



A snapshot of parental involvement with homework and resultant parental perspectives on its value, efficacy and effects within the home.

Professional Master of Education (P.M.E.)

2019

Name: Janette Healy

Supervisor: Dr. Gerry Dunne

Submitted to Marino Institute of Education on 13th May 2019

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to an award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

Janette Healy

13th May

Date: 2019

Word Count: 10,985

Abstract

Despite questions and concerns having been raised about the benefit and effects of homework in Ireland (IPPN, 2010; McMahon 2018), there is a “dearth of Irish research” (O’Toole, Kiely, McGillicuddy, O’Brien & O’Keeffe, 2019, p. 30) on the topic. For this reason, this study, which focuses on the mainstream primary school system, endeavours to generate insights into parental involvement with homework and resultant parental perspectives concerning its value, efficacy and effects within the home. A qualitative approach was utilised in the project, during which appropriate data was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with eleven parents whose children attend co-educational schools in Dublin in 2019.

The findings indicate, that despite a lack of direction from schools, parents adopt a functional assistance role vis-à-vis their involvement with homework as their children mature through the primary school system. As a result of their engagement with the practice, parents value homework as a learning tool that has the capacity to improve children’s academic abilities. In addition, parents acknowledge homework’s benefit as a warning system that alerts them to any difficulties or deficiencies experienced by their children in the curriculum subjects throughout the school year, which in turn facilitates children receiving help at the optimal time to ameliorate these problems. Finally, parents believe that homework does not adversely affect the relationship between parent and child, even if it causes occasional stress. The proviso to this, however, is that the outcome may be different in the event that homework related stress is more consistent in nature. The study concludes by echoing a call for further research about homework in Ireland, with a focus on obtaining information about the levels of stress experienced during homework and the consequent effects of same.

List of Abbreviations

DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DESPB	Department of Education and Science Primary Branch
DES	Department of Education and Skills
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
MIE	Marino Institute of Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NPC	National Parents Council Primary
PME	Professional Master in Education
SEN	Special Education Needs
U.S.A.	United States of America

Acknowledgments

To begin, I would like to convey my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Gerry Dunne, who has been extremely supportive since day one and who has provided me with invaluable advice each step of the way to completion of this thesis.

Next, I would like to thank the twelve parents who gave me the time and opportunity to interview them and thereby conduct all of the research for this project.

I would also like to convey my thanks to my parents, sisters, wider family and friends for their words of encouragement and support over the last two years. A particular mention goes to Catherine Gibney and Seán Cuddy, who contributed to this undertaking in different ways, and who are missed.

To my sons, Daniel and Patrick, thank you both for inspiring me to change career and for reminding me that being a mother will always be my main job...and my main joy!

Finally, I would like to thank Matt, without whom none of this would have been possible. You have been absolutely amazing. Thank you for everything.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	8
Motivation and Research Question	8
Overview of Study	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	11
The Irish Education System and homework	11
Definition and complexity of homework	13
Homework and academic achievement.....	13
Additional benefits of homework.....	16
The adverse effects of homework	17
Parents’ attitudes to homework.....	19
Parental involvement in homework	19
Conclusion.....	22
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	23
Research design.....	23
Chosen research approach: Semi-structured Interviews	24
Sample selection (n = 11).....	25
Data Collection.....	26
Data Analysis – Thematic approach	27
Reliability and validity	28
Researcher positionality	29
Ethical considerations	29
Limitations of the methodology	30
Conclusion.....	31
Chapter Four: Discussion and Analysis.....	32
Data Demographics (n= 11).....	32
Data Analysis	33
Parental beliefs in learning gains from homework	33
Homework as an early warning system for problems.....	35
Homework, even if linked to occasional stress, does not have an adverse effect on parent/child relationships.	37
Parental involvement in homework: a positive functional approach as children mature	40
Conclusion.....	42
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations	43

Research question and Summary of Findings	43
Observations, Conclusions and Recommendations	44
Reference List	46
Appendix A.....	55
Appendix B.....	57

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the background context and motivation for the topic that was chosen for this research project. The aim of this study is to generate insights into parental involvement with children in the mainstream Irish primary school system who are assigned homework, focusing in particular on resultant parental perspectives concerning its value, efficacy and effects within the home. For purposes of edification, this chapter also provides an overview of the entire project.

Motivation and Research Question

When the researcher commenced her studies for the Professional Master in Education (Primary School) (PME), she anticipated that the training would incorporate some instruction in relation to homework so that, as a qualified teacher, she would be in a position to competently deal with any queries and concerns from parents arising from the practice. However, the absence of any reference to homework during the programme prompted a number of realisations for her in relation to the issue. The first was that, as a parent of two children in the senior end of primary school who had been assigned homework regularly since junior infants, she had received little advice or direction about any aspect of homework from teachers. The second was that she had not questioned its value as a practice, but had simply assumed that there was an evidence based, beneficial reason for it, namely to improve a child's academic attainment. The final one was that she considered homework to be a significant and intrinsic part of her children's school lives, which crossed the boundary into their home lives. These realisations about homework were the genesis for research into the topic as the focus for this project.

Initial reading around the area disclosed a lack of research in Ireland about homework (O'Toole, Kiely, McGillicuddy, O'Brien, & O'Keeffe, 2019, p. 40). It also revealed the complexity involved in investigating a practice that "constitutes one of the most important linkages between home and school learning for the majority of Irish children" (O'Toole et al., 2019, p. 29). As a consequence of reading and reflecting on the topic, the researcher acknowledged the reality that, on occasion, homework had been a source of stress in her home, for both child and parent. This led her to investigate its capacity to have an adverse impact on relationships within the home and on a child's attitude to learning and school in general. Of note in this regard, was the fact that in 2010, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) had advised the Houses of the Oireachtas that homework's role in the education system should be seriously researched and analysed because of the lack of evidence that the practice provides any real benefit (p. 4).

Whilst research in the area would have to involve a number of stakeholders including Boards of Management, principals, teachers, parents and children, recent research in Australia posited that an essential precursor to homework reform is "the collection of reliable and detailed information on what parents do and how effective this is" (Carmichael & MacDonald, 2016, p. 209). Consequently, and bearing in mind the size and time constraints of this study, it was decided to narrow the thesis focus to parental attitudes to homework arising from their experience of the practice with children in primary school. Ultimately the following research question was formulated: How are parents involved with homework at primary school level and what are their resultant perspectives on its value, efficacy and effects within the home? The aim of this study is to answer this research question with regard to a small cohort of parents (n = 11) based in Dublin in 2019.

Overview of Study

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters, inclusive of this introductory chapter. In Chapter Two, international and Irish literature that is salient to this research project is reviewed and an overview of homework's position in the Irish education system is detailed. Chapter Three provides a summary of the methodology used to analyse the data collected in response to the research question, together with an evaluation of the relevant ethical considerations, researcher positionality and limitations of the study. An analysis and discussion of the data is the focus of Chapter Four, which includes references to appropriate links to pertinent literature. Chapter Five concludes the dissertation with a summary of the main research findings, together with a detail of the conclusions and recommendations proposed as a result thereof.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter critically appraises seminal literatures drawn from relevant Irish and international literatures which relate to the nature and heterogeneous practices governing homework in diverse educational settings. To effectively answer the research question within agreed parameters, this review first charts the status of homework in the existing education system in Ireland. From here, relevant empirical research which investigates the possible attainment and other benefits conferred by homework will be examined. The purported adverse effects of homework will thereafter form the basis for discussion. Finally, parental attitudes to homework and their involvement with same will be evaluated. To conclude, some of the seminal findings from the review and their implications for educational theory and practice will be synthesised.

The Irish Education System and homework

Homework is referenced only once in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum Introduction document, as an informal assessment tool for teachers (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1999, p. 18). Prior to this, nine years earlier, a circular was issued to all schools stating that parents should be advised of the school homework policy and how to assist with same (Department of Education and Science Primary Branch [DESPB], 1990). At present however, Ireland does not have a departmental policy or official guidelines on homework (Stuart, 2019, p. 56; Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p. 49). According to the Department of Education and Skills [DES] website, specifically the document ‘A guide to the Irish Education System’, schools set their own homework policies. Included in this document are a series of recommendations for parents in relation to the supervision and execution of the practice (DES, 2019, p. 16).

