

Doing Homework: Listening to Students,' Parents,' and Teachers' Voices in One Urban Middle School Community

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Abstract

An increasing amount of scholarship has focused on the roles of teachers and parents in the homework process, as well as on student homework behaviors and whether or not these behaviors affect student success in school. However, research explicitly comparing students' attitudes toward homework with those of parents and teachers has been minimal, at best. This study examines student, parent, and teacher attitudes toward homework through open-ended interviews with teachers, students, and their families from diverse cultural backgrounds in one urban middle school community. The study reveals that these three participating groups shared considerable consensus on the importance of homework and the purposes of homework. It further reveals a number of disagreements between child and adult viewpoints, as well as between parent and teacher viewpoints, related to their primary concerns in doing homework in the home context. Implications from the study are discussed in the light of these findings, particularly relating to how to address homework-associated conflicts resulting from these disagreements.

Key Words: homework, parent involvement, collaboration, middle school.

Introduction

Viewed at the intersection of home and school (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; Nicholls, McKenzie, & Shufro, 1994), homework is a common and well-known educational activity across cultures, grades, and ability levels (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Warton, 2001). It has long been an active area of investigation among educational researchers (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). This is evident in the fact that literature on homework has often become a topic of synthesis or meta-analysis, typically every five to ten years (Cooper, 1989).

It is surprising to note that the voices of students, the principal participants, are noticeably absent from much contemporary homework literature (Bryan & Nelson, 1994; Bryan, Nelson, & Mathur, 1995; Leung, 1993; Warton, 2001). Most research examines what students do, and whether and how the completion of homework or time spent affects student success in school (Cooper, 1989; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1985). Other research examines the roles and views of teachers (see Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001) and of parents (see Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, & Jones, 2001) in the homework process. Yet, what students do in the homework process and to what extent they comply with the expectations of teachers and parents is largely influenced by their own views toward homework (Bryan, Nelson, & Mathur, 1995; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998).

What is particularly missing from much contemporary homework literature is the line of research that explicitly compares students' attitudes toward homework with those of parents and teachers (Warton, 2001). This line of research is important to better understand the complexities of the homework process, to provide relevant "information about possible agreement, or lack of agreement, with the adult viewpoints" (Warton, 2001, p. 158), to better address frequently reported homework-associated conflict at home, and to ultimately optimize learning opportunities in the homework process.

Related Literature

Several studies are informative, in some ways from multiple angles, in examining the views of students, parents, and teachers toward homework. However, in these studies, this examination was either not the focus or was conducted largely using pre-structured quantitative measures. Chen and Stevenson (1989) reported a series of studies that examined cultural differences in attitudes about homework among more than 3,500 elementary school children, their mothers, and their teachers. In Study 1, first and fifth graders from

the cities of Minneapolis (United States), Taipei (China), and Sendai (Japan) were asked to indicate how much they liked homework by selecting among five faces with expressions ranging from a deep frown to a wide smile. The study revealed that

Among American fifth graders, 61% chose a frowning face, and 16% chose a smiling face. In contrast, 66% of Chinese fifth graders chose a smiling face, and only 16% chose a frowning face. Japanese children tended to choose a neutral face (60%), but 29% chose a frowning face. (p. 557)

On the other hand, the study found that in all three cities, fifth graders liked doing homework less than first graders.

In Study 2, fifth graders in these cities were asked to indicate the importance of four common reasons for spending time on homework (e.g., “I like doing school work” and “My parents want me to”). Each item ranged from 1 (“not very true”) to 7 (“very true”). Again, American fifth graders held more negative attitudes toward doing homework and rated “I like doing school work” as less true than the other three reasons.

The mothers in Study 1 were asked to indicate whose responsibility it is to make sure that homework is completed. The results showed that “American mothers were less likely than Chinese and Japanese mothers to believe children should assume primary responsibility for completing their homework” (p. 559).

In Studies 3 and 4, teachers of grades 1, 3, and 5 were asked to describe positive effects of homework. The data showed that teachers from all three countries agreed that homework can reinforce materials presented in class. On the other hand, whereas 41% of American teachers mentioned that homework can develop desirable character (e.g., developing independence), less than 8% of the teachers in other countries mentioned this benefit.

