

Getting the Homework Done: Social Class and Parents' Relationship to Homework *

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the relationship between homework help and social class and describes parents' experiences and feelings about whether and how they help their eighth grade children with homework. Based on interviews with working- and middle-class parents, we find three types of engagement with homework among parents: 1) substantive help, 2) monitoring, and 3) fostering independence. Middle-class parents are somewhat more likely to offer substantive help than working-class parents, but middle- and working-class parents have similar levels of monitoring and fostering independence. Of the reasons respondents gave for not substantively helping with homework, working-class parents were more likely to point to their lack of knowledge or skill, while middle-class parents can pay for tutors when they do not understand the homework themselves. Social class is implicated in this analysis of parents' involvement in homework by way of human capital disadvantage for working-class parents and financial capital advantage for middle-class parents.

Keywords: homework, social class, parenting, middle school, early adolescence, American education

1. Parents and Homework

This qualitative paper examines the relationship between homework help and social class and describes parents' experiences and feelings about whether and how they help their eighth grade children with their homework. By homework we mean "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours" (Cooper, 1989, p. 7). Our interest in parental help with homework stems from a desire to understand parents' relationship with their children's homework and how that is related to social class. In this research we address two primary research questions: 1) In what ways are parents involved in their children's homework? and 2) Are there social class differences in the level and type of parental involvement in homework?

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1.1 Social Class and Helping with Homework

Research has found that social class plays a role in helping with homework. Robinson and Harris (2014), in their research on parental involvement, find that while other types of parental involvement in school, such as reading to children and discussing what happens at school, increase with social class (See also Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Lareau, 1987), helping with homework decreases with social class. Cooper et al. (2000) find that middle-class parents are more likely than poorer parents to provide support for their children's autonomy in their homework. Working-class parents may face some structural barriers to helping students with homework such as a lack of human capital. Some research, however, finds that social class does not play an important role in determining whether parents help their children with homework. Lee and Bowen (2006), for example, find no difference in the frequency of parental homework help by parents' educational attainment. Likewise, Green et al. (2007) find that socioeconomic status is not a significant predictor of home-based parental involvement. Dumont et al. (2012) find that parental homework help does not "mediate the relationship between family background and educational outcomes" (p. 55).

Coleman (1988) suggests that family background may impact children's achievement through financial capital, human capital and social capital. Helping with homework is a means of activating social capital within the family which in turn allows parents to pass on their own human capital to their children (Coleman, 1988). Parents with high levels of human capital may pass on their skills through homework help. Parents without high levels of human capital may use social capital to enhance their children's education as well. For example, Coleman (1988) writes about Asian immigrant parents with low levels of formal education who order two copies of school textbooks so that the parents can read one copy and help their children with their schoolwork. He notes that such families are low in human capital, but high in social capital (Coleman 1988).

1.2 Early Adolescence and Helping with Homework

Early adolescence may mark a shift in parenting practices when it comes to homework help. Baumrind (1991) notes that "[p]arental practices that change in the direction of greater responsiveness and independence granting are expected to facilitate the development of competence following puberty" (p. 125). Such practices may include the monitoring of homework and attempts to foster youth's independence in homework rather than substantive homework help. Young adolescents may seek to assert their own independence with respect to homework practices. The decision to help with homework may be out of parents' hands when youth decide on their own that they want to pursue homework alone. Chin and Philips (2004) describe such a scenario as an activation of "child capital," meaning that the child uses his or her own resources to influence an outcome (p. 187). Some children use their child capital to insist on doing homework without parental help even when parents may be willing to help.

1.3 Effects of Parents Helping with Homework

Relatively little research investigates the impact of parents helping with homework during the middle-school years (Balli et al., 1998). Vatterot (2009) notes that "most parents are unclear about what their role in homework is supposed to be." She adds that "[t]hey often get different messages from different teachers as to what and how much they are supposed to do" (p. 48). Parents also have different comfort levels with helping with homework (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2012; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Research on whether or not parental help with homework is beneficial to children is mixed as well. Cooper (2001), in a meta-analysis of research on whether parental involvement in homework is associated with students' achievement, finds the results to be "inconclusive" p. 45 (See also Cooper 1989; Patall et al 2008). Wolf (1979) finds that homework help is associated with positive achievement in some domains and negatively associated with achievement for other ages and fields of study.

