

## Is Homework Beneficial to Children in Anyway?

I decided to research the contemporary issue of 'homework' as it has been an issue that has intrigued and perplexed me right from my first year of teacher training. Developing my teaching skills, over four years, as a Keystage two teacher has allowed me to witness homework set at every level within the keystage. This issue has come to my attention during each and every block school experience that I have undertaken but it was only in my last school experience that I could really focus on the matter, as being in a year six class it was a prominent feature of the curriculum. The teacher regularly set homework for the children to complete over a designated time period. During my time at the school I noticed that a large majority of the class never completed the homework set and would repeatedly make their excuses to the teacher for the incompleteness of the task set. This made me ask myself the question "why don't they do it?" Taking this question I decided to repeat it to some of the children in the class. They explained their reasons of failure to carry out the assignment to me, and surprisingly they all sounded genuine and actually very reasonable, making me question further and thus research the issue of homework and the factors surrounding it. By investigating this topic it allows me as a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) to understand the issue in-depth and culminate a personal opinion. This will in turn inform my teaching and in the future help me to make educated decisions on how to manage my classroom practice.

Homework as defined by the DFEE guidelines for Primary and Secondary Schools refers to:

*"...Any work or activities which pupils are asked to do outside lesson time, either on their own or with parent or carers."*

(DFEE, 1998, p5)

*Within the education system, homework seems to be a fact of life wherever in the world we live. Though, in England, it is not a legal requirement of schools to give children homework nearly all schools practise and promote it. The common notion, by societies all over the world, is that homework is a positive experience, helping children to achieve higher standards in their work; extra work leads to higher achievement. Homework is akin to faith. We put faith in our government, and assume that if they say it is a worthwhile activity and have guidelines for implementing it into schools and schools practice it without it being a legal requirement it must be good and have a positive impact on children's educations. We assume that it fosters a love of learning, better study habits, improved attitudes towards school and themselves and greater self-discipline; we believe that better teachers assign more homework and that one sign of a good school is a good enforced homework policy. Many parents don't question the issue and assume that because they were set, and carried out homework when they were at school, their children will automatically be burdened with the same task. They resign themselves that their children have the same obligation due to their unintentional ignorance. However all these theories are beginning to be questioned. Are these common universal notions merely fantasy? Do children really get smarter and therefore achieve better exam results from doing homework? Does it introduce good work habits or develop children as a 'whole person'? Or is everything we have ever believed about homework merely fiction? Some recent research has brought to light*

that homework does in no way increase children's educational attainment and many non-educationalists, such as parents, carers and civilians voice a negative view about the subject and wish for homework to subside. They bring to light many important issues surrounding homework that makes the task increasingly difficult to be completed successfully. They say that issues such as parents and pupil's time, money and resources are all reasons that make homework more of a hindrance than a help. Some of these issues are addressed by educationalists but not in a realistic context. Moreover, many of these important issues are overlooked or entirely dismissed altogether.

The effect of homework on the education of school pupils is a topic which has been debated since the early years of this century, and the obvious question that keeps arising and that has arisen for me from all that I have read and seen during school placement is "is homework beneficial in anyway to children?" and therefore should we as teachers and schools be assigning homework to our children?

Without doubt, the biggest influential source in this argument is the government. The Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) promotes homework and sees it as beneficial. So much so that in the 1997 white paper "excellence in schools" they proposed that national guidelines on homework should be set. In November 1998 these guidelines were written, published and presented to schools. It was stated in the guidelines, by the then secretary of state, Mr David Blunkett, that:

*"Learning at home is an essential part of the good education to which all our children are entitled"*

(DFEE, 1998, p2)

They believed that homework raised standards in pupil's progression in two main ways. Firstly that it raised academic achievement. The idea being that when pupils are taught a concept within a school day they are then sent home to complete work on that concept at home. Revising the concept allows the child to extend, consolidate and reinforce skills and knowledge taught throughout the day and therefore gain a deeper understanding, this advances learning and can give the child the increased chance to boost their academic achievement. The other being the fact that by doing homework, skills and attitudes that they will need for successful independent lifelong learning, are developed, aiding the pupil to progress at school. The guidelines back up this theory by beginning its document with the statement:

"Research over a number of years in this and other countries has shown that homework can make an important contribution to pupil's progress at school".

