

Parents' conceptions of their homework involvement in elementary school

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Abstract

Background: Homework is a universal practice used in schools, and is commonly related to academic achievement. According to literature, parental homework involvement has positive and negative aspects, depending on parents' behaviors. **Method:** Assuming a phenomenographic perspective, this study examined 4th graders' parents' conceptions of their involvement in homework. With the purpose of mapping the parents' various conceptions of homework involvement, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed. **Results:** The results show that parents' conceptions of homework involvement have a positive meaning, and focus primarily on the role played in the promotion of academic learning by (a) fostering their children's autonomy, (b) exerting control over their learning, and (c) providing them with emotional encouragement (when children struggle with difficulties). **Conclusions:** Given that parents perceive their involvement in their children's homework as important, it is necessary to promote parent-teacher collaboration and parent-training workshops to improve the quality of parental homework involvement.

Keywords: Conceptions, parental involvement, homework, phenomenography.

Resumen

Concepciones de los padres sobre su implicación en los deberes en la escuela primaria. Antecedentes: los deberes escolares son una práctica universal utilizada en la mayoría de las escuelas y que está frecuentemente asociada al rendimiento académico. Uno de los pilares básicos en esta asociación es la implicación de los padres. Sin embargo, los datos de la investigación pasada indican que la implicación parental puede tener efectos positivos y negativos, dependiendo del tipo de implicación. **Método:** desde una perspectiva fenomenográfica, con el propósito de mapear las distintas concepciones de los padres sobre su implicación en los deberes escolares, fueron realizadas entrevistas semiestructuradas a 32 padres de alumnos de 4.º de Educación Primaria. **Resultados:** los padres participantes en el estudio presentan una perspectiva positiva de su implicación en los deberes escolares y el aprendizaje académico. Los datos obtenidos indican que los padres pueden implicarse para: a) promocionar la autonomía de los niños; b) controlar el aprendizaje y sus resultados; y c) aportar apoyo motivacional y emocional (principalmente en presencia de dificultades). **Conclusiones:** dado que los padres perciben importante su implicación en los deberes escolares de los hijos, es necesario promover la colaboración entre los padres y profesores y talleres de formación de padres para mejorar la calidad de su implicación en los deberes.

Palabras clave: concepciones, implicación de los padres, los deberes, fenomenografía.

Homework is one of the most popular and frequent instructional tools used in home-based involvement, and it is a task in which parents are involved more directly in their child's learning (Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011; Wilder, 2014). However, research on parental involvement in homework is still inconclusive concerning its effects (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Wilder, 2014; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). While some authors advocate parents' involvement as a positive practice, as it can enhance academic achievement, others describe this support as a mere time-consuming exercise, which frequently generates discomfort, anxiety, and conflict in the family due to fighting

over homework (Cooper, 2001; Murray et al., 2006; Patall et al., 2008).

These inconclusive findings could be due to the different parents' behaviors when they are involved in their child's homework (Dumont et al., 2012; Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, & Nagengast, 2014; Karbach, Gottschling, Spengler, Hegewald, & Spinath, 2013). Thus it would be relevant to study parents' conceptions of parental involvement in homework, as their conceptions of parenting influence their parenting behaviors (e.g., Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1993). The present study aims at deepening our understanding of the role of parental involvement in homework by analyzing parents' discourses from a phenomenographic perspective.

Parental homework involvement practices

Previous studies had already explored the ways parents become involved in their children's homework from elementary

school to high school level (e.g., see Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Xu & Corno, 1998). Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel, and Green (2004) summarized parental homework involvement into 8 practices: interaction with the teacher (e.g., communication about students' homework); structuring children's homework completion (e.g., organizing materials); general homework supervision; responding to children's homework performance (e.g., correcting homework); engaging in specific tasks (e.g., teaching, "working with"); modeling meta-strategies related to "the task and student's knowledge, skills, and abilities" (e.g., breaking tasks into small steps); supporting students' understanding of homework (e.g., checking for understanding), and modeling "meta-strategies to help the student learn processes conducive to achievement" (e.g., encouraging self-monitoring) (p. 2).

Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007), for example, organized parents' involvement in homework into four qualitatively different, but dynamically related, dimensions: *autonomy support versus control* (parents supporting children in developing their own schedules for doing homework vs. parents making decisions without children's input); *process versus person focus* (parents helping children focus on the process of mastering the school work vs. parents emphasizing achievement); *positive versus negative affect* (parents who establish a sense of connectedness with the children by maintaining positive affect and intrinsic motivation vs. parents who are hostile and critical while checking children's homework); and *positive versus negative beliefs about children's potential* (parents trusting their children capabilities to do well vs. parents focusing on avoiding complete failure). Lorenz and Wild (2007) proposed instead the following four different dimensions of homework parental involvement: *autonomy supportive practices* (encouragement of self-initiated homework activities), a dimension that was conceptualized as separate from *control* (e.g., pressure on children to complete their homework assignments, providing direct instructions that undermine autonomous behavior); *structure* (parents' organization of the homework environment); and *emotional involvement* (e.g., parental readiness to acknowledge children's feelings about homework).

The study of parental homework involvement according to the previous dimensions is important because students' academic outcomes are positively and negatively related to the quality of parental involvement. For this reason, meta-analyses probably only show a moderate effect size of the relationship between parental involvement (i.e., including interest in and guidance of homework) and students' academic achievement (see Hattie, 2009). For example, parental support perceived by students and parental support for children's autonomy reported by parents were associated with students' higher academic achievement, whereas parent-child conflict about homework perceived by students or interference with children's autonomy reported by parents were negatively associated with educational outcomes (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Dumont et al., 2012). Furthermore, the association between the quality of parental homework involvement and student achievement proved to be mediated by grade level. Findings in middle and high school on the relationship between homework parental involvement and achievement are consistent, whereas in elementary school data are contradictory (see Chen, 2008; Núñez, Suárez, Rosário, Vallejo, & Epstein, submitted; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Thus, further research is needed to overcome these inconclusive findings in elementary school.

The study of parents' conceptions of their involvement in homework can contribute to deepening our understanding of the support behaviors parents report when helping their children with the school tasks. To our knowledge, research often neglects the parents' perspective (see Fan, 2013; Kaplan, 2005), and the analysis of parents' conceptions about the nature and importance of their involvement in homework is limited (Pomerantz & Grolnick, 2009). In fact, Patall and colleagues (2008) called for qualitative studies analyzing the reasons for parents to become involved at each grade level and the quality of the help provided, in order to discuss the mixed results found. As an answer to this call, our study intends to explore the complex social phenomenon of parental involvement from the parents' perspective.

The current research aims to understand how parents of fourth-grade students conceptualize their involvement in their children's homework, and to understand how parents report their involvement in their children's homework.

Method

Participants

Out of the 230 parents from the 4th-grade students of three Portuguese public schools, 50 were randomly chosen and invited to participate in the research. In Portuguese school system, the fourth grade is the last grade of elementary school (9-year-olds). Globally, the invited families are lower-middle class (41% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches). An invitation letter explaining the objectives of the study was sent to the 50 families by the school principals. Forty parents responded positively, but only thirty-two attended the interviews on the agreed date. The interviews were conducted with all parents who attended on the scheduled date (12 males and 20 females aged between 35 and 50 years). At that time, 85% of the parents were working while the remaining ones were unemployed. All the participants signed an informed consent form before the interview.

Instruments

An individual semi-structured interview, lasting 25 to 30 minutes was conducted with all of the participants. All of them answered three questions: (a) In your opinion, what does parental involvement in children's homework mean?; (b) How do you think parents should become involved in their children's homework?; and (c) Why do you think parents can become more or less involved in their children in homework?

