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Homework – Just Benefits?
a study concerning the purposes and motives that junior high school English teachers have for assigning homework

Läxor – Bara fördelar?
En studie om syften och anledningar till att engelsklärare på högstadiet ger läxor

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Abstract

Homework is and has been an integral part of school for many years. However, in the last few years, some professionals have begun to question whether or not homework should be a part of school or not. Opinions vary greatly on this position. Some have even gone on to claim that it is unwarranted and even detrimental to students’ education. Others mean that it is an absolute necessity. This dissertation is an investigation of the viewpoints on the rationale for homework of 6 teachers of English at junior high level.

In order to gain insight to their views, qualitative interviews were utilized. The results show that each of the consulted educators of English utilizes homework as a learning tool in their teaching. The purpose of assigning homework is that it fills the function of giving the students the opportunity to review, to take responsibility in keeping a schedule, planning and for their education, and to train in studying. I have come to the conclusion that if students are to be assigned homework, it is imperative that the homework is interesting for them and that the pupils see it as something that will promote their development in the subject.

Keywords: Homework, study technique, homework policy, motivation
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

I first became interested in the subject of homework after reading what Principal Leo of Flygelskola in Lund wrote in Sydsvenska Dagbladet (2004):

Students think that homework is a part of school; teachers think that homework is a part of school; parents think that homework is a part of school. When mom and dad see that their child has homework they know that they are going to school. If the school does not have any homework the parents think that it is a weird school at which their children are not going to learn anything. Homework stands for education, knowledge and discipline. But they are in fact pointless, children who are given homework do not learn more than children that are not given homework (my translation).

There is no doubt that homework provokes mixed feelings and there are many opinions and attitudes towards it. In recent times, I have had lively discussions with colleagues and parents about the benefits of homework but also about the amount of homework they conceive that a child can manage. Some parents and even teachers are critical of homework and believe that it causes anxiety and stress. They also say that homework assignments often lead to conflict within the family when they interfere with a child’s leisure activities and being with friends. Others feel that homework is a necessary part of school if a child is to get the most out of his or her education and that homework is necessary if a child is to learn to take responsibility.

Whether homework should or should not exist is debated often in the press and other media. During the election year in Sweden, homework was elevated to being a political issue. In the political debate, opponents to homework claimed that it leads to social injustice and inequality within society. Supporters of homework, on the other hand, claimed that homework is necessary to sustain order and structure in children’s education.

Despite the various discussions surrounding homework, it is still a very common element in the Swedish educational system at all levels of education from elementary to high school level. Homework exists even though there is nothing in the Swedish Education Curriculum
(Lpo 94) to imply that homework is a necessary part of a child’s education. On the contrary, the curriculum states that schooling should be adapted to the individual’s needs and abilities.

1.2 Purpose statement

Since homework is such a common phenomenon in our schools today, I aim, with this dissertation, to investigate how junior high school English teachers view the purpose of homework in the context of their teaching and their particular subject. I will do this by interviewing a group of six teachers at three separate schools. The reason for interviewing teachers from different schools was to, apart from learning about their approach to homework in general, gain insight into the policy on homework in each respective school.

1.3 Research questions

In this dissertation, my aim is to answer the following questions:

- What purpose and motive do junior high school English teachers have for assigning homework?
- Since there is no policy for homework in the present curriculum, how is this dealt with on the local level?
2 Literature review

The phenomenon of homework is very common in our schools and homework tends to take up a large part of a child’s daily life. As mentioned in the introduction, a comparison will be provided of how homework is treated in previous curriculum documents from Lgr 1962 to the most recent Lpo 94 in order to analyze similarities and differences over a period of time. In addition, I will examine how homework is defined in various reference sources and how the term is defined by researchers. This section will also include the opinions of various authors on the function and implementation of homework and the importance of motivation to the activity of homework. Finally, background and content to a debate in the media regarding whether or not homework is a good thing or not will be provided by reviewing articles.

2.1 What is homework?

Dictionaries and theoretical texts offer several explanations of how the term homework should be interpreted. According to the National Encyclopedia (1996), homework is a “defined school task to carry out at home” (p 333). The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) defines homework as “work that a student at school is asked to do at home” (p 780). In Uppslagsboken om grundskolan (1999), there is a reference to the term “home exercise” when you look up the word ”homework,” and this means that homework/home exercises are tasks that are assigned over a pupil’s entire school experience. Homework is given partly as a review of previously acquired knowledge and skills. It is also assigned for the purpose of attaining deeper knowledge of particular subject areas. Another over-riding aim of homework is to increase a pupil’s ability to take responsibility and work independently. Österlind (2001), a Swedish drama pedagogue and researcher, does not try to define what homework is or is not. She refers to “home tasks, home activities, homework as all school work which is conducted outside of school hours whether at home or another location” (p 27). Cooper (2001), an American professor in psychology, implies that homework is a task which is designed to be carried out after school hours but one which can be carried out during school hours during, for example, a free period. Westlund, a researcher in pedagogy and psychology, has, referring to pupils’ own experiences, formulated the
following definition of homework: “homework is a strange hybrid which exists in the area between school and home, task and time, work and play, individual and group” (Westlund 2004 p 78). Hellsten, a Swedish researcher of homework, defines homework in several ways. He says that “homework is schoolwork which is carried out outside of lesson period” (2000 p 120). He also points out that the definition is not enough since an important part of homework is also carried out in the classroom when the task is given out and when it is appraised and examined.

Hellsten (1997) describes six clear components of homework. He even adds a seventh aspect which is less obvious. In short, homework comprises of:

1. Preparation
   “Homework teaches pupils to take responsibility for their tasks and prepare for life after school. Homework prepares pupils for their next stage in life”.

2. Scheduling
   “Homework is a way to organize time. It is also a way for teachers to organize their lessons to include appraisal of homework and testing. Homework is also part of organizing one’s free time”.

3. Control and assessment
   “The teacher assesses work done by assigning tasks followed by appraisal and testing. This helps a teacher to monitor a pupil’s development”.

4. Love and care
   “Homework contributes to family members helping each other.”

5. Identity and status
   “Homework is a sign of a pupil’s identity and acknowledgement that a child is now “big enough” to take responsibility for one’s schoolwork. It also gives status to a particular subject. When a pupil gets homework to do in a particular subject, that subject gets more respect”.

6. Community and contact
   “Homework serves to improve communication between teacher and parents”.

7. Work performance
   Hellsten’s conclusion is that a pupil’s work done in school is not seen as a task carried out. What employer would demand that we should always bring work home?

The majority of the aforementioned definitions point to the fact that homework is a task that should be done outside of school hours. This, I believe, is the most common perception of
what homework is. It is also the definition I apply when using the term homework in this dissertation. At the same time, I must conclude that Hellsten’s (2000) interpretation of the term homework provides a more complete picture of the phenomenon of homework since homework is prepared and is worked on even during school hours and that it also covers aspects of life such as family and work performance.

2.2 Homework in the curriculum

Lgr 62 stated that “the majority of work assigned to a pupil at school should be carried out during school hours” (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1962, p 57). It was meant here that lesson periods should not be used excessively to appraise or test homework or to assign further homework tasks. During lessons, pupils should be given the opportunity of active learning. In the school curriculum, it also stated that homework is an important part of fostering a child’s work ethic since they “are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their work, organize their learning and manage time” (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1962, p 57). This was motivated by the fact that the amount of time a child spends at school is quite large and therefore most of the time outside school hours should be spent on recreation. The document also explained the importance of helping children to develop the ability to work independently and together with others, to plan and attain good study techniques. This working approach would mean that homework would play a lesser role. According to the curriculum: “homework should be more or less a voluntary exercise” (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969, p 71).

