

# Homework: its uses and abuses

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## Introduction

Homework has a long and controversial history (Gordon, 1980). Since the mid-nineteenth century it has been used to supplement the curriculum and has been more or less fashionable depending on political, economic, social and educational factors. When there is concern to raise educational standards the amount of homework set by schools tends to increase. As the pressure on children and family life becomes increasingly intolerable parents and those professionals concerned with the well being of children campaign against it. A reduction in homework follows until such time as the whole cycle begins again (Cooper et al., 1998). Research on homework can therefore only be understood taking account of the cultural and historical framework within which it was undertaken.

What exactly is homework? It is usually taken to mean any work set by the school which is undertaken out of school hours for which the learner takes primary responsibility. Of course, it may actually be undertaken on school premises and, where very young children are involved, the primary responsibility for making sure that it is undertaken usually lies with the parents or carers. Over the years a range of purposes and benefits has been suggested for homework. Sometimes these appear contradictory in nature, but, in part, this is because they are defined by different kinds of tasks for pupils of different ages and abilities. At the same time, a number of disadvantages have been proposed (Cowan and Hallam, 1999; Hallam, 2004). These are outlined below.

## Perceived purposes, advantages and disadvantages of homework

Perceived purposes and advantages of homework	Perceived disadvantages of homework
<p><b>Homework can promote academic learning by</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* increasing the amount of time students spend studying</li> <li>* providing opportunities for practice, preparation, and extension work</li> <li>* assisting in the development of a range of intellectual skills</li> </ul> <p><b>Homework can assist in the development of generic skills by</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* providing opportunities for individualised work</li> <li>* fostering initiative and independence</li> <li>* developing skills in using libraries and other learning resources</li> <li>* training pupils in planning and organising time</li> <li>* developing good habits and self-discipline</li> <li>* encouraging ownership and responsibility for learning</li> </ul> <p><b>Homework can be beneficial to schools through</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* easing time constraints on the curriculum and allowing examination demands to be met</li> <li>* allowing assessment of pupils' progress and mastery of work</li> <li>* exploiting resources not available in school</li> <li>* fulfilling the expectations of parents, pupils, politicians and the public</li> <li>* enabling accountability to external inspection agencies</li> </ul> <p><b>Homework can promote home-school liaison by</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* encouraging the involvement of parents</li> <li>* developing links and opportunities for dialogue between</li> </ul>	<p><b>Homework can act to the disadvantage of schools when</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* it increases negative attitudes</li> <li>* it reduces the opportunities for pupils to develop academic skills from involvement in every day life</li> <li>* parents pressure children too much</li> <li>* parents create confusion in explaining material</li> <li>* parents have different approaches to teaching from those adopted by the school</li> <li>* parents do homework for their children or contribute excessively</li> <li>* pupils cheat or copy</li> <li>* the differences between high and low achievers are increased</li> </ul> <p><b>Homework can have a negative impact on the family when it</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* disrupts family life</li> <li>* causes friction within the family</li> </ul> <p><b>Homework can be detrimental to the individual when it</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* causes anxiety</li> <li>* reduces motivation to learn</li> <li>* creates boredom, fatigue and emotional exhaustion</li> <li>* reduces time for leisure activities</li> </ul> <p><b>Homework can have a negative impact on society when it</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* reduces time for involvement in community activities</li> <li>* polarises the opportunities for children from different economic circumstances because some have better facilities and resources than others</li> </ul>

parents and the school <b>Promoting family communication</b> * encourages parents and children to work together	
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Derived from Cowan and Hallam (1999)

## Research on homework

There are considerable methodological problems in undertaking research on the effects of homework. Firstly, it is difficult to isolate the effects of homework from the many other factors which affect learning outcomes, for instance, teaching quality, school ethos, prior attainment of pupils. Secondly, assessing the amount of time spent doing homework is problematic because estimates vary depending on whether they are made by pupils, parents or teachers (Cooper et al., 1998). Thirdly, the quality or type of homework is rarely taken into account. Fourthly, studies adopt different measures of effectiveness, over different time scales, and rarely consider both academic achievement and the affective outcomes of learning, e.g. motivation or attitudes towards school. Finally, research has tended to concentrate on homework where learning outcomes can be measured quantitatively, for instance, mathematics, largely ignoring other domains or homework where attainment has to be assessed qualitatively. For these reasons, interpreting and generalising the findings of much of the research is difficult.

