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THE ARCTIC
UNIVERSITY
OF NORWAY

Institute for Teacher Education and Pedagogy

Homework: based on tradition or research?

A qualitative study of teachers' considerations when assigning homework in English.

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Master's thesis in LRU-3902 English Didactics (30 study points). May 2017



Acknowledgements

Suddenly, five years have passed. This thesis marks the end of my role as a student at the University of Tromsø, and the beginning of my role as a teacher. A transition which fills me with excitement and nervousness. The work with this thesis has been both rewarding and tiring. I have gained new knowledge and enjoyed the process, while at the same time looking forward to this day when I can finally say that the thesis is finished.

To the participants of the study. Thank you for part-taking and sharing your thoughts on homework. Through our conversations, I have learned a lot and gained new ideas, not only about homework, but involving other topics as well.

To all of you who have asked questions, given encouragements and advice, or even read through the thesis in its entirety – thank you. I appreciate each and every one of you.

To my counsellor, Kristin. Thank you for reading a number of manuscripts, answering all my questions and for your encouraging words. This thesis would not have been what it is without you.

To Carina, Elizabeth, Helle and Kristine. Thank you for making these five years a blast.

Last, but not least, to Aleksander, who has been through the exact same process at the exact same time. The list of reasons to thank you would be extensive, but your support, encouragement and advice has been invaluable. Thank you. I look forward to sharing new adventures with you for years to come.

Sabine Volley

Tromsø, 15.05.17

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the current homework practices in the Norwegian school system. It is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with four teachers of English in lower secondary school. By using international research as a foundation, I have investigated the effects homework has on pupils and to what extent teachers base their homework practices on research findings. I have also studied official documents by the Ministry of Education and Research to see if there are any specific guidelines on how and why to assign homework.

Research on homework indicates that pupils can experience numerous effects from homework and that the effects differ between pupils. Evidence on whether homework influences achievement is considered inconclusive, and dependent on variables such as subject, teacher, level of proficiency, type of task and socio-economic background. Apart from the academic effects, homework is also found to affect pupils' stress, emotion and motivation. Studies show that pupils' report stress caused by homework and that pupils' who are motivated are likely to gain more from homework than pupils' who are de-motivated.

The Education Act and the Ministry of Education and Research states that homework is not a requirement in Norwegian schools and that the decision on whether to assign homework is up to the school owners. The studied documents from the Ministry of Education and Research indicate no clear guidelines on how to assign homework.

The results indicate that there are clear pedagogical principles behind the homework assigned, but that they are not necessarily rooted in research findings. Apart from one participant, none of the participants explicitly express that they base their homework practice on research, even though the participants in the study use the same principles as are mentioned in many scientific studies. It is indicated that within the subject of English, teachers experience that their pupils spend time on English during their spare time regardless of homework, and that they gain proficiency through informal learning which they transfer to the classroom.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and research question

Taste the term *homework*! One way or another, we have all had our encounters with homework. Either by being pupils ourselves, as teachers, as parents, as researchers, as politicians or through any other situation you can think of. My point is, homework is something we are all familiar with. To me, homework has been a topic of interest for a long time. As a pupil in lower and upper secondary school I often found myself questioning homework. I wondered whether the given task would have any importance, apart from the discomfort of showing up at school without having done the homework assigned. Throughout my education, I have questioned myself and the practice I have seen during practice periods, wondering if we as teachers really have a clear purpose and reason for assigning homework and whether these really benefit the pupils.

Researching the topic has thrown me into a tumult of opinions and studies. Some are clearly opposed to homework (Bennett & Kalish, 2007; Kohn, 2007), some believe there must be a balance (Cooper, 2007; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Valdermo, 2016), some believe there is need for further research (North & Pillay, 2002; Rønning, 2008) and some simply state the quantitative evidence (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008). Research on homework tends to focus mainly on three issues; pupils' achievement from homework, the pedagogical usage, and the relation between school and home (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016b). There are studies aimed to find the effects of homework in general, and there are official documents on homework. However, finding research on teachers own opinions, considerations and practices regarding homework has proven to be rather difficult. Data on homework in Norway is also limited, especially considering homework in the English subject.

Throughout the initial stage of this study I had many questions and curiosities, mainly about homework in English. Personal reflections on homework has made me wonder if there are any laws stating that homework is a requirement in the Norwegian school system? Whose decision is it to assign homework? If teachers are the ones making the decision, do they assign homework based on habit or are there scientific considerations behind the idea? Does

the Ministry of Education and Research provide any specific guidelines and regulations for the teachers to work with in this regard? My questions on teachers' considerations consequently led me to the pupils. How are the pupils affected by the assigned homework? Is there any evidence indicating that pupils experience any effect on achievement because of homework? The questions continued, but I realized quite early that the topic is large and complicated and that I needed to narrow my focus. As will be explained in section 2.5, there are no administrative regulations on homework. I therefore decided to focus on those who are likely to have more influence on the practice, namely the teachers. Considering my personal reflections and questions I decided to base my study on the following research question:

“What does research state about the effects of homework, and to what extent do teachers of English take these findings into consideration when assigning homework?”

In this thesis, I present a reflection upon the research question through a variety of studies and findings on homework, not solely focusing on the academic effects, but also seeing whether there are other effects that could be important in the homework debate. The considerations of the teachers were addressed through semi-structured interviews with four teachers of English in lower secondary school. During which, I invited the teachers to explain and reflect upon their own practice and the tradition of their school.

My intention for this study is not to give specific answers to the big questions on homework. I am not aiming towards a conclusion on what is right and what is wrong, but rather being a voice in the debate on current practices and shed light on some of the challenges that might exist. My hope is to convince, at least one teacher out there, to look at their homework practice and ask themselves *why?*

1.2 Outline

This thesis is divided into 6 chapters. Following the introduction in chapter 1, the theoretical framework is presented in chapter 2. In the second chapter I begin by presenting a definition of homework, which functions as a foundation for my reflections and discussions. Further, I present international research on homework, research based on data from Norway and official documents and White papers from the Ministry of Education and Research.

Chapter 3 entails information about the method I have used and considerations I have made when attaining data. It also includes a description of my thoughts behind the interview guide and the process of analysis.

In chapter 4 the interviews are presented. I give a synopsis of the interviews I conducted and discuss them in relation to each other in a summary.

Chapter 5 in this thesis involves my discussion. The aim of the fifth chapter is to draw lines between attained data and research. I comment on theory and research in relation to data from the teachers who participated in the study. The reflection of my research question is baked into the discussion, but the chapter entails a summary with a more concise answer to the research question as well.

Chapter 6 contains final remarks and the ending of the thesis, in which I reflect upon future recommendations for the homework practices.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter presents studies conducted on homework, both using international data and data from Norway. The studies look at how homework might affect pupils, both through academic achievement and through stress and motivation. There is also a section about the challenges regarding studies on homework. As a foundation for the coming discussion, the chapter entails information on homework from the Education Act, curriculum and White papers.

2.1 Definition of homework

The meaning of the word homework is very much incorporated into the word itself; work that is done at home or outside of school hours (Cooper et al., 2006). In the definition by Cooper et al homework excludes all types of guided study, which means that home courses with audio or video guidance, in-school study and extracurricular activities are not included in the term (2006). Based on this definition homework is in this thesis defined as work that is assigned by the teacher to be conducted by the individual pupil at home.

Homework can also be classified into several purposes and tasks. Cooper et al categorize these as tasks having instructional and non-instructional objectives. The instructional objectives are fulfilled through the specific tasks assigned to the pupils. These can be tasks that enable pupils to practice subject matter taught in school or they can be tasks that function as a preparation for the forthcoming class (2006). North and Pillay also find evidence on homework containing mostly repetitive tasks to enhance content taught in class (2002). In their study, there is little evidence on teachers using homework as preparation, but this could be dependent on school system and culture. The non-instructional objective of homework, however, does not focus on the specific tasks, but on closing the gap between school and home and informing parents about the subject matter taught in school. Subject matter is in the context of this thesis defined as the content being taught in one subject, for instance in

English. It is argued that homework enhances the communication between school and parents and could affect pupils' success in a positive manner (Cooper et al., 2006; Hallam, 2006). Cooper et al give further examples on how homework can function as an establisher of communication between pupils and their parents, a fulfiller of directives and even as punishment (2006). Not only does this say something about the various purposes of assigning homework, but it says something about how widely arguments on homework may differ from teacher to teacher and parent to parent. Apart from understanding the definition of homework as being school tasks to be conducted at home, teachers may have a range of purposes for assigning homework that are not explicitly understood by others, which in turn tells us that the term homework is difficult to define and even more problematic to understand in the public debate.

2.2 International research on homework

2.2.1 Research on academic effects of homework

Most of the research on homework is conducted in the United States. Studies on homework typically focus on one out of two perspectives; a) a comparison on achievement between pupils who are assigned homework and pupils who are not or b) an examination of the relation between time spent on homework and achievement (Hallam, 2006). Another focus of homework research is the amount of stress, anxiety and worry pupils experience due to homework.

Cooper et al have put together a synthesis of research on homework conducted from 1987 to 2003 that looked at the relation between homework and achievement (2006). In the synthesis, both perspectives mentioned were included; homework as opposed to no homework and time spent on homework in relation to achievement. The result from the synthesis showed that within 32 documents of research there were 69 correlations between homework and achievement. Out of these 69 correlations, 50 were in a positive direction whereas 19 were in a negative direction (Cooper et al., 2006). Taken at face value, the results seem to indicate that homework has an overweighing positive effect on achievement. Another synthesis by

Walberg et al also claims that homework evidently has positive effects on achievement due to the amount of time spent on a given task. By assigning homework, they claim, the school hours are extended to learning at home as well, and pupils consequently spend more time on the given tasks (Walberg, Paschal, & Weinstein, 1985). However, there is reason to argue that these results are inconclusive. Alfie Kohn critiques the synthesis by Cooper et al because, as Cooper et al themselves point out, many of the studies included had methodological shortcomings (Kohn, 2007). Not only did the studies have flaws, but they also used different methods, different criteria for selecting informants and different subject matter which may not necessarily be comparable to one another. In their article Cooper et al write that there was not one study that was not flawed, but since they do not share the same flaws one could conclude that homework does improve academic achievement (Cooper et al., 2006). Furthermore, one should keep in mind that the results from several of the studies in the synthesis came from measurements done on the specific subject matter that was assigned as homework. The posttests conducted were also built upon the content that was assigned as homework (Kohn, 2007). To me this indicates that there might be different perceptions of the term achievement. One is achievement on a specific test, in this case the posttest. Another is long-term achievement. As I understand the synthesis by Cooper et al they have measured achievement on a specific test, not long-term achievement. With that in mind, the synthesis gives very little evidence on the long-term effects of homework as there were no longitudinal studies included.

