



Topic overview

Homework

Encyclopedia of Education

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HOMEWORK

Homework is defined as tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are intended to be carried out during nonschool hours. This definition excludes in-school guided study (although homework is often worked on during school), home-study courses, and extracurricular activities such as sports teams and clubs.

Purpose

The most common purpose of homework is to have students practice material already presented in class so as to reinforce learning and facilitate mastery of specific skills. Preparation assignments introduce the material that will be presented in future lessons. These assignments aim to help students obtain the maximum benefit when the new material is covered in class. Extension homework involves the transfer of previously learned skills to new situations. For example, students might learn in class about factors that led to the French Revolution and then be asked as homework to apply them to the American Revolution. Finally, integration homework requires the student to apply separately learned skills to produce a single product, such as book reports, science projects, or creative writing.

Homework also can serve purposes that do not relate directly to instruction. Homework can be used to (1) establish communication between parents and children; (2) fulfill directives from school

administrators; (3) punish students; and (4) inform parents about what is going on in school. Most homework assignments have elements of several different purposes.

Public Attitudes toward Homework

Homework has been a part of student's lives since the beginning of formal schooling in the United States. However, the practice has been alternately accepted and rejected by educators and parents.

When the twentieth century began, the mind was viewed as a muscle that could be strengthened through mental exercise. Since this exercise could be done at home, homework was viewed favorably. During the 1940s, the emphasis in education shifted from drill to problem solving. Homework fell out of favor because it was closely associated with the repetition of material. The launch of the satellite *Sputnik* by the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s reversed this thinking. The American public worried that education lacked rigor and left children unprepared for complex technologies. Homework, it was believed, could accelerate knowledge acquisition.

The late 1960s witnessed yet another reversal. Educators and parents became concerned that homework was crowding out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities. In the 1980s, homework once again leapt back into favor when *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, cited homework as a defense against the rising tide of mediocrity in American education. The push for more homework continued into the 1990s, fueled by increasingly rigorous state-mandated academic standards. As the century ended, a backlash against homework set in, led by parents concerned about too much stress on their children.

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The Positive and Negative Effects of Homework

The most direct positive effect of homework is that it can improve retention and understanding. More indirectly, homework can improve students' study skills and attitudes toward school, and teach students that learning can take place anywhere, not just in school buildings. The nonacademic benefits of homework include fostering independence and responsibility. Finally, homework can involve parents in the school process, enhancing their appreciation of education, and allowing them to express positive attitudes toward the value of school success.

Conversely, educators and parents worry that students will grow bored if they are required to spend too much time on academic material. Homework can deny access to leisure time and community activities that also teach important life skills. Parent involvement in homework can turn into parent interference. For example, parents can confuse children if the instructional techniques they use differ from those used by teachers. Homework can actually lead to the acquisition of undesirable character traits if it promotes cheating, either through the copying of assignments or help with homework that goes beyond tutoring. Finally, homework could accentuate existing social inequities. Children from disadvantaged homes may have more difficulty completing assignments than their middle-class counterparts.

Extensiveness of Homework

In contrast to the shifts in public attitudes, surveys suggest that the amount of time students spend on homework has been relatively stable. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggests that in both 1984 and 1994, about one-third of nine-year-olds and one-quarter of thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds reported being assigned no homework at all, with an additional 5 percent to 10 percent admitting they did not do homework that was assigned. About one-half of nine-year-olds, one-third of thirteen-year-olds, and one-quarter of seventeen-year-olds said they did less than an hour of homework each night. In 1994 about 12 percent of nine-year-olds, 28 percent of thirteen-year-olds, and 26 percent of seventeen-year-olds said they did one to two hours of homework each night. These percentages were all within one point of the 1984 survey results.

A national survey of parents conducted by the polling agency Public Agenda, in October, 2000, revealed that 64 percent of parents felt their child was getting "about the right amount" of homework, 25 percent felt their child was getting "too little" homework, and only 10 percent felt "too much homework" was being assigned.

International comparisons often suggest that U.S. students spend less time on homework than students in other industrialized nations. However, direct comparisons across countries are difficult to interpret because of different definitions of homework and differences in the length of the school day and year.

Appropriate Amounts of Homework

Experts agree that the amount and type of homework should depend on the developmental level of the student. The National PTA and the National Education Association suggest that homework for children in grades K–2 is most effective when it does not exceed ten to twenty minutes each day. In grades three through six, children can benefit from thirty to sixty minutes daily. Junior high and high school students can benefit from more time on homework and the amount might vary from night to night. These recommendations are consistent with the conclusions reached by studies into the effectiveness of homework.

Research on Homework's Overall Effectiveness

Three types of studies have been used to examine the relationship between homework and academic achievement. One type compares students who receive homework with students who receive none. Generally, these studies reveal homework to be a positive influence on achievement. However, they also reveal a relationship between homework and achievement for high school students that is about twice as strong as for junior high students. The relationship at the elementary school level is only one-quarter that of the high school level.

Another type of study compares homework to in-class supervised study. Overall, the positive relationship is about half as strong as in the first type of study. These studies again reveal a strong grade-level effect. When homework and in-class study were compared in elementary schools, in-class study proved superior.

The third type of study correlates the amount of homework students say they complete with their achievement test scores. Again, these surveys show the relationship is influenced by the grade level of

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students. For students in primary grades, the correlation between time spent on homework and

achievement is near zero. For students in middle and junior high school, the correlation suggests a positive but weak relationship. For high school students, the correlation suggests a moderate relationship between achievement and time spend on homework.

Research on Effective Homework Assignments

The subject matter shows no consistent relationship to the value of homework. It appears that shorter and more frequent assignments may be more effective than longer but fewer assignments.

Assignments that involve review and preparation are more effective than homework that focuses only on material covered in class on the day of the assignments. It can be beneficial to involve parents in homework when young children are experiencing problems in school. Older students and students doing well in school have more to gain from homework when it promotes independent learning.

Homework can be an effective instructional device. However, the relationship between homework and achievement is influenced greatly by the students' developmental level. Expectations for homework's effects, especially in the short term and in earlier grades, must be modest. Further, homework can have both positive and negative effects. Educators and parents should not be concerned with which list of homework effects is correct. Rather, homework policies and practices should give individual schools and teachers flexibility to take into account the unique needs and circumstances of their students so as to maximize positive effects and minimize negative ones.

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