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## Homework insights: Benefits, problems, and recommendations

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## Homework insights: Benefits, problems, and recommendations

### Abstract

"Do your homework now. Then you can play outside." Parents have used this expression time and time again. Homework is as the word says. It is work performed at home. Homework has become a dirty word for most children. It has been a daily event since schools came into being and many systems have required that their teachers make use of homework. For the first 18 years of life, perhaps about half of the waking time, a student is potentially educative. If one hundred, eighty 6-hour school days for twelve years are assumed, then 16.4% of the potentially educative time is spent in school. (Paschal, 1984) Homework has been viewed as a task for those students having difficulty in a particular skill. It is intended to enable them to finish incomplete classroom work, or can be an activity to keep them busy. Such tasks have put a negative cast on homework and associated learning. (Instructor, 1984)

HOMWORK INSIGHTS: BENEFITS,  
PROBLEMS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

"Do your homework now. Then you can play outside." Parents have used this expression time and time again. Homework is as the word says. It is work performed at home. Homework has become a dirty word for most children.

It has been a daily event since schools came into being and many systems have required that their teachers make use of homework. For the first 18 years of life, perhaps about half of the waking time, a student is potentially educative. If one hundred, eighty 6-hour school days for twelve years are assumed, then 16.4% of the potentially educative time is spent in school. (Paschal, 1984) Homework has been viewed as a task for those students having difficulty in a particular skill. It is intended to enable them to finish incomplete classroom work, or can be an activity to keep them busy. Such tasks have put a negative cast on homework and associated learning. (Instructor, 1984)

As early as 1842 controversy over the positive and negative effects of homework occurred in England. In 1904 in Germany, experimental research on homework was first reported. In 1913 a survey in the Ladies' Home Journal was conducted that recommended that public

schools eliminate homework. Cycles of interest in such research followed. (Foyle, 1985)

In the late 19th century learning theories presented the mind as a muscle that could be developed through exercise. Schools stressed memorization and parents and educators considered homework to be an important factor in disciplining the mind. (Strother, 1984)

During the second quarter of the 20th century, Dewey's problem solving approach challenged the practice of memorization and drill. Other philosophies, such as the life adjustment movement, regarded homework as an intrusion into a student's time at home. (La Conte, 1981) During three decades of the 20th century- 1900-1910, 1930-1940, and 1970-1980- parents and teachers strongly questioned the effect of homework on the mental health of children, sleeping patterns, and leisure activities. As a result, homework assignments decreased. There was, however, an associated decline in test scores and grades. The practice of assigning homework resurfaced again especially after Sputnik I in October of 1957. There was pressure to compete with the Russians. (Strothers, 1984) This resulted in renewed interest in experimental research on homework. Before Sputnik there were eighteen investigations of the value of

homework, but after Sputnik, there were sixty-six reported. (Foyle, 1985)

During the 1960's there was a period of experimentation in curriculum and instructional education with "The New Math" or "The New Social Studies." Reaction to these educational changes occurred in the 1970's and interest in homework was renewed by the "Back-to-the-Basic Movement" and the impact of the educational report, A Nation at Risk in 1983. (Foyle, 1984)

What philosophies or practices will persist during the remainder of the twentieth century relative to the merits of homework? A review of literature was conducted to investigate the current attitude toward homework.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is assumed that homework disciplines the mind, fosters self-discipline, encourages responsibility, develops study habits, and fosters creativity. (Pendergrass, 1985)

Interest in homework is widespread because a variety of persons are affected. Students must carry out the assignments. Teachers must plan and evaluate

it. Parents are genuinely interested in their child's progress and feel homework will help. (Check, 1980)

Many school systems have established no policy or written philosophy on homework. Has research shown that homework will improve academic progress? Teachers must make decisions regarding the purpose, benefits, and problems associated with assigning and evaluating homework.

A review of literature was conducted in an effort to provide guidance through research and opinion of authorities. Teachers should find this useful when making decisions about the nature and amount of homework to assign.

#### PROCEDURE IN OBTAINING LITERATURE

Extensive use of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) documents was used to obtain related literature. This included the use of the Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE), and Resources in Education (RIE). A search using the Iowa Network for Obtaining Resource Materials for Schools (INFORMS) through the Area Education Agency Seven facility provided document information.

