



DOES HOMEWORK REALLY HELP STUDENTS LEARN?

A conversation with a Wheelock researcher, a BU student, and a fourth-grade teacher

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. If only it were that simple. Educators have debated the merits of homework since the late 19th century. In recent years, amid concerns of some parents and teachers that children are being stressed out by too much homework, things have only gotten more fraught.

“Homework is complicated,” says Janine Bempechat, a Wheelock College of Education & Human Development clinical professor and developmental psychologist. The author of the essay “The Case for (Quality) Homework—

Why It Improves Learning and How Parents Can Help” in the winter 2019 issue of *Education Next*, Bempechat has studied how the debate about homework is influencing teacher preparation, parent and student beliefs about learning, and school policies.

She worries especially about socioeconomically disadvantaged students from low-performing schools who, according to research by Bempechat and others, get little or no homework.

Bostonia sat down with Bempechat and Erin Bruce (Wheelock’17,18), a new fourth-grade teacher at a subur-

ban Boston school, and future teacher Emma Ardizzone (Wheelock’22) to talk about what quality homework looks like, how it can help children learn, and how schools can equip teachers to design it, evaluate it, and facilitate parents’ role in it.

***Bostonia:* Parents and educators who are against homework in elementary school say there is no research definitively linking it to academic performance for kids in the early grades. You’ve said that they’re missing the point.**

BEMPECHAT: I think teachers assign

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homework in elementary school as a way to help kids develop skills they’ll need when they’re older—to begin to instill a sense of responsibility and to learn planning and organizational skills. That’s what I think is the greatest value of homework—in cultivating beliefs about learning and skills associated with academic success. If we greatly reduce or eliminate homework in elementary school, we deprive kids and parents of opportunities to instill these important learning habits and skills.

We do know that beginning in late middle school, and continuing through high school, there is a strong and positive correlation between homework completion and academic success.

You talk about the importance of quality homework. What is that?

Quality homework is engaging and relevant to kids’ lives. It gives them autonomy and engages them in the community and with their families. In some subjects, like math, worksheets can be very helpful. It has to do with the value of practicing over and over.

What are your concerns about homework and low-income children?

The argument that some people make—that homework “punishes the poor” because lower-income parents may not be as well equipped as affluent parents to help their children with homework—is very troubling to me. There are no parents who don’t care about their children’s learning. Parents don’t actually have to help with homework

completion in order for kids to do well. They can help in other ways—by helping children organize a study space, providing snacks, being there as a support, helping children work in groups with siblings or friends.

Isn’t the discussion about getting rid of homework happening mostly in affluent communities?

Yes, and the stories we hear of kids being stressed out from too much homework—four or five hours of homework a night—are real. That’s problematic for physical and mental health and overall well-being. But the research shows that higher-income students get a lot more homework than lower-income kids.

Teachers may not have as high expectations for lower-income children. Schools should bear responsibility for providing supports for kids to be able to get their homework done—after-school clubs, community support, peer group support. It does kids a disservice when our expectations are lower for them.

The conversation around homework is to some extent a social class and social justice issue. If we eliminate homework for



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all children because affluent children have too much, we're really doing a disservice to low-income children. They need the challenge, and every student can rise to the challenge with enough supports in place.

What did you learn by studying how education schools are preparing future teachers to handle homework?

My colleague, Margarita Jimenez-Silva, at the University of California, Davis, School of Education, and I interviewed faculty members at education schools, as well as supervising teachers, to find out how students are being prepared. And it seemed that they weren't. There didn't seem to be any readings on the research, or conversations on what high-quality homework is and how to design it.

Erin, what kind of training did you get in handling homework?

BRUCE: I had phenomenal professors at Wheelock, but homework just didn't come up. I did lots of student teaching. I've been in classrooms where the teachers didn't assign any homework and I've been in rooms where they assigned hours of homework a night. But I never even considered homework as something that was my decision. I just thought it was something I'd pull out of a book and it'd be done.

I started giving homework on the first night of school this year. My first assignment was to go home and draw a picture of the room where you do your homework. I want to know if it's at a table and if there are chairs around it and if mom's cooking dinner while you're doing homework.

The second night I asked them to talk to a grown-up about how are you going to be able to get your homework done during the week. The kids really enjoyed it. There's a running joke that I'm teaching life skills.

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Friday nights, I read all my kids' responses to me on their homework from the week and it's wonderful. They pour their hearts out. It's like we're having a conversation on my couch Friday night.

BEMPECHAT: I can't imagine that most new teachers would have the intuition Erin had in designing homework the way she did.

ARDIZZONE: Conversations with kids about homework, feeling you're being listened to—that's such a big part of wanting to do homework.... I grew up in Westchester County. It was a pretty demanding school district. My junior year English teacher—I loved her—she would give us feedback, have meetings with all of us. She'd say, "If you have any questions, if you have anything you want to talk about, you can talk to me, here are my office hours." It felt like she actually cared.

BEMPECHAT: It matters to know that the teacher cares about you and that what you think matters to the teacher. Homework is a vehicle to connect home and school...for parents to know teach-

ers are welcoming to them and their families.

ARDIZZONE: But can't it lead to parents being overbearing and too involved in their children's lives as students?

BEMPECHAT: There's good help and there's bad help. The bad help is what you're describing—when parents hover inappropriately, when they micro-manage, when they see their children confused and struggling and tell them what to do.

Good help is when parents recognize there's a struggle going on and instead ask informative questions: "Where do you think you went wrong?" They give hints, or pointers, rather than saying, "You missed this," or "You didn't read that."

BRUCE: I hope something comes of this. I hope BU or Wheelock can think of some way to make this a more pressing issue. As a first-year teacher, it was not something I even thought about on the first day of school—until a kid raised his hand and said, "Do we have homework?" It would have been wonderful if I'd had a plan from day one. **SR**