

Parental participation in pupils' homework in Kenya: In search of an inclusive policy

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Homework is assigned on the assumption that parents or other elder members have the capacity to assist the pupils and that home environment is conducive for the pupil to do homework. A cross-sectional survey using structured and semi-structured interviews was conducted among pupils and parents in Kengeleni division in Mombasa district to explore socio-cultural and economic factors that influence parental participation in pupils' homework and, consequently, propose recommendations for homework policy formulation. The results show that although parental willingness to be involved in pupils' homework is high, this involvement is hampered by many socio-economic factors, including illiteracy and low income. On many occasions, homework is not only incomplete, but also not done, and the pupils are consequently punished for this. In the absence of clear, written policy on homework, there is a poor fit of inclusion of homework as the unwritten part of the curriculum.

Homework policy, parental participation, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between homework, parental involvement and student achievement has become an important area of inquiry in educational research. Although homework is highly supported as useful (Cooper 1989; Ferhman, et al 1978; Leone and Richards 1989; Reynolds 1991), there are mixed research findings about consistent linkages between homework and student achievement (Chen & Stevenson 1989). While a number of research findings have reported a positive relationship between parental involvement in student homework and student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Grolnick & Slowiaczek 1994; Xu & Corno 1998), some research findings have questioned the value of parental involvement in homework (Casanova 1996; Cooper 1989; Levin et al. 1997).

According to Hoover-Dempsey (2004), homework fostered the school-home learning feedback process by allowing parents and other adults to know what the child was learning as well as giving teachers an opportunity to hear from parents about their children's learning. In this regard, educationists, teachers and parents generally agreed that homework developed students' initiative and cultivated parental responsibility. Often, parents became involved in pupils' homework because they expect their pupils to perform better in class work and in examinations (Clark 1993; Levin et al 1997).

Most school practice in well developed countries suggested that elementary and secondary students were asked to do homework, and parents were often asked to become involved in supporting students' homework performance (Cooper 1989; Roderique et al 1994). These, however, were countries and schools with clear homework policies, unlike in many African countries, Kenya included.

The declaration of free primary education in Kenya in January 2003 has shown a huge increase in enrolment figures. The high enrolment rates posed challenges to appropriate pedagogy especially where the pupil teacher ratio was as high as 100:1¹. Equally important was the multiplier effects of coping strategies that were employed to deal with the large classes, such as multi-shifts and multi-grade in the context of a lack of adequate teaching and learning resources. But even when homework was completed, the high pupil-teacher ratio negatively affected effective feedback from the teachers. This called for parental involvement in pupils' homework to supplement the teachers' efforts.

A written school homework policy had several advantages: schools with homework policies tended to set guidelines for teachers to correct, grade, and return homework systematically to their students, thus reinforcing learning. It is worth noting that schools with homework policies generally provide specific guidelines regarding what is expected from parents. Moreover, schools with homework policies tend to design carefully and provide homework assignments appropriate to each grade level. These advantages build on the premise that a lack of written policy on school homework assumes a lot about the factors at work or factors that may influence parental participation in homework. Lack of an established homework policy may place either insufficient or unrealistic demands on the child and the students may not be expected to work to capacity. Conversely, the students may receive too many assignments from different teachers on the same evening that may consequently negatively affect their capacity to learn effectively.

As a supplementary learning strategy beyond the normal school hours, homework is highly favoured. This is necessary with a wide syllabus that calls for extra time beyond the regular learning schedules. However, the workload is often too demanding for the pupils, especially when they have to carry class assignments home against competing family chores and prevailing circumstances in terms of physical facilities and conducive learning environment. In the context of no written policy on homework, teachers often assign homework to the pupils that in most cases is determined by the available textbooks, often regardless of the curriculum and whether pupils are able to get parental guidance, or even whether the pupils are able to tackle the assignment on their own. Pupils are often punished when they do not complete the assignments, with negative implications that may even result in school drop out or push out. Schools should establish homework policies and clearly communicate them to parents and families through written statements or other appropriate media.

