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Teachers' perspectives on homework: manifestations of culturally situated common sense

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exploratory study of English and Swedish teachers' perspectives on the role of homework in year-one children's learning of number. In order to ensure cultural integrity, data were analysed independently by two colleagues in each context. Analyses yielded three broad but cross-culturally common themes reflecting culturally situated notions of common sense. These concerned the existence of homework, the purpose of homework and the role of parents in homework's completion. While homework was unproblematic for all English teachers, half the Swedish cohort spoke against it, arguing that variation in home background would compromise principles of equity. All teachers who set homework, whether English or Swedish, spoke of homework as a means of supporting children at risk of falling behind their peers, a process by which children practice routine skills. English teachers' homework-related justifications were located in a discourse of target setting that was invisible in the Swedish.

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that the processes of education are deep-rooted in the cultures, albeit invisibly (Williams, 1958), in which they are found. Moreover, because culture embodies shared ideas about what is good, right, and desirable (Schwartz, 1999), its maintenance is a key function of education (Triandis & Suh, 2002), with curricula typically reflecting societal perspective on the ideal citizen (Cummings, 2003). In this latter respect, Hofstede (1986) showed how different cultural groups create widely differing practices with respect to the management of teaching, learning, and the respective actors' roles and responsibilities. These practices, which Buchmann (1987, p. 154) has described as folkways, are "warranted by their existence and taken-for-granted effectiveness". From the perspective of mathematics, the focus of this paper, such differences play out in the expectations set out in curricula, the manifestation of those expectations in textbooks and the didactical traditions within which participants operate (Andrews & Larson, 2017).

Underpinning these culturally situated folkways is common sense, or the received beliefs and practices that pass from one generation to the next (Geertz, 1975; Schutz, 1962). For

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example, common sense determines societal expectations with respect to the wearing of school uniform or the provision of free school meals for all children, matters that distinguish educational practices in England and Sweden, the two countries under scrutiny in this paper. In this form, common sense is a cultural construction that draws on “socially accepted or current assumptions, habits, beliefs, laws, and taboos, local knowledge, prejudices, and misconceptions” (Keitel & Kilpatrick, 2005, p. 107). It guides people’s thoughts and actions by means of what has gone before and is believed to be true (Geertz, 1975). Culturally constructed common sense is deep-rooted, informs how individuals interpret their world and is difficult to change (Keitel & Kilpatrick, 2005; Schutz, 1962).

Beyond manifestations of traditional ways of being, common sense can be construed as an intelligent interpretation of a situation prior to action. It is a practical rather than academic intelligence (Sternberg et al., 1995) necessary for human functioning (Keitel & Kilpatrick, 2005). It refers to how one uses one’s senses “judiciously, intelligently, perceptively, reflectively . . . (in order to cope) with everyday problems” (Geertz, 1975, p. 772). This form of common sense has the propensity to facilitate professional reflection by bringing coherence to initially unclear situations (Clarà, 2015), albeit in ways that do not question the basis on which arguments are constructed (Kumashiro, 2015), and warrant didactical practices (Formica et al., 2010). Indeed, for many years educational reform has been underpinned more by notions of common sense than empirically derived warrants (Newmann, 1993; Shaker & Heilm, 2004), with the consequence that research is construed as irrelevant to practice due to its frequent conflict with common sense solutions (Winch et al., 2015).

One aspect of educational practice seemingly warranted by common sense is the didactical use of homework, which, despite a long history, remains a contested practice (Bempechat, 2004). Its impact on achievement remains only partly understood (Trautwein & Köller, 2003), with review studies typically citing research showing both positive and negative impacts on achievement (Fan et al., 2017). In broad terms, homework is more likely to benefit older students than younger (Cooper et al., 2006), although this is likely to be true only “under certain circumstances” (Epstein et al., 1995, p. 15). Also, while primary teachers typically use homework for reviewing material and secondary teachers use it to prepare students for subsequent lessons (Muhlenbruck et al., 1999), students at the border of the two benefit most from homework presented as extensions to current work (Medwell & Wray, 2019; Rosário et al., 2015). Other studies have shown that the amount of homework and the time given to it are less significant indicators of achievement than the extent to which homework is completed (Fan et al., 2017; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011), while others seem to say the opposite (Kitsantas et al., 2011). Other studies have found that emphases on drill and practice are counterproductive (Trautwein et al., 2009), while out-of-school homework has an impact on achievement that in-school homework does not (Keith et al., 2004).

Problematically, notions of common sense have permeated much of the homework-related research undertaken during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century (Gill & Schlossman, 2000), being typically based on opinion or reports of individual practice (Epstein et al., 1995; Gray & Allison, 1971). Indeed, a barrier to understanding the significance of homework is the appeal to common-sense that has underpinned the “claims . . . made at regular and frequent intervals by those who seek to influence or control educational policy” (Farrow et al., 1999, p. 323). It is telling, therefore, that in their

study of English year six students, Farrow and his colleagues found that less homework rather than more was associated with learning gains, a finding that so irritated the common sense perspectives of an education minister that he announced to a meeting of British industrialists that “some researchers are so obsessed with ‘critique’, so out of touch with reality that they churn out findings which no-one with the slightest common sense could take seriously” (Tymms, 1999, p. 22). Furthermore, notions of common sense seem to have underpinned an internationally collective mindset in which the value of homework as an aid to learning, as shown in the research reports of Bembenutty (2011), Hong (2001), Rudman (2014), and Tas et al. (2014), is an assumed given.

