

HOMework: THE UPSIDES AND DOWNSIDES –

Towards an effective policy and practice in Australian schools

A preliminary research and discussion paper

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Introduction

Currently and over the past decade, the issues around homework have been a subject of lively debate and discussion. Views are expressed from opposing ends of a spectrum and from all points in between; and from a variety of standpoints.

Some call for more homework, to prepare and equip children for the rigours of a competitive world. Some want less or no homework, because they want to use that other time for young people's involvement in other extra-curricular activities to broaden their horizons – or give them another kind of edge in life. More homework is given by some because the overcrowded school curriculum is otherwise unmanageable in school hours. Others seek less or no homework because that overcrowded curriculum should not spill over into family time or come to dominate children's lives in ways that may contribute to exhaustion or anxiety.

Homework has been the focus of considerable research particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). This paper will seek to review relevant aspects of the research, explore the issues which it raises and seek to indicate how it may help us to devise and implement an effective policy and practice in Australian schools.

What is it? – Establishing a Working Definition

Homework can be very broadly described as "work set by teachers that pupils are expected to complete out of school hours" (Sharp, Keys & Benefield, 2001). This includes both the completion of work unfinished in class, and set work for children to complete after school.

A more complex definition which also attempts to be universally encompassing, describes homework as "the time students spend outside the classroom in assigned activities to practice, reinforce or apply newly-acquired skills and knowledge and to learn necessary skills of independent study" (Butler, 1987). This description also seeks to establish boundaries which exclude from consideration such things as: home study courses, guided in-school study and extra-curricular activities generally.

Why is it Set? – Establishing the Purpose and Intended Outcome of Homework

In her recently updated benchmark study of the elements of family-school and community partnerships, Professor Joyce Epstein briefly considers a range of literature and research from the viewpoint of homework as a linking element between families and schools.

Noting that the dynamics of homework appear to differ at different levels of schooling, and that the body of research focuses more on the situation in the years of secondary schooling, Epstein observes that "homework is considered one of the most important practices for establishing a successful academic environment in high school". She notes a 1982 study which "concluded that homework and discipline were two features of private schools that made them more successful learning environments than public schools."

Epstein points out the obvious implication of this conclusion "is that if public schools assigned more homework, their students would learn more and the schools would be more effective."

But is that necessarily so? Epstein comments: "This prescription may be too simple. The notion that more is better may not be true for all students, in all subjects, at all skill levels, and

at all grade levels. Indeed, if more homework is assigned than can be completed, or if inappropriate homework is assigned, then home assignments may be counter-productive for student achievement.” (Epstein, 2001 p. 236)

When a teacher gives homework, the stated or unstated purpose and intended outcome of setting it can vary greatly, from giving students extra time to practice what has been learnt in class, monitoring a student's progress – or even as punishment for poor behaviour in class.

Through a review of the literature, Epstein has developed a ten-point typology of the reasons that homework is assigned to students, which she categorises as *The Ten P's* – noting that “some (reasons) are more defensible than others”! These are (Epstein, 2001 pp.237-241):

- **Practice** – Homework which is intended to enable students to practice skills learnt in class, increase the ease with which these skills can be used; and increase their understanding of how and when to use those skills.
- **Preparation** – Homework which is intended to ensure student readiness for the next class, most commonly by completing assignments or activities which have been started in class and need to be completed as the basis to move on in the next activity.
- **Participation** – Homework which is intended to increase the individual participation of students in the learning process: in class some students may seem to be involved but may in fact be passive onlookers to the process. Homework can require each individual to participate actively and continually, to work through the process for themselves, and to take control of their learning and thinking.
- **Personal Development** – Homework helps students to take personal responsibility for their schoolwork, to build their range and competency levels of study skills, ability to follow directions, complete tasks on time, and to achieve a feeling of self-confidence and personal accomplishment. This also includes opportunities for development of talents and skills and providing extension and enrichment activities.
- **Peer Interactions** – Homework can be designed to encourage collaborative learning on assignments or projects, enhancing their teamwork skills and opportunities to learn from each other or to combine their talents to achieve mutual benefits.
- **Parent-Child Relations** – Homework provides opportunity for students and parents to develop positive communication on the importance of learning, exchange information, facts, attitudes and expectations about school; it can show how aspects of schoolwork apply to real-life situations, as well as encouraging positive feedback from the parents.
- **Parent-Teacher Communications** – Homework also allows teachers to communicate with parents, to involve them in the learning process and inform them about what and how the students are learning and how their skills are progressing.
- **Public Relations** – Homework can sometimes be motivated by the felt or assumed need of the school or the teacher to demonstrate to the families of their community that the school has rigorous standards for serious work; such extra work is assigned to fulfill the public's expectation of high student achievement.
- **Policy** – Homework may be assigned to comply with district or school policy that directs a certain amount to be given to all students on certain days.

