

Congruence between teachers' and parents' role construction and expectations about their involvement in homework

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This study explores individual, family and student factors in relation to parents' and teachers' role construction and mutual expectations regarding homework. Survey data were collected in spring 2005 from parents and teachers at both the elementary and the secondary levels. Parents' positive attitudes toward homework are associated with more perceived responsibilities on their part. Contrary to parents at the secondary level, parents of elementary students with learning difficulties, as compared to parents of students who succeed well, do not believe as much that "checking homework and making sure that it is done" is part of their parental role. There is no difference among teachers regarding the understanding of their role in homework, regardless of attitude and work experience. At both the primary and secondary levels, teachers have higher expectations of the parents' role in homework than parents do. Obviously, more work needs to be done related to the activities parents think that they are responsible for with respect to homework. Relative incongruence between parents' role construction in homework and teachers' expectations about their role should not be overlooked if we are to promote more positive family-school relationships.

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Introduction

In the past decade, there has been a wealth of literature about homework - what motivates parents to become involved in their child's homework, the usefulness of homework and the relationship between homework and school achievement (Cooper, 1989, 2001; Cooper, Lindsay and Nye, 2000; Cooper, Nye and Greathouse, 1998; Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Xu, 2004; Xu and Corno, 1998;). The concept of "homework" can be defined as tasks that are required by teachers and conducted outside class hours (Cooper, 1989, 2001). Parental involvement in homework is associated to student skills and attitudes conducive to student achievement and school learning (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, Dejong and Jones, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins and Closson, 2005).

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model of the Parental Involvement Process (1997), parents become involved in their child's education based on their role construction, their self-efficacy, and their perception of invitations to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

In this study, we are interested particularly in role construction. When applied to homework, parental role construction refers to the activities that parents consider their responsibilities regarding their child's and adolescent's homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, 2005). Parental role construction, one of the predictors of parental involvement, is part of their cultural capital (Coleman, 1988) along with their social networks (Carreon, Drake and Barton, 2005; Sheldon, 2002). Parents' understanding of their responsibilities and of the appropriate help during homework is influenced partly by their own experience and the expectations of others (teachers', other parents, etc.) (Dodd and Konzal, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). A number of studies have shown that parents with lower

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income, less education and a non-traditional family background are less involved at home than those who have more education, a higher income and come from traditional families (Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Dornbusch and Ritter, 1992; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994).

Moreover, there appears to be a relationship between parents' own attitudes toward homework and that of their child (Cooper et al., 1998). How do contextual factors and attitudes relate to the types of activities parents consider their responsibilities with respect to homework? Research shows that less successful students in primary school devote more time to homework (Epstein, 1986), whereas at the secondary level, they do homework hastily or not at all (Van Voorhis, 2001). Boys are less likely than girls to complete homework (Deslandes, 2005). To what extent do these student characteristics determine the range of activities that parents consider important regarding homework? These activities usually include simple efforts ranging from checking of homework to making sure the child understands the work he has to do at home (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

As for their expectations toward the teachers, some parents have reported not having enough information about the purpose of assignments or about appropriate helping strategies or about teachers' expectations of their own roles in helping with homework (Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee and Mellencamp, 1994). Needless to say that most parents have limited knowledge of professional practice (Shumow, 1997). Their expectations of the teacher's role rely mainly on their experience with previous teachers or on other parents' experience with different teachers.

For teachers, homework remains a very widespread pedagogical practice, even though research has yielded mixed results on its contribution to school achievement (Cooper, 2001). Teachers generally agree on the value of homework, but very little is known about their role construction in relation to it. The comprehension of their role appears to be also influenced by their past experience, professional training and the expectations of pertinent others (students' parents, school principals, colleagues, etc.) (Biddle, 1986). Teachers too have formed their own mental models of what parents should do (Deslandes and Morin, 2002). However, they do not always take the time to say what they expect from them (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001). If expectations are not verbalized and discussed, they are more likely to become sources of home-school conflict and then conduct to tensions and frustrations between parents and teachers (Baker, 2000; Dodd and Konzal, 2000; Lawson, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lightfoot, 1998).

It is thus a question of bridging cultures and expectations (Trumbull, Fisch, Greenfield and Quiroz, 2001).

