

Primary teachers' homework practices: Identity, expectations, policies and cultural values

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Homework is a pervasive pedagogical practice worldwide, and somewhat neglected as a research topic. This study aims to provide a comprehensive account of teachers' homework practices, an aspect of teachers' work about which relatively little is known. We seek to explore what constitutes teachers' homework practices, illuminate their complexity, and explain what influences them. Findings are drawn from a qualitative study in two middle-class, urban, primary schools in Ireland, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with six teachers and six parents of pupils aged 10-11 years. Our analysis reveals a complex set of practices (designing, implementing, assessing, and providing feedback) that are shaped by professional identity, expectations of parents and colleagues, school homework policies, and cultural values. These practices are characterised by a deliberateness, wherein a careful weighing up of elements is evident, indicative of the importance of professional identity; and by an alignment both with the expectations of parents and the requirements of school policies. We denominate homework as home-school-work because, although commonly perceived as the responsibility of pupils and parents, homework practices actually occur at the nexus of home and school. Teachers' homework practices are central to teaching and learning and, consequently, merit further study with more diverse samples.

Introduction

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study about homework in Ireland, in a middle-class, primary-school context. We focus specifically on teachers' homework practices – habitual activities associated with homework involvement, an aspect of teachers' work which receives little attention. Our aims are to provide a comprehensive account of the complex set of homework practices that are encompassed in teachers' work, and to identify how those practices are shaped by teacher, home, and school contexts.

If there is little agreement about the fundamental work of teachers (Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009), their pedagogical work is generally considered to involve imparting subject knowledge, curriculum implementation, task design, modelling, explanation, assessment, and feedback (Comber, 2006). Considerable changes to teachers' work practices and the demands placed upon them are related to broader educational developments such as the marketisation or commodification of education (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Schubert & Giles, 2019). Teachers' practices also reflect curricular demands (Fang, 2010), and as homework has been established as a systematic (Matei & Ciascai, 2015), routine (Kukk, Rajalaane, Rei, & Piht, 2015), commonplace (Cooper, 2007) practice, we consider homework to be a key curricular practice.

Homework has prevailed as a pedagogical strategy since the mid-nineteenth century (Gill & Schlossman, 2004) and remains a pervasive practice in schools today, and, although not mandatory, nowhere more so than within the Irish education system (Jackson & Harbison, 2014). It forms a central part of children's learning experiences (Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006), being a three-phase process which is initiated and evaluated at school but performed at home without direct teacher supervision or support (Holte, 2016). Homework has been identified as serving many purposes: practice; preparation; participation; personal development; parent-child relations; parent-teacher communications; peer interactions; policy; public relations; and punishment (Epstein, 2011). Teachers play a critical role in the homework process (Murillo & Martinez-Garrido, 2014), in the initial phase by designing tasks and setting homework assignments, and in the final phase by assessing the work, providing feedback, and implementing classroom follow-up practices (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Rosário, Núñez, Vallejo, Cunha, Nunes, Mourão & Pinto, 2015). Homework features prominently, therefore, in teachers' work (Fang, 2010), and assessing homework and providing feedback places a burden on teachers (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Schnyder & Niggli, 2006; Turanli, 2009). It has been argued that teachers' role in homework warrants the same attention as other pedagogical practices (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2012), yet it is not regulated in the national curriculum, it is seldom included in teacher education programs (Gökdağ Baltacıoğlu, Sucuoğlu & Öztürk, 2017), and relatively little is known about the habitual activities that constitute teachers' homework practices.

Research rationale

Although assigning homework is a pervasive pedagogical practice and is widely accepted by educators, policymakers, parents, and children as a routine part of schooling, as a research topic it has been somewhat neglected (Farrell & Danby, 2015; Gu & Kristoffersson, 2015). Much research on homework focuses on its impact on academic achievement (Pfeiffer, 2018), and on psychological rather than sociological understandings. Far less emphasis has been placed on exploring homework from teachers' perspectives (Núñez, Suárez, Rosário, Vallejo, Valle & Epstein, 2015; Tam & Chan, 2016) and their practices in its regard (Rudman, 2014). To our knowledge, no study has been carried out that seeks to present the totality or aggregate of teachers' homework practices, hence our attempt to provide a comprehensive account. Furthermore, there is a significant dearth of Irish research on the topic and no government policy despite it being a topical issue, having come before the Oireachtas (Ireland's national parliament) (McMahon, 2018). A considerable gap in qualitative research on homework has also been observed (Holte, 2016). This study addresses these lacunae.

Research method

Research focus and paradigm

This study aimed to explore teachers' homework practices from design to feedback, and to provide a deeper understanding of what shapes them. Key research questions were:

- What constitutes teachers' homework practices?
How can we understand more fully the complexity of teachers' homework practices?
How do teacher, home, and school contexts shape teachers' homework practices?

A qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) was considered most suitable since the focus was on interpretation, with the aim of understanding teachers' conceptualisation of their homework involvement, and parents' interpretation of this involvement. An interpretivist paradigm underpins this research, where multiple realities are constructed (Hatch, 2002) and multiple perspectives presented (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), in this case, those of teachers and parents.

