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## Substituting Traditional Homework With Outdoor Experiences

David Czepa

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# SUBSTITUTING TRADITIONAL HOMEWORK WITH OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education: Natural Science and Environmental Education.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Pretense**

It's Monday night, and after a long, yet wonderful, day of work I find myself downstairs organizing math assignments for my son's kindergarten teacher, when I should be upstairs diligently working on my capstone introduction. I cannot help but think to myself the importance of both of these tasks, yet on opposite ends of the spectrum. Helping my son, who absolutely adores and loves going to school, and his teacher, or selfishly shutting myself off to the world to work on something that claims to one day aid me in my conquest of becoming the best teacher in the universe. Not to mention paying a substantial amount of money to do so by submitting direct payments to the school to participate in classes. I strayed on the path that benefited the whole rather than a few parts and realized how purposeless homework is in the traditional sense, and something that is needed in its stead, is an idea that benefits the many, rather than the few by using the pure and natural world we live in.

#### **Introduction**

In my opinion, humans are instinctively habitual and prone to follow patterns that accomplish tasks in the "right way." Traditionally, I struggle with change and therefore rarely stray from the path that is familiar. The biggest correlation I see in this behavior is through education. Why do I always push, when what is needed is a pull, or pull when I need to push? Yet a circle story is created and I wonder and fixate on correcting it every time. Take for instance homework: Years ago someone decided to send their students

home from school with more practice work, even after an adult length work day. Yet from this homework, the rich get richer, meaning students who understand and have resources at home with benefit, and all others fall into a void of frustration, confusion, and helplessness. So why do teachers continue? I believe the continuation is because we are always hoping the next time we use homework to supplement instruction, results will change and somehow what has not worked for decades, will suddenly produce results. Education is subjected to scrutiny from every direction. Scrutiny from parents who need their children to be challenged, while for others, magically accomplish multiple years of growth in one semester. Some parents worry as their child might not fit the type A system public education has created. Educators receive scrutiny, in my opinion, from administration who focus on creating an image of educational perfection, while forgetting that perfection is boring, mundane, and unhuman like. But most of all we scrutinize ourselves, waking up every morning hoping to change the lives of the ones who will soon be in control of it. I need to try a more uncharted path.

Boredom's void, which is a healthy one, has slowly been filled with materials, gadgets, crazes, and overstimulated fixations. People are not taught how to organize and manage these, and do not have the experiences to monitor one's self by doing things in healthy increments, yet we indulge to the point of mental exertion in which our brain has had to adapt. Research around the world has found that on average children from ages five to fourteen spent have the time outside, four hours, than their respective parents did. The biggest discrepancy is when it comes to the parents, as most would prefer their children play outside, rather than inside. So what are we doing wrong? We want to send

our kids outside, yet do not. Adults work more, extracurricular activities take up double the time they used to, and there are just so many things you can do with an electronic device. Something needs to change, and I am embarking on a journey to do my part by asking: *How can creating and substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?*

### **Personal and Teaching Career**

I would love to say I was an avid outdoors-boy who looked for every chance I had to get outside and indulge in the beauty life gives us. But let me be honest, what else did I have to do? Cell phones were not created, going to the movie theater was a more novel endeavor, and most television shows were weekly, simplistic, and full of resolve. So instead of those, I chose to venture outside and create my own stimulation based on what and/or who was currently around me. I still see such passion and love in children and young adults' eyes, but with many distractions and over stimulating resources, the confusion is all that is conveyed, and in my opinion the simpler task is all that is pursued. As I grew older, and technology began to spike, I could see the transformation from thinking and understanding such small societal groups, to being forced to adhere, comprehend, and accept a much larger one. I decided to become a teacher and do what I can to help reopen the part of the brain that will always hope and wonder about life outside of what is familiar.

In 2011, I was finally hired as a teacher and placed in charge of twenty-eight students that were five and six years old. My goal was to help every one of them grow to the point of proficiency, in which standards dictate the measurement for your purpose and



lifelong success. The ups and downs, stresses, feeling of constant failure, confusion, and self doubt truly pushed me to take a step back and be forced to accept and absorb humility. I was able to test out a multitude of strategies, concepts, processes, and had such strong relationships with the parents and guardians, that these ideas and philosophies were shared, molded, and further developed to maximize their effectiveness and potential. The greatest being homework. But life goes far beyond the classroom, and the whole picture is only understood when you look at the people behind it.

Behind me, was the greatest gift I was ever given, and is what drives me to be better today than I was yesterday. In 2005, I met a lovely young lady in Orchestra, who later became my wife and agreed to journey with me into the future hand in hand. After a short time, the purest, most miraculous moments happened as we welcomed our first child into this world. A couple years later, we decided to widen our beloved family and welcome another child into this beautiful world. I must say, after those moments, your one life now becomes three worth living, and I promised myself, my boys, and my students that everyday I stepped foot into my classroom, I will never forget those feelings and will always do what I can to expose our youth to the world around them without materialistic parts getting in the way. My wife and I value the outdoors and honor the beauty it expresses to us and being a parent makes you never take any moment for granted. Changes need to happen in education, as some children have no idea of the possibilities outside their window, and even the smallest of steps can have great impact on their lives

## **Rationale and Context**

The biggest hurdle for me as a teacher the past eight years was attempting to establish expectations for my students at home when it came to homework. The first year I was a teacher I simply used the curriculum's recommended homework because I had no idea what to expect. These consisted of your typical, one page math review worksheets and some basic reading calendar documentation. The following two years, and after my feet were grounded a little, I attempted something that was very successful but time consuming and difficult. I adhered and folded to the parents who always state their children needed to be challenged, and I was still attempting to understand what that entailed. I created differentiated, weekly packets that consisted of math work, reading and writing activities, and some fun puzzles and mind games. Most families loved these because it allowed them the freedom to be completed when it was convenient, while also working on the specific skills their child needed. The process would literally take two to three hours every week to put together and print. After two years of persistence, I finally gave that up and went back to the curriculum based things for the following three years.

I can now experientially claim that both processes resulted in the same conclusions: three quarters of the students and families would complete their tasks to the best of their ability and always meet expectations, and the last quarter would have some sort of reasoning to why they were unable to finish. "We were too busy," "I had basketball practice," "I forgot it at school," "I just didn't do it," were all common ways for students to express their incomplete actions. The biggest drawback was always in the quality of the product. No matter how clear and thorough I was with directions, the

assignments were usually completed with a quick and careless mentality, not to mention the same students who understood the concept during the day were always successful at home, yet the ones who struggled spent more time being frustrated, but this time at home. There was no room around it. No matter what I did, how hard I tried, I was always met with the same results: mediocrity.

I began to think about where our society is driving us, the extreme path we are on that is pushing the rates of identified students with anxiety and/or depression, and decided to try something some schools somewhat frown upon: no homework. I knew this would be met with skepticism and resistance, but I always followed that up with a few points. First, a question: when adults get home from work, do they want to work? Secondly, my position as an educator is to help make these children the best students they can be while they are in my classroom, yet I cannot control what happens outside of there, so it is unfair to all parties to expect things I cannot support and monitor. Lastly, family and home life should not be interrupted with meaningless work that takes away from the memories you will cherish forever, or the demands life outside of school sometimes reflects. A simpler question might be, who remembers sitting down at the dinner table completing a math worksheet?

Of course the first year I attempted this had its kinks, but I felt as a whole my students were able to push themselves to be better people and students inside of school, as they knew if they did, that success would be rewarded after. They also understood that if they did not, and their work was not finished because of distracting choices made during class, homework would await them when they left my room. The biggest push

back came from the parents who always needed something for their children to do so they were not “bored” at home, but of course the students loved it. Surprisingly, so did a majority of the parents as well. I cannot tell you how many sighs of relief I heard when I told families what I had planned as most of them dread the battles, tears, frustration, and fights that ensue when you embark on the journey of homework completion at home. They do not deserve that, and the mentality of school, which is truly the most important thing when it comes to learning, suddenly becomes vulnerable. All that was left to do was a little tweaking, as I found what homework meant to me as a teacher.

The next year I did the same routine, but found again that all I was doing was taking something away and not necessarily replacing it with another thing healthier. What I mean by that is when students have homework, they are given an opportunity to have something to do, even if it is redundant and mundane. I find that when they do not, the abundance of resources at their fingertips overwhelms their ability to rationalize or use at healthy capacities. They are automatically driven to participate in many overstimulating customs such as television, video games, or any other screen style activity. They are so much less likely to do what we had to do as children-- go outside and make things happen on our own or with friends-- and that only summarizes part of the population of families I have encountered. What about families who lack resources, modes of transportation, or the financial means to provide a healthy and sustainable environment for their children on a daily basis? How can we produce and implement a positive experience for EVERY child without all of the limitations, or distractions provided by our society. After some heavy and long debating and reflecting, I thought this was the perfect chance to utilize

my non-homework policy, and begin to implement something much deeper and enriching for the students and their families. This was also around the time I started the NSEE program at Hamline. My first class was Equity in the Environment and my professor was a huge reason and influence to my idea; she introduced me into the world of environmentally equitable education. We read a multitude of articles that stemmed from state parks becoming more equitable, to reasons why the outdoors is one of the healthiest things for our youth and their development. Johnson (2017, p. 2) stated, “Outdoor play promotes cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being, offering the necessary conditions for children to thrive and learn. Through play, the child can experiment, solve problems, think creatively, and cooperate with others.” You do not need to be in graduate school to realize the benefits, and importance of getting kids outside, but how can you control what they do for their well-being the moment they leave your classroom? I finally realized I had the perfect platform to do both: get kids outside by creating homework assignments that emphasize outdoor experiences instead of traditional indoor (or paper/pencil) tasks. I knew my work on this idea was just getting started, but if I was able to pour my heart and soul into how much I believe in this change, it would benefit every single student who walked into my room.

