

Why Homework is Assigned

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Abstract

This literature review will provide a synthesis of literature that addresses why homework is assigned, different types and amounts of homework typically assigned, and parental involvement in homework assignments.

The Center for Public Education, TCPE (2007) indicates that teachers assign homework for both instructional and non-instructional purposes. Some of the instructional purposes include practicing what the students learned in class that day, preparing them for new material, expanding the knowledge of content material relative to different contexts, and integrating individual skills into project-based assignments. The non-instructional purposes include improving students' study skills, and fulfill school or district homework assignment policies.

Researchers also report that teachers assign homework because some parents expect their children to come home with one or two tasks (Brock, Lapp, Flood, Fisher, & Han, 2007). These expectations typically come from students whose parents are 'professionals and upper-class' because they want the best for their child (Skinner, 2004), and they want their child to perform to the best of their ability and prepare them for success in the real world. The amount of homework these schools assign far exceeds the recommended amounts. However, this report states that it the general consensus of most Americans, that the more homework the teacher assigns, the better the school. More homework is sometimes correlated to schools that offer 'rigor and challenge' Therefore, these parents view homework as a good thing (Brock et.al., 2007).

Contrary to the more homework, better school idea, parents are complaining to school boards that their child receives too much homework from their teachers, and parents reveal that their child is overworked and burdened by large amounts of homework assignments. Parents want to make sure that teachers follow the guidelines for assigning homework established by the district and that they are not exceeding those limits. Additionally, parents want teachers to be mindful of the amount of work they assign students and not underestimate the amount of time it will take the student to finish the work (Kohn, 2007).

Furthermore, these same parents would like for the school district to re-evaluate the requirement of mandating that teachers assign a certain number of minutes of homework each night to students. This type of policy leads parents to believe that teachers are not matching the assignment to individual ability, but merely giving homework for the purpose of a requirement. Hence, the end result is reduced homework assignments. Conversely, it was determined in one study that the 'typical student does not spend more than an hour a day on homework' (Skinner 2004). This same study also reported that in 1987, 47% of college freshmen completed more than 5 hours of

homework a week. In 2002, the percentage of college freshmen who spent more than 5 hours a week on homework as seniors in high school, dropped to 34%.

Different Types of Homework

The Center for Public Education (2007) defines the nature or types of homework by two types: instructional homework and non-instructional homework. The report also states that there are four kinds of instructional homework and four types of non-instructional homework. Instructional homework is assigned for four purposes (Cooper, 1989b). They are practice, preparation, extension and integration. Practice and preparation are the two most frequently assigned purpose for homework. Practice homework or work that involves the students "doing," is the most common type of homework assigned. It generally reinforces material that the teacher covered in class and aims to help the student master course objectives. Preparation homework is given to introduce students to material that the teacher anticipates covering. It helps the students "get ready" for the next new topic. Extension homework wants the student to apply prior knowledge and skills to different contexts, going beyond what was learned in the classroom and applying the knowledge to other disciplines. The fourth and final type of homework, integration homework involves creativity and requires the student to produce a product, such as a project, by applying multiple skills (TCPE, 2007; Foyle, 1986).

Foyle (1986) reported that social studies teachers were more prone to give preparation homework assignments, which help students get ready for the next day's lesson. Practice homework assignments were usually given by mathematics teachers in efforts to help the students practice math skills they were taught that day. Examples of extension homework assignments might include book reports, the writing of letters, and letter typing. Integration homework assignments or creativity homework might include research reports and projects. This type of homework assignment involves combining new skills and concepts in new ways. Homework of this kind also allows students to display originality in their masterpieces as they are not bound by constraints typical of other kinds of homework assignments.

Brock et.al. (2007), report that out of 133 teachers, practice homework was the largest type of homework assigned. Predictably, they were math teachers. The second highest category of homework assignments consisted of preparation assignments, and they were given by reading teachers. These findings were consistent with other teachers across the United States. Unfortunately, teachers reported that they do not assign extension and integration homework assignments as much as practice and preparation assignments (Murphy & Decker, 1989). Most teachers assign homework that is not meant to induce critical thinking or higher order skills. Instead they give their students handouts that consist of practice and review, vocabulary or word study, and packets (Brock et.al., 2007). However, by incorporating homework of different types into the curriculum, teachers can provide a variety of ways by which to make homework more interesting and meaningful for their students.

How Much Homework Should Be Assigned?

Cooper (2001) reports on how much homework a student should receive based on current grade level. There is a general rule of thumb that teachers should determine the amount of homework to give their students based on the grade level they teach. This rule is known as the "Ten Minute Rule," or ten minutes multiplied by the students' grade level each night. Therefore, the range of time that high school students should spend on homework nightly is between 1 ½ hours to 2 hours. Students in grades 9-12 should receive 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours of work per night while an anonymous writer suggests that a child in the 9th grade should have no more than five assignments each week, lasting no more than 75 minutes. This same writer says that 10th -12 graders should receive no more than five assignments a week, with each lasting no more than 120 minutes. However, the amount of homework the teacher assigns is not as significant to student achievement as is the amount of homework completed by the student (Cooper 2001; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye and Greathouse, 1998). Most likely, time spent on the assignment is more effective and produces greater academic results than the amount of homework assigned. Moreover, in order for the students to complete the suggested or recommended types of homework, parents need to provide a specific place for their child to study and complete homework (Butler, 1987). A consistent work place at home with parental support increases the probability that the student will get the work done.

Summary

Although teachers continue to assign homework when some students fail to turn it in, there are justifiable reasons why they continue to require the completion of such tasks. Some researchers and entities say that teachers assign too much homework, that the teacher's expectations or directions are unclear, and that the teacher gives the students too many handouts. They also state that homework assignments do not involve family interaction or creativity and that this could be a major reason why a lot of the work does not get done. On the other hand, there are some parents who expect their child to come home with homework. They believe that homework prepares their child for college and improves their study and work habits.

There is a distinction between instructional and non-instructional homework and the purpose or focus that is provided for each type of assignment. Regarding instructional homework, teachers should consider assigning homework that enhances practice and preparation instead of work that develops a deeper understanding and application of the subject matter. Other types of homework assignment that might be positively received by students and that allow free expression and more creativity are projects and portfolios. These are the types of assignments that the students generally like and will put forth the effort to get done. Non-instructional homework, which is no less significant, is perhaps indirectly incorporated more into the assignments to develop study habits, time management skills, self-improvement, and peer interaction.

One variable that could be a key variable to the completion of homework is parental support. If parents get involved in their child's academic life and produce a conducive environment, by which the child can study and complete homework assignments, s/he will benefit by seeing improvements in their grades and receive

positive feedback from both teachers and parents. Everyone has to work towards a common goal. Whether that goal is to get students to complete homework assignments, develop personnel skills, enhance interaction and communication between parent and child or teacher and student, it takes the efforts of the community to make a change. In essence, the students receive better grades in school, higher standardized test scores, better teacher evaluations, and district recognition (Cooper, 2001).

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