Irish curricular context

The primary curriculum in Ireland, in place since 1999, aims to provide a broad learning experience that caters for the different needs of individual children and is intended "to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social, and physical" (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p.6). The curriculum is divided into a number of key areas, including Languages; Mathematics; Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE); Arts Education; Physical Education; and Social, Personal and Health Education. The aims and principles underpinning the curriculum emphasise the importance of enabling the child to live a full life; to realise his/her full potential; to develop as a social being; and to engage in lifelong learning. The benefits to pupils' learning of using information and communications technology across all areas of the curriculum are recognised (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Despite this and the ubiquitous availability of computers in Irish homes, as recently as 2016, 46% of pupils surveyed in Ireland were not using such devices for homework, double the international average (Eivers, 2019).

The Irish primary-school system consists of an eight-year cycle, from junior infants to sixth class, catering for children aged 4-12 years (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). The amount of homework assigned to pupils increases incrementally as they progress through the eight-year cycle. At infant level, pupils generally complete reading and reading-related activities for 10/15 minutes each evening. In subsequent classes, a balance between learning, reading, and written work is assigned. It is anticipated that pupils in first/second class spend 20/25 minutes; in third/fourth class 40/45 minutes; and in fifth/sixth class 60 minutes each evening on homework.

Sample and data collection

The research for this study was conducted with teachers and parents of fifth-class pupils (aged 10-11 years) in two large, adjoining, vertical primary schools, one girls' and one boys', in a middle-class, urban setting in Ireland. The schools in the study have two/three classes at each year level, with approximately 30 pupils in each. Both schools have a homework policy, available on the school website in the case of one of the schools. Purposeful sampling, a non-probability sampling approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), was used. Twelve individual interviews were conducted, with six teachers (2 male

and 4 female) and six parents (1 male and 5 female). A semi-structured interview technique was used as it allowed us to gather descriptive data which would provide an insight into how participants interpret a particular phenomenon, i.e., homework (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). It also allowed for flexibility in the sequence and form of questions in order to follow up on specific answers given by participants (Kvale, 2007). Interviews ranged in length from 24 to 47 minutes and were audio recorded. For teachers' interview schedule, see Appendix A, and for parents' interview schedule, see Appendix B.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis was ongoing and emergent from the outset. The data, however, were formally analysed using an iterative, sequential process (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) which involved organisation, immersion, and the generation of categories and themes through coding. These preliminary themes were then reviewed separately and together by the authors, and refined and subsequently compared and contrasted. Data were interpreted using the constant comparative method (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006), with alternative understandings sought in advance of completion (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Analysis continued until the data no longer yielded any new emergent themes (Given, 2016), hence, until inductive thematic saturation had been reached (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs & Jinks, 2018).

Ethics and access

Ethical approval was obtained from Dublin City University Faculty Ethics Review Panel in December 2018. Entry to the research settings was negotiated and signed consent to the research being conducted was obtained from the principals. Informed consent was obtained from participants and assurance was given that participation was voluntary, with no negative consequences arising from non-participation or withdrawal (Cohen et al., 2011). Participants were given a guarantee of confidentiality and assured that every effort would be made to protect their anonymity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In the presentation of findings below, teachers (T) and parents (P) are identified by pseudonym, e.g., (Ciara, T) or Anne (P).

Trustworthiness

The research process was conducted consistently in order to ensure reliability and trustworthiness, and verbatim interview transcripts were peer-checked by each of the three authors as a means of investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970). Since the main goal of interpretivism is to develop a contextual understanding of unique cases with limited numbers, it is not possible to generalise findings (Atkins & Wallace, 2012).

Limitations

While the findings of our qualitative study are not generalisable, we hope that they may generate understandings that may be relevant in other social and geographical locations. Generalisability is further hampered by our small sample size and we recommend further

study with teachers in other contexts to add to our findings about the complexity of teachers' homework practices.

Findings and discussion

In the first section of our findings, we address our aim of presenting a comprehensive account of teachers' homework practices and provide a descriptive account of the elements revealed in our data analysis. We organise these descriptive themes as follows: *Teachers' rationale for homework* and *Nature and extent of teacher homework involvement*. In the second section, addressing our second aim, we present the themes that emerged from an interrogation of the data that sought to illuminate individual teacher, home, and school contexts that shape teachers' homework practices. The following emergent themes suggested themselves: *Teacher identity*; *Expectations*; *School policy*; and *Cultural values and ideologies*. In presenting the findings, thus, we first describe teachers' work in relation to homework, i.e., what we identify as a comprehensive account of teachers' homework practices. We then present our findings about influences on teachers' homework practices.

Teachers' homework practices

Teachers' rationale for homework

Participants identified benefits and purposes of homework that can be categorised as either academic or non-academic in nature.

Academic functions

In terms of academic purposes, homework provides opportunities for the practice and reinforcement of classroom instruction (Ndebele, 2018), which serves to consolidate pupils' learning (Pfeiffer, 2018). According to Cooper et al. (2006), this was the most frequent homework purpose cited by teachers, as was the case in this study: "Its main purpose is to reinforce the work that we do during the day" (James, T). This statement typifies the views of all teacher participants. Another benefit of homework mentioned was "to consolidate the learning in the classroom" (Paul, T). This reinforcement and consolidation is achieved through practice, the opportunity for which is afforded through doing homework. Martha (T) stated: "I like the idea of homework because I think practice is a huge thing ... the reason I use it is for practice", adding that "they need to practise what's been covered that day in school". Homework for this purpose of extending learning is considered most effective (Rosário et al., 2015).

