

Primary homework in England: the beliefs and practices of teachers in primary schools

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Abstract

This study examines teachers' views about and practices in homework in primary schools, based on questionnaire data from 235 primary teachers and 19 in-depth interviews. Findings suggest that teachers prioritise contradictory goals and act in ways that support only some of these. Reading with parents is a universal form of homework and other homework focuses either on English or mathematics or takes a project-led approach. Integration of homework into class learning is problematic. Teachers are concerned about the possible effects of homework on educational inequality and questions are raised about teachers' perceptions of homework as a signifier of good parenting.

Keywords

Primary schools, Homework, Teacher perceptions, Education inequality

Introduction

Homework is a global phenomenon and children in primary schools spend increasing amounts of time on homework (Baker and LeTendre 2005). Worldwide, less than 7% of fourth graders said they did no homework (Mullis et al. 2012) but it is valued and enacted differently in different countries. In England, homework in the primary years of schooling has been and remains a very contentious topic. Ofsted (1999) set guidelines which demanded that children aged five to seven should be set an hour's homework a week, rising to half-an-hour a night for seven to eleven-year-olds, and that all schools should have a homework policy. In 2012, this guidance was scrapped and headteachers told to set their own homework policies, amid criticism that homework can interfere with family life and unfairly benefit pupils from more affluent homes.

Claims about the role and impact of homework are mired in partial understandings of a number of educational debates. These include the expectation that homework is a way for parents to support their children's academic achievement, the belief that homework improves academic achievement and extrapolation from 'high performing' countries where high levels of homework are a cultural tradition. This extrapolation itself gives teachers mixed messages about homework. Asian countries such as Shanghai and Singapore use copious homework and after school classes, whereas Finland offers almost no homework or additional study in the primary years.

The last large scale review of the literature about homework in England took place in 2001 (Sharp et al. 2001) and, in 2007, Pierre noted a lack of research material on attitudes, behaviours and beliefs associated with homework. Despite some excellent case studies of homework in individual schools (e.g. Rudman 2014) we do not have a picture of the culture of primary school homework in England and the views and roles of teachers, in particular, are unexplored. This study seeks to understand what teachers believe and do about homework in the primary years of schooling in England.

The effects of homework in the primary years of schooling.

Homework, for the purposes of this study, means tasks assigned to students by teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-instructional time (Bembenutty 2011) which, in the English context, has included reading to or with parents (Brooks, et al. 2008). Studies of the effects of homework in the primary years suggest it is far from a major contribution to academic achievement. Hattie's (2008) meta-analysis concludes that homework has a 21% chance of making a difference to pupils' learning across both primary and secondary schooling, and that the effect is very much greater in secondary than in primary education. The studies in this meta-analysis took place across the world and across a great range of educational cultures so it is virtually impossible to apply the conclusions to the specific context of English primary schools. Although there have been studies demonstrating an association between time spent on homework in secondary schools and attainment (eg Tymms and Fitz-Gibbon 1992), the evidence of a similar association at primary level is weak (eg Farrow, Tymms and Henderson 1999). The Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit (Higgins et al. 2014), a source of guidance for many school leaders, classifies primary homework as 'low impact for very low or no cost'. In 2013 Hattie noted that:

‘Homework in primary school has an effect of around zero. In high school it’s larger. (...) Which is why we need to get it right. Not why we need to get rid of it. (...) If you try and get rid of homework in primary schools many parents judge the quality of the school by the presence of homework. So, don’t get rid of it. Treat the zero as saying, ‘It’s probably not making much of a difference but let’s improve it’. (Hattie, 2014, BBC Radio)

Hallam (2004), in a review of international studies, concluded that current homework research neglected to consider the quality or type of homework in judging its effectiveness in the UK. In short, we need to know more about practices of homework in England and the beliefs that underpin them.

The purposes of homework

The potential impact of homework depends on what the teachers and pupils seek to achieve through it. Cooper (2007), reporting a meta-analysis of the copious research into homework in the USA, grouped the potential positive effects of homework into four groups:

- a) immediate achievement and learning (practice of skills and knowledge);
- b) long-term academic (good study habits and attitude);
- c) non-academic (self-reliance, self-organisation);
- d) parental and family benefits (contact with schooling and insights into what happens in school).

