

Homework Problems and Remedies

Academic Instruction for Students with Disabilities

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## HOMEWORK PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES

Homework is a complex issue and touted as a “hot-button issue” for schools and has been a topic of education research (Carr, 2013, p. 170). It is defined as out of school tasks assigned to students (Coutts, 2004; Cooper, 1989) and “tasks assigned by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during noninstructional time” (Bembenutty, 2011, p. 185). Homework for teachers and parents is synonymously associated with learning, school and success. It is also associated with hard labor, boring tasks and unnecessary work. While research is scanty regarding whether or not students with disabilities complete homework accurately and in a timely manner (i.e., Hoover, 2006), research indicates that homework continues to be a problem for students, particularly those with disabilities. Contrary to the opinion of some educators and researchers that homework is all pain and basically no gain (Kohn, 2006), a growing body of literature demonstrates the positive effects of homework on student learning, especially students with disabilities.

While homework is an ubiquitous part of the American education and in many other educational systems, critics have challenged its role and merit in student achievement (Maltese, Tai & Fan, 2012). Contrary to such critical positions, a large body of research has evidenced the benefits and role of homework to academic achievement as recapitulated in this paper. The real myth of homework for educators and parents, therefore, is not about the effectiveness of homework, but in identifying strategies and classroom techniques that supports practical and good homework practices. This literature review provides a summary of some of the homework problems experienced by students with learning difficulties documented in previous research. It also seeks to outline some practical suggestions which can be utilized to remediate the homework problems experienced by this group of students. Finally, this review examines the role of teachers in assisting this group of students become successful in this regard.

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### **History of Homework**

Homework performance has been the focus of attention for many decades and has been exhaustively debated throughout the synapses of American educational reform over the past fifty years. From the impact of Sputnik in 1957, to the improvement of special education services as reflected in the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, this educational system has been through a variety of proposals to reform education, “stressing penalties, strict timetables, rigorous testing, scientific measurement, and rigidly prescribed outcomes” (Steeves, Bernhardt, Burns, & Lombard, 2009, p. 74). Part of this reform process included an increased emphasis on homework.

During the 1980s the American educational system came under close examination, calling for the restructuring of the public system (Solderlund & Bursuck, 1995). A commitment to educational excellence was the primary focus of this reform movement and the advocacy for the need to increase expectations of student outcomes, tightened academic standards and increase accountability. Reform Movements such as the “Demands for High Standards”, (1993) and the National Commissions on Excellence in Education, 1983 (as cited in Solderlund & Bursuck, 1995) were articulated, and during this time, homework consequently received increased attention as it was seen as a tool to improve educational preparation (Solderlund & Bursuck, 1995).

American students however, were not fully exposed to this out of class activity and therefore not prepared to ensure the nation’s safety and development, beginning the debate over the merits of homework as part of our educational culture (Maltese et al., 2012). Reports based on national commission reports (i.e., National Commissions, 1983; “Demands,” 1993) indicated that American students spent less time doing homework as compared to students from other nations. Reports also claimed that that approximately two thirds of high school students were

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assigned less than an hour of homework nightly. Additionally, reports concluded that ten percent of this same group was assigned no homework at all when students from other countries were spending two hours daily engaging in homework tasks.

This discovery spurred debate, and solutions were offered in response to the prompting recommendation that students be assigned daily homework. Additionally, was the increased focus of schools in their scrutiny in implementing research-based and effective general educational practices in the wave of IDEA's all inclusive classroom. The outcomes have been a commitment on the part of educators and school administrators to ensure that educational policies and practices are established to assist students with disabilities in becoming successful in the general classrooms (Solderlund & Bursuck, 1995).

### **Benefits of Homework**

Homework in general enhances academic and non-academic success (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Bursuck, et al. (1999), for example, asserted that "homework appears to be a significant part of the schooling process" (p. 149). Gajria and Salend (1995) also argued that homework develops and maintains scholastic skills through practice. The intention of students completing homework is engaging in tasks that will allow them in becoming proficient and mastering new material (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Homework also aids in comprehension and maintenance of previously learned material (Coutts, 2004; Falkenberg & Barbetta, 2013; Lynch, Theodore, Bray, & Kehle, 2009; Rock, 2005; Salend, Duhaney, Anderson & Gottschalk, 2004). Other essential academically benefits include preparing for the next class by reading an assigned piece, extending work already done during instruction through practicing of concepts, research, as well as completing work assigned during instructional time (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

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Advocates for homework have also specifically outlined positive correlations of homework on non-academic achievement. Homework performance helps develop valuable lifelong study skills habits as documented by Falkenberg and Barbetta (2013). It teaches students how to work independently (Bursuck et al., 1999). It fosters effectively time management and improves students' self-esteem (Cooper, 2001; Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Falkenberg & Barbetta, 2013; Gleason, Archer & Colvin, 2002). It develops self-discipline and organizational skills (Axelrod, Zhe, Haugen & Klein, 2009; Hampshire, Butera & Bellini, 2011).