With regards to homework in English, North and Pillay did a study on Malaysian English teachers and found that there seems to be a lack of guidelines on how to assign homework. The teachers reported that homework mainly was given in order to practice what had just been learned, to complete work that had not been completed in class or to give the teacher feedback on pupils' abilities (North & Pillay, 2002). In the case of the Malaysian teachers they usually graded and commented on pupils' homework. The tasks assigned to the pupils consisted mostly of grammar exercises, writing exercises and doing corrections (North & Pillay, 2002). However, as the teachers reported on their evaluation of the study, it showed that the focus was more on whether the homework had been done or not, than the quality of the work. To this North and Pillay argue that the teachers have started to adapt their opinions and thoughts on homework, but without guidelines and advice, the practice is not developing. They stress that the practice of homework needs to be examined and evaluated to make sure

that homework is motivating and useful, that feedback is effective for both teachers and pupils, and that homework is coordinated into curriculums and lesson plans as a whole (North & Pillay, 2002).

In his synthesis John Hattie (2008) has analyzed more than 800 meta-analyses in order to widen the understanding of what kinds of teaching influence pupils achievement. The results are presented with a measured mean effect size between zero and 1.0, with 0.40 as a benchmark for enhancing achievement. This does not mean that an effect size below 0.40 does not have an effect on achievement at all, but it does not evoke an effect to such an extent that we are able to recognize the enhancement, which is possible when the effect size is larger than the given benchmark (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008). The synthesis shows that homework has an effect size of 0.29 (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008). This means that homework does influence achievement, but this effect is not significant. In comparison to homework which is ranked at no. 88, we find self-reported grades at no. 1, with an effect size of 1.44. At no. 10 we find feedback with an effect size of 0.73, which according to the study by North and Pillay (2002), could enhance the effect of homework if pupils' receive feedback on their homework assignments. In relation to homework it might also be relevant to look at the findings on parental involvement. Overall the effect size of parental involvement is 0.51, however, parental involvement relating to supervision of homework has an effect size of 0.19 (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008). This means that the positive aspect of parental involvement does not include homework, but rather aspects such as parents' expectations of their children's' abilities and achievement (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008). Hattie found that there are variants of homework that are more effective than others. Science and social studies are shown to have the lowest effects, whereas mathematics has the highest effects. The material assigned as homework should not be too complex, and should be neither project based nor involve higher level conceptual thinking (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008). Based on the synthesis by Cooper et al (2006), he suggests task-oriented assignments as rehearsal of content taught in class. Another important factor stated by Hattie, is that the effects of homework are greater for higher ability pupils than for lower ability pupils. Also, the effects probably become greater as the pupils become older due to advanced study skills (J. A. C. Hattie, 2008).

Apart from solely looking at the academic effect of homework, there is another aspect raised, namely the development of so-called *personal attributes* (Cooper et al., 2006). Since

homework is to be completed at home, where there is less supervision and no instruction by the teacher, pupils' must complete the task more independently. It is claimed that such a demand develops and enhances children's self-direction and self-discipline. They will get better at time organization and independent problem solving (Cooper et al., 2006). Other potential positive effects regarding personal attributes presented by Cooper et al, are "improved attitudes toward school" and "better study habits and skills" (2006, p. 7). Similar advantages and purposes are presented by Hallam (2006), but she presents them as *perceived purposes and advantages*. She defines them as *perceived* because there is no research to formally back these statements. Her list of advantages of homework includes "fostering of independence and initiative, developing skills in using other learning resources than the ones given at school, developing good habits and self-discipline and encouraging ownership" and "responsibility for learning" (Hallam, 2006, p. 1). Trautwein and Köller (2003) explore this topic further under the term *homework behavior*, essentially the same as Cooper's term *personal attributes*, namely self-regulation and self-discipline. They have attempted to analyze research done on the topic to see which other attributes are a prerequisite for the development of self-regulation and self-discipline. The findings indicate that such personal attributes do not develop automatically and depend on cognitive components, such as learning strategies and learning styles, metacognitive components, such as goal specification and revision, and lastly motivational components, which include intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Trautwein & Köller, 2003). This tells us that learning from homework, be it academic achievement or the development of personal attributes, is complex and depends on numerous factors that differ between pupils. I believe there is a need to recognize that not all pupils will benefit from the same cognitive, metacognitive and motivational components to develop a set idea of personal attributes. As Trautwein and Köller conclude:

"The quality of homework behaviour and the time spent on homework are dependent on pupils' expectations of success, the value they attach to respective tasks, the metacognitive strategies they use, and their learning styles" (2003, p. 139).

2.2.2 Research on stress and motivation regarding homework

An important factor considering homework is not only the academic achievement and development of abilities that may or may not occur, but also how pupils experience homework. A study conducted in Australia with senior high school pupils, ranging from 16 – 18 years showed that pupils, regardless of gender, reported frequently experiencing stress while working on their homework assignments. An important note is the amount of homework the participating pupils reported. On average girls reported doing homework for 39 hours a week, whereas boys reported an average of 34 hours (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002). The study showed that during the average hours spent on homework there was a significantly positive relationship between self-reported stress and mood disturbance. However, the nature of the stress seemed to differ between boys and girls, girls reported experiencing anxiety, tension, confusion and depression, while boys reported the experience of anger and vigor (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002). Although one cannot conclude that the stress experienced arose from homework alone, I believe it to be important to keep in mind that pupils report such experiences of stress due to tasks assigned as homework, even if these pupils may have been subject to a larger amount of homework than the average Norwegian pupil. However, Kouzma & Kennedy are not the only researchers who have found that there might be a link between homework and pupils' emotions. Trautwein and Köller (2003, p. 138) refer to a study that suggests that "homework is accompanied by negative aspects such as frustration and the loss of time for other intrinsically motivating activities such as meeting friends". There are also researchers that claim that a decrease of academic interest, negative attitudes towards school and physical and emotional fatigue can be possible results of homework (Cooper et al., 2006; Hallam, 2006).

Goetz, Nett, Martiny, Hall, Pekrun, Dettmers and Trautwein also conducted a study in order to take a closer look on pupils emotions during homework (Goetz et al., 2012). They found that one must distinguish between in-class emotions, that is pupils' behavior and emotion at school and in class, and homework emotions, which are emotions pupils experience when working with school tasks at home. The need for such a distinction, they claim, is due to the situation in which the pupil is placed. Opposite to what pupils might experience in school, homework mostly includes self-regulated, individual work, which may have an impact on

pupils' emotions in either positive or negative direction. Goetz et al (2012) also shed light on self-concept, defined as one's self-perception formed through one's experience and environment, and how this might have an impact on academic emotions and in turn academic achievement. I understand this to mean that pupils who feel confident and motivated will experience positive academic emotions which consequently can affect academic outcomes. Such an understanding is also supported by the claim that the subject matter also influences academic emotions in either a positive or negative manner (Goetz et al., 2012). However, as stated by Goetz et al (2012) this is an area that is lacking in research and therefore lacking in conclusive results, which stresses the need for further studies.

In relation to pupils' emotions towards assigned homework, Trautwein et al claim that the homework assignments are more likely to be effective for learning when pupils are "motivated to invest effort in completing them and if they do not experience negative emotions when doing so." (Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, & Lüdtke, 2009, p. 177). Hong, Mason, Peng and Lee (2015) support this claim in their study on emotion and worry anxiety regarding homework in English and mathematics. They find that pupils who experience worry anxiety in relation to homework invest less effort and experience negative achievements from homework. Their study also indicates that there is reason to be aware of the differences between subjects. English as a foreign language shows to impose less worry anxiety than mathematics. They suggest the reason for this to be that good results in mathematics often is considered more important when applying for higher education than English (Hong et al., 2015).

There is little evidence on how teachers' beliefs on homework correspond with pupils' homework outcomes, but it is argued that pupils who are aware of the objective of the assigned homework are more likely to be motivated and hence complete the task (Trautwein et al., 2009). Trautwein et al therefore carried out a study in which they looked at the types of homework the teachers assigned in relation to pupils' effort, emotions and achievement. The study indicated that there was a small, yet meaningful, effect between teachers' attitudes towards homework and pupils' homework effort, emotion and achievement (Trautwein et al., 2009). Pupils whose teacher valued pupil motivation showed positive developments on achievement and effort. In comparison, pupils whose teacher graded and evaluated homework, showed more negative results on homework emotion. An explanation to such a

result could be that the pupils had negative experiences of showing up at school unprepared. The teacher could in this case be viewed as over-controlling (Trautwein et al., 2009, pp. 184-185). This finding may make one question whether the need for research on homework is even greater considering that the attitudes of the teacher consequently affects the effort and emotion of the pupil.

Another factor to be considered in relation to homework and emotions is how homework might lead to conflict between the school and the home due to differences of opinion on what homework should involve (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 3). At home the pupils might feel pressure from parents to finish their homework, who in turn feel pressure from the school. Such pressures and demands can possibly lead to conflicts between parents and pupils at home, which in turn affects family life (Cooper et al., 2006; Hallam, 2006; Kohn, 2007). One should also keep in mind that by assigning pupils homework one also assigns part of the responsibility on the parents, who may not have learned the same methods to solve a task as their children. The result might then be confusion on the pupil's part in not understanding the different methods, or even learning a method incorrectly (J. Hattie, 2011, p. 235).

2.3 Research on homework in Norway

As previously stated, most research done on homework is based on data from the United States. Research on homework with data including Norwegian pupils has turned out to be rather limited. However, there is some data to be found in a study by Marte Rønning, using data from the TIMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) 2007 database (Rønning, 2010). The data shows that 30% of the participating 4th graders in Norway spend between 1 and 2 hours on homework daily. In 8th grade the number rises to 46%, whereas 13% report spending between 2 and 4 hours on homework daily (Rønning, 2010).

Furthermore, Rønning looks at how family background might influence time spent on homework. She measures this by looking at the number of books the participants reported to have at home and to what extent the pupils speak Norwegian on a regular basis. Her findings indicate a negative academic outcome for pupils with a family background with either one book shelf or less and those who sometimes or never speak Norwegian at home. They either

spend more time on the same amount of homework as their peers with more than one book shelf and regular communication in Norwegian, or they spend less because they are inclined to not do any homework at all. In fact, pupils with no books at home who are assigned homework in every mathematics class perform worse than pupils with no books at home who are assigned less homework (Rønning, 2010). On the other hand, Rønning finds that there is an overall positive effect of homework in mathematics, but adds that these findings can be seen as inconclusive due to unobserved variables (2010). The conclusion from this study is that homework in mathematics has a beneficial effect, but not for all pupils. Rønning discusses how “lack of interest and necessary skills” and “poor out-of-school learning environments” (2010, p. 23) could be some of the reasons for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds to benefit less. She also mentions how motivation, or the reduction of it due to homework, might contribute negatively to achievement.

In another study using data from the Netherlands, Rønning (2008) examines whether there is a difference between pupils who benefit from homework and pupils who do not. Her study indicates, like the data on Norwegian pupils, that there is a difference. The data contains information on the participants’ socio-economic backgrounds, parental help with homework and parents’ education. Socio-economic background is based on the same principles used in the above-mentioned study by Rønning. High socio-economic background indicate many books at home, whereas low socio-economic background indicate few books at home. The results indicate that socio-economic background influences parental help with homework. Parents who completed their education after primary school tend to help their children less than parents with higher education (Rønning, 2008). If the regularly spoken language at home is different from the language spoken at school, it will also have a negative effect on parental help with homework (Rønning, 2008). As Rønning concludes “children from more disadvantaged backgrounds receive less help with their homework assignments” (2008, p. 13). The findings in the study indicate that there is a positive effect on average achievement by assigning homework, but the effect is not significant (Rønning, 2008, p. 19). Also, the average effect is based on an imbalance between pupils, where pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds benefit from homework significantly, while pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience a negative effect from homework (Rønning, 2008, p. 19). Based on this study it would be reasonable to assume that pupils who are assigned the same homework tasks will benefit notably different. It is therefore not a surprising statement that

homework may be a source of inequality between pupils (Rønning, 2008, p. 23) and that the gap between the high achieving and the low achieving pupils might widen due to homework (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 7; Hallam, 2006, p. 1). Rønning stresses that these findings are important to keep in mind in order to see and “learn more about potential sources that generate or increase (already existing) inequalities” (2008, p. 23).