As each school currently sets its own policy, the myriad experiences of children in Ireland vis-à-vis type, amount and frequency of homework may vary, since it is dependent on the school they attend. This lack of uniformity is somewhat surprising, for the reason that “homework represents a substantial part of overall schoolwork for many children” (ESRI, 2009, p.5). Information about this topic is limited at present as there is a “dearth of Irish research on homework” (O’Toole et al., 2019, p. 30). However, findings from a relatively recent small-scale Irish study (90 completed questionnaires) indicated that most children in the primary school classes from junior infants to second class completed their homework in ten to twenty minutes, though some children took considerably longer (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, pp. 58-59). Results from the same study indicated that, for most children in the middle and senior classes, homework took thirty to forty minutes to complete, though notably for some children it took over two hours (pp. 58-59). Interestingly, in another recent Irish study, when asked what changes they would make to school if they could, most of the children involved in the relevant focus groups suggested a reduction in their work load, including, for example, less homework (Giannakaki, Flynn, Hayes & Fitzsimons, 2018, p. 45).

Of note, however, is that nine years ago, the IPPN (2010), in their Submission on Curriculum Reform, called for in-depth research and analysis to be undertaken into homework and its role in the primary education system (p. 4). The issue was raised because of serious concerns held by principals and teachers about the effect of homework, including an apprehension that it could be a source of stress between parents and their children (IPPN, 2010, p. 4). It appears that their request has largely gone unanswered, though recent research commissioned by the National Parents Council Primary (NPC) did consider the role of homework in assisting parental engagement with children’s learning in primary school (O’Toole et al., 2019). The aforementioned

review concluded that its role was inconclusive, though possibly useful if pertinent to the child and if parental involvement promoted independent learning (p. 71).

Definition and complexity of homework

Homework has been defined by Harris Cooper as “tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are meant to be carried out during noninstructional time” (Bembenutty, 2011a, p. 185). Though there is limited research in Ireland about the practice, in the United States of America (U.S.A.) it is characterised as a “widely debated, hot-button issue” (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 175). Researchers have grappled for years to ascertain what exact, if any, benefits accrue to children from completing homework. The issue is a complex one due to the fact that the practice of giving homework varies extensively vis-à-vis the amount and type given, when and where it is completed, whether or not there is parental involvement and whether or not teachers grade it (Coutts, 2004, pp. 182-183). Vatterott (2009) argued that research on homework is “especially problematic” (p. 57) as researchers are studying the effect of something that is happening not only outside of their control and direct observation but which also involves children and homework environments that differ.

Homework and academic achievement

A large body of research has been completed in North America about homework, including a number of synthesis studies conducted between 1983 and 2006 (Marzano, 2007, pp. 66-67). These studies often focused on whether or not homework raises the academic standards of students. Wahlberg, Paschal and Weinstein (1985) reported that a synthesis of fifteen empirical studies which had been carried out in the

U.S.A. and Canada between 1964 and 1981 indicated that homework gave rise to a consistent and large effect on the learning of both elementary and secondary school students, particularly if the homework was graded or commented on (p. 76). Following a subsequent in-depth synthesis study in the U.S.A., Cooper, Robinson and Patell (2006) opined similarly that “it would not be imprudent, based on the evidence in hand, to conclude that doing homework causes improved academic achievement” (p. 48). This finding however, came with the proviso that there was a “much stronger” (O’Toole, 2019, p. 34) correlation between homework and attainment for students in older classes. Notably, recent Turkish research has mirrored the 2006 findings of Cooper et al. (Baş, Şentürk and Cığerci, 2017).

Rudman (2014), however, citing a number of studies from the 1990s, argued that research that attempted to find a link between homework and academic achievement has “produced inconsistent and at times contradictory conclusions” (p. 14). Indeed, an earlier analysis of homework by Cooper in 1989, had led him to conclude that there was no evidence to show that the academic performance of elementary students was improved by any amount of homework (Farrow, Tymms & Henderson, 1999, p. 324). The validity of research on the issue has also been the subject of criticism. Trautwein and Köller (2003) queried the bone fides of relevant studies due to “the operationalization of homework and achievement” (p. 115) and the way in which data was handled. It has also been suggested that, as Cooper and his colleagues have completed extensive research in this area, there may be an overreliance on their work with the possible limitations that may bring in terms of the interpretation of study results (Vatterott, 2009, p. 64). Kohn (2007a), in fact, went so far as to suggest that in studies in the area some researchers misrepresent research done by other people or do not present their own data accurately (p. 79).

Despite the criticisms aimed at research about homework and achievement, Vatterott (2009) posited that ultimately the main findings from relevant studies indicate that students who do homework score higher in tests than those who do none (p. 59). Earlier this year, however, Bempechat (2019) argued that, as yet, a connection between academic attainment for elementary school children and homework had not been found (p. 38). The reality, it has been suggested, is that “no simple conclusions can be construed” (O’Toole et al., 2019, p. 36) when the relationship between homework and achievement is contemplated because of the complexity and sheer number of variables that have to be taken into account. For those students who do homework, the correlation between the amount of time spent on homework and attainment is unclear and achievement may be affected by other factors such as the student’s ability and the standard of teaching instruction received (Vatterott, 2009, pp. 60-61). Other considerations to be taken into account include the volume of homework given, its purpose and whether or not it is individualised (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017).

O’Toole et al. (2019) also noted that research in this area suggests that academic achievement is linked to “how students engage on homework” (p. 40) and the connection between engagement and student motivation, rather than to the volume of homework completed. Interestingly, in this regard, Farrow et al. (1999) noted in their research, that final year primary school children, who reported doing homework in certain core areas only once a month, scored higher in tests than those who completed homework more frequently (p. 336). In the circumstances, it is arguable that “the nature and strength of the relationship between homework and achievement” (Trautwein & Köller, 2003, pp. 142-143) is still uncertain and because of the complexity surrounding the issue further research is required, particularly in relation to primary school children, bearing in mind the scarcity of studies relating to this age group (O’Toole, 2019, p. 40).

Additional benefits of homework

Though the link between homework and academic achievement may be uncertain, researchers have proposed a number of other benefits for children and parents which justify the practice. Despite his own research findings Cooper still recommended giving homework to young children, as he posited that in the early elementary grades its benefit lay in fostering positive habits, attitudes, and character traits, whilst reinforcing the learning of skills taught in class and facilitating appropriate parental involvement (Manzaro & Pickering, 2007, p. 77). This last factor could be particularly important as extensive research shows that when parents are involved with their child's education in an active way, the child benefits (O'Toole et al., 2019, p.5).

Bempechat (2004), however, suggested that the advantage to homework lies in the fact that it "plays a critical long-term role in the development of children's achievement motivation" (p. 189) which enables children to develop into mature learners (p.195). She argued that completing homework gives children the time and experience to develop strategies for coping with challenges, whilst at the same time inculcating positive beliefs about achievement and study habits (p. 189). Other homework proponents have asserted that homework enables parents to observe what is happening in their child's school and plays a role in the development of children into lifelong learners by helping them to recognise that learning is not confined to school but can happen in different locations (Bembenutty, 2011b, p. 341).

Corno and Xu (2004) took a different perspective as they related homework's value to the fact that it helps to prepare children for employment because of its "potential to help develop a work ethic and important job management skills that are highly valued in the workplace" (p. 233). These skills include being able to organise time, forward plan, delay gratification and cope with mental and environmental

distractions (pp. 229-230). In contrast, Kohn (2007a) queried these suggested benefits to homework with the argument that there was a dearth of any evidence proving that students' attitudes or study habits improved because of homework completion (p. 82).

Research findings in 2014 indicate that parents in Ireland view homework as a multi-faceted practice with a wide variety of perceived benefits, including as a way of involving them in their child's education, as a means of assessing their child's ability and as a vehicle for alerting them to their child's struggles and progress throughout the school year (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p. 54).

The adverse effects of homework

Research has indicated, however, that homework can have a number of adverse effects too, ranging from facilitating dysfunctional parental involvement with homework to damaging students' attitudes to school (Cooper et al., 2006). It has also been asserted that children experience stress because of homework (Kravolec and Buell, 2001). In 1998, Xu and Corno published research following their completion of six case studies of children doing third-grade homework with their parents. This study underlined how homework can become an "emotionally charged event in families" (Corno and Xu, 2004, p. 232) following researcher observations of situations where children became distressed because they made repeated mistakes or became so exasperated with their homework that they had to stop doing it. Corno and Xu (2004) voiced the concern that having too many negative experiences like these could cause children to burn out prematurely or become turned off of homework (p. 232).

Interestingly, Katz, Buzukashvili and Feingold (2012) highlighted that daily homework related stress, though seemingly minor in nature, might build up to the point

that it could “cause emotional reactions that are greater than situational occasional stress” (p. 408). In Ireland in 2016, in an online homework survey of 5,752 parents by the NPC, 58% of the parents of junior/senior infants reported homework as stressful sometimes or all of the time, as did 65% of the parents of children in senior classes (Wayman, 2016). Jackson and Harbison (2014) also noted that almost two thirds of the ninety parents who took part in their research in Ireland indicated “that homework caused some friction at home” (p. 57), an issue which some parents identified as being caused by the frequent assignment of homework that was too challenging for their child.

