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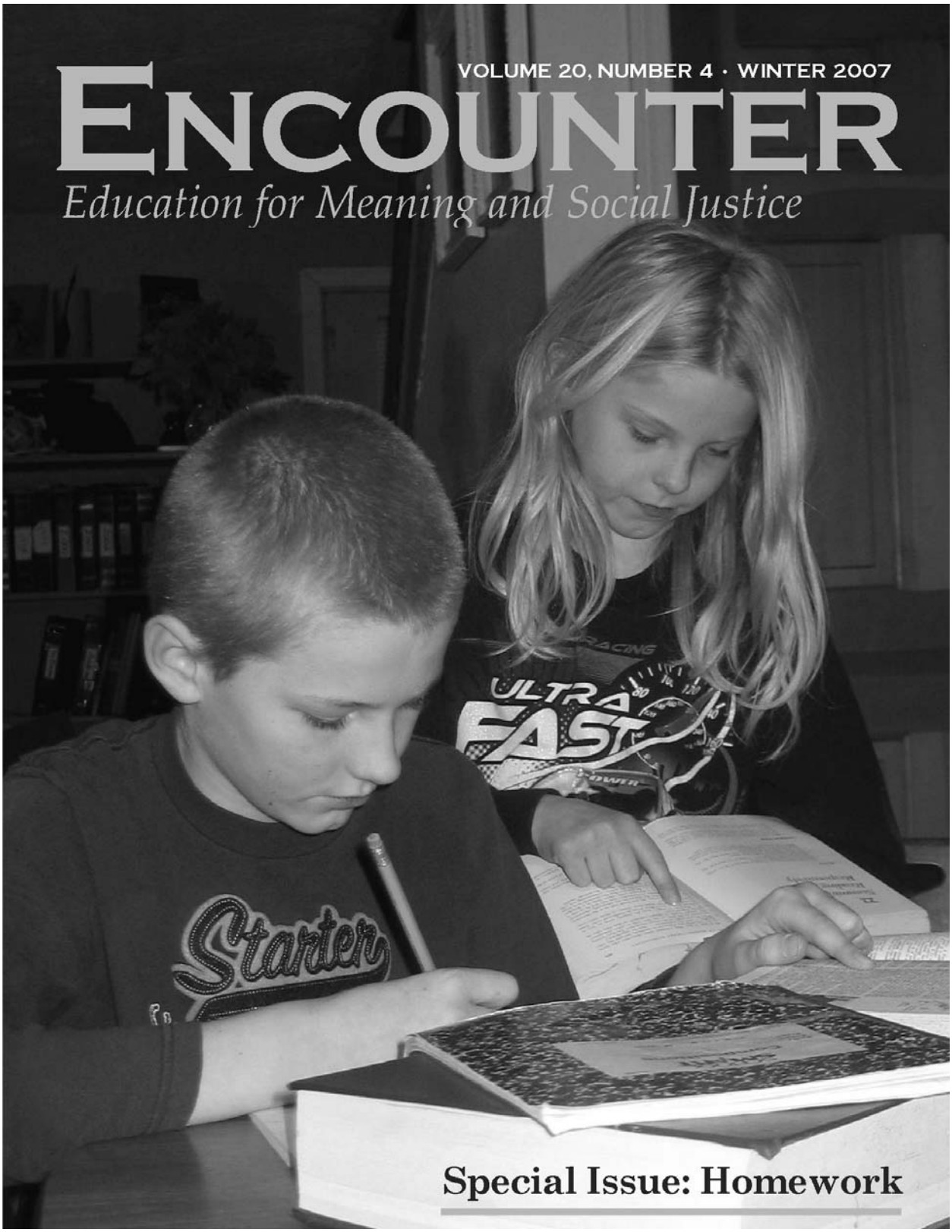
Education for Meaning and Social Justice



