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What Parents, Researchers, and the Popular Press Have to Say About Homework

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Abstract

The popular press has reported the following about students' homework practices: (a) students spend too much time doing homework, (b) parents are opposed to and frustrated with homework practices, (c) parents are uncertain whether and how to help with homework, and (d) there is minimal communication between teachers and parents about homework. To determine whether these assertions are accurate, this study reviewed existing research and surveyed hundreds of parents of middle school children about homework practices using the *Parental Attitudes About Homework* questionnaire. Overall, present findings are more positive than those stemming from the popular press and even previous research. It was found that although students spend 60–90 minutes per day on homework, parents generally perceived homework amounts as appropriate, reported that homework does not interfere with other activities, and felt thankful that homework was assigned. Most parents were also involved with their children's homework and felt well qualified to help. In line with the popular press, however, parents reported minimal communication about homework between home and school.

Introduction

According to the popular press, a homework battle between schools and families is raging (Kalish, 2009; Ratnesar, 1999). In one corner, school personnel are piling on

Homework

the daily homework to resurrect United States students' tumbling test scores relative to world peers (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and to make sure they leave no child behind (*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002*). In this era of high stakes testing and accountability (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003), schools largely view education from a cognitive perspective (Bruning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning, 2004) and seek to educate the child above the neck and slightly to the brain's academic-dominated left side (Robinson, 2006). In the other corner, families who have withstood the jabs of increasing homework for many rounds are now striking back (Kalish, 2009). Some contend that too much homework is robbing children of time to play, explore, and socialize (Bennett & Kalish; 2006; Ratnesar, 1999). In this corresponding era of self-growth, some families view education from a Maslovian perspective (Maslow, 1943). They believe schools should also promote health and secure attachments and thereby educate the whole child (Burke, 2004; Garrett, 2006), not just the left-brain. They want their children released from homework's burden (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

Homework increases and challenges are nothing new. Harris Cooper (2007), an expert on homework, contends that time spent completing homework rises and falls with society's almost cyclical favor and disfavor with homework practices. For instance, homework was supported in the 1950s as America strived to beat the Russians in the space race. Support fell in the 1960s when free-spirited Americans viewed homework overload as a detriment to a child's physical and mental health. Wildman (1968) captured that sentiment, "Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents" (p. 203). A renewed battle cry for more homework arose in the 1980s when the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) called America a nation at risk because its school children lagged academically behind global peers. Teachers and parents continued the homework push throughout much of the 1990s as a means for meeting increasingly stringent state-mandated academic standards (Cooper, 2007). The homework tide might be heading out of favor again as educational critics caution America to stop overburdening children and educate more than their minds (Louv, 2005; Robinson, 2006).

The popular press has taken on the assignment of reporting on the school-family homework battle. Their reports say that (a) students spend too much time doing homework (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Buell, 2003); (b) parents are opposed to and frustrated with homework practices (Ratnesar, 1999); (c) parents are uncertain whether and how to help with homework (Ratnesar, 1999; Rich, 1999); and (d) there is little communication between teachers and parents regarding homework issues (Kalish, 2009; Ratnesar, 1999). Are these assertions true? Has the press done its homework? To find out, educational psychology professors Kiewra and Kauffman enlisted the help of five

preservice teachers who were completing school practicum experiences. Together, the team reviewed the homework literature, surveyed hundreds of parents about homework practices, and wrote this article addressing the four homework issues of completion time, parental stance, parental involvement, and school-home communication. Each issue is addressed by first providing the popular view, next presenting previous research on the matter, and then providing results from our own homework study which revealed the homework beliefs and actions of nearly 400 parents of middle school children. First, the methodology for our study is described.

Method

We developed the *Parental Attitudes About Homework* questionnaire in association with middle school parents and teachers familiar with homework issues and with a research methodologist who is an expert in survey design. This development process improved the instrument's content and face validity. The questionnaire contained 38 forced-choice items that assessed homework completion time (e.g., How long each school day does your child spend completing homework?), parental stance (e.g., The amount of homework assigned seems _____), parental involvement (e.g., Approximately what percentage of the time is a parent involved with your child's homework?), and school-home communication (e.g., Has anyone from your child's school initiated contact with you about the amount of time students should be spending on homework?). Questions were answered using a variety of formats such as Likert scales, multiple choice, and yes-no responses. An open-ended item at the end of the questionnaire also instructed parents to add additional comments about homework. Parents also reported on the educational and family backgrounds of their children.

