

Understanding Change of Practices in the Homework Implementation Process in Primary Schools: Kosovo Case

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Abstract

The objective of this research study is to explore the teachers and parents' perspectives on implementing homework in primary education. The research depends on the system activity theory playing a crucial role in education. This study used qualitative methodology and data from 20 teachers and 20 parents. Data collected with semi-structured interviews were analysed using the thematic approach. Previous research reveals that setting a standard for homework in schools is highly critical and lacking a standard poses various challenges for teachers in assigning homework. Thus, teachers and parents emphasise the need to set a standard for homework assignments by the education policymakers. Moreover, the research has contributed to raising teachers' awareness for using the feedback despite the factors complicating this process. The present study's findings have also shown the relevance of cooperation with parents in implementing the homework. In the end, the study resolves that education policymakers collaborating with schools should urgently set a standard for homework assignments and professional teacher development by providing specific homework training. This study proposes a comprehensive approach by challenging students' traditional perception of homework, examining the teacher background and work context. Furthermore, it suggests a broader policy context to determine a manageable policy and practice for proper homework integration in teaching and learning processes.

Keywords: *homework, teachers, students, lack of standard in homework assignments, activity theory*

Introduction

Homework is an integral part of school practice and the daily family life in Kosovo, as in most regions worldwide. Moreover, it is part of students' daily routine, yet no consensus among teachers, parents, and students exist on implementing it.

The extensive literature on homework suggests that when planning homework assignments, adequate consideration should be given to the purpose of the task, its practical implementation;

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proper feedback to students, the elapsed time by students and the parents' involvement (Cooper, 2006; Fawzy, 2012; Stogner, 2014; Huisman, 2016; Hoeke, 2017; Minke, 2017). How teachers approach homework has been an internationally discussed topic. Thus, applying it to the Kosovo school context is relevant and should include several variables. These variables should address how teachers understand and approach them to provide new insights into the education system and the teaching profession regarding the proper implementation of the homework.

There is an evident lack of a standard or a plan at the macro-level where teachers can base homework assignments. Thus, individual needs should focus on the students' needs. Nevertheless, parental involvement may develop into parental intervention. For instance, parents may misguide their children if the teaching techniques they use differ from those used by the teachers (Cooper et al., 2006; Ozer & Keskin, 2015). The parenting approach sometimes may not be adequate. Due to the parents' workload or educational background, they cannot help their children with their homework assignments leading to additional stress and burden.

This study discerns the teachers' dimensions in handling the homework assignment activity, including the planning phase, homework feedback, time spent on homework, and parents' involvement in homework. This research uses as starting point the concerns over lack of teacher feedback on student homework. Recent studies have revealed that students do their homework more frequently when teachers provide feedback (Núñez et al., 2015). Moreover, finding the opportunity to increase the students' learning potential requires homework assignments as a tool, allowing them to apply the theoretical knowledge to practice. To this end, understanding the variables and contextual factors affecting the existing teacher practices in homework management is critical.

Literature Review

As various authors and researchers have divergent opinions about homework, these homework studies need further elaborations. Researchers stress the crucial role homework environment because homework assignment is one of the most widespread pedagogical practices in the world (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Holte, 2016). Consequently, reviewing homework literature urges scientists to further their work to cover various professional aspects of teachers in implementing homework as a practical tool. Many authors suggest that well-planned homework tasks can benefit

many students (Cooper, 2006; Fawzy, 2012; Epstein & Voorhis, 2001; Hoeke, 2017; Stogner, 2014; Voorhis, 2004; Woolfolk, 2011).

Cooper et al. (2006) reported that homework served many purposes, including academic and non-academic, while Kohn (2006) addressed the burden of a homework assignment and its negative repercussions in the family. He suggested a reduced number of tasks and increased quality. Only can students benefit from homework if they understand it. Teachers should also control homework assignments, allowing students to correct their mistakes or improve their tasks (Hoeke, 2017; Woolfolk, 2011). It is crucial to involve the family and get its support, forming a stimulating environment at home for the learning process. Parental support refers to the care, engendering an enabling learning environment, and encouraging learning (Dangol & Shrestha, 2021).