In Lgr 80, it stated “homework for pupils is an integral part of the working methodology of the school. To teach pupils to take responsibility for a task suited to their individual capabilities were an important part of character building which the school is responsible to provide” (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1980 p 50). It even pointed out that homework should be used to give pupils the opportunity for revision and practice, important methods of learning that serve to secure knowledge intake of knowledge and the learning of skills.

In the present curriculum, Curriculum for the Obligatory School System, Pre-school Class and After School Activity Centers (Swedish Department of Education, 1994), nothing is mentioned about homework or home assignments. This implies that it is up to each school to set up its own rules regarding homework (Elevrätt 1998). The book, Elevrätt (2003) there are
not any recommendations on how much homework should be done. However, it does say that homework is school work and school work should be evenly distributed each week and that school work should not have to be carried out during weekends. If students are given tasks that should be completed by a Monday, then time must be available before the end of the school week. If not, such tasks are unsuitable.

In the previous curriculum, there were guidelines regarding the issuing of homework tasks, whereas in the present curriculum, there are no regulating guidelines for the issuing of homework tasks. In fact, homework is not mentioned at all in the present curriculum Lpo 94. It is not the obligation of the school to issue homework but, despite this, homework is issued at present to pupils in almost all schools. Skolverket, on the other hand, does bring up the issue of homework in its comments on assessment and grading. Homework is compared with amongst other things absence. Skolverket makes clear that teachers may only assess and grade the students’ actual academic achievements, meaning that homework is not allowed to be used when setting the students’ final grades.

### 2.3 Media debate: homework

Peter Frost, a former headmaster in Strömsund, wrote the “Plague of Homework”, a debate article published in the Teacher’s Magazine (1999) a Web site dedicated to teachers and teaching. Peter Frost is very critical towards homework and calls it “an outdated and archaic phenomenon” in the world of education. He maintains that homework is unfair, out of date, irresponsible and serves to discriminate. He claims that is unjust because it takes up children’s free time and social life in an unnecessary manner. Some pupils need only a fraction of the time others need to complete their homework. It is also unfair because some pupils have more access to help and support with their homework than others. Furthermore, he states that homework is outdated because conditions in homes have changed. Parents work more and cannot be as available for their children as they could be in the past. Homework is irresponsible because it hands over the responsibility of collecting knowledge to each individual child. He goes on to say that homework discriminates because the amount of effort and the result of the homework task is not judged as a whole in combination with time spent on the task. Progress is usually marked by test results and pupils who answer correctly are favored. In the worst cases, children who fare less well in tests based on homework, get more
homework to do. Peter Frost concludes that many children suffer from the effects of homework: it causes much conflict in the home. He goes so far to imply that homework is a form of meticulously planned child abuse.

Rosanna Dinamarca, MP wrote in *Aftonbladet*, September 6, 2006 that homework does not fit into the concept of a modern society. According to her, homework comes from a time when mothers stayed at home but much has changed since then. Her view is that homework should be abolished since it is not feasible to expect that all parents have the competence and resources to help their children with various subjects and to instruct them in study technique. Those demands should only be placed on schools and teachers who design the exercises for the pupils. She also points out that school is a workplace where the same rules apply regarding work environment and conditions as apply in any other workplaces. Regulated working hours should apply in schools as they do elsewhere.

Jan Björklund, the minister of education in Sweden, wrote in *Aftonbladet* (June 2, 2006) that social divides within the school system have increased dramatically. One in three children coming from families with low education and low incomes do not reach the minimum educational standard in order to apply to high school. His point is that the Left Party’s proposal to abolish homework and grading, in order to increase equality, is totally wrong. These pupils gain nothing from a school system which places low or no demands on the children. “School should create challenges for those who are not presented challenges in their homes and it should put expectations on children who do not place expectations on themselves.” He goes on to say that through grading, assessment and homework, we can determine if the children attain the educational aims of the school. Those pupils who do not reach their goals are given the necessary assistance and support.

In *Teachers’ Magazine* (March 10, 2005), Ingrid Trädgård, who has worked as a teacher for many years, writes that she does not give homework in the real sense of the word. Instead, pupils work with that which they need to and under their own responsibility. She maintains that it is important to integrate the realities of daily life into school work. For example, to watch a particular TV program, take notes and be prepared to discuss the subject of the program in class. However, she understands that certain knowledge needs to be learnt through practice such as vocabulary and math tables. But these needs are individual and pupils are encouraged to take responsibility for their practice. As a result, pupils are more motivated
due to the fact that they are allowed more responsibility and influence over their education. She claims that it is of the utmost importance to view a child’s development in its entirety, not on what specific test and assessment results indicate. Methodology such as this renders homework useless. Ingrid Trädgård says “What is interesting is to see when and how children learn. And children learn all the time if they are not controlled in an unnecessary way, and I think homework is an unnecessary form of control”.

In conclusion, there is considerable disagreement in the present media debate. Opinions differ whether homework is necessary or if it is an archaic concept which creates injustice. In one of these articles homework is criticized harshly and it is even compared to systematic child abuse. Another article states that homework is absolutely necessary claiming that a school with no demands is not good for any pupil.

2.4 Why homework?

Research has shown that teachers feel that homework leads to increased self-responsibility, better self-confidence, and it results in better study habits. Teachers have also observed that many tasks given as homework send the message to parents that the education offered their child is of high quality. Homework is also used to get parents involved in their child's schoolwork (Westlund 2004). Steinberg (1986) is of the same opinion that homework is necessary if pupils are to achieve good study habits. He claims that homework should be given regularly. It is better with many smaller tasks than with fewer but more time-consuming tasks. By practicing more often and regularly, the subject matter can be successfully absorbed and remembered. Furthermore, he says that homework is a complement to the everyday school work that should help the pupil benefit more from what they have learned at school.

In interviews which Leo (2004) carried out with teachers about homework, the following was deduced: In order for pupils to achieve “flow” in their reading, it is necessary that they read at home during an intensive but limited period. If we teachers, on the other hand, increase the intensive reading periods, they will become monotonous and there is a risk that the opposite effect will occur. According to the teachers, homework is necessary in order to review and store factual information and review subjects they have covered in class. Pupils need to prepare for homework in the future, they need to learn how to do homework when they are young to be able to do homework when they are older and, in that way, achieve good study
habits. Homework is also given because there is not enough time to cover everything at school.

In his book, Westlund (2004) refers to other studies that have been carried out on how pupils perceive homework and the benefits it may bring to them. Younger pupils could not understand the connection between homework and the ability to plan one’s time and learn good study habits. Their understanding was that the purpose of homework was to learn through repetition. He goes on to say that another purpose of homework is to satisfy parents and teachers. Tasks are carried out in order to receive praise or avoid punishment. Pupils also maintained that if they did homework with friends, it was more fun and they learned more.

To summarize, teachers often see homework as necessary to increase pupils’ knowledge and their sense of responsibility. Many pupils, however, are not aware of the benefits of or the reason for having homework.

2.5 Research on the benefits of homework

There is quite a lot of research carried out on the Swedish school system but very little focus has been put on the subject of pupils’ homework. The research on homework that does exist and is described in publications is focused on the effects of homework. The questions asked, based on the theory that homework is beneficial, are about pupils’ increased performance, how much time should be dedicated to homework and what role parents play in their children’s home studies. Little attention was paid to the content of the tasks, their character, what is demanded of the pupils and the suitability of the various subject areas as homework. Some research results that have been published in Sweden and internationally, have proved inconsistent and have been questioned by other researchers (Österlind 2001). Pedagogy professor Ebbe Lindell was given the task of compiling 30 years of research on homework by the Swedish School Authorities. The results were published in his book Homework – home study activities and their effects (Lindell 1990). From the Swedish research on the effects of homework, Lindell could not provide any evidence that homework increases pupils’ performance at school. At the same time, he confirmed that the amount of research findings was insufficient and concluded that, in many cases, the surveys were lacking in quality. In saying this, he doubted the reliability of the survey results. Lindell mentioned international studies on the pedagogical advantages of homework. These studies had shown that “... if
Homework is assigned but not assessed afterwards, the average performance of pupils increases” (Lindell 1990 p 26). However, if the homework assignments are assessed and critiqued, the pupils’ performance is even greater. This is seen to be one of the most marked effects of homework shown in pedagogic research.

