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What is effective homework?

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How can teachers design homework tasks that are reasonable and worthwhile and that also support learning? Teachers must first create quality homework tasks and must then differentiate those tasks to meet individual learner needs.

Creating quality homework tasks

The quality of a homework task affects the student's motivation to approach the task and his or her perseverance to complete it. What do quality tasks look like? First, quality tasks have a *clear academic purpose*—no busy work! Homework should not be used for new learning, but to enhance classroom learning. The ultimate goal of the assignment—pre-learning, checking for understanding, practice, or processing—should be easily understood by the student (Marzano, et al., 2001). Second, quality tasks are *doable*—they help students feel positive about themselves as learners (Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch, 2006; Sagor, 2002). Homework that cannot be done without help is not good homework and is demotivating to students (Vatterott, 2007). In fact, when students feel unsuccessful approaching homework tasks, they often avoid the tasks completely as a way to protect their self-esteem (Past, 2006). Third, whenever possible, homework should be personally relevant and customized to promote *ownership*. If we claim we want students to take responsibility for homework, we must give them more control over what they learn, how they learn it, and how they show that they've learned it. Homework should be designed to give students choices and opportunities to personalize their work

(Tomlinson, 2003; Vatterott, 2007). As a teacher once said, “I’ve never heard of a child not doing his work, it’s our work he’s not doing”. And fourth, it is preferable if homework tasks are *aesthetically pleasing*. The *presentation* of homework --the way it looks on paper, whether it appears easy or hard, fun or tedious, interesting or boring, is probably most important to younger students and academically challenged students. For instance, learning disabled students often react more positively to assignments that are visually uncluttered. They may be easily overwhelmed by spaces too small to write in or by too much information on a page. Homework can be made more appealing by the use of color or pictures, and by decreasing the amount of writing or copying that students have to do.

Setting reasonable time limits

While a small amount of homework may be good for learning, overloading children with hours of homework can actually decrease achievement (Cooper, 2007). Children as well as adults have a limit to how much mental work they can accomplish in a day’s time, before the brain needs downtime (Jensen, 2000).

The *10-minute rule* supported by the research and endorsed by the NEA and the PTA, recommends the maximum amount of nightly homework should not exceed 10 minutes per grade level per night, all subjects combined (Cooper, 2007). That is, a first grader should have no more than 10 minutes of homework per night, a sixth grader no more than 60 minutes per night, and a 12th grader no more than 120 minutes per night. But we know that students differ in their “working speed”. A 20-minute assignment for one student could be a 60-minute assignment for another student. When slower students are expected to take that additional time to complete the same homework task as other

students, they can quickly become overburdened. One solution is to make homework time-based—“Do as many problems as you can in 20 minutes.”

Differentiating homework to fit individual needs

Differences in working speed alone show us that one-size-fits-all homework just don't make sense (Eisner, 2004). Homework tasks can be differentiated by length, difficulty, or by which concepts specific students need help understanding. Homework can also be differentiated by how students demonstrate learning. For instance, learning disabled students may explain their understanding of a concept by using a tape recorder instead of writing their response.

Implementing homework effectively

Decriminalize grading and late policies

When students fail to complete homework, many teachers approach the problem more like discipline than like learning. That is, remedies for students who don't do their homework tend to focus on punitive solutions as the key to changing behavior—consequences like points off, failing grades, or missing recess or lunch to complete homework. But harsh late policies can contribute to failing grades and can discourage students from completing work. What percentage of D's and F's each semester are due to incomplete homework? Do those D's and F's represent a lack of *learning* or a lack of *compliance*? More lenient late policies or mandatory homework support programs focus on learning by requiring that all homework be completed.

Homework should not cause students to fail. Concerned with the high failure rate from homework, many schools are limiting the percentage homework may count in a student's grade to 10% or less. If homework counts too heavily in a student's grade, they

may fail even though they have demonstrated mastery on tests and in-class assignments. The failing grade is then not an accurate reflection of learning. The focus of homework should be to check for understanding and for formative feedback, not summative grading.

Implementing strategies to improve homework completion

When homework is not completed, teachers should attempt to diagnose why and provide help. Lack of homework completion may stem from academic problems such as task difficulty, learning gaps, working speed, or learning style. Completion problems may also be due to organizational or logistical problems, such as when the child fails to write down homework, forgets their book, or completes work but loses it.

Establishing a homework support program in your school

Support programs during the school day (such as during an academic lab period) or after school are helpful to assist students who are either unwilling or unable to complete homework at home. The most successful homework support programs provide *mandatory early intervention* (i.e.: students must attend when missing three assignments) and *voluntary drop-in service* for students who prefer the school environment for homework.

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