

A Case for Making Homework Rare

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Background

Homework is a controversial issue and dominant views on homework change from decade to decade. It will not be my purpose here to review the history of homework or elaborate on all sides of the question. Rather, my purpose is to make a case for a minimalist position on homework for the **students in the age group, locality, and subject matter of my particular middle school teaching assignment.**

“Therefore, I think it would not be imprudent, based on the evidence in hand, to conclude that doing homework can cause improved academic achievement. [...] Still, this assertion must be quickly followed by the qualification that the positive effect of homework on achievements for young students may be limited.”
(Cooper, The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents, 2007, p. 37)

The final sentence in that opening paragraph is in bold to illustrate the first important point of this case: that any broad generalizations about homework that do not take into account the student population (in fact, the individual student), the local culture, and subject area have no validity.

Context

Context is everything when determining teaching method. If the reader can agree that the ideal teaching situation is a private tutor for each student, then teaching practices which employ the same individualizing techniques as a skilled private tutor are the best. This might be one good working definition of differentiated instruction. It is my premise that the most beneficial teaching methods for students are those collected into a format of differentiated instruction.

The people I teach range in age from twelve through fifteen. The context of my teaching assignment at this writing is social studies grades seven through nine. I have the same students over three years in small, heterogeneously grouped classes. The umbrella term for the teaching method I espouse is differentiated instruction. The school in which I work at this writing is a small rural central school district in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State.

Research and my own experiences support a strong case for **minimalist** approach to homework in this context and for **differentiating** homework for different types of students.

Who Benefits from Homework

“Is it good to assign homework?” A question this broad cannot be simply answered with “yes” or “no” any more than one would ask a doctor whether it is good to use bandages. One does not need a bandage for a headache or to set a broken leg. No one medical remedy fits all ailments; likewise there is no answer to the question about the value of homework without taking into account the people to whom one intends to assign that work.

Studies indicate that the variable of first importance in assessing the effects of homework on student achievement is grade-level. “For students in grades 3 through 5, the correlation between amount of homework

and achievement was nearly zero.” (Cooper, Synthesis of Research on Homework, 1989, p. 89) “The average correlation between time spent on homework and achievement was substantial for secondary school students. For elementary students, it hovered around zero.” (Cooper, The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents, 2007, p. 30)

Writes Dr. Harris Cooper: “The evidence is clear. Homework has substantial positive effects on the achievement of high school students [*defined by Cooper as grades 10-12*]. Junior high students [*defined by Cooper as grades 5 through 9*] also **benefit from homework but only about half as much** [*emphasis mine*]. For elementary school students the effect of homework on achievement is trivial, if it exists at all.” (Cooper, Synthesis of Research on Homework, 1989, p. 89).

Dr. Cooper’s conclusion regarding junior high is that homework can advance the achievement of students in this age group, though not as much as homework helps in high school. However, I would point out one weakness in this approach: Dr. Cooper treats the classes as homogeneous groups. That is, the underlying assumption of some of his work is to treat age groups as groups whose members are so similar to one another that applying the same treatment to all will result in the same results. This assumption was valid in 1989; however it is not valid now. Which of my students fall into the category of people Dr. Cooper says will benefit?

Dr. Cooper addresses assigning homework to students with learning disabilities in a recent book. He writes: “... homework for students with learning disabilities should be short and should focus on reinforcement of skills and class lessons, as opposed to integrating different skill areas or extending class lessons into new domains. Students who fall below minimum competencies in a skill area **may not benefit from homework at all** [*emphasis mine*].” (Cooper, The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents, 2007, p. 36) “[...] the benefits of homework for students with learning disabilities can be positive, but its success may lie in (a) teacher preparation and planning; (b) assignments that are appropriate to the skill, attention span, and motivation of students; and (c) successful involvement of parents.” (Cooper, The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents, 2007, p. 37) It strikes me, however, that creating assignments appropriate to the skill, attention span, and motivation of students is of vital importance for students without learning disabilities as well.

Dr. Cooper’s review of research supports the notion of individualizing assignments. “Homework assignments individualized on the basis of students’ learning styles may improve student achievement, attitudes, and conduct more than assignments that do not.” (Cooper, The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents, 2007, p. 48) In an earlier review published in 1989, Dr. Cooper suggested that individualizing homework assignments might not be worth the greater effort it takes teachers to create them because, he writes, “Most classes are made up of students who are relatively homogeneous in ability.” (Cooper, Synthesis of Research on Homework, 1989, p. 90) However, that is simply no longer the case. Students in our classes in New York State in 2010 are far more different from each other than classes in 1989 because we no longer track students into classes of different levels and more students with disabilities are in the regular classroom than twenty years ago.

