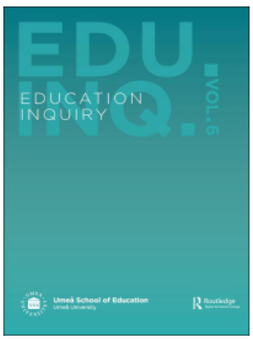

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/zedu20

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To cite this article: Judy Sayers, Jöran Petersson, Eva Rosenqvist & Paul Andrews (2023) Swedish parents' perspectives on homework: manifestations of principled pragmatism, Education Inquiry, 14:1, 66-84, DOI: 10.1080/20004508.2021.1950275

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1950275

Published online: 06 Jul 2021.

EDUCATION INQUIRY
2023, VOL. 14, NO. 1, 66–84
https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1950275

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Swedish parents' perspectives on homework: manifestations of principled pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

Motivated by earlier research highlighting Swedish teachers' beliefs that the setting of homework compromises deep-seated principles of educational equity, this paper presents an exploratory study of Swedish parents' perspectives on homework in their year-one children's learning. Twenty-five parents, drawn from three demographically different schools in the Stockholm region, participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews, broadly focused on how parents support their children's learning and including questions about homework in general and mathematics homework in particular, were transcribed and data subjected to a constant comparison analytical process. This yielded four broad themes, highlighting considerable variation in how parents perceive the relationship between homework and educational equity. First, all parents spoke appreciatively of their children receiving reading homework and, in so doing, indicated a collective construal that reading homework is neither homework nor a threat to equity. Second, four parents, despite their enthusiasm for reading homework, opposed the setting of any homework due to its potential compromise of family life. Third, seven parents indicated that they would appreciate mathematics homework where it were not a threat to equity. Finally, fourteen parents, despite acknowledging homework's potential compromise to equity, were unequivocally in favour of mathematics homework being set to their children.

ARTICLE HISTORY

KEYWORDS

Homework; mathematics; parental perspectives; Sweden; year-one children

Introduction

A recent study found Swedish teachers of year-one children conflicted by homework, arguing, essentially, that unless children can complete homework independently of parental intervention, variation in home background will comprise principles of educational equity (Sayers, Petersson, Marschall, & Andrews, 2020). In this paper, we extend this work by presenting an interview study of Swedish parents' perspectives on the role of homework in year-one children's learning and, in so doing, highlight the extent to which Swedish parents also find themselves conflicted by personal desires to facilitate their children's learning and a collective commitment to equity.

Despite much research on the matter, the nature and efficacy of homework remains both contested and uncertain. From the perspective of its function, Epstein and Van

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Voorhis (2001, p. 181), in an almost whimsical summary of the literature, synthesised ten broad purposes related to "practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent–child relations, parent–teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment". With respect to its classroom manifestation, primary teachers typically use homework to review material, secondary teachers use it to prepare students for subsequent lessons (Muhlenbruck, Cooper, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999), while students at the border benefit from homework presented as extensions to current work (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, Xu, Cai, He, & Fan, 2017; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011), while others seem to say the opposite (Kitsantas, Cheema, & Ware, 2011). Also, emphases on drill and practice are counterproductive (Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, & Lüdtke, 2009), while out-of-school homework has an impact on achievement that in-school homework does not (Keith, Diamond-Hallam, & Fine, 2004).

Parents, homework and children's learning

While some scholars have suggested that little research has been conducted into the relationship between parents and their children's homework (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017), our view is that there has been sufficient to confirm its ambivalence, particularly from the perspective of parents wishing to know how they might best complement schools' expectations. Indeed, so much material has been published that meta-analyses are both increasingly commonplace and diverse in their conclusions. For example, one meta-analysis found that parental monitoring of homework was negatively related to achievement at all age levels (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008), while others found that it has a small but statistically insignificant negative effect on achievement for primary-aged children (Jeynes, 2005) but a statistically significant positive impact on secondary-aged children's achievement (Jeynes, 2007).

