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What Students Say About Homework – Views from a Secondary School Science Classroom in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract: Students' experiences with homework started the moment they enter the schooling system, yet very little is known about how students view homework. In this work, science students' views of homework, and the factors or experiences that have influenced their views of homework are explored. The participants for this work were 34 secondary school science students in their fourth year of secondary schooling. A Likert-type questionnaire was used to gather data on students' views about homework and a semi-structured interview was used to explore what experiences and/or factors have influenced their views. The results indicate that the majority of students perceived homework to be an unnecessary chore from which no meaningful learning emerged, and they suggested that teachers are inconsistent about collecting and marking homework, and that sometimes the homework tasks are either regurgitation, irrelevant to the current class topic or overly challenging and thus, beyond what is covered in classroom learning.

Introduction

Homework continues to be a source of controversy among students, parents and educators. A decade and a half ago Cooper (1989) defined homework as 'work assigned by teachers/educators for students to complete during non-school hours'. Coutts (2004) and Pytel (2007) subsequently improved this definition to suggest that homework is 'teacher assigned and teacher monitored learning experiences that take place outside the classroom.' Pytel (2007) argues that a main reason for assigning homework is to 'reinforce material that has already been presented in class.' There is no question that teachers assign homework to students with the very best of intentions, but what is also clear, from the literature, is that these intentions are not always made explicit to students and parents. Reasons usually given by teachers for assigning homework include, 'to help students practice skills', 'to encourage students to develop good work habits', 'to motivate students to learn' or simply 'to help students prepare for examinations' (Coutts and Pytel, 2007). These all seem to be academically sound reasons for assigning homework, but it is not certain if these intended outcomes are made known to students and whether these intentions are in fact used as a guide when teachers assign homework. It is unclear also whether these intended outcomes are truly achieved through assigned homework tasks. Akioka and Gilmore (2013) as well as Bembenutty (2010) have suggested that when students are unclear about why they must do homework and to what extent it will be beneficial to them, they attribute only minimal regard to it. The nature of the homework task too, is a factor

which impacts on the level of priority students give to homework (Katz, Kaplan and Gueta; 2009).

In science, homework can range from extensive readings of several pages of content material, to working through mathematical and conceptual worksheets, to building or designing some tangible product. These are often assigned at the end of class sessions with very little discussion about what learning outcome the assigned homework is intended to achieve. Students therefore do not always recognize the reasons for which they are asked to do homework and many of them tend to be of the view that homework tasks are assigned by teachers ‘just for the sake of giving homework.’ Teachers seem not to take the time to convince them of the academic value of homework and as a result many students claim that they are ‘turned-off’ by homework.

Horowitz (2005) and Kohn (2006) have suggested that students’ motivation to complete homework is influenced in large part by the relevance, usefulness and academic merit they believe they will derive from the assigned tasks. Skaggs (2007) showed that students’ personal expectations of the significance homework plays in their overall success or failure, influence their willingness to complete homework. Students’ experiences based on the perceived learning merits they stand to gain from completed homework assignments is another critical factor that is linked to the views of homework held by students and also to their willingness to complete homework (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis and Holloway, 2011).

In the Trinidad and Tobago context, there is an over glorification of the ‘extra lessons’ industry to the extent that many students attend ‘extra lessons’ classes on most afternoon of the week (Lochan and Barrow, 2008). This practice is particularly prevalent among students at the secondary levels and most popular among those studying science subjects – biology, chemistry, physics, – and mathematics. This means that students do not usually have the time, at home, after school to devote to completing class assigned homework. Lochan and Barrow (2008) showed further that there is a strong view among science students and their parents that the ‘lessons’ component is responsible for students’ academic success to a much greater extent than formal schooling or any class assigned homework. In light of this view, students and parents are very comfortable placing assigned ‘lessons’ tasks and activities ahead of class assigned homework. This heavy emphasis on ‘extra lessons’ coupled with the perceived irrelevance of class homework have resulted in the current situation in which student, particularly science students, are refuting the once highly esteemed regard placed on assigned homework activities (Moorman & Haller, 2006; Lochan & Barrow, 2008). Furthermore, the perceived irrelevance of class assigned tasks and the incidental academic value attached to it have led students to believe that homework is an unnecessary matter. It is against this background, the current work was conceptualized. It is important to note that while students are doing other subjects as well and may be assigned homework in other subject areas, this research focuses only on the homework tasks assigned in science classes.