In sum, homework’s use, typically driven by societal beliefs not only that homework consolidates learning and fosters personal responsibility but that good teachers give homework regularly and more homework is better than less (Corno, 1996), has not been unequivocally supported by research (Cooper et al., 2006). Furthermore, despite previous research having addressed both students’ (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Dettmers et al., 2011; Xu & Wu, 2013) and parents’ (Dumont et al., 2012; Patall et al., 2008) views on homework, teachers have been largely neglected. Indeed, “few studies have focused on the teacher’s role in the homework process” (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001, p. 181) or given them the opportunity to reflect on what are frequently unquestioned routines (North & Pillay, 2002). Moreover, with a few exceptions, most research on teacher perspectives has been conducted in the United States, where around nine teachers in every 10, irrespective of grade taught, believe that homework benefits students’ learning, facilitates the development of both study skills and time management (Johnson & Pontius, 1989; Markow et al., 2007; Muhlenbruck et al., 1999) and, from the perspective of mathematics, provides necessary consolidation of material (Brock et al., 2007). However, the extent to which the deployment of homework is culturally determined is not well understood (Mau, 1997), a problem exacerbated by the invocation of common sense warrants (Davis, 2014) and cyclical educational trends throughout the twentieth century (Austin, 1979; Gill & Schlossman, 1996). Indeed, although space prevents a detailed summary, debates concerning homework’s role typically occur in 30 year cycles (Cooper, 2001; Wildman, 1968). This paper, therefore, aims to contribute to the field by means of a comparative examination of how year-one teachers in two European countries, England, and Sweden, construe homework in the teaching of elementary number. In so doing, our aim is to make explicit, in ways rarely acknowledged in the literature, the significance of cultural context in teachers’ construal of the practice.

Understanding the contexts

The educational systems of England and Sweden share many superficial similarities. Both have a centralised curriculum on which national tests at different stages of a child’s education are based. However, drawing on Bernstein (1981), the English curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) is strongly framed, with detailed outcomes specified for each of the eleven years of compulsory school, while the Swedish (Skolverket, 2018) is loosely framed, with broad outcomes specified for the end of each three-year phase of compulsory school. English curricular assessments are high stakes, while Swedish, where teacher assessment remains the major component of a child’s overall grade, are low stakes. Both countries have inspection regimes based on a common expectation that inspections will be “proportionate” (Ozga et al., 2015). However, the English regime reflects a “hard” governance, while the

Swedish a “soft” (Ehren et al., 2015). All Swedish schools are comprehensive, with all children following the same curriculum in mixed-attainment classes. Almost all English schools are stratified. For example, unlike Sweden, there is an extensive network of elite fee-paying schools, one of which has educated 20 UK prime ministers. In addition, a small number of local authorities retain a system that segregates children at ages 11 or 13 on the basis of a selective examination. Finally, even in areas with comprehensive schools, children are typically placed in teaching groups on the basis of prior attainment.

Both the English curriculum (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011) and the Swedish (Åkerström et al., 2015) mandate schools to involve parents in their children’s education. However, despite the similarity of the mandate, teachers’ views on parental involvement differ considerably. On the one hand, English teachers, who view parents as supplementary teachers, communicate in instructive ways, while Swedish teachers, who do not expect parents to be supplementary teachers, communicate in informative ways (Sayers et al., 2019). In a related vein, while homework is invisible in the two curricula, its deployment is a matter of “common sense” concern in both countries^{1,2,3}. For example, Rudman’s (2014) review, written from the perspective of a classroom practitioner, seems premised on homework as an entirely natural and integral element of English education. In Sweden, however, the situation is ambivalent, to the extent that despite no mandated expectation of its deployment, the National Agency for Education may have confused teachers by publishing an evaluation of 10 schools’ homework-related support practices (Skolverket, 2014). In a related vein, parents of lower secondary-aged children accept not only the necessity of homework but also their role in ensuring its completion (Forsberg, 2007). Moreover, most lower secondary teachers approve of and set homework but, to minimise the impact of variable home environments, typically do so in ways that enable school-based rather than home-based completion (Gu & Kristoffersson, 2015).

Finally, the visibility of equity in the two curriculum documents differs considerably. For example, while the broad aims of the English curriculum are summarised in two paragraphs (Department for Education, 2014), the Swedish curriculum begins with five pages outlining fundamental values, before a further nine pages summarising the overall goals. While the English document makes no reference to equity in its aims, it includes a section on inclusion that instructs teachers to consider the needs of differently disadvantaged children. There is no articulation of any underlying principle, although teachers are instructed to “take account of their duties under equal opportunities legislation that covers race, disability, sex, religion or belief, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, and gender reassignment” (Department for Education, 2014, p. 9).

By way of contrast, the aims of the Swedish curriculum, which is available in both English and Swedish, include the expectation that education will “impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based” (Skolverket, 2018, p. 5). It adds, same page, that the

inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the school should represent and impart ... achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility.

Finally, further highlighting systemic differences, the word “equality” occurs twice in the English document and 25 times in the Swedish. With respect to the former, the first

occurrence is a footnote connected to the above quote on inclusion, while the second is a technical reference to mathematical expressions. The effective absence of equity in any articulated principles of education has created an educational system in which privilege, however it is defined, leads to improved educational outcomes and life chances (Rayner, 2017; Wilkins, 2016). With respect to the latter, every occurrence, whether in the aims or the subject-specific guidelines, refers to educational equality as a right for all children. However, recent structural changes relating to deregulation, privatisation, and marketisation may have compromised such principles (Beach, 2017; Skolverket, 2012).

