Art. # 1461, 12 pages, https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n2a1461

Homework in the Foundation Phase: Perceptions of principals of eight public primary schools in Johannesburg

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This article reports on a qualitative study done in Johannesburg, South Africa, which investigated attitudes of primary school principals of eight public primary schools towards the use of homework in teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase (which comprises the first three grade levels of primary schooling). Using a semi-structured interview, the study focused on the principals' perceptions of homework in general, whether homework policies existed in their schools, and the extent to which parents were involved in their children's homework. To obtain a representative set of findings, purposive sampling was used to recruit two participating principals from schools in each of the following geographical and socio-economic settings: *inner city*, *peri-urban*, *suburban* and *township*. The findings indicated that although the purpose and value of homework remains debatable, the participating principals viewed homework as a valuable tool in teaching and learning. The principals expressed the belief that parents from low-income environments regarded homework as important, as did their higher-income counterparts, but poorer parents were less involved in their children's homework. The study concludes with recommendations for education policy-makers, as well as primary school administrators and parents, regarding the use of homework in primary schools.

Keywords: effective homework; homework; homework debates; homework policy; parental involvement; socio-economic environment

Introduction

While policy-makers, parents, teachers, teacher unions and learners are role-players in schools, principals in this study were identified as the key players. A pertinent reason for this choice is that principals have a strong influence on the school's purpose and goals (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). They are not only expected to be managers and disciplinarians, but also to be instructional leaders for their schools. According to Omal (2011), one of the roles of school principals is to act as instructional leaders, who monitor teaching and learning outcomes and supervise curriculum delivery: this includes observing the use and efficacy of homework. In view of this instructional role played by principals, determining their perceptions on homework is important. The study's focus on principals is further motivated by the pivotal role principals play in communicating to teachers guidelines and expectations of the school's homework policy. According to Bedford (2014), such communication by principals may help to establish a level of consistency within the classroom. In other words, authority given to principals allows them to lead both teachers, parents and learners in formulating a school homework policy, as well as oversee its implementation. It is in this context that the study regards input on homework from principals to be significant.

This article examines perceptions of homework on the part of principals in eight public primary schools in Johannesburg, South Africa. To facilitate a better understanding of their views, this article begins with a brief review of literature on what homework is, its purpose, factors that make it effective, the importance of homework policy, parental involvement in homework and current debates around the topic. Accordingly, the main question addressed by this study is, "What is understanding of principals of public primary schools in Johannesburg of the use of homework as a teaching and learning tool?"

What is Homework?

Homework continues to play a pivotal role in the learning process and is therefore an important part of any academic curriculum (Hong & Lee, 1999). The word 'homework' refers to tasks assigned to students by teachers, which are meant to be carried out during non-school hours (Cooper, 1989; Jackson, 2007; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Pool, 2006; Trautwein & Köller, 2003). Because most of the assigned tasks are completed by students at home with the help of parents or guardians, such activities or tasks are commonly called 'homework' (Clasquin-Johnson, Joubert & Hartell, 2010). Zentall and Goldstein (1999) view homework both as a window through which parents can observe their children's education, as well as an opportunity for schools to let parents know what their children are learning.

The Purpose of Homework

The purpose of homework is summed up by Cooper (1989), who states that homework is used for practice, preparation, extension and integration. Subsequently, other authors have supported Cooper's view, for instance, that practice homework reinforces material that has already been presented in class (Pytel, 2007) and helps students prepare for tests (Metlife, 2007). *Preparation* homework is used to prepare learners for new work (Pytel, 2007) and extension homework enables them to apply learned skills in different contexts (Cooper,

Robinson & Patall, 2006; Shellard & Turner, 2004). *Integration homework* allows learners to do projects that apply several skills (Shumow, Schmidt & Kackar, 2008).

