

SCHOOL-FAMILY: IS A RECIPROCAL AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP POSSIBLE?

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Student education is not only the responsibility of the school. In this article, we reflect on the relationship between parents and school, understanding this as one of the foundations on which the success or failure of any educational system is based. Initially, we provide information about the diverse research lines developed on this topic; then, we concentrate our analysis on the role homework plays as an indispensable resource to promote parental involvement in children's academic development.

Key Words: Homework, family-school relationship.

La educación de los estudiantes no es sólo responsabilidad de la escuela. En este artículo se reflexiona sobre la relación entre escuela y familia, entendiendo ésta como uno de los pilares sobre los que se fundamenta el éxito o fracaso de cualquier sistema educativo. Inicialmente, se aporta información sobre las diversas líneas de investigación que se han desarrollado sobre este tema para, posteriormente, centrar el análisis sobre el papel de las "tareas para casa" (TPC) como un inmejorable recurso para promover la implicación de la familia en el desarrollo académico de los hijos.

Palabras Clave: Tareas para casa, relación familia-escuela.

In this article an analysis is made of how family conditions influence student motivation, behaviour, and school learning. Initially, we describe some of the most important results that research has provided regarding the influence of family variables on children's academic achievement. In the second part of the article we focus on "homework" as one of the best resources we have in order to link family-student-school.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The results of numerous studies on the teaching-learning process have shown that a significant relationship exists between family involvement and students' academic success (González-Pienda y Núñez, 2005). In this manner, it is known that positive family involvement has an influence on students' conditions for optimal learning, regardless of school level (Muller, 1998), and reduces the probability of students dropping out of secondary education (Martínez y Alvarez, 2006).

On one hand, research has been done trying to explain how different parental behaviours influence children's motivation, self-concept, concentration, effort, attitude, etc., assuming that such variables are fundamental

conditions that, sensitizing the individual towards using his processes and cognitive strategies, will significantly affect future learning and achievement (for example, Castejón & Pérez, 1998; Fantuzzo, Davis & Ginsburg, 1995; García-Linares & Pelegrina, 2001; González-Pienda, Núñez, González-Pumariega, Alvarez, Rocés & García, 2002a; Kim & Rohner, 2002; Patrikakou, 1996; Seginer & Vermulst, 2002; Shumow, Vandell & Kang, 1996). For example, from this perspective, González-Pienda et al. (2002a) have found evidence that certain dimensions of parental involvement with respect to their children's education (expectations regarding performance, expectations regarding their capacity to attain significant achievement, interest in their children's school work, degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the level attained by their children, level and type of help that parents offer their children when doing academic work at home and, parents' reinforcement of behaviour with respect to children's achievements) significantly affect children's academic performance, not directly as is logical, but indirectly through their influence on personal variables such as the student's self-concept, the usual pattern of attribution of causality for particular successes and failures (e.g., exams results), etc.

On the other hand, it has also been investigated how parents get involved favouring or interfering with the learning process itself through their influence on self-regulating conducts (González-Pienda, Núñez, Alvarez,

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González-Pumariega, Roces, González, Muñiz & Bernardo, 2002b; Martínez-Pons, 1996; Zimmerman, Bandura & Martínez-Pons, 1992). The change of perspective regarding school learning, from the classical cognitive model to the self-regulated learning model, has also brought about a new orientation for research on family involvement in children's study and school learning. Martínez-Pons (1996) defines family involvement in the self-regulating process through four types of conduct: modelling (when parental conduct offers examples of self-regulation in its diverse phases and forms to be observed and imitated by their children), stimulation or emotional support (when parents favour their children's persistence in adverse situations), facilitation or help (when parents facilitate learning providing resources and means) and reward (when parents reinforce those conducts or sequences that involve some degree of self-regulation). In general, in these research studies we find empirical evidence that this type of behaviour in parents significantly influences different areas of children's self-regulation process in learning, and that this influences their academic performance.