USA studies suggested that homework increases the time students spend on academic tasks and so leads to immediate achievement (Walberg and Paschal, 1995). The longer term academic benefits of homework for students may not be improved achievement in target subjects, but the development of good study practices and attitudes: it might encourage pupils to learn in their own time; improve pupil’s attitudes towards school and schoolwork and/or improve study skills and habits (Alleman and Brophy 1991; Warton 2001). It has also been argued that homework develops attitudes which promote positive learning behaviour, self-reliance and self-discipline, because it requires unsupervised work, as well as time organisation, inquisitiveness and problem-solving (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001). Homework has also been cited as having a positive effect on parents and families (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001) by increasing parental involvement in schooling (Van Voorhis 2003) and parental appreciation of and involvement in the academic progress of their children (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001).

Potential negative consequences of homework have been extensively reported in the research literature and the UK media (e.g. Coughlan 2016) It has been argued that homework can affect student attitudes toward school negatively (Chen and Stevenson 1989) by overexposing children to academic tasks which cease to be novel or stimulating (Bryan, Nelson and Mathru 1995). A related argument raises the issue of general physical and emotional fatigue and displacement of community and leisure activities (Coutts 2004)

It is likely that the positives and negatives of homework co-exist and are related to the perceptions of the participants, the tasks set and the curriculum and practices of the schools. Metanalysis of a number of studies of the effectiveness of homework has linked student learning gain to assigning homework regularly, over a very short

period of time and providing timely feedback (Cooper, Robinson and Patel 2006). This is common practice throughout the primary years in East Asian countries (Kaur, Kiam and Hoon 2006) where homework is set, marked and feedback given daily (Fang 2010). Higgins et al. (2014) note that the 'evidence base suggests that short focused tasks or activities which relate directly to what is being taught, and which are built upon in school, are likely to be more effective than regular daily homework' in primary school. However, reviews of homework in English primary schools (Sharp et al. 2001) have almost nothing to say about the nature of homework task setting or feedback frequency or content - the teacher end of homework. This study aims to explore this issue.

Parents and homework

Sharp et al. (2001) noted that parents in England want schools to set homework, even though it may cause conflict between parents and their children. The limited amount of research here suggests a positive relationship between parental involvement in homework and children's attitudes towards homework, school and learning in general (Snow et al. 1991). However, Hartas (2011) cautioned against simplistic assumptions about parents and their interactions with children. Her re-analysis of the millennium cohort study of 10,000 seven-year-olds found that three quarters of parents from all socioeconomic groups routinely helped children with their schoolwork. It is the quality of the support, not a lack of support, that may be the issue. Interestingly, no link was found between parental support for learning and children's language and literacy levels at age seven.

In England, numerous home reading projects have embedded home school reading into the practice of virtually all primary schools (Brooks et al. 2008). However, research about the effect of this in improving reading indicates that mere involvement is not enough. Some researchers note positive effects of reading with children (Sharp et al. 2001) or between parental involvement early and reading fluency (Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002) as well as enjoyment of reading (Baker and Scher 2002; Baker et al. 1997). However, the nature of the involvement seems to be more important than past studies have considered. Sénéchal's (2006) meta-analysis of types of parental involvement in America found that parents who teach specific literacy skills to their children (for example: word reading, the alphabet, phoneme-grapheme correspondences) were twice as effective as parents who simply listened to their children read and six times more effective than parents who only read to their children.

Although Hutchinson (2012) notes that primary homework is usually supported by mothers and parental involvement with homework is assumed as an aspect of 'good' parenting, involving parents in homework may also have negative consequences if parents have unrealistic expectations, apply pressure or use inappropriate methods. They may even promote cheating or lack of independence (Cooper, Lindsay and Nye 2000). It has also been argued that homework may magnify differences between high- and low-achieving pupils, because high achievers from economically privileged backgrounds may have greater parental support for homework, including more educated assistance, higher expectations and better settings and resources (OECD-2014). How these aspects of parental involvement play out in primary schools in England is largely unknown, but a subject of concern for teachers.

In conclusion, this brief review identifies how little we know about current practices in terms of primary school homework and the views of the teachers about these. This study sought to explore those issues.

