

A Narrative About Homework in Primary Education – the Perspective of Pedagogical Staff

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Abstract: The paper discusses the issue of homework in primary education in Slovakia. It attempts to contribute to uncovering the homework narrative that is created and used by its teaching staff and to relate it to the discourse on homework and its place in education in the Anglo-American environment. The research used content analysis of the written products of 30 participants (teachers, educators in children's school clubs, and teacher's assistants). Data processing and analysis were carried out by thematic analysis. The results, concentrated in four topics, showed that the homework narrative in primary education is based on homework support. It clearly resonates with the teacher's expectation of the involvement of the pupils' parents in its completion. However, it is without the methodical support of the parents from the school. Part of the discourse is also the teachers' prescription taking into account, particularly, the appropriate number of tasks, their attractiveness, an individual approach when assigning them, and the comprehensibility of homework for all persons involved. Such a setting should reflect potential inequalities between pupils concerning their family background. The narrative revealed details the semantics of school-family relations and the pedagogical strategies of teachers in primary education.

Keywords: homework, primary education, perspective of pedagogical staff, parental role.

Introduction

Completing homework can be considered the most common and most frequent school activity of a pupil¹ that goes beyond the organisational and spatial framework of the school and penetrates its extracurricular environment (Núñez et al., 2017). It is one of the most commonly used platforms where it is possible to capture the expected synergy of teachers, pupils, and their parents.

The issue of home preparation includes highly practical topics, with deep theoretical foundations and broad contexts. Precisely because it affects the environment and family members of each student who are not direct participants in formal education at school. The aim of the paper is to reveal the perception and interpretation of the situation around home preparation, with a narrower focus on homework, from the perspectives of primary education actors who move “behind the teacher’s desk” in the school.

Education staff in the positions of teachers, educators in children’s school clubs (CSC) and teacher’s assistants were offered the opportunity to think about the topic, which is expressly offered for empirical research. Through their interpretations, we have the ambition to describe a used narrative about homework, reflecting a course of events in primary education at a time when education in Slovakia is also undergoing legislative changes².

The narrative was used as a format or a way to formulate, present, share, or exchange the actors’ perspectives, experiences, and knowledge. Any attempt to avoid the cliché that the issue of home preparation and homework is a topic of constant discourse seems hardly possible. It is indeed a school agenda to which the professional and lay public return at various intervals, with more intense debates about the role of homework usually appearing in 30-year cycles (Cooper, 2001; Wildman, 1968).

As will be shown later, the research attention continuously devoted to the topic is rather a matter of foreign research. Hypotheses and personal

¹ In the text, we use the terms *pupil* and *child* as synonyms. The sporadic alternation of both terms leads us to a finer differentiation of the contexts (ties to school and family) within which the pupil/child is written about.

² At the time of writing the paper, an amendment to the Education Act was approved in the Parliament of the Slovak Republic, which is supposed to introduce quite significant changes to the education system in Slovakia, e.g., better eligibility for parents to preschool education for their children, a change in the division of primary education into three cycles, support for children with special educational needs, etc.

experiences shared in the Slovak pedagogical environment would be important for meaningful scientific interpretations if they result from a reflected methodological approach, adequately methodologically processed, and naturally published.

Within the conditions of Slovakia, however, we tend to come across discussions reflecting everyday thinking and sharing (blogs, chats, popular scientific texts³), without processing into research conclusions or theoretically (partially didactically) and overview-tuned contributions (e.g., Petlák & Komora, 2003; Turek, 2014; Belešová, 2021; Osvaldová, 2021). The public discourse on education in Slovakia also integrates topics related to homework, tending rather to limit them and to move towards voluntary homework⁴.

However, the Slovak legislation does not recognize the term “homework,” and its assignment is the responsibility of the school and its teachers. The focus on primary education was created, with the support of stimuli from abroad, for three reasons.

Firstly, the involvement of parents in home preparation is intense at this level of education (e.g., Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Šulová & Škrábová, 2012), it actually peaks there because as the child’s age increases, parental involvement gradually decreases.

Secondly, the answers to the question of the validity of assigning homework in primary education are often contradictory, leading either to their rejection or limitation (Cooper, 1989, 2007; Marzano & Pickering, 2007) or to highlighting and accentuating their functions (for example, Núñez et al., 2017; Bempechat, 2004).

And thirdly, the views of the teaching public on this topic are not very frequent in the professional discourse; teachers are neglected in this regard, while they are the ones who design the tasks (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Without the possibility to think about what their unquestionable routines relate to home preparation (North & Pillay, 2002).

³ For example, najmama.sk, eduworld.sk, dobraskola.sk, modrykonik.sk, aktuality.sk, etc.

⁴ Recently, the former Minister of Education’s call to join the “May without homework also at your school” challenge has sparked debate and media interest (Melicherová, 2023).

