

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Homework as a Teaching and Learning Tool: A Survey of Primary Schools in Zimbabwe.

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400448>

Received: 09 April 2025; Accepted: 15 April 2025; Published: 21 May 2025

ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate the utilisation of homework as a teaching and learning tool and how its effectiveness can be improved in Zimbabwean primary schools. The study utilised survey method to collect data from schoolteachers. By adopting stratified purposive sampling technique, the study employed interviews and questionnaires to collect data. Data were qualitatively analysed. The study established that primary school teachers utilise homework to teach a variety of subjects offered in primary schools. The major emphasis being the consolidation, reinforcement and integration of learnt material from the class. Moreso, the study established that homework is an effective teaching and learning tool. The study recommends that primary teachers should be trained to broaden their skills and competences on effective use of homework as teaching and learning tool. In addition, the study recommends that schools should institutionalise homework policy at every grade level. The study also suggests that teachers should constantly review the learner's load to optimise the impact of homework as a teaching and learning tool.

Keywords- Homework, Effectiveness, Teaching, Learning

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of giving homework to pupils is long standing tradition in most Zimbabwean primary schools. This concept of homework is deeply embedded in the school system and many teachers give homework to their pupils on a daily or weekly basis. The parents also expect their children to be given homework from time to time. Parents consider teachers who do not give homework as lazy and incompetent. In Zimbabwe there is scarcity of relevant research on homework as a teaching and learning tool. Teachers' education institutions in Zimbabwe do not have the aspect of homework as part of the teacher preparation curriculum. The question is, are teachers knowledgeable and well informed about the usefulness and negative effects of homework in the development of children. This research focuses on the effectiveness of homework as a teaching and learning tool in primary schools in Zimbabwe.

Review of Related Literature

When used properly homework can be a valuable tool for reinforcing teaching that takes place in the classroom [2]. Unfortunately, many teachers do not use homework effectively, arguing that it overburdens them with more tasks and deny learners of essential time for relaxation, physical activity, and recreational activities important for their growth and progress [14]. Teachers need to research, understand homework and its implications on teaching and learning. Homework is defined as tasks assigned by teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-structured time ([6],[1]). (Rasure 2025, Kralovec and Suell 2000) make a strong case against homework arguing that it marginalises economically disadvantaged students who find it difficult to complete homework because of inequalities in their home environments. They assert that teachers are not well trained on how to create effective assignments. There is lack of school policy or guidance on how teachers should prepare effective homework. How can teachers then utilise homework to be more effective?

Teachers should be equipped with the tools and knowledge to ensure homework is effective. When teachers design homework, it should meet specific purposes and goals. If homework is properly utilised by teachers, it

enhances students' learning habits, performance, and academic achievements ([16],[5]). Research has established the benefits of effective homework. Students score higher marks than the average student in class. Achievement appears higher in higher grades of the primary school than the lower grades. Teachers should consider the benefits of homework such as better study habits, better self-direction and self-discipline, better time management, and independent problem-solving skills as well, greater parental involvement and participation in schooling ([17],[5],[4]). In the lower grades homework promotes positive attitudes, habits, character traits and parental involvement which is very important. In upper grades homework promote improve performance in class [12]. Research has found homework promoting, self-efficiency, responsibility for learning and delay of gratification.

What Makes Homework Effective?

Teachers must be familiar with factors that make homework effective. Cathy Vatterott (2010) identified five (5) fundamental characteristics of good homework. These are purpose, efficiency, ownership, competence and aesthetic appeal. Purpose means all homework assignments should be meaningful. Teachers should not assign homework as a matter of routine but only where there is a specific purpose. Students should also understand the purpose of the assignment [20]. Homework should provide teachers with feedback about student understanding [11]. Students should be clear of what they are supposed to do.

Homework should not take an individual amount of time and should require thinking. Students who spend much time on homework (more than 90 minutes in middle primary school) perform worse than students who spend less time [3]. Some schools use a policy of 10 minutes a night tasks that are of moderately difficult which most likely enhance student motivation.

The hallmark of effective homework is ownership. Students who feel connected to the content and assignment learn in class and are more motivated. Providing homework in their assignment is one way to create ownership. Connecting assignments with student's interest is also essential for promoting ownership. It is also important for students to understand the utility of homework and its importance it should be crafted in such a way that students accomplish it with a relatively high success rate ([14],[2],[6]). Competence is critical for effective homework. Students should feel competent in completing homework. Students are discouraged when they are unable to complete homework on their own [19]. It should be differentiated so that has the appropriate level of difficulty for the individual students [9]. Homework should never be assigned as a form of punishment [13]. Homework should be returned with feedback. Students learn more from homework which is graded [8].