Method

The questionnaire used in this study was designed to find out:

- whether schools were setting homework and, if so, what type of activity and what types of materials were being used;
- what teachers believed about the importance of homework in primary schools;
- how teachers were supporting, setting and managing homework completed by children in England.

Draft questionnaires were piloted twice to explore both content and method (Van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001). The first pilot was administered as a paper questionnaire to a mentor training conference of 121 teachers in autumn 2013 and had a response rate of 92%. This questionnaire asked open questions about the purposes of homework, priorities for homework and the difficulties of homework. These answers were used to generate categories of answers for attitude scales. The second pilot was electronic, administered in spring 2014 and was sent to key members of staff in 60 schools across the region to determine response rates. School mentors were the group most likely to respond and least likely to choose 'don't know' options. They thus became the target of the final questionnaire. The final version of this can be downloaded from <http://www.literacyworld.info/homework/questionnaire.docx>. It was sent electronically in January 2015 to 502 school mentors in schools in the Midlands of England. 159 of these returned the questionnaire, a response rate of 31.6%, a high rate of return when compared with larger national surveys (e.g. Board and Tinsley 2014 with a return rate of 20%).

The sample in this study was stratified to reflect the distribution of school types in the East and West Midlands and included 5 (3.1%) nursery or early years' centres, 10 (6.3%) infant schools, 10 (6.3%) junior schools, 134 (84.3%) primary schools. The sample included 10 small schools of less than 100 pupils (6.3%), 59 (37.1%) single form entry schools, 64 (40.3%) two form entry schools and 26 (16.4%) three form entry schools. This does not match perfectly, but is broadly representative of the range of school types and sizes nationally.

Follow-up interviews were undertaken with 19 volunteer teachers from the questionnaire sample, 11 face-to-face and 8 by telephone. These interviews sought to expand the responses to the questionnaire and explore teacher's beliefs further (Wengraf 2001). They were semi-structured but focused on:

- Examples of the type and quantity of homework set for children;
- Expectations of teachers and parents;
- Exploring further the teacher's choice of reason for setting homework and what they believed about the purpose of homework;
- Examples of how the school supported parents and children doing homework and the barriers they encountered;
- Examples of how teachers managed homework and, particularly, how they arranged book selection for home reading;
- Examples of changes to the homework practices of the teacher.

The resulting recordings were analysed using a content analysis (Patton, 2015) of each of the major question headings. The outcomes of the interviews are presented alongside relevant questionnaire results below.

School policy for setting homework in the primary years

Of the 159 respondents, 130 (81.8%) claimed their school had a written policy for homework, somewhat less than the 90% in Ofsted 1999, suggesting that mandating a policy was either ineffective or that the policy had lapsed. 127 schools (79.9%) had homework included in a home-school agreement with parents. However, the setting and monitoring of homework was left to class or subject teachers. Only 27 (17%) of schools had a specific member of staff to oversee or monitor homework in the school or key stage. The interviews allowed us to explore this more closely and interviewees said that 'routine' homework content such as selection of spellings or times tables was agreed for maths and English as part of their school policies, though it was up to individual teachers or year-group teams to choose content for their classes. Where 'project' work was set, this was agreed across the school but the content chosen by class teachers. None of the teachers we interviewed had participated in training or staff meetings about homework.

What did teachers believe the purpose of homework to be?

We gave teachers statements about homework and looked at their level of agreement (see Table 1 for full details of responses).

Table 1 here

These teachers showed the strongest agreement with statements about the importance of homework to practice and consolidate skills learnt in school (99.1% agreed or strongly agreed), to create a partnership with parents (97.5%), to reinforce knowledge covered in class (94.9%) and learn study skills and personal organisation (92.3%). Though only 73.3% agreed that homework raised pupil attainment, this is still surprisingly high, given the well-publicised low impact of primary homework discussed above.

The very strong agreement about creating a partnership with parents contrasted with lower agreement with the statement that parents broadly welcomed homework (74.9%) and that homework got parents to spend time with their children (76.4%), suggesting these teachers understood that not all homework was welcomed.

We also asked about 'other' reasons, and the most significant responses (in 2015) were 'to learn how to tackle SAT questions', 'test preparation' and 'revision practice'. These were added by 17.6% of our respondents (28 responses). As this did not emerge in piloting, this may well be a growing practice.

