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Quantitative Study on the Usefulness of Homework in Primary Education

Horățiu CATALANO^{1*}, Cristina CATALANO²

Abstract

Homework is the final stage of the traditional lesson of knowledge transfer and assimilation defined as a task set by teachers to give students the opportunity to study outside of classroom lessons. Although there are persons who criticize homework, in school practice these are seen as facilitators of learning and achieving school performance by most teachers and parents. In this study we aim to analyze the advantages and limitations of homework, based on questionnaires survey that measure teachers' perception of the importance, volume, typology, purposes, degree of difficulty, time spent and parental involvement of homework in primary education. We considered significant for this study our own didactic experiences, peer group discussions and the studies that focus on the positive and negative influences produced by homework on academic performance and school results of primary school pupils.

Keywords: *homework, learning, academic performance, didactic experiences, peer talks.*

Foreword

The need of carrying out such a study departs from the analysis of the literature, from our status as parents and from the challenges of the university students whose major is Pre-School and Elementary School

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Education Pedagogy, from the viewpoint of the advantages and the limits of homework specific to elementary school pupils.

The topics raised by us in this study represent a three-sized challenge, in the sense that they arouse the interest of the teachers, the parents and of the pupils, even though, as Kohn said, ‘The parents who criticise homework will blame the teachers, the teachers who criticise homework will blame the parents and the pupils will blame both the parents and the teachers. But the important thing is to realise that these three categories have in common a burden and the feeling of powerlessness.’ [5].

2. The analysis of literature

Most studies existing in the literature converge toward the fact that homework considerably influences the pupil’s school trajectory and the parental relationship, so that in certain situations the parents are displeased with the too much time spent by their children in doing the homework or some other parents are worried that pupils get too little homework or even at all.

The adverse effects of homework are acknowledged by a lot of teachers and parents; nevertheless, most of them plead for it. Certain children need to be left alone in order to work by themselves, while some others need the presence of somebody to whom they could turn when facing difficulties.

Too difficult homework may constitute stressful factors, difficult or impossible to overcome, with negative effects upon the pupils’ school course and personality, such as : discouragement, the loss of self-confidence or of the interest towards a school subject, excessive time spent to the detriment of other activities or even the absence of the time needed for resting.

Certain studies have discovered a negative relationship between the pupils’ school successes and the time devoted by them to homework, in the sense that the children with learning difficulties are those that spend more time doing the homework, in order to keep pace with the others [4].

The result of another study focused on the correlation between homework and the amount and time allotted to doing it by the pupils with learning difficulties is that the latter ones did not receive more homework than the remaining pupils in the class, even though they may have spent more time solving the homework received, so that homework does not represent a considerable help to the pupils with learning difficulties. Cooper et alli [3] concludes : ‘There has been no proof that the 2nd and the 4th grade

schoolmasters assigned more homework to poorer pupils, however the pupils and their parents declared that the better pupils were assigned more homework, notably when school success was measured in grades.'

Cooper [2] carried out a meta-analysis of approximately 120 studies focused on homework. The potential advantages thereof are : to facilitate learning, to develop critical thinking, to shape a positive attitude towards school, to encourage independent work, to keep the factual knowledge in an optimum way, to optimise spare time organisation etc. The study also mentions certain limitations of homework, such as : surfeit, physical fatigue, emotional instability, spare time limitation, the pressure for high level performance, the need of parental help for solving homework, the lack of difference amongst homework items from the standpoint of individuality observance a.s.o.

From the point of view of our study focused on elementary education, most studies highlight the fact that the homework assigned to pupils does not influence the school performances obtained by them. 'There are no studies proving any benefit in assigning homework in elementary school...; many studies tried to find advantages of homework, but they failed and almost none of them tried to determine their negative effects.' [5]. 'Our results show that the benefits of homework in case of the little children cannot be immediately obvious, yet these ones do exist...' [6]

3. Goal, hypothesis, methodology

The main goal chosen for our quantitative study is to investigate the faculties' attitude towards the sensitive issue of homework in elementary education, departing from the idea according to which if the elementary school teachers assign homework, their attitude towards it is related to the enhancement of school performances, to the development of the ability to work independently and to rendering the pupils responsible.

In our study we used the method of investigating by a questionnaire applied to a random sample of 32 elementary school faculties by means of Google Docs.