Research Questions

What are the views of teachers on use of homework as a teaching and learning tool in the primary school?
What are the challenges faced by teachers in using homework in the school?
How can homework be effective as a teaching and learning tool?

METHODS

This was qualitative research, and teachers participated in this study. The teachers responded to open-ended questionnaires and interviews. Qualitative research involves the researcher studying the participant in their natural setting [18]. The natural setting is the schools. The researcher visited the schools and interacted with the teachers during data generation.

Research Design

A multiple case study design was used in this study to focus on participation in the various schools. The case study design was preferred because it allowed the research to focus on key players and situations affecting the implementation of homework.

Sampling Procedure

To purposive sampling techniques was used to identify the participants to this study. The participants were

teachers in primary schools. The purposive sampling technique enabled the researcher to pick teachers with the vital information to ensure relevant data would be collected [10].

Data Generation and Analysis

To generate data interviews and open-ended questionnaires were used to generate data from teachers. The researcher was able to interact with participants to clarify complex questions and follow up on the responses made by the participants.

Data Analysis

The interpretative study analysis was used to analyse the data. During data analysis the following steps were followed, coding, and categorising. The researcher had to structure the categories of data so that they would be meaningful. Analysis also involved selecting the categories and relating them to other categories. The researcher had the task of integrating the categories to generate meaning and understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers were asked areas in which they give homework. Teachers indicated that they give homework in all subjects such as Mathematics, Agriculture, Science and Technology, Physical Education and Sport, English language, Indigenous language and Social Science. Mostly subjects like Mathematics, Science and Technology and Agriculture, teachers give homework almost daily.

To ensure homework is effective as learning and teaching tool the teachers indicated that they revise all assigned work and mark it. They make sure parent or guardian sign to confirm that the student did the work on their own. They also communicate with parents to let children do their homework without them interfering and then assist if there is need. The teachers also give prompt feedback and give revision tests and exercises through the learners' performance in these tests assessing the effectiveness of homework. One participant said, "I make sure homework is marked and revised so as pupils to benefit at end of the month I give a revision test based on the homework."

Teachers were asked reasons why they give homework. The following responses were given:

Participant 1 'To reinforce what has been learnt'

Participant 2 'To reinforce concepts taught and allow pupils to explore'

Participant 3 'to find out if the content has been grasped / mastered'

Participant 1 'To research new concepts and occupy the pupils even at home'

Participant 4 'For syllabus coverage and concept reinforcement as well as cover concepts skipped in class'

All teachers included that they marked homework, but they did not receive special training in teaching using homework as a teaching and learning tool.

Teachers Identified Challenges Faced by Pupils in Relation to Homework as:

Some parents are not literate, and some are not willing to assist, and some do the work for their children instead of assisting. Pupils are helped by uninformed people and time for marking homework is very little. Most parents do not look at the work done by their children hence children make mistakes, and they do not care and do not take homework seriously. Some students do not attempt the work given to them by the teacher due to other interests not in line with school for example watching television or attending to some social gatherings. In some instances, students are given work beyond their level of understanding. Schools lack resources like textbooks to take home and do homework. Sometimes parents are ignorant, and some do not have the time with their children. Scarcity of resources to use while at home and lack of lighting will force some students not to do homework or

complete homework. Some parents do not take homework seriously hence pupils might not get assistance with work assigned.

Teachers were asked if there are policies guiding the use of homework as a teaching tool. Most teachers indicated that they had no idea while others identified the policy of giving homework on a daily basis and during weekends.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that homework is an effective tool for improving student performance in the school system. It helps students practice and reinforce what they have learnt in class. Homework gives learners the opportunity to apply learnt concepts and develop a sense of responsibility. The study also concluded that teachers design homework tasks at least three times a week that are linked to classroom learning with clearly set aims and monitor students' engagement and progress. However, most teachers have not received training on how to effectively use homework in their teaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study gives the following recommendations:

Teachers should be trained on the use of homework as teaching and learning tool.

The teachers should improve their communication with parents to ensure homework is more effective

Teachers should review the amount of homework they give to the school children to ensure completion of homework.

Teachers should give homework suitable to the level of development of the children taught.

Schools should have homework policy at every grade level of the school.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all the primary school teachers who agreed to participate in this research and sharing their views and experiences. Thank you!

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