### **Summary**

What do you do with an idea? Do you run away from it? Ignore it? Or do you harness it, believe in it, feed it, and realize it? The greatest ideas are ones that are the easiest to come up with, but the hardest to fulfill as they desire and require a larger scope of change. It takes a minority to change the majority and being a teacher gives you far

beyond the typical time, and chances to do so, as the minds and hearts in which you teach are the purest and most receptive ones you will ever come across. I realized this the moment I became a teacher and live every one of my days trying to make today better than it was yesterday. I believe typical homework is a travesty to our society and forces our youth to mature much faster than they should, or desire to. Not to mention the biggest piece missing from our youth that encompass our world is the easiest one to fill, learning to live and indulge in what this beautiful planet gave us, without taking it for granted and missing out on the childlike innocence it expresses. My goal, through time, effort, research, feedback, and dedication is to overlap both concepts, to create one. In the following chapter, I will review literature surrounding the history of homework, the pros and cons of traditional homework, plus the benefits of getting our adolescents outside. This information will be applied to the context of my new found idea of producing outdoor organized activities for students and their families to participate in as I state again: *How can creating and substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?*

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

Throughout this chapter, past and current literature will be reviewed in an attempt to support the research question: *How can creating and substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?* The topics of the history of homework, the pros and cons of implementing typical homework as a daily routine, and the benefits of getting our adolescence outdoors will be discussed in detail as it covers a vast amount of opinions, surveys, studies, and years of debate.

First, literature relating to the history and development of typical homework will be analyzed. After that basis has been created I will focus on the pros of homework from a multitude of perspectives. The goal is to understand the benefits as seen by teachers, administration, society, and parents in relation to the academic growth, and positive mannerisms students endure and learn by partaking in said things. Once the rationale behind the positives for traditional homework is understood, the next step will be to diligently compare and weigh the cons, or negative impact, that traditional homework can have on student learning, outlook toward school, family dynamics at home, and overall time commitment everywhere.

#### **History of the Homework Debate**

Vatterott (2018) stated, “To fully understand today's homework debate, we must examine the beliefs about homework that have developed during the last 100 years, and

the cultural forces that have shaped them” (para. 7). The word homework brings a common, and all too obsessive, household concept that has the understanding to hold an expectation to be completed before a child can indulge in a playful activity. Generations ago homework became a consistent tradition, even when schools only focused on reading, writing, and math, and the style of remedial learning dominated the classroom (Loveless, 2016; Vatterott, 2018).

To understand the basis of the history of homework, and its importance, you must always look at and study what is around it. Vatterott (2018) stated, “Attitudes toward homework have historically reflected societal trends and the prevailing educational philosophy of the time. Each swing of the pendulum is colored by unique historical events and sentiments that drove the movement for or against homework” (para. 15). After reading Fine’s research (1952) I learned that the problems associated with homework arose almost at the same time. In 1904, a German educator concluded that homework was hurtful to a child’s learning. In 1905, an American school teacher did the same and came up with the same results. After both findings, and even more, many countries, such as Scotland and other parts of Europe, agreed to exterminate work at home for kids under fourteen years of age (Fine, 1952). This means homework has been debated well over 100 years, yet we still have no definite answer as to whether it truly benefits all students, or if it is just more clutter in the educational world.

In 1900, Edward Bok, editor of the Ladies Home Journal, published an article called, “A National Crime at the Feet of Parents.” His writings blamed homework for ruining our youth. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall Bok also argued that prescribed learning



at home hinders a children's interest in innocent play, interferes with mental and physical health, and overshadows parents right to decide what does and does not happen at home (Fine, 1952; Loveless, 2016; Vatterott, 2018). Three years after Bok's article, a large anti-homework process exploded and ultimately grew into a national issue. There were school districts from all over that decided to pass limitations on homework resulting in a pause from its use in 1901 in California for any student under the age of 15. The issue on homework remained steadily quiet for many years and became the cornerstone in progressive education (Loveless, 2016; Vatterott, 2018). I might also add this was during a world war so many other concerns trumped that of the homework debate, resulting in its dormancy.

As time passed, more and more pediatric doctors started to voice concern over the extensive amounts of homework and the effects on the well-being of children. By having to stay inside and complete more undesired work, they miss out on the many benefits going outside endorses. It is claimed that years ago children were not diagnosed with attention deficit hyper disorder, a very common trend in American today, but rather to simply get outside and exercise (Loveless, 2016; Vatterott, 2018).

Homework was also seen as a big reason for the lack of social interactions children endured throughout the week. This was around the same time labor organizations were pulling for 40-hour work weeks, and child labor laws assured children would not have too much homework (Loveless, 2016; Vatterott, 2018). Districts around America decided to eradicate homework for grades K-6 due to the demands and stresses of doing it.

In 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the first artificial earth satellite. This made American society become increasingly worried about falling further behind and felt children were lacking the preparation needed to compete in a future that would become controlled by technology resulting in the reissuing of homework, and to a much more demanding level (Vatterott, 2018). The public perception changed extremely quickly and now saw homework as the easiest way to maximize student learning and academic achievement. Not only that, but the general consensus was the United States was losing the Cold War, and to overcome the idea that Russian children were much smarter than their U.S. counterparts, homework became an instrument of national defense policy. A large workload was implemented in hopes of speeding up the learning children are doing (McCarthy, 2016; Vatterott 2018). Within a short amount of time homework was back to having more support for it, and the policies created to abolish it were overturned.

In the 1960's and 1970's America experienced two emotional and controversial periods: Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. These produced a large counterculture of people that again questioned the integrity and rationale of homework (Vatterott, 2018). The American Educational Research Association and The National Education Association both recommended limiting giving homework as it interferes with social opportunities, outdoor play, and simple creative activities. Of course the societal trend changed once again and parents began voicing concern over its use.

By the 1980s everything swung back again. A study called "A Nation At Risk" attempted to prove the reason the U.S. was struggling was because of the educational

system failing. This prediction sparked a debate stating school success was responsible for economic success. From this, there was a view created that education would only be cured if there was the implementation of longer school days, years, use of summative assessments, such as standardized tests, and of course homework (Loveless, 2016, Vatterott, 2018).

An article was published by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986 called “What Works” and reflected homework as an effective way to promote learning, resulting in a pro-homework push well into the 1990’s (Loveless, 2016; McCarthy, 2016; Vatterott, 2018). So far the pattern seems to show whenever reformers attempt to improve the academic outcomes and successes of American schooling, more homework seems to always be the first step. I would say this is based solely on the ease of implementation homework takes. It does not cost extra money, requires no program additions or modifications, no staff needing to be hired, and expands the responsibility of learning to those outside of the school building.

Vatterott (2018) stated: “By the late 1990s, and into today, the tide would turn against homework once again as there was an uptick in the frequency of articles being published that were critical of typical homework portraying the idea that homework was an intrusion on family tranquility and was too big a stressor on the lives of already busy parents” (para. 29). It was also recorded that homework for 6 to 8 year olds had increased by more than 50 percent from 1981 to 1997 (Vatterott, 2018). Once again families voiced their concerns as they became overwhelmed with their children's homework culminating in a mass amount of articles, books, and other resources advocating for less, or no,

homework due to the concern of overworked parents and students. Vatterott (2018) iterated “Internationally, concerns about homework demanded countries such as Ireland, the Philippines, Greece, France, India, Japan, Singapore, Australia, and the government of China, a country long revered as the paragon of educational achievement, to warn that excessive homework could be detrimental to achievement and overall well being” (para. 33). The U.S. has attempted a different, more centrist attitude in homework asking schools to assign it, but consider the vast needs of the population’s students. Once again a less homework movement was established (Loveless, 2016; McCarthey, 2016; Vatterott, 2018).

As the new millenium came and went, homework was still being assigned throughout most of the United States. However the problem has shifted to a more equitable one as the cultural shift inside the school system is far different and more diverse than it once was. But many teachers continue to assign the same material to all students, forcing to disproportionately fail the ones from lower income families, or those who do not have support, understanding, and competent guidance at home. In the end, they are punished with failing grades due to a lack of a fair environment (Loveless, 2016; Vatterott, 2018). As this culture has changed, and the schools and families have changed, homework has become problematic for more and more students, parents, and teachers yet it continues.

After tackling the history and long debate over whether students should be assigned typical homework, it is fair to say there must be strong evidence to support both arguments. To do fair justice to my research topic, I must heavily understand the

arguments both sides so passionately believe in and advocate for, starting with the pros and support for assigning homework and all it entails, even though I must state is far less evident than that of the negative side.

## **Pros of Homework**

### **Introduction**

Assigning traditional homework tends to have three sides for argument: those in full favor, those in full disfavor, and those who like a balance of both. Yet all three sides believe there are positive measures in the approach they take that will ultimately benefit the whole child, without a straining focus on their academic stature. A poll conducted by Public Agenda in 2006 reported 68% of parents describe the homework load as about right, 20% says there is too little homework, and 11% says there is too much homework. A 2006 AP-AOL poll found the highest percentage of parents reporting too much homework, 19%. But even in that poll, they were outnumbered by parents believing there is too little homework (23%), and a clear majority (57%) described the load as about right. A 2010 local survey of Chicago parents conducted by the *Chicago Tribune* reported figures similar to those reported above: approximately two-thirds of parents saying their children's homework load is about right, 21% saying it's not enough, and 12% responding that the homework load is too much (Loveless, 2016). This means over two-thirds of parents are in support of the amount of homework their child brings home on a nightly basis, which is fascinating based on the overwhelming negative connotations placed on the homework debate. For future reference when I talk about homework, The National PTA and the National Education Association support the "10-minute homework

guideline”—a nightly 10 minutes of homework per grade level (Terada, n.d.). That is to say, in 1st grade students should expect a total of 10 minutes of work to complete, while their 12th grade counterparts can expect up to 120 minutes of their own. In this section, I will be reviewing literature that has taken the position in which homework can be a beneficial tool to all children, not just academically, but socially, and emotionally as well.

