

Homework activities in Chivi District primary schools: Effectiveness

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess how teachers in the primary schools of Chivi District were using homework to augment their classroom activities. The population comprised of all the 125 primary schools in the district with a teacher population of 1240 teachers. Random sampling was employed to select a sample of 400 teachers and 40 heads of schools. The study employed the quantitative methodology and adopted the descriptive survey design. All the data were gathered by use of a questionnaire which had both open-ended and close-ended questions. The study revealed that primary schools in Chivi District were not assigning adequate homework activities to pupils as expected. Pupils also faced problems of resources to effectively do their homework activities. The study recommends that teachers should assign homework regularly so that pupils understand that it is as important as work they do in the classroom. The study also recommends that heads of schools should encourage provision of resources for use by their children when they are doing homework.

Keywords: Homework, primary school, district, assessment and effectiveness.

Introduction

In Zimbabwean primary schools it is government policy that teachers assign homework activities to their pupils (Nyoni, 2012) [22]. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education expects every school head to supervise the homework activities that teachers assign to their pupils. Teachers are expected to plan for these homework activities and monitor the pupils' performance on homework and make sure that there is evidence that parents or guardians are involved in their children's homework assignments (Nyakupanda, 2009). As Madziyire (2010) [18] states, teachers are expected to maintain a record of marks for homework activities in order to trace the performance of their pupils. All pupils are to be in possession of a set of homework exercise books to use for their homework which are separate from the school exercise books (Mangara, 2011) [19]. Class timetables should reflect times when teachers assign homework for all to see (Nyoni, 2012) [22]. This information implies that in Zimbabwean primary schools, homework is mandatory in all classrooms and every teacher should assign homework. Heads of schools are also expected to promote the use of home work by all their teachers. It is on account of this information above that this research set out to assess how the primary schools teachers in the area studied were implementing the homework policy.

Literature Review

Homework is defined by Dunkin (2009) [10] as any schoolwork formerly assigned for completion outside school time. Cameroon (2010) [3] gives a simplified definition of homework as a set of tasks formerly assigned to learners so that they can commit themselves independently or to assistance towards their completion. In another words, homework is work generated by a teacher to consolidate instruction through independent work by pupils (Cameroon, 2010) [3]. This homework according to Nivo (2008) [20] is school work given to pupils to do at home during their spare time individually or in groups. Galloway *et al* (2013) [13] asserts that homework is

school work that is done by a pupil after undergoing clear instruction on how to carry out the work. Nyoni (2012) [22] argues that homework should be assigned to pupils in order to fulfill specific learning objectives rather than for the sake of occupying pupils at home.

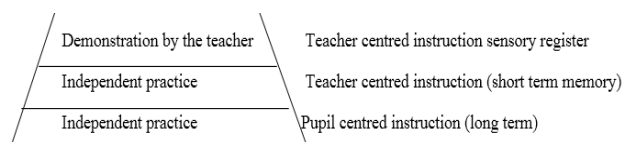
According to Cuban (2009) [8], homework should allow for practice and application by children and children should not be assigned homework that requires new concepts that have not been introduced and taught by the teacher. Homework should act as a revision of learnt concepts. Kadodo (2013) [15] posits that the objective in giving homework is to develop an independent learner who is able to "earn how to learn" and face problems and solve them without having to wait for the teacher, hence developing in him/her the concept of self image and confidence as a learner. Redding (2012) [23] postulates that homework can provide other benefits. For example, the child's ability to bring an assignment home, gather and organize necessary materials to complete the assignment, return the assignment and receive a mark, strengthens his or her sense of responsibility (Redding, 2012) [23].

Homework may also help pupils to learn time management skills also improve development of personal skills (Delon and Shawn, 2012) [9]. Further, when homework proceeds smoothly, it can become a positive aspect of a parent's relationship with their child (Child, 2013) [4]. Goldstein and Zentall (2009) [14] state that although we often do not consider that homework serves a school administrative role, it offers schools an opportunity to let parents know what their children are learning. Thus, according to Goldstein and Zentall (2009) [14] homework can play a public relations role by keeping parents informed about class activities and policies and can also fulfill an administrative role in helping schools achieve their overall mission of improving students' achievement. Homework is a bridge that joins schools and parents. From the school's perspective there is the opportunity to monitor students' independent progress and for parents there is the potential to gain a greater appreciation of education and to

express positive attitudes towards their children's achievement.

