

## **Malaysian Parents' Practices and Perspectives on the Organization of School Homework**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this descriptive nature study is to paint a picture of Malaysian parents' practices and perspectives towards school homework. Additionally, it determines the amount of time children spend on doing homework and aspects related to the management of homework. The sample of the study consisted of 723 parents with children in Primary 3 (aged 9) and Primary 5 (aged 11) from 17 schools selected via a random sampling technique. The instrument used for the study was a self-designed questionnaire comprising three sections: (a) demographic details, (b) parents' perceptions on homework, and (c) open and close-ended questions. Interviews were also conducted to triangulate the data collected from the questionnaire. The results showed that most of the parents viewed school homework as a positive catalyst to help a child learn independently. The majority of parents agreed that doing homework helps improve their children's academic achievement. In terms of time spent in doing homework, the findings indicated that children spent 1.92 hours daily on their school homework, and in terms of communicating with their children's school teachers, approximately 90% of the parents indicated that they hardly communicated with the teachers. The findings also revealed that only 48.9% of the respondents assist their children with homework. In addition, more than two-thirds of the mothers constantly monitor and help their children to complete their homework. It is hoped that the findings will generate further research that can contribute to the area of the practices and perceptions of parents with regards to the organization of school homework.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the education of a child, homework is often viewed as one of the main strategies

used in schools to help learners revise, review, and reinforce learning that takes place within the limited time learners have in the confines of their classroom. Homework can be defined as any task assigned by school teachers meant for the students to complete during non-school hours (Cooper, 1989). According to Painter (2003), homework is an integral part of learning and it is expected by students, parents, and teachers. It functions as reinforcement to what students have learned during the school day and enriches the existing knowledge students have gained from previous lessons. Teachers have long used homework as a mechanism to provide additional learning time, strengthen learners' study and organisational skills, and inform parents about their children's progress (Warger, 2001). It is also seen as a catalyst in cultivating healthy study habits, ultimately allowing students to develop as autonomous learners.

It is generally agreed as illustrated in the literature (Cooper *et al.*, 2006; Painter, 2003; Keith, 1992; Rutter *et al.*, 1979) that the assignment of homework improves students' academic achievement. Therefore, there is a significant need for homework to be assigned to the students in order to support and maximize the learning process. Although homework enhances learning in students' daily lives, it competes with multiple daily activities such as maintenance and leisure. Thus, teachers should assign appropriate homework at instructional levels that match students' skills and provide positive consequences

for homework completion (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumacher, & Lenz, 1998; Rosenberg, 1989). From these literatures, it can be surmised that the assignment of school homework plays an important role in students' school life as most of this homework is done at home.

In Malaysia, a child spends approximately eight hours in school (7.30am to about 3.30pm) on average, including afterschool programme activities. In other words, approximately two-thirds of the day in the life of a child is spent at home (literally eight hours in schools and 16 hours at home), and it is undeniable that the parents' involvement in a child's education plays an important part in ensuring that children do not get left behind in their studies. With regards to homework, parents often play a part in assisting them to complete their assigned homework. Research (Henderson, & Mapp, 2007; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Tam & Chan, 2005) has shown that higher parental involvement, whether formal or informal, in spending time with children, contributes significantly to children's development resulting in higher grades, improved student attendance, improved student conduct and attitude. However, parental involvement becomes a cause for stress when parents feel they lack the knowledge, time, and guidance to support their children's homework efforts. The main issue here is what parents' roles are, and how much time they spend in helping their children complete the given homework. A related issue concerns their perceptions of the homework given to their children.

In 2004, the issue of homework was highlighted in Malaysia when an Australian psychologist Carr-Gregg told a local daily that Malaysian students spent more time on homework than those in most other countries (The New Straits Times, 2004). The Malaysian students were said to spend an average of 3.8 hours a day compared to Singapore (3.5), Russia (3.1), Australia and Canada (2.2) and Japan (1.7). Later, another daily (The New Straits Times, August 8, 2004) highlighted the issue of “too much or too little” with reference to both parents and school students’ opinions on the amount of homework given to school children in Malaysia. Some adamantly viewed homework as the only way to achieve academic excellence, while others questioned not only the amount of homework but also the type of homework teachers hand out to school children. What is most interesting is the fact that these articles sparked a nationwide uproar over the issue of homework given to Malaysian students. The matter was duly investigated by the Ministry of Education and a new circular on homework was issued on 31 December 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004). The circular highlighted the objective and importance of homework and highlighted 3 aspects concerning the organisation of homework in Malaysian public schools: the planning, implementation, and monitoring. Furthermore, teachers were reminded to use their discretion when giving homework taking into account factors such as amount, type, frequency, level of difficulty and students’ abilities.

