

# Homework: Learning from Practice

## Summary of findings from the OFSTED research study

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### Background

- 1 The research summarised here has been carried out by, and on behalf of, OFSTED, for the Department for Education and Employment (DFEE). The findings reflect and take account of best current practice. Evidence was collected in Autumn 1997 through case studies in 19 primary and 10 secondary schools and a telephone survey of 227 primary and 141 secondary schools. Further evidence was drawn from a review of previous research on homework and of current professional judgements, as expressed through responses to the consultation on the 1997 White Paper. Copies of the full research report can be obtained from The Stationery Office.\*

### Key Findings

#### Homework and learning

- 2 Homework is widely accepted as an essential and valuable element of learning. However, earlier research and our own study show that homework can have many meanings and be used to serve a variety of purposes. Schools therefore need to take an active role in evaluating and developing their own homework strategy to meet the needs of the future.
- 3 Increasingly, good practice in homework builds upon and reflects broader changes in educational thinking, relating to learning as a lifelong process. As well as its traditional function of practice and reinforcement of classroom learning, homework was seen by schools in the study to offer opportunities to develop key skills for independent learning, such as information retrieval, planning, analysis and time management.
- 4 Key elements of good practice could be summarised as follows:

#### Homework strategy

- Homework strategy was firmly steered and supported by senior staff as an integral part of the school's plan for learning.

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- The strategy was designed to meet the goals and fit the circumstances of the particular institution, in its current stage of development, but also to be capable of development both to meet existing goals more effectively and to address new priorities.

### Collaboration and communication

- Most schools in the study had a written policy and other documentation to clarify homework practice. More effective schools involved teachers, parents and pupils in the process, and their roles and responsibilities were clearly defined.
- A variety of channels and media were used to keep parents and pupils informed and encourage them to share responsibility. These might include guidelines for each year group, regular class/subject newsletters, subject workshops and homework books or diaries.
- The definition and purposes of homework were clear and agreed by all staff, and the range of tasks was specified.

### Planning and preparation

- Schools recognised that the quality and effectiveness of homework depended crucially on how creatively it had been planned.
- Teachers took homework planning as seriously as lesson planning. They took account of the range of pupil capabilities, and drew on appropriate expertise (e.g. subject and special needs experts). Wherever possible, homework was differentiated on the basis of prior assessment, to provide an equal and appropriate challenge for individuals.
- Homework was planned to complement (not just to complete) classroom learning.
- Teaching teams collaborated in planning and preparing tasks and/or materials.
- The time invested in planning and preparing resources was balanced by more effective use of teaching time in class.

### A learning partnership with parents

Schools which appreciated the benefits of effective homework wanted to ensure that all pupils had access to it. At the same time, they recognised that this required the support of parents either in working directly with pupils or in ensuring that their children could, and did, complete their homework. In support of this aim:

- staff were well informed about family circumstances;
- the school had devised strategies to involve parents in their children's learning, in keeping with their circumstances and the age of the children;

- particular care was taken to collaborate with parents of children with special educational needs, to ensure tasks were appropriate and feasible;
- alternative study support opportunities were provided where appropriate (including individual help, the use of IT, homework clubs).

### Assessment, feedback and progression

Effective schools had clear and consistent principles and strategies for assessing performance, setting individual learning targets and enhancing progression through feedback on performance. These applied equally to classroom learning and to homework.

- Pupils were told the criteria on which work would be assessed and high standards were expected for homework assignments.
- Feedback was planned to show the pupil what and how to improve.
- Progression was planned not just in the time allocated but also in type and level of study skills required.

### Resourcing

In more effective schools an appropriate investment is made in homework.

- Allowances were made for staff to spend time on planning homework, as well as on marking.
- The school ensured that teachers had access to appropriate resources e.g. pupils had copies of published materials to take home or use in school.
- Facilities were provided and staff were given time to prepare banks of homework resources or tasks.

### Scheduling and compliance

Schools ensured that the homework programme was clearly and consistently implemented.

