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Investigating Classroom Strategies That Affect Middle School Students’ Homework Completion

Christin Perillo

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Abstract

Homework remains a controversial topic among educators and families. Although there are reasons to support the assignment of homework as well as reasons against its use, it seemed that a lot of my middle school students were simply not completing the work they were assigned to do at home to reinforce the skills they learned during the school day. The following illustrates an action research project that I completed to learn about two of my classes of eighth grade students' thoughts on homework and to determine whether certain specific approaches within the classroom could boost the homework completion of these students. In order to increase the rate of homework completion, I first gathered information about students' homework habits. From that information, I implemented several strategies into the normal classroom routine. Homework quizzes were administered, where students were assessed on problems taken directly from homework assignments to ensure they were being completed. Data was collected through these quiz scores as well as homework logs, homework completion rates, and a research journal. At the conclusion of the study, these data were analyzed and compared to see if there was any significance between the use of the interventions and the increase of homework completion. The results offered little correlation between the two. In fact, I found that the majority of the students that participated in the study actually did complete their homework most of the time. However, my research led me to other intriguing ideas such as the importance of the quality of homework that students turn in and the question of whether all students need homework.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

/Investigating Classroom Strategies That Affect Middle School Students’ Homework Completion /

by

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INVESTIGATING CLASSROOM STRATEGIES THAT AFFECT MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' HOMEWORK COMPLETION

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Education

by

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Introduction

Located on a side street in the center of the busy suburban town of Upper Montclair, Mount Hebron Middle School is home to a very diverse population of students who come from all over Montclair. I began teaching mathematics at Mt. Hebron five years ago as a new teacher, and since then I have taught various levels of sixth, seventh and eighth grade math courses. Mt. Hebron is one of three middle schools in a magnet district where parents and students have the ability to choose which school they would like to attend for each level, based on their individual learning needs and goals. Each of the three middle schools spotlights its own specific theme which becomes the focal point and building block for students as they spend their years there. Mt. Hebron is considered the Science & Technology magnet school for the district. We focus on the areas of mathematics and science by offering courses in pre-engineering and higher-level mathematics, such as algebra and geometry.

Because my school is specialized in this way, the job I do as a math teacher is looked at carefully, specifically in regards to students’ test scores and achievement. In an effort to boost these types of success, Mt. Hebron and the other two middle schools in Montclair have recently implemented a new mathematics curriculum called the Connected Math Program (CMP). CMP is a problem-based curriculum that focuses on the real-world application of skills and processes. It is designed to increase students’ problem-solving ability and overall mathematical understanding through critical thinking, logical reasoning, and the use of manipulatives. The program was chosen because it accurately addresses and is aligned with the five mathematics standards in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards. Therefore, CMP covers the necessary material to be
appropriate for standardized testing preparation. Over the last four years, the district has introduced the program to the students, one grade level at a time. Teaching Connected Math at Mt. Hebron School is challenging because of the diversity of student learners. Still, there are many positive aspects of the curriculum that make it an effective program for learning mathematics, including a homework segment after each main section of the book from which I assign problems related to the current classwork. This allows students to see exactly how closely their homework and classwork are linked, and why the tie is so necessary.

Aside from being a magnet school, there are several other unique characteristics about Mt. Hebron. We have approximately 70 teachers on staff and over 600 students in attendance. They come from many different ethnic backgrounds, the majority being African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic. In addition, about 30% of our students qualify for the Free & Reduced Lunch Program and approximately 25% are classified as special education students. Another interesting feature of Mt. Hebron is that it follows a block schedule format. Alternating A-day and B-day schedules allow students to have four classes per day that are each eighty minutes long. Therefore, I see my classes every other day, either two or three times per week.

The student body at Mt. Hebron School is broken down into six smaller groups that are called “Houses”. Each house contains about 100 students each from two grade levels, as well as one teacher from each of the core subject areas: math, science, social studies, language arts, technology, physical education/health, and a special education/support teacher for each grade. In order to form positive connections with our children, students usually stay within their house for their core classes all three years they
are at Mt. Hebron School. The 2008-2009 school year was my second year as the House 4 Mathematics teacher and I taught mostly 7th and 8th graders. Many of these students returned to me from last year due to the configuration of our “house” looping system. I had originally wanted my research for this study to focus on four of my six classes: two of seventh grade and two of eighth grade. But once I started working with seventy students’ worth of data, I realized that four classes were way too many. I knew that if I cut it down to only two classes, then I would have a much more feasible number to work with. I also knew I did not want to look at just one class of each grade because then I would be inclined to compare those classes to the other class of each grade that would not be receiving the strategies. This would not be fair since both groups of students in both grades are completely different, so comparisons would not be meaningful for me. After some deliberation, I finally decided that my two regular eighth grade math classes would be the focus of my study. My decision came mainly from my concern for my students’ entrance into high school next year. I wanted to make sure they were as prepared as they could be academically and that they had appropriate strategies in place for doing their best work.

As a math teacher, a growing concern in my classroom centers around the issue of homework. The Mt. Hebron administration expects that teachers assign homework regularly in each class. Accordingly, our grading policy mandates that approximately 10%-20% of final marking period grades in math be based on students’ homework average. The Connected Mathematics curriculum allows for appropriate integration of homework that reflects classwork. Not only are there general practice problems that directly apply to what was taught and learned in class, but there are also connection and
extension problems, which allow for differentiated assignments. Consequently, I believe homework should be a priority among students, as school is their main responsibility at this point in their lives. It has come to my attention however, that a lot of middle school students are not completing their homework for my class and that this work may not be a high priority for some families.

Generally, my students are assigned written homework each day they have math, unless they have a test. The homework I assign is directly related to the skills they learn during class, which makes each assignment a transition from one block to the next. Moreover, because of the block schedule, homework is an essential tool to increasing the retention of material so students are less likely to forget new information over the “in-between” day. When I check homework for completion at the beginning of class, I have been consistently observing patterns where at least several students, if not more, per class do not have their homework done or with them. To me, when more than three children out of a class of twenty do not have their homework on any given day, that is too many. Other teachers may have different opinions, which is what makes this topic exclusive to my own teaching. Therefore, I have one primary goal of my research: what can I do in my classroom routine or class management to increase the amount of homework my students turn in? I am also interested in finding out what motivates students to do or not do their homework assignments, as well as what effects the level of effort they put into their homework.

Literature Review

Homework has been a topic under great scrutiny throughout the realm of education for many years, and it continues to be an issue of concern today (Bryan &
Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Jackson, 2007). From as far back as the early 1900’s, people have either viewed homework as a positive or negative aspect of school (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; O’Melia & Rosenberg, 1994). Researchers, parents, teachers, and even students have come up with a multitude of advantages and disadvantages around doing homework. Given all the pros and cons, it is not difficult to see the controversy. Still, the big problem that schools and teachers are currently facing is that students are not completing the homework they are assigned.

The Debate Around Homework

Many people, including educators, support the value of homework and consider it an integral part of a student’s schooling. Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein (1998) acknowledge that there is a positive connection between homework completion and academic achievement. Van Voorhis (2003) maintains that middle school students “are likely to achieve better grades and achievement scores when they spend extra time on homework and homework completion” (p. 323). Teachers use homework for a variety of purposes. The assignments serve as a communication tool with parents, as well as a method of practicing and reinforcing classwork (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998).

However, not everyone is in agreement that homework is a beneficial aspect of education. In fact, concerns are voiced from parents, teachers, and students alike. If teachers do not assign homework appropriately, it can be a waste of time and effort for the student (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998). Students get upset and frustrated that they are assigned too much work, or that it is meaningless “busy” work. Parents complain that they want to help their children but do not feel prepared enough to do so because they require more school assistance or more of their own academic knowledge.
Others consider doing homework to be “an unpleasant task” that just causes stress for families (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998). It is realistic to acknowledge that both sides of the homework argument are legitimate, so it seems that the debate will continue as individuals express their opinions on the issue.