2.4 Homework in the OECD report

Together with Rønning, Torberg Falch studied data from 16 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries comparing the effect of homework. They studied both pupil and teacher fixed effects, which means that the data only includes information on pupils who have the same teacher in both science and mathematics (Falch & Rønning, 2012). The results were very much the same as Rønning’s previous findings on homework: there is a positive effect on homework overall, but the effect is not significant (Falch & Rønning, 2012). The interesting factor however, is that the effect homework has on achievement differs between countries. While some countries show positive effects of homework, others do not. Out of 16 countries 12 show positive effects of homework. Only three countries show significant effects, whereas Sweden shows a significant negative effect of homework (Falch & Rønning, 2012). Given that Falch and Rønning studied countries based on the same empirical strategy the results are notably different. The Netherlands and Hungary are mentioned as examples of this. Both countries have pupils that perform relatively well on test scores, but pupils in the Netherlands get the least homework and pupils in Hungary get the most (Falch & Rønning, 2012, p. 10). On the same scale, Norwegian pupils have the lowest test scores in both mathematics and science and often receive homework in mathematics and less frequently in science (Falch & Rønning, 2012, p. 10). A possible argument as to why there is a difference between countries, is because the organization of primary school is different. Hence, there is reason to believe that homework is assigned differently. In some countries homework might be used to compensate for lost time in school or as a supplement to teaching, whereas other countries use homework as a complement for in-school teaching (Falch & Rønning, 2012). Falch and Rønning (2012) argue that such differences may in fact lead to different results in studies like theirs.

2.5 Why research on homework is particularly difficult

The research cited clearly shows that there are no conclusive answers to the effects of homework. Hence, the research findings tend to be suggestive, rather than conclusive (Cooper et al., 2006; Kohn, 2007; Trautwein & Köller, 2003) even though there are numerous studies that have attempted to study the effects. Even if researchers disagree there seems to be some level of consensus about what makes the findings inconclusive, namely the number of variables not included. For instance, Kohn points out that there seems to have been given little attention to the fact that there are individual differences between pupils (2007, p. 73).

Research gives general evidence, but not evidence on an individual level. This means that we can use research to conclude on what might work for the average pupil, not the individual pupil. There are also findings that indicate that once other variables such as teacher fixed effects, pupil fixed effects, motivation and social background were included the results changed and the effect of homework decreased (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 5; Falch & Rønning, 2012, p. 27; Trautwein & Köller, 2003, p. 121). It seems to be particularly difficult to measure homework as an isolated variable. Since homework is an addition to school it would seem natural that pupils' achievement is not solely based on the homework tasks they are assigned, but also the competence of the teacher, the socio-economic background of the pupil, the class level, and motivation. The considerations of these variables is why I believe Trautwein and Köller express their hope that "Future research should involve more refined research designs and include a broad range of pupil and teacher variables" (2003, p. 142).

2.6 Homework in the Education Act and the Norwegian curriculum

2.6.1 Homework in the Education Act

It is not cited by law that pupils in Norway are required to do homework, neither in public nor private schools (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2014). Each school must decide on their own whether they wish to assign their pupils homework or not. The decision on homework is up to the schools, and consequently the teachers themselves (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016b; Valdermo, 2016). The main requirement is that the pupils reach the competence aims set in the curriculum “Kunnskapsløftet”, hereafter K06. However, it is argued by the Ministry of Education and Research that homework could be used as an aid to fulfil the demands of §2-3 in the Education Act on pupils’ participation in their education (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2014). The paragraph states that every pupil in Norwegian schools must contribute actively in their own education. The Ministry claims that some schools justify homework through said paragraph and that homework makes pupils fulfil this demand. If a school chooses to assign their pupils homework, pupils are expected to complete the homework assigned (*Meld. St. 22 - Motivasjon – Mestring – Muligheter*, 2011, p. 58).

Even though homework is not required by law, homework guidance is required by all counties in Norway (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016). Homework guidance is an offer where pupils meet with educators and counsellors outside of school hours to work with homework tasks. The Education Act §13-7a states that all counties are demanded to offer homework guidance to its pupils. Homework guidance must be a voluntary and free alternative for pupils who wish additional help with homework assignments (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016). This means that all pupils who are assigned homework must have the opportunity to seek help with their assignments apart from relying on their parents only.

2.6.2 Homework in the Norwegian curriculum

The Quality Framework (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2008) presents a lists of demands the schools must adhere to. These include 1) giving pupils equal opportunities, 2) stimulate stamina, curiosity and desire, 3) stimulate pupils to develop their own learning strategies and critical-thinking abilities, 4) promoting adapted teaching, varied work methods and 5) facilitating cooperation with the home and ensuring co-responsibilities of parents and guardians (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2008, p. 2). None of these are specified to be conducted at home. The Quality Framework further stresses the importance of cooperation with the home and that the school must be the initiator of establishing the contact. The Framework states that the home has the right to be informed about activities at school, which competence aims the pupils are working with, how education has been planned, which work methods are to be used and how the work will be assessed (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2008). Again, there is no mention of homework in correlation with the cooperation between school and home, even though Cooper et al (2006) claimed that homework functioned as a bridge between the two. The Norwegian Core curriculum, which explains the overall aims of education without considering subject matter, states that education should also “provide learners with the ability to acquire and attain knowledge themselves.” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2004, p. 14). This is a statement that could be argued to be well fitted with homework as an individual and self-regulated work method, but still there is no specified link to homework. Further on, it is stated that education has an important task of encouraging pupils in “making effort” and “taking pains” in order to enhance their abilities and proficiency (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2004, p. 18). Pupils cannot be expected to master subject matter on their own, but need guidance and teaching to gain knowledge. Also, one must build on the knowledge pupils already possess. One should not expect pupils to understand something entirely new if there is no previous knowledge to support the new information (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2004).

2.6.3 Homework in Meld. St. 22

“A good and levelled use of homework and measures to ensure homework guidance at lower secondary level will probably both enhance achievement and contribute to neutralize social differences”

(Meld. St. 22 - Motivasjon – Mestring – Muligheter, 2011)

Through Meld. St. 22 the Ministry of Education and Research characterizes homework as pupils’ contribution to their own learning, either as preparation for a lesson or as rehearsal assignments (*Meld. St. 22 - Motivasjon – Mestring – Muligheter, 2011*). It is confirmed that homework is not stated as an obligatory part of the Norwegian school system, but that the interpretation of already mentioned paragraphs on pupils’ demand to participate in their education often result in assigning homework (*Meld. St. 22 - Motivasjon – Mestring – Muligheter, 2011*). It is said to be important that homework is perceived as motivational by the pupils and that they experience mastery through the assigned tasks, while still experiencing the tasks as challenging (*Meld. St. 22 - Motivasjon – Mestring – Muligheter, 2011*). On a concluding note the Ministry of Education and Research states that homework must be motivational to all pupils (*Meld. St. 22 - Motivasjon – Mestring – Muligheter, 2011, p. 58*).

2.6.4 Homework in Meld. St. 16 and 31

Previously cited research indicates that homework does not promote equality between pupils. Due to different social backgrounds pupils experience different learning outcomes from homework. The vision of the Ministry of Education and Research states that pupils in Norwegian schools are to be equal in the educational system and that they are to experience the same opportunities independent of socio-economic backgrounds (*Meld. St. 16 - ... og ingen sto igjen. Tidlig innsats for livslang læring, 2006-2007; Meld. St. 31 - Kvalitet i skolen,*

2007-2008). In Meld. St. 16 the Stoltenberg II administration wrote that “the aim of the government is that more pupils than today shall succeed in achieving their goals and that the educational system shall not continue or enhance social inequalities.” (*Meld. St. 16 - ... og ingen sto igjen. Tidlig innsats for livslang læring*, 2006-2007, p. 8, own translation). Even though it is unlikely to accomplish total equality between pupils, it should still be an aim to even out the inequalities as much as possible. The Stoltenberg II administration states that there will always be inequalities in pupils’ socio-economic backgrounds, and that these will influence education and academic achievement (*Meld. St. 16 - ... og ingen sto igjen. Tidlig innsats for livslang læring*, 2006-2007, p. 8). The topic of social inequalities between pupils is discussed in Meld. St. 31 as well, which claims that there is a strong relationship between socio-economic background, in this case the education of parents, and academic achievement. Pupils with highly educated parents attain higher grades than pupils whose parents have not completed higher education (*Meld. St. 31 - Kvalitet i skolen*, 2007-2008, p. 20).

2.6.5 Homework and adapted teaching

Adapted teaching means taking the individual diversity of a group of pupils into consideration (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2004) and that every pupil must experience mastery and challenges at their level (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2008). This means that as a teacher one must adapt one’s teaching to the level, age and maturity of the pupils and not expect everyone on a group to master the same subject matter at the same time (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2004). However, adapted teaching is not an individual right unless otherwise specified, but is to be fulfilled through “variation and adaptations towards the diversity in the pupil group” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016a, own translation). Adapted teaching is stated in the Education Act § 1.3 and is thereby a requirement in Norwegian schools. Teachers are free to choose how they wish to implement adapted teaching, but the department suggests varied work methods, varied assignments and tasks, varied progression and time on task and variation in level of difficulty, to mention a few (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016a). Since homework is not an obligatory part of Norwegian education there are no specifications on how to implement adapted teaching into homework, but I believe it reasonable to assume that that same rules on

adapted teaching apply whether the pupils work on teacher-assigned tasks in school or at home.

3 Methodology

In this chapter on methodology I present and explain the methods I have used to attain and analyze data. I state why I chose semi-structured interviews above other methods and reflect upon how the method worked in this study. The chapter also entails information on the ethical considerations and formalities relating the interviews and data. As a sub-section in this chapter I present the thoughts behind the interview guide.

3.1 Methodical approach

The topic of my thesis very much lays the groundwork for my methodical approach to attaining and analyzing data. Based on the definition by Christoffersen & Johannessen (2012, p. 99) my study question is derived from a phenomenological approach:

As a qualitative design a phenomenological approach means to explore and describe people and their experience with, and understanding of, a phenomenon. "Meaning" is a key word because the researcher strives to understand the meaning of a phenomenon (an action or utterance) seen through a group of people's eyes. (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 99) (own translation)

A phenomenological approach can also be described as a way of seeing the world through someone else's eyes (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 99). As is the case of my thesis where I strive to see and understand the phenomenon of homework through the eyes of other English teachers.

