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Villain or Savior? The American Discourse on Homework, 1850-2003

This article examines homework's place in American K-12 schooling over the last century and draws three main conclusions. First, homework has always aroused strong passions pro and con. Second, despite prominent press reports to the contrary in the early 20th century and again today, the best evidence suggests that most parents have consistently supported homework during the last 100 years. Third, homework practice is slow to change but is not unmovable, as evidenced by increases in high school homework in the decade after Sputnik and recent increases in homework for children in grades K-2. Nevertheless, the academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has succeeded in raising homework expectations only for the youngest children.

TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE; too easy or too hard; a spur to student achievement or student alienation; a marker of enlightened or lazy teaching; a builder of character or a degrader of self-esteem; too demanding or too dismissive of parents; a stimulus of national economic vigor or of behavioral conformity. The range of complaints about homework is enormous, and the complaints tend—as

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much today as in the past—toward extreme, angry, often contradictory views.

This article provides a brief historical overview of the rhetoric and reality of homework's place in American K-12 schooling since the establishment of widely available, publicly funded education systems in the mid-19th century. We have divided our discussion into four time periods. We begin with a brief discussion of homework in the 19th century, followed by discussions of the era of progressive education, the mid-20th century, and the period covering the academic excellence movement of the last 25 years. Throughout the discussion, we address three key issues:

1. Was homework a hot-button issue, and how was it viewed in educational discourse?
2. What did parents think about homework?
3. How much homework were children actually doing?

Homework in the 19th Century

Homework was rarely viewed as a problem in the 19th century. Students in high school were the only ones burdened with much homework; the common expectation was 2-3 hours per night, weekends included (Reese, 1995). Because compulsory attendance laws extended only to age 14 and adolescents' labor was key to the family economy, just a tiny portion of the population chose to attend (and could qualify for) high school. Parental

complaints about homework appear to have been few. In rare instances, such as briefly in Boston and San Francisco, parents protested against arduous assignments and school boards sought to limit or abolish homework or make it optional (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). But these regulations did not last long. Educators reasoned that those who wished to attend high school must be willing to study; those unwilling to study were free to drop out.

Organized homework in the elementary grades (then viewed as including grades 1-4) was a rarity, indeed, often an impossibility, given short and irregular attendance patterns and typically overcrowded and multiage classrooms. While homework in the grammar school grades (5-8) was often burdensome, the basic method of teaching subject matter—drill, memorization, and recitation—required sustained preparation at home for classroom success (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). At a time when students were required to say their lessons in class in order to demonstrate their academic prowess, they had little alternative but to say those lessons over and over at home the night before. Before a child could continue his or her schooling through grammar school, a family had to decide that chores and other family obligations would not interfere unduly with the predictable nightly homework hours that would go into preparing the next day's lessons.

Toward the end of the 19th century, with the stirrings of the progressive education movement and the initial application of scientific method to educational evaluation, the first systematic critique of homework arose as a result of a research project conducted by Dr. Joseph Mayer Rice, a physician who was broadly interested in children's health and learning (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). Rice zeroed in on children's spelling—the epitome of the drill/memorization/recitation pedagogy—and concluded that children's often arduous devotion to practicing spelling at home was unrelated to their later spelling ability (Rice, 1897). Spelling homework, in other words, was futile; it not only wore children down and alienated them from school, but it did not even translate into higher academic achievement. The emergence of homework as a widely debated, hot-button issue in educational discourse was about to begin.

1890s–1940s: The Progressives' Crusade Against Homework

The rise and rapid dissemination of the child study, child health, parent education, and progressive education movements fundamentally altered the context for educational discourse on homework in the first part of the 20th century (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). Although the homework burdens faced by high school students received more criticism than in the 19th century, the major focus of concern was on children in grades 4 to 8 (homework before grade 4 was still uncommon and thus a non-issue). The drill/memorization/recitation routine was now excoriated as a threat to pre-teens' physical and mental health. Local and state women's organizations (notably the PTA) pressed school boards to regulate and minimize how much homework teachers could assign. Both popular and professional educational periodicals joined in the diatribes; homework forced on children too young to bear its burdens was portrayed as among the worst of school abominations.

