



Education &
Communities

Public Schools NSW

Homework Policy

Research scan

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About the *Homework Policy: Research scan*

There are many differing views, within the educational community and beyond, about the purpose of homework, its value, and the amount of homework that should be set.

This *Homework Policy: Research Scan* summarises research on homework, considers strategies to maximise the benefits and examines in detail whether time spent on homework results in improved student achievement. It looks at both the Australian and the international context, by examining more than 50 national and international studies. The roles of parent involvement and socioeconomic status are also considered.

Searches were conducted using online databases and websites with homework-related content through the:

- AEI: Australian Education Index
- A+ Education via Informit Online
- BEI: British Education Index
- ERIC: Educational Resources Information Center (1966 - present)
- OECD iLibrary.

The *Homework Policy: Research Scan* concentrated on research published after 2004, especially peer-reviewed publications and publications that included a meta-analysis and evidence-based studies.

Of particular importance were four reviews of the research, namely Cooper, Robinson & Patall (2006), Dixon (2007), Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts (2004), and Blazer (2009). The studies considered in the *Homework Policy: Research scan* were predominantly from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US).

Overview

Introduction

The evidence base regarding the benefits or otherwise of homework is not well developed. Results to date lack coherence, are complex, and often conflicting. Too many of the recommendations made in the literature are based on anecdote and speculation (Blazer, 2009; Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Pieper, n.d.). Longitudinal data is sparse and many of the longitudinal studies that do exist include only a small sample of students (Trautwein & Koller, 2003).

Findings

Homework is affected by more factors than most other instructional strategies: the home environment, student aptitude, motivation, and age may all influence homework's effect favourably or otherwise (Blazer, 2009).

While there is no consensus in the literature as to whether homework raises student achievement, homework advocates claim that homework does so by increasing total study time (Dettmers, Trautwein, & Lüdtke, 2009), covering more of the curriculum, and reinforcing work covered in class (Blazer, 2009; HMI for Education and Training in Wales, 2004).

They believe that through homework, students can learn to use resources effectively (Blazer, 2009) and develop good study habits (Blazer, 2009).

Supporters also claim that homework has non-academic benefits, especially for younger students (HMI for Education and Training in Wales, 2004), including:

- improving students' time management and organisational skills (Blazer, 2009; Dixon, 2007)
- improving attitudes toward school and showing that learning can take place outside of the classroom (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006; Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004; HMI for Education and Training in Wales, 2004)
- fostering a sense of personal responsibility and self-discipline (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989; Dixon, 2007).

Blazer (2009) adds that homework may promote a greater parental appreciation of, and involvement in, schooling. Parental involvement in homework may improve students' homework completion rates and parents' attitudes toward their children's schools (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004). The research suggests that parents should be somewhat, but not too greatly, involved in their children's homework (Blazer, 2009).

A 2009 Canadian review reported that students in classes that are set more homework perform at a modestly to moderately superior level to those in classes that are assigned less homework, although no causal link could be established (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Dr Sue Thomson, a Senior Research Fellow with the Australian Council for Educational Research, notes however, that many of the countries with the highest scoring students on achievement tests, such as Japan, Denmark, and the Czech Republic, assign little homework. Critics comment that it appears that

the more homework a nation's teachers give, the poorer that country's results on the achievement tests (Thomson, quoted in Dixon, 2007).

Those who don't support homework argue that homework can widen social inequalities (Blazer, 2009). Children from poorer homes are likely to have more difficulty completing homework since they may work after school or have nowhere at home to study (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006; Dixon, 2007; Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

Others doubt that there is credible evidence that homework yields non-academic benefits (Blazer, 2009). Hattie (2009) concludes that there is no evidence that homework helps students develop time management skills. One recent Australian study found that there has been no research done on whether homework teaches responsibility, self-discipline, or motivation (Moorman & Haller, 2011). Nevertheless, there is some evidence, in the case of US after-school homework programs, that homework improves students' motivation, self-confidence, and study habits. There is, however, no consistent proof that it lifts academic performance (Blazer, 2009).