In assigning homework there are steps which should be considered. According to Dellen and Shawn (2012) [9] there are three steps that enhance the cognitive competencies and mastery of concepts among learners before, during and after assigning homework.

Steps considered in assigning homework



Adopted from Delen and Shawn (2012) [9]

The three steps to be considered by teachers as depicted in the diagram above involve first, demonstration by the teacher, independent practice under teacher centred instruction and independent practice where the pupils is in charge of instruction.

On the other hand, Sammels (2011) [24] suggest two major through processes when assigning homework effectively and these are utilization and automaticity. Unitization is when the learner is putting the skills together slowly sometimes with errors but guided by set principles and automatically is when the learner has no longer to think through each step but instead displays confidence and ability to apply and synthesise events and circumstances. According to Kadodo (2013) [15] in order to make homework effective pupils should be taught to challenge, construct and reconstruct knowledge so as to obtain the essence of meaning required for effective functioning.

Sammels (2009) suggests that work should be assigned to the pupils and not to their siblings, parents or classmates. As Child (2013) [4] posits, aspirations of the teacher should be to lead pupils to do the work on their own and get assistance at home from parents, peers and siblings; and not parents and others to do the homework for them thus in giving homework the characteristics of the individual pupils should be considered. These include age, school history, social, economic background, community culture and the pupils' performance (Child, 2013) [4]. Nyoni (2012) [22] advises that homework must be planned properly, should be stimulating, challenging and exciting and teachers should also mark, give feedback for the homework to be useful and beneficial. Farrant (1980) [12] posits that homework helps to provide a conscious and tangible link between home and school. The teacher should be able to sincerely provide homework which the pupils work on whilst at home under the guidance of their parents or other relatives.

Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) [11] state that homework should not be used as punishment. Historically, some teachers used homework to try to correct problems with student conduct or productivity. Some researchers have described homework, itself, as a punishing activity, referring particularly to poorly designed or overly – burdensome assignments that confuse or frustrate students (Cooper, 2001 and Corno, 1996) [7]. Homework should not involve students in mechanical repetition such as copying from the texts/notes or just rote learning. As Cooper (2011) [6] postulates, homework is not there simply to occupy students' time at home. It should not

be boring or lead students to learn in a passive way and it is not the quantity that counts but the quality of homework. As Cooper (2011) [6] further argues, an appropriate amount of homework should be assigned to keep students inspired and wanting to do more homework. It should not overburden students causing fatigue, or be used as punishment.

Statement of the problem

Primary school teachers in Zimbabwe are expected to assign homework to pupils in order to argument learning time that pupils spend at school. Due to the congested nature of the primary school timetable, it becomes inevitable that some work may remain unfinished in the classroom and thus some time has to be found at home to finish the assignment under the guidance of parents, guardians or older siblings. The study therefore set out to assess how the primary school teachers were implementing this homework policy.

Research Questions

1. Are teachers conversant with the purpose of homework?
2. Do teachers assign homework to their pupils as stipulated?
3. Are homework assignments adequately marked?
4. What challenges do teachers face during the implementation of homework?

Significance of the study

The study sought to assess how teachers were implementing the policy on homework in order to expose the challenges and successes that teachers were experiencing so as to suggest ways of ameliorating the challenges and also come up with strategies to improve on the successes of the policy.

Limitations of the study

The study is limited to the assessment of effectiveness of homework activities in primary schools using the descriptive method which according to Anderson (2012) [1] provides information that indicate norms not standards, and the investigator learns what is being done and not what could be done or should be done. The researcher using the descriptive survey, determines usual practices, rather than causes reasons, meanings or possibilities (Kumar, 2008) [16]. In view of the small population and sample size, the findings of the study might be difficult to generalize with accuracy.

Delimitation of the study

The researchers delimited the study to the assessment of the effectiveness of homework in primary schools using a sample of 400 teachers and 40 heads of schools from Chivi District in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. Other stakeholders were not consulted to solicit their views on this study like parents, pupils, education inspectors and school development committee / association members as they were outside the purview of this particular research.