For students in grades 6-12, Robinson and Harris (2014) find that helping with homework is negatively associated with reading and math achievement (See also Desimone, 1999). Hill and Tyson (2009), in a meta-analysis, find parental homework help to be "negatively related to achievement," while they find other types of home-based involvement such as taking children to museums or providing books to be positively related to achievement. They say that the negative relation between homework help and achievement may be due to too much pressure placed on children by parents, interference with youth's autonomy, differences in ways of explaining the material by parents and teachers, or that poorer students need more help from parents than stronger students. Likewise, Trautwein et al. (2009) suggest that eighth-grade teachers who support students' autonomy through homework assignments have students with more positive outcomes than those who design homework requiring greater parental involvement.

Kahle and Kelley (1994) find that student achievement is enhanced when parents assist with goal setting or when they work to provide a set time and place for homework and identify and address problem behavior around homework such as procrastination. Other research finds that homework that is specifically designed to incorporate family involvement can increase student achievement (Van Voorhis, 2001, 2003, 2004; Epstein & VanVoorhis, 2001). Cooper (2001) finds that the type of homework help makes a difference in terms of achievement. Students witness greater achievement when parents support homework autonomy than when parents become directly involved in homework (p. 45). A reason that results may be inconclusive is that parents may tailor their homework help to the child's needs. When children are excelling in school, parents may be more likely to support homework autonomy, whereas when the child is experiencing difficulties they may become more directly involved in homework sometimes at the behest of the teacher (Cooper, 2001; Epstein 1988; Hill and Tyson, 2009). Rather than providing direct homework help, some research suggests that during the adolescent years parents can best help their children to "develop effective self regulation skills and routines" (Xu and Corno, 2003 p. 506; See also Callahan et al., 1998; Toney, Kelley, Lanclos 2003).

2. Data and Fieldwork Methodology

Much of the work on parental involvement with homework has been quantitative. To understand parents' relationships with their children's homework we undertook a qualitative analysis, which can better get at parents' feelings about their children's homework. For this qualitative study, we interviewed parents of eighth graders at two racially and ethnically diverse middle schools in a large northeastern city in the United States. One school, McKinley, is a magnet school comprised mainly of middle-class families. It competitively selects students from the entire metropolitan area based on test scores and academic evaluations. The school is near the city's center, which is a popular area that contains a mix of restaurants, other businesses, and tourism. The school's racial-ethnic composition is 46.8% white, 30.3% black, 7.6% Latino, 14.6% Asian and 0.7% other. Nearly 40% of students receive free or reduced price lunch. The other school, Glasgow, is a neighborhood zoned school comprised predominantly of working-class and poor families. The school's racial-ethnic composition is 7.7% white, 32.9% black, 46.7% Latino, 12.6% Asian, and .1% other. Over 80% of students at Glasgow receive free or reduced price lunch. Glasgow is situated in a racially and ethnically diverse community that contains a mix of businesses and residences. Community residents are a combination of people who are working, unemployed, and currently out of the labor market. According to 2000 Census data, one third of residents are poor, half of adults have less than a high school diploma, and fewer than half of adults are in the labor market.¹

We recruited parents into our study by first introducing the study at school parent meetings and then sending letters home with eighth-grade students that described the research project and invited their parents' participation in our study. Eighty-seven (87) parents completed a sociodemographic survey that gathered background information about the family, including a roster of household members, family income and other financial resources, education and occupation of caregiver(s), as well as self-reported race and ethnicity. Selecting from these respondents, we used a purposeful sampling strategy to invite respondents for in-person interviews, which typically lasted between 2 and 4 hours. Our goal was to select a diverse sample of parents with respect to race, class, and immigrant generation rather than one representative of the schools from which they were recruited. Interview respondents vary in social class (working class and middle class), race/ethnicity (white, black, Latino, Asian, and mixed-race), and immigrant generation. This analysis is based on an interview sample comprised of 28 working-class and 22 middle-class parents (n=50).^{2,3} We have 17 white, 16 black, 11 Latino, 2 Asian, and 4 mixed-race sets of parents in the sample. In terms of immigrant generation, of those interviewed, 11 were first generation, 6 were second generation and 33 were third-and-later generation.⁴ Our use of a diverse sample gives us confidence that the experiences of working- and middle-class families reported in our study are not limited to those of blacks, whites, and those who are native born.

