

TO ASSIGN OR NOT TO ASSIGN HOMEWORK?

MAXIMISING THE PROS AND MINIMISING THE CONS OF HOMEWORK TO IMPROVE LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Prepared by NEEDU

SUMMARY: The debate over homework continues. The proponents of homework argue that homework is an effective way to reinforce the concepts that were learned at school, improve learner achievement and increase a greater sense of responsibility among learners. The opponents, on the other hand, cite how too much homework takes away time that would be better spent with a meaningful activity that brings the family together.

Many schools that work view homework as a good teaching tool. Rather than seeing homework as an obligatory task learners must complete as part of the routine school process, the following are strategies teachers use to make homework effective, worthwhile and more meaningful:

🕒 Teacher strategies

Teachers do not assign homework as a "time filler" to keep learners busy, a "paper-and-pencil babysitter" or punishment for not doing classwork but to extend learning beyond classroom walls and school premises

🕒 Parent strategies

Parents can show their children that homework is important and valued at home by providing a special place for it and making sure that electronics are shut off

🕒 Learner self-regulatory strategies

Learners take responsibility for their own learning

The ongoing contentions about the importance of homework have been in discussion for years among teachers, parents and learners. Homework is a traditional activity that most children hate to do. There are parents and educators who support this practice but there are also those who are not in favour of making learners do extra school work at home. There are even some countries that implement a no homework policy.

Teachers are faced with a dilemma when assigning homework because the beliefs of its positive influence conflict with frequently negative consequences. However, in schools that work¹, teachers' response to the following question is a definite yes.

Is homework really an integral part of learning?

When it comes to deciphering the research literature on the subject, homework is anything but an open book. After decades of debate, researchers are still sorting out "the truth" about homework's pros and cons. Whether homework is important and necessary, there are strong arguments for and against it. These are discussed next.

INTRODUCTION

Homework is a hot topic and a source of an ongoing controversy in the educational landscape that, for decades, has occupied learners, parents, teachers and policy makers all around the globe.

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za.
NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231

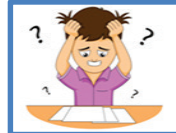


PROS AND CONS OF HOMEWORK



PROS OF HOMEWORK

- **PROPOSERS OF HOMEWORK ARGUE THAT:**
- **It compensates for the insufficient time at school and extends the learning process:** Proponents of homework believe the time spent in school to learn is not always sufficient and that through homework it becomes possible to counter the effects of the time shortages
- **It creates a communication network:** Homework is a bridge that opens lines of communication between the school, the teacher, and the parent
- **It is an effective way to teach learners how to be disciplined:** Learners learn how to focus and set aside unimportant activities to prioritise finishing the tasks they have to submit the following day
- **It can instil good study habits and take children away from computers, TVs, and mobile devices:** Learners get distracted by the myriad of gadgets and computer games. It is best to give them something worthwhile to do so they can understand the importance of studying
- **Parents can see what their children are doing in school and help with the homework as well:** Parents will be able to bond with their children as they assist them and see the kind of education they are getting at school
- **Practice makes perfect:** Mastery of knowledge and skills depends on practice
- **It forces learners to take responsibility and manage their time better:** It encourages learners to set priorities for their time to ensure they can get their work finished on time



CONS OF HOMEWORK

- **OPPONENTS OF HOMEWORK ARGUE THAT:**
- **Too much homework is assigned:** Too much homework can do more harm than good and demoralise learners
- **It can be stressful for learners especially for young children:** Critics argue that homework given to learners especially the younger school children is too much to handle
- **It is not effective:** Some parents or tutors are the ones doing the homework instead of the learners. In this case, giving homework is irrelevant
- **Not every child goes home to a safe home environment:** There are learners who do not have parents to guide them which make homework an uneven playing field for learners
- **It eliminates play time and reduces the amount of down time a learner receives:** When children are not given time to play, they have a higher risk of health concerns
- **The results of homework can be negligible or even negative:** This is because learners are expected to complete homework at a time when they feel tired after school
- **It is sometimes beyond the parent's scope of knowledge:** If parents cannot help with homework, then the purpose of the homework is lost
- **Not every home is a beneficial environment:** Sometimes parents may wish to be involved and support their child, but there are barriers in place that prevent this from happening

POINT OF CONVERGENCE

Both proponents and opponents of homework have presented rational and convincing arguments about homework. From these arguments, it is clear that homework has both benefits and drawbacks.

There may never be a definite agreement about the benefits and drawbacks of homework. But one point most researchers agree on is that for all learners, homework *quality*, not *quantity*, matters.

THE MOTIVE BEHIND HOMEWORK

Following are reasons why teachers in schools that work assign homework:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ To offer learners more time to master a subject □ To reinforce what the teacher taught in class □ To refresh learners' memory on what they learned in class | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ To strengthen learner skills and advance classroom instruction □ To practice what learners have learned in school □ To teach the learners to be responsible for their own learning |
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COUNTERACTING THE CONS OF HOMEWORK

Schools that work use a “community approach,” characterised by a working environment where *teachers, parents, and learners* work together as partners, to ensure that homework assignments maximise positive outcomes. Discussed next, are research-tested strategies that teachers, learners and parents in schools that work, working together as a formidable trio, use to improve the utilisation of homework.