Indeed, when parents support the homework and the children simultaneously receive feedback from the teacher and notice the appreciation of their efforts, they feel motivated to do their homework. Feedback is most beneficial when teachers give suggestions to improve the homework assignment and discuss issues with students individually or the whole class. Skaggs (2007) noted that feedback could differ among teachers, as they might depict differences in evaluating the homework. These differences may be traceable back to the divergent approaches taken by teachers while collecting homework, giving feedback, and checking the homework before or after it is completed. If teachers cannot provide feedback, they should review the number of homework tasks assigned to students. Reducing the amount of homework may increase the chances of delivering feedback.

McNulty (2018) stressed that although most children did not like to do homework, they valued it as a beneficial tool to enhance learning and personal development. Homework completion involves the dynamics of family and peers and influences the nature of teaching in community organisations and schools (Benbenutty, 2009). A highly critical role affecting the practicality of homework is the collaboration among teachers, students, and parent. Hong and Milgram (2000) opined that after the teacher assigned the task, parents should provide the appropriate environment for its completion, enabling students to do it the way suited them the most. Cooperation among all three shareholders is essential to achieve desired results.

The teachers and parents' roles, the homework amount and duration, the suitability for student development, the guidance and feedback for students should be considered assessing the effects of homework in academic terms (Baş & Çiğerci, 2017). According to Sylaj and Sylaj (2020, p.8):

‘Communication is the most appropriate area through which the parents want to establish contacts with the school. Parents' positive communication almost always gives positive results to the parents and the teachers. Negative, superficial or insufficient communication almost always leads to problems throughout the school year. Researchers consider that the way we have the parent-parent conversation is definitely important in the communication between the school and the family to prevent violence among the students. In order for this communication to be effective, it must be positive’. Parents McNulty (2018) stressed regard homework as required and essential to support learning and acquiring knowledge, playing a vital role in building trust and responsibility. Parents often believe the amount of homework is overwhelming; however, they do not challenge the utility and necessity of homework (Kukk et al., 2015). Homework is deservedly a unique educational practice because each child has a varied experience with homework. Therefore, homework is highly challenging and complicated given the marginal differences between school and the home milieu (Vatterott, 2018).

What most affects the practicality of homework is the students’ time on a specific one. Time should carefully be monitored to ensure that it is appropriate to the grade level and not too demanding for the family (Marzano, 2003). Observing the rule of ‘10 minutes’ for a grade may favour students and parents as children will not be excessively busy with homework (Marzano, 2003; Cooper et al., 2006).

This study uses the activity systems theory as a theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting data. This theory is an excellent framework for understanding the pedagogical practice development leading to modifying the present reality towards the desired outcome. According to Engeström (2012), Lev Vygotski (1978) initiated the activity somewhere between 1920 and 1930. Subsequently, Leont’ev (1978, 1981) developed it. Engestrom (1987) devised the activity systems theory as a framework depending on proximal development zone concept (Saqipi, 2020). As can be seen in Figure 1, the activity system’s fundamental components are subjects, objects, tools and instruments (mediating artefacts), rules, community, and division of tasks.

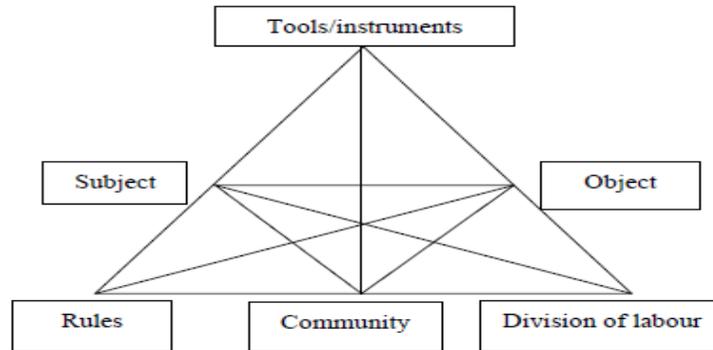


Figure 1 Activity system model. Source: Engenstrom (1987, 2001)

The subject represents the activity participants working on achieving the object that represents the activity's overall objective. The object is the primary purpose for the subject to operate and transform. Tools are the processes the subject may use to obtain the object. Rules depict standards assisting the subject in achieving the overall goal. The community works with all stakeholders to achieve the overall goal. The last element forming the activity system is the division of tasks posing the responsibilities of all participants in this activity system, including the community. All these elements of this activity system were employed in this study to identify the factors affecting homework efficiency.

