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Homework: An Interface between Home and School. Is it a Myth or a Reality in Rural Zimbabwean Primary Schools?

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Author's contribution

All the work in this research was done by this same author KW.

Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the functionality of homework in rural Zimbabwean primary schools. The research acknowledges that, whereas homework is intended to extend the learning from school to home for the benefit of learners, in reality, is this happening in rural schools where a number of parents and guardians are either lowly educated or economically disempowered? The intended collaborative effort between teachers and parents does not seem to be working out well in some of the schools. Where this partnership is dis-functional, what is the likely effect of homework on learners? This research, therefore, examines the functionality, or lack of it, and the net-effect of homework on both the learner and the teacher. Inherently, the research also looks at the attitudes of rural parents and guardians towards the perceived roles they are supposed to play in homework management. A parent in this research is defined as 'the biological parent or legal guardian; the person legally entitled to custody of a learner or any person who fulfils the obligation towards the learner's schooling [1].

Keywords: *Homework; accountability; collaboration; quality assurance; partnership; rural.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of homework is premised on the understanding of the need to ensure that learners in schools are getting the best help they need to succeed in their education. The concept of homework is based on the belief that it is the duty of the identified individuals in schools and society whose role should be supportive of learners to help them in their educational endeavors. Research indicates that family-based learning influences the effectiveness of school on a child. It may be a significant factor among the complex forces associated with inequality of educational opportunity that may push up learners' capacity to endure the demands of schooling. Pollard and Bourne [2] note that if most of a child's education happens outside school, especially in the home, and if parents are co-educators of the child with teachers, "then it seems logical to make the two elements of school learning and home learning compatible, and for teachers to use that home learning as a resource." Homework, therefore, is (or should be) an organized and collaborative activity involving the school and home aimed at improving the performance of learners. Children need someone at home who will offer them encouragement in their schoolwork, understand their strengths and limitations, and be aware of what they are studying [3]. If homework were meaningfully implemented it could prove an important ingredient for experiential, learner-centred learning since "conventional classrooms don't contain the kinds of real-life resources we need to link school learning and life" [4]. This paper, thus, examines the meaning and function of homework within the context of education. The aim is to check whether the implied values of homework are being realized in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. The world over, educators, policy makers and researchers are increasingly recognizing school, family and community partnerships as important for student success [5]. The question in this research therefore, is whether this partnership does exist in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research attempted to answer the following research questions.

1. Do schools have homework policies?
2. Is homework set and managed effectively?
3. Are responsibilities of the student, the parent and the teacher clearly outlined?
4. Is marking and feedback consistently done in line with the school's marking policy?

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of homework is premised on the need for accountability in education. According to Maurice Kogan [6], accountability was traditionally viewed as a duty to render account of work performed to a body that has authority to modify that performance by the use of sanction and reward. For Sallis [7]; Wessels [8], however, accountability in this era "is seen as a requirement to have one's work tested, debated and judged within some more or less formal structure." Success may not necessarily be rewarded or failure punished in the true sense of these terms, but there is an implied obligation to give reasons for actions taken as a way of reviewing outcomes and to submit to judgment on the performance in all the circumstances of the task which one accepts as own. In other words, even though there may not be outright material rewards or observable punishment for teachers (and parents) regarding the outcome of children's learning, there is an implied demand for accountability. Accountability as a concept refers to a process of providing information to others, "enabling judgment to be made about the extent to which the school is responsive to the needs of

students, the local community and society at large (Coldwell and Spinks in Thurlow, Bush and Coleman [9]).

Accountability is a concept that hinges on quality assurance. Quality control presupposes that a product or service is going wrong but quality assurance prevents it from going thus (West – Burnham in Thurlow, Bush and Coleman [9]). Quality is defined in terms of customers' needs rather than those of the suppliers. Thus, in education, quality is defined in conjunction with educational needs of learners than teacher needs. Martin [10] notes that, "accountability systems drive academic work and learning just as surely as assessment systems drive student learning." Homework therefore, is driven by the teachers' desire for partnership with parents to be accountable and realize quality assurance in education.

The high demand for teachers to be accountable for the students' success has led to questions on fairness of such charge. Of significance is the outcry that once learners leave school, teachers have no control over what they do or not do. As noted by Sallis [7], how can we demand "accountability from teachers" only when even research has shown that home support is essential to a child's success? After all, for rural day schools in Zimbabwe, children spend the greater part of their lives at home than at school. In this case, the home needs to play a complementary role to augment teachers' efforts. Teachers therefore, should 'demand' home support in their endeavor to realize quality assurance.