**Common Reasons Why Students Don’t Do Homework**

Regardless of whether homework is viewed as positive or negative, a growing concern for classroom teachers is that a great deal of the homework they assign is simply not being completed. Goldberg (2007) reflects that it is easy to assume that a child’s abilities at home are the same as what the teacher observes at school, though this is clearly not always the case. So, even students who are consistently on-task and strong students in the classroom may not reveal the same behaviors at home. Many teachers attempt to use homework as a critical part of their daily lessons or at least as a transition from class to home and back to class. Therefore, the fact that some students are not doing their homework is having a significant effect on what is occurring in the classroom. Jackson (2007) questions, “How do you have a smoothly running class if large numbers of students can’t fully participate?” (p. 57). This can lead to a continuing downward spiral: if fewer students are doing homework, then it would seem apparent that less classwork can be based on the homework, which means that homework matters even less now. Therefore, students have even less of a reason to actually complete the homework at all (Jackson, 2007).

Unfortunately, quite a number of reasons may explain why so many students do not complete their homework. While these explanations vary based on cultural backgrounds, geographic environments, or individual student motivation and personality,
it is important to point out that sometimes, there may be a legitimate excuse. For instance, some children truly have no time to complete their homework because they have responsibilities that go beyond that of other kids their age, such as holding after-school jobs (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006) that are necessary to earn money for their families or caring for younger siblings. Other students fail to complete their homework due to increased socialization. As elementary turns to middle school, peers become a powerful pressure under which some kids break, for fear of being labeled "geek" or "nerd" just for doing homework responsibly. In other words, it's just not cool to do homework (Jackson, 2007).

Furthermore, there are those students who do not do homework because they simply can't, or rather, they do not know how to do what is assigned to them. It is important that teachers make their homework "doable" because even if students are engaged in the assignment, they will not do it if they do not know how (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006, p. 10). Pasi (2006) logically states, "After tackling assignments they simply cannot complete at home, even with a good faith effort, students often return to class more discouraged about their ability to do the work" (p. 8). Other students (and parents) consider homework to be a waste of time because it has little purpose. That is, the assignment does not reinforce what was taught and learned in school. Sometimes assignments can actually do more harm than good "when they do not appear to assess or reinforce learning" (Pasi, 2006, p. 8). One more reason to explain a lack of homework being turned in is that students are not motivated enough to do it (Goldberg, 2007). Jackson (2007) relays to readers that students have realized nothing really severe happens if they do not do their homework. Whatever the reasons may be,
homework exists in most schools, and a change needs to be made so that students get more of it done.

Strategies to Implement

Regardless of whether the assignment of homework is viewed as positive or negative, the growing concern for classroom teachers remains that too many students simply are not completing it (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006). In fact, approximately 28% of average-achieving students have trouble getting their homework done (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998). Yet, the literature contains specific studies carried out by a number of educators in which strategies were successfully implemented in a variety of settings to attempt to decrease this percentage. While some teachers have employed the assistance of parents and families to accomplish this goal, others have implemented programs solely within their own classrooms to improve the homework rate among their students.

Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) depict classroom teachers who, in an effort to increase the rate of homework their students were completing, provide places and opportunities to do homework for those who know they have difficulties completing it outside of school. Much of the time, teachers who do this volunteer their free time, either at lunch or during their prep period. There are also schools that provide this block of time during the school day to anyone who would like to take advantage of it.

“Successful schools have added homework time at the beginning or the end of the day, in advisory periods during which students work under the watchful eye of their advisor, in Saturday sessions, in weekday breakfast clubs, in after-school programs run by community organizations, and in other settings that provide dedicated time and personalization” (Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch, 2006, p. 12).
In one school in particular, called the Urban Academy, one period of each day is designated as Drop-In. A small group of students are given the time and place to sit and complete homework in a quiet room under the supervision of a teacher who is on his/her preparation period. Opportunities like these make it possible for students to get their work done in school when they normally would not have that time afterwards.

Similarly, Laurence M. Lieberman, (1983), describes a strategy where students who do not complete homework regularly must **earn back** the privilege of being able to do their assignments at home. Any student in his school who continuously fails to turn in his or her homework is required to stay after school for five days and do his or her homework in a designated “homework room” (Lieberman, 1983, p. 435). There is even a follow-up for this method: after the five days are finished, students may complete homework alternately at home and school every other day for five days before fully going back to home. Just one missed assignment, and back to the homework room they go! This strategy requires parental permission for the child to stay after school, as well as teachers who are willing to volunteer their time and effort after the school day has ended. The idea behind this strategy is that students no longer have a choice about doing homework. The result then is that it either gets done at home or at school. Furthermore, being able to do homework at home actually becomes a positive goal because staying after school is viewed by most students as a negative consequence in this case (Lieberman, 1983).

Another model that seems very productive was researched by Mary Curley O’Melia and Michael S. Rosenberg (1994) and examined the effects of Cooperative Homework Teams (CHT) on the homework completion rate of 171 middle school
students in their mathematics classes. The CHT method combines cooperative learning with doing homework. Based on the results of a placement test of basic skills, students were divided into heterogeneous three- or four-person cooperative homework teams. Within their teams, students were assigned homework at the end of every class. At the beginning of the next class, CHTs were given ten minutes to meet, check, and grade the assignment, report each team members’ grade to the teacher, and hand papers back to their owners for immediate reflection and correction (O’Melia & Rosenberg, 1994). During this part of the CHT time, teammates were allowed to work together to fix problems, ask each other questions, and help each other out. Original and corrected homework were then handed in to the teacher for weekly average calculations. Individual and team homework was checked for completion; homework was considered complete if the student had given an honest try to at least 80% of the assignment. Individuals and teams earned points based on their completion of the assignments. Teams who reached a certain number of points were awarded each week with certificates (O’Melia & Rosenberg, 1994).

Finally, Janis Miller (1996) is a math professor who has designed a process that promotes the completion of homework in the form of in-class quizzes, which are drawn from sets of homework problems assigned throughout the course. They are intended to motivate students to give their best effort on every homework assignment. Students may use any method to complete and learn the necessary material. They can work independently or with their peers if they choose. They may also ask the teacher questions about any of the homework problems during or after class prior to the day of the quiz. As soon as they arrive to class on a quiz day, students are given one exact problem that has
been randomly selected from their most recent homework set. Students are graded on their answer to this problem only. After the papers are collected, the solution is shown on the board so as to provide students with immediate feedback and the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings (Miller, 1996).

Several benefits result from this homework strategy. First of all, it encourages students to put forth their best effort in completing each assignment in its entirety, since they will be asked to reproduce the answer to a homework problem with only the help of their own math understanding. Therefore, not only are they doing all of their homework, but they are also giving themselves a better chance of mastering material than students who are not part of this program. This approach to increasing homework completion rates is also beneficial for teachers because it allows for minimal grading, as there is only one problem to grade for each student. Still, the method represents a fair glimpse of whether or not they are gaining an understanding of the material without having to collect and grade all assignments from every single student.

Homework completion is a challenge that many teachers face in their classes each year (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006). It is important to recognize that there are a variety of reasons why students may or may not complete their homework assignments on any given night; however, as teachers, it is equally necessary to take steps that might alleviate the problem somewhat. By implementing strategies within the classroom and at school, and by providing positive experiences for students who need to complete their homework, it is possible that homework completion rates can increase.
Methodology

Research Question

In my classroom, I have begun to notice that students seem to be doing less and less homework. Since it is necessary for me to assign homework and homework is a part of each student’s grade, I am curious to see if there is anything I can do to help my students complete more of their homework. Therefore, my research question is: what can I do in my classroom routine or class management to increase the amount of homework my students turn in? I also wonder about my students’ beliefs about homework and if they affect their motivation and efforts to complete it.

Participants

The participants involved in this study were middle school students in eighth grade. There were two classes, a small group of only nine and a larger group of twenty, for a total of twenty-nine students. Although the smaller section contained no special education students, all nine students were at a fairly low to average academic level. The bigger class contained a majority of general education students as well as six who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), with disabilities ranging from learning disabilities and autism to emotional disturbances. There was a much greater range of ability levels in this class.

Data Tools and Process

In order to find out enough about my students and the homework they did during the length of my study, I realized there were a few different types of data collection tools I would need to include in my research. For instance, I decided it was definitely necessary for me to carry on some dialogue with my students and their parents/guardians
throughout the process about their completion of homework. This group of eighth graders, as with any group that age, I would imagine, was very social so they loved to talk about anything which was great for classroom discussions. Some of them tended to be more articulate with their verbal expression, while others were clearer in their writing. Therefore, I also used some written forms of data tools. I began with an individual questionnaire that included both objective and subjective responses. Later on throughout the study, students were asked to provide some feedback about the strategies implemented by responding to several questions. Additionally, my grade book served as another source of data. In it, I recorded daily the amount of homework each child did or did not complete for every class. Homework logs and homework quizzes were additional data tools that the students and I both used to keep track of how often their homework was being completed. I also kept a research journal where I recorded the various strategies I implemented, my thoughts and questions about these processes, and the students’ thoughts and questions about them. This helped me organize and keep track of my ideas and processes.