- There were clear guidelines about the schedule or timetable of subjects and tasks which were expected, how often and when these would be set and when work was to be handed in or tested.
- A monitoring system ensured that staff as well as pupils complied.
- Rewards and sanctions linked to the schedule were clearly defined and consistently applied.

## Review and evaluation

- The operation of homework programmes was regularly monitored and their effectiveness in achieving their aims reviewed periodically, involving parents.

## Homework Practice in Primary Schools

- 5 Over three quarters of the primary schools in the study had a written homework policy and most of these had been devised in the last few years. These schools valued homework highly.

### Homework strategy

- 6 In most schools, homework policy was led by the head or deputy. In a number of case study schools, there had been a policy decision to develop a more structured homework programme as part of the overall strategy to raise attainment. There were some common features of these structured programmes:

- all pupils, in all year groups, were expected to do homework, the amount increasing with age;
- partnership with parents was seen as fundamental;
- the strategy was designed to fit the school context;
- the core of the homework programme in both key stages was the development of literacy and numeracy skills;
- progression for all pupils was usually catered for by designing or adopting comprehensive skill development schemes or frameworks to cover all age groups;
- homework was planned to complement the classroom programme.

Because programmes were tailored to school priorities and needs, there was considerable diversity, even among effective schools, in the range of tasks, in the approach to parental involvement and to assessment, and in monitoring systems.

### Average amount of homework set

- 7 One of the questions asked of head teachers in the telephone survey was how much homework was set for different year groups, in terms of the amount of time required broadly each week. The distribution, and the average amount, of homework set by the survey schools is set out below.

Amount of homework set per week, in minutes, by Year Group: Primary Schools								
	(Base)	0-30	30-59	60-89	90-119	120+	Don't know	Average H/Mins
Reception	(189)	13	28	33	10	4	10	0h57m
Year 1	(192)	8	22	34	19	7	8	1h07m
Year 2	(192)	4	15	30	27	15	8	1h19m
Year 3	(226)	1	10	24	24	31	8	1h36m
Year 4	(221)	2	10	21	20	40	6	1h43m
Year 5	(201)	1	4	15	18	54	7	2h07m
Year 6	(199)	1	4	10	17	61	7	2h26m

## Collaboration and communication

- 8 The study showed that some primary schools had taken care to involve parents as well as the whole staff in the process of homework policy development or review. Many of the primary schools issued regular bulletins to parents, usually in the form of class newsletters, which included information on forthcoming homework tasks. They also used the letters to reinforce guidelines on the homework rules and regulations, so that parents were clear about what was expected of them and their children.

## A learning partnership with parents

- 9 All the schools stressed that partnership was essential to their homework programme. It took time and effort to build the partnership, but it was seen as a very worthwhile investment, because of the perceived impact on pupils' learning. Parents had to be brought on board from the outset. Popular strategies in support of partnership included:

- workshops (e.g. on practical maths and literacy activities, in KS1 and KS2);
- reading records, link books and diaries, used to encourage two-way (parent-teacher) and, later, three-way (parent-teacher-child) communication;
- shared materials (e.g. games, information and instructions on skills and topics);
- shared activities (early years games, reading, family surveys, testing).

Staff saw two-fold benefits in a collaborative approach: children improved their skills and parents had a better understanding of the learning programme. They found that, with careful planning, most parents were pleased to support their children in this way.

## Planning and preparation

10 In most of the case study schools there was a strong emphasis on planning homework:

- by senior managers and the whole staff, to define the overall structure;
- by teaching teams, who planned homework into their schemes of work.

The overall structure often included whole-school schemes for literacy and numeracy. These established common criteria (and often materials) and consistent rules for all staff and pupils, while enabling class teachers to match detailed tasks to the assessed ability of individual pupils, using a common resource bank. The approach worked best when Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators helped to develop and implement the scheme. Another feature of the overall homework plan, in many schools, was the structured development of project work covering other areas of the curriculum, usually through KS2.

11 In planning their schemes of work, class teachers made sure their class plans for homework fitted into the overall framework and complemented their classroom programme.