Theoretical Background

Home Preparation, Homework – Relationships and Functions

As a rule, every schoolchild undergoes daily preparation for the next school day, during which classes are held. The requirement for performing home preparation is exactly the home environment, i.e., place and time leaving the context of school classes. Home preparation includes relevant proceedings, tasks and activities of the child falling within the framework of preparation for classes, so it can be labelled as the pupil's home learning work (Skalková, 2007).

It integrates many activities, from ensuring (to cultivating) the child's physical and mental readiness to complete the next school day, through the preparation of aids, educational resources, etc. to learning and doing homework. It is homework, written or oral, that is most often the subject of the discourse. Homework generally concerns the quantity and focus of written exercises, transcriptions, calculations, filling in worksheets, drawing or stylistic works, projects, experiments, or observations. Even in primary education, homework can be oral (repeat the text, think over the solution, get information, finish the story, learn a poem, learn selected words by heart, etc.). However, it is often combined with written assignments⁵.

The question of the functions that homework should fulfil appears to be just as broad. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001, p. 181) declare within secondary education ten purposes related to “practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent–child relations, parent–teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment.” In elementary school, the teacher assigns it for revision, practice, preparation for knowledge verification, consolidation or expansion of the curriculum taught at school; its potential for applying acquired theoretical knowledge in practice should also be used. However, homework also has a strong personalization implication, especially in primary education. Van Voorhis (2004) writes about a child's personal development,

⁵ Maňák (1992) offers a comprehensive overview of how homework can be organised according to types and forms. Despite the time gap, his classification represents a meaningful system of how homework can be divided according to content, relation to the main phases of the teaching process and the degree of independence, relation to the individual and the group. He divides the forms of homework according to the prevailing method of implementation, according to the means and aids used, methods and from a time point of view.

with a core in supporting responsibility, learning habits, or establishing and following personal time management.

Homework Dilemmas and Persons Involved

Dilemmas that arise in connection with homework are most often led in the answers to the question of whether to assign homework. Following this, the participation of parents in its preparation is also controversial. Both of these aspects can be significantly influenced by the school's approach and then by the teacher's decision and the student's age, or the level of education. On the one hand, whether he/she will assign tasks regularly; on the other hand, what kind of tasks it will create and manage regarding the expected or, on the contrary, unexpected, or unacceptable involvement of parents in its completion.

The often-cited, more than a hundred-year history of homework (Gill & Schlossman, 2003) should also cover discourse about its validity. Supporters of homework talk about the correlation between a pupil's school achievements and intensive practice, acquiring the necessary skills, promoting self-discipline, managing personal time, etc. There is also established rhetoric that home preparation and homework have a positive effect on a child's/pupil's performance and learning, develop their personality, improve study skills and habits, have motivational potential (e.g., Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), provide children with time and experiences to develop positive beliefs about success as well as strategies for coping with mistakes, difficulties, and failures (Bempechat, 2004).

In this context, Ericsson et al. (2018) write about the empirical evidence supporting a relatively simple scheme: extended and deliberate practice is required for an individual to achieve expert performance in a specific domain. Moreover, there is little room left for that in primary schools (e.g., Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). A solid supporting argument appears to be that parental control and support, mediated through homework, can significantly help low-performing students or who are lagging behind (Núñez et al. 2017). Overall, it can be concluded that research and theory suggest that it is beneficial for learning and achievement under certain conditions and for particular groups of individuals (Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Questioning homework is often associated in the literature with the name H. Cooper, who even claims that the discourse about the utility of homework is one of the oldest and most controversial in education (Cooper, 2007). Opponents of homework extrapolate the topic when they use the metaphor

that homework can be a “sin against childhood” (Gill & Schlossman, 1996). Their criticism does not seem to emphasize the futility of home preparation; instead, it resonates with increased or disproportionate pupil load and stress, which are not “redeemed” by the expected results (Kralovec & Buell, 2001; Kohn, 2006).

It is also due to the thesis that homework can deprive children of time suitable for pleasant activities with family or friends (Galloway et al., 2013; Pressman et al., 2015). They can even potentially jeopardize the quality of their childhood (Holte, 2016) because a positivist educational concept is supported by uniformly assigned homework (Befring, 2012). It is supposed to support “one-way” frontal learning that does not reflect the child’s socio-emotional development, optimism, interests, or desire for freedom.

Parents in Home Preparation

A robust argumentation adding interesting observations to both balance scale plates also concerns parental involvement in the home preparation of the child/pupil mentioned earlier. The role of the family and the consequences of parental involvement or, conversely, disengagement is diverse, establishing colourful stories associated with homework.

One possibility is that teachers assign tasks and expect parents to be supportive and helpful to children in completing them. The family can handle this task with insight and even with the benefit of improving relationships between family members. Another way indicates bigger or smaller problems; homework often represents for parents a burden, conflict, time limitation, and even a threat to family relationships (e.g., Katz, Buzukashvili & Feingold, 2012).

