



# The dog ate my homework

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**H**ave you ever considered that the excuses that students come up with for not submitting homework might just be a lot more creative than the homework task itself? Students might come at their excuses from a perfectionist perspective (*My mum did it wrong, so I threw it out of the bus window*), as a compassionate class member (*I didn't do it because I didn't want to add to your corrections workload*) or even as a humanitarian (*I gave it to a homeless man to help him insulate his cardboard box*). Rather than questioning the excuses, research is suggesting more and more strongly that we should be questioning the concept of homework itself.

Teachers cite three main reasons for setting homework: that it enhances the learning taking place at school; that it develops organisation and responsibility in students; and that it is a parental expectation that children will be doing regular homework. Ostensibly, there is nothing

wrong with any of these reasons – that is, until you take a closer look at both academic research and anecdotal evidence about the efficacy of homework.

So let's start with the crucial area of whether homework does, in fact, improve student outcomes. There is an almost unassailable logic to the notion that if students are learning at school, it stands to reason that continuing to do more work at home will result in even more learning. The problem with this argument is that it's not true. Alfie Kohn in his article 'Rethinking homework' unequivocally states, "...there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. For younger students, in fact, there isn't even a *correlation* between whether children do homework (or how much they do) and any meaningful measure of achievement" (Kohn, 2007).

Before the staunch proponents of homework

get too outraged, let me assure you that Kohn is not the only educator who has reached this conclusion. In his review of homework, John Buell observes, "For a practice as solidly entrenched as homework, the scholarly case on its behalf is surprisingly weak and even contradictory" (2004, p.9). Buell asserts that while some of the many academic studies he reviewed found a correlation between academic performance and the hours spent on homework, none managed to prove that homework was the cause of higher achievement. And as far back as 1985, a review of available homework research by Pendergrass concluded that, "none of the studies yielded significant differences between those who did and those who did not have homework".

One of the reasons that teachers and schools continue to assign regular homework from the earliest years of primary school in the face of this dearth of evidence links directly to the

second rationale for giving homework – that it builds organisational skills and a sense of responsibility in students. Yet, the academic support for this contention is also sorely lacking; and indeed on an anecdotal front, if you search your memory banks, I am sure that you will have difficulty coming up with your own examples of students who miraculously overcame their organisational issues as a result of completing regular homework as well. The reality is that those students who are responsible and can already manage their time well have no problem getting their homework done, whereas those for whom this is an area of struggle, assigning homework doesn't suddenly equip them with a repertoire of the necessary qualities to manage home learning.

Vatterott has a particularly interesting take on why teachers are so set on homework as a vehicle for enhancing student responsibility: "Responsibility is often a code word for obedience... Many teachers are fixated on homework as *the way* to teach responsibility, as though we have no other avenues" (Vatterott, 2009, p.11). Her conclusions are echoed by Buell (*ibid*, p.23) who says, "Not only is the claim that homework evokes long-term discipline largely unsupported by extensive empirical work, but also there is reason to believe that many other extracurricular factors in the life of the child and young adult contribute substantially to this virtue."

Buell looked to science for evidence of why homework does not actually result in improved organisation and reliability in students. He contends that recent research in psychological and neurological fields has revealed that the skill of consequentialist reasoning that drives many adults to adhere to expectations is not fully developed in young people. "[The research] would lead one to question the ability of stiff homework assignments for the young to convey the kinds of moral discipline and time-management skills they are supposed to enhance, especially as the rewards connected with homework will be experienced, if at all, only far down the road" (*ibid*, p.19). In other words, most students, especially in the younger years, are not developmentally ready to fully comprehend the requirements for and benefits of effective homework practices, and are not going to wondrously acquire these skills before they are ready.

Parents, too, observe the difficulties that some students have in completing homework tasks, and yet many parents continue to advocate that homework be given. As Vatterot suggests, "Beliefs about the inherent goodness of homework are so entrenched, so unshakable for many parents and educators, they seem almost cultlike" (2009, p.9). She goes on to say, "Although never proven by research, parents assume an automatic relationship between homework and future success" (*ibid*, p.20). Possibly for parents, this belief stems from their own experiences of school, where homework

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was unquestioned (although this didn't stop it from being uncompleted either!).

