

Home Learning: Improved Student Learning and Community Engagement

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Executive Summary

Those schools that have taken the time to look for an alternative to the traditional homework programme have seen some very positive results. Students, particularly boys have become much more involved and engaged. Teachers talk positively of not having to deal with those students who continually don't bring in their homework or parents who complain about the work being too hard, too easy or conflicting with all the other activities their child might be involved with after school. By making homework tasks more linked to the learning at school and giving students some ownership of what they learn and when the work will be completed has allowed many students to flourish. Students clearly spoke of their increased engagement due to teachers allowing much more choice. Some schools even made (apart from reading and basic facts) home learning not compulsory, although at the same time there were imaginative school wide ways of recognising those students who did complete the tasks the school or the student set.

The starting point for some schools was the relooking at the delivery of the curriculum and the pedagogies that the school believed matter to quality teaching practice. Where there was a strong focus on student inquiry and where schools were working hard to grow a community of learners, then the step to turn traditional homework sheets into home learning projects, problem solving tasks and where students had more negotiated choice was a much easier one.

Purpose

Homework is often a dirty word in many households and classrooms. It is also an area of contention with some educators opposing homework believing research clearly shows that not only does homework have no benefits for the student, but it can have a negative impact on their learning.

To find out how different schools, communities and cultures adapt the concept of homework so that it provides engaging and relevant learning for the students as well as positive opportunity of engagement for their families and communities.

Background and Rationale

Homework has been one of the most consistently discussed topics I continue to have with the families of my school. Parents often use homework as a litmus test as to the effectiveness of a teacher. Concerns come through that homework is too hard, too easy, not enough, too much, not enough time given to complete the work and wanting tasks set every day. Teachers were also not necessarily consistent in the implementation or the marking of homework which compounded and complicated an already fraught area. Combining this with my readings, suggesting that homework can not only have little impact on a student's learning but can in fact have a detrimental impact on students, I decided it was time to look at what other schools were doing to overcome these types of issues. How were schools ensuring that if there was a homework programme in place, that it was helping students with their learning and engagement at school, as well as making connections with the families.

Comparing homework in a range of deciles in New Zealand schools, and then making a comparison to an internationally high achieving multi cultural country like Singapore. By talking to principals and staff about the changes they had made to their homework, the thinking behind the changes and the outcomes they had noticed to students learning and engagement. Alongside this would be finding out how the community adapted to the changes. Then comparing this information to the interviews by the students.

Methodology

To interview a range of school principals, teachers and students to find out

1. How is home learning connected to school learning?
2. What made you decide to make changes to the way you set homework/home learning?
3. What was the pedagogical thinking behind the changes?
4. What have the changes been and what positive impact has it had on the students' learning, their engagement and their families?
5. Have the changes been impactful on families where the students were considered at risk with their learning?
6. How much student, family and community voice is there in home learning?
7. Have there been any positive spin offs such as parent or other community groups being more engaged in other areas of the school? If so has this led to providing 'space' for community in the school environment?

Findings

Homework is a bit of hot potato within the walls of education. It is an area where a huge number of both parents and teachers have a strong opinion about the worth of spending so much time completing homework tasks, often not even taking into consideration the views of the child. The

reality is the research would even support this diversity of opinion. The Ministry Best Evidence Synthesis (2009) states:

An average student in the high school group who participated in the homework condition would outperform 69% of students in the 'no homework' class. The effect was less strong for junior high school level and disappeared for primary students. Cooper reported cases where homework generated negative effects for students when their parents brought conflicting instructional techniques to bear on students' homework activities. (p. 42)

Hattie's research also suggests that homework has little impact on improving achievement levels, while Alfie Kohn is of the belief that homework is damaging and disengages students from learning.

The schools I visited had made adaptations to the traditional homework model that most of us as adults remember from our school days. There was a range of reasons why schools decided that they wanted to review their homework programme. There were schools where the motivation came from teachers concerned about the amount of time they were spending marking homework and feeling that the benefit to the students didn't compensate the time they put in. There were also concerns that there was a whole range of feedback every year from parents, from those who felt it was too easy and the child needed more, to those who felt it was too hard and interfered too much with their child's after school commitments, to those parents who never supported the implementation of homework for whatever reasons. This left teachers feeling that they couldn't please every parent and frustrated with having such a range of responses from both the parents and the students. It didn't provide a positive link between school and home.

Some schools wanted to change how they did homework so that it linked more closely with the changes they were making to the delivery of the curriculum in the classroom. As the curriculum became more inquiry focused and cross curricula, it made for a natural progression to include homework into this inquiry so that it moved away from stand alone homework sheets to a more authentic context. This allowed for students to make stronger connections to the learning in the classroom, especially where schools were focused on ensuring that families where possible became involved in this learning. Attached to this, some schools were also wanting students and parents to have more voice about the learning activities so that there was a stronger sense of empowerment.

Other schools were focused on making homework changes so that they could make much stronger links with the families and the strengths of the different cultures evident at their school. Knowing that if they could help teach parents how they could help their child at home with their learning then this would have a positive spin off for academic gains. Also wanting the skills, expertise and knowledge of the home to become a part of home learning activities. Some of the schools were implementing Mutukaroa or the Hippy programme which very much sat alongside this philosophy.

I also took the opportunity to visit Singapore, knowing of this country's international academic success to see if there were lessons we could learn. In Singapore there has been a move to make the curriculum more holistic. The schools have now stopped publishing their grades and have less focus on academic and more focus on value education. There is a demand that schools grow exemplary citizens that grow to be leaders that serve their community, where character and citizenship education is at the heart of their holistic approach. Here there was evidence of programmes aligned to the educating character work of Thomas Lickona. I viewed examples of home learning linked into their citizenship focus, with tasks being negotiated with students as to how they could serve within their community. Activities, such as students problem solving as to how they could raise funds for the Child's Cancer Foundation which allowed the students to apply the knowledge and budgeting skills they had learnt in financial literacy lessons. It also connected to one of their values of 'giving' in the school community.

