Experiences and Opinions of Parents Regarding Homework in Irish Primary Schools

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Declaration

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Abstract

Homework is widely assigned in Irish schools, impacting children, parents, and teachers alike. A considerable amount of energy is expended on homework, although there is no official policy at the departmental level. As a traditional practice, homework has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. While research into its benefits for young children has been inconclusive, it remains an important feature of school life. Many see it as a valuable home-school link, but some feel that the disadvantages outweigh the benefits.

This small-scale study examined the experiences of parents in one primary school. The researcher sought to assess the level and type of parental involvement in homework. In doing so, it was hoped to assess homework’s impact on family life. Parental opinions were sought on homework’s influence on academic achievement, and its potential non-academic benefits.

A quantitative, survey design instrument was used to gather data. A questionnaire was distributed to all families in a Dublin senior school. 168 valid responses were returned. Analysis of the data revealed a high level of parental involvement in homework, finding most parents positively disposed towards the practice. Nevertheless, a certain level of dissatisfaction was reported. Homework was said to cause a good deal of upset in the family home. A balanced approach to homework was favoured, with many participants believing that it should be limited in primary school. Parents in this sample were not involved with policy creation, and most were unfamiliar with the school’s current policy.

This dissertation will provide a review of the literature regarding homework, with a focus on the limited research undertaken in Ireland. The methodology will be discussed, and the features of the research instrument outlined. The results of the survey will be analysed in relation to the aims of the study and recommendations will be made.
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## Contents

Declaration ........................................................................................................................................ ii

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... iv

Contents ........................................................................................................................................ v

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ viii

List of Tables ................................................................................................................................ viii

Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 1

  Background to the Study ............................................................................................................. 1
  Motivation for the research ......................................................................................................... 2
  Aims of the Research .................................................................................................................. 2
  Structure of the Study .................................................................................................................. 2

Literature Review .......................................................................................................................... 4

  The Purpose of Homework ......................................................................................................... 4
  Homework and Academic Achievement ...................................................................................... 5
  The Case Against Homework ..................................................................................................... 6
  Homework in the Irish Context .................................................................................................... 7
  Parental Attitudes and Involvement ......................................................................................... 9
  Effective Homework .................................................................................................................. 11
  Homework Policy ....................................................................................................................... 12
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 13

Methodology ................................................................................................................................ 14

  Aims of the Study ....................................................................................................................... 14
  Research Strategy ....................................................................................................................... 14
  Research Methodology ............................................................................................................. 15
  Interviews ................................................................................................................................... 16
  The Research Instrument .......................................................................................................... 17
# EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS REGARDING HOMEWORK

Advantages of the Questionnaire ................................................................. 17  
Disadvantages of the Questionnaire ............................................................. 18  
Design of the Questionnaire ................................................................. 18  
Question Design ....................................................................................... 19  
Sample Population and Size ..................................................................... 19  
Distribution and Collection of the Questionnaire ..................................... 20  
Data Collection ......................................................................................... 20  
Data Analysis .............................................................................................. 21  
Limitations .................................................................................................. 21  
Positionality ................................................................................................. 22  
Ethical Considerations ................................................................................ 23  
Conclusion .................................................................................................. 23  

## Analysis & Discussion ............................................................................. 24  

- Participants ............................................................................................. 24  
- Quantity of Homework ............................................................................ 26  
- Level and Type of Parental Involvement .................................................... 27  
- Parental Attitudes Towards Homework .................................................... 30  
- Proponents of Homework ........................................................................ 32  
- Perceptions of Non-academic Benefits of Homework .................................. 33  
- Disadvantages of Homework ................................................................... 35  
- Opponents of Homework ......................................................................... 35  
- The Impact of Homework on Family Life ................................................ 37  
- Parental Views on the Type of Homework Received ................................... 38  
  - Homework Content ................................................................................ 39  
  - Nature of Homework Assigned ............................................................. 40  
- Parental Input on Homework Practices .................................................... 41  
  - Homework Policy .................................................................................. 42  
- Suggestions Made by Participants ........................................................... 43  

## Conclusion .............................................................................................. 44  

- Findings ................................................................................................... 44  
- Limitations ............................................................................................... 45
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**List of Figures**

Figure 1: Response Rate for the Questionnaire ................................................................. 24
Figure 2: Class Levels Represented in the Data ................................................................. 25
Figure 3: ‘On average, how long does your child spend on homework in one evening?’ ...... 26
Figure 4: Degrees of Parental Supervision of Homework ................................................ 29
Figure 5: Parental Opinions on the Academic and Non-Academic Benefits of Homework ... 31
Figure 6: The Purposes of Homework, as Listed by Proponents ...................................... 32
Figure 7: Parental Opinions on Some Non-Academic Benefits of Homework ................. 34
Figure 8: Disadvantages of Homework, as Mentioned by Participants ......................... 35
Figure 9: Reasons Not to Give Homework, as Listed by Its Opponents ....................... 36
Figure 10: Homework’s Impact of Family Life ................................................................. 38
Figure 11: Types of Homework Reported as Being Regularly Assigned ....................... 38
Figure 12: Details about the nature of homework assigned ........................................... 39
Figure 13: Parental Awareness of Homework Policy ....................................................... 42

**List of Tables**

Table 1: ‘How would you describe your role when it comes to your child’s homework?’ ..... 28
Introduction

Background to the Study

Homework is a perennial subject of debate, one that often provokes strong feelings and opinions. Harris Cooper, regarded by many to be a foundational researcher in the field, defines homework as any task assigned by teachers to be done outside school hours (Cooper, 1989). The Economic and Social Research Institute's longitudinal study Growing up in Ireland tells us that 96 percent of Irish children receive homework four nights a week (Williams et al., 2009). However, there is no official homework policy in Ireland.

In 2019, all three of the daily broadsheet newspapers in Ireland published think-pieces on homework, largely positioning it as either completely unnecessary, or as a necessary evil which is misunderstood and mismanaged by teachers (Anonymous, 2019; Donaghy, 2019; Wayman, 2019). After the publication of these articles, a school in Dublin began to receive media attention for implementing a ‘no homework’ policy. The principal of the school cited stress caused by homework to all parties as the reasoning behind the schools’ change in policy (Hogan, 2019).

But does this media coverage reflect the attitudes of Irish parents towards their children’s homework? And what does research tell us about homework’s benefits and drawbacks for primary school children? The Irish constitution establishes parents as the primary educators of their children, and the Irish Primary School Curriculum states that homework has “a particular part to play in helping children to learn.” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2000, p. 41). Epstein & Van Voorhis (2001) assert that parental attitudes towards homework have a profound effect on how pupils feel about it.
Motivation for the research

Despite being such a prominent feature of schooling, homework was not covered in depth on any of the modules of the Initial Teacher Education course the researcher was undertaking. As a student teacher, he was not required to assign homework during school placements. The researcher felt unprepared to effectively deal with this important aspect of primary schooling. He was concerned that he would fall into the habit of assigning homework which was neither meaningful nor purposeful. This study therefore stemmed from his professional concern with effective homework practices, as well as a personal interest in the subject as a parent whose child would be educated in Ireland.

Although the international research on homework is broad, studies undertaken in Ireland are limited. It was hoped that this study would provide some insights into parental attitudes towards homework from an Irish perspective.

Aims of the Research

The broad objective of this study was to investigate the experiences and opinions of parents regarding homework at primary school level. The researcher aimed to identify the disposition of parents towards homework in general and to examine parental involvement from the level of policy creation down to supervision of their own children. The study also aimed to explore parental views on homework’s influence on non-academic factors, both positive and negative. Homework’s impact on family life was of particular interest.

Structure of the Study

Chapter II of this study will critically examine the current research on homework, from both an international and an Irish perspective. Homework’s influence on academic achievement, the cases for and against homework, homework practices in Ireland, parental
involvement with homework, its impact on the family, and research into effective homework practices will all be covered in the literature review.