TEACHER STRATEGIES

Teachers use a wide range of strategies to make homework effective and more meaningful, counteract the cons of homework and maximise positive outcomes. Summarised below are strategies that teachers in the schools that work commonly use:

STRATEGY № 1

Assign work that learners already know: Teachers make sure that learners understand the concepts and possess the skills needed to complete homework independently and with ease by themselves without expecting parents to become teachers at home

You cannot expect parents to get from work and teach at home. Teaching is our job (Teacher, Schools KV-Quintile 2)

Con addressed by this strategy: It is sometimes beyond the parent’s scope of knowledge to help learners at home

STRATEGY № 2

Create homework that applies skills taught in the classroom to real-life situations: Teachers re-inforce skills or concepts and add relevance to classroom lessons by asking learners to do research to apply the knowledge learnt

We give learners homework which encourages them not to regurgitate what they have learnt in class but to apply it. (Teacher, School FG-Quintile 1)

Con addressed by this strategy: Learners find homework boring and meaningless

STRATEGY № 3

Differentiate homework—no one-size-fits-all: Teachers use a variety of ways to differentiate and scaffold homework so that it is pitched at the appropriate level of difficulty for individual learners [see Policy Brief N-06]

Learners are at different levels. The homework that is given to learners is differentiated quite dramatically. (Teacher, School KO-Quintile 4)

Con addressed by this strategy: Smart and young learners do not benefit from homework

STRATEGY № 4

Accommodate learners with disadvantaged background: Teachers take into consideration factors that make it difficult for economically disadvantaged learners to complete homework because of inequities in their home environments

Learners from poor backgrounds have legitimate reasons for not doing homework. So, we don’t give homework. They do the work here at school.

Con addressed by this strategy: Not every home is a beneficial environment

STRATEGY № 5

Hold learners accountable for completing homework and provide immediate feedback: Teachers administer the consequences for missed homework. Homework is marked and discussed in class before the start of a new lesson

You can’t give homework and not give immediate feedback to learners. (Teacher, School MI-Quintile 4)

Con addressed by this strategy: Homework is difficult to enforce. Some learners just do not care about homework

STRATEGY № 6

Co-ordinate homework given to learners: Teachers co-ordinate homework so that teachers in different departments do not all give homework on the same day

We have a homework timetable to avoid a situation where any teacher gives homework as he or she pleases and we end up overloading learners with too much homework. (Teacher, School KH-Quintile 4)

Con addressed by this strategy: Too much homework is assigned. Too much homework can do more harm than good



PARENT STRATEGIES

Schools that work use highly effective strategies to encourage parents and to keep them committed to serving in a supporting role in the education of their children. Parents are not expected to play the role of a teacher at home but teachers empower them at the beginning of the school year on how best to assist their children with their school work. Empowering parents includes providing some guidance to enable them to:

STRATEGY № 1: Understand the purpose of homework so that they could understand why it is important that learners should complete homework at home

STRATEGY № 2: Create a home environment that is conducive to learning. This includes giving parents suggestions how to set a specific time and provide a distraction-free environment where learners can complete their homework and study

STRATEGY № 3: Know how to monitor and what to check if homework is completed without being experts in the subject area

STRATEGY № 4: Support the school's consequences if learners choose not to do their homework. These consequences may include a loss of recess time, staying after school or taking a zero on the assignment or project

STRATEGY № 5: Show their children how to break assignments into doable bites so the pressure won't be on the night before due date

STRATEGY № 6: Avoid giving learners too much help. Parent "overinvolvement" is evident when a homework assignment would be perfect, but the learner would fail the test on the same material. Clues of "take-over" or "overinvolvement" are when a parent says: "How can your teacher give *me* such a low mark after *I* worked so hard?" or when a learner starts thinking: "Mom and dad will do it for me!"

A correct approach is if a child has done a maths problem incorrectly, the parent shows him/her how to work a similar problem but let *him/her* be the one to correct it on his/her worksheet.

By letting parents know their role, the schools that work are maximising the benefit of homework for their learners.

LEARNER SELF-REGULATING STRATEGIES

To encourage learners to take ownership of and responsibility for their own learning, teachers in schools that work, supported by parents, use different approaches including:

STRATEGY № 1

Teaching learners self-regulatory skills, including how to manage time, handle distractions and control negative emotions

A. At school: Taking charge of their own learning, learners:

- ☞ Listen to homework instructions in class
- ☞ Copy down instructions for the task and deadline date into the homework diary
- ☞ Ensure that homework is completed and handed in to meet the deadline
- ☞ Attempt all work and give their best
- ☞ Inform the class teacher of any difficulties

B. At home: Parents encourage self-reliance and responsibility, and empower their children with an "I can do it" kind of attitude. To do this, they avoid bailing their children out if they fail to do their work

Learners have to start now working independently and taking charge of their own learning. (Teacher, School GN-Quintile 3)

STRATEGY № 2

Asking learners to share their work with their peers in the classroom: To save time and to encourage learners to take responsibility for their work, some teachers ask learners to share and discuss their homework

When I give homework I don't mind that learners sit together, discuss it and work on it as a group. In that way, you are giving learners the opportunity to help one another instead of coping from each other. (Teacher, School LN-Quintile 1)

CONCLUSION

The pros and cons of homework often inspire a passionate debate. There may never be a definite answer whether or not to assign homework. The answer likely lies somewhere in the middle, where some homework can be good, but it should not overwhelm learners or their families.

