

Parents' Open Meeting

- An open invitation to attend a meeting was given to all parents in order to discuss the policy on the work and activities sent home by the school.
- The meeting was held on 23rd October 2014 in the Staff room.
- 27 parents were in attendance ranging from Reception to Yr 6.
- Claire Jackman (CJ) led meeting, Libby Kemkaran-Thompson (LKT) taking minutes and consultation / collation of research.

Current Research

CJ opened meeting with explanation of what reports have shown on the subject of homework (HW) set for Primary children. **There is no proof that primary children given HW gain any academic benefit.** One study has shown only a minimal advancement in previous achievement. All other studies conducted to this date suggest no clear benefit, and instead suggest that HW may actually harm children. The Journal of Educational Psychology published a study that showed that the more HW set in early childhood, the more likely there is to be a negative experience to learning and negative association to schooling for the child. **Homework can also reduce the positive interactions that parents have with their children** - effectively turning them into 'homework cops'.

Sutton Trust Report¹ shows that greater gains in academic achievement come from:

- **Peer tutoring/support**
- **Peer assisted learning/ learning from each other (+6months potential gain)**

Current research also shows only that

- Primary HW gives a gain of a maximum of only 1month to primary academic achievement i.e. academic level advanced only from age 6 yrs 7 months, to age 6yrs 8months
- HW doesn't necessarily help with either the love of learning or, the actual ability to learn
- Whilst HW is shown at secondary level to be performed in successful schools, it is still not known if the school is successful because of the HW, or because of other socio-economic factors and the HW is irrelevant. **"The research strongly suggests that it is more valuable at secondary school level and much less effective for children of primary school age."**¹

Parent Survey of Opinions and Feedback

A survey on HW and the effects on the child and family unit was designed and given out to all parents at the end of the 2013/2014 academic year (appendix i).

From the survey respondents it was clear that parents like to know what the children are doing in school and believe HW is the tool to enable them to gain this information. However, HW doesn't always reflect what happens in class as teachers can't always send home the work the children are actually working on, it may instead be 'safe' activities because the school can't risk work not coming back, or, the child failing without correct support/guidance available.

There is also the issue of school providing a standardised learning environment, whereas there is no control over the environment/time/parental input provided to children when working at home. Therefore any HW provided may be activities that are 'off to one side' of their normal classwork. **These may not be of the same level, depth or focus as the school-work so cannot be said to be reflective of what takes place in the classroom.**

CJ referenced research from **The Education and Endowment Foundation²** which clearly states that

- **"Overall, homework in primary schools does not appear to lead to large increases in learning"**
- **"Effective homework is associated with greater parental involvement and support and can be developed to increase parental engagement"**.
- **"Short focused tasks or activities which relate directly to what is being taught, and which are built upon in school, are likely to be more effective than regular daily homework"**

The group then discussed the difference between doing HW with children as opposed to doing it for them, all agreed that **there is very rarely a HW assignment given that a child can do on their own** without some guidance or assisted research.

- o Examples included 'Make a booklet/leaflet/poster comparing the Normans and Celts - look at their clothing, homes, food and work' (given to year 3 to complete at home in May during their half term holiday 2014). Given that these time periods are 500yrs apart, **it is unlikely that a 7yr old would have the analytical skills/work ethic to both research and then pull together the data required by this sort of work without parental input at every stage in the process.**
- o It is also unlikely that valid conclusions can be drawn by the child without the parent discussing and detailing each step. It was acknowledged that not every parent was comfortable providing this level of support/teaching, but had grown accustomed to doing so as to complain may result in the child being 'singled out' by suggesting they couldn't complete what their peers might be completing on their own.