The purpose of this research is to reveal secondary school science students’ views about class assigned homework by exploring the factors and/or experiences that, they believe, have influenced their views. The work looks at how students view homework and identifies significant occurrences and events that have resulted in the views students hold. In that context therefore the following two (2) research questions will be answered in this work:

1. What are secondary school science students’ views about class assigned homework?
2. What factors and/or experiences influence students’ views of homework?

This study holds significance for all secondary school teachers as it prompts them to reflect on their own understandings about the role and importance of homework assignments and

to question the context in which they assign homework and how they treat with the products of homework tasks. It will encourage educators to think carefully about the type of homework they assign and the extent to which the students to whom the homework is assigned is benefiting from the assignments. Given too, the versatility of current technologies the element of redundancy of homework also arises, and this work will encourage teachers to consider this when deciding on what homework tasks to assign to students and very importantly, whether or not homework tasks should be assigned at all.

Literature Review

In the report on the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) conducted by Yazzie-Mints (2007) which polled over 81,000 students from 110 schools in 26 different states in the United States about their overall perceptions of homework, it was revealed that 'Doing Written Homework' was among the most frequent and time-consuming activities students engage in outside of school hours. Students were asked about how many hours per week they spent doing written homework and forty-three percent of students reported spending an average of one hour each week on written homework. Yazzie-Mints (2007) also reported that just about seven percent of participants felt homework to be 'Not at All' important while 68 percent felt it was either 'Somewhat Important' or 'Very Important'. A more detailed probe into this work revealed that the teachers were very careful to ensure that assigned homework tasks were aligned to lesson objectives and that homework was collected, marked and used in subsequent class sessions to provide detailed feedback to students about errors made and misconceptions identified.

Quite different findings emerged from studies done with Israeli students (Katz, Kaplan and Gueta, 2009) and from studies conducted with American students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis and Holloway, 2011). In these instances the students surveyed indicated that they were highly reluctant to do homework and they attributed their reluctance to the fact that homework assignments are hardly ever graded by their teachers and that they are rarely linked to earlier classroom learning. In the case of the Israeli students, more than half of the students interviewed said they did not complete assigned homework because they engaged in 'other activities' they felt were 'more beneficial' to their academic successes than the assigned homework. Just about 10% of the students in this study said that the assigned homework was beneficial to them with an overwhelming 82% suggesting that assigned homework was either overly 'challenging' or simply 'too difficult.' Similarly in the findings reported by Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis and Holloway (2011), students argued convincingly that teachers treated completed homework, which they classified as 'repetitive and irrelevant', very casual even after they (the students) spent a number of valuable after school hours doing 'difficult' homework tasks. Sixty-two percent of the students in this work described homework as either 'difficult' or 'hard' while 58% felt that it was nothing short of an after school 'chore.'

It is important to note that the context of study described by Katz et.al, (2009) is very similar to the Trinidad and Tobago context in terms of the certification academic culture, student demographics, traditional education policy and educational infrastructure. In addition, the work of Bempechat et.al, (2011) is also well-aligned to the Trinidad and Tobago context in terms of student demographics and educational infrastructure. In the study done by Yazzie-Mints (2007) however, while students with similar demographics as those in Trinidad and Tobago were

surveyed, the various school contexts in which the study was executed was very different from Trinidad and Tobago, in that their educational policies were quite progressive, their academic culture truly holistic and their educational infrastructure very sophisticated.

Carr (2013) summarizes the many views about homework by suggesting that in all cases, homework must be aligned to classroom learning in terms of relevance, challenge level and meaningfulness to encourage students to do homework – otherwise students will not only reject assigned homework tasks but will resent the broader notion of homework in general.