Homework also provides a direct link between the home and school. It also offers parents with the opportunity to engage in activities and assignments with their children enabling them to connect with their child's learning experiences (Patton, Jayanthi & Polloway, 2001). Other studies have documented positive benefits such as improving students' attitudes towards school, parental involvement and monitoring of students' personal achievement (Paschal, Weinstein & Walberg, 1984; Salend & Gajria, 1995).

### **Problems Experienced by Students with Disabilities**

Polloway, Epstein and Foley (1992) estimated more than a million students or approximately fifty-six percent of students with difficulties, as well as twenty-eight percent who have not been identified with learning difficulties experience problems completing homework tasks. Teachers and parents perceive that students with disabilities experience more problems with homework as compared to their counterparts without disabilities. Many causes such as personal deficits and academically related problems have been identified as reasons for the number of this estimated group of students (Soderlund & Bursuck, 1995).

Personal deficits often get in the way of completing homework for students with disabilities and a large body of literature have documented these (Axelrod, et al., 2009; Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Bryan, Burstein & Bryan, 2001; Soderlund & Bursuck, 1995). Lerner and Johns

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(2012) posited that many students with learning disabilities are passive learners and they develop learned helplessness in response to their past failures. Their passivity and acquired learned helplessness is compounded with their inability in developing study habits such as planning and completing long term and long range projects, which has to be completed at home in the form of homework tasks. Kuffman (2013) noted that it is often assumed that these students have acquired these independent study habits to complete such tasks. However, these skills must be explicitly taught across content areas, particularly as part of their transition from high school to college life (Connor, 2012).

Students' perception of homework also becomes a barrier for their completion of homework. Bryan and Nelson (1994) in a survey of elementary and junior high students with disabilities reported their perception of homework being too difficult to complete without encountering problems. These students also perceived themselves to have more problems completing homework than their classmates without disabilities. Additionally, others are stigmatized by their peers who are non-disabled (Bryan et al., 2001).

Studies have documented personal deficits faced by students with disabilities such as the lack of poor organizational skills and procrastination (Axelrod et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2001; 2004; Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi & Cumblad, 1994; Polloway et al., 1992; Roderique, Polloway, Cumblad, Epstein & Bursuck, 1994). They lack the organizational skills such as recording assigned homework task given by the teacher, as well as organizing time to do the assigned task, putting it in a safe place, as well as motivation and distractibility problems (Bryan et al., 2001; Polloway et al., 1992).

Those who experience memory deficits may not remember to do the assignments; they may forget where they have placed the completed task or forget to give it to the teacher (Bryan &

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Burstein, 2004; Bryan et al., 2001). Some are more likely to procrastinate and some who have short spans of attention require constant reminders to do the homework task. They also require support while performing the homework task, as having someone in the room while they perform the homework task. Additionally, they are easily distracted and may daydream while attempting to perform the specific task (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Polloway et al., 1992). Others experience language and lack the skills to comprehend what is being asked in the homework task, while others may lack the skills in recording the assigned task and communicating this to their parents (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Bryan et al., 2001).

Academic deficits has also been documented in the literature as a barrier for homework completion in students with disabilities. For example, Bryan et al. (2001) documented academic deficits experienced by students with learning disabilities that interfere with homework and their ability to do grade level homework assignment at home. These include problems decoding, spelling, reading language deficits, problem comprehending, writing as well as problems in math.

### **Homework Remedies for Students with Disabilities**

Despite the wide debate and various analyses regarding the benefits of homework on student performance, studies have shown without question that homework has played an important part, and continues to play a vital role, in our educational practice (Patton et al., 2001). Homework improves student academic achievement and reinforces their learning (Patton, 1994; Trammel & Schloss, 1994). Consequently the significance of homework certainly merits concern for teachers and parents in identifying effective strategies that will enhance and support timely and accurate completion (Madaus, Kehle, Madaus & Bray, 2003). While there may not be any “remedies” for homework problems experienced by students with disabilities, a look at some of

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the interventions and studies may be useful in identifying some practices that may be adopted to assist these students in homework performance. The research documented from studies reveals the systematic efforts to address homework interventions in five broad categories: classroom techniques, group contingencies, self-management and self-monitoring, parental involvement and home-school communication and collaboration.

