From the Field: Practical Applications of Research

Equity and Elementary School Homework: A Case Study

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Abstract

At the end of a two-year discussion about the value of homework in elementary school, the Seaview district decided to move away from the traditional model of homework, and introduced Wonder, Reading, and Play (WRaP) intended to be more equitable and authentic. A case study was conducted to assess the district's goals for and implementation of more equitable learning through WRaP. The experiences of stakeholders with regard to equity issues revealed success in reading due to an already established culture of reading. Lack of structure, consistency, and accountability in wonder, play, and content areas other than language arts resulted in limited success.

The Seaview school district spent two years discussing the value of homework in elementary school (Cooper, 2007; Cooper et al., 2012; Kohn, 2006b; Weir, 2016). Subsequently, the district decided to move from the traditional model of homework and introduced Wonder, Reading, and Play (WRaP) for the 2018-19 school year, intended to be a more equitable and meaningful way to spend time with family and produce opportunities for authentic learning. A district-wide letter (in Spanish and English) from the superintendent shared research on the ineffectiveness of homework at the elementary level (Hattie, 2014) and the benefits of WRaP. The letter encouraged guardians' involvement in literacy activities, including reading to children in their native language or having children read to them in English.

Attentive to the demographics of the district (59% White, 27% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Black/African American, 4% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 2% Multiracial; 28% Economically Disadvantaged; 5% English Language Learners; 16% Students with Disabilities (New York State Education Department, 2022), in an interview, the superintendent argued for the elimination of traditional homework to serve the principle of equity: Independent reading … automatically differentiates … We want to ensure that the playing field is level in terms of what they can accomplish [at home] regardless of ability and resources. Reading does that in ways that other … assignments do not." If reading was seen as accessible to all families, math was not. Therefore, math would not be the province of families

in the home; rather, it was fairer to leave math to the classroom teachers: "We want practice in Math in school with people who can help them." WRaP activities, more than traditional homework, would help neutralize the disparate socioeconomic statuses, languages, and abilities of students in the district, providing access to and engagement in the curriculum for all students.

Prior to the administration sharing plans with teachers and guardians, an area newspaper reported that the district was rolling out a "No Homework" policy. Thus, the first information about WRaP that circulated was neither from district officials, nor accurate. The resulting confusion was reflected in a teacher's anecdote. Her son's friend (not in Seaview) had packed a bag, come to her door, and asked to please take him to Seaview, where there was no homework.

At the district's request, we conducted a case study of the WRaP program over the 2018-19 academic year. Here, we assess the district's goals for and implementation of more equitable learning through WRaP. Findings suggested success in reading due to an already established culture of reading. Lack of structure, consistency, and accountability in wonder, play, and content areas other than language arts resulted in limited success.

Literature Review

The evidence about the value of homework for elementary students is mixed. Studies show some benefit in students doing homework (Bempechat, 2004; Cooper, 1989; Cooper, 2001; Cooper et al., 2006; Dolean, & Lervag, 2022); others suggest homework may have negative effects (Corno, 1996; Couts, 2004; Holland, et al., 2021; Jackson, 2007; Kohn, 2006a). Myriad factors influence student learning, attitudes, and behaviors in doing homework, which may explain this mixed evidence. Student ability and special needs (Olympia et al., 1994; Oram & Rogers, 2022) are important factors, but so are the quality of homework assignments (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Cooper, 1989, Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001), cultural influences (Chen & Stevenson, 1989;

Martinez, 2011), nature of parent involvement (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Lareau, 2011; Li & Hamlin, 2019), home resources (Krashen, 2005; Lareau, 2011), and parent attitudes toward homework (Warton, 1998; Wu et al., 2022).

