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Homework : Providing quality activities that engage the students and extend the learning from the classroom

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Homework : Providing quality activities that engage the students and extend the learning from the classroom

Abstract

Many teachers require homework to be done to extend the learning from school to home. Homework expectations vary from elementary school to high school. This review attempts to look at the benefits of homework and also the issues that assigning homework brings. The review includes samples of variety of homework activities that are student-centered, developmentally appropriate, along with authentic, experiential, and challenging. It discusses ways to motivate students to complete homework and the need for teachers to assign more purposeful and creative activities. This review attempts to involve the parents also as partners in the education of their child as they support homework completion. The goal of all homework should be to lead students to learn more. It examines the traditional use of homework and how we can improve the assignments teachers give to students. It also provides websites as resources for teachers, students and parents that contain a variety of activities and also offer suggestions on ways to assist students in completing their work.

HOMEWORK: PROVIDING QUALITY ACTIVITIES THAT ENGAGE THE
STUDENTS AND EXTEND THE LEARNING FROM THE CLASSROOM

A Graduate Review

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Angella M. Blatz

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STUDENTS AND EXTEND THE LEARNING FROM THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Many teachers require homework to be done to extend the learning from school to home. Homework expectations vary from elementary school to high school. This review attempts to look at the benefits of homework and also the issues that assigning homework brings. The review includes samples of variety of homework activities that are student-centered, developmentally appropriate, along with authentic, experiential, and challenging. It discusses ways to motivate students to complete homework and the need for teachers to assign more purposeful and creative activities. This review attempts to involve the parents also as partners in the education of their child as they support homework completion. The goal of all homework should be to lead students to learn more. It examines the traditional use of homework and how we can improve the assignments teachers give to students. It also provides websites as resources for teachers, students and parents that contain a variety of activities and also offer suggestions on ways to assist students in completing their work.

Introduction

Each year teachers strive to help students succeed in school. Every year the demands on educators increase, with more varied learners and more curriculum that is expected to be taught. In order to meet the needs of each individual student, teachers seek additional assistance from home. The relationship established between home and school is vital and can impact student achievement. Traditionally, homework has served as a communication tool to inform parents of the objectives practiced in school and the practice of homework has been widely used at all grade levels. It is a common ritual in education for teachers to assign homework on a daily basis. Teachers see it as part of their job to extend the learning beyond the classroom. Teachers can provide activities that will be worthwhile and extend the learning from the concepts learned in class. However, is homework worthwhile time spent after school hours for students in the elementary grades? Does it aid in building a positive connection between home and school? Are there specific ways to educate parents to be allies in the education process?

History of Homework

Over the past 70 years, the practice of homework has been accepted and expected as a part of schooling. Many articles have been written and much debate has risen on the subject, however there is limited research on the effectiveness of homework. Over the years, schools have endorsed the use of homework despite the lack of data to prove its effect on student performance. According to Cooper (1994, p. 2), homework is defined as, “tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours” Van Voorhis (2004) explained that most teachers assign homework for one of the following purposes: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-teacher communication, parent-child relations, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment. Cooper (2011)

explains, in the 1940's homework was not a priority. There was more emphasis on extra-curricular activities. In 1957, the launch of Sputnik brought the attention back to homework. Homework was seen as a means to an end, academic excellence. In the 1960's, homework was assigned as drill and practice of concepts that were taught that day or it was used to prepare students for the next school day. Then in 1970's, after the Vietnam War, people were more focused on the emotional side of the child and homework was not a priority. Finally, in the 1980's we went back to the basics and thought that homework would help students achieve. Over the years, homework has always been a source for debate and people's views have changed. However, the practice of homework is still widely used today.

Many well-established homework traditions just do not make sense in today's world, yet tradition dies hard. We know that students differ in their "working speed", yet many teachers assign the same amount of work to all students, expecting struggling students to simply take the extra time to finish the task. We know that students have responsibilities and activities after school, yet many teachers assign homework at the end of one day and expect it back the next day. Cooper and Valentine (2007), state that if students are failing due to incomplete homework, it is unfair to punish them for the conditions of their homes that they can't control. Due to the high failure rate from homework, more and more schools are implementing Homework Support Programs, which provide time and space for students to complete homework after school, during the school day, or on Saturdays.

The authors, Cooper and Valentine (2007), noted that a strong relationship existed between the grade level of the student and the effect of the homework on students' achievement. Elementary students in grades K-5 have a hard time focusing to complete homework compared to middle and high school students. As Cooper and Valentine note, "Students in grades K-5 are

less able to ignore irrelevant information, stimulation, and distractions, unlike that of older students, who have learned to focus and concentrate (Cooper and Valentine, 2001).

