

Influencing Factors for the Quality of Homework Assignments

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Abstract

This research article endeavors to explore teachers' perspectives on effective homework practices and the standards for assigning high-quality homework tasks. Using a qualitative research approach within interpretive paradigms, the study conducted interviews with experienced school teachers through convenience sampling. The investigation delves into strategies for customizing homework to meet students' needs, the role of parental engagement, and the importance of balancing the quantity and quality of homework assignments. Although homework serves as a vital tool in reinforcing learning and enhancing academic skills beyond classroom hours, various challenges hinder its completion, including comprehension gaps and issues with time management and parental involvement. The study seeks to uncover educators' insights into the types of homework anticipated by students and the factors shaping effective homework practices. The findings emphasize the need to balance parental involvement to promote children's independence and responsibility, avoiding excessive assistance that may undermine the intrinsic value of homework. Moreover, the study advocates for prioritizing homework quality over quantity to mitigate negative impacts on student well-being, emphasizing meaningful learning experiences and considering diverse preferences when designing assignments.

Keywords: Homework, Assignment, Teacher Perception, Quality Criteria, Effective Practices

Background of the Study

A home assignment, also known as homework or an assignment, refers to tasks or exercises given to students by teachers or instructors to be completed outside of regular class time. These assignments are typically designed to reinforce learning, allow students to practice skills, or explore concepts independently. Home assignments can vary widely in format and content, including written exercises, reading assignments, research projects, problem-solving tasks, or creative projects.

Homework refers to tasks given to students to complete outside of regular classroom hours, serving as a means to reinforce and enhance academic skills acquired during class time. It plays a crucial role in language learning and serves as a valuable opportunity for students to actively engage in their educational journey. By reinforcing classroom lessons and fostering consistent study habits, homework facilitates ongoing learning and skill development beyond the school environment.

Sam et al. (1999) assert that homework plays a crucial role in fostering students' development of responsibility and life skills, along with enhancing their ability to manage tasks effectively. They argue that homework offers experiential learning opportunities, boosts motivation, and provides students with chances to learn how to cope with challenges. Additionally, homework yields academic benefits, further underlining its importance in the educational process.

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Home assignments represent a significant aspect of students' academic responsibilities, often undertaken without direct teacher supervision. While considered crucial for academic success, students approach these tasks with varying levels of engagement. This research aims to address perceptions of the teachers towards effectiveness of homework practices, particularly in terms of criteria for assigning high-quality homework tasks.

Statement of the Problem

As a teacher, I have noticed students facing numerous challenges with homework, such as unclear task approaches, time constraints, lack of family support, task completion difficulties, inconsistent teacher guidance, variations in abilities and motivation, and home environment issues. To address this concern, research focused on identifying factors influencing homework assignments, particularly those set by English instructors. This study aimed to understand educators' perspectives on the types of homework students expect. Homework is typically seen as vital for promoting independence, creativity, and individuality in students, supported by both educators and parents. However, students' views are often overlooked, with assignments primarily based on textbooks and not tailored to their interests or proficiency levels. This creates a disconnect between students' preferences and assigned tasks, despite various available methods to enhance learning motivation and knowledge enrichment. Thus, students' voices are frequently marginalized in the homework assignment process.

Research Questions

To explore the Teachers' perception on Effective Homework Practices I devised the following questions.

- a) What are the perceptions of the teachers towards effectiveness of homework practices, particularly in terms of criteria for assigning high-quality homework tasks?
- b) What type of homework assignments do students anticipate from their teachers?

Delimitation of the Study

This research had the following delimitations:

The research was conducted specifically in the Kathmandu district, and the study involved collecting data from a total of eight English language teachers, comprising an equal representation of four males and four females. I collected primary data by conducting and interviews with teachers in community schools.