Teachers considered that homework assists in covering the curriculum, viewing it as a means "to make sure things get covered" (Martha, T) or "to get through the books" (James, T): "There's a curriculum to get through so homework keeps that ticking along nicely" (Martha, T). Homework is perceived as "a good tool for parents to see how their kids are getting on" (Laura, T). Paul (T) observed that parents are "able to give more individual attention so if the child is having difficulty they're able to identify it quicker". Homework is also perceived as a useful assessment tool for teachers as it provides

opportunities for monitoring learners' progress (Tam & Chan, 2016). Paul (T) considered that "it helps to gauge what level the child is at".

Non-academic functions

Teachers perceive many non-academic functions of homework including the development of skills such as learning autonomy, time management, and responsibility, as well as motivational and self-regulatory attributes (Cunha, Rosário, Macedo, Nunes, Fuentes, Pinto & Suárez, 2015; Fitzmaurice, Flynn & Hanafin, 2019). These were also highlighted by participants. Prominent amongst these was independence. They claimed that homework helps children "to work independently" (Emma, T; Laura, T). Teachers also identified many other "life skills" which they believed can be acquired through doing homework, considering that "it's really good for time management and their independence and responsibility" (Ciara, T).

Teachers saw homework as beneficial in "preparing children for secondary school" (Laura, T). They considered that "good training for secondary school ... at this level is essential" (Emma, T), stressing the importance of children being "able to manage their homework for the future" (Ciara, T).

Nature and extent of teacher homework involvement

Teachers perceived their role in the homework process to include designing, implementing, and reviewing the homework.

Design: Subjects, subject matter and design considerations

The design stage involves choosing the subject matter, gauging the amount and difficulty level, while being mindful of the purpose of the homework. The subject matter selected by teachers was found to be influenced by a number of design considerations.

Subjects that rely on the linguistic and mathematical intelligences make up the greater part of the formal curriculum in Ireland, both at primary and post-primary level (Hanafin, 2014), and this dominance was reflected in homework prioritisation in this study. Subjects prioritised by teachers when designing homework include the core subjects, English, maths, and Irish. Homework was seen as "important for certain subjects more than others" (James, T): "English and maths are so important" (Ciara, T). Emma (T) described assigning "each of the main subjects ... maths, English, Irish" while Martha (T) also reported that "they'd be the main ones [she] would focus on". They justified their prioritisation of these subjects thus: "There's been a big emphasis placed on numeracy and literacy so those two would be staples on the homework" (Paul, T). This tendency to prioritise core subjects resonates with the findings of Costa, Cardoso, Lacerda, Lopes & Gomes (2016). Parents agreed with teachers' assignment of homework, claiming to "have no issue with any of the homework" (Kate, P). Their priorities in terms of subjects and subject matter were very similar. They placed strong emphasis on the core subjects: "English, Irish ... maths ... [are] very important" (Anne, P). Regarding the core subjects, the subject matter commonly assigned includes reading, spelling, vocabulary, and writing. The homework assigned by James (T) typifies teachers' practices: "Reading in English and

Irish, learning English spellings, Irish spellings, and writing, a small bit of English writing but the main writing would be maths". Also included were "vocabulary" (Ciara, T), "tables or Irish verbs" (Emma, T), "grammar" (Laura, T), "poetry" (Ciara, T), and "problem-solving" (Laura, T).

Other subjects mentioned, but not as prominently, were history, geography, science, music, physical education, and religion. The "SESE subjects" were considered to lend themselves to "project work" (Emma, T) where there might be "a topic in history, geography, or science ... open to project work" (Paul, T). While these subjects were perceived as important, concern was expressed that they are neglected due to limited time and pressure to focus on core subjects: "history, geography, science ... it definitely should be assigned in those ... again it's ticking the core ones ... it's just time constraints" (Martha, T). Parents also expressed a desire for "more geography or history ... and more science as well" (Maeve, P). Music was assigned "because they have to learn the words" (Emma, T) of the National Children's Choir repertoire. Ciara (T) also mentioned music, but more as an optional extra: "When we're doing tin whistle they love practising at home ... and when we're doing musical notation they write their own little tunes". As regards physical education, one school has implemented a whole-school initiative incorporating physical activity into homework: "Recently, we've started giving a bit of physical activity homework which ... is very important" (Paul, T). The other school implements such an initiative but only as part of Active Week: "If it's Active Week, part of the homework will be to go out and do ten jumping jacks" (Martha, T). Emma (T) also reported including "religion now and again". In general, teachers assign a mixture of learning, reading, and writing together with a certain amount of project work and some tasks which promote active learning and recognise different domains of intelligence.

Pupils' age and ability are important considerations in deciding the amount of homework to assign (Ndebele, 2018). Teachers perceived the amount of homework to be an important consideration. They emphasised the need "to judge how much homework to give" and "to give a reasonable amount" (Laura, T): "The most important thing is that we gauge the amount properly" (Paul, T). Parents had mixed views about the amount of homework assigned. Some considered it "a reasonable amount" (Maeve, P): "It's fair ... I don't think that's too much to ask them to ... do" (Patrick, P). Jane (P), however, was concerned that the amount "varies from year to year and teacher to teacher". Anne (P) questioned the value and impact of homework in senior classes: "But there's an awful lot, certainly for fifth class, some days, and it could have a negative effect, adding: "I'm not sure how much benefit she's getting from it for that length of time".