(DFEE, 1998, p3)

In reading this statement it is imperative that we now look deeper into the research surrounding this topic. Many studies carried out by such researchers as Cook and Brown (1935), Koch (1965), Maertons and Johnson (1972), Farrow et al. (1999), concluded that there was a positive relationship between homework and achievement at secondary school level but that it had no effect what so ever on subsequent performance, especially at primary school level. This research was backed up by Cooper (1989) who carried out research on homework studies solely within the

primary school. He also concluded and described, "no gains being found." All this information suggests that the opening statement from the DFEE's homework guidelines for primary and secondary schools is misleading. By what these researchers have discovered the statement only relates to secondary schools and has little relevance to primary level teaching. However, the government's guidelines state that they have evidence to support the notion. I actually discovered there was limited literature that undoubtedly proved that children's progression developed by carrying out homework and was therefore worthwhile. The research that the DFEE claim proves the worth of homework was carried out by OFSTED in 1995. Some question the reliability of this data, as OFSTED are a government-funded body. However, they visited 19 primary schools and from this published a report, that the government's guidelines said, confirmed their reasons for appointing homework. One of the overall conclusions that was made from the data collected was:

*" Where staff, pupils and parents treat it seriously, it has the potential to raise standards, extend coverage of the curriculum, allow more effective use to be made of lesson times and improve pupils' study skills and attitudes to work"*

(HMSO, 1995, p2)

Barber et al (1997) endorse this notion by drawing attention to the link between the amount of homework done by pupils in a school and the likelihood of the school being rated 'excellent' by OFSTED. In her paper she goes on to say that more homework was set by the 'successful' schools and therefore there must be a positive link between homework and pupils progression. The paper however has been criticized by

Goldstein (1997), who pointed to the difficulties of equating OFSTED judgements with effectiveness. Many people argue that of course they are going to produce reports that show a positive correlation between pupil's progression and homework because they have to be seen to reinforce the government's notion that homework is a constructive, valuable task. The quote from the OFSTED report uses the phrase 'has the potential to raise standards'; this is comparable to the phrase 'can make an important contribution to pupils' progression' used in the DFEE homework guidelines. Kralovec and Buell (2000) found similar written statements by some of the top professionals in the field of homework research. It states:

" Extensive classroom research on 'time on task' international comparisons of year-round time study suggest that additional homework might promote students achievement "

(Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p9)

Using words such as can, might and has the potential to, casts doubt over the government's unshakeable enthusiasm on the topic. The highlighted words used in the quotes suggest that there is no solid evidence to suggest that homework is beneficial to children at primary school level. Nowhere in any of these 'official' documents does it clearly state that homework does improve pupils' progression at school. Much of the research, that is used to prove the governments notion that homework is effective, seems to merely place a positive spin on homework, presumably for the governments sake, but fails to actually show any real unyielding evidence that it makes a difference. The 1995 OFSTED report does cite many other useful purposes for homework like:

*"Schools saw the main benefits of homework as the improvement in pupil's attitudes to learning..."*

*(HMSO, 1995, p2)*

*But interestingly none of these purposes make direct reference to the use of homework as a means to raise attainment. Is this because the government don't actually have any solid evidence to back up their notion and therefore have a weak argument? Some people look at these statements and ask the question is all this extra work, effort and pressure, put onto children, really worth it for something that might be true? However the word might is a dangerous one. Using this word suggests that this theory has not been proved either way, on one hand doing homework could all be a waste of time because it does not help children's progression at school on the other hand homework could help children's progression, and therefore it would be detrimental to withdraw it from the education system. Experimentalism is fine for science and business, but when it comes to education of our children, give us the tried and true. Even if it was proved indefinitely one way or the other it is very difficult to believe what research says, whether it says that it does make a difference or does not we can never really be sure that it is homework that is effecting, in a positive or negative way, a pupils progression at school, I mean how do we know that it isn't some other factor, that we are overlooking, that is making, or not making as the case maybe, the difference to the development of these children. In real life situations we can unfortunately never isolate variables to change one particular thing, as in a science experiment, you can isolate one variable change it and see how that effects the end product unfortunately real*

life is not as clean cut as this because of the complexities of human nature.

