

Is Homework Necessary?

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Abstract

Homework is a formative assessment mechanism, wherein, teachers, students and parents are constructively involved in the teaching-learning process. It is an integral part of classroom transaction. To find out the opinion of teachers, students and parents on homework, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed among 40 parents, 40 students and 30 teacher-educators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to add the qualitative data obtained. The findings of the study reveal that all stakeholders unanimously concur that homework is an essential component of the teaching-learning process. It was also observed that homework need not only be engaging, interesting and meaningful, involving continuous learning, but also provide a reflective practice to students.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings learn throughout life. But concepts, values and skills learnt at the primary stage play a major role in a person's life. Primary education is the pillar that shapes a person's future. There are several reasons that make primary education important for children. It is the time when all three stakeholders, i.e., parents, teachers and students collaborate in shaping the students' future.

Parental involvement motivates a child towards learning and strengthens the bond between the child and parent. During the primary classes, homework serves as a link between parents, teachers and the child. Through homework, parents get to know what the child has learnt at school. At home, they help the child revise the lesson learnt at school and make the child understand a concept, if not clear.

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Besides, the student can also assess one's learning while doing homework. Next day, when a teacher goes through the child's homework, the person identifies the gaps in learning, the misconceptions that the child might have formed, and accordingly, gives remarks in the notebook or class diary, suggesting ways to improve the child's learning and performance. It is these remarks that serve as a communication channel between parents and teachers.

Homework is the most frequently used non-testing technique used by teachers in India. No lesson plan is complete without filling in the homework column. A teacher utilises most of the free periods for correcting students' homeworks. Homework, therefore, not only occupies a prominent place in the professional lives of teachers, it also enjoys an equally important status in the lives of students and parents. "What have you got as homework?" is probably the first thing that a parent in India asks a child on return from school. Moreover, all activities like visiting a relative, deciding the playing hours of children, etc., are planned according to the amount and nature of homework that the child gets at school.

Despite its important place in our education system, homework has often been considered as a burden and many educationists have lobbied against it, especially, at the primary level.

According to several theories, homework is one of the non-testing

techniques of assessment, which helps the teacher assess the child's learning growth in a regular and comprehensive manner. Apart from assessing the progress of students, homework also aims to inculcate self-learning, self-discipline, self-assessment and life skills like time management, etc., in them. Assessment may be of learning, for learning and as learning. Homework may be classified under assessment for learning.

Due its continuous and comprehensive nature, homework as assessment for learning is preferred by educationists. However, when it comes to practice, owing to practical reasons like large class size and lack of resources, most teachers prefer paper-pen test for assessing students' learning. Homework is the most prominent among different techniques of assessment used by teachers in India. But the irony is that teachers, despite practising it for such a long time, still seem to be unaware of its actual purposes and the ways it can be utilised as an assessment tool.

To understand these gaps in practice of homework, opinions of students, parents and teacher-educators were collected through a questionnaire and analysed.

WHAT IS HOMEWORK?

Homework is teacher assigned learning experiences that take place both inside and outside the classroom. Homework is an integral part of the education process, which is planned and designed

by the teacher to enhance students' learning and related life skills. It is a means of developing a partnership between home (parents) and school (teachers) that will lead to the overall development of the students.

Cooper, et al. (1989) define homework as a task assigned to students by school teacher(s) that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours.

According to Lyn Corno and Jianzhong Xu (2010), homework creates a situation, where the child must complete the assigned tasks with little initial training and under minimal supervision.

In simple words, homework is the reinforcement of classroom instruction — etiquettes, self-discipline and life skills like organisation and time management — by students at home. In general, homework includes the following tasks.

- Completing anything that could not be completed in class
- Practising, reviewing or revising lessons taught in class
- Preparing for the next class
- Applying classroom learning to create something new or solving new problems

Huntington re-labelled homework as 'extended learning' due to the application of constructing new knowledge by applying skills or knowledge gained in class.

ROLE OF HOMEWORK IN TEACHING–LEARNING PROCESS

The role of homework in the teaching–learning process has always been a topic of debate among academicians, teachers and parents. The positive and negative effects of homework by Cooper, et al. (1989 and 2001) were given separately. Negative impacts came after the analysis of literature review. Cooper, et al. (1989) reviewed 120 studies on homework effects. Homework is described as a practice full of contradictions, where positive and negative coincide, i.e., the findings include both positive and negative effects of homework.

