Parents' perspectives on homework: United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and Japan

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INTRODUCTION

Parents' attitudes towards homework are not static and change depending on political, economic, social and educational factors. As a result of this research on homework can only be understood taking account of the cultural and historical framework within which it was undertaken. In the late 1990s, in the Western world there was a major focus on raising educational standards. As part of the drive to achieve this, attention focused on homework and governments issued guidelines to schools about the setting of homework and encouraged parents to take an active interest in their child's school-work. As the pressure on schools to raise attainment has been raised, the amount of homework set has increased, to such an extent that in Australasia parents groups are now campaigning to review the setting of homework arguing that there is no evidence that students benefit from the practice and that it has become an overbearing invasion of family life. In Japan, education has long been highly valued, and, for entrance to prestigious universities, which facilitate future high status employment, it is also highly competitive. Parents therefore view their child's educational progress as of critical importance and aim to support their offspring as best they can providing a supportive learning environment at home in the earliest stages of education and paying for attendance at Juku (cram schools) or for home tutors

as children progress through school. As a result of this Japanese children spend a great deal of their time engaged in studying to such an extent that it has had a negative impact on their attitudes towards school and in some cases their mental well-being. This has led the Japanese government to implement strategies to reduce the stress and anxiety of children including abolishing school on Saturdays. These examples illustrate how parents, schools and governments periodically renegotiate the relationship between state and family with regard to the time that children spend engaged in education. Views about homework provide a sensitive measure of the state of that relationship in a particular place and point in time.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

In a review of the international literature, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) concluded that parental involvement had a significant effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors such as social status, maternal education and poverty had been taken into account. They identified a wide range of parental involvement activities but it was the 'at-home' relationships and modelling of aspirations which played the major part in school outcomes helping the child to build a pro-social, pro-learning self-concept and high educational aspirations. The longitudinal Competent Children Project in Wellington, New Zealand, came to similar conclusions demonstrating that it was how children interacted with adults and others and engaged in activities particularly those that used symbols and language which was important in predicting adult competence (Wylie, 2001).

In the UK and Australasia school home relationships can be fraught with difficulty. Particularly

in secondary education parental roles are not well defined and their potential to contribute can be a source of misunderstanding between teachers and parents. Schools while expecting parents to support their children often do not wish to involve parents in developing homework policy (Timperley et al.,1992; Beresford and Hardie, 1996; MacBeath, 2000). The skills that parents have often go unacknowledged and those from the lower socio-economic classes and ethnic minorities often report that school practices exclude them (Crozier, 1997; Reay, 1998). Communication between home and school is often problematic and parents are often dissatisfied with the way that schools set homework and the lack of information and guidance that they are given. Parents report that schools frequently fail to explain homework, do not consult them about the amount of homework, which is often inappropriate, and lack consistent policy statements (MacBeath et al, 1989; Kibble, 1991; MacBeath and Turner, 1990). Where schools work hard at partnerships parents speak enthusiastically about them and are encouraged to support homework activities. Parents want information and progress reports from school but also a channel to give feedback to the teacher (Weston, 1999). In the UK, the Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (EPRA) programme supported more than 100 secondary schools in developing a wide range of projects directly aimed at engaging parents in learning. Parents had the greatest influence on the achievement of pupils through supporting learning in the home (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

In contrast, to the sometimes, poor relationships between parents and teachers in the UK and Australasia, in Japan, particularly at elementary school there are close relationships. Teacher-parent ties are established or renewed at the beginning of each year through home visits. These meetings enable the teacher to gain a sense of the neighbouring community, the home

environment, and the concerns of parents who are expected to provide a nurturing and protective atmosphere for learning at home. Throughout the year various ceremonies, parent events, classroom visitation days, and Parent Teacher Association meetings provide other means for teachers to interact with parents. Some teachers send home newsletters (Sato, 1993). Schools value the role of parents and adopt strategies to engage them.