Factors informing the design of homework include a reasonable level of difficulty and challenge (Pfeiffer, 2018). While a degree of challenge may be necessary, too much leads to frustration (Corno, 2000). Teachers emphasised the importance of assigning homework at an appropriate difficulty level, "to make sure that it is at the correct level, that it's not something that's too difficult or too easy" (Ciara, T). There was consensus that "the teacher should be assigning homework that they're able to do on their own" (Laura, T), "something that they have done already so it's not going to create hassle at home" (Ciara, T). It was, however, considered necessary to assign "things that challenge them a little"

(Paul, T). The majority of parents considered that the homework assigned to their children is “at the right level” (Kate, P), that “the level of difficulty is no problem” (Maeve, P): “I definitely think it’s appropriate ... it’s enough of a challenge” (Ruth, P). Jane (P), however, considered that “the reading is ... too simple” while others considered the vocabulary “exercises with very convoluted words” (Kate, P) too difficult. Nevertheless, it was considered that “a challenge every now and then is important” (Ruth, P).

Differentiation of homework was strongly advocated by teachers and parents alike, mirroring the views of Holte (2016) and Ndebele (2018). All teachers claimed to differentiate homework to cater for different abilities. Teachers wanted to avoid children “feeling they’re failing” and to give them the opportunity “to experience success” (Ciara, T): “It’s all about letting that child feel that they’ve accomplished something so I definitely think it needs to be differentiated” (Paul, T). In principle, differentiation was lauded but it raised difficulties in terms of implementation as “it can be a little time-consuming” (James, T): “I definitely agree with differentiation, I just don’t know where we get time to do it” (Martha, T). These difficulties were lessened, however, by having assistance in assigning homework. It was noted that for “children who have learning difficulties, their learning support teacher actually assigns their homework” (Martha, T). Differentiation of homework was important for parents, although they recognised that it may be challenging for teachers. Ruth (P) remarked that she would “hope that homework would be adapted” for pupils with additional needs. Kate (P), however, acknowledged that she does not “know how feasible that is”. Teachers and parents alike supported the idea of differentiated homework provision, but the practice for both, in reality, raised challenges and concerns.

Homework must have a clear purpose (Vatterott, 2011) and be designed such that its intended goals are achieved (Buyukalan & Altinay, 2018). Teachers wanted to make homework purposeful and meaningful: “I think it’s important to constantly be mindful of the purpose of the homework you’re assigning so the role of the teacher is to make sure that the work is purposeful” (Emma, T). They recognised that “there has to be a purpose to the homework, it shouldn’t be just doing homework for the sake of it” (Paul, T), a view that was shared by some parents.

Recommended features of good homework practice include being interesting (Holte, 2016), stimulating (Vatterott, 2011), engaging (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001), enjoyable, experiential, and inspiring creativity (Bembenuddy, 2011). Variety in the type of homework assigned is also considered necessary in order to increase pupil interest (Forster, 2000). In our study, reflecting pupils’ interests was important for teachers as “certain classes have certain interests” (Ciara, T). Parents considered that more variety would enhance children’s learning experiences: “A little bit of variety ... the more of that the better” (Kate, P) “as it can get a bit monotonous when it’s the same thing over and over again”. It was also considered that tasks “could be a little bit more interactive and imaginative” with “more ... creativity” (Ruth, P).

Another consideration is the impact of homework design on teaching time. Although teachers tend to design and prepare the homework during class time, they generally

considered that it does not impact greatly on teaching time: “It’s fairly repetitive ... the same thing every night so it follows a pattern. It doesn’t take long to actually decide what to give” (Laura, T). It was considered that “once you establish at the start of the year how much there should be, the type of learning work, the type of written work, it actually isn’t time-consuming” (Ciara, T), “it doesn’t take a huge amount of time” (James, T).

Other factors which influence homework design include curriculum planning, assessment, and school events. Teachers are guided by curriculum planning, “school plan” and “monthly plans”, when designing homework: “There’s a certain theme ... so ... my tasks ... are going to be based on that” (Martha, T). They “base it on what [they are] doing in class during the week” (Laura, T). Teachers’ identification of a topic requiring reinforcement also influences homework design. This was highlighted by Paul (T): “If I see an area of maths that needs improvement ... it gives that bit of extra practice”. Assessment also guides homework design. This was, again, explained by Paul (T): “As you assess in class on Fridays ... you can see what areas they need to work on”. School events dictate the nature of the homework assigned: “It’s dependent on what’s happening” (Ciara, T), “there’s something on practically every week ... based on a different subject so that will definitely influence it” (Martha, T).

Implementation: Homework assignment, management and monitoring

Once the homework has been designed, the next stage of the homework process involves its implementation. The implementation phase involves assigning the homework, assisting the pupils in organising and managing their work, and monitoring and ensuring its completion.

In order to cater for diversity in pupils’ lifestyles, it is recommended that greater flexibility be afforded them in terms of homework assignment (Forster, 2000), and that teachers allocate appropriate time for homework completion so as not to overburden pupils (Rosário et al., 2015). Teachers had mixed views regarding homework assignment. Some favoured assigning daily homework while others preferred to assign it weekly. Those opposed to assigning homework to be completed over a longer time period felt that pupils might endeavour to complete it at once without giving it due care and attention. It was considered that “if you give the same amount every night you know that they’re spending a reasonable amount on it each night, that they’re not packing it all into one night” (James, T). The fear was that “if they know they’ve a whole week they might rush to get it done and out of the way” (Martha, T).

