Parental Attitudes towards Homework in Maltese Primary School Settings: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores a range of parental attitudes towards homework (HW) in primary school settings in Malta and Gozo. International research suggests that while parental attitudes towards HW vary across certain groups and population characteristics, they tend to be mostly positive. Positive attitudes are associated with increased direct parental involvement, which is in turn thought to improve overall academic performance. However, HW can also become a source of struggle and stress. This study aimed to further explore such claims, as well as develop previous work by local undergraduate researchers in ascertaining major trends in parental attitudes in Maltese primary school settings, and finally, understand how these fit more broadly in the context of Maltese society. A survey design and quantitative analysis of online questionnaire data from a sample of 59 Maltese and Gozitan parents was carried out to test various hypotheses relating to general attitudes towards HW, attitudes towards direct involvement in helping children do their HW, as well as perceptions of HW as stressful, excessive, or too difficult for children. The results showed that despite considering it as a stress factor, Maltese parents held generally positive attitudes towards HW as a valid educational tool, while favouring a less direct approach to helping their children. Maltese children are apparently expected to take a degree of personal responsibility for their HW, which can be interpreted as a crucial requirement for the early education of citizens and independent economic actors in an increasingly individualistic and consumeristic contemporary Maltese society.

Keywords: primary school; homework; education; Malta

Introduction

Homework (HW) can be broadly defined as an extension or continuation of work done throughout the school day to confirm and consolidate content, as well as to cultivate independent study habits and a stronger work ethic in children (Hanratty et al. 2019; Holte 2016; Kukk et al. 2015). A good deal of international research has been carried out on HW and, while some critics have pointed out some of its negative effects on the quality of children’s lives (Holte 2016), there exists a long-standing and relatively broad consensus that HW indeed represents a valid and beneficial educational tool (Cooper 1994; Cooper et al. 1998; Cooper, Lindsay and Nye 2000).

An additional goal of HW is to engage parents in the learning process and improve home-school communication (Hanratty et al. 2019; Tam and Chan 2016). This renders the perceptions of parents an important factor in understanding broader phenomena surrounding HW in primary school settings. Meanwhile, in Malta, the National Homework Policy (MEDE 2018) actively sought to maximise parental involvement in their children’s education while simultaneously reducing excessive pressure on families. In this paper, therefore, we focus exclusively on the perspectives of parents on the topic of HW in
Maltese and Gozitan primary school settings. We discuss parents’ subjective attitudes and opinions about HW rather than make objective claims about their actions or the nature of their involvement in terms of time and material resources.

While there is a vast body of international literature on HW, research on the topic in Malta has been carried out mostly at undergraduate level. We engage with both bodies in our review and present a set of hypotheses based on the common themes that emerge. Throughout our discussion we aim for substantive reach among local stakeholders as well as a contribution to the broader academic literature on HW in primary school settings.

HW in the Literature

Some local teachers admit to having negative attitudes towards HW, claiming that it is actually children’s parents who advocate for it (Dalli 2007). Coutts (2004) proposed that giving HW has become consolidated by parents into an image of the ‘good’ teacher. Given that Maltese parents are thought to value educational achievement as a status symbol and a vehicle for social mobility (Sultana 1994a), HW is elevated to the status of a seemingly necessary condition and a conspicuous marker that serves to reassure parents about the quality of the education their children receive. In this sense, the more HW given, the more reassured parents may be about the quality of their children’s education.

Some of the motives for parents directly supporting and assisting children with their HW include the desire to make up for the help they themselves missed out on when they were in school (Solomon, Warin and Lewis 2002), as well as the belief that HW helps children to assume greater responsibility over work and develop a strong work ethic (Holte 2016). Indeed, despite a general willingness to assist their children with HW, most parents expect their children to exercise at least some degree of independence when doing the work (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow 1995). In Malta, researchers have shown that teachers and parents are mainly in agreement that children should take primary responsibility for their HW, with parents assuming a secondary supportive role (Borg and Camilleri 2017; Buttigieg and Cassar, 2013; Dalli 2007; Farrugia and Xuereb 1999).