Other meta-analyses, focusing on the impact of the broad construct of parental homework involvement, found small positive associations with the achievement of both elementary and high school students (Barger, Kim, Kuncel, & Pomerantz, 2019; Patall et al., 2008). However, the same two studies differed in respect of the impact of parental homework on middle school children's achievement, with the former yielding positive and the latter negative associations. The greatest diversity of findings, however, seem to coalesce around meta-analyses examining the impact of parental homework help on children's achievement. On the one hand, there are studies showing negative associations between homework assistance and children's achievement, both generally (Barger et al., 2019) and at the particular level of middle school students (Hill & Tyson, 2009). On the other hand, there are studies showing, irrespective of student age, positive associations between homework assistance and children's achievement (Ariës & Cabus, 2015; Patall et al., 2008). By way of contrast, there are also meta-analyses concluding that homework assistance is unrelated to academic achievement (Wilder, 2014). In other words, the various meta-analyses have not proved especially helpful with respect to how parents might meaningfully support their children, whether concerning homework monitoring, homework assistance of general homework involvement.

Shifting attention from meta-analyses, many studies have, de facto, drawn on the distinction between mastery goals and performance goals, constructs that can be traced back to the work of Elliott and Dweck (1988), which have been associated with autonomy-related support and controlling behaviour respectively (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). In this respect, autonomy support, which concerns "the ability of parents to guide children's participation in learning activities by tailoring adequate levels of support to the child without over-control or interference" (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017, p. 104), has been found to lead to greater achievement than support focused on competence alone (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Dettmers, Yotyodying, & Jonkmann, 2019; Gonzalez-dehass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Madjar, Shklar, & Moshe, 2016; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). In the context of Sweden, however, parents' autonomy support appears to benefit only those students with a disposition for systemising, or "the drive to analyse systems in the physical environment, and to make predictions about the behaviour of those systems (Jungert & Koestner, 2015, p. 363). In sum, despite occasional ambivalence, parental homework support focused on autonomy appears more productive than support focused on performance.

In related vein, parental behaviour supportive of their children's psychological needs not only benefits their children's mental health (Pomerantz et al., 2007) but impacts positively on both their homework-related motivation (Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011) and effort (Feng, Xie, Gong, Gao, & Cao, 2019). Moreover, when parents perceive their children as succeeding with homework, their support adopts an autonomous focus that reinforces that success (Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, & Nagengast, 2014). However, homework-related involvement that is either controlling or negative compromises both children's achievement (Dumont et al., 2012; Pressman, Owens, Evans, & Nemon, 2014) and emotional well-being (Offer, 2013) in reciprocal ways (Dumont et al., 2014). In other words, it is the quality of parental homework support that influences achievement rather than quantity or, importantly, any temptation to interfere, which children are likely to interpret negatively (Moroni, Dumont, Trautwein, Niggli, & Baeriswyl, 2015; Pezdek, Berry, & Renno, 2002). Indeed, one of the meta-analyses discussed above found that the setting of rules about homework's completion had a stronger positive relationship with achievement than all other actions (Patall et al., 2008).

Separate from their actions, which may be as much a consequence of habit as any articulated justification (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017), the role of parents' beliefs and attitudes has been extensively researched. From the perspective of justifying their homework-related support, US parents believe homework to be a necessary element of the educational process (Liang, Peters, Akaba, Lomidze, & Graves, 2020). They get involved because they believe they should be involved, that their involvement makes a difference, and that both teachers and children expect it (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). However, despite their general enthusiasm and evidence that they may even derive personal gratification from homework-related support (Levin et al., 1997), parents are less positive about homework's role than are teachers (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017). In Sweden, where parents typically believe their children should do their homework independently, their desire to be seen as responsible parents makes it difficult for them not to intervene (Forsberg, 2007).

Importantly, students' homework-related attitudes are greatly influenced by their parents' homework-related beliefs and attitudes (Cooper et al., 1998), frequently

reinforcing gender stereotypes (Bhanot & Jovanovic, 2005). Parents who espouse mastery goals tend to provide autonomy-related support, while parental beliefs about performance are matched by controlling behaviours at both primary and secondary levels (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Indeed, several studies have shown that the more parents believe their children to be failing at school the more they intervene instructionally with, typically, negative results (Hoglund, Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2015; Pressman et al., 2015; Silinskas, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2012). Moreover, while many parents feel unprepared or unable to meet the expectations laid upon them (Collier-Meek & Sanetti, 2019; Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee, & Mellencamp, 1994; Sheridan, Ryoo, Garbacz, Kunz, & Chumney, 2013), a wider problem is that as parents' beliefs in their ability to support their children declines the more family stress is experienced (Pressman et al., 2015). Indeed, homework may cause considerable family stress (Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Solomon, Warin, & Lewis, 2002) and broaden class divides (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). In sum, parents' beliefs play an important role in defining how they choose to support their children, with autonomy-related beliefs being more productive than performance-related beliefs. Moreover, parental over-reactions to perceptions of failure are likely to compound such failure.