### **The “Short” School Day**

In 1869 the average school day consisted of 4-5 hours and was comprised of 45 total school days out of the year. However, attendance remained at a low 59 percent as most children were needed to aid in the caretaking of their homes, and demanding lifestyles. By 1919 the number had jumped to 83 days, and by 1934 to 119. Today it averages 180 days per year, and consists of 7 hours per day, most of that pure instruction. This is almost a five time increase in the time spent in school throughout the year (Mccarthy, 2016).

Lessons were also quite different as things were meant to be memorized and the information you needed was much simpler and less conceptual for the tasks needed to sustain a healthy lifestyle. The rigor has increased dramatically, and children are expected to become proficient on a multitude of subjects, topics, and concepts, leading to the school days and years feeling much shorter than they actually are. The time allotted for each area of study in school, especially in K-12, is often limited to 1 hour or less per day. That is not always enough time for students to be able to grasp core concepts of that material. Not to mention teachers typically move onto another concept right after. By creating specific homework assignments, which address these deficiencies, it becomes

possible to counter the effects of the time shortages, that can benefit students greatly over time. It also serves as a foundation for further learning that students will benefit from in the long run (Lombardo, 2017). This entails core subjects, such as reading, math, and writing, will improve if a student takes the time at home to complete specific tasks related to the current growth goal and learning target, or standard. When the school day is subcategorized into all of the different components, extra practice at home will only ensure a higher level of competency on a given subject.

### **Relationship Between School and Home**

According to Lombardo (2017), “Homework brings the parents closer with schools and keeps them part of the system as students can engage the parents in their learning process” (para. 5). Many parents actually want homework sent so they can see what their children are being taught in the classroom (Lombardo, 2017). The relationship between school and home is a vital one regarding the success of any specific child and their outlook. When parents see that their child brought home homework, it reflects a bridge that opens lines of communication between the different settings, establishing a positive relationship for all parties. It also instills the views on parents that their child must be learning in school if they are having homework, as it is just an extension of the lesson. Homework can also be a powerful tool to help parents become more involved in their child’s learning. It can provide insights into a child’s strengths, weaknesses, and interests, and can also encourage conversations about a child’s life at school. If a parent has positive attitudes toward homework, their children are more likely to share those same values, promoting academic success (Terada, n.d.). As reviewed, homework can be

a source of connection between school and home, give parents insight into what their child is learning, and help establish a positive support system for the child and their success at school.

### **Positive Study Habits**

The biggest belief behind homework is that it instills valuable lessons in children at young ages, which in turn will help them in their later years. They say homework teaches a child to study in solitude, to think problems through independently, and to rely on themselves for solution rather than the teacher (Vatterott, 2018). Harold Fields (1952), a New York Board of Examiners and teacher for a decade stated: “Unless children develop good study habits early in life, they’ll be handicapped all through school and college” (1952, Fine). It also encourages the skill of practice. To get better at a concept, repetition is often necessary. By having the opportunity for homework completion every night, especially with a difficult subject, the concept will become easier to comprehend. This will give the student an advantage later on in life when seeking a long-term career (Lombardo, 2017). I agree that repetition is key when it comes to understanding particular concepts, especially in mathematics, as there are so many skills to master and each is just as easy to forget. Take for instance addition and subtraction facts: by the end of 2nd grade students are expected to have become proficient at all addition and subtraction facts up to 18. This consists of learning many different strategies to understand the number sense behind the arithmetic, but ultimately it is those who practice them enough on multiple occasions, that become proficient with the concept and are able



to move on after they have built their solid foundation, leading to more success with multiplication and division facts later on.

Lombardo (2017, para. 7) stated, “Homework teaches time management skills and creates independent thinking, developing problem-solving skills and encouraging research skills.” It is also an important way for students to learn discipline. It is believed that homework instills the discipline to sacrifice unimportant activities, for those that benefit the learner and their accountability and drive as a student and citizen. Without it the fear of lazy and worthless children being developed creeps into the mind of society. (Ayres, n.d.; Lombardo, 2015). Children have a plethora of resources, tools, and opportunities at their fingertips, and in most cases are not monitored properly. On the average school night, a student in the US might get 3-4 hours of screen time in per day. When that student isn’t in school, that figure doubles to 7-8 hours of screen time (Ayres, n.d.; Lombardo, 2017). By assigning homework, it discourages time being spent in front of the television or other device. This in turn discourages distracting habits from forming and minimizes the chance they take at engulfing in an activity or decision that negatively impacts their mental and physical health, as instead they will be completing tasks that build their skills as a learner, and promotes a sense of accomplishment inside.

One of the greatest benefits of assigning homework is that it allows for a comfortable place of study. By allowing work completion where a child feels the most comfortable, their home, it is possible the environment will only increase the amount of information being absorbed into their minds (Lombardo, 2017). There is no place like home and sometimes the stress of an overstimulated environment, such as school, takes

away from a child's ability to learn and sustain engagement in the comprehension of material as they are more focused on the social and emotional interactions of themselves, their peers, and their teachers. When they get home these tensions are released, and their mind becomes free of the anxieties, and unpredictable nature of a classroom, leading to a more absorbent mind.

Lombardo (2017) also pointed out that homework can be used as a tool to help students begin to prepare for the world once they finish their educational careers. By assigning it, children will learn to be more responsible, solve and analyze problems, and become more responsible in the completion of such tasks. These skills they are learning in school are the same skills they will need as young adults. Proponents are firm in the belief that as adults these children will use these skills in the workforce, bringing much more success to their lives and the economies.(Lombardo, 2015; 2017).

### **Screen Time and Trouble**

When children get home, one of the biggest challenges is how they manage their time without structured activities. This is especially true in low income households, or households that have less adult supervision and support due to heavy workloads, schedules, and disconnect from the importance of an education. One of the biggest advocacies for homework is how it is believed to give students something constructive to do, rather than having an overabundant amount of time to cause mischief, or get into unwarranted situations, leading to much worse consequences down the road (Shuster, 2009). One of those decisions, especially in our technological society, is that over screen time overload. Students have access to a plethora of devices and seem to gravitate to such

things as they are structured, fully guided resources that engage your eyes and brain to an intense state. Things are not as simple as watching tv anymore for short stints, and as stated above, the average screen time has increased dramatically over the last 10 years due to these gadgets and gizmos. By providing enriching, or even simplistic and repetitive homework, you are lessening the chance a student will choose to indulge in the overuse of their devices, benefiting them emotionally, socially, and academically over time (Loveless, 2016).

### **Summary**

As described above, there are many proponents that support homework and the positive effects it has on a child and their development, not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. They build good study habits that will extend far beyond this current school year and benefit them throughout their life, learn how to manage time and understand responsibility, further cement their foundation for learning through more exposure, repetition and a better and more comfortable learning environment, and be less persuaded to spend the free hours of their evenings watching tv, obsessing over a game or device, and/or getting into mischief. If all students were able to accomplish these feats with typical homework, there should be strong support in the continuation of its implementation.

## **Cons of Homework**

### **Introduction**

For every action there is a reaction, and assigning traditional homework is no exception. The problem is that for all of the positive outcomes that might be associated with providing this homework, there seems to be more negative conclusions associated with the same thing, while most of those are much more detrimental to a developing student, their outlook on school, and most importantly the outlook they have on themselves. The American society is one that craves perfection and is always adamant on fixing a problem by providing answers that are not manageable, never proven, and seem to create more tribulations than there was in the beginning. As my history section suggested and defined, every time there was an increase in homework in public education it was because of the fear that our youth were falling behind and the easiest way to speed up their learning and better prepare them for the “real world” was through it. The biggest controversy is that homework assignments are not consistent throughout public education, and sometimes not even consistent between grade level classrooms at the same school (Lovelace, 2016).

So how do we correctly monitor and record if something has a positive impact or a negative one? The best way is through studies, surveys, tests, and observations, all of which have concluded more than not that the only thing homework does is create a negative attitude toward school and education in general. Homework has always lacked a strong connection to higher levels of academic success on a local and national scale. It is true that sometimes it may help students gain knowledge in certain subjects, but that also

assumes and expects they have access to the resources needed to do so (Lombardo, 2017). In this theme, I will be organizing and reviewing literature that has taken the position in which homework can be a more detrimental tool to children, and have a negative impact not just academically, but socially, and emotionally as well.

### **The Myth**

Alfie Kohn (2015), an American author and lecturer in the areas of education, parenting, and human behavior reflected that the positives of homework are largely false. He has spent months of time sifting through research and found the result nothing short of mind-boggling. To begin, there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit to assigning homework, specifically in elementary and middle school. There is also no connection between whether a child does homework and that results in higher achievement levels at school. Even at the high school level, the argument tends to disappear when deeper measures are used. The biggest myth he touched upon is that there are no truth behind studies that claim homework builds character and teaches good study habits. A student would need the perfect environment at all of the perfect times to try to even partially reflect the idea that traditional homework will benefit them in any way (Kohn, 2015).

Another mythical idea is that people have believed with the emphasis that has been placed on assessment performance and the infamous No Child Left Behind, there has been a much higher need to assign homework as it will more than likely improve test scores and close the achievement gap. Roughly 17 years later that achievement gap is more evident than ever, and our assessment data has continued to decrease in diverse

communities, and increase in those that are more established, systemic, and less diverse (Smith, 2017). But the homework debate has never been about kids. It is in turn about parents and their inability to reconcile two competing anxieties: family time, and concern over the quality and quantity of their children's education. It is also primarily focused to keep parents in the loop and fulfill their desire and need to always be included and needed in their child's life no matter the cost (Maclean, 2017). If a child brings home homework the idea is they must be learning in school, and by dedicating time to complete it, they must be learning valuable skills and accountability (Kohn, 2015).

