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Why Homogeneous Homework Does Not Work

Picture this: It is 7:00 PM on a Wednesday, and you have been at school for almost *eleven hours* now. You glance at your watch, knowing that in an hour, you will get back home to hours and hours of agonizingly mindless homework from all your teachers. You start wondering if perhaps you should have skipped all your extracurricular activities today, and your mental state begins transforming into a hellish nightmare with stress and frustration amalgamating, you as their prisoner. The worst part? You are not alone in this scenario. According to research conducted by the CDC in 2021, 42% of high school students “felt persistently sad or hopeless” and 22% “seriously considered attempting suicide” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). One of the biggest factors in this mental health decline in students is homework. While I do not think that homework should be banned as a whole, I have noted four main factors that lead to it not being as effective as it could be. Those four are, in no particular order: the educational value of homework, its ease of use/adaptability, the mental (and sometimes physical) stress it causes, and how much students want to or enjoy doing homework. Proponents of the current homework model believe that homework is not only educational, but it helps students prepare for the future. However, after carefully considering these four factors, I reached the conclusion that in its current state, homework does not properly educate students. Instead, a more

individualized homework plan may improve not only the educational aspect of a student's school life, but also the mental aspect.

Opponents of individualized homework believe that the current homework model allows students to learn new topics and branch out further, but specific constraints and boundaries can make individualized homework fulfill these roles while not alienating the students. According to Cathy Vatterott (author of many books on education and professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis) in *One-Size-Doesn't-Fit-All Homework*, the individualized homework model at Vinal Elementary School in Norwood, MA combines students' choices with "some teacher-specific tasks as well" (Vatterott). This in turn allows students to not only do work that would benefit them, but also teach them responsibility early in life. Vatterott goes on to further this belief, saying that "students are responsible for reflecting on their personal goals for the term and deciding which option to take" (Vatterott). This statement shows that an individualized model expedites homework's goal to help students mature and prepare for their futures. This is something that the current homework model struggles with. However, Dr. Harris Cooper (professor at Duke University), in an attempt to defend the current homework model, explains his belief that "as kids get older, the correlation gets stronger... They show that kids who did the homework performed better" (Walker). The correlation that Dr. Cooper is talking about is between the amount of homework done and the performance of students. Author and New York Times writer Jay Caspian Kang adds on to this by saying that "Even if we could perfectly equalize opportunity in school and empower all students not to be encumbered by the weight of their socioeconomic status or ethnicity, I'm not sure what good it would do if the kids didn't know how to do something relentlessly, over and over again, until they perfected it." (Kang). However, the measure of "amount of homework done" is astonishingly inutile. This can be best

explained with an example. I could practice piano for an hour every day and never improve if what I am practicing does not necessarily help me. Likewise, I could do hours of homework that just will not teach me anything new. Notably, an individualized model of homework would allow students to work on what is most challenging or interesting for them, meaning that students will learn much more in the same amount of time. That being said, Dr. Cooper makes a very good point when he explains that “it’s also worth noting that these correlations with order students are likely caused, not only by homework helping achievement, but also by kids who have higher achievement levels doing more homework” (Walker). Realistically, Dr. Cooper would not be against a model of individualized homework, since his gripes tend to be with people who think homework as a whole should be completely abolished, something that I also do not necessarily agree with. However, I believe that if we want to keep homework in our schools, there should be changes made to some integral parts of the homework model.

A model in which every student gets the same homework is inherently inefficient, as students are not being taught specifically to their needs. On the other hand, individualized homework can easily adapt to any situation, as it is the students themselves choosing what they want to do. Arguably, giving out the same homework to all your students would make it much easier to keep track of and grade assignments, but if the main goal of homework is to educate students, then as previously stated, the current homework model is severely lacking. An individualized model of homework makes this very easy to accomplish, since as Vatterott points out about Vinal Elementary, “as students are given choices, they begin to create their homework tasks” (Vatterott). What this means is that although the main topics that students should study do not change, what students specifically want to study does. The current model of homework, on the other hand, focuses specifically on teacher-given out worksheets that cannot be easily

adapted to the strengths and weaknesses of specific students. A lot of the time, students end up having to do work that is not remotely beneficial to them (or that they just do not understand) which leads to them facing a lot of stress, causing some of the aforementioned statistics to come to light.

Of course, no matter how educational homework is, it is all in vain if students are mentally and physically suffering through homework. The current model of homework causes many students to stress out, stay up all night, and not get proper (if any) sleep. In an individualized homework model, students get to choose their own work, which means that they are much more engaged with the education process. This also means that they do much less busy work and get to do more fun work, which in turn means that they will have a much more relaxed manner towards homework. The statistics brought up in the introduction specifically highlight the fact that the current model of homework is a stress factor, since the almost 1 in 4 high school students “seriously consider[ing] attempting suicide” in 2021 is a frankly staggering amount (CDC). For students who are already very busy outside of school, assigning hours of homework is sure to deplete them of vital sleeping time, causing them to undergo physical and mental stress. However, if students actually enjoy doing homework (and are able to do homework anywhere they want, not just at home), these stress levels will rapidly diminish.

Individualized homework models are not just useful for younger kids, but are also applicable for those in high school and even college. From everything mentioned above, it is clear that an individualized homework model would help mitigate many of the flaws present in the current model of homework. However, one may still wonder if this is only the case for younger students who do not necessarily have to go into great detail with their homework. In my opinion, this model of homework is not only appropriate for high school students, but is also

better than the current model currently in place. For instance, a lot of high school classes are already separated by educational achievement and progress, meaning that specific curricula are already in place. This in turn means that there will not be a great variety of homework that teachers will have to grade. Moreover, students who get homework with specific deadlines assigned to them each night will not learn responsibility or time management when they have to do projects on their own. On the other hand, students who must choose their own work have to specifically think about their strengths and weaknesses when assigning themselves homework and will become further self-reliant in this regard. Transitioning to this model of homework would also be feasible, since many projects that need to be done outside of school are similar to individualized homework. One key problem that may arise with individualized homework is that, a lot of the time, it is hard for students to know what specifically they are struggling with. One way to address this problem is by having ungraded diagnostic tests throughout the year where students can look at their strengths and weaknesses in specific subjects.

Overall, the current un-educational model of homework could easily be replaced with a more adaptable and helpful individualized homework plan. If we want future generations to not only be educated but also be able to take care of themselves in an ever-changing society, then one of the first steps we must take is to instate an individualized model of homework in our schools.

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