

ASSISTING LEARNERS WITH HOMEWORK: PARENTAL ATTITUDES AND CULTURE, SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Sephiri David Hlohlolo

Dr., Department of communication Sciences, Central University of Technology, Free State (South Africa)

Abstract

This study examined the attitudes of parents in assisting their school-going children with their homework. Participants were a purposive sample of 50 parents (Female=27, Male= 23, Black=100%, Rural=100%) with age range 27 to 60 years old. Data on homework assistance were collected using semi-structured individual interviews. The data were thematically analysed. The results showed that parents believed that assisting with homework is the responsibility of educators. South African parents expressed the most discomfort in assisting with homework, indicating that they are in most cases unfamiliar with the contents of homework. Some parents indicated that they are illiterate, and therefore unable to assist their children. Henceforth, parents need resourcing by education department on how to provide homework assistance to their children.

Keywords: Homework, parents, assistance, culture.

1. Introduction

Some parents to-date still believe that school homework given to their school-going children are the responsibility of teachers. They (parents) in most cases have attitudes and cultural beliefs and as a result reluctant to help their children with their homework. A lot has been researched about homework, but this study explores mainly on the attitude and cultural beliefs of parents around school homework given to their children. It is further believed by some researchers that learners from low-income households are likely to benefit less from homework, than those from higher-income households. Further-more, the educational level of parents may have an impact on the attitude and cultural beliefs, such as educated parents are more likely to be prepared to help their children, while those who are not that educated may still believe that it is the teachers' responsibility. Some parents who still believe and do things the traditional ways, are likely not to help their children with the belief that teachers are solely hired to do such duties. More-over, some parents may not even try to help their children, and indicate some reasons, which this study will strive to find out.

2. The concept 'homework' in school environment

Homework is the fundamental stanchion of the education system globally. It may be out of favour with some school-going children, and most defended by teachers. Teachers are indicating that it (homework) serves as a reinforcement of classroom teaching and learning, thus creates discipline and good work habits as well as helping in concentration coupled with memory. However, homework is the sole responsibility of school-going children (referred to as learners), but parents are only expected to play a role of supporting, monitoring and ensuring that their children complete homework. Parents are expected to never do homework for their children, rather assist with it where necessary. More-over, parents should see themselves as the coaches (e.g., soccer coaches), wherein a coach does not kick the ball with the players during a soccer match but advises where needs arise. During the homework doing in a Black society, some parents still have attitudes and cultural beliefs, e.g., attitudes like 'it is the responsibility of teachers to help their children', forgetting that homework is to be completed at home, and some also have a cultural belief that says 'helping their children will make them weaklings'. These above-mentioned (attitude and cultural beliefs) in most cases generates a lot of tension between children and parents. Cooper (1989) postulated that homework is a group of tasks assigned to school-going children by teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours (implying after school and at home).

3. Ethical considerations

Struwig & Stead (2001) stated that conducting research is perceived as an ethical enterprise. It is imperative that moral behaviour should be considered upon conducting research. The researcher was granted ethical clearance approval by the University of Technology Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities to conduct the study. The researcher indicated that at no stage will his participants be known to any person. Further-more, the researcher indicated that participants' rights and privacy will be considered and protected, and hence they will have an option of disclosure or non-disclosure of their identification. Of importance, participants were made aware that, should they feel offended at any point, they are free to discontinue with the research, as they took part willingly. Over and above, adhering to principles of voluntary participation and informed consent, participants were also guaranteed confidentiality of their responses and anonymity of their identities.

4. Data analysis

Burns & Grove (2009) posited that data analysis is a process conducted to reduce, organise, and give meaning to data. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 19 was used to perform the analysis of the data. Data were summarised and presented.

5. The impact of social class in helping children with homework

It has been found by research that social class plays a role in helping school-going children with their homework. Robinson & Harris (2014) posited that parental involvement in school activities, such as homework, increase with social class. Cooper et al. (2000) maintained that middle-class parents are more likely than poorer parents to provide necessary support and guidance for their children's autonomy in their homework. On the other hand, working-class parents are likely to face some structural barriers (such as lack of human capital) to helping school-going children with their homework. However, Coleman (1988) posited that family background could impact children's achievement through financial capital, social capital, and human capital. Parents through advising and supporting their school-going children in their homework, serves as a means of activating social capital within a family. Further-more, parents with high levels of human capital may pass their skills through homework help.

6. Data and fieldwork methodology

This study on parental attitudes and culture in helping school-going children with homework has been quantitative. For this quantitative study, Black parents living in rural areas were interviewed at random about their feelings in helping their school-going children with homework. These parents were from different social classes. Parents were asked the interview questions in busy streets in different towns in the Free State Province, South Africa. Fifty (50) parents were interviewed, with the goal of randomly selecting them from different social classes. 22 parents were from middle class and 28 were from the working class. In the interviews with parents, there were questions such as 'who should help children with homework?', 'how parents feel about helping their children with their homework?' 'What type of help are they providing, if any?'. Follow-up questions and probes on how parents are involved in helping their school-going children with homework, what their expectations are, what attitudes do they have, and what are cultural beliefs around homework.

