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The Value of Homework: Is Homework an Important Tool for Learning in the Classroom?

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Homework continues to be a controversial topic. The debate over homework is an old one, with attitudes shifting throughout the debate over the years. Proponents and opponents make cases to support their views on the necessity and importance of homework in the development of the student and the construction of knowledge. Good and Brophy (2003) indicate that many view homework as, "An important extension of in-school opportunities to learn" (p. 393).

While some proponents of homework believe in its purpose, a question still persists about the role of homework in determining the student's grade. Should homework be assigned and graded on a regular basis, or should it be viewed as an educational means to an end? As a means to an end, should one centralized school or district policy govern homework, or should some flexibility exist?

Education consultant Ken O'Connor (1999) suggests eight guidelines for successful assessment, which includes a directive to not mark every single assignment for grades, but rather take a sampling of student efforts in order to assess how much they have learned. His approach pushes for a more standards based approach in determining grades, combining formative assessment to track students' grasp of lesson concepts as they learn, enabling adjustment of teaching practice on-the-fly, and summative assessment in the form of a test or quiz, which measures the level of student knowledge and understanding after the learning process. This is also a valuable tool for the teacher, as they may be better able to gauge the efficacy of their lessons and unit.

In a study conducted by Hill, Spencer, Alston and Fitzgerald (1986), homework was positively linked to student achievement. They indicate that homework is an inexpensive method of improving student academic preparation without increasing staff or modifying curriculum. "So, as the pressure to improve test scores continues to increase, so does the emphasis on homework" (p. 58). 142 school systems in North Carolina were contacted.

Of the initial 142 schools, 96 responded, and were sent three-part questionnaires seeking information about the existence, scope, development and evaluation of homework policies in their schools. The researchers cite several general conclusions based on their findings, including the importance, and apparent lack, of homework policies in existence. Despite the pervasive nature of homework in every participating school, only 50% of the schools indicated the existence of a written homework policy.

Amongst the policies reported by the other half of the participating schools, most of the policies specified the

type or quality of homework to be assigned, and allowed some flexibility in the assignment and evaluation of homework. The authors indicated:

Particularly encouraging signs were that a variety of types of homework were suggested, and the focus of homework assignment was toward meaningful, creative, and high-level thinking endeavors... and away from tedious busy work and drill. (Hill, Spencer, et. al, 1986, p. 68)

Homework is seen as a valuable resource for teaching, allowing students to practice, and in doing so, learn the unit material. This study documented the importance of flexibility in the assignment and evaluation of quality homework assignments, but also the alarming lack of a written homework policy in 50% of the participating schools.

It can be drawn from this study that some type of homework policy is necessary, as is the assignment of higher cognitive types of homework and the flexible assessment and grading of that work in order to foster and track student learning.

Cauley and McMillan (2009) define formative assessment as, “A process through which assessment-elicited evidence of student learning is gathered and instruction is modified in response to feedback” (p. 1). The authors suggest the use of feedback in the process, but suggest a steering away from performance-goal oriented extrinsic motivators such as grades. Emphasis on performance and grades during the formative process can be detrimental to eventual student achievement because it might shift student focus away from their goal of mastery of course material to concern over the way their abilities might be judged by their peers (Cauley & McMillan, 2009, p. 3).

Constructive feedback throughout this process maintains the focus on mastery goals created at the outset, and provides the student with the support necessary to make connections between new learning and prior knowledge. Homework, ongoing formative assessment, and feedback are all considered to be part of the instruction process. Grading and recording the work completed throughout this time would not accurately create a record of the student’s level of understanding and knowledge because they are still in the process of learning the material.

McMillan, Myran and Workman (2002) conducted a study of over 900 teachers in order to investigate the assessment and grading practices in practice. The authors used surveys returned by a sample of 901 participating teachers of grades 3-5, representing a total population of 1,561 teachers of those grade levels from 124 schools near Richmond, Virginia.