Chen and Stevenson’s investigation (1989) provided some revealing data about student, parent, and teacher attitudes toward homework. However, their primary interest was to compare each group’s perspectives across different cultural settings (i.e., compare the views of students in different cultures). No attempt was made to explicitly compare the views of students, their parents, and their teachers through using parallel questions.

The study by Cooper et al. (1998) provided a direct comparison of views among students, their parents, and their teachers. The sample consisted of 709 students in grades 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12, plus 82 parents and 82 teachers from three school districts: one rural, one metropolitan, and one suburban. To the 424 upper grade students (in grades 6 to 12) in their sample, along with

52 parents and 52 teachers, the researchers posed five identical questions. Two questions focused on affective reactions toward homework—whether it was liked or disliked and if it increased or decreased interest in school. The other three questions focused on the perceived benefits of homework—whether it helped students learn, develop study skills, and learn how to manage their time. These five items were combined, then, in a homework attitude scale based on moderate inter-item correlation. Scale scores could range from 0 (very negative attitude toward homework) to 14 (very positive attitude toward homework). The alpha reliability coefficient for the scale was .77.

The results revealed that teacher attitudes ($M = 10.15$, $SD = 2.35$) were more positive than parent attitudes ($M = 9.30$, $SD = 2.78$), which were in turn more positive than student attitudes ($M = 6.36$, $SD = 3.15$). In addition, they found significant positive correlations between parent and student attitudes ($r = .23$). On the other hand, there was no significant correlation between teacher and student attitudes ($r = .18$), nor between teacher and parent attitudes ($r = .02$). A series of multiple regression analyses, incorporating four independent variables (students' standardized test scores, parent and teacher attitudes, and the amount of homework the teacher assigned), further showed that student attitudes toward homework were predicted only by parent attitudes.

The previous two studies were based on close-ended questions and pre-structured responses. But what does homework mean to students, parents, and teachers in their own terms? Another study (Xu, 1994; Xu & Corno, 1998) provided direct comparison among the views of students, their parents, and their teachers through qualitative case studies. The participants were six third-grade children from one public elementary school in New York City, along with their parents, who volunteered. These families were from diverse cultural backgrounds; at the same time, 9 of the 12 parents held advanced degrees. The children were 8 years old, a mix of boys and girls, and some had the same teachers.

The study revealed that the parents and teachers shared similar views, namely, that homework was a way of reinforcing school learning and developing self-regulatory attributes. As for the children in the study, a majority was aware of the role of homework in helping them understand better their school learning. However, their predominant reason for completing homework was to seek approval from parents and teachers.

The study further revealed “doing homework presented a challenge for both the parents and children in these six families” (Xu & Corno, 1998, p. 415). These parents wanted to be involved parents, however, they also found that helping with homework required a commitment in their daily lives, which “often prevented their doing other things, ranging from their own evening work

or social activities to having some personal time for themselves” (Xu & Corno, 1998, p. 414). On the other hand, although all of the children reported liking some of their assignments, they reported that “working on homework was not their favorite activity, compared with other activities they wanted to pursue after school” (Xu & Corno, 1998, p. 415).

Data from these studies taken together imply that (a) students, parents, and teachers may hold quite different attitudes toward homework; (b) their attitudes may be influenced by their cultural differences or their unique life circumstance; and (c) whereas teacher, parent, and student attitudes may influence each other, the discrepancies among these attitudes may become a source of homework-associated conflict at home. However, two of these studies (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Cooper, et al., 1998) relied on quantitative data, driven and justified by their respective purposes. Unfortunately, for this discussion, these quantitative data provided few insights into and explanations for the kind and nature of attitudes held by teachers, parents, and students. Nor did they shed much light on specific sources of homework-associated conflict or suggestion of possible ways to address this conflict.