Chapter III will outline the research methodology used for the study. The quantitative, survey-design approach to the research will be evaluated, and the rationale for the choices made by the researcher will be presented. The design and administration of the data collection instrument will also be discussed.

Chapter IV will present the results of the study, analysing and discussing these findings with reference to the pertinent literature.

Chapter V will summarise the key findings of the study and discuss the limitations of the research before making recommendations based on the results.
This literature review chapter will critically examine both international and Irish viewpoints on homework, exploring and evaluating such issues as homework’s influence on academic outcomes, the cases for and against homework, the culture of homework in Ireland, parental involvement, and what the research tells us about effective homework practices.

**The Purpose of Homework**

Harris Cooper has defined homework as “tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during nonschool hours” (1989, p. 7). The definition therefore excludes grinds and academic work which has not been assigned by a child’s teacher.

Homework is assumed by many to have academic benefits for pupils, and this seems to be the primary reason that it is assigned. At its most basic, homework is given to reinforce what is taught in class in the belief that pupils will be more likely to retain information and attain mastery over skills with its benefit (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Many studies have been carried out to try to determine if there is indeed a causal effect between homework and academic achievement, some of which will be explored in the next section.

Besides educational attainment, there are several other purposes given for assigning homework. Cooper (2007) cites some of these as being the fostering of positive attitudes towards learning in children and the promotion of self-regulation and organisation. He also claims that homework can develop independent problem-solving skills in children. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001), drawing on a number of different academic sources, outline 10 broad purposes for homework, 8 of which are non-academic. The entire list is as follows:
practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child relations, parent-teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment.

**Homework and Academic Achievement**

The link between homework and academic achievement has been a popular area of study for researchers. However, the defining characteristic of these studies is perhaps the inconsistency of the results.

Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006, p. 47), in a synthesis of research done between 1987 and 2003, concluded that the relationship between the amount of homework done by students and improved academic achievements was “positive and statistically significant”. This much-cited study is often put forward when making a case for the efficacy of homework, but it is important to note that the authors found the data on elementary school students to be inconclusive. Indeed, they highlight what they call the ‘grade-level effect’ (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 50); the younger the pupils, the less effect homework seems to have on academic achievement. The researchers suggest that this could be caused by attention deficits in younger children, and less effective study habits.

In the UK, a 1999 study examining the relationship between homework and achievement from a sample of approximately 20,000 pupils in year six (equivalent to 5th class in Ireland) found that those who completed homework just once a month actually achieved higher test scores than those who had regular homework (Farrow, Tymms & Henderson, 1999). The authors, while acknowledging that homework’s effect on academic achievement is a complicated and problematic area of study, concluded that a little homework is better than none, but ‘less is more’ in the primary school setting.
A similar finding was reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In a major multi-level analysis conducted in over 40 countries, no clear correlation between homework and academic achievement was found, and in fact a strong negative relationship was found between time spent on studying outside of school and performance in science, mathematics and reading (OECD, 2011).

The Case Against Homework

As Marzano and Pickering (2007, para. 5) put it, while “the research support for homework is compelling, the case against homework is popular.” This is reflected in the many articles published in the Irish media, which almost uniformly criticise and denounce homework. But there are also some notable critics of homework in the academy.

Among the most cited of these detractors are Kralovec and Buell (2001, p. 39), who claim that homework “often disrupts family life, interferes with what parents want to teach their children, and punishes students in poverty for being poor.” The authors identify three homework myths. The first is that homework increases academic achievement, which they argue has never been conclusively demonstrated and indeed has been disproven for elementary students. The second myth they address is that (U.S.) students’ test scores will not be internationally competitive without homework. This is contradicted, they argue, by higher test scores in Japan and Germany, where less homework is assigned. Lastly, they deny that opponents of homework want to “dilute the curriculum and kowtow to the inherent laziness of students” (Kralovec & Buell, 2001, p. 41). The authors argue that they are not questioning the ‘work’ of homework, but rather that it should be completed at home instead of at school.

Kohn (2007) speaks of the fatigue, frustration, and loss of interest in learning that homework can precipitate, which is described as ‘satiation’ in the research of Cooper and his
colleagues (2006). He also highlights the no-win situation that it puts parents in, who feel that they will face criticism for either being too involved or not involved enough in their child’s homework. Kohn points to the fact that the research has not convincingly established a causal effect between homework and academic achievement, and in the case of younger students, he says, “there isn’t even a correlation between whether children do homework (or how much they do) and any meaningful measure of achievement” (Kohn, 2007, p. 35). He also dismisses the supposed non-academic benefits of homework as never having been substantiated through research.

**Homework in the Irish Context**

It is clear from the international research that homework is a contentious issue. Rudman (2014) claims that decisions about homework should be made within the cultural context in which it is being given. In Ireland, homework has long been a feature of school life. Although it is not compulsory, most primary school children in Ireland receive regular homework (Williams et al., 2009), and most schools have a homework policy. In the introduction to the Primary School Curriculum, however, homework is referred to only once, simply as one among several informal tools for assessment (NCCA, 1999, p.18). In the NCCA guidelines for assessment in primary schools (2007), homework is mentioned just eight times, and, as Martin Stuart (2017, para. 10) notes, it is “always as an object of the sentence, never the subject”. Stuart criticises that, “the official line in Ireland seems to be that homework is a good thing, so good that it doesn’t need looking into or indeed even departmental research, policies or guidance.” (2017, para. 11)

Perhaps owing to this apparent lack of interest from the Department of Education, empirical research on homework in the Irish context is scant. Some progress has been made in recent years, however, with the longitudinal study *Growing up in Ireland* including
questions regarding homework, and the National Parents’ Council (NPC) commissioning research on parental involvement (O’Toole et al., 2019). It is from the former study that we can ascertain the frequency of homework in Ireland (96% of children do homework four days a week) and the high levels of parental involvement (almost two thirds of parents ‘regularly’ or ‘always’ help their child with their homework). The GUI researchers also learned that socio-economic factors seem to have a significant influence on homework completion, as do family composition (single-parent or not, number of siblings) and gender (boys are less likely to complete homework) (Williams et al., 2009).

Jackson & Harbison (2014) conducted a small-scale study in which they analysed the homework policies of three Irish primary schools, as well as distributing questionnaires to a convenience sample of 90 parents, aimed at uncovering their “understanding of the utility of homework” (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p. 51). In their discussion of the findings, the researchers argue that despite positive attitudes of parents to homework, too little attention is paid in Ireland to the type of homework that is given. Purposeful homework is essential, they maintain, as is communication between the school and parents with regards to homework policies. While the authors heavily criticise the absence of children’s voices from the debate on homework, they themselves exclude children from their study, focusing instead on parental attitudes and policy documents.

Martin Stuart, an experienced Irish primary school teacher, wrote a 2017 paper reviewing the homework literature and assessing Irish homework practices. He concluded that the current ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to homework is failing many pupils and families, and he heavily criticised the Department of Education and Skills for the neglect it has shown in providing no guidance for teachers with regards to homework. Based on Stuart’s suggestion that homework be re-framed as ‘non-school opportunities’, he helped to develop his school’s new homework policy, in consultation with parents. This policy includes sections
on differentiation, content and duration of homework, as well as the individual responsibilities of parents, teachers and children.

The most recent research done on homework in Ireland is an in-depth study on parental involvement and engagement commissioned by the NCCA and the NPC. Published in late 2019, this study incorporated the views of parents, children, and teachers. From case-studies conducted in five schools, representing a range of socio-economic contexts, the researchers uncovered a diversity of views and experiences regarding homework. Citing this as perhaps their most significant finding, they claimed that “contention and in some cases entirely contradictory views on homework dominate the five case studies” (Kiely et al., 2019, p. 209).