Special Issue: Homework

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Guest Editorial

New Thinking about Homework

Etta Kralovec

ETTA KRALOVEC is Associate Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Arizona, South. She is the author of *Schools That Do Too Much* and the co-author (with John Buell) of *The End of Homework.*

Homework, that sacred cow of schooling around the world, is currently front and center in our nation's media. Communities around the country hold forums to discuss the practice and how much is too much. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article outlined changes in homework policies in some of the nation's most prestigious private schools. And it is not only in the United States that homework has hit the media. In Australia, parents are calling for a national policy limiting homework time for the children. In Sweden, the left party is calling for the abolition of homework. Clearly the debates about homework, begun well over a

Editor's Note: The Winter 2007 issue of Encounter grew out of a symposium Dr. Kralovec organized for the April 2007 meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago.

hundred years ago, are still with us today and fueled by media coverage of the topic. And, as any educator knows, problems with homework are often the most difficult discussions with parents.

Homework is a difficult topic because the practice represents some of our most cherished beliefs and values about childhood, such as the belief that it fosters a sense of responsibility and hard work. It is seen as the link between school and home. It is an activity that we tell children has the power to propel them into a successful life. Yet as educators, we know the pitfalls of the practice. Not all children need the drill and practice we send home. Some children can complete projects at home with the support of willing parents while others struggle alone. We often don't know who has completed the homework, so we are uncertain about students' skill levels.

Recent homework debates in this country have centered on questions of how much homework at which grades produces what kinds of learning gains. A recent analysis of homework research by the Center for Public Education (2007) found that homework at the elementary level is counter productive, while homework in middle and high school shows some correlation with small increases in test scores. But those findings do not hold across the board. Asian students benefit more from homework than other ethnic groups, while students from low-income households benefit less from homework than students from higher-income homes. Homework may have nonacademic benefits in terms of time management, developing responsibility and student habits, but the research on these benefits is limited and far from conclusive. There is a lack of research on the effects of different types of homework on student achievement. In short, we

are no closer today to having a clear understanding of the instructional value of homework than we were 100 years ago when the practice was first challenged by physicians, who believed the practice was detrimental to the health of young children (Bok 1913).

A recent analysis of the latest TIMSS international test scores found a surprising correlation. Those countries with the lowest TIMSS scores assigned the most homework, and those with the highest scores assigned the least homework. Looking at these results, researchers found that teachers who assigned a lot of homework also spent more instructional time in the classroom dealing with homework, thus limiting the amount of time on direct instruction (Mikki 2006). Findings like this give us a more nuanced understanding of how homework impacts academic achievement and, perhaps more importantly, why.

A poignant story comes from Gary Natriello. A former advocate of homework, Natriello has developed homework policy proposals that call for more creative and thoughtful homework (Natriello and McDill 1996). However, now that he is on the receiving end of homework with his own children, even he is overwhelmed by the challenges homework presents in a two-working-parent household (Natriello 1997). Natriello illustrates the way the conversation about homework can change when we look beyond the narrow lens of homework and academic achievement.

This special issue of *Encounter* provides a broadened analysis of homework. We hope to stimulate new ways of thinking about the practice. We grapple with questions like

- What does the practice of homework look like in the face of enormous social change?
- What would Piaget say about second graders having an hour of homework each night?
- Is it possible that the practice is based on antiquated ideas about teaching and learning?
- Does homework itself contribute to some of the problems that students have in school?
- Does humiliation over homework battles in school carry over into later life?

In addition, we hear a voice that is not typically part of educators' conversations — that of a parent!

This discussion is not designed to give educators recipes for homework practice. We are not particularly interested in precisely how many minutes children can handle at each grade level, for example. Rather we hope to stimulate new thinking about an age-old practice.

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A Brief History of Homework

Etta Kralovec

ETTA KRALOVEC is Associate Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Arizona, South. She is the author of *Schools That Do Too Much* and the co-author (with John Buell) of *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*.