7. Parents versus school homework

It must be mentioned that this issue has been in discussion for a long time. Many parents are on the fence about homework. Some believe that it does little for their children's total achievement at the end of the academic year. Whatever the parents' views, it is known that there are gains in learner achievements, but it depends on how much time a learner spends in doing homework. Parents, therefore, have a role to play in their children's homework. It is vital for parents to be made to understand the importance of homework, its purpose as well as the amount that is assigned and the consequences thereof if their children do not complete their homework. Parents may explain to their children that homework is extremely important and valued at home by providing an appropriate place for it. They (parents) as a sign of support to their children are to provide needed resources (e.g., scientific calculator for both Mathematics and Accounting) They must show interest in what their children are doing and be actively involved. Further-more, parents are also to monitor their children's homework completion. Of high importance, parents should refrain from doing homework for their children, rather provide support and guidance.

8. Results

These results are based on the responses provided by interviewed parents, in responding to the interview questions.

8.1. What is your view on homework given by teachers to your child?

60% of the interviewed parents believed that homework is for children to do, and parents have no knowledge of the subject or content. As a result, they are not able to assist their children. They still maintain that teachers are specifically hired to help in this regard. A quote from one respondent in Sesotho “*Ke nahana hore botitjhere ba batla re ba etsetse mosebetsi, nna ke tswile sekolong ke bala sehlopha sa botshelela, empa ba batla ke thuse ngwanaka a sehlopheng sa leshome/ kgerateng ya leshome le metso e mmedi*”. A translated version into English reads as follows: “*I believe teachers want us to do their job, and I have only gone to school up to the former Standard 6 and how will I be able to help my Grade 12 child*”. Some of these parents believed that it is against their culture, as in their culture children are taught to do things for themselves in order not to depend on other people once they become parents. Further-more, these parents still hang on to the idea that says ‘if you do things for yourself, you learn faster’; as a result, they want their children to learn faster. Most working parents in this group believes that they are tired at night after coming from work and literally do not have time to do teachers’ work. Some even suggested that homework are to be completed at school where teachers can help. It must be noted that these parents are mainly for children attending school in the townships. They (parents) maintained that their respective School Governing Bodies (SGBs) did not encourage nor indicate to them that they need to help their children with homework.

The 40% of the interviewed parents believed that homework believed that it is proper to help their children with homework. Most of them are middle-class and maintained that it is their parental involvement that encourages them to help their children with homework. Further-more, they indicated that helping their children will help them support, maintain healthy relationship between them and their children, as well as to be able to monitor their children’s progress at school. One parent was firm in providing some reasons why it is important for him to help his child with homework; he said, “*homework explicitly require parents, it is very good when your child get from school and you monitor him doing his homework, and if something is not unclear to him, he asks me, I gladly take the opportunity to help*”. One parent said the following in response to the question in Sesotho “*Ke thusa ngwanaka hore a tsebe ho pasa a tlo itshebeletsa*”. A translated version into English reads as follows: “*I am helping my child with homework so that he/she can pass and become a better person who can work for herself*”. It was evident that parents falling in this group maintained that it is an obligation to help their children with homework.

8.2. Do you have attitude (negative or positive) towards helping your child with school homework? Can you elaborate?

53% of the interviewed parents indicated that they have a **negative attitude** towards helping their children with homework. They responded as follows:

- I need my space after work as I am tired
- I am not a learner, as a result I don’t have to do any schoolwork
- I am paying school fees for teachers to help my child with homework
- I have no idea of what these nowadays school homework requires
- Unfortunately, I can read and write, hence I cannot help
- I have a feeling that I may mislead my child and fail the task
- I am not relevant to the content, meaning I am clueless
- Teachers must do the work they are paid for (work of helping learners complete their homework)
- Unable to distinguish between class work and homework, and believe all the works must be completed at school
- My parents did not help me do my homework

These above-mentioned responses indicate that some parents still do not want to take part in the education of their children. Parental involvement is non-existent in their vocabularies. They still cannot believe that even if they are not that much educated, they can help by simply monitoring that homework are completed. These responses show an element of being “*selfish*” not being supportive in the educational journey of their children.

47% of the interviewed parents indicated that they have a **positive attitude** towards helping their children with homework. They responded as follows:

- I want to be part of my child’s preparation for the future
- I want to follow my child’s progress at school

- I need to be a responsible parent
- I want to create a good and healthy relationship with my child
- Helping my child is a sign of love to him
- I want to do what my parents did not do to me, helping with his homework
- I need to provide encouragement and be a supportive parent
- I must be exemplary to my child
- I want to positively contribute to the success of my child

These above-mentioned responses indicate that some parents still do want to take part in the education of their children. Some in this group indicated that they are SGB members in the schools of their children, and thus saw a need to help in the completion of their children's homework. These responses are the signs of commitment from these parents.

