Social Studies Teachers' Homework Practices in Oman

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Abstract

This study aims at discovering the homework practices of ten social studies teachers in basic education schools of the second cycle (grades 5-10) in Muscat governorate, Oman. The sample comprised of (10) teacher' planning books (5 male teachers and 5 female teachers) distributed in ten schools. The researchers designed a check list for analyzing the planning books of teachers consists of four domains: the types of homework tasks, the levels of knowledge of homework according to Bloom's taxonomy, the resources required to answer homework tasks, and the nature of working on homework. Findings of the study showed that social studies teachers assigned conventional homeworks, which might not be consistent with new goals of social studies in Oman.

Keywords: Homework practices, social studies in Oman, Education in Oman, Social studies teachers.

1. Introduction

Homework has been used in the educational systems to help the students to meet academic goals. Although classroom teaching focuses on developing knowledge and skills, homework has played a substantial role as supplemental learning opportunities for students (İflazoğlu & Hong, 2012). At present there is a growing interest in exploring the practices and effectiveness of homework as it is regarded as important component in learning process (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Hagger, Sultan, Hardcastle, & Chatzisarantis, 2015). Homework is defined as the set of school tasks that are assigned by teachers for students to complete outside of school hours (Cooper, Steenbergen-Hu, & Dent, 2012). Teachers' views and practices remain noticeably absent from this growing homework debates (Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, & Ludke, 2009; Bang, 2012). Deveci and Yiğit (2015) pointed out that homework assignment is not affected by the educational change as the teachers believes in its benefits to the students from pre-school education to higher education. Homework assignment, in Oman, is employed by teachers to achieve a set of educational goals. Yet, we have limited knowledge about the homework practices which are employed by social studies education. Therefore, the current study attempts to fill this research gap in literature by investigating the homework practices that are employed by Omani social studies teachers.

In many educational systems homework is an essential practice. The literature shows disagreement about the impact of homework on student performance. The proponents of homework highlighted the role of homework on enhancing students' achievement and attitudes (Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Cooper, Nye, & Grathouse, 1998; Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Especially at the middle and secondary school levels (Xu, 2010). Cooper, Nye, and Grathouse (1998). Revealed a positive relation between doing homework and students' achievement. Epstein, Simon, Salinas (1997) demonstrated that homework improved students' attitudes, writing and literacy outcomes. By contrast, there were various opponents of homework as it, from their perspective, influence the student learning negatively (e.g Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

The literature shows that teachers' believe that homework helps to achieve different purposes. Van Voorhis (2004) argues that homework enhances students' participation in their learning. Yet, it was found that good practice of homework is not limited to planning shorter assignment and limiting their number (Cooper, 2001). According to Epstein and Voorhis (2001), various types of homework is important to match students' different abilities. In addition, Patton (1994) stresses on explaining homework and having students begin it in class. Xu (2010) uncovered in his study the variables that influence students' purposes for doing homework which include student and family characteristics, Family homework help, teacher feedback and homework interest. The literature showed that homework should be assigned to students in all educational stages to achieve some academic goals. Yet, some experts argued that homework for primary education should directed to develop non-academic goals

such as developing study habits and time management skills. In this respect, Dixon (2007) mentioned that Cooper believed in assigning children homework that suited to their development and home situation whereas younger students must be given short homework that does not involve too much effort and time.

2. Purpose of the Study

Although there is a growing research activities in the field of social studies in Oman (Author, 2009; Al-Rabani, 2009; Al-Malki, 2013; Al-Hamdi, 2013; Al-Sarmi, 2012), the homework practices in this field are still not investigated nationally and internationally as most of the pervious literature focuses on studying teachers' purpose for assigning homework (Xu, 2010; Trautwein et al., 2009). Thus, this study is original and timely especially at the moment when many calls for evaluating Omani educational system are emerged. It hops that the results generated from this study will provide policy-makers with some insight into some aspects of homework practices. The main focus of the current study is to discover the homework practices of ten social studies teachers in Oman. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1- What kind of homework tasks were assigned by the social studies teachers?

2- What is the alignment of the cognitive domain levels of the homework items that each teacher assigned to his students as it related to Bloom's Taxonomy?

3- What are the resources required to complete the homework tasks?

4- What are the methods of completing the homework tasks?

3. Methodology

Participants

This study involved a sample of all social studies teachers in basic education schools of the second cycle (grades 5-10) in Muscat governorate. This sample comprised of (10) teacher' planning books (5 male teachers and 5 female teachers) distributed in ten schools.

