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Homework Challenges for Students With Reading and Writing Problems: Suggestions for Effective Practice

Howard Margolis
Queens College of the City University of New York

Patrick P. McCabe
Nova Southeastern University

Educational consultants are often asked to help teachers and parents develop strategies that address the homework problems of students with reading and writing disabilities. Frequently, these students resist completing homework, which can cause considerable family strife and negatively affect school–family relationships. Thus, consultants must know how to structure homework for these students and how to work with their teachers and parents to enhance students' motivation to complete homework. In this article we (a) examine the value of homework for students with reading and writing problems; (b) provide guidelines and suggest practical solutions to their homework problems from the perspective of curiosity theory, learned helplessness, behaviorism, and anxiety reduction; and (c) describe the consultant's role in ameliorating homework problems.

An issue frequently faced by teachers and parents of students with reading and writing disabilities is the students' inability or refusal to complete homework assignments on time and in a quality fashion. These students are often labeled "lazy," "unmotivated," or "oppositional." Blaming them is easy but unproductive, and it can engender alienation from school and feelings of inadequacy. Consultants can do much to improve the situation

Correspondence should be addressed to Howard Margolis, 1067 Pendleton Court, Voorhees, NJ 08043. E-mail: hmar@aol.com

by helping teachers and parents do the following: (a) understand the value of homework for particular students so it is given proper weight in program planning; (b) understand that homework and related motivation problems frequently arise from mismatched demands, abilities, and perceptions; and (c) respond to student efforts in constructive ways. In addition, consultants can help teachers design and present homework to improve students' attitudes toward these requirements.

THE VALUE AND REALITY OF HOMEWORK FOR STUDENTS WITH READING AND WRITING PROBLEMS

The Value of Homework

Although substantial controversy surrounds the value of homework (Miller & Kelley, 1991), it appears of value for students *without* severe reading and writing problems. Miller and Kelly concluded that homework can favorably affect learning, despite the fact that the bulk of research "consist[ed] of opinion pieces or methodologically flawed studies" (p. 174). Similarly, Polloway, Foley, and Epstein (1992) found that although "recent reviews have generally revealed a pattern of positive effects on academic achievement for homework" (p. 203), the value of traditional homework for students in special education has not been adequately explored. For students with reading and writing problems, the value of traditional homework has yet to be firmly established.

Traditional homework assignments that are effective with most students can be counterproductive to students with reading and writing problems. The limited research and parent reports suggest that students with academic or behavioral problems experience considerable difficulty with homework. Polloway et al. (1992) found that students with learning disabilities "experienced nearly two and half times the level of difficulty with specific homework problems as their peers" (p. 203). Especially salient were motivation and distractibility problems. Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee, and Mellencamp (1994) intensively assessed homework through the eyes of a small group of parents of students in special education. Their research indicated that assignments were often inappropriate for the students. One parent reported that "the [homework] seemed way over his head, even after I tried to explain it.... Fred brings home some inappropriate homework for his level. I think this is discouraging for him.... The total time spent on homework is too much" (pp. 555–556).

Frequently, students with reading and writing difficulties have other difficulties that exacerbate motivational and homework difficulties. For example, many students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) have significant reading and writing problems (Barkley, 1995). Each problem typically aggravates the other, in a spiraling fashion. As Barkley (1990, 1995) noted, homework often becomes a source of frustration and conflict for students with ADHD and their parents. Frustration and conflict can become so destructive that he recommended that

> all parties should consider ... getting a private tutor.... Many parents find it difficult to do homework with their teens or to tutor them in areas of academic weakness. The teens often resist these efforts as well, and the tension or arguments that can arise may spill over into other areas of family functioning even after the homework period has passed. (p. 534)

Although homework is valuable for average- and above-average-achieving students, teachers and parents must examine the effects of homework on *individual students* with reading, writing, and related problems. Homework practices that are beneficial for average- or superior-achieving students may not be so for given students with reading and writing problems. The complexity of this issue was recognized by Jongsma (1985), who noted that "more than likely, the homework/achievement relationship is influenced by a variety of factors such as the ability level of the students, the nature of the homework assignment, and the type of follow up by the teacher" (p. 703).

The Reality of Homework

In practice, the benefit or the harm of homework for specific students with learning disabilities is often ignored due to enormous pressure on schools and teachers to assign homework. Many parents, for example, demand substantial homework and get upset when little is assigned. Professional opinion typically supports homework. Consistent with this, the American Federation of Teachers (1996) asserted that teachers should assign challenging homework because it enhances learning, increases time for direct instruction, and builds self-discipline and work habits. In many schools, homework is a fixed, passion-engendering component of all students' programs, except those students with the severest physical or cognitive disabilities.

With the increased emphasis on inclusion, many more students with reading and writing difficulties will get ever more homework as schools

integrate students with serious academic difficulties into regular classes and require that they meet the regular curriculum's demands. Given the serious and complex academic difficulties of these students, it is imperative that educators construct homework for them and respond to it in ways that maximize its potential academic, social, and emotional benefits and minimize its destructive capacity (Sullivan & Sequeira, 1996). Although this is important for all students, it is even more so for students with reading and writing problems.

For students with reading and writing difficulties to succeed with and benefit from homework, assignments need to be designed, presented, supported, and responded to by teachers and parents in ways that meet the students' learning needs. Frequently, teachers ignore critical homework practices, such as discussing and reviewing homework assignments, grading homework, making students aware that homework contributes to their report card grades, and soliciting feedback from parents about their homework preferences (Salend & Schliff, 1989). Not implementing effective practices can readily contribute to students' failure and resistance. Often, negative attitudes engendered by unresponsive, unrealistic homework practices adversely influence other areas of schooling and stress teacher–student and parent–child relationships. Fortunately, homework practices that sensitively respond to student needs and functional academic levels can prevent or reduce homework difficulties. Although such practices typically require an investment of teacher time and effort, they need not be as labor intensive as dealing with continued resistance to homework.

Assignments matched to students' abilities and interests should consider whether students have a *strong* preference for the same homework as their peers or different, individualized assignments. Prominent among students who prefer individualized assignments are those with learning disabilities. However, some students with learning disabilities want the same assignments as their better achieving peers (Vaughn & Schumm, 1996), although they may be unable to satisfy task requirements. Surveying or interviewing students can identify those who strongly prefer the same or different assignments as their peers. Regularly assigning homework with reading and writing demands that exceed functional abilities will ultimately frustrate these students and adversely influence motivation, regardless of their desire to be like their peers. Assigning topographically similar homework of lesser complexity or difficulty to those who want the same assignments as their better achieving peers can reduce resistance to homework. However, providing differentiated and individualized assignments that match the functional abilities of students who want them can be stigmatizing if students are singled out and differences in assignments conspicuously

highlighted. On the other hand, by routinely individualizing assignments for all students (e.g., assigning different homework to different groups, having students choose an assignment from three offered) and periodically employing cooperative group structures for homework, the potential for stigmatization evaporates markedly. Simultaneously, strong preference for identical homework fades.

Ideally, homework practices, emanating from practical, underlying theories of motivation and anxiety reduction, can bolster the spirits of students, parents, and teachers, while helping students become more competent learners who view learning as an opportunity rather than a threat.

PRACTICAL, UNDERLYING THEORIES RELATED TO HOMEWORK

Teacher and parent beliefs or theories about learning guide their decision making and direct their behavior. Often, teachers and parents are not fully aware of their beliefs or theories or their impact on instructional practices and students' behavior.