## Assessment, feedback and progression

12 Schools differed on whether to use comments, grades or both; those who used grades argued that this demonstrated that homework was treated as seriously as classwork; other schools felt that comments, corrections and targets were more important, particularly for younger pupils. In either case, the more effective schools had a consistent approach, defined in the school's assessment policy. Learning tasks were usually tested after an interval of several days. Where possible, parents were included in the feedback process.

13 In many schools, progression in learning skills was built gradually:

- by extending the range of homework tasks;
  - from numeracy/literacy to other subject areas;
  - from practice and learning to research, problem-solving and written tasks;
  - from closely structured to more open-ended assignments;
- by lengthening the time span for completing task.

A few schools had programmes which developed study skills systematically, through projects or book reviews, across KS2. At each stage the school offered guidance to pupils and parents on how tasks should be tackled. In this way, parents were helped to grow with their children, from a teaching role to an enabling role, listening and offering comment and suggestions when asked, as children learned to work independently.

## Resourcing

14 The material resources provided for homework in most schools included:

- basic equipment (e.g. a homework bag or folder);
- reading books, photocopied worksheets;
- diaries/link books.

As the homework programme grew, some schools were finding the preparation and copying of materials a considerable challenge, but it was seen as worthwhile, as was the investment of stafftime.

## Scheduling and compliance

15 Most primary schools provided a homework schedule, setting out weekly tasks for each age group and indicating other tasks that would be set, perhaps fortnightly, monthly or occasionally. While time indications might be given, schools found it more important to stress the regularity of the tasks, and the deadlines for their completion (e.g. daily reading; weekly spelling and number facts; fortnightly topic assignments; monthly book reviews).

16 Most schools employed some form of rewards and sanctions for their pupils although teachers usually achieved compliance through clear and regular instruction and flexibility. The survey of pupils in the case study schools found that most pupils accepted and even enjoyed homework.

## Review and evaluation

17 Most schools checked that homework was being set and completed and a few had systems for regular evaluation of the programme, for example as part of professional reviews which the head teacher had with each teacher. A few schools had gone as far as to associate improved test scores with the development of regular homework, while recognising that there could be other factors in play to explain the improvement.

## Homework Practice in Secondary Schools

18 Homework is an established part of secondary school practice. Less than half the schools surveyed had made any changes to their homework policy and practice in the last three years. The challenge for secondary schools was to ensure that homework was integrated with learning policy and practice at every level (whole school, department and classroom) and took account of developments in overall learning strategy.

## Homework strategy

19 In some of the case study schools, common criteria and approaches were:

- clearly defined in the whole-school homework policy;
- linked to other aspects of the learning strategy;
- implemented in departmental policies.

However, it was relatively unusual to find even this degree of coherence, since homework content and methods were often largely devolved to subject departments. It was much less common to see homework used as part of a strategy for developing independent learning. Study skills programmes, mentoring and other strategies for study support were established in only a few schools. During KS3, progression in the range of homework tasks, organisational skills and study methods seemed incidental rather than planned.

20 One way used by some schools to ensure that the homework programme was managed in a way which enhanced learning was to include it within the brief of the senior manager with responsibility for the learning strategy, and to include the SEN Co-ordinator and some subject leaders in the planning group.

## Amount of homework set

21 One of the questions asked of head teachers in the telephone survey was how much homework was set for different year groups, in terms of the amount of time required broadly each week. The distribution, and the average amount, of homework set by the survey schools is set out below.

Amount of homework set each week, in minutes, by Year group: Secondary Schools

(Base)	0-300	300-359	360-419	420-539	540+	Don't know	Average H/Mins
Year 7	13	40	15	20	2	9	5h39m
Year 8	11	22	17	36	6	7	6h27m
Year 9	6	9	9	50	36	1	7h42m
Year 10	1	5	2	21	68	2	10h12m
Year 11	1	5	1	18	72	3	10h32m

### Collaboration and communication

- 22 In most schools all staff were involved in the homework programme, both as class teachers and as form tutors. However, only in a minority of schools and departments, it appeared, was the content and management of the programme under active discussion. The system ran more smoothly when responsibilities of middle managers, subject teachers and form tutors were clearly defined (for example in the policy or staff guidelines) and rigorously monitored.
- 23 Guidance for parents was generally in written form, either in the policy, or in booklets written for parents or for each age group. A number of schools introduced homework to pupils through tutor group sessions in Year 7, often using guidance in the school's homework diary (issued to each pupil) as the basis.