This also then leads to HW being subject to the 'competitive parent' effect with the risk of parents being the ones to come up with the bulk of the ideas/manage them to completion rather than the child. The making of a rocket from recyclable materials was a good example of this with several present mentioning **extreme efforts by parents rather than the child!**

Survey responses confirmed this with **88% of parents confirming that they need to help or guide their child at some stage to complete the HW sent home** (39 of total respondents of 44). Additionally, as most research is internet based, the survey respondents also indicated that as **71% don't let their child on the internet alone**, all research is therefore also performed or guided by the parents. This was thought to be too much time and effort for work that is given out purely for the child to have HW to do. The question then has to be asked - **why inflict this on the family unit, as it will take up a large amount of holiday / non-school time and only provide minimal benefit for the child?**

Several parents present expressed they would rather spend the time doing meaningful and more helpful tasks with the child, and do tasks that had proven academic benefit. Survey response N31 a parent of a 6yr and 8yr old at the school notes *"I think my children would find it much more beneficial to have less homework so they can concentrate on times tables, spelling, and reading. As homework is at the moment we really do not have time to spend on the basics. Which are going to help them far more in the long term?"*

Discussion about how to give parents better involvement and clarity on children's work ensued - CJ suggested sending class books home rather than just seeing them once termly at the parents' meetings. CJ to discuss with class teachers.

Further discussion ensued regarding the purpose of HW - agreed HW doesn't prepare for secondary school as both the level and the amount are very different. **Therefore it seems that HW should only be given if it can be shown to directly benefit the child now**, rather than 'to get them prepared for secondary level.' The only exception to this could be pupils in Yr 6.

CJ referenced other indicators for academic achievement in age group 3-12yrs - a large study in 2001 indicated that **families that sit to eat their meals together** is the biggest single predictor in higher achievement and fewer behavioural issues. Also children choosing to **read for pleasure** - active readers are proven to be more advanced, and reading a nightly story is a big indicator of a child being more likely to read for pleasure. More worryingly, **reading for pleasure was found to sharply decline aged 8yrs "due to the time demands of too much homework"**³.

Child Survey of Opinion and Feedback

CJ detailed the recent survey given to the children (in class and on DB Primary) at the beginning of academic year 2014/2015 regarding HW after it was decided to canvass opinion of the children. The questions related to how HW made them feel and what benefit they thought it gave them (appendix ii). Respondents showed approx. **70% have cried over homework** - this would be considered a very high figure if it related to any other school activity.

In response to a question 'Do you argue with your parents about homework?' there was a variety of responses. One respondent in Yr 6 replied ***"When my Mum says different to what I have learnt at school"***. This is a valid point which was also raised by the Parent Survey. Additionally the parents when asked Q5 'What do you think your child suffers as a result of homework set?' answered with a variety of comments relating to how stressed the child can get about doing the HW, and the lost family time. N18 replied: ***"Too much pressure at too young an age. Not enough play and family time. On more life related stuff and not enough fun."***

During this discussion the question was asked - how do teachers react to a pupil not doing HW? Several parents present responded - there is no actual 'punishment' and yet in the past **the name of the child gets written on the board so it's visible to all the class, and they may be asked to complete the work in their break time.** Whilst this is not punitive, CJ suggested this obviously causes shame, anxiety and stress for the child, which would lead to removing any excitement and creativity surrounding the activity. Losing break time is also detrimental.

Child respondents to the survey showed a preference for creative tasks e.g. finding out or measuring things or bake a cake rather than just pure academic as HW. Only 1 child in the entire school replied that they didn't want more creative tasks as HW.

Note - Some of the responses may have been biased towards compliant/polite responses ('I love homework - it helps us learn') as it was a school based and named questionnaire.

Work Life balance

The majority of parents surveyed felt that HW increases family conflict (52%) and that **there is not enough time to complete HW as well as fit in after school clubs and weekend activities (62%).**

This is in contrast to what perhaps is the ultimate goal for all HW - benefits to the child: "Homework activities in primary years shouldn't be at expense of playtime, downtime, and family time, all elements required for a healthy and happy childhood"³

N32, a parent of 2 children at the school responded:

"I really struggle with the amount of homework given as they both need (and I want to give them) a lot of support"... "Two lots of spellings, Times tables, maths, reading, written homework... can be very stressful for us all"... "Homework at primary school can be a good way of introducing older pupils to the ethic of home study. If the volume of it starts affecting family life then the benefits are far outweighed by negative connotations"

Other parents detailed how they would return from a holiday at half term, only to have to wake the children up early in order to then complete the homework set before going in to school on the Monday morning.

