

What About Homework?

MARCIA A. EVERETT

Problems related to homework—what kind and how much—are frequently topics of discussion between parents and teachers. Marcia A. Everett, helping teacher in the Warren County, New Jersey, schools, describes a study which identified many promising approaches to these problems.

AT A CONFERENCE with a parent recently, the teacher of the seventh and eighth graders was startled when the parent said, "I wish, Mrs. Jackson, that you did not assign so much arithmetic homework. Richard spends all his time after supper working on it." "But I don't assign homework of any kind," replied the teacher. "If Richard works arithmetic he is doing so because he wants to."

Here in a few words is the theme of this article—that the modern school does not have to assign homework; if children are partners in planning their school experiences they voluntarily will add extra time to their school day by working at home whenever there is need to do so.

When the writer accepted the assignment to prepare this article, she decided to make a study of the local homework practices in Warren County, New Jersey. She sent a simple questionnaire to about one hundred elementary teachers who work in the twenty-three rural districts of the county, she interviewed parents and children concerning their ideas on homework, and she studied the various objectives which had been set up from time to time by different groups of teachers in the county.

A Sampling of Statements

From these objectives the writer

found that teacher-assigned homework, either to supplement or to take the place of classroom study, had been definitely discouraged for a period of fifteen or more years. The questionnaire shows that about one third of the teachers in grades seven and eight do assign some form of required homework, but many of these teachers modified their, "Yes, we assign homework," by adding, "sometimes—if the child does not have too much farm work or if homework helps him with a special need."

In grades four, five, and six, about twenty percent of the teachers report that they, too, assign homework. Here all but five qualify their statements to show that in assigning homework they consider the home situation and abilities and needs of individual children. The primary record shows that out of thirty-four teachers who teach pre-primary, grades one, two, and three, only two teachers (one third and one second grade teacher) assign homework, and one of these reported that she does so only occasionally.

The teachers give many reasons for not assigning homework:

- ☐ The five-hour school day, if well planned and carried out, provides enough time for a basic program of education.
- ☐ Since all children have different needs and different abilities, assigning everyone the same kind of work is useless. The best

child in arithmetic does not need the extra drill; the slow child needs special help which the teacher is best qualified to give him.

☛ All children do not have the favorable home conditions necessary for doing homework. Some have been up since five in the morning to help with milking, and by the time the evening chores are done they are too tired to work. Their feeling of frustration and embarrassment when they cannot produce the demanded paper the next morning soon leads to permanent discouragement.

☛ Other children who are growing rapidly need extra time for rest and relaxation rather than to do more school work.

☛ Teachers find the checking of additional homework papers a burdensome and unrewarding job.

☛ Children need some time to pursue their hobbies, to attend Scout meetings, and to engage in 4-H activities. There is not enough time in one evening to do an hour of homework, to attend Scout meeting, and to get to bed in time to have ten to twelve hours sleep.

These are only a few of the statements which show that in a program of education which considers the total life of the child, there is no place for wholesale assignments unrelated to the child's purposes or needs.

Homework with a Purpose

One eighth grade teacher writes: "I hadn't assigned much homework until I found that the parents of children who were just starting high school were disturbed over the suddenness with which the children were confronted with a heavy load of homework, for as soon as the children start ninth grade they must do more exacting work at home. So we are practicing doing formal homework in one subject a day."

In another school a group of parents of some exceptional nine-year-olds

asked the teacher to send work home for the children to do. The teacher talked the matter over with the children and together they made two lists. One they called "Things to Do at School," and the other "Things to Do at Home." On their "Things to Do at Home" list they included:

- Work on words we need to know
- Read to an audience
- Write poems, stories, or plays
- Work arithmetic problems
- Make a scrapbook of animals or flowers
- Make a book of machinery, airplanes, occupations
- Make a peep show
- Draw or paint
- Make a puppet
- Look up information in reference books
- Collect news items for bulletin board
- Plan something for opening exercises: music, poems.

Each child has a copy of this list, and the parents are satisfied with the work the children select to do at home.

Self-Chosen Activities

The figures presented early in the article do not mean that children are not carrying on any form of school work at home. Although there is a comparatively small amount of assigned homework, the majority of children are relating their home and school work in desirable and healthful ways. Many times the homework becomes a parent-child project in which the school and home join forces in the education of the child.

Voluntary, self-chosen activities form the basis of much of our present-day homework. Since the activities of different groups seemed to differ in point of emphasis rather than in essence, the list has not been set up by age levels.

† Upper grade children help their parents with farm problems involving numbers. They bring these to school for extra help when necessary.