PERCEIVED PURPOSES OF HOMEWORK

The purposes of homework as generally perceived are that it encourages the involvement of parents in their child's education, and provides opportunities for developing links and dialogue between parents and the school. Most Australian parents consider that homework teaches children about responsibility, to work independently, and to be better organised (Warton, 1997). In depth interviews with mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds have shown that homework is seen as a way of focusing children on their learning, sustaining or enhancing motivation, gaining good study habits and using time productively. Homework was used by the mothers to improve children's academic performance, identify difficulties being experienced, monitor progress, and see what was being taught and whether the level was appropriate (Forster, 2000).

In the UK, parents' views of the purposes of homework tend to reflect those of teachers. Reinforcement and consolidation are seen as important functions, particularly at secondary level, while at primary level, developing basic skills in literacy and mathematics tend to be emphasized. Other purposes include increasing general knowledge, broadening outlook, doing something practical, establishing good study habits, improving communication, developing

critical thinking skills and increasing family interaction (MacBeath and Turner, 1990).

THE CONTEXT OF HOMEWORK

In the recent past in the UK and Australasia, governments have viewed homework as a means of raising educational standards with parents playing an important role (DfEE, 1998; New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998). In 1998, in the UK national guidance was introduced on homework setting out recommended time allocations and indicative tasks that might be set. In years 1 and 2 children are expected to undertake 1 hour of homework a week focused on reading, spellings and other literacy and numeracy work increasing to 30 minutes a day in years 5 and 6 with continued emphasis on literacy and numeracy but also ranging widely over the curriculum. At secondary school in years 7 and 8 children are expected to do between 45 and 90 minutes each day, rising to 1.5 to 2.5 hours each day in years 10 and 11. At primary level the main aim is seen as engaging parents in children's learning while for older children homework is seen as needing to provide opportunities for independent study.

In Japan, at first sight it appears that there is less emphasis on homework. Chen and Stevenson (1989) showed that Japanese children did not undertake a huge amount of homework and Japanese mothers did not spend particularly large amounts of time helping their children. However, homework in Japan (shukudai), refers only to the time spent completing assignments set by the teacher rather than time spent in preparing for lessons and reviewing class material (yoshu) or in answering practice questions (renshu mondai). While the time spent doing homework may be modest, the time spent studying is not. By the time students enter junior high school they are expected to study every evening whether or not they have been assigned

homework (Stevenson and Nerison-Low, 1998). In addition, a substantial proportion of children attend Juku (after school classes) or receive private tutoring. Juku are cram schools which provide about 60% of Japanese high school students with supplemental lessons. At elementary level they may offer recreational activities such as art or swimming, as well as academic subjects. Juku for high school students compete for enrolment with Yobiko which exist solely to prepare students for university entrance. Juku and Yobiko are primarily private for profit schools and are expensive. They thrive because in Japan learning is revered and it is believed that it is effort and family support not innate intellectual capacity which leads to success. Gaining access through examination success to the most prestigious schools and universities is crucial in determining future employment prospects (Stevenson and Nerison-Low, 1998). Practice tests at school and Juku help teachers direct students toward institutions whose examinations they are most likely to pass (Johnson and Johnson, 1996). In addition to Juku, junior high school and high school students attend Hoshu, extra classes organised by teachers to help students do well in their high school or college examinations (Stevenson and Nerison-Low, 1998).

The educational culture in Japan is very different to that in the UK and Australasia and is extremely influential in shaping Japanese youth. Schools have limited autonomy in their curriculum development as course selection and textbooks are determined by the Japanese Ministry of Education. In elementary school, Japanese educators focus on developing the ‘whole person’ including persevering, being kind hearted, strong and healthy, and diligent in study (Stevenson, 1991). The children are expected to learn 1,006 kanji (Sino-Japanese characters) more than half of the 1,945 that have been specified as kanji for daily use through memorisation arising from repetitive writing (Stevenson and and Nerison-Low, 1998). Overall, students spend

a long time in school, 240 days a year, with pupils arriving at eight or nine o'clock and leaving at 6-0 or later in the evening. While academic working time is similar to the UK and Australasia, participation in after school clubs is the norm as this is seen to lead to a well-rounded and healthy person. Most schools offer a wide range of club activities, for instance, broadcasting, fencing, calligraphy, cooking, flower arrangement, computer programming. First year students in high school are required to participate and most continue to do so, although some withdraw later to concentrate on academic work. By high school, Japanese students exhibit considerable independence, often commuting long distances to school and staying late. Parents do not supervise homework and the balance between family time and school time is towards school (Stevenson and Nerison-Low, 1998). Recently there has been concern over the pressure that exams and long hours of study put on students leading to poor attitudes towards school.