As a teaching strategy, homework can have major limitations. Since the work is done in the absence of a qualified teacher and there is no control over who actually completes the homework (Blazer, 2009; Hattie, 2009) cheating is likely to be commonplace (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989; Forster, 2000).

Opponents also warn that homework can inhibit independent learning because students become preoccupied with work assigned by someone else (Blazer, 2009). It can curtail the time available for other activities, such as sports and community activities (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989; Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Dixon, 2007; Forster, 2000). There is evidence that homework does cause stress for students (Blazer, 2009) and it may even create tension between parent and child (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989).

In summary

- The 'more homework the better' view has no research support (Cooper, H, 2001). Homework for All – In Moderation, *Educational Leadership*, 58(7), cited in Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).
- The quality of the homework assigned is likely to be more important than the quantity (Canadian Education Association, & Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2010).
- Homework must be purposeful and relevant to student needs and should not jeopardise the right of children to enjoy a balanced lifestyle (Dixon, 2007).
- The amount of homework and time spent on it should accord with the student's age and developmental level (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).
- Effort spent on homework is a stronger correlate of academic achievement than time spent on homework (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).
- Year level appears to be a determinant of homework's academic effectiveness (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989).

Most researchers conclude that for primary students, there is no evidence that homework lifts academic performance. There is only a small correlation between homework and achievement in middle school (Cooper, 1989; Walker, 2011). Only in the senior years of high school does homework clearly raise academic performance.

Time devoted to homework

The amount of time students should spend on homework is a contentious and complicated issue.

A 2006 Australian study observed that the average amount of homework set for Australian students is a maximum of 30 minutes per day for students up to Year 4, escalating to around 45 to 90 minutes per day for Year 9 students. In Years 11 and 12, homework can involve from one to three hours per night, with a further six hours on weekends during exam periods (Marionos, S., *Homework: Do Kids Need It?*, *Good Medicine*, March 2006, cited in Dixon, 2007).

Average OECD time spent by 15-year-olds on homework "or other study" set by their teachers for all subjects in 2003 was 5.9 hours per week; for Australia 5.7 hours (OECD & PISA, 2004).

US researchers conclude that the ideal amount of time students should spend on homework is between one and a half and two and a half hours per night for high school students, and about one hour per night for middle school students. For primary students, the limited number of available studies indicate that smaller amounts of homework (no more than 20 minutes per night) may help to improve study skills and work habits, but will not directly lift achievement (Blazer, 2009).

Other studies from the US and the UK indicate that Year 1 students should do no more than 10 minutes of homework per day, with the amount increasing by up to 10 minutes per day for each year level up to a maximum of two hours per day in Year 12 (Cooper, H. 'Homework for All – In Moderation' cited in Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

National overview

The current NSW Department of Education and Communities Homework Policy does not suggest recommended times for homework. No formal homework is anticipated for Kindergarten, but informal activities like reading to children at home and involving them in family activities are encouraged to assist with the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

In the primary years of schooling, there is an emphasis on reading as part of homework, while other homework may be spread across all areas of the curriculum. Homework is set on a regular basis in most subjects in Years 7-12. Homework demands increase as students move into senior high school.

(Refer: <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/homework/index.htm>)

Earlier NSW policies suggested no homework be set before Year 5. The total amount of prescribed homework was not to exceed 45 minutes for three evenings per week in Year 5. This gradually increased to a maximum of one and a half hours per evening in Year 9 (*The Education Gazette*, 1951; NSW Department of Education, 1968).

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Development (2012) stipulates the following indicative hours:

- Early Years (Prep-Year 4) not more than 30 minutes per day and not on weekends or vacations
- Middle Years (Years 5-9) 30 to 45 minutes per day in Year 5 to 45-90 minutes per day in Year 9
- For later Years (Years 10-12) from 1 to 3 hours per night a week and up to 6 hours on weekends during peak VCE periods.