According to them, homework has a positive effect on three aspects of students' learning. First, on immediate learning, which means a student can retain factual knowledge for a longer time, develop critical thinking, form concepts and process the information. The second is on long-term academic front. Homework helps develop study habits and skills in students, improves their attitude towards school and inculcates in them the willingness to learn during leisure time. The third aspect is non-academic, which means development of time management skills, making students inquisitive and independent in problem solving, and developing self-direction and self-discipline in them.

According to Cooper, et al. (2001), negative effects of homework include loss of interest, physical and emotional fatigue, less time for community

activities and coping with other students. These lead to increased difference between high and low achievers. They further observed that parental involvement is a factor of confusion in instructional techniques.

According to Lyn Corno and Jianzhong Xu (2010), doing homework correctly boosts the confidence of the students. They demonstrate responsibility and become skilled at managing tasks. These positive outcomes enhance the students' subject matter knowledge.

According to Vidya Thirumurthy (2014), everyday activities at home, often replicating school-based activities, indicate narrowing down the gap between school and home in terms of pursuing linguistic and content specific skills.

According to Oxfordshire County Council, regular and planned homework can:

- develop work habits and self-discipline in students.
- develop skills and attitudes, which can further help children improve their educational performance.
- help parents gain an insight into their child's school work.
- provide opportunities to students to do individual works.
- assist in preparation for future class work.
- provide a context for pupil-parent interaction.

From literature review, it is observed that homework has a lot of

positive impact on students' learning, skill attainment and development of life skills like time management, self-discipline and self-awareness. It also leads to motivation and development of positive attitude in students towards learning. Most importantly, homework binds parents, teachers and students together. Parental involvement motivates children to learn and leads to their emotional development.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE UTILITY OF HOMEWORK

There may be a gap between what the policy intended and what is actually implemented in the classroom. This is, particularly, true for homework. One of the reasons why teachers often fail to utilise homework effectively could be because it involves complex interaction of comparatively more number of factors than any other instructional strategy practised by them.

Individual differences among students

It plays a major role. The effects of individual differences are predominant in the primary classes as the students are too young to get comfortable with their specific weaknesses.

Home environment and economic condition

The environment at a child's home and the family's economic condition may also affect the child's studies, especially, the homework time.

Community services

These are prevalent in some communities, which may compete with a student's homework time.

Student age, interest, motivation and cognitive level

These must be taken care of by the teachers while assigning homework.

Parental involvement

In the primary classes, homework is significant, which depends on parents' qualification, time availability and interest in their child's education.

WHY HOMEWORK?

Homework is a formative assessment technique, which is designed keeping in mind the specific learners and learning contexts. Therefore, its objective is to do continuous and comprehensive assessment of the learners, assess their strengths and weaknesses, which help teachers to modify the instructions accordingly.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To collect the opinions of parents and students on present day practices of homework
- To collect the opinions of teacher-educators on homework and take their feedback on ways to improve it
- To suggest methods to make homework a meaningful activity

METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive in nature. Survey method was used to collect the data. The sample of the study includes 40 parents (whose children study in Classes IV and V), 40 students of Classes IV and V from Delhi-NCR schools and 30 teacher-educators.

TOOLS DEVELOPED AND USED

A questionnaire, consisting of 10 questions, was developed for collecting the opinions of teacher-educators, students and parents on homework.

Table 1: Importance of homework

For parents	For students	For teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding their child• Strengthening bond with the child• Analysing the child's strengths, weaknesses and interests• Planning for the child's future, after understanding the strengths and weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing habits like self-discipline and self-learning in students• Learning life skills like introspecting one's own learning (metacognition), time management, etc.• Developing interest towards learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular assessment of students' learning progress• Analysing gaps in understanding of concepts• Evaluating and improving one's way of giving instructions• Providing immediate feedback to improve students' learning

A semi-structured interview schedule with pointers was developed to add the qualitative data obtained.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The researchers administered the questionnaire onto 40 parents, 40 students and 30 teacher-educators to know their opinions. Opinions echoing same views are not repeated. The suggestions of the teacher-educators were also collected to make homework a joyful activity and an effective tool of learning and assessment.