Although all of the middle-class parents were recruited from the magnet school, not all of the working-class parents were recruited from the zoned school. Four working-class respondents come from the magnet school. The realities of class segregation in residential space and, thus, school attendance patterns made it impossible to recruit middle-class respondents from the working-class neighborhood zoned school. Nevertheless, our sampling strategy has some benefits. First, by drawing working- and middle-class families from mostly separate schools, we avoid limits on class variation that may arise from sampling from a single school (Chin & Phillips, 2004). Our sampling strategy produced a diverse sample, but without the potential drawback of constraints on class variation. Second, use of a city-wide magnet school gave us access to middle-class families in the city, which allows us to avoid introducing an urban-suburban divide mapped along class lines.

In our interviews with parents, we ask about where homework is done, how parents feel about helping their children with homework and teachers' expectations of homework help, and whether and how they helped with homework. We recognize that collecting data on social behavior via interviews creates the possibility of a disconnect between parents' responses to our questions and their actual behavior, but we feel that parents' answered the questions honestly. Because we asked follow up questions and probes on how parents are involved in homework, what their feelings and expectations are for homework completion and their beliefs around homework help we can contextually come to a conclusion of how well their responses to the series of questions triangulate.

We created analytic codes that emanated from the data (consistent with inductive analysis) and developed a glossary for the coding scheme to articulate the meaning of codes. Utilizing a qualitative research software application, Dedoose, we coded the text data into groups and more refined sub-groups to identify patterns and variation in parental homework help.

3. Results

3.1 Parents' Relationships with Homework

Parents' relationships with homework take three main forms: 1) substantive help 2) monitoring and 3) fostering independence. Some parents fall into more than one category. Finally, some parents have no engagement with homework because they lack the human capital to help.

3.1.1 Substantive Help

Substantive help involves helping the child with the actual substance of the homework. Half of middle-class parents and 39.2% of working class parents provide substantive help to their children. This suggests that parents with high human capital are activating their social capital to pass on their own human capital to their parents. A number of those with low human capital also use social capital to help their children's achievement through homework help. Some parents note that teachers and other professionals give mixed advice about whether parents should provide substantive help or not. For example, Holly, a white middle-class mother and her son's stepfather felt their son, Ian, "wasn't ready to handle all of his homework on his own," so they would go through his planner every night with him and "walk him through his homework." They also help him prepare for tests, such as recently in Social Studies, where they felt that there was so much material and little guidance about what to study. Holly has been wondering how much help she and her husband should be giving their son so she looked online and found conflicting suggestions. She decided to ask his teachers, but she got different advice there too. "So, some of them, you know, have said, 'You have to let them make some mistakes and figure it out.' And then one of his teachers said, 'Keep on him.' So, it's been a mixed bag of advice."

Some assignments explicitly require parents' help (Balli et al 1998; Epstein 1988). Juliette is a working-class Haitian immigrant and supports the idea of substantively helping her daughter with homework in general, saying "it's good when your kids get from school and then you watch them, what they doing, you know, helping them with the, the homework, if something that they don't understand, you know...they could asking you and you, you have to be there for them to helping them." Juliette describes a recent assignment where her daughter needed help on a project about family history. She says, "I have to tell her what, what I was doing when I was kids...how everything was that I go through...you know, that my...my mom and my father's name, you know." Although this assignment explicitly required parental involvement, Juliette also participates in helping substantively with homework when parental involvement is not explicit.

One way that parents help kids substantively is by helping them study for tests. Tamara, a black working-class mother helps prepare her daughter for tests by quizzing her with flash cards. She describes a recent episode when her daughter asked her to help her study for a test...

She had um some play [flash] cards, right. She had a lesson in chemistry, biology, and what different atoms mean. ...So she said, "Alright Mommy, now you test me." I said ok, so I'm askin her a question, [She says,] "I don't know that one," [I] ask her the next question, [and she says,] "I don't know that one." (Laughs) I said, "You know what, when you get finished, figure it out, then you come to me and let me test you." Yeah she did, so. Mhmm. I think it's pretty good, you know, if, your child have a test comin' the next day for you to go ahead and just test them yourself, you now. Then they know how strong they points are and what to go back on.

Another way parents provide substantive help is by helping to provide supplementary material to help learn the materials taught in school in a different way. Pilar, a working class Puerto Rican mother describes how she and her husband, who is from Nicaragua, provide additional educational resources to improve their son's schoolwork...

