

Perceptions of Primary and Secondary Private School Teachers Regarding the Effectiveness of Homework and Effect on Learning

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Abstract

Homework assigned to school students is expected to carry the influence to improve their academic performance directly. The present study is to study the views of primary and secondary school teachers about the ways in which they plan homework for their students. The study further informs the about the level of awareness the two group of teachers have about the factors of planning homework and the extent to which the teachers from the two types of schools use these factors when planning homework for their students. The study also informs whether the teachers possess expert or amateur view of homework and homework planning. The study employed interviews, questionnaires and field observations to collect the data from various private schools operating in the city of Karachi.

Key terms: Homework, homework planning, private schools, academic performance.

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Background of the study

Before the twentieth century, homework was viewed as an important means of developing disciplined minds in children (Kravloc and Buell, 2001). The progressive education movement in the early twentieth century, however, denounced the routine of drill, memorization and recitation that had been formerly enforced through schooling, as it was seen as a threat to children's physical and mental health. In the 1950s, the progressive education movement was replaced by a movement focused on academic excellence and higher standards. The idea of homework returned during the 1960s, and reformers sought to integrate the traditional drill or recitation-type homework with principles of progressive education by assigning homework that was academically oriented, yet enjoyable, experiential and individualized (Gill and Scholssman, 2004). By homework, it is meant tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours (Cooper, 2001). According to Cooper and Valentine (2001) homework has little or no effect on academic achievement of primary students because it has failed to tune out the irrelevant stimuli from among the students. In other words, students get distracted by other factors at home that hinder them from being able to focus on completing their homework assignment. Elementary school students have undeveloped study habits whereas secondary and high schools students are mature enough to attend to their homework and develop key study habits.

Most research shows that homework is beneficial to students in the secondary and high school Grades; however at the elementary level it has been a bit more controversial. Also there has been some evidence that homework can foster negative attitudes such as a dislike of learning and school work, causing stress in the family home (Cooper, 2003).

Teachers often view homework as a critical tool to improve academic achievement for students, as it provides students with increased learning opportunities and encourages them to review materials taught in class. Research on homework conducted during the past two decades consistently indicates positive effect of homework on academic achievement as measured by tests and class grades. Furthermore, the most

frequently reported reason for giving homework is that it has immediate effects on academic achievement by increasing the time students spend on academic tasks, thereby helping them retain knowledge and develop increased understanding of course materials (Cooper, Robinson and Patall 2006).

Many educators believe that homework contributes to the enhancement of school learning and academic achievement. At the elementary school level, some students reported a positive effect of homework on academic achievement (Paschal, Weinstein and Walberg, 1984), while others found no difference in students' achievement as a function of time spent on homework (Checkley, 1997). In Pakistani context, according to reports, untrained teachers assign homework without proper coordination or providing basic knowledge about the topic, which results in overburdening the students. It is therefore important that teachers plan out homework in order that students derive maximum benefit out of it.

The study is expected to benefit primary and secondary teachers to develop their awareness regarding planning of homework. It will inform policy makers at school level, curriculum planners and teacher education institutes as to how to induct the factors of planning homework and how teachers of various grade levels use homework planning as a source to enhance the learning of students. It will guide the future researchers to fill in the gaps that maybe left in this research and to address those limitations that the researchers of this research have faced. The study will open doors for researchers who can widen the parameters of the same study. This study will provide guidance to schools authorities in developing policies regarding homework and will guide teacher training institutes to incorporate homework, its planning and its implementation, in the entire training and education programme.

The study is restricted to the selected samples of primary and secondary school male and female teachers only. The resources allocated to gather the data were also limited in terms of effectiveness and utilization. The major study delimitations also comprised the process of data collection and its procedures, gathering of opinions of the stated

teachers regarding their view about homework planning, implications of homework, feedback mechanism given to the students, and the effects of homework on students' academic achievements. The periphery of beneficiary who would benefit from this study are primarily the primary and secondary school teachers, teacher educators, teacher training institutes, primary and secondary curriculum developers and the policy makers. Accessibility of the researchers to the participants and the sample size also contributed as limitation. The study was could not assess the teachers' knowledge and ability to plan homework, their knowledge about the implications of homework and timely feedback on learners' academic achievement. Accessibility to the number of school was another limitation.

Problem Statement

The reason for the researchers to select for this study comes from personal experience of researchers. The researchers observed that an immense amount of ill-planned and extensive homework was given to the students by teachers on regular basis. While allocating such extensive homework the teachers gave minimal consideration to the ability of the students and minimal consideration to the appropriate amount of homework for a particular grade level. Teachers failed to provide proper verbal or written comments as feedback to the student. The teachers believed that homework was given in order to complete the given content and make the parents feel that work was given as homework. All these issues have led the researchers to study the opinion of primary and secondary school teachers while planning homework for students in order to accelerate, extend and consolidate students' learning.

Teachers, parents, students and school administration are all conceptually aware of the term 'homework', but are unaware of its process of planning and implementation and the reasons for giving homework to students. The problem of homework planning by primary and secondary private school teachers will be evaluated through related literature.

