



PRIMARY TEACHERS OPINION ABOUT HOMEWORK

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Abstract: Homework assignments trigger various perceptions and attitudes in students, parents or teachers: some overestimate them, others reject them, some do it with pleasure and to others they cause tears. Literature indicates both benefits and disadvantages of homework. In Romania, at primary level, homework is a systematic practice. The explanation is found in the Romanian education peculiarities and in the myth of homework efficiency for the student's development and achievement. This study aimed at explaining the teachers' perception about homework. In the survey conducted online with voluntary participation, 51 primary teachers were involved. Their answers highlight the teachers' beliefs on the need to request daily homework and the parents' involvement in controlling the homework assigned to their children. Respondents also praised in their answers the homework benefits for students, fully ignoring their disadvantages. The main causes of this situation are found in the peculiarities of the Romanian education. The change of the unilateral beliefs of teachers, parents, teacher trainers, curriculum creators referring to homework requires an active involvement of the education professionals. They should transpose the homework practice to systematic research whose results to be addressed to all stakeholders.

Key words: primary teachers, inquiry, homework

1. Introduction

Homework is defined as tasks assigned by teachers to students to be fulfilled outside of school hours (Cooper, 2007: 4). Marzano and Pickering (2007, citing Cooper, 1989a) link homework with the exercise of knowledge that the student learns in the classroom and with independent work. Painter (2003: 5) sees homework as "an extension of the classroom to allow students to internalise information that has been presented in the class". The quoted source emphasizes the importance of homework showing that it is "a vital part of learning expected by students, parents, school directors and teachers". Hong & Milgram (2000: 4) show that homework "has not yet received the serious attention that it merits in the research literature" and said that it calls the same intellectual skills and readiness for learning as well as classroom learning. The common element of all these definitions is the character of "kind of out-of-school learning" (Hong & Milgram, 2000:4) and the role assigned to homework for boosting learning.

Vatterroott (2009: 9-14) shows that the homework practice is tributary to certain beliefs concerning: a) the curriculum (a great number of and difficult homework are the evidence of a rigorous curriculum), b) the school practice (the school must ask children to do their homework and a school that claims students to do much homework is a serious, credible one), c) the image of teachers (good teachers give homework), d) the image of pupils (good students do their homework, doing homework children become more responsible, independent and time managers) and e) the perspective on the nature of learning activities students need to be requested (in particular the relationship between intellectual activities and non-intellectual ones, considering that intellectual activity is intrinsically more valuable than non-intellectual activity).

Literature highlights homework benefits and disadvantages (Cooper, 1989: 86). Among its benefits we mention: it keeps the student focused on the task; it develops student's initiatives, independence and responsibility; it completes and extends the school knowledge; it strengthens the family-school relation; it facilitates the compliance with the curriculum (Doyle & Barber, 1990:13-14). A number of

disadvantages are mentioned by Czerniawski & Kidd (2013: 9-10), Cooper (2007: 11-12), Marzano and Pickering (2007: 2) and Ronning (2011: 3- 4). Thus, homework leads to / increases mental and physical fatigue and stress in students; it affects the time spent with family; it is consuming leisure time, it amplifies inequalities (because only students with a good financial situation can do their homework in proper conditions) etc.

Marzano and Pickering (2007: 77), citing Cooper (1989a), distinguishes the role of homework on levels of education:

“For students in the earliest grades, it should foster positive attitudes, habits, and character traits; permit appropriate parent involvement; and reinforce learning of simple skills introduced in class. For students in upper elementary grades, it should play a more direct role in fostering improved school achievement. In 6th grade and beyond, it should play an important role in improving standardized test scores and grades”.

Studies with reference to the link between homework and student achievement indicate conflicting findings or operates differences depending on education levels. Thus, there are studies showing positive effects of homework while others show no or negligible effects. Cooper et al. (2006: 50) shows that “the grade-level effect on homework must be viewed with caution”.

2. The homework practice in primary education in Romania

In the Romanian education we can speak of a tradition of homework. At primary level homework is a current practice (almost compulsory). It should be noted, however, that the frequency of homework required by the teacher and the home assignments done by students is significantly reduced as students advance to higher levels of education. Only in Maths and Romanian language students receive systematic homework during all the years of study because these subjects are the basic ones for passing the high school leaving exam;

The explanation for the large share of homework in primary cycle can be identified in:

- the support for homework in compliance with the curriculum, given that in Romania there are many classrooms with approx. 30 students per teacher. By home assignments, such a teacher aims at practicing and fixing students' knowledge, deepening, supplementing or extending the learning in the classroom.
- the teachers' personal experience as former homework solver students;
- the education acquired in school or college. Future primary teachers learn that homework is important because it develops knowledge, skills and attitudes in young students that will help them in life;
- the traditional model of behaviour: the teacher should assign homework to students;
- the expectations of parents of primary school children: children must be assigned homework, at least for the most important subjects (for instance in Mathematics and Romanian) if not in all subjects;
- the structure and content of textbooks and curriculum additional materials. They are present on any primary teacher's desk and offer suggestions on designing lessons and proposing topics.

