

# Making Homework a Catalyst of Teacher-Parents-Children's Collaboration: A Teacher Research Study from an Elementary School in China

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Promoting teachers, parents and students to collaborate and participate in homework has important value to improve educational quality and develop a learning community. Based in the Chinese education context, the authors conducted an experiment of *Happy Homework* in one elementary school. The homework catalyzed the full participation of parents and cooperative innovation between the teachers and students. To investigate the outcomes and experiences of the project, the authors utilized a variety of research methods, such as questionnaires, onsite observation, interviewing and discussion with stakeholders, and transcript analysis. The authors found that collaboration among teachers, parents and students played a big role in the development of the students. It stimulated the students to perceive the quality of learning, and the students' performance, learning quality, self-awareness, and social and emotional development was improved. In addition, a learning community was developed. Based on the initial case study, a series of follow-up research studies are being carried out in the case study school.

*Keywords:* homework, student development, happiness, teacher-parent- Children's Collaboration

## Vignette From The Student Interview (4/8/2015)

P: I think homework can't make us happy. We would be happy if we don't have homework. Is *Happy Homework* worthy of the name?

S1: No homework, no happiness.

P: What makes you happy to do homework?

S1: *Happy Homework* can let us learn more extracurricular knowledge. We are becoming clever.

S2: Parents can talk with us. We can make progress together. For example, we work together and sum up experience during the work of *Embracing the World*. We choose the *Good Essay* together too.

S3: We had a lot of homework to do and felt tired to do such dull work before. Now homework is less but more colorful. Our test scores have not declined, but stayed among the top.

P: What has *Happy Homework* specially changed you?

S3: I can express myself correctly. I did not talk actively in the classroom before. I did not care about what the teacher said. Now I love Chinese lessons, I like to raise my hand and talk with teachers and students.

S4: There is a kind of homework about reading. I read more and know more. I have learned the way of reading and now I am good at reading. It's easy to do such reading exercises.

P: Will your parents feel happy, or think homework is harder?

S5: They feel happier than before. We discuss and design the different homework forms every day with our teachers and parents. It reduces our burdens. Each parent chooses one form of homework to finish with us. Sometimes they will check our other projects of homework.

S2: They are becoming happy too. They did not like to check our homework before, because the quality of our work was not high. They were unhappy then.

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And now the homework is colorful and perfect. They feel happy. They like *Longwa News (News and Story Sharing)*. We talk with our parents about something that happened in school. They can know more about our school life.

S3 : We used to finish our homework very late at night. The parents must wait for us to sleep. They had no more time to talk with us. Now we have less homework. We talk and finish homework quickly.

P : What do the students from other classes think of your *Happy Homework*? Do they feel strange?

S2: They did not feel strange, and they are imitating us now. They think it is wonderful. We have learned a lot of ways to read and write from our homework. We shared these good ways with their teachers."

The above discussion took place between a university professor, the third author of this paper, and the students of the participating class. The topic of the dialogue is *Happy Homework*. It is an experiment happened at Class eight Grade five in Longhutang Experimental School of Xinbei District, Changzhou City, China. The first author is the Chinese Language teacher for this class.

First, the words of the students show the main characteristic of the new type of homework. It was designed, conducted and appraised by all students, parents and the teacher. They collaborated together to finish it. In fact, the project emphasized the parents' and students' engagement at the homework design stage. They reached a consensus through interaction; then, in the process of implementation and evaluation of the homework, the democratic relationships among teacher, parents and students were established. Homework became a catalyst for the collaboration of the teacher, parents, and students.

Second, the value and content of the homework has been changed and restructured. It has a different structure and flavor compared with before, with a goal to try in the best way possible to associate with the student's classroom, family and social life. In this way, the education resources have been transformed, as the students mentioned in the interview, talking about the things that happened in the school with parents, parent-child interaction, parents and the child making progress together, and learning a lot of extra-curricular knowledge are all ways in which homework activities have changed for the children and parents.

Third, the new approach to homework lent great help to the fruitful development of the students. For example, the students mentioned

they were becoming clever, loving Chinese lessons, learning a lot of ways to read and write, and sharing the new homework approach with other teachers. It is really a surprise in the context of Chinese education, for the students always hate the homework. What is more, a community of happiness, including all parents, students and teachers, is truly forming because of the homework.

## Research Background

### The Value of Homework

Homework has been part of students' life since the beginning of formal schooling. Research shows that homework was assigned in every country and economy that participated in PISA 2012. Students spend more time doing homework or other study set by their teachers (regardless of the subject) than they spend in other after-school learning activities. As a result, in most countries, homework time is correlated with student performance (OECD, 2014).

As a complex and sensitive topic, homework is a very important part of education. Its necessity and value have been agreed to by governments and people all over the world. The classic Chinese education literature, *The Note of Learning*, claims that students must have classes at school and they also should have some homework after school. In fact, there was discussion and action for the abolition of the homework in primary and middle schools in Australia and France (Xing, 2014), but until now, no country in the world has abolished homework completely. On the other hand, homework is a tangled educational problem: to keep or to abolish; more or less, tradition or creativity? It confuses many countries and governments, and the current research and discussion cannot give us a convincing conclusion.

Homework is an inevitable topic in the research about school-family relationships too. Children are the hope of the family, and the future of the country. People may agree that parents' participation in homework can have a positive impact, but in China, parents are not always invited to participate in a democratic dialogue, especially in teaching, homework and other relevant professional fields of schooling. Many teachers maintained such attitude: homework is for children; children and parents

cannot understand, just listen to me ... Thus, they failed to consider "why do students do homework?" The main obstacles to teachers, parents, and students' collaboration in homework are the low level of valuing parental participation and the lack of democratic ethics in the schools. This kind of thinking awakened the authors to take a new look at the relationship between students and their everyday life, and pay more attention to the wellbeing and leadership of students.