The level of agreement with positive goals for homework was high, but it was much lower for the negative aspects of teacher workload (only 35.7% agreed it caused unnecessary work and pressure for teachers). However, in the interviews 14 of the 19 teachers commented about workload in relation to homework and suggested allocating more time to homework was not possible and/or not a priority.

- *'I just don't have time and nor does Anna (the TA). It is not a school priority...'*
- *'it takes up too much time - parent workshops, sending out sheets and checking reading books. I don't begrudge it, but I can't do any more.'*
- *'I do what I can with no time for it and I wonder if even that is time well spent'*

Of the 19 teachers, 8 commented in ways which could be considered positive- all about the usefulness of home reading.

- *'such a valuable contact point for me and the parents. Just mentioning the book, talking about a comment. It shows we respect their efforts'.*
- *'it's parent contact time, isn't it? The small comment in the reading diary matters. We notice and are on the ball'.*

Why were schools setting homework?

The findings above give some insight into teacher's general views, but asking teachers to choose the most important reasons for setting homework tells us what their priorities were. Participants were given a list of ten possible reasons for setting homework and asked to indicate the reason they thought was most important, second most important and third most important. These were scored by awarding the most important reason 3 points, the second most important 2 points and the third most important 1 point. The sum of the number of points for each reason is given in Table 2 for the top 10 reasons, in weighted order of importance.

Table 2 here

Two reasons for setting homework were judged as considerably more important by these teachers: both reasons were instrumental. The reason judged most important was to create a partnership with parents followed by the consolidation of skills taught in schools. Looking at the high position of both teaching skills and consolidating knowledge, it is clear teachers prioritised setting homework because they believed it helped children to learn skills and knowledge taught in class. Indeed, they also rated 'raises pupil attainment' third, despite the evidence to the contrary.

The development of pupil character and affective outcomes (longer term learning attributes) were not selected by most teachers as priorities for setting homework, despite the high levels of agreement about their usefulness discussed above.

The interview responses showed a similar balance of priorities. When we asked the 19 teachers: 'What is the most important reason for setting homework?' all their initial answers included mention of parents.

'To meet parents' expectations',

'Because parents expect it',

'To help parents feel involved in their child's learning',

'To give children a chance to consolidate skills with parental help'.

The teachers of children aged 5-11 also mentioned practice, consolidating skills and preparation for high stakes testing and learning to manage test question formats (something not encountered in the pilot work).

Who was doing homework and how much?

All the schools with KS1 and KS2 children set some sort of homework for their pupils, although a very few schools did not set homework for children aged 3-5 (Foundation Key Stage). Table 3 shows the range of homework that was set across age ranges, in terms of the time it was supposed to take pupils to complete.

Table 3 here

These outcomes suggest that as pupils grew older, they were generally being set homework demanding greater time commitment. It is noticeable that most of the schools represented in this survey were exceeding the Ofsted (1999) recommendations for homework time set per night, with almost half of 9 to 11-year-old pupils being set homework lasting longer than an hour per night, contrasting with the Ofsted guidance of up to 30 minutes per night.

The outcomes suggest, therefore, that the setting of homework to primary-aged pupils was virtually ubiquitous in these schools. This may be a measure of the importance that teachers were giving to homework.

What homework was being set?

We asked teachers to identify the types of homework they set their children. The categories of work included were identified from the open questions in the pilot study. Table 4 shows the percentage and numbers of teachers claiming to set each type of homework.

Table 4 here

An analysis by school type showed that foreign language vocabulary was only sent home in only 8 primary schools and that researching new materials was confined to children aged 5-11. Other types of activities were distributed across the age range.

The 'other' category include descriptions of a wide range of activities in relatively small proportions: comprehension sheets, fact sheets, maths workbooks, 'general maths', 'general literacy', practice questions for the national tests, assessment practice, projects, quizzes and completing work. It was notable that most of the 'other' responses identified a type of material - not a type of pupil learning activity. This may tell us something about how teachers categorise homework activities. The largest category of 'other' homework activities was 'project type' activities, some of which might well have fallen into 'researching new materials'.