Methodology

The Participants

In this work 34 secondary school science students in their fourth year of secondary schooling were surveyed by way of a Likert-type questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Their ages ranged between 14 and 16 and the group consisted of 16 boys and 18 girls. The group was mixed in terms of ethnicity, academic ability and social standing. The class was purposively selected (Babbie, 2001), because of repeated concerns expressed by the class teacher about a willingness to explore the contributing factors that have resulted in the poor homework habits observed among her class of students

Research Design

A one-shot case study research design initially described by Campbell and Stanley (1963) and detailed later by Berg and Lunes (2009) was adopted for this work in which a single group of individuals (in this case a class of 34 secondary school science students) was selected for study over a single, limited time period because they have common experiences that have contributed to the shaping of an observed outcome (Cook and Campbell, 1979; Berg and Lunes, 2009). As mentioned, the group was purposively selected and so the one-shot design allowed for an exploration of the phenomenon with a purposively selected small group in a non-comparative manner. The case study design is justified because the 34 students all belonged to a single class, and were all exposed to the same teaching and learning experiences at the same time (Yin, 2014).

Instrumentation – The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two sections (Appendix 1). The first section was a close-ended Likert-type series of questions which focused on students views in respect of difficulty levels and relevance of homework assignments. Students were required to indicate their levels of agreement to five statements by selecting strongly agree, agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree. The items in this section of the questionnaire were adapted from the student homework questionnaire developed by Ekici (2014) and administered to secondary school students in the ‘student opinion survey about homework project’. The reliability and validity checks for the questions are detailed therein. This adapted version was piloted with a small group of students attending the same school and with similar demographics as the participants in this work. Students in the pilot group completed the questionnaire with no instances of ambiguity. This

section was designed specifically to target students' views about homework (research question 1).

Section two of the questionnaire consisted of two (2) questions which sought to determine the extent to which students completed assigned homework tasks and the reasons why they did not complete homework if they indicated that they did not. The purpose of this section was to obtain a preliminary gauge of what experiences and factors may have contributed to the views of homework students held. Data from this section were used in conjunction with the follow-up interview data to answer research question 2.

Instrumentation – The Interview

The interview protocol consisted of five (5) questions as follows:

1. If you had to choose one word to describe how you feel about homework, what word would it be?
2. Tell me why you selected that word to describe your feelings about homework?
3. Give me a specific example from your schooling experience to support how you feel about homework.
4. Besides school related issues, what factors or circumstances outside of school (at home for example), influence the extent to which you do class assigned homework?
5. If you had to say something to your teacher about homework, what would it be?

The initial interview protocol consisted of nine (9) questions. During the review process, it was revealed that some questions were redundant and others were repetitive. The protocol was adjusted by removing a couple of questions and subsequently revising and rewording the remaining questions to arrive at five final questions which covered all areas of focus targeted by the initial interview protocol. The final version of five questions was reviewed by a language expert and then by a measurement and evaluation specialist to ensure that there were no grammatical ambiguities and that the questions were aligned with the intended research question.

Data Collection

In February 2015, the students completed the questionnaire and one week after completing the questionnaire they were interviewed. The questionnaire was designed to elicit from students their views in relation to levels of interest, challenge and difficulty of homework assignments. It also sought to gauge the extent to which students completed assigned homework and if not completed, their reasons for not completing homework. All 34 students completed a questionnaire. The semi-structured interview which followed one week later was tailored to encourage students to elaborate specifically on what factors and/or experiences have influenced the views of homework students held. Each student was individually interviewed. Students were carefully informed about the purpose of the study and were advised that all data gathered from both their questionnaire responses as well as from the interviews will be treated with strict confidence and will be used only for the purposes of the current work. All students were presented with the option to refuse participation, but none of them refused.

