



## Home learning at Coleridge – a rationale for our current policy

*For years, home learning at Coleridge has consisted of a mixture of creative activities that complement the work taking place in class. Home learning sheets have offered research projects, maths investigations, discussion points and practical tasks with the aim of bringing parent and child together in a shared learning experience. Completion of home learning has always been optional, and the results have never been formally marked by class teachers.*

*After years without review, and with calls from some parents to revise our policy, the school's leadership team spent the academic year 2015/16 re-examining our approach to home learning. This work involved looking at recent research findings, examining the policies of other schools, and gathering the opinions of parents and children within our school community. Following this work, the leadership team made some revisions to our home learning policy - a rationale for which, is set out below.*

### Should we set homework?

Homework, or 'Home learning' as we refer to it here at Coleridge, has always been a contentious issue, likely to invoke strong feeling in any parent, teacher or child.

For some, it is an essential part of school life that helps to ensure academic success and instil important self-discipline and time-management skills in young children. For others however, it is an unnecessary source of friction in the home; something which impinges on precious family time.

It isn't just within the school community that homework is hotly debated; academic research papers on the subject – of which over 130 have been published – have reached different and contradictory conclusions.

In his highly influential book, *Visible Learning* (2008), John Hattie attempts to distil the key messages from this vast array of research, concluding that: ‘...homework in primary schools has an effect of zero’. However, according to Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch (2006), ‘the goal should not be to eliminate homework from primary schools, but to make it more meaningful and engaging for the students’.

With polarised opinions amongst members of school communities, and with the scholarly case being so inconclusive, it has been extremely difficult to make informed decisions about whether or not homework should be set for young children. It is for this reason that former education secretary, Michael Gove, decided to scrap government guidelines on homework, paving the way for many primary schools across the UK to drop it altogether.

However, the leadership team at Coleridge thought that scrapping homework was a blunt, simplistic answer to a very complex question. After all, some children and parents *like* doing homework, and even though there is little evidence to suggest that it will improve learning outcomes, it can help to reinforce the message that learning isn’t just confined to school (Horsley and Walker, 2013). If children and parents would like to participate in homework activities, then we thought that they should be given the opportunity to do so. We therefore decided to continue setting homework, but to make it optional.

### **What type of homework should we set?**

But if we are going to set homework, then what sort of homework is best to set? Should we be offering creative, investigative tasks, or more prescriptive ‘skill and drill’ ones such as calculation worksheets and grammar activities?

Though some research does come down in favour of the skill and drill approach, these findings apply to secondary education only. Studies into the most effective types of homework for children of primary age are much less conclusive (various).

Responses from parents and children on this issue of homework type were also varied: for every parent applauding Coleridge’s current format and philosophy,

another opposed it, favouring the more prescriptive approach of developing skills through repetition.

Perhaps then, a mixture of different types of activities would be a sensible compromise? Since many children and parents liked the creative and practical nature of the existing format, the leadership team decided not to diminish this, but instead, to add in more skills based activities as well. For this reason, more spelling, punctuation and grammar activities have been added to the English home learning sheets, and *My Maths* activities will now form part of the maths home learning. For information about *My Maths*, click [here](#).

On the English and maths sheets, we also decided to include information for parents that explains the skills being covered by the work. If parents themselves feel clear about the aims and objectives of the work, then it is more likely that they will support their child to complete it (Sharp et al 2001).

### **Should homework be marked?**

One clear message that *did* emerge from the consultation with parents and children was the need for teachers to mark the homework and to provide feedback on a frequent basis.

Here then, we encounter perhaps the most difficult policy decision of all: given that the educational benefits of homework are so uncertain, is it wise to spend precious class time or teacher preparation time feeding back to children - especially when the benefits of well-planned and well-resourced lessons are so well documented? If teachers are to invest time in marking work meaningfully, then it will inevitably impact upon the quality of provision in the classroom.

Also, providing feedback on homework during class time may serve to bolster the confidence and self-esteem of those able to complete it to a good standard, but for children whose parents do not have the time, space, resources or inclination to support them, then feedback sessions can be an awkward and humiliating time (Cooper et al, 2006). For this reason, it is often stated that homework is socially divisive, leading to children from less supportive family backgrounds feeling like failures. This point was corroborated by the experiences of many teaching staff at Coleridge, who observed that it

was often the same children who complete the work, and often the same children who did not.

Based on the lack of evidence to support it, the shortage of time in the school day and the social divisions which it often highlights, the leadership team decided that homework would not be formally marked and that feedback sessions would not take place during class time. Work would instead be displayed on a home learning wall, and praise/feedback given on an individual basis.

### **How should we overcome the issue of inequality in the homework environment?**

Setting homework should not disadvantage or exclude any child or group of children; however, there will always be inequalities in the homework environment. Disparities in the amount of parental support, resources, time and space available, means that some children will always be better placed to complete homework than others.

Many would argue that the answer to this problem is simply to set tasks that can be completed independently, but children of primary age, particularly those in the younger years, have not yet developed the self-management skills required to do this. Some degree of parental support and/or encouragement will always be necessary if very young children are to complete the tasks.

A homework club, also cited as a possible solution to the issue of inequality of parental support, is extremely difficult to run and to manage effectively. Aside from the time and resources required to staff such a club, the logistics of usefully supporting children of all ages with lots of different homework tasks is unfeasible.

As Horsley and Walker (2013) point out, the best solution to the problem is to make accommodation for socio-economic diversity and the individual needs of the children within the homework itself. In practice this looks like a varied selection of tasks requiring differing levels of resources, time and independence, rather than a *one size fits all* worksheet.

Though setting a variety of differentiated activities will not *solve* the problem of inequality in the homework environment, it can go some way to ‘levelling the playing field’.

## Summary

Based on findings from research, conversations with Ofsted inspectors, surveys of the school community and the experiences of staff at the school, the leadership team decided on the following:

- Home Learning would be issued on a half-termly basis and its completion would be optional.
- Home Learning sheets would be a mixture of creative writing tasks, practical projects, investigative work, and ‘skill and drill’ type activities.
- The activities would offer different levels of challenge, and would require different levels of adult support, time and resources, in order to complete them.
- The school would subscribe to ‘My Maths’ in order to offer more skills-based maths tasks.
- Homework would not be formally marked and feedback sessions would not take place during class time.
- Information would be provided for parents on the skills and objectives that the homework will cover.

Homework will always remain a contentious issue, and no homework policy will suit every family. However, making homework optional allows families to decide for themselves whether they wish to participate or not. For some, this will alleviate pressures.

For those who do wish to participate, then Coleridge’s home learning policy offers plenty of choice. The variety of activities, and the variety of challenge provided, will hopefully engage as many children as possible, and go some way to evening out the inequalities associated with learning in the home.