Kravolec and Buell (2004) explain that the home life of families has changed over the past 20 years. Adults are busy with their work requirements and daily lives. The cell phone, computer, and e-mail have extended the work day. This means parents are even busier than before and may not be available to assist in completing the homework. This homework causes inequity due to the fact that many students lack the resources at home needed to compete with their peers. For the teachers assigning the homework, they have little understanding of the mistakes the students have made and little control over who does the work. Kravolec and Buell, (2004, p.3) refer to homework “as the black hole in the learning process, leaving teachers unaware of students’ true educational level or progress and unable to scaffold new knowledge for the students.” Also teachers have little control over its completion, resulting in teachers who feel the frustration of getting students to turn in their homework.

Homework is a way to extend the demands of the school, but is not helping students learn more. Homework often comes before the student’s health, the development of student interests, and the quality of family life, Kravolec and Buell (2004) argue. In education we must always put students first. We must always reflect upon the way we do things and strive to make them better. If what we are doing is not impacting the success of students then is it not worthwhile.

Methodology

Homework has been a topic of debate for many years. It has shown to be an effective way for students to achieve in middle school and high school. Homework is widely used in the elementary grades, however teachers need to ensure that the activities they assign are worthwhile and can be completed independently by the child. I researched to find the most valuable

homework activities and ways to motivate students to complete their homework and extend their learning at home. Also, I wanted to educate parents to ways that they can support their children to get the most out of students' homework. I searched the Rod Library and EBSCO, an on-line database of scholarly, peer reviewed journal articles, to find articles related to motivation and quality activities. I also searched for resources for parents to use to support their students. The keywords used to search for articles relating to homework and achievement were "homework", "achievement", "school grades", and "elementary". Upon finding the articles, I then utilized the references stated in the articles to research further on the topic on homework and achievement within the elementary school setting.

Literature Review

Positive Effects of Homework

Students have been doing homework for many years. Teachers strive to find ways to help students become successful. Homework can teach persistence, diligence, and responsibility. It can provide extra practice and time to refine student skills. Teachers can provide activities that will be worthwhile and extend the learning from the concepts learned in class. With so much to do and not enough time in the school day, it provides extra time on curriculum. Homework is a way to provide students with extra time on academics. John Buell, (2004) in his book, "Closing the Book on Homework," states that the way we treat homework signals how seriously we consider our central moral values. It dictates the amount of priority placed on work and young people.

Buell, (2004) explains that children whose families encourage at-home literacy activities have higher phonemic awareness and decoding skills, higher reading achievement in the elementary grades, and advanced oral language development. Buell also believes that homework

is the best antidote for T.V. and is key to a child's success in the global economy (Buell, 2004). Children sit idle in front of the T.V., when instead they could be practicing their skills and learning more. Homework gives the opportunity for children to stay competitive in the global market. The extra work and responsibility give students the edge. This is essential so that students graduating will be marketable and competitive in the job market.

Homework is a way to keep parents in tune with their child's education. Michael Winerip (1999, p.5) wrote "the more homework that is assigned at an early age, the more the parent is forced to be involved." Parents who help with the assignments and/or check to see that the work is completed, get an idea of the concepts and expectations of the curriculum. Homework can build that relationship between home and school if parents see the homework as relevant.

Negative Effects of Homework

Time spent on homework has increased by 51% since 1981, as noted in the book by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, (2006) called, *The Case Against Homework*. This increase is seen most in the elementary grades. This increase is due to the fact that teachers assign homework because they think it is part of their job. Others feel the pressure to raise student scores and feel students need the extra practice. Cooper explains that "the push for more homework, which continued into the 1990s, fueled a crowded school-day curriculum, a need for schools to meet increasingly rigorous state and national academic standards, and a desire by parents for their children to be competitive for the nation's best institutions of higher learning" (2011, p.1).

Alfie Kohn, (2006) explains how homework continues to be assigned- in even greater quantities- although there isn't any evidence that it is beneficial. If what we are doing is not impacting the success of students then is it worthwhile? Homework is an ineffective and overly

burdensome practice, explains John Buell, (2004). It entails serious barriers and issues for the poor and unnecessary limits other forms of personal development and leisure time.

At times homework is seen as a punishment for students instead of something enjoyable. Many teachers assign too much homework and assume the child will have support to help them complete it at home. Cooper (2011, p.2) says “parents can get too involved in homework. They can pressure children and can confuse them by using instructional techniques that are different from those used by the teacher.” We must re-evaluate the tradition of assigning homework due to the limitations surrounding this practice. Students without supportive parents, with inadequate home environments for completing it, or with parents who are intellectually unable to help them, are less likely to reap the benefits.