Naturally, there is also the risk of disadvantaging children whose family background (its most vital variable is the education of the parents, e.g., Šubrt, 2010) is not inclined to such a strategy. However, today it is more likely to work with the thesis that not the education of the parents, but the quality of time spent together is essential for children. In England, for example, parents are strong players in the field of home preparation, their support is expected, and they are approached in this way; on the other hand, schools should also be obliged to help them methodically (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011).

Finally, learning at home, as one of the types of parental involvement in school events described by J. Epstein (2002), also assumes the provision of information on how to help parents with home preparation. The world-

famous model of parental involvement in the school of this American expert is also widely accepted in Europe. Teachers can also assign tasks, but with an emphasis on the independence of the child/pupil, without the assumed involvement of parents or other family members, i.e., independently of any support from them (Sayers et al., 2020), which should also emphasize the school's responsibility for the pupils' education.

Parents have different reasons for their involvement in the home education of their children. In addition to the approach mentioned above to teachers, also personal motivation. Academic functioning and children's prosperity at school appear to be the strongest instigator for parents (Núñez et al., 2017). Those parents whose beliefs and expectations are directed towards the student's performance were more likely to control it during homework; those who espouse mastery goals tend to provide autonomy-related support as the most beneficial one (Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Another scenario is written in the case that teachers do not assign tasks, and thus they are supposed to promote justice and equal opportunities for children/pupils. Here we work with the argument that teachers are responsible for education and parents cannot favour or compensate imbalances resulting from the school's activities, especially if differences in parental competence and impact on the child can be assumed (Dahlstedt, 2009).

An example is the Swedish teachers who refused homework because they were convinced of the fundamental threat to deeply rooted principles of equality (Sayers et al., 2021); they consciously ignored the positive practice associated with parental involvement. The policy of schools without homework is also known from the American environment (Carvalho, 2011; Tate, 2018). There the reason appeared to be less ideological and more practical: to reduce the number of tasks or to reduce the burden on children/pupils, which was also pointed out by parents. On the other hand, in such a direction, an underappreciation of the strong potential of home preparation for developing cooperation between school and family emerges.

Gill and Schlossman (1995, in Carvalho, 2011, p. 130) expressed this through a characteristic metaphor – “homework is the eyes and ears of the parent.” It is “the primary and sometimes the only communication channel informing parents about the school's academic mission.” Without homework, parents lose this opportunity.

Research

Objective and Questions

The research was conducted to uncover the homework narrative created and used by teachers in primary education. The main objective was further specified into three research questions:

- how teaching staff in primary education explain their approach to homework;
- what didactic prescriptions they declare in relation to homework;
- what position they attribute to pupils' parents in homework assignments.

Methods and Subjects

The content analysis method of products and written texts were used for data collection (Gavora, 2007). Following the previous semi-formal interviews, participants were asked to respond in writing to several key questions relating to different aspects of the school-family relationship. As the responses to the issue of home preparation were the most substantial, for the purposes of this study we decided to further elaborate on the responses to the question: *Homework in primary education – yes, or no?*

Thus, the choice of questions in writing reflected their preferences. Part of the task for the content analysis products included a recommendation on the appropriate length of texts (the call was for approximately 5 standard pages), the use of supporting arguments and the justification of the stated views, which was intended to develop the expected scope of these written products implicitly.

Primary education teachers, teachers' assistants and educators in school children's clubs were addressed. Eventually, 30 participants were involved in the research, who were also undergraduate and graduate students studying preschool and primary pedagogy in a part-time form. The researcher's links to the academic environment were used, so this was a deliberate selection characteristic of a qualitative research focus.

Data Collection and Analysis

Thirty-five documents were reviewed as part of the first stage, of which 30 met the requirement of a current work position of the author of the

document in primary education. The data corpus was eventually made up of 30 written products, each ranging in size from 9–12 thousand characters and showed a state of theoretical saturation.

Thematic analysis was used in the data processing and analysis. We assumed that it is a method used to identify, analyse, and report certain patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). After the first revision and re-reading of the texts, categories, or concepts, broader thematic areas were established as presumed thematic nodes also relevant for our investigation, in accordance with classical procedures of this type of analysis (Merten, 1995).

We were guided by the classic requirement that each category should be unambiguous, independent, and exclusive of the others (Merten, 1995). The categories were generated as a result of a reconnaissance of the broad theoretical and research field of the subject. After subsequent coding and grouping of descriptive and interpretive codes, we proceeded to editing, or creating modified themes, such as patterns, thematic foci emerging in the data, which were supposed to reflect the conditions of the Slovak school environment.

Ethics and Limitations

Generally applicable principles for collaborative research with human participants were observed in acquiring and evaluating the collected data. Their explicit consent was obtained for the processing and analysis of the written documents, and the rules of voluntary participation, fairness in data analysis and presentation of results were accepted.

Reflection on the limitations that may have constrained the quality of the research data is primarily directed towards the method of data collection and the selection of participants. The connection with the academic environment may have created some bias. We also acknowledge that participants may have felt pushed by the recommended range of documents. Accordingly, we do not claim completeness when defining the discourse on home preparation in connection with school; it is extremely extensive worldwide and directed more towards teachers. In the presented research, we also worked with the opinions of assistant teachers and educators in school clubs, who were also considered actors of pedagogical activities.