> Perhaps no single factor influences the instructional setting more than a teacher's knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning.... Teachers are often unaware of the extent that their views about learning and reading influence and shape classroom instruction and learning experiences offered to students. (Lipson & Wixson, 1991, p. 335)

Without theory that informs instruction, teaching is guesswork that offers little chance of helping students with reading and writing difficulties. Thus, consultants and teachers need to use well-researched, well-articulated, relevant theories to plan instruction for all students. A practical set of guiding principles for designing and implementing homework assignments that is most likely to help students with learning difficulties integrates (a) curiosity theory, (b) learned helplessness, and (c) behaviorism. Each has a substantial research base. For students whose anxiety impedes learning and fuels resistance to schoolwork, anxiety-reduction interventions are also needed. Frequently, guiding principles derived from these theories can help parents to assist their children. As with all applied knowledge, the treatment's effect on the child is the litmus test of its validity for that child. Consequently, teachers and parents must frequently collect and analyze data assessing the impact of interventions on specific students and modify treatments that produce unsatisfactory results.

Curiosity Theory

Curiosity involves arousal, exploration, and reinforcement (Berlyne, 1960). Novelty—or students' realization that their ideas about topics they believe are important conflict markedly with other people's ideas or with what they have seen or observed—evokes curiosity. The more discrepant the ideas and the more important the topic to students, the stronger their curiosity. High levels of incongruity about personally important topics produce uncertainty, thus compelling resolution. For example, if Marylee's father is an honest, helpful police officer, which she aspires to be, newspaper headlines announcing police arrests will arouse acute curiosity. In contrast, Nadine has no strong views or abiding interest in police. For her, these stories will arouse far less curiosity.

Learned Helplessness/Optimism Theory

Learned helplessness is "the giving-up reaction, the quitting response" (Seligman, 1990, p. 15). It refers to the steadfast belief that failure will result, despite bona fide efforts to succeed. It is resignation that one cannot control or influence what happens to him or her. To a large degree, it is a learned response to an overwhelming number of failures or chronic, contradictory, and confusing feedback. The learned helplessness response characterizes many students with reading and writing difficulties, as these students believe they "are powerless to prevent their own failures" (Taylor, Harris, Pearson, & Garcia, 1995, p. 65).

Central to learned helplessness are subjective, causal interpretations or attributions that students *give* their experiences. Seligman (1990) identified two habitual explanatory styles—pessimism and optimism—that promote or deter learned helplessness. A pessimistic explanatory style exacerbates learned helplessness. Pessimistic students habitually blame themselves for their difficulties (e.g., reading problems) and attribute their cause to permanent, unchangeable personal attributes (e.g., low intelligence) that contaminate virtually everything they do. Pessimists, Seligman observed, embrace explanations with the most dire consequences.

Pessimistic students rarely take credit for what they do well and attribute any success to factors beyond their control (e.g., luck). In contrast, optimistic students habitually take credit for their successes and ascribe them to permanent personal attributes (e.g., high intelligence) that positively influence virtually all they do. Optimistic students typically attribute difficulties to temporary factors (e.g., an unlucky day) or to controllable ones (e.g., lack of effort). Both explanatory styles directly influence student expectations of success and the effort they willingly invest in tasks viewed as difficult. As

Seligman (1990) noted, "potential, without the notion of optimism, has very little meaning" (p. 154). Optimists, he asserted, persist in the face of difficulty, whereas pessimists collapse and withdraw under pressure. Often they do not even try. Fortunately, schools can help students transform pessimistic explanatory styles into optimistic ones. The basic strategy is to provide students with many success experiences with historically difficult tasks, while explicitly teaching them how to take credit for their efforts in effectively applying specific learning strategies. This approach requires (a) designing assignments likely to produce success that offer moderate but not anxiety-provoking challenge and (b) providing immediate, frequent, specific, and constructive feedback that focuses on student effort and application of particular task-appropriate strategies.

Behavioral Theory

A vast body of research demonstrates that students typically repeat properly reinforced behaviors and eschew unreinforced or improperly reinforced ones. If extrinsic reinforcers are needed because students find specific tasks unpleasant or lack intrinsic reinforcement, reinforcers must be attractive and powerful enough to produce conscientious, active engagement in the activity. If reinforcers lack these attributes, students will not invest adequate effort. Commonly, students with reading disabilities actively work to avoid reading activities, such as homework, because they find them punitive rather than reinforcing. Here, the nature of the assignments must be changed so that students anticipate success, and the power of the reinforcers must be amplified so that students come to value successful homework completion.

Infrequently or inadequately reinforced behaviors fail to fully develop, or they occur so rarely as to be inconsequential. Initially, extrinsic reinforcement of homework must be frequent enough and powerful enough for students to willingly invest in work they view as unpleasant, difficult, and anxiety provoking. As students routinely experience success, extrinsic reinforcement should gradually and systematically be lessened, until students expect but never know when wanted reinforcement will occur. To maximize the effect of extrinsic reinforcement, reinforcers should be paired with cognitive self-talk, in which students specify what they did to earn reinforcement. If tangible reinforcers are used, they should be paired with positive, task-oriented verbal comments. In all cases, highly valued reinforcers must be delivered only when students satisfy task requirements.

Dependency on artificial extrinsic reinforcement (e.g., token systems) eventually must be eliminated as it improves effort and involvement only

temporarily. However, "extrinsic rewards are ... sometimes the only recourse with children who have learned to dislike reading" (Taylor et al., 1995, p. 69). Although powerful in the short run, and often necessary to begin to change homework habits, behavior encouraged by extrinsic reinforcement ceases soon after extrinsic reinforcement ends. Instead of producing sustained, in-depth involvement, extrinsic reinforcement results in "shallow processing ... and 'least effort' literacy styles." In contrast, "intrinsic motivations are more likely to inspire long-term literacy commitments" (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996, p. 661) and sustain involvement in complex literacy tasks. However, extrinsic social reinforcers, such as positive, task-specific comments about work, should continue. Such reinforcers provide feedback necessary to learning and help create a supportive environment.

Research has supported the use of systematic interventions with clear consequences for targeted outcomes. Rosenberg (1989) found that "merely assigning homework with little or no consequences for compliance or noncompliance will lead to equivocal outcomes. The successful completion of homework assignments is contingent upon an atmosphere where the doing of homework assignments is expected, valued, and rewarded" (p. 323). In a related study, Madsen and Madsen (1974) found that teenagers, functioning below potential, improved homework, at-home study time, and grades when participating in a highly structured program emphasizing scheduled study periods of limited duration, scheduled break times for "pleasant activities" (p. 172), and, in some cases, external rewards. The majority of students maintained superior performances through the following school year.

To begin attributing intrinsic value to reading and homework, students with learning difficulties must customarily experience personal satisfaction and anticipate success from reading and homework assignments. For Shayna (a composite of several students), years of reading failure produced extreme anxiety about reading and homework. By initially assigning reading and related homework assignments well within her ability, reinforcing her for effort as well as for visible success, teaching her to monitor and reinforce herself for effort and success, teaching her to read in enjoyable social contexts, and using homework partners to support her and make homework more enjoyable (i.e., reinforcing), her anxiety lessened and her expectation of success increased. Books she found interesting were read to her regularly in class, and she was asked to read selected portions of these books at home, after careful in-school preparation. Gradually, even with setbacks along the way, reading became intrinsically reinforcing, allowing for the incremental introduction of more challenging materials. As an extension of an increasingly satisfying school program, Shayna began viewing homework more positively. Had Shayna's teacher first depended

on reading and homework's intrinsic value, when Shayna viewed them as threatening, the program would have failed.