Finally, located in assumptions about mothers being principally responsible for parenting, several studies have examined various aspects of mothers' relationship with their children's homework. From the perspective of their homework-related beliefs, many mothers see homework as way of facilitating family time and keeping on top of what children do in school (Fox, 2016). Others, however, feel compelled to uphold an ideology that good mothering means supporting homework (Lehner-Mear, 2020). From a behavioural perspective, increasing maternal intervention reduces children's persistence (Viljaranta et al., 2018) and has no impact on children's academic development (Levin et al., 1997) and may even impede it (Silinskas, Kiuru, Aunola, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2015). In particular, the more mothers perceive their child to be struggling, the more frequent and the more controlling their interventions, with, reciprocally, poorer academic performance and lower self-concept, particularly for boys (Levin et al., 1997; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019; Silinskas et al., 2015). That said, confirming the above, primary-aged children's engagement and achievement is enhanced by autonomy-supportive maternal behaviours (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017; Silinskas et al., 2015), particularly when they have negative self-perceptions of competence (Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2006). Mothers and children's homework-related emotions are not only correlated but implicated in their children's achievement (Else-Quest et al., 2008). In sum, research undertaken on mothers and their children's homework generally confirms the trends identified for parents in general.

Framing the research question

Swedish education is premised on deep-seated principles of equity. Indeed, the rubric of the Swedish national curriculum emphasises the importance of educational equity, particularly with respect to preparing children for life in a participative democracy (Skolverket, 2018). There are no fee-paying schools and all children without exception follow the same broad curriculum throughout their nine years of compulsory school. There is no explicit segregation within schools, although there is implicit segregation between schools due to increased

parental choice and the flight of affluent parents from less affluent areas (Andersson, Malmberg, & Östh, 2012; Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2016). Highlighting expectations of reciprocal roles and responsibilities, whereby "parental involvement and good parenthood are closely connected" (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009, p. 1578), schools are expected to create collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents (Åkerström, Aytar, & Brunnberg, 2015; Forsberg, 2007). This means, typically, that parents are expected to participate in their children's regular teacher meetings (Niia, Almqvist, Brunnberg, & Granlund, 2015) and involve themselves in various school-based activities (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009).

From a systemic perspective, educational equity and the role of parents in the completion of homework are uneasy companions. On the one hand, since 2013, parents who purchase homework tuition are entitled to tax relief, an innovation that not only legitimates the role of homework in children's learning but positions those who can afford such materials as good parents (Svensson, Meaney, & Norén, 2014). On the other hand, the National Agency for Education, whose national curriculum offers no explicit encouragement for teachers to set homework, recently published an evaluation of 10 schools' homework-related support practices (Skolverket, 2014) "designed to help schools take away the responsibilities from parents and contribute to more equal possibilities for students to succeed and manage homework" (Gurdal & Sorbring, 2019, p. 106). In other words, the state's message to parents with respect to homework is ambivalent.

That being said, lower secondary teachers generally approve of and set homework but, to minimise the impact of variable home environments, do so in ways that enable school-based rather than home-based completion (Gu & Kristoffersson, 2015). In similar vein, teachers of year-one children, desirous of maintaining equity of opportunity, are generally reluctant to set homework but, if they do, will set it in ways that require little or no intervention from parents (Sayers et al., 2020). Finally, while parents of lower secondary-aged children accept not only the necessity of homework but also their role in ensuring its completion (Forsberg, 2007), little is known with respect to how parents of year-one children construe homework and their role in its completion. In the following, acknowledging Forsberg (2007) assertion that, while the child is responsible for doing any homework, it is the parents' responsibility for ensuring it is done, we address this issue by means of an interview study focused on the following question.

> What are the (mathematics) homework-related views of parents of Swedish year-one children?

Finally, by way of explanation, the research question posed above includes the word mathematics in parentheses. This is because the interview data on which analyses were based, framed by questions focusing on year-one children' learning of number, yielded results in which mathematics was not always visible.