These are precisely the issues that this present study focuses on. Particularly, there is a need to hear voices from students, parents, and teachers about the homework process at the middle school level and from diverse cultural backgrounds. Based on their study, Cooper et al. (1998) offered one suggestion for further research, which is “to find ways to involve families that are typically underrepresented in homework studies” since participating families in most studies were “more likely to be White and less likely to represent low-income families” (p. 81). In addition, at the middle school level, student, parent, and teacher attitudes toward homework may intensify as there is more pressure to produce more homework, in the light of consistent research finding that homework is more closely associated with achievement in secondary grades, rather than elementary (Cooper & Valentine, 2001).

Method

Midland is a public middle school located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in New York City. For the 1996-1997 school year, it employed nine full-time teachers; one was non-Caucasian (African-American). The enrollment included 140 students in the 6th-8th grades, with a breakdown of 44% Latinos, 24% African-Americans, 21% multiracial, 10% Caucasians, and 3% other ethnic backgrounds. A large percentage of the parents were from working-class backgrounds; 74% of the students received free lunch, and an

additional 7% received reduced-price lunch. Over half (58%) of students lived in a household with both parents present.

The teachers routinely assigned homework in four subjects: math, humanities, writing, and science. According to an informal homework policy, teachers were to assign no more than 30 minutes of homework for completion between classes. Therefore, students received, on average, about 1 to 1½ hours total of homework daily, depending on the number of classes taken in the four subjects. Thus, Midland's homework policy was in line with the average amount of recommended homework per night for middle school students, about 70 minutes (Cooper, 2001; Roderique, Polloway, Cumblad, Epstein, & Bursuck, 1994).

The typical range of homework assignments included math exercises and math application problems, 15 minutes of reading and then writing a page in a journal, interviewing parents about their life experiences in the 1960's, and bringing in artifacts to be used in class (e.g., leaves or rocks) for art or science projects or school exhibits.

Data Collection

Participants in this study included all nine teachers, as well as eighteen students and their families. The students and their families were purposively selected (Firestone, 1993; Stake, 2000) to reflect varying backgrounds. The selection process took into account the following dimensions: gender, grade level, ethnicity, and academic performance as indicated by citywide standardized test scores.

During this study, the first author worked as a researcher in a university research center. His interest in middle school homework was influenced and informed by his previous work on elementary school homework (Xu, 1994; Xu & Corno, 1998). His access to the school was facilitated by a colleague who had known the school director and several staff members for many years. Data for this study were collected from open-ended interviews with the teachers, students, and their families.

Interviews were important to understand what homework meant to teachers, students, and their families, to examine their thoughts on the importance of homework, and to note their concerns in the homework process. Interviews with the teachers, students, and their families posed a series of parallel questions on homework, so that their respective views could be compared and analyzed along a set of common themes. Open-ended questions focused on the participants' views on reasons for doing homework, doing homework in the home context, and their other concerns over homework. Examples of

questions are: “It seems that students (or parents) have mentioned different reasons for doing homework. What are your reasons for doing homework? How would you place doing homework in the list of things you would like to do during after-school hours? What makes you feel this way?”

The study was conducted between March - June, 1997. During that time, all participants were interviewed at least once, with each interview lasting an average of forty minutes. All interviews were conducted at the school and recorded on audiotape.

Data Analysis

Transcripts made of the audiotaped interviews were checked for accuracy against the original recordings. Data analyses occurred simultaneously with data collection. Analytical files (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) were built after interviews or during audiotape transcription. Aside from these analytical files, interview transcripts were organized under the following four categories: (a) the importance of doing homework, (b) reasons for doing homework, (c) doing homework in the home context, and (d) other concerns over homework. The analysis was facilitated by the use of matrix displays, specifically a role-ordered (i.e., teachers, parents, and students) matrix by the above four categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, triangulation of different perspectives was used as a means of enhancing internal validity and safeguarding against various biases (Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994). The purpose here was not so much to advance a certain version of homework perspective, but rather to provide a richer and more holistic understanding of teacher, student, and family attitudes toward homework from their life contexts.

Results

Teacher, student, and family attitudes toward homework are presented under four categories: (a) the importance of doing homework, (b) reasons for doing homework, (c) doing homework in the home context, and (d) other concerns over homework.