Teachers were also advised to think carefully before assigning homework as spot checks would be conducted by the state and federal Inspectorate Division to ensure schools’ adherence to the given guidelines. Henceforth, school management and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) were encouraged to set up their own mechanisms to ensure effective implementation and monitoring of homework in schools such as requiring subject teachers to display homework given to each class.

The trouble with the existing research especially in the Malaysian context is, firstly, it focuses mainly on students and teachers’ (Mohamad, 2008; Kralovec & Buell, 2001; Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006) perspectives with regards to academic achievement and ignores the contexts of students’ home lives, where parents are the students’ first teachers. Secondly, while numerous studies (Cooper *et al.*, 2006; Carr-Gregg, 2004) have looked into the amount of time children spent on homework, the studies have focused on the perspective of the students, sidelining the perspective of the parents. Thirdly, research (Parmjit, 2009; Yusop & Veloo, 2003; McIntosh, 1996) has shown that Australian students, especially in primary schools, have a poor sense of numbers, particularly in estimating time, and asking them to estimate the time taken to do homework assigned to them might distort the actual data. In view of this, it is believed that parents would provide a better estimation as to the time taken by children to complete their homework and issues related to the management of their children’s

homework at home. Therefore, the scant empirical research on parents' perspectives in the Malaysian context provided the main impetus for this study.

With particular reference to the report published by Carr-Greg in 2004 (despite the lapse of 6 years) and in consideration of these issues and concerns, this study was undertaken to look into the organization of homework in Malaysian primary schools from the perspectives of parents. The study focuses on examining parents' perspectives and practices regarding the organisation of homework in Malaysian primary schools. Thus, the research question that framed this study was "What are the parents' perspectives on homework in relation to the following?"

1. The Importance of homework
2. Management of children's homework
3. Time children spend on doing homework
4. Measures to be taken when children fail to complete homework
5. Parents' communication with school teachers
6. Homework and tension

Studies carried out by Kralovec and Buell, (2001) and Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006) pointed out that the trouble with existing research on homework is that it focuses too narrowly on its relationship towards academic achievements and hence it is hoped that this study will help provide some input and feedback on parents' beliefs regarding homework and show the link between homework and the context of

students' time and life at home. More importantly, the output of this study will help shed some light for policy makers, groups, and individuals involved in the education system to bring about improvement to the current practice of homework assignments in the Malaysian primary school.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive design as it allowed both the qualitative and quantitative description of the relevant features of the data collected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003). The population sample consisted of 17 randomly selected primary schools from the following six states in Peninsular Malaysia – Kelantan (K), Terengganu (T), Melaka (M), Selangor (S), Pulau Pinang (PP) and Negeri Sembilan (NS). From these 17 schools, 13 comprised National Primary Schools (referred to as SK - *Sekolah Kebangsaan* – coded as *School 1-13*) and four National-Type Chinese Schools (referred to as SJKC - *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina* – coded as *14-17*). In each of the 17 schools, 25 questionnaires were distributed to parents with children in Primary 3 (aged 9) and 25 other questionnaires were sent to parents with children in Primary 5 (aged 11). Out of the 850 questionnaires distributed, a total of 723 parents (85.1%) responded to the survey with a composition of 39.0% (282) males and 61.0% (441) females.

A questionnaire was designed with the help of a panel of university lecturers, teachers and parents. The questionnaire was based on past literature on homework,

combined with the recent concerns highlighted by the Malaysian public and the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The questionnaire consisting of both close- and open-ended questions comprised three sections – Part A, Part B, and Part C. Part A investigated the demographic details of the child, while Part B comprised 40 items which examined the parents' perceptions regarding homework. Finally, Part C consisted of 6 open- and close-ended questions which further explored and helped support parents' perspectives on homework.

