



Teachers and students attitudes towards homework a case study on Trichy urban primary schools

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Abstract

The analysis is pursued to find out the attitudes of primary school students and teachers towards schoolwork (homework), using five purposively sampled primary schools in Trichy urban area as a case study. The study employed a qualitative research design in which data were gathered through semi-structured personal interviews with a sample of 60 students and 10 teachers. The findings show that generally students have a negative attitude towards homework due to a number of reasons which are, more number of assignments (homework from all subjects in a single day), teachers fails to specify or mark it, the difficulty of the tasks set, lack of resources at home, lack of help from parents, and lack of time to do the homework because students are sent on grocery shopping and other personal work after school. On the other hand, although teachers acknowledge the importance of homework, several factors inhibit them from taking it serious, leading among them are being lack of motivation laid by poor remuneration, and the fact that they are burdened with very large classes and a overfed curriculum. The study recommends that teachers should link homework to classroom activities, make the homework task manageable in terms of difficulty, and abstain from using homework as punishment. The study also recommends that schools should constantly engage parents by making them aware about the importance of their involvement in their children's homework. Finally, the paper recommends that the government should motivate teachers by improving their working conditions and by maintaining the teacher-students ratios at primary school.

Keywords: homework, trichy urban, primary schools

Introduction

Like all teachers, I've spent many hours correcting homework. Yet there's a debate over whether we should be setting it at all.

I teach both primary and secondary, and regularly find myself drawn into the argument on the reasoning behind it – parents, and sometimes colleagues, question its validity. Parent-teacher interviews can become consumed by how much trouble students have in completing assignments. All of which has led me to question the neuroscience behind setting homework. Is it worth it?

Increasingly, there's a boundary between those who support the need for homework and those who suggest the time would be better spent with family and developing relationships. The anxiety related to homework is frequently reviewed.

A survey of high-performing high schools by the Standard Graduate School of Education, for example, found that 56% of students considered homework a primary source of stress. The same students reported that the demands of homework caused sleep deprivation and other health problems, as well as less time for friends, family and extracurricular pursuits.

When students learn in the classroom, they are using their short-term or working memory. This information is continually updated during the class. On leaving the classroom, the information in the working memory is replaced by the topic in the next class.

Adults experience a similar reaction when they walk into a

new room and forget why they are there. The new set of sensory information – lighting, odors, and temperature – enters their working memory and any pre-existing information is displaced. It's only when the person returns to the same environment that they remember the key information.

But education is about more than memorizing facts. Students need to access the information in ways that are relevant to their world, and to transfer knowledge to new situations.

Many of us will have struggled to remember someone's name when we meet them in an unexpected environment, and we are more likely to remember them again once we've seen them multiple times in different places. Similarly, students must practice their skills in different environments.

Revising the key skills learned in the classroom during homework increases the likelihood of a student remembering and being able to use those skills in a variety of situations in the future, contributing to their overall education.

The link between homework and educational achievement is supported by research: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00346543076001001a> a meta-analysis of studies between 1987 and 2003 found that: "With only rare exceptions, the relationship between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes was found to be positive and statistically significant."

Professor Jansen, a leading education expert and vice-chancellor of the University of Free State concurs that ". . . homework is unnecessary.

Homework has become one of the most controversial issues in modern education (Blum, 1998) ^[2]. The controversy surrounding homework, a “topic on which opinions differ widely” (Balassi, 1968:57) ^[1] seems to center on whether homework is beneficial or not to students. For example, while Freeman (1992) asserts that children who are set homework, complete it and have it marked, perform better at school than students who do none, Balassi (1968) ^[1] says it cannot be argued that homework positively results in increased achievement for all students, nor can it be argued, on the basis of research, that homework is of no value.

It is against this backdrop of controversy surrounding the issue of homework that this study focused on teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards homework. Teachers and students are the ones who are directly involved in homework, as givers and doers respectively. The study also investigated factors which contribute towards such attitudes, with a view to recommending ways which may make homework a more fruitful and worthwhile exercise.

Objectives

The study intended to

- a) Identify teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards homework;
- b) Investigate the causes of such attitudes by teachers and students;
- c) Suggest the way forward in light of the findings.

Methodology

This section looks at the methodology of the research, in which the population comprised all the primary school students in India. In this study, data were collected through interviews with Fifth standard students and teachers in Trichy urban. The researchers used semi-structured interviews which acted as a general guide, otherwise questions which sought to address objectives were mostly follow-ups in a casual manner. Relevant issues which were not included in the interview guide but arose during the personal interviews were explored and noted and became the basis for spontaneous supplementary questions.

Semi-structured interviews were found suitable in collecting data on attitudes and beliefs. This is in line with the flexible nature of qualitative research. During the interviews, notes were taken down by the researchers and in some instances respondents were quoted exact. With teachers, the researchers intended to establish the degree of participation and commitment whilst with students, the researchers intended to establish their attitudes towards homework and its role in the framework of teaching and learning in general.