Homework must also mean a sign of a rigorous curriculum and if ten math problems are good for a student's growth, forty problems must be better. Often times tough homework is correlated with a challenging and tough education behind it, which is a Victorian style idea, but negates the fact that more does not always mean better, as the challenge, creativity, and complexity is usually missing from repetitive, and mundane workloads (Vatterott, 2015). It seems that these myths were created simply due to the fear of what might happen without them. The problem is there has been no true venture to see what happens when they are wiped away.

### **Studies and Surveys**

Well over 130 studies, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews have been done within the last century regarding homework and its impact on our youth socially, emotionally, and academically. Some of the conclusions have stated that homework can have a positive impact on a student and their success in school, mostly at the high school level, but well over three quarters of them have stated the opposite; homework is a

pointless waste of time that reflects much more negative impacts on our youth than positive ones (Vatterott, 2018).

A 2-year study was done regarding Connecticut's education system and homework implementation back in 1952 and they concluded homework did not add to a student's knowledge of a subject matter, or improve their work habits or mental discipline (Fine, 1952). At the same time, a Brooklyn High School was completing a survey that divided their four classes into two halves. One half received daily homework, 1-2 hours, while the other half did not. At the end of the school year all of these students took the same standardized test, at both the state level and in their individual classes, to see which group knew more about history, math, and economics. The results were astounding as there was no significant difference between performance, meaning a heavy dose of homework did not fare the students any better than no homework at all (Fine, 1952).

The interesting part was this was well over 60 years ago when homework was extremely traditional, and was more about the memorization and rote learning style associated with public education. One would figure that by having ample more opportunities to study these dates, concepts, and ideas the high schoolers would be much better off, yet it made no difference. In the same area, an elementary school district experimented with 1,200 fifth and sixth graders, with the same guideline, half had homework for the year, and half did not. Dr. Peter J Di Napoli (1951) concluded the same results as that of the high school system: the students performed at the same rate no matter the amount of homework they were assigned (as cited in Fine, 1952). The most fascinating part of the study was that the percentage of failures at a high school in

Bennington dropped from 19 to 2 percent after the abolishment of homework, meaning before the change, students were held to an accountability level that they could not sustain to the plethora of outside distractions and variables that lie with its completion (1952, Fine).

More current studies have also been done, yet reflected the same results. A 2002 survey reported that 64 percent of children between the ages of six and eight have homework on any given day, twice what the workload was in 1981, and even preschoolers are bringing schoolwork home. We know there is some indication that repetition can help a child to master skills if the concept behind the skill is already clearly in place, but according to the US Department of Education (DOE, 2008), five algebraic problems are all it takes to demonstrate whether or not a child understands a particular mathematical function. When kids come home with 100 multiplication problems to solve, it becomes simple drudgery. The children who already know how to solve the math problem don't need that much practice, and those who don't, won't know how to solve it in the first place, let alone 100 times (Ponte, 2008).

In 2015 Jacqueline Fiorentino, a second grade teacher, experimented with dropping prescribed homework as she noticed more students were not completing the assignments than were. After her shift, she found students started doing more work, especially reading, at home as they used this newfound free time to explore subjects and topics that are of interest to them, rather than the predetermined, forceful work the teacher prescribed (Terada, 2018).



At the middle school level, when students have developed better study habits, skills, and are more mature, homework should benefit them and help assist in the retention of what they learn. A study done in 2015 found that when middle school students were assigned more than 90 to 100 minutes of daily homework, their math and science test scores began to decrease. “The researchers recommend homework should present a certain level of challenge or difficulty, without being so challenging that it discourages effort. Teachers should avoid low-effort, repetitive assignments, and assign homework with the aim of promoting autonomous, self-directed learning” (Terada, 2018, para. 7). To conclude, what matters is not how much a student is doing at home, but what they are doing that sparks their independent learning.

At a high school level, when students are understanding what it takes to be more of an independent learner and master the skills they began to build in middle school, homework can provide a boost to learning. A study done in 2013 found high school students can experience serious mental and physical health problems, from higher stress levels to sleep deprivation, when assigned too much homework resulting in school performance drop, poor outlook on themselves, and lack of sustainment and interest in furthering their education (Terada, 2018).

A fascinating study looked at trends in the International Math and Science Study around homework, while analyzing test scores in both subjects for grades 4, 6, and 8 around the world. Researchers found that on average, spending time on homework was not correlated to higher scores, and the countries who performed to worst were the ones who assigned the most. (Maclean, 2017).

The last study I will describe is one of sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation (2015), Children from 5 to 12 years old need between 10 and 11 hours of sleep each night, and teenagers need from 8.5 to 9.25 hours. However, when teens get overwhelmed with schoolwork, sleep is one of the first things to go. The Foundation continued (2015) expressing studies that show only 20 percent of adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 get the recommended amount of sleep. On school nights, close to half of them get much less. Research shows that sleep deprivation affects a whole range of mental activities, including the ability to pay attention, use verbal creativity, think abstractly, make decisions, or retrieve long-term memories, which changes overall mood and motivation. Researchers have also found that when a person learns something new, there is activity during sleep in the same area of the brain where that learning occurred that helps this learning, and helps improve memory performance when the person is tested the next day. Sufficient sleep, it turns out, is critical to the development and attainment of new information (Ponte, 2008).

In my study and research review I only scratched the surface at the data that supports the ineffectiveness of homework at an academic level, yet over 30,000,000 boys and girls are still assigned it on a daily basis. The emotional and social effect of homework will always be subjective as every child experiences a different setting the moment they set foot out of the classroom, but it is definitely worth taking a closer look at.

## **The Home Life**

A major survey on education released by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) revealed that nearly three-quarters of all parents see homework as a frequent source of stress in their house. Homework now consumes nearly 9.2 hours per week for the average adolescent according to statistics and much of that requires parental participation. When you add dinner, extracurricular activities, sleep, family time, and commuting from place to place, their home life has all but disappeared stealing them of their innocence and free time (Maclean, 2017). By taking away this “free time” children are being impacted in their ability to grow socially and emotionally as less play can be associated with lower learning abilities, less understanding of physical safety, lower character growth, and decreased health (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Lombardo, 2017).

School is also already a full time job for kids. An elementary day lasts for around 6 hours, 5 of those being academically based learning, and when you pile all of the extra curricular things kids do after school on top of that, their day is filled with 8+ hours of rigorous activity without homework. Add that on top and students are looking at 10+ hours of mental and physical strain without the freedom of choice. When speaking of younger students this rigor creates a stressful demeanor toward learning and school and if bombarded with lessons in both settings, they might be pushed to dread school, lose interest in learning, and fall further behind as they are less likely to absorb any valuable information if their mind is in a negative place.

## Home Support

Parents and guardians are a huge role player in the completion and success of homework. After a long day at work, many parents dread having to play homework boss, and more times than not this work results in arguments, disagreements, and frustrations brought on by something, and someone, that is not around to support the idea. Many parents are frustrated at the impact homework has on their relationship with their kids yet succumb to the fear of outside sources labeling them as careless and negligent parents who do not care about their children's education (Kohn, 2015).

After long battles, the homework gets done poorly, does not get done at all, or the parent takes it upon themselves to do more of the work completion than the actual child. Miss Schiller, an assistant principal at a junior high school in Manhattan surveyed 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students and found that 79% consult their parents for help, or parents do more than they should. In a few other studies parents were surveyed and shared around 40% actually just do the homework, or more than half of it, to save from frustrations, fighting, anxiety, or the drama associated with its completion (Kohn, 2015).

Accurate practice isn't always possible as well due to the ever increasing stipulations placed on needing resources to understand how and what are being taught. Parents, students, and families do not always have access to such things and expecting them to is far beyond inequitable. Homework is usually about practice and concept repetition, but if the core concepts are not understood from the initial instruction, taking work home will only further the confusion and inaccuracies. If this inaccurate practice continues, bad habits continue to be formed, and then the teacher must acknowledge and

re-correct any deficiencies (Lombardo, 2017). Public education is constantly changing its guidelines, curriculums, standards, and basis of information taught, and unless someone is part of the change, there is no way to understand the rhyme or reason behind it in effort to support them at a high level. Another parent detractor is the emphasis the public educational system is placing on test scores and grades. As a teacher it is overly frustrating to hear such mixed messages around how important the development of children are and their happiness, yet an overwhelming amount of time, resources, efforts, and demeanor are spent on the implementation and follow through of standardized testing (Shuster, 2009).

Without the understanding of testing and the simple message it is supposed to share, the educational system feeds into the hysteria that is testing by placing such huge emphasis on meeting, partially meeting, or not meeting grade level proficiency. When this news is shared with families of the students, the monster gets immensely bigger and parents become overbearing, putting way too much pressure and emphasis on test scores, which can be extremely disruptive for children as it feels intrusive and controlling (Terada, 2018). How can they not? At conferences a majority of teachers share student performance and barely touch on the social or emotional constraints that child might face that stand in the way of better performance. The hope is by providing homework with such support at home, this will cure the problem completely and proficiency will magically be reached (Singleton, 2018).

The biggest and most problematic factor of assigning homework is our ever changing society. There are homes out there that are highly invested in their children,

have a plethora of resources, support, positive environment, and the necessary tools needed to accomplish such tasks. However, there are also homes with little or no educational investment in their child and all of the learning responsibilities are placed solely on the teacher (Ratnesar, 2009). Sometimes parents might hold high value for education and wish to be involved and supportive of their children, but have barriers in place that prevent such things from happening. Some homes do not always provide suitable conditions for the successful completion of homework (Ratnesar, 2009). Less wealthy parents may work more than one job. Single mothers or fathers may have divided attentions. And some parents may not even speak English. Homes might also be overcrowded, have a lack of resources, such as work materials, as well as no adult support, supervision, or guidance, which ultimately results in bad study habits, poor work completion, frustration, the feeling of failure and helplessness, and lack of desire to go to school the next day (Barnum ,N.D.; Lombardo, 2015, 2017). When the student arrives at school, their day has already started out on a negative path as that dark cloud of an unsuccessful night of work completion overshadows and overwhelms their emotional state ((Dudley-Marling, 2003; Lombardo, 2015, 2017; Ponte, 2008). The bottom line is: not every home life is equal, and to expect equal work completion when the teacher cannot be there to support is a completely unfair and inequitable system.

