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Topic: **Meaningful Homework? A critical reflection of the new homework policy in Hong Kong**

Abstract

Over the years numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to determine the effect of homework on students' learning (Thomas, 1992). In practice, there are much problems and misconceptions with the implementation of homework. In Hong Kong, this issue worsens existing educational problems (Education Department, & Home School Cooperation Committee, 1994).

With the launching of curriculum reform in 2001, the education bureau in Hong Kong recommends that there be a change in homework policy and practices (Curriculum Development Committee, 2001). Schools should put more emphasis on "meaningful homework" as an integral part of the school curriculum. In the past, curriculum changes in Hong Kong often encounter unsuccessful experiences because of poor policy dissemination and implementation and mismatching teachers' conceptions, etc (Yeung, 2004). Studies alike demonstrate that any educational change needs an authentic "paradigm shift" in perspectives, philosophy and pedagogy (Kuhn, 1970).

The paper intends to look into the underpinning theory and thereafter the underlying agenda embedded with this homework policy. The researcher has adopted research method including documentary analysis and simple survey. The researcher conducts and compares content analysis of two kinds of documents -- Official homework guideline as well as various samples of school homework. A simple survey of teachers' conception about the new homework policy has been used as kinds of triangulation.

The researcher wishes that findings from the study may have empirical and practical significance to future development of homework practices and policy in schools.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Homework and learning

There are four main types of homework assignments – practice, preparation, extension and creative (Connors, 1991). Epstein (1998) summarizes that there are ten common purposes of homework: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-teacher communication, parent-child relations, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment. There are three functions of homework, which are instructional, communicative and political. Cooper (2001) concludes that homework probably involves the complex interaction of more influences than any other instructional device. These influences include student characteristics, features of the homework assignment (e.g. involvement of family and peers; guidance, etc), features of homework environment and how the homework is followed in class.

Over the years there have been many reviews of research on homework, particularly in western world like the USA. Overall, the reviews are inconsistent in their conclusions. Researches cannot provide a simple answer to the question of whether homework assists in raising student achievement. Researches cannot provide a simple answer to the question of whether homework assists in raising student achievement. Early work focused on comparisons between homework and no homework (Hallam, 2004). More recently there has been a focus on the relationship between the amount of time spent doing homework and attainment. Numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to determine the effect of homework on academic achievement. However, some studies indicate that homework helps; others suggest it doesn't (Thomas, 1992).

In practice, there are much problems and misconceptions with the implementation of homework. Many homework advocates fail to recognize all of the variables involved in teaching good study habits, organizational skills, and self-discipline. They tend to misconceive that more homework (quantity) means better grades (quality) and that homework correlates positively with academic achievement and increased learning. Connors (1992) conducts a review of the literature and finds that research has not validated that increased homework as a means of improving grades and that assigning more homework can produce harmful side effects for some students. They become overwhelmed and simply give up. Moreover, both local and western studies show that students resent homework that was tedious, boring, repetitive and amounted to busy-work. Pupils said that they enjoyed and valued

homework when it was well explained, had adequate deadlines, interesting/varied, and at their level. They dislike homework that neither consolidated nor contributed to their learning (Education Dept. & Home-School Cooperation Committee, 1994; Sharp, 2001). Pupils learn better when they were given homework advice related to their individual learning styles (Sharp, 2001).

Existing practice and problems in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, schools focus much on the “instructional” purpose of homework, with particular effort put in assigning students with “practice homework”. Hong Kong teachers usually focus on the instructional function (Education Dept. & Home-School Cooperation Committee, 1994). They think that homework could help students consolidate knowledge students learn in schools. They rarely consider varying the form of homework in order to help students attain the purpose of application or transfer of learning. Teacher tends to use homework as a way to push students revise the knowledge. Maybe for this reason, the amount of homework in Hong Kong is comparatively higher than other cities in the region. The nature and types of homework in Hong Kong schools are therefore conventional and bored to students (Ibid., 2004). Students complain about the loading of homework which is so heavy that little time is left for students to revise their coursework. There is discrepancy between the views of parent and students with regard to the nature of homework, the amount of homework, the optimal amount of homework, the degree of difficulty of homework. While teachers stress much on drilling and copying while students find least value from such kinds of homework. Besides that, these local researches reveal the fact that when students encounter difficulty in doing homework, they would consult home tutor; parents or family members; they seldom ask their teachers. Obviously, the communicative function of homework needs to be developed in local educational context.

Recent Development of the homework policy in Hong Kong

A local research report discusses about the concept of ‘quality homework’.