- **Punishment** – Homework can be given to students to punish them for lack of attention or poor behaviour: it may include writing “lines” or essays on appropriate behaviour or school standards. There are no studies about effects on students, but punishment is generally seen as inappropriate as a purpose for homework, an exercise of teacher power to use up students time, with a negative focus on behaviour rather than learning.

If these are the purposes, what does the research say about outcomes?

It has been found that having students undertake homework can contribute to their progress in school by teaching them independent study skills, increasing their accountability as an individual, and giving them a sense of personal responsibility, which leads to higher achievement. It also helps the student and their parents understand that the school holds high expectations of its students (Butler, 1987).

Parents believe that homework informs them of the curriculum and promotes increased parental involvement in their child's life, and increased communication between parents and the school (Cowan & Hallam, 1999).

Butler (1987) shows it is believed that homework provides additional practice by creating more time for students to spend on tasks and be engaged in learning outside of school hours, and so teachers often use homework to monitor a student's progress and quickly identify any learning problems. It can also enable teachers to move quickly through the curriculum, introduce new material to their class sooner and enrich the curriculum by giving students a wider range of learning opportunities in the subject.

And: As Epstein noted in 2001, Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore (1982) concluded "that homework and discipline are two features of private schools that made them more successful learning environments than public schools." But, as we saw above, Epstein concluded that perhaps, in a wider compass, this “ain’t necessarily so....”

How can we Unpack This? Let’s Explore via Three Focus Questions

- To what extent does research indicate or suggest that homework achieves each of the stated purposes or justifications?
- To what extent does each purpose apply to students of different levels (early primary, latter primary middle years and senior high school), and to what extent are they achieved in respect of that group?
- To what extent does homework contribute to family-school communication, family engagement and the formation of effective and sustainable family-school partnerships?

What are the Upsides? – Advantages and Benefits

Research undertaken in the USA and the UK suggests that homework can have immediate benefits for children such as improving their grades, performance at school, and attitude towards learning, as well as long lasting benefits such as time management and problem solving skills that can assist them not only in their tertiary study but also later in life.

Cooper in *Homework Research and Policy: A Review of the Literature* (1994), found that benefits from homework can include immediate achievement and learning, involving "better retention of factual knowledge, increased understanding, better critical thinking, concept formations, information processing and curriculum enrichment." It can also provide long term academic benefits such as "encouraged learning in leisure time, an improved attitude towards school, and better study habits and skills", as well as nonacademic benefits including greater "self direction, self discipline, time organization, inquisitiveness, independent problem solving and parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling."

According to USA research conducted by psychologists Harris Cooper, James Lindsay, Scott Greathouse and Barbara Nye, "the more homework students complete, especially from grades six to twelve, the better they do in school" and that "the amount of homework completed by students was positively related to their achievement in school" (American Psychological Association, 1998), while Butler in *Homework* (1987) found that research indicated "schools in which homework is routinely assigned and graded tend to have higher achieving students" and that homework given regularly to students can improve their attitude towards learning and may increase achievement.

A review of research literature on homework in the UK suggests that there is "a positive relationship between time spent on homework and achievement...", although this was only found true for secondary school students, as evidence was inconclusive for primary school children, and that those children with a positive attitude towards homework were more likely to have a positive attitude towards school (Sharp, Keys & Benefield, 2001). A USA study by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) reported "that the assignment of homework by teachers and completion by students were positively associated with student academic performance and school behaviour."

What are the Downsides? – Negative Implications and Effects

Although homework can be found to have a positive effect on a student's performance in school as well as later in life, there are also downsides. Homework has been found to contribute to physical and emotional exhaustion and allows little or no time to spend on leisure and family activities. Some of the negative effects of homework found by Cooper (1994) include "loss of interest in academic material, physical and emotional fatigue, denial of access to leisure time and community activities, parental interference, pressure to complete and perform well, and confusion of instructional techniques."