Anxiety Reduction

Many students with reading disabilities are anxious, impulsive, hyperactive, distractible, or emotionally liable. They frequently suffer from poor self-esteem or depression related to their disability. Many work to avoid or escape from reading-related activities, such as homework, which have caused them shame, embarrassment, and anxiety. When homework arouses excessive anxiety and avoidance or escape behavior, ameliorating anxiety lessens resistance. Ignoring anxiety prolongs resistance and exacerbates anxiety-induced problems.

One class of anxiety-reduction interventions that holds considerable promise for helping students with reading and writing problems is relaxation training. Although not a panacea or universally effective, relaxation training can mitigate many problems associated with homework difficulties. In addition to reducing anxiety (Day & Sadek, 1982), research suggests that relaxation has the potential to improve dysfunctional behavior (Braud, 1978; Colassano & Fish, 1984; Oldfield, 1986; Weimer, 1987), improve self-concept (Loffredo, Omizo, & Hammett, 1984; Oldfield, 1986), and positively influence the reading and academic performance of learners who are exceptional (Frey, 1980; Margolis & Pica, 1987, 1989–90; Prichard & Taylor, 1981). In addition, relaxation training is relatively simple to implement because it places only moderate training demands on consultants and teachers (Matthews, 1983; Oldfield & Petrosa, 1986), while offering lifelong tools for maintaining calm, preventing overreactions to stressful situations, and attending to critical information (Benson, 1984; Goleman, 1976; Groden, Groden, & Baron, 1984; Matthews & Justice, 1983). Its utility and effectiveness have been demonstrated in elementary, secondary, remedial, and special education situations (Frey, 1980; Groden et al., 1984; Margolis & Pica, 1987, 1989–90; Oldfield & Petrosa, 1986; Rickard, Thrasher, & Elkins, 1984; Zenker & Frey, 1985). Moreover, some parents can use relaxation training to assist their children (Loffredo, Omizo, & Hammett, 1984; Porter & Omizo, 1984).

Relaxation strategies that have been used successfully in schools include progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, visual imagery, autogenics, and combinations of these techniques (Margolis, 1990). Ideally, students should receive 20 min of training daily, with strategies they enjoy. Often, students begin to experience generalized benefits after 4 to 6 weeks of training.

Consultants should keep in mind that teachers and parents will not genuinely commit to relaxation training unless they have learned to relax, recognize its value, and feel comfortable with relaxation procedures. If teachers lack the time, training, or inclination to pursue relaxation training, referral of students to counselors, psychologists, or other personnel competent in relaxation training should be considered.

EFFECTIVE HOMEWORK STRATEGIES: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

By promoting the following principles and practices, consultants can help teachers design and implement effective homework strategies for students with reading and writing problems. As with all principles and practices, adapting them to the specifics of the situation and monitoring the effects of the intervention is required. In the long run, adherence to these principles and practices should make teaching easier and more productive and should foster positive relationships with students and parents. For students in special education with homework difficulties, the Present Educational Status section of their individual education plan (IEP) should objectively describe their responses to different homework assignments (e.g., types, length, reading levels, completion rates, grades). The IEP should include homework goals, objectives, strategies, and modifications. This approach makes the timely and satisfactory completion of homework a data-based focus of systematic, planned instruction rather than a lightning rod for blame, animosity, and negative self-talk.

Establish Effective Communication With Parents

Many parents want specific information about their children's homework. They want to know homework requirements, due dates, strategies for helping their children, and procedures for communicating with teachers (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Kay et al., 1994). When parents observe their children's frustration, see them struggle, feel confused about helping their children, and think that teachers are insensitive to their children's needs, anxiety and the potential for school–parent conflict escalate. If needed, consultants can help teachers to understand the importance and value of systematic communication efforts and help them to plan and implement communication with parents. Consultants can model effective communication practices; invite teacher critiques of their efforts; and, if teachers

agree, provide teachers with feedback about their interpersonal communications with parents. To inform parents about homework, secure cooperation, and reduce the potential for conflict, consider the following:

- Send a letter home that delineates homework policy (e.g., the amount of time students should devote to homework, criteria for marking homework). Coordinate this effort with beginning-of-the-year meetings to discuss homework policy and to answer parent questions. Discuss preferred procedures for communicating with parents (e.g., daily log books, weekly telephone calls, recorded homework assignments on a telephone answering machine). Ask parents which communication strategies would work for them or what suggestions they have that everyone might find practicable (e.g., e-mail, mailing home weekly rating forms, periodic meetings).

- Invite parents of children with homework difficulties to individual meetings to understand the problems homework presents at home. Because some parents expect that school personnel will blame them or their child for the student's learning problems, they become defensive. Thus, it is especially important to avoid making judgmental statements and dwelling on the child's "defects." Instead, focus on understanding, trust building, and problem solving. Employ empathic listening, in which parents' concerns are briefly and tentatively summarized so they are satisfied that they have been understood. Ask parents how the school might assist with homework and what modifications (e.g., shorter length) they suggest. If parents are wary about coming to school or lack adequate transportation or child care, consider making a request to meet in their home. If this proves untenable or violates school policy, consider asking a school social worker for help.

- Inform parents of your availability for telephone calls. If faxes do not jeopardize confidentiality, discuss how they might facilitate communication.

- Survey parents periodically to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of homework for individual students. Use a survey form of six or fewer questions to identify needed modifications. Administer a similar instrument to students appropriate for their reading and maturity levels. If their reading abilities fall below third grade, conduct a structured interview.

- Encourage parents to visit your class to see how homework relates to curriculum.

• Annotate completed homework with task-relevant comments. Specify what the student did well. If necessary, list simple, concrete actions students can take to improve their work. (If a student receives several such comments weekly, the homework may be too demanding.) If a student is disorganized or forgetful, mail home the annotated work. Before doing so, discuss effective feedback strategies with parents.

• Ask parents if they would like to discuss constructive actions they can take if their child resists or is careless about homework. If they assent, listen carefully and nonjudgmentally to how they describe the problem and their attributions. Once their difficulties and concerns have been fully and accurately understood, focus on problem solving to achieve mutually satisfying solutions. Consider discussing the importance of setting aside a specific time each day for the students to complete homework in a quiet space. Before the parents leave, invite them back to continue problem solving if the agreed-upon solutions prove ineffective.

When parents know how to help their children and see school personnel taking concrete actions to help them, they are far more likely to feel secure and competent than if they had continued to struggle with their children over homework. By initiating conversations with parents about homework policy and communication procedures, listening to them and engaging in problem solving, reciprocal understanding and trust are enhanced. This often results in constructive solutions to problems that cause school–parent animosity and sustain homework difficulties.

Assure That Homework Is Manageable for Students and That They Anticipate Success

Student expectations influence their behavior. If students expect (and value) success with homework, they will probably invest the effort needed to succeed. Conversely, if they anticipate failure (or do not value success), they will be far less likely to complete assignments on time or in a quality fashion. Many students with reading and writing difficulties have experienced too many homework assignments that proved overwhelming or confusing. To them, homework evokes expectations of frustration, failure, and fatigue. These students have come to believe that they cannot improve the situation. Thinking themselves inadequate to the task and helpless to control events, they often work to avoid or escape homework by not doing it or thoughtlessly rushing through it. From their perspective, this approach is rational. It eliminates the stigma of failure and preserves self-esteem.