Methods

Before describing our approaches to data collection and analysis, it is important to mention that the data on which this paper is based emerged serendipitously from a larger study of teachers' perspectives on the teaching and learning of number to year-one children in England and Sweden. The study, conceived as exploratory in order to avoid constructs derived from, typically, Anglophone literature masking cultural differences in teachers' perceptions of their professional responsibilities (Lareau, 1996; Sayers et al., 2019), involved semi-structured interviews conducted with year-one generalist teachers in both countries.

Each interview, typically lasting around 45 minutes, was structured by a small number of broad areas of enquiry concerning, for example, teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning in general, their perspectives on the teaching and learning of number in particular, and the role of parents in their children's learning. Each of these broad areas was framed by a single question, posed to all informants, supplemented by sub-questions used at interviewers' discretion to facilitate the flow of conversation. Thus, a teacher's perspective on parental involvement, the principle source of data related to homework, was framed by the common question, "how do you see the role of parents in their children's learning of number?" supplemented by discretionary questions like

What sorts of things do the parents of the children in your class do?

Do such interventions help or hinder you in your work?

Does your school encourage parents' involvement?

What are the challenges for parents who want to support their children?

To ensure the integrity of any culture-specific perspectives, each data set was analysed by two members of the project team according to the following schedule. First, each transcript was read and re-read. Second, all excerpts involving homework were identified. Third, following the constant comparison traditions of the grounded theorists, categories of responses were identified and, with each new category, previously read excerpts were re-read to determine whether the new category also applied to them. Fourth, the two analysts for each data set met to agree their categories before arranging them into broader themes. Finally, the resultant broad themes from each country were compared and contrasted. This process, drawing effectively on four independent analyses, resulted in the set of themes used to frame this paper. Importantly, no Swedish data were translated until excerpts selected for inclusion in the report had been identified. At this

point, they were translated into English, including transforming Swedish idioms into forms recognisable to English-speakers.

In order to obtain a representative sample of participants in each country, teachers in diverse schools in different geographical locations were contacted, an approach that continued until 20 volunteers in each country, representing a range of professional experiences, had been identified. Details of the English teachers and their schools can be seen in [Table 1](#), while those for Sweden can be seen in [Table 2](#). The geographical location of included schools was determined, in part, by the home location of the respective interviewers, although a diversity of locations was achieved in both countries. The schools reflected the diversity of size found in the two countries and, importantly, variation in population demographics. For example, while the same measures are not available, the range of English children whose mother tongue was not English ranged from 2% through 43%, while the proportion of Swedish children with a foreign background ranged from 4% through 66%. That said, six Swedish schools, marked with a dagger (+), included fewer than 10 such children and are not included in official statistics. In sum, participating schools reflected well the diversity found in the two countries.

From the perspective of teachers, all Swedish and those English not marked with an asterisk had completed undergraduate teaching degrees while, uniquely in England, those marked with an asterisk had completed an undergraduate subject degree before completing a one-year teacher preparation programme. The difference in age and length of teaching experience accord with recent OECD figures showing that 31% of English teachers are under 30 years of age (OECD, 2019a), compared with only 8% in Sweden (OECD, 2019b). The gender distribution of participating teachers was slightly skewed towards female participants as the same OECD figures show that 85% and 76% of English and Swedish primary teachers, respectively, are female.

Table 1. Characteristics of English teachers and their schools.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Exp.	School	Location	Roll	% Mother tongue English pupils
Carol	F	51	30	A	Urban town	160	96
Christina*	F	49	20	B	Urban town	276	98
Charlie	F	28	6	C	Rural town	431	91
Jessica	F	39	17	"	"	"	"
Amanda*	F	47	12	"	"	"	"
Rachel	F	36	13	D	Rural town	178	99
Jo	F	41	19	"	"	"	"
Gemma*	F	32	10	E	Village	204	96
Megan*	F	28	2	F	Rural town	457	96
Lola*	F	44	16	"	"	"	"
Anna*	F	27	2	G	Rural town	418	84
Kate*	F	40	2	"	"	"	"
Louise*	F	30	9	H	Urban town	367	88
Peter*	M	38	10	I	Urban town	402	63
Rowena	F	37	6	"	"	"	"
Mary*	F	51	25	J	Urban town	415	83
Jenny	F	49	23	K	Urban town	188	57
Sarah*	F	22	1	L	Village	150	98
Michael*	M	24	2	M	Urban town	405	78
Mean		34.8	10.3			299	79

Table 2. Characteristics of Swedish teachers and their schools.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Exp.	School	Location	Roll	% Foreign background
Julia	F	44	10	A [†]	Village	140	
Mona	F	51	8	B [†]	Affluent suburb	165	
Matilda	F	40	17	C	Poor suburb	370	66
Marita	F	63	20	"	"	"	"
Isabelle	F	30	8	"	"	"	"
Wilma	F	40	7	D	Affluent suburb	350	7
Susanne	F	38	11	E	Mixed suburb	350	24
Ellinor	F	41	16	F	Urban town	200	18
Lena	F	61	40	G [†]	Affluent suburb	110	–
Marianne	F	49	18	H	Mixed suburb	380	17
Kerstin	F	53	13	"	"	"	"
Irene	F	48	20	I [†]	Affluent suburb	150	
Claudia	F	57	20	J [†]	Affluent suburb	180	
Anders	M	46	16	K [†]	Village	160	
Hanna	F	32	7	L [†]	Rural town	120	
Erika	F	38	13	M	Urban town	700	5
Sofie	F	39	3	"	"	"	"
Pauline	F	24	1	"	"	"	"
Lovisa	F	41	15	N	Rural town	360	4
Jenny	F	35	5	O	Rural town	450	13
	Mean	41.75	13.35			279	