The Importance of Doing Homework

Homework was considered by teachers, students, and parents as something much bigger than “tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours” (Cooper, 1989, p. 7). Instead, it was viewed as one of the major indicators of whether students were doing well

in school or not, a view shared by all three parties. For example, the school director described the transformation of one student in this way:

You see him [one student] making friends and taking on leadership roles, being transformed basically from just a bad boy to one who exhibits decent behavior. He becomes someone who starts learning in class, someone who does his work in class and his homework, and someone who [then] sees himself as taking the Stuyvesant test.

During interviews with parents, they, too, often made connections between academic well-being and homework (e.g., “Well, he wasn’t doing well, he wasn’t doing his homework,” or “He’s excited about school. He does his homework and tries to do his best. We’re kind of happy with that.”). Students also regularly linked homework to becoming a good student. For example, one student defined being a serious student as “paying attention in class, doing all your homework, doing your class work to the best of your ability.”

In addition, both students and parents viewed homework as one of a few critical indicators that could be used to judge the quality of a school or a teacher. For example, when asked what he would tell his friends about the school, one student answered that this was a nice school, and that he liked the teachers who did not let students get away with not bringing in their homework.

Some parents attached special meaning to those teachers who assigned homework; as one noted, “I think that if they give my child homework, it shows that they are concerned about her; they care about her learning.”

Reasons for Doing Homework

One main reason for homework mentioned by all three parties—teachers, students, and families – was to review, practice, and reinforce what students learned in class. One teacher gave the following example to illustrate this point:

If you taught a particular subject and you want the student to find out whether he has understood it or not, a good way is to give the student homework to do. You can stand there for forty minutes and he says, “Yeah, I understand.” Then he goes home and tries to do what you ask him to do. The next day, he’ll say, “Oh, I really don’t understand this part or that part.” For the teacher, these are clues as to what the student did not understand. So then, I go over all the homework on the board.

Parents agreed with this point of view. One typical response was that homework helped students “perfect” what they learned in school, “so you really

know what the teacher is talking about, so you don't just sit there and pretend you know." Along the same line, students found that homework helped them to understand more of what they were learning in class and to review what they had learned there earlier.

Another reason emphasized for doing homework, shared primarily by teachers and parents, was to develop personal responsibility and study skills. One teacher noted, "I look on homework as a way to have kids own their own learning, and really learn how to set their own pace, manage their time and energy, and plan what they have to do." Likewise, one parent elaborated:

What homework does is teach a kid discipline and organization... You cannot get through higher education without discipline or organization. These are as important as anything else. In class, the kid is guided step by step. You're told what you're going to do and what you're going to talk about. With homework, however, you got to pull that up out of yourself. That's the skill homework teaches.

Although the majority of students interviewed did not mention the purpose of homework as developing personal responsibility and study skills, a few students did. They noted that "homework helps you improve study skills" and "it makes you more responsible and independent." This view was substantiated by self-reported strategies they used to complete a long-term project. One student recalled:

I write down a list and see what I need and where I need to go, like the library. I write down my schedule in my calendar, so I know when I can go to the library and do my work there. Then I look over what else see I need to do... Little by little, I get all my things done.

Another reason shared by a few students and parents was that homework, as an after-school activity, helped keep children away from trouble in what were perceived as unsafe urban neighborhoods. One parent said, "If they're doing what they're supposed to be doing [their homework], this will keep them occupied. They will have much less time to want to hang out in the streets." Some students also mentioned homework was good because "it keeps you busy and out of trouble" or it helped them prepare for the future "in a safe way."

Students listed two other reasons for doing their homework. One was doing homework to earn good grades, or to avoid getting bad grades (e.g., "I've been doing all my homework everyday and bringing it on time because I want honors, not high pass." Or, "I do homework so I don't get an F on my report card."). Another closely related reason was to please significant others or to comply with their expectations, which some students found too obvious to even be questioned (e.g., "Do homework? The teacher tells us to do it, and I'm

not going to disobey and not do my homework.” Or, “My dad says I have to get good grades, so I do homework even if I don’t feel like it.”).