A sample of sixty students from five schools in Trichy urban was selected. The reason for selecting Fifth standard students was that the researchers considered it as the level at which teaching and learning is seriously geared towards attainment of good grades at Six to Seven. Ten teachers (five males and five females) were also purposively sampled. These teachers were teaching fifth at the time of the study so the researchers thought that they would be the best respondents to provide the relevant information on this contentious issue of homework.

Findings

Findings from interviews with students

From the interview conducted with fifth standard student, it is clear that the issue of homework is indeed controversial – student are divided on its merits. Nineteen student from one primary school (5A, 5B, 5C) viewed homework as stressful and said that it is sometimes given as punishment to correct the behavior of student. For example, when making noise in class, the teacher gives homework, so that the student discontinues the unwanted or unruly behavior. Therefore, to avoid being given homework, student refrained from making noise and were always punctual for school activities.

Out of the sixty interviewees, twenty were happy that they were not given homework because they did not make noise in class. Seventeen, who were perceived by the researchers to be average/above average expressed an interest in homework, which they believed was a worthwhile exercise because it gave them “more practice” without the teacher’s or parents’ assistance. Four student from a 5C class liked homework because it was perceived to be extension work from school to finish whatever was not finished at school. They also said that homework was necessary as it reinforced what would have been learnt at school.

At another school, of the fifteen interviewees, ten expressed their dismay and said that they viewed homework as “mere wastage of time” because “the teacher doesn’t mark it” and also that “It prevents me from watching T.V.”

Four students offered to show their so-called ‘homework books’ to the researchers. It was observed by the researchers that where some marking was done, it was not at all thorough as a big tick was put to indicate that the teacher had ‘seen’ rather than marked the book. This observation is also made by Tavares (1998:37) ^[12] who stresses that not marking student homework will make student “think that the teacher is not responding to their effort, or they might prefer to study another subject next time.” One student remained indifferent to the issue of homework. The same student also registered their dislike of homework as stressful and unrewarding because there were no resources at home, such as books whose cost is beyond the reach of many. When assigned work, student would simply not do it since there would be no references to help them manage the exercise.

Due to the regular power outages in the country during the time of the inquiry, seventeen student from another school felt that they were being shortchanged because most parents could not afford alternative lighting for them to do their homework. “I don’t do my homework because there is no electricity” was a common response.

One student found homework painful because “My mother doesn’t assist me and usually sends me ‘market’ to sell vegetables after school.” These responses agreed with responses from other schools at which interviews were conducted, where student attributed their failure to do homework to the fact that they were sent on numerous errands after school and during weekends. On many cases, children are asked to water the garden or mop up the floor after which they would be so tired that homework becomes a taxing exercise. They said that this prevented them from doing

homework even on those rare occasions when such homework is given.

Seven student whom the researchers interviewed expressed dismay with some homework exercises which they found very challenging and painful because they would not have done or talked about such material in class. This confirms Tavares's (1998:36)^[12] observation that for homework to be effective, it ". . . should be something that students have already talked about or done in class." It is clear that some student dislike and ignore homework because it is set on something very unfamiliar to them.

"Out of sixty students from five schools, one set of 60 student have fully described and remaining were missing, the reason is their answer merges (Same reason said by student of different school).

Findings from interviews with teachers

Ten teachers from five schools were interviewed. The findings show that teachers are generally aware of the academic merits of homework.

One teacher said he gave homework because it is a worthwhile exertion "to reinforce work done at school, extend the limited school day and help student to develop skills in learning independently." Such positive sentiments were shared by virtually all teachers who were interviewed. They maintained that homework helps train student to work on their own.

The teachers also stressed that they found homework valuable because it enables parents to have a share in their children's education. This helps to provide a conscious and tangible link between home and school. Govender (2010:10)^[7] reinforces this idea when she says, "I really believe that homework at primary school is necessary. It helps Tremane (her child) consolidate what he has learnt" (emphasis ours). Homework is thus viewed as valuable to the teaching-learning of children at primary school.

However, it is the demerits of homework which the researchers found interesting. All the

Interviewed teachers complained that very few student, mostly the average and above average do their homework regularly. Teachers themselves are supposed to give homework on a daily basis to enhance the teaching-learning process but their student are so "stressed up that they end up too tired to cope with all their responsibilities, especially the ones that require quiet and concentration," said one teacher.

In such circumstances, homework is viewed as burdensome and is given to fulfill administrative requirements. This means that homework is negatively viewed simply as a time-filling exercise to the child's development.

Six teachers from three different schools indicated that they disliked homework, and that when given on those rare occasions, it is mainly in subjects like English and Mathematics which are perceived to be the most challenging. Only some five or so questions are given which would constitute student morning work, to be revised just before the school day begins. Student are simply asked to exchange their work and mark it using pencils, to ease pressure on the already "overburdened teacher." This echoes sentiments made by student.

One teacher said the greatest challenge is that most student

viewed homework as unnecessary because they do not have the resources like exercise books. This militates against their doing homework in particular and learning in general. Asked by the researchers on how she goes round this problem, the teacher said that there was very little she could do because their parents would have neglected their responsibilities. Therefore, the teacher would simply ignore and "go along with those who are willing," she said. The willing ones were mostly those student whose parents come to school on consultation days, to discuss their children's performance. Such as lack of resources echoes sentiments expressed by the student who were interviewed, revealing that this problem is quite rampant. Making a follow-up of such exercises is viewed by this teacher as taxing and unfruitful.