In the book titled, *The End of Homework*, Buell (2004) states, all children deserve time and space on their own to choose how to spend their time. Would spending time with parents in other ways offer other kinds of opportunity for personal growth? Should we be encouraging kids to explore their own curiosities, read books of their own choice, play, and get adequate sleep to improve their learning?

Areas of Debate for Homework

Included below are issues still debated on the topic of homework. These will help to explain the controversy surrounding the topic of homework. These areas of debate will be addressed further in the literature review.

Homework increases student achievement. People argue whether or not homework completion improves academic achievement in elementary students. Research shows that it does improve achievement in high school, but there is no evidence that it helps in the elementary grades. Cooper (1994) explains that the most interesting is the striking influence of grade level

on homework's effectiveness. U.S. high school students, 14 to 16 years of age, who do homework, outperform 69 percent of students who do not do homework, as measured by standardized tests or grades. In junior high school, students 11 to 13 years of age, the average homework effect was half this size. In elementary school, homework had no effect on achievement. In this race to be competitors in the global economy, we try to extend the learning beyond the school day. However, is doing more homework going to make a difference?

Homework teaches responsibility, self-discipline and motivation. Those in favor of homework believe that it is the only way to convey life long skills or character lessons essential to survival. Cooper (2011, p.1) writes, "They claim it can help them develop good study habits so they are ready to grow as their cognitive capacities mature. It can help children realize that learning can occur at home, as well as at school. Homework can foster independent learning and responsible character traits." Alfie Kohn in his article, *The Truth about Homework*, disagrees as he writes, "there isn't a shred of evidence to support the widely accepted assumption that homework yields nonacademic benefits for students of any age" (2006, p.1). Kohn believes these skills can be taught in other ways in the classroom.

Quality activities are being assigned. Some feel most homework is drill and practice and is not worthwhile. Kohn explains that teachers know that drill does not develop meaning and repetition does not lead to understanding (2006). It is not a way to extend knowledge and build a love of learning. Others argue that if it is monitored and adjusted to meet individual students needs, then it is beneficial. Teachers must differentiate the activities being assigned, in order to assure the homework is beneficial. They must be selective in the types of activities they assign as homework.

Intellectual activity is intrinsically more valuable than non-intellectual activity. Cathy Vatterott, author of, *Rethinking Homework-Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, explains that many homework advocates believe that developing a child's intellectual side is more important than the social, physical or emotional. They feel that too much unstructured time may cause children to be less successful. This leads to the belief that parents are not capable of guiding children in productive use of their free time. We give no credit to the parents' ability to provide quality activities for their children (Vatterott, 2010). Cooper, (1994) explains that homework limits the time students can spend on leisure-time and community activities that can impart important lessons, both academic and nonacademic. Students can benefit from other activities like sports, music, theatre, etc.

Students are over stressed with the pressure of homework. John Buell, (2004) explains that homework is an overly burdensome practice for students. Children are faced with the fast pace of growing up today, busy schedules and are distressed. Children have too few opportunities for self-chosen recreational activities. There is a stress of trying to balance homework, extra-curricular activities, and family time. Some argue that children need more down time. Homework should not crowd out social experience, outdoor recreation, creative activities, which are the basic needs of children.

Best Teacher Practice in Homework

Before assigning tasks for homework teachers must make sure the activities are appropriate for the students. Determining the right amount of homework is vital to student participation. Especially in the elementary grades we must be selective in the homework we assign. Cooper, (1994, p. 5) explains "Rather homework should help young children develop good study habits, promote positive attitudes toward school and communicate to students that

learning takes place outside as well as inside of school”. He goes on to say, “assignments to elementary students should be brief, should involve materials commonly found in the home, and should not be too demanding” (Cooper, 1994, p. 5). Cooper adds that the national Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association (NEA) offers a parent guide called “Helping Your Child Get the Most out of Homework”(2007). The guide suggests that for children in kindergarten through second grade, homework is most effective if it does not exceed 10-20 minutes each day. In third through sixth grade, children can benefit from 30-60 minutes of homework per day. Junior high and high school students can benefit from more time on homework, and the amount should vary night-to-night. It is best to think in terms of (a) frequency or how often homework is assigned and (b) duration or how long it takes to complete each assignment. Most teachers in the United States report that in education courses they discussed homework in relation to specific subjects, but received little training in how to devise good assignments, how to decide how much to give, and how to involve parents.