These three questions set the basis for the discussion with the participants about the phenomenon of parental involvement in children's homework. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to reflect on and explain their statements on parental involvement in homework.

Procedure

This study followed a phenomenographic design to analyze the parents' conceptions of involvement in their children's homework. Within the phenomenography framework, research adopts a second-order perspective, as the data collected are to be examined through the participants' perspective and not through the researcher's (Marton, 1986; Harris, 2011b). Marton (1981, 1986)

explained that a conception refers to actual experiences, reflecting how individuals see or understand that experience. Marton and Pong (2005) indicate that a conception presents two aspects: the referential aspect (i.e., revealing the global significance of the object that is conceptualized), and the structural aspect (i.e., disclosing the combination of features that are intended to distinguish and focus on the concept). The latter is composed of *what* and *how* aspects (see Harris, 2011b; Pramling, 1983; Rosário et al., 2014).

In the current study, the *what* and *how* aspects (Harris, 2011a, b; Pramling, 1983; Rosário et al., 2014) were used to examine the conceptions of parents' involvement in homework. In parents' discourses, the *what* aspect is related to the participants' understanding of the phenomenon (i.e., parents' perception of parental involvement in homework), and the *how* aspect refers to their conceptions of the behaviors that facilitate their involvement in homework.

In phenomenographic studies, data is usually collected through recorded interviews (Sin, 2010), in which the participant is encouraged to elaborate on his/her own speech. The main purpose of the researcher is to collect as complete and detailed information as possible, in order to deepen understanding of the participant's knowledge of the phenomenon. All the interviews were conducted by the second author, taped on a laptop, and transcribed *verbatim* afterwards.

Data analysis

Although the data were analyzed from the participants' perspective and not from the researcher's (Marton, 1986), it is

not possible to completely eliminate the subjectivity inherent to this process. However, data were not categorized according to the literature, but instead, categories were developed using participants' own words. To increase the reliability of the analysis process, the first author presented the process followed in the data analysis and the results to a group of expert researchers on the topic of students' approaches to learning, receiving several inputs and suggestions.

The data analysis followed two main steps (Marton, 1986). The first step concerned the creation of pools of meaning (Harris, 2011a), which were subsequently abstracted into categories of description (Marton, 1981). These categories of description represent the different forms in which the participants experience the phenomenon. The second step comprised the organization of the categories of description in the outcome space, which includes all the possible descriptors of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Rosário et al., 2014).

After the complete transcript of each interview, and several integral readings of all of the data, the different utterances were compared and subsequently organized into pools of meaning according to the *what* and *how* aspects (Pramling, 1983). In this step, two indicators were used to facilitate the collection of relevant information: (a) frequency (how often an idea is articulated by the participants), and (b) position (position of the statement in the discourse. In fact, the relevant elements are often at the beginning of each response) (Harris, 2011a).

After establishing pools of meaning, the utterances within the pools were compared and contrasted, leading to changing some data

Table 1
Outcome space

| Conception (What) | Description | Example | Conception (How) | Description | Example |
|--------------------|---|--|----------------------|--|--|
| Promoting autonomy | Helping children to be autonomous and responsible in carrying out their tasks | Parents must promote the autonomy and creativity of their children.... (CF6) Parents can help them to control the distractions in the house, and to assume responsibility for their work. (AC1) | Subsidiarity | Not doing homework for children | I must help him to structure the information to find the best way to solve the exercises, while not losing sight that he is the student, not me. (CF5) I help him to interpret the meaning of the math problems, but he solves the exercises. (LP13) |
| Learning control | Acknowledging the children's level of content knowledge and their main difficulties when doing homework | When parents are helping their children doing homework, they can follow the content topics children are learning in school. When I see his notebooks, I see it all... (GD11) | Collaboration | Teaching strategies for solving exercises, and modeling study behaviors | For example, parents could help children to interpret texts and explain the grammar questions, or read the written essays to check inconsistencies and mistakes. (FC10) Usually children have difficulties to understand what to do, where to start doing the tasks. For example, cleaning the desk is always a good start. (AP2) |
| Learning incentive | Helping to ensure that children do their work and grow better students | Parents can help their children to consolidate the skills acquired in school and reinforce them to continue working. (PC17) | Controlling emotions | Displaying strategies to help the children to cope with discouragement and negative emotions | Whenever she is in despair or stuck, I encourage her by saying, for example, "I know you can do it", or "do you remember the last time? In the end you could finish the task" (PF18)... |