The history of debates about homework in this country are instructive and help us think differently about the practice. For example, did you know that in 1901 the California Civil Code included the following: “No pupil under the age of fifteen years in any grammar or primary school shall be required to do any home study.” This regulation reflects the strong feelings at the time that homework could be called a form of “school imperialism” (Gill & Schlossman 2003). There might also have been a concern that what had happened in DeWitt Texas in

1887 might begin to happen elsewhere. A student refused to do his homework for two nights, claiming the school had no authority over his time after school. His teacher began to whip him, the punishment in DeWitt for not doing your homework, and the student took out a knife and stabbed the teacher in under the shoulder and in the leg (Gill & Schlossman 2003).

The tension over homework may not have reached this point elsewhere, but there was one major antihomework voice who had a very powerful platform. Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, used the magazine as a bully pulpit to launch a crusade against homework. In his antihomework article in 1900, “A National Crime at the Feet of American Parents,” Bok went all out in his attack of homework, a practice that he characterized as “the most barbarous part of the whole [schooling] system” (Gill & Schlossman 1996).

The arguments against homework at the turn of the century most often focused on the issue of school imperialism and the health hazards of homework. Heavy book bags and a lack of fresh air and sunshine, the result of sitting inside doing homework, were on the top of antihomework crusaders lists (Gill & Schlossman 1996). By the 1930s, the progressive education philosophy of John Dewey, Calvin S. Hall, and others broadened the anti-homework debate. Progressive educators argued for the value of play and free time, which homework shortchanged. These educators were also concerned that homework was an invasion into family life. Additionally, the pedagogical importance of “learn by doing,” a hallmark of progressive education, left little place for the recitation model of learning that underpinned the homework practice of the day.

The debates between traditional and progressive educators continued as the country prepared for war. Although the war dominated the headlines, students still experienced homework as a burden and the debates over the practice appear to have continued.

The educational landscape of this country was changed dramatically with the launch of Sputnik in 1957. Suddenly, Americans were “beaten” into space by their archenemies and the schools were called upon to do something about it. Homework was seen as a way to add school time for increased math and science education.

The next major antihomework movement was in the Sixties, no doubt in reaction to the growing post-Sputnik trend to increase the practice. Education journals of the day were filled with admonishments about the problems associated with homework. In the late Sixties, both the American Educational Research Association and the National Education Association published statements about the need to limit homework (Kralovec & Buell 2000). Some historians argue that the faultlines on the homework debates between the 1900s and the 1970s can be drawn between those who see homework as school imperialism and those who view it as an important form of communication and collaboration between the school and the home (Gill & Schlossman 2003).

But in 1983, all that changed with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which argued that the nation’s schools were so bad it was as if a warring army had invaded our shores. (U.S. Department of Education 1983, 5). As in the Sputnk

era, in our Nation at Risk/No Child Left Behind educational world, homework has gained widespread support as a means of increasing academic achievement.

Still, while the last two decades of the 20th Century witnessed a broad consensus on the value of homework, there has been some opposition. Parents in some communities have felt that homework is excessive and damages family life. Last year the principal of Oak Knoll Elementary in Menlo Park, California, limited homework to practicing multiplication tables because of stories from families about the impact of homework on family life (Melendez 2007). And opposition to homework exists outside this country as well. In Canada, a 2006 proposal to ban homework generated extended national discussion and calls for limiting homework across the provinces (Owens 2006). The Australian Council of State School Organizations has begun to review the practice with eyes toward eliminating it in the primary grades (Fox News 2007). And in the UK, scholars question its validity and its role in the development of anxiety among children (Adenekan 2005).

The debates about homework in this country may be seen as a continuation of the debates that have existed throughout the 20th Century. However, as a society we remain uncertain about the role of homework in American life. Hopefully this edition of *Encounter* will stimulate new thinking about the subject, raise new questions about its role in the life of our children, and open up the conversation about homework in your school community in new and fruitful directions.

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An Interview With Alfie Kohn

William Crain

ALFIE KOHN is the author of eleven books, including *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"* (1999) and *The Homework Myth* (2006). *Time* magazine has described Alfie as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades and test scores." His website is <www.alfiekohn.org>.