Instrumentation

To explore the homework practices in Omani schools, an analysis checklist was designed including five parts: demographic data of teacher, they kinds of homework (answering questions, writing a report, conducting an interview, hearing a broadcast or TV programs, drawing maps or graphs, collecting samples, preparing for a school broadcasting, doing a project, answering a mathematical exercise, and kayaking picture for a phenomena); the homework levels of knowledge (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation); the resources of doing homework (textbook, internet, Atlas, media, computer technology); and the nature of conducting homework (individual, small group, and large group).

The analysis checklist items were developed from our experience in social studies and from related literature (Cooper, Steenbergen-Hu, & Dent, 2012; Xu, 2010; Trautwein et al., 2009). A panel of educators with specialties in social studies and research methods reviewed the analysis checklist. Based on their recommendations, modifications we made to the analysis checklist. It was pilot tested with a sample of "two planning books" and modified accordingly. Data were collected from the teachers' lesson planning notebooks of fall semester of 2018. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics such as percentages.

4. Results

This section includes demographic characteristics of teachers and their homework practices as reported in their lesson planning notebooks.

Demographics

Table 1 shows some demographics information about Social studies teachers who agreed to participate in the current study.

Teachers	Gender	Specialization	Level of experience
1	M	History	15
2	M	History	9
3	M	Geography	13
4	M	History	8
5	M	Geography	10
6	F	Geography	15

7	F	History	16
8	F	Geography	8
9	F	Geography	9
10	F	History	14

As indicated in Table 1, the percentage of males (50%) and females (50%). They are equally distributed to history and geography but all of them teaching social studies regard less of their major of study. The level of experience of the study sample range from eight to (16) years of experience.

The kinds of homework

The second part of the tool focused on the kinds of homework that teachers assigned to their students. Despite the nature of social studies that focus on the current events, teachers' practices appear to set rather a conventional approach in the homework tasks they assigned to the students. As shown in Table 2, there is tendency to follow traditional activities such as answering questions, drawing maps or graphs, and writing a report. Yet, they gave a low emphasize on assigning an unconventional homework that require students to take picture the phenomena, doing project, and solving a mathematical exercise. The last tasks that received little attention from the teachers that link students to trace the geographical and history also emphasized on direct students to watch TV programs, conducting interview with people who experienced the event and collecting sample from the environment. These practices might restrict achieving the goals of social studies in Oman.

Table 2. Types of homework task that teachers assigned to their students

Items	Planning books code										F	%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Answering questions	9	9	15	13	10	14	13	13	12	11	119	59.5
Drawing maps or graphs	4	2	1	4	5	2	3	4	4	5	34	17
Writing a report	2	4	3	2	1	0	2	1	2	2	19	9.5
Taking pictures for a phenomena	1	2	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	9	4.5
Doing a project	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	7	3.5
Answering a mathematical exercise	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	5	2.5
Hearing a broadcast or TV programs, drawing maps or graphs	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	1.5
Conducting an interview	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	1.5
Collecting samples	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.5
Total	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	100

Homework levels of knowledge

As shown in Table 3, the homework tasks focus on the lower thinking level of Bloom's taxonomy. The rate of comprehension was (37,5%), following by application (25.5%), and then become knowledge (21.5). In contrast, the higher order thinking is receiving low consideration with "analysis' level got (14.5%), following by "synthesis" that rated (1%). Finally, Teachers assigned no homework task to develop the students' ability to "evaluate". The results confirm the findings from the other study that find social studies focus on rout learning in Oman (Al-Hammami, 1999; Al-Ryami, 2002; Al-Skatit, 2002) and beyond (Barone, 2002; Fairbrother, 2004; Akar, 2006).

Table 3. Homework levels of knowledge

Items	Planning books code										F	%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Knowledge	2	3	6	5	4	6	2	6	2	7	43	21.5
Comprehension	6	8	9	9	6	9	9	8	7	4	75	37.5
Application	7	6	2	4	7	3	3	6	6	7	51	25.5
Analysis	5	3	3	2	3	2	4	0	5	2	29	14.5
Synthesis	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	1
Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	200	100

Required resources needs for students to complete the homework

The third part of the analysis check list deals with the required resources needed to complete the homework tasks. As indicated in Table 4, 53.5 % of tasks required students to use "textbook" to complete it while only 4.5% require them to use the "media" to answer them. These results highlight the authority of "textbook' in teaching social studies where teachers not attempt to link students with new development of the historical, geographical, and civic events and phenomena.