PARENTAL ATTITUDES TO HOMEWORK

Parent's attitudes towards homework may be affected by the extent to which they believe that doing homework is effective in leading to higher levels of attainment. Academic success is strongly emphasised in Japanese society (Chen and Stevenson, 1989) and parents and teachers perceive that the additional practice and review provided by homework is a useful contribution to success. In Australia, parents also believe that homework leads to academic success (Brown, 1999) and in the UK, although the extent to which homework contributes to academic success, particularly for young children, is hotly debated (see Hallam, 2004 for a review), parents believe that the setting of homework is necessary and important and feel that they have a role to play in supporting their children in doing it (MacBeath and Turner, 1990). Homework is also viewed as

a criterion for assessing schools (MacBeath and Turner, 1990; Forster, 2000).

Much of the controversy about homework centres on whether it should be given to children in elementary schools. In Australasia, the evidence suggests that parents do want their young children to do homework but there are issues about the amount of homework that is acceptable (Brown, 1999; Warton, 1998). The issue of overload has also been raised in Japan with teachers expressing concern about the impact on motivation to learn if too much work is required (Chen and Stevenson, 1989). In the UK, parents have reported that teachers do not always seem to be aware of the length of time taken to complete particular tasks (Kibble, 1991). They have also expressed concerns that homework has little relationship to school-work, is not always clearly set, is marked late and that feedback from the teacher in relation to the work is limited (MacBeath and Turner, 1990).

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN HOMEWORK

In the UK, three main roles have been identified for parents in relation to homework; monitoring, support and help. While there is some doubt as to whether parental assistance with homework is beneficial there is a great deal of evidence that parental expectations, support, and monitoring of homework are extremely important in determining the time spent on homework. (Holmes and Croll, 1989; MacBeath and Turner, 1990). In fact, most parents do ensure that their children complete their homework and adopt a supportive and monitoring role. Hardly any do the work for their children (Weston, 1999). Across each of the cultures, parental involvement changes with the age of the child and is much greater with younger children (MacBeath and Turner,

1990).

Helping with homework

Several studies in the UK have found that parents do help with homework and feel that it is extremely important to do so (Peters et al., 2007; Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003). This is particularly the case for women and those from Asian ethnic backgrounds (Moon and Ivins, 2004). Over a quarter of UK parents currently feel that children's education is the parents' responsibility, the great majority reporting that they read with their children (Peters et al., 2007). Other family members also help with homework, although young children are reported to particularly enjoy sharing tasks with parents. The help given is of many kinds often including testing of learning, checking of spelling and written work, help with research, use of libraries and the internet, setting up interviews with family members, finding relevant artefacts and generally helping with problems (Weston, 1999). Middle class parents are more likely to help than working class parents (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003). Where schools encourage parental participation this may reinforce existing social inequities (Brown, 1993, 2000). The more formal education that parents have had the more time their children spend on homework, particularly where the parents also have high aspirations (MacBeath and Turner, 1990).

Studying and homework are central concerns of Japanese families (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). Mothers in particular are expected to support their children. In the preschool and early elementary years the mother is responsible for providing a wide range of support including overseeing homework but as students enter adolescence this changes. Chen and Stephenson (1989) found that completion of homework was considered to be solely the child's responsibility

by 43% of Japanese mothers, although 49% of first graders said they were given help and 69% of 5th graders. The children who received the most help were those doing less well at school. Once a child enters junior high school, teachers do not expect parents to take an active role in supervising or checking homework. Parents may encourage students to study but rarely supervise homework, many children attend Juku which provides additional support.

