

Post-Primary Teachers' Perspectives on the Effects of Homework for Student Learning

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Stephanie has recently completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education, Gaeilge and Business Studies. Since completing an undergraduate degree, she has gained experience in the Post-Primary Sector. Her choice of topic for research was Students' Learning and if Homework benefits learning. Stephanie hoped, as a final year student, completing this research would provide her with an insight into a common practice within Irish secondary schools and provide answers to her research questions.

KEYWORDS: Homework, Learning, Assessment, Feedback, Junior Cycle

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this study was to explore current post-primary school teachers' perspectives on the effects of homework for student learning. This article is a snapshot of a comprehensive piece of research which was conducted for the purpose of a dissertation, where a sample of post-primary teachers were interviewed to gain an understanding of their opinions and views regarding homework and its benefits for student learning. The motivation for this research stemmed from the researcher's interest in the topic and the volume of conflicting research available on homework. International research has shown that there is a divide in opinions on the practice of homework, with Professor Harris Cooper stating that 'homework substantially raises high school students' achievement' (Black et al., 1996, p.139-148), however Pfeiffer contradicted this idea in 2018 after conducting a study which found that 'no homework has left a more positive effect on learners' (Pfeiffer, 2018, p.1). As a teacher in preparation, the researcher was interested in how homework would affect the preparation and assessment of and for students' learning in the classroom. This research will show that homework is an

important part of a student's learning process and will present some of the limitations attached to homework.

CONTEXT

The overarching theme that formed the basis of this dissertation was 'homework' and whether or not it is a useful strategy in post-primary school. 'Homework' at its most basic level can be defined as 'any work or activities which pupils are asked to do outside school time, either on their own or with parents or carers' (Kidwell, 2004, p.6). Homework can also be defined as a form of assessment that is used by teachers as 'the process of generating, gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting evidence of learning in individuals, groups or systems...' which 'provides information about progress in learning' (NCCA, 2019).

While the overarching theme was homework, the researcher was also concerned with how homework impacted student learning. As previously mentioned, homework can be described as a form of assessment. Assessment of learning and assessment for learning (AFL) were both researched in relation to this. Assessment of learning is defined as 'summative, intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about their progress in school' (Earl, 2013, p.29). Assessment for learning is defined as 'the identification of clear Learning Outcomes which describe what a learner should know, understand and be able to do as a result of learning and Success Criteria which indicate to both the student and teacher if the Learning Outcomes have been achieved to the best of the student's ability' (PDST, 2019). Homework, due to its regular nature, can be classed as formative assessment because; 'The purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback on an ongoing basis to improve student learning' (Burke, 2010, p.3). Homework is assigned on a regular basis for the majority of post-primary school students. Teachers can use homework to assess if students have understood material that was covered in class, 'research homework can support implementation of AFL' (Newby & Winterbottom, 2011, p.275-290). Research homework has become a common type of homework for post-primary school students in Ireland since Junior Cycle reform as it aims to allow a more 'rounded assessment' (DES, 2015, p.7).

In 2015 the Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland, introduced a new framework called the 'Junior Cycle' to replace the 'Junior Certificate'. The most significant change from the Junior Certificate was the manner of how students were being assessed; a 'dual approach to assessment' was introduced (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p.7). It is hoped that teachers will assign work for students in line with this change to allow for an 'appropriate balance between preparing students for examinations and also facilitating creative

thinking, engaged learning and better outcomes for students' (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p.35). The idea of assigning homework to facilitate this balance is in line with the opinions of many advocates for homework, who suggest that moving towards individual homework or homework that is assigned based on the students' needs is 'Effective homework' and 'benefits students by taking into account their individual differences' (Sallee & Rigler, 2008, p. 46-51).

The research highlighted some benefits and limitations of homework for student learning. The benefits of homework which emerged from this research included both academic and social benefits. According to Cooper the effects of homework included 'Better retention of factual knowledge, Increased understanding...Learning encouraged during leisure time, Improved attitude towards school, Better study habits and skills, Greater self-direction, Greater self-discipline...more independent problem solving' (1994, p1-2). In 2019, Dawson concurred that homework helps children develop skills such as time management, problem solving and organisation which will 'contribute to effective functioning in the adult world of work and families' (Dawson, 2019).