Homework can be assigned in several ways. Research has shown that the most effective way is to assign homework daily. In the USA, more research has been carried out than in other countries. In his book, The Battle over Homework (2001), Harris Cooper summarizes 120 studies on homework. Seventeen of these studies consider whether homework has any effect on the overall performance of pupils. His results show that the effect on younger children is minimal, a fact that Cooper attributes to younger children finding it difficult to study for long periods. Younger children also tend to lack study skills and are unable to test themselves to determine if the homework has produced results. Studies carried out on older children show that homework has a greater effect on their ability to learn but that ability varies depending on the subject. For example, in math, the difference in performance between those who had done their homework and those who had not, was very little, while greater differences could be seen in subjects in the areas of social science and language. The latter areas are areas that demand more factual and repetitive learning on the part of the pupil. Cooper believes that it is better to give a greater amount of shorter assignments than fewer longer assignments. Cooper also looked at whether homework assigned on an individual basis produced better results but found no evidence of that. He also stated that the time that a teacher spends in preparing and assessing homework could be better used in planning and conducting classroom activities. Leo (2004) comments on why research on homework in the USA has shown greater differences between younger and older pupils. The explanation, according to Leo, is that teenagers have more experience in studying and that their learning capacity is greater leading to better results. They have the tools in the form of study habits, the knowledge to feel more motivated and a greater capacity to remember and store information. According to Leo, these results can be applied to Swedish pupils.

2.6 Homework: time and stress

Jan-Olof Hellsten, a Swedish researcher who has worked as a teacher and headmaster wrote Homework is Nothing to Talk About (Hellsten 1997). He is critical of some of the research carried out on homework so far. He claims that there is nothing wrong with homework and
that most of the research has been centered on the most suitable and the most effective amounts of homework to assign. He also says that homework is treated more as a ritual in schools than as an effective study tool. In his thesis, *School as Child Labor and a Development Project* (2000), Hellsten has focused on the working environment for elementary school pupils. He points out that in most workplaces the working environment is an important part of working life and the pupil’s workplace, school, is no exception. He claims the following are the working pressures on pupils: physical (sitting most of the time), psychological pressure resulting from mental concentration, time pressure, extra effort and anxiety about exams, and homework assessment. In most research attention has not been paid to these pressures, even though homework is often said to be a major source of stress when pupils assess their school situation.

A Swedish Children’s Ombudsman report from 2003, *Children and Adolescents Talk about Stress*, indicates that school is a major stress factor for up to 77% of the children between the ages 9 and 16 years. Looking at the reason for that stress, we see that 47% of the children feel they get too much homework. Swedish studies and research have been carried out to determine how much time Swedish children dedicate to homework every day. Results show that junior high school level pupils spend roughly 1 hour per day doing homework (Westlund 2004). In a research project where school researcher Ingrid Westlund studied pupils’ compositions about how they experienced school, it was found that many pupils wrote about homework. This led to her later study “*Homework - the Time and the Task*” (2004). In her publication, she explains how many pupils feel that homework takes up a lot of time that would otherwise be spent with friends and on their hobbies, sports and other interests. Pupils often experience stress and use much of their leisure time on weekends doing homework instead of things that are more “fun”. Many pupils also experience that they do not have time because individual teachers assign homework in their subjects without considering tests and homework tasks assigned by teachers of other subjects to be completed by the same day or week.

Hellsten (2005) says that many teachers have a clear perception of how long their assignments should take to complete. But an assignment that can be completed in a short time by some pupils can take more time and effort for others. Hellsten also says that many pupils have no clear perception of how much time is feasible to dedicate to an assignment and therefore have
difficulty prioritizing and allocating time to each assignment. This means that, for an average ambitious pupil, an assignment can take an unpredictable length of time to complete. Leo, in his study *Homework is and Remains Schoolwork*, concludes that many pupils experience homework as stressful: “Taking in so much factual information is very stressful. Having homework to do is stressful and not having it done is stressful” (Leo 2004 p 49). However, though pupils generally experience homework as stressful, many think it should exist. In his interviews, Leo has learned from the younger pupils that homework contributes very much to their learning. The older pupils say that if there was no homework, there would be chaos in class. Without homework assignments to show what we can do, “we would all be talking and acting up to get attention from our teachers” (Leo 2004 p 54). They also state that it is the in-class tests that are the worst part and they would rather have more short homework assignments than many in-class tests. Leo also mentions that, in some cases, homework can be used as a form of threat and punishment. When pupils are not active enough in class assignments, they can be given as homework. Whether this is a good or bad teaching method is a subject for discussion. What can be done when pupils get nothing done in school? He points out that it is not easy for teachers in the schools of today but that there should be a better way to set pupils on the right path than to punish them with extra homework assignments.

### 2.7 Homework and the home environment

Lindell sees homework as something positive which improves contact between children, parents and teachers. But he also says that the effects of homework depend on how much help the pupils receive at home. “It cannot be a good work situation to sit with a homework assignment which you cannot complete and have no one to ask for help” (Lindell 1990 p 22). Cooper (2001) claims that there are pros and cons with parents’ participation in their children’s homework. For the most part, this is due to how much time parents have to help their children with homework. It also depends on how educated the parents themselves are. He maintains that it is a case of having the “right parents” who provide support, encourage their children to work independently, solve problems, show the children how to seek out alternatives and install a framework within which homework can be approached. His opinion is that sometimes there are parents who in various ways make homework more difficult for children and therefore he warns teachers against assigning homework to children who require
help from their parents. According to Steinberg (1986), there is a clear connection between successful study results and parents who encourage their children. Schools can obtain sufficient help from parents if they provide them with sufficient information regarding how they can support their children with their homework. He states that most parents are interested and want to help, but are not clear about how they can help or what they can help with. To summarize, research on homework has been focused on various areas but has remained centered on whether pupils learn more or perform better as a result of having homework. Research also studies the pressures that homework puts on pupils, if homework contributes to stress and whether parents influence pupils’ motivation and success with their homework.

2.8 Homework: memory/motivation

Many homework assignments are based on reviewing what has been done in the classroom. To remember things, it is beneficial to associate what is being learned to what is already known. If homework is based on things that people have already mastered, it is easier to store knowledge in one’s memory. Therefore, it is important that homework is prepared carefully in school and that the teacher makes sure that the pupils understand completely what is to be learned. Homework that is not carefully prepared and meaningful is difficult for pupils to remember. Leo (2005) states that much more attention needs to given to this area. Leo also maintains that assignments which are not too difficult provide better motivation and pupils feel motivated if they can manage an assignment and the risk of failure is small. If the assignment is too simple, it is not as motivating. If it is too difficult, there is a risk that the pupil gives up before they have started. Success is seen as a major motivating factor.