Across each culture parents help with homework less as their children progress through school (Chen and Stevenson, 1989; Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Peters et al., 2007; MacBeath and Turner, 1990). The main reason for this appears to be a lack of confidence (MacBeath and Turner, 1990; Peters et al., 2007) in part because of changes in teaching methods and lack of understanding of the child's work. This is particularly the case for single parents (Reay, 1998) and mothers (Maclachlan, 1996; Forster, 2000).

Homework practices in families

There is evidence from the UK and Australasia that helping children with their homework can create extreme tensions in the family (Cowan et al., 1998; Train et al., 2000; Weston, 1999). When parents help children with their homework negative feelings may be not far below the surface. Goodnow and Collins (1990) reported that parents' theories about their children's abilities played a substantial part in their handling of homework. Parents can have strong negative emotions that may disable rather than support their children as learners. Working in New Zealand with elementary school pupils, exploring the relationships between middle class parents and their children in relation to homework, Cowan, Traill and McNaughton (1998) found

that parents tended to construct their perception of their children in relation to themselves and their partner. Parents viewed aptitudes for subjects and attitudes to homework as part of their child's nature, made comparisons between siblings and experienced different emotions and homework scenarios with different siblings. The parents seemed to be trying to make sense of their children's development in relation to their progress at school and their own experiences of trying to help them. Homework served to heighten tensions in relationships or could be fun and rewarding. This did not necessarily depend on the child's progress at school but seemed to be more related to parental expectations.

Research with families of older children, aged 11-16 has identified five styles of homework support: no particular help; praise and unconditional support; promoting autonomy but available when needed (parents as responsive helpers); homework support as proactive involvement – encouragement and guidance; and monitoring and parental control. Almost a third of parents were confident about the support they gave, others felt that they were acting on behalf of the school, or on behalf of the child, while a fifth reported that they were not really capable of helping. For over half, homework was seen as part of their identity as a parent, for others it was embedded in the parent-child relationship and represented enjoyment and closeness, while a quarter expressed anxiety about their child's future and a small group identified conflicts over homework. The findings showed that parents were investing considerable time and emotional effort into supporting homework. They were driven by concerns about their children's futures which created a climate of pressure to succeed. The cost of this was in terms of the quality of the relationship between parent and child (Solomon et al., 2002).

ATTEMPTS TO ENGAGE PARENTS WITH THEIR CHILD'S LEARNING

In the UK and Australasia, there have been increasing attempts to engage parents in their children's education. Most have focused on literacy in the elementary school years with some success (see McNaughton et al., 1981). Others have provided guidance and support to parents relating to homework, for instance, in the UK, the Scottish Executive has improved its Parentzone website to help show parents how to provide support. It offers staff development materials for schools, a leaflet offering advice to parents and more detailed and practical information for families. The Welsh Language Board has also launched a helpline to help the growing number of parents whose children are learning Welsh but who do not speak the language themselves.

Another approach has been to change the nature of homework and the way it is presented. For instance, one secondary school in the UK developed a Personal Study Scheme where students were given a series of booklets at the beginning of the school term providing materials for each subject which the children could work through at their own pace. Parents indicated that their child often asked for help with the study booklets, that they knew more about their child's work, that they enjoyed helping, and that the booklets enhanced learning. They also liked the opportunity they were given to comment on the work completed by their child. Parents reported that the scheme was more effective than traditional homework and made it possible to plan tasks and manage family time better (Rogers et al, in preparation). At primary level, the 'Homework System' has attempted to enhance understanding of numeracy issues. The system operates on tablet PCs as they are mobile, capable of running multimedia, relatively easy to use and robust

enough for use with 5 and 6 year olds. The Homework System enables the physical transfer of learning materials between home and school and enables children and parents to see which homework activities are linked to those carried out in the classroom. In a trial of the system, parents reported that they had gained a better understanding of the methods used to teach numeracy, an increased understanding of the relevance of homework and were empowered to make a contribution. Levels of enthusiasm, confidence, responsibility and independence in numeracy increased significantly in all of the households (Kerawalla et al., 2007).