Homework policy based on home-school agreements is more likely to promote homework completion and a renewed interest in pupils' learning process. Significantly, homework policy needs to be formulated within the context of gender considerations. This is in recognition of the fact that homework completion is more likely to be higher among the boys than the girls – the latter being engrossed in family chores much more than the former. This is likely to influence equal gender participation in classwork and achievement. Hence comprehensive homework policy needs to not only be sensitive to socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, but importantly, to culture-specific gender roles and expectations by giving special attention to the girl-child.

The salient issue therefore is to provide a background for school homework policy consideration, given that in the Kenyan context, parental participation in homework has been affected by the

¹ Kenya School Improvement Project Baseline Survey, 2004

lack of a clear written policy on homework. Homework in this study is conveniently defined as out-of-class tasks assigned to pupils as an extension or elaboration of classroom work. Three types of homework can, thus, be identified: practice, preparation and extension. Practice assignments reinforce newly acquired skills, for example, students who have just learned a new method of solving a mathematical problem may be given sample mathematical exercises to complete on their own. Preparation assignments help students get ready for activities that will occur in the classroom, for example, doing background research on a topic to be discussed later in class. Extension assignments are frequently long-term continuing projects that parallel class work. Pupils must apply previous learning to complete these assignments, which may include science projects and papers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was conducted in Kengeleni division of Mombasa district, a peri-urban setting of people with mixed religious backgrounds (Christianity and Islam) and socio-economic characteristics (business, salaried, unemployed). Hence, while some schools had moderately well developed infrastructure, others were poorly served, and the pupils needed to share the limited learning materials such as reference books.

This study was a cross-sectional survey, in which data were collected using structured and semi-structured questionnaire interviews. A total of 117 randomly selected parents were interviewed. These were the parents' representatives of pre-school, Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3. We focused on the lower classes because it is in these grades where parental guidance in homework was critically sought. The second method of data collection was through the application of the *Learning Styles Inventory*² (Kolb 1984), in which we specifically focused on the children's perception of their study time and sound preferences. Data were analysed using Epi Info.

RESULTS

The mean age for the parents was 34 years, with the most recurring age of 30 years (mode) and hence the majority of the parents appeared to be youthful and could be said to be generally a socio-active group. Many parents were married and this accounted for 87 per cent (100 parents). The rest were 7 per cent (8) divorced, 3.5 per cent (4) single, 1.7 per cent (2) widow or widower and 0.9 per cent (1) separated. The mean number of children for these families was 2 male children (maximum 6), 2 female (maximum 7) children and mean total of 4 children (maximum 13) for a parent. It is therefore apparent that these families were large and a parent might be required to support more than one child with homework.

The majority of the parents had low levels of formal schooling. A significant 90 per cent (104) of them had undergone formal education while the remaining 10.3 per cent (12) indicated informal education. Although 'had formal education' ranked high, the levels attained indicated that majority of them, 56 per cent, had attained the primary level of education, followed by 35 per cent attaining secondary education, seven per cent were below primary education, one per cent were post secondary education and one per cent had received adult education. The remaining who had pursued informal education were 75 per cent (9), Madrassa Education, 8 per cent (1) Arabic, and 17 per cent 'Others'. From the survey, most of the respondents, 46 per cent (53) were business persons or self employed, 27 per cent (31) were unemployed, 15 per cent (17) were classed in the other employment category and 13 per cent (15) were salaried.

² Adapted from Dunn and Dunn teaching and learning styles inventories. It is a Likert scale that probed Pupils' Mobility, Posture, Verbal, Sound, Manipulative, Group and Study time preferences.

All the sources of income pooled together as total yearly income showed that a significant number of the parents (26% (28) of parents) earned an income of between Kshs. 2001- 4000 in a year. Only five (4.7%) parents fell in the bracket of Kshs.16000 and above in a year. Despite this low amount of income received by the parents, many of them lived in rented houses and hence paid rent every month. Sixty-nine per cent (80) lived in rented housing, 22 per cent (25) owned the houses they lived in, and 10 per cent (11) were given accommodation by relatives. Of these, 51 per cent (59) were in permanent housing (probably the rented ones), 40 per cent (46) were in semi-permanent housing and the rest, 10 per cent (11), lived in temporary housing. The type of accommodation dictated the home study environment, for example, in terms of lighting for study and noise levels for concentration.