The main homework set was reading, learning spellings and learning multiplication tables, but activities involving aspects of basic literacy and numeracy loomed large. Sending books home for parents to read with their children was done by all the schools in our sample so we asked the interviewed teachers what books their pupils

took home for reading, and why these were chosen. Of the 19 teachers, five said they let the children choose their own books freely (those teachers with the youngest children (3-5) and the oldest (7-11)) and this was why the books were not those used in school for reading instruction. The others all used school reading scheme books but in different ways. Three teachers said they used reading scheme books for reading instruction in school but the Teaching Assistant who managed home reading sent home different books from a different reading scheme. Others used group or class sets of specially published books for reading instruction in class and sent home different, graded books with the pupils. All the teachers said it was important that children took home books of a reading level matched to their competence and the children were guided in this by the grading of books (they could choose from a certain grade) or by the Teaching Assistant who managed the reading book system. It was clear that current pedagogical practices, such as group or class reading instruction, were seen as a reason to keep instructional books in school and send home alternatives. It was of interest that in 13 of the 19 classes a Teaching Assistant managed the home reading programme, which might make it more difficult for teachers to get feedback on their pupils' reading experiences at home. Although all schools tried to involve parents in reading with their children, the way teachers managed it meant that children's reading experiences at home did not necessarily inform reading instruction in school.

What was expected of parents, in reading with their children?

All the schools expected children to undertake home reading and the time expectation for parents to read with their children decreased with the age of the child, as previous studies have shown (Sharp, et al, 2001). In this study, 74% of teachers said that their Foundation Key Stage pupils were expected to read daily with their parents, and 68.7% had the same expectation for KS1 pupils. Only 37.5% had this expectation for 7 to 9 year olds, and 25.7% for 9 to 11 year olds.

Most written comments on the questionnaire emphasised the importance of home reading, but one written comment summed up others about the relative importance of reading.

I agree that homework is important. However, as a parent and teacher I feel that there needs to be an appropriate level during the primary years. Children are not children for long and they need down time, weekends should be just that - a time for children to play and have fun. Parents shouldn't feel the pressure to spend time doing homework every weekend, they should be enjoying their children. Reading is the homework I feel most strongly about, reading is a life skill and it is important children develop a 'love' of reading. This is what parents should be doing with children - reading every day with and to their child.

The interviews reinforced the theme of the importance of reading, with a great deal of discussion of the importance of parents reading with their children and concerned comments about infrequent reading in some cases. Teachers felt strongly about this.

- *The best thing they can do is read with their parents- every time.*

- *I am convinced that those who get the reading with parents, or others in the family make the progress, which leaves some in a bad position if no one bothers*
- *Our parents are great but even they don't always do the reading. I think they mean to, but there is so much else going on...*

How did schools share expectations about homework and reading with parents?

Although many schools did not have a homework policy, they did make great efforts to share expectations with parents. Table 5 shows the ways in which they did this.

Table 5 here

Other comments added by respondents (11.3%) included informal talks between teachers/teaching assistants and parents, comments in reading diaries and logs, talks at parent evenings, welcome letters and homework bookmarks. Two schools worked with an external homework club run by a University outreach program.

In the interviews, this was another topic that teachers were keen to discuss. They talked about the ways expectations were shared (above) and about their experiences of parental participation. Approaches they discussed which were not captured in the questionnaire included informal meetings when teachers 'bumped into' parents and took the opportunity to prompt them to read or do homework with their children. Some teachers noted that some children received good support and, they felt, were likely to make better progress as a result. However, they were concerned about the effects on children who did not get support, and how this would affect longer term progress.

- *Our parents are great. But they don't all have time to spend with their children on homework. It's always the same ones who do it. Usually the more privileged ones.*
- *Children respond well and most return homework of good quality. The children who don't return homework are usually those who don't have a lot of home support and/or have poor organisation skills*

The interviewees discussed this further, suggesting that they deliberately set homework so that it was not closely related to curriculum learning, in order to prevent such inequality.

- *Most of our parents want homework and we want to meet their expectations. But they don't necessarily have the time or the space or the energy to help their children with homework. Even when they mean to, they don't. And they don't want their children held accountable for doing the work- they would be right in (to the school) to complain if their child was told of for not doing something... So, you see we try to set things which are useful, but aren't ... vital- because we can't expect everyone to do it.*

What do teachers do with homework?

We asked about how homework and reading were followed up in school and Table 6 shows the percentages and numbers of schools using each approach.