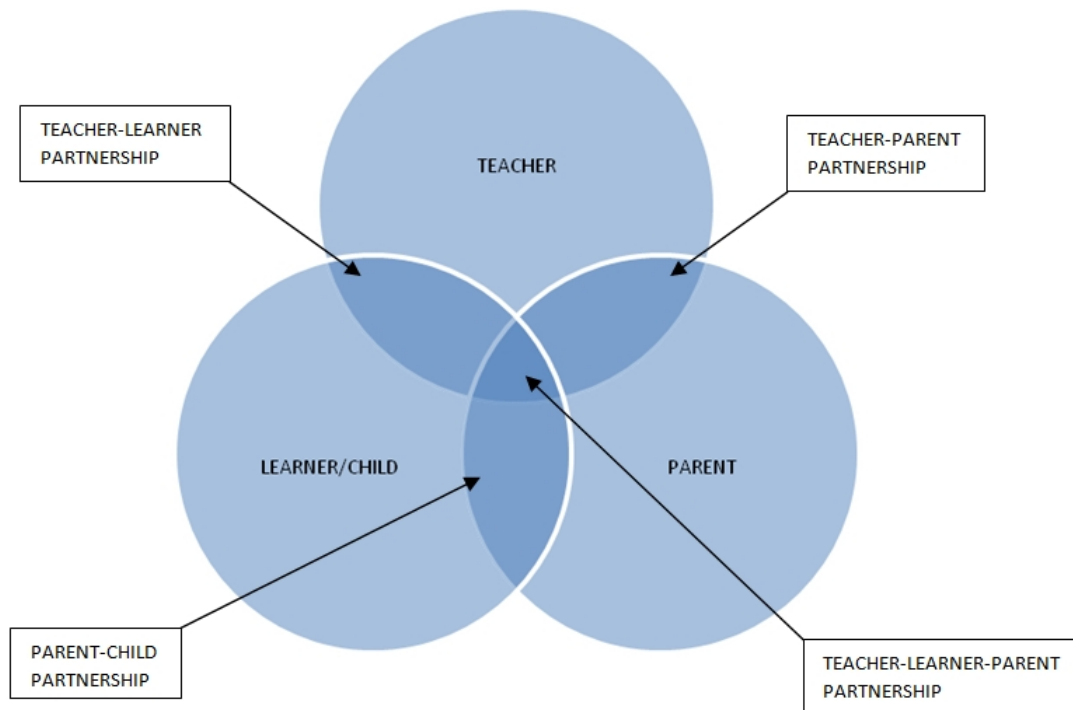
Homework is a call for teachers and parents to exercise accountability towards the learners. In the accountability framework, there are various agencies who seek to monitor the quality of the outcome. These include school inspectors, heads of schools, departmental heads, the learners (who are the silent and indirect monitors), parents (who play a double role of instructing and monitoring) and the school authorities.

3.1 Homework

Homework is a widely used but also one of the more controversial aspects in the education system [11]. Homework itself can be understood to be an out-of-class activity that is used as an extension of classroom work. LaConte [11] identifies three main types of homework, i.e. practice assignments to reinforce newly acquired or taught skills or knowledge, preparation assignments to provide background to particular topics, and extension assignments designed to practice learnt material or just to encourage learners to do more research. It can therefore be observed that homework is purposeful and goal-directed.

One can argue that homework calls for collaboration between teachers and parents for the purpose of creating a permissive environment that promotes acquisition and / or learning. In this regard, there should be greater co-operation between teachers and parents. Homework, it shall be argued, fosters a sense of common purpose for teachers and parents. In this way, teachers and parents become "natural allies who share the common goal of wanting to assist children to develop their full potential" [12]. In other words, homework is a concept that calls for parents to be partly accountable for the learning of their own children. After all, they choose schools for their children and therefore should take an active role in educating them. The school and families have not always shared the same perspectives on what is needed in the child's best interest [1]. Homework should play that role for teachers and parents to realize the need for collaboration. Homework creates partnerships that can be diagrammatically presented as shown below.

