

RETHINKING HOMEWORK

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Chapter 1: The Cult(ure) of Homework

- Late 19th Century: Given the critical role that children played as workers in the household, it was not surprising that many families could not afford to have their children continue schooling, given the requisite two to three hours homework each night. Fifth graders routinely left school to begin their working lives.
- Early 20th century: An anti-homework movement became the centerpiece of the progressive education platform. Progressive educators questioned many aspects of schooling: Once the value of drill, memorization, and recitation was opened to debate, the attendant need for homework came under harsh scrutiny.
- In 1900, the editor of the Ladies' Home Journal, Edward Bok, began a series of anti-homework articles. He recommended the elimination of homework for all students under the age of 15 and a limit of one hour nightly for older students. His writings were instrumental in the growth of the anti-homework movement of the early 1900s, a harbinger of the important role media would play in the homework debate in the future.
- By 1930, the anti-homework sentiment had grown so strong that a Society for the Abolition of Homework was formed. Many districts abolished homework in K-6.
- After the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik I satellite in 1957, the trend toward less homework was quickly reversed as the U. S. became obsessed with competing with the Russians. The new discourse pronounced too little homework an indicator of the dismal state of the American schooling. A heavy homework load was alleged to reveal seriousness of purpose in education; homework became an instrument of national defense policy.
- By the late 1960s and 1970s, in the midst of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, a counterculture emerged that questioned the status quo in literally every aspect of personal and political life. A popular book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, attacked traditional methods of what was labeled "the educational establishment." The anti-homework arguments were reminiscent of the progressive arguments of the early 20th century; homework was seen as a symptom of too much pressure on students to achieve.
- Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time that should be devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents (Wildman, 1968).
- In the 1980s, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* planted the seed of the idea that school success was responsible for economic success. It ratcheted up the standards, staring what has been called the "intensification movement," the idea that education can be improved if only there is more of it, in the form of longer school years, more testing, and more homework.
- In 1986, the U.S. Department of Education published *What Works*; which recommended homework as an effective learning strategy. The pro-homework trend continued into the 1990s, as the push for higher standards resulted in the conclusion that more homework was a remedy.
- Whenever reformers attempt to improve the academic outcomes of American schooling, more homework seems a first step. The justification for this probably has more to do with philosophy (students should work harder) and with the ease of implementation (increased homework costs no

extra money and requires no major program modification) than with new research findings. (Strother, 2991)

- In 1989, Harris Cooper published an exhaustive synthesis of research on homework that seemed to have little effect on popular practice and received little media attention.
- In 2000, Piscataway, NJ, received national attention for implementing a homework policy that limited the amount of homework, discouraged weekend homework, and forbade teachers from counting homework in the grade.
- In 2000, Kralovec and Buell published *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*. In 2006, Kohn published *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of A Bad Thing*, and Bennett and Kalish published *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting our Children and What We Can Do About It*.
- Beliefs about homework:
 - 1) The role of the school is to extend learning beyond the classroom.
 - 2) Intellectual activity is intrinsically more valuable than nonintellectual activity.
 - 3) Homework teaches responsibility.
 - 4) Lots of homework is a sign of a rigorous curriculum.
 - 5) Good teachers give homework; good students do their homework.
- Homework is, in part, an exchange of performance for grades.
- The idea that behavior can be controlled by rewards and punishment is so embedded in the day-to-day practices of school, one rarely even notices it.
- Our parents believe there are three career paths for their children: doctor, lawyer, and unsuccessful. Three faulty assumptions actually feed this trend:
 - The Ivy League is the only route to success
 - Advanced placement classes are essential to get there.
 - Excessive homework is an inevitable part of AP or honors classes.
- The balance movement emerged early in the 21st century. Parents who feel strongly about the need for balance are concerned about both immediate and long-term effects of homework engulfing their children's free time. The immediate effects are loss of leisure time, stress and overall health.
- While some recommend children's yoga and meditation as a way to cope with stress, others are targeting the sources of stress, and homework is a major culprit.
- Challenge Success was formerly known as Stressed Out Students.
- Kohn: homework may be the single most reliable extinguisher of the flame of curiosity.
- What complicates today's debate is the diversity of attitudes about the value of homework. The pendulum is swinging both ways at the same time. As a country, the U. S. is so diverse economically, culturally, and in parenting styles, it is not surprising that not all would agree on a practice that bridges both school and family life.