3.2 Semi-structured interview

The wording of my research question - “*“What does research state about the effects of homework, and to what extent do teachers of English take these findings into consideration when assigning homework?”*” – has determined my choice of methodology. For these considerations to surface I decided that reflection had to be a vital part when I was to attain data. I believed that I would get a better understanding of teachers’ considerations if they were allowed to reflect upon their practices involving homework in English. Therefore, I felt that interviews would be the best approach for attaining data.

There are various types of interviews one can conduct in qualitative research. There are structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 78). A structured interview, which could also be defined as a standardized open-ended interview (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 271), has a fixed set of questions that are to be asked in a set order. Ideally, the only thing that should differ between the interviews using this approach are the answers of the interviewees. A semi-structured interview entails that the topics and some questions are decided in an outline beforehand, but the order of asking questions is decided throughout the course of the interview (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 79; Cohen et al., 2000, p. 271). In an unstructured interview the questions are not decided before the interview is conducted, but emerge based on the given topic of discussion. An unstructured interview could therefore be compared to an informal conversation on a set topic (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 78; Cohen et al., 2000, p. 271).

Given my research question I deduced that a semi-structured interview would be most beneficial. Had I chosen a structured interview there should have been no room for spontaneous questions and interactions (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 271), which was indeed what I was looking for to understand the teachers’ considerations. In retrospect, I see the advantages a structured interview could have given through set questions that were asked to all the interviewees. As both Cohen et al (2000, p. 271) and Christoffersen and Johannessen (2012, p. 79) explain, the benefits of a structured interview is that the data collected is more comparable, which in turn simplifies the analytical process. As a newly hatched researcher, an

unstructured interview seemed too spontaneous and I felt that there would be a risk of me not being able to keep the conversation going and attaining the data I wanted.

I prepared an interview guide (see 3.5 and Appendix 2), but decided that I wanted the structure to be even more open, so I simplified the interview guide into a mind map (see Appendix 2). I hoped that using a mind map instead of a list of questions would enable more diversity in the order of the questions and invite me to take different turns during the interview and ask spontaneous follow-up questions. During the interview, I simply made a mark in the map to indicate which topics and questions we had discussed and which we had not.

Looking back, I see that my structured interviews evolved to become more unstructured. One of my ambitions was that the interview situation should seem like a conversation rather than an interview. My belief was that a conversation-structure would invite the interviewees to be more talkative and open, which is also pointed out by Christoffersen and Johannessen (2012, p. 78). I believe my planned structure for the interview and the actual situation turned my method into something I would like to define as a semi-unstructured interview, an interview that became more like a conversation based on some planned questions, but asked in different orders and with different follow-up questions depending on the interviewee and the topic.

My decision to conduct one-on-one interviews was made quite early in the process. The one-on-one interview entails that there will only be one interviewee interviewed at a time, as opposed to focus group interviews where there are several informants interviewed together (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). The one-on-one interview enabled me to ask questions that promoted personal opinion and reflection without the influence of other informants. Choosing this type of interview also gave me a clear picture on how different individual practices can be within the same institution. Had I chosen focus group interviews I believe the collected data would have differed due to cooperation between the teachers and their presentation of the general and common practice at school (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Also, as a rather inexperienced researcher I believed that one-on-one interviews would be easier as there would be only one informant to observe at a time, rather than four (Creswell, 2012, p. 218).

3.3 Sampling

Throughout the process of sampling I have made several considerations regarding both sample size and my role as a researcher. The first thing to consider was my capacity. The time frame of the study is rather limited, which in consequence meant that I did not have the capacity to conduct extensive interviews with too many interviewees. As mentioned in the previous chapter it was important for me to conduct interviews that could enlighten personal considerations and reflections. To me this meant that the interviews had to be of some duration. I believed that the interviewees would need some time during the interview to become comfortable and consequently feel invited to elaborate on their personal reflections. Therefore, I did not want to plan an interview lasting less than 30 minutes. Hence, the duration of the coming interviews was a consideration I made when deciding the sample size.

As I found myself in the fortunate position of already being connected to one of the schools in the area, I decided to grasp the opportunity and use myself as a gatekeeper in the sampling process. A gatekeeper is a person who has access to a site through his or her role and is able to assist in locating informants and enabling permission to conduct research at the site (Creswell, 2012, p. 211). By using myself as a gatekeeper I easily reached out to potential participants during a staff meeting for the English teachers at the school and explained my project in person. During the meeting four participants volunteered immediately. I considered using another setting to ask other teachers in an attempt to extend my sample size, but decided to begin with a sample size of four and rather extend the sample if I considered it necessary after analyzing the attained data. This decision was based on the duration of the interviews and the size of the study. After going through the attained data, I considered the information to be sufficient and decided not to contact more teachers.

The sample for this study is based on purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling means that the researcher chooses a site or an individual that is able to provide as much information as possible (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Which means that you actively seek out participants who are likely to possess the information you are curious about. A requirement for this study was therefore that the participants had to be English teachers who were currently active. However, within purposeful sampling there are several types, depending on when the sampling occurs. A sample can be chosen either before collecting data or after. My sample was chosen before

collecting data and the aim was “to generate a theory or explore a concept” (Creswell, 2012, p. 207). Therefore, the type of purposeful sampling in this study was *theory or concept sampling* (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). Even though I was not seeking to generate a theory, for that I considered my study too small, I wanted to explore the concept of homework in English.

3.4 Access

In order to conduct a study it is crucial to gain permission and consequently access to a site (Creswell, 2012, p. 61). Through the University of Tromsø and their cooperation with schools in the area some access was already obtained. The next stage in gaining access entails contacting the principal in the given school were one wishes to conduct research (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 54). The principal at the school gave me permission to contact their staff of English teachers to ask whether they would be interested in participating. After receiving formal consent from the principal I contacted the English teachers during the already mentioned meeting and got access to the participants of the study. Due to my connection to the school this access was easily obtained throughout the study.

3.5 The interview-guide

The interview-guide laid the foundation for what I wanted to investigate throughout this study. I had many curiosities and interest, which were already narrowed down to focus on the teachers and their considerations. Throughout the process the project has evolved. Therefore, every question in the interview guide is presented, but not all are discussed as they are no longer relevant for the result.

To ensure that both the interviewee and I based the conversation on the same understanding of homework I made sure that the first focus of the interview would be to discuss the term homework. This was not supposed to entail a definition presented by myself, but rather the

understanding or definition by the interviewee. I also wanted to invite the interviewee to explain their associations with homework and things that immediately crossed their mind when confronted with the term. Furthermore, I was curious whether the teachers experienced there to be any differences between homework in English and homework in other subjects. I wondered if it could be the case that the teachers considered one subject more suitable for homework than another, or if one subject might be in more need of homework than English.

This would lead me to the question on their considerations when assigning homework. I would invite them to present the process of assigning homework and reflect upon the reasons for assigning homework tasks. My hope was that such a question could give insight to whether homework was based on the Education Act, the K06, research, agreements in school or personal experience. If it were so that the interviewee assigned homework, I wanted to learn more about how they worked on processing the assigned tasks in class, and if they would spend time on such processing at all. The idea was that I would get the opportunity to interpret and discuss the relevance of homework and if homework had any effect on the given lesson.

The next topic in my interview guide involved whether pupils or parents gave any response on homework. My preexisting perception was that homework was something that would engage both parents and pupils, and that teachers might have to justify their practices. The last questions were aimed directly to answer my research question, namely whether there was any scientific development or co-operation on homework within the school, and if the interviewee had read any research upon which the homework practice was build.

One of the things I forgot to take into consideration when preparing the interview guide was the possibility that someone might not assign homework in English at all. That way I was not fully prepared when the situation arose, but managed to use the same interview guide, only rephrasing the questions that were aimed directly at reasoning for assigning homework.

3.6 The analytical process

After conducting all the planned interviews, I had approximately 3 hours of recording, divided between four interviews.

The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the raw data. My initial thought was to transcribe everything from each interview to make sure that no information was lost in the process. However, I discovered in some of the interviews that the conversation at times lost track of its original topic. I therefore decided not to transcribe dialogues that were obviously irrelevant. Whenever there was doubt about the relevance of the conversation it was transcribed. When transcription of an interview was complete I listened through the interview in its entirety while following the transcription. I considered this to be necessary to ensure that the transcribed information was as accurate as possible. At this point I had transferred 3 hours of recording into 46 pages of transcription.

The next step entailed going through every transcription and color coding everything I considered relevant for the thesis. Every interview was given a different color. Coding the transcribed text is a method used to make sense of the attained data and dividing the text into smaller, yet understandable, segments (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). Further on, the segments that were color coded were collected into tables of categories. The categories were not pre-determined, but developed depending on the topic of conversation within the interviews. My hope was that such a systematization would enable me to see differences and similarities between the interviewees and our interviews. After going through all four interviews I was left with fifteen categories:

- Definition of homework
- Why homework?
- Why not homework?
- How often
- Types of homework
- Adapted teaching
- Pupil level
- Processing homework

- Effect on lesson
- Guidance
- Differences between subjects
- Motivation
- Meta teaching
- Pedagogical development
- Personal reflection

Within the tables of categories I noted key words that would describe the quotes by the interviewees. These key words had no other function than helping me recognize differences and similarities between the interviewees. The comparisons were noted within the same table of categories. I will not discuss all the fifteen categories specifically, but focus on those I consider valid for the thesis, results and research question.

After dividing the content of the interviews into categories, I still felt I did not fully understand each individual interview. I therefore decided to analyze each interview in more detail. I collected all the color coded segments from each interview, still keeping the categories, and placed them in a table. In this table I made my own comments on the segments and used meaning condensation as a method of analysis. In short, meaning condensation is about shortening the utterances made by the interviewees to shorter sections of text (Kvale, 2001, p. 125). This way I felt I got a clearer picture of each interview and the attained data.

Still, I felt unable to point out specific differences and similarities between the interviews. As a result, I gathered all the key words from each interview and compared them with each other. Placed in yet another table the specific differences and similarities became visually easier to grasp. From 46 pages of transcribed data I was left with one table of key words and comparisons.

3.7 Reliability and validity

Reliability is defined by Christoffersen & Johannessen (2012, p. 23) as the accuracy of the data collected. The more accurate the data, the more reliable one can define the data to be. In qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research reliability is harder to define. In quantitative research reliability simply means that the research must be possible to reconstruct with a similar end result (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 119). However, one can argue that qualitative research does not offer the same possibilities. Since interpretation and analysis of data in qualitative research is very much dependent on the researcher and the participants, there is no guarantee of similar results even if one follows the same method of attaining and analyzing data (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 119). Due to this fact, I have chosen not to focus on the reliability of the study, but rather the validity.

Validity is a term used to describe how valid one can assess the data to be and how well it represents and explains the given phenomenon one wishes to research and describe (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 24). Cohen et al (2000, p. 105) claim that “if a piece of research is invalid then it is worthless”, a claim that emphasizes the importance of validity in a study.

To enhance validity in the attained data I tried to stay aware of using the term “homework” and specifying which subject we were talking about. Whenever I was curious about the teacher’s comparison between homework in English and other subjects I focused on tuning the interview back to English when the question of comparison had been discussed. I tried to avoid bias by asking open ended questions as neutrally as possible. When there were misunderstandings I either asked for an elaboration or a confirmation that I had understood the interviewee correctly. As a further aim to ensure validity, the summary of the interviews was sent to the participants so they could read through and confirm that I had interpreted them accurately.