**Parental Attitudes and Involvement**

Research conducted by Cooper et al. (1998) suggests that parents’ attitudes towards homework have a stronger influence on pupils’ perception than their teachers. *Growing up in Ireland* indicated that Irish parents see homework as a valuable link between home and school (Smyth, 2017). The belief that homework is of value is reflected in high levels of parental involvement. As Rudman (2014) contends, parents often see homework as the only way to be involved in their children’s education. However, while parents value the home-school link that homework can provide, they often find homework practices to be frustrating and badly thought-out (Rudman, 2014).

Jackson and Harbison’s study on the utility of homework in Irish primary classrooms (2014) seems to confirm this. This research found that there was almost unanimous agreement on the value of homework. At the same time, 65% of the respondents expressed feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy when it came to supporting their children. There was
also a strong indication that homework caused friction at home, with almost two thirds of participants saying that it caused upset between child and parent.

Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of almost 60 studies based on parental involvement in homework. They identified three major reasons that parents become involved in their children’s homework: “they believe that they should be involved, they believe that their involvement will make a positive difference, and they perceive invitations to involvement” (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 201). The researchers found, however, that studies yielded mixed results (both positive and negative relationships) when examining parental involvement’s influence on academic achievement. Notwithstanding this, the authors assert that “a solitary emphasis on student achievement is unfortunate” because “the most critical outcomes associated with parental involvement in homework may be found in the attitudes, ideas, and behaviors enacted by students in the course of school learning” (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2001, p. 204). They argue that positive attitudes towards learning, developing self-regulation and perceptions of personal competence are far more important outcomes of parental involvement in homework. In their conclusion, they call for more research to be done on the content, processes, and outcomes of parental involvement, and for information and guidance for parents to be provided by schools.

Vatterott (2009) also suggests that formal methods for parents and teachers to communicate about homework should be established. Some examples she lists are a ‘home schedule card’, a short homework survey at the beginning of the school year, and a standard feedback checklist to be used as a cover-sheet for all homework assignments.
Effective Homework

According to Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001, p. 191) when teachers design purposeful homework with clear and meaningful goals, “more students complete their homework and benefit from the results.” Teachers should clearly state the learning intention – “the ultimate goal of the assignment” (Vatterott, 2011, p. 1) – and the success criteria when assigning homework. Marzano & Pickering (2007) stress that appropriate levels of difficulty will maximise the chance that pupils will complete and benefit from homework. This implies that differentiated homework should be considered, although Rudman (2014), drawing on research done by Cooper (1989), questions the value of the additional work by teachers that would necessarily go into individualised homework versus the perceived benefits.

Vatterott (2011), identifies four ways in which homework can support learning; pre-learning, checking for understanding, practice and processing. She stresses that teachers should not (mistakenly or otherwise) assign new learning for homework. What is often assigned as practice, she claims, is in fact new learning for the children. This places an unfair burden on parents who may not be familiar with the material. It can also lead to the internalisation of misconceptions in the children. For this reason, practice work should only be assigned when the teacher has confidence that the children fully understand the concept on which they are working.

In addition to having a clear academic purpose (which in turn should influence the type of homework given), Vatterott elaborates on four characteristics inherent in quality homework:

- **Efficiency**: efficient tasks do not take an inordinate amount of time and show evidence of the child’s learning. They must also be adequately explained and scaffolded.
• **Ownership**: tasks that are meaningful to children are more likely to be completed. They often include an element of choice and allow for the child’s opinion to be expressed, or for them to share something about themselves. A vital component to this is the child’s ability to self-assess, a skill which must be scaffolded in the classroom.

• **Competence**: Tasks that allow the pupil to experience success foster a positive attitude towards learning. Homework that cannot be completed without help is deemed ineffective by Vatterott. She suggests differentiation in three areas: amount and difficulty of work, amount of scaffolding, and learning style/interest of the pupil. Making homework time-based instead of task-based can be a simple means of differentiating for busy teachers.

• **Aesthetics**: Vatterott contends that the way homework is presented has an influence on children’s motivation. Uncluttered and visually appealing worksheets are particularly important for young learners and academically challenged pupils.

**Homework Policy**

Focusing on the policy aspect of the homework question, Jackson and Harbison (2014, p. 50) argue that Irish homework policies should be ‘concise and unambiguous’ and they should take the age of the pupils into account. Importantly, parents should be involved in the creation of schools’ homework policy, and their role in supporting their children should be made clear to them (Van Voorhis, 2004).

In Ireland, National Assessment reports commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (Eivers et al., 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2014) have indicated that parental confidence and clear guidelines for homework are linked to higher achievement among pupils. In the words of Martin Stuart (2017, para. 23), “there is a need for parents to get a real
voice, not a token voice, in formulating the homework policy for their children if they are to look positively on homework and help motivate the child.”

**Conclusion**

It is clear from a review of the literature on homework that research on the topic has resulted in conflicting and often inconclusive results. There is a common thread throughout the research suggesting that the effectiveness of homework is highly contingent on not only the age of the pupils, but also the type and amount of homework assigned, as well as the parental supports in place for it.

In the Irish context, empirical research is limited. The Department of Education and Skills provide no guidelines for homework practices. Policy documents are drawn up on a school-by-school basis, and parents may not be aware of their school’s policy.

The case against homework is popularised by the Irish media, but what little empirical research has been done suggests that parents are, on the whole, positively disposed towards it. At the same time, many parents seem to be unsure of their role when it comes to supporting their child with homework, and they report family conflict arising from its enforcement.

Considering the above, it seems reasonable to suggest that further research needs to be conducted on homework in Ireland. Since parents are essential in ensuring that their children engage with, and benefit from homework, it is vital that any such research includes their voices. Rudman (2014, p. 25) claims that in order meet the homework needs of children and families, we must look to findings derived from small-scale research projects which examine “the particular issues and challenges within each learning community.” The current study aims to uncover the attitudes and experiences of parents with regards to homework practices in a senior school in North Dublin.
Methodology

The broad objective of this study was to investigate the experiences and opinions of parents regarding homework at the primary school level. This chapter will begin by outlining the specific aims of the study. A discussion of the research design and the instrument used to collect the data will follow, along with the rationale for these choices. The design and administration of the data collection instrument will be examined. This chapter will also contain sections on positionality, ethical considerations, and the limitations of the study.

Aims of the Study

The specific aims of the study were as follows; to identify the disposition of parents towards homework, to examine the type of homework that children are being assigned, to assess the level and type of parental involvement in homework, to explore the impact of homework on family life, to investigate parental perceptions of non-academic benefits of homework and finally to identify if parents are involved in the school’s homework policy.

Research Strategy

In the proposal stage of the study, a survey research strategy was chosen, and a plan of action was developed based upon this. The survey strategy was deemed by the researcher to be the most appropriate for generating the data required to answer the research questions and fulfil the specific aims of the study.

The survey research strategy was chosen based on three factors. The timeframe of the project was the first of these considerations. As Denscombe (2014) states, a strict deadline will greatly influence the feasibility of a given research strategy, and surveys are relatively predictable in their timespan. Creswell (2009) agrees that survey research is best used when a quick turnaround in data collection is required.
Secondly, the survey research strategy is in line with the traditions of educational research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Wellington, 2015). Denscombe (2014) advises that the researcher consider the traditions of their particular research community when choosing a strategy.

Finally, the survey strategy was chosen on ethical grounds. In the initial risk assessment of the study, the survey strategy was considered by the researcher to carry an acceptable number of potential ethical risks. The survey strategy facilitates the obtaining of informed consent. With proper care from the researcher it can also ensure confidentiality for participants.