The instrument's validity was established by a panel of three experts, which comprised of an educationist, a Ministry of Education officer, and an experienced teacher. All three were also parents with school going children at the primary level. The panel looked into both the content and face validity of the instrument. Where possible, unknown or unfamiliar words and phrases were deleted or replaced with words that are easily understood by lay man. The feedback received from them was used to further fine-tune the instrument. The reliability was established via a pilot test in a primary school located in Shah Alam, Selangor. It involved 15 parents with children in Primary Three and Primary Five. The reliability measure for the instrument reported a Cronbach Alpha of 0.82, indicating a moderately high level of internal consistency.

To support data collected from the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with 3-4 volunteer parents from each school (PA referred to a Parent A, PB referred to

Parent B, etc.). Samples from each school involved 2 parents with children in Primary Three and two volunteer parents with children studying in Primary Five. A total of 52 parents were interviewed. These parents were identified using the following coding procedure:

- Parent Code = PA, PB, PC & PD,
- Gender= M (male) or F(female),
- State = Kelantan (K), Terengganu (T), Melaka (M), Selangor (S), Pulau Pinang (PP) and Negeri Sembilan (NS),
- Children's year of study (3 = Primary 3, 5 = Primary 5) and
- type of school = SK (National Type School) SKJC = National Type Chinese School

Therefore, PAFT5 (SK) would refer to Parent A, who is a female (PAF) from the state of Terengganu (T), and with a child in Primary 5 (5) in a National Type Primary school (SK).

The interview questions comprised mainly aspects such as the importance of homework, the number of hours their children spend on homework, the kind of homework they received, how often they helped their children with their school homework, who monitored their children's homework at home and whether their children were also involved in going for tuition class after school hours.

Descriptive statistics involving percentages, means, and standard deviations were employed to analyze the quantitative data collected, while the qualitative

data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed both inductively and deductively based on the questions posed. Finally, the data obtained were constantly compared and contrasted before any final conclusions were made.

**FINDINGS**

This section details the findings of the study.

*The Importance of School Homework in Students' Learning*

The findings presented in Table 1 show the parents' perception towards the importance of homework. Most of the respondents (89.6%) agreed that their children learn a lot by doing homework. The majority (87.6%) of the respondents also agreed that homework helps a child to learn independently.

Besides that, the majority of parents (89.9%) agreed that doing homework helps improve their children's academic achievement although close to 10% of the parents disagreed.

Interviews with the parents corroborated these findings as the majority viewed homework as an effective and vital tool to

enhance students' learning. Approximately 90% of the parents said that it helps to reinforce the learning that takes place in class. This was eloquently stated by a parent [PBFS3(SK)], who stated that *"homework is necessary for children as it provides them an opportunity to review and practice what they've covered in class especially for Maths, where you need a lot of practice"*. Another parent [PCFNS5(SKJC)] pointed out that *"Children do learn by doing homework as it reinforces their learning in classroom. As a parent, I get a better understanding of what topic my child is weak in"*. A parent [PAMM3(SK)] from Melaka added that homework *"helps my children to develop good study habits and positive attitudes. It teaches them to manage their time, especially if they want to watch their favourite TV program. However, the amount of homework should be reasonable"*. However, not all feedback is positive and a female parent [PCFT5(SK)] lamented that *"no doubt that homework is important but at times, there is too much homework given by the teachers. When is Jas (name of her child) supposed to do homework? She needs to have leisure time as well and homework is not everything in a child's education. She*

TABLE 1  
Parents' Perceptions on the Importance of Homework

Importance of Homework	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Do not know
Children learn a lot by doing homework	178 (24.8%)	466 (64.8%)	55 (7.6%)	12 (1.7%)	8 (1.1%)
Doing homework helps a child to be independent	177 (24.5%)	455 (63.1%)	65 (9.0%)	15 (2.1%)	9 (1.2%)
Homework improves academic achievement	240 (33.3%)	404 (56.4%)	69 (9.6%)	3 (0.4%)	-



*is in the Girl Guides, on the prefect board, takes violin lessons, plays netball and helps with family chores. There's hardly any time left to study".* On the whole, the 52 parents interviewed emphasized that homework is important for children's learning as it makes them practise and reinforce what they have learnt in school as it gives them an opportunity to understand what they are learning in school. However, the amount of homework given should not overburden the children.

