



## Homework

### Introduction and Background

Everybody has a theory about homework because everybody has experienced homework at some time in their career as a student. Several years ago we polled our community and the majority of those who responded came down on the side that 'less was better' when it came to homework. In recent times we have refined our homework programme. A recent article in the Herald on Sunday (18 March 2007) prompts me to raise the issue of the value of homework, with the intention that I do so in a balanced and informed manner.

Some people love it and some people hate it. Homework has been a perennial topic of debate and, according to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD 2007, p74) attitudes towards homework have been cyclical. Experiences of homework in our primary school days will be mixed and, probably, to varying degrees, less than one hundred percent accurate. As reported in ASCD the setting of homework has gone through cycles, from the almost non-existent (in my primary days in the sixties; the nineteen sixties!) to dollops of homework being set at other times.

### The Setting: People like You!

Otago University's emeritus professor, Jim Flynn is regarded as an expert on intelligence. He states that children who internalise a willingness to study and who have proper conceptual maturity come from "being around parents who manifest a desire of reading, a love of ideas, who are seen to use numbers for things that are important. The child picks up on that and internalises that." Children with such home environments are getting a rich home learning environment that can be an on-going homework experience in itself, particularly if there are rich family meal time conversations. Therefore, children in our community largely have these rich learning environments and, as such, have many learning opportunities. How fortunate they are for it is into this environment that children from Campbells Bay School go home to.

### Against Homework

As I mentioned earlier there are those in the 'for and against' homework camps. The against homework camp is evidenced by titles such as *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* by Kralovec and Buell (2000) who asserts that homework overvalues work to the detriment of personal and familial well-being. A similar call for action against homework comes from Bennett and Kalish (2006) in *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It*. Of course, we need to be mindful that the arguments in these publications were based on the US experience that varies widely from state education authority to authority. Still, they are supported by Michael Carr, an Australian child psychologist who was reported in the Herald on Sunday article stating that homework has "hijacked family life." (Incidentally, in a survey conducted by Carr he reported that 42 per cent of students reported their parents did their homework for them!) There is, then, a body of opinion that is against homework.

### For Homework

There is a considerable body of research that supports homework, bearing in mind that it is always a challenge to relate research findings with our own context given that this may mean we are comparing the proverbial apples with oranges. Caution should be the watchword. In *The Battle over Homework* (2007) Cooper asserted that homework should have different purposes at different (year) levels so that for primary aged students homework should foster

positive attitude, habits, and character traits; permit appropriate parent involvement; and reinforce learning of simple skills introduced in class.

### **A Reasonable Approach**

It would seem that some homework is appropriate with what is appropriate being in relation to the age of the students (content); the time students are expected to spend on homework; and parental involvement in homework. Professor John Hattie (2007), Professor of Education at the University of Auckland and a world renowned researcher, cautions that the most homework a primary student should be given per night is about 15 minutes. The homework should also be relevant to the student and realistic in terms of the abilities of the student. The role of parents in the homework regime seems to be clear. Parents should not be expected to be 'experts' regarding homework content, while parents should be involved in asking questions of their children about the homework.

The level of difficulty and the issue of parental involvement are, arguably, the issues that are the rallying point for the anti homework camp. More family stress has probably been wrought upon families by homework that is too difficult for the student than any other single issue; at least until teenage-hood approaches and it seems to approach sooner and sooner! Therefore, homework that is set must realistic in terms of difficulty.

Families are busy. It has become more common for children to become engaged in formal out of school activities. Hence, homework has to compete with numerous other demands. Therefore, our homework programmes should acknowledge the reality of the home. Providing students with the opportunity to learn and practice basic facts sits comfortably within these demands. What is required is 'man hours' from students and praise and appropriate encouragement from parents. For those who want to seek out further homework challenges, there is the school's 'extra homework programme' and opportunities in Year 6 for students to develop their own interests and passions through research.

Of course, parents are free to set their own academic challenges for their children. However, be wary of imposing unrealistic demands on children as, according to Hattie, 'play is critical if we want to get the dividends when they (children) become adolescents.' Parents are always given the option of giving their children permission not to complete the homework – as long as it is signed no further action is taken in school. This system allows us to respect and value your family time.

### **Conclusion**

Well targeted homework can assist academic achievement provided the homework is relevant and realistic. Homework works best when it takes place in an environment with parents who manifest a desire of reading, a love of ideas, who are seen to use numbers for things that are important. In other words, parents who demonstrate the pleasure and usefulness of learning that is germane to what their children are doing academically at school and at home provide a fertile environment for their children to enjoy learning.

John McGowan

Marzano, Robert J & Pickering, Debra J (2007) *The Case For and Against Homework. Educational Leadership March 2007 74 – 79.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.