They may prefer to deal with adult anger and poor grades rather than feel shamed by reminders of inadequacy. To reverse these perceptions, try the following:

• Assign homework at or near the student's independent reading level. At this level students correctly read 99% or more of words and correctly answer 90% or more of items, with reasonable effort. Success is immediately apparent. Avoid assigning homework at the student's instructional level. At this level, successful completion requires immediate teacher guidance and assistance, which is unavailable. Without prompt help, students often practice and strengthen errors.

• Initially assign homework with which the student is unlikely to have difficulty. Mark the homework for punctual submission and content. Gradually increase difficulty but never beyond the student's ability to succeed with moderate effort.

• Begin assignments in class and observe how students handle them. If students experience difficulty, modify assignments to eliminate problems. Ask students how they would modify assignments to achieve success.

• Task analyze complex homework assignments and assign simpler units likely to engender success with reasonable effort.

• Assign streamlined homework assignments. For example, if David's class is assigned 20 problems and he can reasonably complete 5 of them, assign him the first 5 problems or every 4th problem (i.e., problems 4, 8, 12, 16, and 20).

• Assign homework that helps students master content without dependence on reading. For example, if Brian finds the class's reading homework about the Battle of Gettysburg too difficult, have him watch the video *Gettysburg*, or have him listen to his parent read a description of the battle. The request that Brian's parents read to him should be made only if the activity does not cause conflict, Brian finds it supportive, they are willing, and they have the time.

• Distinguish between practice, preparation, extension, and creative homework assignments (Lee & Pruitt, 1979). Emphasize the type of assignment the student is most receptive to and most successful with. Many students with reading problems do best on practice and preparation homework assignments. Practice assignments provide opportunity to rehearse

what was initially learned in school; they help students move beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skill to fluency. Preparation assignments ready students for concepts that soon will be presented in class. These assignments should not include difficult reading. For example, students can cut out assigned pictures from magazines and discuss the pictured concepts with their parents, or their parents can read and discuss relevant stories or newspaper articles with them. Despite fine intellect, students with reading difficulties often have trouble with extension and creative homework assignments, which require the integration, organization, application, and generalization of knowledge and skill.

- Ask parents how much time is available for homework, how much time their child typically requires to complete assignments successfully, and how much time their child spends on homework before it becomes unproductive (e.g., the student loses concentration, begins procrastinating, fidgets, gets angry). Obtain similar information from students with the maturity to provide accurate information. If there is a mismatch (e.g., the student spends 3 hr on assignments that the average student completes in 30 min), modify future assignments.

- Discuss with parents the practicality of scheduling a specific time and providing a quiet space for doing homework daily. Talk to parents about what they can do if their child has difficulty with homework. Discuss with students how to prepare to do homework at home and what they should do when they encounter difficulty.

- Chart homework success. For example, Kelly received grades of 80, 90, 95, 75, and 85 on her daily assignments for the week. She and her teacher charted these grades on a histogram (bar graph), which her parents initialed. Kelly was then given the choice of choosing the assignment she liked most and placing it in a special homework album or sending it home with a congratulatory comment from her teacher.

Assign Homework That Students Find Interesting, Valuable, or Both

Homework that arouses high-level curiosity and matches student abilities typically obviates the need for extrinsic reinforcement. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to develop such assignments for students who have psychologically disengaged from school. Moreover, what is curiosity provoking for one student may not be so for another. When students with reading and

writing difficulties find general schoolwork and related homework activities and content uninteresting and unimportant, extrinsic reinforcement for quality homework completion is necessary. Often, word recognition and word analysis assignments require extrinsic reinforcement, as poor readers tend to view these subjects as threatening and wearisome. Lack of extrinsic reinforcement sharply reduces students' willingness to complete activities that have yet to acquire intrinsic value. Thus, to the degree possible, teachers should assign tasks and content that students judge interesting and important, and employ extrinsic reinforcers with assignments that students do not find intrinsically reinforcing. As students come to appreciate the value of assigned activities, far less extrinsic reinforcement is needed.

Interest, feelings of control and autonomy, and intrinsic motivation are enhanced when students choose among homework assignments or create their own. Enhanced feeling of control is central to combating learned helplessness. Asking students to create their own assignments provides opportunities for satisfying curiosity and pursuing personally important interests. Activities likely to increase the interest and value of homework include these:

- Survey students to ascertain their interests and the type of activities they enjoy and dislike. Discuss the survey results with them to better understand their preferences. For example, Carol might enjoy assignments that require choosing correct answers or writing brief sentences but disdain assignments that require writing two or more paragraphs. Also consider surveying parents to gain additional insight into their children's likes and dislikes.

- Discuss paradoxical questions (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997). Assign homework matched to student abilities that extends exploration of the paradoxical questions.

- Present a homework assignment by demonstrating a seemingly contradictory event, such as objects defying gravity (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997). After discussing the event, assign students related homework. Examples include reading independent-level text that explains the process and recording an audiotape that describes and explains the phenomenon.

- Begin homework assignments in class, using activities that pique content interest and activate prior knowledge. These include guided imagery, problematic situations, text previews, vocabulary brainstorming, analogies, anticipation guides, previewing, expectation outlines, and reciprocal teacher–student questioning (Vacca & Vacca, 1995). Positively rein-

force students for effective work habits and correct responses. Modify assignments that prove too difficult. Inaugurating homework in class helps ensure that assignments are properly calibrated to individual student abilities and that students can succeed.

• Discuss with students the importance of particular assignments. After students have completed assignments, lead a discussion about how assignments enhanced their learning and helped them progress toward achieving personally important goals.

• Let students choose from several homework assignments once or twice weekly. Ask them to design homework for given topics (e.g., "How about you and Josh sitting down and designing a homework assignment that reviews this chapter?"). To provide direction and structure, provide students with models and guidelines.

• Develop "study buddies" (pairs of students who help each other with homework). Students who enjoy working with peers can benefit from joint, well-structured homework assignments. Cooperative activities often make assignments interesting and important and positively capitalize on the human penchant for social interaction. Beginning assignments in class allows opportunity to provide feedback and to assess students' abilities to work together. After getting parental permission, teachers should encourage students to share telephone numbers to review assignments and help each other after school.

• Assign curricular-relevant homework that makes minimal reading and writing demands. Sample assignments include collecting objects (e.g., miniature airplanes, leaves, photographs of tropical fish), categorizing information (e.g., placing pictures of rural and urban life in different envelopes), making videotapes (e.g., newscasts), taking photographs (e.g., public buildings, storefronts, supermarkets), and conducting interviews (e.g., grandparents, police, supermarket managers, teachers).