Given the nature of these factors, assigning any kinds of activities to be done at home raises the issue of equity. One argument (e.g., Jackson, 2007) is that thoughtfully designed homework is essential to level the playing field -- otherwise how would students without the resources (libraries, museums, educated family, etc.) ever catch up? Others argue (Zalaznick, 2018; Hobbs, 2018) that too many factors (resources, level of parental involvement, student needs and interests) prevent leveling the playing field.

Evidence-based research about homework and equity is scarce. Rønning (2011) explored the heterogeneous impact of homework on Dutch elementary student achievement and found that the test score gap was larger in classes where everyone got homework in comparison to classes where no one got homework. Rønning concluded that homework can amplify existing inequalities through home inputs. While more research is needed to establish whether and how homework might be equitable, the nature, quality, and structure of homework (e.g., Cooper, 1989; Couts, 2004; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001) may be at the heart of the equity issue.

Methodology

To understand the range and diversity of stakeholders' perspectives on WRaP, during the 2018-19 school year, researchers used a case study approach (Yin, 2017). We sought to understand learning environments at the four elementary schools, four WRaP Teacher Committee meetings, two faculty meetings, one parent academy, and two administrator interviews. We obtained documents and artifacts from these meetings; for example, explanations and expectations about WRaP, #SeaviewReads, and book recommendations.

In addition, we conducted two guardian, one teacher, and eight student focus groups (Broström, 2012), composed of first and fourth graders nominated by teachers as representing diverse learners. Invitations for focus groups were sent in English and Spanish. A focus group of principals was canceled due to an emergency. Guardians completed a short survey, as did 98 teachers. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded after obtaining informed consent.

The research team analyzed the data both inductively and deductively. General methods of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) were used to establish inductive codes for all three groups (students, guardians, teachers, administrators), site visit memos, meetings, and artifacts. Data were then triangulated (Flick, 2007; Maxwell, 2013) across participant groups. There was no expectation of consensus among groups. In the descriptive representation of the findings, researchers reviewed the data analysis across all data sources for exemplars of varied perspectives addressing a pattern or theme.

Findings

"I get to read now a lot!"

The overarching goal of WRaP emphasized reading. Students were to see themselves as readers and take pleasure in reading (Lindfors, 2008). Administrators emphasized that strong reading skills are "the #1 predictor of academic achievement" and these skills are developed in "sustained independent reading." The district had established this culture over the years through school and community connections such as Parents as Reading Partners, book fairs, and local business reading enticements ("tell me what you're reading, get a free slice"). Reinforcing the "culture of reading" theme, one administrator noted, "I think if they don't enjoy reading when they're young, it's very difficult to develop that habit as they get older." Family reading "will create enduring memories of reading as an activity that provides comfort and enjoyment."

Stressing equity, the district believed that independent reading at home, which builds vocabulary and meaning, would level the playing field, regardless of students' ability and resources, automatically differentiating. Administrators emphasized the importance of modeling and scaffolding reading in the classroom to help students experience successful reading at home, even if "a student doesn't have a parent at home to support them." An ENL teacher was grateful to be "part of the team, … [supporting] our Spanish families," as they navigated WRaP.

Many guardians supported the reading approach in WRaP. At a school board meeting, they emphasized that their children were reading more at home with less struggle because they were encouraged to read what they wanted and were not doing busy work. A guardian reported that her son, who had not liked "homework," loves WRaP ("I get to read now a lot!"). She added, "now he can sit with a book, and he can get into it." Guardians appreciated the WRaP process as helping with the natural maturing process, not rushing and forcing homework for young students before they are ready, allowing them a chance to be kids.

Essential to the equity focus on reading, all students indicated their autonomy in choosing their reading material. Their attitudes toward reading varied: two boys said they were forced to read while another said, "I just play video games." Other responses included, "I always love to read;" "I don't love to read;" "I read all the time;" "nothing for me is better than reading." Some students believed, especially with non-fiction, "The more you read, the more you're better at it." While one student described the experience of reading 20 minutes each day as "stretching," expanding her mind, a few did not recognize that they were learning "because it's just reading."