Table 6 here

These responses indicate that less than half of responding teachers marked pupils' homework each week, only 9.4% marked it before the next lesson on the topic and this marking may well have been done by a teaching assistant. Marking of homework completed was much more likely to be done using more informal means, such as pupils marking their own, or their peers', homework.

We also asked teachers about the time they (or their TA) spent preparing, setting and monitoring/ marking homework each week. 93.5% of them said they spent 30 minutes or less per week preparing homework, with 25.7% spending no time each week. Table 7 shows the full responses to this question.

Table 7 here

The teachers we surveyed appeared to spend relatively little time in a working week on homework, and a good deal of this was time spent by teaching assistants. This finding should be considered alongside the workload concerns discussed above, which suggest the teachers did not see homework as a priority in allocating their time. When we asked teachers in interviews about marking homework, teachers commented about the issue of completion of homework by some, but not all children in the class.

- *Only some do it. It would be unfair to spend my time on just those children.*
- *You can't follow up if they don't do homework because, some of our families don't understand, or can't get to grips with it. You know what our catchment is like... But that undermines the homework.*
- *Homework is only successful if there is co-operation between home and school. Parents can support children while doing homework, but often they will do the homework for them. This is not helpful to the child.*

None of the teachers we interviewed marked work for the next lesson, or aimed to do so, and of the 19, only 8 monitored the homework weekly, sometimes after children had peer marked it.

Discussion

Homework in the primary schools involved in this study was, according to the surveyed teachers, an almost universal activity, underpinned by teacher expectations of both children and parents. Children were expected to engage with different aspects of reading and other types of homework at different times in their school careers. Where children aged 4-5 tended to be mainly asked to read with their parents, they were also occasionally asked to share 'discussion' items or complete simple worksheets. Children aged 5-7 tended to be asked to complete worksheets, workbooks, online learning games or projects and self-chosen activities. Between the ages of 7 to 11 the amount of home research seemed to increase, as did the use of spelling lists and worksheets, whereas expectations about reading with parents decreased. However, it was notable that enforcing expectations of children about

homework was problematic for the surveyed teachers. The time allocated for marking, monitoring or follow up was very limited and teachers said they followed up with parents, not the children. The teachers in this study had greater expectations of parents than of children.

The teachers' most important reason for setting primary children homework appeared to be to create a partnership with parents, characterised by expectations on both sides. The teachers perceived that parents had expectations that primary schools in England would set homework for their pupils (Sharp et al. 2001) and though teachers in this study believed that most parents welcomed homework, they understood that some did not and that some parents welcomed but did not participate in their children's homework.

The mechanisms for creating a partnership through homework identified in this study centred on parents reading with their children to practice skills and promote the enjoyment of reading. Firstly, the teachers saw themselves as meeting the expectations of parents that they would be involved in their children's education and that homework would be set by sending home reading books and monitoring parent-kept records of their use. Schools were running workshops, sending out advice sheets, using electronic media and communicating with parents to share school expectations. There was also evidence that these teachers perceived reading as a parental duty that signified good parenting and, crucially, that parents who did not do this regularly were 'failing' in that duty. This strong promotion of reading and the teacher view of the parental role may, of course, be significant in actually creating the parental expectations experienced by the teachers!

The anticipated positive effect of parents reading with their children was clearly not a direct one of reading and re-reading the instructional materials used in schools as, somewhat surprisingly, schools seemed to be sending home different books or materials from those they used for in-school reading instruction. Though some schools sent home flashcards and reading worksheets, these were likely to be managed by TAs and so it is uncertain how they fed into classroom reading instruction. Presumably, then, the positive effects of reading with parents were thought to be gained from the interaction between child, parent and book and use of general reading skills, or increased motivation, rather than a focus on the immediate knowledge or skills for reading being studied in school.

In addition to reading, there were two main types of homework, which were less consistently monitored by teachers than reading. One pattern of homework involved pupils researching new material related to their classwork, completing tasks about class topics or doing 'projects', whether related to classwork or self-chosen. This was relatively popular with teachers and perceived as an opportunity for parental involvement, creativity and motivation. Such homework was usually assessed through displays and sharing. Hattie, discussing the effectiveness of homework, is scathing about this type of homework. 'The worst thing you can do with homework is give kids projects. The best thing you can do is to reinforce something you've already learnt. Five to ten minutes has the same effect of one hour to two hours.' (Hattie, 2014, BBC Radio) This suggests a cultural practice alien to England's teachers - one involving short, daily, monitored tasks (Thomas et al. 2016).