Other authors argue that homework is used to evaluate the learners' knowledge of the subject matter (Metlife, 2007; Shumow et al., 2008). In other words, teachers use it to determine whether learners have understood a lesson and have mastered the required skills; they use homework to regularly monitor the learners' progress (Plato, 2000; Thomas, 1992). Pytel (2007) sees homework as introducing learners to new material that the teacher will present in the future.

Homework provides learners with opportunities to identify and learn to use resources like the library, the internet, reference books, and other resources (Brewster & Fager, 2000). In the process, learners become familiar with the idea that learning also takes place outside the classroom (Horowitz, 2005; McPherson, 2005). In addition, homework allows pupils to use their unique talents and abilities to do individual or group projects that demonstrate their creativity and critical thinking skills (Corno, 2000; Horowitz, 2005; Metlife, 2007; Nuzum, 1998). According to Sousa and Skandera (2003), homework is the foundation for future success – it develops good habits and academic discipline and prepares the pupils for later study that will equip them to function as adults.

Effective Homework

Researchers have identified several elements that characterise effective homework: four of these are considered in this study. First, homework must be relevant to learning objectives, not just assigned as a matter of routine, but with a purpose that is relevant to student learning (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). Highlighting the same point, Cushman (2010) argues that homework assignments ought to be purposeful, requiring thinking rather than meaningless repetition or 'busy work.' Teachers should make sure that the purpose of a homework assignment is clear and that students are not confused about what they are being asked to do and how they should do it (Marzano, Gaddy & Dean, 2000).

Second, homework must be manageable: it must be appropriate to a learner's ability and maturity. Marzano et al. (2001) point out that homework should also be assigned in reasonable amounts and that the instructional level must match the learners' skills as well as the grade level. Learners' preferences and learning styles should be considered when determining the appropriateness of homework (Cooper, 2007; Hong, Milgram & Rowell, 2004). Third, homework must be assigned regularly (Cooper, 2007; Macbeth, 2003). Fourth, homework needs to be checked by teachers soon after it is completed. Suitable and timely feedback in the form of constructive comments must be given to learners about their homework (Cushman, 2010; Macbeth, 2003; Marzano et al., 2001; Walberg, 1999).

The Importance of Homework Policy

Homework must be guided by a clear policy, formulated by teachers, parents, and learners. Schools should locate homework within the framework of an existing policy on homework, which clearly articulates expectations, guidelines and helpful tips (Macbeth, 2003; Marzano et al., 2001). According to these authors, unexplained homework may communicate mixed messages to parents and confuse and frustrate them and their children. To motivate learners, it is also important that, when assigning homework, teachers explain to students and parents what positive consequences to expect when homework is completed (Patton, 1994). A good homework policy should, therefore, specify the purposes, amount and frequency of homework, as well as the responsibilities of teachers, parents and learners regarding to it (Cooper, 1994).

Parental Involvement in Homework

Involving parents in their children's education is gradually becoming an important feature in effective schools. Canter and Canter (2001) argue that, when parents are involved, learners do better academically and behaviourally. Further research supports the connection between parent involvement and improved learner achievement (Epstein & Associates, 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004; Warren, 2010).

Parental involvement in their children's education in emerging economies has been largely influenced by the socio-economic status of the parents (Lareau, 1987), where middle-class parents help children with homework more readily than their working-class counterparts. For instance, a study conducted in a historically disadvantaged primary school in Cape Town found that parental involvement in children's homework was negatively affected by poverty, unemployment, inequalities, lack of educational resources, lack of structure in the home, single parenting, and so on (Abrahams, 2013).

Despite socio-economic challenges, many African countries recognise the value of involving parents in their children's education. For instance, Echaune, Ndiku and Sang (2015) report that some African countries, including South Africa, Uganda and Burundi, have policies that support parental involvement in education.

Research has identified various ways in which parents can support the use of homework in schools. According to Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, De Jong and Jones (2001), parents

are involved in their children's homework in various ways, but primarily by providing space and materials for it to be conducted, and also by interacting with teachers concerning instructions and other information regarding homework.