The questionnaire was distributed during the second semester to 572 parents of seventh grade students at four middle schools in a Midwestern city with a population of nearly 200,000. Three hundred and seventy-two parents responded (65 percent).

Based on parents' responses to demographic items, our sample had the following characteristics. In terms of students' first semester grades in the four core subjects (English, math, science, and social studies), 39 percent attained an A average, 42 percent a B average, 15 percent a C average, and 4 percent a D average. Ninety-one percent of students were in regular education, and 9 percent were in special education. Fifty-one percent of students were enrolled in one or more differentiated classes for high-achieving students. Eighty-four percent of the children lived in a two-parent home, and most households (90 percent) had one–three children. Although no data were collected about the families' ethnicity or economic status, data about the general composition of the four schools indicated that 10 percent of families were racial minorities, and 19 percent received free or reduced school meals.

Homework

Results and Discussion

Results from the popular press, past research, and our present study are reported and discussed for the four homework themes in turn: homework completion time, parental stance, parental involvement, and home-school communication.

Homework Completion Time

How much time do students spend on homework and is it too much? The popular comic strip *Zits* (Scott & Borgman, 2001) once showed the father sitting down to dinner with the family and commenting, “Ah, dinnertime! When we can finally lay down our burdens for the day and enjoy the fruits of our labors.” With that, his teenage son, Jeremy, drags his bulging backpack across the room and unloads it on the dinner table creating a mountain of books and papers. His father acknowledges Jeremy’s plight and adds, “That would be for the non-homework oppressed among us.” Jeremy’s homework load is apparently no lighter today. His exhausted body complains that, “schools expect [students] to be in class all day, do homework all night, and then be back at it bright and early the next morning” (Scott & Borgman, 2008).

Since the late 1990s, the popular press has made the point that too much homework is assigned and that it overburdens children and their families. In the *Time* article “The Homework Ate My Family,” Ratnesar (1999) reports on overworked students — doing as much as three hours of homework nightly — suffering from illnesses and nightmares because of excessive homework. Columnist Dorothy Rich (see Strauss, 2002) says many teachers pile on homework to make up for deficiencies in the classroom and thereby rob students of valuable free time. Rich says, “If you are doing homework, you are not doing something else. You are not riding your bike, you are not reading other materials for pleasure, and you aren’t exercising. These things are important” (p. 2). John Buell, author of *Closing the Book on Homework* (2003), believes students are reaching a saturation point because of the added rigors of too much homework. The result is fatigue, diminished concentration, reduced learning, and frustration. Buell concludes that students need a break from a heavy homework load and need more free time in order to foster creativity, independence, and emotional development. Bennett and Kalish (2006), authors of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, claim that homework amounts have skyrocketed in recent years and that too much homework produces homework potatoes: overweight children robbed of sleep, playtime, and exercise. These deficits, they maintain, impair children’s physical, emotional, and neurological development. More recently, Nancy Kalish (2009) writes, “Too much homework is actually sapping our children’s strength, natural curiosity, and love of learning. Too much homework also means kids miss out on active playtime, essential for learning social skills, proper brain development, and warding off childhood obesity” (p. 74).

Previous research indicates that students spend considerable time completing homework and that homework time has increased substantially from years past. For example, a University of Michigan study (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001) found that the average amount of homework time rose from two and three-quarter hours per week (34

minutes per day) in 1981 to three and one-half hours per week (42 minutes per day) in 1997 — a 40 percent increase. Cooper and colleagues (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998) obtained similar figures. Parents they surveyed reported that most students spent 30–60 minutes on daily homework. Only 17 percent of parents reported that students spent more than one hour on homework per night.

Although homework time has risen, there is little evidence that it is excessive with most students spending less than an hour per day completing homework. This amount is also within the guidelines recommended by Cooper (1989, 2007). According to these guidelines, students should spend 10 minutes times their grade level on daily assignments. This recommendation projects to 60–90 minutes daily for middle school students. Research also suggests that current homework allocations correlate positively with achievement. Cooper (2007) calculated that current homework loads boost academic achievement about six percent over no homework.