Almost all parents indicated that they assisted their children with homework. This was indicated by 97 per cent (108) who said 'yes' and three per cent (4) who did not. Active homework help was primarily a "mother's responsibility" as exemplified by children being assisted with their homework by mothers, 58 per cent (59), 29 per cent (30) by fathers, 9 per cent (9) by other people and 4 per cent (4) by siblings. However, the interpretation of what they meant by assisting the children with their homework might vary. Those who did not assist gave several reasons including, "they are not given homework by the teachers", "I'm illiterate and those who are educated are too busy for that work", and "they go for tuition".

The individual learning styles of the pupils was explored specifically on children's perceptions of their study time and sound preferences. For study time preference, the survey revealed that the majority of them concentrated most when studying just before going to bed (33% Always, 19% Usually, 24% Sometimes, 13% Rarely and 11% Never). In addition, most of them said that the best time for them to concentrate on difficult material was in the evenings (28% Always, 19% Usually, 24% Sometimes, 15% Rarely and 15% Never). The pupil's preference for the time of study was when they were at home in the evenings.

On Sound Preferences, pupils preferred very quiet places (37% Always, 19% Usually, 19% Sometimes, 13% Rarely and 12% Never). This fact was also confirmed when they were asked if radio or music helped them concentrate when doing homework. Many of them said No (19% Always, 13% Usually, 24% Sometimes, 15% Rarely and 29% Never).

DISCUSSION

The theoretical orientation of role construction provided an important framework for exploring and understanding parents' involvement in children's education. Often, the parental-role construction defined the range of activities that parents believe to be important, necessary, and permissible for their own engagement in their children's schooling (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997). This may be derived from a reflection of parents' expectations and beliefs about their responsibilities with regard to their children's schooling. Often, such roles are derived from personal experience and expectations as well as the perceptions and expectations of others (Biddle 1986).

Role theory is demonstrated in our research findings where almost all parents noted that they participated in their children's homework. This demonstrated the belief that parental involvement in children's schooling was a normal requirement and responsibility of parenting. This had also been reported from other similar studies that focused on identified parents' beliefs about the importance of helping with homework, opinions about homework goals and quantity and effective homework helping strategies (Hoover-Dempsey et al 1995; Okagaki et al 1995; Stevenson et al 1990, Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Baumgartner et al 1993; Dodd 1996; Epstein et al 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Kay et al 1994).

The findings in this study show that parents' awareness about their children's learning difficulties is an important reason for their continued involvement in their homework. This fact has been demonstrated elsewhere (Anesko et al 1987; Bryan et al 1995; Chen and Stevenson 1989; Kay et al, 1994; Levin et al, 1997). The study also underscores the fact that role construction is motivating in parental involvement in homework. According to Hoover-Dempsey (2001:195), 'parents' involvement activities take many forms - from establishing structures for homework performance to teaching for understanding and developing student learning strategies. Operating largely through reinforcement and instruction, parents' homework involvement appears to influence student success insofar as it supports student attributes related to achievement'.

Parental willingness to help with homework has been associated with their involvement in pupils' homework (Ames 1993; Balli et al 1998; Chen and Stevenson 1989; Cooper et al 1998). When parents indicate unwillingness, it is often due to the fact that they are incapable or lack the information that can help their children (Kay et al 1994). This is consistent with our findings that show that illiteracy is a strong factor for lack of parental involvement in pupil's homework.

Previous studies (Dauber & Epstein 1993, Eccles & Harold 1993) have demonstrated that often parents would want to be involved in their children's homework because the children are still young and need concerted guidance. Other than giving homework to pupils, teachers have often invited parents and involved them in the pupils' schooling. Teachers often seek parental help, and parents often seek the teachers' help in cases of 'difficult pupils'. Parents thus are made to understand that their involvement in pupils' homework is expected and needed (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

The findings in this study note that socio-economic status is particularly important in parental involvement in homework. This is in sharp contrast with other research findings (Dauber and Epstein 1993; Walberg et al 1985). Even though almost all the parents expressed a willingness to be involved in the pupils' homework, they are incapable of giving the much-needed guidance to the pupils. Many of them are illiterate and poor and cannot afford to buy supplementary learning materials. They are preoccupied with different chores to fend for their families and, paradoxically, children are expected to engage in some form of child labour that can contribute towards family provisioning and sustenance.