The aforementioned findings are very concerning and specific research around homework related stress in Ireland is required without delay to evaluate the effect it is having on children. The DES has acknowledged that schools do contribute to the overall “physical, mental health and well-being of our young people” (DES, 2016, p. 1) and research has indicated a link between learning gains and “children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social and school wellbeing” (Smyth, 2015, p. 4). Homework reform, therefore, may be urgently required if the practice is found to be having an adverse effect on children.

Other perceived adverse effects of homework include the suggestion that parents worry that they will be criticised for their level of involvement with their child’s homework and that they resent having to “play the role of enforcer” (Kohn, 2007b, p. 35) to ensure it is completed. From a societal point of view, it has been asserted that students from economically underprivileged backgrounds do not live in environments that are conducive to successful homework completion and so they are disadvantaged compared to students who are better facilitated to complete same (Marzano & Pickering, 2007, p. 74). Finally, the argument has been made that if excessive homework is assigned, children lose out on the benefits of leisure time which include

time outdoors, family time, downtime and unstructured playtime (Vatterott, 2009, p. 22).

Parents' attitudes to homework

Gill and Schlossman (2004) asserted that, despite frequent media reports to the contrary, American parents had consistently supported homework (p. 180) with Ziegler positing, back in 1986, that parents like schools to give homework as they see it as evidence that a school is focused on its central purpose, that of teaching and learning (Rudman, 2014, p. 19). Coutts (2004) contended that as a general rule, parents view the potential benefits of homework as being related to academic achievement (p. 183) and recently in South Africa it was reported that “there is overwhelming support for the use of homework as a tool for learning among most of the parents in primary schools in Johannesburg” (Ndebele, 2018, p. 8). In Ireland 98% of the parents involved in a recent study noted that homework’s value was linked to a variety of reasons, including the fact that it facilitates parental involvement in students’ learning, it familiarises parents with teaching methods used in schools and it provides a link between school and home (Jackson and Harbison, 2014, p. 54).

Parental involvement in homework

Parental involvement in education encompasses a multitude of activities based on six types of participation ranging from parenting, communicating and volunteering to decision-making, collaborating with the community and learning at home, which incorporates helping with homework (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 25). Research evinces that “increased student success, enhanced parent and teacher satisfaction, and improved

school climate” (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017, p. 149) all result from increased parental involvement in the educational process.

Research focused specifically on parental engagement with homework suggests that this involvement positively effects the type of attributes that can contribute to a student’s achievement like self-regulation, attitudes to homework and perceptions of personal competence (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 206). Rudman (2014), however, argued that not much evidence has been found to support the theory that parental involvement in homework leads to academic attainment (p. 19). Interestingly, recent research in Australia, based on a large longitudinal study, suggests that children’s achievement was, on average, negatively affected when they received actual help with homework from their parents, whilst positive effects were linked to other types of parental involvement (Carmichael & MacDonald, 2016, p. 197). This seems to tally with similar findings reported by Cooper, Lindsay and Nye in 2000. On the other hand, Carmichael and MacDonald (2016) suggested that their negative findings might reflect the ability level of the children being helped (p. 207), which might have an effect on any conclusions that could be drawn from the research.

Parental involvement in homework covers a wide range of activities “from providing materials through helping with the material to dictating work techniques” (Bräu, Haring & Weyl, 2017, p. 65). Parents use different homework assistance strategies and these have been categorised as functional or dysfunctional (Bräu et al., 2017), alternatively described as supportive or intrusive help (Bempechat, 2019, p. 40). Functional or supportive assistance is defined as help that fosters a child’s independence and autonomy and as such is limited and mainly indirect, whilst conversely dysfunctional or intrusive assistance is controlling for the most part, interferes with the work being done by the student and ultimately may negatively affect a student’s

development (Bräu et al., 2017, p. 65). Research has suggested that schools should guide parents at all grades about how better to supervise and support their children during homework as it is “most often supervised either loosely or too authoritatively by adults” because they are not well enough informed in the matter (Corno and Xu, 2004, p. 232). Rudman (2014) also highlighted that if parents put pressure on children or do not know how to assist them with their homework then negative effects can occur (p. 18).

Therefore, it has been recommended that in helping at home parents should act as supportive agents and mentors rather than as instructors or tutors (Pressman et al., 2015, p. 311). It has also been suggested that if any guidance is to be offered to parents in this area any interventions designed should foster involvement “that is autonomy supportive rather than controlling, process rather than person focused, characterised by positive rather than negative affect, and accompanied by positive rather than negative beliefs about children’s potential” (Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007, p. 399). The rationale for this is that supportive help is linked to higher academic attainment, while intrusive help is associated with the opposite effect (Bempechat, 2019; Cooper, Lindsay and Nye, 2000). Interestingly, research has shown that while some students prefer parental assistance when they were doing their homework, for others “parental homework involvement is an important stressor” (Knollmann and Wild, 2007, p. 64). Of note however, is that in 2013 58% of children who completed a Kids Life and Times survey in Northern Ireland rated getting assistance with their homework as the most helpful thing that their parents/guardians did to help with their education (Minogue and Schubotz, 2013).

Conclusion

Homework is a practice that is “variously regarded as a necessary component to education, a worrisome reality for youth, and source of stressful interaction between parents and children” (Pressman et al., 2015, p. 298). Despite the research that has been completed internationally there is still a lack of clarity surrounding the benefits that it may provide to children in terms of academic achievement or otherwise but it seems clear that it can have some disadvantages, including being a source of stress for children and parents. Research in the area is fraught with complexities because homework practice has so many variables, including each child’s age, motivation and ability, whether or not there is parental involvement and if so, the extent and type of the engagement. Questions have also been raised about the validity of some research by homework detractors like Kohn (2007b) who query whether homework persists not because it can be shown to be valuable but because it is traditional (p. 38). Despite the concerns voiced by the IPPN and regular newspaper articles detailing the difficulties caused for primary school children and their parents by homework (Hogan, 2018; McMahon, 2018) Irish research on the topic is very sparse while “giving homework remains commonplace throughout our education system” (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p. 48). It is timely therefore to consider parental involvement with homework during primary school and resultant parental perspectives concerning its value, efficacy and effects within the home.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter details the aim of this study, the relevant strategy which was chosen to conduct this piece of research and the rationale for that choice. An explanation of the research method utilised in the study along with the strategy chosen for sampling will follow, in advance of a discussion of the pilot study and the process used for collection of the relevant data for analysis. The chapter will then conclude with a consideration of the reliability and validity of this piece of research, an examination of the positionality and philosophical worldview of the researcher, together with a reflection on appropriate ethical considerations and the study limitations.

Research design

The aim of this study is to accurately determine parental involvement in, and resultant parental perspectives on the value and efficacy of homework in primary school and on its effects within the home. O'Toole et al. (2019) noted that "homework is an area of children's education that could be said to almost universally affect children and parents" (p. 29). However, the practice is so complex that it would be unreasonable to expect that any research on the subject will produce a straight forward, general finding which applies to all children (Cooper & Valentine, 2001, p. 144). Research in the area is arguably therefore more suited to a qualitative approach, rather than one based on numerical research, as using a qualitative approach facilitates the extraction of "an in-depth opinion from participants" (Dawson, 2013, p. 15) as part of an exploration of their experiences, behaviour and attitudes in connection with a particular issue (p. 14).

Chosen research approach: Semi-structured Interviews

Following an examination of the attributes of a number of qualitative research methods used for collecting data, it was decided to utilise interviews for this research. As a tool for data collection interviews are flexible, in that they allow the interviewer to retain control over the interview, whilst at the same time allowing for spontaneity and the interviewer has the opportunity to record information communicated in a number of multi-sensory ways (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p. 506). Most importantly, interviews enable an issue to be explored in depth and consequently give the interviewer an insight into why and how people make connections between different events, ideas, values, behaviours and opinions (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 506). It has been posited that one of the greatest strengths of an interview is “its capacity to seek explanations by exploring individual view-points” (Drever, 1995, p. 5) and this merit was considered particularly relevant to the topic being explored in this research.