Research Methodology

The study employed the quantitative methodology. The quantitative methodology was found useful because it is statistics driven and can provide a lot of information Bell (2013) [2]. It is also relatively easier to compile the data into a chart or graph because of the members that are made available. As Cohen and Manion (2011) [5] posit, another

advantage of quantitative research is that the research can be conducted on a large scale and give a lot more information as far as value is concerned. However, one major weakness of the quantitative paradigm is that numbers change often (Leedy, 2010) [17]. Which means that if research is conducted on a statistical level then it would have to be conducted much more frequently to help balance out the numbers (Anderson, 2012) [1]. The study settled for the survey research design. The study's population comprised of 994 teachers and heads from 78 primary schools. Simple random sampling was used to arrive at 20 schools and from each school the head and any 10 teachers were used. The simple random technique was used because it permitted every teacher an equal opportunity of participating in the study (Kumar, 2008) [16]. Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which was made up of close-ended and two open-ended questions. The questionnaire was chosen because as Cohen and Manion (2011) [5] argue, the respondent has time to consider questions (especially so when not face to face) and question responses can be highly structured and easily coded. However, as Anderson (2012) [1] observes, the questionnaire if not administered face to face (for example by email attachment or on-line) there is a possibility of a low response rate (not getting many questionnaires back) and questions cannot be misinterpreted and cannot be put in any real world context. There is also likelihood of socially desirable responses to certain questions

(Anderson, 2012) [1]. Researchers sought prior permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education officials at district level and were granted before they proceeded to distribute the questionnaires to the selected schools. Respondents participated voluntarily and they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

The study set out to assess the effectiveness of homework activities in Chivi primary schools in Zimbabwe. This section is presented in two parts; namely, presentation of data and discussion of the presented data.

Presentation of data

Table 1: Composition of sample by category (N=440).

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Heads	40	9
Teachers	400	91
Totals	440	100

Teachers constituted 91% of the sample and heads were 9% of the respondents. The sample fully represents both categories fairly in the school system as all school have one head and many teachers.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by sex (N=440)

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Male	18	47	184	46	202	46
Female	22	53	216	54	238	54
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

There were more female heads and teachers than their male counterparts (54%: female; 46%: male). The statistical significance of this datum lies in the fact that it confirms observations by

Makoni (2007) who found that most schools in rural districts adjacent to major urban centres were staffed with more female teachers than male one.

Table 3: Composition of respondents by professional qualifications (N=440)

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Untrained	0	0	0	0	0	0
Certificate in Education	0	0	20	5	20	5
Diploma in Education	0	0	268	67	268	61
Degreed	40	100	112	28	152	34
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

All the respondents from both the head's side and teachers'

Side were in possession of professional qualifications with all heads in of degrees.

Table 4: Responses to the statement: "Homework must be given to all learners because it complements classroom learning" (N=440).

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	40	100	400	100	440	100
Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strongly Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

All the heads and teaches appreciated the important role teachers: 100%) respectively. Played by homework in the learning of pupils (heads: 100%;

Table 5: Responses to the statement: “At our school it is mandatory for every teacher to assign homework activities to pupils” (N=440).

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	40	100	400	100	440	100
Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strongly Agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

Both heads and teachers indicated that at their schools all teachers were expected to assign homework activities to teachers (heads: 100%; teachers: 100%) respectively. This implies that all the respondents are aware of the existence of the policy to assign homework.

Table 6: Responses to the statement: “Teachers actually assign homework activities to pupils daily” (N=440)

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	24	60	68	17	92	21
Agree	6	15	52	13	58	13
Disagree	4	10	94	24	98	22
Strongly Agree	6	15	186	46	192	44
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

There is incongruence between the responses of heads and teachers on this phenomenon. Whereas the majority of heads (75%) indicated that teachers were assigning homework Activities, majority of the teachers (70%) indicated differently, they admitted that they were not assigning homework activities to their pupils.

Table 7: Responses to the question: “All assigned homework activities are adequately and timeously marked?” (N=440)

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	0	0	20	5	20	5
Agree	0	0	46	12	46	10
Disagree	22	55	114	28	136	31
Strongly Agree	18	45	220	55	238	54
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

There is congruence in the responses of both heads and teachers on this item. Both categories of respondents Indicated that the homework activities assigned to pupils were not adequately and timeously marked (heads: 100%; teachers: 53%).