Theoretical Foundation of Assignment

Since ancient times, the purpose of education has been interpreted diversely, ranging from the pursuit of truth to the development of problem-solving skills and moral character (Ozman & Craver, 1981). Influential pragmatist John Dewey advocated for experiential learning and moral development in American education. Despite these philosophical underpinnings, the perception of homework has evolved over time. While some view homework as crucial for student success (Cooper, 1989; Keith, 1986), historical critiques in the early 20th century raised concerns about its impact on children's free time and physical activity (Eren & Henderson, 2011). Recent research highlights the varying effects of homework on students, influenced by individual and family circumstances (Minke, 2017). However, the cultural norms surrounding homework are often grounded in unexamined beliefs,

including the notion that schools should extend learning beyond the classroom and that intellectual activities hold greater value than non-intellectual pursuits (Vatterott, 2009). These beliefs, rooted in tradition rather than empirical evidence, shape the contemporary landscape of homework practices.

Throughout history, education's purpose has been diverse, encompassing the pursuit of truth, problem-solving skills, and moral character development. Influential figures like John Dewey advocated for experiential learning and moral growth in American education. However, perceptions of homework have evolved over time, with some viewing it as essential for student success, while others raise concerns about its impact on children's free time and physical activity. Recent research highlights varying effects influenced by individual and family circumstances. Yet, cultural norms often shape homework practices, grounded in tradition rather than empirical evidence, perpetuating beliefs about extending learning beyond the classroom and prioritizing intellectual activities.

Effects of Homework

Essentially, there exist two opposing viewpoints on homework: advocates for homework and its detractors. Supporters of homework, as articulated by Cooper, Robinson, & Patall (2006), Ilgar and Ilgar (2012), and Wallinger (2000), contend that homework serves as a valuable tool for enhancing student learning and expediting academic achievement. These scholars highlight the benefits of homework, emphasizing that it encourages students to dedicate more time to their studies, thereby facilitating their academic progress. Additionally, homework fosters parental involvement in children's education, motivating parents to monitor their children's academic performance and stay informed about their progress. Moreover, proponents argue that homework enables teachers to gauge students' comprehension of subject matter, identify individual strengths and weaknesses, and tailor instructional materials and classroom activities accordingly.

Cooper (1989) and Cooper et al. (2006) identified various positive effects of homework, including immediate academic gains, long-term academic improvements, non-academic benefits, and enhanced parental involvement. Maier (2017) implemented daily reading for elementary students instead of traditional homework, emphasizing the benefits of reading at this grade level. Additionally, homework can foster better study habits, self-discipline, time management, and parental engagement (Cooper, 1989; Cooper et al., 2006). Meta-analyses by Cooper (2001) revealed positive correlations between homework and achievement, particularly in high school and junior high settings. However, the causal relationship between homework and achievement remains uncertain. Trautwein and Koller (2003) highlighted the importance of students' motivation, learning styles, and self-regulation in determining the effectiveness of homework.

Conversely, critics of homework, as outlined by Cooper (1989) and Marzano & Pickering (2007), contend that homework can have detrimental effects. They argue that excessive homework burdens may lead to students losing interest in academic content and experiencing physical and emotional fatigue. Additionally, critics assert that an overload of homework may exacerbate academic disparities between high and low achievers and contribute to instances of plagiarism or copying among students. This perspective highlights the potential drawbacks of homework, suggesting that while it may offer benefits, an excessive workload can diminish students' motivation to learn and impede their overall academic outcomes. Kohn (2006) further highlighted concerns about homework's impact on family dynamics, including conflicts, stress, and limited leisure time for children. Ultimately, homework's effects on students and families are complex, with both positive and negative ramifications influencing academic and personal development.

Determining Factors for Quality/Effective Homework

In the ongoing debate surrounding homework, it is crucial to acknowledge that its purpose extends far beyond mere repetition. Scholar Vicki Vatterott (2010) emphasizes that effective homework should strive to deepen students' comprehension and reinforce essential skills. She identifies five key characteristics that define worthwhile homework assignments. Firstly, homework tasks must serve a clear academic purpose, whether it's practice, comprehension checks, or practical application of learned concepts. Secondly, they should efficiently demonstrate student learning while fostering a sense of ownership through personal relevance and choice. Thirdly, students should be able to complete assignments independently, ensuring competence and avoiding reliance on external assistance. Lastly, tasks should possess an aesthetic appeal, engaging students' interest and maximizing learning potential (Vatterott, 2009). Integrating Vatterott's perspective into the ongoing discussion highlights the importance of designing homework assignments that go beyond rote practice and instead prioritize meaningful learning experiences tailored to students' needs and interests.

