

Policy vs Practice: Homework in Hong
Kong EFL Primary Classrooms

Benjamin Luke Moorhouse
Lecturer, Faculty of Education, HKU
Doctoral Candidate, University of Exeter, UK

Outline

- ◆ Examine the dominant position of homework in Hong Kong primary EFL classrooms
- ◆ Explore Hong Kong government guidelines on homework
- ◆ Discuss cultural, historical and social factors
- ◆ Suggest ways to better align practice and guidelines

- ◆ “It’s an **inhumane** way to live... [the children] go to school, **do their homework after school, continue doing their homework after dinner, prepare for tests, go to bed, and the next day it repeats all over again.** The system forces the school to put pressure on teachers, the teachers put pressure on the parents, the parents put pressure on the children, and it’s **an endless loop...** the TSA should be cancelled! No more students should kill themselves because of school pressure! Please let them have a happy childhood and have time to play!” (Joe Wong Ting-ting comment on Anti-TSA Facebook group, Quoted on HKFP, 20th October, 2015)

Dominant position of Homework

My experience in practice

- ♦ Observed teachers and students burdened with high levels of homework and marking
 - ♦ Students taking home 6-10 pieces of homework every day
 - ♦ Teachers marking 50-100 pieces of homework every day
 - ♦ Teacher and students conflict over uncompleted and poorly completed homework
 - ♦ Large amount of class time given over to homework related activities – setting / writing in homework diaries / giving feedback / correcting / checking

My 2015 study on English teachers' homework practices

Research Questions

1. What are the homework practices of English teachers in Hong Kong primary schools?
2. Do these practices align with the Curriculum Development Council's definition of 'meaningful homework'?

Participants

- ♦ 89 English teachers from 22 primary schools

Method

- ♦ Written questionnaire

Findings

- ◆ 88% teachers give **2-3** pieces each day
- ◆ 97% teachers give students **one day** to complete it
 - ◆ Teachers' marking = 2 pieces x 2 classes x 27 students = 108 pieces each day
 - ◆ Students' homework load = 2 English + 2 Chinese + 2 Maths + 1 GS = 7 pieces each day
- ◆ Most students are expected to spend **20-40 minutes** on English homework **every night**
- ◆ Most teachers **do not coordinate** the amount of homework with other teachers of the same class
- ◆ A third of English teachers spend **11-20 minutes of class time** each day on homework related activities

Purpose and Type

- ◆ The majority of teachers set homework so **students can practice what they were already taught in lessons**
- ◆ Most homework tasks focus on **practicing grammar and vocabulary skills**
- ◆ Often this homework comes from textbook supplementary books, such as, grammar practice books or workbooks.

Other studies in Hong Kong

- ◆ Cheung, Hong, & Ip (2000) – Senior primary students in Hong Kong spend 2 hours per day on homework
 - ◆ Homework - boring, difficult, caused anxiety and conflict with parents

- ◆ Tam (2009) – Half of primary students questioned in study spent more than 1 hour each day on assignments and revision
 - ◆ High compared to other countries
 - ◆ “Homework continues to be a crucial part of learning...” (p.223)

**What does the research
literature say about
homework?**

Good News

- ◆ Studies in American colleges and high schools have found positive effects on student attainment (Keith et al.:1993; Doyle & Barber (1990))
- ◆ OECD (2014) correlation between homework time and student performance in Mathematics
 - ◆ HK had highest correlation in the PISA – 33 points per extra hour of homework
- ◆ However, link between homework and performance has been disputed – research has focused on subjects that prioritises their quantitative dimension (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2013)