The surveys featured a 6-point scale for participants to rate the emphasis they placed on different assessment and grading practices, with 1 being *not at all* and 6 representing *completely*. The findings revealed relatively low emphasis on homework grades, but also a positive correlation between the importance of homework and increasing grade levels. The authors state that:

Given the relatively low emphasis on homework, comparisons with other students, other teachers’ grading, and the infrequent occurrence of borderline cases, these results suggest that teachers conceptualize two major ingredients – actual performance, and effort, ability, and improvement. Of these two, academic performance clearly is most important, but effort, ability, and improvement remain as fairly important, especially for some teachers. (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002, p. 209)

This study documents the importance of homework in the construction of knowledge, but also identifies the fact that there was little emphasis placed on the grades for that work. The majority of the assessment for the

students was derived from test and quiz scores, or other forms of summative assessment.

O'Connor (1999) begins his list of eight guidelines for successful assessment with the indication that the only acceptable basis for student grades is their own individual achievement. He goes on to specify that grades recorded must measure the student's achievement of the learning goals established at the outset of the unit. This suggestion is aligned with the information provided by Cauley and McMillan (2009), which emphasizes the importance of setting mastery goals prior to the instruction process.

They also convey the idea that feedback, and not grades, should be used during the learning process, as formative assessment takes place. The true measurement of what the student has learned comes at the end of that learning process, in the form of a summative assessment, which McTighe and O'Connor (2005) suggest also be used at the outset of the unit to establish realistic performance goals:

This practice has three virtues. First, the summative assessments clarify the targeted standards and benchmarks for teachers and learners... Second, the performance assessment tasks yield evidence that reveals understanding... Third, presenting the authentic performance tasks at the beginning of a new unit or course provides a meaningful learning goal for the student. (McTighe and O'Connor, 2005, p. 2)

Waiting until the end of a unit, however, to measure student learning is a mistake, since the time for instruction and learning of that material has ended. It is in the course of the instruction and learning process that McTighe and O'Connor also place importance on the formative assessment process.

Homework is a form of formative assessment, along with draft work, ungraded quizzes and other exercises used with the intent of guiding and instructing the student to promote higher-level cognitive connections. Placing little or no emphasis on grades on those types of exercises and activities allows for focus on the mastery goal, and keeps feedback constructive. "Although teachers may record the results of formative assessments, we shouldn't factor these results into summative evaluation and grading" (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005, p. 1).

This philosophy could be seen in the low levels of emphasis placed on homework grades in the study by McMillan, Myran, and Workman. Effort, ability, and improvement remained important factors in that study, and McTighe and O'Connor echo that idea in their discussion of replacing old student achievements with new ones. They take into consideration, the varying learning curves of different students, and their progress toward goals set at the beginning of the unit. A student will likely have a greater mastery over the unit material at the end of instruction, than at the outset of instruction.

That point, at the end of instruction is the appropriate time to measure what the student has learned, allowing improvements to replace previous difficulties or failures. McTighe and O'Connor (2005) note, "Allowing new evidence to replace old conveys an important message to students – that teachers care about their successful learning, not merely their grades" (p. 6).

The material reviewed has established the importance of the existence of a flexible, written homework policy on a school or district level. Mr. O'Connor presents a total package, in this respect, to schools and districts that are seeking to establish a policy, or re-evaluate their current one. Following my research and analysis of the relationships between the literature, and Mr. O'Connor's work, questions still remains unanswered, possibly to be addressed in further study: Will students be motivated to complete homework and/or classroom activities that they know will not be graded?

If there were a problem with student motivation in this respect, what would the impact be on achievement in

a setting where the same, or similar type of policy is in place? If a teacher wishes to use homework for the purposes of ungraded formative assessment, they must be certain that the work is truly that of the learner him or herself, with no outside assistance coming from family members or tutors they might see outside of school. This is a major problem related to the use of homework in this way, as homework results may not truly be indicative of the student's acquired knowledge.

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