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts (2012) suggests the following times:

- Prep Year generally students are not set homework
- Years 1, 2, 3 could be up to but generally not more than an hour each week
- Years 4 and 5 could be up to but generally not more than 2-3 hours each week
- Years 6 and 7 could be up to but generally not more than 3-4 hours each week
- Years 8 and 9 could be up to but generally not more than 5 hours each week
- For Years 10, 11 and 12 times vary according to the learning needs and individual programs of learning.

The Education Departments in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT, have statements or policies regarding homework, however, recommended hours are not provided.

International overview

A report analysing the data from the 2006 cycle of the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA)¹ concluded that for 15-year-olds, 51% of the students surveyed spent some time, but less than two hours per week, completing homework or studying by themselves in science and mathematics; 54% devoted a similar quantity of time learning the language of instruction. These percentages differed widely among countries. For example, in science, over 50% of students in the partner countries of the Russian Federation, in Jordan, Tunisia and Azerbaijan spent two hours or more per week doing homework or studying by themselves, while only 15% or less of students in Japan, Finland, Denmark, Sweden did so (Borgonovi, Ikeda, Park, PISA & OECD, 2011).

The UK Department of Education and Skills (2012) provides the following suggested hours for school children:

- Years 1 and 2 – 60 minutes per week
- Years 3 and 4 – 90 minutes per week
- Years 5 and 6 – 30 minutes per day
- Years 7 and 8 – 45 to 90 minutes per day
- Year 9 – 60 to 120 minutes per day
- Years 10 and 11 – 90 to 150 minutes per day.

In the US, the average student in recent years across all grade levels completes less than one hour of homework per night, an amount that has not changed significantly in at least two decades. (Blazer, 2009; Gill, B. & Schlossman, S. (2007). *A Nation at Rest: The American Way of Homework. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(3), cited in Dixon, 2007). Between 25% to 50 % of American students report that they have no homework at all (Blazer, 2009).

Overall, it appears that some homework is preferable to too much or none at all, but the time devoted to homework must accord with the student's age and stage of development (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

¹ The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide evaluation in OECD member countries. PISA is an international assessment of the reading, science and mathematical literacy of 15-year-old students. It takes place in three-year cycles.

Homework and student achievement

There is no consensus in the literature as to whether homework raises student achievement. Many respected studies have found that homework has limited effect on student achievement (Blazer, 2009; Dixon, 2007; Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

Cooper and Valentine (2001), following a quantitative synthesis of research, found a small positive correlation between student achievement and homework, but only for secondary school students (Dixon, 2007). A UK study of 20,000 pupils aged 11 years old concluded that there is no evidence that homework in primary schools leads to improved academic performance (Farrow, S., Tymms, P., & Henderson, B. (1999); Homework and Attainment in Primary Schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25(3), cited in Dixon, 2007).

A 2009 Canadian review of the literature reported that students in classes that are set more homework perform at a modestly to moderately superior level to those in classes that are assigned less homework, although no causal link could be established (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Cooper et al (2006) are persuaded by the US literature that homework is positively related to academic achievement with larger benefits at the secondary level than at the primary level.

One recent study analysed the TIMSS² 2007 results. It concluded that for 9 to 10-year-olds in mathematics and science, assigning homework raises achievement:

"... assigning homework in all lessons compared to never assigning homework increases student test scores by 3.2 points, which is 4.4 percent of a standard deviation. This estimate is not sensitive to the inclusion of student fixed effects. The effect of assigning homework is largest in the US, Austria and Australia where it amounts to 14-21 percent of a standard deviation. For most other countries we find an effect of homework of about the same magnitude as the average effect." (Rønning & Falch, 2011)

It is likely that homework is more effective in mathematics. A multilevel analysis of US 7th grade mathematics students indicated that completing frequent homework assignments in mathematics is positively associated with achievement gains at the class level, but that lengthy assignments do not show positive effects (Trautwein, U., Köller, O., Schmitz, B., & Baumert, J. (2002); Do Homework Assignments Enhance Achievement? A Multilevel Analysis of 7th Grade Mathematics. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 2, cited in Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Pieper, n.d.). Another study found that mathematics homework has a large and statistically meaningful effect on maths test scores, but that additional homework in science, English and history has little to no effect on their respective test scores (Eren & Henderson, 2011).