In the article *The Truth About Homework* (2006), Kohn believes that homework has many negative effects, including frustration, stress, loss of time for other activities, family conflict and a reduction of interest in learning. His research revealed that "decades of investigation have failed to turn up any evidence that homework is beneficial for students in elementary (primary) school" and that the only effects of homework that are seen are "more negative attitudes on the part of students who get more assignments." He states that the idea that homework creates long term non academic benefits for children, and teaches good work habits or develops traits such as self discipline and independence, can be described as an urban myth as there is no hard evidence to support these beliefs.

Similarly, Kohn notes in respect of high school, "some studies do find a correlation between homework and test scores or grades, but it's usually fairly small and it has a tendency to disappear when more sophisticated statistical controls are applied. Moreover, there's no evidence that higher achievement is *due to* the homework even when there is an association." Further, he notes that analyses of national and international exam results raise further doubts about such a causal link. He comments that among many examples, the Baker and Letendre *Trends in Mathematics and Science Study* (1994 & 1999) data from 50 countries found that "the overall correlations between national average student achievement and national averages in amount of homework assigned, are all *negative*."

Kohn postulates that "there is no reason to think that most students would be at any sort of disadvantage if homework were sharply reduced or even eliminated", while noting that the evident trend in schools is in the other direction, with a national survey showing more primary school children being engaged for increasing periods of time in assigned homework activities.

Kohn also notes that 'Carole Ames of Michigan State University points out that it isn't "quantitative changes in behaviour" such as requiring students to spend more hours on books and worksheets – that help children's learning. Rather, it's "qualitative changes in the ways students view themselves in relation to the task, engage in the process of learning, and then respond to the learning activities and situation." In turn, these attitudes and responses emerge from the ways teachers think about learning and, as a result, how they organize their classrooms. Assigning homework is unlikely to have a positive effect on any of these variables. We might say that education is less about how much the teacher covers than about what students can be helped to *discover* – and more time won't help to bring about that shift' (2006).

The pressure to complete homework can also lead to students cheating by copying from other students or obtaining help other than tutoring, such as getting their parents to complete it for them. The American Psychological Association (1998) found that students who "perceive that achievement is defined by schools and teachers in terms of grades and performance, worry about school, and believe they can get rewards for doing well in class such as getting out of

homework" are more likely to cheat, and to "avoid using deep level cognitive processing strategies such as trying different ways to solve a problem."

Research by Sharp, Keys & Benefield (2001) indicates that a positive relationship between homework and achievement is only shown in secondary students, and that evidence at the primary level is inconclusive and results are inconsistent. Butler (1987) recommends that traditional homework assignments are not effective in the early school years and so "should be given sparingly, possibly not at all in primary grades."

As suggested by Epstein in *School, Family, and Community Partnerships* (2001 p. 237), the idea that more homework is better "may not be true for all students, in all subjects, at all skill levels and at all grade levels."

Epstein documents and analyses a research study (2001 pp. 243-252) which indicates a number of areas of difficulty or tension, including:

- Parents being unsure of how they can help and feeling in need of more information from teachers as to how they can usefully assist.
- In terms of homework quality, some 10% of parents felt it was mainly to "keep the students busy", 10% had concerns about the appropriate level of difficulty, and some 25% had doubts about the amount being right.
- In terms of student attitudes, some 20% of the elementary (primary) school students do not like to talk about school with their parents, and 35% say they are tense when working with their parents on homework, however these attitudes and behaviours may be early warning signs of more serious learning problems, and can or should serve to encourage parents to talk with teachers how to help their children build confidence and positive attitudes about school and learning.
- Homework can be a source of anxiety for children and parents where there is lack of access to appropriate or necessary learning resources or facilities through the home, which may link in turn to a need for guidance on how to help, and/or to negative socio-economic circumstances of the family.
- Significant numbers of parents in secondary schooling years stop monitoring or being positively and supportively involved in homework, especially if not given information about homework policies and practices, or how to work with their adolescent children.

Research and studies on homework have had mixed results with some indicating there are positive effects for all students, mostly those in middle and senior secondary years, while others show that homework has a negative effect on children, including less time for other activities and frustration and loss of interest in their studies.