The collaborative framework for teachers-learners-parents' partnership



The framework presents a tripartite relationship that exists among teachers, learners and parents. It can be noted that homework acts as the inter-connector in the threesome relationship so created to raise the learners' educational standards. The teacher assigns learners (teacher-learner partnership) to some homework, so designed to achieve set targets. In turn, the learner takes that homework home where he/she enlists the assistance of the parents or caregivers (parent-child partnership). The parents, in the advent of homework, are expected to play a triple role. First, they should necessarily create conducive environment where learners can concentrate on their homework, i.e. quiet and uninterrupted places. Secondly, parents should also provide relevant materials for learners to carry out their research. Thirdly, parents should also monitor and assist learners during homework. Their help need not be giving answers to learners but helping them to arrive at the correct answers. One wonders how much of our rural parents understand the philosophy behind homework? Can our rural parents meaningfully play this role? Is it not possible that some may simply work out the answers and give to the learners in the mistaken notion that this is what is required of them? Wolfendale [13] notes that some parents' ways of assisting their children lack the necessary grounding in teacher professionalism hence may even jeopardize their children's learning. In some cases also, some teachers fear that allowing learners' parents to take part in educational instruction undermines their professionalism. To avert these possibilities, there is therefore need for parents and teachers who teach their children (teacher-parent partnership), to occasionally meet and share ideas on how homework activities should be managed. In the homework framework above, this is where parents and teachers need to meet outside the learner's presents. Such occasions afford them time to share the problems they may be facing and thus strategize their activities. In cases where problems may persist, then the three (teacher, parent and learner partnership) should come together to try and rectify the problems affecting homework. In this regard, it is

doubtful that such is happening in most of our rural schools. It would seem that teachers are closed in their own world of 'school business is school business' and likewise, parents in their 'teaching is for teachers, why do they (teachers) want us to do their work?' Unless these problems are meaningfully addressed, the concept of homework may remain a ritual with very little returns. Where it is dis-functional, homework can become tortuous for the learners. "Teachers need to think carefully about what kinds of teaching and learning are best done in class, and what is best done in the community (either in groups of learners or through independent learning)" [4].

One can also note that most rural homes in Zimbabwe are characterized by low incomes making it difficult for parents to provide the necessary ingredients that are vital to the success of the homework system. What more with some parents having received very little or no education! This researcher is aware of some parents who do not seem to care about their children's learning. There are also others who are at times overwhelmed by stressful life-events, and whose own experiences of schooling were not positive enough for them to overcome fears and anxieties about school and teachers [13]. Coupled with that are the realities of rural areas in Zimbabwe where manual work is the mainstay for survival. Very few parents resist the temptation to send these children on family errands or assign them to some manual work without any allowance for these children to do their homework. Some of such parents believe that their children should have done their work when they were at school. The fact that they are bringing work home might be misconstrued for negligence at school where, parents would believe, they should have completed their work. Included in the parent population are also grannies looking after children left in their care when the parents succumbed to AIDS. To what extent can these grannies help with homework? The problems identified above call for greater planning. For homework to work positively, it is necessary to provide "the required preparation, learning resources and facilities" and the parent 'education' regarding homework-management [4].

Notwithstanding the challenges shown above, homework still forms "an essential part of education and it gives our pupils the chance to practice, consolidate and extend their knowledge and skills" in their education [14]. Macbeth [15] sees "home-based learning as corollary to school-based learning within a compact alliance characterized as mutual information exchange." Exercising schoolwork at home bridges the dichotomy between the school curriculum and knowledge that resides in the family. As Muijs and Reynolds [11] note, if managed well, homework has the potential to yield useful results. Homework can lead to better retention of facts and knowledge, increased understanding, improved critical thinking skills, improved information-processing skills and the possibility of extending the curriculum. In addition, better study habits, positive attitudes towards schooling and studying, and learning beyond the school walls are some of the long term benefits of homework. In the long run, the process would ultimately develop autonomous problem-solvers who are self-directed and motivated. What is of essence is meticulous planning of homework that persuades parents to move away from their protective model [16] where they tend to abrogate the responsibility of the education of their children to teachers. Parents should be shown reason and benefits of their involvement. The nature of parents and the form of assistance they can offer should be matched to ensure that even the grannies would have something positive to contribute in the said partnership. Homework should also be well planned to avoid burn-out in learners which may lead to lack of interest, cheating and possibly copying of work from the able ones. Quantity and concept load should not play the devil's advocate leading to discouragement of learners.

For homework to be effective, it must adhere to a number of principles [11] i.e. not to use homework as punishment, that the teacher should mark homework and provide immediate feedback, that the feedback should be in the form of instructional feedback rather than simply grades, that homework should be integrated into the themes studied, that it should reinforce major curriculum concepts, and that if homework is not completed there should be consequences attached to that to avoid non-compliance in future.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research collected both qualitative and quantitative (mixed methods) data about teachers' perceptions on homework, about parents' views regarding the same and about primary school learners' views on the administration and management of homework. Greene, Caracelli and Grahmann [17] identify "five main purposes of using a combination of methods, namely: triangulation; complementarity; development; initiation and expansion". Through the mixed method, it was hoped that triangulation, "a process in which multiple forms of data are collected and analyzed" [18], would help check on consistency of answers given by respondents.