Data Analysis

Responses obtained from section one of the questionnaire were collated to determine the respective percentage of students who responded across the continuum from strongly agree to strongly disagree for each of the statements presented. Results from the analysis of students' responses from this section of the questionnaire were used to answer the first research question in this work. A similar collation was used for the first question in section two of the questionnaire to determine the extent to which homework assignments were completed by students. Students' free responses, from question 2 of section 2 of the questionnaire, were coded and qualitatively analyzed to arrive at the major reasons offered by students for not completing homework. Interview data were transcribed and the transcriptions reviewed several times before the data were eventually coded and labelled (Bailey, 2007). Codes and labels were repeatedly crossed-checked against the interview transcriptions to ensure that they captured accurately what the data were telling. Level two data analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to merge similar labels to arrive firstly, at categories and subsequently at broad themes which reflected the factors and/or experiences students offered for the views of homework they held. Interview data and data from the open-ended section of the questionnaire were collectively analyzed to answer the second research question in this work.

Results

Questionnaires – Section 1 (Students' views about homework)

Students' responses to the Likert-type statements posed to them in section 1 of the questionnaire revealed that 65% of the students in the class were of the view that homework was a waste of time. Approximately 50% of the students viewed homework as being overly challenging or simply too difficult while a similar percentage felt that it was too easy. Just about 29% of the class indicated that in their view, class assigned homework was interesting. Overall, the responses indicated that 71% of the students who participated in this work were of the view that homework was not a meaningful or beneficial school activity for them.

Questionnaires – Section 2 (Reasons for not completing homework)

Important to note emerging from this section of the questionnaire was that 71% of the students in this class did not complete more than half of the homework assignments given on any particular day. Only two students indicated that they completed all the homework tasks assigned on a given day and 23% of the class had a completion target of 75% or greater. What was even more interesting was the variety of reasons students gave for not completing the assigned homework tasks in their entirety. These reasons included:

- The teacher not collecting the assignments (either forgetting to do so or simply not doing so)
- The teacher not checking to see if the homework was done
- The teacher not grading/marking/correcting the homework assignments
- The assignments being simple repetition of drill and practice type questions
- The homework assignments being beyond the scope of what was covered in the classroom.

Some students indicated that the assigned homework tasks were hardly ever aligned to the work that was covered in class – it was either beyond what was done in class (though related to the topic taught) or simply not at all related to what was taught in class. Other responses from students included comments about the teacher ‘only doing the difficult questions on the board...sometimes these are not even about what was taught in class ...’ or that the homework assignments were ‘... just doing many of the same kind of questions we did in class...’ This latter point was captured in brief open responses in which a number of student said that worksheets given for homework oftentimes contain ‘too many similar questions’.

The Interviews (Factors and/or experiences responsible for views about homework)

During the interview phase, students’ responses from section 2 of the questionnaire were used alongside the interview questions to seek further clarification, explanations and examples for responses given in that section. In addition, the information gleaned from section 2 of the questionnaire provided a general sense of how students felt about homework and this knowledge was particularly useful during the interview phase when there was need to probe or to explore interview responses given by the students. This level of exploration was aimed at arriving at the specific factors and/or experiences that created the views of homework held by the students. During the interviews, some students used the words ‘chore’, ‘pain’ and ‘bother’ to describe what was subsequently coded (based on the criteria outlined by Braun and Clark, 2006) as an *onerous* view of homework (based on coded responses from 10 students). Other students described assigned homework tasks as ‘irrelevant’, ‘waste’ and ‘useless’ suggesting both implicitly and explicitly in a number of responses that the view of homework they held was that it was a *trivial* undertaking (coded responses from 13 students). Yet other students shared the view that homework was *burdensome* by using words such as ‘hard’, ‘challenging’ and ‘difficult’ to describe assigned homework tasks (coded responses from 11 students). In responding to why they described homework by the words they chose, one student whose response was coded as *burdensome* because of her use of the word ‘tough’ (*and who also responded in the questionnaire to indicate that assigned homework is sometimes beyond what is covered in class*) cited an example of the homework task that was given after a session on simple circuits. At the fourth year secondary school level, students are expected to cover circuit components and types of circuits with emphasis on series and parallel circuits in terms of current flow and resistance in circuits. At that level students are not required to analyze circuit loops to determine current values in the various branches of a circuit. The student indicated that after a class session on simple circuits, the homework assignment included questions requiring the computation of the current flowing in each branch of a 3-looped parallel circuit (*a concept which requires the use of Kirchoff’s Laws, which, in Trinidad and Tobago is not part of the fourth year secondary school physics syllabus*). This was therefore beyond the scope of the content coverage prescribed at the fourth year level and proved to be quite difficult for this student.