While the limitations of homework include 'Stress for Children', 'Less time for other activities' and 'Family Conflict' they did not directly relate to the academic progress of a child (Kohn, 2006). Instead, the limitations identified were in relation to leisure time for children, where they could develop skills through activities (Cooper & Valentine, 2010). Similarly, Bennett and Kalish argue that homework 'robs children of the sleep, play, and exercise time they need for proper physical, emotional, and neurological development, and it is a hidden cause of the childhood obesity epidemic, creating a nation of 'homework potatoes' (2007, p.91). These limitations, while not directly related to student learning within the classroom, can affect student learning outside of the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

For this research it was imperative to gain perspectives of post-primary school teachers who were currently teaching in Irish classrooms. Taking a qualitative approach to research, this study used interviews to examine current post-primary school teachers' rationale for assigning homework. A qualitative method was deemed most suitable for this research project because interviews allow the researcher to 'explore their (respondents) perspective on a particular idea, programme or situation' (Boyce & Neale, 2006). This approach had many advantages in this research because it allowed the researcher control over questioning and gave them time to explore opinions of participants in more depth where needed (Creswell, 2009). The researcher

decided to conduct semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Interviews used open ended questions to allow participants to offer their own opinions and experiences. Open ended questions were also used so as to not constrain participant's responses (Shelly & Rosenbaltt, 2010).

Six teachers from three different geographical areas in Ireland were interviewed. The researcher wanted the perspective of experienced teachers so all participants had a minimum of 5 years teaching experience in a post-primary setting and participants were teaching a variety of subjects. Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes and was audio recorded. Each interview followed the same schedule to allow for consistency and validity. The interview schedule included student learning, types of homework participants assigned, and feedback participants gave on homework completed. After the interview, the audio recordings were transcribed so they could be accurately analysed by the researcher and information could be gathered. Thematic analysis was used to understand the data collected in these interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Dawson (2002) thematic analysis is 'inductive, that is, the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher (p.115).

Participant	Role	Subjects	Number of Years Teaching
Participant 1	Teacher	Business Studies, TY Enterprise, LCVP.	12 Years
Participant 2	Teacher	English, Irish, S.P.H.E, C.S.P.E.	20 Years
Participant 3	Teacher	Home Economics, Irish, Learning Support, Resource.	8 Years
Participant 4	Teacher	Home Economics, Business Studies, Link modules.	6 Years
Participant 5	Teacher	Science, Biology, Maths	25 years
Participant 6	Teacher	Irish, English	30 years

Table 1: Profile of Participants Interviewed

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the six semi-structured face to face interviews carried out with post-primary school teachers was interpreted using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emergent recurring themes were identified, and a comparative method was used to

analyse these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following themes are some of the most prominent throughout the data analysis process;

1. Homework is an important part of student learning.
2. Feedback on Completed Homework.
3. The effect of the Junior Cycle reform on homework.

HOMEWORK IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF STUDENT LEARNING

All six participants agreed that homework contributes to students learning. Participant 5 acknowledged that homework can be used as a reinforcement tool, with participant 3 believing it is important for students to go back over material they have covered to consolidate their learning. This, however, is in contrast to Dr David Carey's ideology, who stated in an article published by The Irish Times 'The research seems to indicate it [homework] doesn't really consolidate learning' (McMahon, 2018). While all participants agreed that homework contributes to student learning, they all indicated that the homework given must have a clear purpose. The consensus among participants was that there is no benefit to assigning homework as a task that needs to be completed. Participant 2 explained that when assigning homework there should be a goal in mind. This is consistent with Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker and Lenz (1998) who argue that teachers need to consider the purpose of the homework they are assigning.

Four out of six participants agreed that homework can help students develop and improve a variety of skills. Participant 6 said that homework helps students to '*practice their skills, their writing skills, the skills that they require along with investigating skills*'. Similarly, participant 2 states '*I would say it's about making sure that they build consistent habits that they are working consistently, that they are constantly improving and learning and developing their skills*'. Other skills identified by participants 1, 2, 3 and 6 include the ability to speak in front of a group, reflecting on one's work, technological skills and self-editing. These findings reiterate the findings of Cooper (1994), Dawson (2019) and Cooper & Valentine (2010) that homework can aid student's development of lifelong skills.