Parental attitudes towards HW reported in the literature tend to be mostly positive (Coutts 2004; Kukk et al. 2015), and Maltese parents of primary-school-aged children have so far appeared to mirror this trend, acknowledging that they have an important role to play in their children’s learning (Agius 2014; Mallia 2015; Mifsud 1993;). While some parents do strongly object to HW, seeing it as too stressful (Markow, Kim and Liebman 2007; Voorhis 2011), time-consuming, or a sign of an overburdened curriculum (Pressman et al. 2015), such views tend be in the minority (Warton 1998). Knowing the general attitudes of parents towards HW is important because parents who are in favour of HW tend to involve themselves more fully in the process. Consequently, increased parental involvement in HW is thought to improve the likelihood of academic success, even though this relationship is likely to be complex and mediated by additional factors (Echaune, Ndiku and Sang 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001; Tam and Chan 2009).

Researchers have investigated various factors influencing the propensity for parental involvement in HW in primary school settings around the world. These include the age of the child, education level of the parent, sex of the child, sex of the parent, number of children/family size, and current academic performance of the child. Studies suggest that parental involvement decreases as children get older (Cooper, Lindsay and Nye 2000; Tam and Chan 2009) or as family size/number of children increases (Revicki 1981). Parental involvement tends to be higher in the case of male children (Cooper, Lindsay and Nye 2000) and where parents have a higher level of education themselves (Solomon, Warin...
and Lewis 2002; Tam and Chan 2009). When children struggle academically, parents also tend to become more involved, although sometimes at the cost of increased stress and strain on familial relations (Cooper, Lindsay and Nye 2000). Involvement also appears to be higher among female parents (Coutts 2004; Echaune, Ndiku and Sang 2015), a trend that has also been reported locally (Borg and Camilleri 2017; Bugeja 2014; Buttigieg and Cassar 2013; Dalli 2007; Farrugia and Xuereb 1999). This assertion appears sound in light of known tendencies for women in Malta to bear the brunt of family care roles, even when they also hold down paid jobs (EIGE 2020).

Relationships between parents and guardians have also been found to influence involvement in children’s HW. Biological parents in two-parent households reportedly spend the most time assisting with HW, more so than single parents and step-parents (Astone 1991). Little difference in involvement is thought to exist between single and re-married mothers (Acock and Demo 1994), and paternal involvement is thought to be higher in first marriages rather than in step-father roles (Balli 1998). Ultimately, parental involvement will also depend on the children themselves who will typically show less enthusiasm about HW than their parents (Cooper and Valentine 2001). While younger children tend to request pretend HW in order to mimic their older siblings, such interest tends to fade when they are eventually faced with regular HW of their own (Coutts 2004). Negative attitudes towards HW among children themselves can be problematic (Cooper and Valentine 2001), because when children struggle with their work, there is a risk of conflict and strained relations between the parent and child (Solomon, Warin and Lewis 2002; Warton 2001).

Of course, parents can also struggle to provide HW assistance and support, so parents’ perceptions of both their children’s ability to cope as well as their own also matter. It is interesting to note that despite generally positive attitudes towards HW, researchers have reported that nearly half of parents associate HW with extra work (Voorhis 2011), and almost a third classify it as a major source of stress (Markow, Kim and Liebman 2007). Some parents have accordingly expressed a need for support from teachers when it comes to involving themselves in HW (Coutts 2004), with many proposing they would be able to provide more and better-quality support with some additional guidance from teachers (Dauber and Epstein 1993; Kay et al. 1994).

Given the dearth in published literature on parental attitudes towards HW in Maltese primary school settings and the prominent themes emerging from international studies, we therefore sought to build on the earlier findings of undergraduate educational researchers by exploring the following questions:

1. What is the general stance of Maltese parents towards HW?
2. How are local parents’ perceptions about HW affected by factors like sex, level of education, relationship, and employment status of parents, as well as age, sex, and number of children?
3. To what degree are parents and children alike struggling or otherwise reacting adversely to the HW being given in Maltese and Gozitan primary schools?

Methods

In order to appropriately address the study aims and questions, 14 more rigorously testable hypotheses were formulated and a quantitative questionnaire-based survey design combined with a post-positivist approach to analysis selected as the main research methods.
Data Collection

Following clearance by the institutional review board at the Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology in February 2020, a questionnaire was developed using Google Forms, and disseminated online via social media using a convenience strategy. The data collection period spanned February to April, 2020. The first section of the questionnaire comprised questions on age, sex, employment status, occupation, relationship status, number of children, and level of education. These were treated as explanatory variables in the hypotheses tested (shown in Table 2). The second section of the questionnaire originally contained a total of 24 items to measure the main constructs of interest, based closely on previous HW studies and initial discussions among the authors based around theoretical and face validity. Following a post hoc principal components analysis with varimax rotation and confirmatory logic, construct validity was further established by eliminating six of the original items with poor factor loadings. The remaining 18 items equated to Eigenvalues for the main dependent variables of interest of above 1.00.