In this line of work, González-Pienda et al. (2003) inform about some family conditions which characterize mothers and fathers who are involved in promoting self-regulatory behaviour in their children. Just as these authors propose in the study, the results would indicate that the greater cohesion and family adaptability is, the greater the children's "consciousness" about their parents' behaviours similar to those previously described (although about what we cannot assert anything at all is the relationship between family dynamics and the existence of self-regulatory behaviour on the part of the parents).

In short, what bears no doubt is that family involvement (socially, structurally and functionally) in children's education is a crucial element for their progress and an essential pillar for the school in order to achieve optimal results.

Nowadays, one of the aspects that requires increasing attention, has to do with "homework". Despite the ongoing controversy about whether homework is needed, research has found that when parents dedicate some time to help with school work, students improve their performance and their academic competencies (e.g., Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987; Rosário, et al, 2005; Symeou, 2006; Useem, 1992).

AN APPROXIMATION TO THE CONCEPT OF HOMEWORK

Homework, defined by Cooper (1989, 2001) as the tasks that teachers assign students to do outside the school schedule, has a long and deep-rooted tradition, being a usual practice in most schools throughout the world. The literature suggests that, in periods of educational system reform, homework plays a more outstanding role in day-to-day school life, as this means an increase in the load of assigned tasks for students to do outside of the school context. In this sense, homework is recognised as an indicator of both successful schools and students (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). In the same manner, international studies, such as the PISA study in 2000 and 2006, confirm that those countries and schools that prescribe more homework are also those with the best level of academic achievement.

Homework is, in fact, considered by many teachers as one of the most useful and even indispensable tools for the advancement in the quality of student learning and the resulting improvement in the quality of the educational process. According to Epstein and Von Voorhis (2001), already in the eighties, researchers such as Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore came to the conclusion in their studies that a greater load of homework as well as of discipline are two of the most important factors for the improvement of the environment for learning and the consequent academic success that private schools present as opposed to public schools.

The idea of assigning more homework is based on the presumption that the more time students dedicate to studying the transmitted contents, the more they will learn. This idea, held by some authors, is highly questioned by others. Among the former, they defend that if something is universally accepted it is that the amount of time invested in the task predicts the amount of material learned. In this sense, homework would be a way of extending the school day, as Walberg et al. defend (Walberg et al., 1985). In addition, according to the results of some studies (e.g., Paschal et al., 1984), homework prescribed regularly, on a daily basis, and evaluated with adequate feedback regarding its realization in order to find ways for improvement, is one of the practices most linked to the beneficial effects of homework as a tool for the reinforcement of student learning.

However, even though there is increasing acceptance of

the influential role of homework on students' school results, today the existing relationship between these two variables is still questioned, especially due to the great diversity in the effects of homework at different levels of education.

Talking about homework can be something complex since the variables involved are very diverse and the observation focuses very heterogeneous.

Self-regulation theorists defend homework as a useful tool for improving students' involvement and concentration on the task, thus, providing a work ethic, but they obviously do not sanction just any homework. With respect to this construct, as to many others in daily school life, more than emotionally leaning towards one of the extremes of the barrier, perhaps the solution is in the discussion about its anatomy (e.g., load, typology of tasks prescribed, regularity, functionality perceived by students and parents, feedback given) so that the proposed tasks favour and optimize the willingness and activity of students without being intrusive for the family.

What do we know about the impact of homework compliance on school performance? What should teachers do about homework? What role should be assumed by parents in the construction of an adequate environment for studying? These are some of the questions that we will try to answer on the next pages going deeper into some of the whats and the whys of homework.

PROBLEMATIC ISSUES SURROUNDING HOMEWORK

Something that is frequently mentioned in the educational media, is that students in general, study and work less everyday. Commentaries such as the following are also common: "nowadays students do not study" and "they do not even do homework" Based on street indicators as well as on the support for these ideas included in the OCDE and PISA reports we can affirm that students dedicate little time to studying and personal work, which has direct implications on their low marks (Mourão, 2004).