In Romania, as well as abroad, (for instance Cooper at al., 2006, 2007; Kohn, 2006), more and more voices dispute the systematic assignment of homework to students (for instance, Badea, 2013, 2015; Melinte, 2012; Pânișoară 2013, 2015; Stefan, 2015).

3. Empirical research. Method

This research aims at supplementing the foregoing considerations with reference to the image teachers have on the purpose of home assignments at the primary cycle level. The study was conducted using a questionnaire posted online to be answered voluntarily. The questionnaire contains 16 items of which 9 items with demographic targeting and 7 items concerning the homework issues.

3.1. Demographic aspects. In this research were involved 51 teachers of which 46 (91.9%) women, and 5 (8.1%) men (see Figure 1). This female predominance of teachers in primary education is a feature of the Romanian primary educational system.

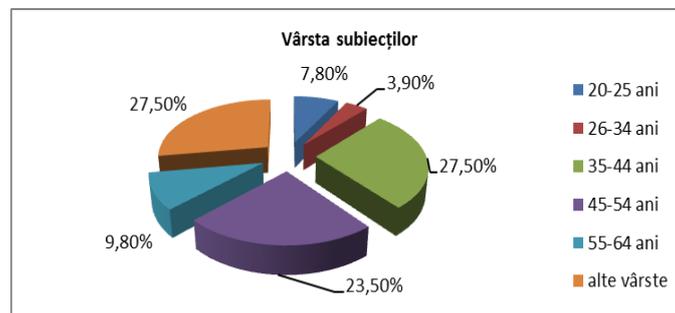


Figure 1. Distribution according to the teachers – respondents’ age

In the sample of respondents (see Figure 2), teachers with ages between 35 and 54 years prevail. Almost 30% of respondents are retired.

Most of the respondents have at least 25 years of teaching experience (62,70% respondents).

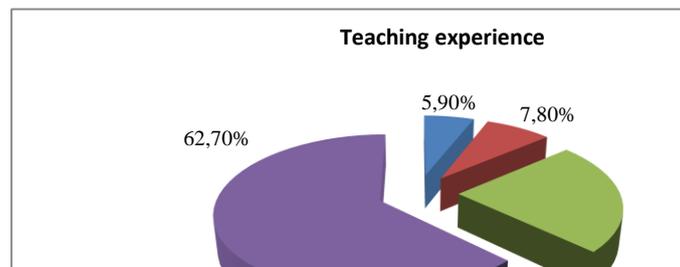


Figure 2. Distribution according to the respondents’ teaching experience

Considering that only holders of a bachelor’s degree may attend master’s and doctoral degrees, it results that the great majority of respondents have a bachelor’s degree (43 respondents representing 84,31%, see Figure 3).

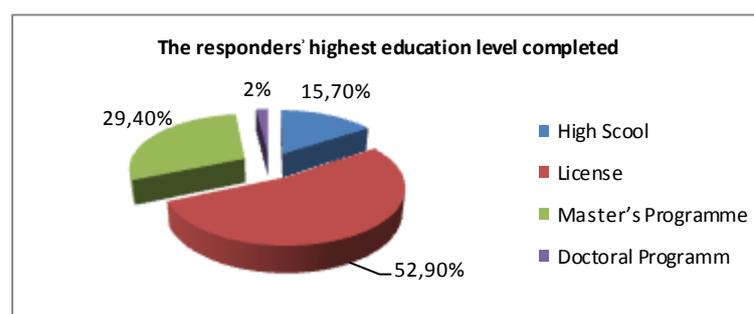


Figure 3. Distribution according to the respondents’ education level

The great majority of respondents have attended the profile courses of the Faculty of Education Sciences, major in Pedagogy of primary and preschool education or the courses of the Teacher Training High Schools. All respondents teach or have taught in primary and preschool education system. 48 respondents (94.11%) are permanent teachers and 3 (5.88%) are qualified substitute teachers.

Schools where most of the respondents are working are located in rural areas (62.74%). Only 37.25% of the respondents are working in urban area. The respondents are working in public institutions (96.07%) and only 2 respondents are working in private institutions (3,92%).

