

"What, why, when, how, and how much?"

*These questions serve to introduce
a controversial topic . . .*

Homework

REFLECTION upon the subject of homework seems to open a Pandora's box for the educator. Pupils, parents, teachers and administrators hold a wide range of beliefs and opinions relative to homework. Beliefs and opinions not only differ within and between each of these groups, but they also vary as attention moves along the line from the practical concerns to the deeper philosophical questions which arise whenever problems of homework require attention.

As if this were not enough, opinions are likely to be affected by "side" concerns, for administrators *are* concerned about public relations; teachers *are* concerned about how "respectable" they appear to their colleagues; and parents *are* concerned about their child's readiness for College Boards. Since standard prescriptions of policy and practice are not likely to end the intense concern over this subject, perhaps an attempt in

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this article to indicate some of the major problems and some of the operating principles revealed by research and by current best practice may be of value to the reader.

The "What" and the "Why"

In an analysis of the topic of homework, we first face a semantic problem. To the uninitiated, perhaps it would appear that homework should mean work assigned by a teacher to be completed at home. This definition of homework is of little help in understanding what a given teacher is likely to mean by the term.

Because of the protests of some pupils, the author questioned an English teacher about the amount of homework she had assigned. The teacher in question denied vigorously that the required reading of a novel within a period of one week in addition to a strong dose of written work was unreasonable because the reading of a novel (although required) was not homework! Likewise, a Latin teacher became incensed with the author because

he objected to the fact that she kept students after school each night to do the work she had assigned in class that day. She held many of her pupils until five o'clock almost daily because she didn't believe in having them do work at home! These are extreme but actual examples of the practices of teachers.

In the literature of the 1930's the term homework apparently had a very clear meaning. The assign, study, recite, test methods in common use gave rise to this parent reaction reported by Butler¹ in 1939. A parent wrote to a superintendent:

I have four little girls attending your schools. I am up at five o'clock in the morning to get them off to school and to get myself off to work. It is six o'clock in the evening when I reach home again, pretty well worn out, and after we have had dinner and have tidied up the house a bit, it is eight o'clock. Then, tired as I am, I sit down and teach the little girls the lessons your teachers will hear them say over on the following day. Now, if it is all the same to you, it would be a great help and a favor to me if you will have your teachers teach the lessons during the day, and then all I would have to do at night would be to hear them say them over.

Unfortunately, as late as 1950, Burton² reported an investigation which showed that four-fifths of the assignment procedures in the social studies classes studied were nothing more than page assignments of a single textbook.

Curriculum workers find the need to distinguish between formal or traditional practices and modern practices relative to teaching methods and techniques including homework. Very largely the distinction is based upon the degree

¹ Frank A. Butler. *The Improvement of Teaching in Secondary Schools*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1939, p. 208.

² *Learning and Instruction*. The forty-ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1950, p. 227.

to which practice is related to the findings of modern research dealing with individual differences in ability, in interests, and in rates of learning. The few statistical studies which have been made show that home study of the formal sort even when accompanied by questions, study guides and the like have little effect upon achievement. As teaching methods and homework shift from the expository-memory type of activity to the problem solving-independent study type there will be many activities to be carried on outside of the scheduled class time. However, these homework activities do not resemble the "assigned textbook pages" kind of homework.

The "How"

The newer approach equates study with learning. The emphasis as far as homework is concerned becomes that of teaching pupils how to learn and how to become self directing in their study. Continuity between classroom and out-of-classroom study is sought. Teachers know very well that the demands of the classroom will largely condition the approaches the pupil will use in independent study. If factual tests are a major element of the teaching method, memory will be the habit of study employed by the pupil. The habit of memorizing is likely to be employed as the means of study even in situations in which memorizing is completely inappropriate. Thus, classroom activities should require a variety of individual and group learning experiences which are completed outside the classroom. Examples of these activities are identifying and defining problems; analyzing problems through library, laboratory or action research type of activity, interviews, visits, experiments and the like.

Needless to say, this kind of homework emphasis does not reduce the range of opinion or the number of issues relative to homework. Rather the shifting emphasis to problem-solving and independent study type of outside of classroom learning has introduced new problems and issues. The efforts to develop independent study have largely centered upon (a) the lengthened period with time devoted to the teaching of appropriate study techniques, (b) the development of separate how-to-study courses, (c) the use of special or remedial teachers such as a reading teacher to develop certain skills, and (d) the provision of supervisory help for the teacher in teaching study habits through regular class procedures. Within any given staff one will almost certainly find advocates of these various approaches. Obviously the direction of curriculum development being taken in a given school, administrative procedures, preparation of staff and the like will determine which, if any, steps are taken to alter the quality of homework and to prepare pupils to profit fully from it.

Regardless of the teaching methods employed, teachers need to understand and to recognize good study procedures and be able to diagnose cases of inefficiency in or ignorance of study procedures. Aids to the teacher in the form of books and monographs on effective study procedures, diagnostic tests, remedial materials, guides, inventories and the like are plentiful and are of excellent quality. In addition, the teacher can detect evidence of poor study habits through observation, examination of pupils' work, conferences, and self constructed questionnaires.

Unfortunately, many schools attempt to initiate curricular changes without the proper preparation of the staff. The

incidents of comic if not pathetic attempts are legend. In one school known to the author, the principal abolished all study halls and lengthened the class periods accordingly with the expectation that teachers would immediately begin teaching independent study techniques appropriate to their subject but with no preparation other than the announcement in a faculty meeting that this would be done.