Lindqvist (1999) points out that people’s memory was previously perceived as having the same level of functionality in every individual, but today we talk about different types of memory, e.g. visual, audio and kinetic memory. For most people, one or another is most dominant. Normally, two memory types function well together without hindering each other in any way. It is important that the teacher uses different methods to help pupils learn and remember: the more, the better. Lindqvist mentions also that interest is a very important component if one is to remember something.
Steinberg (1986) talks about how important it is that teachers and parents motivate children to study. He suggests that encouragement is everything. It is important to explain the benefit of what is being learned so that the child understands that homework leads to learning which will be useful later on in life. If parents and teachers are enthusiastic and positive, they help the children to feel positive about their own homework. Students need to see the connection between repetition and progress, to set goals and to have expectations. He also claims that interest plays an important role in acquiring knowledge. In this he proposes that children who read entertaining and meaningful texts are more inspired to further develop their reading skills.

Imsen (2000) talks about internal and external motivation. Internal motivation is when you do something because it is fun and it benefits you. You are motivated and feel that what you are doing is meaningful. External motivation is an influence that directs action. It can, for example, be rewards in the form of good grades, admiration from others or praise. To conclude, motivation and desire are very important for all learning. One of a teacher’s most important tasks is to awaken pupils’ interest and inspire them to want to learn. We can also refer to the Lpo 94 curriculum and see that curiosity, investigation and interest should be the foundation for all teaching.

2.9 A school without homework

Hellsten (2005) talks about schools that have cut back on or completely removed homework. He says it is too early to be certain what the long-term effects will be, but that study results do not seem to be affected in a negative manner. Research shows that in regard to adults’ performance at the work place, there are clear signs that when stress decreases, performance increases. Parents say that their children became more open and happier, and there are fewer conflicts in the home since homework has been taken out of their lives. Hellsten also says that there would be less stress in school and at home if we had a homework-free school. It is possible to have a school without homework but political measures are needed to make this happen. We would need more teachers and smaller classes. Time spent in class would increase so that pupils could complete their work in school. That, in turn would give all the pupils access to the same amount of professional help. It would also be of help to pupils from homes without a learning culture. Curricula need to be adjusted to suit the time available. This
would result in a focus on quality instead of quantity. Hellsten adds that we are adding things to the curriculum without removing anything.

Leo (2004) reaches the conclusion in his thesis that all education should take place in school. He says that any learning that takes place in the home should be by desire and interest and that there should not be demands from teachers for presentations of work done. Then it is not homework. Reading and reading comprehension are examples of this. He points out that reading is so important that as much effort as possible should be made at school and at home to stimulate and inspire pupils to read and to make reading a positive experience. If pupils are used to different types of reading, they will be better prepared for the greater demands that will be placed on them in the later stages of their education. In his thesis, he points out that the purpose of a homework assignment should be made very clear as well as how it should be carried out, and the requirements for the pupils, their parents and the teacher in the completion of the assignment.

To conclude, both Hellsten and Leo write in support of a school without homework where all teaching and learning take place in the classroom. But for this to happen, schools will need more resources than are available today: more teachers, smaller classes, etc. Leo also says that some parts of a pupil’s learning should also take place in the home so that pupils get the necessary training, for example in reading. Leo maintains that as long as homework remains part of day-to-day schoolwork, there should be formal guidelines explaining how and why homework is to be used.

2.10 Summary of source findings

In reviewing the literature on this subject, I have used dictionaries and literature that explained various definitions of the concept of homework. What the majority of these sources had in common was that they describe homework as a task carried out outside of normal school hours. The findings presented have had different areas of focus, e.g. if pupils learn more or perform better as a direct result of homework; what pressures are brought to bear on the pupils; and if homework leads to increased stress; how does parent involvement affect pupils’ motivation to work and succeed with their homework tasks. In these investigations, one can see that opinions regarding the benefits and uses of homework vary. Even in the
current media debate on whether or not homework should be a part of schoolwork, experts are not in agreement. Opinions vary whether homework is necessary or is an archaic and outdated part of the school system that causes injustice.

To conclude, I have looked at government documentation from Lgr 62 to the present curriculum Lgr 94 and what is presented on the subject of homework. What one can see is that in the earlier curriculum there were clearer guidelines as to the purpose of homework and how it should be used in teaching. In the present curriculum, homework is not mentioned at all.
3. Method

3.1 Method and process

I chose to use semi-structured qualitative interviews to carry out my investigation. Hatch explains that “formal interviews are sometimes called structured, semi-structured, or in-depth interviews” (Hatch 2002 p 94). I thought this method most suitable because it would then be possible to put follow up questions to those teachers I chose to interview; and in that way learn as much as possible about the teachers’ views on the purpose of homework. According to Johansson and Svedner (2001), qualitative interviews provide a more all-encompassing answer to the issue being investigated by the interviewer. In these interviews, questions were limited to an agreed area of discussion, and the questions were generally what are termed “open questions”. The aim was to get the interviewees to express their opinions on a subject. Hatch (2002) explains that the qualitative interview can be like an everyday conversation with the difference being that the interviewer keeps the focus on the subject in question. I put the same questions to all the teachers interviewed, but the follow-up questions were not always the same, depending on how the conversation progressed. I contacted the teachers to be interviewed by phone. I explained the purpose of the interview, told them roughly how long it would take and what questions would be asked. All the teachers were agreeable to the idea, and we agreed on dates, times and locations for the interviews. Some of the teachers wanted to receive the questions before the interview in order to reflect on the questions in their own time. As a result, I sent all the questions to all the teachers in advance of the interviews.

The main questions were:

- How would you describe your attitude toward homework in general?
- How do you set homework? What are the thoughts behind each task? How do you prepare and motivate your pupils? Do you assess the homework you set?
- What do you see as the role and purpose of homework?
- Is there a homework policy at the school where you work? Is the subject discussed?
- Instead of setting homework, would you consider the possibility of an extended workday?
• How do you view homework as a tool for learning English?

Before the interviews were carried out, I did a test interview with one of my colleagues to check if my questions were put in a suitable way in order to provide clear and complete answers to my main questions. The answers in the test interview gave satisfactory results. Therefore, I let them remain as they were. All the interviews were conducted in private in different environments: work study rooms, classrooms, or at the teachers’ homes. The interviewees decided themselves which location suited them best. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder, and all the interviewees agreed to allow themselves to be recorded. I chose to use a tape recorder in order to be able to keep my attention on the answers I was getting and to be able to take part in the conversation myself without the risk of missing important information during the interview. The recordings also gave me the opportunity to listen to the interviews several times and to retrieve as much as possible from them (Hatch 2002). The recordings were useful in compiling my results.

My supervisors recommended that I ask the interviewees how they understand the students’ perceptions of the role and purpose of homework and what teachers do in order to individualize homework thereby taking different learners’ needs into account. This aspect was not specifically covered in the interviews. Therefore, a follow-up question dealing with this issue was sent to the six teachers interviewed via email approximately two weeks after the initial interviews. In the emails, the teachers were also provided the opportunity to adjust or add to any of the matters discussed in the interviews, which they did not.

3.2 Selection

I chose to conduct my study with six teachers of English who teach at the junior high school level. The gender of the teachers was not of importance. Initially, my idea was to interview two teachers each from three different schools. The reason for interviewing teachers from different schools was to, apart from learning about their approach to homework in general, gain insight into the policy on homework in each respective school. My first action was to contact the principals of three junior high schools in southern Sweden and explained the purpose of my work. I asked if there might be interest and the possibility of interviewing some of their teachers on the subject of homework. At one school, the head teacher explained
that their teachers had recently taken part in several research projects and surveys and that they had neither time nor energy for more. At the other schools, the head teachers asked their staff if there were any who were prepared to take part in my research and interviews. The result was that I was allowed to interview two teachers from one school and four teachers from another school.