Table 4. Required resources needs for students to complete the homework

Items	Planning books code										F	%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Textbook	9	7	10	7	9	13	10	15	14	13	107	53.5
Resource center	4	4	6	5	3	1	6	3	1	2	35	17.5
Internet	6	5	3	5	4	3	2	2	4	1	35	17.5
Atlas	1	1	0	1	4	1	2	0	1	3	14	7
The Media	0	3	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	9	4.5
Total	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	200	100

Level of work (Individual, in small group) require to complete the homework

The fourth part of the analysis check list deals with the nature of completing the homework tasks. As indicated in Table 5, 78 % of tasks required students to it "individually" while only 13.5% and 8.5 % require them to complete it in "small groups" and "large group" respectively. These results are in consistent with the nature of homework as it put by Cooper, Steenbergen-Hu, and Dent (2012).

Table 5. Level of work (Individual, in small group, large groups) require to complete the homework

Items	Planning books code										F	%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Individual	14	16	18	17	16	18	7	16	17	17	156	78
Small groups	3	3	2	2	3	1	8	3	1	1	27	13.5
Large groups	3	1	0	1	1	1	5	1	2	2	17	8.5
Total	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	200	100

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore some practices of homework among social studies teachers in basic education schools in Oman. Particularly, the study explored the types of homework tasks, the levels of knowledge of homework according to Bloom's taxonomy, the resources required to answer homework tasks, and the nature of working on homework. Findings of the study showed that social studies teachers assigned conventional homework, which might not be consistent with new goals of social studies in Oman which put more stress on linking students with the current issues. Clearly, this finding reflects important pedagogic issues that limit the ability of social studies to improve the negative attitudes towards subject and to link it with students life (Al-Gharibi, 2008). This lack of interest in the subject influence students' attitudes and homework might be one tool to increase students' interest on the subject.

Although social studies teachers should focus on designing homework that help to achieve different purposes and to meet different level of knowledge (Van Voorhis, 2004), it seems that there is much emphasis on conventional assignments (e.g., answering questions, drawing maps or graphs, writing report). As Fawzy (2012, p.2) noticed, teachers sometimes use homework as "a routine to provide students with drills on important activities". Among the levels that received less emphasis include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. It is important that higher order thinking should be a major focus of social studies. As the Su's (1990) pointed out that although teachers stated that they valued higher order thinking they did not implement it in their classroom. Thus, social studies teachers require to direct their homework assignments to focus on higher order thinking to counter the transmission mode and rote memorization approach that related to social studies (Foster & Padgett, 1999).

In examining teachers' practices on the resources that students needs to do their homework, the most widely resource was textbooks while the media received less important to complete homework task albeit its provide

student with up-to-date information about social studies phenomena. As with Al-Nofli's (2013) results, the most commonly used teaching methods by social studies teachers were those methods that adopt student-centered strategies. Clearly, this finding not supports efforts made by the Ministry of Education to shift away from traditional methods to progressive methods that expand students' horizon by study the topics from different resources (Ministry of Education, 2006).

One of the striking findings of this study was that teachers attempt to build a team work to complete homework by assigned tasks that requires work in small and large groups. The majority of teachers (78%) still focus on assigning individual homework task (see Table 5). In fact, this approach follow the recommendation of most literature to individualized homework (Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Bennett & Kalish, 2006). One major element of the last educational reform that focus on enhance the spirit of working in a team (Ministry of Education, 2012). It is worth supporting by policy and training as teachers less likely to enhance the cooperative tasks of homework without supporting from the schools and the parent.

6. Conclusion

The present study offered insights into some aspects of homework practices in Oman, especially in Social studies. The data demonstrate the social studies teachers give high consideration to homework in their "planning books". Yet, their practices still conventional as they assigned homework that lead students to rout learning instead of helping them to widen their thinking abilities. Therefore, there are some issues that needs to be tackled in order to make homeworks more effective to improve students' attitudes towards social studies. First, sitting a policy for homework is of important in order to enlighten teachers' practices. Second, teachers require some training to development their homework practice. In previous study, social studies teachers reported that they offering very limited opportunity for participate in professional development programme (Al-Maamari, Al-Nofli, & Al-Gharibi, 2014). According to Farkas, Johnson and Duffett (1999), training is the main issue that teachers complained about most and Omani teachers are not exceptional. Third, more research about homework is required to explore how this complicated issue affect students learning. Specifically, future research should be directed to investigate social studies perspectives about homework and how they deal with some practices of homework such as correction and feedback as these very important skills to make homework meaningful for students.

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