

# Toward a More Productive Conversation

## About Homework

In relation to achievement, meta-analyses of the research (see John Hattie's book *Visible Learning*) show that the benefits for middle school students are weak, with only about 20 percent of students in grades seven to nine showing higher levels of achievement as a consequence of their homework. The benefits for high school students are greater but even then only about 45 percent of students show homework-related improvements in their achievement. Additionally, [recent German research](#) conducted by Ulrich Trautwein and his colleagues has shown clearly that, at the level of the individual student, spending more time on homework is associated with lower achievement outcomes.

In relation to the development of self-directed learning skills, the research shows that homework can help middle school students to develop these skills. This has only been shown to be the case, though, when parents help their children to do such things as find a suitable place to work, set goals, manage time, and avoid distractions. In the studies by Lyn Corno and her colleagues, parental assistance with, and modeling of, homework management skills has been shown to be associated with higher student levels of these skills. Corno and her colleagues [have argued](#) that these skills have been internalized by the children through scaffolded interaction with parents.

Parental involvement in their children's homework activities can have beneficial effects, and this is likely to have been the case with Greenfeld's discussions with his daughter about her humanities homework. Parental interest in, and valuing of, homework is likely to lead students to value the homework they do. When parents interfere with their children's homework activities, however, or are over-controlling, parental involvement in homework can have detrimental effects on achievement outcomes.

Homework can be made more motivating by giving students more autonomy in what they do and how they do it. This has been demonstrated in a [study by Patall, Cooper and Wyn](#) which found that students given a choice in their homework reported higher levels of interest, enjoyment and perceived competence than students not given homework choices. These students also had higher scores on unit tests than students not given choices. Some teachers do try to make homework more creative and do

actively avoid boring and routine worksheets; for instance, teachers sometimes ask students to conduct interviews, experiments and surveys, investigate historical records, make films, act as video journalists, and create photographic and digital resources.

**How much homework should teachers assign?** Decisions about how much homework should be required of students are difficult. There is no credible research evidence on which to base decisions about the amount of time that students should spend on homework. School communities therefore need to make their own decisions about homework requirements on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis of homework research and the values and mission of the school.

**What kind of homework is best?** School homework policies should provide some guidelines concerning the nature of homework tasks and the degree of challenge they offer students. While some memorization may be unavoidable in certain types of learning, for instance, in language learning, there is little disagreement amongst learning theorists that deep learning with understanding should be the goal of all schooling. By extension, this should also apply to learning through homework. In *Reforming Homework* we've argued that while some practice of learnt material is beneficial for students, so too is some new learning which leads to cognitive growth. Homework research conducted in the United States and Germany suggests that high-quality homework is challenging for students but not overly demanding for them.

**How should teachers respond to their students' homework?** Of course, there are other issues which also need to be considered when evaluating the value of homework and which are not considered in Karl Greenfeld's essay. Perhaps the most important of these concerns is the homework feedback that students receive from their teachers. Effective learning depends on the receipt of timely and useful feedback from teachers so that students can come to a better understanding of what they have learnt and, where appropriate, correct misunderstandings. Sometimes teachers do not provide this feedback to students; in the absence of effective teacher feedback homework is likely to be of little value to students.

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