

THE RESEARCHERS ATE THE HOMEWORK!

PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS

HOMEWORK! Kids have – for as long as we can remember – complained about it! Now we have heard from hundreds of parents, many of whom suggest that homework is a ‘home wrecker’, adding incredible stress not only for the students but for the whole family, affecting schedules, family time, and feelings of efficacy. In our most recent survey, we have heard from many educators who report that homework raises concerns for them as well.¹ Researchers are questioning homework’s effectiveness as an educational tool. Policy makers are thinking twice about what to do about it. Kids have their fingers crossed!

The battle for and against homework heated up 25 years ago when Ronald Reagan (March 2, 1984) said, “America’s schools don’t need new spending programs; they need tougher standards, more homework, merit pay for teachers, discipline, and parents back in charge.” And so teachers complied, some less willingly than others, and the parents dug in, sharpened the pencils, and cracked the whip. Kids complain as they haul backpacks back and forth from school, heavy with books and time commitment, stressing them in too many ways. Policy-makers are not sure what to make of the research and the demands of the various constituent groups. Researchers scratch their heads about how to accurately determine whether homework is indeed very helpful. We can ask how much and how long and what kind and when...but it is hard to assess how effective homework really is, considering the personal and family cost.

The seemingly relentless increase in homework was seriously challenged in 2001 by Kralovec and Buell in *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*. In 2006 two more books (*The Homework Myth* by Alfie Kohn and *The Case Against Home-*

work by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish) raised the issue of homework in American schools. The massive media response to these books revealed how acutely the Canadian public feels this problem, as well. Since most research on homework has been American, we determined to check in with parents and teachers to see how Canadians feel. Two studies and many consultations with school officials, teachers, kids, and parents later, we have some Canadian data.

After our two national surveys, we have discovered a wide range of opinions – and enormous tension – about homework. Many teachers believe that they ‘have’ to assign homework because parents are demanding it; and many parents complain vociferously that teachers are overloading their families with unnecessary stress by assigning too much homework. Some teachers suggest that homework does not really appear to contribute to learning and is a waste of time, and many parents agree. Others believe the opposite. Some parents speculate that homework was good for them, and so it must be beneficial for their children. Interesting data tells us that if the teacher is also a parent, she is more likely to question the return for the effort and pain.

If assigned homework is real, meaningful, and relevant to the child, is it worth doing? If it engages and challenges, intrigues, or reinforces what the child is learning, is it valuable? If it does, in fact, make the learning shift into the transformative, connects to real life, and makes a difference, then it could be life changing. However, all too often work assigned is ‘busy work’ – assigned to assuage parents’ demands or the rules of the school rather than to enrich and enliven learning.

So we wonder, is it worthwhile? Is it worth the torment and well-documented stress? What is good homework? Is there any? Does homework generally help develop discipline and good work habits? How much homework is too much? Should it be evaluated? If so, who should get the grade? The parent or the child? What happens if the child does not understand the assignment? What if no one can help the student for any number of reasons? Is this a social justice issue? What happens if a dog or alien, Godzilla or the computer, eats it? Many children’s authors have written about that possibility! In a sense our research does put homework on the menu, to be considered at the policy level. Hopefully,

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EN BREF Deux sondages nationaux font ressortir un vaste éventail d'avis – et une énorme tension – face aux devoirs. On demande généralement : « quelle est la quantité appropriée de temps » à consacrer aux devoirs, mais il serait peut-être plus utile de demander « ce qui se produit lorsque les devoirs retirent aux enfants tout leur temps négociable, de sorte que le jeu, les loisirs, les passe-temps, les amitiés et les activités créatives sont laissés de côté ». Les deux sondages manifestent que le stress constitue un problème de taille : près du quart des enseignants du primaire et 45 pour cent des enseignants du secondaire affirment qu'ils constatent des signes de stress reliés aux devoirs. Beaucoup de parents se disent préoccupés par la difficulté des devoirs et l'imprécision des consignes. Les sondages donnent à entendre que nous devons trouver de nouvelles façons d'aider les élèves à gérer cette obligation de l'apprentissage. Il faudrait peut-être accroître les ressources, améliorer l'organisation structurelle et repenser les attentes.



it will cause those in power (teachers, parents, school boards, education ministries, and hopefully children) to make wise decisions.