3.8 Ethical considerations

During my research project the ethical considerations have been of high importance. Not because the data I have collected is of a very sensitive matter, but out of respect for my informants. I have followed the guidelines by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees on “Respect for individuals” (NESH, 2016, p. 12) to make sure that the project is as ethically correct as possible. In addition, the project was considered and approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD). See Appendix 3.

As I contacted the participants individually I enclosed the information sheet for informed consent (see Appendix 1). The same information was repeated at the beginning of the interview to avoid misunderstandings. I double-checked that they were comfortable with the interview being recorded and assured them that the recordings and all other information on the attained data would be stored in a locked cabinet to which only my supervisor and I would have access. The participants were informed about their privacy in the study and that they were to be anonymous and be given fictive names in the thesis. During the transcription, I made sure to anonymize everything that might give away either participant, school or pupils.

Since I chose to conduct my research on a school I already had access to, I felt I had to be particularly cautious when collecting, analyzing and presenting data. When working with the collected data I constantly kept in mind that I would interpret what the participants had said as neutrally as possible. This thesis is not meant to be the definite answer to the homework debate. My aim is simply to shed light on different practices and opinions.

4 Results

In this chapter I will present data collected from the interviews. My interest is not mainly a comparison of the teachers and their practices, but rather enlightening their individual considerations. I believe that one needs to look into the different understandings regarding homework to fully grasp the complexity of the debate. Even though there are similarities to be found between the participants, they give different reasons for their practices, all of which I find important and relevant in shedding light on the general homework practices that might occur in English. The chapter contains a summary of the discussions of the interviews and the viewpoints of the participants. These summaries are not my interpretations, but a portrayal of our actual conversations.

4.1 Interview A

“I am very opposed - as you can tell - very opposed to homework for the sake of homework.”

Throughout my interview with Amelia this was one of her main arguments. The main consideration was not based on the amount of homework, but the value of it. If her pupils were to be assigned homework there had to be both reason and necessity. A typical task that her pupils could be assigned was preparation tasks for the coming lesson, often through reading. Amelia underlines the importance of homework being understood by the pupils. This does not only mean that the topic should be familiar, but that the content of the reading task needs to be processed through additional tasks or reading assignments to be carried out at home. The positive aspect of using homework as a preparation for class is that pupils arrive at school more prepared to discuss a topic. Amelia gives an example of how shy pupils might benefit from such homework. Her experience is that pupils who usually participate less in

class are more inclined to participate if they have been given the opportunity to prepare properly.

Upon the question on how often her pupils are assigned homework Amelia answers that she rarely assigns homework and that she has no rule that there must be homework every week. In her opinion, there is equal opportunity of reaching the K06 competence aims regardless of homework. However, she explains that she sometimes feels like it is her responsibility as a teacher in lower secondary school to prepare her pupils for further education by incorporating homework in their educational habits. On the other hand, she says, not all her pupils have applied for education where such educational habits are required.

To enhance the importance of the homework assigned, Amelia explains that she spends a lot of time on what she defines as meta teaching. This means that she explains her reason for assigning homework to the pupils. The pupils are to be aware of why they are given homework and how they are going to work with the assignments in the following classes. Such focus, she says, is perhaps more important in her classes since the pupils are assigned homework on an irregular basis.

We touch upon the topic of motivation and how some pupils continually show up unprepared when they have been assigned homework tasks. Amelia explains that pupils of all levels on occasion forget, or do not prioritize their homework. She has noticed that some of the pupils who do not prioritize homework are those who experience no personal consequence. Homework does not necessarily influence their achievement. The consequence is either a remark or that they might feel that they are behind during that specific lesson to which the homework was assigned. This contrasts with mathematics, where the consequence of showing up unprepared might be that they are behind for several lessons, not doing one's homework in English may not feel as bad. Amelia also mentions another reason for pupils showing up unprepared, namely the lack of motivation. There are some pupils, she explains, that simply have no motivation left when the school day is over and need a break when they get home. When one relates homework as preparation tasks with pupils who do not complete their homework, the conclusion is that the planned lesson is affected. Based on how many pupils are prepared, the lesson is adapted to include everyone. However, she explains, such a lesson

does not necessarily feel ideal, not only because the lesson did not go as planned, but also because she feels like the pupils who did the homework do not get the credit they deserve.

On the topic of adapted teaching she explains that she does not aim towards all her pupils having homework. If a pupil has completed the given task at school then there will be no homework for that specific pupil. As far as adapting to the level of each individual pupil is concerned, she gives an example of work schedules with three levels of difficulty the pupils can choose between. This way the pupils themselves can adapt the homework to their level. On a regular work schedule, however, the majority are given the same homework tasks.

When asked whether pupils or parents have given any feedback to her homework practice, she answers that there has not been any reaction to the homework she assigns or that there is a difference between classes or groups within the school. She has, however, experienced parents expressing that they expected their children to do more homework as they entered lower secondary school than they actually do. Apart from that, she says, neither parents nor pupils express any feedback regarding homework.

According to Amelia there has been no scientific development or discussion on homework, but that there seems to be an agreement within the school that one should keep some attention to the amount of homework and not burden the pupils with a large workload. Also, the teachers are organized in subject co-operation groups where teachers meet regularly and discuss topics and challenges. Amelia explains that homework could possibly be a topic to discuss in such groups. Regardless of the common agreement, she expresses her belief that there will always exist some extent of individuality. She explains how she has noticed that there often tends to be homework in other subjects, but not in English. As a result, she questions her own practice in assigning homework, but remains true to her premise that homework should only be assigned when needed. She stresses that this does not necessarily mean that such a practice is the correct way to do it, and that she continuously evaluates and reflects upon the matter without being able to reach a conclusion. When asked whether she has turned to research she explains that she has not, but that it would have been interesting to find research articles to discuss with colleagues and draw conclusions from there.

4.2 Interview B

“I do not assign homework for the sake of homework, there has to be an aim or else there is no value.”

Bree defines homework as tasks that are to be conducted or completed at home, or at least outside of school hours. To her, homework is a way to complete tasks one was not able to finish in class or as a way of additional practice on a topic. Bree does not assign homework to her pupils on a regular basis, but rather in relation to projects or larger assignments that might require additional work. In such cases, she focuses on encouraging her pupils to assign themselves homework, either in groups or individually. For instance, if her pupils are working on a written assignment they are told to set themselves goals in the work process to structure their work and finish on time. This usually requires them to work at home as well as in school.

If homework is to be assigned then there must be a need for it. Bree explains that her pupils are not given homework by the reasoning that they should have some work to do at home. The assigned homework must have value for the pupils personally. However, she explains, there are several ways homework can have value. One is that homework can function as a means of communication between school and home. When pupils bring school work home, parents can see what their children are working with and hence keep up with the school. Another example is pupils who work better at home than they do in school. Some pupils might experience the environment in school as stressful and disturbing and are consequently more successful with completing tasks at home where they are able to work at their own pace without the disturbance of others.

Like Amelia, Bree mentions the effect it might have on a planned lesson when pupils show up unprepared. This might entail spontaneously adapting the planned lesson to include everyone. However, as one comes to know one's pupils, she says, one also becomes more aware of which ones need reminding of the assigned homework and which ones manage to remember by themselves. Bree has also experienced that the pupils who do not complete their homework tend to be those who manage the subject well and do not experience any personal consequence on achievement by not completing the assigned task. However, she does believe

that pupils find it uncomfortable to admit that they are unprepared and sometimes try to hide that they have not completed their homework.

Upon the question of pupils' reasons for not completing their homework she answers that they tend to prioritize either spare time activities or other subjects. As an example of a spare time activity that is sometimes prioritized, gaming is mentioned. However, she adds that gaming not necessarily has a negative effect on pupils' achievement in English. Her experience is that pupils who spend a lot of time gaming often speak English quite well. When there are longer periods without homework in English she usually encourages her pupils to read English in their spare time. She believes that it is important to consider the motivational factor of homework as well. Motivation may very likely enhance learning.

Another aspect to not completing the homework tasks could be parental involvement, where some pupils receive more guidance than others. This might impact whether they are able to complete the tasks or not. Also, some of the pupils are given more specific homework assignments than others. Those who fall into this category are usually approached directly and not only through their work schedule. Again, adapted teaching through different levels in the work schedule is mentioned. This way of adapting usually results in pupils getting homework that is based on the same tasks, but with different requirements.

Bree explains that the response she experiences from parents regarding homework usually involves the level of difficulty. By this, she explains, parents sometimes find that written assignments can be difficult to assist their children with, as opposed to the homework they received in primary school which entail more concise assignments.

Bree finds the practice to be varied between teachers and that there is some extent of autonomy concerning homework. Still, she has not experienced a wide range of different practices and believes that the practice is based on some common ground. Bree has not experienced there to be any specific scientific development involving homework, but that there is a possibility to share ideas in subject co-operation groups. She continues to explain how she reflects upon her own practice and might read articles on various topics in pedagogical magazines, but that she does not actively seek out research.

4.3 Interview C

“I think with homework – I think it is still connected with “the way it has always been”.”

Charlotte defines homework as tasks that are to be conducted at home and have consequences if left incomplete. She explains that homework should never involve a topic that is unfamiliar to the pupils. It must be realistic for all pupils to complete the task by themselves and experience equal learning outcomes. However, Charlotte explains that she never assigns homework to her pupils. The only time her pupils have homework is when there are larger assignments and projects, in which case the pupils assess the need to work at home individually or in groups.

Her reason for not assigning homework is based on an assignment she wrote herself. The focus of the assignment was on how socio-economic background influences the amount of parental involvement. Pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds are statistically shown to receive more guidance from the home than pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. By not assigning homework she feels that the pupils attend class on similar premises. Even though this is her main argument, she believes there are other factors to consider as well. One argument she presents is that it takes away some of the stress in class, both for herself and her pupils. By not assigning homework she removes the need to follow up the homework tasks, time she measured as unbeneficial. This also prevents the need to suddenly adapt a planned lesson because some pupils are unprepared. Also, her pupils avoid the stress and discomfort of not having completed the homework tasks. She explains that before she made the decision to quit homework she could easily tell when pupils were trying to hide the incomplete tasks or complete the tasks quickly before they were checked. The result was that they did not really learn anything from the homework tasks either way. Another argument she makes is that most of the pupils have a busy schedule and spend a lot of time in school. Consequently, they need a break when the school day is over. By removing the stress from school work at home they might become more motivated to focus in class.

Upon the question about her pupils' level of proficiency she explains that she has yet to recognize a difference between her pupils and pupils in another English class. In her opinion

level of proficiency should be seen in relation to interest. Those who are interested in a topic are likely to become proficient. Instead of assigning her pupils homework, she spends time talking with them about spare time activities that can enhance their proficiency in English. Whenever she has read a book, watched a series or found a web site she believes might interest her pupils, she tells them about it, often following up on her tip a while later to talk about the book or series. She mentions that she has pupils in her class who spend a lot of their spare time on gaming. In her opinion she can tell that these pupils use English actively outside of school hours by their achievement level in oral English. Like her pupils who enjoy reading or watching movies and series, she also encourages her pupils who enjoy gaming and recommends them to play in English.

