

Primary School Teachers' and Pupils' Attitudes Towards Homework: A Case for Selected Masvingo Province Urban Primary Schools.

Rugare Mareva¹

Winnet Chindedza²

Felix Petros Mapako³

^{1,2,3} Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe

Abstract: *The inquiry sought to find out the attitudes of primary school pupils and teachers towards homework, using three purposively sampled primary schools in Masvingo urban 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 45 pupils and 9 teachers. The findings show that generally pupils have a negative attitude towards homework owing to a number of reasons which are, inter alia, failure by teachers to mark it, the difficulty of the tasks set, lack of resources at home, lack of assistance from parents, and lack of time to do the homework because pupils are sent on errands after school. On the other hand, although teachers acknowledge the importance of homework, several factors inhibit them from taking it seriously, chief among them being lack of motivation spawned by poor remuneration, and the fact that they are saddled with very large classes and a bloated curriculum. The study recommends that teachers should link homework to classroom activities, make the homework task manageable in terms of difficulty, and desist from using homework as punishment. The study also recommends that schools should constantly engage parents on the importance of their involvement in their children's homework. Finally, the paper recommends that the government motivates teachers by improving their working conditions and reducing teacher-pupil ratios at primary school.*

Introduction

Homework has become one of the most controversial issues in modern education (Blum, 1998). The controversy surrounding homework, a “topic on which opinions differ widely” (Balassi, 1968:57) seems to centre on whether homework is beneficial or not to pupils. For example, while Freeman (1992) asserts that children who are set homework, complete it and have it marked, perform better at school than pupils who do none, Balassi (1968) 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.

There have been calls from various sectors of the global society to ‘ditch homework’. The US author and parenting expert, Alfie Kohn, has stressed that homework for primary school pupils is unnecessary, debilitating and puts a child off learning for good (Govender, 2010). Professor Jansen, a leading education expert and vice-chancellor of the University of Free State concurs that “. . . homework is unnecessary. Schools seldom co-ordinate homework tasks across the subject areas – with the result that young people are stressed with too much to do in a grade” (Govender, 2010:10).

It is against this backdrop of controversy surrounding the issue of homework that this study focused on teachers' and pupils' attitudes towards homework. Teachers and pupils 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 pupils' attitudes towards homework;
- (b) establish/investigate the causes of such attitudes by teachers and pupils;
- (c) suggest the way forward in light of the findings.

Literature review

This section reviews literature related to the research.

Homework may be defined as a piece of work that a teacher gives students to do out of class (Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2003). In other words, it is schoolwork to be done outside the classroom (English Dictionary: Concise Edition, 1999). Petty (1993) says it is work a student does alone as private study. Put differently, homework is the transfer of learning activities to the pupils' own learning environment.

Blum (1998), a proponent of homework, observes that it offers an important opportunity to aid and extend learning by setting it into a completely different context whereby conversations with adults and other children may spark ideas and debate in a different way to school learning. Blum (1998) goes on to postulate that work that is done at home offers another dimension because it contributes to a parent's understanding of the child and the school, thereby fulfilling very common wishes of parents with regards to feedback to their children's education. Also, Sutton in Shah (2001) looks at homework as the main medium through which pupils' work can be regularly seen by parents and carers.

Also in support of homework, Kyriacou (1998) states that it is very important in providing information on how well a pupil can perform without aid from the teacher, an observation shared by Freeman (1992). Kyriacou (1998) also observes that homework can be used to determine pupils' organizational skills and power of commitment to meet the demands made on them. Homework can also provide stark feedback to the pupil and the teacher on the nature of any difficulties or problems which are less evident in class, where the teacher may be readily available to render assistance. Kyriacou (1998) further notes that homework is of value in that it can be used to assess pupils' previous learning in lessons, through consolidation and practice-type tasks, or preparing for a test by revising.

Farrant (1991) sums up the importance of homework by observing that, apart from enabling parents to share in their children's education and providing a conscious and tangible link between home and school, homework also extends the limited school day and provides pupils with useful pursuits at home.

However, Farrant (1991) also gives several demerits of homework. Not only can homework be a time-filling exercise which is of little relevance to the child's development, but it can also deprive a child of his/her own interests and hobbies. Apart from that, homework may be so inequitably allocated as to overburden children. Moreover, homework may be given by some teachers as a chore or punishment.

For homework to be a worthwhile exercise, Good and Brophy (1992:492-493) advise that it must be realistic in length and difficulty, and add: "If homework is to have instructional value for the

class as a whole, it is necessary to set up accountability systems to make sure that it is completed on time, to review it the next day, and take corrective action.”

Balassi (1968) notes that homework assignments should be given individually on the basis of each student’s needs, and that the teacher should ensure that students understand what is to be done, why it is to be done and how it is to be done. Balassi (1968:59) further advises: “Devise homework that bears some relationship to what has been going on in class, and vary the kind of homework you give. Take time to look at the homework submitted . . . put thought into planning assignments.”

Freeman (1992) notes that for homework to be effective, it should be built into the original lesson planning, the aim being to make children use the skills they have learned in class by understanding a small individual piece of writing.

Tavares (1998) also offers several pieces of advice to teachers. She advises classroom practitioners to make sure the students understand the homework, to create a correction habit, to assign just enough homework, to plan more than one type of homework to give students a choice, to accept late homework, to link homework with classroom activities, and ,finally, to desist from using homework as a punishment or reward.