Methodology

Purpose of the Present Study

This study aims to identify modalities for enhancing the current practices of teachers and parents in managing homework in primary schools. It includes analysing teacher experiences concerning the students' time on homework assignments and providing feedback on these tasks. It also elaborates the role of collaboration between parents and teachers about homework.

The essential research question is: How can teachers' professional practice in homework assignments be modified to make it a more effective tool for student learning?

The sub-questions this study aims to address are:

What are the current teacher approaches to student homework?

How do parents view the role of homework and their role in this process?

What are the essential factors affecting the change of current teacher practices?

Design

The study has a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews as data collection tools to analyse the teachers, students, and parents' perceptions on homework. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to serve the purpose of the study. Qualitative research is the choice when less is known about a topic or phenomenon, and a researcher wants to discover or learn more about it. It is a standard technique to understand people's experiences and express their perspectives (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Research Setting

The research was performed in Kosovo, a small country where the education system has critically been challenged throughout history regarding teaching and learning development. After the war in Kosovo (1999), the education system was in a constant cycle of reforms and innovations, forming quality and inclusive approach. After 1999, many major fundamental problems were identified, accentuating the need to change the country's education system. Continued efforts focussed on retreating away from the traditional teaching and getting the school to have a student-centred philosophy (Saqipi, 2014). Kosovo schools lack written and agreed-upon strategies and standards for applying homework in schools. When analysing many documents from the Ministry of Education, finding any specific instructions or documents about the homework planning instructions is improbable.

Moreover, the current debate on education reform in Kosovo addresses the need to increase teacher professionalism resulting in enhanced student learning. While homework assignment is not a specific education issue, a broad agreement on students spending less time in schools exists because schools operate at least two shifts. Thus, there is ample room for homework improvement, emphasising the relevance of this study for overall teacher professional practice and student learning.

Participants

A total of 20 teachers and 20 parents across four municipalities participated in this study. The participants' background data are in Table 1.

Table 1
The Participants' Background

Participants	Gender	Age	Location
Teachers	18 F	26 – 28 years (5 teachers)	13 Urban
	2 M	34 – 36 years (6 teachers)	7 Rural
		38 – 42 years (9 teachers)	
Parents	16 F	35 – 39 years (13 parents)	11 Urban
	4 M	40 – 44 years (3 parents)	9 Rural
		45 – 47 years (7 parents)	

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was between June and July 2020. The interview process was performed through the "Zoom" platform due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in place at that time. Before starting the interview, participants were assured of their anonymity. Participants recorded the interview and were guaranteed that the interview would only be used for research purposes. The interviews lasted 20-30 minutes.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews. It provided accessible and systematic procedures for extracting codes and themes from qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were designed and conducted by the researcher. The researcher focussed on the interview and rationale behind participant reflection (Matthews & Ross, 2010). After transcribing the interviews, the data were coded, associating with the research purpose. The codes were then grouped into topics to allow conclusions about student perceptions.

Findings and Discussion

The data collected from the interviews were divided into two groups: interviews with teachers and interviews with parents. The analysis of data are presented in sections below with the view of answering the research questions determined for this study.

Teacher views on homework assignments

Table 2 summarises the topics emerging from the interviews with teachers about doing homework and constantly referring to the research's purpose and questions. This research has identified four intriguing and highly challenging topics in doing homework: Lack of a standard in school planning, lack of training, homework overload, inability to provide timely feedback.

Teachers have responded that their schools do not have any documents, plans, standards or regulations on homework assignments. They have further reported that they assign homework as

they wish because the school does not oblige them to give homework. Homework is the teacher's responsibility as it is. Teachers can also specify the time the student should have for homework, the types of homework, how to use the feedback, and the involvement of parents in the homework process.

Here are some of the teachers' thoughts: '*There is no written rule for assigning homework, so we are the ones who define homework*' (Teacher, 4). '*We have no obligation from school; we are free to act as we wish*' (Teacher, 7).