If he has to go to the library my husband takes him with him. Or if not, my husband looks for other books and he teaches him the material before they assign it at school and he helps him here. So that when they give him that material, he already knows...and then...he won't be lost...when there's something new and he would get scared...and he would get nervous because when they give him something he doesn't know, he gets really nervous. ...The same nerves betray him and he even cries because he doesn't know. So sometimes my husband always helps him in this aspect, so that he can overcome this. And when they give it to him in school ...he doesn't get scared and doesn't suffer this impact. So then ...he helps him quite a bit (translated from Spanish).

Middle-class parents, in particular, help their children when writing papers. Sal, a white middle class father, describes the process of helping his son, Tyler, with a paper...

You know, if he's gotta write something, he can ask us, you know, a better word for, you know, sad. We'll help him out with that-be the human thesaurus, but I'm not gonna sit down and, you know, dictate to him. Ah...but I'm happy to go over all of his spelling errors, which are many, and edit. I do edit it if, you know, after he's written it. I'll go through it and say, "Well, I have no idea what you are talking about here, because you didn't say who you're talking about here. I think you gotta say who you are talking about here," you know things like that, 'cause I'm used to editing things at work. And I get my red pen out ...but he takes that well.

He further helps his son with the computer to make sure that the report looks nice. Tyler, for example, was printing out the pictures and text separately for a report and then gluing the pictures into the paper. He taught him how to "put the picture on the page with the text" using the computer. He says, "I don't think they get a lot of training on, you know, how to present their work and, you know, what the possibilities are... because they just don't know that you can do that. ...So, I've found myself doing a lot of computer training with both the kids just to show them that they can do this a lot more efficiently if they do it, you know, this way and not like I said, cutting everything out and pasting it back on." When his son needs it, Sal provides assistance to his son when writing papers.

Mallory, a white middle-class mother also helps her son, Nicolas, in writing papers. Part of her help involves helping him to think critically about his source material. She says...

So, this is his research paper, so he's quoting all this stuff to me yesterday. I said, "Where did you get this information?" And I said, "So, you read it on the Internet and you don't ever say to yourself, 'Should I think about this?'" And we were just talking about how you have to examine sources and you don't believe everything you read and you have to apply some kind of questioning, that you don't just read things and assume them. Because that's what I want him to learn in school-to not swallow what he's fed-to ask questions, to read the newspaper and say, "Well, this doesn't quite sound right. What's wrong with this?"

Mallory helps her son by asking him about the sources that he is using for his paper.

Middle-class parents may be more likely to substantively help with homework because they have the human capital to do so. Their college education may make them more comfortable with the work that their children bring home. Middle- and working-class parents also talk about helping their children with homework in somewhat different ways. Working class parents who help substantively talk more about quizzing students to prepare them for tests and helping with projects, while middle-class parents talk more about helping their children with essays and papers. Middle-class parents report helping with outlining, editing and assembling sources for their children's papers. It may be that parents with a college education are more familiar with writing papers and can thus help their children with that aspect of homework. It may also be that middle-class students at McKinley are assigned more papers than working-class students at Glasgow.

3.1.2. Monitoring Homework.

A smaller number of parents, 10.7% of the working class and 9% of the middle class, provide homework help through monitoring rather than offering substantive help with homework. Monitoring involves making sure the child completes the homework without engaging in the substance of the work.

It allows the child greater independence in doing homework than substantive help. Gwen and Andrea are white middle-class mothers who are a long-term same-sex couple. They do not help their son, Harris, substantively with his homework, but they monitor his homework and make sure that he does it. About this Gwen says...

Now Harris doesn't do all the homework he's supposed to do, and so we....we really....Andrea's actually taken the role of being a nag, which we didn't have to do with [our older son], but we do have to do with Harris. And so we're always asking him, "Does he have homework and when is he gonna do and has he done it?" And we have to.You know, I'd say that we have, even if we're keeping our hands off certain things, we're pretty achievement oriented. We ...expect kids to do well and that, that comes through and we don't have to be going over the homework assignments in order to get that to come through. But I think in other families it's important for the schools to support the parents to really pay attention to the homework, because maybe the achievement motivation isn't as intrinsic in the family as it is in ours.

For Gwen and Andrea helping with homework means monitoring to make sure that Harris completes his homework.

Erica is a black middle class mother. Her involvement with homework means going through her daughter's planner to ensure that her daughter is completing her assignments. When she was younger she had to sign a sheet to verify that her daughter had completed her homework. She does not have to do that anymore, but still continues the practice of going through her planner. She says...

Even though I didn't have to sign papers anymore and things like that, I still had to follow behind her to make sure that she was doing what was written down in her planner. That planner has been a life saver for me. I still go through her planner.