Before executing any actions, I introduced the study and explained in detail all of the important and necessary information verbally to each class so that they understood the purpose of my research, as well as their role in it. Then I asked them to read and sign the Student Assent letter (see Appendix A). All of my eighth graders signed the form and agreed to participate in my study. A Parent Consent Letter (see Appendix B) was also sent home to each of the parents or guardians of the possible participants. The students’ homework that night was to get the form signed by their parents. Ironically enough, not all of them returned the parental permissions form by the next class though. I had to
remind nine students at least once to get it back to me. Finally, all but one student was
given written parental permission to be a participant in my research.

Although I was looking for an increase in my students’ homework rates, I thought
it was first necessary to find out about their homework habits and beliefs about
homework before I actually did anything. So, I began gathering some specific
information about these ideas by administering a questionnaire (see Appendix C) to all
participants in both classes. Students were asked about their thoughts about the purpose
of doing homework. They were also asked to reflect on the time they spend doing
homework, whether they often have difficulty completing it, and what other things they
do after school that may impact their homework habits. The aim of the questionnaire was
to try and answer the seemingly obvious question of why some students do not do their
homework regularly. Figuring that out was one of the key aspects of my study.

While using the questionnaire as a guide to begin my study, I also used my grade
book as another tool to collect data throughout the course of the study. As my usual way
of checking homework in the classroom, homework data was entered into my grade book
every class to let me know which students did or did not complete their assignments.
This data was in the form of a number, either a “0”, “1”, or “2”, and represented whether
homework was completed fully (2), partially (1), or not at all/not present in class (0).
The overall goal of my research was to increase the amount of homework my students
were doing and turning in, so throughout the study I was looking to see if the number of
zeros decreased and the number of ones and twos increased.

One practice I started at the beginning of this school year with all of my classes
involved the awarding of Free Homework passes to any student who earned a 100%
homework average at the end of every marking period. I did this as a general attempt to boost homework grades and to also encourage the completion of homework among individual students. My goal was that the reward would catch on and more students would want them; therefore, more of them would do their homework on a regular basis, especially the repeat offenders. Originally, this reward system had no relation to my study, since it had not officially begun yet. Later, I realized it could have an impact on my research as it may motivate some students to do more homework, so I felt it was necessary to include as a data tool.

Additionally, I designed homework logs (see Appendix D) as part of my data collection to keep track of individual students, or rather for the students to keep track of themselves. Students kept these individual logs for about two to three months and each day in class they recorded the answers to the same four questions. They were asked to describe the time they spent doing their homework from the last class by listing 1) the time of day they worked on it, 2) where they completed it, 3) how long they spent working on it, and 4) whether or not they struggled with the assignment. If they did not complete the work or it was not returned, they were to explain the reason why.

The purpose of the homework log was twofold. My main intention was that the students would eventually become more accountable for their homework because they knew they would have to write about it next class. Also, as an aside to my overall research question, I really wanted them to become more aware of the time they spent doing their math homework. It has been my experience that a lot of the time kids do their homework just to get it done, but probably cannot remember what they wrote ten minutes later. My goal was for all students to look at their logs and be able to see patterns in their
own data. This included those who completed their homework regularly as well as those who didn’t. I wanted them to take note of the times and places they worked and see if they were able to recognize trends in what they were writing. I was hoping to improve the quantity of homework I was getting and maybe even improve the quality a bit, too.

Another part of my standard classroom procedure included me staying in contact with parents and students on a regular basis. With over one hundred students in total and almost thirty just in my study, I kept a log of these types of communication. In terms of the parents, I kept in touch, as needed, for both positive and negative reasons. When homework did not get turned in several classes in a row, a phone call was made or an email was sent home notifying the parents of the situation. With the majority of families, the parents then asked for the assignments and those students handed me the made up work when possible. In addition, I have always provided my students with the opportunity to come for drop-in tutoring, or extra help. They had the freedom to do this any day of the week during their recess time. About halfway through the year, I started asking them to sign in so that I could keep track of who came in and for what purpose though they did not always remember to do so. Sometimes they would come for make-up work if they were absent, sometimes for homework help, and sometimes to clarify or review things learned in class – all of which can be tied into work done outside of class, or homework. Also, I kept open lines of communication with students who were in special need of additional differentiated instruction based on what I noticed from homework logs or other assessments. I had on-going conversations with several different students who were in need of this extra time.
One more data tool I used during my study was homework quizzes, or checks. Although my main objective was to increase the quantity of homework returned and not necessarily the quality of students’ math understanding, I thought that my students might be more inclined to do their homework and ask for help on the problems they did not understand, knowing they would be graded on a quiz. Originally, I wanted to give a quiz each week, but our block schedule made it difficult, especially when the eighth graders started having activities in preparation for graduation. As a result, the quizzes ended up being a bit less often than I had originally planned, especially when B-days were only twice a week resulting in me only seeing them for two classes. Each of these quizzes consisted of three to five problems chosen at random from the previous homework set and was worth a ten-point homework grade. If possible, I tried to arrange it so that quizzes would occur on the second meeting of every week (either Wednesday or Thursday) due to block scheduling. Homework problems were assigned at the beginning of each block, as my students were used to walking into the classroom and copying the assignment into their planners from the front board. Sometimes, but not always, a quiz would be announced one class period prior to the day it was administered. The quizzes were taken independently by each student immediately as they came into class that day. Students who showed full ability to solve the problem accurately earned all ten points. Students who did not show complete understanding of the problem earned a fraction of those ten points based on how well they demonstrated their skill level. These scores for each quiz were reported in my grade book.

On-going conversations with my eighth graders about my project have been taking place for quite some time now, and take different forms, depending on the topic. I
started recording them in my research journal as another part of my data collection because the kids were so candid with me and they loved to talk about pretty much anything that would temporarily distract us from doing math work. My students provided some really good insight into their general thoughts about math homework. These talks began as whole-class discussions where I would present questions and they would respond freely. For example, I asked whether they thought the homework logs were useful, and whether they thought their homework was negatively affected when they did it in front of the television or on their bed, as opposed to quietly at a desk or table. Informal dialogue like this occurred about once every two weeks during the length of the study. The students were very honest in their answers, and did not seem to change their answers or hold back any information based on what they thought I would want to hear. Then there were also some individual chats. I chose to speak individually with particular students because I was interested in the way they went about doing their homework, or lack thereof, based mostly on what I had seen in their homework logs and how often they completed their homework. Throughout my study, I noticed that many of these individual conversations were with the same few students because they were the ones not handing in assignments. I wanted to know why and to look for patterns in their reasons. Consequently, I did not focus on the students who consistently did complete their homework at the time.

In order to determine how effective each of these homework strategies actually was in increasing completion of homework, I had to rely mostly on the students themselves to give me feedback. I did this in two ways: through regular conversations with them in class and through written reflections. The more informal feedback involved
my regular verbal communication within each class. We talked about the homework logs, quizzes, and passes. I asked them what they believed the purpose was for each one and if the strategy worked or was helpful in their completion of homework assignments.

For the written aspect, I asked each student to respond to three questions regarding the usefulness of the homework logs (see Appendix E). The reflection section inquired again about the purpose of the logs, if they were helpful, and whether they helped the individual do more homework than usual. I think the students were less open and detailed in these written responses than in the more comfortable classroom chats mainly because their verbal communication is much better than their written communication.