**Research Methodology**

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches were all considered for gathering data. As this study is concerned with the opinions and attitudes of individuals, a qualitative approach was the first methodology considered (Bell, 2005). The pragmatic worldview of the researcher, however, favoured the choice of a mixed methods approach. A pragmatic view of research, while privileging a mixed methods approach, allows the researcher the freedom to choose an instrument best suited to the circumstances of their study (Creswell, 2009). As Denscombe puts it, “Decisions about which methods to use should… be based on how *useful* the methods are for addressing a particular question, issue or problem that is being investigated.” (2014, p. 158)

Ultimately, a quantitative research instrument was chosen, with a secondary qualitative component embedded in the design. This was based on pragmatic considerations such as the timescale of the study and its word count. In the analysis of the data, the qualitative information was triangulated with the quantitative data to address the research questions about parents’ experiences and attitudes towards their children’s homework.
Interviews

Interviews with parents were considered for this study, but they were ultimately disregarded on a few grounds. The first of these was a practical issue. Interviews are time-consuming and can be inconvenient for potential participants (Bell, 2005). As parents tend to be busy, arranging time for interviews might have proven to be difficult within the timescale of the study.

The data gathered in interviews carries a risk of being skewed by certain factors. The first of these factors is the researchers’ own bias, which can come in to play more easily when making use of a subjective, qualitative instrument (Bell, 2005). In the case of this study, a potentially sensitive topic was being explored. Embedded within the question of parental involvement are implicit judgements about the kind of support we offer our children with their schoolwork. This is often beyond the control of parents, who may need to work long hours to support their family, or who may feel unable to help their children with their homework due to their own lack of education. Respondents in interviews can often modify their responses based on a desire to present a positive picture of themselves to the interviewer. The perception of how one will be viewed by others, especially in relation to social norms and values, can result in misleading data being generated. This phenomenon is known as social desirability bias. It constitutes a problematic aspect of qualitative research methods, particularly around sensitive topics (Bryman, 2001; Callegaro, 2008; DeMaio, 1984).

Research has also shown that the characteristics of the interviewer (age, gender, voice quality, profession, attitudinal or behavioural attributes) can influence the responses offered in an interview (Kreuter, 2008). As Kreuter states, interviewers “need to learn to interact with the respondent in a way that minimizes the potential for the respondent to infer a preference
for any response” (2008, p. 371). Effective and nuanced interviewing requires experience on the part of the researcher. On the other hand, interviewer effects are, by definition, eliminated in self-administered modes of data collection.

For the reasons outlined above, the researcher decided not to use interviews to gather data for this study.

**The Research Instrument**

Bryman (2001) notes that the self-completion questionnaire eliminates the interviewer effect and can reduce social desirability bias among respondents. The researcher decided on a self-administered paper questionnaire containing both closed and open questions.

**Advantages of the Questionnaire.** In addition to eliminating interviewer effects, another reason for choosing the self-completion questionnaire was that it allows for a strong degree of confidentiality (Cohen et al., 2018). An accompanying cover letter can help to ensure the informed consent of research participants.

As participants would be completing the questionnaire at their own pace, it was hoped that this would allow them time to reflect on their responses. Along with the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality provided by the format, this had the potential to lead to more honest and open answers (Wellington, 2015).

Other advantages of the questionnaire are the relatively cheap cost for the researcher and convenience for respondents. Moreover, both interviews and face-to-face questionnaires limit the number of respondents that can be reached in a study, even when time is not of particular concern (Cohen et al., 2018). In choosing to use a self-administered questionnaire, it became possible to access a much larger sample from which to gather data.
**Disadvantages of the Questionnaire.** Some disadvantages of the questionnaire format include the inability to probe respondents to elaborate, the risk of missing data from partially finished questionnaires and potentially low response rates, which can compromise the reliability of a data set (Bryman, 2001; Denscombe, 2014). With regards to the latter issue, as the topic of homework has a direct impact on the respondents’ lives, the researcher was hoping for a response rate of at least 20%. Cooperation with the research depended on the respondents’ motivation to spend their own time filling in the questionnaire, and personal interest in the topic is known to be a good incentive (Denscombe, 2014).

**Design of the Questionnaire.** Convenience in terms of ‘response burden’ also plays a part in respondents’ motivation to fill questionnaires. To this end, the instrument was designed to take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and this was foregrounded in a cover letter accompanying the questionnaire. The questions were written in such a way as to remove as much ambiguity as possible, and the layout of the questionnaire was designed for ease of answering. Clear, precise and unambiguous questions can also help to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in responses, and thus enhance the validity of the dataset (Denscombe, 2014).

A hard-copy questionnaire was used rather than an online questionnaire. This decision was made on several grounds. Firstly, it was felt that a paper questionnaire which was sent home with the children in the sample school would be more likely to receive responses. The questionnaire was accompanied with a cover letter outlining the project in detail, which helped to ensure informed voluntary consent. The researcher could not be certain that the parents and guardians would have the technical ability to complete an online questionnaire, or indeed easy access to the internet. Denscombe (2014) notes that the capabilities of respondents must be considered when designing a questionnaire. Finally, the researcher did not have access to email addresses or phone numbers of parents prior to designing the
instrument. He could therefore not guarantee an easy means to distribute an online instrument.

**Question Design.** The questionnaire included mostly closed, quantitative questions. Several of the closed questions were accompanied by a space for respondents to add qualitative information by expanding on their answers in their own words. Clear instructions were provided about how to answer each question type, and example questions were included in order to help respondents to complete the questionnaire correctly.

Careful consideration was given to the wording of the questions. Technical jargon was avoided, and the questions were kept short and simple. Words were chosen carefully so as not to ask leading questions or offend respondents with anything that might be taken as an implicit judgement. The ordering of the questions was also a concern; the most straightforward questions were put at the start so as not to discourage respondents from spending their time and effort on the questionnaire. The open-ended, qualitative questions, were introduced towards the end of the questionnaire, as recommended by Wellington (2015).

**Sample Population and Size**

As this was a small-scale research project conducted under tight time-constraints, a non-probability convenience sample was used. Cohen and his colleagues (2018) state that this is common practice in educational research which targets one or two schools and does not seek to generalise its findings beyond the sample in question.

All participants in the sample were parents/guardians of children in School A, a Roman Catholic senior school in a traditionally disadvantaged area of north Dublin. There are
380 pupils attending the school, from 334 families, across 14 mainstream classes and two special education classes.

**Distribution and Collection of the Questionnaire**

Permission was sought and obtained from the principal of School A and its Board of Management to distribute the questionnaire to parents in the school. Full disclosure about the project was given to the school management. The letter to the principal is included as Appendix A.

The researcher distributed a copy of the questionnaire, along with a cover-letter and consent form, to all parents in School A, inviting them to participate. He did so through the pupils, whom he spoke to about the study before distributing the question packs to be given to parents. These documents are included as Appendices B, C and D.

Parents who completed the questionnaire were invited to return it in a sealed, unmarked envelope to a drop-box which was set up in the foyer of the school. Over a period of two weeks, this box was emptied daily by the researcher, who kept the completed forms in a bag on his person until they were transferred to a locked briefcase at his residence. 187 completed questionnaires were received during this period.

**Data Collection**

The survey was cross-sectional, involving data which was collected at a specific point in time. Serial numbers were included on the questionnaires to facilitate ease of withdrawal if necessary, but they were not used to identify participants. The questions included in the booklet were based on the review of the relevant literature on the area of homework, and the research aims that arose from this.
Quantitative data was generated through questions which asked respondents to tick or circle the most appropriate answer for them. These questions related to attitudes and beliefs about homework, the type of homework their child was given, parental confidence with regards to homework, knowledge of policy, time spent on homework and its impact on family life.

Qualitative data was generated through the use of comment boxes below several of the closed questions, as well as open questions which asked respondents to give their views on the purposes of homework and to briefly outline their experience with their children’s homework.

**Data Analysis**

The quantitative data from the questionnaires was compiled using spreadsheet software and summarised into charts, which were used to represent the findings in this paper. The qualitative data was compiled using word-processing software and analysed using a theme-based approach, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Key themes and opinions were identified, which will be discussed in the findings.