Methods

Following the approach used to elicit Swedish teachers' views on the role of homework in year-one children's learning of number (Sayers et al., 2020), schools' principals were approached to elicit their support for the project and invited to act as conduits through which parents could be contacted. Initially, the principals of three schools were

approached in demographically different areas in and around Stockholm. Due to their locations, we have labelled the schools Centre, Suburb and Satellite. It is important to note that in the context of Stockholm, city centre schools generally cater for families of relatively high socio-economic status, suburban schools serve ethnically mixed communities of relatively low socio-economic status, while the satellite town reflects a mixture of all characteristics.

With the principals' support, 22 interviews, timed to coincide with parents' visits to schools for their children's development talks (utvecklingssamtal), were undertaken in private rooms in the different schools, while a further three were held at parent's workplaces. Twenty-five interviews were thought to be sufficient for establishing thematic saturation in such contexts (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Parents, informed of their rights, gave written consent to their participation. Interviews, lasting around 30 minutes, were recorded for later transcription. The interviews were structured by a series of broad questions focused on how parents construe their roles in relation to their children's learning of mathematics in general and basic number in particular. Thus, for example, one broad question invited parents to talk about the sorts of mathematics-related activities they encourage at home. However, motivated by the outcomes of earlier interviews with teachers, questions concerning parents' homework-related beliefs and actions were included.

A study motivated by the desire to elicit parents' perspectives on homework implies an approach that would privilege both the parent voice and facilitate emergent insights. A methodology commensurate with such ambitions is grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008; Conlon, Carney, Timonen, & Scharf, 2015; Hardman, 2013), being explicitly a bottom-up rather than a top-down process (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Classical grounded theory involves a cyclical process of data being collected and analysed, before more data are collected and analysed to elaborate on the themes emerging from earlier analyses (Glaser, 1978; Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009). Its analytical process, constant comparison, is "a process of coding data and then grouping those codes into concepts in an increasingly hierarchical fashion … in grounded theory everything begins with the data" (Wasserman et al., 2009, p. 358). Theories developed in this manner are typically generated "without any presuppositions on the part of the analyst as to what patterns would emerge" (Hardman, 2013, p. 638).

That being said, funding arrangements necessitated interviews being completed within a short period of time, making classical grounded theory an impossibility. However, despite this divergence from the methodological norm, constant comparison is particularly appropriate for analysing interview data (See, for example, Andrews & Hatch, 2002; Boeije, 2002; Conlon et al., 2015). Procedurally, the first phase of the analysis was undertaken independently by two members of the authorial team. Each person took a different random transcript, which was read and reread and codes indicative of the informant's stance on homework identified. A second transcript was then read and reread with the dual goal of refining the codes yielded by the first transcript and identifying new codes not previously noted. In the latter case, the first transcript was then reread to see if the new codes had, in fact, been present. The process was repeated until all transcripts had been read and coded. Following these independent analyses, the two sets of codes were discussed within the whole authorial team and broad categories identified and clustered into the themes discussed below. As the team

worked, it was conscious of the need to both support and challenge emergent codes (Charmaz, 2008; Harry et al., 2005). Finally, in order to minimise the loss of contextual meaning, transcripts were analysed in Swedish before quotes selected for inclusion in this paper were translated into English. This latter process typically entailed transforming Swedish idioms into forms recognisable to an English-speaker without losing the speaker's intended meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Results

As indicated above, when undertaking constant comparison analyses researchers should be alert to unexpected, unanticipated or unpredictable outcomes (Charmaz, 2008; Conlon et al., 2015; Glaser, 1978). This study was no exception. Despite interview questions being framed by mathematics, parents' responses were as likely to avoid mathematics as not. Indeed, the analytical process described above yielded four broad themes, of which only two addressed mathematics explicitly. These broad themes highlighted considerable inconsistencies in most parents' perspectives on the role of homework in their children's learning. The first theme, drawing on the comments of all informants, alluded to parents' satisfaction with their children's receiving reading homework. The second theme, seemingly at odds with the first, drew on the comments of a minority of parents who opposed the setting of homework. These parents we labelled as homework-negative. The third theme drew on the comments of those parents whom we have described as homework-ambivalent. While these parents were generally uncertain about the value of homework, typically because it had the potential to compromise principles of educational equity, they still wished for their children to receive mathematics homework. The final theme drew on the comments of fourteen parents who expressed a desire for mathematics homework. These parents, who all acknowledged a potential compromise to equity, we have described as homework-positive.

