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Regarding Homework ...

Abstract

"Why do teachers give homework? I was a middle school classroom teacher for the first eleven years of my teaching practice. The longer I taught, the less homework I assigned. That's not to say I didn't give students assignments—but they rarely had to do them at home. I'm curious about how teachers use homework, and what role it really plays in students' learning."

Posting from an education professor about homework and if there's compelling evidence that it improves learning from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/regarding-homework/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

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Regarding Homework...

 [all in allthings.org/regarding-homework](http://allthings.org/regarding-homework)

Dave Mulder

Why do teachers give homework?

I was a middle school classroom teacher for the first eleven years of my teaching practice. The longer I taught, the less homework I assigned. That's not to say I didn't give students assignments—but they rarely had to do them at home. I'm curious about how teachers use homework, and what role it really plays in students' learning.

It seems to me that teachers generally assign homework because they feel some pressure to do so. They may put that pressure on themselves; they believe that assigning homework for their students will afford the practice they need to master certain content or skills. Others feel pressure from colleagues: "The other 6th grade teachers are assigning homework...so I guess I should too!" Others may feel pressure from parents who don't want their kids left behind somehow. Still others may feel pressure from their school or district; there may be school- or district-wide policies in place requiring a certain amount of homework at different grade levels.

The argument often goes that homework will improve achievement—that students will learn more if they have homework.

The thing is, I'm not convinced that much of what is assigned as homework really does improve learning. (Many folks agree with this idea, by the way. [Alfie Kohn](#) is a particularly clear voice arguing against homework. You should also check out [Pernille Ripp's](#) page arguing against homework.)

Don't get me wrong; I'm a fan of kids practicing. "Practice makes permanent," after all. And much homework probably falls into the category of "practice." The real question in my mind is this: how does homework support learning?

Let's explore this a bit.

As an example: many teachers believe that students in the early elementary grades should memorize basic math facts for addition and subtraction, because once they have mastered these facts, children can compute more quickly and fluently. Practice will certainly help them to memorize these facts. But consider two approaches to practicing math facts:

The teacher assigns four worksheets with 100 addition facts each that must be completed during the week (at home) and turned in on Friday.

The teacher pre-assesses students to find out which math facts they have already mastered and which ones they still need to learn. Students then create flash cards in school for the facts they don't yet have committed to memory, and practice these for 5 minutes each night during the week (at home) and have a post-assessment on Friday to ensure their learning of these facts with which they had been struggling.

While the second assignment certainly takes more effort on the teacher's part, it is more responsive to the needs of the individual learner. If a student already knows the math facts, how tedious those hundreds of problems must be? And if a student doesn't know the math facts, will staring at a sheet of 100 exercises inspire them to want to learn them? How daunting that would be!

I'm not really arguing that 7-year olds shouldn't memorize math facts, but I would argue that the former assignment will likely turn them off to math. (Or maybe it just turns me off to math. 400 math exercises a week in elementary school—outside of school hours? Ugh.) Most kids don't need to do worksheets of 100 addition facts every night to commit these facts to memory. It may be true they should practice their math facts, but what is the purpose of the practice? Why should they memorize these facts? If the intent is that they will be able to compute fluently, knowing their basic facts will likely be helpful. But once they have the facts memorized, do they need to continue doing hundreds of addition exercises outside of school hours every week?

Another example: many teachers middle school and high school teachers often assign readings from a textbook to prepare for lectures and class discussions. Again, two approaches for encouraging students to read:

The teacher assigns several pages of reading, and assigns the comprehension questions at the end of the section. The students hand in their answers to these questions the next day in class, and await a lecture on the topics from the readings.

The teacher assigns several pages of reading, explaining that students will be working in groups the next day in class to put the ideas from the reading into practice.

In my own experience as a student, readings with comprehension questions quickly became “skim the reading to find enough of an answer to satisfy the teacher's quick check over our papers.” I was enough of a people-pleaser to (usually) still do the whole reading, but the comprehension questions felt like jumping through hoops. If the intent is that students will actually do the reading, perhaps the second approach might be more useful? Particularly if the students really do work with the ideas in the readings in groups—there may be some positive interdependence that is fostered by sharing ideas from reading assignments this way.

Homework is complicated.

I think it's because there are quite a few interrelated issues going on here. Teachers feel pressure (from parents, from colleagues, from themselves) to assign homework. Parents (perhaps because of their own school experiences?) think that their kids should have homework. Students themselves may not like homework, but often have been conditioned to expect homework as a normal part of school. Politicians who rail about raising standards sometimes invoke homework as a means of doing so. Homework is often seen as an institutionalized part of schooling—it has a long and proud tradition! (Or something like that...)

Is there compelling evidence that homework improves learning?

I guess I'm just not convinced it does. I'd love to hear about your experiences with homework. Did you feel like you learned more in courses that required a lot of homework? Do you feel like your kids learn more when they have homework? What kinds of homework seem to make the most sense?

This article was previously published on Dave's personal blog: iteach-and-ilearn.blogspot.com Originally published April 29, 2013. Used with permission.

Dig Deeper

What do you think about the Common Core? How about Standardized Testing? Read more in this three part education series from Ed Starkenburg on “[The Common Core: Good or Bad?](#)” and from Steve Holtrop on “[Standardized Tests: Help or Harm?](#)”.