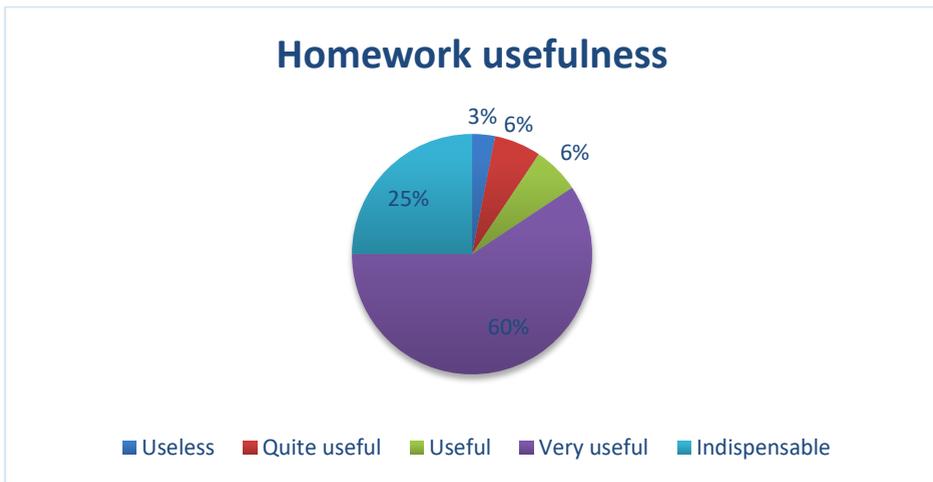
We chose to elaborate opinion questionnaires, because their target is to grasp the faculties' opinions, motivations and attitudes towards the advantages and the limits of homework in the elementary school education.

The questionnaire structure included open, opinion and closed items.

4. Study results

We asked the respondents to express their option as to the usefulness of homework and the results that we obtained are very clearly in favour thereof.

Figure no. 1 | On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 means indispensable and 1 useless, please express your option as to the usefulness of homework in elementary school education.



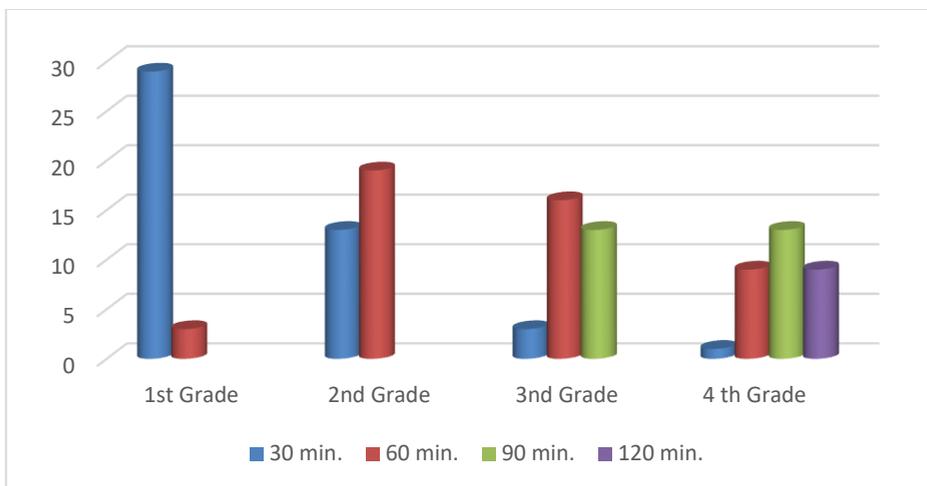
The second item of the questionnaire was an open one : We asked the faculties to come up with arguments in favour of the need to assign homework:

- 'It sometimes represents an exercise of consolidation for those who need repetition for learning or a means of extending and developing the contents covered in class – for those capable of performance, and most of the times they constitute a method of practising an organised lifestyle, namely the fulfilment of tasks according to a schedule.
- Homework constitutes a means of consolidating the knowledge gained at school.
- It develops the ability of independent work.
- Homework is useful if it supplements the school activities : reading, data collection for various projects / topic studies, problem composition, activities partnering the family and so forth.

- I do not agree with such homework as ex./page or with holiday homework as exercises and problems in an impressive number.
- I think that how much the child learns at school is enough.
- Children study very little at home. In this way they are somehow forced to review the lessons made in class.
- Homework makes the pupils more responsible and contributes to practising / consolidating the topics learnt in class.’

By means of another item we targeted the faculties’ perception as to the time allotted to homework doing and we have noticed, as shown in the histogram below, that the time needed for solving homework significantly increases as school levels go up.

Figure no. 2 | In your view, how much time should pupils spend for solving homework ?