This paper builds upon the perspectives of both parents and teachers to examine their understanding of their responsibilities and of their mutual expectations on the subject of homework. We hope to gain an insight into the influence of contextual and individual characteristics that may help shape parents' and teachers' role construction in this regard. We addressed two research questions: 1) What individual, family and student factors are related to parents' and teachers' role construction and mutual expectations regarding homework? 2) To what extent is there congruence between parents' and teachers' role construction and mutual expectations with respect to homework? A well balanced relationship where parents assume responsibilities and understand teachers' expectations regarding their role in homework and where teachers assume responsibilities and understand parents' expectations of them is obviously of paramount importance to family-school collaboration. If parents know what to do and what teachers expect from them, they will be involved with homework more effectively and their child will be more likely to complete his/her homework and develop skills conducive to school achievement. Likewise, if teachers know what parents expect from them, they will be more likely to act accordingly enhancing positive parent-teacher relationships and student achievement.

Method

Participants

It is important to mention that in the Province of Quebec, compulsory elementary schooling lasts for 7 years (kindergarten and grade 1 through 6) and secondary schooling for 5 years (secondary 1 through secondary 5). The participants of this study are part of the first wave of a broader three-year research conducted on homework (2004-07). At the elementary level, they consisted of 467 parents (grade levels 1 and 4) and 48 of their children's teachers working in 20 different Quebec schools. At the secondary level, the sample included 344 parents (equivalent to grades 7 and 9) and 23 of their adolescents' teachers working in 6 different schools. Most of the participant parents at both the elementary and secondary levels were females (88.9% and 82.3% respectively). As for teachers, exactly 93.8% were females at the elementary level and 60.6% were males at the secondary level. See Table 1 for other characteristics of the samples.

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Measurements

Student Characteristics. Parents were asked to report on the child's gender (0=girls; 1=boys) and level of achievement, varying from 1, "has learning difficulties" (1) to "succeeds very well" (3).

Family Characteristics. Parents' education level: each parent was assigned to one of the 3 categories: (1) secondary level or lower; 2) Cegep level (equivalent to college level) and 3) university level. The family structure had 2 categories: (1) traditional families or both biological parents, or (2) non- traditional families (single parents, step-parents and others).

Teacher Characteristics. Gender and school experience: teachers were asked to select a response between 0 to 5 years (0) to 26-35 (3). Because of the small size of the two samples, years of experience variable was recoded in order to have 3 levels.

Parents' and Teachers' Attitudes Toward Homework. (Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye, 1998). Parents and teachers were asked to answer the following question: "How do you feel about homework? The answers ranged from "don't like it at all" (score 0) to "like it very much" (score 4). The answers were recoded in 0 to 3.

Parents' Role Construction regarding Homework.

Adaptation of Parents' Structuring and Activities related to Homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1999 and HPI Homework Process Inventory Cooper et al., 2000). The 10-item scale for parents at the elementary level (alpha=.88) (see Table 1) and the 9-item scale at the secondary level (alpha=.81) measure parents' beliefs about their responsibilities regarding their child's homework. Role expectations for parents measures teachers' beliefs about the responsibilities of their students' parents concerning homework. Parallel questionnaires were used for parents' role construction and teachers' expectations.

Teachers' Role Construction regarding Homework.

This instrument was inspired by the literature (e.g., Cooper, 2001; Valz, 1999) and measures teachers' beliefs about their obligations regarding their students' homework. It includes 8 items at both the elementary (alpha=.83) and the secondary levels (alpha=.82). Role expectations for teachers assesses parents' beliefs about what teachers should do in relation to homework. Parallel instruments were employed for teachers' role construction and parents' expectations.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Samples (in Percentages)