Our research indicated that homework time for most seventh graders fell within Cooper’s (1989, 2007) recommendation. More than half (54 percent) spent one to one and a half hours on nightly homework. Still, there was a substantial range. Twenty-two percent of students spent 30 minutes or less on nightly homework; 24 percent spent two or more hours. On average, these homework time figures are higher than those reported by Sandberg and Hoffereth (2001) and Cooper (1989). The present figures also reflect a trend in increasing homework over the years. Eighty-four percent of parents surveyed recalled having an hour or less of nightly homework.

The present study investigated whether homework time interfered with other personal and family activities as suggested by Kravolek and Buell (2000). It did not seem to detract from other activities. Overall, most students (65 percent) watched one to two hours of nightly television, most (67 percent) spent one to two hours with their families, and about half (51 percent) played with friends for 30–60 minutes daily. These figures indicate that students are finding time for other activities besides homework. The complete data for time spent on homework and other activities is found in Table 1.

Table 1
Percentage of Parents Reporting on the Time Students Spend on Homework and Other Activities

	Almost no time	About ½ hour	About 1 hour	About 1 ½ hours	About 2 hours	About 2 ½ hours	About 3 hours	More than 3 hours
Completing homework	03	20	35	19	14	05	04	01
Watching television	11	12	24	19	22	05	04	01
Socializing with family	04	18	40	15	12	04	04	03
Playing with friends	25	25	26	13	02	01	00	00

Homework

Parental Stance

According to the popular press, parents not only find homework excessive, they find it stressful to them and their children. Romesh Ratnesar (1999), author of *The Homework Ate My Family*, writes:

The sheer quantity of nightly homework and the difficulty of the assignments can turn ordinary weeknights into four-hour library research excursions, leave kids in tears and parents with migraines, and generally transform the placid refuge of home life into a tense war zone. (p. 56)

Ratnesar (1999) reports on the experiences of several parents. One parent describing the typically long and difficult homework assignments for her second grader said, “It made all (our family’s) time together negative. It was painful for all of us” (p. 59). One parent describing her daughter’s hectic after-school schedule weighed down by two hours of nightly homework lamented, “I didn’t feel (stressed) until I was in my 30s. It hurts my feelings that my daughter feels that way at 11” (p. 56). Another parent reported that too much homework made her daughter sick with pneumonia. Another said that her son suffered from homework-related nightmares. A mother of three school-aged children said, “It’s ironic that politicians talk so much about family values when you can’t have any family time anymore because the kids are so busy keeping their nose to the grindstone” (p. 56). And one parent in California was so incensed about homework load that he planned to sue the school system for violating the family’s civil rights. He grumbled, “They have us hostage to homework” (p. 59).

Authors Bennett and Kalish (2006) chronicle the complaints of parents who find their children overburdened with homework and experiencing ill effects such as nightly crying fits, stomach aches, and facial tics. Kalish even shares her personal frustration with homework by recounting how her eighth-grade daughter spent four hours per weeknight on homework, spent even more time completing homework on weekends, and as a result missed numerous family suppers as well as activities with friends and family. Kalish (2009) also quotes another parent who complained about the effects of her daughter’s excessive homework, “By the fourth grade, she had so much, there was no time for after-school activities, playing, or simply enjoying our evenings together. We were always stressed, and I knew many other families were also miserable” (pp. 72, 74).

Previous research supports the notion that parents commonly feel negatively about children’s homework experiences. Xu and Corno (1998) conducted case studies involving the observations and interviews of six children, their parents, and their teachers to learn about homework practices and reactions. In general, the researchers found that the infringement of homework on family life was an issue for the majority of parents. Findings also confirmed that homework was an emotionally charged process for the families studied. The authors reported:

All the children, from time to time, became upset and frustrated over homework. Incidents ranged from children being upset with repeated mistakes to cases where children became so frustrated that their parents had to ask them to take a break or stop for the night. At least four parents became clearly upset or frustrated with their children. One parent remarked, “[when] I see her reaching a point of frustration, she is no longer functional . . . she is hysterical, and I’m hysterical.” (p. 428)

According to Cooper et al. (1998), homework is often the source of considerable friction among teachers, students, and parents. In fact, many pediatricians and family practitioners indicate that problems with homework are a frequent source of concern when children report medical problems (Cooper, 1991).

Alternatively, other recent research shows that parents are satisfied with homework practices. A national poll (Associated Press, 2006) found that 57 percent of parents surveyed believed that homework amounts were appropriate. Just 19 percent of parents believed homework practices were excessive, whereas 23 percent actually believed that too little homework was assigned.