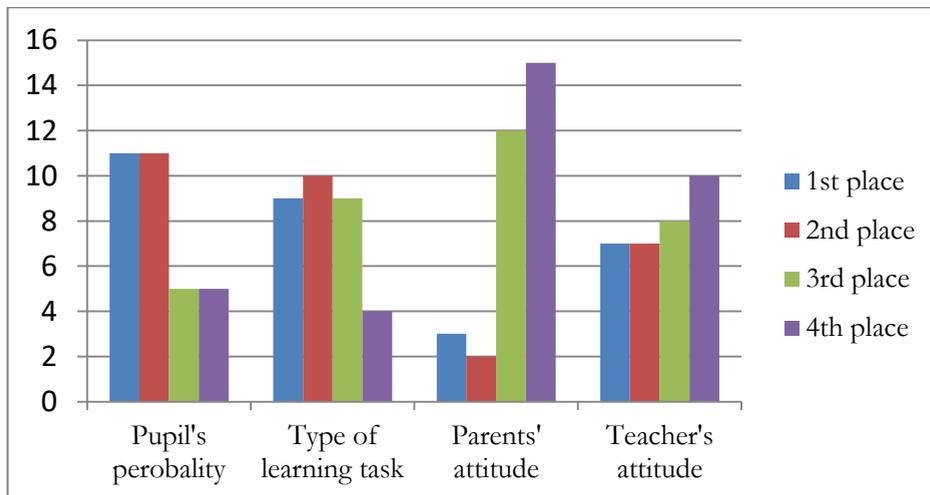


Besides the effects of homework, we also remind a series of factors likely to influence it: the pupil’s characteristics, the kind of task, the family environment, the parents’ involvement, the pupils’ age, the school ethos, the educator’s attitude, expressed by the care in planning homework, homework check and grading etc.

We deem that the following four factors : the pupil’s personality, the kind of learning task, the parents’ attitude and involvement and the faculty’s attitude towards homework greatly influence the latter one, so that we asked the respondents to make a hierarchy from 1 to 4, in the order of the importance to them (where 1 means the most important). The results

obtained are laid down in Figure 3, where we can notice that the best rated factor is the pupil's personality.

Figure no. 3



By means of an open item we asked the faculties included in the sample to express their own opinion as to the advantages and the limits of homework in elementary school education. Please selectively find below part of the answers:

- If the pupils try to solve the homework by themselves by their own efforts, then this is in favour of their development.
- If they only copy the homework solved by their parents or siblings, then this is a waste of time and zero efficiency.
- It helps a lot the pupils consolidate their reading-writing skills, their writing and reading pace. If they didn't have homework to do, the pupils that cannot be monitored would spend all their time in front of the TV, the laptop, the computer or the cell phone.
- It helps systematise the school subject, exercise the capacity of organising time and responsibility. It can sometimes limit creativity if the homework is too rigid.
- Experience gives me the certainty that homework has to be differentiated according to the pupil's personality, capabilities, motivation and to the social position parameters (the family's attitude, the expectations, the pecuniary condition).

- By the homework we need to gradually stimulate learning and the civic exercise by which we wish to develop abilities of positive active integration into the current and subsequent social life.
- The same homework does not have the same effects in case of all the pupils of a class.
- I agree with homework, however it should be customised, not exaggerated and in accordance with what is taught in class.’

5. Study limits

Like most ascertaining studies, the subjectivity of the answers provided could affect the quality of the research more, so that the difficulty in checking up the degree of accordance between the real opinions and the ones expressed by the answers given by the subjects is obvious.

The sample is not a representative one, seeing the large number of faculties teaching within the elementary school education of Romania, however, given the fact that most respondents have got the 1st didactic degree, the results obtained may involve new directions of investigation, which not included in the present topic.

6. Conclusions

Seeing the study of the literature, the results obtained from the present study and the fellow discussions had with the faculties teaching within the elementary school education, we may say that homework should ideally be constructed so as to be attractive, to take into account individuality, for the pupil to wish to enthusiastically work and solve the assigned tasks. The time allotted to homework and the degree of difficulty have to be managed very well and the homework end must be clear.

The design of homework has to be reconsidered in conformity with the needs of the current generation of digital natives, eager for searches in the virtual environment. ‘Seeing the new combination of cognitive skills, derived from a different neuronal connection, influenced by the use of technology ever since early childhood, the features of the instant generation’s personality enable the focus on training while carrying out several activities simultaneously, so that they will wish to obtain immediate feedback, as they get it in their digital habitat.’ [1]

The three categories of persons – the parents, the teachers and the pupils – involved in homework should work together so as this one should no longer be seen as beneficial only because the pupil’s spare time has to be

filled in with something, from the adult's point of view, meaning homework is good because it keeps children busy, not because it helps them learn. The ideal thing would also be for the teacher not to see homework as a factor that decisively adds to shaping a positive attitude towards learning and towards the school facility, but also as a condition for a commitment of which the pupil is aware, in the sense that he/she sees it as a necessity for developing his/her personality.

The educational policies ought to review the regularity or even the compulsory character of homework, so that the teachers could make choices in terms of its amount, quality, difficulty, type, frequency and desirability or undesirability.

An attitude favourable to the change of perception towards homework uttered openly should simulate the faculties to design homework individually, avoiding to take it from various curriculum supports, to give up grading the homework, to involve the parents and the pupils as much as possible in the decisions made about the homework design, to avoid deepening the social differences between the pupils coming from families with an economic potential and from disadvantaged families, between the pupils that can be assisted in solving their homework and those that cannot enjoy privileges.

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