

The value of homework

By Melinda Collins

Homework, or tasks which teachers assign to students to be completed outside of school hours, persists as a controversial aspect of our education system. Whether homework aids students and how much homework is appropriate, has been debated for many years.

While some educators support homework for its value in reinforcing daily learning and fostering the development of study skills, backlash against the practice has been developing since the 1990s.

Those who condemn homework point to the fact that research on the topic has produced inconsistent findings and argue that its impact on achieving is, at best, unclear. But until research is able to give a quantifiable answer as to whether homework is beneficial to students, it is a decision schools are having to take into their own hands.

The debate has again reached the media with a number of Wellington schools scrapping traditional homework methods. This year Karori Normal School stopped providing homework sheets for pupils, instead urging parents to be more involved in their child's learning.

Principal Diane Leggett suggests pupils read comics and model aeroplane instructions, anything the child is interested in will provide more benefit than homework ever will, she says in a letter to parents.

The move was followed by Ngāio and Seatoun schools and backed by Auckland University Professor

John Hattie. His study into what works in schools to improve learning concludes the part homework plays in a child's learning is minimal, to say the least.

Published in 2008 and titled Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement, it is believed to be the largest evidence-based study in the world into what works for students and was the result of 15 years of research into the influences on achievement in school-aged students.

Hattie suggests homework makes little difference to student achievement, so little that in fact any learning taken from the practice "would happen anyway," the impact being so slight:

That is not to say homework is harmful to learning, simply it is of no benefit, he says.

What is harmful, he notes, is watching television more than 10 hours a week, which regresses learning.

Hattie suggests that home factors like parental involvement and the availability of computers and books at home make a measurable difference. But what makes the biggest overall difference to a student's learning, he says, is when the students set their own goals and targets.

One of New Zealand's most prolific authors, William Taylor, spent 26 years teaching New Zealand's students and maintains homework is of no benefit.

"I have always thought most homework set for kids is a waste of time. All I ever required from kids was they have a book they could read a little from in their own time or immerse themselves in fully, they browse a page of a daily newspaper or magazine and listen to or view a news broadcast - things that simply opened up their minds to the world around them.

"I never minded what they were reading, providing they were reading."

