



The Importance of Homework

Research into the value of homework and what makes it worthwhile

Homework is a concept that has been around for years and today is an expected requirement for schools. In order for a school to be rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted teachers must, under the descriptors for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment as stated in the School Inspection Handbook (2015) 'set challenging homework, in line with the school's policy as appropriate for the age and stage of pupils, that consolidates learning, deepens understanding and prepares pupils very well for work to come.' Homework is viewed highly by many, with Epstein & Van Voorhis stating that it not only reflects on the success of the student, but also the success of the school (2001). In spite of this, attitudes towards homework are constantly changing, culminating in the age old homework debate.

Attitudes towards the value and purpose of homework are usually reflective of the current societal stance and mood. For example, in the 20th century the mind was seen as a muscle that would benefit from memorisation, and since this could be done at home, homework was perceived as valuable. However, come the 1940's, where emphasis shifted from drill to problem solving, people started to view homework negatively (Cooper, 1989).

Yet fast forward to when Russia launched Sputnik, society became concerned that our students were not ready for the advanced technologies that were evolving and started to favour homework again. Although, reflective of the attitudes in the 1960s homework fell out of favour with the belief that it put too much pressure on students (Cooper, 1989). This is why we find ourselves in a continuing circle of ups and downs in attitudes towards homework which most likely, will continue.

“ Homework at secondary level can add on an additional 5 months' progress onto a child's learning (EEF, 2016) ”

We believe that homework plays an important role in both a student's education and the performance of the school. Here we look at academic research, but also take into account the opinion of leading educators who give weight to the stance that

homework serves a purpose that penetrates far deeper than improving a student's general understanding of a subject.

The purpose of homework can be grouped into ten strands as stated by Epstein & Van Voorhis (1988, 2001, p.181) 'practice, participation, preparation, personal development, parent-child relations, parent-teacher communication, peer interactions, policy, public relations and punishment.' This suggests that homework affects more areas than just a student's academic ability.

However, when we look at the research that focuses on the link between homework and academic achievement we see that homework does in fact have a positive impact on students' grades. Sharp (2002) states there is a direct link between students spending time on homework and their achievement in secondary school. Furthermore, Cooper similarly found that students who completed homework had better report cards and test results than those who did not complete it (1989 cited by Epstein & Van Voorhis 2001). In a report conducted by the EEF, they also found that the completion of homework at secondary level can add on an additional 5 months'



progress onto a child's learning, with minimal cost incurred by the school (EEF, 2016).

In addition to the academic findings, teachers themselves have commented on the purpose they believe homework provides to students and schools. Epstein (1988, 2001, p.181) found that teachers recognised 'practice, preparation and personal development' to contribute to the overall purpose of homework. Tom Sherrington, a Headteacher at a UK secondary school and influential education blogger, has expressed his personal views on the value of homework: 'Students who are successful at A Level and at GCSE are those who have highly developed independent learning skills, have the capacity to lead the learning process through their questions and ideas' (Sherrington 2012a).

This suggests that even those who do not see an immediate impact from homework, believe that it will help students' personal development but also prepare them for the next stages of education and beyond. This is further supported by Sharp (2002) who recognised that, despite homework not having a direct link to achievement in younger children, it did promote independent learning and prepare them for secondary school.

A second UK teacher and education blogger, Rachel Jones, commented on what she believes to be the purpose of homework and found that it had a positive impact on both retention of knowledge and hand-in rates when the homework set, was assigned with the intention to 'develop learners knowledge and allow them more choice in how they express their work' (Jones 2013).

“ A key purpose of homework is to 'establish communication between parent and child' (Acock & Demo, 1994 cited by Cooper et al, 2016, p.2 ”

In addition to the correlation between completing homework and improved achievement, homework plays a fundamental role in both home-school involvement and students' relationships with their parents. A key purpose of homework outside of 'enhancing instruction' is to 'establish communication between parent and child' (Acock & Demo, 1994 cited by Cooper et al, 2016, p.2).

Homework acts as a bridge between school and home, and the ability to engage parents in school life has a positive impact on teachers - when teachers feel as though there is more parental involvement in school they feel more positive about teaching (Epstein & Dauber, 1991, Hoover-Dempsey et al, 1987 cited by Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Acock and Demo (1994, cited by Epstein & Van Voorhis 2001, p.182) have even stated that homework can help to improve relationships between parents, bringing them 'closer together to enjoy learning and exchange ideas', cementing the idea that homework has greater repercussions than just raising academic achievements within school.

“ Purposeful homework is intrinsically linked to *quality* homework ”

In addition to this, a purpose of homework valued by both parents and teachers, is the idea that homework completed regularly by students helps to promote 'a sense of responsibility' (Warton 1997, p.213).

Moreover, Sherrington (2012b) comments on his stance as both an educator and a parent, saying that he firmly believes that homework has a fundamental part to play in the learning process 'and paving the way to students becoming independent learners'.

Although, in order for homework to really show the benefits expressed here it must be purposeful. Students have expressed their opinion on the value of homework, deeming it to be an important part of the learning experience (Sharp 2002). Yet, they do express concerns regarding how homework is set relating to 'conflicting



deadlines, and tasks that make little contribution to learning' (Sharp 2002, p.3). In order to combat these concerns, schools should be vetting the quality of homework set, and teachers should be communicating with one another in reference to deadlines.

The idea of setting purposeful homework is further supported by Epstein & Van Voorhis (2001, p.19) who reports that those who set homework 'to meet specific purposes and goals, more students complete their homework and benefit from the results'. Additionally, the idea of setting homework with a clear purpose further encourages parental involvement within the child's education.

Purposeful homework is intrinsically linked to quality homework, and when teachers are setting homework the emphasis should be on this as opposed to the quantity. In order for homework to be regarded as high quality, the instruction provided must be clear and detailed (Frey & Fisher, 2011), and the tasks that are being set are 'authentic and engaging' (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch 2006, p.1) providing students with a real reason to complete them.

“ It's important to consider the implications of setting too much homework and the detrimental effects it can have on students, such as stress fatigue and loss of interest in studies (Cooper, 2010) ”

This is further supported by Dettmers et al (2010) who found that when students identified homework as being well thought out and relevant, they were more motivated to complete it. Frey & Fisher (2011) identified quality homework types to include 'fluency practice, application, spiral review and extension' and denounced the value of homework that asks students to complete work that was not covered in class as unvaluable as they have no peer or teacher support and are unfamiliar with the topic.

It is also important to consider the implications of focusing on the amount of homework set - setting too much homework can have detrimental effects on students, such as stress, fatigue and loss of interest in studies (Cooper, 2010). From this we can gather that fewer pieces of well thought out homework will have more of a positive impact on students' learning. It is important for schools to monitor the amount of homework that is set, what is being set and when, so as to avoid over-working students.

From this we can conclude, that homework does indeed serve a purpose, with studies providing a link between homework and higher secondary school attainment. Yet despite the effects not always being apparent in primary school and younger years, homework helps to prepare them for secondary school and encourages them to become independent learners. Homework reaps benefits outside of just achievement with an improvement in home-school involvement and parent-child relationships having positive impacts from homework. Although, it must be taken into consideration that in order to see these benefits, homework being set should have a clear goal and purpose, so as to encourage student completion of the work and for it to be truly worthwhile.



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