
A Two-Way Street: Homework in a social context.**Susie Inglis**

In expressing the difficulty with homework Harris Cooper said, “The completion of a homework assignment involves the complex interaction of more influences than any other part of the schooling process” (Cooper, 1989, p.3). Homework is a major point-of-connection between pupils, parents and schools and it intrudes upon students’ lives perhaps more than any other area of education. By its very nature, homework is removed from the controlled environs of the school and is taken into the community where it invokes complex interactions, influences and expectations. Schooling is mandatory, but homework is not. Nonetheless a potentially anti-democratic culture exists when schools exercise this power that has implicit within it: a sentiment of disregard for the micro-system of students’ lives and time and world. Compounding this is the apparent lack of awareness by schools regarding the effect of homework and homework policies upon the linkages between family and school. Consequently, the issue requiring critical reflection is whether homework is merely a one-sided imposition by schools that disregards reciprocity, or is homework a vital part of modern learning in New Zealand (while still consistent with ecological theory’s depiction of the student in a broad, social setting)?

This paper attempts to edify a practice which every teacher and student in New Zealand faces daily. In order to review recent literature about homework and its sociological context, reference will be made to the work of ecological theorists, Bronfenbrenner and Epstein. Their theoretical frameworks acknowledge “... the importance of the multiple, interconnected contexts of children’s lives” (Scott-Jones, 1995, p.76). The evidence that supports and limits the practice of homework will be examined. Links will be made between education research and the research by developmental psychologists and sociologists about student-family micro-systems

and the meso-system connections between school and family. Finally the theoretical evidence which informs both practice and pedagogy will be appraised.

Urie Bronfenbrenner proposed one of the most influential theories of current times to explain the socialization and education of children. His background was psychology and his perspective was ecological when he wrote, "... human abilities and their realization depend in significant degree on the larger social and institutional context of individual activity" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. xv). Central to his hypothesis was the idea that individuals exist within a series of ecological environments and that development takes place in the context of these environments. He illustrated the environments with the example of a Russian nesting doll, labelling the first two environments as "micro-system", which are immediate situations directly affecting the child and the connections to people such as the family, and "meso-system", which describes the links between micro-systems such as the connections between school and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.24).

In America, much cross-discipline research has since been undertaken into family-school connections. At the forefront of this research is Joyce Epstein who expanded upon Bronfenbrenner's work with her theory of "overlapping spheres" (Epstein, 1987, p.127) of influence. Her theory asserts that families, schools and communities share an interest in, and responsibility for, children across all school years and they interact to help children succeed. Both Bronfenbrenner's and Epstein's theories place all schooling, including homework, into an ecological context. Epstein's model (1992, as cited in Epstein & Lee, 1995) identifies homework as a Type 4 involvement, which is "an activity at home that supports school curricula and student learning" (Epstein & Lee, 1995, p. 112). In addition, both theories identify time as a key variable. Bronfenbrenner (1979) advised that education should be structured so that over time the child gains more independence. Epstein (1996) concurs, citing her assumption that the child is not a passive being but is an active participant in his or her own life. Thus she promotes age-appropriate decision-making in schools and points out that this theme of student as a "doer" is also found in other areas of education reform such as reciprocal teaching, cooperative learning and co-constructivist learning strategies (p.234).

Ecological theory presumes reciprocity in the micro- and meso-systems. Accordingly, homework is impacted by and also has a significant impact upon students and their families. Hence critical evaluation of the evidence regarding homework's effectiveness is merited, in order to determine whether research justifies homework and thereby validates these impacts. Although academics in the field of education research have spent the last eight decades specialising in studying the effectiveness of homework and its value as a learning strategy, the results are anything but straightforward.

The most recent multi-level analysis of the literature concluded there was a lack of strong empirical support for the relationship between homework and achievement (Trautwein, Koller, Schmitz & Baumert, 2002). This was somewhat consistent with the findings of the significant meta-analysis by Cooper (1989) but at variance with the smaller meta-analysis of Paschal, Weinstein and Walberg (1984). Homework research has also been criticised for the lack of a clear causal link between homework variables and achievement (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Lindsay, Greathouse & Nye, 1998; Trautwein et al., 2002). Additionally, many researchers (Cooper, 1989; Corno, 1996; Paschal et al., 1984; Trautwein et al., 2002) have been concerned about the quality of the research data produced. Serious methodological flaws, such as the lack of randomized procedures, have contributed to the "extraordinary variability of results" (Cooper, 2001, p.28) and inconsistency of conclusions.