from the pool. Following Marton (1981), when all the cases within the pools of meaning are aligned, and the criteria for each pool of meaning is clear and stable, data in each pool is abstracted into categories of description. Finally, the organization of the categories of description is displayed in the outcome space (Sin, 2010).

In the outcome space the *what* and *how* categories are aligned. The level of alignment between the categories is considered high when the participants' utterance contains the *what* and *how* aspects (Harris, 2011a). In phenomenographic studies, once the outcome space summarizes all possibilities of describing the phenomenon for that group of participants, replication is not a condition for the validation of the results (Marton, 1986). For this same reason, and following the phenomenographic tradition, inter-judge reliability was not used in this investigation (Sandberg, 1997).

Results

Data analysis produced six categories relating the participants' conceptualization of parents' involvement in homework. Three categories are related to the *what* aspect, and describe the participants' understanding of parental involvement in homework. The other three categories are related to the *how* aspect, and describe how participants conceptualize parents' involvement in homework. The description of these categories and their correspondence are presented in Table 1.

What aspect categories

The *what* aspect categories seek to describe how participants define their involvement in their children's homework. In the first *what* aspect category, *promoting autonomy*, parental support in homework is described as an opportunity to develop a sense of independence and responsibility in their children while doing homework.

"Parents should encourage autonomy, and children must play their role. They [children] need to create routines. Creating habits; working methods... help them to be more responsible." (CF6)

In this example, parental involvement is seen as an enabler of autonomy. Participants emphasized that parents should be available to provide support by facilitating the conditions that make the work more effective. However, the students are the ones who must perform the school-work.

In the second *what* aspect category, *learning control*, homework is seen as a tool with instructional utility, allowing parents to control the level of knowledge content mastered, but also the learning process followed and the difficulties experienced along that instructional path.

"I know what is best for [A.]. When he is having difficulties I show him candies to help him focus" (PC19)

Finally, the last *what* aspect category, *learning incentive*, describes involvement as an enabler of school success. For example, parents could help their children to resist discouragement, avoid skipping homework or postponing it until the evening. One participant justified the importance of parental involvement in homework as follows:

"I consider [parents' involvement] important because it helps children to understand the importance of learning and working hard (...) Also, the parents' help prevents the children from postponing homework until evening." (PF18)

Participants characterized parents' involvement as a key factor to maintain children focused on homework, reinforcing the idea that parents' involvement prevents children from postponing homework. In the participants' words, the control of the children's work appears closely related to children's motivation for academic achievement.

In sum, in the *what* aspect categories of description, participants conceptualize parents' involvement in homework as a useful and effective tool to promote their children's academic success. The incentive and motivation to study, and the control and monitoring of the learning activities enabling children to perform better at school are aspects highlighted by participants as essential to their conceptualization of parental involvement.

How aspect categories

The three categories regarding the *what* aspect, previously described and analyzed, are closely related to the three *how* aspect categories: *subsidiarity*, *collaboration*, and *controlling emotions*. These categories describe how parents report engaging with their children during homework completion.