Chapter 2: Homework in the Context of the New Family

- Balance
 - Academics and family-chosen activities
 - Academics, leisure, happiness
- For many kids, homework is like having to do their taxes every night. How would we feel if we came home to hours of work from five different bosses?
- Reading gap: Lower-class students may not have books in the home, are less likely to be read to in the home, and are less likely to see their parents reading for pleasure or reading to solve problems.

- Conversation gap: Professional parents speak more than twice as many words per hour to their children than do welfare parents. By the age of 3, children of professional parents have a vocabulary twice as large as that of welfare children
- Health and housing gap: lower-class students, in general, are in poorer health than middle- or upper-class students. As a result of poorer prenatal conditions, unhealthy environments, and lack of medical care, lower-class students are more likely to have vision problems, dental problems, and asthma. Because they often lack health insurance, they are more likely to miss school for minor health problems that go untreated, such as ear infections.
- Parent-school relationships have changed. Many parents no longer view themselves as partners with teachers in the job of educating their child. They view themselves as clients for a service to be delivered. Instead of believing that they owe the school support, many parents feel that the school owes them a service.
- Renegotiating the Parent-School Relationship
 - Get real: Schools should not dictate what children do with their evenings.
 - Resist the temptation to judge.
 - Revise expectations of parental support
 - Suggest, but do not mandate, guidelines for the parent's role in homework
 - Parents should be encouraged to be observers, not enforcers, of homework completion.
 - Set parents' minds at ease about homework
 - Endorse a set of inalienable homework rights
 - Children shall not be required to work more than 40 hours a week, when class time is added to homework time.
 - Children shall have the right to homework they can complete without help. If they cannot complete homework without help, children shall be entitled to re-teaching or modified assignments.
 - A child's academic grade shall not be put in jeopardy because of incomplete homework. Children shall be entitled to an in-school or after-school homework support program if they are unwilling or unable to complete homework at home.
 - A child's right to playtime, downtime, and adequate sleep shall not be infringed upon by homework.
 - Parents shall be entitled to excuse their child from homework that the child does not understand or is too tired to finish.
 - Families shall be entitled to weekends and holidays free from homework.
- The role of parents in homework must be voluntary, respectful, and individualized, and the value of family life must be honored.

Chapter 3: Homework Research and Common Sense

- When we try to relate homework to achievement, it is difficult to separate where the effect of classroom teaching ends and the effect of homework begins. We do not know how to tease out the effect of homework from prior learning or what occurred in the classroom. We do not know if the same child would have scored just as well on the test without doing the homework, or how much better the child scored because of doing the homework.
- The body of research on homework focuses on the following elements
 - Time, not task (reflecting the belief that more time is the answer to improving education)
 - Groups of students, not individuals (reflecting a failure to recognize individual differences)
 - Student behavior, not teacher behavior (reflecting the deficit model – that when children do not learn, the problem lies with them, not the quality of teaching)