Before presenting the results, however, it is important to acknowledge that the results may have been influenced by at least three contextual factors. First, it is not unreasonable to assume that parents with children in the same school may have similar views about various aspects of homework. Second, parents who volunteer for interview are more likely to be positively involved in their children's schooling than parents who do not (Cooper et al., 1998). Third, despite demographic differences across the three schools, the parents of this study were generally well-educated.

Finally, to preserve anonymity and make for ease of reporting, all parents were given codes determined by their child's school and a unique reference number. Thus, the one parent from Satellite School was designated Sat 1. The fifteen parents from Suburb School were designated Sub 2 through Sub 16, while the nine parents from Centre School were designated Cen 17 through Cen 25.

Parents views on reading homework

Irrespective of which school their children attended, reading homework was not only given to all children but was well-received by all parents. For example, of the four parents who generally spoke negatively about homework, Sub 7, noted that her son "gets reading homework (and) should read 10 minutes a day", before adding that "we try for a quarter to twenty minutes every night, but not at the weekends". When asked if

she was content with the arrangement, she replied that, "I think it's pretty good with the homework. He should read aloud from a book and talk about what he has read". In similar vein, Cen 17 spoke of how her daughter has

> reading homework once a week. They bring with them a reading book and a writing book and then there are questions on the homework. They should read, they will primarily practice reading, and then they will answer questions and then submit it"

When asked how she felt about the practice, she added not only that "it's good for learning to write as well" but also that when she got "her homework … she got her interest (in reading) and before Christmas, when she learned to read, she began to read well". Similar comments were made by the seven parents whose views of homework we construed as ambivalent and the fourteen parents with positive views about homework. For example, of the ambivalent parents Sub 11, reflecting the experience of others, said that

> we get reading homework. We should read 10 minutes every day. That's what he gets … (My role) is to keep track of whether there is any [homework] and make sure that it gets done or that I try to make sure it gets done. You listen when he reads and help when needed. After, I am expected to make notes on a reading protocol; the number of pages and any comments.

In sum, the comments of all parents indicated a pragmatic approval of the value of reading homework.

Parents expressing negative views about homework

Despite their expressions of satisfaction, bordering on enthusiasm, for reading homework, four parents were, in principle, opposed to homework. It is possible, for example, that all four do not construe reading at home as homework, as seen in Sub 3's comment that the "typical homework is reading homework. Reading homework, but not regular homework". That said, all four expressed, albeit in different ways, principled objections to homework being set for their children. Sub 3's comments were typical of the four. He said that

> I don't think you need homework. It is very important that leisure time is and remains leisure time, even for adults. It is natural for any of us to take work home with us. We'll do that. We may not have a choice. But kids should have that choice. I fully agree that the children should not be given homework.

He continued by suggesting that "homework as an instrument for learning at home is unnecessary. The child should be entitled to his or her free time. Homework should be done in school if you should now call it homework". This latter point was repeated by Sub 7, who commented that "I think you should do your homework in school", before adding that "I think you should do your homework half an hour or an hour before you go home. When you are left in school, there are resources to get help from".

A different argument was presented by Cen 17, whose view was, essentially, it is teachers who should teach and that any expectation of homework may compromise that responsibility. She said that

> I think that children should learn their subjects in school from educators, who have pedagogical training and who can teach … see what the children are and teach them the

> right way … I don't think we parents are capable enough to teach them properly. We can teach them … but maybe not always the right way.

Finally, Sub 6's objection was focused on the relevance of homework in children's learning, saying that

> I'm sceptical of homework on the whole … but with homework, I think it's hard when you get home. It just becomes an annoyance. Then you go through the tasks, but only because it is a must, not because you want to understand. Then the question is how much of it goes in. It will probably only be surface learning".

In sum, while all seemed to concede the value of homework in support of reading, all four offered different arguments for their opposition to homework more generally.

Parents expressing ambivalent views about homework

Seven parents offered comments indicative of uncertain beliefs about the role of homework in their year-one children's learning. For some, these were expressed in short statements, as with Cen 23's "I really do not know about this" and Sub 10's "I am split over it". Others indicated an awareness that homework in Sweden is a contested practice, as with Sub 13's, "I don't really know what I think … it's a matter of dispute. I'm not really sure where I stand actually" and Sub 15's "I think it's a very complex question. Should you have homework at all? Different parents probably have different opinions about it. I think it is problematic". Finally, one parent, Sub 11, confidently asserted that "as far as I understand, there is not much evidence that homework is particularly good". That being said, all seven offered principled concerns over homework while, at the same time, justifying why their children should receive some.