Keeping track of all of this information in an organized fashion was done through my research journal. As mentioned earlier, this journal was where I recorded the various strategies I implemented, my thoughts and questions about these processes, and the students’ thoughts and questions about them. It was also where I logged any conversations I had with the students and many of the questions I asked them as well. The largest component of the journal was probably questions that I wrote down. These were questions that stemmed from things I did, things the students did or said, or just points of interest that I wanted to investigate either later in my study or at some other time. The questions I noted in my journal were not all necessarily answered through my research. Furthermore, once I got into the analysis aspect of my study, I began organizing my ideas for themes and recording them in my journal as well. For the most part, my journal was arranged in chronological order, starting from the beginning of my study. This was helpful when I wanted to check back to a certain period of time or a particular incident for comparison.
Analysis Process

In terms of analyzing all of my data, I started by looking at the questionnaires since they were the leading force behind what I was going to begin doing in the classroom. There were a lot of questions on the form, some of which I realized were not as pertinent to my study anymore; therefore, I did not include all of them in my data analysis. For each question I did use in my analysis, I separated the papers into groups according to the responses and recorded the results. For the open-ended questions, I categorized similar answers together and condensed them into one group. The results of these data are represented as fractions, ratios and percentages for each question.

Next, I moved on to analyzing my grade book for individual student data. I checked this data at several points over the course of my study, specifically at the mid-marking period and at the end of each marking period. Each time, every participant’s average was calculated from the beginning of the cycle; that is, a percent of how many points the student earned from homework divided by how many points were possible in that time period. A group homework average (the mean) was also calculated using all twenty-nine children, so as to make comparisons. Two more quantities I have recorded in my analysis are the raw numbers of missing homework assignments for each child as well as the total number (raw) of missing homework assignments in each class.

In addition, raw scores of the homework quizzes were looked at. One of the results I was most interested in seeing was if those students with higher rates of homework completion had higher quiz scores and conversely, if those with poor homework averages were generally the individuals who scored low grades on the homework quizzes. I chose not to use all of the quizzes; some of them were grouped
together for certain assignments, and others were discarded for various reasons. A quiz may have been discarded because a number of students were absent on a particular quiz day. Because there were so few problems on each quiz, it was difficult, especially toward the end of the study, to get students to make them up. I might have also thrown away a quiz if I realized later that one or two of the problems were unfair for the students. For the ones I kept, I wrote down the scores for each participant and found averages for each student for all of the quizzes combined. I then found a class average for each quiz and a class average for all of the quizzes together.

In order to analyze the homework logs, I went through all of them several times to look for different pieces of information. Because I see my classes every other day, I tried to collect and review these logs every two weeks. First, I made note of common times and places that students recorded for doing their homework. I organized them into common categories and then created some class discussions based on what I found. One of the discussions this data review led to revolved around having a routine time and place for doing homework. I asked how many students worked on their math homework at the same time every day and only ten of them responded that they did. Most of this group said their habit had more to do with their schedules of extra curricular activities than anything else. We also talked about where students completed their homework in terms of minimal distractions. Four eighth graders reported doing their homework in silence. The rest admitted to having the television, music, or computer on while working. Surprisingly, the majority considered those three pieces of technology to be distractions and agreed that their homework would take less time if they did not have or use those distractions during homework time.
After finding commonalities within the homework logs, I examined whether or not students had trouble doing any of the assignments. I made a yes versus no list for each assignment that I had a log for. From this information, I tried to get an idea about the majority of the group because I know that even some students who said they did not have trouble did not get all of the problems correct when we went over the answers. But, I wanted to look for specific homework sets that might have caused confusion for a number of students. That would mean there was something to address and I made note of these topics when found. Another important thing I looked for was the reasons given for not completing the work or having it in class. These were actually the papers that I was very interested in. I started by simply making a list of the explanations, and then merged them into what became a much shorter list of common excuses. These reasons were an important part of my analysis because they brought to light the whole issue of homework for eighth graders.

Feedback sheets for the homework logs were analyzed in a similar format. I organized the papers in groups according to the students’ answers to each question. This time the process was a lot faster since there were only three questions. For the first questions, I simply counted the yes or no responses. With the second question, I made another list of the purposes they saw for the logs. Then I grouped common ones together and made a list of the most popular. The third question had two parts – a yes/no and an explanation. The explanation was what I was looking for, though I did record the number of yes or no respondents. Again, I organized their comments according to similarities.

Analyzing conversations I had with my eighth grade students was a bit more challenging. Much of the dialogue we had was very informal, and a lot of it was me
taking poll-like information. So they would raise their hands as if voting and I would record the raw data. I turned these numbers into percentages for each of the questions I asked. This was part of the information and data I kept track of in my research journal. In terms of their open responses and feedback, I treated these as if they were inquiries off the questionnaire, though I did not have an answer from twenty-nine individuals this time, more like three or four per question. So I listed these as well and grouped them based on commonalities. I also made note of whether or not individual student answers were a good representation of the entire class’s opinion. I thought this was important since some students don’t like to speak up, even though they have opinions as well.

Over the course of my study, a number of data tools were used to collect information about my eighth grade students. Each tool held a significant purpose to the study. But with many tools, came much investigation and the process of analyzing all the data was extensive. However, through the use of such varying methods of data analysis as I have previously described, I was able to learn a great deal about my students and their completion of math homework. These findings that I came across through my analysis led me to make discoveries about my students’ learning and my own teaching.

Findings

Throughout my research, I set out to explore how I, as a classroom math teacher, can help my eighth grade students increase the amount of homework they complete for my class. After analyzing all of my data, I came up with several major findings about my students and myself. First of all, the statistics from various forms of data brought to light some interesting and surprising details that were not necessarily in agreement with what I originally believed. In addition, I acquired a good sense about the feelings and ideas my
students had about their homework in general. I also learned more about the communication I had with students and parents, and how that affected or did not affect homework rates for different students. Some of my discoveries about the previous two sections were supported by one eighth grade student in particular, who struggled tremendously with math homework throughout his last year of middle school. Portions of his academic efforts are highlighted in this section. Finally, I was able to distinguish trends in my students’ learning and its impact on their work for my class, as well as observe patterns in my own teaching strategies that would help me become a stronger educator in the future.

**Student Homework Statistics**

Essentially, I wanted to look more into my students' homework because it seemed to me that a lot of the work I assigned was not getting done. Yet, when I looked at the big picture in terms of homework averages, I found that the majority of my eighth grade students were in fact, doing their homework most of the time. Indeed, at the end of the first marking period, over half of my students completed 90% or more of their homework, and this percentage remained the same for the following two marking periods as well. In fact, about a third of the students kept this high average for all three quarters. Just a slight step lower, 76% of them completed 80% or more of their homework during the first marking period, which is still pretty satisfactory. This percent dropped slightly into the sixty percent range for the second and third marking periods (See Appendix F, Chart 1). Of course, I believe the numbers should have been higher because I believe the homework I gave had a purpose and was meaningful to student learning; but still, that was a fairly decent amount of eighth graders doing homework. Moreover, the whole
group managed to maintain a homework average in the high 80% during the first three quarters of the year. Over the course of this same time, there were only nine individual occurrences of homework averages falling below the 70% mark. Of the nine, three belonged to the same student, who did an unsatisfactory amount of homework every marking period. The rest came from students whose averages only fell that low once; in all six of those cases, each student’s other two averages were significantly higher. These were certainly not observations I would have expected to come across when I started my study.

At first, this data was impressive to me because I expected it to be lower based on my daily observations. However, I am not sure if these numbers were an accurate representation of what I set out to find. I think the problem I was observing can be seen clearer through different kinds of statistics. For example, I took note of how many of the students had perfect homework scores: seven in the first marking period, eleven in the second, and ten in the third. Four of these students earned this achievement all three times. But, it was those numbers that really boosted the few low ones to improve the averages. Then I looked at how many times each of the two classes had a 100% homework day where every student brought in their completed homework. During second marking period homework was assigned 17 times and 15 times during the third marking period for a total of 32 assignments. In my third block class with twenty students, the entire class turned in homework three times – once in marking period two and twice in marking period three. My second block class had a perfect homework rate five times total – once during marking period two and four times during marking period three. This means that those groups turned in all of their homework together only eight
times, or one-quarter of the time homework was assigned. Not to mention the fact that in between each marking period almost as many individuals lowered their homework averages as raised them, regardless of how minor or significant the change. These are more like the results I was noticing on a regular basis in my classroom, and a large part of the reason I wanted to do some research in this area.