Marshall and Rossemann [19] say "qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in lived experiences of people." Qualitative research is very useful especially "where the data are in the form of people's worlds" [20], views and perceptions. In other words, "qualitative research, allowed the researcher to get inner experiences of participants" [21]. In this research, a mixture of the survey and ethnography was employed. Surveys provide "a snapshot of how things are at a specific point in time" [22]. In other words, the survey design was very useful in providing information about the current state of affairs regarding homework in the selected area. As for the ethnographic approach, "the portrayal of an insider's perspective", in which the meanings of the social action for the actors themselves (teachers, parents and learners), was paramount [23]. For that reason, qualitative data was collected to understand clearly, the feelings and views of participants. Their reasons for given actions could thus be understood from their own explanations. Quantitative data, on the other hand, was collected from teachers regarding homework and its management. This helped the researcher to check on the extent and the spread of use and/or abuse of homework.

4.1 Sampling and Collection Procedures

In total, 4 schools were visited out of the eight that make up the Njelele Primary Schools Cluster. Twenty (20) primary school teachers from the four sampled schools from a total of forty-eight (48) in the cluster (41.7%) took part either by completing the questionnaire or being interviewed. These (teachers and learners) were selected using the randomization process where the ballot system was employed. Of the 20 teachers who took part, 10 were interviewed. As for the learners, 20 were randomly selected from the sampled schools for interviews. On the other hand, 20 families were purposively selected for home visits. These were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they were the same families from where the interviewed learners came from for comparability of the results. Any of the available parents of the selected families was interviewed. Data collection was done using the questionnaire and the interview. In all cases where interviews were held, the researcher made field notes to preserve data for analysis.

4.2 Limitation of this Study

It is worth noting that this research was confined to Njelele Primary Schools Cluster which has a total of eight schools. Results, thus, need to be understood within the context referred to as characteristic of schools making this cluster.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results presented below were collected from the sampled teachers, parents and learners. The schools visited and individuals interviewed are referred to using codes for ethical reasons. The four schools visited are SPS, ZPS, GPS and MPS and are all rural day primary schools in Gokwe South District in the Midlands Province in the Njelele Primary Schools Cluster that has a total of eight schools where four were sampled. Five teachers from each of the four schools took part giving a total of twenty teachers.

Data collected through the questionnaire are presented in form of tables, a graph and pie charts for analysis and interpretation. Qualitative data was preserved in field narrative reports. Data was collected between the months of November 2011 and March 2012.

The demography details of participants indicated that the age range of teachers was 25-60 years. The sample comprised of 13(65%) females and 7(35%) males. Years in service ranged from 3-28 years. Of the twenty teachers, 9(45%) had Certificate in Education and 11(55%) had Diploma in Education. As for their highest academic qualification, 13(65%) had Ordinary level, 2(10%) had Advanced level and 5(25%) had a Bachelor of Education (Primary) Degree. As for learners, their age range was 8-12 years. These were drawn from Grades 4-7. Interviewed parents were aged between 21 and 80 years. Interviews with parents were conducted in Shona (Interviewees' L1).

Table 1 below presents data collected from teachers through the questionnaire. Reasons for agreeing or disagreeing are also presented in the same table against the questions that so demanded. In this way the qualitative nature of their answers were provided.

The findings, as shown in Table 1 question 2 below, indicate that the majority of the schools visited (75%) did not have any policy on homework leaving teachers to employ homework anyhow. In the absence of a school policy on homework, each teacher plans and executes such tasks based on his or her own whims. Also, 75% confirmed that they neither held any meetings (question 7a) over homework nor any consultations (question 8a) over learners' school work with their parents. None of the participating teachers discussed with parents how to manage homework (question 8c). Most of the interviewed parents did confirm that there was no such provision. The results confirm the fear the researcher had that the homework system may not be achieving its intended results in some rural schools. Where there is no shared vision and responsibilities (teacher and parent), then homework may not achieve what it is intended to achieve. A high percentage of teachers (65%) confirmed that they did not even know who specifically assisted their learners with homework (Table 1 question 4). None (100%) of the participating teachers had any homework management plan for learners staying with illiterate parents/guardians (Table 1 question 10).