To increase the reliability of the data analysis and to reduce potential limitations, validation by one of the participants was used. After she reflected on it, some minor adjustments were made. However, in principle,

the perception and interpretation of the captured statements on the researcher's part could match the research participants' perceptions.

Results

The thematic analysis resulted in profiling a thematic network of four foci, the core themes characterising the homework narrative in primary education. Each of these themes encompassed several sub-themes. The remainder of the text is organised along these lines.

Theme 1: Diversity of Homework Discussion

According to the participants, the theme of homework is a strong and timeless topic, continuously being subject to discussion. The discussion stems from the fact that it is still being determined whether homework has its place in primary education or whether pupils do not need it. Its scope is also significant; experts and parents reflect on it, which is only the case for some primary education issues. The retrospective view of the participants went back to the beginning of the last century to an Italian Roberto Nevilis, who is said to have given homework as a punishment in 1905, thus basically establishing a negatively justified perspective; they did not go deeper into the history in their accounts.

The dynamics of the homework narrative are thus built on both the diversity of approaches to homework, which not infrequently generate controversy, "*strong emotions and firm opinions*" (T6), and a plurality of possible solutions. It was further developed through the personal experience of the participants, most often in genesis from the recent past ("when I was a child, a pupil") to the present, to the current experience ("when I am a teacher, a parent").

The first of these approaches ("me as a child, a pupil") was based on not questioning homework ("*it was a matter of course and we saw it as a normal part of our lives*" T30), underlining the child's autonomy and the stronger, authority-based position of the school and the teacher in education. It further establishes an accepting approach to homework in the present.

"As a child, I liked to write down my tasks. I learned through them, revised what was explained at school, and always did them on my own. My parents had no idea what I was learning, what we were going through.

They went out to work, and when they arrived, they kept working at home again...” (T4)

“When I was a pupil, homework was a normal part of school life, without anyone questioning it. What the teacher said was true. Parents and pupils respected this without a hint of disapproval.” (T5)

The shifting aspect accompanying current social events and educational conditions resonated in the second stream (“me as a teacher, a parent”).

“Times have changed, people are different, access to information is much easier than in the past, the world moves faster somehow. Leisure time, home preparation, teacher’s interpretation, family relationships, habits, upbringing, environment, all these things change.” (T13)

“Today, everything is different. The era has created a new parent and a new teacher. We live in a different, new, hurried age. We also look at the topic of homework differently, and we do not have the same views.” (T4)

Against the background of the transformations that seem to be a normal part of life, including school life, it was natural for the participants that the view of homework is also changing and evolving or that multiple perspectives, through which different viewpoints are represented, are being allowed in the spirit of postmodern ideas.

Theme 2: Homework? Yes.

Through the responses to the question by which participants entered the research, one could expect their approach to homework. Some did so explicitly; for others, the preference could be induced from the whole text. The power of tradition, personal experience and opinions have led to promoting a narrative that is ultimately positively inclined towards homework. It was not accepted without conditions but with the setting of a specific framework and the fulfilment of the requirements (on which Theme 3 is built) necessary for their implementation. As one teacher said, *“The question is not – homework – yes or no, but what kind and how much.”*

The participants’ accepting attitude towards the homework was rather based on the presented logic of “common” sense; in the argumentation, the participants did not explicitly rely on any authorities or relevant information sources but rather on their own actual knowledge, accepted and verified practices, based on beliefs, and culturally accepted assumptions. The classic reason that dominated the positive attitudes of educators was the way of practising and revising the teaching content covered in school. As well as activating, consolidating, and applying knowledge, it was also

intended to be a vision of developing other skills, such as how to learn, manage their time, build study habits and a responsible attitude, and utilize the potential of homework for self-awareness and motivation for further development.

“Moreover, it is quite obvious that homework activates and applies the knowledge learned at school, prepares the pupil for taking on new study material, shapes his/her work style and gives him/her time to reflect on the material independently and calmly.” (T30)

An extreme, seemingly logically justified viewpoint on the fact that homework *“is an important part of education,”* which should be a follow-up of classes, was the time allocation for teaching in primary education. According to the participants, its level was supposed to be the reason for the homework assignments.

“In some countries, pupils spend more time in school, but in Slovakia, primary education lasts 4 to 5 hours. If the number of lessons is increased, the teacher can cover everything needed for the year, even without homework. Nevertheless, would it be effective? Pupils would not be able to concentrate sufficiently for such a long time. When doing homework, the pupil changes the environment. Between leaving school and starting the homework, he or she relaxes, thus handling and understanding the task sooner and, of course, being more focused.” (T29)

According to our results, teaching staff also knew that assigned homework could be a medium used to interact and develop school-family relationships. However, first and foremost, it is an essential platform for forming a parent’s idea of their child’s learning abilities.

