

THE BATTLE OVER HOMEWORK, 2nd ed.
by Harris Cooper

Book Notes and Synopsis

(Note: the following notes and synopsis points are selected from among those made in the text. Not all questions/answers, findings, or summary points are presented. In particular, where the author repeats past points or those of similar nature, they are not included here.)

Preface

“Homework is a source of complain and friction between home and school more often than any other teaching activity. Parents protest that assignments are too long or too short, too hard or too easy, too ambiguous. Teachers complain about a lack of training, a lack of time to prepare effective assignments, and a lack of support from parents and administrators. Students gripe about the time homework takes from their leisure activities, if they understand the value of the exercise at all.

These complaints are not surprising, considering that homework assignments are influenced by more factors than any other instructional strategy. Teachers can structure and monitor homework in a multitude of ways. Student differences play a major role because homework allows students considerable discretion about whether, when, and how to complete assignments. The home environment influences the process by creating an atmosphere that fosters or inhibits study. Finally, the broader community plays a role by providing other leisure activities that compete for the student’s time.”

Chapter One: Finding the Common Ground

See tables - charts included at the end of this synopsis.

Chapter Two: Does Homework Work?

Q: Is homework better than no homework at all?

A: Yes. The average student doing homework (in research studies) had a higher achievement score than 55% of students not doing homework.

Q: Do homework effects vary with grade level?

A: Yes. Older students benefit most – twice as much as middle-grade students. Middle grade students benefit twice as much as elementary students.

Q: What about other student differences?

A: Comparisons of homework effects on students who differed on characteristics other than grade level or age (including gender, different IQ levels, etc.) generally showed no difference.

Q: Is subject matter important?

A: Somewhat.

Q: Does homework affect all achievement measures equally?

A: No. It affects class tests and grades more than standardized test grades.

Q: What about the frequency and length of assignments?

A: Larger positive effect in terms of frequency per week; negative effect in terms of length of individual assignments.

Q: Does homework affect students' attitudes?

A: Inconclusive.

Q: Is homework better than in-school study?

A: Generally, yes, but result can be misleading.

Q: Does grade level influence the effects of the two strategies (homework vs. in-school)?

A: Yes. Supervised study = more positive effect than homework on the achievement of elementary school students; homework = more effective for middle-grade and high school students.

Q: What about subject matter (homework vs. in-school study)?

A: No relation found in the research.

Q: Are after-school homework programs effective?

A: Research indicates unclear correlation.

RESEARCH FINDING: HOMEWORK REVEALED LITTLE OR NO ASSOCIATION WITH ACHIEVEMENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. THE RELATIONSHIP GREW STRONGER AS CHILDREN MATURED.

Summary: In sum, the effect of homework on young children appears to be small, even bordering on trivial. However, for high school students the effect of homework can be impressive. Indeed, relative to other instructional techniques and the costs involved in doing it, homework can produce a substantial, positive effect on adolescents' performance in school. In addition, the benefits of homework for students with learning disabilities can be positive, but its success lies in (a) teacher preparation and planning; (b) assignments that are appropriate to the skill, attention, and motivation of students; and (c) successful involvement of parents.

Chapter Three: Time Spent on Homework Assignments

Q: Is time spent on homework related to achievement or attitudes?

A: Yes. (Relationship is negligible in elementary school but grows exponentially as students progress through the grade levels.)

Q: Does grade level have an effect?

A: Absolutely yes. (See above.)

Q: Does the frequency or length of assignments matter?

A: Yes, but in varying degrees.

RESEARCH FINDING: HOMEWORK MIGHT BE MORE EFFECTIVE IF STUDENTS ARE GIVEN SHORTER BUT MORE FREQUENT ASSIGNMENTS.

Summary: Fifty correlations based on over 112,000 students revealed a positive relation between student reports of time spent on homework and several academic outcomes. Based on these data alone, it is impossible to determine whether more homework causes better achievement, whether teachers assign more homework to students achieving better, or whether better students spend more time on home study. However, in studies in which other explanations for the relationship were ruled out, the positive relationship remained for older students but was not evident before high school. High school students can benefit from homework at least up to 2 hours per night. Elementary school students demonstrate little relation between homework and achievement, regardless of the length of the assignments.