In our research, we questioned parents about their homework views. Contrary to the popular press and some previous findings, most parents we surveyed responded positively to their children’s homework. Most (61 percent) found the present amount of homework assigned to be “about right.” Fourteen percent actually believed too little homework is assigned. Twenty-five percent of respondents, however, contended that too much homework is assigned. Our results are in line with those from the Associated Press (2006). Moreover, we found that more than half the parents (56 percent) prefer their children be assigned about one hour of nightly homework. Twenty nine percent prefer less than one hour, whereas 15 percent prefer more than one hour.

Asked how homework impacts “your family’s time and activities,” more than half of our respondents (53 percent) said it has no effect, 21 percent indicated that homework has a positive effect, and 26 percent indicated it has a negative effect. Although parents’ responses are mostly positive, it is problematic that roughly one quarter of them view homework’s impact on family negatively. When asked to comment about homework at the end of the questionnaire, several parents expressed negative views similar to those reported by the popular press. Here is a representative parent comment:

Homework has gotten out of hand. Children need time to be children. It makes me sad to see my child in tears or go to school sick because she is worried about falling behind. How many adults spend two–three hours on their jobs at home after a long day? I also want the schools to appreciate the other places my child learns things (such as when

Homework

performing in plays, while with her family, and while on a trip) instead of making us feel bad about those things taking time away from homework.

Parents, for the most part, also responded positively about the homework assigned. As shown in Table 2, most parents judged homework assignments as moderately difficult (67 percent), useful to very valuable (93 percent), and interesting (68 percent). On a scale of 1–5, where 1 represents “to a small degree” and 5 represents “to a large degree,” parents indicated that homework helps children learn what is taught in school ($M=3.5$) and develop study skills ($M=3.8$).

Table 2
Parents’ Opinions of Homework Difficulty, Usefulness, and Interest Level
(reported in percentages)

Category	Percentage (rounded to nearest full percentage)
Homework Difficulty	
Extremely easy	01
Easy	25
Moderately hard	67
Hard	07
Extremely hard	00
Homework Usefulness	
Useless	01
Not very useful	07
Useful	66
Valuable	24
Very valuable	03
Homework Interest Level	
Very boring	02
Boring	29
Interesting	67
Very interesting	01

Overall, parents’ attitude about homework was one of indifference (43 percent) or thankfulness (44 percent). Just 13 percent felt resentful about homework practices. Parent attitudes toward homework are important because they are associated with similar student attitudes (Cooper, 2007).

Parental Involvement

To recap, the popular press paints a picture of parents who find homework excessive and stressful. The mass media also contends that some parents wanting to help with homework

are uncertain of how or how much to be involved in homework while others are overly and negatively involved. In the article “The Homework Ate My Family,” Ratnesar (1999) writes, “Parents are increasingly torn. Just how involved should they be? Should they help a son or daughter finish that geography assignment or stay aloof and risk having a frustrated, sleep deprived child?” (p. 56). Ratnesar also claims that even parents intending to remain passive get “sucked in” when homework becomes overbearing and frustrating for students. One parent completed her son’s math homework because it was “just busywork” (p. 60) and because he had more important homework to complete. Another parent’s child had to build a mini-space station that accounted for food, water, waste treatment, radiation shielding, and zero gravity. After countless hours of toil, the parent intervened saying, “When the frustration level gets that high . . . I’m going to help because the situation has become so hurtful” (p. 60).

Some parents also complete homework assignments to help their children receive higher grades or look good (Ratnesar, 1999). Ratnesar reported that parents in one affluent suburb talked about homework in the first-person plural and sometimes delivered homework to school hours after the child arrived. When one third grader created a fully functioning battery-operated alarm clock that used a windshield pump to squirt cold water at the sleeper, the principal sighed, “It looks like Alexander Graham Bell made it himself” (p. 61).

The popular press also makes recommendations about how parents should help with homework, if at all. John Rosemond, a parenting columnist and author of *Ending the Homework Hassles* (2003), is one who recommends that parents not routinely get involved in homework. Rosemond (2000) argues that, “a parent’s regular participation in homework effectively prevents the child from assuming full responsibility for homework. It encourages dependency, short-circuits initiative, and denies the child the right to struggle with challenge” (p. 1E).