3.2. Respondents' answers referring to the homework issue

Respondents assessed the rate of regular completion of homework as follows (see Figure 4).

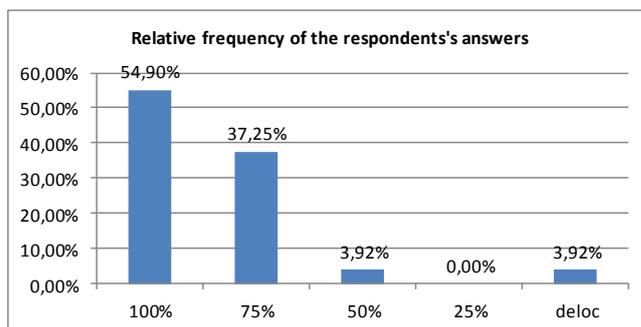


Figure 4. Respondents' answers to the item referring to the percentage of students who regularly do their homework

As it can be seen from the figure, the majority of respondents (92.15%) think that the percentage of students who do their homework is 100% or 75%.

To collect responses to items 11 and 12 the four stages Likert-type scale was used.

Most teachers are in agreement (82.35%) with the statement that homework contribute to the student's school success (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' answers to items 11 and 12

Item	Total disagreement	Partial disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement	Don't know/don't	Other answers
11. Homework have a very important contribution to students' school success	0	1,96%	35,29%	47,06%	0	15,69%
12. Homework help increasing the students' achievement in Mathematics and Romanian language	0	1,96%	29,41%	47,06%	0	21,57%

Respondents estimated that homework helps increasing the performance in Romanian language and Mathematics (76.47% agreement). One respondent expressed a partial disagreement, while 11 respondents considered that homework contributes to the accumulation of knowledge in other subjects (languages, sciences etc.)

In Table there are presented respondents' opinion concerning items 13,14 and 15.

Table 2. Respondents' answers to items 13,14 and 15

Item	Yes	No	Don't answer
13. Do you think daily homework should be replaced by homework over a longer period of time (ie. Project)?	25,49%	72,5%	1,96%
14. Do you think parents still help their children do their homework?	37,25	60,78%	1,96%
15. Do you think homework assignments should involve only the teacher and the students?	45,1%	52,94%	1,96%

In item 13 "Do you think that daily homework should be replaced by homework over a longer period of time (i.e. Project)?" 37 respondents answered no, arguing that daily homework, especially in lower grades, contributes to school performance; learning is done on small units and daily homework is more appropriate; the themes provide additional practice in order to strengthen knowledge. 13 respondents expressed that projects over longer periods of time can be assigned as homework. Respondents who answered yes to item 13 stated that the project cannot fully replace daily homework, but it could be an alternative. Their arguments were as follow: working on a project, students socialize, are more enthusiastic, develop their individual study skills and the inquiry type skills, they are motivated and less stressed.

In item 14 "Do you think parents still efficiently help children do their homework?" the 31 respondents (60.78%) who answered no indicate that nowadays parents are increasingly busy, with no time to check students' homework; children are often neglected; some parents do not possess the necessary knowledge. Very few parents, as the respondents show, know how to help their children. Most of them solves exercises and are relieved that they go to school with the homework done. Reasons? They may not have patience or do not have time or believe that the teacher's job is to help them do their homework. Many parents do not even know if their kids have homework to do, children forget their homework or don't tell their parents they have homework to do, parents don't check children's notebooks etc. Respondents believe that parents should be trained first in order to understand that children's individual work during the time spent at home is necessary for the creation of positive attitudes towards work in general, and not just an obligation to the school or to the school teacher; a child in primary school should not go to school unless a parent has previously checked that the child is both theoretically and practically prepared for classes. Respondents (37.25%) who answered yes showed that some students are still receiving help from parents, but not always effectively. The role of an adult is to make the child aware that he/she must work in order to carry out any task that is assigned to him/her. Parents should help the child procure the materials, find information, check notebooks.

In item 15 "Do you think homework should involve only the teacher and the students?" respondents' opinions were again divided. Thus, 52,94% of the respondents answered no showing that homework should involve parents too. It is the responsibility of the parents of who are - or should be – interested in preparing their children's education. Moreover, as one respondent emphasizes, it is known that the trinomial relation student-teacher-parent guarantees the school success. If the parent does not supervise the way homework is done, the student, not enough responsible, will go to school with incomplete or undone homework. Respondents noted that nothing should replace the parent-child intimacy involved by solving homework assignments! Many respondents believe that parents are mostly convinced that school solves all their children's problems. But a child's education is crucial in preparing him/her for life. If a child has good knowledge, skills and attitudes, he/she is likely to achieve higher academic performance and be better prepared for life.