**Limitations**

The pragmatic worldview of the researcher necessarily recognises that all knowledge is provisional. This philosophical position presupposes that the findings of any research project can never be absolute, as they are a product of the time and cultural context in which they have been produced (Denscombe, 2014). This was a small-scale study with a limited number of participants recruited through convenience sampling. A greater number of respondents from a probability sample might have yielded different results. For this reason, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the population.
The data collected using questionnaires can often be limited in scope and depth (Cohen et al., 2018). Questionnaires do not allow for flexibility of response, as the researcher cannot probe respondents to elaborate. They also contain the risk of missing data (due to partially finished questionnaires) and they can suffer from low response rates (Bryman, 2001).

Future studies in this area would ideally supplement the quantitative data collected through questionnaires with qualitative data gathered through interviews with parents. The researcher also recommends including the voices of teachers and children in studies on homework which are broader in scope.

Positionality

Having been assigned homework throughout his schooling in Ireland, the researcher had quite positive associations with it as a recipient. However, homework was something that he experienced no difficulty with as a child, and this was certainly an important factor. Coming from a teaching background (with both of his parents being primary school teachers) he received encouragement to pursue academic interests as a child and was always implicitly supported by the cultural capital of his parents. The researcher was aware that many did not share his relatively positive associations with homework, and this mitigated his disposition somewhat.

As a student teacher, the researcher was not required to assign homework, and had no experience in this regard. However, he had been influenced by the many primary school teachers in his life (including his parents, his sister and his wife). His understanding was that homework is viewed as a burden and a time-drain by many teachers and parents alike. He was also aware that the perceived benefits of homework in primary school were not necessarily substantiated by research.
As a parent whose child is not yet of an age for schooling, the researcher had no experience of homework from a parental perspective. From speaking to friends who have children in primary school, the researcher recognised that homework is seen by some parents as an important means of keeping up to date with their child’s educational progress.

**Ethical Considerations**

According to The British Educational Research Association (2011), to ensure the voluntary informed consent of participants in a research study, they must fully understand the study and agree to participate without any duress. To this end, each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter detailing the project in plain, non-technical language, explaining what the data would be used for and what the role of participants would be. It outlined how their privacy and anonymity would be protected, and how the data would be stored and ultimately destroyed. Contact details for the researcher were provided, and participants were encouraged to make follow-up inquiries if they wished. The pack contained a consent form (see Appendix E), which included the freedom to withdraw at any stage, without having to provide a reason. The possibility of withdrawal was also made clear in the cover letter. The above measures were in alignment with Denscombe’s (2014) recommendations for ethical research practices.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided the rationale for choosing a survey research strategy for this study, which used a quantitative research instrument with an embedded qualitative component. The following chapter will present the results of the study, analysing them with reference to the current literature on homework, as discussed in chapter 1.
Analysis & Discussion

The data from the questionnaire was analysed with the objectives of the study in mind. This study aimed to identify parental disposition towards homework in general, to investigate the content and nature of homework assigned to children and to assess if it was aligned with effective homework practices as outlined in the literature review. Parental opinions were sought on the benefits and drawbacks of homework, as well as its impact on family life. This took into account the level and nature of parental supervision of homework, as well as involvement in the school’s homework policy and practices.

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSE</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON-RESPONSE</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXCLUDED</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Response Rate for the Questionnaire
There are 380 pupils enrolled in School A, from 334 families. All families were given a questionnaire and invited to participate in the study. 187 families returned completed questionnaires, as represented in figure 1, signifying a response rate of 56%. 19 responses were excluded from the data, due to unsigned consent forms. This left a sample size of 168. The relatively high response rate may indicate a certain level of interest in the topic of homework among participants. Since homework practices have an impact on parents and guardians, they may have strong opinions about the subject. On the other hand, parents tend to be busy, and this may have reduced the response rate. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of classes represented in the study, with roughly 25% of the data representing each level. This even split may indicate that homework has a bearing on families of children at all levels in a senior school.

![Class Levels Represented](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3RD CLASS</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4TH CLASS</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5TH CLASS</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6TH CLASS</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2: Class Levels Represented in the Data*
### Quantity of Homework

![Time Spent on Homework](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 MINS</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 MINS</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 MINS</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 MINS</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 HOUR</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVER 1 HOUR</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3: ‘On average, how long does your child spend on homework in one evening?’*

Most participants’ children (98%) are given homework from Monday to Thursday. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of time spent on homework, as reported by participants. Just over one third of participants’ children spend approximately half an hour per day on their homework. Almost one quarter of the children spend about 40 minutes on their homework every day. 18% of participants reported that their children typically spend one hour or longer on homework. Perhaps unsurprisingly, cross tabulation reveals that pupils in 5th and 6th class spend the most time on homework on average, although the amount of time spent on
homework did not seem to correlate with class level in any consistent way. Many of the respondents reported times spent on homework that went against what has commonly become known as the ‘ten-minute rule’ (Vatterott, 2011) in which the maximum amount of homework each night should not exceed ten minutes per class level (i.e. 30 minutes for 3rd class, 40 minutes for 4th class, etc.). This rule of thumb is backed up by the research of Cooper (2007), who noted a curvilinear relationship between homework and achievement. It is worth noting, once again, that research on elementary school children (roughly equivalent to 1st - 5th class in Ireland) has been inconclusive.

**Level and Type of Parental Involvement**

An overall belief in the efficacy of homework is perhaps reflected in the high levels of involvement reported. 68% of participants said that they ‘sometimes’ or ‘always’ helped their children with their homework, and 18% reported not helping at all.

87% of participants said that they had a means of communicating with the teacher regarding homework, the majority of whom (70%) said they would use their child’s journal to write a note. This was the most formalised method mentioned, with others saying that they would call to the school or contact the teacher by phone, for example. No participants mentioned a standardised feedback method such as those suggested by Vatterott (2009), and some parents mentioned a lack of consistent feedback on homework, with one respondent saying, for example, that their children’s homework “never has comments made by the teachers.” The roles of both parents and teachers may need clarification, and all parties could perhaps benefit from a standard homework checklist or cover sheet.

Most participants in this sample (54%) claimed to feel quite confident supporting their child with homework. A further 42% feel very confident with it, while just 4% said they do not feel confident. Parents were asked to describe their role when it came to their child’s
homework. Table 1, below, presents the various ways that participants perceive their role and the percentage of parents who mentioned each aspect. As can be seen in the table, responses were grouped into degrees of supervision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Supervision</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Supervision. Child has full responsibility.</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Supervision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally overseeing homework.</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing the child to complete the homework independently.</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a suitable environment, free of distractions.</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing encouragement.</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being available to help if needed.</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate Supervision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring completion.</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spellings or maths drills.</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking work from time to time; spot-checks.</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Close Supervision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking work; looking over when finished.</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correcting work; ensuring accuracy.</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided reading.</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close assistance; explaining mistakes; prompting corrections.</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: ‘How would you describe your role when it comes to your child’s homework?’
Figure 4: Degrees of Parental Supervision of Homework

Figure 4 represents the breakdown of these degrees of supervision. 45% of participants provide what the researcher categorised as ‘general supervision’. This was the largest grouping of responses. The criteria for general supervision included being available to help when needed, providing encouragement and ensuring a suitable environment for work.

23% of participants’ descriptions were categorised as ‘moderate supervision’. In addition to being available to help, moderate supervision included making sure that homework is completed, giving drills for spellings and tables and checking work from time to time.

Another 23% of participants’ responses fell under the category of ‘close supervision’. This included checking and correcting answers, as well as guided reading, which is an involved process. This correlated quite closely with the 26% of parents who claimed to always help with homework, although cross tabulation did reveal some discrepancies.