The main dependent variables of interest comprising the survey instrument were: parents’ general attitudes towards HW, parents’ attitudes towards direct involvement, the degree to which children struggled with their HW, the degree to which HW given was excessive, the perceived need for additional guidance from teachers, and the extent to which HW constituted a stress factor among parents. A detailed presentation of the constructs and their measurement are shown in Table 1, complete with the Eigenvalues and rotated component matrix correlation values. The final two constructs were used as dependent variables, but no EVs are shown since they corresponded to single items in the questionnaire. Each of the items shown was measured using a 5-point Likert scale with the labels 1=”Strongly disagree”, and 5=”Strongly agree”.

| Item validation |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| **Main dependent variables** | **Items** |
| **General attitude towards HW (EV=3.07)** | I think HW is beneficial for my child/children \( (r=0.78) \) |
| | HW is beneficial for their future \( (r=0.75) \) |
| | HW is a build-up of what they have learned at school \( (r=0.74) \) |
| | Involving myself during HW helps my child/children learn more \( (r=0.68) \) |
| **Attitude towards involvement in HW (EV=1.93)** | I have ample time after school to help my child/children with their HW \( (r=0.55) \) |
| | I help my child/children because they are still too young to do HW on their own \( (r=0.69) \) |
| | I let my child/children figure their HW out as I believe they should learn how to do it by themselves \( (r=-0.63) \) |
Perceived struggle of child/children (EV=2.72)
- My child/children need/s help with their HW (r=.71)
- My child/children find/s HW difficult (r=.68)
- My child/children get/s distracted easily during HW while at home (r=.81)
- My child/children refuse/s to do work with me at home (r=.74)

Perception of amount of HW as excessive (EV=3.55)
- Teacher gives a lot of HW (r=.57)
- Teacher needs to give more instructions for us parents to help with our child/children's HW (r=.79)
- Teacher gives HW which is very hard for my child/children (r=.75)
- Teacher needs to give more time for HW to be completed (r=.70)

Desire for direction from teacher
- Teacher needs to give more instructions for us parents to help with our child/children's HW

Perception of HW as a stress factor
- I find it difficult to manage work, house chores, and HW at the same time

Table 1: Main dependent variables and corresponding questionnaire items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Research hypothesis</th>
<th>Null</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived struggle of child/children</td>
<td>Parental attitudes towards HW are generally positive</td>
<td>$H_0 = k \leq 3$</td>
<td>(Coutts 2004; Kukk et al. 2015)</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of amount of HW as excessive</td>
<td>Parents are in favour of getting directly involved in their children’s HW</td>
<td>$H_0 = k \leq 3$</td>
<td>(Cooper, Lindsay and Nye 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow 1995)</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Owing to the primary use of Likert scales and the ordinal level of measurement, non-normality was assumed, and non-parametric statistical procedures selected for the analysis. Table 2 shows the research hypotheses together with their formally stated null hypotheses, the literature sources on which they were based, as well as the non-parametric statistical procedures used in each instance. While the main hypotheses were grounded in the literature, the study remained largely exploratory in nature since several additional post hoc hypotheses were formulated throughout the course of the analysis and evaluation of results. These are shown together with the main findings.
### Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Null Hypothesis</th>
<th>Statistical Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H3</strong></td>
<td>General attitudes towards HW and attitudes towards direct involvement are positively related</td>
<td>$H_0 = r_s ≠ 0$</td>
<td>Spearman's rank correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H4</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement increases in parents with higher education level</td>
<td>$H_0 = r_s ≠ 0$</td>
<td>Spearman's rank correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H5</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement is greater among female parents</td>
<td>$H_0 = M_1 = M_2$</td>
<td>Mann-Whitney test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H6</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement decreases as children's age/level increases</td>
<td>$H_0 = r_s ≠ 0$</td>
<td>Spearman's rank correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H7</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement depends on family size</td>
<td>$H_0 = M_1 = M_2$</td>
<td>Mann-Whitney test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H8</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement depends on sex of child</td>
<td>$H_0 = M_1 = M_2$</td>
<td>Mann-Whitney test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H9</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement increases in biological two-parent households</td>
<td>$H_0 = M_1 = M_2$</td>
<td>Mann-Whitney test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H10</strong></td>
<td>Parental involvement depends on employment status</td>
<td>$H_0 = M_1 = M_2 = ... = M_k$</td>
<td>Kruskal-Wallis test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H11</strong></td>
<td>Parents consider amount of HW given as excessive</td>
<td>$H_0 = k ≤ 3$</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H12</strong></td>
<td>Parents want more guidance from teachers</td>
<td>$H_0 = k ≤ 3$</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H13</strong></td>
<td>Parents perceive their children as struggling with HW</td>
<td>$H_0 = k ≤ 3$</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H14</strong></td>
<td>Parents perceive HW as a source of stress</td>
<td>$H_0 = k ≤ 3$</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Hypotheses based on the literature and the statistical procedures used to test them