When looking at the whole picture many people, at varying levels, retain the fear in withdrawing homework in case it does make a difference to children's education. On the smaller scale of things, mothers and teachers possess this fear. They push for it because if it does make a difference, they are afraid that their children may fall behind academically, if not mentally pushed. This, having a knock on effect, would result in failure to gain a place at the ir desired university or even worse, failure to continue into higher education altogether. They see homework as the only way to really help their children get ahead. Schools also possess this fear. As mentioned previously, schools are not legally obliged to implement homework into their school's but as the guidelines will now be part of OFSTED inspection criteria, it will be difficult for schools to ignore (BBC Online Network, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 1998) With this in mind a large majority now have a homework policy that enforces the regular setting of homework. We are all aware that intellect and progression within the education system is measured by set government tests and if schools decide not to set homework and it does make a difference to pupils progression at school children won't do so well in these national exams. Exam results declining will result in the school taking a lower position in the league tables and maybe a diminished reputation of the school. Also, if exam results within a school decline, it is more unlikely that government national targets for English, maths and science will be met. Consequentially, the school may be put under scrutiny by the government. On the bigger end of the scale, the government fear falling behind other nations in these standardized tests. If it does help



children progress at school and they are not seen to be stipulating homework, the nation may well fall further behind other leading nations, such as Japan. Could it be that we as a collected society are afraid to cease imposing homework on our children, in case it does make a difference?

Many studies have been published which claim to support, or refute, the widely held popular belief that homework improves academic performance. Such claims are made at regular and frequent intervals by those who seek to influence or control educational policy-making. By endorsing this notion heavily the government is one of these manipulators and clearly wishes to control the policy of homework in schools. However the studies that claim to support the notion are weak, yet still the notion is held firmly by the government. So why do the government insist on pushing homework when there is a vast amount of strong evidence, which clearly suggests that homework at primary level, has little or no effect on children's progression? This 'common sense' approach (Mayall 2002) to homework is elaborated by Jenks (1999) his theory is that by implementing the system of homework they are trying to have a certain amount of control over society. By creating guidelines for homework they are persuading schools to use these guidelines and impose homework on the children, if the child is at home doing homework he/she is not out on the street being a social deviant. The government are trying to install social discipline. This 'discipline outside of school' not only tries to control children's actions but also the family as a unit, as cleverly, the government encourage the families to get involved and help out with their children's homework. The government control society subliminally, not only are they controlling society by getting children to do homework they

have control down to the point of how much homework pupils carry out a night as the guidelines now have recommended time allocations for each year group, which many teachers comply with:

"...Routinely, children find their daily lives shaped *by* status regulating the pacing and placing of their experience....Children are further constrained not only *by* implicit socializing rules which work to set controls on *behaviour* and limits on the expression of unique intent, *but also by* customary practices which, through the institution of childhood, articulate the rights and duties associated with '*being a child*'."

(Jenks, 1999, p122)

However, homework is not purely *about* boosting children's academic achievement at school the government announce that there are significant other reasons why homework should *be* set at primary level. Returning to the 1998 homework guidelines, Mr Davis Blunkett continues *by* saying:

" Homework supports the development of independent learning skills, so enquiry and investigation are seen as part of the learning process. Given the increasing importance to everyone of flexibility and the ability to learn independently...Homework partnerships with parents, carers and pupils are vital to extending high quality learning *beyond* the limits of the school day."

(DFEE, 1998, p2)

Within this statement the government clarify many valid reasons for homework and how these reasons can be achieved, however many of these issues are being scrutinized and contested on how achievable they actually are.