8.3. Does helping your child with school homework temper with your cultural beliefs?

Some parents still believe that helping their children with their homework temper with their cultural beliefs. This becomes evident whereby one male parent indicated that he cannot sit closer to his daughter, as it is against his cultural beliefs. As a result, this parent does not help his daughter. Some cultural beliefs separate the closeness between women and man, it is more evident when they attend circumcision schools.

8.4. Provide any comment about parents helping their children with their homework

Generally, parents differed in this section wherein they go to opposite sides, one side said they do not like doing homework for their children, whilst the other side were not having any problem in helping their children with their homework. Some parents boldly indicated that they hate homework, as it takes their time when they come from work, they wanted just to rest. Those who were interested in helping their children also highlighted that there should be a limited homework per day. They complained that too much homework made them lose focus and at times help their children by providing incorrect responses. Some parents enjoyed homework in Sesotho and English because they could easily understand and help with activities.

9. Discussion

In maximising the benefit of homework to parents, parents are expected to know their role in helping their children in completing their homework. According to Chin & Phillips (2004) parents' relationships with homework could take three essential forms, namely (1) substantive assistance, (2) monitoring assistance, and (3) fostering independence. The results as discussed above, reflects these forms, as per discussion to follow.

9.1. Substantive assistance

In this form, parents are assisting their children with the actual substance of the homework. The middle-class parents normally provide this form of assistance. Therefore, this suggests that these parents are activating their social capital to pass on their own human capital to their children. These parents do not only help with homework but also the children's preparation for tests, go through the homework. The parents in this form are expected to provide supplementary material, also help with the computer operations. Children in this form, are also expected to ask for help with specific regard to resources he or she may need.

9.2. Monitoring assistance

A very small number of parents provide homework assistance through monitoring. As a result, there is no substantive help with homework. Monitoring encompasses making sure that the child completes the homework without engaging in the substance of the work. In this form, parents are only making sure that homework has been completed in the expected format. Children in this form are allowed a greater independence in doing their homework. Parents in this form are only going through the completed homework. Partly, this form has a little bit of an element of parents who have cultural beliefs.

9.3. Fostering independence

In this form, parents do not offer substantive help with homework, with the reason being they feel that children have achieved homework independence. Homework independence implies the decision either by children or parents, detailing that a child is now ready to complete his or her homework independent of parental assistance. Some parents believed that they can still offer some help, but children need to be taught

responsibility and accountability at one stage. Most parents can monitor and foster independence, and this found across social class. Fostering homework independence is seen as a process whereby parents ease out of providing substantive help to their children. Children are allowed to take full responsibility for their homework completion on their own. The results of this study suggest that for a child to be homework independent is not entirely under parents' control.

10. Implications / recommendations

This study recommends or has the following implications:

- School Governing Bodies are to be empowered through workshop and conferences by the Education Department in encouraging parents to help their children with their homework.
- Schools should have a clear policy on the role of parents with specific reference to school homework given to their children.
- The different roles to be played by parents to be clearly explained to them.
- A flexible contract (around the homework completion) to be entered into between schools and parents of learners.
- All school stakeholders, including learners (in a case of Secondary schools) are to have regular meetings to monitor progress.
- An awareness programme dealing with the importance of homework completion by learners.
- Further-more, parents need to be supported by School Governing Bodies in understanding the importance of helping their children with their homework

11. Conclusion

From the results of this study, there is an extensive gap between parents' understanding of helping their children with homework. The results clearly indicate that some parents still adhere to their cultural beliefs, and some still have negative attitudes towards helping their children with homework. To-date, some parents still hate helping their children with their school homework.

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my heartfelt thank you to the Free State community in giving me their time to interview them. I also appreciate efforts put by everyone who ensured that I am assisted without any hassle.

References

- Burns, N., & Groove, S. K. (2009). *The Practice of nursing research*. Missouri: Saunders Elsevier.
- Chin, T., & Phillips, M. (2004). Social reproduction and child-rearing practices: social class, children's agency, and summer activity gap. *Sociology of Education*, 77(3), 185-210.
- Coleman, J. S. (1998). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington: US Government Printing Office
- Cooper, H. (1989). *Homework*. New York: Longman.
- Cooper, H., Lindsay, J. J., & Nye, B. (2000). Homework in the home: How students, family and parenting-style differences relate to the homework process. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(4), 464-487.
- Robinson, K., & Harris, A. (2014). *The broken compass: Parental involvement with children's education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Struwig, F.W. & Stead, G.B. (2001). *Planning, Design and Reporting Research*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman (Pty) Ltd.