Opinions of parents

Most parents feel that homework is a burden not only on the child but also on them. The nature of homework assigned is mostly such that it is the parents who actually have to do it. Though some parents agreed that homework is necessary, they felt it needs to be made more student oriented. They suggested that homework must be made interesting, creative and less time consuming. Some parents also opined that teachers need to evaluate the students' homework regularly and motivate them by giving a 'star(★)' or similar appreciation rewards.

Analysis of parents' opinions

In general, many parents feel that homework is good for children. They understand its value. Some feel homework must be given as it improves children's understanding and helps them to retain concepts taught in class for a longer time. But many seem to be unhappy with the way home

assignments are given these days. The parents' concerns mainly revolve around the nature of homework and its utility for children. They opine that homework does not lead to the academic and cognitive development of children. It is a monotonous activity and more of a burden on parents, rather than serving as a learning and development tool for children. It was also expressed that children do not value homework as it is not checked and assessed regularly.

Opinions of students

The student's opinions were largely in favour of homework. They liked doing activities, making models, participating in discussions and writing. If they faced problems, it was with aspects like not getting enough time to play, visiting friends and relatives or going out for recreation activities. One student said it was de-motivating if homework was not checked and assessed regularly. A visually impaired child said he wished the teachers would give homework conducive to his condition.

Analysis of students' opinions

In general, students love doing homework. They enjoy it when it is activity based, which means they can do themselves or along with parents or friends. Most of them want to do their homework themselves and do not like when their parents or tuition teachers do it for them. But they do not want homework to leave little or no time for hobbies or recreational activities.

It was observed that homework, sometimes, became a hurdle in community services and did not match the intellectual level of students as they were unable to complete it on their own. The students also wanted appreciation from teachers as they put in a lot of effort in completing their homework. They wished to be informed about their shortcomings, too, so that they could improve upon in those areas.

Opinions of teacher-educators

All teacher-educators agreed on the importance of homework. Some expressed the view that teachers can coordinate and schedule homework among different subjects so that students are not burdened with homework in all subjects on a single day. The homework must be relevant to what the students have learnt in class. Some teachers opined that homework need not be confined to textbook but move beyond and include activities, such as newspaper reading, recording interviews with family members, etc. The teacher-educators opined the following.

- Teachers may structure and monitor homework in many ways or make a concept map, synthesising all points collected from students. The teachers can also use peer assessment technique for this purpose.
- Homework assigned to children needs to be such, which develops their critical thinking ability.

- The purpose of homework is to identify individual learning problems. So, it must not be lengthy or complex.

Analysis of teacher-educators' opinions

Homework must be given, keeping in mind the age and ability of the students. A variety of activities can be given as homework, encouraging parent-children participation. Homework is an important step in the teaching-learning process as it helps teachers and parents to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students and help them improve.

SUGGESTIONS

- Homework need not be given every day in every subject.
- It must be based on the age, maturity and cognitive level of the students.
- Teachers need to ensure variety of activity in homework, which can be used as a follow-up activity. As far as possible, homework must focus on daily life activities.
- The teachers must check the homework done by the students regularly and provide feedback. There can be many ways through which feedback can be given, for example, the feedback for all students can be clubbed together and posted on the classroom wall for the students to observe and correct their own understanding (assessment as

learning). The teacher may also ask the students to read out the answers and give immediate feedback by paraphrasing and summarising the responses.

- Homework that fosters creativity in students, testing their application ability, can be given.
- Teachers of different subjects can coordinate, discuss and give a common homework, which would help test the understanding of the students in various subjects simultaneously. It also leads to a comprehensive assessment of the students.
- Importance is laid on homework in continuous and comprehensive assessment in the progress report.
- Qualitative description of the children's homework for the whole year can be provided in the report cards, which would serve as a motivating factor for both the students and their parents.

- The teachers can be trained in using rubrics to check the students' punctuality not only in attending school but also assessing their progress in completing the assigned homework.

CONCLUSION

Homework is a cost-effective instructional, as well as, an assessment tool. It serves different purposes for teachers, students and parents. Its role varies from grade-to-grade. It is essential at the primary level as it builds a bridge between the teacher, students and parents, and also strengthens their bond. For primary stage students, homework must match their cognitive level and not be time consuming. The students must get sufficient time for pursuing their hobbies and recreational activities. Therefore, it can be concluded that homework is a non-school learning experience that supports the students' learning and development by effectively linking school and home.

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