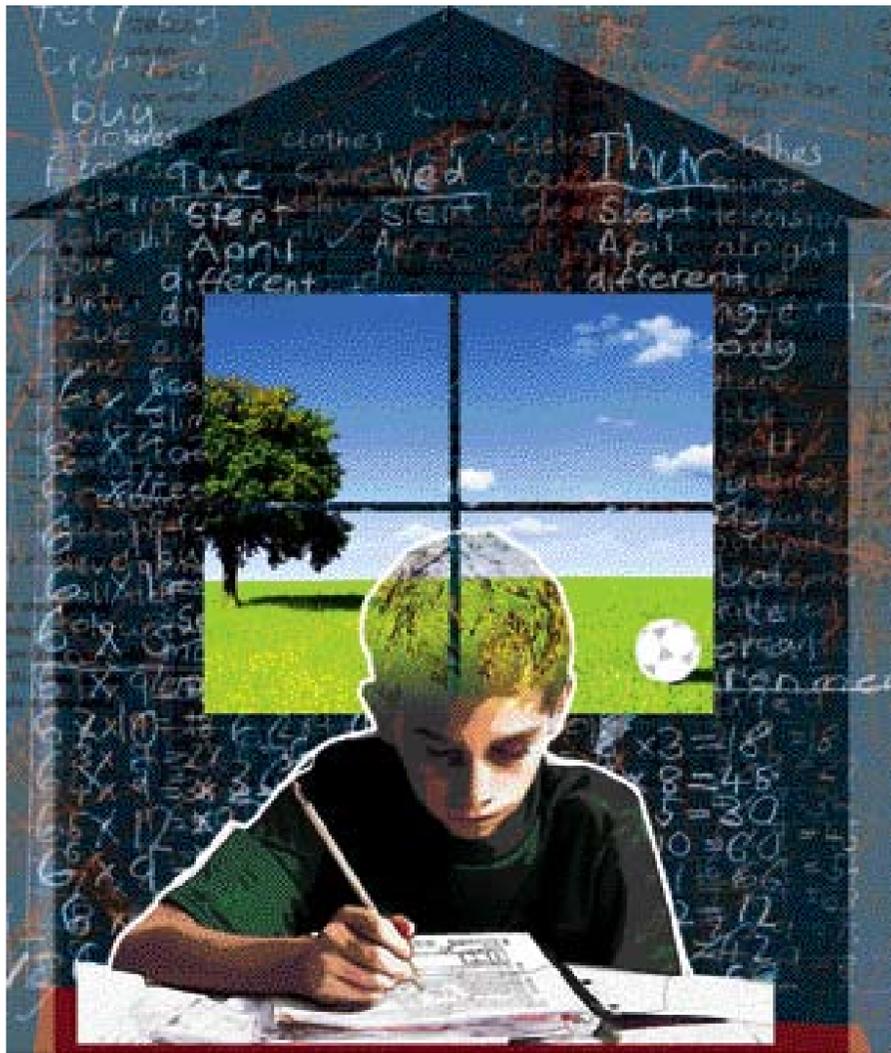


Hamppered By Homework



Illustrations by Simon Bosch

Dr Michael Nagel argues that far from fostering learning, asking children to do more schoolwork at home can actually hinder it.

Education has many sacred cows. One of the most interesting and persistent is that no matter how much we learn about learning, many schools are overwhelmingly driven by misguided notions regarding the educational value of homework. There are still a number of widespread assumptions about the benefits of homework that do not stack up against any available evidence. Many of these assumptions are embedded in bureaucratic government

and long-term academic achievement. I don't really consider myself as 'anti' anything and my profession requires of me a degree of latitude when looking at particular issues or concerns, to avoid my being labelled dogmatic or an ideologue. I am, however, concerned with many facets of education that lack any foundation in research evidence and/or are based on 20th Century practice. Today's learners are very different and live in a

others' economic and cultural standing. In the 1960s, education became the modus operandi for building economic, cultural and political might. Schools were to be the foundation for ensuring that a country did not fall behind any other country and, as such, education became part of a global competition towards building economic and political prosperity. In this environment, academic achievement grew in importance, and homework was viewed as an integral component of enhancing it. However, the research that existed then, and even now, does not prove that homework has any short or long-term academic benefits.

One of the most fundamental difficulties with assuming or suggesting that homework improves academic outcomes is the lack of any available research to support this claim. This is due primarily to the fact that in order to make such a determination, a study would need to be longitudinal, incorporate a wide range of schools and students, and have some instrument accurately to

... the rhetoric supporting homework is almost always provided without any convincing empirical evidence for such endeavour. This begs the question that if parents, and more importantly, children, are to give up home life for homework, then surely there should be evidence of its benefits.

and school-based policies that parents accept because they come from educational 'authorities'. After all, if a school's policy on homework says that it enhances lifelong learning and builds positive character attributes, then surely this must be so. However, the rhetoric supporting homework is almost always provided without any convincing empirical evidence for such endeavour. This begs the question that if parents, and more importantly, children, are to give up home life for homework, then surely there should be evidence of its benefits. Homework is something that need not be taken for granted. Indeed, I believe that it should perhaps be abandoned altogether before the innate curiosity and love of learning evident throughout childhood and adolescence is lost.

As a parent and educationalist, I am not opposed to any measure of educational activity that can enhance learning

very different environment, yet homework practices from a bygone era still permeate much of what happens in many schools. We would do well to question those practices in order to ensure that the activities children are engaged in are beneficial and worthwhile. A good starting point might be briefly to identify why homework may have become so embedded in schooling practice.

