Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools

Submission from the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch

The Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) welcomes the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. The bulk of research on homework provision supports the AEU’s five point policy plan: What My School Needs. Teaching and learning, including successful approaches to homework, benefits from smaller class sizes, a diverse curriculum, individualised support for students, up-to-date classrooms and facilities, and effective professional development and support for school leaders and staff.¹

According to the most recent PISA data, Australian students (15 years-old) spend more than six hours a week on homework; more than twice as much as Finland and Korea, and slightly more than Hong Kong and Macau - it should be noted that Korean and Chinese students are more likely to receive out-of-school instruction from tutors.² The amount of time Australian Year 9 students spend on homework is within the range recommended by DEECD guidelines.

There is some controversy around the benefits of homework - particularly for primary school students - but as the research cited below shows, effective homework strategies require a teacher to work with (or on) the learning styles, backgrounds (cultural and socioeconomic), personalities, abilities, and interests of individual students. Such an approach can only be effective with sufficiently small class sizes and limits on face-to-face teaching time that allow teachers the opportunity to formulate and assess appropriate homework tasks. Any policies on homework, whether at a school or system level, must provide teachers with the space to exercise their professional skills in maximising the benefits of teaching and learning for all students.

Research has also shown that homework as an educational tool can broaden achievement gaps based on students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and parental education (see below). This has important implications for how homework is employed and how schools are resourced to minimise inequities arising from its use.

The following will address each of the main Terms of Reference in turn although some subheadings are addressed in separate sections to avoid duplication.

(a) Evidence supporting the value of homework

(i) benefits to individual students' learning;
(ii) contribution to discipline and other life skills; and
(iii) engagement of parents in student learning;

As mentioned above, controversy around the benefits of homework as a pedagogical and developmental strategy has a long history, particularly for primary school students.³

Hattie’s synthesis of five meta-analyses found only a weak relationship between the amount of homework undertaken and achievement for primary school students but a much stronger relationship for secondary school students. Horsley and Walker’s conclusion is similar although they note that caution needs to be exercised in assessing the research:

While there is support for the achievement benefits of homework at the senior high school level, and to a considerably lesser extent at the middle school level, there is almost no support for benefits at the primary school level.

Controlling for confounding factors (and interactions between them) like student ability, student background, age, learning domain and other contextual factors, as well as correctly identifying the effects of aggregation is a challenge for much of the research on homework. Interestingly, Hattie’s analysis found ‘that prescribing homework does not help students develop time management skills’.  

A negative aspect of homework frequently captured in the research is its tendency to exacerbate achievement differences stemming from students’ socioeconomic backgrounds. As noted by Lamkin and Saleh:

Homework can elevate the Mathew’s effect: Parents from low socioeconomic and educational background can provide little support to their children at home, while parents from high socioeconomic and educational background are more able to provide support to their children at home. This practice can directly contribute to increasing the gap between the poor and rich children. Therefore, it has been suggested that teachers recognise the existence and effects of the Mathew’s effect.

Many studies support this contention (for example see Rønning, Buell, Eren and Henderson). Horsley and Walker state:

It is important for teachers to consider that homework tasks, whose purpose is cognitive growth, necessitate homework assistance, guidance and support. Unless this support is provided for all students, homework will contribute to deepening inequality in student learning and achievement. In the same way, homework tasks will require (to some extent) access to learning resources such as textbooks, libraries and online knowledge sources. Unless access to these resources is provided for all students, then homework may deepen inequality.

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6 Hattie, ibid
8 Marte Rønning (2011) ,Who benefits from homework assignments? Economics of Education Review, Volume 30, Issue 1, Pages 55-64
9 Buell, op cit, p.15
11 Horsley and Walker, op cit, pp.146-147
In a similar vein they note that it 'is also critical from an equity point of view for teachers to reflect on how parents may be involved in homework planning and assistance…TIMSS analysis has also shown that high socioeconomic status parents provide far greater student homework support than parents of lower socioeconomic status’.

This outcome is counter to the notions of equity adopted by the *Review of Funding for Schooling* which describes an equitable education system as one where

- differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions (and)
- all students have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances.

The funding arrangements developed by the review 'aim to steadily, over time, reduce the relationship between student background and educational outcomes and improve the overall equity of educational outcomes in Australia'. We will argue below that both equitable and effective homework practices require a higher level of resourcing, especially for low-SES (socioeconomic status) and other disadvantaged students.

(b) Current approaches to homework, including application of, and access to, the technology outside of the classroom/school:

(i) as a tool to reinforce learning;
(ii) differences across primary and secondary school and the sectors;
(iii) approaches in Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background communities;
(iv) individual versus team homework;
(v) conceptual versus applied;
(vi) relevance to curriculum;
(vii) integration into how teachers help students learn;
(viii) assessment;
(ix) reporting and feedback methods; and
(x) best practice models;

Héfer Bembenutty in the introduction to an edition of the *Journal of Advanced Academics* focusing specifically on homework outlines an ideal approach to its use:

…imagine teachers who understand the pedagogical benefits of homework, assign homework when it is necessary, and provide homework assignments that appeal to the students’ interests while maintaining solid curricular objectives consistent with state and professional standards. Further, these teachers inspire the students to do the homework at the target level of quality, recommend appropriate learning, social, and environmental strategies that students could use to successfully complete the

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12 Ibid
homework, and assign homework that promotes creativity, self-initiative, and autonomous actions.\textsuperscript{14}

