**Home work or home school connection?**

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“Sometimes, I feel anxious while coming to school,” says primary school student Sadia. Upon asking her why she feels this way, she says: “On days when I haven’t done my homework, I feel anxious coming to school.”

With school re-closure in Pakistan, the government is urging students to spend the extended winter vacation doing homework, with the Punjab Minister for School Education Dr Murad Raas claiming that homework will be graded and used for promotions. In light of these announcements, it is worth investigating whether or not continuing to assign traditional homework is the best possible use of student time.

Kralovec and Buell claim that “The belief in the value of homework is akin to faith.” This faith-like belief has been one of the biggest roadblocks that we continue to face in education reform. In our communities, homework is viewed as a ‘common-sense’ practice, and anecdotes from various schools across the country tell us that parents believe that written homework, in particular, provides a competitive advantage to children (presumably over private school students). A recent longitudinal study that investigated the impact of Math homework found it to have limited benefits for students, especially in elementary school. Similarly, a review of 116 studies from around the world demonstrated that homework has little to no effect on children’s learning at primary school. Although research at secondary schools has found some benefits of homework, however, these benefits are skewed in favour of higher-SES students. This is because when homework practices (especially the grading of homework) are grounded in logics of merit and deficit, teachers “effectively erase the unequal contexts of homework production” in interpreting students’ work. Thus, even when parents from lower-SES backgrounds want to help their children with homework, they are often prevented from doing so due to factors that lie outside of their control.

[UN chief calls for making 2021 'year of healing'](https://nation.com.pk/29-Dec-2020/un-chief-calls-for-making-2021-year-of-healing)

So, then, why does homework continue to be our one-size-fits-all response to challenges in education?

Homework has always been viewed as a form of “rigor theatre,” i.e. to demonstrate the intensity of the curriculum to all stakeholders. There is a myth about learning that I have found to be prevalent in our communities, as well: “if a teaching/learning experience is too enjoyable it is somehow academically suspect. If it is ‘rigorous,’ or better yet painful, then it must have merit.” We can see evidence of this thinking in our own communities, as several parents often complain to us that all their kids do is come to school, play, and have fun—but where is the learning? Research, however, shows that more homework merely gives the appearance of increased rigor as more time does not always necessitate more learning. One reason for this is that the homework given to children focuses primarily on work reproduction over meaning/sense-making. When students perceive a learning task to have no personal relevance and see no connection between the task and their world, they are often unmotivated to do the task because it is not perceived to be important. Moreover, the association of grading with homework often ends up resulting in frustration and demotivation. Perceiving grading as ‘judgment,’ results in separating students into ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ – a practice which is not only detrimental to learning and motivation, but also results in furthering inequity and social stratification (as it impacts students from lower SES backgrounds in a disproportionate manner).

[US House OKs $2,000 stimulus payments to most Americans](https://nation.com.pk/29-Dec-2020/us-house-oks-dollar-2-000-stimulus-payments-to-most-americans)

Another persistent belief associated with homework is that it promotes responsibility and self-discipline. Our teachers, who themselves are products of the orthodox teacher-centred and rote-learning based model of schooling, also often cite disciplinary concerns in support of providing more written work, claiming that it is easier to maintain classroom behaviour norms if students are engaged in writing activities. Despite the fact that this belief is not backed by any research, many still continue to espouse these virtues. As Vatterott points out, however, “responsibility is often a code word for obedience.” This is associated with the desire to inculcate students with the capitalist work ethic from a young age. The values of the capitalist work ethic, however, have been criticised for not being significant, in and of themselves, but instead being tools that reproduce social stratification. Homework, therefore, is less about responsibility and more about wanting children to become blindly obedient to authority, because if homework really was about responsibility, wouldn’t it make more sense to give children the responsibility of choosing how they want to learn, how they want to demonstrate their learning, or when they would want to receive homework?

[Moroccan diplomats to visit Israel to discuss direct flights, opening offices](https://nation.com.pk/28-Dec-2020/moroccan-diplomats-to-visit-israel-to-discuss-direct-flights-opening-offices)

What can, then, be done in lieu of burdensome written homework, especially as schools close down again?

A recent phone survey done by the Center for Global Development revealed that while schools were closed (during the initial lockdown), 66 percent of the 1,211 surveyed households did not use technology (TV/mobile) for learning. In the wake of this finding, it does seem that homework for the current round of school closures seems to be the way forward. The question, then, becomes about how we can take what we now know about homework and use the practice to cultivate authentic learning experiences?

Since the beginning of this year, I have been working on an intervention that we rolled out across several of our Public-Private Partnership Schools at The Citizens Foundation, whereby we revamped traditional home‘work’ in primary school, and instead focused on sharing relevant Home-School Connection tasks with students. The central aim of such tasks is to bridge the gap between the home and the school, to extend learning beyond the school, to reduce the burden of hours of written work on our students, and to focus on oral literacy skills, conversations, and connections (especially in the first few years of the child’s academic journey). An example of such a task from one of our Urdu units on emotions is: rather than asking students to write something about the topic or to reproduce what has been written in the textbook, we ask them to talk with their parents about the names of the emotions that they learned in class, and to ask them when and why they feel these emotions. Another example from a Math class on measurement is that we ask students to observe food being cooked at home, and try to figure out with a family member, how we can adjust the recipe for a larger number of people.

[7-year-old girl raped, killed in Lahore, culprits held](https://nation.com.pk/28-Dec-2020/7-year-old-girl-raped-killed-in-lahore-culprits-held)

As we design homework/Home-School Connection tasks for students, the most important question that we can ask is: How will this impact learning? Homework can be used to support learning in several ways: pre-learning, checking for understanding, practicing, or processing learning. Our goals in assigning tasks to children during this extended winter break, therefore, need to be clear: both to the educators and to the children. It is equally crucial (especially in primary school) to consider how play and wellbeing can be explicitly incorporated into home learning activities. Brain Breaks, for example, are one way in which we have incorporated joy, play, and movement into our school schedules (students are also asked to lead these activities with various family members at home). The inclusion of meditation and other mindfulness activities also allows students to acknowledge and let their thoughts and feelings come and go in their own time, without getting overwhelmed by them. Such practices are extremely important during times of uncertainty as they allow children to manage their stresses and anxieties, and develop the vital skill of self-regulation. Therefore, if homework has to be a part of our response to the current crisis of learning, we need to focus our attention on creating tasks that curate authentic learning experiences for children that are directly relevant to their lives, while keeping students’ contexts in mind (without falling into the trap of deficit narratives about the children or their families), providing joy and opportunities for play and movement, and focusing on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and student wellbeing.

[Corona virus engulfs 55 more lives](https://nation.com.pk/28-Dec-2020/corona-virus-engulfs-55-more-lives)

At the beginning of 2020, teachers at a public school in Matiari, Sindh recounted how their students were afraid to come to school because they couldn’t complete their homework as their hands were blistered due to working in fields all day long. In the wake of countless such anecdotes and with homework being touted as the way forward for distance learning, we really should pause and ask ourselves: Is it more important that our students learn authentically and cultivate a deep sense of joy while learning, or that we merely give the appearance of increased rigor by providing repetitive, lengthy, and complex tasks for students to do at home? For me, the answer could not be more obvious.