*Management of Homework*

This section investigated parents' perspectives as to the management of their children's homework. One aspect explored was how often they monitored their

children's homework. The results in this study (Table 2) indicated that they always (42.7%) and usually (39.8%) monitored their children's homework. In other words, 82.5% of the parents in this study do monitor their children's homework on a regular basis. However, the remaining 17.5% appeared unconcerned, stating that they either did not know or never monitored their children's homework.

Parents were also asked to respond to the different approaches they took to assist and monitor their children's homework. The findings presented in Table 3 indicated that a total of 59.3% of the respondents stated that they often reminded their children to do their homework, whilst 48.9% highlighted that they often helped their children with

TABLE 2  
Frequency in Monitoring Children's Homework

Frequency in Monitoring Children's Homework	Frequency	Percent
Always	295	42.7
Usually	275	39.8
Don't know	115	16.6
Never	6	.9
Total	691	100.0

TABLE 3  
Measures Taken in Monitoring Children's Homework

Measures Taken in Monitoring Children's Homework	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
Remind child to do homework	240 (33.2%)	189 (26.1%)	243 (33.6%)	51 (7.1%)
Help with the child's homework	134 (18.6%)	218 (30.3%)	340 (47.2%)	28 (3.9%)
Check child's homework	147 (20.6%)	266 (37.2%)	262 (36.6%)	40 (5.6%)
Leave child to get on with it	73 (10.2%)	244 (34.1%)	296 (41.3%)	103 (14.4%)

their homework. However, 47.2% of the respondents admitted that they only helped their children sometimes due to the lack of time and other commitments. Slightly more than half of the respondents (57.8%) revealed that they often checked their children's homework. The remaining 44.3% stated that they often left their children to do their homework on their own.

These findings were supported by the data obtained from the interviews with parents. The majority agreed that it is their role to monitor their children's homework. A parent [PAFPP5(SKJC)] with a Primary Five child in a Chinese medium primary school had this to say: *"I make sure that my children complete their school homework every day as I always remind them especially my younger child (aged 11 years). I do check their homework diary quite often to see the homework given"*. Another male parent [PBMK3(SK)] from Kelantan added that he often reminded his son to do his homework as he *"quite often they got carried away by watching the television. Every night it's a struggle to get him to turn off the TV and do his homework. Nowadays I am quite strict with his TV time"*.

A mother [PDFNS3(SK) from Negeri Sembilan stated *"I do monitor their homework from time to time as checking up on their work will remind them that the parents are monitoring their work and are thus serious about their progress. Sometimes, they need to be given an opportunity to be responsible for their own learning. Also, they learn from making mistakes."* Another parent with a Year Three

child from Selangor [PAFS3(SK)], who sympathised with teachers, stressed that *"I am my son's first teacher and they spend two-thirds of the time at home as compared as one-third in school. And furthermore, it is difficult for teachers in schools as there are about 35 to 40 students in each class. I make sure that my son does his homework and understands it as well"*. On the whole, parents interviewed do take their children's homework seriously and monitor their children's homework to ensure that their children complete the work assigned.

The parents were also asked whether they felt that they lacked the knowledge to help their children with their homework. Based on the data collected, 43.4% of the respondents agreed to this statement, while the remaining 56.6% felt that they possessed adequate knowledge to assist their children to complete their homework.

The findings in this study (Table 4) also revealed that it is the mothers who most frequently (68.8%) assisted and monitored their children's homework. This could be due to the fact that some mothers are full-time home makers and therefore have more time to spend on monitoring their children. The next person who frequently assisted children with their homework was the fathers who accounted for 18.9%, followed by siblings (6.9%), and others such as friends, relatives, and tuition teachers (5.4%). The following are some of the parents' (mothers) responses from the interviews:

- *"I am the one who monitors my children's homework. Husband is always too busy or away overseas"* PAFK3(SK).



- *“I usually oversee their homework. Husband does assist at times”* PBMPP3(SKJC) 1-2 hours daily on their school homework (Table 5). Another 27.2% of the parents stated that their children spent between 2 to 3 hours daily on their school homework, whilst 6.5% spent more than 3 hours daily to complete their homework, and 3.1% indicated that their children spent 0 to 1 hour on their homework.
- *“My husband takes care of their Science and Maths while I take responsibility for all other subjects”*. PBFM5(SK) (Twelve of the mothers interviewed gave similar responses as husband being responsible for Science and Maths) The data provided in Table 5 are in the ordinal scale of measurement. However, the calculated conservative average mean time spent on doing homework is shown.
- *“He is usually busy with work and comes home late. As a housewife, I spend more time with the children. We have to give and take”* PAFNS5 (SKJC).  $Mean = 1095/718 = 1.53 \text{ hrs}$

