

The Homework Debate: A Brief Summary

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Introduction

Homework is generally agreed to be tasks “assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours” (Cooper, 1989, p.7). The simplicity of this definition obscures the complexity of both the concept and implications of homework. There are also been extensive debates generated in educational contexts. Indeed, arguments surrounding the efficacy of homework have continued in an almost cyclical measure for decades (Gill & Schlossman, 2000). While the early 20th century brought arguments that the employment of homework built disciplined minds, mid-century attitudes were concerned that homework was an interference with time spent outside of schooling. Soon after this, attention once again focused on a supposed lapse in rigour within education, with homework seen as part of the solution. In the 1980s, concerns returned to homework and the potential damage to students’ mental wellbeing. Since then, debates about homework have continued, with arguments detailing both specific and generic concerns. There is also concern that policymakers and researchers “make generalized and frequently polemical statements about what it is and what it should achieve” (Warton, 2001, p. 155).

Support for Homework

Research seen as supportive of homework can be found in a broad range of methodologies and levels of specificity. Experimental studies and correlational studies have supported the notion of homework, with arguments that:

- There is some association between homework and student achievement by comparing experimental (homework) and control (no homework) groups (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005)

- The relationship between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes is argued to be positive and statistically significant (Cooper, Jackson, Nye, & Lindsay, 2001; Cooper et al., 2006).
- Homework is thought to help prepare children for work, improving their aptitude for employment (Corno & Xu, 2010).
- Homework is the intersection of home and school (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; Nicholls, McKenzie, & Shufro, 1994).

The Complexity of the Argument for Homework

Other supporters argue that the amount of homework is not related to students' academic success. Rather, achievement is reliant on *how* students engage with homework (Trautwein, Schnyder, Niggli, Neumann, & Lüdtke, 2009; Núñez, Suárez, Rosário, Vallejo, Valle, & Epstein, 2015). Student motivation in relation to homework is also important (Martin, 2012). Studies have confirmed the importance of effort and commitment by students to complete homework (Trautwein et al. & Trautwein et al. (2006a,b). These findings suggest that academic achievement is also associated with a desire and interest to learn on the part of the students, not just in their completion of homework (Valle, Regueiro, Núñez, Rodríguez, Piñeiro, & Rosário, 2016).

Homework management has also been identified as an element of importance (Xu, 2007). Students are challenged by managing homework time (Corno, 2000; Xu, 2008), and some results allow that good management positively influences academic success (Claessens, van Eerde, Rutte, & Roe, 2007), homework completion (Xu, 2005), and overall school achievement (Eilam, 2001). However, these mixed results show the complexity of the homework context. Xu's (2007) initial work found no correlation between time management and academic achievement. That is, there was no relationship between the actual time that students spent completing homework and the way they managed that time. In a later study, Xu (2010) did note a positive relationship with how the time was managed, the grade level, and the organisation of the environment within which the students completed the homework. Other studies have supported this, with Núñez et al. (2015b) finding that the way time was managed while completing homework was seen to

positively affect the amount of work completed. However, the results showed a stronger effect for primary students over those in secondary school.

An important argument about the efficacy of homework relates to the variation of students' cognitive competencies due to their different ages (Muhlenbruck, Cooper, Nye, & Lindsay, 2000). Work by Núñez et al. (2015b) found the efficacy of homework to be negative in the primary school years, null in junior high years, with positive results found only in the later high school years. Concerns about young children's limited abilities to keep attention to long tasks and to have developed study habits is evident in research (Cooper & Valentine, 2010).

Teachers are also concerned about possible effects of homework on educational inequality (Medwell, & Wray, 2019). In the past, US researchers argued that homework was a contributor to corporate-style, competitive culture. Kralovec and Buell (2000) contend that overvaluation of homework damaged the personal and familial well-being of students, particularly those students who were economically disadvantaged. Kralovec and Buell (2000) argued that there was an unintentional punishment of these students, whose home environments could make completing homework more difficult.