The data were downloaded, cleaned, and organised in an open-source spreadsheet software application (*LibreOffice Calc v.7.2.2.2.*), and finally imported into an open-source statistical analysis software application (*GNU PSPP v.1.4.1*). Spearman’s Rho ($r_s$) was computed using the cross-tabulation function in *PSPP*, while the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests...
Findings and Discussion

Existing studies portray generally favourable attitudes among parents towards HW (Agius 2014; Coutts 2004; Kukk et al. 2015; Mallia 2015; Mifsud 1993). Our findings support this view, given that the lower bound value of the 95% confidence interval surrounding the mean Likert scale score of 4.21 ($CI=4.02, 4.39$) for parental attitudes suggested a population parameter greater than 3 ($j=4.02$). The null for $H_1$, therefore, was rejected in favour of a moderate to strongly favourable general attitude towards HW. Apart from a slight decrease in favourable attitudes towards HW among parents of male children ($\chi^2=7.54, r=-.36, p=.006$), post hoc testing indicated that positive attitudes were mainly ubiquitous. In other words, there were no significant differences in general attitudes towards HW across all the other explanatory variables included in the study, including gender of parents, education level, family structure, age of child, as well as relationship and employment status.

In his broader analysis of Maltese conceptions of class, Sultana (1994a) differentiated Marxist and Weberian sociological approaches to class identity, arguing that the Maltese tended towards the latter perspective. Sultana implies a “status group” approach to negotiating class identities in Malta, via mainly individually sought status symbols like levels of education, occupation, and wealth. In this sense, parents can be predicted to have favourable attitudes towards HW, so long as it is considered as a means of supporting educational development and achievement in their children and, therefore, a way of increasing their chances of getting ahead in society. The tendency towards individualism in the pursuit of status symbols is interesting, given the data for our assessment of parental attitudes towards direct involvement in children’s HW ($H_2$). Despite being generally in favour of HW, parents advocated for relatively limited direct involvement in their children’s work. The estimated population parameter for attitudes towards parental involvement was 2.47 ($CI=2.28, 2.67$), with an upper bound value of the 95% confidence interval below 3 ($k=2.67$). Failure to reject the null for $H_2$, therefore, suggested a consensus among parents, whereby children are encouraged to take responsibility for doing their HW relatively autonomously and independently.
Figure 1: Boxplots showing the mean 95% confidence interval (box) and minimum/maximum values (whiskers)

The box plots in Figure 1 illustrate the high/positive attitudes towards HW in general, and low/negative attitudes towards direct parental involvement more specifically. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) and Tam and Chan (2009) proposed that parents with positive attitudes towards HW in general were more likely to involve themselves directly in the work. We cannot, however, make claims about the actual degree of practical involvement among parents in our sample, but rather, only the degree to which they think they should (or should not) directly participate in doing HW with their children. In this sense, $H_3$ was rejected due to a lack of correlation between positive attitudes towards HW more generally and parental attitudes towards direct involvement ($r_s = .14, p = .65$). It would seem, therefore, that general attitudes towards HW in Malta do not necessarily equate to a more hands-on approach to assisting children with their HW. The overarching aim of HW to cultivate independent study habits and a strong work ethic among children (Hanratty et al. 2019; Holte 2016; Kukk et al. 2015) would appear to predominate as an important perceived benefit, among Maltese parents specifically.