What I realized was actually happening was that even though several students might not have their homework on any given day, it was not always the same ones who forgot it or did not complete it. So I wasn’t imaging things – there were still too many students without homework almost every day. It is important to remember here that not earning credit for homework might have also meant that the assignment could have been complete but that the student forgot it at home or that it was left in their locker. Also, with a block schedule, there may only be fifteen or twenty homework assignments in a marking period, whereas teachers who meet with each class every day could have double that number. So, if one or two individuals didn’t complete their homework once every few weeks, it may not have affected their individual average much. Yet, to me it made it look like a lot were missing each day because it was always some. Generally, the same students over and over again did not do their homework consistently; I like to call them repeat offenders. However, many of my students did complete their homework on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how one might look at the circumstances, I did not see a lot of longitudinal movement throughout my study, in terms of drastic improvements in homework averages. At first glance, it looked like more students were not doing their homework on a regular basis. In reality though, it is
just the same couple of students who consistently did not do it, and then everyone else
who just took their turns every now and again. For the most part, students stayed
consistent in their averages: either fairly high meaning they did it all of the time, or very
low meaning they pretty much didn’t do it at all. So, I am somewhat frustrated with this
part of my results because I wanted to see some change, especially in those students who
had low homework completion rates.

*Student Attitudes about Homework*

Not only did I discover that more students are regularly doing their homework
than I originally believed, but many of them also have a more positive attitude about
math homework than I thought. Almost all of the students truly believed that math
homework was necessary and held a significant purpose in their lives. According to the
questionnaire they filled out, 93% of them agreed that it was important to do math
homework (See Appendix G, Chart 2). What intrigued me were the reasons they gave for
this belief (See Appendix H, Chart 3). More than a third of them associated the
importance of doing homework with their grade, since it is a percentage of their final
grade every marking period, as mandated by the school. When asked why they thought it
was or was not important, most of these responses were comparable to this student’s, who
explained “because it helps you learn and it’s part of your grade”. Over half of the
responses indicated the students’ general acknowledgement that math is used everyday in
many areas of their lives, and will help them at some point in their future. For example,
one student wrote that math homework was important “because you have to deal with
math your whole life”. Another student similarly stated, “We use math everyday,
sometimes not realizing it”. Although this could just be a regurgitation of what has been
etched into their brains for the past ten years by teachers and parents, I took it seriously because they were asked to come up with their answers on their own. Nevertheless I think it is important that eighth graders shared such a high regard for a subject that tends to be fairly difficult for them at this age.

Despite their positive energies about math homework, I wondered how many students would actually do their homework at all if it was not part of their grade. If asked, my eighth graders would probably have been the first to admit that they did not spend as much time and effort on their assignments as they knew they should have. In fact, when asked to make a list of things they do after school, only seven participants put homework on top of their list, five list it second and seven don’t even include homework on their list at all. Collectively, students also listed many other extra curricular activities that kept their daily schedules filled to the brim such as playing sports or video games, hanging out with friends, talking on the phone or being on the computer. It’s really no wonder why completing homework is not a higher priority for more of them. As a matter of fact, the most common explanations on the questionnaires for not doing homework on any given night included the students being too busy (i.e., having other stuff to do) or being too tired. The same finding was also evident in the homework logs. I also made some similar notes in my research journal about a conversation I had with both classes acknowledging their overall lack of effort in the area of homework completion.

Similarly, through some of our regular classroom chats, I learned about the busy lives my students lead and how it affected their homework time. These thirteen-year-olds have been growing up in a very fast-paced community. Due to their hectic schedules, about two-thirds of them were not able to do their homework at a routine time each day.
Not surprisingly, only four of the students did their homework in a quiet setting. Well over sixty percent of the whole group confessed to using some sort of electronic device while doing their homework, whether it was listening to music, watching television, or being on AIM or Facebook on the computer. A couple of them mentioned they “would not be able to focus as well without music on”. Even so, every single student raised their hand in agreement that these would all be considered distractions and that they would have completed the same amount of work in less time if they were to have eliminated these distractions from their homework environment. This tells me that they knew the right things to do, but that many of the choices they made were impacted by the social pressures and expectations in their teenage world. Therefore, they may have realized that their decisions affected their schoolwork but it was difficult for them to act on what they believed in and knew was right.

_A Young Man’s Homework Story_

During my research, I found myself becoming more and more intrigued by one particular student, DC. I kept coming back to his data and had many individual conversations with DC because of his lack of motivation towards anything. I would like to highlight him here and will point him out in other sections, too, where appropriate. Generally speaking, DC is a very bright young man who makes the conscious decision every day not to do his math homework, or any other homework for that matter. I have taught DC for two years now, and at first he amazed me because he was still able to pull off B’s in my class due to very high assessment scores. This showed me that he was learning with understanding by just being in class. As his eighth grade year progressed however, his test and quiz grades dropped. Therefore, his overall grade dropped because
he continued to not do any homework and had nothing to pull his grades up. This year, his homework averages for the first three marking periods were 45%, 62%, and 59%, respectively. More than a few times he was the only one in the class to not turn in his homework. I talked with DC a lot throughout my study about this issue, though the conversations never seemed to go anywhere or result in any changes. Mostly, I was interested in helping him improve his scores. He knew the purpose of my homework and agreed that it would help him review the material and “keep it fresh” in his brain, according to him. I asked him several different times what would motivate him to do his math homework, and he would tell me there was absolutely nothing that would work because he simply did not want to do it; he would rather go home and sleep. From my teaching experience, I have noticed that middle school boys often tend to be more tired than usual partially because they are growing so much, so this was somewhat understandable. But I also knew that DC had no extra curricular activities or structured time after school, making his constant sleeping seem a bit excessive as a legitimate reason for not doing math homework.

One day about two months before the end of the school year, he caught me off guard and told me all he needed was for me to ask him to do his homework, I guess like a special request. So at that moment I asked him to complete his homework assignment for the next class and sure enough that assignment was completed the next class. I tried it again the next day but it did not work a second time. When I asked him why he did not do it despite my asking, he replied that he was tired the night before and didn’t have time. The next time I tried this tactic it did not work again. If homework weren’t mandatory or if I could get around assigning it to everyone, I wonder how DC’s overall grade would be
affected. Perhaps his attitude toward math would be better, increasing his appreciation and understanding of the subject without having to review the material daily through homework. Maybe this would boost his assessment average, which would no longer require any help (from homework) to stay high.

Communication

Student Communication. As 8th graders, the participants in my study have been in middle school for three years. Just about all of them have had math with me for at least two of those years. During that time, I have gotten to know them and their families fairly well. I have been in contact with parents and guardians for both positive and negative reasons and the students were well aware of my phone calls and emails. Together, students and parents were familiar with what I expected of them, in the same way they knew what they could expect from me. Of all my classes, the eighth graders especially knew what their responsibilities were in terms of school and academics, and they knew when they did not live up to them. They knew math homework was assigned almost every class; they knew they were always supposed to do it. Finally, they knew it was part of their grade. Most made a conscious decision about whether or not to do their homework each night. Except for the occasional slip, they did not really “forget” about homework, as evidenced by the overused excuse that I saw on homework logs and as many of them would like us teachers to believe.

However, I still wanted to attempt to increase my direct communication with the students. One of the ways I did this was by sometimes previewing the homework. Before class was over, I asked them to look at the assignment – the directions and the problems – as I clearly explained what was required of them or what the questions were
asking. There were no scheduled times I did this; rather, I specifically chose certain assignments that I thought had unclear instructions or had multiple parts. From past experience I've learned that if I think students won't understand what to do, then I know I won't get very good results back. In my case though, with our block schedule, I wondered if this was even of any real value. How much of what I said would they remember if they didn't do their homework until the following night (since class was only every other day)?

Additionally, I wanted to determine if homework quizzes would produce more successful results if I announced them prior to quiz day, rather than just giving them on any day of the week unannounced. I chose four random homework assignments over the course of the third marking period and gave both classes advance notice about a homework check that would take place the next class. That is to say, I wrote "Homework Check Next Class" on the board along with the regularly written homework plus I verbally stated it during the beginning of the block when students were supposed to be copying their assignment into their planner. I figured, the more often I did this the more they would get used to seeing it and remembering it. Consequently, more students would come in for extra help the next day (the in-between day) to go over the problems. Perhaps it was because it was getting to be nicer weather or towards the end of the year, but I had no more visitors than usual during extra help times.