Teachers claimed that they can monitor homework more effectively if it is assigned daily, allowing them to identify difficulties as they arise: “If it’s apparent at the start of the week that they’re not getting it, you can nab that straightaway” (Martha, T). This type of teacher support is important (Katz, Kaplan & Gueta, 2010). Teachers cited the flexibility it affords as another reason for daily homework assignment, preferring “to do it sporadically as things crop up” (Paul, T). It was considered that “things like maths, English, and Irish should be done every night and things like project work would be given over a week or two” (Paul, T). Others favoured giving pupils “an idea on a Monday what they’ll have for the week”, believing that “it’s good to let them know ahead of time ... and they can work

around their schedule” (Ciara, T), particularly “if they’ve a busy day they can do a bit extra on another night” (Laura, T). Patrick (P) was strongly in favour of weekly homework, describing it as “a fabulous approach because it gives more flexibility”, as recommended by Forster (2000).

Assisting pupils with homework management was also recognised as an important role of the teacher, resonating with the findings of Corno (2000) and Forster (2000): “The role of the teacher is ... to make sure that everyone is organised” (Emma, T). Teachers reported employing strategies to promote pupil organisation: “We’d encourage colour-coding with regards to their books ... for homework management” (Ciara, T). They also claimed to guide pupils with regards to time management: “I would encourage kids just to spend the set amount of time” (Paul, T). Moreover, they reported instructing them “to spread it out so they’ve a little bit of everything done” (Martha, T). This scaffolding of pupils’ learning was aptly described by Martha (T): “This is where the teacher has earlier in the day provided the scaffolding and hopefully they’ll be able to take the training-wheels off and practise it themselves”.

Regarding homework completion, teachers reported that pupils were compliant: “They would all complete it” (James, T). This was attributed to “the fact that they know it’s taken up every day, they know that they can’t not do it” (Ciara, T). The necessity of monitoring homework completion, and of “being consistent with keeping track of who does it and who doesn’t” (Emma, T), was emphasised, as was the need to be “consistent” and to “set the expectations early in the year” to ensure that “things run smoothly” (Paul, T). The need to impose sanctions for failing to complete homework was also considered in the interest of fairness to all pupils. They felt that “there has to be some kind of punishment for not doing it” (Laura, T) as “it’s only fair that everybody does the same” (Emma, T). Monitoring homework completion may affect pupils’ motivation and behaviour (Trautwein et al., 2006).

Review: Assessment and feedback

The final review stage of the homework process involves assessing the homework and providing meaningful feedback to pupils.

Teachers saw their monitoring and correction of pupils’ homework as important for both pupils and parents: “It’s important for them and for parents as well to see that it’s being corrected and it’s worth all the work that the children are doing” (Ciara, T). They believed that “it’s nice for them to see [the teacher] taking an interest in it” (Paul, T), and saw correction as a requirement for completion: “I know ... if I don’t check it they’d never do it so I think it’s important to check it” (Laura, T). Paul (T) reflected: “Once kids realise that [the teacher is] going to be looking at it ... they’ll have it done”.

Teachers employ different correction methods. Some correct homework individually: “The next day I’d take them up” (Ciara, T). Some favour self-correction: “It’s always corrected as a class, the kids self-correct” (Laura, T), while others reported doing “a lot of peer-correcting and group-correcting” (Paul, T). The majority use a combination of methods: “Sometimes we correct it together, sometimes I take them up so it’s a variety”

(Ciara, T). Others reported visually inspecting the homework. They “stamp their homework every morning” (Laura, T) or “date the work and check that it’s done as opposed to checking the content” (Paul, T). Teachers justified this approach by explaining the benefits of group-correction, namely that “children are active in correcting their own work and seeing how it should have been done” (Martha, T), “especially if they’ve made mistakes” (Laura, T).

Teachers differed in their views regarding the impact of homework correction on their time. Some claimed that “it’s not that big of a deal to correct it, it doesn’t take a huge amount of time” (James, T), whereas others “find correcting a big challenge” (Emma, T), considering that “it definitely takes a lot of time” (Laura, T). Many parents also perceived homework to be “a burden to correct” (Ruth, P). They considered that “correcting it must be a nuisance” (Jane, P), believing it to be “tiresome” (Anne, P), “frustrating”, and “tedious” (Kate, P). Some parents expressed strong views about the importance and necessity of homework correction: “My main thing is if a teacher is going to assign homework that they correct it ... if it’s assigned it should be corrected” (Jane, P). They considered that “it’s the teacher’s responsibility to check the child’s homework in a realistic timeframe” (Ruth, P).

Pupils must be provided with constructive and informative timely feedback (Cushman, 2010). Providing feedback was a challenge for teachers: “Finding time to give meaningful feedback ... I’d prefer to have more time to do that” (Emma, T). They reported endeavouring to “draw attention to their neatness, their presentation ... and ... an improvement in their work” (James, T), and to “always say something positive” (Martha, T). Others described providing individual feedback: “I call them up to the desk and go through it with them individually” (Laura, T), or group feedback if a common problem was identified: “Sometimes four or five people might have found the same thing difficult so ... I’ll go through it together as a group” (Paul, T). Parents considered it important “that there’s positive feedback from the teacher regarding the work that [the children have] put into something” but acknowledged that “it’s very difficult” (Ruth, P). Providing meaningful feedback encourages perseverance, motivation, and interest as well as improving completion rates (Katz et al., 2010). Parents may also need guidance from teachers regarding homework to ensure consistency of learning between school and home (Dor & Rucker-Naidu, 2012). Parents in this study value such guidance, believing that “parents need ... the feedback from the homework being done” (Patrick, P). None of the teachers in the study, however, identified guidance to parents as part of their homework practices.