All the ten teachers interviewed viewed homework as an "extra-burden" in a situation where "working conditions are unappetizing and not at all motivating." Given the meager salaries offered by the government, coupled with the need for thorough planning, extra work given as homework was found to be uninviting and unrewarding. The teachers said that they would rather use such time to do other activities like hawking to supplement the little they get as salary.

This confirms student sentiments that "the teacher doesn't mark it." So, instead of doing homework, they would rather watch T.V. or follow their other interests and hobbies. Homework remains a distraction to them. Eight teachers from the three schools echoed student negative sentiments that student are sent on numerous errands and engage in household chores to the extent that they have little time to spare for homework. They said that most families live "from hand to mouth" so much that they often meet their own student either along the streets or at the market, doing some selling to alleviate poverty.

Seven teachers from the three schools said that they disliked homework because the "subjects are too many." Hence homework is given on rare occasions. One of these teachers said, "I give homework as a chore or punishment. Usually, I ask a student to copy down a passage from a textbook into his /her exercise book or set a very difficult Mathematical problem for the student to do at home." This again confirms student attitude towards this task as unfair and difficult. From the researchers' perspective, such exercises are not at all developmentally-appropriate, they are of little value. This confirms Govender's (2010:10)^[7] view that, "Homework is then seen in a negative light and will create a daily 'battleground' between child and teacher."

Two teachers from one school said that they found homework unfruitful because their student disliked it, often giving the excuse that they get very little assistance from their parents who are either semi-literate or too tired with their daily chores to be able to spare time for such. This means that such parents think that assistance sought by their children on homework tasks is burdensome.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that both teachers and student find homework rewarding. However, their attitude towards such a valuable exercise is negatively affected by a myriad of factors. On the part of student, those factors the researchers found common include lack of resources at home, such as

exercise/text books and electricity. Also, situations where homework was given as punishment were rampant. The student also lamented that homework deprived them of the time to follow their interests and hobbies. Another common observation was that often teachers did not mark homework tasks, further compounding students' dislike of it. Students also cited lack of assistance/concern from parents, which made them develop a negative attitude towards homework. Furthermore, students found no time to do homework because they were sent on numerous errands and/or household chores. In addition, tasks were set on alien topics and students felt it was unfair and very difficult to tackle them.

The teachers who were interviewed confirmed all the above sentiments by students and, in addition, cited "unappetizing working conditions", too much work for them, as they had to teach about eleven subjects to very large classes of above 45 students, parental negligence and general lack of motivation as factors militating against effective implementation of homework. As if these were not enough impediments, the communities in which they work no longer view teaching as a noble profession but a last resort career, yet they insist on the need for enhanced performance in the classroom.

Recommendations

Various arguments have been presented in service of and against homework in the primary school. In view of the teachers' and students' attitudes collected in the study, it is clear that the issue of homework has practical implications for both the teacher and the students. As such the following recommendations are suggested:

- The teacher ought to ensure that the students are familiar with the exercise they are going to do either at home or as individuals during their spare time at school. Unclear instructions may discourage students and give them a good excuse for not doing the exercise. When effectively handled, it would provide a useful link between home and school and extend the limited school day (Farrant, 1991)^[4]. It is thus a part of and an extension of the classroom activities.
- Teachers are known for not marking student's homework due to various factors like large classes and poor remuneration or un motivating working conditions already cited in this study. It is, therefore, necessary that whenever they give such homework, they develop a correction habit. Marking such homework early in the school day provides immediate feedback. Where large classes are involved, the teacher may ask students to participate in correcting it. Tavares (1998)^[12] warns against the habit of correcting homework as the last thing in the class since it may generate unnecessary delays in doing such homework or encourage early departures by those students who think that homework is not a worthwhile exercise.
- Parents should contribute immensely to the education of their children by prioritizing material and moral support. For example, where electricity outages are rampant, alternative forms of lighting should be provided by the parent at home to facilitate completion of the task by the students. They should also assist children in managing homework exercises which they find challenging. Weston in Shah (2001)^[11] advises schools to give parents direction

as to what is an appropriate role for them to play and explain why they are being asked to take an interest. They can be told plainly, on consultation days, that their comments are intended to encourage the children, not to make them feel criticized, and that praise and appreciation enhance children's self-esteem.

- Teachers should desist from using homework as a punishment or reward since both may militate against a child's attitude towards homework. Some teachers assign a lot of homework when students are not behaving well or give extra marks for those who do the exercises. One or the other attitude can make the students think of homework as good or bad, and not as an important or challenging activity that helps their learning process. Assigning just enough homework would give the child some time to attend to his/her other hobbies like watching television and socializing with peers through play.
- Where a teacher feels 'overburdened' by too large a class, the teacher may assign short but meaningful tasks to ensure that effective and constructive marking takes place. It goes without saying that the issue of remuneration continues to haunt both the government and parents and that it should remain a priority for both in order to motivate the classroom practitioner.

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