Table 1. Teachers' views on the use of homework (N=20)

| Qs No. | Themes | Yes | % | No | % | Reason /Explanation |
|--------|--|-----|-----|----|-----|--|
| 2 | Any school policy on homework? | 5 | 25 | 15 | 75 | |
| 3(a) | Do you assign homework to your learners? | 20 | 100 | | | |
| 3© | Homework in which subjects? | | | | | 3(d) -Practice -Improve their standards -Further their learning |
| | English | 20 | 100 | | | |
| | Mathematics | 20 | 100 | | | |
| | Shona | 10 | 50 | | | |
| | All subjects | 5 | 25 | | | |
| 4 | Do you know who assists your learners with homework? | 7 | 35 | 13 | 65 | |
| 7(a) | Any meetings with parents over homework? | 5 | 25 | | | 7(b) Once a year during prize giving Never meet parents over homework |
| | | | | 15 | 75 | 8(b) Once a year |
| 8(a) | Do you hold consultation days? | 5 | 25 | 15 | 75 | |
| 8© | Any discussion of homework management with parents? | | | 20 | 100 | |
| 9 | Is homework helpful? | 18 | 90 | 2 | 10 | -Yes for some Not really for weak learners |
| 10 | Any homework management for those with illiterate parents? | | | 20 | 100 | -They have to look for help from their neighbours |

The researcher decided to statistically test the level of difference for questions 2, 4, 7(a), 8(a) and 9 shown in Table 1. The excel programme was employed to calculate the t-test using 2 unequal variance where the 'Yes' (X value) and 'No' (Y value) were tested for significant level of difference on teachers' perceptions regarding the value of homework.

The following questions were statistically tested on teachers' perceptions regarding the value of homework.

| | Yes (X) | No (Y) |
|---|---------|--------|
| 2. Any school policy on homework? | 5 | 15 |
| 3a. Do you assign homework to your learners? | 20 | 0 |
| 4. Do you know who assists your learners with homework at home? | 7 | 13 |
| 7a. Any meetings with parents for homework management? | 5 | 15 |
| 8a. Any consultation days with parents? | 5 | 15 |
| 8c. Any discussions on homework management? | 0 | 20 |
| 9. Is homework helpful? | 18 | 2 |
| 10. Any homework management plan for those with illiterate parents? | 0 | 20 |

| | | |
|--|-----------|----------|
| t - computer calculated value (EXCEL) for unequal variance | t-calc. = | 0.379586 |
| | = | 0.38 |

Significant level of t at 0.05 and 12. $0.05 \div 2 = 0.025$ with 12 degrees of freedom

Critical value (observed) = 2.179 i.e. 2.18 to 2 decimal points

Conclusion: Since t calculated falls within the acceptable range we fail to reject H_0 and conclude that there is no significant level of difference.

In-view of the interpretation of the *t-test* result above, the notion that there is a significant difference between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the expressed views is not supported. However, it should be noted that this could be a result of a small sample that was used for this research. A similar test could be done with a bigger sample to find out whether the result remains the same. The qualitative data in this research though suggest that the lack of proper homework management noted is in fact only a tip of an ice-berg. Perhaps with more research in this area the state of affairs will become apparent.

Fig 1 below shows that 26% of the interviewees (parents) were illiterate. The question is what role do these parents play in homework management? Are they even aware of the positive impact they can play in their children's learning?

The research, however, established that homework was being assigned (100% in Table 1 question 3a) notwithstanding its quality and manner of management. 90% of the teachers participating in this research confirmed that they believed that homework was quite helpful (Table 1 question 9). This belief was confirmed by 75% of teachers who assigned homework 3 times a week while 25% assigned twice a week (Graph 1). The research also established that the subjects for homework are English (100%) and Mathematics (100%). These are subjects that have tended to be popularized in the ordinary level certificate in Zimbabwe and are quite determinant in terms of further education beyond ordinary level or employment. This could explain why homework at this level has tended to be concentrated in these areas. Interviews with selected learners revealed that indeed the majority of teachers were assigning homework. There were fewer cases where both learners and parents confirmed that learners were not assigned homework. There was a worrisome discovery that was noted from some learners who never brought homework. These learners noted that they were required to complete all their homework at school during the tea and lunch breaks or after lessons in the afternoon. By the time they left school in the afternoon they were required to submit the work. Asked as to whether teachers assisted with the homework during such times, none of the interviewees indicated getting such assistance. This researcher was at a loss whether to call this homework or just extension work because of the way the work was organized. When this was checked during interviews, one teacher did confirm that this was happening in some schools. The teacher insisted calling this homework. She noted, *"This is homework because the pupils would be working on their own after lessons (perhaps showing varying perceptions on homework). Even if they took the work home most parents won't be able to assist them. They don't know how to complete the work"* (Interview 5, 2 February 2012: Name code, Teacher SKA). Interviews with parents confirmed the claim by this teacher. Interviews with parents were held in the medium of Shona which is their L1. Some parents were not educated and indeed confessed that they did not know the answers to the school work that their children would be working on. Included in this group were the grannies, the illiterate and some who were merely schooled but not really educated. What became apparent in these interviews was that most parents

were unaware of the various ways they could contribute in homework management. Some parents also felt that they were too busy to spare time for the learners. In their views, learners were best served by teachers at school so that when they came home they would assist with home chores and in the fields.