### **The Roles of Parent, Teacher, and Children in Homework**

It is very easy to find the "TD-SD-PH-TE" (teachers distribute, students do, parents help, teachers evaluate) model of teachers distributing after-school work, students doing it, parents helping the children, and at last the teachers evaluating the student and sometimes parents. Parents, students and teachers are involved in the homework at different stages with different roles, but always individually.

In a survey in Hong Kong, China, researchers found seven types of parental involvement happening in schools: connecting, communicating, parenting, learning at home, volunteering, decision-making, and community collaboration. In the category of "Learning at home", there were "informing parents of the school's expectation of their children in each subject of each grade", "providing parents with information on how to guide their children at home", and "providing training, such as workshops, to help parents improve their children's learning skills" (Ho & Kwong, 2013, p.98).

In recent times, there has been more collaboration happening between parents and students in regard to homework. Some research has shown that parents have high motivation for being involved in children's homework (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2001), and there are different types of parent involvement in homework, such as setting rules, parent monitoring, and direct aiding, which have different relationships to achievement (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Other research on relationships between how parents provided homework help and their children's test scores in middle school and college shows diverse results, and finds that the mothers tended to be more supportive and more frequently and regularly involved with their children's education, while fathers' involvement tended to be more sporadic and harsher (Kim & Fong, 2014).

Some scholars argue that there should be more collaboration between parents and teachers, to make the transformation of homework from paper-and-pencil tasks to hands-on activities. From the authors' perspectives, prior to putting any parent partnership activities into place, careful thinking and consideration must occur for classroom teachers (Trahan & Lawler-Prince, 1999). Similar to this idea, there are scholars who have done research on homework design improvement to attract greater student interest and encourage communication with families (Deslandes, 2013).

In the real education context, the authors find a limited linear-thinking mode very often, and that collaboration does not happen at the stages of homework-design and evaluation. So, from the perspective of parent-teacher-student collaboration, an essential question on homework is: what is the quality of collaboration among teachers, parents and students?

### **Authentic Experience and Thinking**

The first author is a Chinese Language teacher and also an associate principal of the case school. She finds that there are a lot of questions about homework just from the real school life.

First, homework has become the main reason to cause conflicts between school and family; teachers and parents; parents and children. Many tragedies about homework happened around us and were reported in the news, such as "*Students committed suicide for not doing their homework.*" "*Students were beaten by their father just because they had not finished homework.*" Many parents and students complained about the heavy homework burden on the internet and in the letters to the government. Parents and students think teachers should set less homework, and no homework is best. The teachers must face more pressure, and they feel much stressed.

Second, Chinese education has developed quickly, and parents' and students' autonomous consciousness and autonomous ability have increased. They begin to reflect on and doubt the current situation of the homework. The parents and the students of the first author's class complained, "*Homework assignments are all set and evaluated by*

teachers · we can do nothing except accepting the tasks assigned," or "Homework is dull and rigid."

Third, teachers are eager for homework reform. The development of education requires teacher to change their old ways of teaching. Homework reform is the new objective after the reforms of classroom teaching and curriculum. It has not kept up with the steps forward in schooling reform that has taken place in the current decade. For example, the teacher provides workbooks and exercise-books for the students. Students just need to finish the traditional homework. Teachers only care if the students do it or not, paying no attention to evidence of the students' development in homework. Teachers have the belief that "Something is better than nothing" and "Practice makes perfect." They assign homework and check it every day. They become worried when some students do not finish homework, and then they always call parents to discuss and deal with such things.

With such experience and thinking, the first author took up researching about *Happy Homework*. The following two research questions were considered:

1. What does *Happy Homework* mean to students, teachers and parents from the perspective of teachers-parents-children's collaboration?
2. What is the effect of *Happy Homework* on the development of students and the collaboration among teachers, parents and students?

### Theoretical Framework

This study is based on research of school reform in China, especially the New Basic Education Project (NBEP), which the authors all have been in for several years. The NBEP is a large-scale and long-term education reform project, and has been conducted by principals, teachers and professors since 1994 (Ye, 2006; Bu & Li, 2013). It values the students' active involvement in schooling, and respects the potential of teachers' professional development. The project sheds light on the collaboration between elementary educators and university professors, and focuses on innovative practice to improve schooling.

Among the theories and practices of NBE, there are also research studies on school-family collaboration, and some principals and teachers have invited parents into more teaching and

learning activities, school leadership, and other issues related to children's holistic development (Li, Wang, & Chen, 2013; Li & Li, 2015; Li, 2015).

There are several foundations for this paper. The first one is student-focused school changes. NBE emphasizes the importance of life, and regards education as a career that embodies the concern with life in a civilized society (Ye, 2006). The intrinsic value of education at school is to improve the quality of people's life and realize the concern for human life (Li, 2006). Based on such research, the authors believe that homework should be in accordance with students' life, not simply focusing on grades.

The second foundation is the understanding of students' growth. As the current international research focuses on learning in the 21st century (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Marzano & Heflebower, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012), the NBE carefully studies challenges to the development of students during the Chinese social transformation period (Ye, 1994, 2006), and pays attention to students' behavior, ways of thinking, and the cultivation of the spiritual world and the learning state (Li, 2011). The NBE declares the students' holistic development in the life world is reflected in the reform of teaching and learning, as well as in the relationship between school and society (including the family and community) (Li, 2009).