N44 a parent of a 6yr and 10yr old responded ***"I have witnessed the effects on children & family life of a heavy homework schedule and ultimately all it meant is that you mark the parent's efforts."***

There is also the issue of setting up children from an early age to believe that life is about bringing work home, and that work/life balance must always fall in favour of work. N32 responds ***"Family time suffers as for us both parents work so invariably the only time homework can be done is on a Sunday, our only family day"***.

Comparison to other schools

Several parents asked in the meeting if there were any other schools doing this. It was then discussed whether we should be comparing ourselves to e.g. Felsted school. Ofsted were mentioned and CJ will be talking to the School Governors and addressing overall policy. However we must do what suits the learning of our children.

Summary

Feedback from the Parent Survey, Child Survey and Open Meeting would suggest that more focused HW is beneficial to the family unit.

Professor Hallam of the University of London's Institute of Education has studied research on HW going back 75yrs and writes: ***"Teachers need to ask themselves, 'Is this going to make a real contribution to the learning of these children? Why are they doing it? What is the purpose of it?' If they've got a good reason- 'Ah they need to improve their reading' and think reading with parents will help, then by all means do it"***⁴.

CJ - In March 2012 the government scrapped the guidelines on how much HW to set. In the Times Educational Supplement (TES) an article was published in April 2012 detailing the lack of benefit to primary school pupils of regular HW, and therefore leaving the amount/type of HW set entirely up to the school.

Other world views on HW relating to achievement: There is no clear link to HW providing better academic achievement worldwide. **Japan banned homework at primary level in 90s** to allow children more time with family and their own interests - and yet they are academically one of the highest achievers in the world. **Finland has minimal HW** (only 30mins at senior school level) and yet they are also one of the highest achievers on international academic testing. **Denmark has piloted homework-free schools resulting in a reported fall in dropout rates and a rise in overall grades.**

The Future for Great Easton Primary School

Since the beginning of the academic year 2014-2015 the school has begun to not set formal homework assignments in a trial to see how this affected family time. The reaction from parents was assessed at this meeting and the response was found to be overwhelmingly favorable. Many cited having found their families **able to spend more time on essential tasks such as practicing times tables**, once their time wasn't eroded by completing other HW assignments. Other parents reported **more time for open discussion and 'general knowledge'**. This was felt to be far more beneficial than the previous assignments. One parent writes:

"I have found we have had more time to chat about my child's day, with the opportunity to act upon things that have been of interest and follow up. This child led learning has meant we have explored ideas, craft work, iPad research, visits, which has stimulated my child further e.g. looking up meanings in dictionary of new words introduced, creative play, imaginary play, cooking, planting, lots of discussions. I feel a positivity to additional learning from my child, which has involved me in supporting school work, and things that interest my child. After-school learning has become quality time in a non-tiring non-stressful way"..."because it is child-led, sustains interest and positive learning outcomes."**

Ideas generated from Parent Meeting

- The importance of children being happy to explore learning rather than feeling stressed and pressured was discussed. Could the same project/topic be set across the school with all years doing the same investigations but at different levels? This could result in e.g. discussion in assembly/sharing knowledge/children talk about it to each other.

- Discussion items e.g. promote the type of parent/child interaction that can just be a chat about a topic or concept in the car on way to after-school clubs, this would mean not having to be in the shed having to build things over half term! This also gives more time to be exposed to general knowledge and just follow things of interest to the child.
- Use DB primary more to provide a forum to begin discussion and peer learning.
- Discussed the option of an after-school 'Prep Club' where all HW can be completed BEFORE the child goes home e.g. Miss Miles runs after school club, supported learning/tuition, after school for 1hr. This has been done before, but it leaves some parents feeling bad as HW is then taken away from them - they won't opt to join, can't then tell some kids they're not allowed to come.
- Mild medium spicy - work pitched at 3 different levels but all working on same i.e. times tables but different children will self-challenge as there is no pressure applied externally, they don't need to go for top level but mindset is open to the child trying and there is no chance of failure as self set.