		Parents Elementary Level	Secondary Level	Teachers Elementary Level	Secondary Level
Participant Gender	Female	88.9	82.3	93.8	60.6
	Male	11.1	17.7	6.3	30.4
Years of Experience	Less than 5			6.3	17.4
	6-15			41.7	47.8
	16-25			33.3	26.1
	26-35			18.8	8.7
Family Structure	Traditional	65.8	62.5		
	Non traditional	34.2	37.5		
Education Level	Secondary or lower	32.8	45.2		
	College (Cegep)	34.6	27.4		
	University	32.6	27.4		
Student Gender	Female	48.8	52.0		
	Male	51.2	48.0		
Student Achievement	Learning difficulties	28.6	34.6		
	Succeeds well	31.6	30.5		
	Succeeds very well	39.8	34.9		
Attitudes toward homework	Don't like homework or indifferent to it	12.2	17.1	2.2	9.1
	Like it a little	41.2	40.7	32.6	50
	Like it very much	46.6	42.2	65.2	40.9

Procedures

All data were collected from survey respondents in spring 2005 at the same time the Quebec Teachers Union was applying pressure during negotiations for a new collective convention. This explains why we were able to approach only a small sample of teachers. Consent forms were signed by all participants, and included parents' authorization for their children's participation. At the elementary level, the final return rate was 40% for parents and their children and 90% for teachers (who had been approached); at the secondary level, the return rate was 25% for parents and their adolescents and 35% for teachers.

Results

Means and standard deviations of parents' and teachers' responsibilities with respect to homework are presented in Appendix 1 and 2.

To answer the two questions, univariate analyses (ANOVA) and t-tests were computed using SPSS. When the items within a scale were considered separately in t test, only results significantly lower than $p < .01$ were retained. Unequal variance was also taken into account.

Question 1. What individual, family and student factors are related to parents' and teachers' role construction and mutual expectations regarding homework?

Parent's Role Construction and Teacher's Expectations

At the elementary level, t tests and ANOVA results indicate no difference in the global understanding of the parental role based on family structure, parents' education and child's gender. As for the attitudes toward homework, the ANOVA results for the global score, $F(2,454) = 22.165$, $p < .000$ and the results on all of the items are significantly lower for parents who don't like homework at all or are indifferent compared with parents who like it very much (attitude toward homework) ($p < .001$). The more positive the parents' attitude is, the more seriously they take their responsibilities. When individual items are considered, compared with parents of students who do well in school, those of children with learning difficulties consider it less important to check homework, $F(2,458) = 4.732$, $p < .009$, to ensure that it's completed, $F(2,460) = 8.671$, $p < .000$, and to closely monitor the child's progress, and $F(2,459) = 5.213$, $p < .006$.

At the secondary level, parents have the same understanding of their role regardless of family structure.

The more positive a parent's attitude is, more the parent sees ensuring the adolescent understands his/her homework as part of his/her responsibilities $F(2,326) = 4.784$, $p < .009$. When the adolescent is a male as compared to a female, parents believe more that it is their responsibility to decide when to do homework, $t(1,330) = 2.795$, $p < .005$, to check the work, $t(1,335) = 2.942$, $p < .003$, and to make sure it's done, $t(1,332) = 3.412$, $p < .001$. As a whole, parents feel that their responsibilities are greater when the adolescent is a male $t(2,326) = 2.795$, $p < .005$. When school achievement is low, parents feel less responsible $F(2,339) = 6.301$, $p < .002$. More precisely, they think less that it is their duty to sit with their adolescent when he/her does his/her homework, $F(2,329) = 9.039$, $p < .000$, to decide when he/she should do his/her homework, $F(2,329) = 8.498$, $p < .000$, to check his/her homework, $F(2,334) = 5.985$, $p < .003$, to explain what he/she has to do, $F(2,328) = 4.928$, $p < .008$, and to monitor his/her progress closely, $F(2,338) = 4.405$, $p < .01$. No interactions were observed between sex and school achievement.

On their part, primary and secondary school teachers have the same expectations concerning parental involvement with homework regardless of teaching experience and attitude toward homework.

Teacher's Role Construction and Parent's Expectations

At both the elementary and secondary levels, results indicate there is no difference among teachers regarding the understanding of their own role in homework, regardless of attitude and work experience. In primary school, parents' global expectations of the teacher regarding homework are not significantly different in function of parental education and student achievement (see also Deslandes et al., 2006). Nevertheless, they tend to be higher for non traditional families $t(2,460) = 2.252$, $p < .025$.