Likewise, Adrienne, a black working-class mother is involved with her son's homework by making sure the homework gets done. She says...

I went to check up on his homework when he come in here. I made sure he did his homework. Was his homework done?...Projects, I always ask him if he had any projects coming up. No falling back on projects. He stayed on top of his game.

Thus, for Adrienne, homework help means making sure her son "stays on his game" and completes all his homework.

3.1.3. Fostering Homework Independence

In families where parents do not offer substantive help with homework, the primary reason is that parents feel that children have achieved homework independence. We define homework independence as the decision either by the child or the parent that the child is ready to complete his or her homework independent of parental help. Nearly 40% of working-class and 45.4% of middle-class parents say that their child is in a process of homework independence. Vatterott (2009) suggests that middle school is an appropriate time for parents to "wean their children off homework help" so that they are "rarely involved at the high school level" (p. 49). Many parents also feel that by the eighth grade the child should be working independently on homework. Harriet, a black working class mother says that her son Isaiah has always been self-sufficient, something that she encourages. Of her transition away from helping him with homework, she says...

When they come home you supposed to be able to help them [with homework] and I did up until I think a certain, maybe 4th or 5th grade then I started seein' him getting more independent. You didn't need to like sit over top of him and guide him and that's the way we do things.

Marie, a black middle-class class mother feels that middle school is the right time for youth to reach homework independence. She says...

I think at a certain point, the child should be able to do it his or her self. At that certain point, I believe is middle school. Um....with both of 'em-when they first...from pre-K to whatever to 4th grade, we sit down, we'll do the homework. "Let me see your homework." That's with both of them. When they got to middle school,when they first started, "Let's see your homework, you know, let's do it." Fine, but after a while, they're on their own and like I said because I slouched off, it doesn't matter me sittin' down with 'em if I don't know what they're talkin' about. That's with the math....English, I can handle. But after a while, it's their responsibility and that's the way I leave it and thank God, it's worked. "You know, you know what you have to do. You know what you want to do. You don't want to be here with Mom and Dad all your life."

Grace, a black-Asian middle class mother, feels that homework is an area where eighth graders should be independent to make their own mistakes. She says...

So I think to some level, you have to allow teen-agers or certain age kids.....especially if they're in [the gifted program] and they're doing all these extracurricular activities.....obviously they're doing something right....give them some leeway and let them make their mistakes here and there.

Bette is a white middle-class mother and thinks that eighth graders are old enough to do their own homework, and that her own daughter is very independent in doing her homework. Bette thinks that teachers play a role in fostering homework independence among eighth graders. She says, "It does seem to me that a teacher should be focused more on helping kids to be more independent and give them strategies for studying that don't include parents."

Some parents who provide some homework help to their eighth graders still value the idea of homework independence. For example, Jacky, a white middle-class mother, says...

Well, I think half of homework is learning how to do stuff by yourself, so if you are doing too much of it, you're going to undermine the most important thing, which is them learning how to be responsible.

Other parents are moving towards a process of homework independence for their children. Some researchers have found that parental efforts to teach children self-management strategies can increase homework completion and quality as well as overall academic performance (Callahan et al 1998; Young et al 1991). Erica, a black middle-class class mother, as mentioned earlier, still regularly goes through her daughter Faith's planner to make sure she is doing the work that is written there. She gave her daughter substantive homework help when she was younger to prepare her for independent work during the middle school years, but has now moved totally away from offering substantive help. Erica describes the process of Faith's transition to homework independence ...

I did it [helped with homework] when she was younger because I felt like, and this is truly selfish, I felt like in order to prepare her for school when she got older whereas I wouldn't have to be involved, I needed to teach her things when she was young. So, I felt as though, "Okay, I'm gonna read this chapter with you, but I'm gonna also show you how to outline it. And I'm gonna also show you how to study, because when you get older I don't want to have to do this," and it was purely selfish reasons. It actually worked for her, because she's extremely organized. When they all study for a test, she studies like I study for college. It just works. Her teachers love her notebooks, because her notebooks are always organized, they're always color-coordinated. They could always tell what goes with what. And that is because I used to sit with Faith every single night and do her homework and for a year I made it my business for a year when Faith was in the 5th grade to study with her for every single test, because, "If I study with you for a year for every single test, I shouldn't have to do this in the 6th grade. Faith would be like, "Oh, Mom, nobody else's Mom studies with them for every test." But now, I don't bother Faith at all when it comes to her work and studying. She doesn't stress about it. She doesn't ask me for help. She knows when she has to study. She knows how much time it's gonna take her to study according to what class it is, because math is harder; you know you have problems to go over. You're gonna need more time for math than you're gonna need for English. You know, if it's English, it's a paper. You read the book, you type up the paper, and you know you're done. Math is a completely different story, so I think in that respect, I did us both a favor whereas now, it's just not a problem.