**The effects of homework on achievement** Many reviews of the effectiveness of homework in promoting achievement have been undertaken over the years. They have often reached contradictory conclusions. In part, this is because the research has been relatively simplistic in its conceptualisation and has not taken account of the many factors that affect learning outcomes in school. Studies have fallen into two main categories, those which compare homework with no homework and those which examine the relationships between time spent doing homework and learning outcomes. Taking account of both, with reference to the international literature, the evidence suggests that at secondary level homework has a role to play in promoting academic achievement. However, the relationship appears to be curvilinear. Attainment seems to be highest with moderate levels of homework (Cooper, 1998). At primary level the effects are much less clear, particularly for young children (see Cooper et al., 2001; Hallam, 2004). Classroom grades seen unrelated to students' attitudes towards homework but are predicted by how much homework is completed, student ability and the amount of parent facilitation of homework (Cooper et al, 2001). There has been very little research in the UK examining the importance of homework in the achievement of individual children. Studies undertaken comparing homework demands in schools tend to support the importance of homework (OFSTED, 1995) but research undertaken at this level subsumes many confounding factors. Exploration of the effects of the setting and undertaking of different amounts of homework for different subject domains or school classes has also been inconclusive (see Hallam, 2004).

Some of the inconsistencies in the research findings might be explained by taking account of two factors, children's ability or prior knowledge in a field and school practices in relation to homework. In all phases of schooling, if pupils lack prior knowledge or ability in a given area of study it will take them longer to complete homework to the same standard as their more able or expert peers. At primary level, where the concern is with the development of basic skills, teachers and parents are likely to try to encourage children to spend longer doing homework in order that they do not fall behind. This may explain the negative relationships found between time spent on homework and attainment at primary level. While the principles underlying these relationships do not change at secondary level the attitudes of educators do. There is an increasing acceptance of differences in attainment and an expectation that children will not all attain at the same levels. Those perceived as more able are given more homework so that they will excel in their examinations, while those perceived as less able are given less.

## **Towards a model of homework**

Cowan and Hallam (1999) outlined a model which sets out those factors which are likely to contribute to the effects of homework on learning outcomes and how they interact with each other (see Figure 1). The model suggests that societal and cultural factors influence the behaviour of students, schools and families. In turn there are complex interactions between aspects of each of these. The nature of the homework task and its presentation are largely determined by the school, although, in setting homework, teachers may take account of student characteristics and home factors. The nature and presentation of the task will to some extent determine the process involved in doing homework. Process includes the strategies available to the student for undertaking the task itself and the strategies that they have for supporting their learning, e.g. maintaining concentration, organising time. The process will also be influenced by the degree and quality of support that pupils receive at home from parents, siblings, friends or other family members. The outcomes of homework can be both academic and affective and may be related to school, family, personal or social factors. Student characteristics may directly influence learning outcomes through prior knowledge and level of expertise. In turn, the outcomes of homework will affect student characteristics, not only changing academic and metacognitive characteristics but also those relating to self-esteem, attitudes and motivation. The outcomes of homework are affected directly by time factors, in particular opportunity to do homework, while the home environment can be influenced by outcomes in relation to the degree of family commitment to school and the child's progress. School factors are affected by homework. Teachers respond more favourably to pupils if they are working hard and doing well. The school's reputation may improve and its ethos can become more positive. The reverse can also apply. Negative outcomes of homework can contribute to a downward spiral where teacher morale is low leading to cycles of blame and the emergence of a more negative ethos. While this model does not take account of all the complexities of the interactions between factors affecting homework it does provide a broad framework for considering them.

There is little research to date within such a multi-dimensional framework. Cooper et al. (1998) have shown that amount of homework completed is associated with student grades at both primary and secondary levels, although the relationship is stronger at secondary level. Primary pupil attitudes were unrelated to the amount of homework completed. At secondary level there was a relationship. In both sectors, pupil attitudes were affected positively by parental attitudes and negatively by the amount of homework the teacher gave.