Overly lengthy worksheets with several questions requiring the use of the same skill, for example, transposition of formulae or gradient calculations from plots of graphs, were some of the specific examples students gave for the suggestion that in their view homework was *trivial*. One student recalled a worksheet that contained 50 calculation type items with 12 items that required the simple addition of 273 to given degree Celsius temperatures to convert them to temperatures in the Kelvins. On that same worksheet another student spoke about 10 items which required simple substitution into the formula $PV=nRT$. No unit conversions or manipulation of

the formula were required in any of the 10 items, just different numbers were provided to determine either P or V. A number of the students who responded this way were some of the same ones who provided open responses in section 2 of the questionnaire to indicate that homework assignments oftentimes contained a number of very similar questions. Some of them elaborated further during the interview that homework assignments like these were very time consuming yet yielded no meaningful learning.

Students spoke about their experiences of having completed homework assignments that were not checked, marked or collected by the class teacher in subsequent classes, so that for them the homework was nothing more than an unnecessary chore from which no meaningful learning was derived. Some students indicated that there were occasions when they were uncertain about whether the answers and explanations they provided were correct, but because the assignments were not collected and graded or even discussed in class, they were unable to derive the expected learning from the homework experience. Many agreed that because of experiences like these, homework quickly became nothing more than a bother to them.

In response to the interview question which sought to elicit from students what non-school related factors influence the extent to which they do class assigned homework, two main factors emerged:

- Attending ‘extra lessons’ on most if not all evenings of the week which left no time for class assigned homework, and
- Domestic responsibilities which consumed after school time leaving very little time to complete homework.

Students in this work indicated that they attend ‘extra lessons’ an average of 3 times per week and on one day over the weekend which leaves very little time for them to attend to class assigned homework. In any event, students were unanimous in their perception that ‘extra lessons’ earns them more academic value than class assigned homework. Homework is rarely assigned in ‘extra lessons’ as the focus is on classroom learning which comprises lots of classroom discussion and collective problem solving activities. On the rare occasion when homework is assigned in ‘extra lessons’, the tasks are few, topic focused and are always marked and discussed in subsequent ‘extra lessons’ class. Some students did not attend ‘extra lessons’ but indicated that they had domestic responsibilities, such as family-run farming or commercial duties to attend to after school. They indicated that, based on their experiences of the overall inconsequential emphasis placed on homework, even when it is completed, they gave priority to domestic duties over homework assignments.

Students were almost unanimous in the call they issued to their teachers about homework – make it relevant, keep it focused on the class topic and grade/collect/discuss the assignments so that meaningful learning can be derived from it. One student even suggested that if more engaging teaching and learning approaches are used in the classroom, homework might even be unnecessary.

Discussion of Results

Carr (2013) speaks of the challenges students may experience when doing homework and suggests that if homework assignments are not selected or designed to make them meaningful learning activities for students, they will reject it. The findings of this work have not only added credence to the suggestions made by Carr (2013), but have shown further that teachers’

responses to homework assignments, particularly the degree of emphasis placed on it as a teaching/learning exercise have significant bearing on the value students attribute to it. When teachers treat homework assignments as an exercise in redundancy or make it a burdensome undertaking, students are likely to reject it. The extent of students' rejection towards homework came out clearly in this work with an overwhelming 71% of students indicating that they do not complete assigned homework tasks.

In addition and quite interestingly as well, 71% of the students also indicated that assigned homework tasks were not meaningful or beneficial to them. It is not clear if the exact students constitute the 71% in each case but the identical high number in both instances suggests that in this class there is a high degree of resentment towards homework for more than one reason. The strong sentiment echoing from herein is that the teacher's intention when assigning homework is not one aimed at building skills, or giving additional practice nor is it an intention to use homework in a formative way to promote discussion and collaborative learning in the ways articulated by Yazzie-Mints (2007). In fact, as was reported by both Katz et.al, (2009) and Bempechat et.al, (2011), it seems that homework given to students in this work were assigned quite arbitrarily, with very little intention to follow-up, with minimal alignment to classroom experiences and as an activity with no well-intended learning outcomes.

