Homework is Cruel in the Primary Grades

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If we are concerned with the educational progress of at-risk students, we need strong affirmative action for sound instructional practices that increase the likelihood of their academic success. We can't give them reading programs that are marginally successful with middle-class students. We certainly can't use fuzzy math programs that are categorically unsuccessful with middle-class students. These programs will fail, succeeding only to provide multiple demonstrations to the students, "You failed again, so you must be a failure." Confidence and positive self-images do not derive from these experiences.

A related issue that hasn't received much attention in Direct Instruction rationales is homework. Those who champion homework seriously discriminate against at-risk populations. The supporters don't consider the situations that exist in most at-risk homes.

Advocates of homework for the early grades seem to assume a home situation that is more along the lines of Dick and Jane readers—warm, loving folks who discuss central events like naming the new kitties or figuring out what present to give Grandma on her 75th birthday. This picture does not match more than half of our schools. Consider Illinois. One year before all students are supposed to pass the state test (according to the schedule of No Child Left Behind), the *average* student in Illinois is a failure.

> About half of Illinois public high school students flunked state exams in reading, math and science this year, the worst performance in the history of the 11th-grade Prairie State Achievement Examination, statewide test results show. (Diane Rado and Tara Malone, Chicago Tribune reporters, October 20, 2011.)

If we gear homework to the half that failed, not the half that is pondering grandma's birthday, the work will be doable for everybody and easy for the upper half. Those who spend enough time in inner-city homes, however, will know why current homework practices are highly discriminatory in favor of homes in which there are people who can help students work through assignments that require help from a knowledgeable parent or sibling. In an inner-city home, there is often nobody to help struggling students. In the crowded conditions of many residences, the ambiance is noisy and distracting, not conducive to doing homework. Also, the value of doing homework is not perceived as being high by peers and siblings. "Come on, let's go out. You can do that homework later."

Another serious problem with homework is that it rarely serves as a basis for teaching students what they don't know. Even if the teacher shows how to work the various problems, the activity does not constitute teaching. If the teacher followed the explanation with a series of problems that have the same form and are solved by the same steps, the activity would have a teaching function. But simply showing the answer or the solution steps does not constitute teaching.

The history of homework has had its ups and downs. During the 1930s, there was very strong opposition to homework in elementary schools. The generation of students who went through these schools learned much more than they would in today's schools. The schools were certainly not perfect, but they were far more adequate without homework in the primary grades than schools today with oodles of homework.

In the late 1960s, homework became fashionable and functional because schools were teaching whole language and discovery math. Students

were not learning well in school. Educators obviously didn't know how to correct their failure, so they expanded the notion of the PTA by assuming that parents were responsible for the success of their children. This was a transparent, but clever, change because it broadened the causes for student failure. If students didn't learn, the school could blame the "parents" for not being more involved. This elastic philosophy of "non-accountability" is clearly at odds with the assumed purpose of the schools, the designated institutions that are supposed to cause specific learning. If schools were fashioned according to basic tenets of social justice, they would assume 100 percent of the responsibility for causing the learning of all students who are not frequently absent. They would not blame the parents for student failure. Yet, in addition to blaming parents, the schools are often insensitive to the appropriateness of the homework content. Several informal observations of math homework that we have conducted locally reveal that only one to three students in grades 3 to 5 solve the assigned problem of the day.

The generally accepted guidelines for issuing homework refer to time, not content or the actual mechanics associated with homework. The most common time formula is the "ten-minute rule." For each year in school, ten minutes is added to the homework schedule (grade 1: ten minutes of homework per day; grade 2, 20 minutes of homework per day; and so forth). This rule makes the homework seem to be minimally invasive in the primary grades, but the ten-minute rule is generally an underestimate of the time assignments take. Furthermore, this rule does not cover passages children are to read at home. So on a given day, a first-grader could have a math assignment and a passage-reading assignment.

The rule also does not take mechanics into account. The first-grader (or kindergartener) is expected to take papers home, complete them, bring

them back on the following day, and check them. Unless the home has well-organized, compulsive helpers to assure that the work is completed and stashed in the backpack so it will be returned to the school, there will be considerable default. In fact, unless the teacher is compulsive and assures that children are well versed in the rules about taking the papers home, a high percentage of papers will drop from the children's hands as they exit the school.

A larger question about homework is, "Does it make a difference in student performance?" Some reviewers say *yes,* some say *no*, and some say *sometimes*. Probably the best case could be made for middle school and high school, but certainly not for the primary grades. A review conducted by Duke University concluded that there was a positive correlation between homework and grades, but "… the positive correlation was much stronger for secondary students … than those in elementary schools." In other words, even with the middle-class orientation referenced by much of the prose supporting more homework, there is no significant data for the elementary schools, let alone for kindergarten through grade 3.

A related question is, "How necessary is homework?" Possibly the most direct way to answer this question is to view the school as a kind of employment. Students are "employed" for usually over six hours per day. Students in the elementary grades are under 16 and are, therefore, below the minimum age for full-time employment. Yet, with its lavish and often ill-conceived homework assignments, the schools want to extend the workday. Why? Why is it not possible to teach everything scheduled to be taught during the regular school day? If the schools are competent, they should be able configure themselves so the students are taught everything they need to

be taught and have “study periods” in which they can do extended assignments or “homework.”

Certainly, the school’s capacity is greatly compromised if the school week is being cut back because of budget shortfalls; however, for schools on a regular five-day schedule, there is no excuse for homework. In fact, if homework assignments were done in school, teachers and administrators would have a much more detailed understanding of what students actually know and how instruction would have to change to prepare students for homework assignments. As it is, administrators and teachers are conveniently removed from much detail associated with poor homework assignments.

Given the unlikelihood that elementary schools will reconfigure themselves so they are humane and sensible with respect to their homework assignments, what guidelines should they follow? The restrictions can be expressed as two simple rules:

1. No homework for grades K through 3. These are the students who should be protected most from unfair labor practices that extend the workday.

2. No homework assignments that students are unable to complete, without assistance, in 20-30 minutes. This requirement implies that the teacher has knowledge that students are able to complete problems of the type that appear in the homework in class, in the specified time limit, with no assistance.

This restructuring of homework does not mean that primary-grade students should not bring material home. Children in K through 3 should regularly bring home stories *they can read* and math problems *they have worked*. The assignment would be for the children to show these works to

their parents and read the material to them. They would rehearse this behavior in school, and teachers would regularly ask students what their parents said when children showed off their reading skills. Without rehearsal and follow up, the papers will end up in the schoolyard. With preparation, the material the students bring home provides evidence that they are learning important skills in school and that there is a basis for parents to feel good about their children's progress.

These guidelines will be remarkably difficult for schools to follow because current practices are so far from what should happen. Students regularly receive math assignments that require them to figure out things that their teachers would often be unable to figure out. The programs that issue these obnoxious discovery assignments use rhetoric, not data, to suggest that the practice students receive in trying to discover relationships justifies the assignments even if students are unsuccessful in discovering the correct solution. Wrong. Children in elementary school, and even in high school, benefit from success, not a diet of failure. If what they have learned leads to successful homework assignments, the homework is humane. If homework is not properly aligned, it results in failure, which means simply that the homework is cruel.