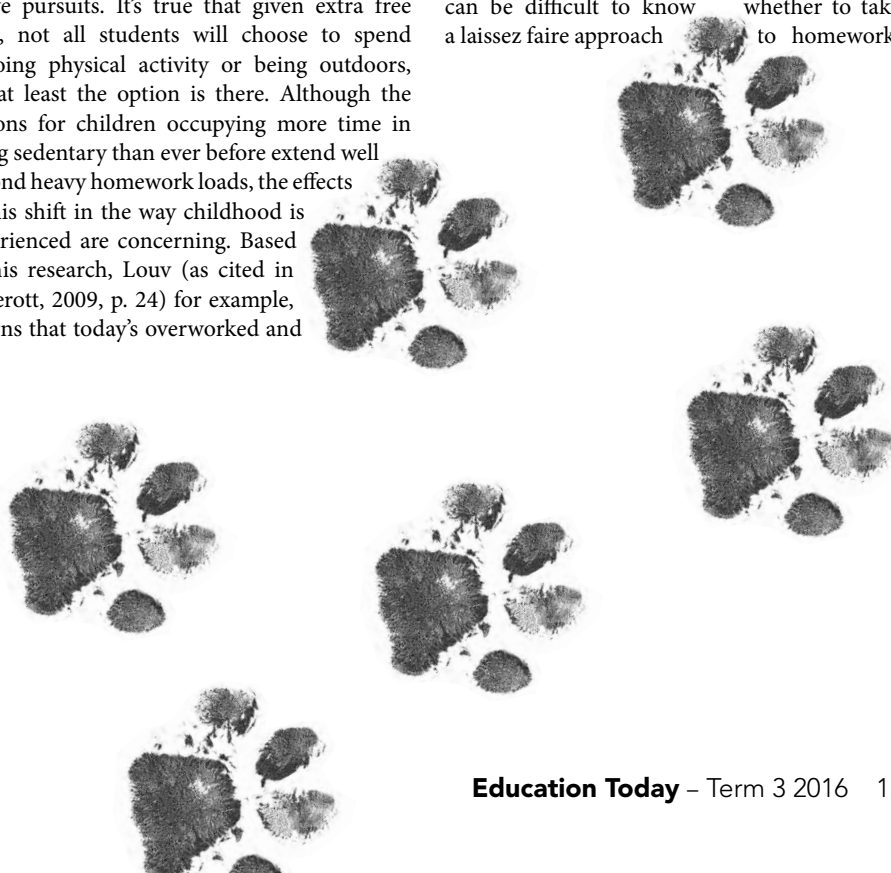
But for every parent who is pushing for homework, there is another parent who mistrusts the concept, but who, for want of motivation or fear of upsetting the status quo, says nothing; and of course, there are vocal opponents of homework. There are, indeed, many valid reasons why a parent might argue against homework. In our over-scheduled and fast-past society, the concept of 'free time' can be alien to today's children, yet many parents recognise the importance of allowing the space for kids to be kids. The potential for unstructured playtime with siblings and parents is far more likely to develop social skills, tighter family bonds and qualities desirable in the modern world such as flexibility and creativity than filling in a worksheet will. In considering the student perspective, Buell notes, "They are siblings and community members, budding artists, musicians, and athletes. They are natural inventors and scientists and spiritual beings. Do we allow our children to exercise these selves?" (*ibid*, p.27). In fact, particularly for younger students, for whom both receptive and productive oral language is so important, there are more likely to be academic benefits in spending time playing rather than in completing homework.

There are other undesirable aspects to regular homework too. With obesity rates rising, extra time spent sitting at a desk doing schoolwork is preventing children from undertaking more active pursuits. It's true that given extra free time, not all students will choose to spend it doing physical activity or being outdoors, but at least the option is there. Although the reasons for children occupying more time in being sedentary than ever before extend well beyond heavy homework loads, the effects of this shift in the way childhood is experienced are concerning. Based on his research, Louv (as cited in Vatterott, 2009, p. 24) for example, "warns that today's overworked and

overscheduled children can suffer from what he calls *nature deficit disorder*, resulting in obesity, depression, and attention deficit disorder."

But probably the worst consequence of homework is that it can have exactly the opposite effect to what is intended – it can extinguish all hope of students developing a love of learning. Bennett & Kalish observe, "For many kids, homework is like having to do their taxes *every night*. How would we feel if we came home to hours of work from five different bosses? At least some of us would quit or enter therapy – which is where some of our children now find themselves" (2006, p. 22). They make a good point. For a child for whom learning is difficult, for whom every day at school is a struggle to make sense of what is going on and an assault to self-esteem as other students seemingly breeze through the assigned tasks, having to then do even more of the same work at home can be spirit crushing. It is ironic that the very students who one would assume would gain the most from homework because they have the most to learn are often the ones for whom homework is most damaging.

Parents, too, can find homework a source of stress and tension. Indeed, "Many parents lament the impact of homework on their relationship with their children; they may also resent having to play the role of enforcer and worry that they will be criticized either for not being involved enough with the homework or for becoming too involved" (Kohn, *ibid*). It can be difficult to know whether to take a *laissez faire* approach to homework,





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be fully hands on, or somewhere in between those extremes as a parent. The ‘I’ve just finished our Italian assignment’ parents may rob their children of learning opportunities. At the other end of the spectrum there are a multitude of reasons why parents might not get involved in their child’s homework, ranging from a desire to build independence to a lack of the skills and knowledge required to complete the task. In the latter case, Buell suggests, “Homework, which diminishes the interaction between teachers and students, goes home with the child, who may struggle with an assignment he or she never quite grasped in the classroom, compounding frustration and often dragging a parent into the quagmire” (ibid. p. 18).