In the first *how* aspect category, *subsidiarity*, parents reported that, in order to help children to be autonomous in their homework, they should not do their children's homework. Parents doing their children's homework was considered an ineffective strategy, as children will not learn to assume responsibility and autonomy in their schoolwork, as suggested by the following example:

"When doing homework with my son, I do not solve the problems or write down the answers (...) in the end, he has to do it by himself, otherwise he won't learn." (CF5)

The second *how* aspect category, *collaboration*, describes the willingness of parents to help the children to study, organizing the study environment and teaching them relevant learning strategies to complete their tasks. The selection and organization of the core information for completing homework are examples of the strategies mentioned by parents as important to facilitate their children's work.

"I'm always available and near him to see what happens. When I see mistakes or incomplete answers, we, my son and I, correct the homework together, searching for alternatives and creative solutions." (CF6)

The last *how* aspect category, *controlling emotions*, is directly related to the parents' actions to cope with children's negative emotions while doing homework. In situations of emotional distress (e.g., tantrums, sobbing), parents report displaying emotional control strategies (e.g., changing to a different task, lowering the voice to calm the child, allowing a break) to help children remain focused on the task, even in difficult situations when children do not believe they are capable of accomplishing the task. These strategies of emotional control are referred to by parents as aids for children to assume the control of tasks, predisposing them to complete their work in time.

“One day M. couldn't find the answer to a few questions and told me in tears:” I do not know, I do not know... “ (...) I said: “If you do not know ... let it go. Go to the bathroom and take your bath, have dinner, and then you'll start again.” (FC10)

Within the three *how* aspect categories described above, participants referred to a set of overt behaviors (e.g., teaching learning strategies to overcome difficulties, and encouraging the continuation of the task) as evidence of parents' involvement in homework. Participants stressed the idea that it is important for their children to develop the ability to work autonomously and to cope with distress adequately.

Discussion

As presented above, Category 1 from both the *what* and *how* aspects is aligned and linked. Within these two categories, parents focused on the importance of encouraging an autonomous and responsible study behavior. Parents discussed the importance of not doing the homework for their children, even in the presence of difficult questions or problems. Instead, parents defended the need to guide their children toward the correct answer, scaffolding their study behavior (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Participants believe that their educational involvement fosters their children's academic learning. This idea is corroborated by Epstein, Simon, and Salinas (1997), and Cooper and colleagues (2000), whose results indicate that parental involvement improves children's learning habits and their performance in homework.

Category 2 in the *what* aspect is related to Category 2 in the *how* aspect. These categories stress the relevance of parents' helping with the children's learning, and also the prospect that, as a result of their involvement, parents can recognize children's content gaps and difficulties while doing homework. For this reason, participants emphasized the need for providing children with learning strategies to cope with personal study (e.g., mind maps, time management), homework, and distractors (Wilder, 2014).

Lastly, Category 3 of the *what* aspect is aligned with Category 3 of the *how* aspect. Within these categories, participants emphasized aspects related to incentivizing children to study and deal with emotions while completing homework. Participants said that their assistance with homework helps the children to focus on the task, and reported using strategies such as positive reinforcement, encouragement, and praising to motivate the children. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2001) found that parents' expression of positive beliefs towards homework encourages a more effective work done by the child.

Our collection of discourses on homework involvement by parents of elementary school ages analyzed from the phenomenographic framework, is not very different from middle and high school students' self-reports of their parents involvement (e.g., see Lorenz & Wild, 2007; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Thus, future studies could try to examine what may be contributing to the inconsistent findings in elementary school (see Chen, 2008; Núñez et al., in press; Patall et al., 2008).