3.3 Ethical aspects

According to Johansson & Svedner, we can gain the interviewees’ respect and their confidence if we follow the ethical guidelines of research laid down in *Thesis in Teacher Training* (2004). The teachers taking part in the investigation received information about ethical rules that are a basis for my work, i.e., that no outside parties may examine the material, that the material (recordings and notes) will be destroyed when the results are compiled, that they may ask questions at any time or discontinue their participation if they wish and that their anonymity will be guaranteed. The teachers were also promised a copy of the final results of the investigation: “The participants should also be sure that their anonymity is protected, in the final report, it should not be possible to identify school, teacher or pupil” (Johansson & Svedner 2004 p 24).

3.4 Discussions on Methods

Will my investigation give a true picture of how teachers view homework and their attitudes toward the use of homework in their work? I believe that the credibility of my results will be at a high level. This is due the fact that the interviews will be conducted in the same manner by the same person, and the interviewed teachers were asked the same questions. These are criteria that lead to a high-level of credibility in interviews according to Johansson and Svedner (2001). From the fact that the results of my investigation will be based on interviews with only a few teachers at junior high school level, one can discuss whether results can be generalized to apply to most teachers. In order to get the views of teachers in general, many more interviews, i.e. qualitative methods similar to the ones used in national surveys, would have to be conducted. The qualitative interview, like other data-gathering methods, has its strengths and weaknesses, this technique is an instrument and its value depends on its
pertinence to the research questions. Its strengths and weaknesses are dependent on the expertise of the researcher who uses this tool to elicit information.

I chose qualitative interviews with a low degree of structure when I carried out my investigation with six teachers at junior high school level (grade 6 – 9). I am satisfied with my chosen method and believe that I received a good response, was well met, and received spontaneous and honest answers to my questions from the interviewees. I also think that the method worked well because I had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions during the interviews. This led to the interviews becoming conversations about homework where follow-up questions and time-lengths were not always the same in the various interviews. I also believe that it was beneficial to use a tape recorder during the interviews. I could concentrate on the interviewed teachers’ answers without the risk of missing important input; this probably would have happened had I been taking notes during the interviews. It also gave me the opportunity to listen to the interviews over and over again when it was time to transcribe. I am aware that not many interviews were carried out and that I cannot draw general conclusions from my investigation. Furthermore, there is a latent risk using interviews as a research method (Johansson and Svedner 2006). The interviewer may inadvertently affect the answers by unknowingly expressing the expectations and values. Another weakness in the investigation is that we are only given the views of teachers. Asking deputy heads and doing student surveys would have provided more in-depth information and triangulation.
4. Results

4.1 Analysis and Results of Interviews

I have chosen to present the results of my investigation of six junior high school teachers of English in a running text, including quotes from the interviewees. I have compiled the answers I received in the interviews and am presenting them under the following headings:

- Attitudes and thoughts on the function of homework
- Working with homework
- Homework policy
- Follow-up questions

In the results, I have tried to categorize the teachers’ answers and point out similarities and differences in the views of teachers and why and how they use homework in their teaching. As background information, here is a short presentation of the teachers interviewed on the subject. The names below are fictitious.

**Name, teaching experience**

James, 18 years
Per, 27 years
Martin, 10 years
Elin, 4 years
Julia, 35 years
Maria, 8 years

4.2 Attitudes and Thoughts on the Function of Homework

All the teachers used homework in one form or another in their teaching. Some of the teachers said that they did not set “traditional” homework assignments from one day to the next followed by assessment. Instead, they spoke about homework as a contract. What they meant by this was that either certain sections of the workbook were to be completed by a certain date or that a project was to be completed by a certain date. In these cases, it was up to the student to decide when he or she would do the work. Two of the teachers state that homework is
absolutely necessary, partly as a form of learning and also because it helps the pupils to
develop their own self-discipline. One of the teachers even pointed out that he would like to
set even more homework than they do today. “I can sometimes think there is too little
homework. I think it is better to set many but shorter tasks than to set tasks needing much
work and many hours. If homework tasks are too great, it can feel overwhelming and difficult
to take in for the pupils” (James). All the teachers wanted to point out that they do not set
assignments for the sake of giving homework, but that the purpose of homework is that the
pupils learn to take responsibility, plan their work, organize their school work, and develop
good study technique. One teacher put it this way: “homework is not there to put unnecessary
pressure on the pupils. People have the impression that homework is some kind of punishment
or that it is for the teacher’s or the parents’ sake that homework assignments are set. For me,
homework is a way for the pupil to develop an independent approach to learning. I would like
to interpret homework as a form of study technique” (Per). One of the teachers said that pupils
in general need more practice in reading, partly to prepare themselves for future study
challenges in high school and partly because they feel that children and youths simply read
too little these days.

The teachers felt that homework is also needed to give pupils the chance to review what they
have covered in class. As with all learning, it is necessary to secure knowledge in order to
achieve good study results. The teachers stated that a lot of repetition is necessary in order to
best learn a language. The time necessary for this is not available during school hours. The
fact that there is not enough time available during school hours for pupils is another argument
as to why they use homework in their teaching. Some of the teachers claimed that they used
homework to build the students’ planning abilities. This way of working involves the pupils
themselves in planning and taking responsibility for certain tasks within a certain time frame.
It is not always possible for all pupils to complete their tasks at school, so it is necessary for
them to put some time into them at home or to devote more time to practicing. Another
advantage of homework is that the pupils can have control over their own time and decide
when they will do their homework or as one teacher put it, “since pupils have interests which
they pursue in their free time, I think they should be able to plan their time as they wish”
(Julia).

Several of the teachers agreed that many pupils, in particular those in junior high, are not
mature enough and find it difficult to plan their own studies in a satisfactory way. They need a
lot of help and practice. One of the teachers said that some pupils are just not up to longer contracts but want to know what they should do for homework and when they should do it. The teachers also said that pupils who are used to getting homework in previous schools are more used to planning their own work and taking responsibility than those who get little or no homework. They claim that this difference is also reflected in their level of knowledge. One teacher said, “At the moment, I have three different English groups of which two are used to homework. These groups find it easier to work and reach their goals, but the other group does not. The group finding it difficult to work and reach their goals comprises of those who had little or no homework while in mid-level elementary school. They are not as advanced in their knowledge of the subject which means that I have to help them with things they should have covered at mid-level” (Maria).

Homework is often used as a preparatory measure. This means that homework gives time for the pupils to prepare themselves in their own time for upcoming learning tasks. Homework is also seen as important since it helps pupils gain a pre-understanding of upcoming lessons. “I don’t always assess the homework but instead discuss the subject in depth with the pupils. Sometimes, for example, I would have the pupils read a few pages of a book and expect that they understand and when we discuss the material in class that they participate in the discussions” (Elin).

It also became clear that homework is necessary in order for pupils to attain good results on tests. Pupils who have not prepared and read through the required material often attain less than average results on tests. Homework is also a way for parents to gain insight into their children’s schoolwork. Many parents are interested and enjoy knowing what their children are working on at school. They say that it is through homework that they can keep up with what is happening in the classroom. However, some of the teachers thought that it was not always positive especially with parents who are too involved and helpful. One stated that, “Results from homework can not be the sole basis for grading because you are never sure that it is the pupil who has done the work” (Julia).