Table 2

Codes and Themes Derived from the Thematic Analysis of Interview Data with Teachers

Codes	Themes
The school does not oblige us to give homework There are no written rules for assigning homework The teacher is a determining factor for the amount and type of homework Each teacher assigns their homework to their class The director does not oblige us about homework Homework is the teacher's independent decision It is up to teachers to give homework The school has no standard for homework	Lack of a standard to guide homework planning
We have not attended training for homework Critical thinking training 'Mix training' Curriculum training Discussion during master lectures about homework	Lack of training on student homework
Homework overload Excessive stress Stressed children. I am not a pro homework Less homework I do not want to overload my children with homework Homework for the weekend is overload for students Tasks as overload if you do not enjoy doing them	Homework overload
More oral information Frontal control Check them at home Not adequate time in class Return them the next day after checking them home The overwhelming number of students in the class	Inability to provide feedback on time

No written plan or rules are available in any documents specifying how teachers assign homework. Nor does a person encounter anything specific in the National Curriculum Framework on how teachers should practice homework instead of formative assessment used in the homework assignment. Therefore, most teachers are reluctant to assign tasks as they have no standard from the school on giving homework and specifically the time students should have it.

Many studies suggest that each school should have a policy for homework assignments (Cooper, 1994; Epstein & Voorhis, 2001; Skaggs, 2007). Homework policy in schools revealed that while many schools have explicit homework policies, some lack them (Merritt et al., 2015). The findings of another study agreed well with our research's as schools lacked homework policy and had misleading information from parents and teachers about homework policies (Holland et al., 2021). However, Volley (2017) emphasised that the challenge of doing homework should not necessarily be addressed to teachers and be first addressed by education policymakers such as the Ministry of Education and school management.

Lack of professional development is the second topic emerging from the present study. Even though teachers have received extensive training to improve classroom teaching practices, they have not received adequate training for homework assignments. Consequently, teachers often have dilemmas concerning assigning homework, adapting homework to the whole class, arranging the time students spend on homework, giving feedback, and collaborating with parents.

Some thoughts from teachers on this topic follow:

Unfortunately, I have never had the opportunity to attend training specifically for homework, nor was there any other training during which homework was mainly mentioned; how and why I formulate it. I think it would be a very good idea to have such training where the main focus would be homework (Teacher, 12). I have not attended any specific homework training, nor any training that has helped me with homework (Teacher, 8).

Another study suggested that teachers needed to get training on communicating with parents on the help they should provide to their children while doing homework (Merritt et al., 2015). Professional development enables teachers to be more committed to developing and improving professional skills in the required field. It makes teachers more successful, providing them with the best possible job (Nyamai, 2021).

Hoeke (2017) also championed the teachers' professional development. She further suggested that schools, besides their homework policy, should offer teachers the opportunity for professional development related to homework.

As there is a lack of a standard in schools and professional development regarding homework, teachers, students, and parents face many challenges and dilemmas on homework assignments. The third and most exasperating issue emerging from the interviews with teachers is homework overload. Most teachers stated that students were excessively busy with homework. This overload

of tasks deprives students of their free time. Moreover, many teachers give homework on weekends and holidays, causing additional stress for students.

This topic is not surprising because there exists no standard in schools on when students should be assigned homework. Teachers also lack professional development about homework assignments, evidently leading students to be overloaded. Epstein and Voorhis (2010), noted that school policy should be interactive with parents supplying them with the opportunity to help their children with homework. Some schools assign homework only on weekdays, decreasing opportunities for parent-child interaction.

The fourth issue was the inability to provide timely feedback. Although teachers gave homework, most suggested that they could not give feedback. Due to the overwhelming number of students in the class and the tight schedule, they had to give oral feedback or take homework to check. Some of the teachers' thoughts on giving feedback follow: *However, if I do not have time, I tell my students to leave it on my desk, and I take it home or I check them during breaks (Teacher, 8). However, the large number of students inside the class makes it difficult to fulfil each student's needs. Normally, we were told that every child is special and learns differently does the tasks differently. But it is quite difficult in those circumstances to strengthen each child's weak points. This is the worst (Teacher, 19).*

Students learn even more and feel more influential when they receive constructive feedback. Therefore, teachers should find the time and opportunity to give oral or written feedback while giving homework. According to Costa et al. (2017), homework assignments should always be evaluated, strengthening the relevance and usefulness of task perceived by students.

Parental views on homework management

Table 3 summarises the topics deriving from interviews with parents regarding their views on the homework their children do. From the interview, three essential issues have emerged from the data focussing on (i) parents agreeing that their children should have homework, but without being overloaded, (ii) parents assessing the teacher-parent-student collaboration as highly necessary, and (iii) parents suggesting ways teacher feedback can be used.