† Children listen to several radio news commentators and report to the class what each has said, learning to consider all sides of a question. The children discuss with their parents, too, what they have heard.

† The children talk over with their parents the new ideas they have learned at school. "Dad, I think we're plowing our fields the wrong way. Why don't we call up the farm agent? He was at school today and he's better than you think." So on Saturday or Sunday father and son may walk over their land together, discussing the problem of erosion, and on Monday the boy goes back to school eager for more information.

† When the home atmosphere is warm, approving, and understanding, children like to share with their parents a story learned at school, a picture drawn or painted, a poem memorized, a finger play dramatized, or dance a waltz to the new record.

† Children of all ages go to their parents and other members of the family for help in locating innumerable types of materials and for finding various kinds of information. They borrow uncle's microscope and father's crosscut saw (the older boys are making a house for the first grade) or grandmother's mother's candle mold or mother's latest magazine to get a picture of a baby eating cereal or drinking orange juice.

† A fourteen-year-old boy studying vocations wants to know why Dad chose to raise orange trees or to run a dairy farm.

† Some children ask their parents for special help. "Mother, tomorrow I'm going to report for my committee. I can use only a few notes. Will you listen to see if I say it all right?" Another says, "I'm going to read a story aloud tomorrow. Will you see if you hear every word?" And still another, "Will you please dictate these spelling words to me?"

† Children and their parents go to places of historic interest which have been the topic of discussion at school.

† A younger child explains to her father that they need a cupboard for the school room, and sometimes he makes one for her to take to school. This may seem like homework for father, but getting a cupboard made is her homework too. She must be able to explain the size and kind of cupboard needed. If father is wise, he asks her to bring him the tools and she learns their names and uses. Or father, if he is still wiser and very patient, will help her to make the cupboard herself.

† Some parents take an active interest in the children's school work by becoming actual partners in a project. A boy who is constructing a model of the locks in a canal is helped by his father. A girl planning a budget for her imaginary family and planning meals for them as part of a home-making unit brings her ideas to her mother for suggestions and criticism.

Home Activities Are Creative

The activities which children select to work on alone are many and varied.

—Children use their home libraries to find the information needed for their current interest.



U. S. Forest Service Photo

—They read newspapers and magazines to find up-to-date information.

—They read for fun, and like to find interesting facts and ideas to share with their classmates.

—Upper grade children often become very interested in their notebooks, which they take home to index or to illustrate.

—Some choose to do their next day's work at home so as to have more time at school to use equipment not available at home.

—Children work on their individual needs at home. For instance, Richard, mentioned in our introduction, realized that he needed extra drill on fundamentals so was doing added work at home.

—Many young folks make a special effort to listen to radio programs of music which their teachers have suggested they would enjoy.

—They read to find out more about their favorite authors or musicians.

—They make gourds, rattles, drums, and castanets when studying about Mexico.

—When studying "sound" they use all the glasses they can find for tuning and get the flower pots from the cellar for bells.

—They create original tunes, or prepare musical programs to present to their classmates.

—For the classroom museum the children collect bird's nests, seeds, leaves, flowers, insects, plants, stones.

—They pot plants at home for school room beautification.

—They search for plants and animals for the terrarium.

—They select and bring from home books, toys, and phonograph records to share with others.

—They search for relics of early days; they take hikes; they draw maps.

—They select nature plots to observe and to record changes from week to week and season to season.

—Boys and girls interview many individuals and representatives of various organi-

zations in the community for needed information.

Home-School Activities Integrated

When the school day is over, the interest in school activities is expressed by the child in many ways.

- Children tell stories, sing songs, and play the games they learn at school.
- They play school.
- They say or sing "Grace" which they learned at school.
- They use their erector sets to show things they have learned: how miners go down in a mine or how gold is dredged.
- They read to their young brothers or sisters stories they have read at school.
- Children set up their own science museums and work on hobbies which they have learned about and started at school.

The Old and the New

Homework used to be the child's drill work. Today his practicing is done under the careful supervision of the teacher where wrong procedures cannot be practiced unchecked, and where expert help is available. Today homework provides the child with opportunity to explore further his particular interest, to broaden his experiences so that the school work takes on added meanings. Homework used to be assigned to one and all alike regardless of the existing conditions. Now a child selects the activity he wants to carry out and plans his time accordingly. Understanding parents and teachers realize the child's need for outdoor play, for relaxation, for quiet recreation, and for social interchange, and they help him to plan and live a well-balanced life.



Copyright © 1950 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.