One disadvantage with homework that the teachers pointed out was that it interfered with the pupils’ leisure time activities. The pupils need time to relax and do fun things after school if they are to manage their studies in the long term. But these days, many children have too much of their time booked for organized activities. This results in many pupils feeling
stressed because they do not have proper time to prepare for tests or do homework. The teachers explain that it is not the schools’ fault but that pupils should prioritize and plan their time better. “Often, it is the school that gets the blame for pupils’ stress though it is not really clear if it is their schoolwork which is causing their stress. They are involved in lots of time-consuming activities and things to do, for example, online chat, computer games and lots of other things” (Per). One of the teachers pointed out that there are some pupils who do not need the extra burden that homework presents. Some pupils are already struggling with their schoolwork as a whole. They have to put a lot of time into their homework, and it can be a major struggle for them. She states that it is very important that this is taken into consideration when homework is set. Several of the other teachers are also aware of this and adapt the homework tasks to suit the individual where necessary. One example given was that instead of having 20 vocabulary words a student might have 10.

To conclude, all the teachers use homework in their teaching. Homework, according to the teachers, provides a chance for review, develops pupils’ sense of responsibility and improves study technique. It can also be used as a base for future classroom discussions.

4.3 The Activity of Homework

One teacher went about giving homework in this manner: homework is set for once or twice a week, usually one large task, such as a writing assignment and one smaller one, such as vocabulary training or reading and understanding a short text. All the teachers emphasized that they do not set tasks for which the pupils are not prepared. All work set as homework has been covered in class. Another teacher claimed that he set homework in the form of a contract, that is to say, setting a certain number of tasks to be completed in a certain time. There are even home assignments in each chapter of the English book. They should be completed and handed in to the teacher. “We have a plan laid out so that the pupils know how much they should cover in a certain time. If they are not up to speed, it is suitable that they do some of the tasks at home” (Martin).

Another teacher said she used homework in her teaching in a slightly different manner. Sometimes, she applied a contract by setting a theme-based task to be completed in by certain time. Another way of giving homework is that pupils are set to read a few pages in their book
or study their notes on subject areas they have covered in school. These assignments are then assessed in class verbally or are written. Sometimes the teacher may give a pop “do you remember” quiz based on a home reading assignment. Another way of testing is to have pupils discuss something they have read or a film or TV show they have seen. One of the teachers said that she gave her pupils a plan of what they would be covering and what they should be expected to learn during the term. For seventh grade pupils, the homework assignments are scheduled once a week and are assessed in the “old fashioned way”. In the higher grades, the pupils take responsibility for when and how the assignments are carried out. In the schedule that each pupil has, they fill in what they have covered in each lesson. They also write which assignments they have carried out at home. In some cases, the teacher must step in with guidance and encouragement and help the pupils plan their work so that they do not leave too much to be done at the end of a project. The teachers also said that pupils who have not completed their homework tasks in time do not get time in class to complete them. The tasks must be completed at home.

One of the teachers was not at all positive about working under contract. He stated that this way of working generally benefits the motivated pupils. Getting a certain amount of pages to read and to work independently does not suit all pupils. Pupils absorb information in different ways. Some learn better by listening. If the teacher is well-informed on a subject and gives inspiring and interesting lessons, pupils will become more interested and learn more.

“If I, for example, have a test with questions from books we have worked with or things we have discussed in class, I often observe that pupils who, in other situations, are “weaker” get the answers right when it comes to things we have discussed in class” (James). All the teachers follow up on homework assignments in one way or another. The teachers make notes of the results of completed assignments. This can be part of the foundation for grade setting and teacher/pupil development meetings. “I follow up homework assignments and other work done very accurately and always give comments. Response is everything. Pupils always want their work to be acknowledged. If pupils are expected to carry out tasks without being acknowledged, it is no fun. It is also a way to see the development of each pupil close up” (Maria). Another put it this way, “I take in the assignments, correct them, and copy some of them. Then we go through them together using an overhead projector. The rest of the pupils get a chance to give their input or ask questions about word use and grammar. They become more involved and learn better study techniques.” (Per). And one expressed it in this manner:”When grades are being set, and pupil development meetings are coming up, I look
at, among other things, how they have fared with their homework assignments. For each pupil, I have a homework log. In this, I can see if a pupil needs more practice in one or another area” (Martin).

One of the teachers says that he always sets easy tasks in the beginning. This way, the pupils’ self confidence increases and they become more motivated to study. The teachers also try to make the pupils aware that the more they concentrate during class lessons, the easier it will be for them to manage their homework. A couple of the teachers made the point that their own attitude and approach is of great importance. It is their responsibility to make the homework tasks fun, exciting and interesting.

To conclude, it became clear that homework is given regularly by English teachers. In many cases, contractual homework is set, i.e., the pupils are, under their own responsibility, to carry out defined tasks in a defined time frame. The teachers felt that it was important to prepare and follow up each homework assignment and that they should work hard to motivate the pupils before setting a task.

4.4 Policy of Homework

Discussions where the entire staff of a school discuss homework have taken place on a few occasions at one of the schools but discussions like this are most often had by smaller groups of teachers. One of the teachers points out that the discussions are less about homework in general but more about individual situations. For example, it can be about a particular pupil who is not doing his homework or performing well in class. At the one school, language teachers said that they meet with their language teacher colleagues and discuss how the whole term will look for their part. They are agreed that roughly two homework tasks per week are enough for languages. In the other school, opinions vary as to how much homework should be set and therefore they do not follow a plan. Each teacher makes their own decision there. However, all the teachers are agreed that teachers should communicate with each other in order to avoid situations where pupils get too much homework to do at the same time. That is to say that they confer with the other subjects so as to not overload the students. This is sometimes done by several teachers providing information, on a board or in a binder, about what tests they have planned and when. In this way, they try to get an even spread of
homework for the pupils. In one school, a teacher mentions that pupils should not have more than three tests per week. All the teachers agree that it is difficult to avoid situations where testing in different subjects can collide from time to time. This is due to the fact that theme reading periods for different subjects are usually around the same time period of a term. The reading periods often end with some sort of test or presentation.

“It is difficult to avoid situations where tests are carried out in different subjects at the same time. Theme periods are normally one to two months. It is not right to test pupils on subject areas too great to manage. In mid term, we set preliminary grades and there is always much activity at that time. At the end of term, we set final grades. It is nearly impossible to avoid periods of intense testing of pupils. This is something we discuss very much” (Julia). Another teacher puts it like this: “There is no written agreement as to how much homework is given in each subject but we all work in pretty much the same way” (Martin). When we discuss longer school days, the teachers are agreed that the pupils’ working days are already long enough and they could not manage more time at school. One teacher also says that all pupils learn in so many different ways. Some need to work at home in peace and quiet; others need to read loud in order to learn something, while another pupil needs someone to read aloud for them etc. It is difficult for many pupils to find situations at school where they can learn without being disturbed. At both schools, help with homework was available. One homework help period was outside of school hours. It was about 2-3 hours spread over two days. At one of the schools, the project has just started up but the response was not as they expected it to be. Few pupils have chosen to use the service as of yet. “We believe in this because we know that there are many pupils whom we know do not get so much help at home. We hope that the pupils take advantage of the service. The project is, as said, in its early stages” (Carol).

Another teacher thinks that help with homework is good, but also says: “Study hall helps but doesn’t work so well because it is scheduled outside of school hours and pupils prefer to go home. Unfortunately, it won’t work unless it is scheduled to be available during school hours” (Maria).

The pupils in both schools have also had the possibility of one scheduled period per week which they call pupil’s choice, where they can work with tasks they need to complete. In these periods, pupils can also work with their homework. According to the teachers, these periods work very well and many pupils choose to work with their homework there.
The conclusion is that none of the schools have a direct homework policy or activity plan. The teachers try as much as possible not to overload pupils with too much homework and tests at the same time. All the teachers are positive towards the idea of help at school with homework but they point out that help with homework should be scheduled during school hours if it is to work.