The author Vatterott (2010) explains that,

The best homework tasks exhibit five characteristics. First, the task has a clear academic purpose, such as practice, checking for understanding, or applying knowledge or skills. Second, the task efficiently demonstrates student learning. Third, the task promotes ownership by offering choices and being personally relevant. Fourth, the task instills a sense of competence -- the student can successfully complete it without help. Last, the task is aesthetically pleasing -- it appears enjoyable and interesting. (p.2)

According to Vatterott (2010), homework needs to have a clear purpose. Vatterott writes, “Our goal is to give students methods that are purposeful for them, methods that work for their learning styles. A better way might be to allow students to design their own task” (p.1). Ideally, homework should provide feedback to teachers about student understanding, enabling teachers to adjust instruction and, when necessary, re-teach concepts before assigning practice. Assigning practice prematurely can cause student frustration and confusion. Students must see the reason

behind the homework and understand the why. The purpose of homework in kindergarten can only be to bring family into the fold and encourage family involvement and interest in the education of young children. So the assignments should reflect this. Everything should have some component of family involvement and covering basic skills. This will encourage discussion about topics being covered in school. Many curriculums have a parent component that involves activities to be done at home. These activities help extend the learning from the classroom. We must be careful in making sure that they can be completed independently by the student.

Vatterott (2010) notes that homework needs to be efficient saying, "Some traditional tasks may be inefficient -- either because they show no evidence of learning or because they take an inordinate amount of time to complete but yield little bang for the buck" (p.2). Both students and parents tend to view tasks that don't appear to require thinking as busywork. These types of tasks are a waste of time and will not promote a love for learning in our students. The traditional drill and kill type worksheets have no place in homework. Homework activities should be more than just practice. Teachers need to vary the activities and make sure they can be done in an appropriate length of time.

Vatterott (2010) suggests that homework needs to involve ownership and writes that "When we customize tasks to fit student learning styles and interests, the task becomes theirs, not ours. The goal of ownership is to create a personal relationship between the student and the content" (p.2). Students who feel competent and capable of completing the homework will learn more. By giving students some choices in the tasks they complete helps them feel ownership. Teachers need to allow students to be creative in the ways they practice their skills. Providing a list of activities to choose from, will help students feel in control of their learning.

Vatterott explains the importance of feeling competent to complete homework. He says, “To ensure homework is doable, teachers must differentiate assignments so they are at the appropriate level of difficulty for individual students” (Vatterott, 2010, p.3). Teachers must structure the homework so that all students can complete it independently and successfully. Homework that cannot be done without help is not good homework! Parents should be less involved in the actual homework task and more involved in communicating to the teacher when their child is unable to complete homework. Materials sent home should be introduced to children in school first. The content should be non-threatening and the activities need to be enjoyable.

Finally, Vatterott suggests that homework must have aesthetic appeal. He explains that “Wise teachers have learned that students at all levels are more motivated to complete assignments that are visually uncluttered. Less information on the page, plenty of room to write answers, and the use of graphics or clip art make tasks look inviting and interesting” (Vatterott, 2010, p.4). Homework is more appealing to the students when teachers vary the format.

Purposeful Activities

One of the homework activities teachers use in the elementary grades is reading at home. One such program is called the FRED program, (Families Read Every Day). Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde (2005) suggest, “When children grow up in print-rich homes, where literacy is a tool of day-to-day family life where stories and words are treasured, where reading aloud is a bedtime ritual, good readers usually emerge” (p.59). This program attempts to encourage reading at home to develop readers. Students are allowed to take home books each night to read. The books are self-selected by the students. They are arranged in different categories and levels; ABC book collection, easy readers, fiction and non-fiction, and leveled texts, to allow for new

books to be available throughout the year. The FRED program puts books in the student's hands every day. Reading with children is the most important homework task we can encourage especially in the elementary grades. See Appendix A for a copy of the parent letter that is sent home to explain the program.

Another activity teachers can use are Family Book Bags. Richardson writes, "Families need to take part in their children's literacy development. Thousands of hours of parent-child interaction provides the foundation for language and literacy development" (2008, p. 3). The bags contain children's books and activities on a variety of topics. They are highly motivating for students and allow parents to be involved in their child's literacy development. They also provide meaningful activities at the kindergarten level. The activities cross all the curricular areas and provide more than just reading the books. To find out more about "book bags" look for the websites listed in Appendix F.

Another homework activity that is meaningful and purposeful is a writing journal, "A Night With Ted E. Bear." Students take home a teddy bear in a suitcase and write about their adventures with him. Families can be involved in the adventures the bear has that night. The student must write about their night with the bear. They can draw pictures, write labels, or use invented spelling to communicate their experiences that night. Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, (2005) suggest "Writing should not wait for reading or grammar to develop first; experimenting with written language is one of children's prime path to reading achievement" (p. 86).