During the 1940's a large number of controlled studies were conducted! The author was, however, unable to find a study which actually compared various techniques rather than various administrative schemes for facilitating study. A Project for the Improvement of Thinking, now being conducted by Professors Henderson and Smith of the College of Education of the University of Illinois, is an excellent example of a project which developed and tried out materials for improving pupil learning within the classroom. This study and others like it, however, have not directly investigated the aspect of independent study or the transfer of these learnings to use beyond the classroom. Soundly conceived experimental studies are badly needed in this area.

Although the nature of instruction and the development of sound habits of independent study are important to worthwhile out-of-class study, the assignment is a crucial element in productive homework. Regardless of the nature of the homework assignment, the pupil should clearly understand what he is to do and have definite leads to begin his work. There is ample research data to support the belief that pupil failure relative to study is as much caused by factors indicative of a poor assignment (frustration, lack of interest, failure to under-

stand the relationship of the assignment to the classwork, etc.) than to poor study habits.

The "When" and the "How Much"

Definite answers to the "when" and the "how much" questions are offered from many quarters. Generally these answers are not derived from the nature of a particular unit of school work or from the needs of particular pupils. Unfortunately, the professional journals contain just as many such answers as do the newspapers and popular magazines. In a 15 minute scanning of professional journals the author found seven separate (and each surprisingly similar) statements of the amount and timing of homework. Generally these statements were policies adopted and in force in some school system and apparently their publication implied their recommendation to the profession to be used as a standard for adoption in other schools. One such statement recommends: "In kindergarten to grade four: no homework; in grades five and six: one-half hour; in grades seven and eight: one hour; (and so on). It is suggested that no homework be given over weekends or holidays." Another article with the same time requirements is headed by the words "homework may harm the child's health and the school's public relations"!

These kinds of statements are not likely to be of much help to parents or to teachers. If such policies are taken seriously they may be a source of frustration to the teacher and a cause of irritation to parents that could defeat the public relations purpose which the statement professes to serve. Louis Brumer, the father of a pupil in a New York City high school, wrote his reaction

to homework policy in the June 1956 issue of *High Points*:

Do responsible members of the high school teaching corps recommend 30-50 minutes (of homework) daily in each prepared subject?

Do they believe students should be encouraged to give services to the school?

Do they believe youth should be encouraged to attend school club meetings, and/or community religious group club activities after school?

Do they believe school children at the high school level should continue with music lessons, dancing lessons, or art lessons. . . . ?

Should children develop responsibility toward the home and family by performing special duties. . . . ?

Should families be encouraged to dine together nightly for an hour to review the day's events. . . . ?

Should there be an occasional free afternoon. . . . ?

Should at least one morning a week be assigned to formal religious devotions?

Should time be set aside for shopping for a suit or dress, other wardrobe essentials, or an occasional birthday gift. . . . ?

Should any unscheduled time be left for an adolescent to read a *book of his own choice*. . . . ?

How many hours of sleep should a growing young man or lady require?

Some school-wide policies relative to homework seem to be required but it is doubtful that rather fixed time limits are either effective or meaningful. The most fruitful approach seems to lie in the direction of the study of the curriculum and the teaching procedures out of which the homework evolves. A knowledge of home conditions and the out-of-school experiences of pupils should help teachers to devise learning activities which develop into stimulating out-of-

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ity. Since the large majority of students and teachers favored continuing the sectioning and since non-class activities were considered far more important by all the students than classes as the basis for forming friendships, the sectioning is not considered likely to produce any more undesirable social effects than would non-sectioned classes in which possibly a larger number of low ability students might fail, quit school, and not have the opportunity to form friendships at school in non-class activities.

Size of school and community within the limits of the study is unrelated to students' direct and indirect judgments

about sectioning. Three somewhat different bases for sectioning were used in the three schools, but none assigned students to heterogeneous classes in all subject fields. Entrusting social and intellectual development only to arrangements within heterogeneous classes appears unwise. Apparently when students and teachers feel that learning opportunities are improved for students of all abilities and when many non-class activities are available for friendship formation, sectioning in most of the subjects required for graduation does not produce appreciable undesirable social effects in the comprehensive high school.

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class study and which can be tailored to individual needs.

Another avenue to independent study that is important to those concerned about homework is the use of the extended school day. Shops, libraries, science and language laboratories, work space and equipment for the use of tapes, television kinescopes and the like under the care of a para-professional teacher or a laboratory assistant are already available in some schools during out-of-class study time. Such facilities with proper provision for their use create excellent study conditions and do not involve the taxation of teacher time. This kind of activity meets many of the objections to homework held by parents and teachers. These activities could be incorporated with leisure time pursuits, relieve the home of the burden of providing materials and equipment, enrich and extend classroom experiences and promote the development of independent study.

In an opinion poll of school adminis-

trators conducted by *The Nation's Schools*, 96 percent of the administrators polled favored scheduled study during the school day; 95 percent favored homework assignments for junior and senior high school pupils; 79 percent favored homework at the upper elementary school level; and 31 percent favored homework for pupils in the lower elementary grades. According to reports from the administrators involved in this poll, the average time spent doing homework was about three hours per week for elementary pupils and from four to six hours per week for high school pupils. If these reactions represent homework conditions generally, there is wide acceptance of the practice of assigning homework; and at least at the high school level, the average time spent doing assigned homework is the equivalent of one school day each week. If this time is to be employed effectively and if it can be invested to produce independent, self directing students, the effort by teachers to improve the quality of homework becomes one of education's most compelling tasks.

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