The first broad category, classroom techniques, embraces research-based interventions and considers student-centered learning strategies that may be employed to enhance and facilitate homework completion and performance. The term is used in the context of the various acceptable educational practices, strategies and adaptations used by teachers in supporting and encouraging homework completion and accuracy. Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1997) reported the positive results of the use of classroom techniques. These included: the use of reinforcement for homework completion; graphing homework completed, “real-life” assignments designed to assist students to connect classwork to out of classroom daily home routines and other home and community activities. These real life assignments involved homework tasks which were completed by students in the natural environment which incorporated tasks such as learning to tell the time by making a note on the clock regarding the beginning and ending of their favorite show. Other tasks involved estimating the amount of paint needed to paint their bedroom walls and determining the cost of the paint from local paint stores. Interviewing family and community members with the purpose of obtaining information about their experiences during major events for example earthquakes and issues affecting the community were part of the study. Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1997) confirmed a significant increase in homework completion and performance in mathematics and spelling tests as a result of these strategies. They also



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documented the positive effects of homework planners made by students on homework completion and performance.

The second broad category group contingencies is an alternative to individual contingencies and can be classified as independent, interdependent and dependent contingencies and are effective in managing some students' behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2013; Litow & Pumroy, 1975; Lynch et al., 2009). Studies have demonstrated the positive effect in utilizing individual and group contingencies in enhancing the overall homework performance with accuracy in students with disabilities (i.e., Olympia, Sheridan, Jenson & Andrews, 1994; Ryan & Hemmes, 2005).

In an independent group contingency, the criteria are similar for all members of the group however, reinforcements are based in individual performances. In an interdependent group contingency, behavioral criteria is defined for the entire and reinforcements are based on the performance as a group. Consequently, each member's consequence depends on the group's performance. In a dependent group contingency, the class reinforcement is based on the performance of one student or a group of students (Alberto & Troutman, 2013).

Lynch et al. (2009) reported success when all three group contingencies were utilized in improving homework completion among fifth grade students in a self-contained special education classroom. Students were reinforced for completing homework accurately with rewards such as stickers, couch time, extra recess time, and points towards a pizza party.

Self-management, the third broad category, has been documented in the literature by researchers as changing one's behavior by applying a behavior modification tactics and is an easily accessible technique that can be used to assist students with disabilities with homework performance and completing homework. A desired change in behavior is necessary as an

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indicator of self-management (Cooper, Heron & Heward, 2007). Axelrod et al. (2009) noted that self-management can be used especially students who have attention problems, problems organizing and competing work independently. They claimed that self-regulation interventions “are designed to teach students to maintain control of their own behavior” (p. 326). They are also used to achieve “quick and dramatic improvements in on-task behavior for students with impairing attention problems” (Axelrod et al., 2009, p. 331).

One specific self-management strategy was successfully tested by Hughes, Ruhl, Suhumaker and Deshler (2002), involved teaching students with disabilities skills for completing homework independently. The strategy involved listening for and recording as assignment correctly; planning the amount of time needed to complete the given assignment; identifying the required material; soliciting help when needed and monitoring progress.

Self-monitoring was employed by some researchers (e.g. Axelrod et al., 2009; Cooper et al., 2007; Falkenberg & Barbetta, 2013; Fish & Mendola, 1986; Patton, Jolivette, & Ramsey, 2006). This self-management strategy is often considered key to cognitive-behavioral social skills training, as a multistep approach of students observing and recording their own behavior (Crum, 2004; Patton et al., 2006). It involves components such as self-talk and self and teacher-reinforcement (Mace, Belfiore, & Hutchinson, 2001; Cooper et al., 2007). Self-monitoring is a key step towards independence and this happens when students take responsibility for their own behavior (Falkenberg & Barbetta, 2013; Porter, 2002; Vaughn, Bos & Schumm, 2000). The advantages of teaching students with disabilities self-monitoring include, providing prompt feedback on their behavior, actively engaging students in improving their behavior, teaching them to rely less on adults or other peers to assist in controlling their behaviors (Falkenberg & Barbetta, 2013).