Bad News

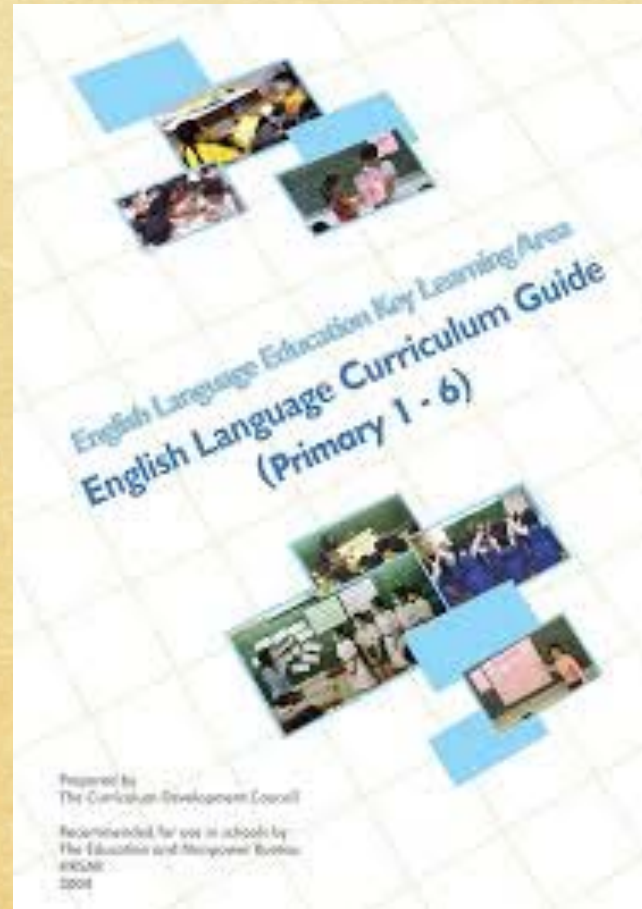
- ◆ Excessive homework has been linked to lack of interest (Tam, 2009), reduced efficacy and a negative effect on students' academic performance (Cooper, 2001)
- ◆ Farrow et al. (1999) study in UK on homework and attainment found “those pupils who did very regular homework made less progress than those who did homework infrequently”
- ◆ Longer students spend on homework → decreased effectiveness (Kohn, 2006)

- ♦ BMJ (1927) – “Excessive homework dulls the mind” (p. 846)
- ♦ Majority of literature argues against the ‘more is better’ approach (Pendergrass, 1985; Farrow et al., 1999, Cooper, 2007, Good & Brophy, 2003)
- ♦ Cooper (2007) suggests that research findings support a “10-minute rule”

Homework with young learners

- ◆ Homework in primary grades is under-researched (Cooper, 2001; Rudman, 2014) and positive effects are less apparent (Muhlenbruck, et al. 2000; Hallam, 2004)
- ◆ ‘no gains’ on young learners academic performance (Cooper, 1989; Farrow, Tymms & Henderson, 1999)
- ◆ Young learners are less able to cope with distractions, less effective study habits, cannot prioritise their homework (Cooper & Valentine, 2001)

Government Guidelines



- ♦ Part of HK's education reform “focuses on the use of homework in **consolidating learning, deepening understanding** and **constructing knowledge**” (Tam, 2009, p. 213)
- ♦ Three core **government** documents give **guidance on homework** in primary school (CDC, 2002; CDC, 2004; CDC, 2014), one specifically relates to English – English Language Curriculum Guide (CDC, 2004)

- ♦ The CDC documents provide guidance and suggestions on – **quantity, purpose, type, differentiation and feedback on homework** (CDC, 2002; CDC 2004)
- ♦ school-based English **homework policy** (CDC, 2014)
- ♦ CDC documents take a **positive view of homework** seeing it as as an “important component of the learning process” (CDC, 2014, Ch 8 p.1)
- ♦ They emphasis the need for ‘**meaningful homework**’ that is ‘**well-designed**’ (CDC, 2002, Ch.8 p.1)
- ♦ Warn that homework can be ‘**easily abused**’ (CDC, 2002, Ch.8. p. 1)

◆ Quantity of Homework

- ◆ Lower primary no more than **30 minutes** of written homework each day
- ◆ Upper primary no more than **60 minutes** of written homework each day (CDC, 2002)
- ◆ Removed from CDC, 2014 document – “Schools can exercise discretion in deciding on amount of homework...” (CDC, 2014, p.363)
- ◆ The CDC suggest teachers **‘coordinate’** with other teachers of the same class so not to **‘overburden’** students (CDC, 2002)
- ◆ Focus is on quality rather than quantity

◆ Purpose of Homework

- ◆ The CDC documents suggest a number of purposes for homework:
 - ◆ **Consolidating** and **extending the learning** outside formal class time (CDC, 2004)
 - ◆ **Practice skills** learned in one setting at one time (school) and in another setting at a different time (home)” (CDC, 2004)
 - ◆ **Apply skills** they have acquired (CDC, 2004)
 - ◆ Construct knowledge, deepen understanding, make connections (CDC, 2002)
 - ◆ **Inspire** students and encourage them to **want** to do homework (CDC, 2002)

◆ Type of Homework

- ◆ The documents recommend, “**a variety of approaches** and styles can be used for designing homework to **motivate students**” (CDC, 2002, Ch.8 p.3).