The formal reform proposal for a major change in education in Hong Kong was launched by the Education Commission in Sept 2005(Education Commission, 2000). Following the rationale of this educational reform, a review of homework and assessment policy was highly recommended. Now the original function of homework – as a part of the learning, teaching and assessment cycle – is reiterated. The meaning of “quality homework” was highlighted (Curriculum Development

Council, 2001). Quality homework should avoid drilling, excessive copying and repetitive exercises. This official document elaborates that quality homework could help develop students' independence learning and transfer of learning. Furthermore, it helps promote higher order thinking of students. The term "quality homework" was re-termed as "meaningful homework" in later issue of official agenda.

This official recommendation for homework is further reinforced in a formal curriculum guide for school implementation – the Basic Education Curriculum Guide in 2002 (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). With this official guide, schools in Hong Kong are recommended to formulate a homework policy to put into action the principle of "meaningful homework".

The officials define "meaningful homework" as homework that helps students to "construct knowledge, develop deeper understandings and connections amongst the concepts to which they have been introduced, and provides an opportunity for them to apply the skills they have acquired (p.1, Ibid.). Meaningful homework serves the following functions:

- It develops students' learning outside formal class time;
- It helps students to understand their own progress and identify areas for improvement;
- It consolidates classroom learning and/or prepare students for new learning;
- It helps teachers to identify students' problems that need to be addressed;
- It allows parents and schools to work together to find ways to help students to improve.
- Homework should has a clear learning goal;
- Rote learning is to be de-emphasized while students should be helped to learn through different resources;
- A variety of approaches should be used for designing homework. E.g. experiment, survey, model-making and other activities;
- Homework should be more efficiently used for helping students to improve their learning, to develop good study habits, to develop group learning skills, and to take control of their own learning;
- The difficulty, frequency and amount of homework should be appropriate – not too hard nor too easy; not too much nor too little;
- Homework should be able to improve students' thinking and deeper understanding;
- Homework should be able to cater for individual difference;
- Homework should link classroom learning to students' lives, e.g. by linking

events;

Hence, with the launching of the new homework policy, the officials are keen to improve the existing problems with regard to students' homework in school curriculum.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The study inquired into the actual implementation of the said policy in schools. It also intends to explore the differences, if any, between the conceptions of school teachers and those of policy-makers regarding the new homework policy. Analysis of this should prove to be of value to both planners and practitioners in the local educational setting. The information and understanding obtained from the study could also contribute to the field of curriculum change and implementation.

The following research questions were formulated for the study:

1. How do school teachers perceive and implement the new homework policy?
2. Comparing the implemented practice in schools with the official intent about the new homework policy, are there coherence and consistency shown? If not, what are the reasons?
3. What are the practical inferences that can be drawn from this comparison?

These questions are the key issues guiding the line of inquiry.

METHOD

This is a preliminary study and the researcher invited teachers from two local primary schools as participants (total 51 teachers). The method includes the following:.

1. Documentary analysis of homework samples (30 in total)
2. A brief questionnaire survey was conducted, in total 60 inservice teachers returned their questionnaires

The data collected from the simple survey was analysed with simple descriptive statistical analysis. The preferences and opinions of teachers were illustrated by percentages. Homework samples were studied by qualitative content analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

Teachers' perception toward homework

Findings showed that teachers' conception of homework is conventional and somehow conservative. About 69.2 % of them agree that homework is for "checking student understanding"(34.9% ranked this as the most important purpose of homework) or for "revising and consolidating students' learning in schools"(34.3%). They usually assign "drilling" or "copying" types of homework to students (total around 78.2%). Similar pattern were found from the 30 homework samples. Most homework were categorised as "exercises". For those namely "activity worksheets", the design were for consolidating students' memory of content taught in lessons. Although teachers' were aware that most students "did not like" homework (76%) they did little to improve the problem. Similarly they seemed aloof with the tendency that few students would like to approach their teachers when they encountered difficulty in doing homework (only around 3.6% teachers claimed that they thought students would contact them). To one's surprise, 48.3% teachers were aware that family tutors served to solve students' difficulty in homework. Furthermore, most teachers were used to mark students' homework by "simple symbols" (65.4%) or "writing brief comments like 'good', 'well done', 'try harder'"(27.1%). Little teachers would write detailed comments on students' work (about 7.8%).