Homework can be ineffective if it is not appropriately and consistently designed, structured and assessed. Teachers should assign appropriate at instructional levels that match students' skills and provide positive consequences for homework completion. A survey of teachers of students with learning disabilities found that 80 percent of teachers regularly assigned homework but few matched the tasks to student skills or provided feedback or positive consequences for homework performed. Homework in which the teacher has embedded instructive comments (formative assessment) has the greatest effect on learning; too often that opportunity is ignored or lost (NREL, 2005).

Those who would project from the study by Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore (1982) that 'more is better', should note that correlations between time on homework and achievement should not be taken as evidence that more time on homework necessarily leads to better achievement. Time spent on homework explains only a small amount of the variance in pupils' achievement scores, even at secondary level (Sharp, 2001).

It needs to be understood "why homework is assigned, whether it is appropriate in quantity and quality, and how it is structured to fit into teaching and reteaching skills in the classroom." Homework policies and practices at the early and latter primary school level need to be examined, as the achievements of students in those years plays a large part in determining their ability at high school.

What does it all Mean?

In terms of the focusing questions established above to provide a frame of reference:

- *To what extent does research indicate or suggest that homework achieves each of the stated purposes or justifications?*

For homework to be in any way productive, it is essential that all parties to the process (teacher, students and parents) have a clear and shared understanding "why homework is assigned, whether it is appropriate in quantity and quality, and how it is structured to fit into teaching and reteaching skills in the classroom." Where purpose and process are not aligned, then it seems likely the possible benefits will be significantly reduced, negated or counter-productive (e.g. if the purpose is participation and/or personal development and the work is not reviewed and feedback provided, it is losing its major opportunity for confirmation of learning and formative assessment and can be resented as a pointless imposition of "busy" work).

The research is at best indecisive about the value of homework in primary years for any purpose, even parent-child relations and parent-teacher communication, if the parents are unclear about how they should be involved and the process becomes excessive and turns to drudgery and resentment.

- *To what extent does each purpose apply to students of different levels (early primary, latter primary/middle years and senior high school), and to what extent are they achieved in respect of that group?*

As noted above, the research is at best ambivalent in respect of homework quantity, quality and purpose and the extent to which it results in appropriate benefits in primary school years. Some researchers clearly and strongly believe that any such benefits can be achieved by effective teaching and structured in-class activities, plus complementary means of family communication and engagement. There is also evidence of unproductive behaviours such as parents doing the work for the students, and other forms of cheating that defeat and negate any intended purpose and outcome of the homework process and activities.

In the middle and high school years, a review of research on homework in the UK suggested that there is a positive relationship between the amount of homework completed and a student's achievement in school. This view is held by a number of researchers, many claiming that not only is homework beneficial for students in middle and high school years but that it also has long lasting benefits that can assist them later in life. Although most studies find a correlation between homework and achievement in school, this is usually quite small, and can sometimes disappear if more complex controls are applied to given statistics.

- *To what extent does homework contribute to family-school communication, family engagement and the formation of effective and sustainable family-school partnerships?*

While that is an identifiable intended purpose of homework, the research is similarly ambivalent as to the extent to which this is an outcome achieved in practice. Points to the contrary noted above include: parents more concerned about how useful it was to student learning in terms of quantity, quality, structure; and the extent to which this seemed to be providing an aspect of anxiety and tension in their interaction – though this may be an indicator of other problems needing discussion with the teacher. A significant number of parents felt unsure of how they could usefully be involved in the process, and there is a tendency for parents of high school students not to get involved. There is also evidence of unproductive behaviours such as parents doing the work for the students, entirely defeating the purpose of the homework process.

The extensive and continuing work of ACSSO and APC in relation to the dynamics of effective and sustainable family-school partnerships suggests that there are other far more powerful and appropriate means of establishing and maintaining effective family-school partnerships; and other ways to engage and involve parents in their children's learning and personal development.

So: Where to Forward From Here?

The admittedly limited literature search that provided context and content for this preliminary research and discussion paper, identified a range of research from the USA and UK. It did not identify any similar research in the Australian context.

It is suggested this would be an appropriate area for attitudinal research to be carried out in Australia's school communities, to explore the complementary and contrasting perspectives of parents, students, teachers and principals, at each level of schooling.

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