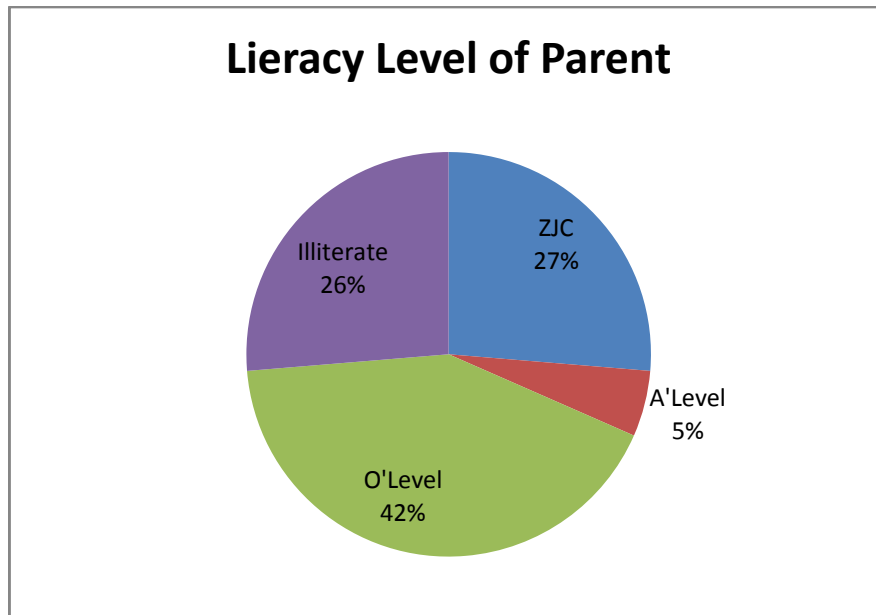
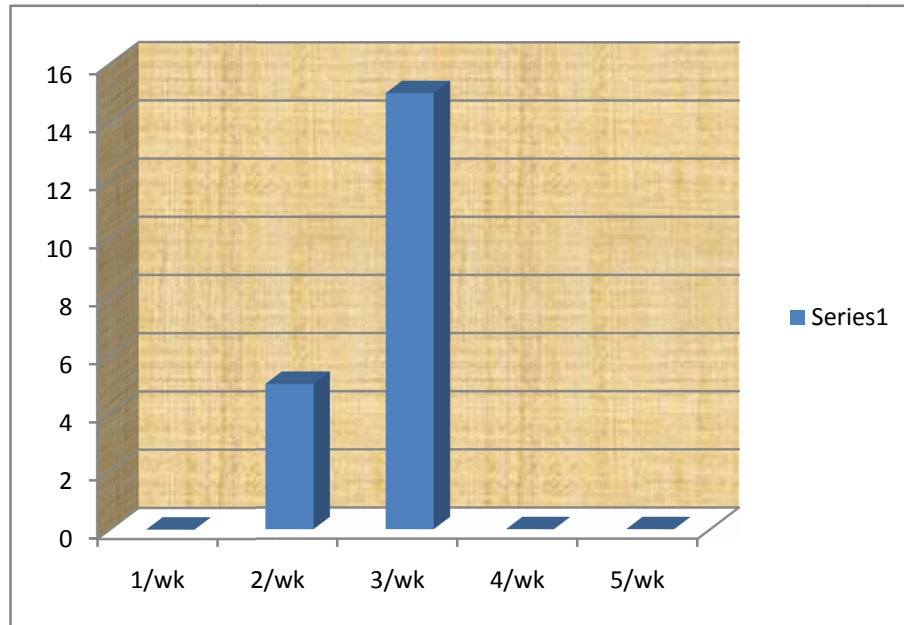


Fig. 1. showing literacy level of parents

Another variety of the 'homework' mentioned (This researcher did verify this issue.) was given in the form of morning work. For instance, at school GPS, the researcher discovered that Grade 5, 6 and 7 learners had to arrive at school at about 0645 hours in spite of the fact that their school day was timetabled to start at 0800 hours. This was to enable them to complete the said work which was due when lessons started at 0800 hours. In spite of the good intentions of teachers, this may need to be examined in the context of the net effect on the learner. Some of our rural students in Zimbabwe walk for distances that are up to 10 kilometers to school.

