework when it is assigned.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

After reviewing the literature on the subject of homework, accumulating and analyzing data, and forming conclusions based on that data, I recommend that the following actions take place in order to improve the level of homework completion by my students. First, I recommend that a note be sent home to be signed by parents, which informs them when a homework assignment has not been turned in. Because my students indicated a high level of parental support, I feel that this will have an impact on their motivation to complete assignments. Second, I plan to teach organizational skills to all of my students. I will make recommendations to them about how to become better organized, and will continually follow-up with students to see if they are implementing the organizational skills that they have been taught, such as writing down assignments in a planner.

One policy that I am currently employing, and that I will continue to utilize, is to allow students to turn in homework late if needed. Students are made aware that if they turn in an assignment late, points will be taken off; however I feel that it is better to give students another opportunity to complete homework than to make zeroes permanent. I also plan to focus more attention on making homework assignments meaningful. This is an area that many teachers often take for granted, but I have realized through my research that students' different learning styles need to be considered when creating assignments. If students see homework assignments as useful and applicable to their own lives, they will be more willing to do them. Finally, I am recommending that the action research process be continued. Only now, I will focus my attention on the topic of how to motivate my students to do their homework. One of the trends I have noticed throughout my research is that the students I teach are not motivated to be successful. For this reason I want to find teaching methods and learn the psychology behind what motivates the middle school child to succeed.

## APPENDIX

### *Survey Results (58 Respondents)*

**1. I feel I have disappointed my teachers if I don't do my homework.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
31% (18)	41% (24)	16% (9)	3% (2)	9% (5)

**2. I am more willing to do my homework if I like my teacher.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19% (11)	21% (12)	17% (10)	21% (12)	22% (13)

**3. I feel good about myself when I do my homework.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
53% (31)	36% (21)	7% (4)	2% (1)	2% (1)

**4. I feel that copying someone else's homework is bad.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
17% (10)	31% (18)	24% (14)	17% (10)	10% (6)

**5. If my teachers rewarded me for doing my homework, I would be more willing to do it.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
50% (29)	16% (9)	16% (9)	14% (8)	5% (3)

**6. My Parents are always willing to help me with my homework when I need it.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
50% (29)	17% (10)	24% (14)	5% (3)	3% (2)

**7. My parents do not care if I do my homework.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7% (4)	5% (3)	2% (1)	23% (13)	63% (36)

**8. I have a difficult time understanding my homework assignments.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7% (4)	17% (10)	43% (25)	21% (12)	12% (7)

**9. I often do not turn in homework because I can't find it.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9% (5)	21% (12)	17% (10)	33% (19)	21% (12)

**10. If I do not finish homework at school, I am more than likely not going to do it.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
16% (9)	9% (5)	28% (16)	26% (15)	22% (13)

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