Neither of these strategies seemed to prove particularly effective in increasing the amount of homework being turned in. Going over the assignment prior to the students doing it would only have been productive if they actually remembered, or wrote down, what I explained to them in the classroom. But because of all the other (non-math)
information they have running through their brains, they did not remember as well as I would have liked. Most came in the next class and said they forgot what I had explained two days earlier. How’s that for retention? I think the announcements of the quizzes prior to the actual quiz day itself did not yield the desired results because the same individuals as usual still did not do their homework. Specifically going back to DC, he was no exception. Despite my specific requests and many encouragements, grades were still not a good enough motivation for him. It had been quite evident that he craved attention from anyone around him, so I thought that some individual positive reinforcement might work. But again, we could not come up with a sufficient incentive because DC said that nothing I could give him would be enough motivation to do his homework; he simply did not want to do it.

Home - Parent/Guardian Communication. I had a tendency to stay in touch with parents and guardians on a pretty regular basis, and I have found this continuous contact to be generally successful with my eighth graders this past year. In terms of homework, I am saying that if I made a phone call or wrote an email home due to missing assignments, most of the work was made up and turned in soon after, even if the student could no longer earn credit for doing so. Sometimes, in cases like DC and one or two others, it was less clear to me whether contacting parents really made a difference or served a purpose other than giving them a warning about their child’s lack of work because the homework still wouldn’t get done even after the communication was made. Ultimately, it came down to the student to actually do the assignment. Whether or not the parent or guardian required them to do it, essentially they did not have to turn it in. However, of all the negative contacts that I made due to lack of homework return, all but three
individuals resulted in positive outcomes for the student in terms of homework averages and understanding. This tells me that this kind of communication was significant and necessary to continue.

Homework planners also serve as a very useful source of school-to-home communication for parents, teachers, and students alike, if used correctly. Each student was provided with a planner on the first day of school at Mt. Hebron and they were required to write their daily and long-term assignments in it for each subject. Generally, in my room this entailed students simply copying the work from the front chalkboard. I truly believe in these planners as a huge learning tool for my students. My eighth graders staked the same claim, as all but one of them responded “yes” on the questionnaire to referencing their planners when they are doing their homework. They help such easily-distracted middle schoolers remember their homework each night when they leave school. These organizers also assist parents in teaching their children proper study and homework habits at a young age. Finally, they allow me to be on the same page with parents by writing notes or jotting questions to keep the lines of communication open.

All of this only works, of course, if the students bring the planners back and forth to school and home with them. Unfortunately, I noticed over the course of my study that more and more planners seemed to be left at home or in lockers. As I kept track of this for a couple of classes, I learned that more times than not, it was the same students who did not have their planners that also did not have the assignment prepared for the next class period. In the same way, the homework logs indicated that when students did not have their homework it was not because they did not complete the work, but rather because they left it at home. This showed me the planners had a fairly direct impact on
homework completion and that organization was still a skill that needed to be reinforced in eighth grade. Because it was so close to the end of the school year, I did not have enough time to make any changes or implement any strategies that would be effective for the students that often forgot their planners. However, since the planners are used by every student on a daily basis, I think this would be a significant aspect to pursue next year.

**Student Learning and Work**

Through conversations with them and from their feedback on the questionnaire, I could tell that most of my eighth graders understood that doing their math homework was a way to review what was learned in class and help them retain the material. However, although students may have been conscious of the importance of math homework, it has been my experience through this study that students were not transferring that knowledge when they were actually doing their homework. In other words, they were not making the connection that math homework was directly related to the skills and activities completed in math class. This lack of a connection was demonstrated in one class when I accidentally wrote the wrong page number on the board for their homework one Friday night. Of course, I realized after class, too late to change it. I received only three emails over the weekend questioning whether this was the correct assignment because it did not match the material we had covered in class. The rest of the class did the work from the pages I had mistakenly written, which had absolutely nothing to do with the lesson! When we talked about it during the next class, some of them acknowledged that they were a bit confused about why I might have assigned something different, but did the problems anyway. Other students didn’t even think twice about it and tried to work them
out, though many had trouble. Although this seemed totally absurd to me, I came up with two possible explanations: some of the students were not really putting enough focus into their homework to realize what they were writing, and perhaps some still did not understand that my purpose for homework was to review what they learned in class.

Furthermore, the ability level of my eighth grade students varied greatly. Clearly, academic knowledge affects how well a student can do their homework. One of the factors that I considered when beginning my research was how much help they needed to complete their math homework. I addressed this through the questionnaires, the homework logs, and by having daily conversations with both classes. I also provided drop-in extra help/study sessions during lunch and recess time or after school with the purpose of offering students the opportunity to ask questions about the problems on their homework or their math understanding in general.

In the questionnaires, I specifically asked how often individuals struggled to complete their math assignments. Of the twenty-nine respondents, twenty-four said “occasionally” and five said “never”, with no one responding “all the time”. Five of the students who occasionally needed assistance stated that they never asked for help, despite acknowledging that they did have someone to go to if they needed it. The homework logs also indicated that the bulk of the students had difficulties with at least one of the assignments listed. The students would write in their logs that they struggled with certain problems or a whole assignment in general. (I cannot be certain how accurate the logs are however, because students would lose them and have to start new ones or not bring them to class each day, so it seemed like each log had a different number of assignments on it.) Additionally, I talked with individual students as I walked around to check
homework each day. I would always take a look at their papers and be able to tell which problems were left blank. For the most part, the problems that they skipped were ones they did not understand. They knew the rule was that they had to come for extra help if they did not understand something otherwise they could not earn full credit for leaving the problem blank. This was because they had the in-between day with block scheduling to get help from someone. Of course, we would go over those problems that they were unable to complete during class time, especially those that I noticed when I checked. Still, it was my hope that the homework quizzes would further entice the students to inquire deeper about their math homework when they didn’t understand it. I thought they might be more likely to ask for help from a parent or to seek extra help from me during recess if they knew they were, or might be, having a quiz on the material. Still, despite the countless opportunities I provided for them to increase their understanding of the material, the number of students that came in during recess or after school to ask me questions about their homework did not increase during the length of my study.

When I began my research, I was solely focused on the quantity of homework because that is what I thought was most important to my classroom. I knew that I would eventually need to address the quality of assignments as well, but did not want to work on both simultaneously. I figured, why would I focus on quality yet if I couldn’t even get all the students to bring anything into class regularly? But, as I discovered over time, the greater part of them did not fall into this category. As I mentioned earlier, homework was meant to review what had been taught so that students could practice and improve their skills. They should have then gained a better understanding of the material, ideally. Consequently, if they were doing what they were supposed to do, it is likely that they
would have seen a positive effect on their overall grades. As my research went on, however, I noticed that there were some students who were consistently doing their homework but not doing well academically on their assessments. Just because they were doing their homework, did not necessarily mean learning was taking place. This showed me no correlation between homework completion and assessment scores and led me back to my findings about students’ attitudes about homework. Some of them were just not putting a sufficient amount of effort and attention into their homework. Perhaps they were distracted or had no time to complete their homework; regardless, they may have been writing down answers but probably not understanding what they were writing. Even worse, when given the chance to ask questions about something, they did not take advantage of this support. Whatever the case may have been, I am brought back to the notion that quality is equally important as anything else in doing homework. By quality, I am referring to how thoroughly the problems are completed and the questions are answered. The quality of homework affects students’ grades and more importantly, their mathematical understanding.

**My Teaching Strategies**

Throughout the course of this study, I have learned a lot about myself as a teacher and how I function in my classroom with and for my students. As in my past teacher research projects, I have once again learned that action research is not as much about finding answers, but instead it’s about asking more questions. I think that was where my thinking changed a bit in terms of the bigger picture of teacher action research and its purpose. Action research has always been a long, tedious process that I would go through in order to find out information on a specific question I was curious about in my
classroom. However, it has become clearer to me that teacher research is just as essential to the growth of my career and to my students as are formal professional development opportunities. Professional development is designed to keep educators up-to-date within their field and within the realm of teaching so that we can do what is best for our students. Action research doesn’t seem very different. Teachers need to constantly analyze and evaluate their classroom management and teaching styles and adjust them according to what each particular group of students needs throughout the school year. Of course, it seems obvious that this should be the case even when not formally collecting data or doing research. Some teachers get stuck in ruts with what they do simply because they refuse to change, even if a particular approach may not be working at a certain time.