- Major findings of homework research
 - The amount of time spent doing homework is positively correlated with achievement.
 - Homework appears to be more effective for older students than younger students.
 - As more variables are controlled for, the correlation between homework and achievement diminishes.
 - At each grade level, there appears to be an optimum amount of homework.
- For middle school students, research shows that achievement improves slightly with even a minimal amount of homework (less than one hour). Achievement continues to improve until assignments last between one and two hours a night.
- For high school students, achievement appears to improve until students are doing 1.5 to 2.5 hours of homework at night.
- A small amount of homework may be good for learning, but too much homework can actually be bad for learning. Children and adults have a limit to how much mental work they can accomplish in a day's time before the brain needs downtime and time to process information.
- The 10-minute rule states that the maximum amount of nightly homework should not exceed 10 minutes per grade level per night, all subjects combined.
- Dr. Harris Cooper of Duke University is widely regarded as the nation's leading researcher on homework. Pervasive flaws in Cooper's methodology, and homework research as a whole, include:
 - Many studies rely on self-reporting by students or parents as to how much time was spent on homework.
 - Time spent on homework is measured as the cumulative time spent per week, not by the day.
 - Sample sizes of students may be as small as a few students or a few classrooms.
 - Often students are not randomly assigned to groups.
 - Some students measure homework assigned, not homework completed.
 - Most studies lack equivalent control groups.
- More time spent on homework could indicate a slower working speed, or simply that those students complete all the homework assigned. Lumping together students who work at various speeds into one statistical profile renders the results questionable.
- A focus on time instead of task fails to take into account the types of learning tasks that contribute most significantly to learning.
- When comparing slower processors to faster processors, the slower student could spend more time on homework and still perform poorly on tests.
- Correlational studies do not prove causation.
- The value of research is in the broad strokes it paints not in the minutiae. Its value comes as we reflect on the logic of its conclusions – do they make sense for our population of students?
- Tenets about learning that directly affect the practice of homework
 - Quality teaching matters: What if, instead of focusing on the students' homework behavior, we looked at the teacher's homework behavior? Have we considered the possibility that some teachers might use homework more effectively, might do more diagnosing and individualizing of homework? What if effective teachers provided more appropriate homework, homework that children might find worthwhile and enjoyable? When teachers use homework to check for understanding, do they give non-punitive feedback? Do they reteach concepts students did not understand?
 - Skills require practice: First, we must make sure students are practicing the skill correctly, so they do not internalize incorrect methods. It is wise to examine a few problems in depth and focus on the reasoning used to solve them before moving to the state of practice. An approach that uses smaller amounts of practice spread over a number of days (distributed practice) is

superior to an approach that uses larger amounts of practice done over a shorter period (mass practice).

- Time on task matters: There is a difference between the amount of time spent on learning and the amount of time needed to learn. Time needed to learn is influenced by aptitude, ability to understand instruction, and the quality of instruction. Time on task refers to teachers too. They need adequate time to plan effective classroom activities.
- Task is as important as time: Students are less likely to complete tasks they perceive as busywork. Quality homework tasks allow students to practice or process information, introduce them to material that will be discussed in the future, or provide feedback to teachers so they may check for understanding. Quality tasks are clearly related to classroom learning, are simple enough that students can complete them without help, and are relevant to real life.
- Children differ in readiness and developmental level: Homework can initially be used for diagnosis and then can be adapted to fit individual student needs. Common sense tells us that differentiated instruction is necessary and desirable, yet when it comes to homework, teachers often assign the same task to all students regardless of their level of readiness.
- Children differ in learning style: Student achievement increases when teaching methods match students' learning styles; yet, teachers often fail to adapt homework for individual learning styles.
- Children differ in motivation, persistence, and organizational skills. They may lack metacognitive skills such as orienting, planning, executing, monitoring, evaluating, and correcting. A lack of metacognitive skills often leads to students abandoning tasks too easily.
- Frustration is detrimental to motivation and the desire to learn.
- Homework that is not completed does not help learning.

Chapter 4: Effective Homework Practices

- When students fail to complete homework, we tend to approach the situation more like discipline than like learning.
- Do Ds and Fs for not completing homework represent a lack of learning or a lack of compliance?
- If students do not complete homework on time, does that mean that the teacher has failed to teach them responsibility? If that is true, the logical act would be to reteach them without penalty. Instead, the use of late policies judges students for not learning responsibility and then fails them as a result. We are faced with the irony that a policy that may be grounded in the belief of holding students accountable (giving zeros) actually allows some students to escape accountability for learning.
- Inherent in the old paradigm are the assumptions that all students can do the work, that all students have the time to do the work, and that students should take as much time as is necessary to do the work.
- The homework gap can compound the problem of the achievement gap that already exists between children of different social classes and can impeded the long-term goals we have for students.
- What we want is to develop and refine intellectual skills, but when students do not do homework, they may not perfect math skills, may not read as well, or may lack depth of knowledge for future learning.
- What we want is to develop independent learners, but when students do not do homework, they may fail to develop strategies for independent work and may miss the sense of efficacy that comes from completing tasks independently.