Assign Homework With Which Parents Can Easily Assist

Often, parents of children with reading disabilities want to actively help their children learn to read. Many feel guilty if they do not actively assist with homework. Experience, however, has taught many families that homework can cause conflict, failure, and strained relationships. By assigning easy-to-implement homework that focuses directly on improving reading abilities, providing successful experiences that enhance optimism, and

emphasizing positive reinforcement tied to task-directed feedback, teachers can help eliminate the emotional strife ignited by traditional homework. Although the activities that follow require some parent training, their benefits far outweigh the investment. Training can be conducted in small groups by classroom teachers, reading specialists, or other competent professionals. To address difficulties that routinely arise when people engage in new activities, professionals must remain readily available to assist parents. Assistance may include follow-up conferences, problem-solving sessions, and in-home demonstrations. Simple homework activities include asking parents to do the following:

- Read aloud to their children. To become proficient readers, children with word recognition and word analysis difficulties require extensive exposure to many different and interesting reading activities and materials. Despite this need, the nature of their basic reading difficulties frequently makes it difficult to adequately involve these students in homework activities and materials they find highly interesting, curiosity provoking, and intriguing. By reading interesting, thought-provoking books to their children at a set time daily, parents can kindle excitement about reading, while helping their children develop needed background information and vocabulary. This helps to improve word recognition and comprehension abilities. By informing parents about upcoming topics that will soon be studied and recommending books to read to their children that will prepare them for these topics, teachers can maximize the potential benefits of reading aloud. Parents can acquire effective read-aloud strategies by observing read-aloud sessions at school or at local libraries.

- Engage in Paired Reading (Topping, 1987, 1989). To become proficient readers, children with reading disabilities need extensive practice reading connected text. They also require frequent task-specific, immediate, positive feedback. Participating in 15 min of Paired Reading daily contributes significantly to both. In Paired Reading, child and parent simultaneously read aloud from a book selected by the child. Self-selection helps ensure that the child finds the chosen books interesting and experiences autonomy. Before reading, the child and parent agree on a prearranged signal (e.g., a hand signal) the child will use to inform the parent to switch to silent reading while the child continues reading aloud. Joint reading continues until the child signals the parent to read silently. If the child errs on a word or takes longer than 5 sec to pronounce it, the parent immediately rejoins the child in reading aloud. A parent can further assist the child by verbally describing and praising desired behaviors, such as correct signaling and accurate decoding.

Topping (1995) stressed training parent–child pairs with other parent–child pairs. This is economical and fosters a positive group spirit. He also recommended frequent self-checking (e.g., daily monitoring forms) and data analysis with supportive professionals.

• Listen to their children orally read easy materials. As Allington and Cunningham (1996) asserted, "children need to read lots of easy stuff" (p. 53). This is how they develop sight vocabulary and fluency and gain confidence in their reading ability. Despite the need for abundant practice, children with reading disabilities often receive little opportunity to read easy materials (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). Teachers can help parents promote widespread reading by helping students self-select easy, interesting reading materials (e.g., books, magazines, newspaper stories) to read to their parents and discussing with parents the importance of *telling* their children troublesome words rather than asking them to "sound it out." By sharing daily home–school reading logs, describing what the student read and how well, teachers and parents can coordinate efforts and quickly resolve unexpected problems.

• Take dictation from their children. Homework assignments often require considerable writing, which evoke images of frustration and failure for students with reading and writing problems. By parents reading short portions of teacher-identified text aloud to their children, asking teacher-supplied questions, and writing down their children's dictated responses without correction or modification, parents can help their children satisfy reasonable homework demands. This activity continuously informs parents about their children's functioning and the teacher's instructional emphasis. When nonjudgmentally and routinely implemented, dictation allows children to fully express their knowledge and intellect without the constraints of reading or spelling abilities.

Not all parents can or want to actively help their children with homework. Some get too emotional and some too demanding. Some lack the academic skill and some feel so overwhelmed and depressed by their economic circumstances that they cannot muster the energy needed to help their children. Some feel highly self-conscious about helping their children and some hold long-standing disdain for schools and homework. Some, who want to help their children, will work with their children only after seeing specific strategies demonstrated, discussing their benefits, and speaking with parents who have used the strategies. If parents decline to help their children, participation should not be coerced. Instead, other homework adjustments need to be considered.

Provide Immediate, Task-Relevant Reinforcement and Personalized Feedback, Linking Success to Effort

Behavioral interventions systematically manipulate external reinforcers to strengthen desired behaviors and enhance motivation. To help students who resist homework improve completion rates and homework quality, students must receive highly valued reinforcers shortly after submitting quality assignments and recognize the connection between their effort and reinforcement. The more students value reinforcers, the more immediate their delivery, and the clearer the connection between effort and reinforcement, the greater the likelihood they will satisfactorily complete future assignments. Conversely, the less students value reinforcers, the greater the interval between homework completion and reinforcement, and the weaker the connection between effort and reinforcement, the less the likelihood they will satisfactorily complete future homework assignments. Thus, Salend and Schliff's (1989) recommendation that rewards and privileges be contingent on satisfactory homework completion should not be surprising.

For behavioral interventions to be effective, students must clearly know what they must do and achieve to earn valued reinforcers. They must believe that with modest effort they can achieve success and valued reinforcement. Thus, homework assignments should evoke images of success. Assignment goals must have sufficient challenge to engender interest and effort but be easy enough so students realistically anticipate success. Because many students with reading problems chronically feel hopeless and attribute success to temporary, uncontrollable, external factors such as "dumb luck," feedback should be frequent and task oriented. It must clearly establish the connection between student actions, efforts, and consequences. It must link success to effort and inform students what they did to earn desired reinforcement. If students experience difficulty, feedback must explain and show students what to do differently to earn reinforcement. Initially, reinforcement must occur after virtually every successfully completed homework assignment to promote optimistic expectations and produce high compliance rates. To maintain high compliance rates, to reduce dependency on external reinforcement, and to develop strong homework habits, reinforcement schedules must systematically be thinned and artificial reinforcers replaced by naturally occurring ones. Eventually, for example, intermittent positive comments describing students' effort and the quality of their work should replace free time earned for each assignment completed with 85% accuracy. Simple applications of behavioral and learned helplessness theory include the following:

• Assign homework that students accurately believe will produce success with moderate effort.

• Stress that all homework will be graded shortly after submission and that desired reinforcement depends on the timely and satisfactory completion of homework. If this becomes an overly burdensome task, the percentage of homework assignments graded by the teacher can be *slightly* reduced once students have achieved a high, steady rate of compliance. Strategies for reducing direct teacher grading include grading samples of homework, grading homework at random intervals, having students grade other students' papers, and having students grade their own papers using teacher-supplied answer sheets (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997). These approaches, however, are not as effective as teachers (or other knowledgeable adults) grading each homework assignment.

• Offer a brief homework menu of assignments that match students' functional abilities. Allot more points for more demanding assignments. Show how different point totals earn different grades and reinforcers.

• Employ reinforcers sufficiently attractive to students that they will deliberately work to obtain them. Identify and monitor the effectiveness of specific reinforcers (e.g., verbal encouragement, notes home, free time). To identify potentially powerful reinforcers, ask parents what their children enjoy, ask the students, and watch what the students do when they can freely choose reinforcers.

• Chart daily the students' homework completion rate and the quality of the homework. In private, share this information with the students. Whenever possible, emphasize improvement and place it in perspective. Avoid exaggerated comments.

• Place students on a homework honor roll for achieving important, mutually agreed-on goals. Have administrators and other teachers acknowledge student successes.

• Coordinate homework success with in-home reinforcement. Ask parents to immediately provide their child with previously agreed-on reinforcement for each short-term homework goal achieved.

• Employ group contingencies. For example, an entire group earns highly valued reinforcement (e.g., free time) when they average 85% on a homework assignment.

