

# Views of Parents on Instructional Homework at Elementary School Level, Bulilima District, Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Education systems of the world value instructional homework. At elementary school level, both teachers and parents are expected to see to it that students do their homework. The concept of homework is based on the belief that family-based learning positively impacts a child's learning. However, some studies concluded that homework can cause loss of interest in academic issues among students. Furthermore, it causes fatigue and interferes with important personal and family time. This study focused on what the parents, whose children receive homework from primary schools in Bulilima District, Zimbabwe say about homework. The study used a qualitative research methodology; data was collected through face-to-face interviews and descriptive analysis was applied to the collected data. Findings showed that parents are positive about the homework issue; they find homework valuable to their children for it gives them basis for research and allows for classroom extension work. The study also showed student motivation, academic improvement and student responsibility as positive qualities cultivated by homework. Homework bridges home and school and stimulates parental involvement in their children's education. Parents welcome aiding their children doing homework for they strongly feel that it is their responsibility. Parents have no challenges with their children's homework and they applaud a job well done by homework suppliers and markers: teachers. This study recommends for a broader research that can bring new insights to the instructional homework issue.

*Key Terms:* Zimbabwe; instructional homework; primary school level; academic improvement

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this study emanated from some encounters that the researchers had in relation to the homework issue. One of the researchers received a WhatsApp message from her sister-in-law asking how 1000 is written in Roman numerals. On failing to provide the rightful answer, the researcher communicated so and further asked what the interrogator wanted the information

for and was shocked to learn that it was part of the homework for the sister-in-law's grade one boy. The researcher remembered her related experience when her last born used to sleep at 10pm when she was in grade 7 while doing homework. The other researcher has three elementary school-going grandchildren whose parents usually use the family WhatsApp chat group to post homework questions for their children. These experiences triggered the researchers to embark on this study.

Homework has been defined by Cooper (2007) as tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are intended to be carried out during non-school hours. Skaggs (2007) highlighted that in the majority of schools in the United States, homework is assigned to students as work to be completed at home, outside of the classroom and should be returned to the teacher for credit. This is true for many countries including Zimbabwe. Instructional homework can be as old as formal education itself. It dates back to 1800 when children in elementary school (grades one through four) rarely received homework while those in grammar school (grades five through eight) typically received two to three hours' worth of homework each night (Gill and Schlossman, 2004).

Issues associated with homework also emanated early in the twentieth century; as early as 1927, Hagan was the first American researcher to examine homework's effects on academic achievement compared to the effects of supervised study in school. In recent years, the issue of homework has received increased attention in the popular press and has become a topic of controversy; educators and other interested parties question on the importance, amount, administration and marking of homework, among other questions. Unfortunately, research and commentary offer conflicting conclusions on homework.

Critical minded people such as Edvantia (2007) had questions on homework; for example, on whether homework helps or hinders students' learning and which students, under what conditions, does it help or hinder. School authorities also ask similar questions as they strive to set up and implement policies that support students' learning. Parents also worry on the issue of homework; some complain that their children have too little homework while others complain of too much of it. On all the scenarios, the teacher is always blamed.

Absence of homework policies and homework plans make teachers just assign homework based on their personal assumptions and beliefs which can result in the teacher not considering student's physical, social, academic and mental factors that contribute to appropriate homework.

Some researchers concluded that homework can cause loss of interest in academic issues among students, cause fatigue and interfere with important personal and family time. Assigning too much homework can result in poor performance (Fernández-Alonso, Suárez-Álvarez, & Muñiz, 2015). Students' ability to complete homework may depend on factors that are outside their control (OECD, 2014). In addition, Chindanya (2011) argued that homework can be a challenge to students whose homes have no electricity, no space for quiet study, or where parents are illiterate. On a similar note, Kohn (2016), a critic of homework propounded that there was no consistent linear or curvilinear relation between the amounts of time spent on homework and the child's level of academic achievement.