### **There Is Just TOO Much**

Alfie Kohn (2015, p. 5) stated: “Over the last quarter-century the burden of homework has increased most for the youngest children, for whom the evidence of positive effects isn’t just dubious; it’s nonexistent.” When a child gets home from school,

their parents witness a barrage of remedial studies explode from their backpack. Suddenly an overwhelming emotion comes over them as they realize their night will now be spent completing, battling, and dealing with such busy work. Many teachers have doubts and remorse about giving homework, yet feel an incredible amount of pressure coming from outside sources who incompetently believe a lack of homework reflects a lack of academic learning. It is believed that if students have things to do at home, they must be learning at a higher rate. Research has shown over and over again that it never makes sense to give the same assignment to every student in class as those who already understand the concepts are just wasting their time, and those who do not will continue to distance themselves from actually understanding. One size does not always fit all (Kohn, 2015).

Too much homework also encourages a lethargic lifestyle as some assignments require children to sit for long periods of time. This lifestyle has many direct correlations to premature death, obesity levels, which are at record highs, and unhealthy emotional levels (Lombardo, 2017).

I stated above that The Public of Education created the 10 minutes of homework per grade a day rule, yet the average first graders in the United States public education system come home with 20 minutes of math homework and then are asked to read 20 minutes in addition. The problem is that 20 minute math assignment assumes the students understand the concept, and have the ability and time to complete it successfully. If a child does not, it could take them 3 to 4 times longer to finish, or possibly just quit doing it. Most of the time the reasons for incompleteness are far beyond their control. Due to this

restraint, homework has also been known to widen the achievement gap, putting students who suffer from many uncontrollable variables at home at a huge disadvantage. In high school it is much worse. At some high performing schools in the U.S. where 90% of graduates go onto college, the average amount of work assigned per night is 3 hours (Ayres, n.d.; Lombardo, 2017).

However this “average” again means some students take less, while others take far longer than the 3 hours expected. Lastly, homework is often geared toward benchmarks to improve test scores, but when children are tired, which a majority are after a long and rigorous school day, they do not absorb much information, and just want to get it done. This has been correlated to lower test scores, burnout of curriculum interest, and a decrease in overall performance and grades (Maclean, 2017). So with the overwhelming amounts of homework being piled up on our youth, what is not getting done?

### **Missing Out**

When teachers assign students homework, they are under the impression that every child and family has a specific time set aside, and a never-wavering dedication geared toward its successful completion. The problem is that has never been the case; from the moment a child gets picked up, dropped off by the bus, or gets home, their second life begins. Extracurricular activities such as basketball, hockey, soccer, dance, and volleyball have seen an increase of time expectations and are sometimes asked to practice or play games 4 out of 7 nights a week (Ratnesar, 2015). This does not take into account the rest of their night, and a bedtime that usually attempts to occur around 7-8 o'clock.



So what might they be missing out on that they could be doing instead of doing homework? Research supports the notion that children should participate and are involved in extracurricular activities, like those described above, as well as many more like cub scouts and/or community activities. However, children might not have the time for other creative endeavors if we ask them to complete homework on top of those. Kids just do not get to play much anymore because of how overworked they are, and their fun time and the social activities they partake in by their own choice, have all but dissipated. The long-term effects of lack of play are yet unknown as enough time has not passed for us to view any correlation, but to the naked eye, it is evident that it has had an immensely negative impact on children and their development socially and emotionally (Kohn, 2015).

Diagnosed anxiety, depression, and ADHD rates in children are at an all time high and continue to increase every year, but have yet to correlate it to the overwhelming expectations placed on children, whether that be from school, society, or their home life. Chores are also not getting done at homes as instead of helping around the house, or place of living, children are completing homework that is only aimed to benefit them. By helping at home you are also being taught time management, responsibility, helping a small community, and these things benefit a whole household rather than one individual (Ponte, 2008).

Exercise and socializing are also being sacrificed as instead students are wasting their time completing mindless tasks that burn out their once desire to be active and get some energy out, while also problem solving, using creativity, and conversing in

unstructured settings with their friends. Developing a child takes time, and deserves utmost care, but all society wants to do is speed up the process, jump over important tunnels, and cross the finish line to success (Ponte, 2008).

Children are simply missing out on family time and privacy. Imagine taking a job where you are told work is over at 6:00 p.m., however we also supervise your time at home and on vacations. We will make sure that you leave the office every night with a minimum of three hours of paperwork to do, and if we can not find something that really needs to get done, we'll make something up. And sure, you can go on vacation if you like. We'll even cut back on the busy work a bit. And, by the way, you will be paid nothing for this, and you can't quit this job (Ponte, 2008). After all this missing out, we should ask: do schools have the right to dictate what children can and cannot do once they leave their premises? Do they have the right to decide how much time a child will spend on any given night completing tasks that have no true benefit or purpose? I personally think that answer is simple: NO.

### **Summary**

As described through my literature review of the cons of homework, extra work at home does not equate to better grades or test scores; limits the opportunities for students to partake in activities that interest them and are appropriate for building social and emotional skills; creates a negative and stressful environment for the family; and most importantly builds up frustration and a negative attitude toward school in general. The U.S. spends more than 300 extra hours of time outside of school, not to mention over 100 extra hours in school, compared to high-performing countries around the world, but this

has not closed the educational achievement gap between these countries and the U.S. as it continues to fall further behind the global rankings (Lombardo, 2017).

As children begin their school careers, the focus should be on enriching a passion for learning, and giving homework can interfere with that completely. Not to mention, young students often do not have the study skills, or accountability built up to fully benefit from homework, making it a poor use of time. Even as children grow older and develop study skills at high levels, one must ask what they are sacrificing instead to waste countless hours of their time completing repetitive and mundane homework. Alfie Kohn (2015) thinks that much of modern day education is infused with the mindset that reveals a deep societal distrust of children, particularly teenagers. The typical educational classroom seeks complete control of how children behave, what they think, and what they learn, and he feels there is almost a puritanical belief that because most kids do not like homework, it must be good for them. Kohn (2015, p. 13) stated, "If we do not trust our children to stay out of trouble, then trying to keep them busy is unlikely to accomplish this goal." Alfie (2015, p. 13) continued: "Whatever our kids are doing says more about our relationship with them than it does about how much free time they have." Free time is just as likely to create opportunities for unexpected learning, Kohn thinks, and is also the best way to spark new ideas (Ponte, 2008). The responsibility of a child's development lies primarily with the home, and the community as a whole, rather than on the school alone. A school should never assume more than its part in the job, which is contained to a normal school day.

## **Benefits of Getting Adolescents Outside**

### **Introduction**

As described in the cons of homework, students are being stretched thin to the point of having less and less time to partake in pleasurable interests, creative thinking, and unstructured learning. Instead, students spend their evenings cooped in their place of living completing mindless busy work that they either already understood in class, or will still be confused as they did not fully understand the concept in the first place. Not to mention the extracurricular activities they are involved in take hours of their week and weekends up with practices, commuting from place to place, games, rehearsals, and everything else one can imagine. So if they are already being overrun with a plethora of organized activities, school work, and programs, I might ask when are they finding the time to get outside to be a kid?

Keogh (2016) reflected from his article that children are spending half the time their parents did playing outside. While more than 83% of parents questioned on a survey thought it was extremely important their children learned to use technology, 95% would prefer their children to spend their childhood outdoors instead, allowing them the opportunity to connect with nature. Ninety-six percent of the 1,001 parents of children between the ages of 4 and 14 quizzed for the National Trust claimed with connection was beyond important, but of those 1,001 parents, 80% surveyed that their children spend more time inside than out. The research also found, on average, these children were playing outside for just over 4 hours per week, compared to the 8.2 hours per week their parents spent outside when they were kids (Keogh, 2016).

This is a problem. Children are asked to do far more than any adult was in their childhood, and rather than taking time to help them organize, process, and become competent decision makers, society instead stimulates them more, by placing unrealistic expectations, and resources in their hand that they have yet to comprehend. One fundamental necessity is being taken away from our youth, simply due to lack of time, energy, effort, and understanding of the wonders it holds, and that is nature. The true importance of outdoor play for children's development is grounded in a strong body of research, as the natural world promotes compelling activity, cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being, and the necessary conditions for children to thrive and learn on their own accord (Bento, 2017). In my final section I will be reviewing literature that explains the need, and true developmental benefits socially, emotionally, and physically, of getting our youth outside to experience our natural world.

### **Learning And The Environment**

Outdoor play is one of the main factors that characterize childhood. Lord Nuffield, or also known as William Morris (2005), one of the first British industrialists to introduce mass production methods talked about the best preparation for adulthood is to have a full and enjoyable childhood that must fully include outdoor play. Children need these opportunities to explore, experiment, influence, expand, marvel, change, practice, discover, dam up, yell, sing, create, push limitations, and most importantly wonder (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005).

What outdoor play does, benefiting development in every aspect of a child, is enable young children to learn a plethora of things about the earth. How does ice feel and

why does it freeze? Why and how do plants grow? Can I climb these rocks? Why do some animals hibernate or fly south in winter? What does mud feel like? Why does the tree grow toward the sun? What animals are out at night, and during the day? Why are shady areas cooler than sunny areas? Do butterflies have to learn how to fly and how in the world can such a small thing migrate so far? All of these are valuable questions children, or even adults, are able to marvel at and discover on their own as nature engages our individual interests and allows us the ability to inference and come to conclusions that stay in our hearts and minds (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). When we learn things based on our individual curiosity they are ten times more likely to stick (Kohn, 2015).