The research cited thus far focuses mainly on students in primary through to middle school, and as a general rule, on regular setting of generic homework tasks for a whole class of students. While even homework proponent Harris Cooper in his meta-analysis of research admitted that primary and junior high school students got minimal benefits of homework, he did find it

had a strong influence on the results of senior high school students (Cooper, 1989). Similar studies support that finding.

Should homework then be abandoned for all but our older secondary pupils? Before making that decision, it’s worthwhile considering the kind of homework that is being set. Many schools have policies that stipulate the expected or maximum amounts of homework for each year level.

The problem with this is that it favours quantity over quality. John Marsden, principal of Candlebark School and Alice Miller School north of Melbourne, explains that they have chosen to have no set expectations about the amount of homework students should be doing. “There’s just a general understanding that most homework is a waste of time. As well, kids at the school are generally exhausted by the time they get home, as they lead a vigorous school life!” Although he has personal views on the subject – “I feel half an hour a night, maybe three or four times a week, is enough for mid primary kids; maybe going up to 45 minutes by Grades 5/6. And maybe an hour a night, three or four times a week, for years 8/9” – he also has a healthy respect for students as broader individuals. “I don’t want the students burnt out by the time they get to the start of Year 11. Bart Cummings is a good role model for teachers!”

While in primary school tools such as homework grids give students some degree of control and choice over their homework tasks, overall the activities on offer have not evolved to keep pace with the rapidly changing world that the students live in. Vatterott (ibid, p.47) suggests, “Sometimes it’s easier to judge children as unmotivated or lazy than to reflect on our own teaching methods or to admit we don’t have the tools, experience, or training to meet individual students’ needs” and there is probably some merit in that argument. Our understanding of the importance of personalised learning in the classroom has substantially developed over the last 10 to 15 years, but in many cases, this knowledge of sound pedagogy is forgotten when it comes to homework.

Setting homework because it is expected is very different from setting it because it is a strategic and integral part of the learning process. As Kohn (ibid) observes,

“It’s not as though most teachers decide now and then that a certain lesson really ought to continue after school is over because meaningful learning is so likely to result from such an assignment that it warrants the intrusion on family time. Homework in most schools isn’t limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important. Rather, the point of departure seems to be: ‘We’ve decided ahead of time that children will have to do *something* every night (or several times a week). Later on we’ll figure out what to make them do.”

For teachers and schools who do value homework, the emphasis should then be on choosing tasks that have clear and relevant

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learning intentions and that will actually be of benefit to students.

If you are a lower primary teacher and are questioning the validity of assigning reading in the face of evidence about homework efficacy, you can relax. As John Marsden remarks “I think reading – almost any material – is of course fantastic.” Research clearly supports the importance of regular reading, especially in the early years, and this includes students reading appropriate texts at home. An *Educator’s Briefing* article, for example cites Cunningham and Stanovich as concluding that, “even among students with lower general intelligence and weaker reading skills, extensive reading was linked to superior performance on measures of general knowledge, vocabulary, spelling, verbal fluency, and reading comprehension” (Scientific Learning Corporation, 2008). And it’s possible for lower primary school students, regular reading is enough in terms of homework.

When it comes to slightly older students, it is more challenging to find homework tasks that can be considered worthwhile. Many teachers still preference projects as open-ended learning opportunities that allow students entry at their current level of capability, but it is interesting to note that Prof John Hattie questions their effectiveness, suggesting that they have a ‘zero to negative effect’ on student learning (Hattie, 2014). Kohn (2007) advocates that teachers ‘assign only what they design’ rather than setting textbook or worksheet activities, a strategy which could in turn lead to greater differentiation in homework tasks.

Many schools are also experimenting with

flipped learning models, where students spend a relatively short amount of time viewing a video or PowerPoint ‘lecture’ or introduction at home, so that they are then prepared for deeper discussion and learning with teacher support at school. A Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into homework found that flipped learning “allows students to take responsibility for the pace of their learning as they can do this at a time of their choice. This method also enables students to review concepts at their own pace, rather than at the teacher’s pace, ensuring comprehension” (Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2014).

But probably most helpful are Vatterott’s (2010) five hallmarks of good homework: purpose, efficiency, ownership, competence and aesthetic appeal. The ‘ownership’ and ‘competence’ dimensions in particular hinge on moving away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach to homework, to selecting tasks that promote success for students and offer an element of choice.

Homework can be a little like venetian blinds. They seem to be serving a useful function and you therefore give them little thought in the scheme of things, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t collecting dust and that there isn’t a better option for keeping the heat in and the light out. If you haven’t thought about your homework practices recently, maybe it’s time that you did.

#### Further reading

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