*Time Spent on Doing School Homework*

Parents were also asked to state the amount of time their children spent a day doing school homework. According to the parents, close to 63.2% of the children spent between

The calculation in Table 5 reveals that the conservative average time spent by children doing school homework is approximately 1.53 hours a day. It must be noted that this is an average mean score due to the ordinality of the data and three hours

TABLE 4  
Monitoring Children’s Homework

Person/s Monitoring the Children’s Homework	Frequency	Percent
Father	136	18.9
Mother	494	68.8
Siblings	49	6.8
Others	39	5.4
Total	718	100.0

TABLE 5  
Amount of Time Children Spend on Homework

Time Spent doing Homework	Mid-score X	Frequency f	fx	Percent
*Three hours or more	3	47	141	6.5
2 to < 3 hours	2.5	195	487.5	27.2
1 to < 2 hours	1.5	454	455.5	63.2
0 to < 1 hour	0.5	22	11	3.1
Total		718	1095	100.0

\*Three hours taken as the conservative score

is taken a conservative time for the interval of three hours or more. These data show that the amount of time spent on doing school homework is much lesser than reported by Carr-Gregg in his report in the local daily (The New Straits Times, 2004).

This finding was triangulated from the interviews where the majority of the parents opined that their children spent about 1 to 2 hours daily to complete their homework. However, when queried on why he wrote 3.5 hours, parent SK12 explained that it included doing tuition homework and swimming lessons. The parents acknowledged that the time taken to do homework reduces when exams are around the corner.

Table 6 reveals that for this sample, 59.4% of their children attend tuition classes as compared to 40.6% whose children do not.

In terms of the time spent on completing the tuition homework as shown in Table 7, 57.6% indicated that their children spent

between 1-2 hours, followed by 20.2% who spent 2-3 hours, 17.5% who spent 3 hours and above, while 4.7% spent 1-2 hours.

$$\text{Mean} = 732.5/382 = 1.92 \text{ hrs}$$

From this calculation, the conservative average time spent by children on tuition homework is approximately 1.92 hours a day. Again, it must be noted that this is an average mean score resulting from the use of the ordinal scale to display the data and three hours is taken the conservative time for the interval of three hours or more. This average score is much higher than the time taken for the homework assigned by school (mean = 1.53 hours). In other words, a child who attends private tuition spends approximately 3.45 hours (1.53 school hours and 1.92 tuition hours) to complete their homework. This result seems to concur with the findings of Carr-Gregg (2004).

TABLE 6  
Attending Tuition (n=712)

Homework Management	Yes	No
Attend Tuition	423 (59.4%)	289 (40.6%)

TABLE 7  
Amount of Time Children Spend on Homework

Time Spent doing Homework	Mid-score X	Frequency f	fx	Percent
*Three hours or more	3	67	201	12.6
2 to < 3 hours	2.5	77	2.5	14.5
1 to < 2 hours	1.5	220	330	41.3
0 to < 1 hour	0.5	18	9	
Total		382	732.5	100

\*Three score taken as the score

*Subjects with the most homework in SK and SJKC Schools*

Parents of children in national primary (SK) schools indicated that the subject with the most homework was Mathematics (54%), followed by Bahasa Malaysia (17.4%), and Science (12.4%). The findings presented in Table 8 also indicate that English accounted for 11.5% of the homework load, whilst other subjects amounted to 4.7%. Similarly, the subject with the most homework for the national-type primary schools (SJKC) was also Mathematics (46%). This was followed by Mandarin (29%), Science (8.5%), Bahasa Malaysia (6.4%), and English (5.8%).

The emphasis in both types of school is on Mathematics as the subject with the most homework. Following that are the language components with the emphasis on Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin respectively for the SK and SJKC schools.