Professional journals and magazine articles, and research reports were obtained from the University of Northern Iowa Library. Research studies reviewed by

various authorities provided references to original sources which the researcher then attempted to obtain.

#### DEFINITION OF TERMS

There seems to be no commonly accepted definition of homework, but literature abounds with opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the practice. It is an issue that evokes strong feelings and opinions despite the lack of clarity in defining and categorizing homework. There is serious division in what homework is thought to be. Many educators view it as a separate entity while others see it as study taking place both in school and out of school. (Knorr, 1981)

For purposes of this research, homework will be defined by Webster's Third New International Dictionary as "an assignment given to a student to be completed outside of a classroom". Homework would include drill and practice, preparatory, extension, and creative assignments that are assigned to the student outside the school environment.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Homework and Achievement

There has been little empirical research on homework. In 1979 Frank Coulter noted that in the 1930's research findings yielded conflicting results and many had methodological flaws. Researchers often were more concerned with the amount not the nature of homework. However, Coulter noted that educators supported the view that regular assignments enhanced student achievement. (Strothers, 1984)

Paschal examined empirical research on the effects of homework using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI) databases for the period of 1966-1981.

Thirty-eight ERIC citations were found on homework or home study using as modifiers "achievement," "attitudes" and "motivation". Twenty-nine dissertations were found. From these 67 documents, studies of elementary and secondary students were selected which provided sufficient statistics for a quantitative synthesis. A final sample included fifteen studies that compared students with various amounts of assigned homework and various qualities. It also included a comparison of students who were and were not assigned homework. Evidence revealed a

moderately large average effect of assigned homework that is commented upon or graded. It was concluded that students in the United States may score lower than students from other countries because they spend less time studying both within and outside their school classes. (Paschal, 1984)

A 1960 survey revealed 280 references to homework in the Education Index. Of these only 17 were original research reports. A 1971 report showed more than 400 articles in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and Education Index since 1900. These extensive traditional reviews of empirical research have concluded that its effects on learning are generally favorable. (Otto, 1985)

Good and Grow's study showed a very high correlation between homework and achievement. Supervision and feedback on homework were tightly structured. Homework needs to be given under teacher supervision who gives feedback and reinforcement. (Pendergrass, 1985)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress of 10,000 seventeen year olds in mathematics reported students who were completing more homework and watching less television generally scored better on the NAEP Assessment Test. This was a correlation of achievement instead of grades. (Pendergrass, 1985)

Joe Dan Austin researched mathematics homework on achievement. He found that mathematics that required homework may be preferable to voluntary homework, having no homework assigned in one grade can adversely affect performance in subsequent grades, and having homework assigned seems preferable to no homework in grades 4-10. He also found comments by teachers on the homework can help boost achievement. (Strothers, 1984)

Keith and Ellis Page conducted a path analysis study to focus on public versus private schools. Keith points out that homework was a manipulated variable and requiring homework and grading students on at least part of the completed homework is a fairly simple and inexpensive means of improving academic achievement. (Strothers, 1984)

Goldstein in 1960 examined seventeen experimental research projects from 1929-1959 and concluded that results were mixed due to limited and inadequate studies, but that data supported achievement gains due to homework. (Foyle, 1985)

In a study by Foyle and Baily, a research project was conducted to determine if there was higher achievement by students assigned homework or by those not assigned homework. The results done at the high school level was a statistically significant difference (.05) in achievement mean scores between students who

were assigned homework and those who did not have homework assigned. (Foyle, 1985)

Researchers continue to comment about the positive correlation between grades and homework. Review of the 84 homework experiments supports student achievement. Grades can be manipulated by teachers, whereas achievement tests are less susceptible to manipulation. Achievement tests or criterion-referenced tests indicated that homework raised student achievement. (Foyle, 1985)

Pendergrass stated that all five teachers in his study would continue to give homework mainly because class time was too pressured to cover everything in class. The homework groups covered two units of math in 25 days while the no homework group needed 33 days for the tasks. Thus those with no homework would indeed receive a constricted curriculum over their school career. (Pendergrass, 1985)