Doing Homework in the Home Context

It is interesting to note that when asked about their perspectives regarding how to get homework done at home, teachers, parents, and students expressed quite different views. In fact, teachers held varying views among themselves in terms of their expectation of parents’ help in the homework process. Some teachers wanted parents to coach, to help children manage their time, and to share their own life experience relating to homework assignments (e.g., life in the 1960s).

Other teachers preferred that parents limit their involvement to simply reminding students to do their homework. One teacher explained:

If the subject is too complicated for the parents, then a student can’t ask them for help or to check his work, because maybe they don’t know the subject or haven’t read the book [assigned]. Also, if there’s too much participation, then the student doesn’t really do the homework themselves; and in the end, you don’t know what he really knows.

Consistently with their perceived importance of doing homework, parents felt that doing homework was their children’s top priority during after-school hours. They viewed that their role, primarily, was to make sure that their children completed homework first. One parent said:

We have a schedule. When they [two daughters] come home [from school], they eat, rest a little, and then start doing homework. When they finish their homework, then they can do whatever they want—but not before. When they are sitting at the table doing their homework, I come around, ask them if they need any help and how their homework is going, and check to see what they are doing.

For another parent, making homework a top priority meant that the family had to put some restraints on the child’s school-organized athletics activities, such as basketball.

Well, we’ve had to tell him [his son], if you want to play athletics, then you have to take care of your school work.... You have responsibilities here. If you want to participate in sports, you have to do your homework as well. That’s something we had to deal with, and we dealt with that.

About half of the Latino parents were recent immigrants, were not fluent in English, or did not complete high school themselves in their home countries.

Given that assistance with content seemed out of the question, their involvement with homework turned instead to emphasizing that homework was the most important activity during the after-school hours and to making sure that their children indeed completed all of their assignments on time. One typical approach in these families was that they would continue asking the child “if he did his homework.”

Students, on the other hand, did not view doing homework as one of their favorite activities during after-school hours (as compared to watching TV, playing on a computer, listening to music, phoning friends, and playing with their friends outside), although they were aware of its importance. Rarely did they place doing homework at the top of their list of activities they enjoyed pursuing after school.

About half of the students said that they would place homework somewhere in the middle of the list. This group of students often expressed mixed feelings about homework. One student explained: “I’d put it in the middle. I wouldn’t put it in the end because it’s important, and I wouldn’t put it at the top because I really don’t like homework that much. But I know I’m going to learn something from it.” Some students in this group took a more matter-of-fact approach. One student noted, “I’m not very excited about it, but I’m not bragging about it either. . . . As soon as I get home, I’m just used to doing my homework and that’s it. It’s not that I like doing it; it’s just that I’m used to doing it.”

The other half of the students placed homework at or near the bottom of the list. Some of these students felt that homework was “a pain in the neck.” One student placed it near the bottom simply because “I don’t like doing it. It makes me upset, and I don’t want to do it.” For other students in this group, they placed it at the bottom of the list because doing homework intervened with their pursuit of other, more attractive activities. One student said that homework was the last thing he wanted to do because he wanted to go outside, play video games, and watch TV. Or in another student’s words, “homework is bothering because it takes away from the business of having fun.”

Concerns Over Homework

One major concern was what the appropriate amount of homework should be for students from diverse cultural backgrounds at this developmental stage. The three groups expressed quite different, and in many cases, rather conflicting views. One constant concern among teachers was, “Do we give too much or too little homework?” In general, the school was hesitant about giving too much homework. In one case, the school director explicitly asked one teacher

to assign less homework. When asked about this decision, she explained:

If I looked at the homework she was assigning, I saw that there were a significant number of kids who weren't doing it because it was like two and three hours a night, if you wanted to do it well, for an average student. I didn't think that was fair for kids....I felt that reading two chapters and then summarizing them were too much for kids....To be a really excellent teacher here, you have to look at the range of ages, the range of abilities, and the range of interests that your kids have—and then use this to make entry points, so that kids don't fail even when they're trying hard.

Another teacher seemed to be caught between these arguments. On the one hand, he felt that the school needed to raise overall expectations for students, including homework:

We seem to be very comfortable acknowledging any little thing that kids on the bottom do. If they come to school everyday we give them an award. If they don't get kicked out of class, we give them an award. If they hand in their homework, we give them an award. I felt that that was wrong, I felt we should have had expectations that they should have done that anyway.