Other aspects of parental involvement are overseeing and monitoring the completion of homework; making rules about when, where or how homework is to be done; responding to questions about homework, and giving feedback or providing direct homework instruction. However, when involving parents in the homework process, Marzano et al. (2001) advise that parents should be asked to facilitate homework completion and not to teach content, as this might confuse learners.

Current Debates around Homework

The value of homework as a tool for teaching and learning remains a contested terrain. There is concern that an overload of homework might cause learners to lose interest in their work and become physically and emotionally fatigued (Cooper et al., 2006; McPherson, 2005; Moorman & Haller, 2012; Skaggs, 2007). When learners become emotionally stressed about homework, or see it as something that needs to be completed as quickly as possible, they tend to dread it and this may lead to poor academic achievement (Haas, 2008; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2007). Furthermore, because excessive homework takes away family time, it often causes tensions between parents and their children (Checkley, 2003; Clemmitt, 2007; Moorman & Haller, 2012). It is also argued that learners spend too much time at school and more time doing homework, leaving little or no time for extra-curricular and family activities, which is a common complaint of parents (Cooper et al., 2006; Coutts, 2004; McPherson, 2005; Moorman & Haller, 2012).

While there appears to be a purpose for homework in high schools, the function of homework in the primary school has been debated by several authors. For instance, Bempechat (2004) states that the impact of homework in academic achievement at primary school level is unclear. In thirty-five studies across America, Cooper (2006) found little or no relationship between homework and achievement in primary schools. Arguing that there is no real evidence showing homework to be beneficial to primary school learners, Kohn (2006) was adamant that there is no disadvantage to reducing homework or eliminating it altogether from primary school teaching. This view is echoed by a Cape Town primary school principal, Gavin Keller, who has instructed his school to do away with homework altogether (Vlok, 2015).

In South African public primary schools, the use of homework at the Foundation Phase is problematic. Despite the fact that most learners at the Foundation phase are not learning in their home language, teachers continue to send schoolwork home (Clasquin-Johnson et al., 2010). According to this source, illiterate or semi-literate parents are expected to read to their children, correct their pronunciation and monitor homework, in a language they do not even understand. These authors further argue that the homework system in South Africa reinforces Eurocentric values and assumes that every learner has parents available and that there is space and electricity in every learner's home. In short, homework at the Foundation Phase does not reflect the realities of South Africa.

There is a general ambivalence among South African parents towards homework policy in schools, as demonstrated in a survey by Swanepoel (2015), which sought to establish how parents felt about the homework policy. According to Swanepoel (2015), most parents complained that their children often got to do their homework at the end of the day once the parents had returned from work. This resulted in tired children struggling to focus and overworked parents having to prepare supper and do chores in-between. According to the survey, the majority of parents agreed that smaller children should not be given homework and be allowed to play and dream, and that homework should only be given gradually.

Despite these criticisms, homework continues to have a place in teaching and learning in primary schools. Bempechat (2004) believes homework develops achievement motivation in younger children. It also provides the time and experience children need to develop study habits that encourage learning. Bempechat's view is consistent with that of Cooper (1994), who argues that homework should be given to primary school learners, not to improve academic performance but to promote good study habits and positive attitudes towards school.

Research Design

Research Aims, Questions and Design

The broad aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of primary school principals in Johannesburg on homework at the Foundation Phase. Specifically, the study aimed at establishing the views of principals with regard to their understanding of homework, the application of policy and the involvement of parents in homework.

In order to answer the research question the following sub-questions framed the study:

1) What challenges do principals in public primary schools in Johannesburg face regarding homework?
2) To what extent does homework policy inform the use of homework in public primary schools in Johannesburg?
3) What strategies do the principals put forward to improve the implementation of homework in public primary schools in Johannesburg?

4) How do principals in Johannesburg public primary schools perceive the involvement of parents in children's homework?