The government talk about how homework helps to develop vital skills that children will need throughout their entire lives. Schooling is merely there to prepare children for the outside world, nevertheless within this outside world awaits the 'world of work' that they must inevitably fall into when they leave school. It is to be anticipated that these vital skills, that homework is said to be developing, will be needed and used frequently. By developing these skills in school, you are developing good educational practice, which hope fully promotes good working habits making a natural process to working in a vocation.

The most important skill that homework teaches children is self-discipline; the ability to control and motivate ones self to get on and complete a given task. From this cultivated self-discipline many other skills can also be developed with regards to homework. It is believed to develop the skill of independent learning, a skill that will most definitely be used in any work place. People are expected to have the self-discipline and incentive to work, learn and complete tasks independently. By setting a homework task that has to be completed away from the freely available assistance that you have from a teacher in the classroom, children learn to investigate and enquire, not necessarily unaided, but for themselves. Giving children homework also develops their own sense of responsibility. The teacher is putting the responsibility for completion of the task onto the pupil. Another skill that homework can develop is teaching children to manage their time effectively. By providing deadlines for pieces of

homework the children learn to prioritise their commitments and use their given time to the best of their ability.

One factor that homework is said to develop and is yet often ignored is the fact that homework can build confidence within children. When pupils put effort in and successfully complete homework tasks they can feel a great sense of self-gratification. In turn, a child's self-esteem can rise, increasing their self-confidence.

By doing homework, and continuing to undertake homework on a regular basis, the above skills and qualities grow and become more advanced. The skills gained can be used across the curriculum, in any subject or any scenario in and out of school hours. As a consequence, we start to see that not only does homework address what children can attain and improve on academically, but we discover that it addresses the 'hidden curriculum' and assists in developing the 'whole' child. Developing well-rounded individuals by teaching them universal skills that are needed not just in school but in the world outside of education. However, Kravloec and Buell (2000) say that while school's philosophy is based on the belief in the importance of educating the whole child, how can we raise 'whole' children when they have little time to do anything other than homework? They are not apposed to the skills that the children are trying to be taught by homework but simply voice that there must another way to teach these skills and qualities. Many would like to set the agenda for our children's learning themselves. Self-discipline can be acquired in a variety of ways. Whether it can be imparted through assignments imposed by teachers is an open question.

Good work habits are often touted as a favourable by-product of homework:

*"After all, schoolwork is to the child what paid work is to the adult. Because schoolwork also involves homework-the bringing home of work-it means that the youngest is under steady pressure of this job, they are also developing sound work habits."*

*(Levine & Anesko, 1987, p26)*

*Apparently, learning to deal with stress and pressure is another good work habit that is a derivative of homework. With pressure on teachers to do well in standardized tests, more and more homework is being set which transfers the tension and stress onto the pupils. Some consider that the undoubtedly anxiety that homework causes is necessary because it teaches children to cope with these feelings that they will almost certainly meet at some time during their occupations. The implicit-assumption here is that we learn best how to handle pressure by having to handle it from an early age. But do we really believe that learning how to handle work pressure is an appropriate goal for children at primary school, or indeed for a child of any age? Morrissey (2000) a spokesperson for the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) believes that by doing this we risk causing untold damage to our children, she says that "stress is not good for adults, so it can't be good for children - they're heading for burnout" she continues by saying that primary school level is too soon for children to be trying to cope with stress and supports the notion of not overburdening children but letting 'children be children'. In a report published in the 'Guardian' on the 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2003 it stated that one in ten 7 year olds had been reduced to tears by stress from homework and the same number had lost sleep over it. One third were said to be "seriously stressed." However, Weston (1999) opposes this view and believes that*

given homework at primary school level is a good idea as it prepares pupils for the perceived demands of the secondary school homework programme. She declares that by starting to socialise them into good work habits at Keystages one and two, it allows for a smooth transition up to keystone 3. She believes that the changeover between schools is very unsettling for children and by previously experiencing homework and knowing what to expect it is one less issue to make them anxious.