The goal of 20 interviews in each country was informed by two considerations. First, if too few interviews were undertaken then thematic saturation, or the point after which no new themes would be generated by the analysis (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), may not be reached. Second, undertaking too many interviews would be ethically problematic insofar as obtaining but not using data from an interview would be an abuse of colleagues' goodwill. In this respect, where a study is focused on understanding "common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals, 12 interviews should suffice" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 79). Consequently, acknowledging that teachers in each country constitute "relatively homogeneous" groups, 20 interviews in each country were thought to be sufficient for ensuring thematic saturation while minimising the ethical problem of undertaking too many. In practice, one of the planned English interviews failed to materialise.

Results

The analyses described above yielded three broad themes common across the two data sets. Moreover, they allowed the construction of a narrative highlighting culturally situated differences, frequently within a nominal similarity, with respect to how teachers in England and Sweden view the role of homework in the teaching of number to year-one students. These three themes concern the existence of homework, the purpose of homework and teachers' views on the role of parents in homework's completion. In the following, we present each theme, with evidence from Sweden followed by evidence from England. In so doing we acknowledge a key difference in the ways the two sets of teachers refer to the children for whom they are responsible; English teachers typically spoke of children while Swedish teachers typically spoke of pupils.⁴ However, with the

exception of colleagues' utterances, which have been quoted accurately, we have tried to use the word "child" consistently throughout the following.

Theme 1: The existence of homework

The existence of homework was a theme that distinguished the two sets of teachers. On the one hand, all English teachers spoke in ways that indicated not only homework's existence but of its being an integral element of classroom life. On the other hand, half of the Swedish teachers spoke of their not setting homework, typically arguing that homework is not only undesirable but divisive, while the other half offered tentative and occasionally apologetic acknowledgements of its existence.

Swedish teachers and the existence of homework

As indicated above, half the Swedish teachers did not give mathematics homework to their year-one children. In some cases, this was dismissed with a simple statement like Julia's "right now I have no maths homework" and Mona's "No, we have no homework at all". Such short responses, which typically were expanded upon later, seemed to indicate that not having homework was the natural order of the Swedish classroom. Others, such as Lena, qualified her denial of homework by saying, "Not unless there is someone who has been sick". Three teachers' arguments for not sending homework were as responses to other matters. Two of these three, Hanna and Jenny, spoke of giving reading homework but not mathematics. In this respect, Jenny spoke for them both when she said, "Because I think that reading is a major part of daily life ... they have reading homework, but they do not have maths homework". The third teacher, Irene, having expressed concerns about parents who wanted her to send extra work home, commented that

I do not spend time doing extra homework for them. I am pleased to give them what they should have here in school so that they are skilled to meet the challenges I give them here at school.

Three further teachers spoke of not setting homework in accordance with their school's policy. Reflecting the comments of two of them, Kerstin commented that "we are a school without homework ... and there is actually some research on the fact that there is nothing that shows that you do better at home than you do at school". An alternative position, that distinguished her from her other colleagues was Marianne, who said, "I must say then that this is a homework-free school ... which I do not support 100 percent".

With the exception of Marianne's dissatisfaction, teachers' reasons for not giving homework were similar and located in a principle of educational equality. Typically, this was reflected in concerns that if homework was given then differing family circumstances would compromise children's equal opportunities to learn. Ellinor's comment in this respect was not atypical. She said that "it should not matter what you do at home. But it does, it will always make ... we can never weigh up what children get at home". In a similar vein, Julia said that "because it (a child's education) is supposed to be equal, then if we're going to have the same opportunities, we cannot send it home ... (because) they have different conditions". Others offered more specific comments. For example, Jenny spoke of parents "who say, 'we do not have time'", while Matilda and Lena observed that some children's parents had limited access to Swedish and would, therefore, find supporting their children

difficult. In this respect, Matilda's comment represented both their views, "We have children here who, where they only speak French at home ... then it is difficult to get support at home, to be able to help with homework or to get someone to listen (to reading)". Overall, though, many teachers' arguments were remarkably consistent, as summarised by Wilma,

We do not send home things that need to be explained at home, it's we who teach, not the parents. And it is not that we do not believe that parents should be able, if we asked them, but we do not want to put that responsibility on them; it's our responsibility. And they are different ... kids have different conditions at home ... not everyone has the time (...) you might have two jobs (...) or be a single parent. So, it's deliberate.

While half the Swedish cohort did not set homework, albeit reluctantly in Marianne's case, the other half did. For many, the existence of homework emerged incidentally during a discussion of other issues. For example, as part of her response to a question about the use of software, Susanne mentioned that "we digitised homework last year". Similarly, Claudia, responding to a question about parental involvement in children's learning, mentioned that some parents complained that "the homework's too easy". Others mentioned homework in direct response to a question about its existence, as with Erika's comment that "we are always doing homework, you may have different views, but they have a maths homework each week and have had it since they started in year-one. And then they have Friday to Friday". Interestingly, Erika's use of the phrase, "you may have different views" implied an awareness that homework may not be viewed positively in Sweden.

