

“There’s something wrong with homework” published in The Principal,

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Austin Powers was frozen for 30 years and was quite disoriented when he woke up in the present. As a beginning teacher in the early 1970's, if I had been frozen for 30 years and woke up today, I too would be disoriented. After all, many of the educational practices we believed to be good 30 years ago, like corporal punishment, retention, and tracking, have turned out to be bad. The same fate may soon befall another practice that always seemed to be good: homework.

I became particularly interested in the topic of homework about five years ago, around the time my LD/ADHD son entered the 5th grade. Having been a middle school assistant principal, I remembered how many students failed primarily due to incomplete homework. I also knew from my experience as a parent how hard it was for my own LD/ADHD child to focus on homework after his daily medication had worn off. As I began to share my concerns with other teachers and parents, I found that almost everyone had strong feelings, pro and con, about homework.

A few years ago, a comprehensive synthesis of homework research by Harris Cooper concluded that there was little, if any, correlation between homework and academic achievement. However, my concern is not only about how homework relates to student achievement, but how it relates to student needs. I think that the traditional practice of daily homework may be out of sync with the needs of some, if not all, of our students.

There’s something wrong when we believe that more homework is better, regardless of its quality.

There’s something wrong when teachers who don’t want to give homework feel obligated to do so because parents insist on it, or because they feel pressured by the demands of higher

standards. Whether it's an attempt to cover everything in an already glutted curriculum, or a subtle way to pass off excessive amounts of work to parents, excessive homework just doesn't seem right.

There's something wrong when homework doesn't allow for a healthy balance of work, play, downtime, fresh air, and exercise for growing children. Two-career families with precious little family time together shouldn't have to compete with homework on weekends and school vacations. Parents shouldn't have to do their child's homework so the child can get a full night's sleep. When you add classroom time to homework time, children should not be working longer than an eight-hour day.

There's something wrong when homework becomes a source of frustration and conflict for parents and children, damaging the parent-teacher relationship and negatively affecting the way parents feel about the school. Homework breeds resentment when assignments are perceived as busy work, or when neither the parent nor the child can see the value to learning. When a child can't do homework independently because he doesn't understand it, it becomes a painful experience for both parents and child.

There's something wrong when homework "entrenches privilege" (Kralovec and Buell, 2000). Used improperly, homework disproportionately causes students who are academically challenged or situationally challenged to fail. Academically challenged students, already mentally exhausted and frustrated from a long day at school, attempt to do homework without the help of a teacher. Situationally challenged students—including low-income students, ESL students, students with illiterate parents, and students whose parents work nights—have little incentive to do homework.

There's something wrong when we are too morally attached to homework as a virtue to see the potential harm it can do to some students.

Isn't it time to rethink the practice of assigning homework?

Reference

Kralovec, E. and Buell, J (2000). The end of homework: How homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning. Boston: Beacon Press.