Homework In The Irish Context

It is clear from the international research that homework is a contentious issue. Rudman (2014) claims that decisions around 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). The NCCA published its guidelines for assessment in primary schools in 2007. In this document, homework is mentioned only eight times, and, as Martin Stuart (2017, para. 10) notes, it is "always as an object of the sentence, never the subject". Stuart goes on to claim 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." (Stuart, 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 (GUI) including questions regarding homework, and the National Parents' Council (NPC) commissioning research on parental involvement at the primary school level (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, focussing 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 in light of his findings. 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.

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), and the belief that homework is of value is reflected in the high levels of parental involvement in homework in Ireland. 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 among parents 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 with their homework. There was also a strong indication that homework caused friction at home, with almost two thirds of parents replying that it caused upset between child and parent.

Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of almost 60 studies based around 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 behaviours 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.

Vatterot (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" (Vatterot, 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.

Vatterot (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 they are working on.

In addition to having a clear academic purpose (which in turn should influence the type of homework given), Vatterot 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 Vatterot. 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**: Vatterot contends that the way homework is presented has an influence on children's motivation. Uncluttered and visually appealing worksheets are particularly important to young learners and academically challenged pupils.

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., 2015) 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 very 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.

In light of 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." With this in mind, the current study aims to uncover the attitudes and experiences of parents with regards to homework practices in a DEIS band 1 suburban Dublin school.