"the projects are funner"

Well-designed, open-ended projects can be equitable because they allow students to engage in learning at their own levels, develop knowledge and skills, represent their learning in multimodal ways, and collaborate with peers, resulting in increased learning. This goal of open-endedness was echoed in this administrator's comment:

What does that say to our students if ... they don't get ... a chance to experiment with the things that [they like] to do. Read about something [they're] interested in, do a[n] ... experiment or ... build something or grow something. Those are the Wonder experiences.

Some guardians recognized that students were assigned WRaP projects. For example, "There's a monthly assignment, like a bigger project type thing," but, mostly, guardians discussed their perceptions of WRaP more generally: "The point of it was not that they were going to be assigning specific things because it was more open," "I think it's fantastic that they're doing it this way," and "parents who have kids with IEPs love [non-traditional activities] because their kids struggle all day long."

Students stated their clear preference for projects over traditional homework: "Homework is much more boring, and the projects are funner." Students perceived projects as distinct from homework describing projects as when "you get more extended time." Students were also articulate about their favorite projects and what they learned. Fourth graders described a historical figure museum project in which they all chose whom they wanted to portray by making a board, memorizing a speech, and creating a costume. The student who chose to portray Neil Armstrong described the process: "I read it for myself, then I act like I'm on the news, ... I'll read it to another friend and pretend I got a microphone," implying reading, wonder, and play wrapped into this social studies project. Another student described what they liked about this project, "reading facts, us[ing] photos, backgrounds, animat[ion], gif moving pictures."

In another project assigned, students were asked to create a puppet from paper plates at home; they were asked not to buy objects at a store. One student described what they made as "fun as a store bought toy." Students demonstrated awareness of inequities ("kids are poor ... they can't ... just go to the store and buy their own toys") and displayed autonomy and agency ("instead of having to go to a store and buy things, you can just make things").

Not all assigned projects engaged all students. Students had difficulty recalling the details or were clearly not engaged in some "projects." Some of these challenges included coloring, reading a book about rain while wearing rain boots, completing a project in exchange for points or prizes. Making clear that the reinforcements of prizes and points did not work consistently, one student declared, "My mom said I don't need a prize because I have over 200 toys in my house." The quality of engagement evident in the social studies projects (described above) seemed qualitatively different from students' engagement with some of the other challenges, suggesting that students valued well-structured projects that allowed them to engage in the content and form in a variety of ways.

"no fidelity across the district"

WRaP was conceptualized to facilitate authentic assessment and, thus, support diverse families, by offering open-ended invitations for home learning and assuring that students would not be academically disadvantaged if their guardians could not assist with home activities. Multiple areas of confusion and inconsistency among teachers, guardians, and students suggested that the first-year implementation of WRaP lacked clear communication and accountability around goals and meaningful home activities, limiting the potential for equity. Some teachers provided invitations for reading and active learning. Yet, without a clear home-school connection, guardians and students engaged unevenly with WRaP.

One teacher's experience reflected her frustration with WRaP's accountability inconsistencies: "How can you do project-based learning when nothing comes back from home?" A survey of most (N=98) elementary teachers revealed that the types of work sent home for WRaP varied widely. Only 72% of teachers assigned daily independent reading--the heart of WRaP--and only 14% promoted reading logs. Other assignments (games to promote learning 45%; choice menus 27%; research projects 30%) did not indicate consistency, nor did the 13% of teachers who selected "I don't send work home for WraP." Some students' teachers gave "prizes" and "points" to encourage WRaP completion; others did not discuss WRaP opportunities at all. When discussing Mathematics, teachers were particularly concerned: "The parents need to see models of problems in order to properly question their children and help reinforce concepts." Multiple guardians expressed their discomfort at these inconsistencies, one summing up, "there's no fidelity across the district." Some students loved the reading challenges; others completed them because their parents told them to; some did not complete them. One first grader succinctly expressed the difficulty of understanding what was required and the lack of accountability: "Me and my dad always can't find the WRaP. Poof! It go. We lost it."