There are a number of interview types, including structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Bell & Waters, 2018, pp. 211-213). After analysing the pros and cons of the aforementioned options, it was noted that semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for investigating “issues in educational policy and practice” (Drever, 1995, p. 17). With a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has an agenda of issues and questions to be discussed and answered but the order in which the topics have to be addressed is not strict and this flexibility allows the interviewee to develop their thoughts and ideas and, in the process, elaborate more extensively on the issues raised in the interview (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). This is facilitated by the interviewer’s ability to probe the interviewee for information and “investigate motives and feelings” (Bell & Waters, 2018, p. 210) during the process of teasing out a response to open-ended

questions. Ultimately therefore the semi-structured interview was chosen as the most appropriate method for this small-scale research project.

In addition, it was decided to conduct one-to-one interviews with parents, as opposed to group interviews. The rationale for this included ease with regard to making interview arrangements with parents and also for interview control, as the interviewer only has to question and guide one person at a time through the interview process and then make sense of one person's responses (Denscombe, 2011, p. 176). In addition, transcribing an interview involving one interviewee is easier than transcribing one with a number of voices overlapping and crucially, in the subsequent data analysis, it is far easier to link specific ideas with specific individuals, if each person gives their opinion in separate interviews (Denscombe, 2011, p. 176).

Sample selection (n = 11)

In order to select a sample of parents for interview it was decided to use a purposive sampling strategy which is “a non-probability form of sampling” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). This decision was made with the knowledge that the sample chosen simply represented itself and not the wider population (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 217), which imposed consequent limitations vis-à-vis generalisation. The criteria for sample selection was that the parent had at least one child attending mainstream primary school in Dublin, who was assigned homework regularly and that the said parent was involved with homework to some extent. The strategy incorporated an initial convenience sample as the first three parents who were chosen for interview were “simply available to the researcher” (Bryman, 2012, p. 201) from an accessibility point of view. The children of these parents attended three different schools in Dublin. Snowball sampling was utilised thereafter, whereby the aforementioned three parents identified and

facilitated contact with other parents who qualified for inclusion in this research project (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 57). Eight parents, who had been contacted in this way, were interviewed, giving a total of eleven interviewees on whose interviews the results of this research are based. The children, whose parents participated in this study, attended six mainstream schools in Dublin.

Data Collection

Following the design of an appropriate schedule, a parent known to the researcher completed a pilot interview to facilitate a trial run of the interview in a realistic manner and to obtain relevant information from this parent regarding their interpretation of and reaction to the interview questions (Drever, 1995, p. 56). The responses collected in the pilot interview did not however form part of the research data which has been analysed in this thesis. In light of the pilot interview though, the original interview schedule was very slightly amended with regard to the phrasing of some of the questions. The amended schedule was then used in the subsequent interviews with the eleven participants with the aim of obtaining rich data for analysis in relation to the research objective (See Appendix A).

Interview questions explored the participants' views and understanding of the purpose and efficacy of homework and their opinions of the benefits and challenges relating to same. Participants were also asked to detail their involvement with their children with regard to homework completion and their opinion of whether homework had an effect on the relationship between parent and child. The interviews were completed over a three-week time frame and took place mornings and evenings midweek, with the interview location being either the interviewee's home or the researcher's home, depending on each interviewee's preference from a convenience

point of view. Each interview was recorded on two devices after consent had been obtained. From a data collection perspective, it was noted that field notes taken during an interview are advantageous vis-à-vis participants' non-verbal communication throughout the interview process, in that "they can fill in some of the relevant information that a recording alone might miss" (Denscombe, 2011, p. 187). Therefore, field notes specifying significant features of the information both heard and observed throughout each interview were also taken (Bryman, 2018, p. 447).

Data Analysis – Thematic approach

Analysis of the research data was an iterative process. It involved the initial preparation of the information, the subsequent implementation of "different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 183), followed by a representation of the information and finally the interpretation of its larger meaning. To begin with, the recording of each interview was transcribed which brought the data closer for analysis (Denscombe, 2011, p. 275). In total eleven interview transcripts were transcribed and then collated with the information detailed in field notes taken at each interview. Once the raw information was available in written form the researcher began a "process of 'immersion' in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 204) by reading and re-reading it to formulate an overview of the research and to form a general impression of what the participants had communicated during the interview process (Creswell, 2009, p. 185).

Thereafter a thematic analysis approach to the data was adopted in order to discover, interpret and report patterns existing therein (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor & Barnard, 2014, p. 271). In effect, the content of the interviews was coded in order to "cluster" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p. 271) key issues arising from the research

together. This involved categorising all of the sentences of the text data from the interviews, labelling each category and then using this coding system to generate four themes which represented the main findings of the study (Creswell, 2009, pp. 186-189). The data were then represented by means of an in-depth discussion of each of the themes, inclusive of “multiple perspectives from individuals, and quotations” (Creswell, 2009, p. 189). In the final step of the analysis, new questions that arose from the research were noted.

Reliability and validity

All research is limited by bias (Crowley-Henry, 2009, p. 60) and in the qualitative research paradigm, any knowledge produced reflects the subjectivity of the parties taking part in the process “even if only in some very minor way” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 36). However, it is posited that by minimizing bias, greater validity can be achieved in interviews (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 271). To minimize bias in this project the researcher was very well informed on the subject matter, structured the stages of the interview clearly, formulated the questions carefully so that there was no confusion about the meaning of each one, listened carefully in a sensitive and empathic way and allowed the participants the space and opportunity to answer questions at a speed and in a way that suited them (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 273).

With interviews, Bryman (2012) highlighted the issue of the social desirability effect, wherein interviewees might answer questions on the basis of “their perception of the social desirability of those answers” (p. 228). Accordingly, every effort was made to create a non-judgemental atmosphere at all times throughout the interviews and the interviewees were regularly reassured of the confidential nature of the process. From a validity point of view, it is posited that the findings which emerged from this study are

solidly founded as a relatively long interview period (an average of twenty-seven minutes) was spent with each parent during the collection of the empirical data (Denscombe, 2011, p. 299).

Researcher positionality

This research project was completed by a final year female PME student in Marino Institute of Education (MIE), who is the parent of two children in the senior end of primary school who receive homework regularly. As a parent, the researcher considered that homework comprised a significant element of her children's school lives, one which extended beyond the classroom and into her home. She was interested, therefore, in the reality that very little research has been completed in Ireland in relation to the educational practice (O'Toole et al., 2019, p. 30) and the fact that, during her teacher training programme, no guidance was provided to students pertaining either to the rationale for setting homework or to considerations to be taken into account when assigning it, including differentiating for individual students.

Ethical considerations

The Marino Ethics in Research Committee of MIE granted full ethical approval for this study and the steps proposed in the application process were adhered to scrupulously. In addition, the study was completed in line with the fourth edition of the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Particular emphasis was placed on treating the study participants respectfully at all times (Dawson, 2013, p. 149). Prior to interview all participants were furnished with a letter of information which set out both details of the research being undertaken and

the role they would play in the study (Appendix B). The participants were informed that interviews would be recorded, transcribed and stored thereafter for a limited period. In addition, they were given the option of choosing the interview location and advised both verbally and in writing that they were free at any time, without the need for any explanation, to withdraw from the study, in which case all information received from them up to that point would be destroyed immediately.

Participants were also assured, both in written and verbal form, that their information would be kept confidential at all times during the process (in compliance with GDPR guidelines) and no one would have access to the information they provided, save for the interviewer. In this regard, pseudonyms were used instead of real names during the project. Consent forms were signed before each interview commenced and these are kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's residence. In addition, the transcripts of the interviews together with the original audio recordings are contained on an encrypted personal laptop and these will be destroyed in due course as per MIE requirements.

Limitations of the methodology

This study had to be completed in a relatively short length of time. The reality therefore was that a practical research method and sample size were chosen to ensure the relevant data collection and analysis would be completed within the time limitations of the course. The sample was therefore restricted to eleven interviewees and as the sample chosen was not representative of the wider population, there is a negligible chance of generalising the results of this study (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 218).

During each interview every effort was made by the interviewer to present herself as neutral and not reveal any of her biases and values (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 517) but it could be argued that the three parents who knew her were already aware of these. However, she was confident she had not ever discussed her attitude to homework with these parents and any one or all of these interviews would have been discounted if she had formed the opinion that they had been compromised in this regard.

A final limitation relates to one of the questions in the study which involved parents disclosing information about their relationship with their child. It is possible that parents may not wish to disclose anything negative in this regard to any researcher and therefore their answers to this question may be tempered accordingly.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the rationale behind the selection of the research paradigm used to obtain the project data and the methodological steps taken throughout the process of thematically analysing same. Furthermore, the reliability and validity of the research, its limitations and relevant ethical considerations have been scrutinised, paying particular attention to the merits of each epistemic position. Finally, the researcher's positionality has also been disclosed to reveal all information that may be pertinent to the study.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to examine, interpret and discuss four main themes that emerged following the thematic analysis of data generated during semi-structured interviews with parents of children, who attend mainstream primary schools in Dublin, and who regularly receive homework.

