

Rethinking HOMEWORK

Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs

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The Cult(ure) of Homework

Homework is a long-standing education tradition that, until recently, has seldom been questioned. The concept of homework has become so ingrained in U.S. culture that the word *homework* is part of the common vernacular, as exemplified by statements such as these: “Do your homework before taking a trip,” “It’s obvious they didn’t do their homework before they presented their proposal,” or “The marriage counselor gave us homework to do.” Homework began generations ago when schooling consisted primarily of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and rote learning dominated. Simple tasks of memorization and practice were easy for children to do at home, and the belief was that such mental exercise disciplined the mind. Homework has generally been viewed as a positive practice and accepted without question as part of the student routine. But over the years, homework in U.S. schools has evolved from the once simple tasks of memorizing math facts or writing spelling words to complex projects.

As the culture has changed, and as schools and families have changed, homework has become problematic for more and more students, parents, and teachers. The Internet and bookstores are crowded with books offering parents advice on how to get

children to do homework. Frequently, the advice for parents is to “remain positive,” yet only a handful of books suggest that parents should have the right to question the amount of homework or the value of the task itself. Teachers, overwhelmed by an already glutted curriculum and pressures related to standardized tests, assign homework in an attempt to develop students’ skills and to extend learning time. At the same time, they are left frustrated when the students who most need more time to learn seem the least likely to complete homework. Teachers are afraid not to give homework, for fear of being perceived as “easy.”

With diversity among learners in our schools at levels that are higher than ever, many teachers continue to assign the same homework to all students in the class and continue to disproportionately fail students from lower-income households for not doing homework, in essence punishing them for lack of an adequate environment in which to do homework. At a time when demand for accountability has reached a new high in its intensity, research fails to prove that all that homework is worth all that trouble. (The research on homework is discussed in Chapter 3.)

Although many people remain staunchly in favor of homework, a growing number of teachers and parents alike are beginning to question the practice. These critics are reexamining the beliefs behind the practice, the wisdom of assigning hours of homework, the absurdly heavy backpack, and the failure that can result when some students don’t complete homework. There’s a growing suspicion that something is wrong with homework.

This more critical look at homework represents a movement away from the pro-homework attitudes that have been consistent over the last two decades (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). As a result, a discussion of homework stirs controversy as people debate both sides of the issue. But the arguments both for and against homework are not new, as indicated by a consistent swing of the pendulum over the last hundred years between pro-homework and anti-homework attitudes.

A Brief History of Homework

The history of homework and surrounding attitudes is relevant because the roots of homework dogma developed and became entrenched over the last 100 years. Attitudes toward homework have historically reflected societal trends and the prevailing educational philosophy of the time, and each swing of the pendulum is colored by unique historical events and sentiments that drove the movement for or against homework. Yet the historical arguments for and against homework are familiar. They bear a striking similarity to the arguments waged in today's debate over homework.

At the end of the 19th century, attendance in the primary grades 1 through 4 was irregular for many students, and most classrooms were multiage. Teachers rarely gave homework to primary students (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). By the 5th grade, many students left school for work; fewer continued to high school (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). In the lower grades, school focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic; in grammar school (grades 5 through 8) and high school, students studied geography, history, literature, and math. Learning consisted of drill, memorization, and recitation, which required preparation at home:

At a time when students were required to say their lessons in class in order to demonstrate their academic prowess, they had little alternative but to say those lessons over and over at home the night before. Before a child could continue his or her schooling through grammar school, a family had to decide that chores and other family obligations would not interfere unduly with the predictable nightly homework hours that would go into preparing the next day's lessons. (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 174)

Given the critical role that children played as workers in the household, it was not surprising that many families could not

Economic Diversity Issues: The “Haves” and the “Have-Nots”

Economic diversity of families holds perhaps the greatest challenge as schools struggle to implement fair and equitable homework policies. There appears to be an ever-widening chasm between the rich and the poor (Zuckerman, 2006), which has major implications for education in general and homework in particular. One indication of this trend is that between 1995 and 2004, families headed by college graduates showed a 75.8 percent *increase* in net worth, whereas families headed by high school dropouts showed a *decrease* of 26.2 percent (Pethokoukis, 2006).

America is fast becoming a nation of haves and have-nots, with rising income inequality. Data from the Federal Reserve for 2001 to 2004 shows that median family income rose just 1.6 percent during that period, compared with 9.5 percent during 1998 to 2001. Income distribution from 1995 to 2004, during both an economic boom and a recession, kept tilting toward the already wealthy. The top income quartile gained 77 percent, while the bottom gained just 8 percent. (Pethokoukis, 2006, p. 43)

Socioeconomic status separates the haves from the have-nots in several concrete ways, all of which can affect learning. The works of Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) and Richard Rothstein (2004) document important gaps between the home environments of lower-class students and students from the middle or upper class. First, there is a *reading gap*—lower-class students may not have books in the home, are less likely to be read to in the home, and are less likely to see their parents reading for pleasure or reading to solve problems. Second, there is a *conversation gap*—professional parents speak more than twice as many words per hour to their children than do welfare parents. By the age of 3, children of professional parents have a vocabulary twice as large as that of welfare children (Hart & Risley, 1995). And third, there is

(More options for extending the amount of time students have for homework are discussed in Chapter 5.)

Time on task refers to teachers too. They need adequate time to plan effective classroom activities. What if more time spent grading homework equaled less time to plan quality classroom instruction, which could affect the quality and amount of learning that occurs in the classroom?

Tenet #4: Task Is as Important as Time

The quality of the homework task is as important as the amount of time required (Bryan & Burstein, 2004). Students make decisions about whether to attempt homework based on their assessment of the task. Is the homework perceived to be interesting or boring, simple or tedious? Students are less likely to complete tasks they perceive as busywork. Quality homework tasks allow students to practice or process information, introduce them to material that will be discussed in the future, or provide feedback to teachers so they may check for understanding. Quality tasks are clearly related to classroom learning, are simple enough that students can complete them without help, and, it is hoped, are relevant to real life. (Examples of quality homework tasks are presented in greater detail in Chapter 4.)

Tenet #5: Learning Is Individual

Teachers know that each student is unique and that each student learns differently. A basic concern about the homework research is that it reports on *averages*. The 10-minute rule, for instance, suggests that 10 minutes of homework per grade level per night is the maximum amount of work that should be assigned. But that is an *average*—which means that for some students, the optimum amount of homework will differ. For instance, some 6th graders may be capable of sustaining attention and benefiting from 60 minutes a night, some may be capable of working 90 minutes a night, and others may have trouble completing just 30 minutes of homework and may not benefit from more.