Factors Influencing teachers’ homework practices

Several elements of teacher, home, and school contexts emerged as influential in relation to teachers’ homework practices, viz., their professional identity, the expectations of others, school policy, and cultural values and ideologies.

Teacher identity

Teacher identity strongly influences teachers' practices (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As regards homework, teachers appeared self-assured and secure in the knowledge that they could rely on their professional judgement: "I suppose you just have to stand over anything you're doing and be able to give a reason why you're doing it" (Paul, T). They reported having autonomy to deviate from the norm on occasion: "Some days ... we decide that we'll let them just have their learning work" (Ciara, T). Any such decision, however, appeared to be based on a consensus amongst teachers to ensure uniformity across classes, with Ciara (I) adding: "The three fifth classes, we're together on that". This indicates that teachers may not be prepared to deviate without the support of colleagues.

None of the teachers deemed the amount of homework they assign an indicator of the quality of their teaching or "any reflection on whether [someone is] a good teacher or not" (Laura, T). This sentiment was strongly invoked by Ciara (I): "I absolutely would not think a teacher is a good or a bad teacher judging on the amount of homework". She did, however, consider that "teachers put pressure on themselves to make sure they give homework". This was confirmed by Paul (I), who reflected: "I'd feel that I should be setting it". Therefore, although teachers consider that they have a degree of autonomy regarding homework assignment, their identity limits their enactment of this.

Expectations

Teachers' practices are influenced by the expectations and judgements of others, particularly parents and colleagues (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). This was true of teachers in this study. They believed that there was "an expectation to give homework" (Paul, T), that "parents come to expect it" (James, T). Laura (I) explained: "If I'm not giving homework and the other two fifth classes are, I could have trouble with parents, or other teachers could be asking why I'm not giving it". Emma (I) felt "that parents would freak out" if there was no homework assigned, adding that she "would feel pressure, there wouldn't really be an option, there'd be an expectation". Martha (I) also believed that there would be "kickbacks from parents". These perceptions are not unfounded as parents do expect homework to be assigned (Hutchison, 2011; Ndebele, 2018).

Teachers had mixed views about whether parents judge them based on the homework they assign. Emma (I) was emphatic in her belief that parents base their judgements entirely on the homework assigned: "How else would they judge us? ... If they're going to judge us, that's what they're going to judge us on". This resonates with Jackson's (2007) view that parents perceive teachers' homework practices as a critical indicator of teacher quality. Laura (I) was somewhat less convinced, stating that "it probably does have a factor in their judgement", while James (I) felt that "it's only a small minority that would actually judge the teacher on the homework they give". Therefore, expectations and fear of being judged appeared to influence teachers' homework practices to varying extents but, perhaps overall, not as strongly as noted by Conway & Murphy (2013).

School policy

Homework policies influence teachers' homework practices insofar as they are required to assign a specific amount (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Teachers reported that they "don't feel constrained" by the schools' homework policies, considering that they serve as "a good guide" (Emma, T) in terms of the "specific time that children should be spending on homework" (James, T). They claimed to "adhere to it because it's enough" (Ciara, T). It also ensures that "everybody is giving roughly the same amount" (Emma, T). Although the school's homework policy dictates the amount to be assigned, teachers do have autonomy in terms of subject matter and task design (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001), a point re-echoed by Laura (T): "You have a say in what you give but not in whether you give it". According to Moorhouse (2018), any deviation from policy would be obvious to parents. Parents in this study, however, were largely unfamiliar with the schools' homework policies.

Cultural values and ideologies

The tradition of assigning homework is an unquestioned practice which teachers feel obliged to implement even without approving of it (Holte, 2016), "almost an unwritten rule" (Paul, T). Laura (T) explained: "There are certain aspects that I think are important and then there are others that I don't necessarily agree with but I just do it because it's the done thing". She attributed this to "school culture". The practice has become "so normalised" that if teachers "stopped giving homework it would cause issues because it would be out of the ordinary ... people would start to question why" (James, T). Homework practices have remained largely unchanged over the years (Jackson, 2007). This was explained by Martha (T): "A lot of it is ... whatever the status quo is and not messing with that". Consequently, homework has become an expected and accepted part of schooling (Van Voorhis, 2004).

Discussion

Teachers perceived their role in the homework process to include designing, implementing, and reviewing homework. Although reasonably self-assured in their homework practices, they were influenced by their own professional identity, school policy, expectations of parents and colleagues, and cultural values and ideologies.

A dominant, some would argue outmoded, construct of intelligence shapes curriculum content, teaching methods, assessment modes and techniques, and school organisational practices in Ireland (Hanafin, Shevlin & Flynn, 2002). Homework, as an element of teachers' practice, reflects this. When designing homework, teachers prioritised core subjects, a practice approved of by parents. This practice can be understood in terms of teachers' purposes for assigning homework. Both academic and non-academic functions were identified by teachers but, despite the unclear correlation between homework and achievement, they tended to favour assigning homework to reinforce or consolidate academic content. A common type of homework involved practising knowledge and skills taught in class, a function of homework which teachers had prioritised.