After working with Faith so closely in the fifth grade, Erica stopped helping her in the sixth grade. She describes the transition from fifth to sixth grade as a hard one because she had to let go and be willing to let her daughter fail. About the sixth grade year she says...

I just completely stopped and you know, she messed up a couple times. She messed up, but she was able to pull her grade back up, because I think she really didn't think I would stop. Like I think she thought, "You know, Mom is just saying that. She's just talking, but, you know, she'll help me 'cause she doesn't want me to fail." You know and that was the thing that she had in her mind. "My Mom is not gonna let me fail." [But] I thought, "You're gonna have to fail," because I saw it coming.

Erica, like Grace, feels that mistakes offer a learning opportunity in the process of homework independence.

Mallory, a white middle-class mother, had a similar strategy to Erica's and has been taking steps to lessen her involvement in her son's homework since the fifth grade. She says...

I did it [helped with homework] to help him adapt in 5th grade and then as I said, it's lessened every year. And it's like last year, I told him, "I'm not gonna do this in 8th grade. You have to take over your own studying and it has to be self-directed and you've got to learn to budget your time, because in high school, this stuff is a lot more important.

Unlike Erica, however, Mallory hasn't been able to completely pull away from substantive homework help. Although she said she wouldn't help in the 8th grade, she still provides substantive help in various ways.

Many parents cite that their eighth-grade children don't need or want their parents' help and would rather do homework independently. Such a situation is indicative of "child capital," the notion that children use their own resources to advance an outcome (Chin and Philips 2004). Joella, a working-class black mother supports the idea of helping kids with homework, but her own daughter is not interested. She says...

Well, Kendra, with a lot of her homework, she, I don't know why, but she doesn't want help with it. She, she likes to study on her own, uh, and like I said, especially when she does her homework in her room. She just wants to be left alone listening to her music doing her homework.

Layla is a working-class Puerto Rican mother of eighth-grade twins whose daughters prefer to work independently. She says...

My kids are more independent than other kids so that's why maybe it's strange 'cause some parents have to sit down and read or go over the words with them and [the] writing on the paper and you know. They usually test each other. My three daughters work together. They sit there and they have to test each other. They help each other do projects. It's totally different.

Gloria is a white middle-class mother who doesn't help her daughter with homework because her daughter has never expressed an interest in being helped. She says...

I don't think it's that great, because if, you know, the child doesn't want your help, they're not gonna want your help. ...I mean, Heidi has never asked me a question about her homework, like how do you do this or what am I supposed to do here? She's never asked me that question.

Although she thinks it okay for parents to help with homework if the child actually wants the help, she emphasizes that "I don't think a parent should force themselves on the child."

3.1.4. When Parents Don't Know How to do the Homework

Structural factors also play a role in why some parents do not help with homework. Sometimes parents do not help their children with homework because they do not know how to do it themselves. Although both middle- and working-class parents admit that they are not confident helping their children with homework, this is more prevalent among working-class than middle-class parents. Nine percent of middle-class parents and nearly 18% of working class parents do not help with homework because they do not have the skills to help. The MetLife survey of the American teacher finds that the subjects in which parents find themselves ill-equipped to help their children are foreign language and math (MetLife 2007). The survey also finds that as children move to higher levels of study, and particularly in the transition to high school, parents feel less able to help with homework (MetLife 2007). Monica is a white middle-class class mother who cannot help her son substantively with homework because she feels the material taught at McKinley is too advanced for her. She says...

I can't help...to be honest with you, McKinley is way above me even though I'm a teacher, and I can't help my kids anymore.

Wendy is a white middle-class mother. She does not help son with homework because she lacks confidence in her abilities, especially math. She says, "So, I couldn't help with math, that's for sure." She goes on to say, "He really hasn't asked for help and I doubt I could do it...Well, I can't do Spanish, can't do the math. English I could help with, that's it, yeah."

Although some middle-class parents expressed concern about their abilities to help with homework, such concerns were more prominent among working-class parents. Sarah is a black working-class mother who doesn't feel she has the skills to help her children with their homework. She says...

