SHOULD SCHOOLS SET HOMEWORK?

In 1998, the DfEE (now DfES) issued guidance to all schools in England, recommending that both primary and secondary schools should set homework. Yet homework is a controversial issue. Some argue that it makes a major contribution to academic achievement, teaching children the value of independent study. Others say that it disrupts family life and contributes to educational disadvantage. In this article, Caroline Sharp of the NFER examines these arguments in the light of a major review of recent research for OFSTED. (The views expressed are those of the author, and do not represent those of OFSTED.)

Everyone has a story to tell about homework. Most of them are stories of boredom, frustration and lame excuses. Just occasionally, someone might recall a positive experience when homework was interesting and even fun. Every day, parents ask their children whether they have done their homework: it’s such an accepted part of schooling that people rarely question whether schools should set homework at all.

THE GOVERNMENT VIEW

Is homework beneficial? The DfEE certainly thinks so, and has suggested that all English schools should set homework, beginning with 1 hour per week in Years 1 and 2, and rising to up to 2½ hours a day for Years 10 and 11.

The Government believes that there is enormous advantage in children spending regular periods of time, initially quite short, on different learning activities devised by schools as part of a homework programme which supports the work they do in class (1).

The DfEE guidance suggests that homework has different purposes for pupils of different ages. For younger children, it says the main aim should be to involve parents in their children’s learning. As children get older, the aim should be to provide opportunities for independent learning and help pupils to develop the habit for studying.

At the time the guidelines were issued, homework was a common feature of secondary schools, but there was a great deal of variation at primary level. The DfEE document refers to research carried out in 1995, showing that almost half of pupils in Year 6 were not given regular homework. Although containing non-statutory guidance, it strongly encourages all schools to develop a written policy on homework, setting out the expectations for pupils of different ages.

The impact of the 1998 DfEE guidelines in primary schools can be traced through a series of national surveys conducted by the NFER. In 1997, 64 per cent of responding primary schools had a homework policy, but by Autumn 1999, the proportion of primary schools with homework policies had risen to almost 90 per cent (2).

WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

A variety of charges have been levelled against homework, including the claim that it is simply ineffective in raising achievement. Homework can be viewed as positively harmful if it is so boring as to turn pupils off learning, or so demanding that it causes stress and reinforces failure. It also adds substantially to teachers’ workloads. Then there is the potential disruption to family life to consider, because homework can undoubtedly be a subject of conflict between parents and children, and may cause children to cut down on other valuable leisure-time activities. Moreover, homework has been identified as contributing to the cycle of social and economic disadvantage. Just contrast the situation of a child from a middle-class background (with her own bedroom, desk space, reference books, computer, internet access and parents who have the time and skills to help) with that of a pupil from a less advantaged background who has to struggle to complete her homework against the odds.

Given this litany of criticism, it is not surprising that some people have called for traditional homework to be banned, arguing that it would be better to extend the school day so that pupils could tackle their (home)work after school, using the school’s facilities (3). What I want to do in this article is to examine the research evidence, to see whether it sheds any light on this contentious debate.
A REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH

In 1997, OFSTED asked the NFER to compile a bibliography of research findings on homework to contribute to their advice to the DEEE about homework policy. Later, OFSTED agreed to give further funding in order to update the bibliography and draw together the best available evidence into a review. (The review is available from NFER publications (4) and the full bibliography is available from the NFER website (5).)

We decided that it would be useful to focus on research conducted after 1988 (the year of the Education Reform Act) and that we would try to include as much UK research as possible. In fact the choice of 1988 as a starting date was fortuitous: in 1989, Professor Harris Cooper, of Missouri-Columbia University, published a comprehensive and authoritative review of homework research (6). We were able to use his findings as a starting-point from which to consider the more recent evidence.

There has been a considerable amount of recent research on homework, although evidence on some key issues is disappointingly thin. We extracted information from over 100 recent studies, many of which were conducted in the USA, although about a third originated in the UK.

DOES HOMEWORK CONTRIBUTE TO ACHIEVEMENT?

One of the strongest arguments made in favour of homework is that it helps to raise achievement. The link between time on homework and achievement is one of the most common topics of research into homework. But this does not make it a simple area to study. Just measuring homework time is problematic: do you ask teachers how long they think a homework task should take to complete, or do you ask pupils how long they spend doing it (and will they give you an accurate answer)? Is it important to measure how long it takes, or how frequently homework is set? And if you do find a correlation between the amount of time pupils spend on homework and their school achievement, could this be because higher-achieving pupils are more willing to spend time on homework, rather than the homework causing the higher scores?

We decided to concentrate on evidence from studies which had at least considered these issues and had used statistical approaches designed to single out the ‘homework effect’. The results were remarkably consistent with earlier findings highlighted by Harris Cooper. They showed that time on homework contributes to achievement at secondary level, and the effect is stronger among older pupils. However, the research on primary pupils has been much less extensive and the results are probably best described as inconclusive (a mixture of slightly positive and ‘no effect’ results).

How much does homework contribute to achievement? Even among older pupils, the homework effect appears to be relatively modest. For example, one English study calculated that A-level students who spent 7 hours or more per week on homework for a particular subject achieved a third of a grade higher, on average, than students of the same gender and ability who spent less than 2 hours per week (7). Similarly, international studies of achievement in mathematics and science have found a within-country relationship between time spent on homework and achievement: but time on homework accounts for only a small proportion of the variance in pupils’ test scores (8). One study (9) identified a trend in several countries for 13-year-olds spending between 1 and 3 hours per day on homework to score highest in mathematics and science.