Although 18% of parents said that they did not help their child with homework, only 9% of respondents claimed to give their children complete unsupervised responsibility for it.
When the results were cross tabulated, they revealed that the descriptions of 13 parents who claimed not to help their child with homework in fact fell under the *moderate* or *close supervision* categories. This may suggest that while some children are not given help answering questions, their homework is nonetheless closely supervised, and even corrected by their parents.

These seeming anomalies may indicate that some parents are unclear as to their role with regards to homework, or even as to what constitutes helping with it. If so, this could potentially be remedied by greater involvement in and familiarity with the school’s homework policy, as recommended by Van Voorhis (2004) and Stuart (2017). 59% of participants did not know if the school had a homework policy and 5% incorrectly believed that it did not. While 35% were aware of the policy, only 29% of this subsection claimed to be very familiar with the policy, representing just 10% of the entire sample group. 69% of the sample group, therefore, was either unaware of the school’s homework policy, or unfamiliar with its contents. In addition, 91% of participants believe that they have no say in the amount and type of homework that their child gets.

Participants’ answers about their roles with regards to homework might have been influenced by what Kohn (2007) referred to as the no-win situation many parents feel they are in regarding this topic. Many believe they will face criticism if they are either too involved or not involved enough, and this must be taken into consideration when assessing the results.

**Parental Attitudes Towards Homework**

At first glance, most parents in the sample seem to be positively disposed to homework. 65% of respondents believe that primary school children should get homework, and 72% feel that it helps their children to improve their schoolwork. This means that some
parents, despite believing that children should not be given homework in primary school, nonetheless see some academic benefit to receiving it. As Epstein & Van Voorhis (2001) have noted, this is perhaps the most commonly held belief about homework. An influential meta-analysis by Cooper, Robinson and Patall’s (2006) concluded that the correlation between homework and academic achievement was statistically significant, although the data for young children was deemed inconclusive.

![Parental Opinions on the Benefits of Homework](image)

*Figure 5: Parental Opinions on the Academic and Non-Academic Benefits of Homework*

As represented in figure 5, 72% of participants felt that homework helped their child to improve their schoolwork and 55% believed that it had non-academic benefits. Parents were asked to explain their reasoning for these opinions.
Proponents of Homework

Those who agreed with homework listed four major purposes, which have been broken down in figure 6. 33% said that homework helps with the revision and consolidation of learning and a further 14% listed literacy or numeracy benefits (spellings, tables and reading) as the principal justification for assigning homework. As discussed in the literature review chapter, the academic benefit of homework for primary school children is not conclusive, and some studies have found that ‘less is more’ (Farrow, Tymms & Henderson, 1999).

‘Preparation for secondary school’ was listed by 20% of proponents as homework’s main purpose. As one participant put it, without experience of homework in primary school, children “would be overloaded in secondary school.” However, some of these respondents believe that homework should only be given in senior classes. This is supported by Cooper and his colleagues (2006) who note a ‘grade level effect’ on the efficacy of homework.
16% of parents in support of homework mention how it helps them to keep track of their child’s learning. This echoes the research done in the Growing up in Ireland study, which found that Irish parents see homework as a valuable link between home and school (Smyth, 2017). Several participants felt that homework can help to identify academic problems that a child may be having.

Non-academic benefits were another salient justification for homework, with 20% of parents claiming that homework helps to develop positive habits, particularly with regard to learning.

**Perceptions of Non-academic Benefits of Homework**

Although studies have found both negative and positive correlations between parental involvement in homework and academic achievement, it may have benefits that extend beyond academic outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). 55% of participants in this study felt that homework had non-academic benefits. ‘Good habit formation’ was the most prevalent non-academic benefit listed by parents, with 20% of the sample mentioning benefits that fell under this category. Some of those listed by parents were that homework “can help with organisation skills,” “gives them discipline,” “teaches them to motivate themselves,” “encourages independent thinking” and “encourages them…to manage their time.” 13% of participants felt that homework gives children a sense of personal responsibility. 7% of parents said that homework helped them to keep track of their child’s progress.
Figure 7: Parental Opinions on Some Non-Academic Benefits of Homework

Figure 7 represents the participants’ responses when asked about homework’s influence on attitudes to learning, children’s ability to focus and their self-confidence. Respectively, 40, 51 and 45 percent of respondents feel that homework does have a positive effect on these things.

Just over a third of parents do not think that homework improves their child’s attitude to learning. When asked about the disadvantages of homework, 7% of the sample mentioned that homework can in fact have a negative effect on their child’s disposition towards school. This resonates with Kohn’s claim (2007) that homework can lead to a loss of interest in learning.

When asked about homework’s effect on their child’s self-confidence, 45% of parents believed that it had a positive influence, with a further 22% saying that it possibly did. According to Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues, parental involvement in homework, rather than homework per se, “is likely to support students’ sense of competence and ability, which is in turn related to positive student learning outcomes” (2001, p. 205).
Disadvantages of Homework

![Disadvantages of Homework](image)

Figure 8: Disadvantages of Homework, as Mentioned by Participants

When asked if homework had any disadvantages, just over half of all participants (51%) responded that it did. Figure 8 breaks down the disadvantages that were listed by respondents in the qualitative section of this question. Many mentioned more than one disadvantage. Almost half of these parents listed stress, anxiety, pressure or household tension as a disadvantage of homework. 44% mentioned that homework takes time away from extra-curricular activities or leisure.

Opponents of Homework

The percentage of participants (32%) who fundamentally disagree with homework in primary school is significant. Furthermore, 24% of participants who stated that homework should be given (constituting 16% of the total sample), qualified their response with comments such as “some of it can be irrelevant,” “keep it basic,” “everyday [sic] is a bit much,” “not at the level they currently get it,” “It should be half the week,” “homework on reading only,” and “only during the senior years.” Taken together, this means that 48% of all
Participants either believe that homework in primary school should be limited or that it should not be given at all.

![Bar Chart: Why Shouldn't Children Get Homework?](image)

**Figure 9: Reasons Not to Give Homework, as Listed by Its Opponents**

Figure 9 represents the breakdown of reasons given by participants who stated that homework should not be given to children. A sizeable number of these respondents (69%, representing 25% of the full sample) cited reasons that fell under the category of ‘time-consumption’. Many of these participants said that children spend long enough in school, and that homework takes time away from other important activities. Cross tabulation reveals that 15% of parents who agree with homework also list time-consumption as one of its disadvantages. In total, therefore, 35% of all participants are dissatisfied with the amount of time that homework takes up. The majority of participants’ children (78%) spend between 20 and 40 minutes on homework, which seems reasonable. 98% receive it every day (barring Friday). This may indicate that parents would be more satisfied if homework were not assigned every day.
88% of respondents in this study say that their children do not, or only sometimes enjoy doing homework. 5% feel that homework has no benefit, and 7% say that homework fosters a negative attitude towards learning in their children. As one respondent put it, “[Homework’s] time is past, and I believe it actually is counter-productive in the education of children.”

The Impact of Homework on Family Life

18% of opponents to homework listed the stress that it caused as their main reason for opposing it. When asked about the disadvantages of homework, 25% of all participants mentioned some form of stress (anxiety, arguments, pressure etc.). Some participants’ responses were quite concerning. A parent of two children with special needs commented that homework “causes tears in our house every single day.” Another parent said that homework is “a big worry” in their son’s life, causing “lots of anxiety in the morning before school and after school.” This parent claimed that their son is medicated due to his anxiety over homework, and that at one point he felt that he “didn't want to live anymore” because of his distress about spellings and reading.

![Chart showing frequency of upset caused by homework at home.](chart.png)
As represented in figure 10, 57% of all respondents said that homework was a source of upset in the home, with 15% listing ‘often’ or ‘always’ as the frequency of homework-related distress. 10% of respondents specifically mentioned homework’s negative impact on family life in the qualitative sections of the questionnaire. These findings resonate with the assertions of Kralovec and Buell (2001), who claim that homework imposes on family time, causing disruption and conflict. Similar findings were reported by Jackson and Harbison (2014); just over two thirds of the parents in their sample claimed that homework ‘sometimes’ or ‘frequently’ caused friction at home.