Regardless of the kind of family we are, the story is essentially the same. Bring any group of parents together and the talk will eventually turn to the problems they face in coping with homework. One of the main issues that parents seem to be expressing fairly frequently is the issue of 'time'. They believe that homework is taking over and that there is no or little time for anything else in their children's lives. After hearing about this discrepancy the government decided to publish 'recommended time allocations for homework' within the 1998 Homework Guidelines. They are that years 1 and 2 should do 1 hour a week on a choice of reading, spellings or other literacy work and number work. Years 3 and 4 should carry out 1.5 hours of homework a week in literacy and numeracy (as for years 1 and 2) with occasional assignments in other subjects. Finally years 5 and 6 should exceed no more than 30 minutes a day. They should have a regular weekly schedule with continued emphasis on literacy and numeracy but also ranging widely over the curriculum. They state that these times are a 'rough guide' to the amount of time that should be taken for completion of homework. Furthermore, at the bottom of the time allocations it states:

*" The daily reading which the government recommends for all children can, of course, be done as part of the homework. On days when the homework activity is something other than reading children should be encouraged, in addition, to read-on their own or with others-for at least 20 minutes."*

*(DFEE, 1998, p11)*

*Some parents believe this to be an unrealistic amount of time for young children to spend on homework. In accordance with the 'recommended time allocations' and the additional 'reading' notice it would mean that children as young as seven could be doing over 30 minutes of homework in just one night! Released by 'BBC Online Network' on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1998 the then shadow schools minister, Theresa May said that David Blunkett was obsessed with telling schools what to do, she said that surely it was up to teachers to decide when homework is to be set and how much set. However, according to the 'Guardian' 85% of parents approved of Mr Blunkett's guidelines saying that the concept of the guidelines was a good one. (6<sup>th</sup> December, 1999)*

*Recent reports (Guardian, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2002) have discovered that children are far exceeding the recommended time allocations for homework. They are spending more than 4 Hours on their homework in order to complete the amount of homework that they are given, showing that the 'time allocations' are proving to be useless. Taking into account, from these findings, how long this homework is realistically taking, if the children stopped anywhere near the time allocations that the government have recommended then the work would not be complete. The child would then most certainly be reprimanded and labelled as a deviant, a 'naughty boy/girl' when it came to handing in his incomplete homework. It is not*

only the children that are committing longer hours towards homework it is also their parents. In a report released by the 'BBC Online Network' on 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2000, it exclaimed that the pressure to succeed at school was having consequences for parents -with a survey claiming that when helping their children they were clocking up an average of seven hours of homework a week.

Work and schoolwork are part of our core values, and they play a vital role in our lives, but they do not define the totality of those lives. It is entirely legitimate and appropriate to question the extent to which even core values should dominate our existence.

Some people believe that schooling practises are starting to undermine social life. Family life is an important part of our society and with vast amounts of homework now being issued on a regular basis; quality family bonding time is slowly being diminished. Having a family spend time together can change it into a strong entity. The unity of families is important to enrich a healthy community. We seem to have lost sight of the importance of community life and only when we curb or abolish homework, will we be able to take back our home lives we value so much allowing us to begin the process of enriching our community lives once again. However the government combat this negative notion that homework takes away from family time and says that in fact it does the opposite and adds to the concept of family time. In the guidelines they promote the view that parents should be working with their children on homework. By helping their children and working together to complete tasks. Whilst working in this collaborative way, the government propose that quality-bonding time is taking place. Through communicating and co-operation, working out a set homework problem as a family allows for



parents to spend significant quality time with their children. By working collaboratively as a family it creates and provides a supportive environment for young children to talk about what they are learning and to practise key skills.

While some parents believe that academic ability is important to succeed in life others believe that socialising their children to become family orientated is clearly as important. Where they do believe homework does promote good habits they also believe just as firmly that teaching their children 'everyday life skills' through common household chores, such as doing routine repairs, washing etc, is just as beneficial for them. For many children these habits are never learned because homework gets in the way of that work. Kralovec & Buell (2000) continue by stating that other children fail to complete their homework precisely because they have obligations that are far more pressing, such as looking after younger siblings or aging grandparents. Some older children must prepare dinner for their families.