Chapter Four: The Homework Assignment

Q: Is the timing of homework and its related work in class important?

A: Yes. Studies that included tests of achievement given immediately after the class had completed the content unit revealed that homework assignments including both practice and preparation along with same-day content were superior to assignments that included only same-day content.

Q: Should teachers individualize assignments within a class?

A: Generally no, except in cases of students with specific learning disabilities.

Q: Should homework be compulsory or voluntary?

A: Not enough research to be conclusive.

Q: Are teacher comments and grading important to the utility of homework?

A: No research to indicate.

Q: What about providing incentives?

A: Studies of the effects of incentives suggest that provision of rewards for handing in homework can increase completion rates.

Summary: In sum, the studies examining practice and preparation homework provide a convincing, consistent pattern favoring these assignment purposes. Whether or how much instructional feedback is given, whether all or only some problems are graded, and whether the teacher provides evaluative comments appear to have little relation to homework's effectiveness for improving performance.

Chapter Five: Home and Community Influences on Homework

Q: Does watching TV affect achievement?

A: Some empirical support exists for assertions that TV-watching negatively impacts student academic achievement.

Q: Do high school students who have after-school jobs perform well in school?

A: Student employment may benefit students up to a certain number of hours worked per week. After reaching this number (not specified), having a job may begin to interfere with academics.

Q: What about extracurricular and other structured group activities?

A: In general, the research addressing this issue suggests that the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and achievement may be small but consistently positive.

Summary: After-school activities that are directly related to achievement (that is, homework) or that foster positive identification with school (for example, extracurricular activities) had positive influences on achievement. Activities that displace schoolwork (for example, TV-watching) or replace school identities with other identities (for example, employment) had an overall negative influence on achievement.

Q: Is parent involvement associated with a student's academic achievement?

A: Inconclusive. Two possible explanations: a) increasing parent involvement causes improved student achievement and b) poor achievement causes greater parent involvement.

Q: What are some ways that parents can become involved in homework?

A: a) Autonomy support: the most effective
b) Direct parent involvement: can be the most negative in long term
c) Provision of structure: the more, the better
d) Interference: making homework harder by poor mentoring or contradicting teacher's classroom efforts

Summary: Our results are consistent with the suggestion that an active teaching role for parents may be most appropriate for students in early grades who may be experiencing difficulty in school. However, because training students to be autonomous learners may improve later achievement, parents of students who are doing well in school should be encouraged not to interfere with self-study.

Chapter Six: Homework Policies for School Districts, Schools, and Classrooms

RESEARCH FINDING: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS FOUND THAT ONLY 35% HAD WRITTEN HOMEWORK POLICIES. SOME INCLUDED REGULATIONS REGARDING THE FREQUENCY AND LENGTH OF ASSIGNMENTS, MOST OFTEN CONCERNING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS AND STUDENTS. ABOUT HALF SPECIFIED THE TYPE OF HOMEWORK THAT SHOULD BE ASSIGNED. AMONG THESE, “PREPARATION” ASSIGNMENTS WERE PRESCRIBED MOST OFTEN.

Chapter Seven: Quick Tips for Parents and Students

For parents

From the National Parent Teacher Assn. (PTA) and the National Education Association (NEA) online homework guide, “*Helping Your Student Get the Most Out of Homework*” (Henderson, 1996):

1. Send your children to school each day well rested, fed, and with a positive outlook.
2. Take an active interest in your child’s schooling.
3. Try not to let your own negative experiences keep you from supporting and encouraging your children’s learning.
4. If possible, set up a quiet, comfortable study area with good lighting and the school supplies that your child needs.
5. Set a family quiet time during which you and your children can work together on homework, reading, letter-writing, and playing games.
6. Allow your children to study in a way that helps each of them learn best.
7. Make homework a daily activity and help your children develop good homework habits.

From the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement’s “*Helping Your Child With Homework:*”

1. Show you think education and homework are important by setting a regular time, picking a place, removing distractions, providing supplies and identifying resources, setting a good example, and showing interest.
2. Monitor assignments by asking about the school’s homework policy, being available, looking over completed assignments, monitoring TV viewing.
3. Provide guidance by figuring out how your child learns best, helping your child get organized, encouraging good study habits, talking about assignments, and giving praise.
4. Talk with someone at school to resolve problems by sharing concerns with teachers and others.