The very important feedback aspect of homework assignments, which Yazzie-Mints (2007) has advised is one of the most positive aspects of homework, and which can act as an incentive to encourage students to complete homework, seems absent from this class. When homework that has been assigned is not collected and not graded or discussed with students its purpose amounts to nothing more than an exercise in futility which the students in this work have identified clearly is a common occurrence in this class. Among the overwhelming 71% who did not complete homework, many of them made it explicitly that in their view, homework was a 'waste of time'. Feedback, particularly when given in response to homework assignments, encourages students to willingly engage in school work outside school time because they know that the products of their after school efforts will be beneficial to them. Yazzie-Mints (2007) describes this as a necessary and tangible outcome which many students seek from their schooling experience, and one which teachers must make provision for when they assign homework to their students.

Important to note in the Trinidad and Tobago context and emanating clearly from this work is the reverence and honor students place on 'extra lessons' and the ease with which they are prepared to compromise class assigned homework to attend 'extra lessons'. Lochan and Barrow (2008) have suggested that students are quite willing to complete 'extra lessons' tasks instead of homework assignments because the learning benefits they derive from 'extra lessons' are more beneficial and meaningful to them. Even when 'extra lessons' were not cited as an excuse or a reason for not completing class assigned homework, students in this work suggest that they would place other activities such as domestic tasks and chores ahead of homework, mainly because in their view, there is very little academic gain, class assigned homework will yield to them personally. This aspect of the findings herein – opting to pursue other activities instead of doing homework – is very similar to that found by Katz, Kaplan and Gueta (2009) where students deliberately chose to engage in or pursue 'other activities' instead of doing homework assignments.

It is important to note that this study was done with one class and involved the action of only one teacher. Good research reporting practice requires a caveat to caution against generalizing the findings, but it is speculative from herein that the outcomes and the views

expressed may be not limited to the disposition of this teacher alone. The rationale for this speculation is based on the fact that not even one student, even in a casual way, cited another teacher or another class in which assigned homework was less resented. It will be interesting to see what a broad-based study, involving several classes, teachers and schools in Trinidad and Tobago, will yield. Many possibilities for further work lie in this interest.

In summary therefore, it seems that much advice has to be given to teachers to encourage them to think carefully about the homework assignments they give to students. In particular, they are to carefully consider the purpose for which they are assigning homework, and when they do assign homework, that it should be well-aligned to the classroom learning experience in terms of learning outcomes and challenge levels. Furthermore, teachers must, bearing in mind the purpose for which homework is assigned, make deliberate allowances in subsequent teaching sessions to review and/or grade homework assignments and most importantly, provide meaningful feedback to students for their efforts.

The students in this work, albeit science students only, have a collective view of homework as an onerous, trivial and burdensome exercise. It is their view that their out of school time earns them greater academic rewards if it is invested in 'extra lessons' instead of in completing class assigned homework tasks.

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Appendix 1

Student Homework Questionnaire

SECTION 1

I am interested in your views about homework assignments. Please complete the questionnaire as instructed and return to me when done.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I find homework assignments very interesting				
Homework assignments are much too challenging for me				
Homework assignments are too easy				
Homework is a waste of time				
Homework assignments are too difficult for me				

SECTION 2

1. Place a check next to the proportion of homework you normally complete.
 - a. I complete 100% of my homework
 - b. I complete about 75% of my homework
 - c. I complete about 50% of my homework
 - d. I complete about 25% of my homework
 - e. I do not do any of my homework

2. If you do not usually complete all your homework, please indicate the reason/s why. You may check more than one.
 - a. I do not have the time
 - b. I do not understand the homework
 - c. I do not feel well
 - d. I have family commitments which prevents me from completing homework
 - e. Other reasons. Explain below.

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