The third foundation is the new family-school collaborative relationship. The NBE develops the new theory of family-school collaboration relationships in the area of student development, with the belief that collaboration will not only contribute to the development of the teachers and parents, but will eventually contribute to the growth of the students (Li, 2014). The significance of the family-school relationship itself means the change and development of practice. The development of the relationship leads to the development of the students.

Based on the foundations discussed above, the authors believe that homework with teachers', parents' and students' participation must be combined with students' holistic development and their everyday life.

**Research Process**

This is a case study, and there are forty-eight students in the class. The research of *Happy Homework* has been carried out since September 2014 and covers three stages.

**The Design of *Happy Homework***

The design of *Happy Homework* was from early September to mid-September 2014, and included three steps.

The first step was to define the development goals of *Happy Homework*. At the beginning of the new semester in September 2014, the Chinese Language teacher encouraged students to show a scene of class life that they wanted to achieve most by drawing. Then the teacher talked with students one by one about the drawings. They found that *Happiness* was the main pursuit of students of the whole class. Among the activities, homework was one of the parts that students wanted to change the most. Through further conversation, the first author clarified the students' ideal goal as "*Happy Homework*": easy and fun; achieving many things at one stroke; and making children and parents improve themselves together.

The second step was to determine the content structure of *Happy Homework* from September 4<sup>th</sup> to September 15<sup>th</sup>.

Around the goal of "happy homework", the Chinese Language teacher and students carried out discussions about the contents of homework according to their previous experience. From two dimensions, which were the training of the key abilities of Chinese Language and life-oriented holistic development, they determined the content structure and rules of the homework in a week together. Then, they sent parents the first round of a questionnaire, which mainly introduced the results of the discussion between the teacher and students, consulting them and collecting information about the resources they could provide. Combined with the reasonable suggestions given by parents, the teacher adjusted the content and the requirements of the *Happy Homework* plan for the second time. The students created favorite names for each part of the homework as below (see table 1), and then there were 7 projects for the seven days.

Table 1.  
Homework projects named by students

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Good Essay	Reading Skills	News and	Lexicon	Memory	Embracing the	Writing
Hunting	Competition	Story Sharing	Study	Challenge	World	Show

The third step was establishing collaborative agreement for *Happy Homework* from September 16<sup>th</sup> to September 18<sup>th</sup>.

The first author had a dialogue with all parents about the value of *Happy Homework* by writing a letter with the topic of "Happy homework, for whose happiness?" and inviting parents' comments. After achieving consensus, the first author distributed the second round of questionnaires to parents, asking them to finish selecting projects and to give suggestions about the manner of parent involvement. All parents responded, and each parent chose at least three

projects to participate in. The first author integrated and refined the suggestions about the manner of parents' participation and made it more operable. Then she listed homework content, completion requirements, parents' manners of involvement and parents' selection of the projects in a form (see Table 2), and sent it to every family. Parents and children signed on the form and thus the three stakeholders reached the formal collaborative agreement about *Happy Homework*.

Table 2.

Structure of Happy Homework weekly

Development goal: easy and fun; achieving many things at one stroke; and making children and parents improve themselves together.					
time	Homework name	Content and requirements	Parents' manner of involvement	Parents who participate in the different projects	Operation tips

### The Daily Practice of Happy Homework

The implementation of the project took place from the late September 2014 to December 2014. In late September 2014, *Happy Homework* came into effect. Two mechanisms were established in the process of implementation.

The first one is the *Happy Dialogue* interaction mechanism. The Chinese Language teacher wrote letters to communicate with parents regularly, focusing on the periodic core issues of *Happy Homework*. The head teacher, a role similar to homeroom teacher or advisor, established a chat group for parents of *Happy Class 8* on the internet. The teachers of different subjects talked with parents about daily assignment feedback and guidance in the chat group wholly or individually. The class monitors established a chat group for students on the internet too, and played a role as managers. Students learned from each other and helped each other with homework on the internet. They were supervised by parents at home every evening and teacher at computer room every two weeks. The teacher could get the feedback easily from the monitors and by talking with parents and students.

The second one was the *Happy Chart* evaluation mechanism. Evaluation matters. The teacher discussed with the students and made two kinds of *Star Award* criteria: *Daily Star* ensured the timely completion of homework every day, and *Excellence Star* encouraged the pursuit of excellence. The head teacher organized the further discussion about the integration of the other areas of classroom life, such as *Happy Classroom Environment*, or *Happy Classroom Activity*. Then an overall evaluation scheme of the class using the *Happy Chart* was formed. The evaluation took one semester as a round. According to the number of stars students received, they set up four levels of rewards: (a) *Happy with Choosing Homework Freely*: homework of various subjects can be chosen freely one time; (b) *Happiness Bonus*: the score of midterm or final test could be added 5 points; (c) *Happy Red Envelope*: getting a certain amount of scholarship support; and (d) *Happy*

*Talent*: getting one of the honorary awards at the end of the semester.

On the one hand, teacher, parents and students participated in the evaluation of different aspects of the projects. For example *Writing Show* should be evaluated mainly by the teacher; *Lexicon Study* by the student-group leaders; *Memory Challenge* by the parents; and *Excellence Star* by the teacher, students and parents together. Every Friday, the monitor summed up the number of the stars that every student got in a week; at the end of each month and the semester, the representatives of students and parents formed an audit team to check and publish the numbers of the students' stars, and then every student would be rewarded based on his stars.