- What we want is to nurture within students the identify of a successful learner, but when students do not do homework, they may have trouble keeping up in class, may receive failing grades, and may lose confidence in their ability to learn.
- Creating a new paradigm for homework
 - Design quality homework tasks
 - Differentiate homework tasks
 - Move from grading to checking homework
 - Decriminalize the grading of homework
 - Use completion strategies
 - Establish homework support programs
- Homework typically supports learning in one of four ways (Purpose of Homework)
 - Pre-learning
 - Checking for understanding
 - Practice
 - Processing
- In order for practice to be effective, teachers must check for understanding before the students attempt the homework.
- When planning homework tasks, teachers should reflect on the type of learning they want the homework to reinforce.
 - Facts
 - Concepts
 - Principles
 - Attitudes
 - Skills
- The type of learning that is desired and the purpose of the homework determine the type of homework task the teacher should design.
- Designing quality homework tasks requires attention to four aspects, each of which affects students' motivation to approach the task and their perseverance in completing it.
 - Academic purpose: Tasks should have a clear academic purpose
 - Competence: Tasks should have a positive effect on a students' sense of competence.
 - Ownership: Tasks should be personally relevant and customized to promote ownership
 - Aesthetics: Tasks should e aesthetically pleasing
- I have never heard of a child not doing his work; it is our work he is not doing.
- Students are most likely to be emotionally engaged by tasks that allow them to give their opinion, solve a problem that is important to them, compete with others, imagine possibilities, or be creative.
- Students connect personally with the content when they identify with people or feelings, connect the content to something in their everyday life, use the content to understand the world around them, or wrestle with moral or ethical dilemmas
- Quality homework tasks promote ownership when they
 - Allow for choice
 - Offer students an opportunity to personalize their work
 - Allow students to share information about themselves or their lives
 - Tap emotions, feeling, or opinion about a subject
 - Allow students to create products or presentations.
- The presentation of homework is about how appealing the task is judged to be – the way it looks on paper; whether it appears easy or hard fun or tedious, interesting or boring.

- While quality in homework tasks is important to motivation, differentiating homework tasks is critical to ensuring that students can be academically successful.
- A simple means of differentiation is to ask all students to complete what work they can in a specific amount of time, draw a line, and then work longer if desired.
- One of the easiest ways to capitalize on learning styles is to allow students to choose which method they will use to demonstrate what they have learned.
 - Differentiate for
 - Difficulty
 - Amount of work
 - Complexity (Scaffold Structure)
 - Learning Style
 - Interest
- Research indicates that grades tend to interfere with learning. Grading is viewed as evaluative by students. Checking (providing feedback) is diagnostic; the teacher is working as an advocate for the student. Should all homework be graded? No. Should all homework receive feedback? Yes.
- Homework's role should be as formative assessment – assessment for learning that takes place during learning.
- The goal of feedback on homework is to improve learning, to improve performance on summative assessments, to promote student ownership of learning, and to encourage self-assessment.
- Focusing on feedback requires teachers to slow down, to teach less, assess more, and make time for re-teaching some students or providing others students with additional assistance.
- Good feedback on homework requires back and forth dialogue between the teacher and the student, each asking questions of the other.
- She scans each assignment and puts the papers into two piles: Students who appear to have understood the concept and students who did not. Without marking papers, she knows how to regroup students, re-teach, or assign students to buddy pairs to go over concepts again.
- Teacher gives formative feedback on student notebooks with a symbol stamp; A right side up symbol signifies a good job, a sideways symbol signifies an OK job, and an upside down symbol signifies the work is not adequate.
- Feedback can be given from student to student. Teachers will simply ask students to meet in groups to compare their homework answers, ask each other questions, and then report back to the teacher.
- The move away from grading is a move from what Kohn calls the demand model to the support model. Instead of demanding that students do their homework under threat of bad grades or punishment, we actively support them in taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Those students who have been following the rules face a bigger problem – they have internalized the external nature of assessment as something done to them. Due to past experience, these students may have little sense of ownership of their learning, believing that it is all about giving the teacher what the teacher wants, what gets the grade.
- Students can use one of three symbols at the top of the homework assignment to indicate their level of understanding:
 - Got it/understood (happy face)
 - Sort of got it/not sure (neutral face)
 - Did not get it/totally lost (frowning face)
- Assign test corrections as homework. For each question students got wrong, they must state why they missed the question. Students can regain some lost points on their test grade when they turn in test corrections.