“Through homework, parents can find out what their children are learning at school, if they are going or not going well with the subject content and what progress they are already making. It is also an impulse for communication and for an exchange of views in which they can meet and come to an understanding.” (T12)

The argument against homework was almost without exception associated with the name of Harris Cooper and his questioning of the impact of homework on the effectiveness of primary school pupils’ learning. Thus, the participants knew this scientist and seemed to need to defend themselves with authority and relevant empirical evidence when disrupting established stereotypes. Even in the case of homework refusal, they inclined towards the familiar causes: undue burden on the pupil, their parents and family, stress, and fear of being reprimanded for not completing the

assignment. They also advocated limiting the room for leisure activities and consequently increasing negative attitudes towards school or worsening parent-child relationships, putting children at a disadvantage under the influence of the family environment in which homework is to be supervised. Homework refusal was not the dominant approach. A similarly highly negative attitude emerged among those who preferred it, ultimately allowing for some homework format.

“I consider homework to be a hangover from the past, which in today’s fast-paced times is running out of effect. Neither parents nor teachers are as much of an authority as they once were, and testing through homework as we know it doesn’t have the meaning we give it. I feel that homework is often just a kind of tradition from the teachers; it is made up promptly, is not objective, and is certainly not creative and fun as it should be for pupils aged 6–10.” (T2)

Homework refusal was not associated with reflection or discourse about how to replace the claimed benefits of homework to make up for its “lost” potential in everyday teaching.

Theme 3: Didactic Framework of Homework

The research participants moved in a school environment; therefore, we believe they did not infrequently use their accounts’ prescriptive level when seeking and clarifying various homework-related aspects.

These can be systematised into a concept structured through basic didactic questions: what, what content, and in what volume is to be presented in the homework; why, with what aim, when, and with what methods it is to be carried out; where and with what to work on it. They did not avoid recommendations reflecting the children’s abilities and dispositions. Based on this structure, it was possible to draw the architecture of the didactic concept of homework authored by primary education teachers as follows.

Homework should be set primarily in a reasonable amount with the potential to apply, develop, and practise what has been covered at school, never as new content that the teacher should have managed to cover in lessons. One participant’s statement frames this with a slogan: *“Going for quality rather than quantity.”*

The basic general requirement for homework is meaningfulness; a motivational and playful basis was also considered, which indirectly promoted a change in methods and, according to the participants’ views, the

use of the potential of the family environment. Therefore, the aim should be to formulate a task attractive to pupils, with a focus that reflects and elicits interest, ideally in the form of a game. The call for homework to be meaningful was perceived in the participants' perspectives as an ambition of the assignors; the required meaningfulness was also intended to meet the needs of the pupils or their parents. It should have affected not only each specific task but their overall approach.

"I know that teachers often give children homework, if only for the purpose of forcing them to at least look at the material, because a child won't open a book on their own at home. That is why it is crucial to give children assignments if they are already given, in such a way that they do them without feeling compelled, or at least that they understand the meaning and importance of what the preparation, the doing of homework entails. To play a game is good." (T28)

"Well-assigned tasks must be timesaving, clearly specified, and interesting. They should support liking for the subject. They should evoke joy in doing them." (T13)

The use of the imperative of an individual approach to pupils also emerged in the participants' interpretations of the homework. They pointed out that it is important to be aware that not all children have the same conditions at home for its implementation. They marginally also mentioned the integrated approach to pupils with certain limitations, which should also be evident in homework. In this context, they then considered and offered reflections on potential mandatory versus voluntary homework, a one-size-fits-all task versus personalized and differentiated tasks at different difficulty levels.

"However, in schools, we have children who have different conditions, whether they are favourable or not, they need to be perceived because every child is different and differently raised... it is important to guide children of different character and with different backgrounds..." (T27)

"Every child is different, distinct, special, and unique. Everyone should be treated individually. You cannot compare the sun with the moon. Everyone shines when it is their time. Some need help, some just need to be guided in the right direction and supervised, and some have no one." (T10)

According to the participants, the teacher's role in homework should be broader than it might seem. Within this quite idealised picture, the teacher is supposed to be the one who thinks it through perfectly beforehand (it is supposed to be part of the preparation), is creative in doing it, and

remembers to check it. He/she coordinates its assignment with other colleagues for a consistent approach and monitors its appropriate amount and communicates well with parents. Indirectly, but flagrantly, such an approach is represented in a kind of integrated form by an example of good practice from the pen of one participant:

“Pupils like to create, play, explore. So, if you can work creatively in the classroom, even the tasks can be a great experience for the pupil. In math class, they review geometric shapes. Outside is freshly fallen snow. The teacher gives the children a homework assignment – to make traces of a square, circle, rectangle, etc., in the snow. Then, they take pictures of these footprints and send them to the teacher. In one task, children revise geometric shapes and computer skills. Alternatively, build a snowman, take a picture, paste the picture into a PC, and describe the body parts in English. To interconnect several subjects – the child will be outside in the fresh air, move around, work on the computer at home, and write in English.” (T13)

The adjective “home” sets task fulfilment primarily to the home environment, with all the variables it contains. The potential involvement of parents as teachers in homework in the participants’ perspectives was hinted at by sporadic statements about tasks exclusively promoting pupils’ independence, i.e., without parental involvement, but in principle, this type of parental supervision was, according to the teachers, important and fit in with the didactic strategy of homework completion. As part of the individual approach to pupils, there should also be an opportunity to do homework in the after-school children’s club, following a survey of parental preferences. It also sounded like an option to accommodate parents who are time, or otherwise occupationally indisposed.