BILL CRAIN: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got interested in education?

ALFIE KOHN: I was a teacher for a while; that goes back a ways. And of course, I was a former student. After teaching, I started doing different kinds of writing on human behavior and found myself circling back to the question of

education. After having published a couple more general books, one about competition (*No Contest: The Case Against Competition* in 1986) and one about altruism (*The Brighter Side of Human Nature* in 1990), I started thinking back not only to my time in the classroom but also about social change and human behavior in the context of teaching and learning. So I began to write articles and then books dealing specifically with education.

CRAIN: Your recent book, *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, discusses the child's feelings about homework. Most kids dislike it, right?

KOHN: Of course! Every parent knows this. Every former child knows this. Most kids dread homework. They find it frustrating beyond words, exhausting. Many families know the ritual called the "homework wars," with parents nagging the kids to do the homework and the kids weeping. Even the kids who are good students in the traditional sense, who can get through it without great *angst*, see it as something to get done as quickly as possible so they can get on to something they care about, after having spent the day in school. And the notion that we can disregard children's feelings — the notion that "of course children don't like it but that doesn't matter" — is bizarre. To assume that the child's perspective doesn't matter, that children are like vending machines in which you put assignments in and get learning out, is naïve with respect to human behavior.

My first question with respect to anything in education is what is the child's interest in it? How does it affect the child's disposition to learn, the child's love of

learning? Even if we succeed in developing a skill in children, if they see it as chore, they are unlikely to persist with it. They won't want to do it on their own time.

CRAIN: You mention in *The Homework Myth* that there are some schools that do not assign homework but assume that children, if they are given interesting and exciting activities and projects during the school day, will naturally want to continue them.

KOHN: Many of them do, that's right. Those schools report that kids without any homework do fabulously by any measure, including conventional criteria. Many of them spontaneously carry on learning after school is over — for example, trying to replicate some science experiment they did in school once they're with their family in the kitchen or continuing to read something on the same subject as a topic introduced in class.

One high school history teacher told me that he used to assign a lot of homework when he started because he wasn't a very good teacher yet. As he got better, he was able to phase it out completely and now his kids do just fine on AP and other tests. But he also said that his students were starting to read the newspaper and make connections between current events and the history they were learning in class only when he stopped giving them homework so that they were freed up to do that.

Other kids, though, won't; let's be honest. Some kids have had enough academics when they get home from school. Instead they may go make a friend and hang out; they may paint a picture; they may go on the internet; they may develop artistically, socially, physically and in all the other ways that we as

parents want them to develop — not merely academically, and I think that's fine, too.

And if some kids don't even do that and just want to chill out, why the hell shouldn't they have that right? Adults need to relax after a full day of work. What does it say about our view of children that they should have to be constructively occupied until they fall asleep?

CRAIN: Some critics say that they will just watch hours and hours of TV, which will rot their brains. How do you answer that?

KOHN: I'm not a big fan of most TV programs. But I would say number one, I actually challenged those myths a few years back in terms of TV watching's being inherently addictive or unconstructive regardless of the content. That tends not to be supported by research.

Number two, there are some TV programs that I frankly would rather have my children watch before having them do worksheets in math, which is in some cases not only pointless but destructive because the practice approach doesn't make sense according to what we know about learning, and the busy work turns the children off to math itself.

And, look, it's not up to the school, in my judgment, to reach into families and give kids homework to keep them from watching too much TV. That's a decision that has to be made by families: how much TV, what kind, whether the kids watch it alone or with their parents, and so on.

The people who suggest that without homework kids would just plop in front of the TV, have basically given up the store here in terms of the argument. They're implicitly conceding that homework has no intrinsic value. They are suggesting that it literally is busy work, a way to "keep the young 'uns moral after school." They assume that parents are inept and that we educators (in our arrogance) must step in and give children academic assignments to keep them on the right course.