The opposing popular view is that it is the parents’ responsibility to help with homework. Dorothy Rich (1999), author of *Homework Headaches*, writes:

The school can only do so much. Teachers cannot follow children home to ensure that they do their work. That’s the role of family members, and it cannot be replaced by buying kids all kinds of learning toys and equipment. There is no substitute: Children have to do homework and it must be monitored. (p. B2)

Rich offers parents these (and other) homework help tips:

- prepare a quiet work space,
- develop a homework schedule,
- convey a positive impression that children can do the job,
- help divide a job into manageable steps, and
- convey that you value homework and its completion.

Homework

Overall, Rich (1999) offers this advice for parents who are unsure just how much they should contribute to homework assignments: Think about homework in the same way you think about your child's sports activities. You can cheer but don't go out on the field to catch the ball or make a tackle. Rich also offers recommendations for teachers assigning homework. She contends that the best homework assignments are those that can be done only at home such as reading with a family member, a writing assignment that calls for interviewing family members, or a science experiment best carried out in a kitchen or bathtub.

Previous research confirms that parents are involved in children's homework, their assistance takes several forms, their contributions are sometimes negative but usually positive, and that parental involvement training boosts students' homework completion and reduces homework problems. Regarding parental involvement, Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye (2000) surveyed the parents of more than 700 students in grades 2–12 and found that 58 percent of parents helped with homework because the child needed help. Only 11 percent of parents never supplied help even when needed. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Burrow (1995) interviewed the parents of 69 elementary school children and found substantial and varied homework involvement. Virtually all the parents helped structure the homework environment or sessions. Three quarters said they monitored homework. Half reported teaching their children during homework sessions, and half also reported providing motivation for homework completion.

Similar parent involvement findings were reported by Xu and Corno (1998). Results from their six case studies confirmed that all parents (a) arranged or structured the environment to aid homework completion, (b) helped their children plan and manage homework time, (c) monitored and controlled attention — in part by preventing and removing distractions and by directing and enhancing attention, and (d) monitored motivation — sometimes through praise but sometimes through warnings and harsh judgments. These reported findings fit with most of the aforementioned popular recommendations offered by Rich (1999). The recommendation to prepare a quiet workspace is an element of structuring the homework environment. The recommendation to develop a homework schedule pertains to planning and managing homework time. The recommendation to convey a positive impression that children can do the job is an aspect of monitoring motivation. And the recommendation to subdivide tasks is a means for fostering attention.

Sometimes parents provide inappropriate or ineffective help according to Cooper et al. (2000). They found that about two-thirds of parents reported providing help that interfered with student autonomy. More specifically, one-third of parents reported helping with homework so it can be finished faster. Twenty-seven percent helped with homework meant to be completed alone. And about 41 percent admitted that their “help” sometimes made homework harder.

Researchers have also found that parental involvement in homework is beneficial. Cooper et al. (2000) found that when parents help in supportive ways (for example, doing the things reported by Xu & Corno, 1998) such as monitoring time, attention, motivation, and the work environment, children tend to complete more homework and achieve higher grades. Oddly, direct parent assistance in answering homework problems is related to lower achievement. This relationship, however, is likely due to lower achieving students requiring more direct assistance rather than direct assistance causing lower grades.

Other research clearly favors parent involvement. Leone and Richards (1989) found that students were more attentive to homework when aided by a parent than when working alone or with a friend. McCaslin and Murdock (1991) found that parental involvement in homework resulted in positive parent values and styles being transmitted to their children. Similarly, Xu and Corno (1998) concluded that children learn to manage the homework process by observing parents doing it. Finally, Cooper et al. (2000) concluded that parent attitudes about homework directly influence children's attitudes, and that schools' efforts to improve parents' attitudes about homework will likely pay off in terms of improved student attitudes, homework completion, and achievement.

Finally, research also confirms that parent training positively influences homework practices (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Results from a meta-analysis of 14 studies confirm that parent training in homework assistance (a) boosted students' homework completion, (b) decreased homework problems such as complaints and frustration, and possibly (c) improved achievement among elementary students.

Our own results confirmed that most parents are involved in children's homework (even though homework assignments are rarely designed to involve family members), parental involvement is generally minimal, and the nature of parental help takes several forms — some of it negative. Parents claim that just 10 percent of homework is designed to involve family members. Apparently, few teachers follow Rich's (1999) recommendation to assign homework that incorporates family participation. Still, we found that most parents (96 percent) were involved to some degree in homework but that the majority (76 percent) were involved less than 25 percent of the time. Only 10 percent were involved in 50 percent or more of children's homework.