Table 3
Codes and Themes Derived from the Thematic Analysis of Interview Data with Parents

Codes	Topics
Continuous conversations with the teacher about homework When the child has stagnation, I discuss the issue We discuss any ambiguities with the teacher Perfect triangle Technology enables us to be closer to the teacher Quite often, we discuss homework	The need for teacher-parent-student cooperation
Teachers give a lot of homework Three-to-four hours of tasks causing fatigue and overload The unnecessary task, repeating the same things Kids have to be free at the weekends Extremely busy with tasks Constantly having homework Very busy with homework Even on weekends, there is homework	Homework overload
Checking them by adding a signature There cannot be any feedback as there are 40 students in the class Evaluation by grade or smile Limited time concerning the number of students in the class There is no comment but only underlining of wrong parts	Lack of written feedback

The first issue from the research was the need for teacher-parent-student collaboration. Collaboration with parents was much more pressing than necessary, depending on parental responses. Most parents claimed they constantly communicated with their teachers about their children's homework. *For any ambiguities and delays of their children in homework, parents discuss with their children's teachers. We discuss them quite often, and she is always ready to give us answers about the children's tasks; where she has difficulty, she gives us explanations. Parent, teacher, and child can cooperate and achieve something good with lessons (Parent, 17).*

Likewise, Sylaj and Sylaj (2020) founded their research on collaborating between parents and teachers, suggesting a positive correlation between these factors. Teachers can also benefit from family involvement. Thus, they promote positive feelings about teaching in their schools when there is more parental involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987, as cited in Epstein & Voorhis, 2010). Teachers communicating with parents tend to increase expectations and appreciation for all parents and 'continue to increase family involvement activities' (Epstein & Voorhis, 2010, p.5). The second issue materialising from parents and in line with teachers' views was student overload. Like teachers, most parents accentuate that their children are too busy with homework. Although they favour homework, they disagree that children should do a lot of homework assignments. Children have homework seven days a week plus weekends but also on holidays. According to them, children are overwhelmingly busy with tasks.

Eight of the twenty parents interviewed noted that their children did three to four hours of homework, causing them to be overwhelmed and tired. Moreover, some tasks were unnecessary as the same functions were repetitive. What follow are some thoughts from parents on their children's overload:

I have three children, one in high school. Children are given a lot of homework. Sometimes it is not very necessary, according to me, because they have a lot of obligations at school, and then at home, they need 3-4 hours of work again and this causes fatigue and workload (Parent, 11).

It is a big burden for young students to be assigned homework seven days a week. Even working adults should have a break, let alone children of this age. But today, everyone has their own criteria, so we have to apply them (Parent, 20).

Parents assisting their children with homework felt that the volume of homework assignments was too exhausting, and children could not find adequate time for leisure activities. Most authors and parents thought that homework was beneficial and necessary (Kukk et al., 2015). Even though homework assignments can present educational benefits, they can take from children's free and family time. Therefore, children may spend less time with their families due to too much homework assigned (Garcia, 2021). The third issue correlating with teachers' opinions was the inability to provide timely feedback emphasised by both parties. Despite teachers providing feedback, depending on the answers of most teachers, written feedback is lacking. One of the reasons suggested by almost all teachers is the limited time due to many students in the class. When students have discernible feedback, their work is respected as long as they receive advice and reduce gaps where needed (Hattie, 2011; Fawzy, 2012).

The factors relevant to effective homework management

The findings led to establishing a broader framework, using activity systems theory as a framework. It meant understanding that the systems connected to the development of practices relied on the effective management of homework assignments. The figure below presents an overview of the critical factors to understand the transition model needing adoption to transform the present realities of unduly focusing students on homework management.