I suspect a common misunderstanding when reviewing research on homework is to confuse **assigning** homework with **doing** homework. The act of a teacher assigning homework obviously does not in and of itself

lead to improved student achievement. It is common sense that it is the act of doing homework that raises achievement, though this is only for high school students. In grades 10-12, the benefit of homework is very powerful for the secondary students who do it. For students who won't do homework, however, there seems no benefit to assigning it no matter what grade level. In my experience, the threat of failing marks never makes kids do homework with any consistency.

A problem with research on homework is that it often addresses grade levels. The problem with grade levels is that they do not represent homogeneous groups of people (if even they ever did). Generalizations about what is good for "grade 3" or "high school" are based on the silent premise that the people making up these groups are similar enough to be treated the same. This is not true. I would like to see research on homework addressing more individual yet measurable student attributes, such as perhaps some composite picture of reading proficiency, score on standardized math tests, intelligence tests, and so forth. We could then look at response to and effectiveness of homework on groups matching these "student profiles".

Supervised Study

Over the past 7 years I have gradually decreased homework for my students. Only recently did I review research on homework. I was decreasing homework because I was very dissatisfied with the results. One experiment four years ago was particularly disappointing (and now seems foolhardy) – for a brief period, I actually assigned greater homework to students who were failing (students who usually had learning disabilities). The premise of that failed experiment was that these people needed more practice, so more homework should increase achievement. I was wrong because these students did not do homework under just about any circumstances. I ended up just canceling the zero grades assigned for the incomplete work because these zeros ruined my attempt to accurately measure what students know.

The last remaining typical and regular homework assignment I was giving to my classes was study for quizzes. Many students made a leap in achievement when I changed from assigning study for quizzes as homework for outside class to having in-class supervised study and when I created a modified minimal curriculum. Dr. Cooper notes what I found by experimentation: "There is no reason to believe that homework would be more effective than in-class study. In fact, alternative treatments should be devisable that are far superior to homework." (Cooper, Synthesis of Research on Homework, 1989, p. 88) The research-supported practice of **supervised in-class study eliminates the problem of kids in my context not doing homework and enhances their achievement in ways that doing homework would.** Some might argue that there just isn't time for this in class; however, the strong benefits my students realized from in-class study are reason enough to re-evaluate how I used my time in class and to make time for this. A team from St. Xavier University in Chicago found benefits for students in tutored study halls (Dicken, Foreman, Jensen, & Sherwood, 2008) in a small study done for a graduate research project.

A laudable effort by some of my colleagues in high school classes is to use the flexibility in our schedule to create 30-minute "labs" where supervised homework can be done. This would seem supported by Cooper's research review.

Parental Assistance with Homework

Holding parents accountable to make their children do homework is a practice that is not supported in some research nor is it supported in my experience. Dr. Cooper wisely notes that “[b]ecause homework goes home, we have to consider variations in out-of-school environments when we think about what might determine the value of an assignment.” (Cooper, *Synthesis of Research on Homework*, 1989, p. 87) However, he also notes that: “Regardless of grade level, I recommend that the formal role of parents in homework be kept to a minimum. [...] Obviously, in earlier grades parents should be more involved.” (Cooper, *Synthesis of Research on Homework*, 1989, p. 90). “Cognitive ability, family background, and parental homework help or control **were only loosely associated** [*emphasis mine*] with homework motivation and homework effort.” (Trautwein & Ludtke, *Predicting Homework Motivation and Homework Effort in Six School Subjects: The Role of Person and Family Characteristics, Classroom Factors, and School Track*, 2009). This study identified the following elements to be most determining factors in homework motivation and effort: student perceptions of homework quality and control (classroom level), student conscientiousness, perception of homework quality, value beliefs (student level). Parental control is not in that list. It would not seem a great leap to see that only differentiated homework would stand the greatest chance of meeting the factors that actually enhance homework completion rates. From a second study on determining factors related to homework effort and attitudes: “Controlling homework assignments were associated with less homework effort and more negative homework emotions; the opposite pattern was found for students whose teacher supported student homework autonomy rather than parental homework involvement.” (Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, & Ludtke, 2009) In other words, greater effort and positive regard for homework (thus, presumably, greater benefit from homework and chance students will do it) is achieved when parents are **not** the controlling factor in homework completion. From the abstract of a report in *Education Week* in 2009: “Helping with homework, for instance, **did not have much of an impact at all in secondary school** [*emphasis mine*]. Visiting the school, volunteering, and attending school events seemed to be just moderately related to student achievement. Twice as effective as the things parents did at school were the efforts they made at home, **apart from helping with homework** [*emphasis mine*], to support schooling” (Viadero, 2009). Parents seem to know this. Only 64.6% of parents of secondary students in 2007 check that homework is done. 23% of secondary students get no help, according to that report, and only 11.3% get help 3-4 or 5 days a week from parents. (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 2009)