*"These students are faced with the agonizing choice between meeting their familial responsibilities and meeting their school responsibilities. Even those who are able to complete both household chores and homework face painful choices regarding social, recreational and other non-academic opportunities."*

(Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p13)

This quote invokes another dilemma that is associated with homework, the predicament of extra-curricular activities. With an ever-growing array of new and weird sports and past-times being introduced within society, more and more children are taking up hobbies. Being at school all

day, most days, restricts the spare time they do have to participate in these extra-curricular activities. Due to this restriction of time it is hard for both homework and extra-curricula activities to exist on the same evening. The struggle usually ends up with one not getting done. However some parents say that the extra-curricula commitments should have the priority above homework as these types of activities develop an authentic self and a meaningful social life for children, which in turn serves to develop the 'whole child', creating a society of well-adjusted citizens. In a report released by 'BBC Online Network' on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2000, a school in the United States reduced the amount of homework they set significantly so that children could participate in more extra curricular activities. Although our society thrives on the belief that studying hard rewards you with academic qualifications and these qualifications help you to succeed in life, but is this always true? What happens if your extra-curricula activity that you practice after school becomes your career? For example if a child takes part in gymnastics every night after school and never has time to complete her homework but becomes so good that she goes on to compete in the Olympic games and earns a vast amount of money do you really think that not doing her homework dramatically effected that students life? Some parents believe whether participating in an extra-curricula activity or not all children need 'down time' after a hard day at school. MacBeath and Turner (1990) believe that relaxing and taking time to stimulate themselves in whatever pleases them is essential if children's learning is to progress. They say that perhaps children would thrive and even learn better, not only in the long run but even on a day-to-day basis, if they had a little more space for a world of play and fantasy, if their lives were not fully colonized by the demands of schools or parents. Some parents and

educationalists are concerned that forcing young children to work after school when they are already tired is actually counter-productive (BBC Online Network, 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1998)

Homework can be an immense source of tension within a household. The time old story of, child not wanting to do his/her homework because they would rather go out and play with their friends. This creates an argument because parents forbid it due to the fact of having the obligation to make sure that their children's homework is completed and ready to be handed in. This leads to a negative ethos surrounding the family, as the child starts to resent his parents for playing 'teacher.' (Mayall 2002)

Dr Richard Cowan and Dr Susan Hallam of the University of London Institute of Education back up this notion. They presented a research paper to the British Psychological society education conference in Exeter. This paper outlined that teachers who set homework for younger children could be overloading their pupils and causing unnecessary tension in the family. (BBC Online Network, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1998) Unfortunately, these homework arguments are not only causing tension within the family but they can venture out of the household and put strain on home-school connections. Parents start to resent the school for causing so much repeated tension within their household, putting Home-school agreements (HSA's) under enormous jeopardy. Research carried out by Solomon et al. (2002) made clear conclusions that homework made a negative impact on families and was described as a significant site of parent-child tension. They also say that policies such as the DFEE homework guidelines and the information of home-school contracts do not take account of the complex factors mediating the three-way relationship between schools, parents and their children. Yet the DFEE (1998) constantly remind us through

documents how homework will improve home-school agreements and generate more effective partnerships between home and schools as parents will be able to get more involved with their children's education. By working in partnership with their children on homework, parents will be able to become more knowledgeable about the schools curriculum and where their child is at within that curriculum. In doing so the parent automatically becomes more involved with the assessment of their progression at school, becoming aware of what their child can or can not achieve. In an article from 'BBC Online Network' an OFSTED study proved that involving parents in homework definitely benefited their children (10<sup>th</sup> November, 1998) From homework being completed and handed for marking, the teacher is able to gain different perspectives on pupils and their families though some families contest this and say that they wish their home life to remain undisclosed and personal. They believe that schools have little right to intrude in this way.