The design of a study refers to the plan or steps followed to collect, analyse and interpret data (Creswell, 1994:12). Qualitative approaches focus on exploring and understanding the way individuals or groups interpret and make sense of their experiences, behaviours, interactions and social contexts in the world in which they live (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamount, 2003). A qualitative approach was used in this research to explore how public primary school principals in Johannesburg perceive homework and its implementation in their schools.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The sample comprised eight school principals from selected public primary schools in the Johannesburg area. To ensure an equitable distribution of geographical and socio-economic settings, principals were drawn from schools in the inner city, peri-urban, suburban and township of Johannesburg. In this study, principals of two primary schools were selected from each of these settings. For ethical reasons, the schools were identified according to a numerical code (Schools 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8), and the principals according to the schools where they worked, as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7 and P8. In terms of the categorisation used by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), the schools were located in the Johannesburg East District. The principals were paired as follows: P1 and P5; P2 and P7; P3 and P8; P4 and P6. Table 1 below summarises the socio-economic profiles of the schools represented by the principals:

Table 1 Schools and socio-economic profiles (adapted from Ndebele, 2015)

Schools	Description
1 and 5	Situated in low-income suburbs adjacent to the Johannesburg City Centre. Parents' communities include large numbers of foreign nationals from other African countries.
2 and 7	Situated in low-income areas in the Eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. Parents mainly from Johannesburg inner city and townships.
3 and 8	Situated in low socio-economic areas located in Alexandra township.
4 and 6	Situated in affluent North-eastern suburbs of Johannesburg.

Purposive sampling (a non-probability sampling approach) was used to recruit participants for this study. In purposive sampling, the researcher looks for participants with certain criteria critical to the study, and representative or informative about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Strydom & Delport, 2011). In this research, principals were selected and paired on the basis of their schools' socio-economic profiles.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was used for data collection. This instrument was appropriate, not only because it permitted a focused exploration of a specific topic, but also because it allowed the researcher to be aware of non-verbal cues, which were valuable in interpreting the participants' emotional responses to certain questions (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Various questions in the interview schedule were designed to explore primary school principals' views on homework, particularly at the Foundation Phase.

The researcher applied for permission from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to conduct research in the eight public primary schools. Permission was granted by the GDE and the Johannesburg East District, which was where the eight schools were located. All the required ethical considerations were observed and the researcher obtained an Ethics Clearance Certificate from the University of the Witwatersrand. The researcher then visited the eight participating schools to explain the nature and purpose of the project. Information sheets describing the project and inviting participation were issued to the principals, who were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The principals who agreed to participate in the study arranged appropriate dates and times for the interviews, which took place in their offices.

Data analysis for qualitative research is the non-numerical process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Babbie, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), qualitative data analysis involves the breaking up of data into manageable patterns in order to identify relationships, trends and themes. In this study, the principals' responses to the interview questions were grouped into patterns/themes, with each principal expressing their views about the use of homework in primary schools, the use of homework policy, parental involvement in homework, and so on. Themes in this study were aligned with the research questions. The study has some limitations that centre around the limited sample of participating principals in Johannesburg. Although data was collected from such a small sample of principals, it provides an in-depth understanding of the principals' perceptions of homework in their schools, as shown in the next section.

Results

Principals' Understanding of Homework

In order to establish how participating principals understood the 'homework' phenomenon, principals were asked to state whether they thought homework had a role in enhancing learner performance. They were also requested to explain what they understood by 'effective homework.'

Homework and learner performance

When asked about the role played by homework in enhancing learner performance, all eight principals from the participating schools, irrespective of their schools' socio-economic backgrounds, agreed that homework enhanced learner performance. Four principals believed homework reinforced what children had learned. The others saw homework as encouraging learners to consolidate what had been learnt according to the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Another respondent expressed the view that homework was an indicator of whether or not the learners grasped what had been taught in class. One of the respondents thought that homework allowed learners to revise concepts that they might not have grasped fully in class. Yet another respondent viewed homework as an extension of classwork and of what learners already know, as well as developing critical cognitive skills in learners. Articulating the role of homework in learner performance, a principal at School 4 (in an affluent northern suburb in Johannesburg) said, "Homework reinforces what has been learnt; parents are involved and they spend time with their children." From this response, homework provides opportunities for parents to participate in their children's learning, as well as bond with their children.

