

Research on "Parental Involvement in Homework of Primary School Students"

Executive Summary

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A Study Commissioned by Committee on Home-School Co-operation

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1. **Background of the Study**

- 1.1. The Research Project on "Parental Involvement in Homework of Primary School Students" was commissioned by the Committee on Home-School Co-operation in December 2004.
- 1.2. The objectives of this study are: (a) To examine primary school students' actual and preferred involvement in homework and the respective relationships with educational development; (b) To examine the actual and preferred involvement of parents in their school-age children's homework and the respective relationships with educational development; (c) To examine and compare the perception and expectation of the functions of homework held by primary school students, their parents, and teachers; and (d) To investigate individual, family and school factors affecting the perception and expectation of the functions of homework

2. **Research Methodology**

- 2.1. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed in this study. A questionnaire survey was conducted on a large, representative sample of primary school students, and their parents and teachers. Qualitative interviews were carried out with a sub-sample. Data collection took place from February to June 2005.
- 2.2. This study made use of multistage sampling that consists of a series of stratified and cluster sampling strategies. First, stratified random samples of 36 schools were drawn basing on financing mode (public and private) and geographical district (urban and new town). Then, within each participating school, cluster samples of students, parents, and teachers were drawn.
- 2.3. Altogether, 2442 students, 1499 parents, 327 teachers from 72 intact classes representing all six primary levels in 36 schools took part in the questionnaire survey. The survey involved separate questionnaires developed for and administered to the

three respondent groups. In addition, a diary for assessing students' and parents' involvement in homework was used. The quantitative data collected focused on involvement of and perceptions towards of homework among the three groups of stakeholders. Data from all participating teachers and 1398 pairs of parent-child dyads, who both responded to the questionnaires and homework diary, were used in the analyses presented in this report.

- 2.4. Four of the participating schools also took part in qualitative interviews. A total of 24 focus groups and 16 individual interviews were conducted these four focus schools, involving 48 students, 51 parents, and 38 teachers. The interviews covered topics on the actual and preferred involvement of students and parents in homework, attitudes toward homework, and perceived functions of homework.

3. **Qualitative Interviews: Experiences and Perceptions Regarding Homework and Parental Involvement**

- 3.1. Analyses of the qualitative data reported a diverse range of experiences and views regarding homework and parental involvement among students, parents and teachers interviewed in the four focus schools.
- 3.2. In general, homework was considered an essential component of learning, especially given the unique educational context of Hong Kong. Homework was seen as fulfilling two major sets of functions: (a) learning-related functions, including consolidating learning, preparing for tests and examinations, developing learning skills, assessing learning, and improving teaching; and (c) functions that were not related to learning, including developing self-esteem and responsibility, encouraging collaboration, enhancing teacher-student communication, and avoiding punishment. Variations in attitudes towards homework and time spent on homework were reported among

students. Factors that explained such variations, as identified by teachers and parents, included interest, learning motivation, and academic ability.

- 3.3. A range of responses was noted in the interviews with students and parents on their perception towards the load of homework. Some wanted more homework whereas the others found the load excessive. Some parents wanted more coordination in assignment homework across days and across teachers, whereas others pointed to the significance of students' interest and competence into consideration. Teachers in general found the load of homework acceptable. They tended to focus on quality issues related to homework and saw the dilemma between homework and academic achievement.
- 3.4. The amount of time parents spent in supervising homework also varied across families. Two major types of parental involvement in homework were reported: (a) involvement that was directly related to homework and learning, including checking homework, explaining learning materials, supporting learning, collaborating on projects, and doing homework for children; and (b) indirect involvement, comprising establishing daily routine, setting up rules, assigning extra homework, and seeking additional help and learning opportunities.
- 3.5. A variety of parental goals underpinning these types of involvement was identified. On one hand, parents were motivated by task-oriented parental goals which included monitoring homework performance and monitoring learning progress. On the other hand, there were goals that pertained to children's psycho-emotional development, such as developing independence and responsibility and showing support and concern to children.
- 3.6. As noted by the adult informants, parental involvement should vary according to children's characteristics and grade level. In most instances, parental involvement was generally considered beneficial to children's learning, parent-child relationship, and the

parents themselves. At the same time, concerns were expressed as to the problems emerged, including children's over-reliance on parents as well as parent-child conflicts.