Socio-economic status is a critical issue in many African communities where illiteracy and poverty levels are high, thus limiting parental involvement in homework. In some cases learning and reference materials have to be shared among pupils, and not all parents are able to buy for their children personal subject-specific text copies. More important is the fact that some parents expect the children to help them after school, during the time the children are expected to undertake their homework assignments. Based on the traditional gender division of labour, this is the time when the boys have to look after the animals and the girls to fetch water, firewood and help in the evening to prepare the family food before they eventually clear the table and wash the dishes. This is against the children's desires to study in the evening and in a quiet place. High poverty levels lead to crowded homes where distractions and little opportunity for concentration are the norm. The net effect of distractions and lack of concentration is that homework is not guided, poorly done, incomplete or never done at all, and therefore precipitates conflicts at school and at home.

The fact that homework is seldom completed is confirmed by KENSIP (2002) survey reports³. The survey report indicates that either the pupils do not get adequate parental guidance with their homework, or that they are assigned a lot of homework that they cannot complete in time. Consequently, the pupils are punished for not completing their homework and this may not

³ Kenya School Improvement Project Survey Report, 2002.

encourage them with their assignments, but only demotivates and discourages them. The overall effect is a lack of participatory learning.

The individual learning styles of the pupils agree with the research findings of Xu and Corno (1998) who emphasised that specific decisions about creating structures for homework at home depended in part on the pupils' needs and preferences and on parents' ideas about specific involvement activities that fitted the pupil and family context, for example, what the home was like and what other demands required parents' time. This underlay the significance of socio-cultural and economic factors in influencing parental involvement in pupils' homework.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (1999) has noted that "education which focuses mainly on written texts (to make it worse in a foreign language) tend to disadvantage children, especially those in rural areas. The written text-based schooling also makes education very costly, thus out of reach to many Kenyan children and households". However, it needs to be noted here that literacy is part of education, and striking a balance between needs and costs is deemed important, and particularly in the context of homework policy formulation. Based on this case study, homework policy formulation takes the following considerations: parental literacy level, household poverty level, homework workload, gender considerations and the availability of learning resources specific to each school.

There is need for the Kenyan Government to consolidate and address the inadequacies in the existing education policy documents. Unfortunately, Kenya has produced several education Reports through Commissions, Acts and Sessional Papers that are yet to be integrated under one legal education policy document. Even the Ministry of Education and other Ministries' operations need to be streamlined, so that greater mandate is given to certain ministries. There is urgent need to bring together all education policies ranging from Early Childhood Education, Basic Education, Higher Education and Technical Education under one legal education policy document.

In order to foster productive parental involvement in pupils' homework, there must be a deliberate attempt to raise the literacy level of the illiterate parents. In particular this involves the strengthening of the Adult Education Department, which currently is under the Culture and Sports, and unfortunately, not under the Ministry of Education. By being placed under the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the Adult Education Department has over the years slumped into oblivion. The failure of the Adult Education Department is best exemplified with the recent introduction of Free Primary Education in Kenya that has shown primary schools enrolling so-called 'adult pupils' – currently holding the record of the world's oldest pupil who is only interested in learning "how to read the Bible and count money".

By strengthening adult education by the government, and coupled by intensive literacy campaigns by civil society organisations, the literacy level of parents will be raised, thereby allowing willing parents to engage in productive involvement in their pupils' homework. Strengthening the adult education component can also help bridge the gap between the tutored and untutored pupils. Currently, there are no equal learning opportunities for all learners with the increasingly widening gap between private and public schools, and even sadly, within public schools where only pupils whose parents are able to pay for private tuition receive additional private tuition. The thesis is that if all willing parents' literacy levels were raised, the differential household income levels might not result in marked disparities in the learning opportunities between the tutored and non-tutored pupils.