### The Advancing of Happy Homework

It is from January 2015 till now, July 2015. January 2015 was the end of the semester. Taking *Happy Homework* as the topic, the teachers asked students to write self-reports and express their feelings freely. At the same time, the teacher consulted parents too, including the characteristics and effects of *Happy Homework*, and the approaches of promoting *Happy Homework*. Forty-eight parent-questionnaires were distributed and 48 copies were recovered.

According to students' and parents' responses and suggestions, in the new semester beginning from February 2015, the teacher carried out two aspects of *Happy Homework*. One was to make *Happy Homework* more suitable with students' developmental needs, with the perspective of core Chinese Language skills. Based on Chinese Curriculum Standards, the teacher integrated homework with activities in the classroom, and focused more on higher-order thinking capacities, for example, the ability of analysis and extraction. The other was to edit and publish the *Happy Homework Newspaper*. It was also called *Happy Class Newspaper*

related to the classroom community development. Students put themselves into different groups, and then took responsibility for the *Newspaper* one by one, therefore all children had the opportunity to draft, review, design layout and review the *Newspaper*, and even publish his or her homework. The *Newspaper* was published every two weeks, and was distributed to every family. Whose homework can be published? The students had discussed together and formed the standard, and they selected the excellent homework according to the standard and then contributed to the editorial office. It was a platform for the display and exchange of students' *Happy Homework*, and also a way for students to interact with each other. Because it was a classroom newspaper, it showed all aspects of students' life. The head teacher and the teachers from different subjects who teach this class can reach good understanding of the students, and weave the newspaper into the teaching and learning. For example, in the section of *Embracing the World*,

the students always encountered the real problems from the life, and these problems were often the combination of Maths, Language, and Social Science. Parents knew more about their children by reading the newspaper. They selected the best work with children, which made them further understand the evaluation criteria of *Happy Homework*. Moreover, this process stimulated parents' participation in their children's education.

In this stage, the *Happy Homework* began to draw the attention of other school teachers, and the achievements of the students amazed the school leaders and parents.

**Data Sources**

From April to June 2015, in order to better understand the experiment, the authors carried out a series of research studies and obtained a large amount of data (see table 3).

*Table 3.*  
The survey of Happy Homework

Time	method	Research object and quantity
April 8, 2015	random interviews, by recorder	twelve students
April 15, 2015	Discussion	ten volunteer students and ten volunteer parents
May 17, 2015	Discussion	The teachers of different subjects of Class eight Grade five, and master teachers of Chinese, Maths and English from the school, nineteen persons in total.
June 3, 2015	Questionnaire	Forty-eight students of Class eight Grade five
June 5, 2015	Questionnaire	Forty-eight parents of Class eight Grade five

The topics of the random interview on April 8 and the parent-child discussions on April 15 were open-ended. The authors mainly listened to the feelings and stories of participants who engaged in the process of *Happy Homework*.

The main purpose of the discussion on May 17 was to know other teachers' points about *Happy Homework*. The authors focused on the structural features of *Happy Homework*, and the possibility and difficulties of scaling up in other disciplines and grades.

In the questionnaire in June, the authors mainly used forty-seven multiple-choice questions of different levels to understand two themes from perspectives of the students and parents. One was

the understanding of *Happy Homework*, including: its importance; the right of participation; the state of participation; the collaborative relationship among students, parents and teacher; the structure of homework; the evaluation method of homework; and the possibility of homework improvement. The other theme investigated was the achievements of *Happy Homework*, including: overall evaluation; academic, emotional and social development; classroom culture; and the relationship among teachers, parents and students. Forty-eight student-questionnaires and forty-eight parent-questionnaires were distributed and then collected by the first author. The statistics of all the questionnaires were analyzed by some students.

The ongoing analysis of these data will become important resources for future research and planning.

### Findings

The Class eight, which the first author is teaching, was organized by students being randomly chosen after finishing Grade four. They were not quite ready for the new class and new teachers. At first, parents kept silence and gave no response to parent-teacher meetings. *Parents Visiting the Classroom*, which is atypical school activity, could not be organized well at all.

But after carrying out the research of *Happy Homework*, in a short time, things took a new look. Students, parents and teachers began to talk about happiness. Xingpeng Wu's mother said at the forum, "When my son was assigned to Class eight, I was very worried. But now I feel very lucky, and we are happy to join in Class eight" In the questionnaire, 100% of the students and parents said that they were very satisfied with *Happy Homework*, and 100% of the students and 98% of the parents agreed that *Happy Homework* brought happiness. At the same time, the culture of *Happy Class* produced a great influence on other teachers. The research of *Happy Homework* was elected as one of the school's *10 Highlight Events of 2014*. On this platform comes *Happy Class Eight Tutors Group*, which has also been honored as one of the *Moved Campus Teams of 2014*.

### The Possibility of Parents and Students' Participation in Homework

The experiment aims at encouraging parents to participate in homework. The first author communicated with parents equally, and encouraged the parents to choose the projects they preferred, and then to participate in according to their different abilities and interests. Although the parents indicated that their resources were not excellent (60% of the 48 parents surveyed only had primary and secondary school degrees, and 81% of them engaged in ordinary work, small businesses and other similar occupations), 100% of parents did participate in the *Happy Homework*. Each family had chosen more than three collaborative projects. A lot of parents chose the easy projects, but still some of them chose the difficult ones. Zhukang Xu's mother reflected the changing state of the participation in the end-of-term inventory of the

*Happy Dialogue*, "We had no communication with the teacher before. But now we chat with the teacher about the children's learning on the Internet every day. At the beginning, his father and I did not dare to talk. After a period of time, we began to communicate with Ms. Gu smoothly." Now the result is: all parents were involved in it, and the awareness of responsibility was developed by the project.

