

The Homework Myth

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A lot of truth, but also a lot of willful oversight

Kohn leads off with some solid observations. Some children are given what seems to them and their parents to be a lot of homework. It is often more than the rule of thumb guideline of 10 minutes per day per grade. And, as Kohn points out, that rule of thumb has never been so subjected to any empirical test of reasonableness.

It is also true, as he claims, that some homework is just pure busywork. Before the national Council on Teaching Mathematics recanted and went back to basics this year, they endorsed some pretty dumb ideas. My kids laboriously cut out little squares of paper, arranged them in into rectangles, and counted the squares. We built a replica of Hadrian's Wall with rocks and glue.

Thirdly, his claim that there is not much of a scientific basis for formulating homework assignments is also true. Teachers are not taught how to make homework assignments. It is also true, although not central to his point, that teachers are not taught how to make in-class examinations and quizzes. For all of the research that goes on in our schools of education, there is an awful lot that we just don't know. I will add as a graduate student of education myself that a vastly disproportionate amount of the research in education goes into a single topic, the black-white test score gap, and such diversion of research funding to questions of equality appears to starve research in fundamental questions of how children learn and fundamental teaching techniques.

Kohn does not define homework. It is assumed that he means specific assignments, such as sheets that are handed out to be filled in. He does not explicitly indicate that it includes studying for tests, or researching papers. My definition would be fairly broad. I would include under the title of homework every thing that a student does at home that is school related. I would even venture to assign value to different kinds of activities. For a student to study foreign language vocabulary on their own, or commit equations for geometric forms to memory, shows a lot more initiative and academic bent than filling in some stupid busywork assignment.

Kohn's arguments against homework are similar to his arguments against testing. He complains about criterion-referenced tests (like NCLB, with a fixed pass-fail criterion) because they are not norm-referenced (like the SAT, with each examinee measured against other examinees; in other words graded on the curve), and norm-referenced tests because they are not criterion referenced. He complains about time limits on speeded tests. He complains about the way distractors (attractive wrong answers) are used on multiple-choice tests. Kohn doesn't like testing. His position on testing is that because there can never be a totally fair test, there should be no tests at all. His position on homework is thus pretty predictable. Because it isn't perfect, we ought to do away with it.

Kohn says he is unaware of studies that have addressed the question of whether homework enhances the depth of students' understanding. It is a question of how people learn. The theoretical basis for assuming that homework would help is well established in the field of psychology. Homework has a student collect data in their short-term memory, organize them, and move them as "chunks" of knowledge into long-term memory. It is a process that can and does of course happen in the classroom. However, as should be evident, not every student picks up every point that a teacher delivers orally in class. Homework has the virtue of taking place at the student's own pace, giving them the opportunity to internalize material at the rate at which they can absorb it.

Kohn says that there is no value to homework in elementary school. I would argue that homework has to develop on a continuum. At the far end, adult life is a matter of homework assignments that we give ourselves. In graduate school homework consists of large projects that we conceive on our own, with guidance from our professors. At the undergraduate level it is a mixture of short assignments and projects. In high school the emphasis is more on short-term assignments, and so on down to elementary school, at which level most of the assignments are fairly brief and highly structured. Kohn's stance on homework in elementary school begs the question. Where on the continuum should one start?

One of the problems with Kohn's analysis is that he leaves ability out of the question of correlation. A number of students in my kids' schools use tutors. It is safe to say that the kids who have tutors spend more time on homework than the kids who don't. It is also safe to say that the best students don't need tutors. Right off the top, it ought to be evident that time spent on homework doesn't correlate with superior ability. If we leap to the conclusion that superior ability correlates to high grades, we would expect that the time spent on a homework correlates negatively with grades. Kohn's correlations don't make sense without taking ability into question, but the fact is that schools haven't given IQ tests for 30 years or more and they don't have any objective measures of the kids' native abilities. Neither he nor the researchers he cites, such as Harris Cooper, could do it. Significantly, Cooper's experimental-method studies (take equivalent students, give some of them homework, others none) show the most positive correlation between homework and achievement.

Kohn claims that homework destroys the desire to learn. It is hard to square this claim with what we observe in university enrollments. More and more people are going to the University, and more and more are in graduate school. If they couldn't do homework, they wouldn't be there. At a minimum they get used to it, in Kohn's parlance. And in some cases, they even develop interests in the subject matter that is covered by assigned homework.

Kohn surely knows that homework is here to stay. He could make a bigger contribution to education, though he might sell a few fewer books, if he confined himself to suggestions as to how to make it better. There is ample room for improvement. I should add that my area of professional interest is in helping kids find the quickest and easiest way to get whatever homework they happen to be assigned done. They all have computers, but for the most part nobody tells them the best techniques to use those computers to get the job of a student done. More information on my web site.