As far as feedback from parents or pupils is concerned, Charlotte has not heard any complaints about her not assigning homework in English. She has experienced that parents sometimes give the same advice as she does about reading books in English.

Charlotte experiences that the decision on assigning homework is individual and that there are no clear guidelines from the school administration. Upon the question if she would have read additional research on homework given the chance, her answer is positive. However, the work hours are quite set and the opportunity to do so is limited. If research had been more available she believes she would be more inclined to read studies and research articles.

4.4 Interview D

“I do not believe that it is a thing we really think about, we just do it. Out of old habit.”

Denise focuses a lot on reading as homework. The tasks often function as revision, with the important premise that the content must be understood by the pupils. Denise usually assigns reading as homework, accompanied with an assignment or oral practice. She explains that she encourages her pupils to read English aloud at home to hear their own voice and pronunciation. Reading aloud is an example of an assignment accompanying the reading task. Another type of homework might be tasks to revise subject matter from class or grammar

practice. However, the assigned homework is not always closely connected to tasks from class, but could be based on other topics as well.

Homework is not assigned on a weekly basis, even though she says she might wish it was. Denise explains that she finds it important not to overload the pupils with homework. As a result, she often finds herself adapting the amount of homework in English, or removing the homework completely, if her pupils have a lot of homework in other subjects. When homework is assigned she usually explains her reasons for assigning the given tasks. She explains why she has assigned homework and how they it is going to be used in class.

Denise believes that parental involvement differ between pupils. Some pupils receive a lot of guidance from their parents, while others receive none. However, she says, there will always be individual differences between pupils. One pupil's lack of learning outcome from homework guidance does not necessarily limit the learning outcome another pupil might experience. Denise explains her belief that lack of guidance at home not necessarily is linked to parents' lack of proficiency in the given subject, but that they are unable to explain why and how the homework should be done, or because pupils do not wish their parents assistance. Teachers might have one reason for assigning homework, but this reason might not be known to the parents and therefore create conflicts and misunderstandings at home. In addition to conflicts that evolve from homework itself, some types of conflict at home might not involve the pupil directly, but still affect their ability to complete the assigned homework. If it were a possibility to receive homework guidance at school she believes that many pupils in such positions would benefit.

It is not unusual that some pupils show up unprepared and without having completed their homework. Denise explains that she notices how pupils seem more engaged in class discussions when the homework is completed. When they work in groups she has observed that the discussion often is more fruitful when the pupils show up prepared.

There is often a problem with time when it comes to checking that the homework is done. Denise explains that the pupils often remind the teachers that the homework must be reviewed and that it seems important to them to get acknowledgement from the teacher on the completed homework. Instead of checking the homework individually her pupils often review the assigned tasks in pairs or groups. Recently Denise's pupils have begun writing about their

homework in a log book. This way Denise and her co-teacher can see how the pupils feel about their assigned homework and whether they have completed the tasks. In their homework log the pupils also note that they experience more difficulties in cooperating with others when they have left their homework incomplete and how this feels uncomfortable.

Denise says that she cannot recall there being any reactions from neither parents nor pupils about homework. She only gives one example of feedback questioning if there were any traditional homework, such as translation and glossary repetition.

Like the other participants, Denise sees homework as an individual decision. However, she adds that this autonomy might be rather difficult to avoid. Everyone adapts a method to fit one's own way of teaching. As far as scientific development is concerned, there has not been any focus on homework, but she adds, she would not mind if there were. She believes that schools need a focus on research as an addition to the already established practice and seems positive to gaining access to research articles if it were possible.

4.5 Summary and interpretation of results

Initial analysis of the interviews and statements show that the similarities often are based upon the participants reasoning for assigning homework. The participants also seem to agree on the individuality of the homework practice in school. There are especially two arguments where the participants concur. One is that homework must be understood by the pupils and the other is that there is no scientific development on homework. The last argument could be a reasonable explanation for the differences between their practices. Even though Amelia mentions that there seems to be common agreement on the amount of homework, the teachers still do not assign homework based on any given guidelines. Therefore, type of task, adapted teaching, amount of homework and methods for processing homework in class differ between the teachers. Even though there are some similarities in their practices and they give examples of co-operation with other teachers, they still have the final say themselves. However, even if their homework practices are based upon individuality they are positive to working with

homework and develop the practice further. I believe this to be evident through how they self-evaluate and reflect on their current practices. They all question their habits and seem curious about other methods and input. My understanding is that there is willingness and possibility to work with the homework practices if school administration or state initiate the work. This shows that the current homework practices are fully possible to challenge and adapt.

On the topic of reviewing homework in class, all the participants seem to agree that this can be challenging, either due to pupils who are unprepared or due to lack of time. The positive sides of having pupils show up fully prepared for class are discussed, but often followed by the statement that they never or rarely experience that all pupils have completed the homework tasks. Amelia, Bree and Denise exemplify situations where the lesson must be adapted to include everyone, and Charlotte gives examples of pupils rushing through their homework before class begins, none of which might seem ideal, as Amelia herself points out.

Bree, Charlotte and Denise all discuss how parental involvement can differ between their pupils. Charlotte has seen this as crucial to her stance on homework, whereas Bree and Denise see this as a challenge that not necessarily has a negative effect for all pupils. Although some pupils experience a lack of homework guidance or lack of learning outcome, does not mean that this is the case for everyone. Some might benefit significantly from homework guidance or benefit through working in an environment where they feel less stressed. In other cases, the reason for lacking guidance is not because parents are not willing or motivated to help the pupils at home, but perhaps because pupils will not let their parents help them, like Denise mentions in her example. Even though they have had varied experiences regarding parental involvement on homework, none of the participants have experienced any elaborate response from neither parents nor pupils.

When it comes to larger assignments all the participants agree that homework is required. In relation to larger assignments and projects all four teachers explain that their pupils are usually required to work outside school hours as well. In these cases, the pupils are not told exactly what they are to do at home, but the pupils must plan their work and assign homework to themselves. Even if one plans there to be mostly work in class, many pupils need to spend more time on the assignment and hence work outside of the scheduled lessons as well.

All participants touch upon the topic of how spare time activities influence the English subject. The common opinion seems to be that spare time activities involving English is not necessarily a bad thing. Bree encourages her pupils to read when there is no homework, Denise usually gives homework tasks involving reading, and Charlotte assigns no homework, but encourages exposure to English in other ways. There seems to be an agreement between the teachers that English in informal settings might also influence pupils' abilities.

The interviews show that teachers make numerous considerations when assigning homework. They consider their pupils' level and their ability to understand and complete the assigned tasks. They consider pupils' opportunity to receive guidance at home and thereby the likelihood of pupils finishing the assigned homework. They also consider how homework might affect the planned lesson and what their pupils are supposed to achieve. Even though some of the teachers discuss the possibility of homework being based on habit, their reflections show that it is not solely the case. If that were so, I do not believe they would have been able to mention all the considerations they make. It seems like homework is not assigned by chance. It is assigned for a reason, even if the reason not necessarily is linked to research.

5 Discussion

The aim of this chapter is to link research and findings from the interviews together. By connecting theory and findings I hope to shed light on some of the challenges that need to be addressed, as well as raise some critical questions regarding homework, both in general and in the English subject. The answer to my research question is an underlying subject throughout the discussion, but will be summarized in the final sub-section of the chapter.

5.1 Formal and informal learning

To fully understand homework, I believe it important to note the terms formal and informal learning. The easy explanation would be that formal learning occurs in school and informal learning occurs outside of school. Such an explanation is not incorrect, but unfortunately somewhat inaccurate. Instead of stating that informal learning occurs outside of school, one could say that it occurs outside the school curricula (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 2). Which means that the opposite, formal learning, often is led by a teacher, structured, pre-arranged and evaluated (Eshach, 2006, p. 174). Eshach characterizes informal learning as spontaneous, voluntary, unstructured and liable to happen anywhere (2006, p. 174). The setting of informal learning is also a point emphasized by Schugurensky (2000, p. 2) in that it can take place anywhere, even within formal learning at school there can occur informal learning. This is explained as learning that was not planned through the curriculum, but that occurred naturally and spontaneously. Within the term informal learning one can find what Schugurensky defines as incidental learning (2000, p. 4). That is learning which was not intended by the learner, but through which he or she later realizes that knowledge was attained. For instance, if a pupil reads a book in English and later realizes that new vocabulary was acquired, there has been incidental learning or, using a wider term, informal learning. Reading a book is only one example of a source through which informal learning can occur. There is also the internet, film, TV, museums, family and newspapers, to mention a few (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 6).

5.2 Homework and academic effects

As stated in the introduction, research on homework has left me with many questions. There seem to be many “if’s” and “but’s”. The Education Act, Quality Framework, Core Curriculum and White Papers I have studied fail to provide any specific answers or guidelines on how to assign homework. It particularly caught my attention how homework is justified in Meld. St.22. The opening quote in section 2.6.3 states that homework *probably* has an effect on achievement. Should we really base our educational practices on probabilities? As a future teacher, I would like to explain to parents that the daily educational practices their children experience is based on certainties. This does not mean that everything in school must have proven positive effects, we should always strive towards testing new practices, but when old and implemented practices are based on probabilities we need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture.

It seems that research on homework is inconclusive. There are studies which indicate that pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds benefit from homework (Hong et al., 2015; Rønning, 2008; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016b), whereas pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds benefit less or not at all (Rønning, 2008). Research also states that pupils report stress and mood disturbances from homework (Goetz et al., 2012; Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002). This goes for everyone and is not found to be based on proficiency. Statistics show that within OECD countries homework and achievement is not necessarily correlated (Falch & Rønning, 2012). Cooper et al (2006) find that homework might influence achievement, but the results are not significant, in contrast Hattie (2008) finds that homework has little effect on achievement. Furthermore, Alfie Kohn (2007) claims that homework has no significant effect on achievement. North and Pillay (2002) explain that the lack of guidelines on how to work with and assign homework seems to affect achievement. Lastly, homework might have an effect on personal attributes and study skills, but research cannot say for certain (Cooper et al., 2006; Trautwein & Köller, 2003).

The Education Act and the Ministry of Education and Research in Norway state that school and home must communicate and that parents have a responsibility when it comes to aiding their children in their education. If it were the case that every pupil could ask at home and get help with their homework there would be nothing better. However, I believe we need to

acknowledge that this is not necessarily the case. The possibility of parental involvement seems to vary. Several of the informants explain that they experience differences relating to guidance and involvement from the home. Some parents support their children with most of the homework tasks, while others are unable to support at all. In Meld. St. 16 and 31 it is stated that the government should strive for equal opportunities between pupils and that the school system should not attribute to social inequalities. Seen in relation to Rønning's findings on homework this is rather interesting. By assigning homework the school does exactly that; contributes to different opportunities and enhances inequalities.