Our outdoor world is filled with so many academic concepts we stress upon in the classroom setting, yet are done in a pure and unique way. Through this outdoor play and exploration of natural elements, it is more than possible to promote education in the broadest sense. Math can be taught using flowers as fractions, trees with geometry, symmetry with insects, tessellations with beehives, weight and volume by using their body, and playing with soil and water to see to how they interact with one another, and these are just scratching the surface. We can also expose our youth to scientific concepts: gardening, construction, farming, vocabulary, times of day, and weather by utilizing the things nature already has in place, yet people tend to take for granted and pass over without second thought (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). Children can also learn, through play, how to problem solve, think creatively, cooperate with others, gain a deeper knowledge of themselves and the world, and learn to promote positive self esteem,

autonomy, and confidence as the outdoors is an open and constantly changing environment where it is possible to experience freedom, gross and boisterous movements, and contact with natural elements (Bento, 2017).

An essential task of learning through the environment is the development and appreciation of how we fit into the natural order of things. Humans have always viewed themselves as superior, yet to what extent does nature care for us? Not only does it provide natural resources we depend on like water, food, oxygen, etc., but also presents problems that we must learn to adversely solve on a daily basis. We can push ourselves to discover this relationship with the natural world by living in it as we grow up, developing with it, and learning to interact appropriately with the natural world we live in (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005).

The exploration of natural elements is also important to capture the attention and richness of children and the diversity of nature. That sense of discovery and fascination influences learning to the fullest and allows for the development of an emotional connection towards the environment. Bento (2017) goes into detail claiming if we assume that attitudes of respect and care are more likely to emerge regarding something that is dear to us, than it is crucial to promote a sense of belonging and familiarity towards nature from an early age. If there is an assumption this will happen without helping to facilitate it at an early age, that connection will be missed and passed over. There is an infinite amount of things to discover, and children need these opportunities to explore the unknown, the unpredictable, and be adventurous and there is not a better time to start than now (Bento, 2017).

## **Health and Physical Exercise**

Nature is a place where humans have evolved for millions of years, long before our current world of electronics, testing, fears, overstimulation, diminishment of time, and over-scheduling of extracurricular activities ever existed, yet these are all diminishing the time children get to spend outdoors partaking in unstructured play. Due to these unnatural concepts and ideas, McGurk stated, “The average American child spends as few as 30 minutes in unstructured outdoor play each day and more than seven hours each day in front of an electronic screen, and because of these obligations our youth is losing the physical, mental, and emotional health the outdoors promotes, sustains, and warrants” (Johnson, Christie, and Wardle, 2005, p. 4).

There are countless articles that have been produced, and studies that have been done focusing on the health benefits of getting outdoors, but how, and in what ways? With our ever growing society, bacteria is spreading much faster, and viruses are more prominent, yet one way to reduce the spread of infection is through getting lots of fresh air. Outdoor play helps these germs to spread out and be dissipated, and interaction with natural elements, such as soil, helps build immunity for the future (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005).

Growing research has shown the importance of soil and dirt play, through digging holes, making mud pies, or even sifting hands through it, as it promotes contact with harmless microbes that provide protection from such infections and diseases. It can even improve a child’s mood and reduce anxiety and stress, and with the growing number of kids suffering from depression and anxiety, experts are starting to fully recognize the role



nature has in enhancing kids' mental health naturally, rather than being prescribed medication (McGurk, 2016). Children also benefit from being exposed to sunlight, natural elements and fresh air, which contributes to bone development, a stronger immune system, and even stronger blood flow (Bento, 2017).

It is well documented that children who play outside are also more physically active. This helps the prevention of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other health issues, creating and sustaining a healthier lifestyle (McGurk, 2016). Through outdoor play, nature boosts more advanced motor skills such as agility, balance, and coordination, increases muscle fitness and flexibility, and has even been known to lower the number of kids who suffer from nearsightedness due to the constant need for the use of depth perception (Bento, 2017).

Outdoor play also supports the surplus energy theory which hypothesizes that play helps people release the emotions and stamina that has been built up over time (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). After an intense, and often immobile, academic activity, allowing outdoor play enables students the chance to refresh themselves by participating in activities outside of the classroom that are less structured and goal driven, but free and creative. The theory states honoring outdoor play time, after such a lesson, helps children get ready to return to their academic work in a refreshed, and more engaging way (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005).

It has been found that children with nature-rich schools and homes are calmer and pay more attention in class than those who are not, especially children diagnosed with ADHD as they have shown significantly fewer symptoms after spending ample amounts

of time in nature (McGurk, 2016). Research has also concluded that children who spend more time outside engage in more imaginative games, score higher on standardized tests, are less likely to bully, and develop stronger awareness, reasoning, and observation skills (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; McGurk, 2016; Bento, 2017).

Lack of sleep among youth is another growing topic in our society and it has been proven that children are suffering from constant sleep deprivation, up to two hours per day, due to the overstimulating world they live in, which results in associated struggles physically, emotionally, and cognitively (National Wildlife Federation, N.D.). According to the National Wildlife Federation's report, the reality is American children are spending, on average, more than 7 hours per day using some form of electronic stimulation, and that screen time overworks the brain to the extreme, disallowing it a chance to decompress, shut down, reflect, and rest (National Wildlife Federation, N.D.).

Building outdoor time into schedules will help sleep deprivation as nature has a way of comforting children, taking away the stresses they face, elevating their mood, and assisting their internal body clock for a better night's sleep, which will result in improvement in school, and a much healthier lifestyle as they get older (National Wildlife Federation, N.D.).

Today's society often neglects the importance of risk taking for learning and development. Children are capable of much more than they are given credit for in the current culture of fear their society promotes, and are limited in their possibilities to learn by experience through risk and failure (McGurk, 2016). By adopting a wider vision of risk, and going beyond the possibility of accidents, society needs to consider the positive

implications related to the feelings of success, accomplishment, humility, or even failure when a challenge or new skill is, or is not, mastered. During outdoor play, children should be able to experience moments of failure, learn by trial and error, and if prevented to do so, will not know how to deal with unpredictable environments when they get older, as they will lack the confidence, awareness, and ability to overcome these challenges in autonomous ways (Bento, 2017). One cannot help think that the fear that is driving our world, is the same fear that can be correlated to the rising number of children diagnosed with depression, anxiety, ADHD, and obesity due to the lack of time being spent, or allowed to be spent freely, outdoors.

### **Socialization**

Children are limited in their ability to gain and build on their social play skills based on the over-structured and constantly narrated life most of them live. School, extracurricular activities such as sports or organized groups like scouts, and family time at home, are great ways for children to learn how to socialize in appropriate and positive ways, yet are limited in the open ended, and unpredictable sense (Bento, 2017). The youth in our world need a lot more opportunities to develop basic social competencies than what the society provides in its constant constraints. Allowing more time for outdoor play enables the development of individual and joint goals between children, and the ability for them to become teachers and learners by sharing their knowledge and skills to accomplish different tasks or challenges. This helps lead to companionship among peers, and the freedom to make choices based on their current surroundings, without the adults constant need for correction and guidance (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). Pushing

each other on a swing, pulling a wagon carrying one another, and playing in the sand together are all processes of learning cooperation making it possible to develop empathy and understanding of human needs as children can begin to comprehend people's feelings and needs (Bento, 2017). But the most crucial difference between indoor and outdoor socialization is that the opportunities for interaction happen in a gradual, pure, and honest way, giving children the chance to choose the moments to connect with others based on their comfort, goals, and interests without having to continually run into others in a close and exiguous room that are predetermined, and single goal oriented (Bento, 2017; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle; 2005). Children need these unpredictable situations to fully and properly develop, yet society is constantly driving them away due to its obsession with structured and overstimulated settings that purposefully guide children into the directions their predecessors feel benefits them most. All it takes is the ability to let go, trust, and understand less, in this case, will always equal more.

### **Summary**

There are a plethora of basic reasons why outdoor play is crucial for children. The main benefits are of the many developmental activities children must learn through exploring, risk taking, fine and gross motor development, and comprehension of the vast knowledge nature provides. Since our culture is making it harder for children to enjoy the outdoors through technology, unsafe neighborhoods, busy and tired parents, educational accountability, and heavy academic standards, we need to take extra care and time to allow the chance for them to be exposed to the outdoors in their own innocent and curious way, to allow the needed growth to happen appropriately (Johnson, Christie, &

Wardle, 2005). The outdoors benefits everyone, especially growing children, by increasing physical and mental health, allowing for improved and interactive socialization in unpredictable habitats, and also increasing the appreciation, interest, and understanding of our natural world and where humans fit in. Learning should not be constrained to a classroom setting, as the most valuable and engaging material is right outside the window in an ever changing, and breathing system: nature.

### **Literature Review Summary**

Throughout my literature review I discussed and summed up the history of homework in public education, the pros and cons of traditional homework being assigned to students, and the benefits of getting children outside to begin to answer this question: *How can creating and substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?* So where does one go from here?

After countless surveys, studies, tests, and research no one still really knows or fully understands if traditional homework is important to student success in and out of school. There are both positive benefits, as well as negative effects from assigning typical worksheet homework, but what are children missing out on when spending countless hours inside completing mundane and repetitive tasks? The answer is more time in an outdoor setting, which in turn limits their full ability to appropriately develop and learn skills in an unpredictable environment. But one thing is true. Despite the tension surrounding homework for the last century nearly 80 percent of parents surveyed in the U.S. still agreed that homework enhanced learning and they considered it necessary to

building good study habits and responsibility. These ideas are validated in parent's minds when their child brings homework home after school (Maclean, 2017).