Teachers' awareness of new homework policy

Most teachers are unsure or not aware of the homework policy (89.8%). Almost unanimously teachers commented that the officials' effort made in disseminating homework policy was "too little" (65%) or "none at all" (32.2%). Hence, not surprising, most teachers thought that the new homework policy would bring "no major change" to existing context of students' learning in schools (45.3%)

DISCUSSIONS

-- *Some Critical Issues:*

In reality, this research reveals that teachers' conception of homework, which was quite conventional, would not be altered to a great deal even though the educational authority in Hong Kong has launched its formal intent to reform. The local policy-making and dissemination mechanism has not functioned as effectively as one had expected. The policy-makers failed to communicate a clear intent and concrete suggestions about implementing new homework policy to the teachers. As a result, one can see how unsure the teachers felt about the homework policy.

Because of their unclarity, teachers mostly chose more 'cautious' forms of implementation – "no change" indeed! When the teachers have not received clear messages from this central agency about the homework initiative, it could hardly be implemented with its intended outcomes.

Maybe Sarason (1990) was right when he predicted the possible failure of the efforts of educational reform, primarily due to the fact that many reform efforts do not really address changing the educational system, including teachers and schools. It would be difficult to achieve success in educational reform within a fundamentally conservative system. Fullan (1993) has a sharp comment,

You cannot have an educational environment in which change is continuously expected, alongside a conservative system and expect anything but constant aggravation.(p.3)

The administrative or political orientations of officials failed to bring along 'real change'. Unsuccessful local experiences in the past have already shown that politically or administratively driven reforms do not bring forth real changes – two more instances, the development of the Activity Approach in Hong Kong primary schools (Fung et al., 1996); school-based curriculum project scheme (SBCPS) in Hong Kong schools (Lo, 1993). Curriculum integration might demonstrate another equally unsuccessful example (Yeung, 2004).

This relates closely to the problem of "ideological limitation" among policy-makers, decision-makers (like schoolheads) and teachers in local educational settings.

School curriculum is formed and shaped *ideologically*. The dominant forms of school curriculum reflect the dominant ideological forms in society (Giroux, 1981;

Goodson, 1993). An influential factor leading this ideological limitation is the examination-oriented traditions in Hong Kong. Curriculum and assessment consequently becomes a mechanism for social reproduction. In fact, academic rationalism has long been a dominant school epistemology in Hong Kong's school curriculum. One can see that many participants and even some schoolheads are still more adherents of or show more acceptance of a teacher-centred or "traditional", discipline-based type of teaching and curriculum. This might be related to the kind of social order or fixed mindsets or something cultivated during the hundred and more years of colonial governance in Hong Kong (see Bray & Lee, 2001). Today, also shown in this research, the legacy from such a kind of social order and thinking still influences the perspective of knowledge and therefore curriculum conception of local educational practitioners.

Obviously the new homework policy implies the implementation of the notion of "assessment for learning". It means changing the way a teacher thinks about their teaching and their view of their role as a teacher. "Assessment for learning is a way of thinking, almost a philosophy (Black & et al., 2003). Teachers need to change their underlying beliefs about homework and assessment. Their focus should be less on teaching and more on "learning" in their classroom.

All these need a change in culture and mindset toward education in the local educational context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study suggests that the policy-making process in Hong Kong needs to be improved. Competence in the government and the government-related machinery should be enhanced to facilitate reform in homework practices in schools.

Moreover, a real change or paradigm shift ((Kuhn, 1970) of the conception of homework is needed. This could be accomplished by persistent effort in teacher development, provision of adequate capacity (in aspects of resources, time, etc) for teachers to conduct innovative endeavor in assessment, etc.

Furthermore, Fullan (1993) has proposed eight "basic lessons" of the new

paradigm of change. The policy-makers are recommended to study these 'lessons'. The central authority should consider undertaking 'continuous negotiation' and 'articulation' between the 'top' (the officials) and the 'down' (schools and teachers). The curriculum of integration requires a collaborative deliberation and cooperative construction process between the stakeholders. The officials, the school administrators and teachers should form and develop as "a learning organization" (Young, 1998). The whole profession should be coupled with a learning orientation and a commitment to continuous improvement, backed up by supportive policies and structures. For this purpose, the central authority should take into account Fullan's (1993) four core capacities required as a generative foundation for building greater change capacity: *personal vision-building, inquiry, mastery, and collaboration*.

With sheer and deep collaborations, the professional community should deliberate and put into practice the rationale of "quality/meaningful" homework. Teacher researches, especially action research, can be a particularly effective way to link improvement and inquiry to classroom practice. By placing teachers as inquirers of change and development, there could be greater opportunity for organizational growth. A shared and collaborative endeavor would help a school to become a learning community in pursuit of educational visionaries.

With the onset of the next five years after the launching of educational change in 2000 (Education Commission, 2000), the present researcher would anticipate that development and improvement was on the way. The prospect would be positive.

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