Effective homework

As potential implementers of effective homework, principals' views on what they regarded as 'effective homework' were solicited. In general, principals in this study did not fully understand what constituted 'effective homework.' For most principals, there was not a noticeable difference between homework in general and 'effective' homework in particular. In other words, they could not identify what made homework effective. For instance, some of the responses from principals were that effective homework was "work done in class" (Principal 3), remedial work for slow learners, and so on. However, the principal of a low-income community school in an area near the Johannesburg City Centre explained that it was "effective work" that he said should be "constantly supervised by teachers and parents, […] encouraging learners to produce quality work" (Principal 1). An even more impressive interpretation of effective homework came from the principal of an up-market school in a Northern suburb, who said "it must not be too much; it must allow for the bonding of children with parents; and it must encourage learner responsibility" (Principal 4). This divergence of opinion on the notion of 'effective homework' among principals creates the impression that standards set for homework in the participating schools were different.

Principals' Perceptions of Challenges Associated with Homework

When asked about their perceptions of the challenges associated with homework, principals identified quite a few challenges. According to the principals at Schools 1, 2 and 4, there was poor parental supervision of homework. The principal at School 2 elaborated on why parents did not supervise homework, pointing out that parents were illiterate in English, making it difficult for them to supervise homework in the medium of English. The principal at School 7 specifically pointed out linguistic problems faced by parents of foreign origin when supervising their children's homework, especially those from French-speaking African countries. A principal at School 7 (in the low-income eastern suburbs of Johannesburg) was vehement: "Parents are not supportive – they are illiterate, and foreigners have language barriers." According to the School 2 principal (in the same low-income area), the language problem was compounded by parents who often got home late from work, leaving them with limited time for homework supervision.

Principals who participated in this study were adamant that most of their learners just did not do their homework. For the principal at School 1, learners simply lied to their parents, claiming they had not been given any homework to do by their teachers. In fact, according to the principal at School 7, about 90% of his learners did not do their homework. The principal at School 3 was concerned that it was the weak learners who did not do it. He said, "Learners don't do homework – especially those that need it most." Similarly, the principal at School 6 observed that it was not an entire class that did not do their work. For him, "particular learners were well-known for not doing their homework." From these responses, it may be concluded that both parents and learners presented homework challenges for the participating schools.

Homework challenges faced by the principal at School 8 in Alexandra township were noted in the failure by learners to do their homework and the inability of parents to supervise. According to the principal, most learners came from shack dwellings, which could not provide space to do homework. He added, "Children have no space to do their homework."

Principals' Views on Homework Policy

When asked if their schools had been given a homework policy by the Department of Education, all the principals denied this, claiming that each

school was encouraged to develop its own policy on homework. However, all the principals agreed that the Department of Education provided schools with homework books/workbooks with tasks and activities to be done at home. Of the eight principals who participated, two (of a school in a low-income community in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg, and a township school in Alexandra) reported that they did not have a school homework policy of their own. Various descriptions of homework policies were given by the six remaining schools. For instance, Schools 2 and 3 had a homework diary with a year's work pasted on a page, showing each subject and time. Schools 4 and 5 had more elaborate homework policies: School 5 had a policy showing enrichment exercises, how much homework to be set, and how parents should be involved in the children's homework.

School 4 (which was in an affluent area) had carefully printed and bound copies of their homework policy, with a definition of homework, vision and mission of the school, the role of parents and learners, guidelines for teachers on homework, types of homework and the expectations of parents, caregivers and teachers. All six principals who reported having homework policies at their schools confirmed that parents had access to the homework policy.