4. **Student Involvement in Homework**

- 4.1. Data collected from the homework diaries show that primary school students on average had 6.01 items of homework assignments on a regular school day. They spent 102.12 minutes on homework and an additional 77.69 minutes on revision each day. Grade level differences were observed in the amount of homework as well as in time spent on homework and amount of homework. The amount of homework was highest with Primary 4 and 5 students, with 6.64 items and 6.43 items per day respectively. As for time spent on homework, the general tendency was that senior level students spent less time on homework than did the junior level students, with Primary 6 students using 83.99 minutes and Primary 1 students using 113.77 minutes. These variations reflected different curriculum demands at different grade levels as well as developmental differences in competence.
- 4.2. Findings of the questionnaire survey show that the majority (66.1%) of primary school students preferred to spend less than one hour on homework and revision each day whereas only 31% of the parents and 24.3% of the teachers showed the same preference. The expectation of teachers and parents on students' homework involvement was thus higher than that of the students.
- 4.3. Homework of the language subjects were nominated by students to be the most time-consuming, yet students tended to be less interested in these assignments than homework of Mathematics and General Studies. As a group, they preferred assignments that involve imagination and group collaboration. Their preference was different from those of teachers and parents who considered homework that involves analytical thinking the most crucial for student development. Furthermore, more students showed

interest in homework that was easy, interesting, or related to a favorite subject, than assignments that were deemed important by parents or teachers, or assigned by a favorite teacher. Hence, interest in homework was linked to intrinsic and extrinsic properties of the assignments, rather than to the demands of teachers and parents.

- 4.4. Results of correlation analyses indicate that homework involvement, indicated by estimated time spent on homework, was negatively correlated to most indicators of educational development including interest in academic subjects, self-perceived academic performance, ability to cope with learning, and efficacy for self-regulated learning. In other words, the more interest a student showed in academic subjects and the more academically competent and efficacious he/she was, the less time he/she spent on homework. Yet, the strengths of significant associations in most instances were less than substantial, with Pearson's r coefficients ranging from $-.11$ to $-.16$, $p < .001$, indicating that there are factors other than homework involvement that affect educational development.

5. **Parental Involvement in Homework**

- 5.1. Parents were identified in the survey to be the major actual and preferred source of support for homework, especially among younger students. 43.6% junior level primary students and 17.9% senior level primary students received assistance from parents on homework whereas 50.1% and 38.6% of the two groups preferred parents to other sources of help on homework. At the same time, 28.2% senior level students and 49.3% of their parents favored independent work without getting support from any source.
- 5.2. As reported in homework diaries, parents on average spent 39.67 minutes each day on supervising or accompanying children in the process of doing homework. Large variation in time spent among parents was noted, with 34.5% parents reportedly not

- contributing any time at all. The phenomenon of uninvolved parents was more commonly observed among parents of senior students, constituting 47.6% of this group.
- 5.3. The majority of parents – 70.4% of junior parents and 60.1% senior parents – preferred to spend half an hour to two hours each day on homework support. Overall speaking, parents of senior level students tended to have lower expectation on their homework involvement than those of junior level students. Specifically, 29.1% of them preferred to spend less than half an hour a day on children’s homework whereas only 15.5% of the junior level counterparts showed the same preference.
 - 5.4. Analyses on parental involvement behaviors showed that parents engaged in homework mostly through encouraging the child to finish homework independently, ensuring a quiet and comfortable environment, setting up rules, and checking homework. Behaviors that were least frequently performed included setting up timeline for homework completion, providing answers to homework, and sitting next to child. Results of independent t-tests showed that parents of junior level students were more likely to engage in direct involvement and provision of structure than their senior level counterparts.
 - 5.5. Results of ANOVA tests showed that parents and teachers’ view on preferred parental involvement behavior were similar in that they were more likely to endorse autonomy support than provision of structure and direct involvement. However, senior primary students showed lower level of preference for autonomy than the adult respondents did.
 - 5.6. The characteristics of involved and uninvolved parents, as indicated by whether the parents spent time in children’s homework or not, were compared using a series of independent t-tests and Chi-square analyses. Findings showed that parental involvement in homework was related to other attributes of parenting, including parental academic efficacy and parental involvement in home-school collaboration, as well as demographic characteristics. Overall speaking, involved parents were found to

