



Research Report

**THE HOMEWORK DEBATE: A REVIEW
OF THE LITERATURE EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

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“For homework to be effective, it should be carefully planned to support specific educational goals, take into account the specific abilities and needs of students, and strengthen the link between home and school” (ERS Focus on Homework: Research and Best Practice, 2004)

The merits and limitations of homework have been a topic of **ongoing public debate** throughout the 20th century and current research and opinion is still far from unanimous regarding the benefits and limitations of homework. On the one hand, many studies report that homework, when used properly, is an effective method for reinforcing educational learning goals and indicate positive correlations between homework and higher levels of student academic achievement. At the same time there are growing questions and controversies about the amount of time students should be required to spend on this activity and the quality and usefulness of the assignments themselves.

There was sufficient evidence to conclude that the relationship between the amount of **homework and achievement** outcomes was positive, however that relationship was moderated by students' age or grade level with no clear consensus on achievement benefits at the lower grades. In response to these findings, researchers often suggest that the focus of homework should serve different purposes at different grade levels.

The **intended goals of homework** may be instructional or they may be non-instructional to serve other non-academic purposes and each of these serves unique functions which teachers should acknowledge and communicate when creating and assigning homework tasks.

In the earliest grades, homework can help to develop positive attitudes, habits, and traits, promote parent involvement and reinforce simple skills. As students move into the upper elementary grades, homework plays a larger role in fostering improved school achievement. By the 6th grade and beyond into high school, homework would have a more direct role in improving standardized test scores and grades (Cooper).

The actual **amount of time spent on homework** is also a contentious issue. Education experts tend to agree that the amount of homework should depend on both the age and the skill of

students (Cooper and Gersten, 2002). It appears that, at least for older students, homework in controlled amounts is beneficial, but that too much may diminish its effectiveness or even become counterproductive. The commonly used “10 minute rule” as a guideline or benchmark for daily homework (i.e. 10 minutes per day multiplied by grade level) appears to be generally supported by the research findings.

It is recognized that there are also more complex factors at play beyond simply achievement and many references are made to the **non-academic benefits** and/or the development of motivational skills – such as responsibility, confidence, persistence, goal setting, planning, etc. It is generally agreed that students need these skills increasingly as they progress to the higher grades and that homework can be an important channel for students to learn self-discipline, time management and independence. Particularly in the early years, homework may be more valuable for motivational skills in the long term as opposed to an improvement of grades in the short term. As such, homework can provide opportunities to introduce and develop good work habits, management strategies, task completion, self-discipline, etc. at an early age.

Determining the true effectiveness of homework however is problematic because it is dependent on so many **diverse factors and variables**, and studies about homework need to take into account all the other variables that can have an impact on the utility of homework. These may include:

- School Factors (e.g. the existence or non-existence of homework standards, guidelines or expectations and the extent to which clearly defined policies at either the district or school level are in place and communicated)
- Teacher Factors (e.g. pre-service and in-service training, teacher expertise and variations in practices including homework frequency, purpose, communication, and monitoring, etc.)
- Student Factors (e.g. individual student traits, demographic characteristics, the range of ability levels)
- Parent Involvement and Home Environment Factors (e.g. the home environment and the level of parent support, interest, knowledge, supervision, availability and involvement)

Nevertheless, many researchers have identified practices and conditions that could enhance the homework experience and have **recommended guidelines** to clarify homework expectations. The full literature review provides a synthesis of these suggestions under broad categories including:

- Homework Policy
- Intended Outcomes
- Home-School Connections and Parent Involvement
- Individualizing Homework Assignments
- Monitoring and Feedback

The literature review concludes that practitioners still need some specific advice about what are proven and effective homework practices and suggests that the solution is not to create another list of positive and negative effects, but to answer the question “under what conditions and for which students can these effects be expected to occur?” (Cooper, Valentine 2001).