### Qualitative Factors

In 1968 and 1977 Donald G. Ziebell found that homework was not a significant factor in obtaining gains in scores in his course. He felt greater gains in achievement on tests occurred when students were in the classroom receiving personal help from the teacher. Ziebell also found long-range assignments on project

work were more successful than daily task assignments. (Check, 1980)

Synthesis of 15 empirical studies show that merely assigning homework without feedback from a teacher appears to raise a typical student at the 50th percentile to the 60th percentile. But when homework is graded and commented on learning is raised from the 50th to the 79th percentile. (Walberg, 1985)

Homework guidelines policy of 77 New York school districts were studied by Bond and Smith. The investigators concluded that current homework practices did not harmonize with research related to sound teaching and learning principles. Often the same assignments are given to each child regardless of individual differences. Independent and research homework projects were assigned only 15% of the districts. In only 33% of the districts did teachers systematically correct, grade, and return homework assignments. Also Bond and Smith found reading assignments to be a common practice. (Lee and Pruitt, 1979)

Students need feedback as to whether their work was correct or incorrect. Often in math a child may miss the same type of problem due to a mathematical procedure. The student was mislearning which is very difficult to unlearn. Thus homework needs to be

checked, commented on and/or graded. (Pendergrass, 1985)

Assignments of homework in which students are highly motivated and which they feel are useful will promote learning. (LaConte, 1981) Homework assignments need to be regularly assigned, clearly stated, regularly collected, promptly graded and promptly returned. (Foyle, 1985) Strategies are needed to break the negative homework cycle and turn it into a positive learning experience. It is important to motivate students to be successful. (Instructor, 1984)

### Cultural and Social Considerations

Keith (1982) studied homework on the achievement of secondary school students. He found an impressive positive effect of homework on high school grades. He used cross-sectional data and controlled race, family background, ability, and school programs. There was a linear relationship between hours of homework per week and school grades for students. In the study he found that the grades of low ability students who did 10 hours of homework or more a week were as good as those of high ability students who did no homework. Keith's findings relate that personal commitment to school and

homework can have a positive consequence for success in school. (Epstein, 1983)

Student structured individualized enrichment homework was studied by Singh. Seven hundred Arizona children in grades fourth through sixth analyzed their own need with the aid of their teacher and given their choice of the kind and depth of assignment they wished to do. The data showed significant improvement over the controlled group. Reading scores especially improved when students are actively involved in learning structured to their personal interests. In individualized enrichment homework, teachers need to take into consideration their special interests, academic needs and ability, extra-curricular activities, home environment, and availability of resources. (Singh, 1970)

Between 1916-1978 Charles Friesen reviewed surveys, polls and questionnaires on homework. Students were consistent in their attitude that homework helped them achieve better grades over the years. Parents, likewise, were supporters of homework as in the study by Walter Farrell and James Johnson study of inner-city black parents. Their concern was lack of homework assigned. (LaConte, 1981)

Differences in the pupil's background will also have an effect on homework. The upper and middle class

seem to take the idea of homework more seriously. Other considerations influencing interest in homework are intelligence, subject, the teacher, and kinds of assignments. (Strang, 1960)

Educators have the opportunity to educate parents as well as children. Educators are leading both the student and the parent to new stages of growth, development, and understanding. Teachers and parents communicating together can make parents feel a part of their child's school life. (Zehring, 1985)

Educators should recognize that home conditions are often not conducive to study and that excessive homework may cause tension and anxiety in some students. This is especially true with the children of ambitious parents; they feel the strain of competition for high marks. (NEA, 1975) Other problems are the "latch key" children who often are unsupervised and lack the motivation to do the homework.