There are many activities that can be sent home in kindergarten to work on the phonemic awareness skills. These are pre-reading skills that are needed before a child reads. Students are allowed to choose an activity bag to take home for extra practice. The materials needed to complete the activity are included in the bag, along with a notebook to allow parents to

comment/question on the effectiveness of the activity for their child. Samples of these types of activities are included in Appendices B-E.

Technology is a great asset for extending the learning to the home. There are many websites that offer practice and extensions of learning in all the academic areas. These sites offer students practice and enrichment to develop their skills. We need to offer these sites to students so that they are aware of the various activities they can do at home. There are also many sites available with ideas for teachers. These sites offer suggestions of activities that teachers can send home. A list of these sites that are appropriate for students in the elementary grades and teachers can be found in Appendix F.

Ways to Motivate For Completion

Homework can only provide benefits to the students who complete it. Teachers need to find ways to ensure all students are motivated to do the homework activities. Wagaman (2009) writes, Some of the ways to motivate is first of all assigning more creative activities that students are compelled to complete. We must set them up for success. We must vary the types of activities to keep the interests of the students. We can also provide them with choices of activities to complete. This will help meet the individual needs of each student. Providing choice for students helps them feel ownership and then they can choose the activity that interests them.

Ways to Differentiate

Technology can be used to open avenues for parents to be involved and informed. Teachers can offer a choice of assignments and let students select ways to practice or show their mastery of a topic or unit, and technology can open up many possibilities to choose. When everyone in the class has exactly the same homework assignment, some students will likely be

doing busy work because they have already mastered what they have been asked to practice, while some other students simply will have no idea how to do the required work. “Differentiated homework can provide a great opportunity for students to “work backwards” to master missing skills, to extend content to challenge advanced learners, and to link applications of content to student interests”(Vatterrott, 2010, p.4).

Differentiating is important to keep all students engaged. “A simple means of differentiating is to make homework time-based instead of task-based” (Vatterrott, 2010, p. 5) It does not make sense for the slower students to have to spend more time on their homework. Teachers need to give these students specific activities that meet their needs, but are also able to complete in a reasonable amount of time. Vatterrott (2010) further explains that teachers must also take care to adequately explain assignments -- preferably in writing -- and structure them so students know how to complete them. Students should be able to complete the assignments without outside help.

Educating the Parent

Homework can work if we have the support of the parents/guardians. Parents need specific suggestions and guidelines about what to do. We need to be supportive of their work as they monitor their child’s work. Researchers offer the following suggestions when working with parents; keep it simple, help parents see their options, provide texts or booklists, and teach parents the “five finger rule” when helping their child select books to read.

In elementary school, appropriate parent participation clearly improves performance in the elementary grades, particularly when parents demonstrate how much they value homework, parents model the skills that the child is developing in their own daily life, like reading a book while their child reads theirs, or balancing a checkbook while their child does math, and when

parents train their child to develop good homework habits. Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde state, “When children grow up in print-rich homes, where literacy is a tool of day-to-day family life, where stories and words are treasured, where reading aloud is a bedtime ritual, good readers usually emerge”(2005, p. 59).

Teachers can offer the following tips for parents when supporting their child’s homework completion.

1. Be A Stage Manager: Provide your child with a quiet, well-lit place to study, equipped with the needed materials—like paper, pencils, and a dictionary.
2. Be A Motivator: Be positive about homework. The attitude you express will become the attitude that your child acquires. Homework provides a great opportunity for you to convey to your child the importance of school.
3. Be A Role Model: Model the skills they are practicing. Turn off the TV and read when your student is reading. Help them understand how the skills they are developing relate to adult activities.
4. Be A Monitor: Watch for signs of frustration or failure. Suggest a break when you see them. When your child asks for help, provide guidance not answers.
5. Be A Mentor: When the teacher asks that you play a role in homework, do so happily. Stay away when homework is meant to be done alone. Over-involvement can be harmful to your child's academic health.

For more information on how to support children to complete their homework, parents can check out the list of websites listed in Appendix F.

Reading Incentive Programs

So many teachers require reading homework in a reading incentive program. Students are required to read at home and record the amount of books or time they have read. Small (2004) explains, “The problems with such reading incentive programs is that they require students to select books from a pre-established list only, test them on facts presented in the books, and award points to those who pass the test, allowing students to cash in the points for tangible prizes”(p.1). She continues to explain, “Reading is not a simple mechanical skill to be repeated. Instead, it is a personal act that should result in aesthetic pleasure, a gain of knowledge, or both. Furthermore, giving extrinsic rewards sends the message that the task or behavior is not, in and of itself, interesting and valuable, rather it says that the task must be unpleasant, since a reward is required to do it and that reading is perceived as a means to an end rather than its own reward” (p.2)

Further research should be done on reading incentive programs used in elementary schools. The research could offer recommendations for motivating students to read at home. It would be beneficial to look into these programs and see how teachers can improve upon them. The purpose of a study would be to describe and interpret the experiences of reading incentive programs of elementary students, grades K-5. The study would attempt to determine the effectiveness of reading incentive programs and how they are perceived by teachers, parents and students. This study would determine the best methods of reading incentive programs.