The other major type of homework identified in this study involved the practising of knowledge or skills used in class, such as through spelling lists, multiplication tests, worksheets, online games, workbooks and, increasingly, sheets of test questions. This is the type of work which met teachers' other high priorities for homework - practising skills and consolidating knowledge learnt in class. These types of homework were planned, but unlikely to be closely related to the actual learning in the classroom through marking or monitoring of performance as part of a teaching cycle, because most work was either self-marked, peer marked or marked weekly, often by a TA. It seems unlikely this could be giving teachers detailed feedback about children's performance, as, for example, would be common in an Asian school context (Thomas et al. 2016) There is a contradiction here between teachers' priorities for homework and the way it was managed and marked, which may be related to teachers' ambivalence about pupils who did not complete homework and to teachers' working capacity.

Crucially, teachers were concerned that homework might present a threat to equality of opportunity for children, raising concerns about disadvantage caused by limited parental support in their questionnaire responses and a potential 'Matthew effect' whereby advantaged children (in this study- those with support and resources at home) gained a proportionately greater advantage because of their starting point. Some of the schools whose teachers were involved in this study had created homework clubs to offset the 'disadvantage' of limited parental support or resources. The effects, spread and understanding of these clubs, within schools, has not been researched and this interesting phenomenon may well be the start of expectations of 'additional classes' typical of East Asian countries, but not yet typical in England. The creation of homework clubs could also be interpreted as one manifestation of a 'deficit' model of parents, whereby the school was seeking to provide compensatory education for 'poor' parenting.

In conclusion, the picture emerging from this study raises a number of issues which schools might well consider in setting their homework priorities. The Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit (Higgins et al. 2014) characterisation of primary homework as 'low impact for very low or no cost' is at the heart of the matter. The 'low cost' of homework is based on the low teacher workload allocation to homework which was used to create a partnership with parents through home reading. Teachers, and TAs, spent time on book management, communication with parents and monitoring reading. The alternative, of Hattie's '5-10 minutes of practicing what was taught that day at school' (ibid.) has implications for teacher's use of time for marking, monitoring and planning school lessons informed by homework outcomes. In countries that adopt this practice in primary schools a much larger proportion of teacher time is spent on these activities (OECD, 2014). On the basis of this, it could be argued that homework, conceived in this different way, actually has high cost implications.

In short, despite the resource limitations on feedback practices, schools in England appear to continue to prioritize both partnership with parents and practice of skills and knowledge, knowing that this results in homework that has little effect on pupil achievement. This study raises questions about which purposes for homework can be successfully addressed within current resources. It also raises the question of whose work primary homework is. Schools' priorities and resources seem to be directed at

parents, rather than children, and it is parents who are seen to be accountable, or 'failing' if homework is not completed.

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Tables

	Strongly agree % (N)	Agree % (N)	Disagree % (N)	Strongly disagree % (N)
Homework helps pupils practice and consolidate skills taught in school N=158	25.9 (41)	73.4 (116)	0	0.6 (1)
Create a partnership between parents and school about children's learning N=157	37.6 (59)	59.9 (94)	1.3 (2)	1.3 (2)
Homework reinforces knowledge covered in class N=157	21.0 (33)	73.9 (116)	4.5 (7)	0.6 (1)
Homework helps pupils learn study skills and improve personal organisation N=156	12.8 (20)	79.5 (124)	6.4 (10)	1.3 (2)
Homework makes pupils responsible N=157	12.1 (19)	73.2 (115)	12.1 (19)	2.5 (4)
Homework encourages pupils to develop perseverance initiative and self-discipline through independent study N=148	6.1 (9)	82.4 (122)	10.1 (15)	1.4 (2)
Homework gets parents to spend time with their children N=157	12.1 (19)	64.3 (101)	22.3 (35)	1.3 (2)
Homework prepares pupils for secondary school N=145	13.1 (19)	69.0 (100)	13.8 (20)	4.1 (6)
Homework is welcomed by most parents N=155	8.4 (13)	66.5 (103)	23.2 (36)	1.9 (3)
Homework raises pupil attainment N=157	10.2 (16)	63.1 (99)	23.6 (37)	3.2 (5)
Homework stimulates creativity or interest in school work. N=157	18.5 (29)	30.6 (48)	41.4 (65)	9.6 (15)
Homework causes unnecessary stress to pupils and parents N=155	5.2 (8)	33.5 (52)	56.1 (87)	5.2 (8)
Homework causes unnecessary work and pressure for teachers N=157	8.3 (13)	27.4 (43)	59.9 (94)	4.5 (7)