These responses from the principals indicate that, although most schools had a homework policy, individual schools had their own individual policies, instead of a co-ordinated, standard approach. In fact, schools could even go as far as doing away with policy altogether, as was the case in Alexandra township schools.

Principals' Strategies to Improve Homework at their School

The study identified some of the strategies used by principals to monitor homework at their schools. The principal at School 1 (in a low-income area near the Johannesburg City Centre) explained that each grade is given a weekly homework timetable at the beginning of each term. Another principal in a similar socio-economic setting pointed out that Foundation Phase learners were given homework sheets, while Intermediate Senior Phase learners were given homework projects and assignments. Two principals from low-income areas highlighted the importance of involving parents in the supervision of homework. For example, the principal at School 2 claimed that she often talked to parents about the importance of homework. Similarly, the principal at School 7 said that she often held meetings with teachers and parents about homework. She added that ways of assisting parents who did not know how to help their children with homework were discussed at such meetings.

Three principals (Schools 2, 4 and 6) reported that they spot-checked learners' exercise books to see if homework had been given and marked by the teachers. These principals also checked whether the learners' homework diaries had been signed by the parents. At School 4 (which is in an affluent area), the principal reported that she would phone the parents of a child whose homework was not done. However, this study showed that principals at the two township schools that participated did not have a 'hands-on' approach in their supervision of homework. For instance, the principal of School 3 relied on feedback from Heads of Department as part of their homework monitoring plan. Similarly, the principal at School 8 monitored homework through a Homework Assistance Team, employed by the Department of Education.

Principals' Perceptions on Parental Involvement in Homework

All eight principals who participated in this study responded that parents of Foundation Phase learners were expected to be involved in their children's homework. For most of these principals, parents were involved so that they could be informed about what their children were doing at school and what level they were at. The principal at School 4 (in an affluent area) argued that involving parents in children's homework "forces parents to participate and become involved in their children's education." More detailed responses came from principals of Schools 5 and 7 (both located in the lower-income suburbs): according to the principal of School 5, parents must be involved because "Young children need guidance from parents, e.g. grasping a pen; a closer bond is formed between the child and its parents, and child discipline is improved." The principal of School 7 had an interesting argument on parental involvement. He gave a 'yes and no' response to the question: according to him, parental involvement led to improved learner performance. However, as an estimated 80% of the learners' parents were illiterate in English and most of them worked long hours away from home, only clever learners would be able to do their homework on their own. Struggling children would always fail to do their homework due to a lack of parental involvement.

The principals who participated in this study differed markedly in their responses when asked about the extent of parental involvement in their schools. In general, differences in parental involvement were associated with the socio-economic background of the parents. According to the principals of Schools 1 and 5 (both situated in poorer socio-economic environments), the majority of parents at their schools were not involved in their children's homework as they worked long hours and travelled long distances to and from work, leaving them with little or no time to attend

to their children's homework. Furthermore, most of the parents were not literate in the English language, making it difficult for them to assist with their children's homework, most of which was in English.

The principal at School 1 added that most parents were single and unemployed, forcing them to give priority to more pressing family needs than the education of their children. Similarly, the principals of Schools 2 and 7, and Schools 3 and 8, which were all in poorer socio-economic settings, reported low levels of parental involvement at their schools. However, according to the principals of schools in the affluent suburbs of Johannesburg (Schools 4 and 6), there was a lot of parental involvement in their schools, where parents checked and signed their children's homework diaries on a regular basis.

Principals' views on parental feedback on homework

According to the principals who participated in this study, some parents did not see homework as important for their Foundation Phase children. For example, the principal of Schools 1 and 2 reported that parents failed to participate in their children's homework because, in the first place, they did not see its relevance. At School 3, the principal claimed that parents did not know or understand what they were expected to do to assist their children with their homework, hence their reluctance to be involved in it. This concern amongst parents was echoed by the principal at School 7.

