Reforming homework: Practices, learning and policy - Mike Horsley and Richard Walker

Homework has always been a fraught and controversial topic for students, educators, parents, and policy makers. Horsley and Walker tackle the topic head-on, covering all angles with a comprehensive, research-based focus. At the outset, the authors acknowledge that “it is difficult to assess what proportion of educators, parents and students are strongly opposed to homework and what proportion are supportive of it” (p. 5).

Reforming homework systematically answers the following three questions (p. 10):

1. Is homework beneficial for student achievement outcomes?
2. Does homework help to develop the skills of independent, self-directed learning in students?
3. Is parental involvement in their children’s homework activities beneficial for achievement, motivation and the development of independent learning skills?

The major complicating factor when studying the pedagogy, practice and assessment of homework is the number of variables at play, including: student characteristics, homework effort, time spent on homework, learning strategies, expectancy and value components, parental involvement and individual teacher variables. Horsley and Walker work hard to consider these variables individually. The text is broken into solid chapters which address achievement, motivation, sociocultural factors and international comparisons. Chapters 5-10 concentrate on reforming homework with implications for students, teachers, parents, online support, equity, and policy.

Despite the diversity of variables and research findings, Horsley and Walker attempt to provide summaries and recommendations from each chapter, including helpful checklists where relevant. Their overall findings are that “homework has no achievement benefits for students up to grade 3, negligible benefits for students in grades 4-6, weak benefits for students in grades 7 to 9, and reasonable benefits for students in grades 10 to 12” (p. 10).

There are mixed findings about the amount of time students spend on homework and achievement outcomes; however it is clear that more student time spent on homework does not equate to higher achievement outcomes. Parental involvement in homework “can be both beneficial and detrimental for student achievement and motivation” (p. 10). A key statement from Reforming Homework summarises many areas succinctly; “it is individual students themselves who will ultimately decide what they will learn from homework” (p. 120).

A refreshing idea raised in Reforming homework is implications for equity and inclusion. This means the “development of specific accommodation for ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, special education, and learning-disabled and physically disabled students” (p. 195). The authors recommend evaluating and auditing how different homework practices may advantage some students and disadvantage others at the individual school level. There are practical steps that can be taken to provide scaffolding and assistance to overcome socioeconomic and ethnic diversity factors that may lead to disadvantage. Horsley and Walker conducted research into after-school homework study and learning centres for
Pacific Islander students in Sydney and helped to develop culturally responsive homework practices.

There is little doubt that *Reforming homework* is a valuable and thought-provoking text. Horsley and Walker leave no stone unturned in their comprehensive analysis of homework pedagogy, practice and assessment. It is a timely text for educators, as many homework policies and practices in schools may well need reforming and improving. Educators may dip into chapters of the book which are relevant for their school, or use the checklists to perform a succinct analysis. The text sweeps readers across international homework studies down to national homework policies and school-level vignettes. *Reforming homework* is an excellent addition to every school’s resource and research base.