Does Homework Increase Students' Autonomy?

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Abstract

Assigning homework is a very common practice among Italian teachers. From elementary school until high school, no student escapes this task, with a few exceptions in the case of full-time school.

Generally, teachers' demand more as students grow older. Their stated purpose is to train students to become gradually more autonomous. But is it really so? On this point, studies are conflicting: some authors consider homework an important tool in school, but recent studies have found no correlation between time spent on homework and academic achievement.

In general it seems that the advantages of assigning homework are not associated with the time it takes students to do their homework. So there are other factors that should be investigated.

In order to ensure that homework can actually increase the autonomy of the students, it needs to be calibrated in such a way that students do not require the help of their families. Proper correction by the teacher at school is also necessary. But if, on the other hand, when assigning homework, teachers rely more or less consciously on families, the effects may be negative.

In some cases, the fact that teachers feel they do not have enough time to explore activities at school due to lack of time and heterogeneous classes, may be a factor that makes homework dysfunctional. The risk is that school delegates some of its functions to families, increasing inequality in the case of parents who lack the time or ability to help.

In addition, a dysfunctional mode of using homework can negatively interfere with the sense of self-esteem and the development of autonomy, in addition to absorbing too much time, which is detrimental to the afternoon activities in which students are normally engaged.

So, if, on the one hand, it is stated that the school is not the only educational agency, on the other hand, it is not given space and time for other activities recognized as formative and important for teens.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a theoretical framework for identifying ways of managing homework that enhance autonomy and recognizing those that are dysfunctional.

1. The debate about the usefulness of homework

In 1989, Cooper published an article summarizing the state of the art of research on homework . After a brief historical reconstruction, Cooper analyzed the results of empirical research, which he divided into three types. The first set of studies compared the achievements of students who had homework assignments with students who had no homework. The second set compared results of students with homework with those of students who had in-class supervised study. The third correlated the amount of time students reported spending on homework with their achievement levels.

The result of Cooper's research presents a very controversial picture: some studies seem to highlight the effectiveness of homework, others do not. At higher levels of education the majority of studies show the effectiveness of homework, but this trend disappears in lower grades and it is further less clear in studies that compare the academic achievement of students who had homework with those students who had in-class supervised study **Error! Reference source not found.Error! Reference source not found.**.

From a theoretical point of view, the framework offered by Cooper (and by the more recent literature) was that of a polarized debate on whether or not extra time should be dedicated to school at home. Some researchers who were against the use of homework considered it counterproductive either

because an excessive work load could have a negative effect on motivation, or because it might take time away from other activities, or because it might increase inequality. Conversely researchers convinced of the effectiveness of homework seem to start from the assumption that an additional practice produces positive results, so the time spent on homework could have a positive effect both on knowledge of the topics dealt with at school and on the strengthening interest in school as well as on the involvement of parents and families in their children's commitment to school **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**. There is also an analysis of the complex relational, motivational and cognitive dynamics that may interfere with the effectiveness of study at home, and on how such study should be structured in order to be effective. Such analysis provides guidelines for families, teachers and educators and educational policy makers **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**.

What is missing in our opinion is a bridge between this type of analysis and the theoretical framework underlying the empirical testing: if in fact there are different types of tasks and assignments, it makes no sense to compare students who have homework with those who have none, because by doing so different and incomparable realities are being grouped together.

2. Towards a theoretical framework

A unifying feature of work done at home compared to that done in school, is the lack of supervision by a competent adult. This is clearly a disadvantage in terms of optimal organization of work, but it is an advantage if one thinks of the development of the capacity for self-organization.

Tasks should therefore be designed to be carried out independently, or with a proper involvement by parents **Error! Reference source not found.**. Moreover, the student should not feel the need to copy the required responses from other sources (classmates, the Internet). They should be well calibrated for difficulty, for the amount of time required and for the motivation they produce. Motivation is indeed central to the effectiveness of the tasks performed without supervision. If there is no external figure facilitating the learning process, the student needs to maintain a good level of motivation in order to carry out his/her homework autonomously, while maintaining a level of attention that enables him/her to derive benefit from it. Even boring homework is positive, as long as the student is able to grasp its meaning and is sufficiently motivated to do it.

These brief considerations indicate, in our opinion, the necessary criteria for identifying a theoretical hypothesis for defining effective homework: effective tasks have to promote autonomy and motivation.

The self-determination theory (SDT) seems to be a theoretical framework that could be very useful for this purpose **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**. The SDT is a theory of the motivation, but it highlights the importance of autonomy, connecting it with the need for relatedness, which makes it possible to include in a common framework the motivation of the student with respect to homework and the relational dynamics occurring in the family **Error! Reference source not found.**. Moreover, the SDT is a general theoretical framework that allows for a common reading of different phenomena, and that therefore makes it possible to unify the many different dynamics that modulate or interfere with the effectiveness of homework. Finally, the SDT has an immediate applicability in the context of motivation to study .