To determine how parents help with homework, parents responded to five Likert scale items where responses ranged from 1 (to a small degree) to 5 (to a large degree). Table 3 shows the mean response for each involvement factor measured. It is evident from Table 3 that helping-parents primarily motivate children, check and monitor homework, and teach learning strategies. These are the kinds of supportive activities recommended by Rich (1999) and found to benefit student learning (Cooper et al., 2000). Interestingly, parents who answered our survey spent the least time helping

Homework

students complete assignments — the type of help discouraged in both the popular press and the research literature. In our sample, parents generally chose not to help students complete assignments even though they felt qualified to do so. Thirty-three percent reported feeling somewhat qualified and 66 percent felt qualified or very qualified.

Table 3

Types of Homework Involvement and Parents' Mean Responses
(where 1 = "To a small degree" and 5 = "To a large degree")

Homework Involvement	Mean Response
Arrange setting and plan activities	2.0
Help motivate	2.7
Help complete assignment	1.9
Check and monitor homework	2.5
Teach learning strategies	2.4

The parents in our sample were not immune, however, from providing direct assistance that might prove counterproductive in fostering autonomy. Results show that 68 percent of parents helped students complete an assignment in the past month in order to receive a better grade. Moreover, 43 percent helped their child with homework in the past month in order to relieve the child's stress.

In summary, our findings confirm that almost all parents are involved in homework to some degree. Most parental assistance is indirect and should foster autonomy, homework completion, and achievement based on previous findings. A good deal of parent help, however, could be viewed as negative or inappropriate and fits with the popular theme that some parents are inappropriately involved in student homework.

School-Home Communication

The popular press paints a picture of limited communication between school and home about homework. If this limited communication truly exists, it might be at the root of other homework issues raised by the mass media: Parents find homework excessive and frustrating, and are unsure how to help their children. In the article "The Homework Ate My Family" (Ratnesar, 1999), one teacher was reportedly surprised to learn that a student was spending close to three hours a night completing homework. One parent, a college president, noted the completion time on each assignment his child finished because "sometimes, teachers are not aware of how much time is being spent" (p. 61). The same article also reports that less than one-third of U.S. school districts provide any homework guidelines to parents and teachers. Such guidelines would not only provide a common understanding for parents and teachers but would also alleviate the purportedly uneven

nature of homework assignments across teachers or from day to day. Finally, the article holds up the city of Hinsdale, Ill., for instituting a homework policy jointly developed by administrators, teachers, and parents that limits homework by age and mandates that some of it be optional. In that city, school-home communication up front is likely to preclude discrepant views about homework practices later.

The more recent picture emerging from the popular press about home-school communication is one of parent-initiated changes to school homework policies. Kalish (2009) reports that parents are shaping homework policy. One parent, for example, lobbied the Toronto School District to hold public meetings about homework research and practices. The result was a new policy that affects 3,000 children. The new policy limits homework to reading in elementary school, eliminates homework over holidays, and reminds teachers of the value of family time. Kalish prompts parents to join the revolution (p. 76) and offers tips for working with school personnel to alter homework policies.

Previous research recognizes a communication problem between schools and parents regarding homework. Without clear standards for the amount of homework assigned, teachers, parents, and students have markedly different perceptions about homework load. Cooper et al. (1998) found that no teachers, 17 percent of parents, and 6 percent of students reported that teachers gave more than one hour of nightly homework. These researchers call for teachers to communicate with parents about how best to help with homework and about how parent involvement aids learning. Xu and Corno (1998) also reported school-home communication problems. They contend that teachers would benefit from recognizing the homework struggles that take place in the home. They also call for coordinated efforts by schools and parents to support the homework process.

In some cases, teachers might not communicate with parents about homework believing they have little influence over how it is carried out in the home. Epstein and Becker (1982; also Becker & Epstein, 1982) found that teachers were divided on whether they could actually influence parents to help with homework, either because of the parents' skill level or because of the infringement on their time.