Data Demographics (n= 11)

The parent who completed the pilot interview and the sample group of eleven parents (n = 11) interviewed for the study were female, which was not an intentional arrangement. It is submitted that this may have arisen as the three parents known to the researcher, who facilitated the snowball sampling selection, were female and they recommended parents known to them who were eligible for the study. The interviewees' experiences of homework at the time of the research related to twenty-one children (twelve boys and nine girls) who represented all classes within the Irish primary school system. Seven boys and three girls were students in classes ranging from junior infants to second class and five boys and six girls were students in classes ranging from third class to sixth class. The children attended six mainstream, co-educational schools in Dublin. Two of the schools had a DEIS Band Two status but it is proposed that this has no statistical relevance to this study as the parents whose children attended these schools did not present as more socially disadvantaged than the other parents in the study.

Data Analysis

The research data was thematically analysed, using a system of coding of the answers provided by the parents during the interviews and recording the emotions they displayed throughout the process. The information was subsequently collated to group the collected data under common themes. Four main themes emerged as follows:

- Parental beliefs in learning gains from homework.
- Homework as an early warning system for problems.
- Homework, even if linked to occasional stress, does not have an adverse effect on parent/child relationships.
- Parental involvement in homework: a positive functional approach as children mature.

Parental beliefs in learning gains from homework

A key theme to emerge from this research project is one of strong parental beliefs that homework completion has the capacity to assist primary school children to improve their academic achievement in curriculum areas. Most parents in this study (n = 9/11) opined that homework gave them an insight into their child's academic ability, a benefit also noted in earlier Irish research (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p. 54). The same parents (n = 9/11) also advised that, in their opinions, completing homework helped to improve their children's academic performance. Parent # 2 recounted that her daughter "had difficulty with reading at a certain time and particularly when maths became problems as opposed to just pure numbers". This participant attributed a one hundred per cent improvement for her child in these subjects to the practice she did through homework as she felt "the more she did homework, the more it benefitted her".

On questioning, this cohort of parents (n = 9/11) credited this improvement in attainment to the fact that homework engaged their children in repeating work and re-practising skills they learned during the school day, a perspective illustrated by Parent # 4 who advised that “systematically doing something similar every day helps them learn and it reiterates what they are learning in school”. Parent # 7 opined that it made sense that improvement would happen through daily homework repetition when learning phonics, reading and writing as “doing something twice is better than once”, with parent # 5 agreeing that homework benefitted her children academically as it acted as “a practise session for the learning” that was done in the classroom during the school day.

This parent group (n = 9/11) were mindful however that homework does not necessarily provide an equal learning gain at all times or to all children because, as parent # 5 put it, “the experience of homework and if it’s of benefit to your life is dependent on you and how you are doing it”. The relevance of the individuality of the child was highlighted by all nine parents (n = 9/11), with parent # 2 noting that “homework benefits the child in the subject that they’re least proficient in”. From the point of view of context, six parents (n = 6/11) indicated that there was no advantage to be gained by completing homework if a child was too tired to engage in the process properly and five parents (n = 5/11) noted that homework should not be too long or otherwise, as parent # 6 reported, children get “jaded” and lose focus.

As evidenced in chapter two, more research is required to clarify whether or not homework contributes to academic achievement in primary school and if it does, in what format, under what conditions and to what extent. In 1989, Cooper had concluded that achievement gains in elementary (i.e. primary) school had no association with homework (O’Toole, 2019, p. 34). However, subsequent research findings support the view that there is a positive link between homework and academic attainment, with the

proviso that the correlation is not as strong for younger students (Cooper et al., 2006; Baş, Şentürk and Cığerci, 2017). The finding from this study would appear to support the research that correlates homework with academic attainment. However, it is relevant that this finding is based on nine parents' (n = 9/11) personal perceptions of achievement gains made by their children as a result of homework completion and it is not based on any form of objective testing. For this reason, it is important to exercise caution and resist generalising this finding in any way.

Homework as an early warning system for problems

The second theme to emerge from this study is one of strong parental views of homework as a useful process for flagging any academic issues that arise for children during the school year. Eight parents (n = 8/11) opined that a significant benefit of homework was that it acted as a means by which a parent was alerted if their child was finding a particular curriculum area or skill being taught at school challenging or if there was a gap in the child's learning, with parent # 2 describing it succinctly as “an early warning system” for problems.

Interestingly, seven of the aforementioned parents (n = 7/11) reported that one of their children had struggled with an aspect of school work at some stage since starting school (with five reporting challenges within the mathematics curriculum). All of these parents (n = 7/11) noted that the issue came to their attention during homework, with parent # 5 recounting that “I did see that N had a lot of his sums wrong and I thought ‘why are you getting so many wrong?’ So, I asked him to show me what he was doing”. Some of these parents (n = 6/11) then took the opportunity to personally help the child with the specific issue if they felt they could. Parent # 10, who realised her daughter did not understand subtraction, advised that she “took about five minutes to explain it and E

got it...it wasn't actually difficult one on one". Recent research queries the effectiveness of parents giving direct help with homework, but it is possible that the relevant findings may be linked to situations where parents help "more than five nights a week" (Carmichael & MacDonald, 2016, p. 207) as opposed to occasional direct help when a specific difficulty arises for a child. As an alternative to helping directly, or in addition to this, six parents (n = 6/11) requested and obtained assistance from the class teacher, with parent # 9 noting that her daughter received extra help in school with mathematics after the teacher was advised of the child's difficulty with related homework. Some participants in Jackson and Harbison's (2014) recent Irish research ostensibly referenced this benefit of homework too, when they referred to it as "a way of identifying their child's weaknesses and strengths" (p. 54) but the prevalence of this opinion is not clear. As noted previously, this study is so limited that generalisation of the finding is not possible to any extent.

During her interview, parent # 3 suggested that this benefit of homework could be linked to an academic benefit for her children, because if issues arose "I might be able to help them more". In addition, parent # 8 reasoned that if a problem for her child became evident through homework, she could act as an "advocate" for the child with the teacher and ensure that, as had been the experience of parent # 2's daughter, "she got the right help at the right time". This parent was keen to stress that if an issue for her child only became apparent in an end of year school report, it would be too late to help as "you can't go back on the time then". It is arguable therefore that if homework facilitates a child receiving help with academic struggles as they arise throughout the school year, this would have a knock-on benefit for the child in terms of academic achievement as any gaps or misunderstandings in learning would be identified and remedied promptly. This may be of particular relevance to certain children. Parent # 2 advised that her daughter "C was very quiet so she wouldn't actually tell me anything

that was going on in school”. It is posited therefore that this benefit of homework may be especially important if a child is unable or unwilling for any reason to self-declare any difficulty that they are experiencing with academic studies.

Notably, when the subject of homework benefits was discussed, none of the parents (n = 11) referenced its potential to develop children’s motivation (Bempechat, 2004) or to develop children into lifelong learners (Bembenutty, 2011b) or to develop children’s work ethic and job management skills (Corno and Xu, 2004). In fact, eight parents (n = 8/11) listed homework’s only benefits as those of a learning tool and a warning system for academic problems. It might be worth researching therefore whether parental perspectives on homework would change if parents were informed of relevant evidence-based research about it and if the possible benefits and disadvantages of the practice were highlighted appropriately.

Homework, even if linked to occasional stress, does not have an adverse effect on parent/child relationships.

Another key theme to emerge from this study is one of strong parental beliefs that homework, even if linked to occasional stress, does not detrimentally affect parent/child relationships. In 2010, the IPPN highlighted the possibility of homework causing a lot of stress between children and their parents (p. 4). In this study four parents (n = 4/11) reported that their children never found homework a stressful activity, while six parents (n = 6/11) advised that their children found it stressful on occasion only. However, parent # 11, who has a child with special educational needs (SEN), advised that her son was regularly overwhelmed by his homework and though it was differentiated somewhat, it still caused him consistent stress.

The parents of the children who experienced homework related stress (n = 7/11) advised that the main reasons it arose was either a child's tiredness or his/her perception of having excessive homework. Parent # 3 noted that her son occasionally left most of his writing assignments to the end of the week, which "was really stressful, because in his head, having to write six sentences and then find all the words and then draw the picture...in his head, that seemed to be a huge amount of homework". Interestingly, these parents, bar one, (n = 6/11) indicated that homework stress was rarely related to the actual content. This seems to contrast with Jackson and Harbison's (2014) study wherein homework that was "consistently too difficult for the child" (p. 57) was reported as one of the reasons for causing friction in the home.

