

Dimensions of Homework

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In 1901, the California State Legislature passed an act that effectively abolished homework for all students at all levels below Grade 8. However, in the 1950s, with increasing pressure on the United States to stay ahead in the Cold War, homework was re-introduced into American schools. By the end of the Cold War, the consensus in American education was overwhelmingly in favour of issuing homework to students of all grade levels (Steven Schlossman, Department of History, Carnegie Mellon University).

Locally, homework has been an integral part of schooling over the years. Many primary and secondary school students come home after a long day at school with “tons” of homework, and students are encouraged to believe that homework is a sign that their teachers care about them. Teachers have a variety of approaches when it comes to assigning homework, and many have realised that it is more useful, and perhaps even easier, **not** to give lots of drill and practice exercises as homework, but instead to give a few challenging exercises or tasks. Assigned homework teaches students to organise their time and to work independently, as well as to use effective study habits and to develop discipline. Many educators advocate the meaningful use of homework to reinforce skills learned at school and to provide an opportunity for students, parents, and even siblings to work together on exercises and projects.

While it is important that students appreciate the purpose of assigned homework, the manner in which the homework is treated by the teacher is equally important, for example, how the assignments are collected and marked and the extent to which the assignments are used for formative evaluation and/or to plan subsequent teaching/learning experiences.

Experienced teachers know (and new teachers find out very quickly) that collecting, correcting, and evaluating homework is one of those housekeeping routines that constitute a significant aspect of classroom management and which, if not properly coordinated, can cause problems in their classrooms. Teachers have devised several methods for collecting homework, with one of the most effective being collection at the beginning of the day (in primary schools) or at the start of the period (secondary schools). Some teachers position themselves at the door and require students to hand in the homework as they enter the classroom. This works well, as it greatly reduces the amount of classroom teaching time that would otherwise be used to collect homework. Other teachers have a designated homework box where students know they are to turn in their assignments each day, before the teaching session begins. Finding the method that works best for you may take some time, but it is important to realise that creating a daily routine which is known to all students and adhered to by the teacher is a very effective strategy.

Providing timely feedback by way of correcting misunderstandings, highlighting errors in thinking, and providing constructive and motivating comments and suggestions can guide students in their understanding of methods and applications, thereby significantly improving student learning. Paediatrician and educator, Dr. Robert Needlman, suggests that the effective use of misconceptions arising from homework to plan subsequent lessons not only provides teachers with a meaningful starting point, but also makes the learning “real” for the students.

Additionally, homework is an important parent-teacher relationship tool. Whether teachers like it or not, homework represents them—in quantity and quality. If it is just simply a lot of “busywork,” it tells the parents that perhaps there is only superficial quality in your teaching. If it is so difficult that the parent rather than the student has to play the major part in its completion, it tells the parents that perhaps you have not taught the background material or that perhaps you see homework as a punishment for the students.

Today, despite the many documented benefits of homework, a growing number of parents, students, and even some teachers in this country are beginning to question homework—both in quantity and quality. Their argument is simply that students also learn from involvement in various activities, and that spending most of the night doing problems and reading from textbooks leaves students with very little free time to engage in physical activities and to pursue extra-curricular interests such as music and art. With these concerns, there appears to be a need, in the local context, for an articulated policy on homework.

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