**See Figure 1: "A Model of Homework" at the end of this document**

### **Effectiveness of different kinds of homework**

While considerable effort has been made to establish whether the amount of homework completed contributes to enhancing achievement there has been little concern with examining the nature or quality of the homework undertaken and its relationship to the particular learning outcome being assessed. The closer the relationships the more likely there are to be positive effects. The nature of the homework, its value in contributing to the curriculum and the motivation and concentration of the individual undertaking it will be equally if not more important than the time spent doing it. Pupils perceive homework as more useful when it is an integral part of school work (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). There is also some evidence that, on both immediate and delayed achievement measures, homework which includes preparation, practice or both is more effective than homework concerned only with current curriculum content. Students also report that written homework assignments are more effective because there is a concrete outcome that ensures that homework is actually undertaken (see Hallam, 2004).

Some research has been concerned with whether homework should be tailored to individual needs. The DES (1987) suggested that it was not possible to be definite about the kind or amount of homework desirable for all

pupils because of the extent of individual differences. To some extent this has been reflected in school practice, where it has tended to be assumed that lower achieving children should get less homework, although in some schools learning support staff help teachers in differentiating homework and work with parents to help them support their children (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). Central here is the perceived purpose of homework. If there is a trade-off between ability and time spent learning, as some have suggested, then homework could operate as a means of increasing learning time for the less able, enabling them to keep up with their more able peers. Generally, there is a tendency in schools to reverse this procedure and set greater amounts of homework for the more able students, although there is some evidence that low ability pupils who do regular homework can achieve higher grades than more able pupils who do no homework at all (see Hallam, 2004).

### **Does homework develop responsibility and independent study?**

Both parents and teachers believe that homework develops a sense of responsibility. There is no evidence of such a general development. An Australian study suggests that children may accept increasing responsibility for doing their homework as they get older (Warton, 1997), while other research suggests that children as young as eight can develop homework strategies. These may be modelled on strategies adopted by their parents (Xu and Corno, 1998). Others have also suggested that homework can encourage the transition from motivation to please the teacher or parents to a position where work becomes intrinsically satisfying, but again there is no evidence to support this.

### **Schools, teachers, and homework**

International comparisons indicate large differences in the amount of homework which pupils are given in different countries. Large variations between schools, subject areas and the practices of individual teachers have also been observed in the UK (OFSTED, 1995), although the amount of homework which pupils are required to do tends to increase as they progress through school.

Teachers generally agree that homework is worthwhile (Keys, Harris, and Fernandes, 1995). Certainly, if it is to be of any value in raising standards of attainment, clear expectations and the commitment of teachers are essential (DES, 1987). Pupils themselves have indicated that teacher expectations are one of the most decisive factors in motivating them to do their homework (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). Where teachers feel that homework is relatively unimportant, this may be communicated to parents and pupils. Although, generally, teachers accept the importance of homework, the evidence suggests that their concern with the planning and setting of it may not always be optimal. They may feel pressured, regardless of the stage of work that has been reached in class, to set homework on the stated day or instructions may be given hurriedly, with insufficient guidance and inadequate opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification (see Hallam, 2004).

There is general consensus that homework must be monitored and marked if students are to take it seriously. Marking homework is time consuming and if teachers doubt its value they will not be motivated to take the time to do this. Most teachers do regularly assign, collect and grade homework (Keys et al., 1995), but they vary in the kind of feedback they give. The evidence suggests that providing multiple feedback, with marks or grades, evaluative comments and explanations as to how things can be corrected, is best. Explaining solutions to homework problems to the whole class has also been shown to be effective.

Teachers report that motivating students to undertake and complete homework can be difficult. The evidence suggests that any combination of consequences, rewards or punishments, relating to homework can increase completion rates, although there can be dilemmas for teachers about punishing non-completion of homework depending on the circumstances, for instance, problems at home, access to resources, or confusion over the requirements.