In contrast, the principal at School 5 reported that most parents would ask, "Where is my child's homework?" if the child had not been given homework by their teacher. In other words, for most parents at this school, homework was a routine exercise. However, feedback from parents at the affluent schools in Johannesburg (Schools 4 and 6) revealed stiff resistance to 'too much' homework. According to the principals, homework in the Foundation Phase had to be down-sized due to common complaints by parents that the homework was excessive.

Principals' strategies to support parental supervision of their children's homework

Principals participating in this study were asked what they did if parents consistently failed to supervise their children's homework. All the principals had a common approach to this problem: the teacher contacted the parents by telephone, e-mail or letter, inviting them to come to the school to discuss their child's homework problem. One principal (at School 3) emphasised that parents were encouraged to supervise but not to teach their children during homework time. They were also discouraged from doing homework for their children. The principal at School 5 pointed out the need for regular workshops with parents to discuss homework-related matters. Principals from the two more affluent schools (Schools 4 and 6) also stated that problems of homework supervision should not be dealt with only by the teacher and the parent; they suggested that the HOD or principal should also be informed if the problem persisted. At School 6, the principal was more proactive in dealing with failure by parents to supervise their children's homework: the child was detained, and sometimes the School Governing Body (SGB) was informed.

Discussion

This chapter discusses four important findings based on the research questions used in this study.

Firstly, the study found that principals participating in this study believed that homework was an essential tool for teaching and learning in the primary school. For them, homework not only enhanced academic performance, but strengthened bonds between parents and their children. This observation is consistent with the view that homework can facilitate bonding between parents and their children (Du Preez, 2014). In a similar vein, Eita (2007:3) adds that, when parents work with their children, it does not only form a strong parent-child bond, but that when praise is given for completing homework correctly, the child's self esteem improves.

With regard to the principals' understanding of 'effective homework', the principals of two affluent Johannesburg schools (Schools 4 and 6) highlighted that the amount of homework must not be excessive, and that parents' resistance to too much homework at the Foundation Phase had forced their schools to reduce the amount of homework. This view was consistent with what Sousa and Skandera (2003) identified as features of effective homework. For these researchers, homework is effective when it is appropriate to ability and maturity, as well as assigned in reasonable amounts. This view is supported by Marzano et al. (2001), who also point out the importance of reasonable amounts in homework.

Secondly, the study found that parents did not provide the necessary support expected of them when it came to homework. According to the principals, parents' late arrival at home, English language barriers and poor socio-economic environments, as well as other factors, contributed to the non-involvement of parents in their children's homework. On this point, Naidu, Muthukrishna and Hobden (2011:130) comment, "parental interest and support is a very important factor for their children's success in school." It is also not surprising that children were also not keen to do their homework, especially when considering their lack of space to do their homework, as well as lack of parental support.

Thirdly, the study found that participating principals thought that the involvement of parents in homework enhanced their children's academic performance and development. This finding was consistent with that of Patall, Cooper and Robinson (2008), who found that involving parents in children's homework might accelerate learning in children as well as improving homework completion and performance. Research has also shown that parental involvement in homework is a leading factor in improving academic performance (Cooper, Jackson, Nye & Lindsay, 2001). Research also confirms that, of all the types of parental involvement, helping with homework is particularly effective for enhancing achievement (Epstein, 1986; Sanders, Epstein & Connors-Trados, 1999). This finding concurs with a study by Erlendsdóttir (2010) in Namibia, which proved that parental involvement in children's homework does improve academic achievement.