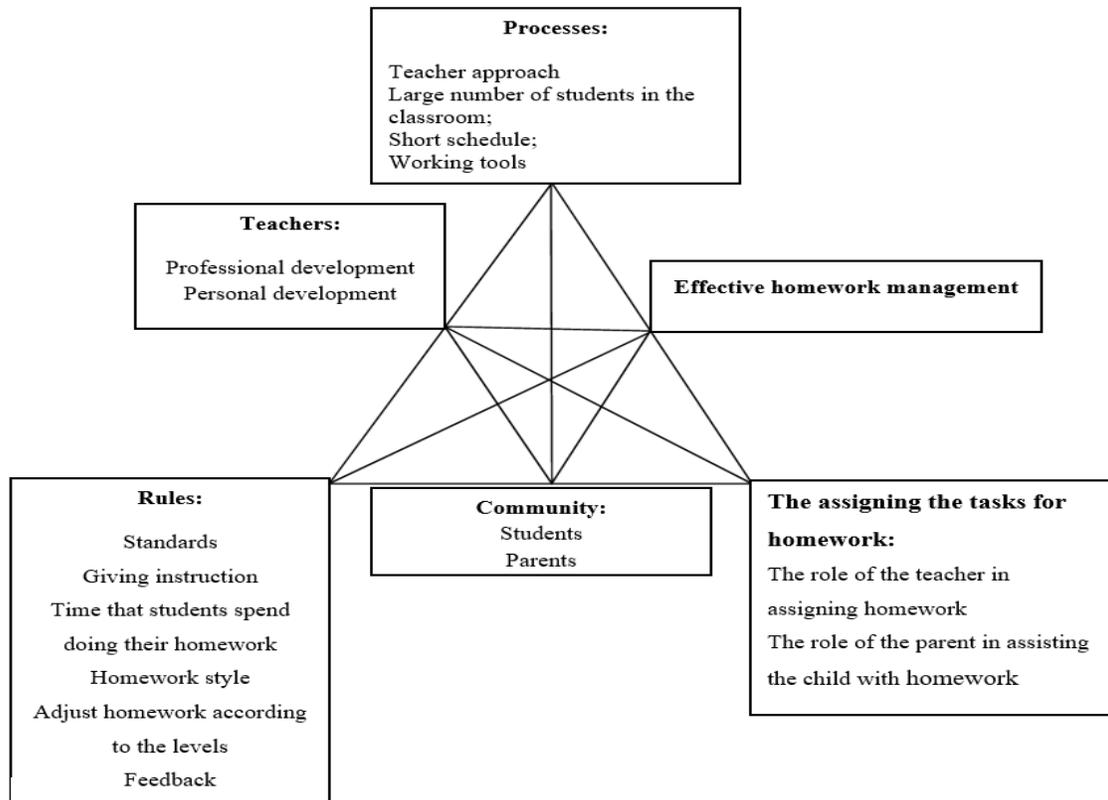


Figure 2 *Understanding the Development of Homework Activity*

As seen in Figure 2, one should discuss the impact of the change and which variables can best steer the difference in the right direction to understand the development of teacher practices on student homework. They are the processes related to homework implementation, the teachers' background, and the division of roles changing the student homework implementation. Teachers need to develop the standard and policy as part of their professional identity, applicable within the school context broader scope. Then, they can incorporate their work, while such an orientation needs to empower conducive cooperation between parents, students, and teachers. It can coherently contribute to planning and implementing homework beyond meaningful student learning. This study has confirmed the findings of past research on important variables that need to be addressed when talking about effective student homework in pre-university education. However, the innovation of this research indicates that the weight assigned to specific variables is dependant on the educational context. This study has emphasized the need to pay attention to the factors of teacher professional background and preparation as well as class size and time available for feedback.

Conclusions

This study addressed the factors affecting homework efficiency in primary education and aimed to provide insights into how teachers and parents should approach the student homework assignments. How current practices managing homework assignments should be assessed from a broader perspective of the educational system context is a critical issue, including several crucial variables. It is not easy to project a single unified standard for school homework assignments for two reasons. Firstly, different teachers face varied challenges in assigning homework to students and managing it effectively and is oriented towards the students' homework activity. Secondly, while some standard conclusions can be drawn from the present study and previous research concerning the effective homework paradigm, the contextual variables are relevant to the point. These include teacher approaches and more extensive homework management system dynamics covering variables such as parental involvement and available time for feedback.

Therefore, education policymakers should note the role that standard for homework would play, benefit schools, teachers, parents, and all students. Setting such a standard should consist of the following elements: the purpose of assigning homework, homework design, the time available to students, the responsibilities of the teachers and students, and the role of parents or other family members supporting the children in their homework assignments. It should not interfere with imposing uniformity and prescribed actions for teachers to pursue in managing student homework. Instead, it is a guide for developing teacher professional practice theory and thinking aligned with the need to transition from present reality to the desired situation. Integrating homework as part of the teaching and learning process demands a comprehensive view of teachers' professional preparation and practices to determine the policies and applications. It can best be managed within the relevant education context. After all, building professional identity of teachers that can influence affects other variables such as homework related processes and the standard developing into a school policy. Only then can meaningful changes occur.

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