English teachers and the existence of homework

All teachers spoke of their setting of homework, which we explore in depth in the next section. There were none who did not set homework, nor any who expressed any doubts as to its validity and relevance. In most cases, its existence emerged incidentally and before the interviewer could ask. For example, in response to a question about how his school communicated with parents, Michael commented that "We do a newsletter every week ... and the children have homework", while Peter, in response to a similar question, mentioned that "I have conversations with parents about the maths that we're doing with the children. Then we've got homework". Similarly, in response to a question about parental support of children's learning, Sarah spoke about parents who "try their hardest to, like, do things at home with them. And bits of homework I send home get done and things like that". On other occasions teachers responded to a direct question about homework. For example, in response to such a question, Mary replied, "Yes, there's homework, erm, the homework's done on a half-termly basis", while Christina commented "Yeah ... and I will clearly communicate to the parents what the main objectives are". In short, for all the English teachers, homework emerged as an everyday and integral part of school life seemingly beyond question.

Theme 2: The purpose of homework

The purpose of homework both unified and distinguished teachers from the two countries. For example, many from both cohorts spoke of homework as a means of supporting children who struggle with mathematics and, when given to all students, a means by

which they consolidate what is currently being taught in school. However, while such purposes may seem transparent, their manifestations varied cross-culturally.

Swedish teachers and the purpose of homework

Swedish teachers' comments fell into two broad categories, depending on whether homework was intended to support the struggling individual or the class's consolidation of routine skills. With respect to the former, Julia's comment, despite her not setting homework for the whole class, was not atypical, saying that "some children who are struggling need the extra support and then it's important to get parents to understand it". In a similar vein, and in addition to her earlier comment about homework typically being given for children who are sick, Lena, speaking in ways resonant with others, added that

When you have a pupil who has difficulty with something, then you have to contact the parents and give them things ... that they can practice at home. These different things, for example, ... they can be number sense or number friends (number complements) or something ... but we need to give them some tips on how they can work.

Interestingly, teachers' perceptions on homework for the struggling child transcended any belief about the value or otherwise of homework, with few teachers not mentioning the exceptional circumstances of such children. Finally, Irene, commented that she works in such a way that if a child gets no homework then all is well at school. She said

They (parents) know that ... if there's something that I think they should work with when I have said very clearly that they will hear from me if there is someone who cannot keep up, someone who needs work, has been ill or absent, Then I send homework in those cases. If you hear nothing from me then it is good. And I think they feel quite comfortable with it too. They know.

With respect to the consolidation of routine skills, all teachers who gave homework and two who did not, spoke on the matter, as with Isabelle, for whom homework "will be more training at home". In a related vein, Wilma spoke of the need to practice skills that cannot be completed in school, saying that

Well, we are doing skills training. But (...) time is not enough. And it is the same as regards reading. So, we want them to get more training than we can give them at school ... So ... at home they practice the skills that become automated in mathematics.

English teachers and the purpose of homework

Superficially, English teachers' comments fell into three broad themes, two of which were the same as with their Swedish colleagues and one was unique. From the perspective of homework and the support of the struggling child, nearly half the cohort said something similar to that of Amanda. She said that

So, last year we had quite a few children who really, really struggled with maths ... We had to get a lot of the parents in and say 'You need to do extra with them at home' and we could really tell the ones that had. We gave them specific things to work on, a lot of it was problem solving but also accurate counting. And the parents that did it, it did make a huge difference.

From such comments can be inferred a belief that parents not only have a role in supporting struggling children's learning but, in Amanda's instruction to parents that

“you need to do extra things ...” a belief that parents were obligated to do so. This was reflected in, for example, Carol’s comment that “if the parents reinforce what we’re trying to do at school and you let them know what you’re trying to do at school, it helps immensely”.

With respect to the consolidation of routine skills, the majority of English teachers had something to say, as represented by Michael’s comment about the importance of parents

just supporting the child, knowing what’s been taught at school and trying to consolidate that learning at home. Much in the way that homework is designed to consolidate previous learning.

Interestingly, half the cohort spoke of a particular form of homework related to “instant recall facts”. In this respect, Mary spoke for several when she said

Homework’s done on a half-termly basis. So, children have ... what are called KIRFs ... Key Instant Recall Facts. Things that children should be able to, to know off by heart. So, it is that rote learning that they need to do so that they’re not having to think about ‘Oh 6 and 4. What’s 6 and 4?’ [snaps her fingers] ‘6 and 4 is 10’ ... So, there are ... six KIRFs per year (and) they go in the homework book ... But children ... should be doing maths every week and they should be also learning these KIRFs.

Interestingly, two teachers, Rachel and Jo, spoke of SMIRFs, their textbook’s variant of KIRF. An acronym for Space Mission Instant Recall Facts, its function, as mentioned by Rachel, is to support “the mental recall of things”, which, as indicated by Jo, parents are “very much encouraged to practice at home”.

The category unique to the English teachers, and implicit in much of what has been said above, concerned the role of homework in support of children (and by implication teachers) being able to meet their targets. In this respect, the link between targets and homework was made explicitly by Louise, who said that “since I’ve been here ... most parents (have been) supportive and completed the work in the homework books and helped their children with the targets”. Later in the interview, she expanded on the issue, saying ...

at the end of the day, you’re accountable for progress in your class. And you have to be able to go and justify who has met what they need to meet and who hasn’t. So, you can feel pressurized but we just work closely with the parents so we have, erm, parent consultations and we have a mid-year report. And in the mid-year report we set targets for, for individual children. So that parents know which things to support the children on.