The attacks on homework advanced further between the 1920s and the 1940s, the heyday of progressive education (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). The topic received more coverage in the educational and popular press, and more attention from school boards throughout the country, than it would receive again until the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Several communities abolished homework in some or all grades. Countless other communities attempted to restrict its use between the late elementary and junior high school years. (Virtually no one proposed that homework be formalized or regularized for children in the early elementary grades.)

The complaint that homework constituted a health hazard was reinforced by major advances in pediatrics as a medical specialization and by the expanding role that schools began to assume for protecting children's health. One of the most serious charges against homework was leveled in 1930 by the American Child Health Association, which coupled homework with child labor as the "chief causes of the high death and morbidity rates from tuberculosis and heart disease among adolescents."

During the 1930s, many of homework's critics began to define the health issue more broadly,

charging that homework threatened children's health by depriving them of outdoor play that was essential to healthy development. The increasing emphasis on play was consistent with the general drift of the progressive education movement. A concern for educating the "whole child" became the movement's keynote. Schools were responsible not only for children's intellectual growth but for their physical and emotional growth as well. Play, not work, should define the motive force in education, stated one progressive enthusiast. "For the elementary school child and the junior high school child," homework was nothing less than "legalized criminality" (Nash, 1930).

The same critics who regretted the intrusion of homework on play also lamented the loss of other after-school activities, such as music lessons and museum trips. These critics argued that learning involved more than just school work, and that homework deprived children of important non-school learning activities. Of more general concern was the impact of homework on family interaction inside the home. Just as the advocates of play regarded it as a natural right of childhood, the advocates of extra-school education regarded it as a natural right of parenthood (Gill & Schlossman, 1996).

Even as the critics of homework alleged various harms to health, character, and family on one front, they opened another attack, striking at the very *raison d'être* of homework. Not only did homework cause serious collateral damage to family and child, they argued, it also failed on its own academic terms and did not improve children's learning.

During the 1930s, school measurement experts came to the fore in conducting research on homework. With only a few exceptions, they concluded that homework in the pre-high school grades had no beneficial effect on school achievement. This very negative conclusion about homework was incorporated into the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (Otto, 1941). The entry was widely quoted and remained unchanged until the end of the 1950s. For several decades the irrelevance of homework—and, more generally, of parental inputs to the success of children's learning—was axiomatic in social science research on education (Gill & Schlossman, 1996).

Parent views of homework before 1950

Did parents go along with the dominant expert viewpoint opposing homework in the first half of the 20th century? The evidence is sporadic. Some parents certainly did support the experts and helped persuade school boards to restrict or even abolish homework in grades 1-8. Overall, though, most parents appear to have supported homework regardless of how insistently the experts told them otherwise (Gill & Schlossman, 2003a). Some educators who tried to abolish homework in their schools came up against serious parental opposition. Parents typically did not endorse large quantities of homework, but they wanted their children to spend some time daily studying at home on school assignments. In the early 1930s in western Pennsylvania, for example, parents of children in grades 1-8 found homework desirable by a margin of 78% to 22%. They expected homework to begin as early as first grade, if only for 15 minutes a day, and to increase to 1 hour a day in the late elementary grades and junior high school. In a 1929 survey of parents in a New York City elementary school, less than 10% opposed homework.

Why did parents like homework? It seems clear that parents believed, despite contrary conclusions reached by scholars, that children who did homework learned more. Apart from its direct academic benefits, many parents also believed that homework fostered good character traits. And some parents appreciated homework simply because it kept their children home at night. Parents also used homework as a tool to maintain some involvement in their children's education, and to monitor what the schools were teaching their children (Gill & Schlossman, 2003a).

Homework practice before 1950

But how much homework were children actually doing during the first half of the 20th century? Until the end of this time period, the evidence is quite sparse. Scholarship on homework was meager, despite all of the attention that school boards, educational periodicals, and the popular press paid to the topic. The few studies that were done were local and contained significant methodological variations and disagreements with one another. Very rough estimates from a few scattered schools and

school districts suggest that students in grades 4-6 probably averaged around 1 hour per day, students in grades 7-8 perhaps a little more than 1 hour per day, and high school students perhaps a little more than that. We are unable to say whether these amounts were higher or lower than in the 19th century, or whether the amount of homework declined after the turn of the century due to the influence of the anti-homework campaign. All we can say, with some confidence, is that excessive homework was not commonplace at any grade level.