Schimmer (2016) proposes a set of questions to guide teachers in creating productive homework experiences. These inquiries align closely with Vatterott's principles of effective homework. Firstly, educators must ensure that assignments are centered on essential learning objectives rather than busywork. Secondly, they should assess the necessity of homework in relation to students' home lives, avoiding undue burdens. Thirdly, assignments should be reasonable in terms of time allocation, considering students' age and readiness levels. Additionally, tasks should uphold high quality standards, steering clear of superficial activities like word searches. Moreover, students' readiness for independent work must be taken into account to prevent frustration and promote engagement. Lastly, involving students in decision-making processes regarding homework fosters a sense of ownership and enhances motivation (Schimmer, 2016,). These criteria underscore the importance of meaningful, personalized, and manageable homework assignments that cater to diverse learner needs (Vatterott, 2010; Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

Factors Influencing Home Assignment

Various factors as highlighted by Walberg (1986), influence the effectiveness of home assignments, encompassing aspects such as difficulty, length, objectives, feedback, support, and scheduling time. The home environment also plays a critical role in students' ability to complete their homework, with some students lacking a conducive atmosphere for study due to social or economic factors. Moreover, students who consistently submit their homework punctually tend to excel academically, demonstrating effective time management and good moral behavior. Additionally, the nature of assignments, initial classroom factors, home community factors, and classroom follow-up all contribute significantly to students' homework experiences and outcomes.

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping student self-confidence, motivation, and academic achievement, underscoring the importance of implementing effective homework completion strategies. Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1998) investigated various teacher-selected strategies aimed at improving homework completion among different student groups. Among these strategies, three stood out: real-life assignments, student planners, and self-graphing homework completion charts.

Life assignments encourage students to relate classroom concepts to everyday life, fostering abstract and critical thinking skills (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Rosário et al., 2015). Student planners, on the other hand, promote self-management skills and facilitate positive communication

between students, parents, and teachers, leading to enhanced homework completion (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998). Similarly, self-monitoring tasks, such as graphing individual homework completion, empower students with independent accountability and a sense of accomplishment (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998).

Schimmer (2016) emphasizes that homework assignments designed for practice should prioritize descriptive feedback to aid learning, rather than grading, which can hinder feedback effectiveness. This approach aligns with formative assessment strategies, which inform instructional adjustments based on student understanding (Ehringhaus & Garrison, 2013). Grading, Schimmer argues, should be deferred until after students have received ample practice and feedback to facilitate academic achievement.

Student engagement strategies play a crucial role in fostering homework completion and academic success (Cates & Dalenberg, 2005). However, homework in elementary school is often perceived negatively by students, who view it as mere busywork with little impact on their learning (Van Voorheis, 2011). Reinforcing homework completion with rewards, tangible or intangible, has been shown to increase student achievement (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998).

Creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment is essential for promoting student effort and homework completion (Schimmer, 2016). While homework completion may not always directly correlate with academic achievement, it can help cultivate students' independence and problem-solving skills, preparing them for future challenges.

Role of Guardians in Home Assignment

The role of guardians in home assignments is crucial for fostering a successful partnership between schools and families, as emphasized by Epstein (1996). This partnership encompasses six broad categories outlined by Epstein, each contributing to the collaborative effort between schools and guardians. Firstly, parenting involves schools supporting families in enhancing their parenting skills by providing guidance on children's developmental stages and creating a conducive learning environment at home. Secondly, learning at home entails educators and schools sharing strategies to facilitate learning outside the classroom, empowering parents to monitor and assist with homework effectively. Thirdly, effective communication ensures that families are well-informed about their child's progress and the available school services. In decision-making, schools involve families in organizational matters through advisory panels and committees, fostering a sense of ownership and participation. Volunteering opportunities enable parents to engage with their child's school directly, whether through visits or active involvement in classroom activities. Lastly, community collaboration extends the partnership beyond the school setting, involving community or business groups in educational initiatives while encouraging family participation in community activities. Together, these categories underscore the importance of guardians' involvement in supporting students' academic endeavors and promoting a holistic approach to education.