Ideally, one of the considerations to be made when assigning homework should be on each individual pupil. That way one would be able to make sure that the pupils get tasks that are suitable to their level and realistic for them to complete by themselves at home. One could argue that homework naturally entails adapted teaching because the pupils are free to work at their own pace. However, individual adaptations would result in an immense workload for the teacher. Not only would the teacher have to assign individual and specialized tasks, but there would also be further need for individual follow-up in class to comment on and evaluate the tasks done at home. Bree explains that she has a focus on adapted teaching with homework as well as with in-class tasks. However, like Amelia and Denise, she explains that the majority of the pupils receive the same homework assignments. Considering the guidelines for adapted teaching by the Ministry of Education and Research, adapted teaching should be possible with homework tasks as well as with in-class tasks. Nevertheless, no matter how one decides to implement adapted teaching, I would still argue that it is just as important with homework as in class. The principles should apply to both, which is something one should be aware of if homework is assigned. In English one would have to consider whether such extensive work would be fruitful. Like Amelia claimed in her interview, reaching the competence aims in English is manageable even without homework. None of the competence aims in the K06 are specifically aimed towards homework, which one could interpret to mean that reaching the competence aims in the English subject should be possible both in theory and practice, even without homework. Bree also reflects on time spent on homework and how assigning more would demand time that could have been spent on teaching instead of having to spend it on reviewing homework.

The idea that homework is more than just school tasks is discussed by Trautwein & Köller (2003) and Cooper et al (2006) under the before mentioned term personal attributes. There is little evidence to conclude that pupils' study habits and personal attributes improve through homework. I wish to stress that this does not entail the development of personal attributes in other contexts, such as in class, but solely such a development through homework. It is discussed that by assigning homework with this reasoning aims to prepare the pupils for further education. An argument against this use of homework is the uncertainty of all pupils entering higher education. Assigning homework with this intention would be based on the assumption that all pupils are going to university or other higher study programs. This dilemma is something Amelia discussed as well. Even though her aim for the homework she assigns is to prepare her pupils for further education, she is torn in the reasoning because she knows that not all her pupils have applied for programs that require study habits to such an extent. Therefore, some pupils may not see the purpose or find the motivation to complete the tasks.

However inconclusive research on homework might be, there seems to be especially one point to make of it, namely that the effects of homework differ. There is not only an individual difference between pupils, but there are also different effects of homework between countries, as shown in the OECD report. Homework cannot be seen as the recipe for enhancing academic achievement, as the numbers in the report clearly state. I have mentioned that research on homework is particularly difficult because there are so many contributing variables. Whether it is socio-economic background or proficiency is irrelevant, my argument remains the same; depending on the pupil, the academic effects of homework will vary.

5.3 Homework in relation to stress and motivation

Trautwein and Köller (2003) and Hong et al (2015) mentioned that motivation and interest were important factors in relation to homework. Pupils who were motivated and interested were more inclined to complete their homework than their opposites. In her interview, Charlotte claimed the same. She said that she did not believe achievement was based on the amount of work pupils did outside of school hours, but should rather be seen as a result of

interest. Motivation was also a topic discussed with Bree, who found that motivation and interest also could be seen in relation to achievement. I believe that pupils with a specific field of interest will find it easier to complete their homework in the given subject than pupils who are less interested. The homework might seem less stressful when one is interested and motivated. However, there is reason to believe that pupils with a particular interest in English are more inclined to seek out English through informal learning in the first place. Not assigning homework in English would not necessarily mean less learning, it would only mean less time for teacher assigned tasks. One could argue against such reasoning by focusing on the pupils who have no specific interest in subject matter. Would homework not be beneficial to them? That way one would at least be certain that they practice outside school hours. However, looking at research findings one could claim that pupils who are less motivated in a subject benefit less from homework to begin with.

Kouzma and Kennedy (2002) studied the effect homework had on stress and mood disturbance. The hours spent on homework might not be as extensive in Norway, but still I believe the aspect of stress needs to be taken into consideration. Referring to Charlotte, one of her arguments for not assigning homework was to decrease the stress her pupils might experience, both the stress of completing the homework, but also the stress of showing up to school unprepared. Charlotte is not the only one to mention the stress and discomfort pupils experience from not completing their homework. Both Bree and Denise discussed this as well. With Bree giving the example of how she believed pupils found it uncomfortable to show up unprepared, while Denise explained how her pupils themselves claimed this to be uncomfortable. I do not mean that one should eliminate everything the pupils might find uncomfortable, but given the findings on how stress affects achievement I believe there is a need to question the importance of homework. What do we as teachers find more important and what should the school system prioritize? Is it doing homework or is it removing unnecessary stress from our pupils' week days? Another factor is that we do not always know the real reason for a pupil's incomplete homework. Firstly, as Goetz et al (2012) discuss, the emotions teachers see in pupils in class are not necessarily the same emotions they experience when working individually at home. This is an argument that can function both ways in the debate. For instance, referring to Bree, if there are pupils' who work better at home than in school, there is still a distinction between in-class emotions and homework emotions, but in their case the homework emotions are the ones that could be considered most beneficial.

Furthermore, there could be situations at home that demand more of a pupils' attention. The result being that homework might not be regarded as something to prioritize, a situation which was given as an example by Denise. In addition to the stress of the situation at home, the pupil might experience stress by not completing his or her homework as well. I believe most teachers expect their pupils to be alert and focused at school. Allowing the pupils to let go of the academic focus when they go home could perhaps be considered a means to enhance concentration in class? Further on, I believe we need to consider the amount of time pupils spend in school to begin with. They attend school five days a week and I have heard some explain school as children's and adolescent's profession. It is the arena where they are expected to attend and perform every week, just like adults attend work. Some professions require additional work outside the given hours, others do not. Why does it seem so natural that children's profession should be in the first category? I think many adults would admit that the most comfortable days are the days where they leave work without bringing tasks home. Days where you can spend your afternoon doing the things that interest you and matter to you. A bold claim, of course, but not unreasonable in my opinion. It is my belief that pupils have enough on their plates as it is. When their school hours are over they deserve to focus on interests and the activities that motivate them, at least in the absence of conclusive evidence that homework has any positive academic effects.

My final arguments on the topic of pupils' emotions during homework are based on two claims. The first is that homework can result in physical and emotional fatigue, negative attitudes towards school, and decrease academic interest (Cooper et al., 2006; Hallam, 2006). The second is the claim that homework has shown to have an impact on family life (Cooper et al., 2006; Hallam, 2006; Kohn, 2007). When assigning homework, I believe these claims to be important to note. If one decides to assign homework one should possess the information and knowledge that the tasks will affect more than just in-class situations. This does not mean that many teachers are not aware of these factors, but maybe such information should be more accessible to everyone working in education.

5.4 The homework practice

The participants of the study discuss several reasons for assigning homework, the key word being *reason*. None of the teachers assign homework for the sake of homework, but explain that the tasks must have value and reason for the pupils. No matter the reason, which seems to vary between the participants, homework for the sake of having something to do at home seems out of the question.

The considerations made about homework are numerous. There seems to be a common understanding that homework is not assigned blindly, but is thought through and seen in relation to topic, level of proficiency and necessity. First and foremost, it seems important that the pupils have enough former knowledge about both topic and task to complete the homework successfully. Also, the teachers seem to find it important that the pupils are aware of the *reason* for the given homework. An argument also stated by Trautwein et al (2009). Pupils should know why they are given homework and why it would be beneficial for them to complete the tasks. All the considerations made are possible to link to research findings. The teachers mention basic principles that are discussed in studies and research, however, the participating teachers who assign homework do not refer to any of the studies. This is rather interesting because it seems to indicate that there are common and well known understandings of homework principles, but teachers seem unaware of the link to research. Charlotte is not included in this, since her decision on homework is explained and justified through research she has studied.

Charlotte explained that the planning of lessons was one less worry when not assigning homework. Amelia and Bree often felt like they had to adapt their lessons because there were always pupils who had not completed their homework tasks. Hence, it would often prove valuable to have a back-up plan for lessons that relied on pupils being prepared. Amelia explained that such adaptations became easier with experience, but that they rarely felt ideal. Not only did it affect the pupils who had not completed their homework, but it affected those

that had as well. Amelia felt that such adaptations were somewhat unfair towards the pupils who had completed their homework because they did not get any credit for it. When homework creates the likelihood of sudden changes and adaptations, that do not seem ideal for neither teacher nor pupil, I believe there is reason to evaluate the benefit of the given homework. I imagine that I would find my preparation time better spent if I knew that the lesson I had prepared would be the actual result. There are several factors of stress and discomforts to be avoided quite easily. Removing homework will enable teachers to plan the actual lesson and conduct the lesson without feeling that some of the pupils lost out. I believe many teachers find themselves in a dilemma where one would wish to avoid such scenarios, but at the same time feeling torn about homework because neither state nor school provide specific guidelines. In contrast, the Ministry of Education and Research claims that since homework is a given part of school there is no need for specific regulations and guidelines (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016b).

Apart from the sub-conscious agreement between research and each other, the participants explain that there are no explicit agreements within the school. Which means that in the end, the teachers themselves have the final say on homework. Since there are no guidelines teachers decide whether they want to follow the rather vague guidelines that exist in White Papers and Quality Framework, or if they want to follow their personal opinion and experience. Interestingly, it seems to me as if the participants in the study who assign homework are uncertain about their stance on homework. They explain their main arguments and points, yet they seem to continue in reflection and self-evaluation throughout our conversation. However valuable reflection and self-evaluation is, I find this is an aspect to argue in the context of this thesis. Had the participants known and had access to research on the topic, there might have been more specific opinions. Lack of specified information may also result in lack of decisive opinions, there are too many uncertainties to consider. Another interesting aspect, is that the teachers would like there to be scientific development focusing on homework. They all agree that this is a topic due for debate and that it would count as positive if there was a clearer agreement within the school. This underlines that the homework practice is ready for further development, as well as my understanding that the teachers feel the need to confirm or affirm their practices.

Considering homework in Norway, there is reason to look at English with a different perspective than one might view other subjects. It is evident that Norwegian pupils are exposed to English outside of school hours. English is no longer a school subject only, but is extended to be a part of many pupils' spare time activities as well. The participating teachers mention pupils who play games, read books and watch series and movies in English, often to such an extent that it becomes recognizable in their English proficiency. The conclusion being that many Norwegian pupils acquire English language abilities through informal learning. By spending time on activities that interest and motivate them, they acquire language that is transferable to the English subject in school. These are factors I find important to consider with regards to homework in English. As stated earlier, homework must be seen in relation to several variables, and perhaps homework in English must be seen with an extended number of variables due to the opportunities of informal learning. If the aim of homework is practicing English, the pupils might as well be encouraged to continue with their spare time activities where English is included. If the aim is to spark an interest, the answer remains the same. Society has changed; hence the homework practice must change as well.

5.5 Research question

To sum up the research question - *“What does research state about the effects of homework, and to what extent do teachers of English take these findings into consideration when assigning homework?”* – I have found that the effects of homework are variable and inconclusive. Teachers make several considerations involving homework, but these might not always be based on research. A possible reason for this could be that they do not have access to it. The database on which the theory of this thesis is based, is accessible to me through my role as a student. The problem therefore, is not that teachers do not consider the research that exists, but that the homework is not made accessible to the teachers unless they spend time to initiate change by themselves and find studies on their own. Again, there is reason for the Ministry of Education and Research to enable teachers access. When there has been a possibility to focus on research, as Charlotte has, then research findings are considered, otherwise it seems homework is based on tradition and some common understanding of basic homework principles.