So what can schools do to provide more meaningful experiences that spark creativity, socialization, emotional and social development, and peaks the interest of children outside of the school's doors, if homework is still valued by more than 80% of these parents surveyed? The answer yet again is sacrificing the traditional worksheet method, for more meaningful, doable, and invigorating activities that utilize nature and allow children the chance to grow at their own, and much more appropriate, pace. Education, like most of life, is about balance and schools should not assume full responsibility in the development of a child's character, so it is vital to work together with their community, family, and the children themselves in the creation, implementation, and pursuit of a more engaging and beneficial method of learning, which center around the outdoors.

In short, creative use of a student's evening hours can mean construction for personal time later in their life, leading to the growth of values, appreciations for others and nature, and skills that will enrich and stimulate vocation, career, community, and further push positive growth in their mind, body, and soul (Terada, 2018). I state again: *How can creating and substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

#### Introduction

This chapter provides a full description of the capstone project, including its context and purpose. The project is designed in an attempt to answer the question: *How can creating and substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?* This is an idea I have played with for a few years, yet have not taken the time to truly implement something worthwhile until now. I have attempted to apply my “no homework” rule, by simply reflecting to the students that if they work hard, learn to apply themselves to the fullest during the school day, and complete their tasks, they will be rewarded with no work to do at home, other than reading. They have loved this, and I have seen a huge amount of appreciation and engagement during the normal school day. It is a lot to ask children to not only come to school for 6+ hours and work their tails off, but then to go home and complete more tasks, in a different environment, with unknown support because someone told them to. I wanted to change that.

Yet during this time, I also noticed another thing: my students had ample more time to partake in activities outside of typical homework, yet most of them were choosing to spend those minutes and hours inside watching tv, playing video games, or engaging in an activity that took minimal effort and discovery. This was roughly the same time I started the NSEE program at Hamline, and was the perfect format to implement something new. How could I use my platform, being an elementary teacher, to expose,

educate, and implement a program that instills wonder, curiosity, discovery, appreciation, care, dedication, protection, advocacy, and love into their minds, hearts, and souls.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the project I have completed in detail: an outdoor adventure curriculum. I will give an overview of the project with my rationale of its purpose, the proposed setting and audience for its use, and detail the format of my project with a timeline for when the project will be completed.

### **Project Overview, Rationale and Monitoring Engagement**

My project, to be completed by May of 2019, is a homework substitution that will take the place of indoor worksheets, and instead ask students to partake in meaningful outdoor adventures that extend on the learning they have accomplished and been exposed to in class. The goal of this project is to give an opportunity for children to enjoy and be interested in spending a little more time outside than they currently do. If homework is taking so much time away from them, my goal is to take that homework away, and provide the possibility for something that benefits the mind, body, and spirit. More outdoor time is also claimed to help increase the measurements of their academic, social, emotional, and physical health and success. (Bento 2017; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle 2005; McGurk 2016) Using all of the information I have learned throughout my literature review I have created 3, one-week units that take place during fall, winter, and spring of that respective school year. Each week will focus on specific aspects of the seasonal changes that happen in Minnesota and how that affects the wildlife and plant life we are so accustomed to here. Three of the lessons each week are somewhat identical, as students will be asked to compare and contrast the seasonal differences in a more



observational way. The other 2 lessons focus more on physical learning and give students a chance to be more hands on to understand and feel comfortable in nature. All of the lessons will focus on specific objectives regarding living, and non-living organisms that make up our natural environment and how they adapt and change during each season, but are open enough to expose and discuss much more. The lessons will be taught in class using materials I created, environments I have explored and found enriching, and discussions that are student led. The main focus area for each weekly unit will be based on the seasonal effects of Minnesota's climate and how that affects the rest of the environment around it. After each lesson has been taught and the students have been exposed to the concepts and understand how to implement the ideas themselves, I will then assign outdoor experiences for them to experience that complements the learning they did in class. I want to support the families with this outside of school as much as possible to help dismiss any fears or restraints similar to those I discussed in chapter 2, so I will be aiding whenever I can.

To help monitor student learning and interest, and get a basic evaluation of my project and where to go after implementation, I will be doing two assessments. The first is very informal in the sense of allowing students the chance to either share their experience during morning meeting, or write and illustrate about their experiences during morning journaling, and throughout the day. The second assessment is to gauge a simple level of commitment from beginning to end. After the first outdoor experience is assigned, I will ask students if they participated and tally the total. I will continue to teach the lessons throughout the year, assign the "homework," and after the final outdoor

adventure at school, and assigned homework, I ask who participated again, and hope to see the numbers increase. I am expecting some fluctuation between lessons and participants due to many variables so these assessment ideas will continually adapt to record and reflect the best data.

I also need permission slips from all families so students can walk off of the school site. We will be traveling to different locations close to our facility as they have better access to the ideas and concepts in the lesson. Not to mention the walks there and back have exponential benefits as well.

### **Audience and Setting**

I am a 3rd grade teacher and will be implementing this to my class in the Fall of 2019. The concepts, lessons, presentations, and outdoor adventures I created can easily be adapted and implemented in any grade as the ideas are always centralized around the natural environment that is around us, and all children can benefit from this exposure and understanding. The parents of my students will also be a primary focus as I will need their support to fully implement and aid in their children's ability to get outside and put to use what they have learned in class. I will stay in full communication with them to answer questions, share ideas and guidelines, and explain the reasoning to my idea and the benefits of partaking in it for their children.

At Spiderman Academy we have our very own school forest that consists of an area of sapling trees, some more mature trees, an amphitheater, and some prairie type grasses that fill the more exposed area. Within walking distance of Spiderman Academy is Gotham City Nature Center that consists of a boardwalk and trails that circulate

through 52 acres of marsh, prairie and forest habitats. We are also within walking distance, less than a half mile, of a multitude of young and old forests that encompass many concepts that will be utilized and taught in the lessons, and a couple are surrounded by a small lake, marsh areas, and a natural stream. Each lesson gives the specific location these concepts are being taught, yet are not bound to this specific place as the lessons simply encompass a basis for understanding, and all of Minnesota can be used as the outdoor playground for students.

The school has a student population of 777 and is composed of grades K-8. There is a student-teacher ratio of 16 to 1, and that population breaks down in the following manner:

White (63.4%)

Asian (13.5%)

African American (11.5%)

Hispanic (5.9%)

Two or more races (5.5)

American Indian (.1%)

The school has 22.5% of its students on free and reduced lunches and offers two setting III programs, Ishine and Home Base. Sixty out of the 777 students are English Language Learners, and the gender breakdown comprises of 51% female and 49% male. The school has 14.4% of all students currently qualify under gifted and talented. My specific class population changes from a year to year basis, but I currently sit at 30

students; 17 female and 13 male. Eighty percent of my students are white, ten percent Asian, seven percent African American, and three percent Hispanic.

### **Project Format**

I have chosen to create a curriculum that concentrates on specific areas of focus that are within our natural setting, that being Central Minnesota. My curriculum design is based on the Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (2005), as this concept of curriculum design is recognized and in common use throughout school systems in the U.S. This framework is based on seven key tenets, and helps focus the curriculum and teaching on the development and deepening of student understanding. This style is very effective because it is planned backward from a long-term process. Teachers also focus on being the coaches, not the purveyors on content knowledge. I feel this style benefits my capstone idea, as well as engages the students in the learning, especially since they are the ones I am hoping will take this to the next step in the protection, understanding, wonder, and advocacy of our natural world.

I have also aligned the lessons to Minnesota State science standards, even though the lessons will incorporate much more than just those and can be adapted to many different content areas.

Once I start teaching the lessons and finding the most practical things to use to present the information, my lessons will fluctuate and change. I always want to leave the learning open and allow students the best chance to guide these ideas themselves. I want to limit the “busy work” students have to do during the 3 weeks, as my main goal is for them to understand and comprehend the accessibility of our natural world just by getting

outside. The lessons are meant as simple exposure to understanding the concepts of trees and birds in the seasons on MN, and will be extended each year I teach them. Extensions will include identifying birds and trees, learning the parts of birds and trees, and more hands on activities. I hope the materials listed above will help build that foundation so students can apply the knowledge to their daily lives. When the week long lessons are over every season, the main goal is for them to be more comfortable and confident in experiencing the outdoors for themselves.

### **Timeline**

This capstone project was completed in the spring of 2019. Implementation of the project will begin in the fall of the 2019 school year. The time these weekly lessons will be taught is extremely flexible and can be broken up as one sees fit, as long as they take place in the appropriate season. After every lesson is taught, necessary changes, additions, and separate lessons will occur to strengthen the foundation that was created.

### **Summary**

To summarize, my project was to create a curriculum. It is composed of 3, one-week units in which students will partake during the school day, and then apply the same concepts and ideas to their “homework” assignment when they are outside of school. The lessons are taught during the week, time always to be determined based on yearly class schedule, and the outside of school work will be suggested to be completed in the flexibility of their home schedules. The hope of this project is to advocate for appropriate social, emotional, and physical development, while limiting the mindless, repetitive work most participate in after school for their homework. I also hope to help

build an appreciation, love, advocacy, and deep level of interest, discovery, and wonder in the students towards nature, the outdoors, and everything it beholds. I feel more learning can come out of them getting outside and experiencing the bliss of life, than sitting at their dining room table and mundanely completing worksheet after worksheet.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

The idea and creation of this capstone were in an attempt to promote the opportunity for students to choose to spend more time outdoors, by supplementing traditional worksheet homework with outdoor experiences. During the process of the last couple of years through coursework, research, professional dialogue with colleagues and administration, and brainstorming I have completed 3, 1-week units that focus on two environmental ideas that change dramatically due to Minnesota climate; birds and trees. I believe the exposure to such common and engaging material will only encourage students to build on their curiosity for the outdoors, and aid in the quest of helping them feel more confident and comfortable experiencing it on their own.