HOMEWORK CLUBS

In the UK, the evidence that some families do not have the necessary resources (Johnson, 1999; Adams et al., 2000) or home learning environment to support homework (MacBeath and Turner, 1990; Weston, 1999) has led to the setting up of homework clubs in schools and libraries (e.g. Gordon, 1980; Faulkner and Blyth, 1995). Pupils, teachers and parents all believe that these can be a valuable resource (Train et al. 2000; MacBeath, 1993). Pupils from socio-economically deprived areas report that school based clubs make homework more enjoyable and give them a better chance of passing exams. There may also be positive effects on participants' behaviour, self-esteem, confidence and motivation (Mason et al., 1999; MacBeath et al., 2001).

Curriculum extension activities can also include revision schemes, study skills and other types of support. Pocklington (1996) evaluated a two-year school improvement project involving eight secondary schools in London where a range of study support activities were offered, e.g. flexible learning centres, revision classes, coursework clinics and homework centres. Teachers reported

that the students showed improved motivation, self-esteem and behaviour. Those students who attended the revision sessions achieved higher grades than students who did not. An evaluation of the Tower Hamlets project (Tower Hamlets Study Support Project, 1997) produced similar findings. Participating schools experienced larger gains in General Certificate of School Education (GCSE) results over a three year period than did non-participating schools while at the student level a positive association was found between GCSE performance and attendance at Easter revision classes. Parents of children identified with Special Educational Needs are particularly supportive of their children attending such clubs (Peters et al. 2007).

In Australia, Homework Centres (HWC) are part of the Government's Whole School Intervention Strategy which encourages schools and local indigenous communities to work in partnership to develop and deliver initiatives to improve education outcomes for Indigenous school students. They provide a supervised after-school hour's environment to support study. Overall, study support centres offer a valuable resource for supporting homework. The single drawback, as argued by MacBeath (1998) is that they may disenfranchise parents and break the vital link between parents and their child's life in schools. However, the evidence to date suggests that the centres offer pupils an avenue for achievement, raise self-esteem and feed back positively into the home making children more disposed to talk about their learning and share their success.

CONCLUSIONS

This consideration of parents' perceptions of homework in the UK, Australasia and Japan has

highlighted a number of similarities:

- parents in each culture, overall, share the desire to support their children in doing as well as possible in their education;
- at elementary level all parents are expected to support their children at home in developing the basic skills required for full participation in society; and
- all parents lack confidence in supporting their children's school work as they progress through school.

There are also some major differences between the cultures. Historically, the value attached to education in Japan is greater than in the UK or Australasia. Cultural differences in perceptions of the nature of what leads to high attainment, effort in Japan and ability in the UK and Australasia are evident in the extent to which children are engaged in educational activities. Children in Japan spend longer in school than children in the UK and Australasia, initially participating in recreational activities, but increasingly engaging in academic studies as they progress through school often attending Juku or receiving home tutoring. In Japan, at secondary level, children spend long hours in school, are expected to take greater responsibility for their learning and parents have relatively little involvement. At elementary level, however, the role played by parents is viewed as sufficiently important for the teachers to visit each home. In contrast, until relatively recently, parents in the UK and Australasia were not viewed as being important in children's educational success and schools were often reluctant to facilitate parental engagement. Now, governments and schools are developing a range initiatives which attempt to enhance parental involvement and offer support. In addition, schools are being encouraged to extend the school day, providing recreational and homework clubs. These initiatives represent a change in

values and moves towards the situation in Japan. There has also been an increase in the number of families employing home tutors to support their children's learning (Ireson, 2004). It seems that as the pressure to achieve in school and competition for higher education and employment increases the strategies adopted by families and governments become more similar globally. As international comparisons and the process of globalisation progress greater consistency across cultures in the way that educations systems operate may develop with an increasing emphasis on obtaining the highest educational outcomes alongside the best social and personal outcomes for children.

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