So on many levels — in terms of assumptions about TV, about children, about the role of the school *vis à vis* the family — I find this argument very disturbing.

CRAIN: It seems like there is an assumption that kids won't do anything unless adults take control and force them to do it.

KOHN: Right.

CRAIN: That they are inherently lazy, unproductive, unimaginative, uninterested and we have to assign more and more work or they won't learn.

KOHN: Yes. I agree with you, Bill. I think there is a deeply cynical view of children — and by extension, about human nature — that underlies a lot of educational practices, including homework. In my book, I review the evidence that homework actually doesn't help academically and doesn't have non-academic advantages either. It doesn't promote self discipline, responsibility, independence, good work habits — collectively, we might refer to this

assumption as an urban myth except that people in the suburbs tend to accept it, too. There's not a shred of evidence to justify any of those claims.

But after reviewing the evidence, or lack of evidence as the case may be, I asked the question, why does homework persist? Why do we accept it? And I came up with half a dozen answers. One of which is exactly what you put your finger on. I think it reflects a very dark view of children; we don't trust them to decide how to spend their free time so we're going to make sure they have as little of it as possible. On such assumptions and cynicism do our common practices rest.

CRAIN: I would like to turn to your recent *Education Week* article, "Against 'Competitivness'" [Sept. 19, 2007]. It takes on this idea that is so dominant that our task as educators is to prepare children to succeed in the competitive economy of the 21st Century. You take this idea head on, right?

KOHN: I do. If you tease it apart there are really two assumptions. One is that schools are primarily about preparing students to take their place in our economic system, turning out adequately skilled future employees who will do their part to improve the profitability of giant corporations. And then the second, an overlapping but distinct claim, is to frame all of this in terms of competitiveness.

The first I find objectionable in its own right. To see schools as helping students to realize their potential, to help children grow into caring people and lifelong learners or to help support a democratic society — all of that is very different from an economic imperative that tends to drive so much of the discussion, especially on the part of politicians and, not surprisingly, the

corporate leaders who have been accorded a disproportionate amount of power in setting the educational agenda.

But then, making it worse, it's not just an economic argument for schooling or for particular practices within schooling, but the idea that it's all about beating people. Fifty years ago, with Sputnik, it was the Soviets. Then in the '80s it was the Japanese. And today it's maybe the Chinese or the Indians. There always has to be an enemy. It always has to be about triumphing over other people, and that also shows up in the way kids are supposed to have a good time on the weekends: All the games are about winning.

And then in the broader picture it's all about the purpose of schools themselves. The really sad thing is that even though standardized test scores tend to show us what matters least, and have very little to do with the quality of the workforce or with the economic vitality of a given country — despite these facts, we readily lap up these rank-order lists of country's scores on standardized tests because the notion is that we Americans have to be number one, as if it were a sports match.

The implication here when you think about it for two seconds is that we apparently want children who live in other countries not to learn well, to do poorly. That's a view that is implicit in the very idea of international test rankings, putting aside the question of whether the tests are good measures. But I find it to be intellectually indefensible in its focus on relative rather than absolute performance, and morally bankrupt to the extent we are in effect rooting for children in other lands to fail.

CRAIN: And I guess you would find it acceptable if scientists from other countries made progress in a cure for cancer?

KOHN: Yes. I quote Janet Swenson at Michigan State who made that wonderful observation. She said, do we really care if the person who discovers the cure for cancer is from Africa instead of from America.

CRAIN: Or they produce a great sculpture or a great work of art in Italy or whatever.

KOHN: Or whatever it is, exactly. That's the sickness, the pathology, of this us-against-them mentality, and it tends to be reproduced and perpetuated not just by this sort of global competitiveness rationale for schooling; it tends to be reproduced with spelling bees and awards assemblies and subtler things where kids are set against each other in individual classrooms.

