

NARROWING THE GAP IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Homework Clubs for Students in Low Income Neighbourhoods

by Sarah N. Harper & Maureen Anglin



The Effects of Poverty on Student Achievement

It is an unfortunate reality that children from low income families often do not do as well at school as children from middle and upper class backgrounds. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the Toronto District School Board showed that among students from the lowest income bracket (parents who made less than \$30,000 a year), less than half (47%) were meeting the provincial standard in reading. Alternatively, among students from the highest income bracket (parents who made \$100,000 a year or more), nearly two thirds (66%) were meeting the provincial standards (*"Race, poverty matter as early as Grade 3"*, by Kristin Rushowy, *The Toronto Star*, February 28, 2009). The significant gap in academic achievement between children of poor and affluent backgrounds may be due to a number of factors. For example, children from disadvantaged homes often have less access to reading materials such as books, newspapers and magazines, may attend under-resourced schools and day care, and the parents of these children may spend less time reading with their children at home, due to challenging work schedules.

How Tutoring and Homework Clubs Can Help

Many Canadian schools have introduced tutoring programs that take place during or after school, as an attempt to help students from disadvantaged homes succeed at school. These programs typically involve teachers, parents, volunteers from the community, and fellow students who work one-on-one or in small groups with students who require additional assistance. Many teachers, educators and researchers report positive effects of tutoring on students' academic success. Tutoring may be particularly beneficial to low income students, as it helps level the playing field for these students.

Although tutoring can take place in a wide range of settings (home, community centre, school, etc.), more recently, some schools have initiated a trend towards after-school programs that focus on helping students with homework. Frontier College, a national literacy organization, runs school-based programs across Canada with support from various government and corporate funders. At Frontier College, "homework clubs" or "homework centres" are typically supported by a "student-centred individualized learning" philosophy. This type of learning environment allows for students' individual needs and goals to be met as they do their own lessons with the help of the tutor. Students bring their homework to the session and actively contribute to their own learning. The tutor provides guidance and assistance as necessary, keeping in mind that students have different learning styles and will progress at different rates.

Homework clubs are cost effective as they are often run by volunteer tutors and community organizations, in partnership with a local school board. Tutors provide guidance and assistance with homework assignments, as opposed to direct instruction, and therefore are not required to have previous teaching experience or certification (although some of them do). Often these individuals are current or retired teachers, secondary school or university students, or members of the community who are eager to volunteer their time. Homework clubs can be run in any school, community centre or library, provided there is a quiet space available after school or during the evening. Teachers may choose to assist with tutoring, or simply act as a valuable resource for informing parents about the homework club. Educators and community development workers consider homework clubs as a cost effective and efficient way to help students succeed academically.

Homework Club Research

Frontier College has conducted research over the past three years on the impact of homework clubs on children's academic success. Our research findings show that students from low income families who attend the homework club improve academically. In our study, 48 students from Kindergarten to Grade 10 attended the after-school homework club at a school in a low income area. Reading tests, student grades and surveys completed by both students and parents were evaluated, in order to measure the effectiveness of the program. Students attended the homework club one to three times per week for approximately eight months of the school year. Volunteer tutors from the school community worked with students one-on-one or in small groups, assisting students with homework assignments, reading and small academic projects. During program sessions, tutors also organized quiet educational games and activities for students who had completed all of their homework.

Students who participated in the program showed significant gains in their oral reading ability and English grades at school. In addition, most students indicated that the program helped them do better at school, they enjoyed the program, and they liked working with the tutors. When parents were asked about the changes that their child had made as a result of the homework club, the majority of parents indicated that their child's school work had improved, their child is reading more often and is more interested in books, and their child does more writing activities. Overall, the study showed that homework clubs are effective in improving low income students' academic achievement.

Many of the students who participated in our homework club were English language learners. It is particularly informative to know that homework clubs specifically benefit students in the area of language and reading development. Since homework club tutors are generally fluent in English, students who are English language learners may receive additional benefits from interacting with and receiving homework help from highly competent English speakers.

How Teachers and Principals Can Help

Research has shown that although students from low income families face greater challenges at school, after-school tutoring programs such as the homework club can help these students to improve academically, particularly in reading and language arts. Although educators are well aware of the positive effects of tutoring on students' academic achievement, a more cost effective form of tutoring, such as a homework club, can effectively help low income students succeed academically, while relying on few resources from parents and school personnel. Teachers and principals can support these types of programs in their schools as an attempt to equalize student academic achievement.

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Maureen Anglin is the Ontario Regional Manager and a researcher for Frontier College. Her contributions have played a significant role in the development and implementation of homework club programs and in determining the effectiveness of these program on student achievement. 🍁