The subject matter selected was influenced by various design considerations. It is necessary to ensure that homework assignments fulfil their purpose, are well-aligned with the curriculum, and appropriate for the pupils who are to complete them (Keith & Keith, 2006). Teachers were aware of the importance of pedagogical issues relating to homework design, highlighting the necessity of gauging the appropriate degree of difficulty and amount of homework, and of differentiating homework according to pupil ability. Teachers wanted homework to be purposeful and meaningful, inspiring interest and creativity. Despite more innovative pedagogical approaches advocated in the curriculum, however, teachers appeared, in practice, to follow a rather conventional approach in the types of homework they set, with a tendency to assign traditional tasks. Their principles for homework design seemed to be similar to those for lesson planning. Homework appeared to be well integrated in curriculum planning and related to content covered in class. Such a focus on quality of homework assignments is likely to promote pupil motivation and ensure that the effect on learning is greater. Teachers did not consider that designing homework was overly time-consuming or that it impacted negatively on teaching time, despite the fact that they generally tended to prepare it during class. Rather than working collaboratively, teachers appeared to work largely independently on designing homework tasks.

In terms of implementing homework, teachers had mixed views regarding the frequency of homework assignment. Most favoured the traditional approach of daily homework assignment but justified their reason, considering it preferable for facilitating the monitoring of homework completion. Some, however, favoured the more modern approach of assigning weekly homework on the premise that it allows greater flexibility for pupils. Assisting pupils with homework management was also recognised as important.

For teachers, homework monitoring and correction is required to convey to pupils that their work is valued, to satisfy parental expectations, and to ensure completion. They employ various methods but generally a combination of individualised, self, peer, and group-correction. They considered it important that pupils be active in homework correction, a view shared by Zhu & Leung (2012) who highlighted the advantages of pupils engaging in self-evaluation of their homework assignments, rather than adopting a passive role or being uninvolved. These alternative approaches can help pupils to become independent learners and can also help to promote intrinsic motivation, with pupils feeling a sense of satisfaction at their own achievements, rather than merely fulfilling the teachers' requirements. Moreover, this preference for more learner-centred strategies relieves some of the burden of correction from teachers' workloads than would be the case with more traditional, teacher-centred approaches. While individualised correction does have a place, it is not always necessary, and results in teachers having less time to plan other important aspects of the curriculum (North & Pillay, 2002). Even cursory checking of homework – dating and stamping work rather than checking the content – as reported by teachers, can be beneficial in terms of increasing completion rates and observing mistakes or misconceptions (Fang, 2010). Homework is a type of formative assessment assigned to assess pupil progress (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). It enables the teacher to examine the teaching effect, ascertain the level of mastery of the knowledge and

skills taught, and plan future instruction accordingly. It is questionable in the absence of individualised correction, however, whether teachers would obtain an in-depth insight into pupils' performance (Thomas, Kyriakides & Townsend, 2016). It is difficult to ascertain whether teachers' choices regarding correction methods are guided by their perceptions of best practice or by the pressures of their work.

Teachers considered providing meaningful feedback important but time consuming, and reported being limited to the amount they could provide as a result of time constraints due to curriculum demands. Homework feedback consisted of oral or written comments, praise, and rewards. The importance of these practices is reflected in the findings of Núñez et al. (2019), that there is a positive correlation between pupils' perceptions of teachers' homework feedback and performance.

Conclusion

Teachers articulated a complex set of considerations that made up their homework practices. They employ well-established routines for designing, setting, managing, and assessing homework. Teachers' practices during the various phases of the homework process influence curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment by linking task design, classroom instruction, and homework assessment in a consistent loop with each aspect connected. These practices were characterised by a deliberateness, wherein a careful weighing up of elements was evident, indicative of the importance to the process of teacher professionalism and self-efficacy. They were further characterised by an alignment of teachers' practices both with the expectations of parents and colleagues, and the requirements of school policies, pointing to the necessity for parental support and cooperation and the desirability of intra-school teacher collaboration.

In some regards, homework is a misnomer as a lot of the work of homework actually happens in school, whereas it is assumed that it happens in the home. Teachers' homework practices are central to teaching and learning, and if they are not recognised as such, there is a risk that they will not advance in line with other areas of analysis of teachers' work. We conclude that, although homework is commonly perceived as being in the domain of pupils and parents, it forms an integral and prominent part of teachers' work. Teachers' homework practices are, in fact, complex home-school-work in that they occur at the nexus of home and school. This home-school-work is an intrinsic element of teaching and learning and, consequently, merits further study with more diverse samples.

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Appendix A: Teachers' semi-structured interview schedule

Title: Perspectives on homework

I will begin by thanking the participant for taking part in the interview. I will ask him/her if he/she understands what the research is about and whether he/she has any questions that he/she would like me to answer or anything to be clarified (*informed consent*). I will remind the participant about confidentiality and I will assure him/her that his/her privacy will be respected (*confidentiality*). I will tell the participant that he/she may withdraw at any time and is not obliged to answer any question that he/she does not want to answer (*voluntary participation*). The following interview schedule will then be used with the participant.