Some questions that could lead the research are:

1. Do all schools use reading incentive programs to try and motivate students to read at home?

2. Are the programs effective? Do students participate? What types of incentives are most effective?
3. What are the requirement/ student expectations of the programs?
4. How are these programs viewed by teachers, students, and parents?

The researcher's role would be to obtain information as an interviewer. They would interview students, teachers and parents to find out the attitudes towards the programs used. They would study the various forms used to track the reading programs and the documents used to record the reading. The data could be collected primarily by interviews. They would provide the in-depth attitudes and perceptions of the reading incentive programs. The data will then be analyzed by first organizing it (creating codes for specific topics), summarizing, and then interpreting it.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The practice of assigning homework needs to be re-evaluated. Teachers need to assess whether the homework they assign is meaningful and appropriate. Educators must thoughtfully consider its purpose before assigning homework. Some students do need the extra practice of skills; however, if no one is there to assist and monitor may be wasted time. These students may also be practicing the wrong way. Some feel that educators need to design rigorous academic work, scaffold new knowledge, and coach new study habits, and the place for such work is in school, not at home (Kralovec and Buell, 2004). In school, teachers can give assistance to those who need it and differentiate the assignments to challenge those students who need more.

Ideally homework could be a great way to extend the learning beyond the classroom. If assigned the right kinds of homework, students can benefit academically. If teachers would differentiate the assignment, students would be able to improve their skills at their individual

level. Homework should be tasks that require students to think critically, to apply their learning and motivate them to want to learn more.

Homework remains a part of the education system today. It can be beneficial if we take special care in assigning it. “Homework has the potential to increase student understanding, conceptual knowledge, cognitive thinking ability, and possibly student achievement if used in a correct manner”(Vatterrot, 2010, p. 10). We must evaluate the types of homework and the amount we assign each night. We must make accommodations for the students who need them. Today, teachers have access to many resources that can aid in their search for creative activities to send home. With the addition of technology, students can also collaborate on homework to enhance their learning. Kohn, (2006) explains, “In essence, our goal as educators is to foster a learning environment conducive to learning, to promote sound work habits, responsibility, and successful educational and social skills” (p.5). Homework can aid in establishing these goals and also foster a love for learning in our students.

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Appendix A

FRED Reading Program (Parent letter)

F.R.E.D. Books

Reading to your child is the single most important activity you can do to foster literacy. Books are often expensive, and public libraries are not always convenient to visit. That's why we would like to start a classroom take-home library.

As teachers we know children learn to read by reading and that reading to your child is the single most important activity that you can do to foster literacy. Research studies show that the likelihood that a child will succeed in school depends most of all on how much she or he has already learned about reading in the primary years.

We would like to begin a new program called F.R.E.D. (Families Read Every Day) Books. In this program the children will be allowed to check out books from the classroom library everyday. A ziplock bag will be the way to transport the book to and from school. Each time your child returns his/her book in the bag, he/she can select a new one. Please read the book with your child and return it as soon as possible.

We hope you enjoy this reading experience and that this will be a way to get more books in the hands of children.

Thanks!

by Nancy Welsch, adapted by Angie Blatz

Appendix B

Letter/Sound Homework Bag

I have been working with _____ on learning letter names and initial consonant sounds. As I am sure you can imagine, it is difficult to find enough time in our day for individual drill and practice with every child. **Regular practice can make a huge difference your child's progress.**

I am sending home this homework bag for you to practice with your child. Please cut apart the letter and picture cards and spend 10 minutes most evenings reviewing the letters and sounds. Please start with the letters we have worked on so far this year, as well as, the letters in your child's name. You will know which new letters to add by checking the weekly newsletter I send home.