In a similar vein, Amanda commented that it is important that parents

understand what you’re teaching and actually at the beginning of the year we give them a sheet with all the targets on it. And say ‘This is what we’re focusing on now; this is what we’re focusing next’. And say, you know, ‘Your child needs to work on this, this and this’.

Such comments, which emerged in a third of the English interviews, seem to suggest that parents are implicated in a series of activities at home through which they facilitate the meeting of their children’s targets and thus enable teachers to demonstrate to a higher authority that their responsibilities have been fulfilled.

Theme 3: The role of parents in the completion of homework

The third theme concerned the role of parents in homework completion. Here, the two sets of teachers presented very different expectations.

Swedish teachers and the homework-related role of parents

In broad terms, Swedish teachers were clear, albeit for different reasons, that parents had a limited role with respect to supporting their children's homework completion. Indeed, while notions of equity warranted half the cohort's antithesis to homework, it also informed how their homework-setting colleagues viewed it. In this respect, Anders's comment was not atypical. He said that

I give the homework to be consolidation of lessons. So, they're never really learning anything that's new at home ... but, (this) applies to all pupils, the principle is that the pupil who cannot get support at home will not lag behind because of it.

In such comments, particularly in his use of the word principle, can be seen an expectation that children should be able to complete homework independent of parental support. Indeed, as Isabelle commented,

I know that maybe some pupils do not get any support at home ... I think it is quite clear which pupils have received a little help from home and which have not.

Other teachers were uncomfortable with parents who buy additional resources to supplement their children's school work. In this respect, Anna commented forcefully that it "should not be that they buy maths books and sit at home", while Susanne indicated that while she can understand that "there are some that really sit with their children and do numbers and stuff", she finds it hard to accept those parents who "take the extreme the other way ... after all, it is me who teaches maths ... they are not educators themselves". In such comments can be seen a concern not only that parents who buy additional materials compromise principles of equity but that they may not be adequately qualified to manage their use appropriately.

Two other teachers commented on the ways in which parents' desires to accelerate their children's learning undermined their use of homework. For example, Claudia, whose comments reflected those of her colleague, complained about critical parents who thought that the homework she set was too easy. She added that

They (parents and children) do not understand that we are building up Some of the children say 'my mom thinks the homework is too easy' ... 'Yes, my mom says she wants me to be more challenged' ... And they do not know, they do not really understand what we are trying to do.

English teachers and the homework-related role of parents

With respect to the role of parents in the completion of their children's homework English teachers seemed to have much more to say than their Swedish colleagues, with their comments falling into four categories.

First, most teachers spoke about how their school ensured parents' homework-related engagement. In this respect, Peter's comments were not atypical. Having commented on his school's having a policy stating not only that parents are expected to engage with

homework but also that “they seem quite happy to do it”, he added that “we send maths homework every week and the parents will write down what they’ve been ... what maths activities they’ve been doing with their children at home”. In a similar but less formal manner, Louise spoke of her school’s homework policy, which “maps out the different year groups and different methods we use to help the children with the different aspects. So, the parents can refer to that to see how to help and what to do”.

Second, several teachers spoke of providing parents with materials to support their work with their children. For example, Jo spoke of how her school’s “Home School Association provides a maths pack for each child ... it’s ... got teddies and things in ... and a number line and things for them to use at home to practice maths”. In a similar vein, Rachel spoke of how her school gives children

Maths packs (in which there are) objects to count, to compare bears or little plastic counters ... all of different colors so you can do lots of sorting. And we give them ... digit cards and lots of examples and things to do. That’s then built upon as we move through the school. So, in year 1, we give them, we give them a 100 square and give them (parents) different ideas and activities they can do at home.

Others spoke of sending newsletters that explain to parents what children are currently working on and ask them to practice those things at home as well. In a related vein, Carol spoke of sending home “little reminders” saying to parents, “It would be really helpful if you could give your child some pocket money so they could go to the shop and, you know, work out the change”, because they just do not do that anymore.

Third, teachers spoke explicitly about how different school-based activities allowed them to model the ways that parents could support their children’s work at home. For example, Michael indicated that

In a maths workshop we talk about the number bonds they’ve been learning and how we can do that and how that can be taken home. And then we bring in the children whose parents are there, who then come and work with their parents and we circulate round and discuss ways of them doing it at home and how this can help them in school and stuff.

For Megan, this process of modelling took place annually, when her school has a

Parents presentation, for year-one, and they all come in and we’ll talk about different areas of curriculum and their importance. And we talk to them then about the numeracy and we ... say ... what we’re gonna cover, where they (the children) should be at different points and how they (parents) can do things at home.

For others, like Jessica, it happens on an individual basis during parent consultation evenings, where they “have a chat about them (homework)”, as it does with Lola, who said that when parents “come to the parents’ evenings”, we will “talk to them (parents) about how to help them (children) at home”.

Fourth, three teachers spoke about parents who preferred their children not to have homework, as seen in Jessica’s comment that

Some parents either just can’t do it for some reason or don’t want to do it. You know ‘Learning is for at school’ and then they don’t want to do it at home. Their children have too many other things to do at home ... They say, you know ‘they’ve done their work at school and home time is for the things they want to do’.

However, Amanda’s view, while similarly framed, was less conciliatory. She said that

I think some of them don't (help with homework) because ... they think that their child shouldn't be doing homework anyway. So, it's like an issue about homework The ones that are not doing it is because they've got issues with homework in general, yeah, rather than doing maths, yeah, because they don't do any homework.