These inconsistencies are demonstrated in an examination by Paschal et al. (1984). Their study, which has been widely cited in the academic literature, claimed that more homework was key to America's achieving international academic and economic advantage. Business and political lobbyists in America who are part of the "intensification movement" continue to propound this thesis (Covington, 1996; Taylor, 1996), and the hypothesis has also resonated with certain groups in New Zealand (Masters, 2001). Paschal et al.'s (1984) analysis showed the effectiveness of homework was strongest for fourth and fifth grades, that homework was most effective for reading and social sciences, and that grading homework had more beneficial effects than giving no feedback. Conversely Marshall (1983, as cited in

Cooper, 1989) found that adolescents rather than children benefited most from homework. Cooper (2001), Sharp (2001) and Trautwein et al. (2002), reported that teacher monitoring of homework completion did not contribute to achievement gains. Fisher (2000) recounted that her New Zealand based research found no significant relationship between the time spent on English homework and School Certificate marks received.

There was, however, one area where the literature was so conclusive that Cooper (2001) was confidently able to advocate for action. In line with Bronfenbrenner's and Epstein's presumptions of increasing personal independence, Cooper (2001) indicated time was a key variable for homework effectiveness. Fifty correlations over 112,000 students revealed that homework showed no effect on the achievement of elementary students and little effect for junior high students. Yet by the time students had reached later adolescence, the relation between time spent on homework and achievement was highly significant. Cooper (2001, p.23) claimed, "... for high school students the effects of homework can be impressive. Indeed, relative to other instructional techniques and costs doing it, homework can produce a substantial, positive effect on adolescents' performance in school".

Expanding on this finding, Cooper (2001) maintained that the greatest achievement effect of homework for high school students began at one hour a week and peaked at two hours per night. In-school supervised study was no more effective than working at home and gender and intelligence levels did not impact on the effectiveness of homework (although the evidence in these areas is less compelling). Cooper (2001) warned that the differences between subjects were slight and needed careful interpretation. Cooper et al. (1998) cautioned teachers that it was the amount of homework completed, and not the amount set, that affected senior students' grades, and, if there were too many assignments and they were too long, completion rates and grades declined. Notwithstanding the previous points, as a learning strategy, and particularly for older adolescents and inside these parameters, the literature indicates homework is useful. However Cooper's analysis, which concentrated solely upon homework's effectiveness, is limited. It did not begin to represent the impact

homework has upon the family micro-system as students, and even their families, forgo activities in order that homework assignments are completed.

A fascinating qualitative account of adolescent boys' lives outside school hours can be found in, "*Reading don't fix no Chevys*". The youths interviewed in this book prioritised their out-of-school activities as socializing, sports, music, computer games and movies. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) investigated these realms to ascertain what learning was inherent in them and found that often the boys were engaging in sophisticated literacy activities that neither the young men nor their schools recognised. The authors hypothesized that these activities gave the teenagers a sense of competence and control, whereas "(T)he boys almost universally felt that school denied them choice and control and therefore any sense of personal agency and competency" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p.109). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) suggested that these feelings were missing when schools took control and defined what was a suitable homework, or a suitable literacy learning experience. Epstein's and Bronfenbrenner's interpretations indicate that, since the boys were older adolescents, it would be apt for schools to allow them a more active role in deciding what was purposeful, independent study. As it stood, the boys complained that they often didn't comprehend the English homework assignments given to them to complete. One boy described them as "contrived" and others perceived the assignments as "busywork", while another stated that they were "mostly purposeless, I guess" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 118).

The End of Homework by Kralovec and Buell vividly articulates parents' negative view of the impact homework has on the family micro-system. In this often-angry account, an unambiguous disquiet is centred on time poverty or the limited amount of time that families with two working parents have to spend with their children. Kralovec and Buell (2000) argued that excessive homework interfered with important family and community participation and claimed much homework was an imposition, removing families' right to choose how to spend their leisure time. They pointed out that parents' learning priorities for their children may involve them learning to fix a car, study Hebrew or complete household chores conscientiously, and they queried

whether completing a maths problem was of any greater value (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 23).

As teachers, we may question the relevance of these parental attitudes for our pedagogy. However, Cooper et al. (1998) have shown the importance of both student and particularly parental attitudes towards homework, and their significance as a predictor of homework effectiveness. Since it is the completion of homework assignments that is critical for achievement, "... their own [the student's] and their parent's attitudes towards homework play an increasingly important role in how much homework they complete and their class grades" (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 81). The researchers hypothesized that a lack of positive effect of homework may be in part due to parental attitudes that "... impede, or at least do not support, their children's full participation, persistence, or commitment to completing assignments" (Cooper et al., 1998, p.82).

Non-completion of homework is not just an outcome of negative attitudes or an over-active social life. In New Zealand, it is estimated that half of all secondary students have part-time work and that a quarter of the students believe that the jobs impede their homework (Collins, 2000; Garner, 2000). Lints (1998, p.9) illustrated the poignant human face of these statistics when he recounted the case of a bright student at his Northland secondary school who was failing to complete his homework and underachieving. The student was the oldest child in a solo-parent family where his part-time pay was a significant proportion of the household income, and as such, he felt unable to reduce his work hours to improve his academic progress. Kralovec and Buell (2000) also highlighted complex forces at work in certain students' lives that prevented them from completing homework. These students had obligations that outweighed homework such as looking after siblings or aging grandparents, doing housework or preparing dinner. Anecdotal accounts suggest that this situation is often the case in New Zealand, particularly for Pacific Island girls.