The equity gap between the ideal and the practice of WRaP was an expressed concern. Teachers suggested that the same students who were doing traditional homework were picking up on WRaP invitations, while students who needed extra help might not be picking up on those invitations. One guardian commented: "I can imagine that WRaP actually may reduce disparities, [with] … the responsibility potentially … shifted to the [classroom] teacher. I know that's not [how] everyone experiences it." Guardians spoke of the unfairness of having to search out materials ("hours researching on google") to help their children, when that

help "should be coming from the school district." They raised questions about families who had neither the wherewithal ("they are not creative, they are not going to sit there and make puppets with their kids about the story") nor time ("they're working three jobs," "both my husband and I work full time") to "make connections within the home or the learning."

Discussion and Implications

WRaP was a bold initiative, a paradigm shift, with potential and promise for students of all backgrounds, especially welcome, given the dearth of evidence-based research regarding the links between home academic activities and equity. That potential and promise were realized in the area of reading. The district had developed a culture of reading over a period of two years, involving all stakeholders, even community businesses. Thus, WRaP's emphasis on independent reading was well-received and resulted in benefits for students, including struggling readers and ELLs. Cultivating engagement by providing children with choice and access to books nurtured students of varied backgrounds to see themselves as readers and increase their pleasure in reading, thereby enhancing equity for all levels of readers. Similarly, the use of home time for well-structured, meaningful activities, such as the historical figure museum project, wherein students had choice about both topic and presentation method, promoted equity, as students from a variety of backgrounds were invited into meaningful work.

Changing the culture around homework for teachers, guardians, and students is a challenging endeavor, requiring communication (prior and ongoing), scaffolding (via meetings and exemplars), and time, all of which are necessary for buy-in. While these crucial elements existed with respect to the district's reading initiative, similar investments were lacking for math, science, social studies, wonder, and play. Insufficient professional development and discussions about pedagogy, goals, and authentic accountability prior to WRaP made a consistent approach to meaningful home activities unlikely. One explanation for this lack of investment in the other subjects and aspects of WRaP was the belief of administrators that improvement in reading would close the achievement gap in all subject areas. While reading competency is important, the district did not provide evidence that reading efficacy would necessarily translate to measurement and other mathematics, science, or social studies concepts and practices.

Without clear expectations, goals, and exemplars in these less accessible aspects of WRaP, teachers and guardians were left to interpret home academic activities as best they could. The inconsistencies in activities assigned and levels of accountability expected resulted in inequities for families with varied backgrounds and levels of time to devote to their children's academic home activities. Not all teachers and guardians had been provided with games and activities that employed math in thoughtful, academic ways. Thus, guardians who felt that their children would fall behind without traditional homework (e.g., math worksheets) sought out those materials online, thus potentially increasing the gap between students who did and did not receive some sort of math homework. If WRaP activities required guardians to be creative and resourceful, perhaps, as both teachers and guardians suggested, some students were advantaged and benefiting more from WRaP experiences, contrary to the district's aim in instituting WRaP.

The district's explicit valuing of wonder and play was innovative and sought to promote healthy family interaction but required more scaffolding for students and guardians lacking the academic and cultural capital to understand what was expected. Years of district work in supporting reading suggests a way forward.

Cultivating thoughtful and creative approaches that bring wonder and play to math, science, and social studies, and clearly communicating these to all stakeholders, will contribute to supporting and building students' identities as mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists (beyond their identities as readers). Building and supporting meaningful activities and accountability structures, as well as sustaining home-school relationships, will lessen the inconsistencies in the practice of such a homework paradigm shift. Teachers and guardians need extensive preparation and ongoing scaffolding to change definitions and practices of homework in a variety of subject areas; only then can students from families with varied academic and cultural backgrounds have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

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