**4.5 Summary of Interview Results**

This study shows that all the teachers use homework in their teaching but in different ways. Some of the teachers do not want to call it homework in the traditional sense of the word but that it is part of a contractual way of working with learning. Some teachers set homework regularly. They are however in agreement that in order for pupils to learn a subject like English, homework is necessary because language demands so much repetition. All the teachers agree that homework is an exercise in repetition and is designed to help the pupils to learn. It is also clear that homework helps to develop a sense of responsibility and good study technique, i.e. help pupils plan their time and independently carry out their tasks. Homework contributes to pupils being better able to perform in tests and in assessment situations.

A negative aspect of homework is that homework at times takes up much of the pupils’ free time and makes them feel very stressed. Teachers believe that it is not the schools’ fault that pupils are stressed and say that pupils often have too many outside activities and therefore have little time left for their school work. None of the teachers believe that longer school days would be a suitable way to make homework more effective. However, all agreed that schools should offer homework help for those who need it, in particular those who get little help at home. Homework help that is now offered functions best when it is scheduled during school hours. In general, schools do not have a homework policy or process that describes homework or what it should entail. Nor is it common that homework is discussed widely by all staff members at any school. These discussions are more common in smaller teacher teams.

**4.7 Follow-up questions**

After conversing with my supervisors, I decided to do a follow up interview where the question was posed how the interviewees understand the students’ perceptions of the role and
purpose of homework. All of the teachers expressed, in what I interpreted to be a joke, that their students believed that homework was given to plague the students’ lives. Although this answer was given in jest, I predict that there is some truth in this perception since all of the teachers responded in this manner. Epstein, director of the Centre on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University identified 10 purposes of homework: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child relations, parent-teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, and public relations. The 10th purpose is punishment (Epstein, 2001).

Julia wrote: "I would think the majority think we give homework because it's what you do in school, it's the norm. I doubt if they realize that it's got anything to do with learning. Actually I don't think they reflect on it at all. It's just how it is". This statement made it apparent that students should be informed the purposes of homework. Martin stated that he tries “to motivate the pupils and make them aware of why they should do homework, which is for their own sakes and that it is a study technique which will help them learn and reach their goals”.

An interesting view on this matter was given by Maria:”I believe that some of the students actually understand that they are given homework in order to learn more. On the other hand, some students probably believe that they are given homework because that is what one does in school. I discuss the reasons for homework with my students but that which is discussed is not always understood nor accepted by all.”

When asked what teachers do in order to individualize homework thereby taking different learners’ needs into account all the teachers say that they inform the students of what they need to work on but do not assign individual tasks due to the lack of time. They also inform the students’ parents during teacher-parent conferences of what the student needs to practice more. Although they do not give individual assignments, they do offer the students extra tasks dealing with the area they need to develop but do not offer to correct these tasks. On the other hand, the student can correct the tasks on their own since there is a key to these exercises but considering that speaking and listening cannot be corrected with a key, it would seem that teachers do not offer extra speaking or listening assignments.

How they dealt with learner preferences was only answered by James who wrote: “In the classroom we use various learner techniques. We use the standards of course, but also drama,
games and other activities. When it comes to homework, I do not do anything in regards to learner preferences.”
5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Discussion

I believe I have gathered some valuable information about the status of discussions concerning homework. It has been very interesting for me to interview the teachers, learn their views, and to read the literature and articles written on the subject. The investigation shows that teachers interviewed here are positive towards homework and use it as part of their teaching. Where opinions differ is that some of the teachers do not see contractual homework as a home assignment. I would argue, however, that these assignments are homework. Assignments that must be done outside of the lesson time and under the pupil’s own responsibility are in my opinion homework. I have also discovered that there has been very little research done in Sweden on homework despite the fact that homework is seen as a natural part of a pupil’s school life. Therefore, it is difficult to find unanimous or credible single answers to my questions about the positive or negative effects of homework. This is due to the fact that even the researchers are not agreed on the subject.

One of the conclusions I can draw from the results of the interviews with teachers is that the opportunity for review is one of the strongest arguments for using homework. Revision, according to teachers, is a necessary part of the learning process. This opinion is also held by Hellsten (1997) and Leo (2004). Here I can only agree. Certain knowledge, such as vocabulary and oral skills, needs to be practiced and in these cases, there is definitely not enough time at school. The same applies to reading and reading comprehension. In this area students need many opportunities to practice. Practice in reading is something that pupils cannot succeed with if they only study at school. They must use some of their time outside of school hours to develop their reading skills. One of the teachers said that some junior high school pupils lack so much in their reading skills that they will have difficulties reaching their goals. Leo (2004) also repeated this when he said that reading is so important that much time must be used at school as well as at home to help pupils with their reading.

Another strong reason to continue with homework, according to teachers, is to teach pupils to bear their own responsibility. This is an aspect of learning that they need to develop if they
are to succeed in higher levels of education and in their future professions. Westlund (2004) also shows in his research where the teachers are agreed. In his research, it is apparent that the advantages of homework include improved self-confidence, responsibility and study technique. I believe that, if pupils are to improve in these areas, they need opportunities to practice where they can take responsibility for their work and where the demands are slowly increased. How mature a pupil is for these tasks is something a teacher should consider carefully when homework assignments are set. Hellsten (2005) says that most people need practice, when developing self-discipline, in managing their work tasks and defining the borders between work and leisure time. He is, however, critical because young people are often “left in the lurch” and expected to learn things that many adults would have difficulty learning. Whether homework improves pupils’ self confidence or not is a subject for discussion. Much depends on the nature and content of the homework task in question. Here I believe that, as a teacher, one must know one’s pupils very well. Some pupils receive more help in the home than others, and the capability to learn and absorb information varies from pupil to pupil. One “wrongly set” homework task can in some cases have the opposite effect than was meant. Instead of developing the pupil’s knowledge, it can hinder the pupil who, in turn may lose motivation and, in the worst case, give up the task.

The question is whether homework should be more individually adapted than it is today. Cooper (2001) says that individually adapted homework tasks would not improve pupils’ results. The time that the teacher would have to devote to preparation and assessment of individually adapted homework assignments would be better spent on planning and executing lessons in class. It was also noted in my investigation that there was not enough time to individually adapt homework assignments. Nevertheless, it was made clear that all the teachers in my investigation individually adapt homework assignments to a certain degree. It is not about adapting the task for each individual pupil but rather providing more help to those who need it most and to set fewer tasks for those pupils who have difficulties. The question arises whether more resources would result in a more individually adapted way of teaching. Cooper (2001) says in his research that the effect of homework on younger children is minimal, while studies on pupils in higher levels show that homework has a greater effect on learning but that it varies depending on subject. In my investigation, it became clear that in language subjects in particular, pupils showed greater progress if they had been accustomed to carrying out homework assignments from their years in mid-level. The effects of homework are, according to the teachers, improved test results if the pupils have prepared and done their
homework. The question I ask myself is if the knowledge gained through homework is lasting or if it only remains long enough for the pupil to pass a test or attain a certain grade. Steinberg (1986) says that it is better with many short tasks than fewer longer tasks. If pupils practice regularly, the knowledge remains longer. I can only agree with Steinberg in his reasoning that to assign fewer and easier tasks to a pupil helps to build self-confidence and, in turn, increases the motivation to progress. Cooper (2001) believes that parents’ involvement in homework has advantages and disadvantages depending on how much time parents have to help their children with their homework. This often depends on how well educated the parents are. Lindell (1990) says that sometimes the parents lack the knowledge needed to be able to help their children with their homework and that the schools should offer some training to parents. I strongly disagree with Lindell’s view that parents should be trained to help their children with their homework. I believe that tasks should be set that pupils can manage themselves. However, I agree with Steinberg (1986) when he talks about how important it is that parents are informed about how they can help and encourage in the best possible way. My investigation shows that all the teachers say that they try to motivate the pupils and make them aware of why they should do their homework. It is for the pupils’ own sakes, and study technique will help them learn and achieve their educational goals. Steinberg (1986) emphasizes also that making the pupils aware is very important.