In 1948, the Purdue Opinion Poll conducted the first systematic, nationally representative survey of homework practice in the U.S., focusing on the high school grades (9-12) (see Gill & Schlossman, 2003b). This was, of course, the end of an era in which progressive education had held sway over educational discourse; as we have seen, the anti-homework motif was central to that discourse, at least for grades 1-8. Nonetheless, the Purdue data remain of great interest because they reveal that the homework behaviors of high school students were fully consistent with the progressives' antipathy toward homework: Most high school students did not study very hard. Only 8% of high school students were doing more than 2 hours of homework daily in 1948 (Remmers, Gage, & Shimberg, 1948). On average, high school students were doing *less than an hour of homework per day*, although girls were doing considerably more than boys. And if students were doing less than 1 hour per day in high school, we feel confident in surmising that they were doing even less homework in earlier grades, where the progressives' attack against traditional teaching had been most sharply aimed.

1950s-1960s: Homework Rehabilitated and Reformed

Homework remained a hot-button issue during the 1950s and 1960s, but in both substance and tone the discourse changed in dramatic ways. Basically, the aura of extreme negativity that was central to the progressive discourse on homework—the view that homework *per se* constituted a serious problem in American education, and the less of it the better—virtually vanished after mid-century. This transformation was part and parcel of the precipitous decline of the progressive education movement,

which went into a nosedive in the early 1950s. Progressivism was replaced by an academic excellence movement that championed higher standards and grounded subject matter instruction in the conceptual approaches of the academic disciplines. Homework was integral to a new Cold War strategy that made education central to meeting the threat of Soviet technological and military superiority (Gill & Schlossman, 2000).

Especially after the Soviets launched *Sputnik* in 1957, the homework problem was reconceived as part of a national crisis: the U.S. was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter; that is, they were working harder and achieving more in school. Progressive education was blamed for causing America's failures in space and for undermining its economic and military supremacy. Whereas the perceived problem in the first half of the century was the negative effect of too much homework on children and families, the new discourse pronounced too little homework an indicator of the dismal state of American schooling. A commitment to heavy homework loads was alleged to reveal seriousness of purpose in education; homework became an instrument of national defense policy (Gill & Schlossman, 2000).

Favorable views of homework began to appear regularly in scholarly and popular educational periodicals in the 1950s and 1960s. The most important blow to the prewar expert consensus on homework's academic value was struck by an outsider, Avram Goldstein, a professor in Stanford University's medical school. Writing in the *Elementary School Journal*, Goldstein showed how anti-homework bias had introduced methodological distortions into prior scholarship on homework. Goldstein's reanalysis of the data that scholars in the 1930s had assembled showed that homework positively influenced student achievement in the elementary and high school grades. In Goldstein's view, homework should clearly be required in all schools (Goldstein, 1960).

Research and politics thus led to the rehabilitation of homework as a normal and necessary tool in the teaching and learning process (homework in the early elementary grades was still considered anomalous, however). As new, more positive attitudes toward homework began to circulate in the 1950s,

and as higher and tougher standards were introduced into school curricula, school boards across the country took steps to overturn long-established policies—instituted between 1900 and 1940—to limit how much homework teachers could assign. The reevaluation and ratcheting up of homework norms to agree with the academic excellence movement was especially apparent in California, which had been in the vanguard of progressive education in the inter-war period (Gill & Schlossman, 2000).

To a limited degree, the concept of “drill” was also rehabilitated during this period. By the late 1950s, *drill* was once again a term that educators could utter in polite company (Gill & Schlossman, 2000). By 1966, a National Education Association publication on homework could sum up the revisionist view by noting that “Certainly drill should not be used excessively, but it can serve a worthwhile educational purpose when used wisely” (Epps, 1966, p. 5).

But if the discourse on homework after mid-century began to accommodate to the idea of drill, it did not eschew all elements of progressive educational philosophy. In fact, even as homework was rehabilitated, it was also re-invented to increase student and parent buy-in to the movement for academic excellence. This homework reform movement was the first sustained effort in the 20th century to seriously address issues of content and scheduling in homework (Gill & Schlossman, 2000).