SURVEY CHARACTERISTICS

The issue perspectives presented here are based on two separate surveys. The first – *Homework Realities: A Canadian Study of Parental Opinions and Attitudes* – was a survey of 1094 caregivers of 2072 children across Canada which we conducted in 2007,² and the second – *Teacher Perspectives on Homework* – is a survey of 945 teachers across Canada. The teachers in the survey represented all levels: K-3 (31.1 percent), Grades 4-6 (30.6 percent) Grades 7-8 (22.1 percent) and Grades 9-12 (31.3 percent). They also represented all experience levels: less than 5 years (23.4 percent), 5-10 years (26.2 percent), 10-15 years (16.0 percent), 15-20 years (11.6 percent), 20-25 years (10.7 percent), and more than 25 years (12.2 percent). The schools the teachers represented were in all sizes of communities: Rural – less than 15,000 (26.9 percent); town – 15,000-30,000 (18.1 percent); small city – 30,000-100,000 (14.4 percent); city – 100,000-300,000 (22.5 percent); and metropolitan area – over 300,000 (18.3 percent).

What we learned from these surveys is that homework really is problematic. As we examined the data, a number of issues emerged and interestingly, so did a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation that cause tension between home, school, policy-makers, and children.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

It is interesting that “what is an appropriate amount of time?” is the question most often asked about the homework issue, but in our opinion it is not the right question. It is impossible to predict how long an assignment will take or to assume that it will occupy the same amount of time for every student. It ‘just depends’ on many factors such as interest, aptitude, clear understanding of expectations, understanding of concepts, tiredness, other preoccupations, ability, and so on. The same homework might take ten minutes one day and an hour another. It might have taken Johnny fifteen minutes, Billy five, Shelley half an hour, and Sammy never finished, but spent an hour fighting with his

mom about it. Deirdre's dad did it for her! Even though time is not a viable variable to control, it has been the object of much policy discussion and is often the stated expectation. The ten-minute-per-grade rule is an unrealistic stipulation.

There is a real perception gap about the amount of homework assigned. Parents/children seem to experience more homework per day than teachers claim they give. For example, our survey showed that 28 percent of parents of Grade 1 students and over 50 percent of parents of Grade 2 students report more than 20 minutes of homework a day. However, of all the primary teachers, 66.6 percent report they assign 20 minutes or less per day (32.9 percent give 20 minutes; 33.7 percent give 10 minutes or less). Close to 45 percent of parents of high school students report that, between Grades 9 and 11, their children have 60 minutes or more of homework per night, and in Grade 12, 64 percent report having 60 minutes or more. High school teachers, however, tell a different story: 61 percent say they give 20 minutes or less homework per night. Students in high school do have several teachers, but the numbers still seem at odds. The survey also shows that just over 60 percent of high school teachers 'rarely' or 'never' coordinate the homework they give with other teachers

The question is not really how many minutes, but rather what happens when homework takes away all the negotiable time from children, so that play and recreation, hobbies, friendship development, and creative activities are usurped? This can't be good. Children need time to relax and renew. They need controllable time to plan, organize, choose to waste, choose to spend with friends, negotiate, and explore. And, depending on level, parents need to provide some guidance and resources, to model appropriate leisure activities, and to play with their children in order to teach them the possibilities. Parent involvement with their children is critical, no matter what the nature of the experience. They need to be involved with homework, piano lessons, sports, and playtime. Kids should have out-of-school curriculum potential like dance, art, or music lessons, Taekwondo, etc. – especially when the arts are disappearing from the school curriculum. They need activities such as sports that will keep them fit. They need to find things to do that help them to feel good about themselves, to interest them. Parents told us this, and more.

A seven-year-old suggested that homework "ate his family". What he meant was that there was no time for the family to enjoy each other, doing things that matter to them. Family values are being replaced by school obligations. There is something wrong when a student comes home from school day after day and has to start to do homework right away, stopping only for supper or to drop into bed exhausted. Reports of this agenda came from too many families, even in the primary grades, and especially in junior high. The result of this unnecessary regime is stressed and burnt out kids who want to quit school sooner rather than later. The parents fall prey to helping their children survive and get caught doing far too much.

Parents went on to say that when homework is so difficult that they have to be unduly involved, it is too difficult. Undue amounts of homework, and ill-defined assignments, place an inexcusable stress on the student and on his family. Piling homework on children of all ages is not productive, say these parents; we hate it and so do the kids. Home-

work not only reduces family time, it also becomes a primary source of arguments and power struggles; it is disruptive to building a strong family. One mom calls homework an "ever-present albatross around our family's neck!" Many families agree with a dad who claims, "We as parents find our marital stress is based primarily on the rigors of school and academic marks!"

