

Is “homework” really necessary?

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Homework has traditionally been considered the “job of childhood”, as it prepares children for their future work, developing their attitude and sense of responsibility, thus being potentially positive for students’ academic achievement. Nevertheless, making students do a large amount of homework has been one of the most criticised practices in recent years, opening the debate about the “utility of homework”; this debate has received attention in [national](#) and [international](#) newspapers. In fact, parental associations have long held the view that Spanish elementary school pupils spend too much time upon homework. This situation is so alarming that the Spanish Confederation of Associations of Mothers and Fathers of Students (Ceapa) promoted “homework strikes”, in which students did not do their homework during the November weekends of 2016. The reason why children in Spain are assigned so much homework is that there is a strong belief amongst education policymakers that this will improve students’ academic achievement. This is mainly due to some previous research, which has mostly pointed out that any homework can improve students’ academic performance, to the extent that children remain “engaged” in school tasks and learning at home. Furthermore, being assigned an excessive amount of homework is a serious problem which extends well-beyond Spain.

In light of this context, in [this paper](#) (published by [John Jerrim](#), [Luis Alejandro López-Agudo](#) and [Oscar D. Marcenaro-Gutierrez](#)) we provide new evidence on the relationship between homework and academic performance. Specifically, we use a rich dataset of primary education students from the most populated Spanish region (Andalusia) to exploit the similarities between twin siblings (born in 1998) to analyse that relationship. Our main conclusion is that homework is not associated with young people’s academic achievement (in reading and mathematics). But, how did we get to that conclusion and, of top of that, which are the potential explanations for that result?

To focus the debate, we should bear in mind that in some countries with high academic performance (according to the international large scale assessments) as, e.g., Finland, children have relative low workload in terms of homework; however, Spanish students are far from being at the top of the academic performance distribution, despite having a homework load above the OECD average. So, what is going on? To answer this question, we took advantage of the heterogeneity existing in time devoted to homework within-twin pairs (more than 50% of twins showed differences in time devoted to homework). By doing this, we are able to remove the between-twin variation, meaning that we implicitly control for everything that these twins share (e.g. schools, parents, socio-economic background). This allows us to grasp the relationship with academic performance (in terms of the competences in two subjects – Spanish language and mathematic reasoning) of the variables which actually vary within twins; in this instance, time devoted to homework. This analysis also includes how children progress through compulsory education (from primary to secondary education).

As previously indicated, we find no substantive association between changes in homework and variations in academic achievement for twins, neither between homework time and academic progression between primary and secondary education. These conclusions provide some support for those parental organizations that have claimed that Spanish children are doing too much homework for too little apparent benefit.

These results may be striking, but we have to bear in mind that the skills that we have focused on in this article are mathematics and reading “competencies”, this is, “real-world” skills that are meant to be important and relevant in the labour market. The fact that we find no substantive association between changes in homework and variations in academic achievement for twins may not mean that all homework is not beneficial, but that the homework students are doing may not be helping young people develop these key skills. Indeed, homework in Spain usually consists of repetitive tasks to mechanise and memorise curriculum-content knowledge (i.e. rote learning), with children then unable to apply these skills to solve new problems in other contexts. In other words, maybe the problem is not the “quantity” but the “quality” of the homework. In this sense, we should promote homework genuinely focused on competency development rather than the mechanical learning of tasks. Part of this issue may also come from the way in which this knowledge is assessed at school exams, in which children are usually required to perform these repetitive tasks in order to pass; this is, exams in which the questions are slightly reformulated compared to the content of lessons or only change the numbers or the figures in mathematics problems.

This is consistent with the conclusions of [Cosden et al.](#) (2004, p. 220), who note how it is important to “balance homework with other aspects of the child’s home life to promote positive developmental outcomes”.

Last but not least, when interpreting our results, one should bear in mind that twins are over-represented amongst higher socio-economic status families and thus we should be cautious about extending our conclusions to other populations.