Table 1. Levels of agreement with statements about homework (in order of positive agreement with Strongly Agree and Agree responses aggregated)

Reason	Weighted choices
Create a partnership between parents and school about children's learning	301
Practice and consolidate skills taught in schools	209
Raise pupil attainment	117
Reinforce knowledge covered in class	99
Encourage children to develop perseverance, initiative and self-discipline through independent study	89
Gets parents to spend time with their children	49
Learn study skills and improve self-organisation	46
Homework stimulates creativity or interest in school work.	29
Make pupils responsible	24
Prepare pupils for secondary school	14

Table 2 Reasons for setting homework weighted in order of teachers' judgements of importance.

Age range	None % (N)	10-15 minutes % (N)	15-30 minutes % (N)	30-60 minutes % (N)	More than an hour % (N)
FKS N=142	4.9 (7)	45.8 (65)	32.4 (46)	16.9 (24)	0
KS1 N=150	0	18.7 (28)	46.0 (69)	31.3 (47)	4 (6)
Lower KS2(Y3 and 4) N=143	0	2.1 (3)	26.6 (38)	57.3 (82)	14.0 (20)
Upper KS (Y5 and 6) N=143	0	1.4 (2)	9.1 (13)	43.4 (62)	46.2 (66)

Table 3 The percentage of schools setting homework in each age phase (Only schools with the relevant aged pupils were included in this analysis)

Category of homework	Percentage of teachers setting this (N=159)
Reading books sent home from school	100.0 (159)
Learning spellings	86.2 (137)
Learning multiplication tables	80.5 (128)
Researching new material	78.6 (125)
Learning tricky/sight words	78.0 (124)
Learning number facts	72.3 (115)
Practising calculations learnt in class	68.6 (109)
Practising handwriting	32.1 (51)
Counting activities	54.1 (86)
Learning foreign language vocabulary	6.3 (10)
Other	23.9 (38)

Table 4 Types of homework set regularly

Sharing strategy	Teachers using this % (N)
Homework expectations are part of our written home-school agreement	66.0 (105)
We have an annual leaflet or letter about supporting reading and/or homework	68.6 (109)
We do workshops about supporting reading/homework	46.5 (74)
Homework is on the website or E-mailed to parents	30.2 (48)
We have a homework club (for some or all children)	22.6 (36)
Other	11.3 (16)

Table 5 Ways in which schools share homework expectations. N=159

Follow-up strategy	Teachers using this % (N)
Teachers or Teaching Assistants monitor reading diaries/records	76.7 (122)
School contacts parents who do not contribute to reading	37.1 (59)
Teachers or Teaching Assistants mark homework each week	43.3 (69)
Teachers or Teaching Assistants mark each piece of homework before the next lesson	9.4 (15)
Children peer mark each other's homework	40.8 (66)
Children mark their own homework in class	30.8 (49)
Pupils present their work to class or groups.	46 (28.9)
Pupils display their work.	20 (12.5)

Table 6 Ways in which homework was followed up in school

	None	10-15 minutes	15-30 minutes	30-60 minutes	60-90 minutes	Longer than 90 minutes	Total
Time spent preparing homework (out of class)	41(25.7)	75 (47.1)	20.7(33)	3.7(6)	0	0	155
Time spent by TA/teacher marking homework each week (outside class time)	9.4(15)	56.1(87)	25.7(41)	7.5(12)	1.3(3)		158
Teacher /TA time spent monitoring reading each week (outside class time)?	0	23(14)	29.5(47)	49.6(79)	6.2(10)	0	150
Time spent (with the class) introducing homework each week	50.3(80)	39.6(63)	9.4(15)	0	0	0	158

Table 7 Time estimated by teachers spent preparing, monitoring and marking homework.

7815 words in total