Here we come back to where in some ways I started with all of this some 20 years ago, in *No Contest*. If we are really serious about doing what is in the best interest of our children and of all children, then we have to set up classrooms and families and a culture that really is about democratic caring communities that support everyone rather than making sure that some kids have to triumph over their peers.

CRAIN: Very few win, ultimately.

KOHN: Right. And the whole accountability movement, the whole tougher standards movement that has given us such abominations as the "Many Children Left Behind Act," is really setting up a sorting machine. The language is leaving

no child behind and all children can learn and so on. But through the fog of rhetoric it quickly becomes clear that the core of this approach is raising the bar until we guarantee widespread failure. And that would be disturbing enough if the kids branded as chaff instead of wheat were a random sample of the children. But we know that's not true.

Most of the kids who will not be able to succeed are kids of color, kids from low income families, kids whose first language isn't English, kids who have special needs, kids who are not college bound. These are the kids who get the most dreary, test-driven education. And if I was determined to create a segregated society like this, where the winners and the losers are marked almost from birth, and where we made sure that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, I would probably devise a system of high-stakes testing, and with lots of homework as well.

CRAIN: You've said that standardized tests are terrible measures or poor measures of what we really want to measure. In your book, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, you quote Bill Ayers who says that standardized tests can't measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity and so on. Would you say a word about that?

KOHN: The one thing that standardized tests are very, very good measures of is the size of the houses near a given school. The research shows that 80% to 90% of the variance in test scores between communities or schools — or whole states, for that matter — is purely a function of the socioeconomic status of the children in the school. So for a website or a newspaper to publish schools' test scores is not just unhelpful, it's unethical because it gives the

impression that you are talking about the quality of instruction when you're primarily talking about the affluence of the kids.

But even if you take one particular school and you say we have the same demographics this year as last year and our scores went way up, my first response is, Oh no, what did you have to sacrifice from the learning in order to make that happen? What every parent needs to realize is that rising test scores are probably a reason to be concerned, and part of it has to do with how test scores can't measure the stuff that is really of concern to us. But part of it also is the high-stakes nature of the testing, where the imperative to raise the scores is often at the expense of real learning.

What ties all of this together, I think — the reliance on standardized tests, the use of homework, the emphasis on competition — is our tendency to take stuff at face value, to just accept the basic contours of what we've been told and then to ask piddling little questions about implementation within that.

What I've been doing for a number of years — and I know you have been doing it too, Bill — is to invite people to get at the premises, to ask the radical questions — and I use radical in the original Latin sense: *root* questions. Not just how much homework but why homework at all, not just how can we raise the standardized test scores for all kids but why is it that some kids get a diet of nothing more than glorified test preparation. We have to ask the big questions, the radical questions, if we want to do right by our kids.

CRAIN: A final question for you Alfie is what qualities might be sacrificed and what qualities in children or all learners do you put the highest value on?

KOHN: I guess in a way my first answer would be a sort of meta-level answer, which is to say what I place the most value on are the qualities that the kids themselves value most. If we talk less and ask more, we involve the kids in thinking about what counts for them.

And then beyond that, I get the same answers everywhere in the country when I ask teachers or parents what their long-term goals are for their kids? They say we want kids to be creative, compassionate, caring. We want them to be ethical and happy. We want them to love learning and to think deeply and critically. And those are precisely the characteristics that tend to be sacrificed by many traditional practices.

CRAIN: Thank you, that's a beautiful ending. And thank you for asking the radical questions and getting us back to what really matters.

KOHN: Thank you.

A Parent's Perspective on Homework

Sara Bennett

SARA BENNETT, the co-author of *The Case Against Homework*, is the founder of Stop Homework, a project devoted to changing homework policy and practice. Her website is <www.stophomework.com>. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two children.

At the beginning of every school year, in almost every school across the country — public, private, or religious — parents attend back-to-school nights. They meet the teacher, often sitting in their child's chair, and learn about the year's curriculum, class rules, and the teacher's expectations. The teacher usually talks about how eager she is for parental support, how she wants to work together with the family, how the family and the school will be "partners" in the child's education. According to researchers at Johns Hopkins University, "there is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for

parent involvement." (Epstein et al. 2002) The reason: a healthy parent-school partnership fosters student success.