“The style of life has changed compared to the past. The pace is faster. Parents work longer hours, often coming home in the evening... Children attend clubs... If the children are in the club almost until the evening, they come home tired, so it is better to do their homework in the after-school club. Children work out tasks independently, thus encouraging their independence. The educator only checks their homework. On the other hand, when writing assignments at home, it’s the child’s time spent together with the parent...” (T13)

Participants confirmed that parents are essential actors in homework, as evidenced by the next theme.

Theme 4: Parent as a Home Teacher

As we have shown, parents fit into the scheme of home preparation and are a stable link in its didactic conception. We noticed a considerable need in participants to comment on home education more intensely, to reflect on the broader contexts of this strong parental role. Participants' perspectives on the role of parents in their children's homework preparation ranged from non-interference to opportunity or even obligation to participate in completing homework. On that continuum, the strongest position was the one in which the parent was supposed to be a partner with the school and the teacher, with legitimizing their share of responsibility for their children's education.

"... Parents should create appropriate conditions and an optimal environment for children to comply with their school duties. The teacher's prerequisite and expectation are the parent's cooperation in the spirit of encouragement, support, guidance, hint, and explanation of uncertainty. The task is intended for the pupil." (T5)

The teacher's view of parental involvement in home education, even without assignments given at school, appeared to be extreme. The apparent freedom of the parent in promoting the child's independence is preferable, because if the child does not get the assignment at school, the parent should automatically become the teacher. Teaching professionalism is supposed to be part of their parenting.

"Whether the teacher assigns homework or not, the parent should be the one who helps the child progress in education. If a child is given homework, the parent should let the child work on it in their own way. If a child does not have homework, it is in the parent's interest whether to engage in voluntary home education with the child or to leave their child's education solely to the teacher. After all, from an early age, the family is the child's 'first school,' and the parent is the child's 'first teacher.'" (T22)

The exception to parental non-participation in homework was the first year of primary school. If a parent had not been involved in homework, it did not, however, in the perspectives of educators, also mean the absence of homework in the extra-curricular life of the child/pupil.

"If homework is intended to support the child, it should be independent work. However, they are unquestionably important for the pupil. Parents should not interfere with its completion, although first-graders need and, in my opinion, welcome it." (T7)

As one of the participants said: *“Homework is a part of a household with school-age children.”* This viewpoint is dominant in the narrative. The concept of the household suggests that it is the private space of the whole family, and the home education of its youngest members should be fully integrated into it. It was then interesting to see what was expected of parents in completing homework, and what the nature of parental involvement in homework should be. In this context, we isolated three roles in which the participants situated the parents or what type of involvement they anticipated in them.

With this in mind, the parent should be primarily involved in homework as a *controller*, should create the conditions for performing homework, and should unconditionally check the homework after it has been completed:

“It would be challenging without parental control. A lot of kids don’t want to, and they need to be organized. At the very least, the parent should manage those tasks and check it at the end. After all, we have a common interest.” (T16)

Another type of involvement described the *parent* as a *supervisor*, who is supposed to accompany the development of tasks, directly supervise the child, motivate them, promptly assist, and support them:

“To find the time for the child, devote it to them even in view of their school duties. It is ideal to support them, to be there for them; after all, the child needs to have support at home. But the most important thing is some supervision, guiding the child and helping with the solution.” (T25)

Moreover, finally, the parent as a *home tutor* is to assist in completing tasks, supplement the explanation, or extend the curriculum with examples, own opinions, methods, and experiences:

“Some children don’t understand everything in class right away, and the teacher doesn’t have the time and with today’s class sizes, nor the opportunity to always sort everything out with every pupil. Nevertheless, the parent at home has room for this if he or she takes the time and knows that it is important for his or her child. Why couldn’t they, because they know their child best, still go over everything with him, and if he didn’t understand something, go over it with him afterwards. To the best of their ability, knowledge and ideas.” (T19)

It has been shown that teaching staff in primary education assume a certain professionalism of parents and expect a reasonable degree of their involvement in homework elaboration. These types of involvement do not

represent a strictly defined activity focus; the type in question was about highlighting a key activity of the parent.