A lack of supporting evidence for $H_4$ through to $H_{10}$ further supported the idea that parental stances towards less direct involvement were ubiquitous. Attitudes did not change significantly according to the level of education of the parents ($r_s = .09, p = .92$), gender of parent ($\chi^2 = .42, p = .52$), gender of child ($\chi^2 = .13, p = .72$), age of child ($r_s = -.30, p = .10$), number of children in the household ($\chi^2 = .32, p = .57$), relationship/cohabitation status of the parents...
(\chi^2=2.42, p=.12), or employment status (\chi^2 =2.92, p=.40). These findings generally support earlier insights by undergraduate researchers on HW in local primary school settings. The possibility of children becoming “dependent” on their parents appears to be a long-standing concern among local teachers and parents alike (Buttigieg and Cassar 2013; Farrugia and Xuereb 1999). Many parents feel they should provide assistance only in case of difficulties (Borg and Camilleri 2007) and only at the direct request of their children (Buttigieg and Cassar 2013). Teachers, meanwhile, have shown an awareness that degrees of parental support are likely to vary across given cohorts of students (Axiaq and Ellul 2015). In other words, not all students can rely on getting help (Farrugia and Xuereb 1999), so explicitly involving parents in HW tasks should ideally be avoided (Dalli 2007), with any such available support considered merely as a bonus (Buttigieg and Cassar 2013). These views ultimately suggest that Maltese children are expected to assume a relatively heightened degree of personal responsibility for doing their HW (Buttigieg and Cassar 2013), with parents assuming a supportive role, providing motivation and supervision (Dalli 2007).

HW as a means of learning personal responsibility for one’s work, meanwhile, fits with broader sociological interpretations of Malta’s unique economic and political situation. Local scholars have long argued that a distinctive shift has been underway in Malta, since the late 1980s, towards a culture of heightened consumerism, consumption, and individualism (Gellel and Sultana 2008; Sultana 1994b). Even traditional religious and family values in contemporary Malta have been conceptualised as undergoing fundamental transitions. Such values are increasingly understood as primarily serving individual rather than communitarian interests in contemporary Maltese society, and are practised increasingly within the personal as opposed to the collective domain (Gellel and Sultana 2008; Tabone 1994). HW, in this sense, represents a form of acculturation in a society that primarily operates according to fundamentally individualistic values.

Maltese society has evolved in the past several decades not only in terms of its values, but also structurally and materially. According to the then Maltese Ministry for the Family, Children’s Rights and Social Solidarity (MFCS, 2017), the traditional Maltese family comprising a male breadwinner and a female carer is no longer the norm. Children now grow up in more pluralistic and diverse family forms, representing an important factor for any discussion on HW which, after all, is intended to be carried out in the child’s family home space. An increasing proportion of females have entered the Maltese workforce over the past few decades, with the natural consequence that, despite retaining a majority of unpaid child-rearing and family care work (EIGE 2020), less time is left for home-based activities with children, such as helping with HW. In this sense, HW can be a source of stress and strain on family life and parent-child relations (Buttigieg and Cassar 2013; Mifsud 1993).

Despite generally favourable attitudes towards HW, therefore, it was interesting to note that parents ultimately tended to view HW as a source of stress (Mean=3.61, CI=[3.31, 3.91]), resulting in a rejection of \(H_{ij}\), while supporting the findings of Voorhis (2011). A post hoc correlation test further confirmed no relationship between degrees of positive views on HW and the degree to which parents see HW as stressful (\(r_s=-.03, p=.55\)). In other words, parents did not require a negative attitude towards HW in order to consider it a source of stress. Similarly, there was no correlation (\(H_{ij}\)) between a general attitude and the degree to which children were perceived to be struggling with their HW (\(r_s=.09, p=.34\)). As such, generally positive attitudes were persistent despite the stress or difficulties imposed by HW. In other words, stress and perceived struggle among children were independent of general attitudes. Mifsud (1993) similarly argued that parents were in favour of HW despite it being a demand on children’s time, thereby maintaining a generally positive outlook on HW despite its perceived negative effects.
Figure 2 shows the mean responses and 95% confidence intervals for perceptions of HW as a stress factor and parental perceptions of children's struggles. While views on the extent to which children struggled with their HW overall were actually mixed (Mean=2.94, CI=2.71, 3.18), as indicated by the 95% confidence interval overlapping 3, this factor was correlated with perceptions of HW as stressful ($r_s=.22, p=.04$). In other words, seeing children struggling with their HW was enough to make parents see HW as stressful; however, neither state ultimately had any effect on how parents generally perceived the validity of HW as an overall important educational tool.