The concept of the parent-teacher partnership is not new. In 1994, when the Goals 2000: Educate America Act was signed into law, one of its eight goals stated, "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children." The goal sounded good on its face — all parents want their children to develop socially, emotionally, and academically, and they're willing to do what it takes to accomplish that goal. Who could argue with the give-and-take promise of a "partnership?"

But now, thirteen years after Goals 2000, homework in kindergarten has become the national norm, children spend a good part or sometimes even all of their evenings on schoolwork, and many parents are frustrated and confused about what their children bring home every night. The reality of parent-school partnership, parents quickly discovered, was not quite the give-and-take they were led to expect. While the schools were happy to rope parents into doing more and more supervision and taking over more and more of the teaching and drilling at home, the parents had no say whatsoever in the content or the methods of their children's education, either at school or at home.

For this article, when I asked teachers what they expected from a parent-teacher partnership, not one mentioned listening for what the parent's needs might be. "To me," says the mother of a fifth-grader from Brooklyn, New York,

> a good relationship is where people decide something together, where both parties have a say. But, with respect to homework, I don't have a say. The teacher has decided what my child will do. If I want something different for her, I have to go through multiple emails and sound like a bitch and even then I don't really have a say.

Still, teachers do have firm ideas of what they expect from parents. One kindergarten teacher I interviewed said:

> Parents must check the nightly folders I send home. If they don't, they're missing important information. It's important for them to see what their kids are doing. They need to establish that routine. Let's face it, the kids are 5 and 6, it's the parents' responsibility. But if the parents don't establish it, then their kids aren't going to learn responsibility.

A third grade teacher in Brooklyn told me that "Parents should trust me, listen to their children, and not meddle. The parent should encourage and provide help when asked; the teacher should enlighten and inspire."

And from a 7th and 8th grade teacher in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, I heard:

> Parents should provide a consistent place where their children can do their homework, make sure that their kids have any materials they need, and discuss the work that their kids are doing on a reasonably frequent basis. The parent needs to communicate with me any relevant circumstances that might impact the student as a learner. It's my responsibility to communicate with the parent(s) if the student is doing extraordinarily well or extraordinarily poorly.

Even if the teacher isn't specifically asking for parental involvement, parents often experience the teacher's expectations as a mandate that the parent must provide help. A 2006 poll from the NEA and Leap Frog (Roper Public Affairs 2006) found that parents help their 8- to 13-year-olds on average two hours and 45 minutes a week. Says Frank, a single father of two from Sacramento, California,

> I am going crazy over the load of homework my kids are bringing home! It started with a call from the school that my oldest was not turning in homework, so I tried helping her every night when I got home. Even when I help with the math and the answer is correct, the teacher marks it wrong because the "technique" or "mechanics" I use is not the so-called new math.

Frank ended up turning to an Internet homework site for help, something that, given the proliferation of these sites over the last few years, other parents must be doing as well.

To top it off, many teachers explicitly require parents to be involved in homework, creating assignments precisely for that purpose. So-called family homework can be anything from quizzing the child on her math facts or spelling words, to reading a required book with the child and expecting the parent to turn in her own notes on the book, to being the subject of an interview, to getting supplies so that the child can build a boat that floats or a suspension bridge that holds weight. It's no wonder that parents find the partnership to be a one-way street, the very antithesis of what they expected. Instead of feeling involved in their children's schooling, they feel more alienated than ever. You know we're in the middle of a crisis when the American Academy of Pediatrics issues a report

(Ginsburg et al. 2007) lamenting the lack of play and recess in children's lives and suggesting they be restored to ensure children's mental and physical health, as it did in October 2006. Another indication of the crisis: the 2006 Yankelovich report finding that reading for fun declines rapidly after age 8 because of homework demands.