Finally, school-home communication is probably reduced because only 35 percent of schools have homework policies to communicate and four of five schools with policies do not mandate that teachers follow those policies (Roderique, Polloway, Cumblad, Epstein, & Bursuck, 1994). Moreover, school administrators oftentimes do not communicate existing policies adequately with teachers and students (MacBeath & Turner, 1990). Perhaps school homework policies are now more publicized because of the Internet. When Cooper (2007) conducted an informal Internet search for homework policies, he found 72,000 elementary school sites, 74,000 middle school sites, and 109,000 high school sites.

Our findings confirm the purported lack of homework communication between schools and home. Moreover, findings indicate that home-school communication is

Homework

not a two-way street or a one-way street, but a dead end. We asked parents how many times the school contacted them about homework policies or practices over the first seven months of the school year. Fifty one percent said never, 18 percent said once, and 22 percent said three times or fewer. We then asked if the school informed them about specific homework issues. Eighty-six percent were never informed about the amount of time students should spend completing homework. Eighty six percent were never informed about the purpose of homework assignments, and 79 percent were never given advice on how to help. Similarly, parents reported minimal initiation with the school about homework. Fifty percent said they never contacted the school about any homework matter. Fourteen percent did so one time, and 26 percent contacted the school two or three times about homework.

Without communication, misperceptions might arise. Recall that schools in Hinsdale, Ill., made some homework optional to lessen the homework load. Parents completing our survey do not support that practice. When asked, 92 percent said they prefer that homework not be optional.

Summary and Conclusions

This article hopefully adds clarity to the homework battle that has been raging since the dawn of the new millennium (Kravolec & Buell, 2000; Ratnesar, 1999) and continues today (Kalish, 2009). It showcases (a) viewpoints expressed in the popular press, (b) previous research findings, and (c) our own findings with respect to four homework issues: homework completion time, parental stance, parental involvement, and school-home communication.

The popular press contends that students are assigned too much homework and are therefore overburdened and robbed of free time. Previous research supports the notion that homework time is on the rise but probably not excessive (Cooper, 2007; Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001). Our study found homework times higher than previously reported with most middle school students spending one to one-and-a-half hours on daily homework. This amount of homework, however, does not seem to interfere with students' other recreational and social activities.

The popular press contends that parents find daily homework excessive for their children and stressful to both children and parents. Previous research confirms that parents commonly feel negative about homework and report that homework infringes on family life and creates stress in the home (Xu & Corno, 1998). To the contrary, our study generally revealed a positive parental reaction to homework. Most found the amount of daily homework appropriate. Most reported that homework did not interfere with family activities, and most were either indifferent about or thankful for homework. Still, a quarter of the parents surveyed indicated that excessive homework practices do infringe

on family life. Several parents from this group offered moving testimonials about the family stress that homework creates. These parents and their heartfelt concerns should not be ignored.

The popular press contends that parents are uncertain how to help their children with homework or are overly involved, to the extent where some parents are completing a student's homework. Previous research reveals that most parents are involved in homework but usually in positive, helpful ways (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 1995). Some parents, though, are over involved and thereby inhibit student autonomy (Cooper et al., 2000). Our study confirmed that most parents are involved in homework and that involvement is usually minimal and positive such as motivating students and checking answers. This sort of involvement is not a reflection of parent ineptitude; most feel well qualified to help. As was claimed in the popular press (Ratnesar, 1999) and previous research (Cooper et al., 2000), some parents provide negative homework support such as completing assignments for children so they can receive a higher grade.

The popular press claims that communication between school and home about homework is limited. The previous research literature supports this claim by showing that teachers, parents, and students have markedly different perceptions of how much homework is assigned (Cooper et al., 1998). Our study confirmed that there is scarcely any communication about homework initiated by the school or by parents.

Overall, this study paints the homework process in a more positive light than the popular press or previous research with the exception of school-home communication about homework. Because communication is so poor, however, most teachers are probably unaware of how homework affects families. In the hope of informing educators about homework's impact on families, four final conclusions stemming from our study are offered:

- students are spending considerable time completing homework,
- parents are generally supportive of homework practices,
- parents are involved in homework — usually in minimal but supportive ways, and
- schools and parents are not communicating about homework.

Teachers can use this information as a springboard for improving the scholarly partnership between school personnel and parents about homework and for involving the many supportive parents in ways most helpful. Such is the case for the educators who helped conduct this study. They assign moderate homework loads, offer advice for parent involvement, and open wide the lines of homework communication among teachers, students, and parents.

Homework

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