Researchers have identified parent involvement in student achievement as having both positive and negative implications (Cooper et al., 2006; Gonida & Cortina, 2014). A negative aspect arises when parents place undue pressure on themselves for their child to excel academically, leading to feelings of inadequacy and confusion about instructional techniques, particularly in subjects like mathematics (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Despite these challenges, teachers value any additional support parents can offer at home. While some parents may feel ill-equipped to assist their child due to a lack of skills, fostering a positive relationship between parent and child is strongly encouraged, as it enhances confidence and communication skills.

Moreover, parent involvement promotes a robust connection with the school and fosters positive communication (Cooper et al., 2006; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Van Voorheis, 2011). When parents demonstrate an interest in their child's academic progress, it not only boosts confidence but also enriches students' knowledge. Students who are aware of their parents' involvement tend to exert more effort and exhibit higher rates of work completion, ultimately enhancing student achievement (Cooper et al., 2006). However, this perspective contradicts some previous research by Schimmer, Bennett, Kalish, and Kohn. Nonetheless, the importance of parent involvement, communication, and support between home and school remains paramount for student success.

Despite the prevailing belief that homework promotes academic success and instills responsibility and study skills, current research challenges this assumption, particularly for younger students (Kohn, 2006). Studies suggest minimal correlation between homework and achievement among older students as well. In light of these findings, the question arises: if homework yields more frustration than benefits, why do we continue to impose it on children after school hours?

Challenges in Completing Homework

Homework presents numerous challenges for students, ranging from a lack of understanding on how to approach assignments to issues such as insufficient time and lack of support. Additionally, assignment characteristics, such as their quantity and level of individualization, are often overlooked by teachers. The home environment also plays a significant role in homework completion. Goldstein and Zental (1999) highlight various factors contributing to the persistence of homework problems, including the need for practice, engagement in learning tasks, and the development of personal skills like time management. However, techniques such as self-correction are often underutilized, with teachers lacking sufficient time to thoroughly check and provide feedback on assignments. Furthermore, large class sizes make it challenging for teachers to follow up with students who fail to complete their homework. Despite these challenges, a supportive home environment and parental involvement can help students develop consistent homework habits.

Sharon and Richards (1995) in their work titled "Home Assignment: A concern for the entire family" aim to shed light on some of the problems and challenges faced by Nepali public schools. Their findings underscore the critical role of teachers, emphasizing the importance of teachers being cognizant of students' levels and the volume of homework assigned. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of the family's role, suggesting that teachers should assign homework appropriate to students' instructional levels and provide positive reinforcement for completing assignments. Furthermore, the involvement of guardians is highlighted as crucial for offering support and fostering a conducive home environment for students.

Research Methodology

For this study, I utilized a qualitative research approach within the interpretive research paradigm. Primary data was gathered through interviews conducted with school teachers. Participants were chosen using convenience sampling, considering factors like availability, skills, experience, and expertise relevant to the research. Specifically, I targeted teachers with over five years of teaching experience.

Analysis and interpretation

According to the insights shared by FT1, it's crucial for teachers to tailor homework assignments to students' needs and interests. When homework resonates with students on a personal level, their

motivation naturally increases. Conversely, if homework feels disconnected from their interests, students may approach it with reluctance, viewing it as mundane and uninspiring. FT1 emphasizes the importance of tapping into behaviorism theory, suggesting that teachers should identify stimuli that engage students effectively. This approach not only enhances students' willingness to complete homework but also ensures its quality. Ultimately, FT1 highlights the significance of creating homework tasks that resonate with students, fostering intrinsic motivation and promoting meaningful learning experiences.

MT1 emphasized the vital role parents play in ensuring their children's successful completion of homework. According to MT1, parental monitoring is crucial, tailored to the individual capacities and study habits of each child. While parental supervision is essential for children's academic achievement, MT1 cautions against excessive involvement. Too much assistance can hinder children's development of independence and responsibility, undermining the intrinsic value of homework as a tool for personal growth. Therefore, MT1 suggests that parents strike a balance between providing support and allowing children to tackle homework tasks autonomously, fostering self-reliance and accountability in the learning process.

