

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN HOMEWORK AS AN ENABLER OF ACHIEVEMENT

Homework has been found to influence achievement positively and improve the development of key learning skills. It is a crucial instructional practice for mathematics and science domains, where knowledge in these areas provides a foundation for lifelong success. Findings from the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) confirm the importance of homework and parental support for homework. *Jaqueline Harvey and Vijay Reddy* discuss the findings for grade 9 learners.

Giving learners homework to do after school carries [several benefits](#), including extending opportunities to learn, refreshing learners' knowledge and skills, and supporting their progress through the subject content. It also allows educators to evaluate whether their instruction methods were effective and can assist learners to develop independent learning, time-management skills, and perseverance.

[Studies](#) have found that parents helping with homework is also beneficial. Expressing interest in school-related activities such as homework shows children that education and learning are important. Furthermore, homework gives parents the opportunity to assist their children in developing beliefs and behaviour that contribute to effective study skills, academic resilience, and self-regulation. The latter is critical to school success. Many parents provide support by creating homework routines, removing distractions, expressing expectations, giving encouragement, and helping children to manage their time.

The ability of parents to help with homework can, however, be limited by parental levels of education, language difference, and the complex nature of the homework. While certain affluent countries (e.g. Finland) have debated whether or not homework should be given, in South Africa, with its high levels of poverty

and inequality and low achievement, homework may be enabling.

To understand the relationship between homework and parental support, we looked at homework frequency and the time spent on homework as reported by grade 9 learners who participated in the [2019 TIMSS](#) assessment. We will examine the national data as well as the data specifically related to the Gauteng and Western Cape provinces.

Homework frequency and time spent on homework

TIMSS 2019 questionnaires asked learners how often their educator assigned them homework. Over 80% of learners reported receiving homework at least once a week. Learners were also asked the approximate time spent on homework per day. There was again a clear pattern in the national data, which was echoed in the two provinces of Gauteng and the Western Cape. More than 80% of learners spent up to an hour on homework per day and about 1 in 10 spent more than an hour per day on it. These patterns were fairly consistent in both fee-paying and no-fee schools.

The positive responses were encouraging, but we need to view these self-reported data with caution, especially where grade 9 learners responded that they regularly spent about an hour a day doing both mathematics and science homework.

Parental support regarding homework

TIMSS assessed parental support for homework by asking learners if their parents checked if they set time aside for homework and if their parents checked their homework. According to responses, more than 80% of parents performed both checks at least once a month and more than half of parents did so almost every day. This trend was consistent across the national dataset and the Western Cape and Gauteng datasets.

The data showed that, in general, in both low-resource and high-resource contexts, parents provided a high level of caring and support to their children to ensure that time was spent on homework and that it was completed.

Barriers to parental assistance with homework

Certain barriers may preclude parents from substantially assisting their children with their homework. TIMSS 2019 asked learners to indicate the extent to which their parents struggled with (i) understanding the language in which their homework was provided, and (ii) the difficulty of the homework content.

Approximately two-thirds of learners (62%) nationally reported that language was at least sometimes a barrier. When these results were disaggregated into fee-paying schools and no-fee schools, there was a notable difference. A smaller proportion of learners who attended fee-paying schools (46%) reported that their parents struggled to understand the language of instruction, compared to 70% of learners who attended no-fee schools. These patterns were also reflected in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces.

Responding to questions related to content complexity, nationally, 65% of learners reported that their parents struggled to assist them because their homework was too difficult. Responses differed slightly between learners from fee-paying schools (59%) and no-fee schools (68%). These patterns were also reflected in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces.

Despite parents' interest in their children's homework, the barriers that prevent South African parents from substantially assisting with homework may have implications for their children's achievement.

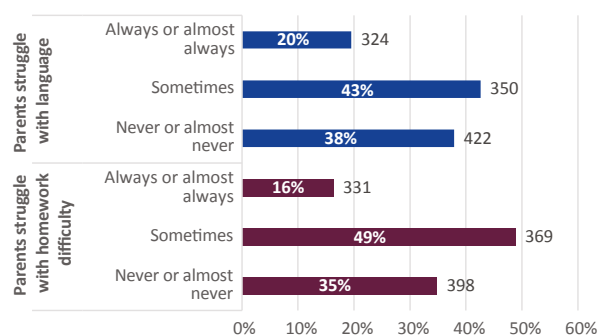
Barriers to parental assistance and achievement

Learners who reported that their parents struggled to understand the language or struggled with homework difficulty showed a lower achievement in the TIMSS 2019 mathematics and science assessments. Figure 1 illustrates these relationships for national learner achievement in science. Learners whose parents reportedly 'never' struggled with language achieved 422 TIMSS points, which was significantly higher than for those whose parents reportedly 'sometimes' (350) or 'almost always'

(324) struggled with language. In addition, learners whose parents did not find the homework too difficult achieved 398 points, which was significantly higher than for those whose parents 'sometimes' (369) or 'almost always' (331) struggled with homework difficulty.

These results suggest that parents who can provide substantive assistance with homework content are important enablers of academic achievement. Language and content barriers are related to parental education, which has been shown to significantly impact achievement in previous [TIMSS reports](#). It is less likely that parents who have obtained post-secondary education qualifications will experience these barriers in assisting their children with their homework.

Figure 1: Extent of barrier and relationship between barriers to parental support and science achievement



TIMSS score explained

The TIMSS achievement scale for science and mathematics has a centre point of 500. Learners who achieve a score below 400 do not have the proficiency for the grade assessed. A score between 400 and 475 indicates some knowledge of the subject, a score between 475 and 550 the ability to apply subject knowledge, and a score above 550 the ability to apply knowledge and to reason.

Conclusion

From learners' responses, it seems that homes, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, care about and are supportive of homework. However, input from parents with higher levels of education is associated with achievement. The homework support will be part of the home social capital that influences educational achievement. Nationally, 38% of learners came from homes where at least one parent had completed tertiary education. This disaggregates to half of parents of learners in fee-paying schools and one-third of parents of learners in no-fee schools. Learners whose households do not have this social capital are dependent on schools providing a high-quality education to assist them to achieve higher educational outcomes and break the cycle of low achievement and persistent poverty.

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