For Amanda, particularly in her repeated use of the word "issues" and very strong emphasis on the word "any" that some parents may have principled objections to homework are of no significance. Her comments represent a complaint indicative of a belief that such parents are renegeing on their responsibilities and, therefore, failing their children.

In summary, English teachers' views on the role of the parent in the completion of homework, albeit represented in a variety of ways, point to the same conclusion; parents are expected to support their children's homework-related activities. To this end, teachers encourage this support in a variety of systematic ways and, broadly speaking, parents' principled objections to such activities are construed negatively.

Discussion

In this paper, drawing on serendipitously emergent data from semi-structured interviews, we have presented analyses of English and Swedish teachers' perspectives on the role of homework, mandated in neither country, in year-one children's learning of number. These independently undertaken analyses yielded three broad but cross-culturally equivalent themes concerning the existence of homework, the purpose of homework and the role of parents in homework's completion. The manner in which they spoke led us to construe teachers' utterances as manifestations of different forms of culturally situated common sense. That is, the similarity of response within each of the two cohorts indicated a cultural construction in which people's thoughts and actions are guided, possibly unknowingly, by tradition (Clarà, 2015; Geertz, 1975). This sense of unknowing tradition was particularly evident in the matter-of-fact ways in which the English teachers spoke, highlighting the extent to which common sense does not question the basis on which arguments are constructed (Keitel & Kilpatrick, 2005). Indeed, while it is not inconceivable that some Swedish teachers perceive homework as a sin against childhood (Gill & Schlossman, 1996), such notions were completely absent in the English teachers' utterances.

With respect to the existence of homework, the analyses indicated that homework exists uniformly and unproblematically within the practices described by the English teachers, while it polarised their Swedish colleagues between those who do not set homework, usually for reasons of principle, and those who do. From the English perspective, not only did all teachers speak of setting homework but none expressed any doubt as to its validity and relevance, seemingly in accordance with Bembenutty's (2011, p. 185) assertion that it is "an important and an effective educational supplement". Thus, for all English teachers, homework emerged as an integral part of school life, seemingly beyond question, in much the same way as the teachers in Thomson et al.'s (2010) case study of an English secondary school. In this respect, their homework-related utterances, despite neither the curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) nor school inspectors' (Ofsted, 2019) expressed expectations of homework, align with an earlier education policy, based on an earlier government-commissioned review (Barber et al., 1997) and its embedded

notions of common sense (Goldstein, 2008; Rudman, 2014; Tymms, 1999), that homework is a necessary element of learning (Department for Education and Employment, 1998).

The views of the Swedish teachers were different and reflected an ambivalence identified by Pettersson and Leo (2005). On the one hand, half the cohort spoke of mathematics homework as something they would not set. For a few, this was due to their prioritising reading but for most, homework was rejected because it compromises deep-seated principles of equity. Broadly speaking, colleagues' arguments with respect to the latter followed two strands. Firstly, it is teachers not parents who are responsible for children's learning and, secondly, school cannot compensate for variation in what the home may be able to provide (Dahlstedt, 2009; Gu & Kristoffersson, 2015), particularly as differences in parental attitude and competence would impact on children differently. Interestingly, while much research acknowledges variation in home support (Cosden et al., 2004), rarely is the compromise to equity presented with such conviction. Therefore, it was of little surprise to find several teachers speaking of school policies outlawing homework, with at least one teacher asserting the existence of research justifying the decision. That being said, the extent to which Swedish teachers invoked equity as their rationale for the rejection of homework could be construed as a particular form of common sense, clearly very different from that which dominates the homework warrants found in the literature (Epstein et al., 1995; Gill & Schlossman, 2000; Gray & Allison, 1971). On the other hand, half the cohort spoke of giving mathematics homework although there were tacit acknowledgements, as with Erika's "you may have different views", that setting homework may not be viewed positively in Sweden.

With respect to the purpose of homework, the utterances of both sets of teachers fell into two nominally similar categories focused on, on the one hand, individual children in need of additional support and, on the other hand, the consolidation of routine skills. From the perspective of the former, both English and Swedish teachers spoke in ways that indicated a strong belief in homework as a means of supporting those children in danger of falling behind their peers, despite evidence that such students may experience homework-related anxiety (Epstein et al., 1995), are more likely to be distracted from completing their assignments (Gajria & Salend, 1995) and create more homework-related stress for their parents (Margolis, 2005) than their mainstream peers, problems experienced by many Swedish students with learning difficulties (Allodi, 2002). Moreover, students who are unable to complete their homework are prone to absenteeism due to concerns relating to their teachers' reactions (Sahin et al., 2016). In short, despite evidence suggesting that homework should be used judiciously with students with behavioural or learning difficulties, teachers from both countries seemed confident that homework had beneficial effects for them.

From the perspective of the latter, the whole English cohort and the Swedish half-cohort for whom homework was philosophically unproblematic, construed the consolidation of routine skills as an important part of the learning process (Brock et al., 2007; Earle, 1992). That being said, the two groups differed in both the manifestation of this belief and, in the case of the Swedish teachers, their philosophical perspectives. For example, few English teachers were not implicated in the use of school-initiated mechanisms focused on "instant recall facts". Moreover, the uniformity of English teachers' responses indicated not only a collective view of the purpose of homework but a lack not only of any reflection on the warrant for their routines (North & Pillay, 2002) but also any awareness of

the limited impact on achievement of drill and practice homework (Trautwein et al., 2009). This uncritical collective view seems to us to suggest a received common sense. By way of contrast, not one Swedish teacher referred to the systematic use of such devices for facilitating the rote learning of routine facts. Moreover, unlike their English colleagues, Swedish teachers typically adopted an equity-based argument that homework should neither rely on parental support nor introduce new material as teaching is unequivocally the responsibility of the school (Forsberg, 2007), reflecting again, a common sense interpretation of education.

