Homework – the good, the bad and the undecided

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How much homework do you expect the kids in your school or class to do each week?

How much time do you think an average teacher in your school spends setting this homework, giving it out, explaining it… marking it (thinking about marking it!)… giving it back?

Consider how much time parents spend cajoling their kids to complete their homework or, as often happens in primary schools, completing it with them…

When I ask these questions at an educational event or at an in-house PD, I will generally find that nearly all mainstream Australian schools set homework. Moreover, although early learning educators often set minimal homework, the majority of teachers set between one and three hours of homework every week for every student in their care.

The Victorian DEECD guidelines (2012) indicate no more than 30 minutes per day and no homework during weekends or holidays for Prep to Year 4; 30 to 45 minutes per day in Year 5 extending to 45 to 90 minutes by Year 9; one to three hours per night for Year 10 to 12, plus six hours on weekends during peak VCE periods.

Meanwhile the 2012 Queensland education department guidelines suggest: no homework for Prep students and weekly limits of one hour for Years 1 to 3; two to three hours for Years 4 and 5; three to four hours for Years 6 and 7; and no more than five hours a week for Years 8 and 9. For Years 10 to 12 it says hours will vary according to individual learning needs. NB The remaining state and territory education departments do not make recommendations on hours to be spent doing homework although they do have homework policies.

Anyone could easily be forgiven for thinking that such a mainstream and prevalent practice must be based on a solid foundation of grounded research. Unfortunately, in the case of traditional forms of homework, this is simply not the case.

There have been over 150 studies published, which explore the effectiveness of homework in modern western education systems. These studies explore the impact of homework on improving learning outcomes, increasing parental involvement in their children’s learning and also for nurturing independence in students.

The results of these studies are certainly varied but none-the-less there are some very definite overall findings. Overall, it can be said with confidence, that there is absolutely no substantive support for the benefits of primary school aged children doing traditional forms of homework to improve long term learning outcomes. Some small benefits have been found for children in the upper years of primary school in terms of parental involvement in learning and in terms of introducing a more independent approach to
learning. However, these are questionable. At best, it seems that homework for young learners can provide a temporary practice effect (eg kids in head start programs may appear to be performing at a higher level than their peers upto about year three, but advantages are then lost).

Overall, I suggest that primary school kids are better off spending their spare time outside of school enjoying sport or simply running around, after all kids are very much made to move. It is also essential for young people to have time for imaginative play and creativity. After all, kids also very much made to learn through play. In fact play is essential for creative development. Unlike many educational policies would have us believe, kids are not short adults. They are developing neurologically, physically cognitively, socially and emotionally. Rote learning and repetition are not the best ways to attain long term educational results. Learning is about setting a foundation for life long success not simply a means to win a race to the next round of assessments.

As one might expect, the results concerning the benefits of homework for high school students are more divided. There are more factors to consider including the range of subjects studied, the variation in homework approach and content and also the time and effort put into actually doing the work. Overall there is a leaning towards the ineffectiveness of homework in improving learning outcomes, particularly for project based homework. There is better support for homework that involves practicing skills learnt in class. (eg Maths homework that involves practicing a learnt strategy has been found to be more effective than homework from other subjects).

As with homework in primary schools, benefits are also sometimes found for high school students in terms of parental involvement and developing independent study habits.

Overall, despite the limited support for homework that has been identified in some studies, it appears that young people spend a lot of time and exert a lot of emotional energy for very limited benefit. Across Australia thousands of student, teacher and parent hours are spent following this ingrained educational practice simply because ‘it seems like a good idea’ or simply because ‘this is the way it has always been done’.

Yes, some papers support homework… but to be honest, the support is so sketchy in comparison to the lack of support… we might as well be telling kids to play Twister for an hour every evening… no difference really.

You would think that with the world of Google at our finger tips that we would all be able to easily seek out objective information concerning common educational practices. Unfortunately, when it comes to our ingrained beliefs about education, we are generally unable to be objective about seeking knowledge. It is challenging to have to deal with change, especially if change means re-examining the way we have invested so much of our time and energy. This means we generally only seek the information we want to find. When we look for research evidence to support educational practice, we tend to ask questions that are biased in favour of what we already do. For example, if I Google ‘why homework is a great idea’ I am going to get very different search results to a search
based on ‘why homework is a terrible idea’. It is vital to make sure that we consider objectivity as much as is possible. Try Googling “the impact of homework on learning outcomes”, or a similar neutral statement.

In addition to our reluctance to challenge or change ingrained beliefs; we often leave practices unchanged simply because we believe ourselves to be too busy to explore what we do in any detail. If this is you, then I recommend concentrating on reading other researchers’ reviews of the literature, or meta-analyses. This means that others have already looked carefully across lots of different studies, and you simply have to find time to read the overall findings. When it comes to homework, there are several great literature reviews – including one on the Victorian Department of Education website that is really worth looking at. The review might take a little time to read, but could save you a lot of time in your teaching practice…

Overall, I believe that whenever we consider the benefits or costs of homework, we need to consider what can be gained from the homework itself, AND, what the student would be doing with their time otherwise. After all, if a student has no homework, then this means that they will be spending their time doing something else. If a student is passionate about reading or sport or art; or busy writing their own software or detective novel; it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that a lack of homework would certainly enhance, rather than detract from their overall educational experience. If however, a student would be spending that five hours a week on social media or watching YouTube clips of cats falling off tables… the idea of time spent on homework suddenly seems a better one. This makes me think that the real issue is not so much about whether homework is a good idea or a bad idea, but rather, what we consider quality homework to actually be.

Research certainly tells us that an add-on academic project is going to do very little to support a students learning outcomes in a particular subject. However, ‘homework’ that encourages finding your passion in life or building on your existing strengths, could be a great idea for supporting life long learning and wellbeing.

Perhaps instead of the traditional homework policy schools could embrace a ‘creative time’ policy and ‘after school exercise programs’ that welcomes students of all abilities.

Suggested reading


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