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Table 1.1 Distinctions in Homework assignments

<i>Classifications</i>	<i>Within Classifications</i>
Amount	Frequency Length
Purpose	Instructional Practice Preparation Extension Integration Noninstructional Parent-child communications Fulfilling directives Punishment Community relations
Skill area used	Writing Reading Memory or retention
Degree of individualization	Geared to individual student Geared to groups of students
Student choice	Compulsory With task options Voluntary
Completion deadlines	Long term Short term
Social context	Independent Assisted Parent, sibling, other students Group

Table 1.2 Positive and Negative Effects of Homework

Positive Effects

Immediate achievement and learning

- Better retention of factual knowledge
- Increased understanding
- Better critical thinking, concept formation, information processing
- Curriculum enrichment

Long-term academic

- Encourage learning during leisure time
- Improved attitude toward school
- Better study habits and skills

Nonacademic

- Greater self-direction
- Greater self-discipline
- Better time organization
- More inquisitiveness
- More independent problem solving

Greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling

Negative Effects

Satiation

- Loss of interest in academic material
- Physical and emotional fatigue

Denial of access to leisure time and community activities

- Parental interference
- Pressure to complete and perform well
- Confusion of instructional techniques

Cheating

- Copying from other students
- Help beyond tutoring

Increased differences between high and low achievers

Table 1.3 A Process Model of Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Homework

<i>Given Factors</i>	<i>Assignment Characteristics</i>	<i>Initial Classroom Factors</i>	<i>Home-Community Factors</i>	<i>Classroom Follow-Up</i>	<i>Outcomes Effects</i>
Student characteristics	Amount	Provision of materials	Competitors for student time	Feedback Written comments	Assignment completion and performance
Ability	Purpose	Facilitators	Home environment	Grading	Positive effects
Motivation	Skill area used	Suggested approaches	Space	Incentives	Immediate academic
Study habits	Degree of student choice	Links to curriculum	Light	Testing of related content	Long-term academic
Subject matter	Completion deadlines	Other rationales	Quiet		Nonacademic parental
Grade level	Social context		Materials	Use in class discussions	Negative effects
	Degree of individualization		Others' involvement Parents Siblings Other students		Satiation Parental Cheating Increased student differences

Table 7.1 Homework Tips for Parents

1. **Be a stage manager.** Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework. Make sure the needed materials (for example, paper, pencils, dictionary) are available.
 2. **Be a motivator.** Homework provides a great opportunity for you to tell your child how important school is. Be positive about homework. The attitude you express about homework will be the attitude your child acquires.
 3. **Be a role model.** When your child does homework, don't sit and watch TV. If your child is reading, you read too. If your child is doing math, balance your checkbook. Help your child see that the skills he or she is practicing are related to things you do as an adult.
 4. **Be a monitor.** Watch your child for signs of failure and frustration. If your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers. If frustration sets in, suggest a short break.
 5. **Be a mentor.** When the teacher asks that you play a role in homework, do it. If homework is meant to be done alone, stay away. Homework is a great way for kids to develop independent, life-long learning skills. Parental overinvolvement can be a bad thing.
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Table 7.2 Homework Tips for Kids

1. **Pick a good time to do homework.** Try to do your homework at the same time every day – right after school, just before dinner, or right after dinner. Try not to leave homework until just before you go to bed.
2. **Remember to make time for long-term projects.** Think about using a weekend morning or afternoon for working on big projects, especially if the project involves getting together with classmates. If you need special stuff for a project, make sure to tell your parents to get it for you well in advance.
3. **Spend more time on hard homework than easy homework.** If you know what's easy and hard, do the hard work first. Take a short break if you are having trouble keeping your mind on an assignment.
4. **If homework gets too hard, ask for help.** If your parents are busy and you have older brothers or sisters, ask them for help or get your parents to ask them. Ask for help only if you really need it.
5. **Find a place that makes studying easy.** Collect all the books and supplies you'll need (and your snack) before you begin to work. Do your homework in the same place everyday.