The demands made on full-time workers have increased dramatically in the last quarter of a century. This is reflecting the ability of corporations to require longer hours and the desperation of employees who are, or who fear slipping down the economic pyramid. With these ever-increasing working hours parents are managing to spend less and less quality time with their families, especially their children. Consequently it is becoming increasingly difficult for parents to help their children with homework. After a number of long exhausting hours at work, many parents, usually mothers, come home and begin to cater for their families needs in the form of cleaning, washing and cooking the evening meal. This reduces the hours of quality time that could be spent with their family by even more. Even when all tasks are completed and they may have a little

time to help their children with homework tasks tiredness usually takes over and they neither have the energy or focus to be of any good in helping with their children's difficult mathematics calculations. But if time pressures are primarily economic, they also reflect equally broad trends. The two-decade explosion in the rate of divorce and the consequent number of families in which one parent -usually-the father is absent, means that these economic, educational and household responsibilities all fall onto the other parent, typically a single mother. Therefore if two-parent families are finding it increasingly difficult to find spare time to help their children with homework, single parent families will find it near impossible.

Although, from this problem stems another, parents are voicing the fact that even when they have got time to help their children with their homework they are unable to do so because of their own lack of knowledge on the subject. An article in the 'Independent' on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2000 told us that "Most British parents can't understand their children's school work" although they spend more than two hours a week trying to help them do it. A BBC survey showed that 54% of parents felt out of their depth when attempting to help with homework. A study of 1200 parents suggested that adults feel they can't offer adequate support to their offspring because they find 'modern subjects' too difficult and the National Curriculum unfamiliar. However, to contest this problem the DFEE launched a website offering parents direct links with their children's schools. Parents worried about whether they know enough to help their children with homework can now tap into the national curriculum and latest learning techniques. It was proved that about 28% of parents have access to the internet either at work or at home, but

schools and libraries will be encouraged to provide access to the parents website. (Guardian, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1999.)

Some parents and schools are worried about the vast economic disparity in society between the richest and the poorest in the community and that it might have a significant impact on the poorer students ability to do and succeed at homework.

Increased transportation, clothing, and child care costs incurred by two-income families mean that most have been barely able to maintain the status quo and only in the most educated segment of the workforce do two-income families manage to keep pace with inflation. Many economically disadvantaged families do not have the money to buy resources and supplies that children might need for homework to be completed successfully and to a high quality. The most expensive and most useful resource that brings many advantages to the child, with regards to homework, is the computer. The computer is seen frequently throughout society and is readily accessible at many points, especially schools, throughout the country. However it is this 'readily accessibleness' that many of us take for granted, we forget about the expense of the computer and automatically assume that everyone possesses one. However the reality is that some families cannot afford to buy or run a computer, leaving their children without this advantage. The disadvantages to not having a computer, comes in the form of presentational quality and the amount of time and effort put into work. These disadvantages can be a different degrees depending on what is available to the family and what is not. For example, a piece of

homework is set to research the topic of 'dinosaurs' and write a short assignment on it, it might take one child with access at home to a computer ten minutes to look up all the relevant information on the internet and another 20 minutes to type the assignment out on the computer, another child might have a computer but not internet access, so they will have to spend considerably longer looking for the information in books but like the first child will take 20 minutes to type out the information gained. However the third child might not have a computer at all so a considerable more amount of time will be spent both looking up information from alternative sources and then hand writing the assignment. Unfortunately a piece of homework cannot be set in accordance to what resources or lack of resources every child in the class has, but is it fair that that the 'rich' children have clear advantages whilst the 'poorer' students are effectively being punished for being 'poor' and going without? With these huge disadvantages apparent to those who do not have the money to buy a computer, is it fair to set homework at all? However in a survey carried out by the government it was stated that nine out of ten students had access to a home computer and half of these used the internet, 93% of those students used the home computer and internet for school work (Guardian, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2003)

