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The Use of Assignments in Education

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Abstract

In all educational levels, teachers assign their students with different activities to practice and reinforce what they have learnt. Further, assignments are valuable educational tools that raise students' consciousness as believed by teachers, parents, and authorities. It functions, in a sense, as a bridge between schools and homes. Assignments require the effort, time, and dedication of students, families, and teachers. Thus, it is crystal clear that assignments are practical tools to develop communicative skills and provide learning experiences in order to achieve the needed behavior change. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the views of state primary school students on the assignments given by their teachers. The participants of the study were chosen from the most convenient and accessible schools located in Adana, Turkey. The sample consisted of 250 primary school students (178 female and 72 male) who voluntarily participated in the study. Based upon a qualitative research design, a semi-structured interview designed by the researcher was utilized in order to attain the required data. Therefore, based on a descriptive research design, this study involved the data analysis of descriptive statistics (SPSS 22.0) in order to report the views of participants in numerical data. The findings of the study suggest that assignments are favored by the students, which may be attributed to their school level.

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Keywords: Assignment, education, reinforcement, learning, revision

Introduction

Although we see a number of radical propositions which prohibit assigning students with heavy work load out of school times, counter ideas are also observed in the related literature (Kember, 2004). However, the importance is not on whether to assign students or not, since it is attributed to assign students according to their age and class levels. Further, in order to reinforce learning (Boctor, 2003), the assignments have to be chosen by the teachers competently. Particularly in primary schools, the given assignments must be reinforcing tools that equip students with the required study skills and habits. Thus, authorities or policy makers should develop an assignment policy (Babadoğan, 1990; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003) and educate teachers accordingly. Such a policy is to end the related conflicts

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between students, teachers, and parents as well (Kapikiran & Kiran, 1999). The studies carried out in the United States of America suggest that most of the students, parents, and teachers assume that assignments support learners in reinforcing what they learn (Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Beauchaine, 2001). Further, American parents demand more assignments for their children since they believe that assignments keep their children busy and consequently the children do not head towards negative actions (Blazer, 2009). An assignment has been an integrated part of both formal and informal educations (Eshach, 2007), although the practice has sometimes been favored and sometimes been negated. This is because assignments may have both positive and negative impacts on learners' performance and attitudes towards school (Cooper & Gersten, 2003). It is simple that not all teachers assign their students and not all students do their assignments. Thus, the effect that an assignment has on success differs from one learner to another learner, based on how many assignments are given and how much the learner does it (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Ektem & Yıldız, 2017). A teacher assigns subject related tasks to their students and demands their students to do these tasks at home so that they show parents what has been taught at school. Accordingly, these assignments reinforce students, support them in comprehending the subjects learnt at school, and help them learn more about the related topic (Enhancing Student Learning, 2006). Within the narrowest scope, even if a school itself has an assignment policy, the assignment practices of teachers may be of high quality with the highest practice standards focusing on providing effective feedback to learners (Protheroe, 2009). Assignments should serve to diverse goals at different levels in that the related expectations for its impacts on students, particularly in primary school level, should be modest (Cooper, 1989; Soyulu & Topaloğlu, 2015). Therefore, the time required to complete an assignment should be arranged in accordance with the levels of the students in that great care should be given to adjust the shortest assignment time period in primary school level (Dawson, 2009). Though some scholars agree that assignments are given for a number of different formal and informal reasons, others disagree on the exact value of assignments and the amount of assignments that learners should be given (Blazer, 2009). Moreover, if an assignment is not correctly given and followed, it may result in negative impacts on students. Teachers and parents are anxious about the heavy work load assigned to students. They think that if students are demanded to spend too much time on assignments out of school time, they will easily get bored and lose motivation. Assignments given out of school time may hinder students from spending their free-time and this prevents them from developing the required social skills (Cooper & Gersten, 2003; Ok & Çalışkan, 2019). Hence, the aim of this study is to inquire the views of state primary school students on the assignments given by their teachers. With this in mind, the following research question was put forward:

What are the views of state primary school students on the assignments given by their teachers?