The barriers that homework has created throughout the years were one that I could no longer ignore, as a majority of their free time at home was being spent completing simplistic and mundane activities that they already finished doing during their workday. The cons of implementing traditional homework far outweighed the pros, and the increased expectations on students have only driven their desire to wonder, dream, and be curious, away. However without homework, and the routine of setting aside time to complete at home, students were deciding to spend more of their time indoors, and in front of a screen. By creating a system to replace both with more meaningful and accessible ideas I feel I have provided a solution to the question, *how can creating and*

*substituting outdoor experiences for traditional homework increase the time students choose to spend outside when not in school?*

The following section summarizes my conclusions made throughout the capstone process. I will conclude my thoughts by reviewing my literature review, intended implications, project limitations and extensions, future use, and benefits to the teaching profession and its students.

### **General Conclusions and Literature Review Revisit**

As I set out on the path of a capstone project in the fall of 2018, I already had a basic idea for where I was interested in heading. As my chapter 1, and pieces of 2 and 3 state, I am beyond opposed to the idea of homework and always have been. There is no one way to fit the needs of every child, even in a single classroom, as the amount of variables dramatically increases the moment they leave the school building. The second part of the project was where my indecisiveness increased; how to use the outdoors as a homework substitute? Through extensive research, and many collegial discussions that idea has morphed from a 15, separate lesson focus to three thematic, one-week units. After playing around with focal concepts, I simply concluded it would be most beneficial to utilize the beautiful and incredible seasonal changes Minnesota undergoes and how two global creations, birds and trees adapt and endure these dramatic changes. This entire process has taught me how immensely dedicated and knowledgeable one must become to fully understand and create a curriculum that can be truly impactful.

During all of my research, I found myself reading different articles, books, and other forms of print that repeated the same messages surrounding homework. I felt the



need to include the historical aspect, past studies, and foregone conclusions to better base my arguments for both sides as public schools have been around for over a century, and homework is not far behind. Research has shown that throughout the last century the conclusions of homework and its implementation has been tied to most current economic trends. For example: In the early 1900's students under the age of 15 were not allowed to be assigned homework due to the barrier it placed on parents right to dictate their children's life at home, and also social and emotional concerns (Vatterott, 2018). However in 1957, after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, there was an uproar that American schools are failing our great nation and assigning more homework is the most effective way to counteract that (Vatterott, 2018). We then saw a shift back to a more progressive stance, and the fluctuation continues.

I became fascinated by the historical portrayal of human patterns and how they affected the homework stance that my curiosity toward each sides arguments increased. The literature, as described by Lombardo (2015; 2017), Lovelass (2016), and Vatterott (2018), showed positive benefits to assigning typical homework such as:

- Teaching responsibility and organization
- Limiting screen time
- Establishing healthy communication between home and school
- Increased practice and learning
- Building positive study habits
- Comfortable place of study

The conclusions I was able to formulate based on these findings were that of improving study habits and increasing the time students spend practicing a skill, resulting in faster proficiency rates as homework serves as the foundation for further learning (Lombardo, 2017). If homework truly instilled these benefits, our student engagement, and success levels should be through the roof.

I then spent time researching the opposing side, those opposed to traditional homework. This time there was far more research, data, studies, and conclusions that supported the notion that assigning homework was much more detrimental to students than not. Homework has always lacked a strong connection to higher levels of academic success on a local and national scale. It is true that sometimes it may help students gain knowledge in certain subjects, but that also assumes and expects they have access to the resources needed to do so (Lombardo, 2017). Alfie Kohn, an American author and lecturer in the areas of education, parenting, and human behavior, reflected much of this in his decade long study around the cons of homework. He reflected that as the assigning of homework has increased, so has the achievement gap as the mold does not fit the entirety of the classroom (Kohn, 2015). Many studies have been done throughout the years showing no improvement on student achievement with or without homework. Some of the main themes as summarized by Fine (1952), Ponte (2008), Kohn (2015), Vatterott (2015), Lovelace (2016), and Maclean (2017) are:

- Too much time being consumed at home completing homework
- Lack of home support and resources for some students
- Way too much assigned

- Missing out on social, emotional, and physical development
- Mundane and repetitive
- If you get it at school, you will get it at home. If you don't you more than likely will only build on bad habits
- The school day is already full time
- Extracurricular things are taking over family lives

Based on all of the information I have read and studied, I concluded homework can have a far worse effect on students, their learning, outlook toward school, and overall development, than the benefits that are believed to take place because of it.

All of that being said, the last part of the capstone research was focused on the benefits of kids getting outside. Some of the main points as pointed out by Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005), Kohn (2015), McGurk (2016), and Bento (2017) consisted of:

- Learning through play
- Positive mental and physical health
- Socialization
- Gross motor skills
- Appreciation and love for the world

I wanted to utilize this data in my creation and implementation of a substitute for homework, as it not only promoted the positives that backed the pro homework debate, but also balances the benefits with getting outside and limiting repetitive, typical busy work students are accustomed to.

As I began my project creation I kept these ideas, barriers, studies, and valued opinions in my mind so my lessons and units reflected the best outlook possible going forward.

### **Project Implications**

The intent of this project is to utilize the newfound concepts and ideas I have latched onto throughout the program. I have methodically began including environmental education opportunities already in my teaching, have seen immense interest, curiosity, and benefits, and also found a way to meet academic standards in a much more engaging style. After the many conversations, meetings, and reflections I have had with my colleagues and administration I wanted to create a more meaningful environmental process that focuses on specific ideas coherent to the geographical area we are currently in, being Minnesota. Rather than this curriculum including 15 different lessons that touch on different concepts, I wanted to take the time and concentrate on establishing a deeper understanding and foundation for birds and trees in Minnesota that hopes to instill and create a deeper desire to engage in the outdoors when not in school. I have chosen to focus on third grade, as it is the grade I will be teaching next school year, yet created these lessons in a way that they can easily be adapted to any grade below or above. My hope is that students can begin the journey at a young age, and by the time they reach secondary school, they have a rich and thorough understanding for these concepts. In the very near future, fall of 2019, my proctoring will begin and from there I will continue to adapt and reflect on my idea.

### **Project Limitations and Extensions**

Throughout this process I have taken the time to balance and eliminate as many barriers as possible, yet feel no matter what there will always be limitations to it. The first might be the location of an appropriate site at home. By utilizing a local park rich in wildlife and trees in school, some students might find it difficult to reenact a similar location near their home. I will do my best navigating this as I start and reflecting that location does not matter, but I can foresee some students losing interest with limited natural space at home. I also did as best as I could to limit the materials needed to complete the activities to a notebook, and pencil, but see some struggles with commuting these materials and utilizing them in the desired places. I want students to experience nature innocently, but am also asking them to complete tasks while doing so. This might limit some pure learning as the focus will be on completion of a task, rather than wonder and open-ended questions regarding the concepts. Only after implementation can I adapt to the desirable goals I have.

The best part of this curriculum is in its adaptation ability. I wanted to make sure the units were appealing to younger and older students, while also differentiating for them. These lessons are easy to adapt to a vast range of ability and age levels. I also made sure to leave room for the possibility and creation of more lessons on top of the ones I have, as well as more homework extensions for students to partake in. My hope is that by the end of a few uses, I will have over 100 different homework experiences for students to choose to complete at home throughout the school year.

## **Recommendations and Future Use**

As I begin to implement this curriculum in my classroom I would like to survey families to see and understand the access to nature they have. We will be spending time in specific locations at school, but once students leave the building the environments change, sometimes dramatically. I am hoping through a survey, or short questionnaire, I can understand the common environments they are in and recommend locations, or other areas of study for them to use to fulfill the homework extensions.

I am also planning on spending some time following through with the higher and lower grades in my school to see if others are interested in partaking in such enriching activities, whether that be on trees and birds, or other concepts navigable in our environment. I am more than willing to assist and support teachers in their quest to use the outdoors as a means of education, and understand the first step will be proctoring this myself to show results, data, and increased student engagement throughout the rest of the day.

The future use of this curriculum will be based on the first year of implementation as I will be able to fine tune, add additional resources and activities, and understand the most effective and efficient ways to reflect and teach the concepts and knowledge I am hoping to expose them to. Once I am able to gauge the level of participation at home, I will be able to truly hone in on the most proficient ways to reach all learners no matter their obstacles or the variables that have stood in their way regarding typical homework. The possibilities are endless.

## **Benefits to Students and Teaching**

As reiterated at the start of chapter 4, the idea of homework has been instilled in our minds for over a century, yet time and time again it has been proven typical homework is more detrimental to a student, their learning, and emotional, social, and physical development than beneficial. On the other hand, spending more time outdoors can have immense positive effects on the whole child, yet we are giving less and less time to do so in and out of school to do rigor, and the crazy home life's most kids lead. I feel students spend enough time during the day focusing on academic proficiency, that once they leave these doors they deserve to partake in much more enriching activities. This will not only relieve some school stress, but also reinvigorate their attitude toward school and learning, ultimately having an impact on their studies and overall growth. The community as a whole will also benefit as students will better understand ways to care and sustain the world around us in a positive and passionate way leading to environmental health down the road.

I also believe this new curriculum will not only re-energize the students, but their teacher as well. Having the chance to partake in something different is always beneficial to anyone, yet as a teacher the thought of engaging them through the world I grew up in only sparks the deep desires I had becoming a teacher in the first place. We all deserve a break from the stresses and extreme, sometimes unrealistic, expectations public education has on us, and there is no better way to spend that time in such an intimate, innocent, and pure setting.

## Summary

I am beyond ecstatic to begin a new journey with my students to see if there can be a peaceful balance created between the outdoors and assigning homework. The homework assigned will be meaningful outdoor activities that promote the positives of learning, yet give the opportunity for them to be free to explore and engage in an unpredictable environment. I believe that as I begin, and become more competent in teaching and implementing the concepts and homework expectations, the students and families will see firsthand the true benefits of getting outside, and how much time has been wasted through the years on typical homework completion, or lack thereof. I will do everything in my power to ensure this idea takes off as the benefits, and positive outcomes far outway the opposing fears and complaints. We need to start somewhere, and this is my somewhere.



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