On the other hand, other researchers viewed homework from a different perspective. Valle et al. (2016) postulated that the general consensus in the literature they studied was that homework is

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beneficial to students. Others claimed that homework aids students develop responsibility, life skills, the ability to manage tasks as well as provides experiential learning. It also increases motivation and opportunities for students to learn to cope with academic difficulties and distractions (Corno and Xu 2004; Edvantia (2007). Similarly, Terada (2015) saw homework as an academic exercise with many benefits; for instance, it facilitates higher academic performance, improves students' study skills and develops stronger school-parent connections. On the same note Chindanya (2011) propounded that the way parents interact with their children is more important in predicting child academic outcomes than the extent to which they are involved in school. Cooper (2001) took a more balanced approach when he said that research on the effects of homework suggested that it is beneficial as long as teachers use their knowledge of developmental levels to guide policies and expectations.

From the above background information, it can be seen that research has it that instructional homework has two facets: on one hand it is helpful to the learners while on the other, it is a menace to them. This study wanted to find out the Zimbabwean perspective.

### **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The homework aspect has attracted a number of researchers for it is of real concern to parents and educators. Edvantia (2007) studied in the United States on who can benefit from homework. Findings showed that homework may benefit some students under certain conditions while on others it does not do so; students from lower-income families are most likely not to have as much support as those from affluent families. This means that those from poor families may not benefit much from homework. The researchers found this study in the United States as being suitable to juxtapose their own study in Zimbabwe.

When considering age, Edvantia (2007) realized that homework provides more academic benefits to older students than to younger students. For the younger students, their only benefits lie in non-academic realms, such as, in improving study skills and learning structure as well as responsibility. The study concluded that homework is not a strategy that works for all children. The study by Edvantia (2007) also concluded that since homework has its possible negative effects, for instance, of decreasing students' motivation and interest, thereby indirectly impairing performance, homework should therefore be assigned cautiously and moderately.

Again in the United States, Skaggs (2007) looked at the influences of homework on students in the elementary grades using content analysis books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, magazine articles, and interviews. Findings showed that educational, socioeconomic and parental factors were the largest influence, both positive and negative toward homework. The study recommended the need for homework policies to be set up within school districts, individual schools and in the classrooms.

Mikk (2006) examined the association between homework and Maths achievement in forty-six countries, most of them in Europe. Interestingly, student achievement was lower in countries where homework counted toward grades, where it was the basis of classroom discussion, and where students corrected homework in class.

Al-Naqbi (2014) investigated the effects of Instructional Homework Technique (IHT) - as a systematic preparation homework assignment- on the Chemistry achievement of the

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United Arab Emirates (UAE) tenth graders. He used students as respondents; these were conveniently selected and randomly assigned into experimental and control groups. The experimental groups received instructional homework twice a week while students in the control groups regularly received homework for ten weeks. The results showed that the students in the experimental group (with IHT) scored significantly higher on the chemistry post-test achievement measure. The study recommended teachers to become more aware about the importance of the instructional homework as a viable instructional tool which should be well planned for.

A recent study by Fernández-Alonso, Suárez-Álvarez and Muñiz (2015) found that when middle school students were assigned more than 90-100 minutes of homework per day, their Mathematics and Science scores began to decline. This finding goes in line with the American National PTA and National Education Association that support the *ten-minute homework rule* which recommends ten minutes of homework per grade level, per night (ten minutes for first grade, 20 minutes for second grade, and so on, up to two hours for 12th grade) (Cooper, 2010).

Other studies, for instance, the one by Agnieszka (2010) recommended for more proper planning on the part of the teacher so that appropriate homework is administered to learners. It also called for learners to be conscientised so that they are awareness of the aims attached to homework.

Terada (2015) made an interesting study on whether homework is an effective academic tool of learning or a waste of time. He weighed the pros and cons of homework from past researches and

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came up with the table below.

The Benefits of Homework	
Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Better retention of factual knowledge</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Potential loss of interest in academics</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased understanding</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Physical and emotional fatigue; can cut into sleep time</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stronger critical thinking skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Decreased leisure time and family/community activities</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Better study habits and management skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can widen gap between high and low achievers</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More independent problem-solving</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased opportunities for cheating</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greater parental involvement in schooling</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can increase pressure from parents to perform well</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Helps teachers track student progress</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May disproportionately harm economically disadvantaged or minority students</li></ul>

Terada (2015) concluded that research gives a big-picture idea of what works and what doesn't as far as homework is concerned and it is for the teacher to make almost anything work. He also concluded that the question is not about *homework versus no homework* but on how homework can be transformed so that it becomes engaging, relevant and can support learning.