In my opinion, holding parents accountable for homework completion is a questionable policy because it shifts responsibility for homework from the student and the teacher to the parents, people who will describe their frustration in the limited control they can actually exercise over homework (Cameron & Bartel, 2009). Many cannot do the assigned tasks of high school classes, they do not have the time to micromanage teenagers who are adept at being deceptive, they cannot regularly get reliable information about what homework assignments are, and so forth. Appropriate and useful homework assignments, when even necessary, grow from the teaching-learning context created mostly by the teacher. It’s up to the partnership of teachers and students to get learning done and this includes homework.

In cases where a student at any grade-level is not doing homework, a common response by teachers is to contact parents. Most parents wish to be informed and this reporting is an important responsibility of the teacher. In some cases, however, the reporting to parents carries the unfortunate subtext of holding them responsible for making the student do his homework, which may be unreasonable in some cases and may cause antagonism between school and home. In some cases parents wish to take on this role, if even temporarily as

their child develops independence. In some cases parents do not wish to take on this role, teaching responsibility in a different fashion. In some cases the home structure simply cannot provide a homework support environment. I make no judgments here. What I do know is that school districts cannot micromanage home environments of whatever sort. In a libertarian spirit, one could argue that only in extreme cases should educational institutions interfere in the home, leaving parents the freedom to raise their children in the way they see fit.

The variety of outside-of-school situations is simply staggering and the ability of the teacher to adapt to all of these is severely limited. That being the case, I take the following approach: I rely entirely on my own time and methods in school with students to promote their achievement in social studies. Parental involvement is completely optional for my students: parents are welcome to participate, including sitting in on classes, but I do not require it. One way I can do this is to reduce homework to a bare minimum. Since I have discovered that achievement is possible with minimal homework, a policy especially effective with students with disabilities, I am satisfied with the practice.

How Much Homework

On the rare occasion that I assign homework in the heterogeneously-grouped junior high context, the assignments are differentiated for the student. I would be remiss if I gave any student work he could not accomplish independently. Research studies would inform me in designing the appropriate amount of homework: minimal is best. A small amount of well-designed assignments can yield the same benefits as many hours. Cooper writes: "Students who reported doing more than 20 hours of homework per week revealed a relationship with achievement test scores nearly equal to those reporting between 1 and 6 hours of homework per week." (Cooper, *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, 2007, p. 34) Cooper's review of studies on homework indicate that "... for junior high students, the positive association with achievement appears for even the most minimal amount of time on homework (less than one hour) but disappears entirely at the highest interval. (Cooper, *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, 2007, p. 33)

It is interesting to note that studies show "Distributing the content of homework assignments so that it includes material meant to practice past lessons or prepare for future lessons, or both, is more effective than assignments that include only same-day content." (Cooper, *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, 2007, p. 45)

It seems clear to me that the higher level students in my classes would most benefit from homework. They are capable of doing work independently. They are sufficiently motivated to apply themselves to it. I wonder if they are operating at a high school level such that increased homework would enhance their achievement in ways it helps high school students. This is all theoretical. At this point, I am certain my advanced students would resent greater homework.

My Experience

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of students passing the New York State Intermediate Social Studies Test 2005-2010 (data for other schools and the state was not available for 2010 at this writing). A gradual conscious

implementation of improved teaching strategies during the period 2007-2010 yielded an average passing rate of 93% for students at Schroon Lake over that period compared to a statewide passing rate of 61% for that same period. Comparison with three regional schools similar to Schroon Lake also shows strong favorable results for Schroon Lake students. By contrast, only 56% of Schroon Lake students passed that test in the years 2002-2004 (NYS Education Department, 2010). A key feature of the methodology change was to progressively reduce the amount of homework. At first, homework was reduced to rare written assignments and study for quizzes. By 2009, study for quizzes was happening in the classroom, so even that was not homework. I do not claim causality here: reducing homework was a small part of a larger collection of teaching method improvements and it is that collection of reforms that brought on the higher passing rate. The point here is to show that one *can* promote high student achievement without homework.