With respect to their principled concerns, five parents focused on equality of opportunity. The gist of their arguments was well represented by Sub 15, who said that homework

> places very high demands on the family. Not all children have the same conditions and this creates inequality … If you have a family, maybe with two parents who live together, who have an education that they feel secure with and who are in the know, then I think their child will automatically receive support if the family is functional. But if you do not come from such a background, then it is much more difficult. Then you are more excluded. I think it is problematic to place a lot of responsibility for learning on the family. Because then an inequality arises quite quickly, which cannot be compensated.

Other concerns relate to homework's impact on children's right to relaxation. For example, Sub 13 observed that "they are children and need play and other things besides sitting still", while Sub 15 noted that it is "healthy for children to learn that it is very important to be able to relax". In addition, Sub 11 tied the right to relaxation to a child's cognitive development, saying that

> the brain needs different kinds of activities for us to develop and feel good. And it can also, be very worthwhile to have free time too. A time to let … to relax, for creativity. I think that's more how it works over time. Then you also know that in the morning the brain is at its most alert. So, it is probably more, most effective, that one should be learning while you have that energy. Then it is quite natural in the evening to do more relaxing and less mentally demanding things to get a total mix.

Importantly, by way of distinguishing these parents from their homework-negative peers, all seven indicated positive perspectives on the role of homework in relation to their children's learning of mathematics. For example, both Sub 10 and Sub 15 spoke of the value of repetition, with the latter suggesting that "repetition is very important. Therefore, it may be important to go home and repeat what you talked about during the day". Two parents, Sub 15 and Cen 23, spoke about setting mathematics homework themselves because their children had asked for it. The former commenting that "my son wanted homework and to learn the multiplication table", adding that "I don't count that as a homework", while the latter spoke of using "small booklets that … my partner (name removed) makes for (name removed) to sit and calculate in. She thought it was fun that her brother had homework so she wanted homework". Sub 10, despite her ambivalence, spoke about how

> homework could meet a need for me. That I could see that 'now you (my child) are at this level and now you are learning this'. So, it's probably for my own and not so much for the sake of the children.

Both Sub 11 and Cen 23 saw value in homework if a child was struggling with something at school, with the former saying that "if there is a need to strengthen from home, then I am not negative about it". Sub 13 spoke of doing "practical stuff at home. "how many steps are here?", "which is the middle one?", "how many steps above and below?" … and such', while Cen 25, having also articulated the value of such home-initiated activity, acknowledged a sense of guilt in her comment that "it still becomes unequal because we are engaged and other parents may be less involved". Finally, Sub 10, closely reflecting the views of Sub 9, commented that homework "should be something that fulfils a function. It shouldn't be a homework just to be a homework".

Overall, these seven parents seemed conflicted by homework. All expressed uncertainty, and warranted their uncertainties in principled ways, typically pertaining to equity or the stress homework places on learners. However, all, pleased that their children received reading homework, offered a range of pragmatic justifications to support their desires for mathematics homework.

Parents expressing positive views about homework

Sixteen of the twenty-seven informants (of twenty-five children) offered comments indicative of positive views about homework, which fell into three very different sub-themes with considerable participant overlap. The first sub-theme drew on the comments of thirteen parents, who spoke of how homework prepares children for later experiences, whether at secondary school or as adults. In this respect, Sub 14's comments were typical. She said, "I think there is value in having children learn early to take responsibility for their own learning (otherwise) there comes a real jump when suddenly homework arrives, or you change school". This sense of the later arrival of homework, typically when children transfer to secondary school, permeated several comments, as seen in Sub 2's view that

> If I am to be honest, I think a little homework is good, that you should start with a little. Because in high school it is not like that. Therefore, I think you need to learn a little how to

> do homework … maybe not every day, but some days every week so that you have some structure.

Others spoke more generally of homework as a preparation for life, as in Cen 20's comment that "I guess it's clear that sometimes they have to take things home. I guess it's nothing strange. So do I", while Sub 16 added, "you can have homework sometime in the week, and one homework may not take as much time … I see it as learning for life". In sum, for these parents, homework serves long-term pragmatic purposes unrelated to a child's immediate learning and any concerns about equity.

A second sub-theme drew on the comments of six parents and concerned the insight parents gain from observing their children's homework. Indeed, as Sub 5 observed, "I think it is great with homework. It gives parents insight", while Sub 8, whose comments included a caution, said that "it is good to give something that is not compulsory, which I take as inhibitory to learning … otherwise you have no insight into how they are doing". Such perspectives were developed by Sub 4, who commented that.