In 2014, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the developers of the International Student Assessment (PISA) test, published a report on homework around the globe. Findings showed that students aged 15 spend an average of five hours per week doing homework. Only few countries like Finland and Singapore spend less time (2-3 hours per week) on homework. However, these countries still have high PISA rankings; the research realized that these countries have support systems in place that allow students to rely less on homework to succeed.

In Zimbabwe, Kadodo (2013) studied the functionality of homework in rural Zimbabwean primary schools; that is looking at whether homework serves what it is intended for: to extend the learning from school to home for the benefit of learners, hence the collaborative effort between teachers and parents. Findings indicated that the majority of the schools visited (75%) did not have any policy on homework, thus, leaving teachers to employ homework anyhow. Also, 75% of the respondents (teachers) confirmed that they neither held any meetings over homework nor any consultations over learners' school work with their parents. A high percentage of teachers (65%) confirmed that they did not even know who specifically assisted their learners with homework while none of the participating teachers had any homework management plan. Findings also revealed that 40% of teachers marked and provided feedback to learners while 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. Punishment was associated with those who failed to submit the homework.

Mapako, Mareva and Chindedza (2013) made a study that sought to establish and compare the views of rural and urban primary school pupils on homework in Zimbabwe, using six purposively sampled Masvingo rural and urban primary schools. The inquiry used a qualitative methodology where data was gathered through semi-structured personal interviews and document analysis. The study established that while in both rural and urban schools, there are some pupils who like homework while others dislike it for various reasons; there are more pupils in urban areas who view homework in a positive light than those in rural schools. The paper unearthed home and school factors as the causes of rural and urban pupils' different views on homework.

Several recommendations were put forward by Mapako, Mareva and Chindedza (2013) from their made. Firstly, the government should endeavour to narrow the gap between the socio-economic statuses of the rural and urban populace in Zimbabwe as this is a major contributor to pupils' different views on homework. The paper further recommended that rural schools be improved in terms of the quality of teachers and teaching-learning resources. Also, parents in both settings needed to be encouraged to take an interest in their children's homework. Moreover, teachers from both rural and urban schools needed to take homework more seriously as their attitudes to homework influenced pupils' views on it.

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory of 2004 which shows that behaviour is learnt especially through reinforcement (Raingruber, 2013). The theory says that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modelling. The theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences. This theory is regarded as a bridge between behaviourist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory, and motivation.

When considering the issue of homework at elementary level, it can be argued that parents aid their children to do homework, thus the children learn from them and the parents reinforces their teaching.

## 2.2 Statement of the Problem

Instructional homework is believed to be helpful to learners at different levels of education. Educators, learners and parents join hands to see it done. However, the same homework-interested parties are stressed with it and some researchers have questioned the credibility of home-work (Edvantia, 2007; OECD, 2014; Chindanya, 2011; Kohn, 2016). A number of studies have been done on instructional homework mainly interrogating teachers and students as well as focusing on homework policies in selected school. Very little research was done on the stance of the parents especially in Zimbabwe. This study therefore wanted to find out what the parents of primary school pupils say about homework.

## 2.3 Research Questions

1. How do parents with children at elementary school level view homework?
2. What is the role of parents in their children's homework?
3. What are the aspects of homework that parents are not happy about?

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research methodology. The researchers prepared a semi-structured interview schedule which asked parents questions on how they viewed homework; what they thought was their role on their children's homework; the benefits and disadvantages of homework and what they thought about their children's teachers' approach to homework.

### 3.1 Population of the Study

All parents for primary school going pupils who attend school in Bulilima District are the population of the study.