PISA 2003 reveals that students expending more time on homework overall are likely in most countries to do better in mathematics, but the size of the difference is generally small (PISA & OECD, 2010). The strength of the association diminishes considerably once socioeconomic background and school track (the allocation of students into different schools or classes) are controlled (Dettmers et al, 2009).

² The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is an international assessment of the mathematics and science knowledge of for students in Year 4 and Year 8. TIMSS reports every four years. Australia has participated in all five cycles.

The relationship between time spent on homework and academic achievement may be nonlinear. An increase in the amount of homework can initially lead to academic improvement but further increases can lead to lower academic improvement. Homework may be more productive when teachers set moderate amounts, rather than a very small or a great amount of homework (Blazer, 2009). It is widely accepted by academic analysts that the amount of homework and time spent on it should accord with the student's age and development (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). More time on homework in the early childhood years is found to relate to lower achievement but, in the middle and high school years, it correlates with higher achievement. For high school students, at least one hour of homework per week is positively correlated with achievement (this positive relationship was still evident when less homework was completed), but was not entirely apparent when students report doing more than two hours each night. There seems to be a point of diminishing returns. The 'more homework the better' view has no research support (Cooper, H. (2001). Homework for All – In Moderation, *Educational Leadership*, 58(7), cited in Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

The homework provided for students is not always age appropriate. One study revealed that in Australia there are few differences in homework practices across Years 2, 4 and 6. (Warton, P. (1997). Learning About Responsibility: Lessons from Homework. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 67, cited in Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

No homework at all may be harmful. A recent Australian literature review concluded that there is a negative impact on academic achievement where no homework is done or it is badly done (Bryan, T., Burstein, K., & Bryan, J. (2001); Students with Learning Disabilities: Homework Problems and Promising Practices. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), cited in Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

Dr Sue Thomson, a Senior Research Fellow with the Australian Council for Educational Research, notes that many of the countries with the highest scoring students on achievement tests, such as Japan, Denmark, and the Czech Republic, assign little homework. Critics comment that it appears that the more homework a nation's teachers give, the poorer that country's results on the achievement tests (Thomson quoted in Dixon, 2007).

There is little research on a student's ethnicity, socioeconomic status or aptitude as a moderator of the homework-achievement link (Dixon, 2007; Blazer, 2009).

Homework quality has been found to predict homework effort, as measured by the percentage of homework assignment attempted and homework compliance (Trautwein & Ludtke, 2009). Better quality homework may motivate students to devote more effort. Effort is positively associated with achievement and achievement gains (Trautwein, 2007). The Homework-Achievement Relation Reconsidered: Differentiating Homework Time, Homework Frequency, and Homework Effort. *Learning and Instruction*, 17, cited in Trautwein & Ludtke, 2009).

Year level is a determinant of the academic effectiveness of homework (Blazer, 2009; Cooper, 1989). Most researchers conclude that for primary students, there is no evidence that homework lifts academic performance. There is only a small correlation between homework and achievement in middle school (Cooper, 1989; Walker, 2011). Only in the senior years of high school does homework clearly raise academic performance. One Australian researcher reports that at the senior high school level, homework raises the achievement of about 45 % of students (Walker, 2011).

The Center for Public Education concludes that:

“Homework appears to provide more academic benefits to older students than to younger students, for whom the benefits seem to lie in non-academic realms, such as in improving study skills and learning structure and responsibility. The amount of homework provided to younger students may therefore be less important than simply assigning something to help them establish routines and learn personal responsibility.” (Center for Public Education, 2007) Research Review: What Research Says About the Value of Homework. Retrieved January 13, 2012, from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org> quoted in Blazer, 2009).

The quality of the homework assigned is likely to be more important than the quantity (Canadian Education Association, & Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2010). Any impact on achievement is more likely to arise from effort than time. Effort spent on homework is a stronger correlate of academic achievement than time spent on homework (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Aptitude and socioeconomic context are key factors. Weaker learners may require additional time to complete the same amount of homework. Students from a low socioeconomic background may have their good homework practices undermined by inadequate home learning conditions. The parents of some children may not be able to provide sufficient advice or support (OECD & PISA, 2004).

