

Is Homework 'All that and a Bag of Chips?': The Variables Required for Effective Homework Practices

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Much research has been done during the past century with arguments both for and against homework. Harris Cooper (2001) wrote in *The Battle over Homework*, that public opinion has wavered between support and opposition throughout the 20th century. He states that homework was believed to be important for improving the mind. The mind was viewed as a muscle that needed the mental exercise of memorizing the multiplication tables, names, and dates.

Today, public policy officials believe that homework should be given to students at the primary level regardless of the direct impact it may or may not have on test scores. One of the main reasons for giving homework is that the children develop good study habits early. It is believed that homework is a valuable home-school connection and a way of extending the school day to give students a chance to practice the skills they have learned. For example, not all students will be able to learn the times tables in the amount of class time they are given. Practicing them at home until 'they get it' makes sense. Daily reading for fluency and comprehension is one of the greatest success builders possible. The only way you can learn to read is by reading. The more chances you have to read, the better reader you will become. Homework can be a real self-esteem builder. The student is learning responsibility, which will be a lifelong asset. Students need to be made accountable for taking the assignments home, for doing the assignments, and for returning the completed homework to class in a timely manner.

During the 1940s, public opinion was against homework. The public wanted more problem solving, and self-expression. Great emphasis was placed on student initiative and interest. In the 1950 edition of *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, H. J. Otto wrote, "Compulsory homework does not result in sufficiently improved academic accomplishments to justify retention." (380).

Homework was back in full force in the late 1950s, after the Russians launched the satellite Sputnik. Americans wanted a big push to insure that children were prepared to compete in the technological future (Cooper, 2001). By the mid 1960's many parents and educators felt that too much pressure was placed on children and the homework cycle was reversed. In 1968 Wildman wrote, "Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents (203).

In the 1980s homework was back. The National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, cited homework as a defense against the rising tide of mediocrity in education. During the 1990s, newspapers and magazines were filled with articles about stressed-out children, burnout, struggling single parents, working parents, and family time.

Currently many school districts are recommending that teachers increase the amount of homework they assign and that school administrators establish homework requirements (Berkowitz, 1996). Berkowitz's definition of homework is the out-of-class tasks that a student is assigned as an extension of the classroom work. He cites that studies have noted a positive relationship between homework and student performance.

Some schools are actively trying to involve the parents in their child's education. Working with their child at home, and knowing where they are academically is a necessity for many parents to help their children to achieve in school.

Many school districts have a homework policy which mandates that teachers give out homework to every student at least four days a week. They have a set amount of minutes recommended for each grade level. For some, this is a valuable commodity that teachers may use to reinforce learning; others see it as a time-consuming aggravation.

The homework debate continues. A summary of both the pro and con positions is followed by the variables required for homework to raise student achievement.

Pro:

- A child's future may depend on homework and developing life long study skills.
- Homework is a way for children to get back on track.
- Students are made more responsible.
- The board of Education's stance might serve as an intellectual discipline, establishing study habits, and ease the amount to be taught in the classroom during the day.
- Students demonstrate that they retain the information.
- Schools that assigned homework on a regular basis frequently show higher student achievement levels than schools that make little use of homework.
- Gives parents an opportunity to be involved with the academic development of their children.
- Raises the consciousness of a child's active thinking.
- Homework provides an important link between home and school.

Con:

- The students do not get enough sleep. They are tired the next day in school.
- Students are stressed and anxious.
- Homework limits the time that students can spend with their family and friends.
- Homework is not meaningful. It seems to be just busy work.
- Parents spend a lot of homework time fighting with their children.
- Asking children to sit down and do homework at an early age may be developmentally inappropriate and therefore counterproductive (Kravolec & Buell, 2000).
- The homework may not be relevant to their life.
- Research has not found a relationship between the amount of homework that young elementary students do and their achievement level.

Homework assignments are not one size fits all. To make homework assignments meaningful and effective, some of these variables must be considered:

- What kind of homework is most effective?
- How much homework is appropriate for each grade level?

- Who will be monitoring homework?
- Are different learning styles taken into consideration?
- Do the students have the skills necessary to do the work?
- How do we know that students know what homework counts?

Homework should demonstrate when the student needs intervention strategies. Piling on more homework s/he does not understand is detrimental to the student. It is up to the teacher, the child, and the parent to invest in making homework a meaningful, successful experience. Homework administered with insight and wisdom can be "All that and a bag of chips".

References

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