**Parental Views on the Type of Homework Received**

![Diagram of homework types](image-url)
Homework Content. Participants were asked to indicate whether various homework types are ‘regularly’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘never’ received. Figure 11 represents the frequency of homework types which were marked as being regularly received. Based on the results, pupils in this school seem to most frequently receive homework for reading, spellings and times tables. The least frequently received type of homework is preparation for a lesson, with almost half of all respondents saying that their child never received this kind of homework. Projects are also seldomly assigned, with 18% of respondents reporting that they were never given and a further 73% saying that they were sometimes given. All parents reported their children receiving reading homework, and only one participant said that their child never received spellings and times tables as homework. This may indicate that teachers perceive the primary benefit and purpose of homework as a support for literacy and numeracy, which was also mentioned by 14% of homework’s proponents (see figure 6).

![Nature of Homework Assigned](image)

*Figure 12: Details about the nature of homework assigned.*
Nature of Homework Assigned. As shown in figure 12, 70% of parents reported that their child’s homework sometimes involved new learning. When asked if children were ever given choices about their homework, most participants (93%) reported that homework never involved an element of choice. 53% of parents reported that their child did not enjoy homework and just 12% of parents said that their child did enjoy it.

In terms of difficulty, most participants (88%) feel that their child’s homework is appropriate to their ability. Marzano and Pickering (2007) cite this as an important feature of effective homework, and Vatterott (2011) also maintains that homework which cannot be completed without help is unlikely to foster a positive attitude towards learning. In this sample, just 4% of participants felt that the homework assigned was beyond the capability of their child, and 8% said that it was too easy. Despite this, 26% of respondents claimed to always help their children, which may suggest that the homework being assigned is in fact too difficult to be completed independently by many. While it is difficult to know what participants understood as ‘helping’, the fact that 23% of parents’ support constitutes ‘close supervision’ also suggests that homework may be either too difficult or over-supervised.

Vatterott emphasises the importance of assigning homework which does not involve new learning. Doing so can place an unfair burden on parents. 70% of participants in this study said that their child’s homework does involve new learning. Although most participants said that they feel confident in supporting their children, homework that involves new learning can also lead to the internalisation of misconceptions in children (Vatterott, 2011).

Another characteristic of effective homework, as outlined by Vatterott, is that it gives the child a sense of ownership over their own learning. Indeed, many parents seemed to recognise the importance of this idea. As one participant put it, homework “gives the child a sense of responsibility. Writing list of [homework], carrying it out by themselves, asking and
accepting help where needed, returning items to school etc.” When asked about the non-academic benefits of homework, 13% of all participants mentioned the development of personal responsibility or independence. Central to a sense of ownership, says Vatterott (2011), is an element of choice. Kiely et al. (2019) also emphasise the importance of choice over the ‘when, where and how’ of homework as a motivating factor for children. However, only 7% of parents reported that their child had any choice with regards to homework. 53% said that their child never enjoyed homework, and only 12% said that they did. This lack of enjoyment may be related to the absence of choice given to children, which in turn can deny them of a sense of ownership over their independent learning.

**Parental Input on Homework Practices**

Rudman (2014, p. 25) claims that many parents and teachers find contemporary homework practices “unsatisfactory, frustrating and poorly considered.” Although homework is widely assigned, it is not mandated by the Irish curriculum and there are no departmental guidelines. Most Irish schools have a homework policy (including the school in question), but Jackson and Harbison (2014) argue that too little attention is paid to the type of homework that is given. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ kind of homework is often assigned out of tradition rather than as a purposeful learning tool (Stuart, 2017).
Homework Policy. 59% of respondents did not know if their child’s school had a homework policy and 5% incorrectly believed that it did not. While 35% were aware of the policy, only 29% of this subsection claimed to be very familiar with the policy, representing just 10% of the entire sample group. The overall familiarity with the school’s homework policy is represented in figure 13, above. 70% of the sample group was either unaware of the school’s homework policy, or unfamiliar with its contents. Related to this may be the fact that 91% of participants said that they had no say in the amount and type of homework that their child received.
Suggestions Made by Participants. A number of participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with current homework practices. The repetitive nature of homework emerged as a theme, with 8% of respondents mentioning it in the qualitative sections of the questionnaire. Many parents (both for and against homework) suggested ways in which homework might be improved. One participant suggested that homework could involve “more open, less structured tasks such as … projects with monthly deadlines.” Similarly, another respondent felt that pupils “…should be given some project-type work that they can do over a certain time-period on topics they are interested in.” Another parent mentioned that “there is very little creative homework,” and yet another suggested that homework be limited to practical activities such as cooking, exercise and painting.

One parent whose two children have special needs believed that their sons “would benefit from homework assigned at the start of the week, that they can complete in their own time as long as it's finished by Friday.” This was echoed by another participant who claimed that this practice was used in a different local school.
Conclusion

This research dissertation sought to ascertain the experiences and opinions of parents regarding homework and their involvement in their children’s homework at the primary school level. A quantitative survey-design instrument was chosen to gather data. The sample was drawn from a Roman Catholic senior school in a traditionally disadvantaged suburb of North Dublin. Since parents are the primary educators of their children, their attitudes towards homework have a profound effect on how pupils feel about it (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). In gathering this data, the researcher hoped to gain insight into the benefits and purpose of homework, as well as its impact on family life.

Findings

Echoing the recent research conducted by Kiely and her colleagues (2019), analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data generated in this study reveal a multiplicity of views and experiences regarding homework.

The results of the study showed that 65% of participants believed their children should be given homework in primary school, while 32% did not. This was a significant level of disagreement. Although 72% of respondents felt that homework helped their children to improve their schoolwork, many who agreed with homework made it clear that it should be limited. The amount of time consumed by homework was of concern to 34% of the sample.

In addition to academic achievement, 55% of participants believed homework has other benefits. Among these were the development of good habits such as discipline and time-management, giving children responsibility for their own learning, and helping parents to maintain a link with the school.
The results showed that parental involvement with homework in the sample school is high, with only 9% of parents ceding complete responsibility to the child. 66% of parents said that they made themselves available to help when needed.

Worryingly, 57% of all respondents said that homework was a source of stress in the home. Some of the strongest opponents of homework had serious concerns about its impact on their children’s mental health. In the qualitative components of the questionnaire, 10% of all respondents specifically mentioned homework’s negative impact on family life.

The data revealed a certain level of dissatisfaction with current homework practices. Most participants reported that their children did not enjoy homework, that it sometimes involved new learning and that there was no element of choice in the work assigned. 69% of participants were not familiar with the school’s homework policy and 91% felt that they had no say what their child was being given for homework, though plenty had suggestions for changes.

**Limitations**

This was a study small-scale study, with a limited number of participants recruited through convenience sampling. Respondents were parents of children in a senior school in a traditionally disadvantaged Dublin suburb. Although the school serves a diverse population of families in terms of ethnicity, the socio-economic backgrounds of the respondents were likely not very diverse, and the results of the study cannot be generalised. It can nevertheless provide an insight into the experiences of parents in a particular context, broadening our understanding of the dynamics of the home-school relationship. The findings might therefore be transferable to other contexts, and ways of improving our current practices identified.
The timeframe of the study and limitations on the word-count meant that the literature review was not as in-depth as it might have been. The international literature on homework is broad and extensive, while at the same time the research conducted in Ireland is limited. A comprehensive study on parental involvement was recently undertaken in Ireland (Kiely et al., 2019), but the results only became available to the researcher in the latter stages of this paper.

The 56% response rate for the questionnaire suggests a reasonable level of interest in the topic among parents in the school. However, respondents were likely those parents who had a particular interest in education, and this may have influenced the results of the study.