At the same time, the value of parents' participation was also recognized by parents and students. 100% of the students and 96% of the parents said *Happy Homework* needed parental involvement. 96% of the students and 74% of the parents thought the role of parental involvement was beyond the traditional supervision and was becoming more effective. 88% of the students and 86% of the parents hoped that there should be more time to do *Happy Homework* together.

### Collaborative Creativity

With the project, a variety of communication platforms were set up. *Happiness Dialogue*, in the form of written letter and aiming at solving the problems in each stage, was undertaken many times, for example, "Whose happiness?", "Repeated behavior problems", and so on. By the *Happy Parents Group*, *Happy Students Group*, and *Happy Assignments Hotline*, the teacher gave students and parents' daily feedback in the forms of text messages, images, or individual discussions. All these helped the joint creativity happen.

If there is true collaboration, there will be real creation. While designing *Happy Homework*, the teacher put forward the framework, and the students could decide their own quantity and type to finish on the basis of their abilities. They had the right to design the page of the homework, and the way of showing their work. The homework of each week was not fixed. Students created the titles of the homework such as *Good Essay Hunting* or *Embracing the World*. The parents learned to appreciate children's homework, shared their progress and gave appropriate advice.

Democratic and equal collaboration has greatly stimulated the enthusiasm and initiative of the parents' and students' participation. The data showed that 98% of students and 94% of parents were willing to do *Happy Homework*, 96% of students and 92% of parents affirmed that the students had their own ideas about *Happy Homework*, and 61% of students said that they had proposed new ideas in the process. At the same time, teachers of other subjects had been

inspired. 98% of students said Math and English teachers knew *Happy Homework* in Chinese language, and 92% of students thought Maths and English teachers were also learning from it.

### **Academic, Social and Emotional Development**

*Happy Homework* made the development of academic literacy and the training of abilities more frequent and solid. On the other hand, parents incorporate family and community resources into their children's life, and created a warm and pleasant learning environment.

By self-reports, all students expressed their confidence about *Happy Homework*. Most of the students regarded it as "relaxing and fun", "answering multiple purposes," and "parent-child developed together". The data showed that 94% of parents said the teacher explained why *Happy Homework* was designed like this, and 74% of them felt that *Happy Homework* was not only related to the knowledge of Chinese language but also let the child learn more than with other forms of homework. In the discussion, they regarded the *Happy Homework* as logical, of high quality, flexible and favorable. Many parents reported their feeling of happiness of learning in the process.

The data showed that with teacher, parents' and students' participation in *Happy Homework*, the Chinese Language outcomes of Class eight have become obvious, and the average score and the excellent rate of the class were among the top of the whole grade. In the discussion and interview, the students were sure that *Happy Homework* improved their test scores. However, students had different opinions about the question, "Students who had good grades are all those who did well in *Happy Homework*" in the questionnaire, 28% said yes, 8% not sure, and 64% disagreed. The main reason was that students had different understanding of the standards of "good grades" and the relationship with *Happy Homework*. "Be top in the class" or "Get excellent grades" is good, "Do a good job in *Happy Homework*" or "Homework meets the teacher's and parents' requirements" is good, and "My grades are not the first or second in my class, but I am not bad" is good too. Some students thought, "My homework is not beautiful, but I have improved my grades." These responses meant that students are becoming more open to learning, and there is more confidence and critical thinking among students.

In the case class, the phenomenon of students not doing homework disappeared, and the homework quality has been improved significantly

with increasingly clear writing and more beautiful layout. Student who had been considered naughty or lazy were trying to do the homework too, and some students even did homework ahead of the schedule according to their own situation. They became the models for other classes. It became visible that students' interest was developed, as well as their learning habits and abilities. In the questionnaire, 98% of the students thought they learned how to learn by doing *Happy Homework*, and 96% of parents agreed with that.

*Happy Homework* emphasized students' daily life and encouraged students to create a rich life, such as *Embracing the World*, which was planned so as to encourage them to visit and experience more occupations and do more projects related to community life. It further enriched the student's family and social life. In the evaluation process, the students did more self-reflection, learned from other's visions, and developed their own sense of self. In the questionnaire, 98% of students thought they became more confident because of *Happy Homework*, and 94% of parents agreed with that. 98% of students said that they had more chances to participate in community or social activities via *Happy Homework*, and 98% of students said that they made more friends with *Happy Homework*. Some students commented that "*Happy Homework* made the life colorful"; "Happy work let me know how important friendship, sunshine and cleverness are! It made me know myself well and find the goodness of others and friends. Sometimes I could imagine the future." In the questionnaire, parents expressed that *Happy Homework* made children think more, and it would be helpful to children's futures.

### **A High Quality Classroom Community**

*Happy Homework* was loved by all the classmates, which made their class unique. The head teacher, teachers of other subjects and parents were all involved in the project, so they all experienced the value of students' development. Therefore, *happiness* became a joint pursuit of the class. The idea of *happiness* gradually developed into the classroom culture, and has produced the *Happy Class*, *Happy Activity* and *Happy Classroom Environment*. 96% of students and 94% of parents said they felt very proud of having *Happy Homework*. The students' homework, reflecting their rich learning life was directly visible on the walls outside of the classroom. In the survey, 69% of students said that their *Happy Homework* often became the resources of the class environment.

Everyday homework has played a big role as a data pool to guide the classroom management. The first author encouraged students to write their own stories and express feelings, from which the teachers could get good understanding of the developmental problems and valuable resources, and then could solve problems and improve classroom management.