In secondary school, more highly educated parents, $F(2,325) = 8.509$, $p < .000$ expect more than other parents that the teacher will give students feedback about the homework they have done. Parents with positive attitudes toward homework, $F(2,328) = 4.481$, $p < .01$, are more numerous to believe that the teacher should clearly define the purpose of homework. Less educated parents think that it's the teacher's responsibility to be aware of students' family conditions regarding homework, $F(2,328) = 9.372$, $p < .000$.

Question 2: To what extent is there congruence between parents' and teachers' role construction and mutual expectations regarding homework?

Comparison between parents' understanding of their parental role and teachers' expectations of them

At the primary level, teachers have higher expectations, than parents do, regarding the following behaviours: make sure the homework is done, $t(2,512) = 3.438, p < .001$, and make sure the child has a quiet place to do his/her homework, $t(2,509) = 3.962, p < .001$. On the other hand, teachers have lower expectations toward parents with respect to homework explanation to the child $t(2,505) = 3.261, p < .001$. At the secondary level, teachers expect parents to check their adolescent's homework, $t(2,359) = 2.712, p < .007$, to help their adolescent manage his/her time during homework, $t(2,358) = 3.652, p < .001$, and to make sure that their adolescent's homework is completed, $t(2,356) = 3.510, p < .001$ more than parents think about having to do. High school teachers, believe more than parents do, that making sure students understand exactly what the homework involves $t(2,364) = 2.943, p < .007$, and giving students feedback about the homework they've done $t(2,351) = 3.854, p < .001$ is part of their teacher role with homework.

Discussion and Conclusion

We examined individual, family and student factors that are related to parents' and teachers' role construction and mutual expectations regarding homework. We also compared the understanding of their role and their mutual expectations regarding homework. Findings show no difference in the parental role construction score when student achievement, family structure and parent education level are examined in relation to global scores of the scales. Results suggest that parents of elementary and secondary levels with more positive attitudes perceive their role with homework more important than other parents. Also, when the child and the adolescent have some difficulties in school, parents feel less responsible mainly in terms of checking homework completion, and verifying the child's understanding of the work he/she has to do. Likewise, when the adolescent is a male, parents believe that they should do more concerning homework than when the adolescent is a female. As for parental expectations toward teachers, there is no real difference among primary level parents, except for non traditional families who tend to have higher expectations (see also Deslandes et al., 2006).

At the secondary level, more highly educated parents and those who have a positive attitude toward homework expect more from the teacher in terms of feedback on homework and defining the purpose of homework. Less educated parents believe that teachers should consider family conditions when giving homework.

When comparing individual scores at the primary and secondary levels, results indicate that teachers expect more from parents than parents themselves understand they should do mostly with respect to making sure the homework is done at both the elementary and the secondary levels and that the child has a quiet place to do his/her homework at the elementary level, and to checking the adolescent's homework and to helping him/her manage his/her time during homework. There is congruence between primary teachers' role understanding and parents' expectations toward them. At the secondary level, teachers perceive, more than parents do, that they should make sure students understand exactly what the homework involves and giving feedback about the homework they've done.

The findings in this study are important for a current understanding of parents' and teachers' role construction with respect to homework. There are several implications for pre-service and in-service teachers and university professors. This study highlights the importance of working much more intensively on parents' attitudes toward homework, and with parents whose children have learning difficulties. At the secondary level, parents feel more responsible regarding homework when the adolescent is male. This is not surprising considering that boys are less autonomous than girls during those years, mainly in terms of self-reliance and self initiative (Deslandes, 2003). More highly educated parents and parents with positive attitudes and those whose child succeeds well expect more from the teacher's role in homework than other parents do, lending to believe that they might put more pressure on teachers to act professionally with regard to homework. Do parents of learning difficulties students feel less responsible or do they just ignore how to work effectively with their child and their adolescent? Previous studies have reported parents' need for effective and helpful strategies in helping with homework and more precise homework purposes (Kay et al., 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Teachers' role construction is quite similar regardless of school level and teaching experience. Teachers' expectations of parents, however, are much higher than parents' perception of their own role with regard to homework.