These findings concur with the views of the parents who were interviewed. The parents of both the SK and SJKC schools acknowledged that Mathematics is the subject with the most school homework as the children need lots of practice to

improve their maths skills. They also indicated that their children spent at least 30 to 45 minutes on Maths homework daily as compared to other subjects. A parent [PCMS5(SKJC)] from Selangor indicated that, *“mathematics is a skill and they need to do lots of practice, and also I send my son to Kumon”*. Kumon refers to a technique popularized in Japan, where students are drilled to use mental computations by doing worksheets after worksheets. Similarly, another parent [PCFPP3(SK)] from Pulau Pinang, with a child in Year 3, said that *“the emphasis in my daughter’s school is a lot of drilling, worksheets after worksheets. This is necessary if they want to improve their maths”*.

On the language components, a father [PBMPP3(SKJC)] with a Year 3 child lamented that *“too much homework is given to Bahasa Malaysia and too little to English language which I believe is wrong; equal emphasis should be given to English language”*. Another father [PDMS5(SK)] with a year 5 child in Selangor felt that *“English language is being neglected and children are not able to converse. There must be something wrong with*

TABLE 8  
Subjects with the most homework in SK and SJKC Schools

Subject with Most Homework	SK	SJKC
Mathematics	54.0	46.0
Bahasa Malaysia	17.4	6.4
Science	12.4	8.8
English	11.5	5.8
Mandarin	-	29.0
Others	4.7	4
Total	100	100

our education system". Another parent [PCFM3(SJKC)], in acknowledging the importance of Mandarin as the mother tongue, said "we need to give emphasis to Mandarin if not, children will never speak it. It's very important for them to be able to read and write in Mandarin". In general, parents from SK and SKJC schools agreed that after Maths, Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin respectively are the subjects with the most homework assigned.

*Parents' views on measures to be taken when children fail to submit their homework*

The parents were also asked to give their views on the measures that should be taken if their children failed to submit their homework on time. Table 9 indicates that 40.0% of the parents stated that they would prefer being told immediately when their children failed to complete their homework. In the event that their children repeatedly committed the same offence, 53.9% of the parents stated that they should be informed so that they could take the necessary measures.

From the interviews, a parent [PAFT5(SK)] from Terengganu stressed that "Homework is part of learning. So

if a child does not complete homework consistently, I must be told, efforts must be taken to find out the reason. At times, too much homework is assigned by all the teachers and it is a burden for children. The child should not be punished straight away". This sentiment was also echoed by a mother [PDFPP5(SK)] with a Year 5 child who highlighted that "Parents should be told if it happens too often. I will talk to my child to see if there are problems which are preventing him from completing his work. Follow up with me through letter or calls (if the case is serious)". However, another parent [PDFM5(SJKC)] gave a different view and pointed out that pupils "have to be reprimanded if it happens often. I would gauge if the homework volume for the day is tremendous then the child should be excused. If the school only gives small volume of homework (e.g. 5 to 10 math for recap) then the child should be given detention". In general, the data from the interviews indicated that parents preferred to be told if their children did not complete their homework on a consistent basis.

However, when asked about the frequency of communication with their children's school teachers (refer table 10), 18.8 % indicated that they never

TABLE 9  
Parents' View on Measures to be taken when their Children do not Complete their Homework

Measures taken for Incomplete Homework	Frequency	Percent
Parents should be told if it happens repeatedly	380	53.9
Parents should be told immediately	282	40.0
There should be no further action	29	4.1
Something else	14	1.9
Total	705	100.0

communicated with their children’s teachers, followed by 70.7% who said they sometimes did. A mere 8.1% indicated that they often, with 2.4% who said they did communicate with their children’s teachers very often. This finding seems to indicate that parents expect the teachers to initiate the communication process and call them if their children do not complete their school homework.

From the interviews, the majority of the parents said that they communicated with teachers only on formal occasions. A parent from Kelantan [PCFK5(SK)] said that she communicated with her children’s teachers “*about two times in a year when collecting their school exam results*”. This is common as many schools in Malaysia still do not have a well-established relationship with parents as compared to schools in developed countries in the west (Simon, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; Fan, & Williams, 2010). Nevertheless, some parents highlighted that they do communicate with teachers through their children’s homework diary. Another parent from Selangor (PCMS5(SK)] stressed that

“...so far there is not much of a need to do so” and since his children were doing fine in school, the need to consult teachers did not arise. The following are some of the responses received from parents, when asked how they communicated with teachers,

- “Rarely”
- “Regularly through homework diary”
- “Almost every day. I am a lucky mother as I work in school as the administrative staff”
- “Daily, if necessary by communicating with a homework diary”
- “School is doing good job, so I meet them during the open days they have for report cards”.
- “Seldom”

In other words, parents only meet the teachers during formal occasions like Open Day and Report Card Day. In some school, there exists written communication through the homework diary that they used to communicate with the respective teachers concerning homework.