The way the home learning ended up, looked different in every school but there were three distinct models

Model 1. Challenge

A programme that had 'challenges' that were graduated over the student's time at school. These were divided into different categories dependent on the focus for the school, although in saying this all schools had a category of 'Academic Excellence'. Some selected to have categories that were pulled from the key competencies that they felt were a weakness in their students, some linked it to the focus for the year and others had set categories that usually didn't change over time. Running the programme more like the challenges that accrue 'badges' within the Cubs movement. This approach tended to be more flexible in its implementation, often giving students a term or even a year to complete the tasks that the students decided to complete. The schools where the challenges were constant and well set for each level across the whole school, still allowed for student choice by having negotiated areas of learning. The tasks also were often connected and graduated between the levels. For example in year 5 under 'Service in School and Community' a task might be to keep an area of the school tidy, watered and clear of weeds for 3 terms, while in year 6 the task might be doing the same task for the year.

Categories such as 'Giving', with activities at the Year 6 level such as:

- Give to children in need: participate in the 20 hour famine. Raise a minimum of \$20
- Give to your family: prepare 2 formal three course meals, including the menu, cooking and presenting, photographs of the meal and feedback from your guests
- Give of your time: visit an elderly person at least six times over two terms

Parents role then became more about encouraging them to complete the negotiated tasks and to sign these off once they were completed.

Model 2. Theme

A programme that was totally linked to the current syndicate or school wide learning theme. Activities would align with the learning in the class and there was a range between schools as to how much choice the students had in these activities. Most had set learning intentions and/or success criteria that featured strongly in the paperwork that was given to the student.

Model 3. Theme with strong family input

A programme that was linked to the learning in the class but the activities would be focused on the input of family to this learning. Such an example is a home learning topic of 'Words that Inspire'.

There were three parts to the work:

- Interview a minimum of 4 family members or friends and find the words that have inspired them in their lives. Is it a song/quote/poem? Why does it inspire them? These will be shared in group discussions at school.
- Find and select words that really inspire you. Explain the significance of the words to you personally.
- Think creatively and share both the inspirational words and their personal meaning to you. We will be sharing these visual presentations in class in small groups and then displaying them.

Usually there was more negotiated choice and in one school the family could be included in the school presentation of this home learning. The tasks would be set over a longer period of time, usually around three weeks and the marking would be by their peers with criteria set when the task was handed out.

As the transition to a model of home learning that had connections to the current learning theme in the classroom, schools found other needs and opportunities arose. Parents were not only becoming more engaged with the school but also wanting to know more about the curriculum. Some schools responded by holding parent curriculum meetings or evenings. There were a range of strategies that brought about the success of these events such as:

- having spot prizes (staff would donate unwanted presents or tinned goods for hampers)
- class prizes for the best attendance
- involving students in the presentation of games and activities
- having a range of 'stations' that covered assessment procedures to fun activities that parents could play at home
- sending students home with 'bands' around their wrists to remind them of the upcoming curriculum evening

Some schools had ideas about possible next steps for the home learning programme

- Looking across the school so that the learning activities had some connection from one syndicate to the next
- developing a booklet so that parents on enrolment were more informed about the process and expectation of home learning

- informing parents more strongly of the pedagogical thinking behind the transition from traditional homework sheets to the adaptations in the school. This could include websites that parents could find useful
- having a home learning book that more fully tracked the students reflections
- putting the home learning on the website for ease of access and as well as a way of promoting the work the students completed
- Having more student voice in being able to negotiate the activities or the content of the activities (as long as it still connected to the overall theme of learning).

Implications

Last year I surveyed my community as to their thoughts on homework - what stress did homework put on their household? Did they believe that homework was important? I was surprised at the positivity of the responses, especially when I investigated more closely and realised that there were many families who had positive responses but in reality their children were completing very little work at home. This made me realise how important it is to ensure the collecting of information is robust and the questions carefully phrased. That people need situations that allow time for their stories to unfold. With this in mind at our school we will be using the time before the end of the year to survey students and families about homework after showing them some examples from the schools that I have visited. It can be hard for anyone to form differing opinions about an issue when they have had no differing concepts presented to them. This feedback then needs to be taken to the staff and BOT, along with the array of current research. We need to spend time thinking - How does our home learning programme align with our pedagogies, competencies and culture within our school? At the moment I would have to say, not very well. Our curriculum is inquiry focused. We talk about the importance of student voice and growing independent learners who think critically and yet this is an area of learning that as yet does not match as well as it should.

Benefits

By going through the process of reviewing the traditional homework programmes in their schools, many found that staff were (or were not) spending time marking homework that did little to improve their students learning. The idea of marking work without students present often didn't align with the Assessment for Learning beliefs a school held. The range of responses about homework from parents often frustrated teachers and put the relationship between the school and family at risk. By introducing home learning in such a way that allows student choice, has strong connections to the learning at school and brings the strengths of the family and their cultural knowledge to the fore can only help make learning more engaging.

Conclusions

Homework doesn't have to be an area of frustration for teachers, parents and students. Research would indicate that if the home learning is meaningful and strongly connected to the teaching in the class, it is well connected to a student's access to support and resources at home and there is the ability of a student to have choice and some control over content and presentation, then there is a positive learning gain for the student. If we truly believe that students learn best when school and home are working together, than the reformatting of the home learning programme can only help aide this relationship.

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