Time spent on personal study and specifically on homework is, with no doubt, a determinant factor in student academic performance. Research underlines and confirms the importance of the role of "time on task", both during class and afterwards at home when completing homework and studying. In any case, it is convenient to highlight that, when we talk about time dedicated to homework, research recommends distinguishing between the quality and quantity of such time. Investing too much

time in homework could simply mean insufficient background knowledge or obvious difficulties for working contents. Thus, dedicating little time to homework may be related to high student efficiency or the opposite, to a great incapacity. Therefore, more important than the time spent, is the quality and the level of realization of prescribed homework, since these factors are related positively to students' school results (Cooper, et al., 1998). The findings of a broad research program by Cooper et al. (1998) demonstrate that homework exerts a greater influence at more advanced levels of schooling than at the initial levels. A more detailed examination of the benefits of homework in the first grades of primary school demonstrates that younger students have a tendency to be less efficient than their older classmates with respect to their study habits and the control of distracters which will have an effect when doing the prescribed homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Add to this Muhlenbruck et al.'s findings published in 2000, which suggest that primary teachers put more value in the opportunity that homework offers the student for training time administration skills and study habits, than actually working on the content. The development of these competencies occurs not only in the broad school environment but also in the home-family environment. As partners in the children's learning process, parents and teachers play a major role in the development of beliefs and approaches that go hand in hand with homework (Bempechat, 2004).

Throughout schooling, homework plays an increasingly important role in the consolidation of learning. If in the first grades of primary education teachers use homework in order to develop in their students good study habits and to improve self-control, in the last years of primary education and in secondary education students should start assuming homework as a personal responsibility, adequately writing down the tasks prescribed, doing them on time and verifying their realization. Therefore, the consolidation of good work habits should be an explicit objective in primary school. Teachers and parents should work cooperatively in the sense that they should provide a sufficiently rich and favourable homework environment that provides opportunities for modelling and guidance (Corno & Xu, 2004).

The assumption of responsibility in the administration of tasks and personal study, which are skills that lengthen and deepen students' knowledge about a subject,

corresponds to the characteristics of the step from “the apprentice” to “the expert” (Rosário et al., 2004; Zimmerman, Bonner & Kovach, 1996). In other words, homework should be one of the driving forces in the road towards expertise, since it constitutes a privileged tool of self-regulation (Mourão, 2004).

ANATOMY OF HOMEWORK

Homework constitutes a powerful tool for school learning. Teachers have always prescribed it and will continue to do so, although we cannot take this tradition for granted (Corno, 2000). Understanding homework in a new manner involves not limiting our debate solely to its effects on school achievement.

Homework is clearly influenced by many aspects of society, both in its realization and in its products. In many families, parents help their children with their homework, providing books and magazines, there are older brothers or sisters, they have internet, etc. But, obviously, it is not this way for all students, and teachers should take this into account when prescribing homework.

Homework should incorporate an adequate combination of challenge and realization skills with the aim of making it something gratifying in the eyes of students. More than enough times, teachers prescribe homework with the central objective of consolidating or expanding knowledge about subjects studied in class. Other times, homework is prescribed as a way of complying with a very extensive curricular plan.

However, in the same way that work performed in school evolves in cognitive complexity, homework should also do the same. Throughout the school years, it is not only important that homework shows a level of complexity adapted to student capacity but also a degree of challenge and incentive that will encourage students to get involved in the task. Students need to understand that learning is not only memorizing, training and practice (Corno, 2000).