It is prudent at this point to note that a comprehensive homework programme should examine closely the kinds of co-operation that should exist amongst teachers, learners and parents. A comprehensive teacher-learner-parent partnership should necessarily look at the nature of homework management to ensure that each parent (depending on his/her capacity) makes a positive contribution. This could be in the form of creating conducive environment for learners to concentrate on their homework, provision of materials (e.g. reading and writing materials, pens, pencils, adequate lighting etc) and other basic needs that may have indirect effects like the Maslowian basic needs. Parents should also create appropriate time for children to do their homework. Their demand for learners to assist with work at home and in the fields should be balanced with the need for learners to do homework in an environment that allows them to meaningfully concentrate on the task.



Graph 1. showing frequency of homework per week (Qs 3b: How often do you give homework to your learners?)

Table 2 below presents findings regarding how the homework was treated. The researcher felt it important to establish this because of its capacity to either encourage or discourage learners thus affecting learners' future treatment of homework. Findings reveal that 40% of teachers marked and provided feedback to learners. 35% allowed learners to mark their work whilst the teacher gave answers and 25% revealed that learners exchanged and marked each other's work whilst the teacher gave answers. This researcher believes that the teachers who marked homework and provided feedback to learners may indeed positively propel the learners' endeavours provided the feedback was not in form of just marks without incisive comments that are in form of instructional feedback [11]. The problem with learners marking each other's work is that there is no guarantee that the marking would be accurate neither will there be instructional comments. It is also doubtful that the teacher would later check all books for accuracy in the marking. In such a situation are we not likely to reinforce incorrect answers? Despite the fact that none of the teachers revealed that some teachers did not assess the assigned homework, interviews with learners did reveal that some teachers never looked at the assigned homework. This researcher did examine some homework books as follow up to the claim by some learners. Indeed the exercise books revealed that some teachers did not bother to look at the work. This researcher was at a loss as to why these teachers bothered to assign the homework? One learner claimed that her teacher would ask them to display their homework and those who did not have the work would be beaten. The issue just ended there, the homework would thus be left unmarked.

It can be noted at this point that there is need to come up with clearly defined objectives for every piece of homework that teachers assign learners to. A clearly defined work plan and management process of the work should be put in place to ensure that homework contributes meaningfully to the learning process. Homework should not be a ritual whenever

and wherever it is employed. Improperly done homework can create negativity in learners and once that happens then it would have lost its value.

Table 2. Treatment of submitted homework (Qs 5: What do teachers do with submitted homework?) (N=20)

| Qs No. | Treatment of submitted homework | Frequency | % |
|--------|---|-----------|----|
| 5 | Teacher marks it and gives feedback | 8 | 40 |
| | Learners mark their work as teacher gives answers | 7 | 35 |
| | Learners exchange books and mark each other's work as teacher gives answers | 5 | 25 |
| | Leave it unmarked and move on to new work | 0 | 0 |

When learners were asked about what happened with those learners who failed to present their completed homework on time various answers were given as shown in Table 3 below. 25% revealed that their teachers send non-compliers to the head's office for canning. 35% said their teacher punished the offenders and according to the learners this was usually in the form of canning. Interestingly, 40% sent such learners out and were only admitted back into class once the work was completed. What this researcher could not establish was whether the completed work would be checked for accuracy before readmission or simply that the learner had written something. The researcher notes that the problem with this form of punishment is that such learners may be losing much more than the value of the homework itself. Although none of the teacher respondents did reveal that some teachers simply ignored the assigned homework, learners revealed that some teachers simply 'forgot' about the work and never bothered to check on it. One wonders why assign the homework in the first place. Given this scenario where learners see no value in homework the likely effect is that they may not put their mind to it. Also significant in the results in Table 3 is to assess the impact of the type of punishment meted on those who failed to submit homework. One may ask as to which methods are likely to reinforce homework in future and which are likely to create negative evaluation of homework by learners? The punishment for offenders should at the end of the day propel learners into doing their homework positively in future. Learners must have a positive view of the process. The process should create a self-belief image in learners. In that way there would be a possibility for learners to do the best they can and possibly look for help where need be. This of course would work if the home-school linkage is soundly planned for to ensure that learners get assistance both at school and home.