The essential argument of the reformers was that homework was equally compatible with the principles of academic excellence and progressive education. The pursuit of academic excellence, they believed, inevitably required alternatives to traditional textbooks and memorization. Schools could not aspire to higher standards of learning by turning back the clock pedagogically. Where the progressives had erred, the reformers believed, was in throwing out the baby with the bath water by assuming that homework was synonymous with stultifying pedagogical approaches. In fact, they argued, teachers could raise the academic content of homework and make it more enjoyable for students by incorporating activity-based, hands-on, individualized assignments that were equally compatible with the goals of academic excellence and progressive education.

In addition, the reformers contended, parents had a positive role to play in their children’s formal as well as informal learning. Teachers could incorporate parents into the enterprise as homework enablers without, as the progressives had feared, undermining the teacher’s pedagogical authority. Homework was a vital link in school-parent communication—and therefore essential to building public support for higher educational standards.

As vital as improving content and parent-school communication was the seemingly mundane issue of homework scheduling. The readiness of students and parents to support new homework expectations could only be secured, the reformers believed, by rationalizing how teachers assigned homework so that it was consistent with students’ practical needs and, no less importantly, with family prerogatives. Specifically, this included such changes as eliminating weekend homework, setting maximum time limits for assignments, establishing homework schedules for each subject, and making sure that students did not have to prepare for multiple tests on the same day, especially Mondays (Gill & Schlossman, 2000).

Implementing such changes carried significant implicit challenges to the norms of class management and school administration. Department heads and principals would inevitably have to intrude on day-to-day teaching prerogatives to a degree that most teachers, especially in the higher grades, were unaccustomed. Thus, proposed reforms in the scheduling of homework could radically affect the routines of teaching and learning and alter how schools were run.

Opinion and practice in the 1950s and 1960s

The discourse on homework underwent significant changes after mid-century. But what about student behaviors and parental attitudes? Did they also reflect the new scholarly and popular viewpoints?

The Purdue Opinion Poll data again provide our best source of information on students’ homework behaviors. The data from the 1950s and 1960s show that high school students did indeed begin to do more homework, as both the academic excellence and homework reform movements expected. In 1952, homework levels were approximately the same as in 1948. Over the next decade, however,

the proportion of high school students doing 2 hours or more daily nearly tripled. Clearly, the proportion of students spending this much time studying remained a minority, but the 23% of students studying 2 hours or more in 1962 and the 20% in 1967 were substantially more than the 8% of students investing that much time in 1948 and 1952 (see Gill & Schlossman, 2003b). The broader cultural and political forces associated with the Cold War, combined with substantial increases in educational funding and systematic improvements to school curricula and teaching methods, were consistent with efforts by teachers to demand, and by students to complete, substantially more homework in the early to mid-1960s than in the late 1940s.

Because parents had always been more supportive of homework than professional educators, they generally approved of the increases in homework in the post-*Sputnik* years. In 1954, when student homework loads were low, only 39% of American adults felt that high school students should be given more homework. In other words, most parents did not perceive low homework loads as a problem. Just a few years later, however, by 1958 and 1959, this share had risen to 51%. That homework was becoming more central to the growing discourse on academic excellence was also suggested by a significant decline in the share of respondents who recorded no opinion: from 27% in 1954 to 12% in 1959 (Gallup, 1972).

1970s-2003: Much Ado But Little Result

The ideas and structures that had animated the academic excellence movement fell apart very suddenly between 1968 and 1972—victims of the broader challenge to political and cultural authority that surrounded the Vietnam War and the late civil rights movement. Although interest in homework receded as a hot-button topic in education, it was indirectly implicated in the general malaise regarding students' lack of discipline and respect for teacher authority. The big concern now was not what types of homework might best enhance student achievement, but whether students could be persuaded to attend school regularly, pay attention to their teachers, and study seriously at all.

Concern about declining educational standards gave rise to a new academic excellence movement

that sought to move schools "back to basics." *A Nation at Risk* sounded the clarion call of the new excellence movement in 1983, denouncing a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). While the Soviet threat had motivated the post-*Sputnik* excellence movement, the excellence movement of the 1980s was motivated by threats from economic competitors around the world. *A Nation at Risk* explicitly brought homework back into the national discussion, calling for "far more homework" for high school students. Three years later, William Bennett's U.S. Department of Education published *What Works*, which endorsed homework unequivocally and provided specific recommendations for educators (U.S. Department of Education, 1986); it became one of the most popular government publications of all time (Cooper, 2001). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, educators, parents, and policymakers of all political and pedagogical stripes endorsed homework's virtues. Its value was touted both for academic and character-building purposes, and for promoting America's international competitiveness.