You know like really the only way I can help my child with they work is if they explain it to me. You understand, if they explain it to me then I can help them, you know as best as I could but the work that they bring home I can't do it that good.

Gabriella, a working-class mother, grew up in El Salvador where she never had the opportunity to go to school past the first grade. She does not speak English well and regrets that she cannot help with homework. She says...

Since I never went to school, I can't help mine. But yes, I think it's a good role and our responsibility...You understand? Our job...but, unfortunately I can't help with that, help, "Look, here, math...look, your reading is well done." You know, I didn't go to school and...it's something that you regret at this age. But now I have my kids and I have to look for help with whomever I can, you understand? (translated from Spanish)

Gabriella says that her son almost always does his homework alone.

Language alone can be a barrier for parents who do not speak English well. Carina is a working-class mother who migrated from Puerto Rico and who says, "I can't help them with their homework because I don't know English." She believes helping children with homework is a good idea, but she goes on to say, "but when it comes to the homework I can't because I just don't know English and there's nothing in Spanish" (translated from Spanish). She says she could help a little in math because it's numbers. Louie (2012) finds that some immigrant parents do not help with homework because they lack the skills rather than because of lack of interest. Ling is a working class mother who migrated from Vietnam. She also finds language to be a barrier in helping with homework. She says...

Yeah, because my children, they know me, I'm not very good English...reading or writing something, yeah, so they have [to do homework] ...by themselves. They have [to do homework] by themselves and they do...mostly everything by themselves.

Ling's language skills mean that her children have to do homework without assistance from her.

When parents do not know how to help with homework, sometimes they call on others to provide help that their children need. Marie is a black middle-class mother who now regrets that "I slouched off and you know just did what I had to do the bare minimal to get by" because she cannot help her son with his math homework. She says "He's comin' up with algebra. I can't help him with that." Her solution was to get her son a tutor who could give him the help he needs with his math homework. Of this decision to hire a tutor she says...

When he comes to me and says, "Well, Mom, what's Pi over this and that?" "Oh, okay, let's sit down and do it." I can't...I can't. I have to say, "Oh, go to your Dad." And then his Dad says, "Who's good in math? I can't do this either." So, we had to get a tutor, but at least I could have tried. So, I'm not able to help them there.

Middle-class parents have the financial capital to pay for tutors for their children. Working-class parents look for other solutions. Anne, a black working-class mother mentioned above, says that she is not really good at math. She says, "I'd say I'm usually 80% of the time I'm effective at being able to help her, but there are times where I just don't have a clue." For those times she has found some external resources to help her daughter. She says...

I learned a lot because we'll get on with AOL homework help or we'll get on with ...there's a hotline, one of the local television stations has a hotline and we'll all get on the phone and we'll try to...they're telling me how to...how to do it as well as her. ...One of the local television stations has volunteer students from [local universities]. It's a bunch of college students that there's a phone bank and generally, they're very helpful. And they're....you know, it's newer to them. I mean I'm 42 years old, so the math, half of, I've never even seen before, you know, even the terminology. She's like, "We're estimating." I'm like, "Estimating...you know, what is that?" And it's....I call it rounding, but it's not, you know. So, they're really helpful and I think it's funded...well; it's volunteers....it's volunteers. So, it's run by, I think it's NBC or one of the local television stations that does it. And actually I prefer that to the AOL, because you're talking to someone live and they can kind of break it down better for the children. But we have utilized that in the past, especially with the math.

Schools can also play a role in helping with homework when parents lack the skills. Carina, the working-class Puerto Rican mother mentioned above, doesn't speak much English. She says she can't help her daughter with her homework except sometimes math, but she feels that her daughter does need "someone to help her." She likes that the school "offer[s] a program where they can stay at school and get help with assignments (translated from Spanish)." Many of the parents with children at Glasgow report that their children participate in an after-school program where homework help is offered among other activities.

Other parents get help from people they know. Polly is a working class mother. She does help her daughter, Robin, with homework, but sometimes she has a hard time figuring out how to help her. That is when she calls on her relatives. She says...