The parents' experiences, unsurprisingly, matched those of their children, with four parents (n = 4/11) reporting that they never found homework stressful personally. Six parents (n = 6/11) reported homework as occasionally stressful, usually if they were under time pressure or as parent # 1 described it, "if you have to get the homework done and make the dinner and have a three-year-old screaming at you...that part of it is stressful". Parent # 11, however, found homework consistently stressful, as her son's SEN meant that it took a long time to complete each day and she had to provide him with a high level of support.

It has been suggested that homework related stress could evoke seemingly disproportionate emotions (Katz et al., 2012, p. 408) but this study's relevant participants (n = 7/11) did not report unusually heightened emotions at times when homework proved stressful. Of note though is that six of these parents (n = 6/11) only had to deal with homework related stress periodically. In addition, all seven parents (n = 7/11) had dealt with homework over a number of years and they had arguably developed strategies for minimising homework related tension when it arose, which

may have helped to offset the levels of stress experienced in the home. During the interviews, parents detailed strategies including simply telling the child “to give it a break and then come back to it later” (parent # 4), postponing homework to the following morning (n = 3/11) or writing a note to explain any unfinished homework to the teacher (n = 3/11).

Interestingly, a number of parents (n = 7/11) felt that homework actually benefitted their relationship with their children as it allowed them to show an interest in and to gain an insight into their child’s overall educational experience, including the social and emotional side of school. Parent # 5 described it as “a chance for connection...an opportunity to come into their world”, whilst parent # 2 described it as a “conversation opener” about the school day, a benefit also referenced in earlier Irish research (Jackson and Harbison, 2014, p. 54). In fact, six parents (n = 6/11) reported homework as an enjoyable experience at times, with parent # 8 linking her enjoyment to a feeling of camaraderie, of being “in it together” and therefore feeling a part of her daughter’s learning.

At the end of the interviews parents was asked if they felt their relationships with their children had been affected because of homework and in what way. The majority of parents (n =10/11) reported that, overall, homework either had a positive effect (n =5/11) or a neutral effect (n = 5/11) on their relationships, a finding which might assuage the concerns of the IPPN to some extent. The reality for these parents (n =10/11) was that homework, even when it caused stress occasionally, did not detrimentally affect their relationships with their children. However, parent # 11, whose child has SEN, advised that the only arguments at home were “always related to homework” so, in her opinion, homework had adversely affected her relationship with her child.

During the interviews, the parents whose children experienced occasional stress with homework (n = 6/11), gave the impression that it comprised an ordinary life stress and the fact that it did not occur daily was significant. However, the effect of consistent homework related stress on the life of parent # 11 and her child was very worrying. Accordingly, it is posited that research should be completed, without delay, to ascertain and record the homework experiences of parents with children in mainstream schools who have special educational needs. It seems likely that if specific changes need to be made around homework for some children, then the starting point for reform will be relevant findings about the extent and essence of the problem that needs to be tackled.

Parental involvement in homework: a positive functional approach as children mature

The final theme to emerge from this research is the adoption by parents of a functional assistance approach to their involvement with homework as children mature. When asked if they had ever been given advice by a teacher about parental engagement with homework, the entire cohort (n = 11/11) advised that they had been given class guidelines for the length of time that homework should last but only two parents (n = 2/11) were given any advice regarding the type of assistance, if any, they should offer. This appears to support Corno and Xu's (2004) contention that parents "tend to receive little to no guidance from schools" (p. 232) about effective homework supervision.

All of the study participants (n = 11) had established a general routine to facilitate homework being done at a consistent time each day and all were involved with their children's homework to varying degrees. Seven parents (n = 7/11) regularly collected their children from school and homework was completed in the manner described by parent # 2, whereby children "come in straight after school, sit up at the

counter and do their homework”. The remaining parents (n = 4/11) were working full time but caregivers facilitated the children completing their homework as close to the end of the school day as possible. These working parents also arranged to directly supervise homework at least one day each week, with parent # 5 remarking that she viewed Thursday as a “catch up day” to recap on how the homework had gone that week. All of the parents (n = 11) indicated that they tried to ensure that all homework was completed each week.

Interestingly, despite the lack of guidance on the issue, the participants in this study seem to have adopted the type of functional strategy of homework assistance that is mooted to have “long-term beneficial effects on students’ motivation and commitment” (Bräu et al., 2017, p. 65). Four parents (n = 4/11) who had children in first class or below stated that they sat with these children while they completed their homework because of their young age, the fact that they were learning to read and write and because, as parent # 1 noted, some of the homework is “kind of designed by the school so that there is a certain level of parental involvement”. However, all of the parents (n = 9/11) with children from second class upwards (bar one whose child has SEN) adopted more of a supportive, supervisory and checking role vis-à-vis homework, with the amount of their direct involvement decreasing as the children moved through the classes. Parent # 4 noted that whilst she was more “hands on” with her son in first class, “the other two in third and fourth can work completely independently”. These parents (n = 9/11), however, reported staying in close proximity to their children during homework time so that they were available, if needed, if any problems arose, or so they could partake in general conversations around school life or, if necessary, ensure all homework was completed and signed off. It is posited that these parents’ approach to homework embodied an “autonomy supportive” (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p.399) type of engagement. Indeed, parent # 9 advised that she had recently ceded full responsibility to

her fifth-class children to ensure that they had completed all of their homework as “they are responsible now at the age they are to make sure that they have everything done”. O’Toole et al. (2019) noted recently that in order to be useful, parental involvement with homework should promote and not limit “independent learning” (p. 71) and it is posited that the parents in this study were intent on enabling their children to develop independence, where possible, in this regard.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed that, whilst the participants in this research project were involved with their children’s homework to varying degrees, their involvement, once children mastered reading and writing, supported their children’s learning autonomy. However, it was still sufficiently supervisory to allow them to be alerted if any aspect of homework was problematic for their children. In addition, the chapter disclosed strong parental perspectives on homework as a practice which helps to improve a child’s academic performance and acts as an early warning system if a child is struggling with school work or if there is a gap in learning. The chapter also detailed strong parental beliefs that homework, even if linked to occasional stress, does not adversely affect the parent/child relationship.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research question which formed the basis for this project, followed by a summary of the major findings gleaned from data generated during semi-structured interviews with eleven participants in this small-scale Dublin based study. The chapter will thereafter conclude with a detail of the observations, conclusions and recommendations that presented from these relevant findings.

Research question and Summary of Findings

The rationale for this study was to answer a research question which queried the manner of parental involvement with homework at primary school level and resultant parental perspectives on its value, efficacy and effects within the home. With the knowledge that an interview simply gives an interviewee's "perception of the phenomenon of interest at that particular point in time" (Merriam, 2009, p. 114), this research question was answered by interviewing a cohort of eleven parents (n = 11) in Dublin in 2019.

The findings indicate that the majority of parents (n = 9/11) believe that homework is valuable as a device for helping with learning gains for children. It was acknowledged however that the extent of the benefit can vary depending on the individual child and on the context within which homework is completed. These parents (n = 9/11) opined that homework helped their children to improve academically and they attributed this to the fact that it engaged them in the repetition of work and the re-practice of skills that they had learned during the school day.

The second major finding is that most parents (n = 8/11) maintain that homework acts as an early warning system for parents which highlights if a child has any academic difficulties or deficiencies. These parents (n = 8/11) acknowledged this as valuable in that it facilitates children receiving appropriate assistance in a timely manner to ameliorate problems. Seven parents (n = 7/11) had, in fact, been alerted to issues for their children during homework.

A further key finding is parental beliefs that homework does not adversely affect the relationship between parent and child, even though it can engender a variety of emotional responses from children and parents, depending on the time and circumstances under which it is completed. All but one parent (n = 10/11) advised that homework had either a positive or neutral effect on their relationship with their children. The proviso to this finding, however, is that the position may be different if homework gives rise to consistent stress for a parent and child.

The last notable finding is that, despite a lack of direction from schools, parents have adopted a functional assistance approach to their involvement with homework, once children can read and write. This type of involvement, recommended by a number of researchers (Bräu, et al., 2017; O'Toole et al., 2019), promotes independent learning, as children mature through the primary school system.

Observations, Conclusions and Recommendations

Homework is a very complex subject to research, as evidenced in chapter two. However, it is posited that it is deserving of attention as it is a means by which parents can be involved in their child's education (Epstein et al., 2002) and "the importance of parental involvement and engagement is so well established that it stands as one of the

most agreed-upon principles of good educational practice” (O’Toole, 2019, p. 11). This study could be seen as an addition to the small body of Irish research about homework, with the limitation that it is a snapshot of the majority view of one relatively homogeneous cohort of parents in Dublin in 2019, who are relatively satisfied with their current homework experiences, as outlined above.