Homework involves a complex interaction of many influences. Conclusions about homework must be contextualised in terms of year level, socioeconomic status, and subject area (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Parental involvement in homework

Parents of younger children are more likely to be actively involved with their children's homework (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004). Parental involvement in homework can improve students' homework completion rates and parents' attitudes toward their children's schools. (Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004). One Australian study found that positive parental involvement in homework correlates with higher levels of student achievement (Horsley & Walker, 2008). Another, that any impact of parents' involvement on student achievement is not substantial (Blazer, 2009), except among the youngest students, it is negligible to nonexistent (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

There are risks in encouraging parents to assist with homework. Parents can confuse children by using different instructional techniques to the teacher or can even undermine their child's sense of academic autonomy (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). The research suggests that parents should be somewhat, but not too greatly, involved in their children's homework (Blazer, 2009). Attitudes about homework, feelings of personal competence and self-regulatory strategies are particularly susceptible to parental influence (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, Dejong, & Jones, 2001).

Homework and socioeconomic status

It is likely that more children from poorer homes will have part-time jobs or other family duties or a physical environment that is unsuitable for doing homework. A 2011 OECD Economic Survey of the United Kingdom (based on PISA data) found that in the UK, time spent on homework is much more highly correlated with socioeconomic status than in other OECD countries (OECD, 2011).

Teaching strategies to maximise the benefits of homework

The effectiveness of homework relies on the quality of tasks (Walker, 2011; CEA & OISE, 2010). Trautwein and Ludtke (2009) use multilevel modelling to show that homework quality predicts homework motivation and homework effort. There is modest evidence that homework that engages students in active learning enhances achievement (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; CEA & OISE, 2010).

It is likely that homework quality is enhanced when the principles of effective pedagogy are utilised (Trautwein & Ludtke, 2009). Homework must have a clear purpose. Teachers should ensure that students fully understand what they are supposed to learn (Blazer, 2009). It must be tailored to the audience. The amount should reflect the student's age and stage of development with expectations differing across early, middle and senior learning phases (Dixon, 2007). Its limitations cannot be ignored. It should not be used to teach new material (Protheroe, 2009). Students describe more negative emotions when doing homework than class work (Walker, 2011). Many students need additional support with both the academic and logistical aspects of homework (Blazer, 2009).

It is clear that homework must be purposeful and relevant to student needs and that it should not jeopardise the right of children to enjoy a balanced lifestyle (Dixon, 2007).

Research limitations

The research on homework faces many inherent sources of uncertainty and variability. The fact that there are many different stakeholders and purposes makes empirical research difficult. Trautwein and Koller (2003) caution that many of the studies are conducted by teachers themselves who may overestimate the effects of homework (Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006; Rønning & Falch, 2011). In addition, homework can serve various purposes and involve tasks of different quality (Trautwein & Koller, 2003).

Homework is affected by more factors than most other instructional strategies: the home environment, student aptitude, motivation, and age may all influence homework's effect favourably or otherwise (Blazer, 2009). Regrettably, these inherent sources of uncertainty and variability are often not controlled in the research.

There is a lack of high-quality quantitative research in this field. Most studies are correlational not causal, so homework completion and achievement may be the result of other, unstudied variables (Blazer, 2009). Very few studies have considered interaction effects between homework and student characteristics (Trautwein & Koller, 2003).

The methodologies employed are weak. It is often teachers themselves who conduct the research. Student or parent reports are regularly the major source of data. While valuable sources of information, self-report data are not always reliable. Students may exaggerate and parents may be absent when the children do their homework (Blazer, 2009). A stronger quantitative evidence base is needed with theories of learning and instruction more often being employed in the research (Trautwein & Koller, 2003).

There is insufficient evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of many homework programs. Any correlation between homework and achievement is usually modest and can vanish altogether if more complex controls are applied to the data (Alanne & Macgregor, 2007).

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