So where does this leave us? The research evidence has been used by people on both sides of the homework argument. Those in the anti-homework camp point to the lack of evidence of impact on younger children, and say that the small positive gains in achievement at secondary level are outweighed by homework’s negative effects. Those in the pro-homework camp point to the consistent finding that spending time on homework contributes to achievement among secondary pupils. They argue that the lack of evidence at primary level is not a good enough reason for abandoning homework for younger children, because there are other benefits to be gained from setting homework, such as encouraging parental involvement, helping pupils to become independent learners and getting them used to homework in preparation for secondary school.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN HOMEWORK

Homework is one of the major points of connection between pupils, parents and schools. The research suggests that parents are generally in favour of schools setting homework, although they may have concerns about the amount of time it takes up. In fact, OFSTED finds that homework is one of the issues most likely to be raised by parents as a concern in their pre-inspection questionnaires. In 2000 about one in five parents expressed some concern to OFSTED about their school’s homework practices (not enough homework and inconsistency being the main bones of contention).

Parental involvement takes two main forms: indirect involvement in encouraging their children to complete homework, and direct involvement with the homework task. The research evidence confirms that parents play an important role in encouraging their children to spend time on homework and eliminating distractions, such as watching television. Direct involvement in homework is much more common when children are younger (for example, a parent helping their child to read or learn spellings). It is also related to the needs of the child, and the type of task set.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the research suggests that direct parental involvement in homework does not necessarily result in higher achievement for pupils. The reason seems to be that the kind of help is the crucial factor. Although most parents are keen to support their child, there is a danger that some could actually make learning more difficult by using approaches that run counter to the teaching methods adopted in school, doing the homework for their children, or becoming upset and angry with their children’s mistakes.
Research is beginning to confirm that the type of parental involvement is key. A theme apparent in some of the more successful initiatives to encourage parental involvement with reading is that parents were given advice (and sometimes training) in how to encourage their children’s learning (10). Harris Cooper and his colleagues found that primary children who said their parents helped with homework without ‘making it harder’ achieved higher classroom grades (11). At secondary level, the higher achievers have parents who encouraged them to become more self-reliant (12). These findings would seem to suggest that parents can make an important contribution to their children’s learning through involvement with homework, provided that they have the necessary encouragement, time, knowledge and skills.

DOING HOMEWORK AT SCHOOL

It has been suggested that rather than expecting children to do homework at home, a better approach would be to lengthen the school day, providing time for children to complete their homework at the end of the school day, on school premises (13). It is argued that this would ensure better homework completion and help to counteract the disadvantage suffered by children from poorer backgrounds. Indeed, in an attempt to raise standards of achievement, Hull LEA has consulted its secondary schools over a proposal to restructure the school day to provide compulsory after-school homework sessions for all.

Recent research has found that attendance at school-based study support is associated with positive effects (14). The research was carried out as part of the National Youth Agency’s study support programme, focusing on schools in disadvantaged areas. The study found that students who attended ‘drop in’ study centres had more positive attitudes, and in some schools there was a significant correlation between attending a centre in Year 10 and achieving better GCSE results.

So why do I have misgivings about the idea of making homework a compulsory part of schooling? The reasons stem from the growing evidence about the benefits of study support. For pupils, the fact that participation is voluntary is a vital part of the learning ‘contract’. Pupils attend homework clubs and study centres because they want to, because their friends go there and because they find it interesting, useful and rewarding. They appreciate the access to facilities and the help on offer from fellow pupils, teachers or mentors. They are also grateful that disruptive pupils choose not to attend. We have visited schools taking children from very disadvantaged backgrounds, who have made study support an attractive option for most pupils, using it as a means of counteracting an anti-learning culture. Make it compulsory, and you risk destroying the learning contract, thereby damaging the conditions that lead pupils to become well-motivated, independent learners.

So should schools set homework? In the end, it is not up to researchers to decide. The evidence suggests that time spent on homework has a positive effect on the achievement of secondary pupils. It also suggests that access to voluntary study support is valuable, and may be particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Primary schools aiming to raise achievement by setting more homework could be disappointed. But primary teachers may wish to consider using homework to promote other goals, such as developing children’s study skills or improving parental involvement.

Research into homework: some additional findings

- Most pupils consider homework to be important to learning. Pupils’ main complaints about homework concern inadequate or conflicting deadlines, and tasks that make little contribution to learning.
- Pupils who spend more time on homework are likely to have more positive attitudes to school. Pupils’ attitudes to homework are related to characteristics such as cultural background, age and gender (e.g. girls are more prepared to spend time on homework than are boys).
- Pupils have individual learning styles which affect their preferences for the type of task (e.g. visual, written, oral) and the homework environment (e.g. some young people prefer to work with music on).
- Except for children with special needs, there is no evidence that setting individualised homework tasks is worth the additional workload for teachers.
- Parents and teachers feel that homework centres in schools or public libraries are particularly valuable for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- There is a need for more research into certain aspects of homework, including: the role of homework in encouraging independent learning; the learning outcomes associated with different types of task; and the impact of specific approaches to marking and feedback.

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Notes and references


9 See BEATON et al. (1996), op. cit.

10 See Section 6 of: SHARP et al. (2001) [online], op. cit.


13 See KRALOVEC and BUELL (2000), op. cit.


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