### 3.2 Sample of the Study

Convenient sampling method was used to get the sample of this study. Eight Parents with primary school going children were interviewed. Four primary schools out of six in one cluster of Bulilima District of Matabeleland South in Zimbabwe were conveniently selected. Parents of pupils from the nearest primary school who are neighbours to the researchers were interviewed without consulting the school head. For the other three schools the researchers arranged with the kind assistance from the respective heads. These in turn negotiated with the respondents to be at the school premises on the day of the interview. This was considered convenient considering the accessibility and distance to their homes.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The two researchers enlisted the services of a third workmate to serve as a translator; interviews were done using the local language. For each respondent an explanation was given as to why the interview was being conducted and how it was going to be done. Consent was sought from the respondents on their participation in the study as well as them being recorded. Face-to-face

interviews were carried out one at a time and these were recorded. The responses were also recorded in English in notebooks. This was done in one day. The collected data was ready for analysis.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

After collecting data, the researchers studied, analysed and coded the collected data. Commonalities and trends were found, noted and discussed as findings which were used to answer the research questions. Information was compiled using suitable descriptive techniques, including excerpts that were used to support findings. Data interpretation was done supported by past researches.

## **4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*Research Question 1: How do parents with children at elementary school level view homework?*

All the interviewed parents were positive about the homework issue. Even their facial expressions concurred to their statements. They argued that homework is good to their children for it gives a student a base to research since their future education demands for this skill. Some respondents said that the homework experience allows for extension work which motivates their students to read and get more information compared to what can be obtained in the classroom. One respondent explained that this is so because the teacher cannot cover everything in class.

On the same note, the majority of the respondents argued that homework necessitates responsibility on the part of the students.

*Excerpt 1: When my children come home from school, they are conscious that there is work to be done; in doing it, they fulfil an obligation, thus becoming responsible.*

Another respondent explained that this responsibility is also necessitated by the fact that teachers ask for the homework for marking every morning.

The idea that homework bridges home and school was echoed by many of the respondents. One of them happily said:

*Excerpt 2: Homework makes us (parents) cooperate with the school in the education of our children. We are happy to participate.*

Another respondent confidently explained that parental involvement in their children's homework keeps the parents informed about the performance of the children making it possible to help where necessary. Generally, respondents were happy to partake in the education of their students. They felt that it was their responsibility to work in collaboration with the teacher in their children's education. This finding tally that by Chindanya (2011) who found that the way parents interact with their children is more important in predicting child academic outcomes than the extent to which they are involved in school.



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Another fact that was raised by a number of respondents is that homework accelerates students' progress. A homework loving parent responded:

Excerpt 3: *Homework has helped my child progress academically.*

This finding is similar to that by Al-Naqbi (2014) who realised great improvement in students who were administered to homework in an experiment.

Another respondent propounded:

Excerpt 4: *I have seen progress in my children's education due to the homework given to them by their teachers.*

In response to the question on how taxing and involving homework is, one respondent relaxed and then echoed:

Excerpt 5: *My child is in grade 7. He usually does his homework on his own. He only consults where he does not understand. I like the teacher because my child is kept occupied.*

From the response above, the researchers concluded that teachers give reasonable amounts of homework to students that neither stresses the students nor the parents.

One respondent summed it as:

Excerpt 6: *Homework starts at Early Childhood Development (ECD) stage up to grade 7 and it tallies with the level of the learners. Homework for ECDs is usually in the form of drawings and colourings.*

In as-much-as they wanted to help their children in their homework, some respondents exposed some challenges that they encounter, for instance, one respondent propounded:

Excerpt 7: *I like helping my children doing homework because I know they benefit from that but I usually fail to help them due to pressure of doing other things.*

Some parents are formally employed while others are very much engrossed in subsistence farming which makes it difficult for them to help their children on homework.

Another respondent said that he found some of the homework challenging and could not usually get the correct answers. However, he took it to be a learning experience on his part for he asks his child to share with him the teacher's correct answer when the homework is marked. On the same note, the other respondent who is sometimes vexed by her child's grade 6 homework proudly said that she is often corrected by her child whom she highly rated.

These findings tally those by Corno and Xu 2004; Edvantia (2007) who found that homework develops responsibility, motivation, life skills, the ability to manage tasks, provides experiential learning as well as increases opportunities for students to learn to cope with academic difficulties

and distractions. However, contrary to Edvantia (2007) whose findings showed that only the students from the rich families benefit from homework, this study found equal benefits regardless of social status of the students.