Introduction

As you are aware, I am conducting this interview today to give you the opportunity to discuss your views about homework. Thank you for your time and for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Interview questions and prompts/probes

- 1) How long have you been teaching?
- 2) How do you feel generally about homework?
 - Necessary?
 - Important?
 - Beneficial?
 - Impact on class teaching time?
 - Challenges associated with homework?
- 3) When you think about homework in the broader context of children's and families' lives, do you think that perhaps there are tensions that arise when priorities are divided across homework and family or leisure activities?
 - Should these priorities be made?
 - Which do you think should take priority?
 - Do you think that homework causes stress to families? If so, in what way?
- 4) Why do you assign homework?

- 5) What purpose do you think homework serves?
- 6) What do you perceive the role of the teacher to be in the homework process?
- 7) What do you consider important when you think about assigning homework?
 - How do you decide what homework to assign?
 - Time spent designing homework assignments?
 - Designing homework assignments - what influences the assignment type?
 - Subjects?
 - Types of homework?
 - Daily homework or homework spread over longer periods of time, such as project work?
 - Differentiated according to pupil ability?
 - Amount / time spent?
- 8) How much time do you estimate that your pupils spend on homework daily?
- 9) Do your pupils regularly complete their homework?
- 10) How often do you correct your pupils' homework?
 - Do you think it should be checked or corrected daily? Why / Why not?
- 11) Do you provide your pupils with feedback on their homework? Why / Why not?
- 12) What factors do you consider influence your assignment of homework?
- 13) Who do you think puts the most pressure on teachers to assign homework? Can you elaborate, please?
- 14) Do you think that parents judge teachers based on the homework they assign? Can you explain, please?
- 15) Do you think assigning lots of homework is a sign of a good teacher? Why / Why not?
- 16) Do you adhere to your school's homework policy? Please explain.
- 17) How do you think children feel about homework?
- 18) How do you observe your pupils responding to homework?
- 19) How do you think homework impacts children's lives?
- 20) How do you think the parents of your pupils respond to homework?
- 21) Do you think that parents help their children with homework? If so, how?
 - What evidence do you observe?
- 22) Do you think that parents should be involved in their children's homework? Why / Why not?
- 23) Who do you feel controls the homework process? Can you explain, please?
- 24) Who do you think is responsible for helping children with homework? Can you elaborate, please?
- 25) Do you think that homework should be abolished? Why / Why not?

Conclusion

Thank you again for agreeing to do this interview. Is there anything that you would like to add or any questions that you would like to ask?

Appendix B: Parents' semi-structured interview schedule

Title: Perspectives on homework

I will begin by thanking the participant for taking part in the interview. I will ask him/her if he/she understands what the research is about and whether he/she has any questions that

he/she would like me to answer or anything to be clarified (*informed consent*). I will remind the participant about confidentiality and I will assure him/her that his/her privacy will be respected (*confidentiality*). I will tell the participant that he/she may withdraw at any time and is not obliged to answer any question that he/she does not want to answer (*voluntary participation*). The following interview schedule will then be used with the participant.

Introduction

As you are aware, I am conducting this interview today to give you the opportunity to discuss your views and practices regarding homework. Thank you for your time and for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Interview questions and prompts/probes

- 1) Can I begin by asking you a few general questions about you and your family?
 - How many children are in your family?
 - What ages are they?
 - What classes are they in?
 - Do you work outside of the home?
- 2) How do you feel generally about homework?
 - Necessary?
 - Important?
 - Beneficial - academic / non-academic benefits?
- 3) How do you feel about the homework your child is assigned?
 - Do you agree with the amount? Can you explain, please?
 - How would you rate the difficulty of your child's homework?
- 4) Is homework time a pleasant time in your home?
- 5) Can you tell me about your own experience of homework when you were at school?
 - Did you like homework? Why / Why not?
 - Do you think it benefited you? Why / Why not?
- 6) How do you see your role in the homework process?
- 7) How involved are you in your child's homework?
 - Types of involvement?
 - Rules and routines?
 - Managing distractions?
 - Strategies used to help your child?
 - Is parental involvement shared or the responsibility of one parent?
- 8) Do you allow your child the freedom to decide when and where to do homework? Can you explain, please?
- 9) Which subjects require the most parental help?
- 10) Are there any particular types of homework that you enjoy helping your child with?
- 11) Are there any that you particularly dislike?
- 12) How do you think your involvement influences your child's progress?
- 13) What motivates you to become involved in your child's homework?
- 14) Do you think your child likes you to be involved?
- 15) Can you describe how homework fits into your daily schedule?
- 16) Do you feel that teachers welcome your involvement in homework? Can you elaborate, please?

- 17) How do you perceive your child's attitude to homework?
 - Child's likes / dislikes regarding homework?
- 18) Can you tell me about your child's homework routine?
 - Time spent on homework each evening?
 - When and where does your child do homework?
- 19) What extra-curricular activities is your child involved in?
 - How do these leisure activities fit in around homework?
- 20) How do you think teachers feel about homework?
- 21) Why do you think teachers give homework?
- 22) If you were assigning homework, what would you assign?
- 23) Are you familiar with the school's homework policy?
 - If you could amend it, what changes would you make?
- 24) Who do you feel controls the homework process? Can you explain, please?
- 25) Do you think homework should be abolished? Why / Why not?

Conclusion

Thank you again for agreeing to do this interview. Is there anything that you would like to add or any questions that you would like to ask?

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