On the other hand, like the school director, he felt that the school needed to look at students as individuals, to be more aware of their needs:

If you carry a blanket in your bag because you have to sleep in the hallways at night until someone comes home at eleven-thirty or at midnight, how can I expect that child to come to class with all his homework done? I can ask him, "Where is your homework? Why don't you have your homework done?" I mean I can do it. But, is it real?

To address the issue that some kids had no support at home and that public libraries were posting shorter and shorter hours, the school provided after-school homework help for any students who needed additional support. This homework help was offered every day, lasted about an hour, and was staffed by one teacher, along with several college volunteers from a nearby university.

Despite such a coordinated effort from the school, teachers often found that some students still did not hand in their homework on time. One teacher noted:

It's very hard to get any homework out of some kids; and if you get homework, it's not good quality. Now, some students do very well. But, for the most part, it's like pulling teeth. You have to play more cop than anything else, so the homework loses its effect.

Another teacher voiced his frustration from a slightly different angle: “It’s an almost impossible situation. If you don’t have 80-85% of your students bringing in their homework, then you have a counter-revolution. And the acid energy that is there just drains away the [counter] energy to learn.”

Parents, on the the other hand, wanted teachers to assign more homework for their children, even for about half of the Latino parents who had difficulty in helping their children with homework directly. One parent felt that her son got “too little work” from school. She wanted teachers to give him extra homework “because he can do that” and “he can accomplish more. I’ve always believed that you can never get too much homework.” This belief, she explained, had to do with her childhood experience as well as her recent return to college, where she again appreciated the value of homework to reinforce and expand what she learned in class.

A small number of parents took the matter to their own hands. After her daughter completed her homework, one parent would ask her to read the latest *New York Times* and write a summary of one or more of the articles in the Science Section.

Yet, for many parents, they lamented they were just so busy “trying to get by” to devote much time to their children’s homework. One parent observed, “Unfortunately, with people at this income level, with the majority of them, their major concen is just keeping a roof over their heads and food on the table.” In the case of one parent who requested that teachers assign extra homework for her son, she found her busy schedule prevented her from following up with teachers. Her job at a college library was full-time, and in addition she attended college classes four nights a week. Often she was not at home during the early evening hours; when she did arrive home, she sometimes had to work on her own homework assignments until 3:00 a.m.

To the extent that parents were involved in the homework process, they were concerned about the perceived discrepancy between their expectation and that of some teachers. One parent found that some teachers just wanted to see if a homework assignment was done, not if it was done correctly. She explained,

I’ve seen papers that she [my daughter] wrote and then went to the computer and did it. And I’m like [flabbergasted]. The teacher couldn’t possibly read this because there are misspelled words and sentences that just don’t make any sense at all. I can’t see how a teacher can allow you to leave it like that without telling you to do it differently.

This mother had reservations about such a practice because “if you let children write something to you, and it doesn’t make sense, and you don’t correct

it, then they think it's okay. And they'll continue doing that." She found that this practice also made it difficult for her, as a parent, to help her child because if "the teacher doesn't correct it, and if I see it, I correct it, and she has to do it over, and it's like 'You're just picking on me.'" Other parents shared similar sentiments. One parent lamented,

because they [some teachers] tell him [her son], he gets an "Excellent." So he comes home and says, "See, mom, I'm getting an 'Excellent,' what's the problem?" I've got nothing to say. If the school tells him his work is "Excellent," who am I to say that it's not?

Unlike their parents, students did not look forward to more homework and, in fact, would like less homework to do. In the case of the mother who requested teachers to assign extra homework for her son, her child did not want to have more homework. One of the children's concerns was related to the nature of homework assignments: whether they were interesting or not. One student said, "I think that homework is good because it teaches you more about what you've learned at school. But I wouldn't call it my hobby. Sometimes I like my homework—but that depends on what the homework is."

Acknowledging that some assignments were interesting, many students frequently also noted that other assignments were frequently boring, or considered too easy or too hard, or involved too much writing, or were not relevant to their life context (e.g., "They don't really ask about your opinion. They say, 'Look up other stuff and find out other people's opinions'").