• Negotiate realistic, short-term (e.g., 2-day, 1-week) behavioral contracts with students. The contract structure should engender success and earn students wanted reinforcement when they put forth moderate effort. As students demonstrate success over time, increase the length and demands of new contracts, assuring that they continue to match the students' functional abilities.

• Provide frequent, task-specific feedback emphasizing students' accomplishments and corrective actions (i.e., steps) needed to improve results. Initially, proffer task-specific feedback every few minutes. Over time and with increased success, lengthen the duration between feedback statements. If corrective feedback is repeatedly called for, reanalyze the match between assignment demands and student abilities. If problems continue, with individually appropriate homework tasks, task analyze the work and demonstrate specific strategies students can use to succeed; then ask students to demonstrate these strategies.

• Write positive comments on student papers that link success to effort and the correct use of learning strategies. Begin written feedback with the student's name. For example, "Jill, your summary was clear and to the point." Privately read comments to students that they might find difficult to read.

• Employ attribution retraining. Each day, spend a few minutes with students who achieved success on a particular homework assignment, discussing its goal and the strategies they employed that produced success. Have students explain (a) the link between their effort and success, (b) what they will do to succeed on the next assignment, (c) why they deserve credit for making a bonafide effort and correctly employing a learning strategy, and (d) what personal attributes they have that contributed to successful homework completion. Jointly agree on a realistic goal for the next assignment (McCown, Driscoll, & Roop, 1996).

• Model positive, realistic attributions to students. Teach them to make concrete self-statements, such as "I earned 90% on this assignment because I followed the directions, took two deep breaths before answering difficult questions, and stuck to it. I visualized what to do and didn't give up."

Ensure That Students Understand Their Assignments, How They Benefit From Them, and How to Get Help

Confusion adds to anxiety and learned helplessness. It virtually guarantees that students with reading problems will have difficulty completing assign-

ments. Knowing the assignment's goal, the steps required to achieve it, how it will benefit them, and where and how to get help fosters feelings of control and competence, reduces anxiety, and encourages involvement in the assignment. Do the following to ensure that students understand an assignment's requirements and potential benefits and know the supports available to them:

• Present clear, simple directions. Clarify homework expectations. Specify the criteria for obtaining an A and a B. Demonstrate how to complete the homework. State the assignment's purpose and potential benefits. Let students examine completed samples. Discuss any potentially confusing aspects of the assignment, especially if the type of assignment is unfamiliar to students.

• Ask students who might find the assignment confusing to explain it and briefly demonstrate how to do it. Do this in a way that avoids negative attention from peers.

• Have students begin the assignment in class. After 5 min, have them form triads to examine each other's work and to interview each other to identify their questions and concerns about the assignment and its benefits. Discuss student responses in a small group or whole class format.

• Help students to inventory personal competencies they can employ to satisfy explicit homework requirements. In a step-by-step fashion, demonstrate how students can apply their skills to successfully complete specific assignments. Have students complete several items and provide task-specific feedback. In subsequent demonstrations, feign mistakes and invite correction. Coupling recognition of personal abilities with observations of one's successes builds confidence that is antithetical to anxiety and learned helplessness.

• Review completed homework with students. During or immediately after the review, briefly tell students how it benefited them or lead a brief discussion of its benefits. Avoid preaching, lengthy discussions, or exaggerated claims.

• Have well-respected older students or adults (e.g., businesspeople, college athletes, military personnel, retirees) discuss the value of particular subjects in their lives. Two or three of these discussions yearly can vitalize subjects that students consider irrelevant.

• Use cooperative goal structures in which student pairs (or small groups) assume responsibility for an assignment and assist their partners. Provide time for students to discuss the assignment and begin it. The next day have students integrate their individual efforts into a single submission for joint grade. To promote individual accountability, have students enclose their individual homework with the joint submission.

• Discuss with students when to work on homework and how to structure their work setting at home. If parents are receptive, discuss the same with them or send home materials on the topic. Ask students to estimate the time required to complete the homework; then have them compare estimated times to actual times. Discuss the findings, the underlying reasons, and the implications.

• Counsel students who consistently have trouble completing homework in a quality way. Empathetically listen to and problem solve with them for 10 to 15 min a week. This activity often reveals critical information needed to create practical solutions. If time for counseling is lacking, request help from the school's guidance counselor, reading specialist, school psychologist, or social worker.

• Display and discuss a list that specifies where homework help is available and how to access it. Use simple diagrams and pictures (e.g., photographs of teachers) to enliven and clarify the list. Sources of homework help might include school-run hotlines, drop-in support centers, e-mail homework addresses, and times that school personnel offer homework help. To avoid confusion, provide supervised practice before expecting students to independently access these supports. Also inform parents where and when homework help is available.

• Carefully structure and supervise a "homework buddy" program in which students of comparable achievement confer about homework after school. If matched for personality and achievement, all students can enjoy and benefit from paired support. Involving all students prevents stigmatization.

• Hold a general parent meeting about how to structure homework time, arrange space for doing homework, and provide help with homework at home.

• Discuss conflict-resolution strategies with parents who want to discuss how to avoid fighting with their children about homework. If warranted,

obtain permission to discuss homework conflict-resolution strategies with their children, or refer the student for in-school counseling.

Ensure That Students Have Realistic, Personally Meaningful Homework Goals

Goals are ideals that individuals work to achieve. Personal goals engage emotions (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) and energize people. Students who believe school success will help them achieve goals they consider important tend to work hard in school and appear industrious. Students without personally important goals, or goals they think are disconnected from school, often avoid schoolwork and appear lazy. In essence, personally important goals motivate students and influence their actions.

Achieving personally important goals produces a satisfying sense of completion and accomplishment. Personal goal achievement contributes to "flow," or the state of mind "when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and [people] want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 6). Regularly achieving personally valued homework goals buttresses student confidence and reduces homework-induced anxiety.

Personal goals differ from assignments. Assignments are what others require. Personal goals are what people decide they want to achieve. Assignments can acquire the properties of personal goals. Lisa, for example, wants to finish her homework so her parents stop "nagging" her and she passes English. Any passing grade will do. She doesn't care if she learns anything. Lisa rushes through her homework without considering neatness or quality. She lacks a personally important homework goal. She is merely going through the motions of complying. Like Lisa, Michael finds the assignment itself boring. His personal homework goal, however, is to complete three successive assignments with grades of B or better and to learn something new from each assignment. He believes that the more he learns, the better are his chances of making the honor roll, which he desperately wants to achieve. After completing each assignment, he concisely logs what he learned in a composition book. Periodically reviewing the book reminds him of his accomplishments. By establishing a personal homework goal, Michael added a meaningful, interesting dimension to work he otherwise finds uninteresting.

Students with reading and writing disabilities who erratically complete homework that matches their functional abilities typically lack short-term, explicit, moderately challenging, personal homework goals they believe achievable and beneficial. By regularly achieving such personal goals, students combat learned helplessness. Amelioration, however, necessitates that students attribute personal goal attainment to stable, global, internal

sources, like high intelligence. If students resist the short-term homework activities necessary to achieve short-term personal homework goals, they cannot challenge learned helplessness. To reverse avoidance, personally valued extrinsic reinforcers must be made prominent and immediately available, contingent upon goal attainment, so students think it profitable to complete assignments in a quality way. Initial activities must produce quick, visible success. Over time, the application of extrinsic reinforcement, following systematic reinforcement schedules that gradually eliminate planned reinforcement, tends to make initially unattractive tasks intrinsically reinforcing.