The *Happy Homework Newspaper* is becoming a new way for students' involvement within classroom life. What was emphasized in this newspaper was that students could apply their knowledge to solve real-life problems encountered in practice. Four teams took turns to edit this biweekly newspaper. What is more, different responsibilities were taken for this newspaper, so different groups such as editor and writers were formed, and their leadership and management abilities became better and better.

More class-based activities had been developed, which had a close relationship to *Happy Homework*. Students and parents had provided more class-based curriculum, and the interesting names were given by them, such as "Embracing the world", "I can, you can", "Noon Project course," etc. The teacher also invited parents to observe such class-based activities that were parts of students' homework. So the teacher, parents and students experienced more efficient learning, and at the same time the burden on teachers and students was reduced. In the questionnaire, 92% of students and 83% of parents agreed that *Happy Homework* had close relationship with the rich class-based activities carried out by the head teacher.

### **Harmonious Relationships in a New "Family"**

In January 2015, the school did a survey on the question of "Who is your favorite teacher?" Results showed that the Chinese teacher, the first author, received a high degree of recognition at Grade 5. In the questionnaire, there was an open-ended question: "What are the reasons that he/she is your favorite?" Most students mentioned *Happy Homework*. The collaboration in *Happy Homework* had improved students' sense of trust and intimacy with their teachers. In the questionnaire, 98% of students affirmed that they had established a good relationship with the teacher because of *Happy Homework*. 90% percent of students felt the teachers' appreciation and satisfaction from the completion of *Happy Homework*.

Harmonious parent-child relationships were also developed. Because the parents' participation

was based on their independent will and choice, all parents fulfilled the "parent-child agreement". This brought about changes in the parent-child relationship. In the questionnaire, 98% of students and 92% of parents agreed that *Happy Homework* has made the parent-child relationship better. Just like what Yuehang Shao's mother said, "*Happy Homework* has improved the parent-child relationship between my child and I. Whether the materials' selection of *News and Story Sharing*, or the selection of the best job, or the content of the *Embracing the World* we all involved in. We talked and learned from each other."

In the interview, parents expressed more satisfaction. Many parents in the questionnaire said they had more interaction with children, had closer relationships with their children, and they felt more like friends. At the same time, students in the process of self-report felt a change in the way they got along with their parents: chatting together, playing together, and studying together. One student, Bing Xu, said, "The parents seldom concerned about me before, but now they cared for me. They did not accompany me before, but now they did since we had *Happy Homework*. Our family is warmer and more harmonious. And we also felt relaxed, efficient and particularly happy."

Harmonious parent-teacher relationships had been produced by the collaboration. In the questionnaire, parents agreed that the relationship between the teacher and the parents is good, and they were regarded by the teachers as colleagues and friends. Under this kind of relationship, parents got more understanding of teachers. They also began to understand the school's educational system. When a few parents had some questions about the *Homework*, some other parents explained and guided them to understand the teacher's guidance voluntarily. Besides, parents often shared some family education experience and did some self-reflection in the parent group, and care about not only their own children but also the other children in the class. They even paid attention to the children of the whole school. For example, Chao Wang's mother concerned about the traffic safety of students on rainy days, and called for the actions of the school. Hongyi Cai's father found the bad behaviors of the students by reading the son's homework, and then initiated the discussion with all parents in the website, and called for the modeling of the parents.

Parents, teachers and student are now forming a new family, and the *Happy Homework* is really a

catalyst. Most parents agreed that they are members of *Happy Class Eight*, and the students and parents had great confidence in this family now.

### Discussion

From the case of Class eight, the authors found that it was possible and important to involve the parents and students in the homework design and evaluation. By one year's efforts, the students have achieved dramatic academic, emotional and social development. The classroom community has been developed, and a new family is forming. Because the experiment was conducted in an authentic school context, the authors believe that more classrooms and schools could learn from the case.

In the survey, 46% of students and 42% of parents agreed that *Happy Homework* could be better. During the discussion, parents and students showed strong desire and requirement to implement *Happy English and Maths Homework* in addition to the *Happy Homework* of Chinese Language. Actually, there are some important issues to be discussed.

First, we need to clarify the value of homework reform. In traditional ways, doing homework is only for improving students' test scores, and quite a few studies also focus on this aspect, ignoring the fact that the homework is a part of holistic educational activities. Its value should be put on the cultivation of the students comprehensively. This case study identified this value. Teachers of other subjects always focus on the core skills of certain subjects. Actually, homework is related to the whole life of students, with treasure in it.

Second, we should improve the organizational mechanism of promoting parents' participation in schooling. In the research process, the authors invited all parents, and they did it but with different levels of involvement. The students' development demands high-quality parent involvement. In subsequent research studies, the teachers can guide parents to establish their own

project teams, to set up their own operation mechanism from multiple dimensions, and to encourage more parent involvement in the assessment of homework and schooling.

Third, we need to explore an effective strategy to promote teachers of other subjects to participate. In the research, the value of collaboration and participation of teacher, students and parents in the homework has been recognized. The interdisciplinary penetration is also the demand that was put forward by the parents and students, and the principal also clearly pointed out: "*Happy Homework* of Class eight should be scaled up in the school." At present, *Happy Homework* has been popularized in the Chinese Language Department of the school, and Maths and English Language Departments are learning from it too. A new challenge is there: How to make the collaboration among all teachers, students and parents happen?

Fourth, the research is a case study, and it has limitations. A pre-survey was not conducted, the theoretical background and review of related literature should be further elaborated, and more data should be collected and analyzed. In the follow-up studies, the authors will try to do more collaboration with district and school authorities to scale up the *Happy Homework*, and do more dialogues with domestic and international researchers about the theory and practice.