Method

Participants

The data of the study were collected from the state primary school students studying in Adana, Turkey. The sample consisted of 250 students in total (178 female and 72 male) who voluntarily took part in the study. Great care was given to select both urban and suburban schools from diverse districts in Adana. While

choosing the participants, convenience sampling method was utilized since the target population was too large.

Instruments and Data Procedure

This study was conducted through qualitative methods of data collection. The data collection tool utilized in the study was a semi-structured interview formed by the researcher. Expert opinions (N= 5) were consulted in order to understand if the interview questions serve for measuring the aimed dimension. The data of the study were evaluated and displayed by means of descriptive statistics. Based on a descriptive research design, the study made use of SPSS 22.0 (a Statistical Program for Social Sciences). Frequency of codes was employed as a statistical technique to grasp the rate of views under five categories. Further, expert opinions (N= 5) from the related field were consulted for the reliability of the codes.

Data Analysis and Results

In this section, the results of the study were described based on the data obtained from the participants by means of the instrument. The results were grouped under the titles of the categories from the interview.

Results Pertaining to the Attitudes of the Students Towards Assignments

Most of the respondents (90%) suggest that they like assignments, while a small percentage of them (10%) put forward that they do not like being assigned. Those enjoying assignments also declare that (25%) assignments develop them, while another group (20%) state that assignments make them revise the subject. Further, 18% of the respondents suggest that any assignment is enjoyable; while some (16%) claim that an assignment makes them learn new things. Moreover, 11% of the respondents state that an assignment helps them spend time properly, while some of them (10%) argue that assignments make them study regularly. Additionally, the following views were also put forward by small percentages: while assignments enhance responsibility, they prevent students from playing games, give students much stress and tiredness.

Results Pertaining to the Desired Type of Assignments

Majority of the informants (20%) state they prefer research assignments. Further, writing assignments (14%), mathematics assignments (12%), quizzes (10%), and reading assignments (9%) were observed to be uttered by the respondents. Besides, projects with 8%, group study with 8%, drawings with 8%, science assignments with 7%, presentation with 4% occurred with slight percentages.

Results Pertaining to the Assignments of the Favored Course

Pertaining to the assignments of the favored lesson, there is a high tendency towards Mathematics with 40%. The reason why Mathematics is mostly favored by the majority of the respondents is interpreted consecutively as the informants like numeric (70%); Mathematics is enjoyable (15%); Mathematics is easy (8%); and Mathematics develops intelligence (7%).

Turkish course occurred to be the second favored course (25%). Further, 50% of the participants stated that they enjoy reading; while 32% of them put forward that they enjoy writing. The pursuing views were also put forward consecutively: Turkish language development (6%), easiness (6%), and Turkish exercises (6%).

Science course appeared to be the 3rd favored course (20%) with a number of dimensions; enjoyable (22%), most favored course (18%), experiments (18%), easy (17%), projects (14%), and interesting (11%).

English course (10%) appears to be the next favored course stated by the respondents, the majority (70%) of who favor English since it is a foreign language. Besides, 18% of the respondents suggest that they enjoy learning the unknown vocabulary. Additionally, a number of the informants (12%) indicate that English is interesting.

Further, 2% of the informants declared that they mostly favor the Art course since it is an enjoyable (100%) course. Lastly, the following courses were stated to be scarcely favored: Life Sciences (1%); Music (1%); and Physical Education (1%).

Results Pertaining to Giving Assignments or Not

Majority of the informants (88%) declare that they would assign their students if they were teachers. However, 12% of the participants state that they would never assign their students. Among those who would assign their students, 62% state that assignments provide success; 18% put forward that students revise; 14% declare that assignments develop responsibility, and 6% suggest that assignments make students use their spare times properly. On the other hand, the respondents who uttered that they would not assign their students gave the following reasons: assignments are tiring (70%); games are better ways of learning (24%); and a student does not need assignments since he or she already learns at school (6%).