Summary and Discussion

In the introduction, we indicated that the narrative format was intended to enable the text to conceptualise the perspectives, experiences or knowledge articulated, presented, shared, or exchanged by the actors involved. The narrative about homework in primary education in the Slovakian context developed against the background of teachers', after-school club educators' and teachers' assistants' testimonies, was saturated with four key themes: the discursive potential of this issue, teachers' positive attitudes towards homework, the design of homework fulfilling a particular didactic framework, and finally the role of parents in homework.

The discourse on homework in the first theme might suggest an admitted transformation of perspectives on this issue over time. The search for answers to emerging questions and considering other perspectives signals that participants are capturing the diversity of approaches of persons involved in doing homework, who may have a different understanding of their functions or meanings. Personal experience, on the one hand, and openness, on the other, establish the variability of this topic and communication about it, as contemplated by H. Cooper (2001) mentioned above. Thus, participants feel that there is an ongoing discourse, similar to Dolean and Lervag (2022), who return to the older thesis that the utility of homework and its impact on academic achievement has been discussed for more than 100 years. Understandably, an insight into the literature also offers different answers. As Fan and colleagues (2017) write, even review studies usually present research findings showing both positive and negative impacts on pupil success in school. Accordingly, the dynamics of the discussion on the issue of homework is evident in the participants' responses to the present research more inclined towards their acceptance.

The key theme of this discussion is to address the dilemma of homework assignments. As a result, this means taking a viewpoint on whether homework belongs in primary education or not. In the second theme, it became clear that homework has its place in the educational processes from the perspectives of Slovak educators. A relatively strong optimistic viewpoint carries elements of using culturally situated common sense as a cultural construct guided even unconsciously, with the underpinning of tradition,

locally situated customs, and experiences, as Sayers and colleagues (2020) write about in the case of English and Swedish teachers.

The comparison of the Slovak primary teachers' approaches to homework can be based on the situation in England and Sweden. While the English teachers and some of the Swedish colleagues (the whole English cohort and half of the Swedish cohort studied) had a positive, accepting approach to homework based on revising routine skills, the other Swedish teachers were convinced of a similar approach to be suppressing pupil equality (Sayers et al., 2021). However, only some participants from Slovakia, whose opposing viewpoint corresponded with the Scandinavians' rejection, did not work with the concept of equality but rather attacked the nature, setting, focus, and types of homework itself. Even those Swedish teachers who had the ambition to assign homework, administered tasks that could be completed by children without any parental support (Sayers et al., 2021), which was intended to prevent potential disadvantages for pupils. Similarly, a tiny proportion of primary teachers in Norway also thought in terms of not assigning homework (Holte, 2016). Educators in Slovakia raised a comment on the potential disadvantages of pupils in connection with designing homework. This should be set up to avoid disadvantages, for example, through voluntary or individualised assignments.

The primary reason for assigning the tasks was, in the narrative of Slovak educators, to practise and revise what was taught in school. Holte (2016) also arrived at similar results; Norwegian primary teachers made similar arguments in interviews, talking about the revision of what pupils had learnt. Participants in the present research almost unanimously considered homework as a "must-do," but they were not alone in taking a similar approach. This has already been indicated in the theoretical background. However, Holte (2016) proposes to rethink such an approach in this context, referring to Hadwin and Tevaarwerk's (2004) study review of a hundred articles on the study skills of pupils developed in homework. They found that the vast majority were related to time management, reading techniques, test preparation, and learning note-taking techniques. According to Holte (2016), this indicates considerations around the utility of such skills for the pupil and their future working life. In response, this brings us back to the nature of homework again. What the homework should look like was the focus of the third theme. Within it, the homework setting was prescribed.

A homework design fulfilling a particular didactic framework was used to interpret the third theme. The didactic use of homework remains a controversial practice despite its long history (Bempechat, 2004).

According to the data collected, homework should be comprehensible and given in a reasonable amount. This resonates in the narrative as a necessity. Recent research by Dolean and Lervag (2022) has confirmed that a one-size-fits-all approach to assigning homework is not possible – a moderate amount of homework can be beneficial for primary school pupils, and this effect may be more significant if the task is directed towards extending existing knowledge in terms of its application.

The ideal homework in primary education, according to the Slovak scenario, should have a motivational potential, should have elements of play, attractive for the pupil, and consider his/her family and personal situation, which can be performed through voluntary and personalized assignments and diversified methods of its completion. Behind everything, there should be a thoughtful approach of the teacher, who creatively prepares it and negotiates with other stakeholders, teachers, and parents. Similarly, English teachers, for example, run workshops and consultation evenings for good collaboration with parents and send them a maths pack with specific aids or a weekly newsletter (Sayers et al., 2021). Thus, if parental involvement is expected in their system, good conditions are also created for it, which was not considered by our participants.