MT2 pointed out that there is a common assumption that increasing the amount of homework assigned to students will lead to higher test scores. However, MT2 suggested that instead of focusing solely on quantity, the emphasis should be placed on the quality of homework assignments. According to MT2, many students struggle to complete their homework within a reasonable timeframe, leading to feelings of stress and overwhelm. Despite the intention to reinforce classroom learning, excessive homework can have detrimental effects on students' well-being. MT2 highlighted the negative consequences of overwhelming homework loads, including sleep deprivation, headaches, exhaustion, anxiety, and even weight loss. Therefore, MT2 advocated for a more balanced approach to homework assignments, ensuring that students have enough time for leisure activities and sufficient rest to maintain their health and overall well-being.

FT2 emphasized the importance of students feeling content with the homework assigned to them. According to FT2, undertaking tasks without a sense of happiness and satisfaction can lead to mental stress. FT2 suggested that when students feel satisfied with their homework, they are more likely to be motivated to complete their assignments. To foster this satisfaction and motivation, FT2 highlighted the necessity for teachers to consider students' individual levels, interests, and abilities. Particularly, FT2 noted that completing English homework poses a unique challenge for Nepalese learners. Without intrinsic motivation, FT2 argued, students may struggle to reach their learning objectives.

FT3 conveyed their intrigue in understanding students' preferences regarding homework types. As the discussion unfolded, attention turned to the types of assignments commonly given by teachers and those favored by students. FT3 shared a preference for tasks linked to textbooks, drawing, and creative writing, indicating a desire for imaginative tasks. FT3 emphasized the importance of connecting homework to students' real-life experiences. She emphasized that the ultimate aim of education is to equip students for their lives ahead, emphasizing the practical application of knowledge and skills. According to her, assignments such as fieldwork and group projects offer substantial benefits to students as they enable them to explore new concepts, engage with others, and encounter real-world objects and events firsthand.

On the contrary, MT4 expressed a keen interest in incorporating internet-based homework into the curriculum, highlighting the benefits of utilizing online resources for English learning and completing tasks. This underscores students' preference for technology in education, recognizing

the internet's role in providing access to a vast array of information across different subjects. FT4 also emphasized the importance of avoiding certain types of homework tasks to maintain student engagement and motivation. Specifically, educators should avoid assigning tasks that are unfamiliar, dull, or overly challenging, as these may deter students from participating. Furthermore, homework should not consist of unfinished seatwork, as this could be perceived as unproductive by students. Tasks requiring excessively complex skills or unreasonable time frames should also be avoided to prevent overwhelming students. Additionally, homework should not be repetitive but instead aim to reinforce learning objectives and stimulate independent thinking. By sidestepping these potential pitfalls, educators can develop homework assignments that promote meaningful learning experiences and facilitate students' academic progress.

Findings

The study identified numerous significant elements concerning efficient homework methods and their influence on students. Firstly, it's crucial for teachers to tailor homework assignments to students' individual needs and interests to enhance motivation and engagement. This involves identifying stimuli that effectively engage students, fostering intrinsic motivation, and creating meaningful learning experiences. Additionally, while parental involvement is essential for homework completion, it's important to strike a balance to promote children's independence and responsibility. Excessive parental assistance may hinder students' development and undermine the intrinsic value of homework. Moreover, there's a need to shift the focus from increasing homework quantity to ensuring its quality. Overwhelming homework loads can have detrimental effects on students' well-being, including stress, exhaustion, and anxiety. Therefore, a balanced approach that prioritizes homework quality and considers students' individual levels and interests is essential. Lastly, students exhibit diverse preferences for homework tasks, with some favoring imaginative assignments while others prefer internet-based tasks. This underscores the importance of considering students' varied interests and learning preferences when designing homework assignments.

Educators emphasize the importance of tailoring homework to students' needs and interests to enhance motivation and engagement. They stress the need to avoid tasks that are unfamiliar, dull, or overly challenging, as well as incomplete seatwork. Homework should not require excessively complex skills or unreasonable time frames, and redundancy should be minimized. Instead, assignments should reinforce learning objectives and promote independent thinking to ensure meaningful learning experiences and support academic growth.

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