Lindqvist (1999) and Leo (2004) discuss how important interest is for learning. Studies have shown that when something is interesting, people remember it. One thing that became clear in my study was that several of the teachers were quite aware that interesting home assignments were necessary, but they did not indicate how they worked to achieve this. One of the teachers said that by being well-read on a subject and holding interesting and exciting lessons, pupils’ interest was also generated. The teachers must be positive themselves and try to encourage the pupils. All the teachers emphasize the point that homework set to their pupils must be well prepared in class. Even Leo (2005) maintains that tasks that are not prepared and meaningful will be difficult for pupils to remember. He also points out that there are often cases where both parents and children find a homework task incomprehensible. All the teachers follow up the tasks they set as homework in one way or another. Acknowledgement is very important. One teacher said that it is an essential part of the concept of homework.

I also believe that feedback is very important, partly to show interest in what the pupils have done and partly to motivate the pupils. As one teacher said, it is one way to meet each pupil close up. In following up homework, it is important that one notes that the task is completed.
and what the result is. Teachers should comment and discuss with each pupil and use homework results as part of the basis for development and grading. In this case, I see a risk that too much attention is paid to test results and the pupils’ performances as a whole can be undervalued. Grades should not be set based solely on homework tasks and test results. Leo (2004), Hellsten (1997) and Westlund (2004) conclude that many pupils experience stress in conjunction with homework. Westlund (2004) says that many pupils feel stressed because homework takes up too much of their time. Weekends are spent doing homework when the children could be enjoying themselves. Tests and homework assessment often coincide and lead to stress.

In my investigation, one of the few disadvantages that most of the teachers experienced was that pupils feel stressed and worried because they do not have time for the work they have to do. The teachers are aware of the pupils’ need for leisure time, but they point out that in many cases children and young people fill their time with other activities and that some of the stress may be due to this. They try to avoid setting tests when other teachers are setting tests, but this is often difficult. I believe that pupils have a right to and a need for time to spend on free activities. Non-school activities contribute also to a pupil’s learning but, of course, they should not get in the way of their education. Hellsten (2005) believes that stress in school would decrease if we had a school system without homework. He does not believe that performance would decrease if pupils did not get homework. He further points out that the school curriculum should be adapted to the time available. These days, pupils are required to do things that are not possible. Time spent at school should be increased so that everyone can get the work done at school where there is professional help. It would also be very good for those pupils who do not get enough help at home. Even Leo (2004) draws the same conclusions, but at the same time, he says that as long as homework exists, there should also exist a homework policy that clearly stipulates the purpose of and reason for homework.

In my study, it became clear that neither of the schools had a written policy or process for homework in which it is stipulated how much homework is suitable, why homework is set, etc. Agreements in smaller teacher teams exist, and teachers try to avoid setting too many tests at the same time. I question whether such a common concept as homework in our schools should be left to individual teachers to decide. I do agree with Leo (2004) when he says every school should have written guidelines stating how homework should be used in teaching, and discussions should be ongoing about the purpose of homework.
An extended school day is seen by both Hellsten (2005) and Leo (2004) as a way to integrate homework into school hours. A measure such as this would require more resources than are available in schools today. In the investigation, teachers said that the school day is long enough for both teachers and pupils and did not see it as a feasible alternative. They believe that schools should provide help with homework especially for those who do not receive enough support at home. Homework help in schools has worked best when it was scheduled and not too late in the day. For that reason, I wonder how an extended school day would work when pupils can not effectively gain from homework help in the afternoon when they are tired. What I do see as the positive thing with homework help is that the pupils are offered professional help. This is an important aspect in the debate for a fairer school. To summarize, we can conclude that there are advantages and disadvantages. Before I started my work, I doubted whether homework was necessary and felt strongly that pupils needed their free time to recuperate and do things they enjoy. However, I also recognize that activities outside school are also a type of learning and a form of development for pupils. Much of the debate in the media about homework has centered on its being unfair, old-fashioned, and taking too much of family time. It quite simply doesn’t belong in the school of today. I do not believe we can avoid the fact that certain social differences will always exist. To simply abolish homework in order to increase equality is not, in my view, the right way to go.

Our task at school is to help pupils whose conditions at home are not the best. A school without demands can never be a success. I believe that order and structure in school are necessary since so much in our society and daily lives is stressful and divided. I think that the opportunities for review that homework provides are beneficial. I also think that homework is necessary because the time spent in school is not enough to cover everything that needs to be covered. The important thing is that the pupils believe that they do homework in order to learn more and not just because the tasks have to be done in order to pass a test or get a good grade. In this situation, homework would merely lead to unnecessary anxiety and a possible tiredness of school on the part of the pupil. I agree with Hellsten (2005) that the curriculum should be adapted to the available time at school and that this would lead to a focus on quality instead of quantity. He claims that these days we add subjects all the time to the curriculum without removing anything. I believe that this becomes a stress factor for both teachers and pupils. I also believe that it is one of the reasons why teachers more or less feel forced to use homework without always preparing properly, simply to cover something that needs to be
covered. Homework should be discussed more in teachers’ training because in their future profession, teachers will have to use homework and use it in a professional manner.

To conclude, I have through this study come to realize that if homework is to be used as an integral part of teaching, it should be well-prepared, well thought out, and designed in such a way that the pupils themselves can manage the tasks without taking too much of their time to complete. We should also remember that all pupils do not learn in the same way, and therefore we should design homework tasks to be carried out in different ways and appealing to different senses. Homework should be fun and interesting if the pupil is to gain knowledge from it.

5.2 Conclusions

The purpose of this investigation has been to gain insights the attitudes of junior high school teachers about homework and home assignments. The questions asked at the beginning of my project were:

- What purpose and motive do junior high school English teachers have for assigning homework?
- Since there is no policy for homework in the present curriculum, how is this dealt with on the local level?

In regard to purpose and motive, one can conclude that teachers set homework for diverse reasons. One of the strongest arguments for using homework in teaching is that it is necessary to give pupils the opportunity to review what has been covered in the classroom. This extra practice that homework provides is, according to the teachers, a necessary part of the learning process especially in regard to reading. This opinion is also held by Hellsten (1997) and Leo (2004). Another purpose of homework is to train students in taking personal responsibility for their learning. The rationale is that students need to practice and thereby learn to plan their schoolwork and develop good study technique, a skill needed in higher educational settings.

Concerning policies dealing with homework, neither of the schools had a written policy or process for homework in which it is stipulated how much homework is suitable, why
homework is set, etc. Agreements in smaller teacher teams exist, and teachers try to avoid setting too many tests at the same time.

5.3 Further Research

In my investigation, it became apparent that the purpose of homework is to prepare, to review and to develop pupils’ sense of responsibility. The results of the investigation cannot be seen as a general view on homework but the opinions of a small group of teachers. As a novice researcher, it becomes apparent that my own lack of experience has had an effect on the outcome. Issues that arose during the 90% seminar which I had not considered during my investigation had to do with what is needed to make homework a tool for learning and avoid having it become a selection tool where some succeed while others fail. My role as an interviewer has been central during my investigation and I would have received different and even more interesting answers if I had provided more angles. Since there is relatively little research on the subject, and the research that has been done is critical and questions the need for homework, it would be interesting if more research were to be carried out taking into consideration the views on what teachers need to do to provide more support so that the students can successfully carry out homework tasks. Another aspect which I had not considered earlier is why the discussion on homework limited to something individual. And, why language homework is seldom of a communicative nature.
Sources


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