When talking about homework, the above problem is seen a fairly significant one. Children frequently exclaim that the incompleteness of their homework is due to a lack of resources at home. However the government have considered and are beginning to combat this problem with the proposal of ensuring that more than 6,000 schools in England set after-school homework clubs and support centres where the children will have free access to resources such as computers and art supplies. The

centres are being financed with money from the National Lottery and are seen as important in helping children who, for what ever reason, have difficulty studying at home. (BBC Online Network, 9<sup>th</sup> November. 1998)

However the article continues to say that:

*"Teachers will be expected to run these classes, which will begin when formal lessons finish. Whether they receive extra pay will depend on arrangements made by individual schools."*

([www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/210669.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/210669.stm))

Teachers therefore are unenthusiastic to the governments ideas regarding the issues of pay, the issue of these clubs creating more work for teachers and therefore increasing pressure on them and the issue of spending more hours at school, meaning less time for themselves and their families.

Unfortunately in a recent report published by the 'Guardian' on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2002 it stated how OFS TED had discovered that the after-school clubs were failing the needs of the children they were provided for. While many schools invested heavily in providing after -hours lessons and support, the quality was patchy, claimed the report. A "common weakness" it said was where teachers running the after-school activities had no knowledge of what work had been set in class that day. Homework club teachers did not have a mechanism for feeding back progress to day teachers.



Conversely, some parents do have the time, effort, money and knowledge to help their children but still oppose homework saying that it is not their job to do so. By children bringing homework, the responsibility of providing help if they require it (effectively becoming the 'teacher') is pushed onto the parents. With many resenting this added liability, they have begun to ask, "Whose job is it to teach our children?" Some see homework assignments not as a sign that the school is doing a good job, but rather as an indication that it has ceded its responsibility for teaching to the parents. Rather than providing accountability, this kind of homework allows schools to shift accountability to the parents. Nonetheless, according to the 'Guardian' 6<sup>th</sup> December 1999, 66% disagreed with this proposition that it was the schools responsibility to educate children, not parents, which suggests a high level of parental commitment.

If as teachers we are to set homework we must take into account these 'equal opportunities' issues that will in the end determine the success of the homework. For example, if a project was set on 'investigating your local church and other churches around the country' a child with no computer would be unable to use the internet to research the topic at speed or type out the final product, If his parents have work/family commitments or a lack of time he would also be unable to visit the alternative, a library, or indeed the 'local church' On which the project was set on. The child asks his mother and father whether they know anything about the local church or religion but unfortunately due to their limited knowledge on the subject they are unable to help. All this combined, results in the incompleteness of the homework.

When culminating my own personal opinion on this topic I firstly must look at the entirety of the debate with an open mind, then focus in on both sides of the argument by studying the issues raised. Although I must be aware of the reliability of the data at hand. Without carrying out the research for myself I can never be positive of the findings that have been presented to me but I have to place my faith the information and believe that both sides discoveries' are accurate and correct. However, from the issues raised throughout the assignment many questions have been uncovered about the topic. Questions that I believe to be almost impossible to answer, even with solid research and information. I believe that the answers to these questions have no right or wrong answer, the answers merely depend on personal opinion and priorities. If your priority is 'the family then you will undoubtedly oppose homework if your priority is 'education' you will support homework. I believe that homework in no way helps the child to raise their academic standards at school. I purely believe this due to the vast amount of strong evidence that supports this notion. The opposing argument, to me, appears weak and unfounded, showing 'politically sugar-coated' evidence by researchers that work under government jurisdiction. However, I do believe that homework promotes good work habits that children will need throughout their lives and whilst taking into account that homework can be disruptive to family life and be extremely tough on the children in many different ways I believe that if it was not homework causing families and children to be unhappy it would almost certainly be something else, maybe the new strategy that you put in place of homework.

Nevertheless, the point must be raised of the insignificance of my personal opinion towards this topic. In the context of reality if the school that I work at promotes a homework policy I must be seen to

comply with the schools request for the regular setting of homework. However, possessing a personal opinion about the topic is important as now knowing a vast amount about homework I could challenge the schools reasons for a policy and try to educate those around me to the discoveries I have uncovered or help the school to set an effective homework policy that caters for all.