## **Pupils and homework**

Pupils' attitudes towards homework are often influenced by peer group and community factors. MacBeath and Turner (1990) found that a range of factors were important including motivation, mood, well-being, family circumstances, the weather, and the quality and quantity of homework assigned. Pupils who like school are more likely to believe in the importance of homework and spend more time doing it than those who dislike school. Some pupils see little relationship between home and school work and perceive homework as inadequately explained and marked late. They also report a lack of pupil teacher interaction resulting in poor feedback about homework. Despite these apparently negative perceptions, they seem to view teachers as more effective when they set regular homework. They tend to resent work set above or below their ability, to criticise teachers who cater for the lowest common denominator and to believe that good teachers individualise homework. Most think that homework helps them, although they often do not enjoy doing it (MacBeath and Turner, 1990).

## **Gender differences**

A number of studies have commented on gender differences in relation to homework. Girls tend to spend longer doing their homework, are more positive in their responses to it and take more responsibility for their own learning. Primary age girls are more likely than boys to believe that homework is important in helping them to do well in school (see Hallam, 2004, Rogers and Hallam, 2006).

## **The homework environment and competing activities**

Generally, teachers advise pupils to work in a quiet place where disturbance will be minimal. This advice is rarely taken. Many children do their homework with the radio, CDs or the TV playing (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). Some report that these provide companionship. More commonly, pupils claim background music aids concentration because it shuts out other distractions or builds a wall of sound behind which they can retreat. Some pupils report that TV aids concentration, but for many it provides an intermittent distraction and 'eases the pain' (MacBeath and Turner, 1990).

Children adopt different patterns for completing homework and undertaking leisure activities. Unsurprisingly, as they get older work tends to continue later into the evening. The most common leisure activity is watching TV. However, watching television does not appear to interfere with the completion of homework. There seems to be sufficient time for pupils to do both (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). As pupils get older, part-time work and help with domestic chores become important competing activities. Extensive involvement in these can seriously interfere with motivation and time spent studying.

## **Parents and homework**

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on encouraging parents to become involved in the education of their children (Cowan et al., 1998). Some believe that the home is an especially effective learning environment, particularly for young children. Homework is seen as an important bridge between home and school. This is relevant to beliefs that increased contact between home and school can affect pupil's success at school. Most parents take their child's educational progress seriously and aim to support their offspring as best they can. They see homework as contributing to educational progress and feel that they have a role to play in supporting their children in doing it (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). They believe that time spent doing homework, and the level of accuracy with which it is undertaken has a positive effect on academic achievement (Levin et al., 1997) and become increasingly concerned that homework is not only completed but also done well.

Effective parental involvement with homework requires a dialogue between home and school. Communication between home and school is often problematic and parents are often dissatisfied with the way that schools set homework and provide information and guidance (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). They often feel that homework has little relationship to the work in hand, is poorly set, marked late, and that there is a lack of pupil-teacher interaction resulting in poor feedback for the pupil. In addition, they report that teachers do not always seem to be aware of how long it takes pupils to do particular pieces of homework. Some schools may fail to communicate their homework policies effectively, or provide sufficient explanation of the purposes and goals of particular pieces of homework. The problems this may cause can be particularly acute in primary schools where teachers rely on children to explain what they are meant to do. Some schools may be unwilling to enter a partnership with parents. While expecting parents to support their children they often do not wish to involve parents in developing homework policy, wishing to retain educational power within the school

### **Parents' views of the purposes of homework.**

While parents generally resemble teachers in their belief in the desirability of homework for children's educational progress, they may differ in their view of its purposes. For parents, homework serves the purposes of informing them about the curriculum, promoting family discussion, and offering opportunities for their involvement (MacBeath and Turner, 1990).

### **The effects of parents helping children with their homework**

Research on parental help with homework is inconclusive. Some studies suggest that it improves achievement while others indicate that the effects are negligible. One explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings is that parents may provide more help for children who are experiencing difficulties. Helping children who are finding homework difficult can cause frustration and disappointment and ultimately may be counter productive to the child's functioning in school and to their general well-being (Levin et al., 1997). There is also evidence that parents with children who are not progressing well at school become increasingly frustrated and reluctant to forge connections with the school.