Homework gives rise to cheating and copying another's homework. This defeats the purpose of homework and may have a long-term detrimental effect on both the individual who copies from another and the person who allows her/his work to be copied. Often older siblings and parents can confuse the student by using methods different from those used in the schools. (NEA, 1975)

In 1966 questionnaire data from over 1,000 students, parents, and teachers were analyzed by John F. Check. He found that most favored and expected outside-of-school assignments, and that these should be well-planned, be meted out with moderation, and be of a positive learning nature. (Check, 1980)

#### Advantageous Homework

Homework is good discipline. Homework eases curriculum demands and fosters student initiative, responsibility, and independence. It improves learning by reinforcement and supplementing school learning experiences. It brings school and home closer together by allowing parents to see the child doing something. (Laconte, 1981)

It is important to keep home-school relationships positive and mutually supportive. Classroom teachers need to be sensible and sensitive concerning homework practices. Teachers need to avoid assigning long drill assignments, or unrealistic reading or using homework as punishment. Educators need to explain the nature and purpose of each assignment and match the assignments to the maturity and ability of each student. It is vital to prepare parents for new work so they can help their child. Outlining what children will be doing, why they are doing it, and what the

school expects about homework matters can be sent to parents in the form of flyers or handouts. Scheduling meetings and conferences can also relieve parent frustration. (LaConte, 1981)

Teachers need to take time to clarify the assignment and get students started on their homework during the class period to anticipate any problems. (NEA, 1975) Then the assignment would not involve questions to parents which they would not be prepared to answer.

Routine practice drill seem to be the most popular teacher homework assignments. Follow up these assignments with a quiz. If the child knows the mechanics of the assignment, do not continue giving these assignments when mastery has been met. Cutting down practice assignments by assigning odd or even problems for instance on a math page can greatly determine mastery without the work becoming drudgery. The basic aim of homework should be learning how to learn, not merely preparation or practice. (Turvey, 1986)

#### SUMMARY

Regularly assigned homework can extend a school day. If a typical American student added four hours of homework per week to thirty nominal hours of school

work, he/she would add 13% to their nominal learning time in school. Effective schooling involves "time on task". Learning takes time. (Walberg, 1985)

Increasing homework costs no extra money, and there would be no need to change existing programs. It can become cost effective as research verifies that homework can raise achievement scores.

Homework can bring parents into the school learning program as partners in the educational experience of their child. This must be handled carefully so that the parent and the child can work if necessary to avoid any problems completing the assignments.

Research has shown that the best homework results occur when the teacher comments or grades homework assignments. Building a positive attitude about homework can improve the image of homework.

Homework should not be continually associated with drill and practice assignments. Educators have a duty to expand assignments into creative or extension modes of learning. Educators need to take the "work" out of the word homework. Assignments that are meaningful and tap into students' creative minds can become useful tools to making students effective democratic, problem solving citizens.

Additional studies should be designed to clarify the extent to which such factors as ethnicity, curriculum area, grade level, and frequency and type of homework can limit the possibility of research findings with experiences of field practitioners. (Knorr, 1981)

## CONCLUSION

Schools may not need a rigid policy on homework. It is the teacher, the individual child, the subject area, and the grade level that will determine the amount and kind of homework given to each child. Considering the amount of discussion about homework given to students by teachers, it is surprising that research is so limited.

Society favors homework because it is a way of extending the learning situation for children. Society realizes that there is a need to raise competent individuals who will continue to lead the country to a better society.

Teachers make the decision about their homework in their classroom. They need to be realistic about the amount and kinds of homework that is assigned. Homework could start in the primary grades as a token assignment. Perhaps the children could bring to school to share an item that is green when they are studying colors. Other homework at different grade levels

should include recreational reading, written compositions, problem solving, computer activities, collecting, interviewing, designing, planning, and practice and drill when necessary. Assignments need to be regularly assigned, clearly stated, systematically collected, promptly evaluated, and returned to the individual. Educators need also to match the homework with the ability level of the child. Homework should never be used as punishment or as a disciplinary device.

Parents need to support the idea of homework. Encouragement and an appropriate place to study in the home environment would benefit each child.

Students need to recognize that homework is a valuable educational procedure. They need to write the assignment on paper, ask any questions pertaining to the homework assignment before they leave the school, bring all the necessary materials home, complete the work, and return it when it is due.

Homework should be a rewarding, challenging experience that can take children to new heights of learning. The national controversy about homework may continue for many more years and may never be resolved. Until there is positive evidence that homework is of no value, homework can remain a valuable school tradition.

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