All in all, under the background of Chinese education reform, teachers, parents, and students' collaboration in homework can be achieved. It can contribute to the high-quality school-family collaboration, and can also open new areas of promoting students' holistic development. In order to produce more happiness for students and establish a learning community, the authors will continue the *Happy Homework* Project.

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APPENDIX 1. Summary table of the student questionnaire on *Happy Homework*

Theme	category	question	Very much agree		Partly agree		Unsure		Partly disagree		Very much disagree	
			number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Understanding of <i>Happy Homework</i>	Value	I think <i>Happy Homework</i> is important	48	100%								
		My parents oppose <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%			1	2%			46	96%
		I wish I can do well in <i>Happy Homework</i>	48	100%								
	Right of participation	<i>Happy Homework</i> is totally decided by teachers	2	4%			1	2%	1	2%	44	92%
		I contribute to the design of <i>Happy Homework</i>	43	90%	3	6%					2	4%
		Teachers have discussed with parents about <i>Happy Homework</i>	47	98%			1	2%				
		I think parents have nothing to do with <i>Happy Homework</i>							1	2%	47	98%
	State of participation	Parents complain that they have to do <i>Happy Homework</i> with children	2	4%	1	2%	1	2%			44	92%
		Parents can only supervise my <i>Happy Homework</i>	2	4%							46	96%
		I am willing to do <i>Happy Homework</i>	46	96%	1	2%					1	2%
		My classmates often give suggestions to teachers on <i>Happy Homework</i>	22	46%	7	15%	4	8%	1	2%	14	29%
	Collaboration	I seldom discuss with classmates about <i>Happy Homework</i>					1	2%			47	98%
		Teachers often inform parents about <i>Happy Homework</i>	41	86%	1	2%	2	4%			4	8%
		Teachers never care about our ideas on <i>Happy Homework</i>									48	100%
		Chinese Language teachers have never explained something about the design of <i>Happy Homework</i>									48	100%
		Math and English teachers don't know <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%							47	98%
		Math and English teachers learn about Chinese <i>Happy Homework</i>	42	88%	2	4%	1	2%			3	6%
	Content	My classmates think <i>Happy Homework</i> is too much									48	100%
		I don't know daily <i>Happy Homework</i>			2	4%					46	96%
		I think <i>Happy Homework</i> is too difficult									48	100%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> is only about Chinese	2	4%			2	4%			44	92%
	Assessment	I know how to do <i>Happy Homework</i> well everyday	46	96%							2	4%
		My <i>Happy Homework</i> never satisfies teachers	3	6%					1	2%	44	92%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> is evaluated only by teachers	2	4%							46	96%
		Parents have no idea of <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%							47	98%
	Revision	Teachers often discuss and handle problems occurred in <i>Happy Homework</i>	48	100%								
		Parents tell us that <i>Happy Homework</i> needs to be polished	16	33%	6	13%	2	4%	1	2%	23	48%
		I hope there will be more time to do <i>Happy Homework</i> with parents	41	86%	1	2%					6	12%

APPENDIX 1 (cont.)

Achievement of <i>Happy Homework</i>	General assessment	I am quite satisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>	48	100%								
		I am quite unsatisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>							1	2%	47	98%
		My parents are quite unsatisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>									48	100%
		My parents are quite satisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>	47	98%	1	2%						
		Teachers are quite unsatisfied with our performance in <i>Happy Homework</i>			3	6%	1	2%	1	2%	43	90%
	Academic, emotional and social development	My classmates often complain that <i>Happy Homework</i> makes him/her unhappy									48	100%
		Students who do well in <i>Happy Homework</i> also get good test scores	10	22%	3	6%	4	8%	4	8%	27	56%
		I have made more friends by <i>Happy Homework</i>	46	96%	1	2%					1	2%
		I have known more about others' life by <i>Happy Homework</i>	41	86%	5	10%	1	2%	1	2%		
		I am isolated from outdoor activities because of <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%							47	98%
		I become less confident by doing <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%							47	98%
	Class culture	I know how to learn well by doing <i>Happy Homework</i>	45	94%	2	4%					1	2%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> is often the resource-pool of classroom decoration	31	65%	2	4%	2	4%			13	27%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> has nothing to do with class activities	2	4%			2	4%			44	92%
		All the students are proud of <i>Happy Homework</i>	43	90%	3	6%	1	2%			1	2%
	Relation of teachers, parents and students	Students from other classes always give very low evaluation on <i>Happy Homework</i>					1	2%			47	98%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> haven't improved the relation between parents and children	1	2%							47	98%
		Some students have developed negative relationship with teachers because of <i>Happy Homework</i>					1	2%			47	98%
		Some parents are always criticized by teachers, for they take little care of <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%	3	6%	4	8%			40	84%

N=48

*APPENDIX 2. Summary table of the parent questionnaire on Happy Homework*

1. Relationship with children

A. father		B. mother		C. others	
Number	Percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
24	50%	23	48%	1	2%

N=48

2. Education background

A. primary school		B. secondary school		C. junior college		D. bachelor		E. bachelor above	
Number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
4	8%	25	52%	14	29%	5	10%	0	

N=48

3. Occupation

A. employer		B. teacher		C. manager		D. employee		E. else	
Number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
3	6%	1	2%	5	10%	24	50%	15(sole trader, driver, vendor)	31%

N=48

4. Apartment

(unit: square meter)

A. less than 30		B. 30-60		C. 60-90		D. 90-120		E. more than 120	
number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
1	2%	3	6%	6	13%	16	33%	22	46%

N=48

APPENDIX 2 (cont.)