6 Final remarks

I hope the topics I have discussed in this thesis are considered to have an importance for how we view the homework practices. Both interviews and research indicate that there are still practices in the educational system that are not based on research and that a scientific focus has failed considering homework. The homework practices are so implemented in the school system and schedule that one forgets to question it. Even though the topic might be debated, there are no conclusions. There are opinions and experiences, but no final say.

The school system and structure needs to be challenged on its homework practices. The challenge is not necessarily aimed at the teachers, it is aimed at the school owners and the Ministry of Education and Research. One way of challenging the homework practices is to inform future teachers about the status quo and give access to research findings they can use when the students become active teachers themselves. As it stands today, I find it hard to conclude whose responsibility it is to re-evaluate homework. It seems as if the responsibility is being handed down from the upper administrations to the teachers. I do not wish to undermine the idea of autonomy to the teachers and school administration, I do, however, believe that many will find it hard to take a stand without guidelines and without proper access to research. To improve the practice, school owners and the Ministry of Education and Research should consider simplifying the access of research and information about homework. If this were to happen, teachers might seek out the research and make an informed decision.

With the current situation, I feel like homework is justified through the *belief* that it will benefit the pupils, not the evidence.

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Appendix 1. Informed consent

Forespørsel om å delta i masterprosjekt om hjemmelekser i engelsk.

Et masterprosjekt om hvorvidt hjemmelekser i engelsk oppleves som pedagogisk relevant for lærere og elever i ungdomskolen.

Bakgrunn og hensikt

Jeg er masterstudent på Integrert master i lærerutdanning, 5.-10.trinn ved Universitetet i Tromsø, og skal i den forbindelse skrive min mastergrad våren 2017. Jeg har alltid vært interessert i debatten rundt hjemmelekser, både som elev, student og tidvis som praktiserende lærer. Jeg ønsker derfor en dypere innsikt i læreres tanker og refleksjoner rundt hjemmelekser, da med spesielt fokus på engelskfaget. Jeg håper å lære mer om læreres erfaringer med hjemmelekser og hvordan de oppfatter elevenes holdninger rundt dette tema.

Hva innebærer prosjektet?

Prosjektet innebærer at jeg, Sabine Volley, gjennomfører et intervju med varighet på inntil 1 time. Intervjuet vil kun ta for seg refleksjoner og erfaringer rundt hjemmelekser i engelsk og vil ikke berøre din taushetsplikt. Intervjuet vil bli tatt opp på lydbånd.

Mulige fordeler og ulemper

For at prosjektet skal bli best mulig gjennomførbart er jeg avhengig av informanter som kan stille til intervju. Det er viktig for meg at prosjektet medfører så få ulemper

som mulig, og jeg vil derfor være fleksibel i forhold til din timeplan og arbeidsdag slik at intervjuet kan gjennomføres på et tidspunkt som passer deg best. Underveis, og i ettertid, vil jeg legge vekt på at du som deltaker skal være informert og ha innblikk i resultatene som tas fram i prosjektet.

Hva skjer med informasjonen?

Informasjonen jeg får gjennom intervjuene vil bli en del av min masteroppgave. All informasjon vil være anonymisert og jeg vil ikke inkludere informasjon som kan føre til at du som informant eller din arbeidsplass blir gjenkjent i oppgaven. All informasjon som samles vil oppbevares i henhold til forskningsrådets etiske retningslinjer og meldt til Personombudet for forskning, Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste (NSD). Lydbåndopptakene vil lagres på en ekstern harddisk som låses i skap ved Universitetet i Tromsø. Disse opptakene vil kun være tilgjengelig for meg og min veileder. Opptakene blir slettet ved prosjektets slutt som er planlagt til juni 2017.

Frivillig deltakelse

Din deltakelse i prosjektet er frivillig. Du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke og ditt bidrag vil bli fjernet fra oppgaven. Dette vil ikke få noen konsekvenser for deg.

Dersom du ønsker å delta signerer du samtykkeerklæringen. Ved spørsmål i forkant, underveis og etter prosjektet er det bare å ta kontakt.

Med vennlig hilsen

Sabine Volley

Masterstudent, engelsk

Tlf: 993 98 789

svo010@uit.no

Institutt for lærerutdanning og pedagogikk, ILP

UiT, Norges arktiske universitet

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjonen om prosjektet og er villig til å delta

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Veileder for oppgaven:

Kristin Killie

Professor, engelsk språk

E-post: kristin.killie@uit.no

Institutt for lærerutdanning og pedagogikk, ILP

UiT, Norges arktiske universitet

Appendix 2. Interview guide and mind map

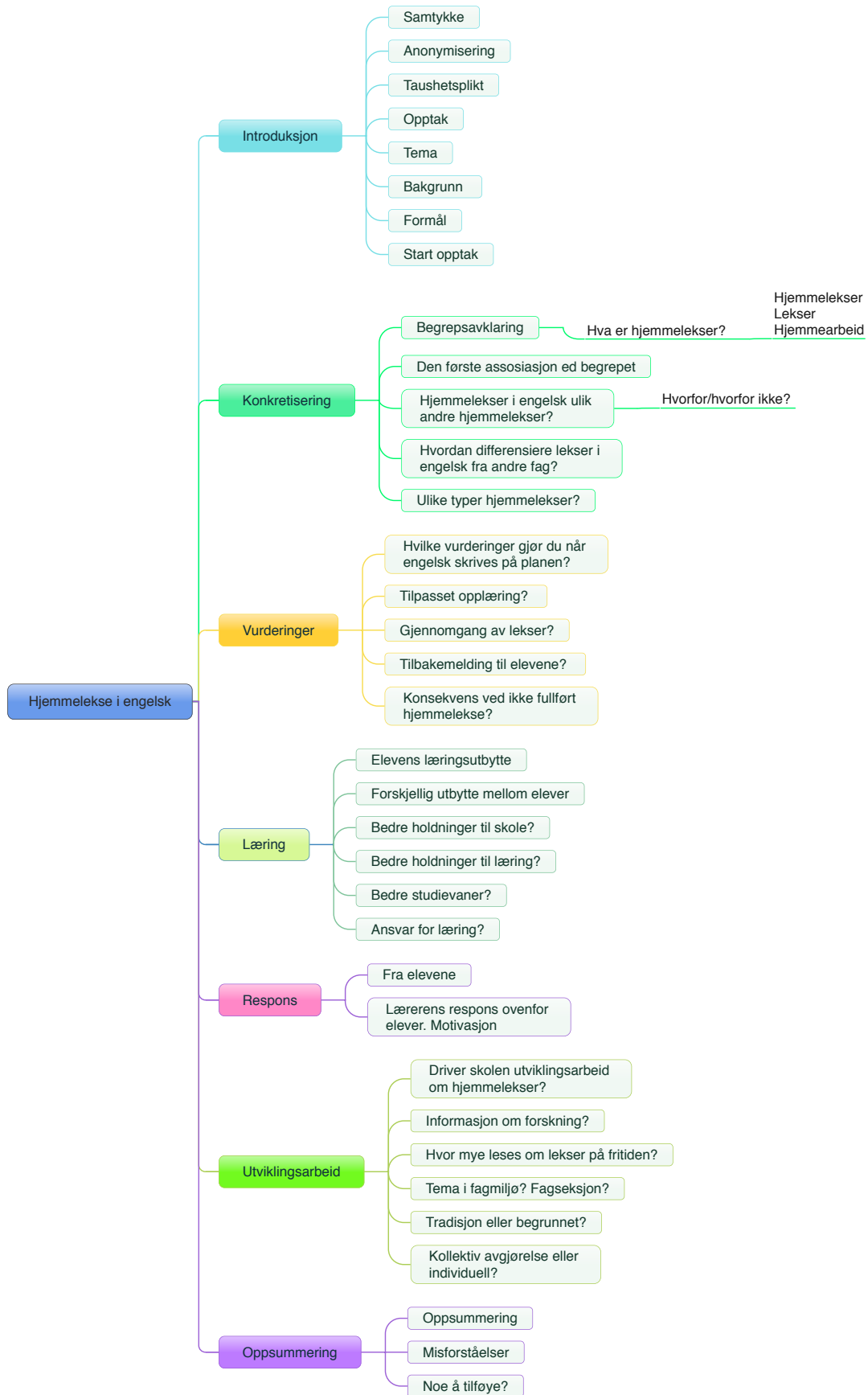
Intervjuguide: Hjemmelekser i engelsk.

Forventet varighet: 60 min

Tema	Spørsmål/samtale	Estimert tid
Introduksjon	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Løs prat for å komme i gang med samtale og intervju.❖ Informasjon om intervju:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Tema- Bakgrunn/Formål- Anonymisering- Taushetsplikt- Informasjon om opptak på bakgrunn av taushetsplikt og anonymisering.- Samtykke (se samtykkeskjema)❖ Start opptak.	5 min 5-10 min
Konkretisering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Begrepsavklaring: hjemmelekser, lekser eller hjemmearbeid. Legger informanten ulike ting i de ulike begrepene?❖ Tanker rundt begrepet hjemmelekser. Hva er det første som tenkes på da?❖ Er hjemmelekser i engelsk ulik andre hjemmelekser? Hvordan kan man i	10 – 15 min

	så fall differensiere hjemmelekser i engelsk i forhold til andre fag?	
Fokusområde	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hvilke vurderinger/hensyn tas når hjemmelekser føres på planen? Opplæringsloven? K06? ❖ Opplever du respons fra elevene på engelsklekser som tildeles? Hvordan er responsen? Er det ulik respons fra elev til elev? Uten å nevne individuelle forskjeller/detaljer. ❖ Hvilke konsekvenser vil det få for elevene dersom de ikke har gjort hjemmeleksene sine? ❖ Opplever du respons fra foreldre angående hjemmelekser? Hvordan utarter en slik respons seg i så fall? Uten å nevne navn eller beskrivelser. ❖ Hvordan ser du på sammenhengen mellom tilpasset opplæring og hjemmelekser? ❖ Bruker du tid på å gjennomgå leksene? Hvorfor/hvorfor ikke? 	20 – 30 min

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Foruten samtaler innad i fagmiljø, syns du informasjon om lekser er lett tilgjengelig og synlig? ❖ Hvor ofte gir du hjemmelekser? ❖ Hvordan føler du samarbeidet på skolen rundt hjemmelekser fungerer? 	
Oppsummering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Oppsummere samtalen. ❖ Ta opp mulige misforståelser. Få klarhet i utsagn. ❖ Er det noe du ønsker å legge til eller ta opp? 	10 min



Appendix 3. Approval from NSD



Kristin Killie
Institutt for lærerutdanning og pedagogikk UiT Norges arktiske universitet

9006 TROMSØ

Vår dato: 27.01.2017

Vår ref: 51971 / 3 / ASF

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 09.01.2017. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

51971	<i>Homework: how teachers reflect upon homework in English and justify it pedagogically</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	UiT Norges arktiske universitet, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Kristin Killie
Student	Sabine Volley

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 01.06.2017, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Kjersti Haugstvedt

Amalie Statland Fantoft

Kontaktperson: Amalie Statland Fantoft tlf: 55 58 36 41

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.