Methodology

This section looks at the methodology of the research, in which the population comprised all the primary school pupils in Zimbabwe. In this study, data were collected through interviews with Grade Five pupils and teachers in Masvingo 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 conversational 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 impromptu 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 verbatim. With teachers, the researchers intended to establish the degree of participation and commitment whilst with pupils, the researchers intended to establish their attitudes towards homework and its role in the framework of teaching and learning in general.

A sample of forty-five pupils from three schools in Masvingo urban was selected. The reason for selecting Grade Five pupils was that the researchers considered it as the level at which teaching and learning is seriously geared towards attainment of good grades at Grade Seven level.

Nine teachers (five males and four females) were also purposively sampled. These teachers were teaching the Grade Five pupils during 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 pupils

From the interviews conducted with forty-five Grade Five pupils, it is clear that the issue of homework is indeed controversial – pupils are divided on its merits. Fifteen Grade Five pupils 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 pupils. For example, when making noise in class, the teacher gives homework so that the pupil discontinues the unwanted or unruly behaviour. Therefore, to avoid being given homework, pupils refrained from making noise and were always punctual for school activities.

Out of the forty-five Grade Five interviewees, twenty were happy that they were not given homework because they did not make noise in class. Fifteen, 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 pupils from a Grade 5C class at one school 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 pupils 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) who stresses that not marking pupils’ homework will make pupils “think that the teacher is not responding to their effort, or they might prefer to study another subject next time.” One pupil remained indifferent to the issue of homework. The same pupils 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, pupils would simply not do it since there would be no references to help them manage the exercise(s).

Due to the regular power outages in the country during the time of the inquiry, fifteen pupils 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 pupil found homework painful because “My mother doesn’t assist me and usually sends me ‘kunjanji’ (train station market place in Masvingo) to sell vegetables after school.” These responses agreed with responses from other schools at which interviews were conducted, where pupils 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 pupils 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) 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 pupils dislike and ignore homework because it is set on something very unfamiliar to them.

Findings from interviews with teachers

Nine teachers from three 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 endeavour “to reinforce work done at school, extend the limited school day and help pupils to develop skills in learning independently.” Such positive sentiments were shared by virtually all teachers who were interviewed. They maintained that homework helps train pupils 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) 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 pupils, 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 pupils 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 Maths which are perceived to be the most challenging. Only some five or so questions are given which would constitute pupils’ morning work, to be revised just before the school day begins. Pupils 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 pupils.

One teacher said the greatest challenge is that most pupils 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 pupils whose parents come to school on consultation days, to discuss their children’s performance. Such lack of resources echoes sentiments expressed by the pupils 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 nine 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 pupils' 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 pupils' negative sentiments that pupils 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 pupils 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 pupil to copy down a passage from a textbook into his /her exercise book or set a very difficult Mathematical problem for the pupil to do at home." This again confirms pupils' 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) 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 pupils 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 educators and pupils find homework rewarding. However, their attitude towards such a valuable exercise is negatively affected by a myriad of factors. On the part of pupils, 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 pupils 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 pupils' dislike of it. Pupils also cited lack of assistance/concern from parents, which made them develop a negative attitude towards homework. Furthermore, pupils 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 pupils felt it was unfair and very difficult to tackle them.

The teachers who were interviewed confirmed all the above sentiments by pupils and, in addition, cited "unappetising working conditions", too much work for them, as they had to teach about eleven subjects to very large classes of above 40 pupils, 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 favour of and against homework in the primary school. In view of the teachers' and pupils' attitudes collected in the study, it is clear that the

issue of homework has practical implications for both the teacher and the pupil. As such the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The teacher ought to ensure that the pupils 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 pupils 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). It is thus a part of and an extension of the classroom activities.
2. Teachers are known for not marking pupils' homework due to various factors like large classes and poor remuneration or unmotivating 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 pupils to participate in correcting it. Tavares (1998) 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 pupils who think that homework is not a worthwhile exercise.
3. 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 pupil. They should also assist children in managing homework exercises which they find challenging. Weston in Shah (2001) 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.

References

- Balassi, S.J. (1968). *Focus on Teaching*. New York: The Odyssey Press.
- Blum, P. (1998). *Surviving and Succeeding in Difficult Classrooms*. London: Routledge.
- English Dictionary: Concise Edition* (1999). New Lanark: Geddes and Grosset.
- Farrant, J. S. (1991). *Principles and Practice of Education*. Harare: Longman Zimbabwe.

Freeman, J. (1992). *Quality basic education: the development of competence*. Paris: UNESCO.

Good, T.L. and Brophy, J.E. (1991). *Looking In the Classroom*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

Govender, S. "Ditch Homework." In *The Sunday Times*, 21 February 2010, p 10.

Kyriacou, C. (1998). *Essential Teaching Skills*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes Publishers.

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners. (2002). London: Macmillan Publishers.

Petty, G. (2001). *Teaching Today: A Practical Guide*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.

Shah, M. (2001). *Working with Parents*. Oxford: Heinemann Publishers.

Tavares, L. "Changing Homework Habits: Rethinking Attitudes." In *English Teaching Forum*. Vol. 36, No.1, Jan – March 1998.