Indeed, the growing rumblings of discontent about excessive homework evident in the popular press over the last several years would seem to confirm the success of the pro-homework movement in raising how much homework students do. Despite polling evidence indicating that parents overwhelmingly continue to support homework—a nationwide poll in 2000 found that only 10% of parents believe their children have too much homework (Public Agenda, 2000)—anecdotal reports of deep parental concern about excessive homework have appeared in the press with increasing frequency. According to a story in the *New York Times*, for example, American students are increasingly "homework bound" by the "gross tonnage of today's homework" (Winerip, 1999). *USA Today* reports that America is in the midst of a period of "homework intensification" (Hellmich, 2000).

But is this widespread public perception accurate? Is the alleged increase in homework loads supported by empirical data? The answer appears to be no. True, the supporters of homework are correct in assuming that homework loads declined in the 1970s (Gill & Schlossman, 2003b). In 1972

and 1976, two nationally representative surveys—the National Longitudinal Survey and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), respectively—asked high school students, “Approximately what is the average amount of time you spend on homework a week?” In both surveys, only 6% of high school students reported studying more than 10 hours weekly. In the early to mid-1980s, homework loads for both middle school (age 13) and high school (age 17) students rose somewhat, according to NAEP long-term trend data. Meanwhile, student surveys at the elementary level (age 9) indicated that teachers were increasingly likely to assign daily homework (Gill & Schlossman, 2003b).

Nevertheless, NAEP data indicate that throughout the last two decades, the majority of students at all grade levels averaged less than 1 hour of homework nightly (Gill & Schlossman, 2003b). Average time spent on homework peaked at relatively low levels in the mid- to late 1980s and has gradually declined since then, for all ages tracked by NAEP (ages 9, 13, and 17). The only age group for which there has been a substantial net increase in homework over the last two decades is the youngest schoolchildren, aged 6-8, who saw homework increase from the negligible amount of 52 minutes weekly in 1981 to the moderate amount of 128 minutes weekly in 1997 (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000). In 1999, despite the sustained campaign to raise standards and increase homework, the majority of students at all grade levels were studying less than an hour on a typical night. Even among 17-year-olds, only 12% spent more than 2 hours of homework on a typical night (Gill & Schlossman, 2003b; Loveless, 2003). In short, claims about large increases in the homework load carried by most students are seriously overstated.

Conclusion

This brief historical overview suggests several conclusions for the present, and one nagging question. First, it is clear that homework has aroused strong passions pro and con for the last 100 years. Unfortunately, these passions have inspired views that lack nuance and pedagogical sensibility, and that sometimes reflect ideological bias as well. While the opponents of homework exaggerate its harms, the supporters overstate its benefits.

Voices advocating a more moderate and reformist position on the uses of homework are too often drowned out by the din.

Second, despite prominent press reports to the contrary in the early 20th century and again today, the best evidence suggests that most parents have consistently supported homework during the last 100 years. Against this historical backdrop, predictions of a mass parental backlash against homework should be taken with a large grain of salt.

Third, homework practice is slower to change than expert opinion, but is not unmovable. The post-*Sputnik* academic excellence movement succeeded in achieving a substantial increase in time spent on homework at the high school level for a decade. The more recent movement to raise standards has made homework (in small quantities) a standard part of the educational experience of primary grade children for perhaps the first time in history. Nevertheless, we are left with a worrisome conundrum: The academic excellence movement of the last 20 years has succeeded in raising homework expectations only for the youngest children, for whom research suggests homework has the fewest benefits (Cooper, 1989, 2001). Increases in homework in middle school and high school, where it is likely to be most beneficial, have been neither substantial nor sustained over the last 2 decades. Most teenagers do very little homework, and most 17-year-olds do no more than most 13-year-olds (Gill & Schlossman, 2003b). For those who support (as we do) a moderate amount of homework, escalating as children mature, these trends are highly problematic. They suggest the need for a fresh dialogue among teachers, parents, students, and scholars about how to make homework more integral and vital to the pursuit of high academic standards for all students.

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