But what about the experiences of parents who have children with SEN, parents who have English as an additional language or parents from different socio-economic backgrounds and cultures? What also do we know of the experiences of children, teachers, principals and boards of management in Ireland around homework? It is posited that all children deserve homework that is as effective as possible and at a minimum it should not be damaging to them in any way. In 2014, Jackson and Harbison called for homework to be radically overhauled in Ireland and they posited that all parties involved should be afforded the opportunity to give their opinions on the issue (p. 61). This call is echoed, particularly in light of the adverse homework experience reported by parent # 11 and in light of the reported levels of stress around homework in Ireland, as detailed in chapter two (Jackson & Harbison, 2014; Wayman, 2016).

Finally, though research on homework, as evidenced in this thesis, can be contradictory and does not lend itself to definitive advice, it is posited that it is a topic that should be included, in some capacity, during teacher training, on the basis that pre-service teachers should be equipped with “a better understanding of how classroom and home-based learning work together” (Trenholm & Chinnappan, 2019, p. 50). It may be that teachers are obliged to assign homework in line with school policies but it makes sense that they should be aware of homework’s complexity and “multidimensional characteristics” (Trenholm & Chinnappan, 2019, p. 54) and of relevant up to date research before they become stakeholders in the practice themselves.

Reference List

- Baş, G., Şentürk, C., & Ciğerci, F. M. (2017). Homework and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review of research. *Issues in Educational Research*, 27(1), 31-50. Retrieved November 14, 2018, from <http://www.iier.org.au/iier27/bas.html>
- Bell, J., & Waters, S. (2018). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers*. London, England: Open University Press.
- Bembenutty, H. (2011a). The first word: Homework's theory, research and practice. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 22(2), 185-192. doi: 10.1177/1932202X1102200201
- Bembenutty, H. (2011b). The last word: An interview with Harris Cooper – research, policies, tips, and current perspectives on homework. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 22(2), 340 -349. doi: 10.1177/1932202X1102200207
- Bempechat, J. (2004). The motivational benefits of homework: A social-cognitive perspective. *Theory Into Practice*, 43(3), 189-196. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip4303_4
- Bempechat, J. (2019). The case for (quality) homework: Why it improves learning, and how parents can help. *Education Next*, 19(1), 36-43 Retrieved November 16, 2018, from <https://www.educationnext.org/case-for-quality-homework-improves-learning-how-parents-can-help/>
- Bräu, K., Haring, M. & Weyl, C. (2017). Homework practices: Role conflicts concerning parental involvement. *Ethnography and Education*, 12(1), 64-77. doi: 10.1080/17457823.2016.1147970
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research, a practical guide for beginners*. London, England: SAGE Publications Ltd.

- British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition*. Retrieved May 6, 2019, from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods, 4th Edition*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Carmichael, C., & MacDonald, A. (2016). Parental influences on primary school children's mathematics achievement: insights from the longitudinal study of Australian children. *Education 3-13 International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 44(2), 197-211. doi: 10.1080/03004279.2014.939684
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. London, England: Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Cooper, H., Lindsay, J. J., & Nye, B. (2000). Homework in the home: How student, family, and parenting-style differences relate to the homework process. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, 464-487. doi: 10.1006/ceps.1999.1036
- Cooper, H., Robinson, J. C., & Patall, E. A. (2006). Does homework improve academic achievement? A synthesis of research, 1987-2003. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(1), 1-62. doi: 10.3102/00346543076001001
- Cooper, H., & Valentine, J. C. (2001). Using research to answer practical questions about homework. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 143-153. doi: 10.1207/S15326985EP3603_1
- Corno, L., & Xu, J. (2004). Homework as the job of childhood. *Theory Into Practice*, 43(3), 227-233. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip4303_9

- Coutts, P. M. (2004). Meanings of homework and implications for practice. *Theory Into Practice*, 43(3), 182-188. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip4303_3
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Crowley-Henry, M. (2009). Ethnography: visions and versions. In J. Hogan, P. Dolan, & P. Donnelly (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: Theory and its practical application: A guide for dissertation students* (pp. 37-63). Cork, Ireland: Oak Tree Press.
- Dawson, C. (2013). *Introduction to research methods: A practical guide for anyone undertaking a research project*. Oxford, England: How To Books Ltd.
- Denscombe, M. (2011). *The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press.
- Department of Education and Science Primary Branch (DESPB). (1990). *Circular Letter 20/90*. Retrieved December 7, 2018, from https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/pc20_90.pdf
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2016). Promotion of Healthy Lifestyles in Primary Schools. Circular 0013/2016. Retrieved December 7, 2018, from <https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2016/13.pdf>
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2019). *A guide to the Irish education system*. Retrieved December 7, 2018, from <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/A-Guide-to-the-Irish-Education-System.pdf>

- Doctoroff, G. L. & Arnold, D. H. (2017). Doing homework together: The relation between parenting strategies, child engagement, and achievement. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 48, 103-113. doi: 10.1016/j.appdev.2017.01.001
- Drever, E. (1995). *Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research: A teacher's guide*. Glasgow, Scotland: Scottish Council for Research in Education.
- Đurišić, M. & Bunijevac, M. (2017). Parental involvement as a important factor for successful education. *CEPS Journal*, 7(3), 137-153. Retrieved December 6, 2018, from <https://ojs.cepsj.si/index.php/cepsj/article/view/291>
- Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). (2009). *Growing up in Ireland: Key findings: 9-Year-Olds, No.3: The education of 9-Year-Olds*. Retrieved November 20, 2018, from <https://ww.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2015-07/No 3 The Education of 9 Year Olds.pdf>
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Clark Salinas, K., Rodriguez Jansorn, N., and Van Voorhis, F. L. (2002). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, third edition*. Retrieved May 6, 2019, from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/ERIC-ED467082/pdf/ERIC-ED467082.pdf>
- Farrow, S., Tymms, P., & Henderson, B. (1999). Homework and attainment in primary schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25(3), 323-341. doi: 10.1080/0141192990250304
- Gill, B. P., & Schlossman, S. L. (2004). Villain or savior? The American discourse on homework, 1850 – 2003. *Theory Into Practice*, 43(3), 174-181. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip4303_2

- Giannakaki, M-S., Flynn, P., Hayes, N., & Fitzsimons, S. (2018). *Teachers' beliefs about education and children's voice practices in the island of Ireland: Final project report*. Retrieved November 20, 2018 from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Paula_Flynn/publication/327111277_Teachers'_beliefs_about_education_and_children's_voice_practices_in_the_Island_of_Ireland/links/5bbcb0f34585159e8d8f50ce/Teachers-beliefs-about-education-and-childrens-voice-practices-in-the-Island-of-Ireland.pdf
- Hogan, J. (2018, September 24). 'I didn't like homework as a child, but I hate it even more as a parent'. *The Irish Times*. Retrieved November 20, 2018, from <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/i-didn-t-like-homework-as-a-child-but-i-hate-it-even-more-as-a-parent-1.3634578>
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Battiato, A. C., Walker, J. M. T., Reed, R. P., DeJong, J. M., & Jones, K. P. (2001). Parental involvement in homework. *Educational Psychologist, 36*(3), 195-209. doi: 10.1207/S15326985EP3603_5
- Irish Primary Principals' Network. (IPPN). (2010). *Submission on curriculum reform*. Retrieved December 5, 2018, from https://www.ippn.ie/images/stories/Submission_and_Position_Papers/JointOireachtasCommitteeCurriculumReformOctober2010.pdf
- Jackson, J., & Harbison, L. (2014). An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms. *Irish Teachers' Journal, 2*(1), 47-62. Retrieved May 5, 2019, from https://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal_2014.pdf

- Katz, I., Buzukashvili, T., & Feingold, L. (2012). Homework stress: Construct validation of a measure. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 80*(4), 405-421. doi: 10.1080/00220973.2011.610389
- Knollman, M. & Wild, E. (2007). Quality of parental support and students' emotions during homework: Moderating effects of students' motivational orientations. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 22*(1), 63-76. doi: 10.1007/BF03173689
- Kohn, A. (2007a). *The homework myth: Why our kids get too much of a bad thing*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press.
- Kohn, A. (2007b). Rethinking homework. *Principal, January/February 2007*, 35-38. Retrieved May 4, 2019, from <https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/resources/2/Principal/2007/J-Fp35.pdf>
- Kralovec, E. & Buell, J. (2001). End homework now. *Educational Leadership, 58*(7), 39-42. Retrieved May 4, 2019, from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr01/vol58/num07/End-Homework-Now.aspx>
- Marzano, R. J. (2007). *The art and science of teaching: A comprehensive framework for effective instruction*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Retrieved January 16, 2019, from http://site25.net/tn/clinical/The_Art_and_Science_of_Teaching.pdf
- Marzano, R. J. & Pickering, D. J. (2007). The case for and against homework. *Educational Leadership, 64*(6), 74-79. Retrieved January 16, 2019, from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar07/vol64/num06/The-Case-For-and-Against-Homework.aspx>