The letters to begin with are: Aa, Bb, Ss, Ff, Dd, Nn, Pp and Gg

Helpful Hints

1. Start out slowly and gradually add unknown letters/sounds. Too many letters at one time will be confusing and frustrating for your child.
2. Try to make a game out of the practice. I have included a set of capital letters, lower case letters and picture/sound cards. You can select certain letters/pictures to play a matching game like Concentration. You might have them try to match capital and lower case letters or lower case letters and sound pictures. Remember to keep the cards to a minimum so your child does not get frustrated. You could also use the cards to be played like Old Maid or Go Fish.
3. You could set a timer and encourage your child to beat the timer or increase the number of letters or sounds they knew the evening before.
4. If your child is having a hard time remembering a certain letter or sound you could have them hunt around the house for things that begin with that letter and make a list of the things they found. Having your child roll out play dough and forming the letter(s) that they have trouble remembering can also be helpful.

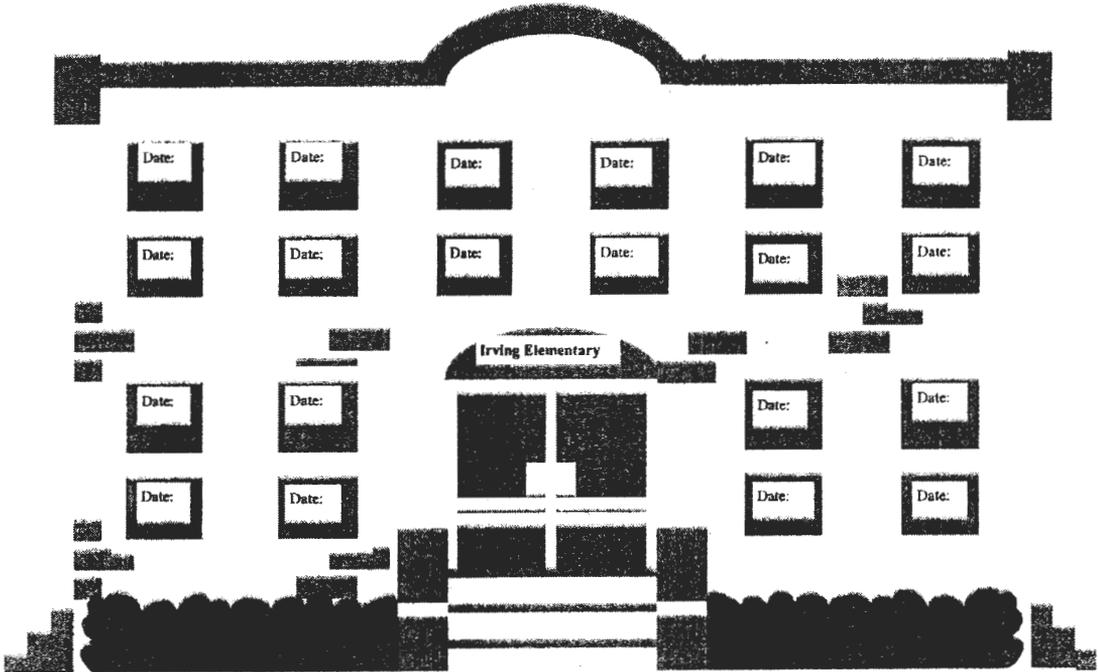
I will list the new letter/sound that we have focused on throughout the week in my weekly newsletter. My goal is for your child to know the letter names and initial sounds quickly, without any hesitation.

Attached you will find the most recent assessment that I did with your child. It will give you some idea of which letters/sounds they need to practice. Remember that I am looking for a consistent and fluent response.

by JoAnn Lombardi, adapted by Angie Blatz

Appendix C

September Reading Incentive



Dear Parents,
 Our goal is for students to read/or be read to 20 times this month. Please record the date that you read in the window after reading. Incentives can be returned to school when completed or by _____. Students meeting their goal will receive a prize. Thank you for your help and participation!
 Irving Kindergarten Teachers

by Margie Conlon, adapted by Angie Blatz

Making Words

Activity: listening for sounds in words and representing them with letters

What to do

Say to your child, "Let's build the word *sad*." Ask your child what sounds he or she hears at the beginning, middle, and end of *sad*. For each sound, have your child locate the appropriate letter and place it on the table until the entire word *sad* is spelled out.

Try these

Repeat with two or three more words from the list below. Revisit this activity daily, each time building several words from the list.

bed	web	van	dog	ten	sun
fan	red	six	fox	pan	rat
hat	lip	man	jet	net	mop
leg	pig	map	pin	sat	

Note that vowel sounds, even if they have been introduced already at school, may be tricky for your child. You may need to supply the vowel letters as you build words together.



On the back of the *Show and Tell* recording sheet provided in the HomePack, have your child record each of the words he or she builds.

Silly Song

Activity: practicing letter/sound relationships

What to do

For a bit of silly letter sounds fun, have your child line up the lowercase letters *a* through *z* in order. Now, sing the alphabet song together, but instead of the letter names, sing the letter *sounds* instead!