Recently, research has begun to demonstrate that time spent on homework is not a relevant predictor of academic achievement (Trautwein et al., 2009; Núñez et al., 2015a; Valle et al., 2016). Indeed, some results have even shown time spent to be negatively associated to academic achievement. Núñez et al. (2015a) surmised that students' inefficient management and lack of motivation could be seen as the reasons for the negative findings. Additionally, although time on homework has been shown to relate to students' commitment to their school work (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013), others have shown that the amount of time associated with homework does not necessarily result in higher levels of engagement with the tasks (Valle et al., 2016). Indeed, some students may always complete their homework, but this will not result in these students learning more (Kohn, 2006).

Bennett and Kalish (2006) recommend that there are reductions in the amount of homework given to students and that more valuable experiences be designed. Cooper et al. (2006) warn about excessive amounts of homework, which can reduce any positive effects and even been found to be counterproductive. A commonly accepted suggestion of maximum homework duration involves the "10-minute rule" (Cooper, 2007, p. 92), which states that

homework should take 10 minutes, multiplied by the students' grade level. Recommendations also argue for the avoidance of any prescribed homework over breaks and holidays (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

Recommendations for Homework

Should homework be given, teachers must focus on its careful design. Homework is known to reflect teachers' knowledge of the curriculum, as well as their understanding of the abilities and needs of their students. With the additional consideration of the students' families and their circumstances (Epstein, 2001), the design of effective homework is a complicated task. Poorly designed or overly-burdensome homework can confuse or frustrate students (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984; Xu & Corno, 1998). Teachers should also carefully plan the follow-up practices they undertake in class in order to monitor homework tasks, such as checking homework completion and providing individual feedback. These activities have been found to positively influence students' homework behaviors (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017).

Some recommendations for teachers include:

- Assigning homework only when the task can be justified as "beneficial" (Kohn, 2006, p. 166)
- Individualising homework by considering students' ages, home circumstances, and needs (Mojdehi, & Bazargani, 2018; Vatterott, 2017)
- Involving activities appropriate for the home, such as cooking, doing crossword puzzles, watching quality television programs, and reading (Kohn, 2006)
- Involving students in deciding what homework, and how much, they should do (Kohn, 2006)
- Setting learning goals related to homework (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006)
- Designing homework that is realistic in length and difficulty, so that students can complete the tasks independently (Good & Brophy, 2003)
- Encouraging parental/carer involvement and interaction, as students have been found to spend more time and complete their assignments with higher quality work when this

occurs (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones,, 2001), but providing clear guidelines to parents/carers as to their roles without expecting them to be experts in the content (Epstein, 2001; Van Voorhis, 2004).

- Prioritising the quality of any work that students undertake, over the quantity (Fernández-Alonso, Suárez-Álvarez, & Muñiz, 2014)
- Considering and including students' cultural backgrounds and families' "funds of knowledge" (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992)
- Involving students in setting homework goals, selecting tasks that are in their areas of interest, allowing multiple ways for presentation of learning, and student self-reflecting on learning (Vatterott, 2017)

In summary, critical examinations of homework in recent times have moved away from those espousing the supposed positive effects (Kralovec & Buell, 2000) to now making impassioned arguments about quantity, quality, feedback, forms, and appropriateness of homework. More and more, research argues that there is no thorough evidence supporting the effectiveness of homework. With some hesitation, studies have shown an association, not a causal relationship between homework and achievement (Cooper, 1989; Cooper et al., 2006). The concerns raised by contemporary research, including issues of social justice, decreased student motivation, increases in students' anxiety, and the time taken from other activities in students' lives, should be of importance in any consideration of homework programs.

Further recommended reading: Kohn, A. (2006). Abusing research: The study of homework and other examples. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 88(1), 9–22. Retrieved <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/003172170608800105>

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