In the current study, participants talked extensively about their involvement in children's homework as a means of promoting their independence and encouraging and monitoring their learning. However, participating parents' did not follow Pomerantz et al. (2007) in conceptualizing autonomy and control as opposite ends

of a continuum. These two dimensions were conceptualized as separate, even though interrelated. Some parents acknowledged the importance of controlling children's behaviors (e.g., using extrinsic rewards to help children progress), while acknowledging the limited value of this strategy when the goal is to promote autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Promoting autonomy was conceptualized by the participating parents as more than avoiding excessive control (Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003). To accomplish these educational goals, participants stressed the need to reduce educational assistance as soon as possible, as their children should assume the responsibility for their homework (Núñez et al., 2013). Moreover, parents also underlined the importance of collaborating with their children, for example organizing the learning environment and providing instructions and strategies to cope with homework tasks. These educational guidelines and learning strategies are especially important to help children learn how to self-regulate their learning (Núñez, Rosário, Vallejo, & González-Pienda, 2013; Rosário, Núñez et al., 2010; Rosário, González-Pienda, et al., 2010). This finding is aligned with the dimensions called “supportive control” by Baumrind (1991), and “structure” by Lorenz and Wild (2007).

However, children often present difficulties and display negative emotions while completing homework, as participants noted. Parents also stressed the need to be sensitive to children's feelings during the completion of the task, and to display emotional control strategies whenever necessary. In spite of acknowledging the importance of helping their children to control the emotions, which is aligned with the dimension of “emotional involvement” described by Lorenz and Wild (2007), participants revealed some difficulties to console and encourage the children to continue working.

“I know I shouldn't shout at my son because of homework. It is wrong, and doesn't help to overcome the situation...but sometimes he drives me crazy” (CH3)

Thus, future studies should analyze in depth the difficulties associated with the process of helping children with homework by exploring the conditions that may interfere with the nature and quality of that involvement. In the current study, the majority of participants presented a positive perspective of parental involvement, focusing on the “bright side” of their involvement. However, students and teachers often report pressure whenever parents are involved in homework (e.g., Patall et al., 2008). Thus, the emerging categories of this study show the need to conduct more detailed qualitative studies to explore “all sides” of parental homework involvement (e.g., observations, videotaping).

In general, our results are consistent with parental involvement practices in their children's homework as reported in the literature (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995, 2001), but participants focused only parental involvement directly related to the moment of homework completion and did not refer to other ways of becoming involved in their children's homework (e.g., consultations with their children's teacher about student homework difficulties and progress) (see Walker et al., 2004). Cooperation between parents and teachers can be used as a tool to overcome children's specific difficulties, including homework (e.g., Christenson, 1995). Parents can talk about their concerns to teachers so they can work with the children in classroom and/or teachers can offer some strategies for parents to use with their children at home (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995).

It is also important to analyze our findings in light of some limitations that should be acknowledged. The nature of this study, the instrument used, and the limited number of participants do not allow generalization of the results. Studies conducted with parents with other opinions about homework would probably have obtained different results. Converging multiple sources of data is probably the key for developing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

There are some educational implications derived from our findings.

First, it would be useful to promote parent-teacher collaboration in order to facilitate communication about students' homework behaviors and performance. Strengthening this partnership would foster parents' efforts to help their children and would improve children's homework process. Secondly, schools should offer training programs for parents addressing the core aspects of parents' involvement (e.g., training in how to prevent and cope with children's emotional distress; parental pressure). Despite parents' discourse of promoting their children's autonomy, students seem to be at an observational or imitative level of self-regulatory

development, as they still depend on their parents' guidance (see Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Parents' training could address this issue and equip them to help their children to become more self-regulated learners.

These educational courses, following a practical and experiential format (e.g., case study method), could provide real opportunities for parents to reflect upon the *how* and the *what* of their involvement (Cooper, 2001) (e.g., discussing positive and negative aspects of teaching their children problem-solving techniques far beyond their grade level against the teacher guidelines; types of rewards given; strategies to cope with emotional distress). An evidence-based orientation will prevent these workshops from following a recipe format, and may enhance the benefits associated with both the completion of homework and parental involvement in school education (Cooper, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

In conclusion, deepening our understanding about conceptions and parental practices allow data to be used for the design of effective school-based programs and questionnaires on parental involvement in homework, fostering the quality of the educational process and improving students' academic results (Wilder, 2014).

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