Typically, a teacher’s approach to homework with regards to sub-headings i to x above will be determined by the characteristics of his or her class and the needs of individual students within the context of resource and time constraints, and bounded by their school’s homework policy. As argued above, homework policies should not be overly prescriptive. For example, the Finnish system prescribes no mandatory homework policy but does provide ‘advice, guidance and support’. There is ‘no recommendation on the amount of homework’ but there is a ‘specific direction…that after “travelling to and back from school and completing homework, the pupil must have enough time for rest, hobbies and recreation”’.\textsuperscript{15} Teachers choose the ‘teaching methods they use in order to achieve the objectives stated in the curriculum Teachers shall also take into consideration the individuality of the pupils in devising teaching and learning strategies, including homework’.\textsuperscript{16}

Horsley and Walker outline a series of issues that teachers should consider in formulating effective homework practices:

- clarifying the nature and purpose of homework tasks to more clearly understand the prior knowledge students bring to the homework activity
- planning a homework curriculum to more systematically balance different types of homework tasks, link homework to classroom learning, and provide more personalised homework student support, choice and autonomy
- planning for scaffolding to enhance student homework guidance and support
- developing quality homework tasks to promote deep learning and the development of metacognitive skills
- planning homework feedback to assist in the contextualisation of homework tasks and provide remediation
- balancing teacher homework control to overcome the negative impacts of over-controlling and under-controlling teacher homework behaviour
- promoting equity in planning homework to promote learning from homework for all students.\textsuperscript{17}

One of Horsley and Walker’s goals in Reforming Homework is to ‘develop teachers’ understanding, capacity and motivation to make homework more personal and meaningful’.\textsuperscript{18}

In opposition to the provision of individualised homework, Harris Cooper in his 1989 meta-analysis of homework research concludes that ‘there are few benefits of individualising homework’ and that ‘individualised homework may burden the teacher’.\textsuperscript{19} It should be noted, however, that the first conclusion is based on analysis of only four studies and that the study

\textsuperscript{15} Horsley and Walker, op cit, p.217
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, pp.136-137
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p.143
to which Cooper ascribes the most weight was not strictly a study of homework individualised by teachers but of the effects of student choice. Two earlier studies cited by Cooper found positive relationships between individualised homework tasks and achievement although he also found methodological flaws in all four studies. Cooper seems to have retreated from this initial conclusion as in a later piece he notes that ‘preparing assignments that take into account individual students’ learning styles may be more effective’. Certainly, subsequent research has found strong links between achievement and homework tasks that accommodate individual students' learning styles.

There is no denying that optimal approaches to homework - especially the provision of individualised homework tasks - require a higher level of resourcing to allow smaller class sizes and a higher proportion of non-teaching time. However, increasing resource levels is a policy choice that governments are free to make and their willingness to do so reflects their commitment to quality education for all students. The AEU’s policy document, *Education for Everybody’s Needs*, recommends ‘building stronger and better relationships between students and their teachers (and) increasing personal attention by reducing class sizes (to a) maximum of 20’ and for a greater number of teacher assistants in primary and secondary school. These measures will improve the ability of teachers to provide the individual support that students require.

Extra resources not only allow teachers to implement best homework practice but are necessary to promote the effective and equitable use of technology. To repeat the quote from Horsley and Walker on page 2 above, unless there is equitable access to the use of technology and online resources, ‘homework may deepen inequality’.

(c) Future of homework in Victorian schools:

(i) balance between reinforcing and extending what has been learnt in the classroom with time to undertake extracurricular activities and to spend time with family;
(ii) differentiated approaches for primary and secondary schools;
(iii) the nature, and time dedicated to, homework to facilitate best student learning in different communities;
(iv) application of, and access to, technology to assist learning.

We do not intend to prescribe the optimal times dedicated to homework based on school level and student backgrounds. Nor do we want to recommend some perfect balance between homework and other outside-school activities; these are matters for individuals, families and school communities. We will note that the research tends to show weak returns

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20 Ibid, pp.125-126
24 Ibid, p.28
to homework for primary school students and is mixed on the benefits of homework for secondary students, particularly in the middle years. Our position is that teachers, given sufficient professional space within school and system policies as well as adequate resources and professional support, are best placed to implement effective homework strategies for their classes and individual students. *Education for Everybody’s Needs* states that student outcomes will be improved by

- Facilitating teaching in professional teams, and providing time and resources for teachers across sectors to work together developing effective approaches to learning and teaching drawing on their own knowledge and skills and those from elsewhere
- Developing learning partnerships with parents, recognising their primary role.\(^{25}\)

It is in this spirit of collaboration that school homework policies should be developed by students, parents and staff.

**Recommendations**

Effective and equitable homework practices require closer interactions between teachers, students and their parents; something that can only be achieved with higher levels of expenditure. In the interest of equity, this expenditure will need to be directed to schools with the greatest need. The fact that Victoria spends less than any other state on government schools shows that there is room for expenditure to grow. The AEU recommends that

- Victoria increases its per-student recurrent expenditure to a level at least equal to the national average
- Victoria must pressure the Commonwealth to commit to the full six-year program of funding as agreed to in the *Heads of Agreement between the Commonwealth of Australia and The State of Victoria on National Education Reform*
- There needs to be a substantial increase of the equity component of the SRP
- School-level homework policies need to be the product of an inclusive collaboration between students, parents and staff
- Additional resources are required for schools to better engage with parents to enable them to support their child’s learning
- System-level and school-level homework policies should allow teachers the professional space to provide the most effective and equitable tasks for their classes and individual students
- Effective and equitable homework practices should be supported by greater access to professional development (PD) including an increase of CRT funding to accommodate PD and an expansion of the number of places available in the Professional Leave Program
- The ever-increasing breadth of the curriculum (particularly in the early and middle years) and the growing preoccupation with NAPLAN testing have the potential to increase the amount of homework tasks allocated simply to allow time to cover mandated content. These trends are not conducive to effective teaching and learning and need to be halted.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, p.4