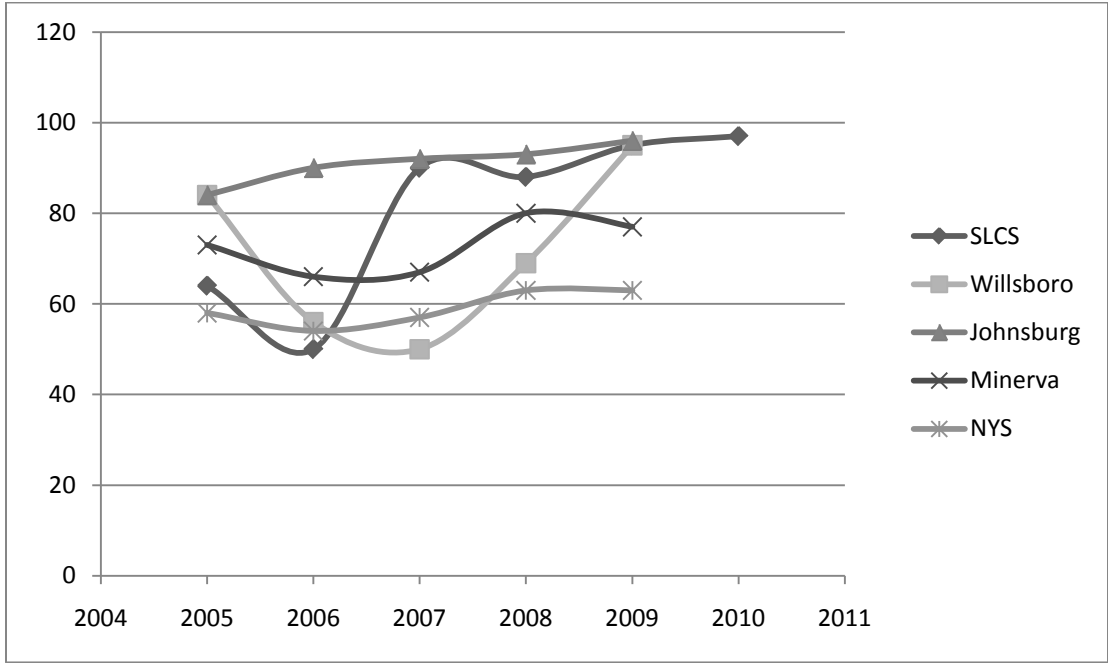


Figure 1, Passing NYS Social Studies Test, 2005-2010 (NYS Education Department, 2010)

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of students scoring at level 4, the highest level, at Schroon Lake on the New York State Intermediate Social Studies Test since 2005. During the period 2007-2010, the time during which important changes were underway in teaching method, 39% of Schroon Lake eighth graders scored level 4. This is nearly double the state figure of 19% and well above the percentage in the three local similar schools. Again, the minimalist homework policy was not causative here. Rather, it was one small element of a collection of practices. Clearly, however, it is strong evidence to refute the notion put forth by some that homework is absolutely necessary for high achievement.