Second, as some students indicated in the previous section, the reason they placed homework at or near the bottom of the list had to do with the greater attractiveness of other, competing activities, even for those who liked doing their homework (e.g., "I enjoy doing homework, especially the writing work. Yet I always leave time for other activities, too."). Still, for other students, what was at stake was more than just taking away from "the business of having fun." One student explained:

Sometimes I find that I get a lot out of homework, like math, for example. I have learned a lot from math [assignments]. At other times, I find homework boring and pointless. There are also times when I find homework interesting, but not that much. I usually spend hours on my homework, and then I find I don't have any time to do [other] things I want to do. I never get to go outside and play with my friends or even talk to them on the phone. I feel this is one of the reasons I don't have many friends. Many times I feel trapped at home, doing homework, and I never get out, having fun and enjoying life. It's not fair....Another problem I have when I get too much homework is that

I don't have much time to practice my violin or study for the Regents exam, which I will have to take to get into a more advanced math class. I don't like to miss homework because I don't want to have a bad year, but I just wish I could have a break from it now and then.

Discussion

This present study examined student, parent, and teacher attitudes toward homework. The data revealed that all three groups—students, parents, and teachers—considered homework more than just tasks assigned by teachers. Rather, homework was often viewed symbolically as handy and important criterion to judge how well students, teachers, and even the school overall were functioning. Thus, this study challenges the assumption that many educators seem to have about the value parents from diverse cultural backgrounds place on their children's homework. In fact, a few parents in this study, along with their children, mentioned an additional benefit of having homework—that of preventing children from getting into trouble in their unsafe urban neighborhoods.

Consistent with homework literature in general (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001) and empirical studies comparing adults' views in particular (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Xu & Corno, 1998), the data from this study revealed that both teachers and parents shared similar views about the purposes of doing homework, namely for reinforcement of school learning and for development of personal responsibility. The data from this study further implies that, by the middle school level, students have largely internalized adult views about homework, particularly relating to the purpose of homework to reinforce school learning. Also, whereas the third graders in one previous study were largely unaware of the intrinsic aspects of developing personal responsibility and good study habits as one reason for homework (Xu & Corno, 1998), a few middle school students did so in the present study. This difference implies that some older students have learned over time or perhaps internalized some homework management strategies from their families (e.g., to learn to pace themselves to meet deadlines), and consequently they saw these embedded values. Thus, it becomes important and beneficial for middle schools to continue to work closely with parents to develop desirable personal attributes in their children associated with homework. This is particularly important in light of empirical evidence showing that families of all kinds can play a role in promoting self-responsibility through homework behaviors in children beyond the elementary years (Xu & Corno, 2003).

In addition, the data from this study revealed a number of disagreements between child and adult viewpoints. First, consistent with previous studies (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Xu & Corno, 1998), students here mentioned some extrinsic reasons for doing homework (e.g., to earn good grades and to meet parents' or teachers' expectations). Second, in line with teachers' expectation, parents viewed homework as a top priority during after-school hours, demonstrated by making sure that their children completed their homework first and reminding them to get homework done. On the other hand, students often placed doing homework in the middle or near the bottom of their list of preferred after-school activities. This is congruent with relevant findings from other empirical studies that suggested that doing homework was not children's favorite activity, compared with other-school activities they would rather pursue (Xu & Corno, 1998), and that their levels of affect, arousal, motivation, and attention were rated lower than similar subjective experiences during other activities (e.g., classwork, leisure, and maintenance, such as eating and doing chores; Leone & Richards, 1989). Moreover, students were often caught between the importance they perceived in doing homework and the lure of other, competing after-school activities. This tension was heightened when homework assignments were perceived as "boring" or "pointless."

What can be made of these disagreements between the child and the adult viewpoints? Instead of imposing adult views on children, teachers and parents need to take the children's perspective into consideration in the homework process. Middle schools need to design homework assignments that are more purposeful and motivating for students at this developmental stage (Leone & Richards, 1989), so that the students will be more drawn to the homework tasks at hand, and so more likely to develop self-regulatory efforts and to complete their assignments on time.