Parental involvement in homework in the fourth theme emerged as an essential aspect of teaching staff in Slovakia. In addition to the disadvantage of pupils depending on the quality of the family environment, there is another line of discourse around this issue. This ranges from advocating parental involvement as a positive practice leading to increased pupil school achievement to descriptions of this support representing time-consuming activities not infrequently associated with family discomfort, anxiety, and conflicts (Cooper et al., 2001; Pomerantz et al., 2005). The teachers in Slovakia were also aware of these imbalances, yet they agreed to connect with parents, they saw their solution in the optimal design and planning of homework; however, they did not consider the parents' beliefs in the reality of creating homework. Parents' beliefs related to children's autonomy may be more productive than those related to their performance (e.g., Sayers et al., 2023).

From another Sayers and colleagues' (2021) research, we know that English teachers who, like their Slovakian counterparts, viewed parents as supplementary teachers, communicate in a directive and instructional manner. In contrast, Swedish teachers who did not have these expectations, communicate informally. The participation of Slovak parents was also expected in the homework. However, the communication that should have

been directed to them from the teachers should have been rather informative, implemented primarily through the children or as part of other initiatives of the school-family agenda. No indications were noted pointing towards any planned and targeted interaction.

According to the results, the parent is no longer considered a pedagogical (Průcha, 1999); on the contrary, he/she is supposed to be involved in his/her child's education, just in the home environment. Participants saw their involvement as that of a controller, supervisor, and home tutor, where a certain degree of professionalism was assumed. Núñez and colleagues (2017) also present dimensions of parental involvement in homework, one of which is controlling, which they interpret as parental pressure on children to complete tasks; the other is to be supportive, as parents' help in supporting pupils' self-guidance or autonomy development in homework.

The messages shaped by the neoliberal climate represent parenting as a relentless effort to provide the best and most suitable environment for children. It is meant to be a complex mixture of good decisions, actions, and emotions because the power and success of parenting assume a causal relationship between parents' actions and children's outcomes (Vincent, 2017). Fargion (2023) refers to this situation as parental determinism, according to which parents are solely responsible for childrearing. They are supposed to be competent and prepared for parenting. The results showed that even in the conditions of Slovakia, according to teachers, parents should be significantly involved in their children's education, not only in terms of ensuring a relevant psycho-social and physical environment, but also through direct activity and acceptance of responsibility and their share of homework.

Apart from the neoliberal mission, which Kaščák and Pupala (2012) pointed out a decade ago in the context of home preparation, the peculiarities of the Slovak educational environment, including home preparation, are also the result of previous development. Nevertheless, the rather fragile professional identity of teachers, but also the relationships with parents themselves. Both variables naturally contextualize their attitudes towards homework as well. Before the change of political circumstances in 1989, the state directed the school-family relationship with its supervision of the family on the one hand and its filtering of parents' possible contribution to their children's education on the other (cf. Průcha, 1999).

Through compulsory homework, the school and, therefore, the state had the opportunity to intervene in families or at least exert a kind of "silent"

pressure. In the 1990s, attitudes towards parents and pupils' families changed dramatically. Teachers and schools had to "switch gears," open up to families, gradually involve parents, and accept them in a level of expected partnership. Such transformation only slowly left the compulsory extension of the state into families, and today, even according to the results of the present research, some remnants persist in teachers' attitudes. In many cases, this clashes with the client approach of parents to schools and teachers, resulting in strained relationships between the two parties. Teachers' perceptions of their own professional identity did not and still do not contribute to their solution. The latter was first doubted by the almost 60-year separation of the components of teacher competence (professional, subject, and pedagogical dimensions), then by legislative changes and the nature of higher teacher education, which was not conceived based on any of the recognised conceptions of teacher training (Transformation, 2012). Although it is possible, regarding the research methodology, to consider elements of teachers' collective professional identity (according to Bačová, 2008), the results tend to indicate that the use of homework is fully embedded in it for the time being.

Conclusion

Home preparation and homework are part of education in most school systems (Godall, 2021). In Slovakia, the homework narrative in primary education is built on the promotion of homework, with the teacher's expectation of parental involvement in its completion. It includes prescription, considering, above all, the appropriate amount, attractiveness, individual approach, and clarity of the homework for its actors. According to our results, primary education teachers in Slovakia are identified with the idea of parental participation in the home preparation of their children, and with a relatively clear idea of the design of homework, they also interestingly touch in the semantics of school-family relations, or their own didactic strategies.

There are many themes for further research on the issue of home preparation and homework in particular. In our context, research on homework in primary education could be directed towards uncovering the perspectives of other homework actors, parents, and children themselves, and the contexts that influence them, somehow enter into them. For example, the issue of homework for underachieving pupils is raised. It would be helpful to monitor the relationship between homework and individual subjects, etc.

Analyses of the broader contexts of the issue of home preparation of pupils for classes focus on studying its place in education, especially with an emphasis on the analysis of its impact on the educational outcomes of children/pupils. A second vital area of this issue arises through the lens of school-family relations or the analysis of the family background for its implementation. Children in primary school have one foot in the family and one foot in the school (Holte, 2016). Homework can be a tool, a bridge that connects the two spheres and makes it easier for the child to function in this position.

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