In respect to this continuous evaluation of myself, one of the things I noticed while conducting my research was how much more frequently I wanted to change my strategies that I was using. I was listening more to what my students were (and were not) telling me. For instance, the homework logs sounded like a great idea at first and genuinely had a useful purpose. The students liked them for the first few weeks because it took away a little bit of time from the beginning of class. But as I watched my students while they answered the four questions about their homework, I realized that a lot of them really weren’t even paying attention to what they were writing on the logs at all. I wondered if this was how much attention they gave their actual assignments, too. So, we talked about it in class and I told them what I was noticing. A couple of them noted that they only saw a benefit for me and that we could be spending more time on other things in class like going over homework and asking questions, while others commented on how it reminds them what they did and whether or not they rushed through their work. For the
most part, the students conveyed their lack of enthusiasm for them, or at the very least, their extreme indifference. I think my original intention was the reflection aspect of it; I guess I’m not too sure if eighth graders are capable of making the kind of analysis I was looking for.

Despite these conversations I continued to use the logs for several more weeks. But, by mid-March, I decided to stop using them because they were not as effective as I had originally thought; they were no longer serving the function that I had intended for them. I think this change is important in that I was aware enough to see that the logs were not working for my students, nor were they further helping my study. In fact, when I asked the students for their feedback about the logs, the majority agreed that they did not help them improve on their homework habits or completion more than when they did not use the logs. I learned of their opinions from individual written responses as well as during a whole-group discussion. After unanimous responses, I decided it was time to stop using the homework logs.

Another revelation from my data was that a number of students would constantly not finish one or two homework problems and then tell me they didn’t understand them when I checked for completion. Yet, they would not ask me for extra help on the in-between day of class. This negatively affected their grades because they could not earn full credit for completing the assignment. Although some might say that it is their own loss and fault at that point, it was happening so consistently that I felt I needed to do something about it. To compensate for their lack of understanding directions, I started going over the instructions for certain assignments before class was over if I felt like they might be unclear. I wondered how much this strategy helped though; would they
remember what I said if they didn’t do their homework until the following night? I think
this could be viewed as one of the disadvantages of block scheduling.

In terms of my teaching, I also realized that there are several things I need to do in
order to get my students where they need to be. First of all, I need to teach study skills
like time management and organization starting in 6th grade. The majority of my students
did not have any strategies in place for studying or doing homework simply because no
one ever taught them how to do such tasks. Many parents think they should or will learn
them in school, and therefore do not take any time to teach or enforce any kind of routine
at home. Teachers give suggestions about what kids can do but don’t usually have class
time to teach these concepts. Then the students just continue on through the grades
without ever learning these skills.

One strategy I would be interested in trying at the beginning of next year is
including some structured homework time into my math class, even if it is only once a
week for ten or fifteen minutes. Although there never seems to be enough time during
class, this would be an excellent chance to take advantage of the longer block periods. I
would be able to monitor students’ attention and time spent on homework problems and
understanding. Students would receive immediate verbal feedback on what they do
because I’d be able to determine and correct any inappropriate behaviors and praise
positive ones. Moreover, I think the opportunity to begin homework in class may
encourage students to ask more questions about problems they do not understand since I
would be right in the room with them. In turn, they would get used to asking questions
and do so more often no matter where they do their homework. Furthermore, it might be
beneficial for each student to create their own individual homework plan. After teaching
and modeling some study skills during class, the plan would outline the details of when, where and how they will complete their math homework regularly. I would work on this with the students in class and then send it home for parents/guardians to read with their child and sign in acknowledgement that they will work together to set the plan in action each night.

In addition to study skills, I think I should start off the year creating cooperative homework groups. All classes will be divided into heterogeneous groups of two or three. Within their groups, students will be responsible for communicating both in and out of class to remind each other to complete assignments and for working together on homework problems when necessary in or outside of school. Group homework quizzes may also be a possible cooperative tool. Perhaps it may also be beneficial for me to meet with each of these groups individually since it might be easier to notice patterns and problems in both quantity and quality of homework. In general, action research is making me more aware of my students’ needs. I would want more regular feedback from them about everything, even if it is just in the form of my daily conversations as part of classroom routine.

Conclusion

My original reason for doing research on this topic stemmed from my curiosity about why some students do not do their homework for my class. It seemed like more than a couple students would not have it prepared on any given day no matter how large or small the class size; a perfect homework day was rare for any of my groups, not to mention several consecutive days. Although I learned a lot from this project, I do not believe that I successfully accomplished what I initially set out to do: increase the
homework averages among my eighth graders. Unfortunately, I may just have to accept
the fact that there are always going be some students in my classes that will not do their
math homework. I may also have to acknowledge that there might not be anything I can
do about it; I’m still unsure. I definitely came up with more questions about my research
than answers to my original questions. Among the top questions on my list are how to
increase the quantity and quality of homework simultaneously, and does one matter
without the other? Another question is what can be done to self-motivate the
unmotivated students to do their homework since middle school requires the challenging
balance of socialization and academic success? Finally, I am curious to find out whether
or not homework is actually necessary for every student in a class (and how to manage
that decision). I had begun to think about these ideas during my research but I realized
they would overwhelm me because I already had enough data to look at. Therefore, this
is only a pause for me because I already have some ideas as to where I want to go next.

My Future in Action Research

Even though I will not have an action research class to take next semester or a
thesis to write, I think action research has nevertheless been imbedded into my practice as
a teacher. I believe an effective teacher needs to be continuously evaluating his/her
methods and strategies in the classroom. In some ways, I was probably already doing a
lot of checking and balancing prior to this study in a less formal manner. I think that is
what led me to start this project in the first place. Of course, time is, and always will be,
a factor in this process. It was very difficult for me to keep up with my note-taking and
data collection when it required me to do something inside my classroom or during
school because I teach so many students. However, since I will no longer have to collect,
organize, and analyze data, and write a report all in three short months, I am convinced I will be more inclined to conduct my own research more frequently in future years. Whether formal or informal, I do see more action research in my teaching future. In fact, I would like to begin by further investigating some of the questions that came out of this project.

For instance, there was one question in particular that kept coming up in my discussions with various people about my project — do all students need homework? This is something I am very intrigued by because in all honesty, I’m not quite sure how I feel about that yet. Aside from the occasional exception, I believe that reinforcement benefits the majority of students, though in variation and moderation. So I think differentiated instruction, even in homework, is necessary. I just haven’t figured out how to accomplish that feat yet, especially since homework is mandated by school policy as part of students’ grades. How can I get around that issue and still ensure students are accountable for their work? I would really like to do some research on this idea and perhaps experiment with my incoming sixth graders next year.

As a matter of fact, I think the 2009-2010 school year might be a good time to start a more long-term study. One semester simply is not feasible for me to gather enough information and make any kind of valuable analyses about my teaching or my students. Next year, my house is getting a new group of sixth graders, as our eighth graders are now moving onto high school. With Mt. Hebron’s looping system, I have the opportunity to begin a study immediately in September and work with the same group of kids in my house for all three of their middle school years. This will allow me to develop, implement, and change strategies over a longer period of time, and hopefully be
able to see some positive results over the course of three years instead of less than one. I feel like this will be more productive to my students and myself because I won’t feel as pressured to use certain strategies to see if they make sense in my classroom in a short period of time. Plus, I will not be as anxious to get things done (for a graduate class) and the process will hopefully come a bit more naturally. It is this part of teacher action research that I look forward to continuing.
References


Appendix A

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Dear Students,

As many of you may remember, I am currently working to complete my Master’s Degree at Montclair State University. A requirement of my degree is that I do a research project. This form describes my study and invites you to be a participant.

For my study I want to investigate homework completion of my students. I want to determine if there is anything that I can do that might help students complete their homework more regularly. If you choose to participate in this study, you will not be asked to do anything more than what I normally expect of you in my class during the school year. You will continue to do your homework as you usually do, and I will continue to record in my grade book whether or not you complete it. I will also continue to use all other regular classroom practices. I will use specific data that I collect over the rest of the school year (such as your feedback about your homework and your homework grades) and analyze that data for my study. If you participate in this study, it means that I will look at and analyze your information and include it in my study. From this analysis, I will be able to make some generalizations about my teaching practices, which will be written up in a written report.