The study findings are also supported by those by Terada (2015) who realised homework as an academic exercise which facilitates higher academic performance, improves students' study skills and develops stronger school-parent connections. However, none of Terada (2015) homework disadvantages were realized in this study.

When asked whether the teachers mark their children given homework, all the respondent seemed to be satisfied with teacher's work. One respondent defended teachers saying:

*Excerpt 8: I have seen some few unmarked pages of my child's homework; maybe my child never handed in the homework book for marking.*

This finding is contrary to that by Kadodo (2013) in Zimbabwe who found that most of the teachers, (up to 60%) never marked their students' homework.

It can be said that all the parents value homework for they see it as a tool for their children's improvement. They therefore support it and collaborate with teachers in its execution. Thus, the recommendation by Mapako, Mareva and Chindedza, (2013) in their study in Zimbabwe that parents need to be serious with the homework of their children does not apply to this study.

*Research Question Two: What is the role of parents in their children's homework?*

Most of the respondents strongly felt that it is their responsibility to aid their children doing homework. They disagreed with those parents who think that teachers should "do it all".

Among the activities they sighted, they included supervision of their children's homework. One respondent said:

*Excerpt 9: I supervise my child when doing homework. This is understood because at elementary level most of the students are playful, therefore this supervision is necessary.*

Another respondent brought in the idea of aiding children when doing homework. He explained:

*Excerpt 10: I assist my child doing her homework tasks especially with difficult questions. Where I cannot provide answers, I consult the other family members.*

The statement above shows that, through their children's homework, parents also gain academically.

A number of respondents said that they assist their children by providing them with the needed homework materials and resources. Others responsibly articulated that they exempt their children from manual work at home, thus giving them time to do the homework.

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A reasonable number of the respondents said that they encourage their children to do homework while others showed that they go an extra mile encouraging their children to study even during those days when they do not bring homework.

Excerpt 11: *I have made time allocation for my children to do homework every evening. They don't usually bring homework every day but I encourage them to study every evening.*

Findings of this study tally with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which was used as the basis for this study. The Theory shows that behaviour is learnt especially through reinforcement (Raingruber, 2013). For this study, it was found that students learnt from their parents during homework sessions. Hence, parents involvement in homework motivates students to learn and make them improve in their academic performance.

The findings of this research question showed that all respondents, regardless of their educational levels and socioeconomic status, found no challenges with homework. This contrasts findings by Skaggs (2007) in the US who found that educational, socioeconomic and parental factors were the largest influence on homework.

*Research Question number three:* What are the aspects of homework that parents are not happy about?

Most of the respondents could not figure out any problems with their children's homework. One respondent propounded and said:

Excerpt 12: *I don't know of any bad aspects connected to my children's homework.*

Another cheerfully praised the teachers saying:

Excerpt 13: *Teachers should go ahead with the good work they are doing.*

Still another responded in smiles saying:

Excerpt 14: *I support homework and I am happy with teachers who give students homework.*

Finally, one concluded the matter saying:

Excerpt 15: *Homework, as long as it is manageable (in terms of the time it demands and is giving the child ample time to sleep), should continue.*

This shows that parents have no challenges with their children's homework at all. They praise the teachers for a job well-done. These findings are supported by Cooper (2010) and Fernández-Alonso, Suárez-Álvarez and Muñiz (2015) who realized a great improvement in performance due to homework but a noticeable decline in marks when too much time was allotted to homework.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that parent in Bulilima District in Zimbabwe are positive about the homework issue. They found homework being of value to their children for it gives them basis for research since their future education demands for this skill. Homework also allows for classroom extension work giving students more learning opportunities. Student motivation, academic improvement and student responsibility are some of the positive qualities of the students that are cultivated by homework. Homework bridges home and school and stimulates parental involvement in their children's education thus keeping the parents informed about the performance of the children.

Parents welcomed aiding their children doing homework as a learning experience and they strongly felt that it is their responsibility to supervise and aid their children doing homework as well as supply the needed homework resources (including time) and materials. Parents have no challenges with their children's homework and they applaud a job well done by homework suppliers and markers: the teachers.

This study was limited to only one District in Zimbabwe, that is, Bulilima; the researchers recommend for a broader research that can bring new insights to the instruction homework issue.

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