

Homework hysteria

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with cartoon by Peter MacMullin

Almost every parent of a school-aged child has experienced the hysteria of the last-minute realisation that there is a test or an assignment due tomorrow and the child has not done the work. (Sometimes, it's not clear who is the more hysterical: the child, or the parent!)

Then there's the nightly nagging to get started on the homework. This policing role leads to tension in the family and disputes between parents and the many children who cannot or do not want to do the work. Or, there's the times when the parents 'help' by doing the work themselves, because they realise that the job is too difficult for their child.

What's it all for?

It certainly is not to teach children self-discipline and good study habits, because it's the parents and teachers who impose and police the homework. Therefore, the discipline is external, not internal.



The rationale is also not that homework improves children's school performance. A penetrating review of research into the effects of homework found that any gains it produces in students' achievement levels are minimal and occur only in high school (Trautwein & Köller 2003). Even the modest demonstrated benefits at that age could be due to the fact that the most able students are in the most academic classes, where most homework is assigned and teaching is typically of a higher quality (Gamoran & Berends 1987), making it impossible to separate the effects of homework from these other teaching practices. Prior to the late high school years, children who are

given more than 30 minutes of homework a night show *declines* in their academic skills, compared with children who are given none.

Effects on children

Young people resent the intrusion of school work into their private lives (Mayall 2002). Homework does not meet children's needs and indeed violates their requirements for recreational and extra-curricular activity time, and for sleep (which is especially vital for adolescents). Giving children compulsory homework in primary school causes them to dislike school and to work less well during the school day in the knowledge that they have more to do that evening. Finally, to get them to do work which violates their needs, teachers and parents have to use coercion, with all of its disadvantages. Controlling parental instruction can produce in children poorer task orientation and greater negativity towards school work (Parker et al. 1999).

Effects on parents

Many groups of parents are unable to oversee their children's homework. This can be because parents value home time as an opportunity for relaxation and leisure, not for doing more schoolwork (Coots 1998). Others parents may want to assist their children's learning at home but may not be proficient in English or may themselves have received little education, and therefore do not know how to help their children with the work (Hill et al. 2004; Kohl et al. 2000).

When children have learning difficulties, homework forces them to confront at home what they endure all day at school: failure. Yet when children cannot do the work, parents' instructional support is seldom beneficial, particularly for children with learning disabilities. Constantly placing parents in the role of their child's instructor does not improve educational outcomes for children, and can even be detrimental to them and to the entire family by adding to family stress (Ramey & Ramey 1992; White et al. 1992).

When children have behavioural difficulties, their parents are less willing to incite outbursts by attempting formal tutoring or supervising their homework (Coots 1998). Parents whose children have attention deficits and highly disruptive behaviours experience particularly elevated stress (Sheridan et al. 1997; Williford et al. 2007). Compounding this, parents who share their children's condition will have difficulties structuring everyday family life, let alone overseeing homework.

Effects on teachers

Teachers have to set homework, police its completion, and mark it. For the majority of students who are progressing well, this extra work is an unnecessary burden on both students and teachers.

The solution: voluntary and naturalistic work

If instead teachers could design specific remedial activities for the handful of struggling students, both they and their students would be less burdened. Individualised activities and specific feedback for the students with learning difficulties would make it more likely that their skills could improve.

Teachers could continue to set home-based activities for students to complete voluntarily when:

- the work can only be done at home and is not just an extension of class work – such as when students need to watch a particular TV program or interview relatives;
- if students chose not to apply themselves to their work during the school day, thus electing to complete it in their own time;
- if students choose to revise and practise in order to improve their skills by completing extra work at home (Glasser 1998a).

What makes these forms of homework different from compulsory homework is choice. When we lack choice, activities become work, and when they are joyless, they teach us little – other than to dislike them.

Aside from these voluntary tasks, naturalistic activities at home can be the most beneficial. In the early years of school, reading to children is the most beneficial activity for the children's academic development (Halle et al. 1997). In the middle primary to high school years, simply reading for recreation is the best 'homework' that children can do. Finally, in years 11 and 12, those young people motivated to pass their year 12 exams will choose to do the necessary work. Some may not be motivated, but the previous imposition of homework on them would make it no more likely that they will apply themselves in their final years of schooling, and may even make it less likely as the children become exhausted by the stress.

Conclusion

I agree with Bill Glasser (1992, p. 231) that children would be better emerging from schooling ignorant, than hating to learn. It's the children's willingness to learn that is most harmed by compulsory homework. Children don't like it, many parents don't like it, teachers don't like it. For good reason.

Glasser's criticisms of compulsory homework

Reduction of student motivation and achievement

- Compulsory homework reduces the quality of students' lives: it does not meet their needs.
- Homework is irrelevant, especially until the most senior years of high school.
- Students have no choice about doing it, which makes them unmotivated.
- Homework allows students to make the same mistakes over and over when studying at home without teacher supervision.
- Most homework is more easily and better done at school.

Contribution to student drop-out and burn-out (stress)

- Homework is excessive and tedious and causes students to detest school and learning.
- Homework eats into relaxation time, which would offset stress.
- Bright students who are conscientious about doing homework have no time left to pursue other recreational activities; less able students do not do the homework but because this defines them as failures, they do little else either. Thus, both groups of

students are denied other learning and enjoyable activities. And by adulthood, they have not developed ways to enjoy their leisure time.

Exacerbation of demarcations between students

- Students from privileged homes have the facilities for quiet study whereas students from disadvantaged homes have not, leading to a widening of the differences between their academic achievement levels.
- Just as it contributes to social status differences between students, homework highlights differences in their academic status, as only academically able students complete their homework, while the remainder are defined as disruptive.

Interference with high-quality teaching

- Assigning compulsory homework prevents teachers from planning exciting instruction.
- Homework must be graded, with all the disadvantages of grading.
- Failure to do homework must be punished, which violates egalitarian principles.
- To avoid arguments, teachers (and parents) accept low quality homework, sending the message that it is acceptable to do poor work.

Contribution to antagonistic relationships with young people

- Compulsory homework leads to conflict between students and teachers.
- Voluntary homework that involved talking to adults could help bring parents and children together, whereas compulsory homework only creates antagonism between them, as parents frequently believe that it is their role to ensure that their children complete their homework. (Instead, if the school sets the work, it should supervise it.)

Sources: Glasser 1969, 1998a.

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