Some of you may be wondering how this will affect you. The risks you may encounter during this study are no greater than those in ordinary life. Because I am not asking you to do anything more than what you would usually have to do in my class, there is nothing extra to worry about. You will simply be a student in my math class.

There are, however, several benefits that I think are significant to you. Since I am trying to figure out how to get students to complete more of their homework, my goal is that your individual homework grades will increase, which will increase your overall marking period grade in math. Also, if you are completing your homework regularly, you will be constantly reviewing the skills we are learning in class so you may have a better, more fluent understanding of the material. I believe this will also allow you to become a stronger student in class because you will have more to contribute during our discussions. As my study goes on, the information I discover will lead me to implement new strategies that may help you improve as a student as you finish middle school and move on to high school. Besides all of these great advantages for you, this study will also be very beneficial to me because it will help me find out what I need to do to be a better teacher in terms of encouraging my students to complete their homework every night.

You do not have to be in this study. If you do not want to be in this study, you will still experience all strategies that I typically use in my classroom, including student feedback and homework checks. But your data will not be used in my analysis and will not be included in my report. If you are not in the study, I will not use any information
about you in my report. I will not use any feedback you give me, your grades, or any other information about you. Nothing will happen to you if you do not want to be in the study, and your grade for math will not be affected in any way.

If you do not agree to be in the study, only you, your parents(s), and I will know. None of your classmates or other teachers will know if you are or are not participating. Also, your identity will be kept anonymous. I will not use your name in my report so there will be no risk of identifying you in my written report or any presentations.

If you have any questions or concerns, please see me at any time. You can also email me at cperillo@montclair.k12.nj.us. If you do not feel comfortable talking to me about it, please see Mrs. Fiore.

In signing your name in the space below, you are agreeing to be a participant in this study and giving me permission to include your information in the research, analysis, and results of my study.

Name of Research Participant          Signature          Date

Name of Witness                        Signature          Date

Name of Principal Investigator         Signature          Date

Name of Faculty Sponsor                Signature          Date

Thank you for your time.
Appendix B

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Please read below with care. You may ask questions at any time.

**Study's Title:** What Can I Do to Increase Students’ Rate of Homework Completion?

**Why is this study being done?** After reflecting on my experiences as a teacher at Mt. Hebron School, I have decided to investigate why many students do not complete their math homework on a regular basis. I want to figure out what I can do that will increase the amount of homework students do for my class.

**What will happen while your child or dependent is in the study?** If you choose for your child to be part of this study, they will not be asked to do anything more than what I normally expect of them in my class. They will continue to do their homework as they usually do, and I will continue to record in my grade book whether or not they complete it. I will continue to teach as I always do, and your child will participate in regular classroom practices and give student feedback regarding homework. I will use specific student information that I collect as part of my regular teaching practices and I will then analyze that information. If your child is a participant in this study, it means that I will look specifically at his/her information, analyze it, and include it in my study. From this analysis, I will be able to make some generalizations about my teaching practices and will include these generalizations in a written report.

**Time:** This study will begin immediately and last through the remainder of the 2008-2009 school year.

**Risks:** You may be wondering how this study will affect your child. The risks he/she may encounter during this study are no greater than those ordinarily experienced in my classroom on a daily basis. I will not be asking him/her to do anything more than what he/she would usually have to do in my class. There will be no additional work assigned. Your child will simply be a regular student in my math class.

**Benefits:** There are several benefits of my research that I think are significant to your child. Since I am trying to figure out how to get students to complete more of their homework, my goal is that homework grades will increase, which in turn will increase overall marking period grades in math. If your child is completing his/her homework regularly, he/she will be constantly reviewing the skills we are learning in class so they may have a deeper, more fluent understanding of the material. I believe this will also allow your child to become a stronger participant in class because he/she will have more to contribute during our discussions. As my study goes on, the information I discover will lead me to implement new strategies that may help your child to improve as a student while he/she continues through middle school and on to high school. Aside from these great advantages for your child, this study will also be beneficial to me because it will help me find out what I need to do as a teacher in terms of encouraging my students to complete their homework every night.
Who will know that your child or dependent is in this study? You, your child, and I will know that he/she is participating in this study. I will not know that you have given permission for your child to be in the study until after the end of the school year and after grades are posted. Your child’s identity will be kept anonymous. There is no risk of identifying your child in any written reports or presentations because of each participant’s anonymity.

Does your child or dependent have to be in the study? No, your child does not have to be in this study. Although they will still experience all strategies that I typically use in my classroom, including student feedback and homework checking, their information will not be included in my analysis and will not be included in the results of the study. For example, I will not use any of your child’s feedback, grades or homework record. Also, I will not use any information about your child in my report. You can remove your child from the study at any time, even after you have given permission for your child to participate. By doing this, none of your child’s information will be used, analyzed, or included in my final report, and your child’s grade for math will not be affected.

Do you have any questions about this study? Please contact me at cperillo@montclair.k12.nj.us

Do you have any questions about your rights? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Joan Besing (973-655-3182, besingj@mail.montclair.edu) or the IRB Administrator, Fitzgerald Edwards (973-655-7781, edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu).

Please fill out the following information and return it to me via your child. Thank you!

It is okay to use her/his data in other studies:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

I would like to get a summary of this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

The above copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to have your child or dependent in this study, please fill in the lines below.

Name of Child/Dependent ________________________________
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<th>Name of Parent/Guardian</th>
<th>Signature</th>
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<tbody>
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If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

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<tr>
<td>Name of Principal Investigator</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
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(if applicable) Name of Faculty Sponsor | Signature | Date |

Thank you for your assistance. I truly appreciate your support!

Thank you,
Christin Perillo
Appendix C

**Student Homework Questionnaire**

This is an anonymous questionnaire. Please answer the following questions as honestly and openly as you can. Your answers will NOT affect your grade in any way!

1. How often do you complete your math homework? (Circle one)
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Occasionally
   - Once in a while

2. If you are assigned more than one part to your homework in any given subject, you usually ___(circle one)____.
   - Choose just one part to complete
   - OR
   - Complete all parts

3. On average, how long do you spend each night doing all your homework? (Circle one)
   - 0-30 minutes
   - 1-2 hrs
   - More than 2 hrs

4. On average, how long do you spend each night doing math homework? (Circle one)
   - Less than 30 minutes
   - 30 minutes – 1 hr
   - More than 1 hr

5. How confident do you feel that your HW answers are correct?
   - Very confident
   - Somewhat confident
   - Not at all confident.

6. Do you have someone who can help you with your homework? 
   - Yes
   - No
7. How often do you struggle with completing your homework? (Circle one)

Almost every night  Occasionally  Never

8. How often do you ask someone for help in completing your homework? (Circle one)

Almost every night  Occasionally  Never

9. Do you reference your planner when you are doing your homework?

Yes  No

10. If yes, how do you use your planner? (Check one)

_____ Glance at it to jog your memory of assignments, but then put it away

_____ Carefully check off each assignment as you complete them

_____ Other (please write in): ________________________________

11. Tell me about your typical night of doing HW. What do you do? Be as specific as you can, including setting.

12. Do you think math homework is important? (Circle one)

Yes  No

13. Briefly explain why OR why not:
14. If you don’t do your HW on a certain night, what would most likely be the reason?

15. What do you do after school? (You can just make a list.)

16. What time do you get home after school? ______________________

17. Do you do your HW at about the same time each day/night?

   Yes       No

18. If so, what time? ______________________
Appendix D

Homework Log Template

1. What time did you do your HW?

2. Where did you do it? Be specific – library, bedroom, desk, kitchen table, etc.

3. How long did it take you to complete?

4. Did you struggle with any of the problems?
Appendix E
Homework Log Feedback

Did the homework logs help you do your homework more than you normally do?

   Yes           No

What did you see as the purpose of the HW logs?

Do you think the homework logs were helpful for any reason? Why/why not? Please explain.
Appendix F
Chart 1

Student Homework Averages

- □ Students with 80% or Greater HW Average
- □ Students with Less Than 80% HW Average

<table>
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Appendix G
Chart 2

Do You Think Math HW Is Important?

- 93% (Yes)
- 7% (No)
Why Is Math HW Important?

- It's part of my grade.
- Math is used in everyday life.
- Math can help you get a job (or in your future).
- We need it to review class material.

n = 29 students (Students may have written more than one response in the questionnaire.)