Table 8: Responses to the statement: “Head priorities supervision of homework activities” (N=440)

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	6	15	4	1	10	2
Agree	8	20	12	3	20	4
Disagree	12	30	114	28	126	29
Strongly Agree	14	35	270	68	284	65
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	40	100	400	100	440	100

There is convergence of views on this item between heads and teachers. They are indicating that heads are not prioritizing the supervision of homework when they conduct their supervision exercises of teachers. (heads: 65%; teachers: 96%) respectively. The questionnaire had two open-ended questions which bolstered responses from the close-ended questions. The question wanted to find from the respondents what challenges were posed by the homework policy. The majority of respondents in both categories (heads and teachers) indicated that the primary school time-table was conjested and gave

teachers very little time to plan, assign and mark homework activities. The other major challenge commonly cited was the shortage of resources by parents and children to cater for homework activities. Heads indicated that they were always busy with other equally important chores and could not find time to assist or guide teachers with homework. Some teachers stated that they used homework to fix those pupils who came late and did not catch up with work covered during their absence.

Discussion

Heads and teachers appreciate the role played by homework in the education of children. This was to be expected as all the respondents in this study were professional teachers who are likely to have come across the merits of using homework in their studies during training and research after training. Further to this, the policy on using homework to supplement classroom teaching is well known by all the teachers and heads which according to homework activities to their pupils.

In spite of their positive attitudes towards homework and its attendant merits, teachers admitted that they were not effectively assigning homework activities as the policy expects them to. Teachers are expected to plan for homework activities as the policy expects them to. Teachers are expected to plan for homework activities and monitor the pupils' performance on homework and make sure that there is evidence that parents or guardians are involved in their children's homework assignments (Nyakupanda, 2009) ^[21]. Some of the reasons for failure to assign homework activities to pupils were highlighted in the open-ended responses where teachers indicated that their workload made it difficult for them to attend to homework demands and that most of their pupils could not afford the extra exercise books for homework. Parents were also said to be failing to procure paraffin or candles to be used by their children, thus, rendering the whole homework process impossible.

Teachers were not marking the few sporadically assigned homework tasks. The challenges of lack of exercise books and lights at home may not totally hinder all pupils to do their homework as some may do it during lunch break or after school before they go home. It is necessary therefore, that those who have written, must have their work marked by the teacher. As Nyoni (2012) ^[22] states, homework must be planned properly, should be stimulating, challenging and exciting and teachers should mark, give feedback for the homework to be useful and beneficial.

Heads of schools do not prioritise homework when supervising the teaching/learning process. Like teachers, heads also cited a congested work programme as the major reason for not paying attention to homework yet they were of its important role in the learning of children. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education expects every school head to supervise the homework activities and monitor the recording of marks for homework activities (Nyoni, 2012) ^[22]. Major challenges experienced by both teachers and heads to fully implement the homework policy included the congested workload for the two categories of respondents, pupils' lack of resources like exercise books and paraffin or candles. In some cases teachers used homework to fix pupils who were not finishing their school work on time or latecomers thereby negating the objectives of homework. This tallies with observations by Epstein and van Voorhis (2001) ^[11] who

state that homework should not be used as punishment. Historically, some teachers used homework to try to correct problems with student conduct or productivity. Cooper (2011) ^[6] adds that homework should not overburden students causing fatigue, or be used as punishment.

Conclusions

Given the background of the above findings, the researchers make the following conclusions: -

- Heads and teachers in Chivi District are conversant with the role that homework plays in the education of children.
- Teachers were not effectively assigning homework to their pupils and the few tasks that were sporadically assigned were not marked.
- Heads did not prioritise the supervision of homework.
- Major challenges experienced by both heads and teachers in relation to the operationalisation of homework include congested school timetable, parent's lack of resources to procure extra exercise books for homework and paraffin and candles for evening studies by children as well as using of homework as punishment by some teachers.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study, the researchers would like to make some recommendations: -

- Heads of schools should prioritise the supervision of homework by encouraging teachers to give homework regularly, by encouraging pupils to do the given homework and by encouraging parents to provide materials to use during homework for example, textbooks, exercise books and lights.
- Teachers should plan and mark homework so that pupils receive timely feedback.
- Teachers should liaise and work collaboratively with parents so that they help each other to improve the learning process of the pupils.
- The District Education officers and District Inspectors from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should insist on the implementation of the homework policy during their visits to the primary schools.
- The primary school timetable should be decongested so as to leave only three areas that are key for primary school children. A number of subjects could be merged for example environmental science and HIV/AIDS to create space and time for teachers to prepare for homework activities.

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