### Planning and preparation

- 24 There were some instances of rigorous and imaginative homework planning at departmental level, to provide a range of tasks which effectively complemented the scheme of work. This included homework booklets to accompany specific course units and a bank of homework tasks and resources which teachers could draw on. However, within departments, homework planning was often delegated to the class teacher, even though the scheme of work had been planned as a team. While this meant the teacher could be flexible, in devising tasks which met a class's needs, there was a risk of a disjointed, ad hoc approach. It appeared that finishing off was used more often in some schools or departments than the written policy recommended. This could place a heavy burden on pupils with special educational needs. Careful planning was particularly important for these pupils, and some schools had involved the SENCO closely in planning a homework programme for all abilities collaboratively with subject staff.

### A learning partnership with parents

- 25 Almost all schools expected pupils (and subject teachers) to take the main responsibility for seeing homework was completed, with parents generally seen as having a back-up role, symbolised by signing off work in the diary. Nevertheless parental commitment to homework was seen as critical, particularly in KS3 and for pupils with SEN. Only a minority of schools used contracts to formalise this commitment.

### Assessment, feedback, differentiation and progression

- 26 Some schools recommended more selective but specific marking, to enhance the quality of feedback while keeping the marking load manageable for teachers. Pupils valued comments and suggestions for improving their work, which were relatively uncommon. Pupils were very aware that effective feedback often depended on clear leadership by heads of department.

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- 27 Homework could be used to promote progression in study skills, although this was not common. Some subject departments helped by clarifying objectives and assessment criteria for pupils (and parents). Others challenged pupils by setting demanding but well-structured, often differentiated, assignments, requiring the use of a range of skills. Some schools were encouraging tutors, through structured personal and social education programmes, to work more systematically on the development of study skills, including time management and the organisation of homework, and making the links between mentoring, target-setting and the development of independent study. Homework was more effective for pupils with special needs when SENCOs were able to collaborate with subject specialists in developing homework resources and planning assignments for individuals.

### Resourcing

- 28 Most schools and pupils in this study seemed broadly satisfied with the material resources available for homework (in particular, provision of books or worksheets). However, other studies have suggested that many KS3 pupils cannot regularly take school books home. The underlying issue was whether homework learning goals could be met within resource limits. Schools or departments with the greatest investment in homework were planning to expand the range of resource available and teaching pupils to use them effectively.
- 29 Development of various forms of study support provides an effective complement to investment of time spent planning and assessing homework. One example is the homework club. Schools were exploring the most effective way of supporting pupils whose parents were unable or unwilling to provide them with appropriate homework facilities or support.

### Scheduling and compliance

- 30 Almost all schools had homework timetables which allocated time to be spent on each subject per week. Timetables could be important management tools, to ensure staff were realistic in their demands. In practice they often seemed to be applied by both staff and pupils rather flexibly. One secondary school allocated most subjects a major and a minor homework per week. Parents and pupils appreciated clear guidelines on when tasks were to be set and completed.
- 31 Again, it was commonplace to have rules and sanctions to ensure pupils complied; in effective systems, the sanctions rarely had to be invoked. The key to success seemed to be clear and manageable requirements, backed up by vigilant monitoring at all levels, to ensure homework was set, completed, assessed and returned as intended. However, there were some indications that a proportion of pupils perhaps as many as half sometimes spent much longer on their homework than the school indicated in order to meet these requirements.

### Review and evaluation

- 32 In some schools, senior managers and heads of department regularly monitored and evaluated the quality of homework tasks and their relevance to the learning programme, or included homework in staff reviews. It is early days yet to see more formal evaluation of the homework programme, through linking homework to target-setting.