Homework has not always been part of 'schooling'. Until the 1950s, homework was not highly valued and in many educational contexts was actually banned. In the United States, a large number of prominent educators and academics not only viewed homework as unnecessary but also as unhealthy. What changed? The debate surrounding the emergence of homework is very complex, but many suggest that support for it occurred in Western countries as a response to their comparing each

measure achievement. A bold assumption would also need to be made that all children who were part of such a study had a uniform level of ability and developmental timelines that could be measured. Yet most parents know that no two eight-year-old children are the same. Placing children in classrooms based on age is an administrative function, not an educational one. Moreover, there is no way to measure exactly what goes on in a home during an evening. In the end, the vast majority of studies on homework cannot demonstrate a relationship between homework and enhanced academic achievement. In fact, quite the opposite is evident.

One of the ways in which many people try to link achievement with homework is by associating grades and test scores with learning. A major difficulty with this approach is that quite often the person responsible for



As a researcher and educator, I have always found the view that more work builds a child's character a rather curious notion. Character is not

derived from extending school life into the home. Much of a child's emotional and social development occurs long before children go to school, and is shaped by parents and caregivers.

setting the homework is the same person who evaluates the work once it is completed and assigns a mark or grade to it. In other words, there is no opportunity for any independent measure of the work that is set or the work that is completed. A second problem is that tests, especially standardised tests, are a poor measure of intellectual ability and provide little indication of creative capacity. Quite often, tests only really demonstrate how skilful particular students are at doing tests. Some students who do their homework conscientiously will nevertheless test poorly, simply because test-taking is not their forte.

Homework often denies access to leisure time and community involvement. It can reduce the positive interactions parents have with their children: family relations may be strained due to parents assuming undesired roles or pressuring children to complete work. Much of the homework children receive is fundamentally 'busy' work that often results in emotional and physical fatigue (for both children and parents). Children and adolescents reach a saturation point for absorbing new information far more quickly than adults, and fatigue

and an inability to sustain concentration are likely to be substantial factors in hindering learning. Moreover, while some homework may be set as a form of revision, it is still often stressful and tiring. Homework has also been linked with the promotion of undesirable traits, such as cheating. Regardless of the age of a child, it is not uncommon for parents to be active participants in the completion of homework, whereby a nine year old gets help with a project or a 16 year old is assisted with assignments. In the end, one must ask what lessons children learn from such endeavours?

Research has demonstrated that homework accentuates inequities – for a complex set of reasons,

it is more difficult for children from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds to complete homework. Studies done in the United States and Australia have identified that children from poorer backgrounds are often unable to complete homework due to variations in family responsibilities whereby children take on adult-like roles to help support the family.

Furthermore, it is hard to recognise from homework where a child is having difficulty; it is even harder to find out exactly why. Given that any struggles with homework take place outside of the classroom, it is often difficult for a teacher to ascertain where exactly the problem might lie. This is exacerbated on many occasions when a parent

**1/8
vert**

1/6 rect

1/6 rect

... the notion that homework builds independent thinking and positive work habits is, at best, whimsical. The only thing independent about work assigned to do at home is whether a student chooses to do it or not, and often the 'choice' is a product of the desire to please a parent or a teacher ...



inadvertently contributes to the inadequacy of diagnosing problems by 'teaching' their child differently to the classroom teacher.

Finally, the claim that homework promotes long-term discipline is largely unsupported by extensive empirical work.

Homework does not deliver the numerous academic benefits its proponents promise. Moreover, innumerable studies of homework actually show no correlation between homework and a student's performance.

One of the most menacing propositions often used to support homework is that it somehow builds character and positive attitudes to learning. There is an assumption that homework is always positive and therefore character-building, which actually flies in the face of what we know about children and learning and the nature of most homework. Stating that homework builds a positive attitude to learning does not make it so.

As a researcher and educator, I have always found the view that more work builds a child's character a rather curious notion. Character is not derived from extending school life into the home. Much of a child's emotional and social development occurs long before children go to school, and is shaped by parents and caregivers. This is even more significant when we examine current trends that see younger and younger children expected to do more and more educational activity. We seem to be convinced that the more 'education' we give children, and the sooner we do so, the better. Homework is

actually an outgrowth of broader cultural notions about the sanctity of work. In Australia, we are working longer and harder than ever before and the importance of leisure time and play is underappreciated. Children, adolescents and adults alike deserve time for the kind of leisure that fosters creativity and sustains a lifelong interest in learning.

Homework is often assigned for a number of reasons that have little to do with learning, including a belief that it fosters good work habits for the future. It is just as likely that children's work habits are adversely affected by homework because they do not want to do it and see little value in it. Furthermore, because children have little say in the work they are given to do at home, the notion that homework builds independent thinking and positive work habits is, at best, whimsical. The only thing independent about work assigned to do at home is whether a student chooses to do it or not, and often the 'choice' is a product of the desire to please a parent or a teacher, which can hinder any intrinsic motivation to learn.

Homework creates stress for children, parents and teachers. It does not instil a lifelong interest in learning, because many children do not want to do it and they see it as burdensome. As they get older and as homework increases in volume, young people begin to view schoolwork as an intrusion on their free time, and are often left dealing with everything from anxiety to apathy because they cannot or will not do the work. In the end, homework becomes something to be tolerated as a necessary evil, a sentiment that tends to permeate other aspects of 'schooling'.

A passion for learning isn't something that you have to inspire; it is something you have to keep from being extinguished. Surely then, until someone can provide well-founded evidence that homework is beneficial, parents and teachers must do everything possible to ensure a child's love of learning is not diminished by an insistence that they complete schoolwork at home. ■

Dr Michael Nagel is head of Education Programs in the School of Science and Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

1/8 rect

1/8 rect

1/4 horz