Results Pertaining to Attractive Assignments

A big number of the informants (54%) suggest that rewards after completing an assignment make it attractive. Further, 26% of the respondents declare that exercises attract them when given as assignments. Additionally, motivation of learning new things (8%), attaining success (6%), easiness of the assignment (3%), and revising the lesson (3%) are the factors making assignments more attractive as stated by the informants. Moreover, regarding what makes assignments irritating: 44% of the respondents suggested that too many assignments are irritating; 16% of the respondents claimed that assignments are complicated; 15% of the respondents suggested that assignments are boring; 10% of them stated that assignments are tiring; 10% of the informants put forward that assignments cause stress; and 5% of the participants indicated that assignments are not practical.

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendation

Although assignment is an indispensable part of education, how it is assigned to learners poses a serious problem for many learners because assignment is perceived as an impediment to their lives (Ala-Mutka, 2005). Therefore, teachers need to involve themselves in assignment as well by cooperating with learners. If teachers objectify assignment and learners, then learners perceive assignment as a burden on their shoulders (McDonald, 2008). Similar to testing and assessment, assignment may also be deprived of student-centered approaches. Teachers can do scaffolding by not leaving them alone at all. Zone of proximal development is a pivotal concept in that it helps teachers endorse their students in the same learning environment (Vygotsky, 1987). Students' leisure time should not be perceived as a waste of time because learners start to perceive their life and time as divided into two. Leisure time and assignment time are conceptualized as dichotomous. In addition to zone of proximal development, critical pedagogy also offers important concepts such as dialogic communication, dialectal thinking and praxis. Unless the participation of both teachers and students is encouraged, assignment is perceived as a burden and disciplinary power. Besides, assignment affects not only school circle but also a larger circle such as family and friend circle. Although technology and social media have developed dramatically in recent years, online assignment

also poses a serious problem for learners (Koohang & Durante, 2003) because if learners do not believe that online assignment teaches them something new and it is worth spending time online, then online assignment can become a sheer distraction (Halici Page & Mede, 2018).

Providing typical and traditional assignment, whether pencil-paper or online, can be devastating for learners. Students should be able to perceive assignment as a part of their actual learning (Deveci & Onder, 2013). Teachers should give up assigning tasks and homework to compensate for their leisure or play time. Considering that all students are at school all day long, it is important not to assign them at home. Japanese and Chinese education systems have been successful in recent years because they have changed their assignment system and reduced even schooling time (Li & Xiao, 2019).

Turkish education system sees assignment as a duty that has disciplinary power on learners' physical activities, social life and psychological state. This sense of assignment duty turns into broader disciplinary circles in their adulthood. Therefore, teachers should reconsider learners' socioeconomic status and psychological state while assigning homework (Baltaoğlu, Sucuoğlu, & Öztürk, 2017). Assignment does not contribute to freedom, creativity or psychological development. Rather, assignment hinders their vision, imaginative power and freedom. Another problem from a perspective of critical pedagogy is who assigns homework because assigning a task and homework is related to power and power relations. If teachers are always designated as those who assign homework, then power emerges as an effective factor, and students feel that they encounter such power and hegemony because assignment is perceived as a torture and pain for them (Bempechat, 2019).

In line with the problems mentioned above, it can be said that teachers and students work together in each stage of education including assignment because shared assignment can have considerable impact on both agents in education. Assignment should not be a part of education that is given only by teachers. Rather, assignment can be done in classroom settings together with teachers. Even the types of assignment can be determined by both of them. Unless participatory and democratic approaches are adopted in education, students may continue to feel that assignment is a heavy burden for them. Teachers can develop radical approaches by including themselves in doing tasks and assignment together. A new approach would be co-assignment, which means that any kind of assignment would be performed by both sides within the zone of proximity (Chaklin, 2003). By doing so, both teachers and students can learn to be responsible for both each other and tasks assigned to them. In addition, teachers and students can transform what is dictated and imposed on them by those curriculum makers into more humanistic sphere.

In order to develop the sense of sharing assignment, critical pedagogy can be a proxy for teachers and students. Future studies need to focus on what can be done together with students about the nature and type of assignment. It seems plausible to emphasize that co-assignment can benefit classroom atmosphere in that spending time together can turn into a creative process. Assignment should, in this sense, be authentic, inspiring, instructive and challenging. Teachers may take new roles by involving themselves in doing assignment with learners. I also strongly believe that assignment should be given and done in classroom settings (LeCourt, 1998).

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