- McMahon, A. (2018, January 23). Should homework be scrapped for primary school students? *The Irish Times*. Retrieved March 5, 2019, from <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/should-homework-be-scrapped-for-primary-school-students-1.3363917>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009) *Qualitative research. A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Minogue, O. & Schubotz, D. (2013). The impact of parental involvement in the school experience of 10 and 11-year olds. *Research Update*, 85. Retrieved December 5, 2018, from <http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update85.pdf>
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (1999). *Primary school curriculum introduction*. Retrieved November 11, 2018, from https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/c4a88a62-7818-4bb2-bb18-4c4ad37bc255/PSEC_Introduction-to-Primary-Curriculum_Eng.pdf
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (2017). *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines*. Retrieved November 11, 2018, from https://www.ncca.ie/media/2487/wellbeingguidelines_forjunior_cycle.pdf
- Ndebele, M. (2018). Homework in the foundation phase: Perceptions of principals of eight public primary schools in Johannesburg. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(2), 1-12. doi: 10.15700/saje.v38n2a1461
- O'Toole, L., Kiely, J., McGillicuddy, D., O'Brien, E. Z., & O'Keeffe, C. (2019). *Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years*. doi:

- Pomerantz, E. M., Moorman, E. A., & Litwack, S. D. (2007). The how, whom, and why of parents' involvement in children's academic lives: More is not always better. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(3), 373-410. Retrieved December 5, 2018, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4624903>
- Pressman, R. M., Sugarman, D. B., Nemon, M. L., Desjarlais, J., Owens, J. A., & Schettini-Evans, A. (2015). Homework and family stress: With consideration of parents' self confidence, educational level, and cultural background. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 43, 297-313. doi: 10.1080/01926187.2015.1061407
- Rudman, N. P. C. (2014). A review of homework literature as a precursor to practitioner-led doctoral research in a primary school. *Research in Education*, 91(1), 12-29. doi: 10.7227/RIE.91.1.2
- Smyth, E. (2015). *Learning in focus: Wellbeing and school experiences among 9- and 13-year-olds: Insights from the growing up in Ireland study*. Retrieved December 5, 2018, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280085063_Wellbeing_and_School_Experiences_among_9-_and_13-Year-Olds_Insights_from_the_Growing_Up_in_Ireland_Study
- Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Ormston, R., O'Connor, W., & Barnard, M. (2014). Analysis: Principles and processes. In J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls, & R. Ormston (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students & researchers* (pp. 269-293). London, England: SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Stuart, M. (2019, January/February). Homework – is it worthwhile? *Intouch*, 184.
Retrieved March 5, 2019, from
https://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/InTouch/2019/JanuaryFebruary2019/Intouch_JanFeb2019_Archive.pdf
- Trautwein, U., & Köller, O. (2003). The relationship between homework and achievement – Still much of a mystery. *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(2), 115-145. doi: 10.1023/A:1023460414243
- Trenholm, S. & Chinnappan, M. (2019) Prospective primary teachers’ perceptions about the use of mathematics homework. *Teacher Development*, 23(1), 50-63, doi: 10.1080/13664530.2018.1490923
- Vatterott, C. (2009). *Rethinking homework: Best practices that support diverse needs*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- Wahlberg, H. J., Paschal, R. A., & Weinstein, T. (1985). Homework’s powerful effects on learning. *Educational Leadership*, April 1985, 76-79. Retrieved January 5, 2019, from
http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_198504_walberg.pdf
- Wayman, S. (2016, May 27). Young children stressed, says national parents’ council primary. *The Irish Times*. Retrieved December 5, 2018, from
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/young-children-stressed-says-national-parents-council-primary-1.2662436>
- Xu, J. & Corno, L. (1998). Case studies of families doing third-grade homework. *Teachers College Record*, 100(2), 402-436.

Appendix A

Gender of the interviewee

Questions to ask in the semi-structured interview

1. Can you tell me the kind of primary school that your child or your children are currently attending? For example, Catholic, Educate Together, Community National School, Gaelscoil etc.
2. Do you know if your child's/children's school has a homework policy and if yes, what do you know about the policy?
3. Has any representative from your child's/children's school ever given you a reason or rationale for giving homework?
4. Have you ever been invited to be involved as a parent in the drafting or amending/updating of the school's homework policy?
5. How many times each week does your child or children have to complete homework?
6. Is there a homework club in the school your child or children are attending?
7. In your opinion does homework help to improve the academic performance of your child or children? Please give reasons for your answer.
8. In your opinion does doing homework offer other benefits to your child/children? Please give reasons for your answer.
9. In your opinion are there any disadvantages for your child/children in doing homework? Please give reasons for your answer.
10. Are you involved with your child or children while they are doing their homework? If yes, can you describe the way or ways that you assist your child or children/the nature of your involvement while they are doing their homework?
11. Have you ever been given advice from your child's teacher about how to assist your child/children with their homework? If so, what was the advice?
12. All in all, do you believe that homework is a valuable part of your child or children's school life and why?
13. In your opinion, does homework limit your child's/children's life/lives in any way, with regard to activities outside of school hours?
14. Can you describe your child's/children's attitude to homework?
15. In your opinion, do you think your child finds homework a stressful activity?

16. Can you describe how you feel when you are involved with your child/children while they are completing their homework?
17. Do you think your child/children like the way in which you are involved with them as they complete their homework?
18. In your opinion has your relationship with your child/children been affected because of homework?

Appendix B

Letter of Consent – for Participating Parent

Dear Parent,

My name is Janette Healy and I am currently studying to qualify as a primary school teacher. I attend Marino Institute of Education in Dublin where I am in the second and final year of the Professional Master of Education course. As part of my course work this year, I am conducting a research project entitled ‘Would homework policies in mainstream primary schools in Ireland be any different if parents were involved in the formulation of same and why?’ My research has three main aims as follows;

- to ascertain the attitudes and opinions of parents of primary school children in a selection of mainstream Dublin schools towards homework,
- to ascertain their level of involvement in their children’s homework and,
- to ascertain their opinion of the effect that this involvement has on their relationship with their children.

I am interested in this area as homework is an aspect of the educational experience of most children in Ireland and as a future teacher it will come within the scope of my duties. I hope that following this research I will have a broader understanding of the topic so I will be in a position to discuss the issue with all stakeholders in the school community in a knowledgeable way.

I am writing to you as I would greatly appreciate your help with my research. This help would involve you participating in an interview with me in relation to the above topic. The purpose of the interview is to collect information/data from parents and invite them to share their opinions and attitudes towards homework for children attending mainstream primary schools in Ireland. The interview which will take forty minutes approximately will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. It can be conducted at your convenience in relation to time and location and please note that it will be recorded to assist me later on in my research analysis.

The issue of confidentiality is absolutely paramount in relation to my research. Several steps will therefore be taken to protect the identity and anonymity of all participants who are interviewed. In my project I will ensure that there is no reference to

any participant's name, school or geographical details that might lead to a participant being identified. On completion of the interviews they will be transcribed to assist with the analysis of the data. However, I assure you that all recordings and documents related to the interviews will be accessible only to me and I will destroy all of the information thirteen months after the study has been completed.

Please also be assured that your participation in my research is completely voluntary and you can decide at any time to withdraw from the study without any need to provide a reason. All information received from you will be immediately destroyed if you do choose to withdraw.

When my study is complete, I will present my findings in a dissertation which will be read by educational professionals at Marino Institute of Education. The dissertation may be published to Marino Library, if selected, where other students will have access to it. Please note however that no participant names or identifying information will be revealed at any time.

If you have any questions, require any further information about my study or wish to contact the project supervisor, please do not hesitate to contact me at 087-XXXXXXX.

I appreciate that the life of a parent is a busy one and so I do understand that participating in this study will take up some of your valuable time. Therefore, I would be very grateful indeed if you could accommodate me by participating in this study. If you are in a position to help me, please complete and sign the 'Consent Section' at the end of this letter.

Yours faithfully,

Janette Healy

I have read the above information regarding this research study relating to parental attitudes to homework for children in mainstream primary schools in Ireland and I consent to participate in this study.

----- (Printed Name)

----- (Signature)

----- (Date)