References:

1. Sutton Trust: Toolkit of Strategies to Improve Learning by Professor Steve Higgins
2. Education Endowment Foundation.
<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/homework/>
3. Article by Michelle Higgins - 2012 - What is the Value of Homework? Research and Reality.
4. Article by Helen Ward - 2012 - Out-of-school fuel for young minds. Published in TES. <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6204355>

Appendix i - Questionnaire given to Parents

Appendix ii - Questionnaire given to Children

Appendix i

Homework Assessment

Feedback please!

We are assessing the needs of the entire school for after-school homework, now is the time to have your thoughts heard. Please reply to this - it is all anonymous and we will only be counting the number of responses to each question, not trying to guess who it is, so please be completely open with your thoughts!

Q1/ Ages of any children at Great Easton Primary School.....

Q2/ What do you think of the **amount** of homework given?

In term time?.....

In holiday time?.....

Q3/ Do you think there is a clear **benefit** from the homework given-

Maths?.....

English?.....

Spellings?.....

Other?.....

Q4/ What do you think is the purpose of homework at this age? What do you think your child has **gained** from doing homework at this age?.....

Q5/ What do you think your child suffers as a result of the homework set?.....

Q7/ Do you think we should be comparing the amount of homework set at e.g. **Felsted School** against the amount set here?.....

Please mark these statements, either **Agree**, **Strongly Agree**, **Disagree**, **Strongly Disagree** (only tick one box per question):

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My child enjoys homework				
My child is able to complete EVERY piece of homework by themselves, without any guidance from me or another adult				
I let my child research on the internet on their own				
I let my child research in the library on their own				
I let my child research on their own from books we have at home				
I feel primary schools should set homework				
I feel they should have homework every week				
I feel they should have homework in the holidays				
I feel children benefit at this age from doing homework				
I feel homework can help build good study skills				
My child learns study skills from the current homework				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I like doing homework with my child				
I feel my child benefits from me guiding them through the homework				
I feel with the current homework there is plenty of time to support: - Reading alone or together - Basic maths skills like number-bonds - Times tables practice				
I feel there is not enough time to fit in homework as well as after school clubs and weekend extra-curricular activities				
I feel that homework increases family conflict				
I feel there is too much emotional pressure put on the children to				

complete homework.				
I feel unable to support my child				
I feel unhappy supporting my child in their current homework				
I feel the level of parental input and support/time needed for the current homework is too much				

Q8/ How would you feel if we were to **change homework** to have more emphasis on reading, basic number bonds, times table knowledge and principles of spelling? Would you be in favour or not?.....

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Q9/ **Any further additional comments** (please expand on any answers above - use separate sheet to continue if you run out of room!):

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Q10/ Please give your name here **only** if you would like to discuss further and be part of a focus group, we will contact you to arrange a time for feedback. (Alternatively you can submit comments which we can include in the focus group).....

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Thank you for your help, we will circulate the results as our new homework policy in the Autumn term.

Claire Jackman and all the staff at Great Easton

Pupil Voice Questionnaire - Homework

1. Do you enjoy homework?
2. Why do you think we have homework?
3. If you could choose whether to do homework - would you?
4. What are your favourite types of homework?
5. Do your parents help you?
6. Do you think your parents should help you?
7. Does your homework improve your learning?
8. When and where do you do your homework?
9. How often do you read and for how long?
10. Does someone read you a story at home?
11. How do you practise your times tables at home?
12. Would you enjoy building, making a cake or finding something outside as type of homework?
13. Do you argue with your parents?
14. How do you practise your spellings at home?
15. Have you cried about your homework?
16. Does it make you love learning?
17. Any suggestions as to how we could make homework better?