Teachers' expectations are usually verbalized during the back-to-school night at the beginning of the school year. These group meetings offer occasions to teachers to talk about their expectations and to exchange ideas with parents (Epstein, 2001). If parents are to be partners, their views on homework issues must be heard and taken into account (Shumow, 1997). Communication between parents and teachers needs to be fostered in order to increase understanding of each others' role and expectations. Obviously, work needs to be done relative to the activities for which parents should be responsible. Indeed, relative incongruence between parents' role construction in homework

and teachers' expectations about their role should not be overlooked if we, as educators, are to promote more positive family-school relationships. There are certain limits that must be mentioned. Given the very limited size of the teacher sample, findings cannot be generalized at this phase of the study. However, these findings should stimulate discussions about family-school relationship as it relates to homework completion, teachers' expectations and parental involvement with regards to students' gender and school achievement. It will be interesting to see if upcoming results will point to different expectations as the students get older.

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Appendix 1

Parents' responsibilities in regard to homework according to parents and teachers

Items		Parents				Teachers			
		Elementary Level		Secondary Level		Elementary Level		Secondary Level	
I believe that it is my or his/her responsibility to ...		N	M	n	M	n	M	n	M
1	Sit with my child when she does her homework.	462	2.25 (.727)	333	1.32 (.688)	48	2.21 (.824)	23	1.30 (.765)
2	Decide when my child should do his homework.	465	2.15 (.674)	333	1.33 (.680)	48	2.08 (.846)	23	1.43 (.788)
3	Check my child's homework.	465	2.53 (.545)	338	1.80 (.642)	48	2.67 (.559)	23	2.17 (.717)
4	Help my child manage his time during homework.	465	2.28 (.636)	337	1.77 (.658)	48	2.50 (.505)	23	2.26 (.619)
5	Read with my child.	467	2.15 (.715)			47	2.43 (5.80)		
6	Make sure my child's homework is completed.	467	2.60 (.517)	335	2.07 (.600)	47	2.83 (.433)	23	2.52 (.511)
7	Explain the homework to my child.	461	2.07 (.785)	332	1.38 (.673)	46	1.67 (.871)	23	1.17 (.576)
8	Make sure my child has a quiet place to do her homework.	463	2.49 (.522)	338	2.13 (.558)	48	2.79 (.504)	23	2.43 (.507)
9	Monitor my child's progress closely.	466	2.66 (.492)	342	2.40 (.558)	48	2.79 (.410)	23	2.65 (4.87)
10	Make sure my child understands the work he has to do at home.	465	2.41 (.644)	339	2.09 (.584)	47	2.36 (.640)	23	2.09 (.668)
	Global Score	465	2.36 (.439)	343	1.82 (.395)	48	2.43 (.405)	23	2.03 (.32)

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Appendix 2

Teachers' responsibilities in regard to homework according to parents and teachers

Items		Parents				Teachers			
		Elementary Level		Secondary Level		Elementary Level		Secondary Level	
I believe that it is his/her or my responsibility to ...		n	M	n	M	n	M	n	M
1	Clearly define the purpose of the homework given.	465	2.46 (.524)	342	2.42 (.546)	48	2.54 (.582)	23	2.61 (.499)
2	Make sure students understand exactly what the homework involves.	464	2.52 (.517)	343	2.51 (.535)	48	2.77 (.425)	23	2.78 (.422)
3	Give students feedback about the homework they've done.	452	2.40 (.557)	330	2.30 (.537)	48	2.62 (.489)	23	2.74 (.449)
4	Vary the types of homework.	464	2.36 (.552)	341	2.29 (.527)	48	2.50 (.652)	23	2.52 (.593)
5	Check students' interest in subjects likely to be worked on at home.	462	2.23 (.609)	341	2.16 (.594)	47	2.49 (.505)	23	2.26 (.689)
6	Check students' interest in certain types of school work to be done at home.	462	2.22 (.579)	339	2.15 (.564)	48	2.31 (.589)	23	2.09 (.668)
7	Be aware of students' family conditions regarding homework.	458	1.74 (.765)	333	1.61 (.779)	48	2.08 (.710)	22	1.41 (.796)
8	Encourage the development of students' organizational skills with respect to homework.	458	2.16 (.622)	341	2.10 (.617)	48	2.29 (.683)	23	1.91 (.596)
	Global Score	465	2.26 (.401)	344	2.20 (.397)	48	2.32 (.363)	23	2.30 (.402)