When tasks are too demanding and are above students' perceived capacity, students may fall into a state or into a sort of self-consciousness that inhibits their action (Kuhl, 1985). In these cases, individuals under this state forget about the task at hand and fall into a state that Bandura (1982, p.137) designates as “repetitive perturbing ideation”, focusing on their personal weaknesses and underestimating their capacity (Corno, 2000). This situation occurs more frequently to children with low

academic achievement. In a study by Butler (1998), where personal accounts of students with learning difficulties were gathered, one of these students described his feelings regarding homework as follows: “I got nervous”, “I lost my concentration(...) I felt stupid, I did not want to finish, I worked more slowly and I was distracted”. Forty-nine percent of the students in this study reported unpleasant emotional reactions during the realization of homework.

Many teachers make the effort to show their students how to prioritize tasks by not leaving the most difficult or unpleasant ones for last when willingness, strength and energy decrease. In primary education teachers can alert parents about the importance of providing an adequate space for doing homework, minimizing distracters and being, whenever is possible, available to answer questions and help with possible problems that may arise.

In the United States, and other countries, especially English speaking, useful indications and instructions are given to parents regarding homework: the so called TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork). Corno (2000) provides interesting suggestions for parents with respect to the realization of homework assignments, for example: “establish an hour for starting; accompany your child, but do not do his assignments for him; use a watch in order to increase your child's control and mastering of time used, but also to develop his competencies of monitorization and volitive control toward tasks; offer a simple glass of water as a reward”, etc.

The main objective is to establish routines that the child will associate with doing homework assignments (Klavan, 1992). These routines serve as a support with certain difficulties and many times they last throughout life. Quoting Zimmerman (1998), Corno (2000) reminds us that subjects who stand out for their high degree of excellence usually attribute their success to having effective and deliberately established working routines.

If there are homework assignments that are too difficult, there are also assignments that are too easy and are boring for the students. Boredom may lead to distraction and feelings of distance towards the assignment, for example, “daydreaming and loosing oneself in fantasy instead of working on the task” are behaviours that can occur. In the worse scenario, children may even openly refuse to do the homework, generate more destructive thoughts, posing questions such as: “Why should I be

sitting here doing this?”, “ Why haven’t you given us something more interesting to do?”, “I hate homework”, “I hate the teacher”, “I hate school”.

THE HOMEWORK SETTING

Beyond the nature of homework itself, there is a complex context of expectations to consider. In these we include the expectations of teachers, parents, family, children and classmates.

Parents and teachers can insist to their children that assignments have to be done with 100% correction. Increasing expectancies to this level can have dreadful consequences, obliging the student to go beyond his limits and significantly reducing time of sleep only to fulfil inadequate expectancies. It is not desirable for a child to adopt this behaviour of working to obtain a “9” or “10”, his parents’ approval or satisfaction, or other rewards. Moreover, it is preferable that children enjoy the experience of learning and feel satisfaction from a job well done (Corno, 2000). In any case, the ideal would be that the expectations of others were adjusted to the real capacities of the students in order to avoid frustrations; only then will both parts in question win.

In the first grades of primary school students can benefit when an adult corrects and verifies their homework. Once the students become more skilled, the adult must step back staying in the background of the process, making it clear to them that the responsibility regarding the realization and the completion of homework assignments as well as the quality is theirs and theirs only. If homework is always handed in to teachers previously corrected by an adult, the teacher does not have the possibility to distinguish between what the student really knows and what he still does not master.

It would be of great help for the teachers if they had a better understanding of the difficulties and tensions that surround the completion of homework by students, especially the youngest ones (Corno, 1996). But they also have to be conscious that, according to research in this area, the development of self-regulating strategies and management competencies through homework is a possibility more than a reality. Personal responsibility needs to be developed and we need to provide conditions that will allow its development. Understandably, some students usually require more support and take more time to develop routines for doing homework than others (Xu & Corno, 1998).

Time control and resource management are aspects regarding self-regulation that teachers deal with at school, but there are other more subtle aspects, for example those relative to the energizing dimensions of behaviour, motivations and volitive control (e.g., emotional control), which are not always present in the educational agenda of schools.