This study supported the idea that parental involvement in their children's homework was heavily influenced by the parents' socio-economic status. The socio-economic status of parents has been identified as contributing to the involvement of parents in their children's education by researchers (Georgiou, 2007; Schmitt & Kleine, 2010). The study emphasised the negative effects of the practice of giving homework in situations where parents in poorer circumstances participated less in their children's homework. The issue of parental involvement in their children's education took the centre stage in educational debates in the early 80s, with much research and publications taking place in the industrialised countries. For instance, earlier research evidence suggests that the socio-economic status of parents has more influence on parental participation than variables such as age, gender or marital status (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Epstein, 1986; Fehrman, Keith & Reimers, 1987; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997). This finding is consistent with what was established by Tam and Chan (2009) in their study of parental involvement in Hong Kong, where they found that middle-class parents possessed cultural and social capital to help children to more readily do their homework than their working-class counterparts.

Further arguments against an overload of homework include pupils' loss of interest in schoolwork, becoming physically and emotionally fatigued and limiting the time available for sports and community involvement (Cooper et al., 2006; McPherson, 2005; Moorman & Haller, 2012; Skaggs, 2007). Earlier research has shown that the more homework a learner has at primary school level, the less likely they are to enjoy learning (Cooper, Lindsay & Nye, 2000). This study also found that the majority of the principals were deeply concerned about the lack of parental supervision of their children's homework. This was particularly evident in the schools in low-income communities. It has been established that the higher the income and socio-economic status, the more parents will participate and become involved in their children's education (Friedman, 1990). More recently, researchers have observed that families from a low socio-economic background are less likely to be involved in their children's education (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Machen, Wilson & Notar, 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007).

Fourthly, some strategies were identified that principals used to support parents in their supervision of children's homework. While parental supervision of homework was strictly encouraged by the principals, parents were also expected to supervise within certain limits, as their excessive involvement could be harmful (Cooper et al., 2000; Trahan & Lawler-Prince, 1999). According to these researchers, parents could not teach content to their children because they lacked the knowledge of content areas of homework tasks, as well as information about child development. The same researchers added that parents were not supposed to do homework for their children, a point also raised by the principals who participated in this study. When parents did the homework, their children failed to get the practice that they needed. Cooper et al. (2000) further argued that, while doing homework, parents should act as their children's partners, rather than their teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings described here, it can be concluded that, while there are debates around homework, there is overwhelming support for the use of homework as a tool for learning among most of the parents in primary schools in Johannesburg, irrespective of their socio-economic background. It can also be concluded that the problems of poverty, illiteracy in the English language, limited time for most parents to engage with their children in homework, and other barriers, presented major homework challenges for the principals. Again, in the absence of a standard policy on homework, principals were left on their own to formulate homework policies suitable to their own schools – and this was a challenge if the Department Basic of Education did not provide necessary guidelines. However, despite the challenges they faced, it may be concluded that principals in this study took the initiative to come up with homework policies that would improve the implementation of homework in their schools. In doing so, most principals involved the parents in the homework process. The study is a challenge to the Department of Basic Education to do what it has never done before – to develop guidelines on homework policy in schools. Besides, the active involvement of parents in the

formulation of homework policies as observed among principals in this study presents a new phenomenon in the study of homework.

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Given the valuable of homework in enhancing teaching and learning in schools, workshops for primary school principals must be conducted to educate principals on the importance of homework in their schools.
- Principals, together with teachers and parents, must place on the agenda of their School Governing Body meetings the challenges faced by principals on the issue of homework. Such meetings should aim at formulating concrete strategies to mitigate the named challenges.
- Since homework policies in schools are not co-ordinated and standardised, there is a possibility that some of these policies may be more effective than others from school to school. Principals need to work with other principals and compare notes on the formulation of their individual school homework policies. Such a cross-pollination of ideas may improve homework policies in schools.
- In the sharing of ideas with other schools described in the previous recommendation, principals may also learn of more effective homework strategies from their counterparts, which may enhance homework practices in their own schools.
- Principals should emphasise the role of parents in their schools, especially in the supervision of homework. As the overseers of their schools and school communities, principals should ensure that teachers, parents and learners, promote homework as an effective element in teaching and learning, and that all stake-holders should play their part in making learners benefit from homework.

Note

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