5. Theme investigation

theme	category	question	Very much agree		Partly agree		Unsure		Partly disagree		Very much disagree	
			number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Understanding of <i>Happy Homework</i>	Value	I think <i>Happy Homework</i> is important	41	86%	7	14%						
		I oppose <i>Happy Homework</i>	2	4%	2	4%	1	2%	3	6%	40	84%
		I wish <i>Happy Homework</i> takes effect	41	86%	6	12%	1	2%				
	Right of participation	<i>Happy Homework</i> is totally decided by teachers	3	6%	6	12%	6	12%	3	6%	30	64%
		I contribute to the design of <i>Happy Homework</i>	36	75%	8	17%	2	4%	2	4%		
		Teachers once discussed with us about <i>Happy Homework</i>	41	86%	6	12%	1	2%				
	State of participation	I think parents have nothing to do with <i>Happy Homework</i>			1	2%	1	2%	8	17%	38	79%
		There are some parents who complained that they had to spend time on working with their children	1	2%			9	19%	6	12%	32	67%
		When my child does <i>Happy Homework</i> , I am only the supervisor.	5	10%	6	12%	2	4%	12	25%	23	49%
		I am willing to do <i>Happy Homework</i> with children	37	77%	8	17%	1	2%	1	2%	1	2%
	Collaboration	My child had some suggestions to <i>Happy Homework</i>	9	19%	9	19%	14	29%	3	6%	13	27%
		I never discuss with other parents about <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%	4	8%	8	17%	10	22%	25	52%
		Teachers often inform parents about children's <i>Happy Homework</i>	34	71%	8	17%	6	12%				
		Teachers never care about our ideas on <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%	2	4%	2	4%	3	6%	40	84%
		Chinese teachers never explain the design of <i>Happy Homework</i> for us					3	6%	5	10%	40	84%
		Math and English teachers don't know Chinese Language <i>Happy Homework</i>			2	4%	4	8%	1	2%	41	86%
		Math and English teachers have learned something from Chinese Language <i>Happy Homework</i>	34	71%	8	17%	4	8%	1	2%	1	2%
	Content	I think <i>Happy Homework</i> is too much			1	2%	5	10%	11	23%	31	65%
		I don't know what daily <i>Happy Homework</i> is			1	2%	5	10%	3	6%	39	82%
		I think <i>Happy Homework</i> is too difficult			2	4%	4	8%	5	10%	37	78%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> is only about Chinese Language	5	10%	2	4%	6	12%	9	19%	26	55%
	Assessment	I know what the good <i>Happy Homework</i> looks like	33	70%	7	14%	6	12%	1	2%	1	2%
		My child's <i>Happy Homework</i> never satisfies teachers	1	2%			2	4%	7	14%	38	80%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> is evaluated or assessed only by teachers	1	2%	2	4%	3	6%	7	14%	35	74%
	Revision	I have no idea about <i>Happy Homework</i>			1	2%	2	4%	5	10%	40	84%
		Teachers often discuss and handle problems occurred in <i>Happy Homework</i>	39	82%	4	8%	1	2%	2	4%	2	4%
		I once told my child that <i>Happy Homework</i> needed to be polished	12	25%	8	17%	14	29%	2	4%	12	25%
		I hope there will be more time to do <i>Happy Homework</i> with children	35	74%	5	10%	2	4%	1	2%	5	10%

APPENDIX 2 (cont.)

Effect of <i>Happy Homework</i>	General assessment	I am quite satisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>	38	79%	10	21%						
		I am quite unsatisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>					2	4%	8	17%	38	79%
		My child is quite unsatisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>			1	2%	2	4%	4	8%	41	86%
		My child is quite satisfied with <i>Happy Homework</i>	38	79%	7	15%	3	6%				
		Teachers are quite unsatisfied with children's performance in <i>Happy Homework</i>			1	2%	6	13%	5	10%	36	75%
		My child often complains that <i>Happy Homework</i> makes him/her unhappy					1	2%	8	17%	39	81%
	Academic, emotional and social development	Students who get good test scores also do well in <i>Happy Homework</i>	7	15%	6	13%	13	27%	5	10%	17	35%
		My child has made more friends by <i>Happy Homework</i>	37	78%	6	12%	4	8%			1	2%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> makes me know more about children's life	40	84%	6	12%	1	2%	1	2%		
		My child is isolated from outdoor activities because of <i>Happy Homework</i>					2	4%	3	6%	43	90%
		My child becomes less confident doing <i>Happy Homework</i>	1	2%			2	4%	4	8%	41	86%
		My child knows how to learn well by <i>Happy Homework</i>	35	74%	11	22%	1	2%			1	2%
	Class culture	<i>Happy Homework</i> often becomes the resource-pool of classroom decoration	28	59%	5	10%	9	19%	2	4%	4	8%
		<i>Happy Homework</i> has nothing to do with class activities	1	2%	1	2%	6	13%	2	4%	38	79%
		All the students are proud of <i>Happy Homework</i>	35	74%	10	20%	3	6%				
		Students from other classes always give very low evaluation on <i>Happy Homework</i>					5	10%	3	6%	40	84%
	Relation of teachers, parents and students	<i>Happy Homework</i> haven't improved the relation between children and us	41	86%	7	14%						
		Some students have developed negative relationship with teachers	2	4%	2	4%	1	2%	3	6%	40	84%
		Some parents are always criticized by teachers, for they take little care of <i>Happy Homework</i>	41	86%	6	12%	1	2%				

N=48

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