Objectives of the study

The study aimed to explore the effects of 'grade level' on the attitudes of primary and secondary teachers in Karachi towards planning

of homework and see to what extent the primary and secondary teachers are aware of the factors which need to be considered while planning of homework. It also aimed to find out whether the primary and secondary teachers of private schools are aware of the purposes of assigning homework.

Review of Related Literature

Cooper (2001) is of the opinion that homework plays a key role in quality teaching and learning and brings forth prior knowledge so teachers teach effectively. Cooper states that homework helps the student practice new learning, leaving more class time for quality instruction. Thus homework helps the student practice new learning, leaving more class time for quality instruction. It assists in assessing students' understanding so the teacher after checking the assigned homework can re-teach as necessary. Home work also sets the stage for the next day's learning and gives more time for drill and practice to cement the new learning.

According to Glazer and Williams (2001), homework is an integral part of instructional programs. For a new skill to become automatic or for new knowledge to become long lasting, distributed and sustained practice is necessary. Homework provides reinforcement, practice, application, transference and enrichment of what is taught in class, prepares students for meaningful class participation and fosters a closer home-school connection for ongoing parental involvement in the student's education. As students complete their assignments, they become more interested in and responsible for their learning. Demands are placed on students due to homework which help them to develop mental skills such as concentrating, following directions, organizing materials, solving problems, and working independently which are essential for holistic development of an individual. It offers a way for students to develop a sense of competency and independence. The most helpful homework assignments are carefully planned by teachers and have direct meaning to students (Marzano & Pollock, 2001).

General Principles of Homework

Sowell (2003) has stated the following six principles of homework

1. Homework is a purposeful learning experience which provides revision and consolidation, extension and enrichment of what was earlier taught in class. It is an educational activity which arises from an interesting, stimulating and appropriate school experience and is seen as consistent with life-long learning.
2. Structured activities set deliberately by the teacher designed to complement class work (example reading books and collecting items). As schooling becomes more structured in organization and as the specific needs of students are more clearly identified, the teacher may establish more formal homework programs appropriate to need.
3. Homework fosters the home-school partnership in the education of the student as it is a means by which the school programs are introduced in to the home setting.
4. Homework is to be regularly monitored and involves evaluating the students' achievement and assisting them to overcome difficulties. Monitoring should be carried out as soon as the homework is complete.
5. When assigning homework, practical and useful opportunities are provided by teachers who recognize differing needs or encourage differing talents among students. Students with special talents are to be stimulated and challenged while slow learning students are to be given homework which allows them to do it to the best of their abilities.
6. The amount of time that students are expected to spend on homework will depend upon the age, ability, home environment and extra -curricular activities of students, including family and cultural obligations. It is important that students of all ages have opportunities for free time, leisure and physical activities outside school.

Characteristics of Homework Assignments

Homework assignments must be meaningful, relevant and must complement the curriculum. Homework is a cost effective instructional technique. A properly designed homework which truly complements the curriculum will leave positive effects on student achievement and

character development and can serve as a vital link between the school and family. Homework, along with sports, special programs, and other activities, is an important component of the total educational program (Bempechat, 2004).

Chaniotakis and Thiodis (2007) state that one of the characteristic of a well-designed homework assignment is that it is directly related to what has been taught in the classroom, another characteristic is that it extends students' learning beyond the classroom. They also claim that student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign meaningful homework and students conscientiously do it. The purposes of the assignment should be clear to the teacher and to the students. It should also be made very clear by the teachers how the students should profit and what they should learn from the assignment.

Willingham (2002) states that a characteristic of homework assignment is it is most effective for the learning of simple tasks. Students should not be expected to teach themselves complex skills at home. However, if the purpose of homework is to generate interest in a topic, it is appropriate to provide more challenging assignments that require the use of high order thinking skills and the integration of different domains of knowledge. Activities such as explaining what is seen or read in class, comparing, relating, and experimenting with ideas and analyzing principles are examples of assignments that are more interesting and thought provoking to students. They also teach students to be independent learners.

Exogenous factors to be considered by the teachers while planning homework are the students' abilities, study habits and grade level (Eggens & Kauchak, 1999). Individual student differences regarding academic abilities need to be considered when providing homework that is grade level appropriate. Educators should adjust teaching strategies, including the use of time spent on homework according to the individual needs and abilities. It is the duty of the teachers to determine if students have the concepts and skills necessary to complete the assignment as insufficient preparation for homework may result in high levels of student

frustration. Teachers must also match the homework assignments to the skills, interests and needs of students in order to make them into meaningful experiences, allowing the student to feel competent. They should allow students to choose their assignments and create variety from time to time (Cooper, Lindsey and Nye, 2000). According to Willingham (2002) homework policies are essential in setting appropriate guidelines for each grade level and establishing realistic demands on students. Elementary, middle school, and high school guidelines should be provided to enhance the clarity of homework assignments and to control homework load, especially for students with a different teacher for each subject.