Unfortunately, many students who work for extrinsic rewards need to learn to establish personally important, realistic, short-term goals. The following help students establish personal homework goals:

- Focus on explicit, specific, concrete, attractive goals that students can readily visualize themselves achieving. For example, "I will videotape 10 neighborhood signs by Tuesday afternoon" is far more explicit, concrete, attractive, and susceptible to visualization for students who enjoy videotaping and cannot read social studies texts than is, "Do well on social studies assignments."

- Assess student interests and formulate initial goals that capitalize on them. If students have adequate maturity, jointly develop short-term, student-centered goals.

- Formulate goals of moderate challenge, recognizing that challenge is extremely subjective. Thus, Joshua, a 12-year-old with a third-grade reading instructional level, views his science homework as overwhelming, whereas Vince, another 12-year-old with the same instructional level, finds the same assignment moderately challenging and interesting. When students think goals are too easy, they tend to call them "boring" or "insulting." They attribute little value to success. When students perceive goals as too hard, they often label them "overwhelming" or "impossible" and avoid them. Both situations create psychic entropy, which dramatically undermines motivation. In contrast, "enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 52).

- Model the thought processes involved in establishing short-term (e.g., 1-min, 10-min, 1-hr, 1-day, 2-day), realistic homework goals. For students who ardently resist homework, start by jointly agreeing to one extremely short term, realistic homework goal. Help them visualize themselves

achieving it with moderate effort and minimal stress. Have them complete the assignment in class to earn personally attractive reinforcers (to be systematically eliminated over time). As extremely short term goals are routinely achieved, use think-alouds to model the step-by-step thought processes involved in formulating incrementally longer term goals (e.g., increase from a 1-day to a 2-day goal; increase from a 2-day to a 3-day goal) or more complex goals. Eventually, have students complete assignments at home. With students, identify concrete, visible criteria for determining the degree of goal attainment. In advance of initiating goal-directed work, discuss gradations of achievement, as opposed to all-or-nothing thinking. By regularly focusing on and achieving realistic short-term goals of even 5 min duration, people tend to experience flow, or happiness, which is incompatible with anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

• Practice goal-related homework tasks in class and help students see how their assignments help them achieve personal goals. For example, Sue has the realistic personal goal of completing four straight assignments with a B. Encourage her to say to herself, "Getting an 85 will mean I finished my homework 3 days in a row. One more day and I'll meet my goal of 4 straight days with an 85." Estella's realistic personal goal is to complete her vocabulary homework quickly and accurately. Encourage her to say to herself, "I finished this in 20 minutes and got 8 of 10 right. Tomorrow I'll do it in 20 minutes and get 9 of 10 right."

• Teach students to divide short-term goals into much shorter, moment-to-moment or immediate goals if the original ones prove troublesome or tedious. For example, to most people Jason's homework goal of correctly answering five questions seems simple and manageable. Not to Jason. To him it is overwhelming. He needs more immediate feedback from the task. By developing a checklist that lists each question by number, satisfactorily answering each question becomes a discrete, immediate goal. In essence, five questions become five moment-to-moment goals. Jason's first immediate goal is to satisfactorily answer Question 1. When satisfactorily answered, he places a check in the box before Question 1 on his checklist, indicating he achieved the first immediate goal. Jason continues checking off each immediate question or goal until he satisfactorily answers all five. Task completion alone is a major source of intrinsic satisfaction.

Employ Strategies to Reduce Extreme Anxiety or Tension

Students with reading disabilities often labor assiduously to avoid homework. Many have learned that homework produces failure, shame, and

conflict, despite earnest efforts. Their avoidance is negatively reinforced when it averts homework-induced anxiety. Many students with reading disabilities think it better to not try and fail than to try and fail.

Providing interesting experiences and assignments that students value and that match their abilities is insufficient when anxiety overwhelms students. When anxiety creates or exacerbates homework (or other school) problems, it must be addressed directly. Anxiety reduction can require the coordinated involvement of other professionals, such as guidance counselors and school psychologists. It can require balancing the students' day with intrinsically enjoyable activities not directly related to homework or schoolwork. Some approaches, such as relaxation training and counseling, require training and consultation support. To reduce anxiety, try the following:

• Have individual students read homework materials aloud in class to identify troublesome words. Organize this to prevent embarrassment. Tell each student his or her troublesome words and audiotape them (e.g., /w/ /a/ /n/ /d/ /e/ /r/ says "wander"). Record up to five words. If six or more words are unknown, modify the assignment. Easier assignments reduce anxiety.

• Make clear to students, by word and action, that they are fully valued and respected, independent of achievement. They need to know that although homework completion is preferred and personalized homework assignments will directly benefit them, homework difficulties will not lessen respect and concern for them. School psychologists and counselors can help develop proper phrasing.

• Acknowledge that all feelings are valid. Tell students that competent people feel anxious and confused when they experience difficulty.

• Teach students to relax and give them daily relaxation opportunities (e.g., in the resource room or with a school counselor). Discuss with parents whether they want to relax with their children at home. Inform interested but skeptical parents about the potential academic, psychological, and health benefits of daily relaxation. For example, parents may need to learn that although it is not a panacea, or always effective, relaxation training has positively influenced anxiety, stress, self-esteem, reading performance, attention to task, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and aggressiveness (Margolis, 1990; Margolis & Pica, 1989–90).

• Refer students for professional counseling. Ensure that it is carefully coordinated with in-class instructional efforts. If, for example, the counselor

emphasizes cognitive therapy, stressing the identification and disputation of automatic thoughts, distraction, and visual imagery, the student's teachers should be educated in the strategies and taught to frame comments to reinforce and complement the thrust of counseling. If the counselor emphasizes behavioral therapy and systematically employs reinforcement schedules, the student's teachers and parents should provide agreed-on reinforcers according to the current reinforcement schedule. Not doing so and inadvertently ignoring behaviors requiring reinforcement while reinforcing inappropriate ones will adversely affect student behavior.

- Involve students in enjoyable activities to which they look forward. For students exceptionally averse to reading and homework, provide enjoyable activities daily. Initially, make them as different from reading, writing, and homework as possible. After several weeks of enjoyable, intrinsically reinforcing activities, discuss with students what makes the activities enjoyable, which of their personal attributes contributed to their success, and how they focused their efforts and monitored their performance. Consider discussing both psychological safety and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) attributes: goal clarity, centering, commitment, choice, and challenge. Gradually, in small steps, weave reading, writing, and homework into the activities and reinstitute discussions of how students can make activities enjoyable and successful. Given the need for extremely anxious students to enjoy themselves in nonthreatening situations, avoid eliminating these activities when faced with time pressure.

THE CONSULTANT'S ROLE

Homework problems, like most educational problems, require that consultants proceed systematically and tentatively. Consultants need to collaborate with both teachers and parents to assess the importance assigned to students' difficulties, define the problem in objective terms, collect data to adequately understand the dynamics and maintaining factors, agree on goals, plan and build commitment to implementing potentially effective solutions, implement and frequently monitor treatments, refine interventions, evaluate outcomes, and determine future steps. To transform abstractions and guiding principles into functional reality, consultants may need to provide sample homework modifications and demonstrate in-class preparation, feedback, and follow-up procedures. They may need to visit students' homes to make parents comfortable and to assess the family's ability to support homework. Collaboration with teachers and parents, individually and jointly, involves considerable time.