In addition, the English interviews yielded a third category that distinguished them from their Swedish colleagues concerning children's learning targets. Such matters, which have increasingly defined English teachers' professional accountability (Day et al., 2007; Perryman et al., 2011), can be construed as reflecting a received common sense, not least because not one teacher referred to such matters as problematic. Indeed, despite a government discourse of decentralisation, the generation and management of English school data have not only resulted in teachers constantly setting and being set targets (Lawn, 2013; Ozga, 2009) but reduced what children are expected to learn to that which is demonstrably visible (Gorard et al., 2002). By way of contrast, not one Swedish teacher referred to either target setting or the systematic use of devices for ensuring the rote learning of routine facts.

Of the three broad themes identified above, teachers' perspectives on the role of parents yielded more culturally situated differences than the other two. For example, while English teachers argued strongly that parents play a key role in supporting their children's homework completion, their Swedish colleagues argued strongly for the opposite. From the English perspective, teachers also argued that parents who do not support their children's homework completion, irrespective of their reasons, are reneging on their responsibilities and are likely to contribute to failures on the part of the child. Such views are probably not surprising in light of the fact that earlier governments, despite failing to legislate on the matter, have not only advocated homework as a means of raising achievement (Farrow et al., 1999; Medwell & Wray, 2019) but implicated parents in its completion (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007; Edwards & Allred, 2000). Thus, schools are obliged to provide "mechanisms for helping parents to support their children's learning" (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011, p. 16), as evidenced in teachers' comments about parents being informed of their school's homework policy and the use of the "instant recall facts" mechanisms. Indeed, so deeply embedded is the expectation that parents should engage with such activities that the former Chief Inspector of Schools has argued for the introduction of penalties for those parents who do not (Wilshaw, 2014).

By way of contrast, homework has a long history in Swedish education (Strandberg, 2013). However, while teachers are under no legal obligation to set it, parents are expected to provide appropriate support when it is set and "are offered (tax) deductions if they hire homework consultants" (Strandberg, 2013, p. 340). Thus, homework seems to occupy an ambivalent position within the Swedish educational discourse that is reflected in teachers' interview utterances. Of those teachers who set homework, most spoke of the need for it to comprise tasks that could be completed independently of any parental support, not least because such forms of parental involvement are construed as having the potential to compromise principles of equity, with educated and committed parents providing opportunities that

uneducated or uncommitted parents could not. Such views align well with current Swedish perspectives on parental involvement, whereby parents, who have the “right to participate in and take the responsibility for their children’s upbringing, lives, and activities” (Skolkommittén, 1997, p. 113), are expected to be supportive of the development of their children’s autonomy (Jarl, 2005). In practice, this means that parents are expected to provide a home environment conducive to learning but not to interfere in how teachers construct children’s opportunities to learn. In this respect, Swedish parents understand and accept the need not to intervene, even though their role as responsible parents may make acceptance of such abstinence difficult (Forsberg, 2007).

In sum, the perspectives of both sets of teachers seem located in mixed messages concerning the desirability of homework. On the one hand, English teachers, today working in a system with no homework-related expectations, had only recently been released from earlier requirements that homework should be set. This particular historical uncertainty, coupled with continuing high stakes tests, a hard inspection regime and differentiation by stratification, may have contributed to the construction of a common sense narrative in which homework has an unambiguous role in optimising all children’s learning. On the other hand, Swedish teachers, also working in a system with no homework-related expectations, are confronted with a government-sponsored report on homework-related support. This current uncertainty reflects a systemic ambivalence whereby the value of homework has been cyclically promoted and denigrated since the 1960s (Forsberg, 2007). This particular historical uncertainty, coupled with low stakes tests, a soft inspection regime and well-articulated expectations of educational equity, may have contributed to the construction of the two common sense narratives identified above. In other words, this study has shown how teachers’ views are located in cultural constructions of common sense based on “socially accepted or current assumptions, habits, beliefs, laws, and taboos, local knowledge, prejudices, and misconceptions” (Keitel & Kilpatrick, 2005, p. 107) that guide their thoughts and actions by means of what has gone before and is believed to be true (Geertz, 1975).

Notes

1. See <https://matr.org/blog/homework-debate-disadvantages-benefits/> (Accessed 31, 01, 2020) for a summary of the English “common sense” views on the matter.
2. For a Swedish common sense argument for homework, see <https://www.vt.se/asikter/insandare/laxor-ger-sjalvstandiga-och-starka-elever-om5452584.aspx> (Accessed 31, 01, 2020). Here, a former teacher argues that homework makes for independent and stronger students.
3. For a Swedish common sense argument against homework, see <https://www.vn.se/article/tjanstefel-att-ge-laxor/> (Accessed 31, 01, 2020). Here, a former teacher argues that homework undermines childhood.
4. The Swedish word for pupil, *elev*, was used in all the Swedish interviews. Not one teacher used the word *student*, which is reserved for tertiary education. Indeed, even young adults attending post-compulsory school are referred to as pupils.

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