Initial factors to be taken care of while teachers assign homework to students are provisions of material and facilitations in order to complete their task successfully (Eggen, 1999). Mc Garvey (2003) says that it is often useful to start a homework assignment in class to make sure students understand the assignment. Homework assignments should include material taught in previous weeks and even months. (Willingham, 2002). When teachers prepare written instructions and discuss homework assignments with students, the students take the assignments more seriously than if they were just announced. According to Butler (2002), written feedback on homework assignments has proven to be an effective way to correct student errors and to promote learning. Primary students learn to understand the relationship between effort and grades over time as they are quizzed frequently and their homework is scored and returned quickly.

Hong and Milgram (2000) are of the opinion that properly designed follow-up contributes to learning. To be most effective, homework should be collected, scored and included in the grading system. Cooper (2001) claims that when teachers prepare written instructions and discuss homework assignments and its follow-up and grading procedure with students, the students take the assignments more seriously than if they were just announced. Students are more willing to do homework when they believe it is useful, when teachers treat it as an integral part of instruction, when students know that it will be evaluated by the teacher, and when completion of the assignments counts toward the total class

participation and grade. Teachers comments provided on homework, particularly positive ones, tend to produce better learning. The comments also demonstrate that teachers find the homework valuable and important. According to Mc Garvey (2003) homework assignment is a useful diagnostic tool for teachers as it provides information about the student's level of learning and understanding of the topic.

Review or reinforcement of assignments is conducted by teachers so that homework is not an isolated entity. If the tasks assigned as homework has a worthwhile purpose in the first place, they should be worth following up in class (McGarvey, 2003). Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006) claim that teachers often view homework as a critical tool to improve academic achievement for students, as it provides students with increased learning opportunities and encourages them to review material taught in class. They further add that homework has positive effects on achievement as measured by tests and class grades. Homework has immediate effects on achievement by increasing the time students spend on academic tasks, thereby helping them retain knowledge and develop increased understanding of course materials.

Statement of the Hypothesis

The researcher has developed the following hypotheses after a thorough review of literature which are stated in both alternate and null form.

H_0^1 : There is no significant difference in the opinions of primary and secondary school teachers regarding the effects of the _characteristics of assigned tasks' while planning homework.

H_0^2 : There is no significant difference in the attitudes of primary and secondary school teachers regarding the effects of _exogenous factors' while planning homework.

Methodology of the Study

Causal comparative research methodology was employed which is a quantitative approach. The study employed the steps that included formulation of hypothesis, design the study, selection of samples and instruments, collection of data, analysis of data and drawing conclusion.

The target population for this study was the primary and secondary private school teachers in the city of Karachi-Pakistan. The selection of schools for this study was based on the selection of both primary and secondary private school teachers who assign homework to their students. The sample selected for this research study was a group of secondary and a group of primary private school teachers who planned and assigned homework to their students. The sample was made up of class teachers, subject teachers. There were teachers with a minimum of 2 years of experience to a maximum of 10 years of experience. These teachers taught a minimum class size of 20 to a maximum class size of 40 students' per class. Majority of the primary teachers were intermediate or high school pass whereas majority of the secondary school teachers were graduates. In the sample, there were 5% males and 25 % female teachers.

Instrumentor the Data collection tool

The instrument was developed after several consultation with the mentor and literature reviews. As a result, the instrument was designed and developed to collect opinion of teachers. It was designed to gather the opinion of primary and secondary school teachers regarding the influence of the various factors which affected the _planning of homework. The questionnaire was made up of four sections which consisted of statements relating to the four hypotheses of the study. The opinion of the teachers' were gathered in each section using a five point Likert scale with the categories of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

Data Analysis

Test Statistics

	Primary agreement of using characteristics of assigned tasks	Secondary agreement of using characteristics of assigned tasks
Chi-square	.600 ^a	.600 ^a
df	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.896	.896

The asymptotic significance in the above table is p-value $0.896 > 0.05$. Therefore we fail to reject the H_0 and conclude that there is no significant difference in the levels of agreement between the primary and secondary

teachers in using the characteristics of assigned tasks while planning homework.

Test Statistics

	Primary agreement levels of using exogenous factors	Secondary agreement levelsof using exogenous factors
Chi-square	.000 ^a	.000 ^a
df	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	0.756	0.756

The asymptotic significance in the above table is p-value $0.756 > 0.05$. Therefore we fail to reject the H_0 and conclude that there is no significant difference in the levels of agreement between the primary and secondary teachers in using the exogenous factors in using homework plans.

Findings

From the test of hypothesis, it can be ascertained that both the primary and secondary teachers' who plan homework do consider the two essential factors of planning homework. Their consideration of the two factors make homework planning and its implementation purposeful, relevant and beneficial for their students. All the four null hypotheses tested using chi square at 0.05 level of significance failed to be rejected. Therefore the chi square test results confirm that there is no significant difference in the levels of agreement between the primary and secondary school teachers in using the two factors while planning homework. Both the primary and secondary school teachers were well aware of the necessary factors while planning homework and there was no significant difference in their planning.

On the basis of this research, it can be concluded that homework is an effective teaching technique which if planned, implemented and evaluated or assessed timely by teachers can prove to be beneficial in the academic achievements of the learners'. They must also consider the amount of homework they assign and provide accurate and timely feedback in order for the students to become independent and efficient learners.

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