> I would love to have homework. Partly because you get more insight into schoolwork, that's not very easy to get. You have your full-time job. You pick up (the children) from leisure and it just rolls on. If they have homework, they can much more easily see what they have done. One becomes more involved than simply asking "What have you done in school?". They just say "maths, Swedish and English". Then they say nothing more.

Taken together, it seems clear that for a small number of parents, homework provides a way of monitoring what children do in school. It is a pragmatic perspective and one unrelated to any concerns about equity or subject area.

A third sub-theme, involving twelve of the sixteen parents, concerned the mathematics homework parents would like to see or, in fact, the homework they set themselves in lieu of their child's school's failure to do so. With respect to the former, Cen 21's comments, including both general and particular ambitions, reflected the comments of others. She said, with respect to her son,

> It's not good. It should be at least once a week. At home I try to … he wants to keep on with his maths, he wants to memorise all the times (multiplications) … But there should be homework. Because I want to know his performance level … I had a meeting with the teacher who said that 'he has a problem with this; 2, 4, 6 … He counts like this 2 … 4 … 6 [probably counting numbers between quietly]. I would like to have some homework on this because it is new to him … I just want a little bit of homework at home, like once a week. He will memorize everything and not forget anything.

In related vein, Sub 10, acknowledging that he did "not want to interfere or challenge anything", commented that

> if you have ten minutes a day of reading homework, then you might … spend five minutes on maths. So, I think you should be able to have some kind of mathematics homework a couple of times a week. Or for that matter, you have one that runs throughout the week … I think it is good with each week, because otherwise it is so easy that both children and parents forget. Some weekly homework … . After all, we feel that it works well in school.

Finally, despite their personal desires, five parents explicitly mentioned the likely impact of different home circumstances on parents' abilities to support their children's homework completion. Typical of the comments of others were those of Sub 12, who said

> It's not one size fits all (dra alla över en kam), because everyone has such different conditions. If some (parents) work shifts, then they can't help at home with homework. Others have poorer study backgrounds and such like … After all, it is difficult when there is such a large spread in what one could expect from parents … Then it would be worthwhile with resources from the school … for the school to do even more, so that not too much ends up with the parents. One has heard of … a mathematics club in the afternoon at school and you can get help doing the homework there from some good mathematics teacher.

Others added that while homework may be desirable, it should be, as noted by Cen 22, "like the reading homework and not require any knowledge from the parents … Homework introducing new material can create unequal situations in how much help parents can give", before adding that, "it is well that one (the parent) should be involved. And a little responsibility can be placed on parents perhaps for just those sorts of routine practice of number skills".

In sum, the majority of interviewed parents expressed positive views about the posing of mathematics homework. Interestingly, while many members of this group mentioned potential threats to equity, few did not speak of routine tasks requiring little or no interventions on their part. In other words, with few exceptions, parents' pragmatic desires were tempered by acknowledgements, implicit and explicit, of equity.

Discussion

In an earlier paper, Sayers et al. (2020) found Swedish year one teachers' perspectives on homework informed by a clearly articulated awareness that variation in home background compromises principles of equity. In this paper, motivated by that earlier study and drawing on similarly structured interviews, we have examined the homework-related views of parents of year-one children. Data, which were subjected to the constant comparison analytical processes of the grounded theorists, yielded four broad categories of response. Importantly, acknowledging that constant comparison requires analysts to be mindful of unanticipated or unpredictable outcomes (Charmaz, 2008), it was a surprise, despite interview questions being framed by mathematics, invoked it explicitly.

The first theme, drawing on parents' comments about reading homework, highlighted not only the fact that every child implicated in the study received reading homework but that every parent supported and encouraged it. In other words, parents see helping their children learn to read as a natural responsibility (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2012; Forsberg, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995) and may even derive pleasure from so doing (Levin et al., 1997). Such responses indicate that parents do not associate such support with educational equity, despite evidence that Swedish parents' backgrounds influence greatly children's reading competence (Axelsson, Lundqvist, & Sandberg, 2020; Myrberg & Rosén, 2009).