Ecological theory is not only useful for describing the factors contributing to the non-completion of homework, but also for deepening our understanding about the impact of non-completion. An ecological framework highlights the tensions that the non-

completion of homework can generate within students' micro-systems both between the parents and child, and also between the classroom teacher and student where it creates management issues. North Shore teenager, Philip Boughtwood said, "It's a bit of a drag really...I just do it [homework] so I don't get blasted by the teachers" (Middlebrook & Walsh, 2001). Smith and Wilhelm (2002, p.94) illustrated the stresses that homework can introduce into family relationships by mentioning Fred who "... was grounded by his parents for his entire eighth-grade school year because he refused to do homework." Fred spent the time in his room just staring at the wall because "(I)t was boring staying in my room, but homework is even more boring."

In addition to qualitative evidence, substantial quantitative research on homework and students' micro-systems is also available. The National Educational Longitudinal data of 1988 (NELS: 88) followed eighth graders in America from 1988 until their twelfth grade in 1992. The sample comprised over 1000 schools and 24,000 students. Epstein and Lee (1995), who have a strong bias towards promoting family and school connections, analysed the data. They found that most parents (91%) felt that homework was valuable for their young adolescents yet over half (57%) seldom assisted with homework. They noted that students did not expect their parents' involvement and fewer than forty five percent of students said their parents regularly checked their homework

Eccles and Harold (1996) hypothesized that contributing to less family involvement in homework was the wide-spread belief that children need and desire increased autonomy as they reach adolescence. Epstein's research (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1991 as cited in Epstein, 1996) challenged this notion. She found that young adolescents did not wish to completely extinguish family involvement in schooling. Her surveys have shown that younger adolescents, in particular, wanted their families to be knowledgeable partners in their education and available as sources of guidance (Epstein, 1996).

Researchers and the media have acknowledged that direct parental involvement in homework can sometimes be inappropriate, with parents completing their children's assignments or becoming angry at their children's mistakes making learning more

difficult. (Burgham, 2001; Masters, 2001; Sharp, 2001). Cooper (2001) suggested that for older adolescents less direct parental involvement was indicated, as this decrease provided more age-appropriate autonomy. His conjecture was that at senior levels of schooling most parents lacked the subject knowledge and teaching strategies to truly assist their children. Rather, he suggested for older, high school students that parents acted as mentors, instead of providing active instruction. Cooper (2001) prescribed the parent-as-mentor role to facilitate students becoming “autonomous lifelong learners outside formal educational settings” (p.49). Sharp (2001, p. 28) agreed: “(A)t secondary level high achievers had parents who helped them less, but encouraged them to be self-reliant”.

There was one significant impediment to parents successfully assuming homework-friendly attitudes and practises. Epstein and Lee (1995) found that parents would not regularly discuss or monitor homework if the school had not initiated communication with them and provided them with guidance and information. Their research showed that this point-of-connection was often neglected. Only twenty-five percent of principals surveyed in the NELS: 88 data (Epstein & Lee, 1995) responded that parents regularly received information from the school about how to help at home with specific skills or homework, and this advice was more likely to be given at private schools or at schools with more professional families. This socio-economic skew in the family-school meso-system raises the important issue of homework and social justice, and in particular that of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990). Consequently, in order for all parents to fruitfully support homework, schools must first perceive parents as partners in their children’s secondary education. Secondly, schools must proactively foster meso-system connections by enlightening parents of homework’s objectives and informing them of the most valuable ways in which they can help.

The research describing the connections between secondary schools and families over the last three decades has been primarily conducted in America. However, critical reflection may suggest that there are also parallels for the links in New Zealand. Unfortunately, the picture painted by this research is not always a pretty one.

Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) concurred with Eccles and Harold (1996) that levels of communication from schools were low, with little advice given to parents on assisting students with homework. They added, "... at high school level, parental aid was no longer considered an appropriate discussion topic with each parent" (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996, p.38). Epstein (1996) stated that teachers did not know the goals parents had for their children and they did not understand the information that parents needed in order to be more effective at home. Epstein and Lee (1995, p.111) continued, "... partnership declines dramatically from the elementary to middle grades, even though families may need more information and guidance from the schools in order to assist and monitor their early adolescents", and they carried on to say that involvement declined further in high schools. Dornbush and Glasgow (1996), and Epstein (1996) cited the differences in structural arrangements between primary and secondary schools as contributing to the weakening of meso-linkages. There was a significant decrease in family-school connection as soon as schools were structured into departmentalised programmes. Epstein and Lee (1995) also attributed the lack of parental monitoring of homework completion to school policies which requested that students work on their own and not interact about it with their parents.