Teachers' homework practices are **not aligned** with CDC guidelines on 'meaningful homework' or the research literature on homework

- ♦ **Students do more than the CDC suggested** 30 minutes for lower primary and 60 minutes (CDC, 2002)
- ♦ **Teachers may struggle** to select meaningful tasks in a short period of time and give meaningful feedback on students' homework tasks.
- ♦ Teacher's practices go against the findings in previous 'homework research' that **more is not always better** particularly with young learners (Pendergrass, 1985; Farrow et al., 1999; Cooper, 2007, Good & Brophy, 2003)
- ♦ This quantity could lead to **demotivation** (Cooper, 2001), **less interest** (Tam, 2009) and possibly a **negative effect on their academic performance** (Farrow et al., 1999).

- ◆ Teachers have **narrow purpose** for giving homework
- ◆ The emphasis placed on grammar and vocabulary could be due to **external pressures**, such as, parental expectations and assessments (Tam & Chan, 2011).
- ◆ **Narrow variety** of homework tasks = low student motivation (CDC, 2004; Tam & Chan, 2011)

Why aren't schools
following the government
guidelines?

1. Practice makes Perfect and 'Backwash'

2. Working Hard = Success

3. Keeping up with the Saints

1. Practice makes Perfect and 'Backwash'

- ◆ English is treated like other subjects , such as Mathematics with **'fixed knowledge'** that students can be taught and mastered.
- ◆ **Cycle** – teacher teaches something from textbook / students practice it at school / practice again for homework / then get assessed on it
- ◆ **English gets broken-down** into easily teachable, practicable, and assessable parts ('micro-parts of language')
- ◆ Very regular assessments (tests, dictations, exams) lead to 'backwash'
- ◆ Homework's role is **consolidation** and practice and little more

2. Working Hard = Success

- ◆ Parent, students, and teachers **expect homework to be given** and need students to ‘work hard’ (Hu, 2002; Ebbeck, 1996)
- ◆ A good teacher is one who expects students to work hard and sets homework regularly (Corno, 1996)
- ◆ Parents expect schools to “**stretch**” pupils (Adamson and Morris, 1998, p.201)
- ◆ “Chinese people believe that **intensive drilling and practice** through homework assignments enhances children’s academic performance” (Tam & Chan, 2011, p.361)
- ◆ Learning has only been achieved once it has been written down – visible evidence that teaching and ‘learning’ has been done
- ◆ Chinese people believe education is the best way to social and economic advancement (Salili et al, 2003)

3. Keeping up with the Saints

- ◆ **Competitive education system** - schools under pressure to attract good students and increase grades (Adamson & Morris, 2010) and not die!
- ◆ **Parents place pressure on schools** to raise grades and increase chance they will get places at prestigious secondary schools (Tam & Chan, 2010)
- ◆ Lead them to **'emulate' prestigious primary schools** – 'keeping up with the Saints'
 - ◆ Top schools traditionally give a large amount of homework
 - ◆ students often have resources to cope with the homework load

“Everyone gives homework so we have to give homework, too” and **“It has always been this way”**

Suggestions

- ◆ Need to **re-valuate** the purpose of homework and ensure school-based policy and teachers follows CDC guidelines
- ◆ Provide a **variety** of meaningful homework tasks that account for the needs of the students in the school
- ◆ **Reduce quantity** to allow teachers time to set 'meaningful homework' that is well designed
- ◆ **Provide training** on giving homework - including teacher-training programmes

Questions for discussion

- ◆ What other factors could account for the gap between policy and practice?
- ◆ How can the EDB better ensure schools are following the guidelines and implementing 'best practice' in their homework policy?
- ◆ How can teacher-training programmes better prepare and support teachers' homework practices?
- ◆ What research should I undertake to help improve the learning experience of young EFL learners regarding homework?

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