be confident of their ability in supervising children's homework and they were more likely to participate in home-school collaboration activities. Moreover, they had fewer children and attained a higher socio-economic status, as indicated by residing in self-owned property, attaining secondary school education or above, and born in Hong Kong. In other words, compared to uninvolved parents, involved parents were more resourceful and hence they could afford to spend time on children's homework.

- 5.7. Results of Twoway ANOVAs comparing students with involved and uninvolved parents across grade levels indicate that the former group performed better in most indicators of educational development, including academic interests, academic competence, and academic efficacy, than the latter group.
- 5.8. The relationships between parental involvement behaviors and educational development were more intricate. On the whole, parental involvement behaviors bore mainly insignificant correlations with educational development outcomes among junior level students, with Pearson's r s ranging from .00 to .11. For senior level students, autonomy support correlated significantly with self-rated and teacher-rated academic performance and efficacy for English Language, with Pearson's r s ranging from .12 to .16. Provision of support and direct involvement were found to correlate with efficacy for English Language, with Pearson's r s being .15 and .09 respectively. However, significant negative associations were observed between direct involvement and efficacy for Chinese Language and teacher-rated academic performance, with Pearson's r s being -.10 and -.12 respectively, and between provision of support and efficacy for Chinese language with a Pearson's r of -.09. This shows that parental involvement behaviors are double-edge swords which may facilitate or jeopardize children's intellectual development, at least for students at senior level.
- 5.9. Taking the evidence as a whole, it seems that students whose parents are able to spend at least some time in homework had an edge over others in terms of academic

development, but the exact modes of behaviors should be carefully considered to ensure that the effects are positive.

6. **The Functions of Homework**

- 6.1. The views of students, parents, and teachers on the perceived and ideal functions of homework were examined in the questionnaire survey. Across the three groups of respondents, homework functions related to immediate learning goals were endorsed as the top perceived and ideal functions of homework whereas those related to meeting external demands were least endorsed.
- 6.2. Two interesting group differences in perceived homework functions emerged from ANOVA test results. First, parents were less likely than teachers and students to see the value of children's homework in achieving learning goals. Second, students were more likely than the adult respondents to see homework as for the purpose of meeting external demands.
- 6.3. Comparisons between ideal and perceived functions of homework using paired sample t-test were made so as to reflect the expected directions of change on homework functions for each group. Results showed that all three groups would like to see homework achieving more the purposes of meeting long-term learning goals and less for meeting external demands. Furthermore, while teachers did not note any ideal-perceived discrepancy with immediate learning goals, both parents and students expected to see homework realizing this function more explicitly.
- 6.4. Factors affecting perceptions of homework functions were examined separately for the three groups of respondents using a series of multiple regression analyses. Results showed that variations in students' perceptions on homework functions, especially those related to learning, was more adequately explained by student-related factors including interest in academic subjects, efficacy for self-regulated learning, and interest

in homework than by parental factors such as parental academic efficacy. However, student's time spent on assignments was not a significant predictor of their perception on homework functions. This means that students' perceptions on the use of homework are intrinsically linked to their learning attitudes and aptitudes whereas the impact of students' actual behavior concerning homework and parental influences are peripheral in nature.