Departmentalized programs typically require even more time, as consultants may have to simultaneously work with several teachers and the student's parents. Consultants should initiate discussion about selecting a professional to (a) coordinate homework from the student's many teachers to prevent the student from becoming overwhelmed, (b) modify homework to assure it matches the student's abilities, and (c) scrutinize homework requirements with the student to prevent confusion. If participants agree that a coordinator is warranted, the consultant can assist in identifying the specific responsibilities of the coordinator and provide essential supports. If a coordinator is deemed unnecessary, the consultant should initiate discussion about alternate means of discharging these coordinative functions. In departmentalized programs, uncoordinated efforts rarely succeed.

Data collection is central to all aspects of problem resolution, from problem awareness and identification to the termination of consultation. It involves carefully and empathetically listening to teachers and parents discuss the details of the student's homework difficulties, observing the presentation of assignments and the support given, inventorying homework requirements, inspecting the nature and immediacy of feedback, and verifying hypothesized causes. Sugai and Tindal (1993) provided an excellent sequenced model for structured problem solving that emphasizes objectivity and can be used in different consultation situations. They also identified treatment acceptability factors that consultants should assess when formulating interventions. These include time and effort requirements, implementation responsibilities, instructional knowledge and skills, philosophical orientation, classroom management and organization, available support, past experience, and perceptions of the intervention's fairness and appropriateness. In addition, consultants need to assess teacher and parent expectations of success and their willingness to try new methods, refine interventions, and accept feedback. Although consultants should address the objective aspects of problematic situations, they should also accurately assess and sensitively respond to teacher and parent perceptions and values. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) observed, all experience is ultimately subjective. It is the subjective interpretation of objective reality that shapes behavior.

Building commitment to changing homework practices involves listening and collaborating with teachers and parents to design assignments that they believe meet their needs and the students'. It also involves listening and collaborating with students and using their performances to guide the design of future homework. Analysis should focus on understanding relevant variables directly subject to modification. These include assignment length, grade level of materials, assignment complexity, curiosity attributes, presentation procedures, feedback practices, attributions, reinforcers,

reinforcement schedules, and in-class and in-home supports. In some instances, obtaining genuine commitment requires that teachers and parents know that the school will provide support services they consider critical (e.g., student counseling). For maximum benefit, these services need to be sensitive to and carefully articulated with in-class and in-home efforts.

Consultants should aim to develop relationships and an interpersonal atmosphere that build commitment to faithfully implementing agreed-on interventions. Through skilled listening, trust building, and problem solving (see Margolis, 1986, 1990), consultants can help teachers and parents accurately regard themselves as part of a team committed to helping the student and each other. Skillful facilitation of meetings can produce accurate perceptions important to developing commitment. This effort includes correctly believing that agreed-on interventions (a) have high probability of succeeding, (b) represent important values, (c) are fair to everyone, and (d) will be modified if ineffective. In addition, teachers and parents need to accurately believe that if their preferred ideas were not adopted, they were carefully listened to and understood and that decisions were based on merit rather than an idea's origination. All need to know that blame will not be an issue if interventions prove ineffective. Although designing and securing commitment to implement agreed-on interventions in a quality manner normally takes considerable time, the investment can yield benefit beyond the immediate homework problem. Well-conducted problem solving cultivates mutual trust and respect and advances knowledge about the process, facilitating future collaboration. It also teaches participants to remedy similar problems with other students.

Despite well-intentioned efforts, homework difficulties can persist. In such instances, it is particularly important that homework not be viewed as an isolated problem, disconnected from the daily difficulties students face and the social forces that impact on their lives. Student resistance to homework can reflect a deeply rooted, rationally based negative attitude toward school, stemming from a history of unrealistic demands and repeated failure. Resistance can also reflect a family's values or difficulties. Some parents, for example, believe that schools alone are responsible for teaching their children and that parents should not be burdened with supervising homework. Other parents live stressed, chaotic lives. They lack the time, resources, and organizational abilities to adequately structure their children's lives and home environment. Whenever homework problems persist, consultants must infer and systematically test, without attributing blame, the functional messages the students' difficulties communicate. If homework and instructional practices conform to the principles delineated in this article, and if the student has ongoing difficulty with assignments, the real issue is unlikely the work itself. If teachers and parents

agree that homework is an unyielding but important problem, consultants should employ a very systematic, highly structured, group-centered problem-solving process, such as Lewin's force field analysis (Lewin, 1947; Ulschak, Nathanson, & Gillan, 1981). Here, the consultant functions as facilitator to identify relevant factors that contribute to the problem and that need to be weakened or neutralized and factors that can improve the situation and that need to be strengthened and capitalized upon. The structure and rationality of force field analysis can illuminate underlying but often ignored factors critical to improving the situation and provide the analytical understanding needed to create precisely focused solutions or to establish more realistic goals.

Because student behavior change is often slow, with false starts and reversals, teachers and parents can get discouraged easily. Thus, the importance of reinforcing positive teacher and parent behaviors cannot be underestimated. By (a) agreeing to small, readily achievable goals, with discernible feedback indicators; (b) attributing legitimate successes to teacher and parent efforts; and (c) relating them to teacher and parent values, consultants can help maintain motivation. If realistic, short-term, precise homework goals are established that match teacher, parent, and student abilities, all will likely benefit. Conversely, if agreed-on goals are too demanding, long-term, or vague, anxiety and disappointment commonly ensue. Thus, consultants need to ensure that interventions reflect valued, realistic, explicit short-term goals that moderate effort can achieve.

One purpose of homework intervention is to help students develop the habits and skills essential to independently satisfy future requirements. Thus, artificial, extrinsic reinforcement must gradually be phased out, according to student success rates, to ensure the continuation of productive habits. However, avoidance or escape habits are likely to reemerge if future assignments fail to match student abilities and violate sound instructional principles. Consultants can help prevent future problems by discussing the student homework needs with their new teachers and inserting a highly visible list of homework practices that promote and impede progress in students' cumulative files. Bringing together a student's previous teacher with his or her new teacher to discuss successful homework practices can foster positive homework practices and provide the new teacher with collegial support. For special education students, collaboratively designing IEPs that specifically address homework difficulties can sustain effective practices.

CONCLUSION

Often, homework problems are direct manifestations of students' reading and writing disabilities. As such, homework problems need to be rationally

and sensitively addressed to reverse the devastating effects that reading and writing difficulties have on self-esteem and overall school functioning.

Resistance to homework or poorly executed homework are often responses to factors outside the student's control. By viewing homework difficulty as a problem to be solved and employing structured problem-solving procedures for more intractable homework difficulties, consultants can improve the situation. We recommend that consultants (a) employ curiosity theory, learned helplessness, and behavioral theory to carefully structure and respond to homework; (b) directly address anxiety that interferes with schoolwork; and (c) collaboratively problem solve with teachers and parents. Working closely with teachers and parents to resolve homework difficulties can be extremely time consuming. If, however, homework problems persist, create conflict, and undermine student functioning, consultants should view the time and effort as an essential, worthwhile investment.

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Howard Margolis is a professor at Queens College of the City University of New York. He specializes in conflict resolution, applied behavioral analysis, and reading difficulties.

Patrick P. McCabe is an associate professor at Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL. His research interests are related to motivation and reading and home–school connections.

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