Table 10  
Communication with teachers (n = 714)

Management of Homework	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Communication with Teachers	134 (18.8%)	505 (70.7%)	58 (8.1%)	17 (2.4%)

Table 11: Children recording homework in their homework diary (n=702)

Homework Management	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
How often does your child record his/her homework in the homework diary	32 (4.4%)	93 (12.9%)	397 (55.1%)	199 (27.6%)

However, using the homework diary as a mode of communication does not seem that successful as only 17.3% of the parents indicated that their children often recorded their homework in the diary (refer to Table 11). In fact, 82.7% of the parents indicated that their children hardly recorded their homework in the diary. The data indicated that although the homework diary was introduced in schools in 2005, it is currently being barely enforced.

*Homework and Tension*

Parents were asked their views regarding the issue of homework as a cause of tension at home. The data in Table 12 indicated that 82.7% reported that homework was sometimes or never regarded as causing tension. The following are excerpts from the parents who were asked if their children’s homework had caused tension and if so, why:

- “Yes, because my children sometimes end up spending the whole evening doing homework and have no time for revision.” [PDFK5(SK)]
- “Yes, when there is too much of homework and the child is unable to cope. There is also no time for revision.” [PBMT3(SK)]
- “Sometimes. When all the subject teachers for the day give too much

*homework and you know the child cannot cope with this ridiculous volume.” [PDMS5(SK)]*

- “Sometimes, when insufficient time is given by the teacher to complete it. Especially when there are other teachers from different subjects giving homework on the same day.” [PAFPP5(SJKC)]
- “Sometimes, when the child has homework but does not do it by herself and waits for the parent to instruct her to do it. Perhaps a study on why children like or dislike homework would help clarify the issue” [PAMM3(SK)].

The findings indicated that approximately 17.3% of the parents indicated that the voluminous homework given by teachers could cause a tension.

**DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The study investigated the organization of homework in Malaysian primary schools from the perspectives of parents. First and foremost, the findings indicated that homework is viewed as an integral part of schooling and it is essential in ensuring the enforcement of learning goals expected from previous lessons. The findings showed that the majority of the parents agreed that their children learn a lot by doing their homework (89.6%) and it helps them to be independent (87.6%). They also felt that homework

TABLE 12  
Homework Management (n=721)

Homework Management	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
Homework causes tension at home	32 (4.4%)	93 (12.9%)	397 (55.1%)	199 (27.6%)



is essential for academic achievement (89.9%), especially in helping their children to master specific knowledge and skills in class. The findings in this study are in line with a review of over 60 research studies (cited in Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006) which revealed that homework is important with a positive correlation reported between the amount of homework done and students' achievement.

The majority of the parents (63.2%) agreed that on average, a child spends 1 to 2 hours daily in completing their school homework as compared to 27.2% who said their children take about 2 to 3 hours. From the calculation of the average time taken to complete the homework, it was computed that the approximate time spent on homework is 1.53 hours. This duration of time is much lesser than what Carr-Gregg reported in a Malaysian daily that Malaysian students spent an average of 3.8 hours a day on homework (The New Straits Times, 2004). Further investigation revealed that approximately two-thirds of the parents stated that their children attend private tuition and the amount of time spent on doing their tuition homework is 1.92 hours. In other words, the children who attend tuition spend approximately 3.45 hours on doing homework. This finding concurs with the findings of Carr-Gregg (2004). There is a possibility that the time taken on doing homework in Carr-Gregg's report refers to both school homework and tuition homework.

Keeping in mind the guidelines offered by researchers (Cooper, 2001; Sharp *et al.*,

2001; Ofsted UK, 1997, as cited in Silvis, 2002), children at primary schools should get about 10 minutes of homework each night for each grade. Therefore, Primary Three and Primary Five pupils should not be doing homework for more than 30 and 50 minutes, respectively. This shows that currently, Malaysian primary pupils are being overloaded with school homework although measures have been taken by the Education Ministry to curb the situation by introducing new guidelines pertaining to school homework. Burdening the students, especially at the primary level, is detrimental to the children's well-being, especially physically, as it reduces their access to leisure which is vital for appropriate psychological growth in the early learning years. Supporting this view, Widdup (2008) stated in *The London Evening Standard* that Ofsted inspectors in the UK highlighted that one of the main factors that has made learning depressing for students is the extra evening homework. Rather than spending all their free time on homework, students should be encouraged to watch educational television programmes, listen to music, play games, and focus on extra-curricular activities during their recreational time.