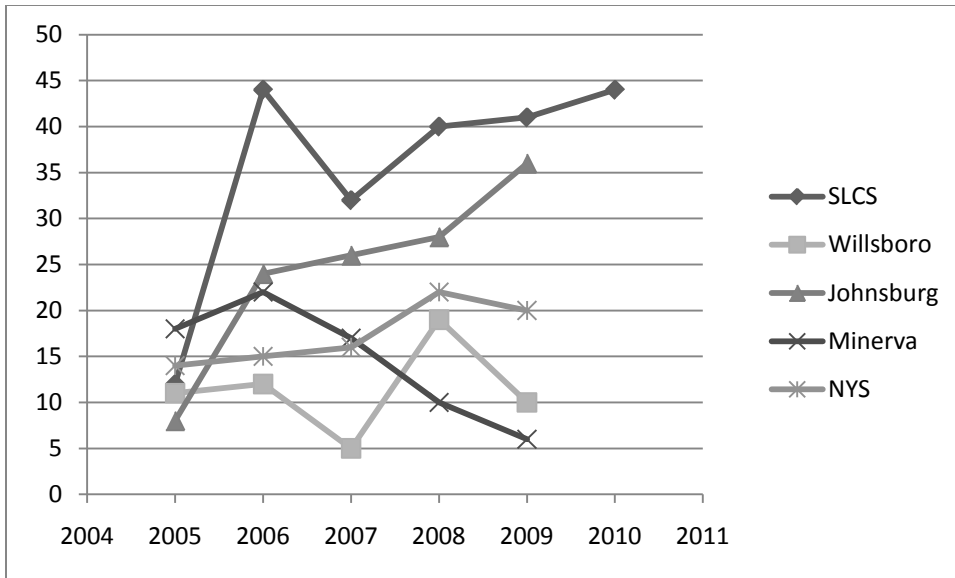


Figure 2, Scoring Level 4, NYS Social Studies Test, 2005-2010 (NYS Education Department, 2010)

It is difficult for me to quantify here, as indeed I should, what I mean by “minimal homework”. There are no records to shed much light on this because for most of the past 6 years “homework” mostly means study for the next quiz. Even presenting statistics on passed quizzes would not illuminate this question much, since some may easily score well on a quiz without studying. I suspect students will not disagree when I assert that most students never did homework.

One strong argument in favor of minimal homework is my assertion that it can be done. In one brochure I distributed to parents, I wrote “If you could teach without giving a lot of homework, why wouldn’t you?” Schroon Lake students performed consistently higher on standardized tests than their peers statewide and locally. All of this was done in an extremely minimal homework environment.

“Cognitive ability, family background, and parental homework help or control were only loosely associated with homework motivation and homework effort.” (Trautwein & Ludtke, Predicting Homework Motivation and Homework Effort in Six School Subjects: The Role of Person and Family Characteristics, Classroom Factors, and School Track, 2009).

Changing the Regular Classroom

There is a bias I think should be challenged: the bias that the regular educator’s homework policy is above scrutiny.

I see this bias when I sit in on special education committee meetings and homework is discussed. Long discussions address strategies for getting the student to complete homework, strategies which I know will only enjoy short period of success if any at all. The reader may be familiar with these efforts: have a homework planner signed by the teacher each day, daily emails

home listing assignments for a student, reports to parents when a certain number of assignments have not been completed, and so forth. Everyone sitting at the table, I suspect, knows what I know: these things will likely not

work or will yield limited results despite the massive time and energy needed to maintain these strategies. Often this effort cannot be sustained. Perhaps sometimes we come back to the table in review of the case and find that even with the homework done, the student is not passing because he has not passed the tests (a factor that shines a light on potential problems with the regular educator's grading system).

The regular educator seems to remain aloof from the discussion of homework. Parents and the committee on special education are placed in the position of dancing around the seemingly unmovable policies of the regular classroom teacher. A strong argument can be made that this assumption is not functional because strategies based on this premise simply work so rarely and require too much effort relative to the gain.

The regular classroom is the place to focus our attention here. A good faith effort must be made to apply homework policies that conform to best research. I would hazard a guess that best research does not support homework policies that result in students failing.

Conclusion

It is clear that the usefulness of homework depends upon the student, especially grade level, with homework being unsupported at the elementary level, moderately helpful in junior high, and very helpful in high school. It is also clear that homework has benefits when, among other things, students believe in it, when the teacher controls accomplishment instead of parents, when students can and do actually do it in the spirit intended (meaning when the homework assignment fits the particular student, meaning homework should be differentiated). My own studies support the notion that homework is not necessary to promote high achievement in my context.

I think we need to start thinking in terms of student profiles, not grade level categories, because grade level labels no longer represent homogeneous groups who would respond in mostly the same way to the same treatment. Such a system would greatly clarify our thinking about what practices lead to success for what students. I wonder if profiles of common student types could be developed that are composites of measurable characteristics of students such as reading level, favored learning style, IQ score, and so forth.

People get frustrated trying to change things over which they have limited influence. Students working on inappropriate assignments, parents and special educators trying to get students to do homework, teachers facing failing grades due to incomplete homework: all of these are instances where people are trying to control that which lies mostly beyond their control. An added disadvantage to this is that energy may be drained from areas that one does control. It would seem to be best to get out of the business of trying to act in this way, and rather focus one's energy on that over which one has control.

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