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A fourth broad category identified in the literature is parental involvement. Tasks assigned to students to be completed at home, are typically supervised by parents (Jayanthi, Bursuck, Epstein & Polloway, 1997). Parental involvement is therefore an intricate element in the homework completion and performance especially with students who have disabilities. In fact, parental involvement is often correlated with higher levels of academic achievement, lower dropout rates and improved school attendance (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollock & Rock, 1986).

An increase in grades was shown when parents of gifted students with disabilities were taught how to use family home planners (Sah & Borland, 1989). A study conducted by Hampshire et al. (2011) further proved the positive gains in homework performance in students with autism spectrum disorder, when a combination of self-management and parent participation was utilized. This study emphasized the importance of parental involvement in the completion of homework routines. The positive effects more specifically, providing training to parents to equip them with skills to help their children with homework, has also been documented in other studies (e.g., Vinograd-Bausell, Bausell, Proctor & Chandler, 1986; Sah & Borland, 1989; Callahan, Rodemacher & Hildreth, 1998).

Consideration of the fifth broad category, home-school communication and collaboration, includes the use of technology, frequent communication and parent-teacher meetings. Adopting new methods and strategies to reach our digital generation requires innovation and the use of new technologies. Use of the internet is becoming synonymous to good classroom practice, and can be used to bridge the communications divide between teachers and parents. These two tools can also be utilized at the convenience of students and in individualizing homework for students with disabilities. Teachers considering using the internet may utilize it to share homework policies and practices with parents (Salend, et al., 2004; Kay, Fitzgerald & Paradee, 1994). They

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can be used to individualize assignments and, as the authors explained, the internet can make an effective instructional tool when educators, “individualize assignments and make them meaningful to students’ educational program” (Salend et al., 2004, p. 67). This type of differentiation can be achieved by varying the length of the online assignment, the content and purpose of the assignment; extending time lines and utilizing alternate evaluation strategies to meet the needs of learners (Patton, 1994). Other positive uses of technology and the internet includes the ability for students to create authentic and innovative assignments, having the freedom to submit these online as well as receiving immediate feedback. This by no doubt, fosters positive reinforcement, motivates and provides meaningful experiences for students and parents alike (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1997).

### **The Role of Teachers in Homework Performance**

An issue as debatable as homework cannot only be solved from a remedial standpoint in terms of classroom practices, but must also be addressed in light of teacher beliefs, perspectives and the individual role that they play in assisting students with disabilities perform homework tasks. Although it may not be considered a direct remedy, the teachers’ role includes their perceptions about homework, as well as the quality of support in implementing homework practices is worth considering.

Teachers’ beliefs and perspectives regarding homework affects students performing and completing homework tasks, and the impact of differing perspectives and beliefs are often reflected in the disparity of homework practices in students. Bryan and Burstein (2004) for example, opined that “homework assignments are based on their preferences of individual teachers” (p. 218). This supports the conclusions of other researchers regarding teachers and educators’ perspectives, beliefs and responsibilities regarding homework (e.g., Epstein, Munk,

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Bursuck, Polloway & Jayanthi, 1999; Buck & Bursuck, 1996; Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Bryan et al., 2001). The research documented as in the following discourse demonstrates the vital role of teachers in supporting effective homework practices through a solid knowledge-base of homework strategies, their ability to implement as well evaluate their practices.

While the problem of homework performance may be related to the perspectives and beliefs of some teachers, the issue for others, lies within the limitation of their knowledge and their ability to employ effective strategies to address the homework issue (Bryan & Burstein, 2004). Other researchers argue that that some teachers are not trained in creating effective homework assignments (Bennet & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). The literature directly and indirectly delineates some valuable techniques and practices that may be applied and seen in light of the importance role that teachers play in homework performance.

McNary, Glasgow and Hicks (2005) noted that teachers can maximize the effectiveness of homework by utilizing research-tested strategies and accommodations. Firstly, teachers need to be committed to developing and implementing self-management interventions. Bryan et al. (2001) argued that “attention, metacognitive, and organizational problems have been implicated as root causes of failure to complete homework assignments” (p. 175). Teaching students to self-monitor and self-regulate therefore empowers them to become independent and fosters on task behaviors during homework, as well as an increase in on-time homework submission particularly in students with behavioral problems (Axelrod et al., 2009).

The second role of teachers in homework performance relates to the actual homework assignments given to students. Teachers must ensure that they develop and assign real-life assignments. Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1997) in a study involving elementary teachers for

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two years, focused on testing the effectiveness of teacher-selected homework strategies. They noted that students with disabilities were able to connect class work to home routines.