In New Zealand, individual schools set their own homework policies. The Ministry of Education has no policy on homework (Middlebrook & Walsh, 2001), and there are currently no large studies on New Zealand secondary school homework policies. In an endeavour to get a snapshot of current homework practice and pedagogy in New Zealand, I contacted local secondary schools and six schools generously made copies of their policies available. Each school expected all students from Year 9 onwards to complete homework. Some schools allowed classroom teachers' discretion, while others had homework policies that dictated how much homework students had set for them each day. These schools often used homework journals for junior students, journals that had to be signed weekly. Most schools did not monitor senior students' homework, as they believed that this increased students' individual responsibility for their own learning. One low decile school's policy was that all homework completion was to be acknowledged and rewarded by teachers and favourably commented upon in school reports, but non-completion was not to be ignored. This behaviourist approach of reward and punishment was also adopted successfully by Fraser High

School, another school that had underachievement and management problems (Middlebrook & Walsh, 2001). In my brief survey there was only one school that communicated with parents about homework in anything more than a cursory manner. This school sent parents a comprehensive letter about homework. Unfortunately, it was sent only once at the beginning of the year, and the information it contained was chiefly about the high expectations held by the school of the parents.

What then are the conclusions to be drawn from the recent academic literature and how should they affect teaching practice in New Zealand? This paper has shown that many areas of homework research are still open to debate. Much of the investigation has taken place in America and there are no large-scale studies on the topic that have been conducted in New Zealand. The international studies make credible recommendations that are of interest, and may hold relevance for homework practice in New Zealand. There is, however, one instance where the research findings should be applied with particular caution and that is the lack of a clear relationship between homework effectiveness and feedback (Cooper, 2001; Sharp, 2001; Trautwein et al., 2002). The scope of the enquiries on this topic is limited and the findings appear to be counter-intuitive. If homework is a considered part of teaching strategy, then professional practice presupposes some degree of feedback. The notion that homework does not need formative assessment sidelines it as an adjunct-to-learning or relegates it to mere “busywork”. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education strongly recommends that teachers mark homework and give students feedback (Middlebrook & Walsh, 2001).

One consideration that this review has attempted to highlight is the importance of having an acknowledged theoretical basis for pedagogy and practice. The assumption of an ecological framework, such as described by Bronfenbrenner and Epstein with their emphasis on reciprocal relationships has directly affected how I have interpreted the research data. The ecological perspective has highlighted an opportunity for secondary schools to improve the meso-connections with families and has shown that there is tremendous potential in using homework as a catalyst for this change. But more than that, the research has shown for homework to be optimally employed as a learning strategy then the school-family meso-system must be strong. Cooper et al.’s

(1998) evidence about the impact of parental attitudes on homework's effectiveness was particularly compelling. The literature implied that many parents would welcome an indication that they have a positive, evolving role to play in homework guidance and monitoring. Furthermore, the literature specified it was for secondary schools to initiate communication in order to boost the level of school-family connection regarding homework. In essence, homework communications from the school to parents should ideally be regular, informative and actionable, inclusive in tone and invite appropriate parental feedback as is apposite in a reciprocal relationship.

In general, the current results of homework research are not definitive and so for the classroom teacher there remains much scope for professional discretion. The literature suggests that smaller and more frequent homework tasks appear to be associated with better achievement outcomes, as it was the homework completed and not just set that was crucial. Research has shown that for junior students there was a slight relationship between achievement and the time they spent on homework. However, the most conclusive findings were about senior students, where research indicated that homework was of such value that it should be regarded as a critical component of study. In fact, rather than referring to it as homework, the term "independent study" would better encapsulate its role as a learning strategy. By implication then, as it is such an integral aspect of senior learning, the homework that is set by teachers should be well designed and given all the planning consideration of a classroom lesson. The homework should also be genuine and purposeful, as the older students surveyed became resentful when artificial "busywork" impinged on their time and other micro-systems. Additionally, as suggested, teachers could consider designing homework to increase students' options, such as a choice of reading material or a range of topics for a research project, in order to enhance older adolescents' sense of personal control and accomplishment.

This paper began by asking if homework was consistent with ecological theory. The answer is both yes and no. That is, homework is able to be in harmony with ecological theories but it isn't always practised accordingly. The literature has demonstrated that homework is an appropriate learning strategy, particularly for older students. Other studies have shown that parents, if not students, approve of homework

when schools and teachers are open and informative about its role as a learning strategy and communicate clearly how families can best assist. However, if schools set too much homework of little perceived value, and if neither student nor parent understand the reason for it, then homework becomes not a point-of-connection but a bone-of-contention.

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