STRESSED-OUT KIDS

Both surveys point to stress as a major issue. Talk of burn-out and low self-esteem for students peppers the qualitative data. "I am worried about my daughter burning out on school and not being able to handle the higher expectations when she gets to later grades," reports a Grade 1 mom. "My 11-year-old has so many worries about homework at the end of the day, he can't sleep." Parents are worried that their children hate school because of the stress of homework. Pediatricians concur that homework and school-related stress is the new morbidity for kids.³ Many teachers also recognize signs of stress related to homework; we suspect they are the teachers who focus on teaching children, not just curriculum. In our survey 23.2 percent of primary teachers and 45 percent of high school teachers say they see signs of stress related to homework.

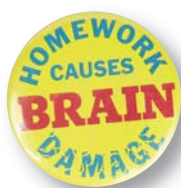
HOW HARD IS TOO HARD?

Parents and teachers both report needing to put in lots of effort to support homework. More than three quarters of parents of primary children claim that they "usually or always help" their children. Half of the teachers surveyed claim that creating homework adds significantly to their workload, and two thirds suggest that assessing homework adds "much to very much" work. We know that parents and teachers both would willingly do whatever it takes to help kids be successful, but we question whether the contribution of homework is commensurate with the "pain and torture" described by many. There is no real evidence that homework in the primary grades has any positive effect on learning, and in some cases it seems to have a negative one. Effort for effect matters, many suggest. Remember, many parents told us that they too often end up doing the homework. We have been guilty ourselves! ...what about you?

Of course, stress and frustration with difficulty affects attitude. Parents report that in Grade 3, for example, over 40 percent of the children are "grudgingly cooperative to very resistant" and in Grade 11, almost 60 percent feel that way. Teachers think that kids are much less negative towards homework than do parents – although interestingly, teachers who are also parents see it differently. High school teachers think that slightly more than a third of the students are negative to very negative, and less than a third are positive.

HOMEWORK OR BUSYWORK?

Parents recognize that considerable time and family stress is invested in homework. If they perceive it to be busy work, or of little value, they become less supportive. Many parents expressed the opinion that homework should be new learning extensions and engagements instead of just review or practice. "Far too much is of little value. Too much is expected of parents in terms of helping out. Too much boring drill work. Too much class work completion. Too much busy



work!" For teachers, creating quality assignments is a challenge. It depends somewhat on what they perceive as the purpose of homework – as merely the drill and practice side of learning or as quality learning based on creative and holistic problem solving and application in real life. We found teachers to be quite split on this matter; school and board policy and in-service discussions would be helpful in examining this issue and developing a unified approach.

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?

One factor that seems highly significant and related to a number of issues is the question of homework expectations. Respondents expressed concerns that too often the assignments were not clear, that expectations were too high for the child to accomplish and required parental assistance, and that there was inadequate accommodation for English language learners and students with learning disabilities. Some comments that highlight this:

"I feel that my child is being asked to complete homework that is too difficult for her to do on her own. She needs the help of one or both parents. This seems to me to be inappropriate. I do not mind helping my child with homework, but it seems that she should be given at least some homework that she can complete on her own."

"It comes home without them knowing what to do. Some of it hasn't even been taught yet! Very aggravating."

"I can only imagine the struggles that new immigrants, ESL families, single parents, and those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups must have when they are not able to take on the role of 'home-schooling' that today's education system forces upon us."

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CONCLUSION

The issue of homework is now uppermost in many parents' and teachers' minds. School boards are recognizing this. In Ontario, the Minister of Education has called for every school board to review homework policy and practice. This starts by taking the opinions of parents and students seriously and by carefully examining and defining what really is homework. To see it clearly as 'school work' to be done away from the teacher's supervision is a start. It is the school's responsibility, not the parents'. And that may require finding new ways to assist students with managing this learning obligation. It may require greater resources. It may require greater structural organization. It may require a rethinking of expectations. It may well be the 'tipping point' for the next educational reform movement. |

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Notes

- 1 L. Bartel and L. Cameron, *Teacher Perspectives on Homework* (in progress).
- 2 L. Cameron and L. Bartel, *Homework Realities: A Canadian Study of Parental Opinions and Attitudes* (2008). Technical Report available at: http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/cameron_barbel_report.pdf
- 3 D. Elkind, *Ties that Stress*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).



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