Second, middle schools need to help parents become more involved in structuring and monitoring their children's homework (Xu & Corno, 2003), particularly in light of the finding that middle school parents were more concerned about helping their children establish beneficial study routines than assisting them with the academic content of their homework (Reetz, 1991). Also, the data from this study suggests that, aside from the nature of homework assignments, homework was not children's favorite activity due partly to the relative attractiveness of other competing activities. Thus, and equally important, parents need to play a more active role in helping children prioritize and structure their other after-school activities, not to prevent them from participating in these activities, but rather to help them plan and schedule their necessary and preferred activities on a weekly basis. If children know that they still have time for other desirable play activities during the week, they will be

less sidetracked by thoughts of other competing activities while doing daily homework.

Third, parental attitudes toward homework play a significant and stable role in shaping student attitudes toward homework, as well as on the academic achievement of middle school students (Cooper et al., 1998). Although parents from diverse cultural backgrounds may not actually monitor their children's homework due to overextended schedules or because they do not feel comfortable with the content of the homework, their positive attitudes toward homework can make a difference in their children's attitudes and in improving their school grades.

The data from this study revealed that the adults (teachers and parents) shared more consensus among themselves than with the children. On the other hand, each group of adults voiced their respective concerns. Teachers struggled with their primary concern over what should constitute the appropriate amount of homework for these middle school students from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as what steps the school needed to take to get the majority of students to turn in their homework on time. On the other hand, parents struggled between their desire for teachers to assign more homework and the reality that their hectic schedules often prevented them from getting more involved in their children's homework. To the extent some parents were involved in helping their children, they were further concerned about perceived discrepancies between their own expectations of how homework needed to be done and evaluated and the views of some teachers. They found that such discrepancies often became a source of homework-associated conflict at home, particularly when they thought that their children were not learning all that they should be learning, whereas some teachers did.

What can be learned from these agreements and disagreements among adult viewpoints? The fact that teachers and parents shared considerable consensus suggests that they have a common basis upon which to build. On the other hand, these two groups of adults had disagreements over a number of issues, which suggests that teachers and parents need to communicate more closely and listen to each other's viewpoints. Particularly, they need to look beyond some general issues (e.g., the importance of homework and purposes of homework), for, as this study showed, the fact that they shared quite similar views on these issues did not prevent various concerns from surfacing in the two groups. Consequently, more time should be spent listening to one another's concerns over the homework process as they emerge, whether concerning the amount of homework to be assigned or the standards established for student work.

Perhaps more importantly, as teachers and parents work out their differences, they need to listen to students' voices about their concerns over homework

in their real life contexts, so that homework is not viewed as something to be done *to* them, but *with* them. There is emerging evidence that it is important to listen to the voices of middle school students. For example, when given opportunities, students in this study provided some useful insights about what could be done to make homework more beneficial and rewarding for all three parties involved, as discussed earlier in this section. Similarly, the adolescents in Benson's study (1988) generated a range of reasonable strategies to deal with homework distractions, which could be helpful to their parents in the homework process.

Homework is found "more strongly associated with achievement for high school than middle school students and for middle school than elementary school students" (Cooper & Valentine, 2001, p. 147). At the same time, studies show that student attitudes toward homework become more negative as they move from early elementary years to later elementary years (Chen & Stevenson, 1989), from elementary school to middle and high school (Cooper, et al., 1998), and from middle school to high school (Xu, in press). If the desired homework outcomes include both reinforcement of school learning and long-term gains, such as improving child attitudes toward schooling and developing better study habits, as teachers, parents, and (to some extent) students claimed in this study and has been noted elsewhere in homework literature (Cooper, 1989; Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Xu & Corno, 1998; Warton, 2001), then middle school is a developmental junction to make sure that these desired homework outcomes do occur. This is a critical challenge facing middle school homework today. For this reason, we need to continue the line of research illustrated here, to examine and monitor student attitudes toward homework during middle school years, along with the views of their teachers and parents. Particularly, future investigations need to treat student attitudes both as an outcome variable and as a mediating variable that influences their long-term academic achievement and desirable non-academic attributes.

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