FEEDBACK ON COMPLETED HOMEWORK

Every participant that was interviewed believed that feedback on homework is a core component of setting homework tasks. Participant 3 stated that '*I think your feedback itself has to be effective, as in when you are correcting homework you can't just give it a tick*'. Participant 5 concurs that '*in theory if they are actually wanting to learn and keep track of their own progress*

they should be getting the feedback that should be informing them.’ These findings are consistent with the Framework for Junior Cycle, 2015 that was published by the DES which stated that ‘the greatest benefits for students’ learning occur when teachers provide effective feedback to students that helps them to understand how their learning can be improved’ (DES, 2015, p.35).

Participants in this study also unanimously agreed that feedback on homework should be given ‘as soon as possible’ (Participant 6) after the task has been completed. Participants 2, 3, and 4 believed that feedback on completed homework should be given back within 2-3 days, ‘if not the next day I would always try to have them back within two or three days as I do think if it goes on too long that they have nearly forgotten what they were doing’ (Participant 2). Similarly, participant 3 stated that ‘feedback given within that specific time has helped them because they are actually involved in the learning process’. While participants 1, 5 and 6 did agree feedback should be given as soon as possible they also commented that the length of time it took to give feedback was contingent on the type of task that was being corrected, ‘it depends on the nature of the work, if it’s something like project work they are very tolerant because they have invested a great deal in it, if you can wait a week before you give it back they are okay with that, they will remember what they did’ (Participant 5).

All participants in this study agreed that effective feedback can aid student learning if it is given back in a timely fashion. Participant 6 indicates that ‘if you do give them feedback pretty much straight away that they will benefit from it because they see well that homework was worthwhile’. Participants 1, 4 and 5 concur that feedback on homework can be used as a guide for students to identify the mistakes that they are making ‘I’ll mark what ones they need to improve on and then bring them up in the next class and go through them’ (participant 4). This concurs with the advice given in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (DES, 2015). Overall participants felt that students benefit from timely feedback on homework as they remember what they have done, and the feedback is relevant to what they are learning at that time. In conclusion participants felt that time taken to correct homework and give feedback should be timely but also reflective of the time and effort taken by students to complete.

THE EFFECT OF JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM ON HOMEWORK

Five out of six participants cited that the reform of the Junior Cycle as having an impact on the type of homework teachers are now assigning to students. Participants noted that research homework was becoming more beneficial for student learning with the recent changes to the assessment process at Junior Cycle level. The new Framework will allow for a more ‘rounded

assessment of the education of each young person' (DES, 2015). This will provide teachers with an opportunity to understand each student's level of progress and learning. When asked about Junior Cycle and its impact on homework, participant 1 stated that; *'The new aim of the Junior Cycle is to get away from rote learning and I think research homework is becoming more important for the juniors particularly'*, while participant 6 said *'with the new Junior Cert now you have a lot of research skills, independent learning so you're approaching things slightly differently'*.

The data indicate that participants believe that a more self-directed style of learning can be beneficial to students learning, building on and creating new skills. One example included oral presentations. Three participants teach a language and noted that oral presentations have become an important part of how students are assessed in the current curriculum, *'the new Junior Cert is more independent learning, teaching them different types of skills, research, investigation, breaking tasks down, also there is a lot more presentation work and I suppose building up their confidence in their communication skills'* (Participant 6). Participant 2 agrees *'at Junior Cert up to now it would have been more written based work or learning based work whereas now there is that oral element to it'*. This is all concurrent with Dawson, 2019, who talks about homework helping students develop skills for life as an adult.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore post-primary teachers' perspectives on the benefits of homework for student learning'. This research found that homework contributes to student learning despite its limitations (Bennett & Kalish, 2007). Feedback is necessary to ensuring that homework is effective for student learning. This study has made the researcher aware, as a future practicing post-primary school teacher, of areas of potential change in the assignment of homework and the need for improvement of feedback on homework. This research will help the researcher identify any future gaps in homework practices. This study ignited the researcher's awareness of the benefits of homework as it creates a strong link between home and school for student learning.

This research was carried out using a limited number of participants, six qualified post-primary school teachers who teach a variety of subjects in different schools. Due to the limited number of participants in this research it is not possible to relate this to the whole population as it is not a true representation of all teachers in post-primary schools in Ireland. Despite the limitations of this study the following are some recommendations the researcher proposes based on the findings. These include:

1. The researcher recommends that professional development be made available to post-primary school teachers on how to effectively provide students with feedback on work that they have completed in order to benefit their learning.
2. Continuous professional development is also recommended by the researcher for best practices relating to the designing and assigning of homework in line with Junior Cycle reform aims for a more rounded assessment of students (DES, 2015).

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