As your child sings, notice any letter sounds that he or she seems unfamiliar with or hesitant about. Take those letters aside and review the sounds with your child one letter at a time. Together, name words that start with each sound. You might have your child draw a little picture as a reminder of the sound of each of these troublesome letters. Next time your child lines up the alphabet letters to sing the letter sounds, they may put these little pictures above the corresponding letters as reminders.

Appendix E

Child's name _____

Dear Family, Your child is learning the sound each letter makes in a word.

- Say each word to your child with a short pause between the letters (**b-o-x**).
- Have your child repeat the letter sounds back to you (**b-o-x**).
- Repeat each word with a shorter pause between the letters (**box**).
- Have your child say the word (**box**).

1. b-o-x box	4. c-u-p cup	7. b-e-d bed
2. c-a-p cap	5. c-a-t cat	8. h-i-t hit
3. d-o-g dog	6. p-o-t pot	9. s-a-t sat

Child's signature _____

Parent's (Learning Partner's) signature _____

K/When Given Sound Segments Can Merge Them into a Meaningful Word/1

Appendix F

Listed below are sites for students and teachers/parents that provide various activities for homework. These sites also offer suggestions on how to support students with their homework.

Sites for Students:

- <http://www.primarygames.com> This site offers activities for k-5 on all academic areas, along with games and puzzles.
- <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/Home.html> This site has many games and activities for all ages.
- www.kidport.com Kidport is an Internet-based educational service designed to help K-8 students excel in school.
- www.funbrain.com This site was created for kids age preschool through grade 8, offers more than 100 fun, interactive games that develop skills in math, reading, and literacy.
- www.funschool.com This site offers games for grades k-6 along with videos of crafts kids can make.
- www.alfy.com This site has free online games to play.
- www.starfall.com This site offers literacy games for primary grades.
- <http://www.web-games-online.com/mastermind/> This is the game mastermind online.
- <http://www.freegames.ws/games/freegames/cargames/rushhour.htm> This is an online game of rush hour.
- <http://www.studyzone.org/testprep/ela4/c/impatica/juliesight2.html> This site offers practice with sight words.
- <http://www.agameaday.com/1106/1006calendar1.htm> This site offers a calendar of games to play each day.

- <http://www.onlytypinggames.com/games/type-em-up> Free typing games and keyboard games to play online.
- <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/index.jsp> This site offers books and games for kids.
- <http://www.kidsreads.com/> This site offers book reviews for kids to read.
- <http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/> This site offers science and social studies activities.
- <http://www.mathsisfun.com/games/mathionaire-addition-quiz.html> A game to practice addition and subtraction skills like “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.”
- <http://freekidsmusic.com/> This site offers music for kids to listen to.
- <http://www.storylineonline.net/> This site offers books online with activities and lesson plans.

Sites for Teachers and Parents:

- http://www.tutorgiant.com/tip_422htm This site offers suggestions for parents on how to best support their child with homework.
- <http://sc.jeffco.k12.co.us/education/staff/staff.php?sectionid=11723> This site is Mrs. Sheehans kindergarten and has many ideas for homework activities.
- <http://mrskilburnkiddos.wordpress.com/thematic-units/fall/> This site has so many resources for year round themes, helpful sites, and printable activities
- <http://prekinders.com/> This site has many ideas for Pre-K and K teachers.
- <http://larremoreteachertips.blogspot.com/> This site has many resources and ideas for kindergarten teachers.
- <http://heidisongs.blogspot.com/> This site is a reading specialist teacher that has lots of songs and videos to share.

- <http://www.mrsperkins.com/dolch.htm> This site offers sight word lists and activities to teach the sight words.
- <http://www.k-3teacherresources.com/classroom-themes-labels.html> This site offers ideas for teachers and parents.
- <http://www.eduperry.com/> This site is full of ideas for the primary grades.
- <http://ktkindergarten.blogspot.com/2010/09/literacy-bags.html> Mrs. Topple shares many ideas for kindergarten, even some apps for the ipad.
- <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/index.jsp> *This site offers books and activities for parents.*
- <http://www.storylineonline.net/> This site offers books online with activities and lesson plans.
- <http://its.leesummit.k12.mo.us> This site has information on technology integration.
- <http://www.cloudnet.com/~edrbsass/edadolescentlit.htm#short%20stories> This site contains links to lesson plans and resources for adolescent and young adult (grades 6-12) literature.
- <http://www.readingrockets.org/> This site offers parents help in helping their struggling reader.
- <http://www.internet4classrooms.com/parents.htm> Tips for parents in many areas including discipline.
- <http://charactercounts.org/resources/> Free teaching tools for character education.