The findings from this study also indicate that as a whole, Mathematics is the subject with the most homework in national (SK) schools, followed by Bahasa Malaysia, and Science. Mathematics was also found to be the subject with the most homework in National-type (SJK(C)) schools. This was followed by Mandarin, Science, Bahasa Malaysia, and English. In order to do well

in Mathematics, exercises and drills are essential parts of mastering the subject. Therefore, this may have resulted in the teachers routinely providing Mathematics homework to the students to enhance their “memorised” or instrumental understanding of particular mathematical concepts. The distinction of understanding was succinctly explained by Skemp (1976), whereby he refers to Instrumental understanding as involving knowing *what to do* to get an answer whereas relational understanding as involving knowing the *what* and the *why*. The former relates to memorize understanding whereas the latter refers to conceptual understanding. However, if children are spending too much time on Mathematics as compared to other subjects, then this notion may have to be reconsidered. Does the old saying “practice makes perfect” that is usually associated with Mathematics still prevail in today’s learning?

With regards to children completing their homework, the majority of parents emphasized that they should be told or consulted if their children did not complete their homework. This inclination towards getting feedback regarding their children’s behaviour indicated these parents’ concern over their children’s progress and performances in school. Parents want to be involved and look forward to feedback given by the teacher/school. However, the irony is that Malaysian parents hardly communicate or keep in touch with the school teachers. Mohamad (2008) also discovered a similar low level of *parental involvement in*

*school activities and keeping in touch with the teachers. Similar findings were also indicated in previous research by Wee (1995) and Wee (1996) and, although 15 years have passed, the level of partnership between parents and teachers still appears to be in a sorry state.*

*One of the most common platforms to encourage parents’ involvement in Malaysian school matters is through the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) of the respective schools. The primary purpose of PTA is to get parents and teachers to cooperate in the best interests of the schools and students.* Parental involvement needs to expand beyond the current platform (practices) if they are to be co-partners in the children’s educational progress. The PTA plays an integral role in bridging the gap between parents and teachers. The PTA could also take the initiative towards educating parents on the significance of parental involvement in children’s homework. Parental education could also highlight the parents’ role in promoting self-discipline and time management skills among the students to facilitate homework process (Tam & Chan, 2005). Parents could be informed that the limitation in interaction between parents and teachers influences the growth of the child. As this study has revealed, majority of interviewed parents are often concerned about and involved in their children’s education through homework. Whether children do their homework at home, complete it after school programmes, or work on it during the school day, homework can be a powerful

tool for (a) letting parents and other adults know what the child is learning, (b) giving children and parents a reason to talk about what's going on at school, and (c) giving teachers an opportunity to hear from parents about children's learning (Canadian Council in Learning, 2008).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated parents' perspectives of the organization of homework in selected Malaysian primary schools. It has brought to light a number of issues and concerns surrounding the implementation of homework in Malaysian primary schools such as the importance of homework in the life of school going children and how homework is managed in schools. This study also explored the amount of time primary school children spend on completing school and tuition homework and what parents' feel about homework as a whole.

At this juncture, it is perhaps pertinent to point out that this paper is part of a larger study on homework and thus, it is not without its limitations. Though effort was made to get more parents involved in this study, time and access to parents were our main constraints as the researchers had limited time in each state. These two constraints also limited the ability of the research team to explore in greater detail other variables such as gender and types of schools. Another limitation of this study is that the team did not have sufficient time to collect data in order to measure the different levels of family involvement and

the team did not seek parents' views for not interacting with teachers.

Nevertheless, the authors hope that this exploratory study has to a certain extent provided some insights for policy makers, school administrators, educators, and parents on the implementation and organization of homework in the Malaysian context. Further studies need to be undertaken to address these issues and how parents and families could be brought into the loop as many parents out there are "involved and concerned" about the children's education with or without homework. In addition, it is also hoped that this research will open new avenues for researchers to work with issues related to school homework in Malaysia.

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