- Almost 70% of US teachers use homework to calculate student grades, compared with 28% in Canada, and 14% in Japan.
- The goal is to have grades reflect learning, not behavior or personal responsibility.
- If students test out of some standards, no homework should be necessary for that content.

Chapter 5: Homework Completion Strategies and Support Programs

- New homework paradigm
 - Designing quality homework tasks
 - Differentiating homework
 - Moving from grading to checking
 - Decriminalizing grading
 - Strategies for homework completion
 - Programs that support students in completing homework at school
- It is common for teachers to become obsessed with the fact that all homework must be done.
- Five reasons homework is not done
 - Academic: task too hard or too lengthy for the students' working speed
 - Organizational: Getting it home, getting it done, getting it back
 - Motivational: Burnout, overload, too much failure, frustration with tasks
 - Situational: Unable to work at home, too many other activities, no materials available at home for the assignment
 - Personal: Depression, anxiety, family problems, or other personal issue
- For some students, incomplete homework is the result of procrastinating and then running out of time
- Students procrastinate for different reasons, each needing a different solution: tasks are boring and tedious; tasks are so difficult that he feels frustrated and incompetent, etc.
- Diagnostic Tools
 - Parent or student feedback checklist
 - Home Study plan
 - Homework Chain
- All students benefit from a consistent routine such as having homework due on the same days of the week, or from homework in the same format.
- School-based strategies for improving the rate of homework completion:
 - Limit homework to one assignment or one subject per night
 - Take time to discuss the homework assignment and possibly given students a few minutes to begin the assignment in class.
 - Avoid giving homework assignments at the end of the hour, when students are packing up and focused on leaving.
 - Set a maximum amount of time that the student should work on each assignment
 - Provide peer tutors or study groups for some students
 - Assign students homework buddies to work with or call for help
 - Give assignments further in advance of the due date, or give students more than one day to do assignments
 - Provide homework packets or lists of weekly or monthly assignments
 - Give all assignments for the next week on Friday, due the next Friday.
 - Establish intermittent due dates for parts of long-term projects
 - Provide a course syllabus at the beginning of the semester with all homework listed.

- Allow some homework to lag two to three weeks behind the introduction of a concept to check for understanding
- Make sure all students have the necessary materials at home to complete specific assignments.
- Home-based strategies for improving the rate of homework completion:
 - Use the parent or student feedback checklists for students who repeatedly have completion problems
 - Use the home study plan to help students create the best homework environment at home
 - Use Taylor’s homework chain to diagnose students with organizational problems
 - Use the home schedule card for parents to determine if some students need more flexibility in homework deadlines
 - Give some students a copy of the textbook to keep at home
 - Allow parents or students to call the teacher at home when necessary
 - Have younger students make and decorate a homework box to keep materials in at home
 - Give parents specific guidelines on how to help with homework and how much to help
- Homework support programs are no magic bullet. Support programs focus on completion, but in isolation. They fail to take into account why students are not completing homework – the diagnosis is missing.
- Options during school day
 - Lunch and homework
 - Recess and homework
 - Elementary classroom homework time
 - Advisory or homeroom time
 - Daytime homework support programs
- Curricular and scheduling options
 - Monthly late-start day
 - Weekly homework time
 - Academic lab periods
 - Study hall or independent study courses
 - Alternative strategies or study skills courses
 - Mandatory math help or credit recovery courses
 - One-hour lunch period
 - Extended school day
 - Student teacher access time
 - A comprehensive daily support program
 - After-school homework support programs
- Minor changes
 - Limit the percentage that homework may count in the grade
 - Revise late policies
 - Limit the number of subjects in which homework is assigned each night
 - Limit the weight of the backpack
 - Set weekly or nightly time limits
 - Prohibit weekend or holiday homework
 - Coordinate homework with a calendar limiting the number of tests or projects at a given time
 - Limit the number of AP classes that students may take in one semester.