In order to improve these competencies we have to unite the effort of parents, teachers and other educational agents, working together to provide opportunities that will facilitate the student in developing his capacities, for example, regulating the work environment, especially when doing homework and monitoring his volitive control and his affective states during its realization (Xu & Corno, 1998). Teachers should be realistic with respect to the time and emotional demands that homework assignments involve.

Finally, the numerous extracurricular activities that children and adolescents are engaged in daily also compete with the daily completion of homework. Despite being conscious of these threats, we insist on believing in the potential of homework as an educational strategy, and we endorse it reiterating the importance and weight of the results of its proper use in the teaching-learning process.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

The relationship between time spent on homework and academic achievement has been the focus of numerous international research studies. A brief summary of some of their conclusions is presented below:

Time spent on homework

- ✓ The relationship between time spent on homework and academic achievement is clear and positive in the last grades of Obligatory Secondary Education (ESO) and in Bachillerato (post-compulsory secondary education). Empirical evidence for this relationship is not as clear in primary education with inconsistent and inconclusive results obtained in the studies done.
- ✓ Time spent doing homework explains only part of the variability in students’ academic results.
- ✓ Research studies conducted in the United States indicate that younger students (primary education), especially students with low school achievement, spend more time on homework. The tendency is the opposite in older students (high school): it is the students with higher school achievement who spend more time on homework.

- ✓ Studies in the US also show that girls have a tendency to spend more time than boys doing homework and that Asian students dedicate more time to homework than students from other ethnic groups. These Asian students usually take greater advantage of the time dedicated to homework.
- ✓ Diverse international studies suggest that the relationship between academic performance and time spent on homework could be curvilinear.
- ✓ The positive and significant correlations found between time spent on homework and performance should not be taken as proof that, by itself, more time invested in doing homework necessarily leads to greater performance.

Homework and student attitudes

- ✓ In a general manner, students present positive attitudes towards homework and verbalize its importance for helping them “get on well” in school. A positive attitude towards homework is associated with a positive attitude towards school, and the inverse is also true.
- ✓ The scarce existing research about students’ preferences indicates that students do not very much like the daily, routine assignments they are prescribed (e.g., such as finishing or completing unfinished assignments in class). In general, they prefer interesting, challenging and divergent tasks.
- ✓ Student attitudes towards homework are usually related to gender. Recent studies suggest that girls tend to dedicate more time to homework than boys.
- ✓ Prescribing adequate homework assignments in the first grades of primary education which is supported by the modelling and responsible monitorization of parents or other significant adults (e.g., older siblings), helps interiorize study habits, develop organization and management of time, instilling routines that will be useful in subsequent grades.

Parental involvement in homework

In general parents like schools to prescribe homework, even though sometimes homework may cause conflicts between parents, students and teachers. An exposition of some of the results of the research done on this topic follows:

- ✓ Parents get more involved in homework when their children are younger. The type and degree of parental involvement in homework is related to socio-economic and cultural level.

- ✓ There are no research findings that establish a clear relationship between parental involvement and students’ academic performance. However, evidence suggests that more important than the quantity of time spent by the parents on homework is the quality and type of approach during the time spent with children.
- ✓ Parental involvement in homework adopts different forms and, consequently, has different repercussions on students’ marks. It is possible to identify parents who appropriately intervene, for example by providing adequate places and proper material for studying. Other parents behave in a less adequate manner, for example by doing tasks for their children, planning and controlling their study schedules without letting them exercise their freedom to act and the responsibility to assume the consequences of their behaviour.
- ✓ Research reveals as very important that parents and adults support the autonomy of their children.
- ✓ The typology of parental involvement (e.g., what they do, when and how they do it), more than the time spent, may be the key factor in the success of the interaction between parents and children in the mastering of homework.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Homework demands the performance of three actors: the teacher who prescribes the assignments and gives feedback, the parent who monitors them, and the student who does them. If one of the three is missing, the play will be a failure. Thus, “the role of the teacher when offering feedback – when positively reinforcing what has been well done and reviewing what still has not been learnt – is the key to the maximization of the positive impact of homework” (Walberg & Paik, 2000, p.9).