**Recommendations**

The researcher recommends that School A considers some of the suggestions made by parents in the study. As most of the study’s participants were not aware of the school’s homework policy, a committee of all stakeholders (parents, teachers, and children) could be involved in creating a new policy. This would ideally clarify the roles of all involved and take the voices of the children into account. Choice and flexibility with regards to homework is highly recommended, and homework’s impact on the family should be directly addressed in the policy. Formal methods for parents and teachers to communicate about homework might be established, such as those suggested by Vatterott (2009).

While the results of this study cannot be generalised, they may indicate certain areas of research to be undertaken in more depth. For example, purposeful homework which can be differentiated for individual pupils would be worth exploring in an intervention study. Qualitative studies in schools that have abolished the practice of homework would also be of great value. Ideally, views of teachers and children would be included in further research.
Conclusion

Although most participants in this study were in favour of homework, there were reservations about the amount and type given and the stress that it causes. There was a high level of parental involvement with individual homework, but parents in this sample were not involved with policy creation, and most were unaware of the details of the current school policy. The researcher recommends that further research be undertaken in this area, in different contexts and settings, to broaden the perspective on this important aspect of schooling.


Cooper, H., Lindsay, J., Greathouse, S., and Nye, B. (1998) Relationships among attitudes
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Williams, J., Greene, S., Doyle, E., Harris, E., Layte, R., McCoy, S., McCrory, C., Murray, A., Nixon, E., O’Dowd, T., O’Moore, M., Quail, A., Smyth, E., Swords, L. and 

Approaches.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Board of Management,

School A,

Dear _____ and members of the board of management,

My name is Diarmait Grogan and I am currently studying to obtain a Professional Master of Education from Marino Institute of Education. As part of this programme, I am conducting research on homework in primary schools. The title of my paper is, ‘Experiences and Opinions of Parents Regarding Homework in Irish Primary Schools.’

As parental attitudes have been shown to have a profound effect on children, this project wishes to investigate what the opinions of parents are towards homework at the primary school level, and what challenges they face in supporting their children with it. I would be seeking to distribute a questionnaire among the parents of children in your school.

I am aware that this this is a very busy time of year for the school, and I would greatly appreciate your assistance with the project. I can foresee no risks being associated with individual and school participation in this study. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about your school or the participants will be identified in the research. As your school would be the site for data collection, a copy of the results can be made available to you if requested.

Please note that the parents who receive the questionnaire would be under no obligation to participate in the study, and those who did would be free to withdraw at any stage.

If you have any further questions regarding this research, please feel free to get in touch. I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Best Regards,

Diarmait Grogan
Dear Parents/Guardians,

I’m looking for your help. I want to know your opinions on homework.

My name is Diarmait Grogan and I am doing research for a Master of Education course in Marino Institute of Education.

The title of my paper is, ‘Experiences and Opinions of Parents Regarding Homework in Irish Primary Schools.’ Your views are essential to my research, and I would be very grateful if you agreed to take part in the study.

The Board of Management and the principal, [Name], have given me permission to work in [School Name].

Completing my questionnaire should take 10 – 15 minutes. Please see the instructions overleaf. If you have more than one child in the school, please base your answers on the oldest of your children.

**If you agree to take part, please fill in and return the consent form** along with the questionnaire. It is an essential document. Without it I won’t be able to use your answers.

Please answer as honestly as you can. The data will be anonymous and no information about you, your child or the school will be revealed in the research. Your answers will be stored securely and shredded after 6 months.

You will have the option of withdrawing your data from the study before it is submitted in May 2020. Please keep this letter for future reference. Your random serial number is in the top left corner. My contact details are below.

If you do not wish to take part, please ask your child to return this pack to their teacher.

Thank you very much for your time.

Kind Regards,

Diarmait Grogan
Appendix C

Instructions

- There are 20 questions in this questionnaire.

- For **yes / no** questions, please circle the answer that applies to you.
  
  *Example:*

  1. Does your child attend a primary school in Dublin?
  
  *Yes* / No

- For multiple choice questions, please mark the box next to your answer.

  *Example:*

  2. How many children do you have?

  1 ☐
  
  2 ☒
  
  3 or more ☐

- Some of the questions have boxes for you to explain your answers or provide extra information.

  Including even a few words in these sections will really help my research. Thank you very much for your time!
Appendix D

Homework Questionnaire

1. What class is your child in? __________

2. How often does your child get homework?
   Every day (except Fridays) ☐
   2-3 times a week ☐
   1 day a week ☐
   Never ☐

3. On average, how long does your child spend on homework in one evening?
   10 mins ☐
   20 mins ☐
   30 mins ☐
   40 mins ☐
   1 hour ☐
   Longer than 1 hour ☐

4. Which of these types of homework does your child get? (Tick the boxes that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regularly</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revising schoolwork</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for a test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for a lesson</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing a project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spellings or times-tables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Does your child’s homework ever involve learning something new?
   Yes / No

6. Does your child ever have a choice in what they do for homework?
   Yes / No

7. In your opinion, is your child's homework:
   - Too hard □
   - Too easy □
   - About right □

8. Does your child enjoy doing homework?
   Yes / No / Sometimes

9. Do you help your child with their homework?
   Yes / No

   If yes, how often do you help your child with their homework?
   - Rarely □
   - Sometimes □
   - Always □
10. Is there a way for you to communicate with the teacher about your child’s homework?
   Yes / No

   If yes, please describe how you communicate with the teacher

11. How would you describe your role when it comes to your child’s homework?
   (e.g. allow them to take responsibility, supervise, help with tricky questions, make sure they finish, provide a quiet environment, etc.)

12. How confident do you feel about supporting your child with their homework?
   Not confident ☐
   Quite confident ☐
   Very confident ☐

13. Do you think that children should get homework in primary school?
   Yes / No

   Why / Why not?
14. Do you think your child’s homework helps them to improve their schoolwork?

   Yes / No

   Optional comments

15. Apart from improving schoolwork, do you think homework has other benefits?

   Yes / No

   If yes, what?

16. Do you think homework has any disadvantages?

   Yes / No

   If yes, please explain below.
17. Do you think homework improves any of the following?

- Your child’s attitude towards learning  
  - Yes / No / Maybe

- Your child’s ability to focus  
  - Yes / No / Maybe

- Your child’s self-confidence  
  - Yes / No / Maybe

18. Does your child’s school have a homework policy?

- Yes / No / Don’t Know

  If yes, how familiar are you with the contents of the policy?

    - Very familiar / Somewhat / Not familiar

19. Do you have a say in the amount and type of homework your child gets?

- Yes / No

20. Does homework cause upset at home?

- Never / rarely □

- Sometimes □

    - Often □

    - Always □

If you have any other comments, please include them here.
Appendix E

Consent to take part in research

Title of paper: ‘Experiences and Opinions of Parents Regarding Homework in Irish Primary Schools’

• I………………………………………… voluntary agree to participate in this research study.

• I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question, without having to give a reason.

• I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my questionnaire within two months after returning it, in which case the material will be deleted.

• I understand that I should retain my randomised serial number (included on the covering letter, consent form and questionnaire booklet) in order to withdraw my participation if desired.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

• I understand that participation involves anonymously answering a series of questions about my own experiences and opinions regarding my child/children’s homework in primary school.

• I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

• I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
• I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain
anonymous. There will be no details which may reveal my identity, my child’s identity
or the identity of the school or its staff.

• I understand that disguised extracts from my responses may be quoted in the
research paper.

• I understand that the signed consent forms and the completed questionnaires will
be retained by the researcher for six months before being shredded.

• I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access
the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

• I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification
and information.

Researcher: Diarmait Grogan
Professional Master of Education, Year 2 (2019/20), Marino Institute of Education.
dgroganpme18@mmail.mie.ie
087 752 3296

Signature of research participant

__________________________       _________________
Signature of participant           Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

__________________________       _________________
Signature of researcher           Date