Dalli (2007) suggested that some Maltese parents may actually desire more HW to keep children occupied. Our findings, accordingly, suggest that parents did not generally feel that the amount of HW given was excessive (Mean=2.94, CI=2.66, 3.22). Beliefs that the amount of HW given was excessive were observed only when parents simultaneously perceived their child/children to be struggling ($r_s=.40, p=.003$). Regardless of the degrees of seeing HW as either stressful or excessive, parents still maintained their belief in the validity of HW ($r_s=-.18, p=.09$) as well as their attitudes towards direct involvement ($r_s=-.07, p=.49$). The ubiquity of positive attitudes towards HW in general therefore remained a persistent trend throughout the analysis.

Finally, parents’ sentiments were less clear on the subject of acquiring support and guidance directly from teachers. Failure to reject the null for $H_{12}$ suggested no consensus
among parents in their desire for more direction from teachers about how to exactly involve themselves in their children’s HW. The estimated population parameter \((Mean=3.20, CI=2.84, 3.56)\) suggested mixed views. Dalli (2007) argued that parents likely make assumptions about their role without really knowing if their chosen level of involvement is actually helping their children to learn. These insights could indicate that there is a lack of clear conviction that approaches to HW assistance are “correct”, or at least that there is not enough cooperation between teachers and parents about how HW should be done in accordance with the teachers’ own intentions, which may vary.

**Conclusion**

Despite the emergence of significant trends in the data, a larger sample size would have increased confidence in the generalisability of the findings to the full population of Maltese parents of primary-school-aged children. The findings do, however, constitute a valid basis and a set of more qualified themes for informing future research involving larger, more representative samples. Specifically, parents who do not work in full- or part-time employment were under-represented in this study, which means that the findings should be delimited mainly within the context of working parents. Furthermore, it was not differentiated in this study whether parents were representative of state, church, or private school settings. While such distinctions have been previously made in local undergraduate studies and constitute a valuable area for additional future research, this study was primarily aimed at understanding HW in Malta within the context of what has been reported elsewhere. The hypotheses, in this sense, were based on a study of Maltese parents as a collective in the wider context of the international literature. We were principally motivated by an interest in relating our findings to broader sociological underpinnings applicable to all Maltese parents.

The study ultimately suggests that Maltese parents tend to have generally positive attitudes towards HW. These attitudes appear to be ubiquitous and independent of the age of parent or child, sex of parent or child, level of education, and relationship status. Such positive attitudes, however, do not appear to translate into a belief in substantial direct involvement in helping children do their HW, as might be expected, with Maltese parents clearly favouring a less direct approach and fostering a sense of personal responsibility among their children. This finding was common among all categories of Maltese parents included in the study and appears to fit the pragmatic early educational requirements of developing citizen-consumers equipped to live and work in an increasingly individualistic society.

Parents only felt that the amount of HW given was excessive when they perceived their own child/children be struggling. Regardless of whether or not HW was excessive or children struggled, however, parents were generally in agreement that HW constituted a stress factor. Accordingly, the evidence supports the general scope of national HW policies, which aim specifically at reducing the stress HW imposes on families. A more systemic implementation of guidelines seeking to cap quantities of work given, or indeed any initiatives designed to otherwise minimise the daily load, are essential for mitigating the evidently stressful effects of HW.

Nevertheless, stress was ultimately not sufficient to adversely affect parents’ overall generally positive perceptions of HW or their beliefs about the degree of direct involvement. In their views on seeking additional guidance from teachers as to how to best to assist their children, parents’ views were mixed. It would appear that a more organised and systemic approach to promoting teacher-parent cooperation for improving the effectiveness of HW would help maximise its potential as a valid educational tool, as per national policy
recommendations. Any initiatives designed to foster and direct such cooperation are therefore supported by the findings.

While future studies might further explore variations in parental attitudes towards HW across state, church, and private schools in Malta, we would also like to investigate variations across the other factors in Sultana’s (1994a) status group approach to understanding Maltese class structures, namely variations in attitudes according to occupation and material wealth. Furthermore, while this study was limited strictly to parents’ perceptions on involvement, future research might explore more objective measures of actual involvement in terms of time and material resources. Bugeja (2014) argued that the education level of parents affects type rather than the degree of involvement. Given that our findings are primarily concerned with attitudes towards the degree of involvement, future research might also look to categorise and quantify involvement by type and test accordingly for variations between parents of different education levels. Ultimately, we offer these findings to help propel further studies by educational researchers so as to continue to explore the topic of HW and its interactions with broader educational and social factors unique to the Maltese context.

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