Within the teaching profession, there are some teachers who use homework as a last resort in order to fill in gaps in knowledge and overcome time problems for covering all the contents, to promote the individual training that classes do not always guarantee, or more positively because they consider it a useful and indispensable tool for the development of skills for independent and autonomous work. However, there are also other teachers, who almost gratuitously reject homework, despising its usefulness, based on the discouragement shown by many students for its realization and compliance with a minimum of quality. With respect to students, we find, on the one hand, those who are more

distant and contrary to school tasks, who very easily adopt an attitude of aversion or repulsion for homework, considering it an intrusion in their free time or an activity of no value, and on the other hand, we find those students that methodically are committed to the daily completion of homework assigned by teachers, accepting it without much questioning as logical participants in their role as student who are responsible for their own learning.

If, on one hand, many educators believe that homework contributes to the improvement of learning and the maximum use of school, on the other hand, the same homework is widely criticized for the negative effects that it sometimes has on children's development. One of the harshest criticisms about the use of homework arises precisely regarding its degree of efficacy. For homework to be effective it must make sense and be significant to the student, be relevant, and whenever possible creative and cognitively challenging.

Homework is by definition, tasks that are carried out without the direct control of the teacher. For this reason, when students are faced with its realization they can choose what to do. First, they can decide if they are going to do it. Later, it is up to them the time and effort that they are going to dedicate to the prescribed assignments. Even after this decision-making process, the student still has countless options to choose from regarding "what", "where", "how" and "with whom" they want to (or can) do the assigned homework, options that inevitably affect the final quality of the performance (Hong & Milgram, 2000).

However, we cannot deny that on many occasions homework is a source of family conflict and a reason for friction and complaints in school-home relationships (Cooper, 2001). Essentially, the discussion with respect to homework is focused on whether it is good or bad for children (talking about school achievement or, at least of the development of good study habits) and for their families (homework as a means of having knowledge about their children's progress and/or for improving communication with the school).

If there are parents who deliberately make an effort to help their children create a proper environment for the realization of homework as proposed by the teachers, there are others who resign from that responsibility or who simply do not know the appropriate way to do so. The exact measure, the adjusted "dose" of help and type of ideal parental involvement are some of the present concerns regarding homework (Rosário et al., 2005b).

In any case, literature suggests that students benefit greatly from the experience of doing homework assignments in a family environment when they are helped by an appropriate parental structure (Xu & Corno, 1998). This idea should be present in the spirit of teachers who, in conjunction with parents, will be able to negotiate feasible and useful methods for the desirable daily accompaniment in the tasks that students do at home.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Serious and systematic initiatives should be implemented, eventually clarifying information sessions at schools guided by involved and well-informed homeroom teachers (tutors) experienced in contact with parents. These sessions could be oriented towards making parents conscious of their essential role as educators and role models of behaviour and positive attitudes regarding school in general, and homework in particular. For example, issues could be discussed such as the importance of controlling the study environment at home with respect to its physical and emotional aspects, overcoming and eliminating external and internal distracters that are often present when doing the prescribed homework (e.g., arguments, insults, change of plans in timing that disrupt study, excessive noise, environments which are too hot or too cold, the physical working space, television or loud music, mobile phones, computer games, chats, amongst others). It would be desirable that schools, every school, every management team, every disciplinary group, every teacher, each and every one of them at their level, assumed their responsibility in the promotion and adoption of homework policies which are serious, feasible, theoretically based and as systematic as possible.

It would be preferable that this would not occur due to an imposition from above but based on the conviction that there is a need for education of better quality where homework has a noble function; that is, contributing to the increase of self-regulating skills and the success of our students.

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