In this item 45.1% of respondents answered yes showing that the teacher's role is essential. In school children are taught how to learn. They are formed skills and abilities. It would be ideal if students understand everything that is taught in class. The quality of teaching is important, but we shouldn't forget the equipment of school with educational materials and appropriate means in his respect. The student and teacher form the working team, and parents should mainly provide their children only the study conditions at home. Respondents agree that they are mostly responsible for homework because parents are often busy, cannot provide proper learning conditions for their children, don't help them when they have problems etc. and teachers are forced to fill these deficiencies.

As can be seen from the Table 3, respondents don't agree homework in pair and also disagree on the idea of homework over longer period of time or on the mutual correction of homework. Teachers find that students still do not have enough responsibility to deal with rhythmic and organized project work, that they are likely to postpone homework in the absence of close monitoring from parents, leaving the fulfilment of tasks to the last minute (which sometimes may lead to poor quality). Regarding the mutual correction, primary school children are not ready to make the difference between checking according to a model and judging the way of solving a problem, especially if the solver deviates from a given algorithm.

Table 3. Respondent's answers to item 16

Item	Percentage of agreement
16.1. Homework should be differentiated according to the cognitive level of students.	35,29%
16.2. Homework should encourage students to look for varied solutions	39,22%
16.3. Homework should create surprises to students when done	37,25%
16.4. Homework should propose students to solve items similar to the one in the class	50,98%
16.5. Daily homework should be replaced by projects over a longer period of time	21,57%
16.6. Homework should be solved by students in pairs	9,80%
16.7. Homework should be checked on a daily basis	49,02%
16.8. Homework should also be checked by students	23,53%
16.9. Homework should be a bridge between what is taught in school and the acquisitions in family and in daily life	41,18%
16.10. Homework should encourage the students' autonomy	54,90%

Furthermore, a large percentage of respondents believe that homework should be similar to those addressed in the classroom, be corrected on a daily basis and that it should encourage student autonomy.

The link between homework and student's life experience is valued by less than half of the respondents (41.18%).

Some teachers have found that students should be encouraged to do their homework by: verbal appraisals, sometimes by scores; exemplifying and anticipating in the classroom possible difficulties arise in solving homework assignments; the individual work of the teacher with each student; a focus on choosing the correct worksheets whose completing to represent the students' homework; awarding low marks for homework undone. Respondents suggest that in teacher-parent meetings those parents who efficiently help their children to do homework should be valued (for instance talking to them about difficulties, helping them to understand the questions they are asked, the explanations offered, encouraging them but doing no homework for them).

3. Conclusion

Based on the results, we find that the opinions of Romanian teachers are in line with literature that highlights the merits of homework to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes in primary school students, respectively their contribution to student achievement. No respondent expressed doubts on the necessity or usefulness of homework. Instead, most respondents plead for daily homework.

The explanation is found in part in the peculiarities of the Romanian education. As specified in paragraph 2, teachers must follow an overloaded curriculum and are asked to work with a large number of students. This makes the moments of independent work to be short and fairly rare, the students do not systematically benefit from differentiated support, as the feedback is often frontal and the assessment of student performance is mainly done through written papers. As a result, teachers count on the moments of individual work represented by homework sessions and, whenever possible, on the homework checking by parents, respectively on their support or on the support of other family members (differentiated) that students need to do their homework.

These considerations are added to the ones referring to the teachers' beliefs inoculated at school or at work, with reference to the usefulness / benefits of homework. The answers given by respondents indicate that, by doing their homework, young students revise the study subject and deepen the knowledge acquired in the classroom, are able to explore the topic more thoroughly than during the class, preparing themselves for the next lesson, they get used to consult various resources (books, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, web), they work in a self-paced manner etc. Meanwhile, students learn to work independently; they have to be self-disciplined and take responsibility to go to school with the homework done and the lessons learned, face the problem of time management and of overcoming the difficulties encountered in homework assessments. Students thus acquire useful skills not only for school but also for life (every day life).

In conclusion, Romanian teachers are accustomed to see homework as an important link in the educational process. But beyond opinions regarding the necessity or usefulness of homework there are research findings that highlight the disadvantages of homework. For now, Romanian teachers either ignore or disregard these disadvantages. The voices that challenge the practice of homework are still few and weak. Professionals in education should make the curriculum conceivers, teacher trainers, teachers, parents and student aware of the disadvantages of homework so as to eliminate the causes that make this a true practice after school.

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