Toomey (1989) suggests that the home-school relations policies and practices used in most schools in disadvantaged areas tend to encourage only a minority of parents to become involved. These he describes as enthusiast parents who are confident in their relations with the school and in their role as educators of their children at home. The less confident parents, who form the majority, are less likely to enter the school regularly and therefore less likely to benefit from the school's home-school relations activities. The gap between the achievements of the children of the enthusiasts and the children of the rest tends to increase over time. The parents who need the most help are not engaged by most current systems. He suggests that they require home visits to help them.

Three main roles exist for parents in relation to homework; monitoring, support and help (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). There is a great deal of evidence that parental expectations, support and monitoring of homework are extremely important in determining whether homework is completed. Recent UK evidence suggests that most parents do ensure that their children complete their homework (Keys et al., 1995), although some feel inadequately equipped to help their children. The latter tend to increase as children progress through school. This can lead to a lack of interest and a failure to place any importance on the completion of homework. Socio-economic and educational differences are important here. The more formal education that parents have had, the more time their children spend on homework, particularly where the parents also have high aspirations (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). Parents' attitudes towards homework at primary level may play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes towards homework later (Cooper et al., 1998). This implies that efforts to

improve parental involvement and attitudes towards homework may pay off in the long term even if they appear to have little effect in the short term.

### **Homework practices in families**

For some parents, homework provides opportunities for developing common interests and enhancing the relation between them and their children (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). For others, homework provokes conflict (Cowan et al., 1998). This does not necessarily depend on the child's progress at school but seems to be more related to parental expectations and the nature of the relationship between parent and child. Where this is difficult, parental involvement with homework may be counterproductive. Children may manipulate their parents by playing dumb and getting the parent to do the work. This is a relatively unexplored area and one where research is needed to attempt to establish what kind of parental support is most productive under what circumstances. Parents may have the most positive influence when they make appropriate resources available, offer moral support, and check that the homework has been done. Providing help only when asked, and reporting difficulties to teachers may be in the child's best interest.

### **Interventions to support pupils in undertaking homework**

A range of interventions has been developed with the intention of supporting pupils in undertaking their homework. These have often been small-scale projects developed at school or local level and it is difficult to assess their effectiveness because of the extent of possible confounding factors. Some projects have provided direct support for students through the provision of homework clubs and telephone help lines. Others offer indirect support to students through homework checklists which can help identify pupils who are having problems, the provision of booklets containing advice on how to do homework, study skills courses, interventions to help homework management and the use of self-monitoring procedures. Others operate through providing guidance and support to parents. Any project that raises the awareness of the importance of homework for the parties involved is likely to affect the monitoring of homework completion, the care with which it is undertaken, and the effort made.

### **Where now?**

The evidence suggests that generally, pupils, parents and teachers see homework as actually, or potentially, useful in contributing to learning. While there is not a simple relationship between time spent doing homework and achievement, where homework is valued and serves to motivate pupils it is likely to make a valuable contribution. The challenge for schools is to develop homework policies and practices, which achieve this end. While too much homework can have a negative affect on attitudes (Cooper et al., 1998), existing research does not offer clear criteria for assessing whether demands are excessive. The older mental discipline view of education believed that children benefited from being set work that was difficult, meaningless and dull. There is no support for this view. Instead, it is likely that homework, which is perceived as tedious, boring and pointless, will have a demotivating effect. If teachers, pupils and parents are committed to homework, tasks are interesting and teachers provide appropriate explanations, encouragement and feedback there are more likely to be positive effects on learning outcomes. The pupils in the study by MacBeath and Turner (1990) expressed the view that:

- \* homework should be clearly related to ongoing classroom work;
- \* there should be a clear pattern to class work and homework;
- \* homework should be varied;
- \* homework should be manageable;
- \* homework should be challenging but not too difficult;
- \* homework should allow for individual initiative and creativity;

- \* homework should promote self confidence and understanding;
- \* there should be recognition or reward for work done;
- \* there should be guidance and support.

These are sensible and reasonable demands. The challenge for educators is to find ways of satisfying them.

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Figure 1

# Model of Homework