The second, homework-negative, theme emerged from the utterances of four parents who spoke negatively about homework. For these parents, each of whom offered clear

justifications for his or her perspective, whether perceived compromises to children's free time or their own inability to provide adequate support (Collier-Meek & Sanetti, 2019; Kay et al., 1994; Sheridan et al., 2013), there was an underlying sense that homework creates unnecessary stress for both children and parents (Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Pressman et al., 2015; Solomon et al., 2002). However, none of their arguments were premised on concerns for equity, although Sub 7's comment that when children do their homework in school, "there are resources to get help from", could be construed as an oblique reference.

The third, homework-ambivalent, theme coalesced around seven parents who expressed uncertainty about the setting of homework and its potential compromise to equity, as seen in Sub 15's observation that "inequality arises quite quickly, which cannot be compensated". However, despite any uncertainties, all expressed a desire for their children to receive mathematics homework. That being said, their utterances, implicitly addressing concerns about equity, typically focused on the repetition of routine skills, which, we speculate, would rarely require parental intervention and resonates with earlier studies of how teachers prefer homework to be managed (Gu & Kristoffersson, 2015; Sayers et al., 2020). In other words, there is an argument that even when making their pleas for teachers to set homework, these parents, albeit implicitly, did so in ways that minimised any compromise to equity.

The fourth, homework-positive, theme drew on the comments of sixteen parents who spoke positively about the importance of homework. Their homework-positive perspectives were categorised in three ways. One group indicated, pragmatically, that homework affords them insights into what their children are doing in school. In this guise, homework could be construed as functionally equivalent to Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) notion of parent–teacher communication. Importantly, such views were expressed independently of any concerns for equity: homework keeps parents informed without the need to interfere. A second group spoke of how homework prepared children for later learning and real-world functionality (Johnson & Pontius, 1989; Muhlenbruck et al., 1999). None of these utterances alluded to equity, although Sub 2's use of the phrase, "if I am to be honest" alongside his desire for his son to receive homework can be interpreted as a guilty allusion to his tacit compromising equity. A third group spoke of their desire for their children to receive homework focused on the consolidation of routine mathematical skills. However, half this group of parents, whose comments concerning variable home circumstances indicated equity-related awareness, suggested that any homework should avoid the need for parental intervention.

Closing thoughts

Acknowledging that our informants were generally well-educated, the narratives presented above shine interesting and important lights on how homework is construed by Swedish parents and an apparent conflict between pragmatism and principle. First, whether or not they expressed concerns for equity in other homework-related contexts, parents seemed not to construe reading homework as homework and, as a consequence, did not see it as a compromise to educational equity. Indeed, it could be argued that their enthusiasm for reading homework reflected, albeit tacitly, a pragmatic compromise of principle. Second, equity emerges explicitly only when homework was discussed in contexts other than

reading. For example, the homework-negative group raised two issues, one principled, that children have a right to free time, and one pragmatic, that they lack confidence in their abilities to support their children. The latter is interesting in its implication that these parents would have compromised equity had they believed in their abilities to support their children mathematically. The pragmatic compromise of equity, however, emerges particularly strongly in relation to the perspectives of the homework-ambivalent and the homework-positive groups. Indeed, parents in both these groups, while acknowledging that mathematics homework has the potential to compromise equity, seemed prepared to compromise equity in their desire for mathematics homework. That said, the main difference between these two groups was that homework-positive parents seemed further prepared to compromise equity by arguing for homework as a means of maintaining an overview of their children's school work and preparing them for later life. In sum, while equity was present somewhere in all but a handful of transcripts, the extent to which it was compromised by pragmatic concerns highlights the significance of this paper. From the perspective of reading, homework is an unproblematic pragmatic necessity and an unconscious compromise of equity. From the perspective of mathematics, homework is a pragmatic necessity and a conscious compromise of equity, albeit, for some parents, mediated by pragmatic expectations of tasks requiring no parental interventions.

Finally, the pragmatisation of principle, whether conscious or unconscious, is unsurprising when set against, as discussed earlier, the Swedish state's homework-related ambivalence. In other words, across Swedish society, a collective desire to facilitate educational equity is made problematic by the existence of homework, problems that could be alleviated by school's providing the facilities for children to complete their homework before leaving for home. However, evidence that in-school homework is less effective than out-of-school homework (Keith et al., 2004) behoves educational authorities to examine how in-school homework may be better structured and implemented.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge with gratitude the financial support of Vetenskapsrådet, project grant 2015-01066, without which the work reported in this paper would not have been possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Vetenskapsrådet[2015-01066].

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