According to SDT there are three main needs that appear to be essential for facilitating the optimal functioning of inner resources: the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness.

The SDT predicts, therefore, that a student will develop a greater inner motivation to engage in school work if he/she feels that he/she can:

- self-manage his/her own choices in relation to the work to be done;
- express his/her creativity;
- have a perception of his/her own competence;

- feel that he/she belongs to a group by which he/she is supported.

The distinction between intrinsic motivation, to perform a task (i.e. when the task is done because it was considered interesting in itself), and extrinsic motivation (when the task is reinforced) is of central importance: according to SDT, intrinsic motivation is more persistent and effective, and even reward systems can have counterproductive effects in that they reduce intrinsic motivation **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**.

It is therefore important to support intrinsic motivation, on the one hand, and, faced with tasks for which the individual is not motivated, to facilitate the internalization of motivation, promoting understanding of the importance of the task and compliance **Error! Reference source not found.**.

According to the SDT to enhance intrinsic motivation it is necessary not only that people feel that they are competent with respect to a given task, but also that they experience a feeling of autonomy: reward systems may have the effect of decreasing intrinsic motivation if they are perceived as a form of control **Error! Reference source not found.**. For processes of internalization of motivation it is essential that the need for relatedness is met, and that the individual can identify with the group and connect with others **Error! Reference source not found.**.

The work hypothesis that we are proposing here is that homework is actually beneficial as long as teachers take these factors into consideration. Otherwise homework might be ineffective or counterproductive, although this may be masked, in empirical studies, by other factors, for example, the fact that a greater number of hours devoted to homework might be the effect of greater motivation to study and thus be associated with better academic performance.

The results of the studies conducted by Cooper show that elementary school children derive limited advantages from time dedicated to homework. The results are different for young secondary school students: this is consistent with our hypothesis, since it is likely that older students are also more able to do homework independently and understand their importance with respect to the work they are doing at school, so it is easier to assign tasks properly. It is more difficult, however, to calibrate homework properly for younger students, and this perhaps explains why only a few studies seem to demonstrate the effectiveness of the homework in lower age groups. In any case, older students obtain positive effects from homework as long as the homework does not require a commitment of more than one or two hours: Cooper suggests that overloading students with homework may diminish its effectiveness **Error! Reference source not found.**, and concludes that there should be a reduced initial commitment in the lower grades, which will be gradually increased by 10 minutes for each year of school attendance up to a maximum commitment of two hours per day for high school students.

Since motivation is sustained by the satisfaction of the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness, homework should never be assigned as a punishment, because the implicit message that educators would send would be that homework is tedious, burdensome and to be avoided. Commitment should be commensurate with the ability of the students, in order to strengthen the feeling of being able to perform the homework task independently without the help of adults. Since homework is generally given to all the members of a class, it should be simple, so that all of them are able to complete it, or it could be creative, so that each student can carry out the task at his/her own manner and level. It would be optimal to assign homework taking into account the extracurricular activities of the children as the experiences of sport, game or favorite books (competence). It would, moreover, be appropriate for the motivation to carry out the tasks to emerge not from a system of rewards and punishments, but by using in class homework for work that involves the group in order to facilitate the introjection of motivation through the fulfillment of the need for relatedness .

In addition to these general guidelines, an important consideration is necessary: if the purpose of homework is the development of pupils' autonomy, attention should be paid to how, how much and what type of exercises should be assigned. A system for the allocation of homework should be structured and teachers should design it so that the homework proposed respects the characteristics above mentioned and is complementary to activities planned at school. In addition, as for school activities, the procedures for assigning homework should be planned and communicated to parents,
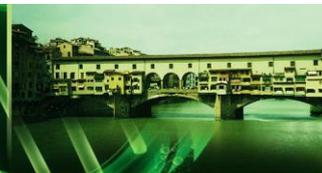
along with the recommendations that will lead to appropriate involvement by them. Parents should encourage the search for the solution of problems without suggesting answers, accepting the validity of the solutions proposed by their children. Moreover, parents should also point out that a mistake is simply the result of inattention (and is a natural part of the learning process), making it clear to their children that greater effort can lead to success (autonomy) and thus encourage them to ask for help. Similarly openly acknowledging their children's academic progress increases the latter's motivation and transmits trust and the feeling that their parents are attentive to the learning experience (relatedness).

3. Conclusions

Empirical studies on the effectiveness of homework should not only be carried out to exercise control over the interfering variables **Error! Reference source not found.**, but also to distinguish at least three types of homework. Those expressly and properly designed to support the autonomy of the students, those that, even in the absence of a coherent design, do not inhibit the development of autonomy, and those that are unfavorable to the development of self and the satisfaction of three essential needs for the enhancement of intrinsic motivation. In our opinion this is the only way to test empirically the validity of an organic theory of homework and to evaluate the effectiveness of different types.

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