I like the idea [of helping with homework] but ...because of my educational level, I have a little more hard time for that. So I do rely on my mom for that a lot...My mom will turn around and help them out. I'll go over stuff with them and I've been able, a lot of times, to figure things out. It's getting a lot harder for me, because Robin's level, because her level is a lot higher than whatever ...I was taught. And that bugs me a little bit, that I can't do as much as I want to do for her, but then I always turn around and try to figure out as many ways as possible, like my cousin graduated from [a local university]. So she helps me out too. I can turn around if it's something that we can't do...you know, pick up the phone and she can help her out over the phone and stuff like that. And I have other people that...back me up on that. Cause I can't do too much of that.

Robin uses her family members to provide homework help when she lacks the skills to help.

4. Conclusion

All eighth graders are given homework in a variety of subject areas; it is a standard expectation and experience in the middle years of schooling. It is a facet of learning that occurs in the home and is done on family time, though it is assigned by teachers through schools. Parents across social class are invested in their children doing well and getting their homework done. We find three types of engagement with homework among parents: 1) substantive help, 2) monitoring, and 3) fostering independence. Middle-class parents are somewhat more likely to offer substantive help than working-class parents, but middle-and working-class parents have similar levels of monitoring and fostering independence. In terms of substantive help, middle-class parents report helping their children more with papers, while working-class papers report helping with quizzing and projects. Not helping with homework due to a lack of human capital occurs is more likely in the case of working-class parents, due to their limited schooling and educational experience. Some of these parents seek to outsource homework help by soliciting homework help from others when they cannot provide it themselves. While middle-class parents have the financial capital to hire a tutor, working-class parents seek out low-cost alternatives. The middle-class has greater human capital than the working class and they use this human capital to assist their children with schoolwork. An unfortunate paradox results. Homework presents itself to middle-class parents involved in substantive help as an opportunity to teach their children new skills (such as computing) or further enhance their skill sets (such as through revising papers). For working-class parents who cannot provide substantive assistance, homework presents itself as a challenge, for both them and their children, and these parents feel constrained by their lack of knowledge to be helpful with the homework. In this way, homework does appear to widen social inequality as it is an opportunity for some and a challenge for others along social class lines. Homework potentially serves as a mechanism to further advantage those students who already experience some privilege in the school system while further disadvantaging those who may already be in a marginalized position.

Some forms of homework engagement are not tied to human capital. For example, all parents can monitor and foster independence and we find similar proportions of parents doing this across social class. These forms of engagement foster greater independence in early adolescence with respect to homework. Monitoring involves making sure that the child completes the homework without engaging the substantive material of the homework. It may entail providing a space for homework, checking in with the child, or going through the planner. Fostering homework independence is a process whereby parents ease out of providing substantive help to their children and allow children to take full responsibility for homework on their own. Our results suggest, however, that becoming homework independent is not entirely under parents' control as youth use their "child capital" to assert homework independence on their own. Ultimately we find that social class plays a role in substantive help with homework, but not forms of engagement that do not require human capital such as monitoring and fostering homework independence. Schools can play a role in leveling some of these class differences by offering homework help on site where working-class children might get help with homework that parents cannot provide.

There are some limitations to this study. We did not examine the students' actual homework so our work cannot speak to the potential differences in the types of homework at the two schools and how that might impact parental involvement in homework. We also did not interview the eighth graders about their parents' involvement in their homework. Future research could include these elements.

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Endnotes

¹ We provide only a limited number of sociodemographic indicators in order to protect the anonymity of the neighborhood.

² While recognizing the robust debate around the question of how to measure social class, the approach we adopt is in service of analyzing the “ways in which unequal life conditions and individual attributes generate salient effects in the lives of individuals” (Wright 2008:336). Such an approach is consistent with a measure of class that is reflective of the “relationship of people to income-generating resources” (p. 331). Consequently, a bachelor’s degree held by at least one parent or caregiver served as our measure of middle-class status. This measure is consistent with Weber’s (1947) focus on skills and expertise. Moreover, this measure is intricately related to other indicators traditionally used to measure social class. Possession of postsecondary educational credentials affects access to and placement in the occupational structure (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Collins, 1979). It also affects the wages and salaries one can command in the labor market. In our sample, 60% of working-class families report earning less than \$25,000 per year, while the same percentage of middle-class families report earning more than \$75,000 per year.

³ The overwhelming majority of working-class parents were in the labor force and employed. Specifically, 89.7% were in the labor force. Of those in the labor force, 80.8% worked full time and 3.8% worked part time.

⁴ We categorize those from the island of Puerto Rico as first generation even though Puerto Rico is part of the United States. Those from the island have some similarities such as use of Spanish and lack of familiarity with the school system that make them similar to immigrants.