Given that almost all parents consider it their responsibility to be involved in their children's education, this positive attitude can be harnessed to by organising school open days, in which the pupils' class teachers take parents through their children's performance. Open days are organised

in very few urban schools in Kenya, and rarely in the rural schools. The open days need to be made compulsory for the parents, and particularly for the male parents with a penalty of non-attendance. This can foster parental responsibility against the ill-conceived notion that homework help is a “mother’s responsibility”.

The gender biases in domestic chores that are performed by girls and boys are deeply and culturally entrenched, and may not be immediately resolved by a homework policy. However, several suggestions can be advanced to cater for equal learning opportunities for both boys and girls. First, the so-called ‘take away’ component of homework should be made as small as possible, so that all class assignments are conducted and concluded at school and not at home. This can ensure that the few shared learning resources like textbooks are available to the pupils through working at school. Homework completion is low when few pupils are able to borrow the textbooks and take them home. In practice, therefore, the timetable should be formulated such that the last school hour is dedicated to homework. But even if this is being done, parents must still be constantly sensitised to the need to allocate equal learning opportunities for all their children regardless of their gender.

School policy on homework needs to be developed at the school level, local level and national levels. At the lowest level of policy making, the document on homework policy needs to be made at the class level. Each school needs to have a clear written policy on homework with respect to the amount for every class, beginning with the lowest class to the highest, and each parent needs to sign this as a binding document. In practice, the document becomes an agreement between the class teacher and the parent. In content, the document spells out the role of parents in relation to homework, and the penalties for breaching this agreement. In the document it can be spelt out how much work a pupil is assigned per week in respective subjects, thereby regulating the workload that the pupils carry home. While it is worth noting that some schools have gone ahead and introduced homework diaries that parents must countersign, this needs to be reinforced, legitimised and applied across all primary schools in Kenya. The problem with diaries, however, also centers on the literacy level of the home, and the assistance of the literate members of the family needs to be sought.

The middle level of the homework policy document needs to be at the school level, in which each school as an institution sets out the overall guidelines regarding homework. At the school level, policy issues may include how home-school agreements can help to create and maintain parents’ commitment to homework, the frequency and content of homework tasks such that homework tasks are carefully designed to meet a child’s individual needs including those with special educational needs, parental roles on child homework support such as the provision of a peaceful and suitable place for doing homework, and the need to motivate children by praising them once homework is completed. This needs to be a binding document between the school administration and the parents, and needs to spell out what the school expects of the parents, and what the parents demand from the school and the teachers. This will foster home-school collaboration; thereby enhancing parental involvement in their children’s learning process. Homework policy drafting at this level needs to involve all the teachers, the parents, the school management committee members and representation of the parents – teachers association.

The highest level of homework policy document must be at the national level, in which the Ministry of Education sets clear overall guidelines regarding homework. The District Education Boards and representation of the Parent-Teacher Associations should be involved in the policy formulation process. However, creating several layers of policy level is likely to give rise to problems of enforcement. This is particularly true, considering that in essence; even the zonal, district and provincial levels may need to have distinct homework policy documents. Nonetheless, emphasis needs to be made at the class and school levels, with the national level providing overall legal framework for homework policy guidance and regulation.

CONCLUSIONS

The significance attached to homework nationally in Kenya cannot be gainsaid. This is critical where learning has to be relevant at national as well as individual levels - allowing pupils to realise their other 'multiple intelligences' (Gardener 1986). A well-documented homework policy ultimately allows for school-parent participation in the pupils' learning process for effective benefits. One significant step in doing this is through the establishment and publication of school, local and national guidelines on homework.

The Kenyan Government also needs to consider giving clear guidelines on the purpose of homework, the type and amount of homework that is appropriate for pupils of different ages, homework to cater for special education needs, planning and coordination of homework so that the demands on pupils are balanced and manageable. Moreover, the role of parents and guardians in supporting pupils, homework and study support facilities, and importantly, the emphasis on the inclusion of homework in the preparation of lesson plans need to be stated. Feedback mechanisms on homework from parents to teachers, teachers to parents, teacher to pupils and pupil to teachers, needs to be given substantial emphasis within the documents that are prepared.

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