

## **Homework Myths**

by Dr. Cathy Vatterott

Homework is a long-standing educational tradition so ingrained in our culture that it is part of common vernacular. The meaning of expressions like “Do your homework before taking a trip” or “It’s obvious they didn’t do their homework before they presented their proposal” are clear. Our beliefs about the benefits of homework are also ingrained. “Our belief in the value of homework is akin to faith” (Kralovec and Buell 2000). Faith, tradition, and moralistic views of human nature intermingle to influence our beliefs about homework. But what does that have to do with learning? Perhaps it would be wise to question some of our more prevalent beliefs about homework.

### *Belief #1: Homework Teaches Responsibility*

One of the most stubborn beliefs is that homework promotes responsibility, discipline and time management. Responsibility is often a code word for obedience. When we say we want students to be responsible, are we saying we want them to be *obedient*—to do what we want them to do when we want them to do it? By discipline are we asking students to be self-disciplined—to do something they hate to do because it’s their duty? Does time management really mean the ability to delay gratification—to work when they want to play?

True responsibility cannot be coerced. It must be developed by allowing students power and ownership of tasks (Vatterott 2006). One study indicated that responsibility is learned only if parents systematically structure and supervise homework with that goal in mind (Kralovec and Buell 2000). And that is out of our control. If students don’t see a valid reason for homework, or if they view the task as meaningless, boring, or tedious, they will often risk failure rather than waste their free time on those tasks. That usually means teachers must spend as much creative energy designing fun, interesting, and satisfying homework as they do creating fun, interesting, and satisfying classroom activities.

Inherent in this belief is the assumption that teachers have the *right* to control children’s lives outside the school (how arrogant!)—that homework keeps children out of trouble and that homework is better for children than television or video games. Is it really our job to be the moral police for our students’ personal lives?

### *Belief #2: Lots of Homework Is a Sign of a Rigorous Curriculum.*

If some homework is good for children, then more homework must be even better. If ten math problems for homework are good, then forty problems must be better. Many people equate lots of homework with a tough school, regardless of the type or length of assignments. This belief is related to the somewhat Victorian idea that hard work is good for you and that meaningful learning must be painful. More homework gives the appearance of increased rigor, but “difficulty is often equated to the amount of work done by students, rather than the complexity and challenge” (Williamson and Johnston 1999). Ah, if it were only that simple. More time does not necessarily equal more learning. The

“more is always better” argument ignores quality of work and level of learning required. Rigor is challenge—but it is not necessarily the same challenge for each student. Given the diverse nature of students, challenging learning experiences will vary for different students.

How much homework is too much? Both the PTA and the NEA endorse the “10-minute rule”—that the maximum amount of homework should not exceed ten minutes per grade level per night (Vatterott 2005). Coincidentally, research shows that achievement declines when homework exceeds two hours a night, the maximum amount recommended by the 10-minute rule for a twelfth grader (Cooper 2001). In addition, recent brain research shows the importance of downtime and rest for peak learning efficiency (Jensen 2000). Children benefit when their time outside of school is balanced to include play, productive hobbies, family time, and downtime (Vatterott 2003).

*Belief #3: Good Students Do Their Homework.*

The danger in this belief is the inherent goodness we attribute to children who dutifully complete homework, and the laziness we often attribute to children who don’t complete homework. If we believe that good students do their homework and lazy students don’t, then it becomes morally defensible to give failing grades for incomplete homework, thereby punishing laziness and rewarding virtue. But is lack of virtue the reason many children don’t do homework? Therein lies the problem.

This belief is damaging because it negatively judges children who don’t complete homework. In *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*, Kralovec and Buell claim the practice of homework today “entrenches privilege,” causing educational disadvantages for poor and minority children. Affluent students, students with parents home after school, students with quiet places to study, extensive home libraries and Internet access, and students with supportive, well-educated parents are more likely to complete homework. Students without supportive parents (or with single parents overburdened trying to make ends meet), with inadequate home environments for completing homework, or with parents intellectually unable to help them, are less likely to complete homework (Vatterott 2006). Are these less-advantaged students bad? Of course not. When homework causes these less-advantaged students to receive failing grades, they are being graded on their home support system, and being penalized for their family and home environment.

It is unfair for homework to cause students to fail. As educators have come to realize this, more and more schools now provide after-school homework support programs, prohibit teachers from counting homework in the grade, or require teachers to limit homework to 10% of the grade.

*Rethinking Our Beliefs About Homework*

How many of our beliefs are based on faith, tradition, or views of human nature and how many are based on what we know about effective teaching and learning? It is important

to reflect on what we believe about homework and how those beliefs influence what we do in our classrooms. As we plan our curriculum, hopefully we will use homework to support and evaluate learning, not to make moralistic judgments about children.

#### Works Cited

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