- 6.5. As for parents' perceptions of homework functions, parental academic efficacy, provision of structure, aspirations for the child's education, and educational attainment were found to be strong predictors, especially for functions related to learning. Whether parents spent time or not on homework was not strongly linked to their perceptions on homework functions. Finally, teachers' perceptions of homework functions were found to relate to teacher efficacy and teaching experience.
- 6.6. Across the three groups of respondents, variations in perception of homework functions were more adequately explained by factors related to efficacy and less by structural or involvement-related variables. In such regard, the extent to which these three groups felt competent in their respective roles in the teaching and learning process was demonstrated to be a major contributor to perceptions on homework functions.

7. **Recommendations**

7.1. **Homework load**

- 7.1.1. Findings of this study lead to the concern that excessive load of homework may bring about negative impact on primary school students. Primary schools should assign an optimal load of homework to students by considering a host of factors including the academic level and abilities of students as well as the demand of individual academic subjects. School administrators are encouraged to set up policies and guidelines on homework with a view to monitor the types and number of assignments across

subjects so as to facilitate the effective use of homework as a learning tool and hence are recommended.

- 7.1.2. Furthermore, teachers and parents need to pay closer attention to students' involvement in homework. Efforts that promote the development of basic academic skills and time management skills as well as the cultivation of learning motivation and self-regulation are helpful in facilitating the completion of homework as well as enhancing learning in general.
- 7.1.3. Schools should consider setting up tutorial periods that allow students to do homework under supervision of teachers and senior schoolmates. This arrangement may offer a previous opportunity for the development of time management skills and self-regulation with regard to homework completion.

7.2. The design of homework

- 7.2.1. The learning functions of homework, as unanimously endorsed by students, teachers, and parents, should be highlighted in the design of homework so that the role of homework in triggering learning motivation, consolidating learning, and promoting academic skills can be maximized.
- 7.2.2. Findings of this study show that students' preferences on homework are related to its learning functions and thus should be considered in the design of homework. The careful consideration of students' preferences can effectively promote students' engagement in the homework process.
- 7.2.3. Furthermore, homework assignments should be more explicitly linked to learning goals and teachers should convey to students and parents the significance of these homework functions. This will help parents and students to appreciate the values of homework in developing academic skills and aptitudes such as academic interests and responsibility that pertain to long-term learning goals.

7.3. Homework functions

- 7.3.1. In order to enhance perceptions of homework functions, students, teachers, and parents need to feel that they are competent in their respective roles in the homework process. Specifically, better design of curriculum and teaching and learning strategies can help improving students' efficacy beliefs on their academic competence. Parents should be encouraged and enabled to involve in children's homework through parent education program arranged by the school.
- 7.3.2. Professional training and adequate support for teachers are likely to enhance their sense of efficacy in teaching. Furthermore, teachers need to explain the functions of homework more clearly to students and parents and improve the design of homework basing on the crucial functions.

7.4. Parental involvement in homework

- 7.4.1. The focus of parent education should be on clarifying and recognizing the significance of parental involvement in children's homework and learning that is tailored to the developmental characteristics and needs of children. The three major modes of parental involvement behaviors, namely direct involvement, autonomy support, and provision of support, provide a framework for the design of parent education programs. Furthermore, parent education should highlight the role of parents in developing children's self-regulation and time management skills so as to facilitate the homework process.
- 7.4.2. Parent education on involvement in homework should be directed towards socially disadvantaged families to help them familiarize with the local school system and to understand the developmental and learning needs of children.

7.5. Further research

Caution should be taken when interpreting the relationships among the major constructs as they are likely to be bi-directional in nature. The direction of causation between

homework involvement and educational development cannot be determined using cross-sectional design and correlation analyses alone. Similar situation happens to the relationships between parental involvement and children's educational development, as well as that between perceived functions of homework and the associated factors. Future research that draws upon longitudinal and/or experimental design is needed.

8. **Final remark**

All in all, evidence gathered through this study reveal that homework is a significant element embedded in an intricate context of learning comprising multiple players, processes and intervening factors. Educational development of children can indeed be enhanced through improved design and delivery of homework, as well as through the enthusiastic and proper involvement of parents.