Table 3. Treatment of non-compliance in homework (Qs 6: What happens with those who fail to submit homework?) (N=20)

| Qs No. | Treatment of non-compliers | No | % |
|--------|--|----|----|
| 6 | Sent to the Head's office for canning | 5 | 25 |
| | Teacher punishes them | 7 | 35 |
| | The teacher sends them out of the lesson to first complete the work before readmission into lesson | 8 | 40 |
| | The teacher ignores it | - | - |
| | | | |

Effective planning of homework needs also to take into account the nature of the parent/guardian. The manner of assistance needs to be matched with capacities that helpers at home are able to provide. Fig. 2 below reveals that among the parents who took part in this research were grandmothers (20%). Some of them were illiterate and others advanced

in years. Teachers need to be decisive in terms of what form of assistance they can render. Fig. 2 also reveals that 25% of participating children came from extended families (uncles and aunts owing to the deaths of their biological parents) and the set up in the majority of cases, in the view of this researcher, did not seem to create supportive environments. This is not to say this is the case with every family of this situation. In particular, 2 cases of the visited homes were particularly disturbing for the researcher. In both cases, the two children did not even have adequate exercise books for daily exercises let alone homework books. They seemed to be overloaded with home chores. Claims of absence of proper environments for school work by the two children were not, however, confirmed by the guardians who were not interested in talking about their surrogate children. From an outsider's perspective these homes were not properly framed for educational work. There was also a case of a child headed family where a 16 year old boy (Interview 8, 11 February 2012, name code Parent MN) looked after his siblings owing to the death of their parents. There was collaboration between the siblings and the boy regarding his assistance with homework. This researcher, however, notes the burden of providing for the siblings as cause for worry regarding the extent to which he could assist with homework. These are cases that require teachers to seriously consider, and indeed make provisions for when they give homework.

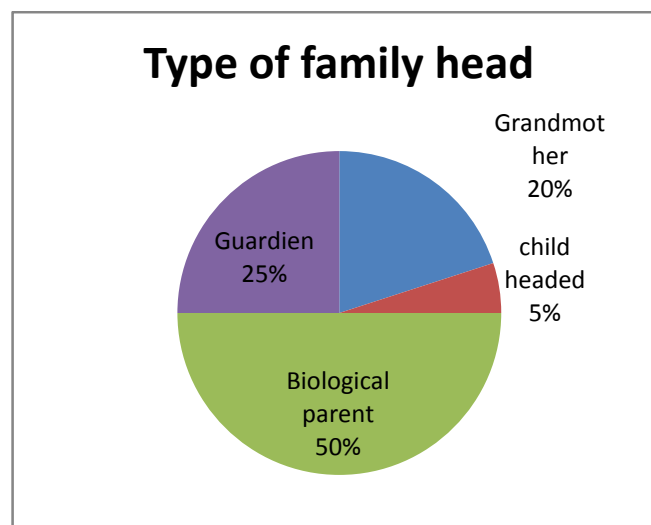


Fig. 2. Shows the type of family head

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of results in this research revealed that for most of the schools and families visited, the homework system was not being implemented successfully. This research unraveled some of the realities in some of the rural schools in Zimbabwe regarding homework management. Some of these realities certainly call for meticulous planning on the part of those designing homework. As noted by Lemmer and van Wyk [1], there are several challenges to the success of the Teacher-Learner-Parent partnership for the promotion of children's learning. These include limited knowledge and experience of parental involvement (no shared responsibilities), time constraints, unsupportive family structures, cultural and social barriers and lack of a well-defined school policy on home-school linkage. There is equally need for a shared understanding of the nature of parental involvement as well as a

shared and negotiated involvement of illiterate parents. The planners should also ensure that there is correlation between the learner's level of education and the kind of parental assistance to be offered. In other words, there must be a well-designed and executed context analysis to know the various situations that obtain in learners' families. This might seem a mammoth task but is indeed a worthwhile one. It does not help to pretend that we are doing something when we are probably doing the opposite. Even the procedures so designed to enforce homework should be re-evaluated. Whatever we do, we must be able to explain how that will lead to learners' improved scores. This should be done as a matter of principle perchance we may improve our learners' learning.

This research thus, concluded that there was no homework policies at the four schools visited. As a result, teachers were operating in isolation. There was no systematic approach to homework owing to the absence of a school policy on homework. The research also discovered that marking of homework and provision of feedback was erratic in cases and that tends to work negatively against homework. Notwithstanding the problems noted above, the research did establish that most teachers in the sample were assigning homework to their learners. It is worth noting that these results need to be understood within the context of the schools that make up Njelele Primary Schools Cluster.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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