Teachers must thirdly teach homework strategies directly and evaluate these for their effectiveness. Self-management strategies such as graphing, use of home planners, use of technology to keep track of homework, use of self-monitoring packages such as KidTools, a free software program have been found effective with students with disabilities and most likely may be valuable in increasing homework performance and accuracy (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Falkenberg & Barbetta, 2013). Other considerations in this regard include ensuring that homework assignments are at students' level of difficulty as it relates to content and load (Bryan et al., 2001; Patton et al., 2001) and ensuring that assigned homework is evaluated for relevance and is presently clearly (Polloway et al., 1992; Patton et al., 2001).

The fourth role involves communication and collaboration between teachers and parents regarding homework performance and accuracy in students with disabilities. These two considerations have been thoroughly addressed in the literature (Jayanthi, Nelson, Sawyer, Bursuck, & Epstein, 1995; Patton et al., 2001; Polloway et al., 1992; Soderlund & Bursuck, 2011). For example, Soderlund and Bursuck (1995) proposed the need for improved communication between teachers and parents with students with behavioral problems, because of the nature of homework as an activity which must be completed at home under the parents' supervision.

Patton et al. (2001) opined that, "home-school collaboration can have many faces" (p. 227). They explained that one side of this collaboration involves specific focuses such as dealing with students' behavioral problems, and other sides involve accomplishing tasks that are more general yet critical such as working with students and finding ways to help them in

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accomplishing homework. They articulated four types of home-school collaboration techniques which includes parent-teacher conferencing, telephone contracts, written communication, and parent groups. Parent-teacher conferencing was described as a common method of collaboration that has three purposes. These include administrative purposes for example, dealing with eligibility or administration issues, conference resulting in a crisis, for example when dealing with problem behaviors and conferences addressing routine reporting of students' performance. They also identified written communication as the commonly used technique through note writing or a progress report. Patton et al. (2001) contend that despite the wide use of email to convey messages, some teachers face the dilemma of some parents unable to access these notes because they are unable to access related technologies. Consequently, they recommend the old fashioned written note to communicate information to parents or to inquire about problems regarding students. Traditional telephone conversations was recommended as the third form of communication. The researchers claim that telephone calls to parents are usually evoked in times of crisis and in communicating important information. Parent meetings in and on-going school-parent collaboration also increases communication between the school and the home.

Communication and collaboration between the special education and general education teachers also plays a critical role in establishing homework policies and utilizing techniques to support homework performance by students with disabilities (Roderique et al., 1994) and is perhaps at the heart of homework performance. Bryan et al. (2001) noted that teachers outlined the importance of this kind of collaboration in addition to having a planning period during the day where both the special and general education teacher can share homework related information such as adaptations and flexibility with assigning homework for students with disabilities.

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### Discussion

The history of homework can be dated as far back as the early 1900s and the relevance of homework on student performance has been widely debated (Patton et al., 2001). Students with disabilities are likely to face many challenges as our educational system attempts to adopt new learning standards. One of the challenges includes the expectation to complete significant amounts of difficult homework assignments aimed at providing students with opportunities to master concepts as part of the general curriculum. This paper sought to outline some of the homework difficulties experiences by this group of students and some of possible research-based practices that may be used to address this problem.

A detailed analyses regarding the role of the teacher was also presented based on literature. A general consensus exists in the literature which indicates that homework performance in students with disabilities is influenced by, teacher-practices, the perceptions and attitudes of teachers as well their ability to communicate effectively with each other and with parents (e.g., Bryan et al., 2001; Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Buck et al., 1996; Epstein et al., 1999; Patton et al., 2001; Polloway et al., 1992; Soderlund & Bursuck, 2011). Additional influencers of homework performance was student related, such as personal deficits, lack of techniques and strategies to compete homework (e.g., Axelrod, et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2001; Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Lerner, 2012; Polloway et al., 1992; Roderique et al., 1994; Soderlund et al., 1995).

The majority of intervention studies were successful in demonstrating techniques and strategies that increased homework performance of students with disabilities (e.g., Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein, 1997; Callahan et al., 1998; Olympia et al., 1994; Paschal et al., 1984; Ryan & Hemmes, 2005; Sah & Borland, 1989; Trammel & Schloss, 1994). Effective communication between teachers and parents was found to be a major part of this solution. Teaching students



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techniques was also widely documented in many intervention studies as a probable potential of increasing their homework performance, as well as employing classroom techniques and strategies. The role of teachers was also a general theme in addressing this issue. It must be noted however, that no one strategy or remedy may work in isolation, but rather used a combination of strategies based on the needs of students.

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