If we are to stem the tide of disaffected parents and students and restore some sense of balance to our children's lives, we must figure out how to change the current paradigm so that teachers and parents have an equal role in the partnership, even if that means taking into consideration parents' and children's unique situations and skills, as idealistic as that sounds.

How do we begin? By establishing ground rules for dialogue between schools and parents. Like any good relationship, there must be room for give and take, with each party on equal footing. That means that parents and teachers should either be on a first-name basis or a Mr./Ms. basis, but the teacher shouldn't be the only one with the honorific. At parent-teacher meetings, the teacher should not be sitting behind the desk, but should arrange the seating in a more egalitarian manner. And, just as the teacher has expectations and requirements, the parents should be allowed, even encouraged, to voice their own expectations and requirements. Then, they can discuss, negotiate, compromise, and, finally, reach an agreement that works for the parents, the student, and the teacher. Not all students will be doing the same work every night, nor need they.

If this means that students end up doing less homework every night, that may just be a fair price for stemming an incipient rebellion among parents. And consider: homework research hasn't found any correlation between homework

and achievement in the elementary school years; research finds improvement in later years only on teacher-created tests (Cooper 2001, 23, 33; Kohn, 2006, 27). So by doing less homework, students will be losing very little, if anything, and will have more time for sleep, play, and socializing with their friends, and more time to pursue their own particular interests, whether they be academic, creative, or social. And then, the actual goal of the parent-school partnership will be realized: children who reach adulthood with their social, emotional, and academic skills intact.

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Homework and the Freedom to Think

A Piagetian Perspective

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Many people have expressed concern over the recent suppression of democratic liberties in the United States. Equally worrisome is the increasingly repressive nature of public education. In the name of standards and accountability, government bodies have taken unprecedented control over

instruction and have subjected it to tight regimentation. The federal government has forced schools to gear instruction to standardized tests, and many municipalities mandate “scripted teaching” that tells teachers exactly what teach. In New York City, “literacy police” visit schools to make sure teachers are following orders.

As for the students, much of their education has become mind-numbing test prep. The arts and play, which foster individual expression, have been pushed aside. Today’s young people have few opportunities to think creatively or independently; instead they are taught to produce the answers that adult experts say are correct. All in all, our schools seem better suited to a totalitarian regime than a free-thinking democracy.

When I was a child, in the 1950s, we were happy to hear the bell ring at the end of the school day. We felt pretty free. Today, in contrast, the oppressive weight of school continues in the form of large amounts of homework (Kohn 2006, 6-8; Bennett & Kalish 2006, 11). Youngsters generally hate homework (which is frequently just busywork), and they frequently resist doing it, so parents take control. They become, as some parents put it, the “teacher’s enforcer,” the “task master,” and the “big bad wolf” (Bennett & Kalish 2006, 55-56). Advocates of homework claim that homework promotes positive character traits such as self-discipline and responsibility, but, as Alfie Kohn (2006, 65) observes, what children really learn is “to do what one is told.” As one parent says, “My child looks at her schoolwork as forced child labor” (Bennett & Kalish 2006, 117).

In this authoritarian climate, Piaget’s thoughts on education are particularly valuable. In Piaget’s view (1964), the goal of education is the development of

independent and innovative thinking. He wanted young people to be able to challenge authority, weigh evidence, and come up with new ideas. In this essay, I will discuss Piaget's view of intellectual development, giving special attention to the ways in which homework impedes this development. In the final section, I will comment on ways in which homework might, from a Piagetian perspective, be productive.

At the outset, let me acknowledge that recent research raises questions about aspects of Piaget's theory. Still, it is the preeminent theory of child development. Piaget's broad map of development has received considerable empirical support, and, 27 years after his death, even his most controversial proposals remain credible and stimulate new research (Crain 2005, 41-150).

Interests

In Piaget's theory, the driving force behind intellectual development is the child's interest and curiosity (Crain 2005, 136-137). Children spontaneously become interested in problems they cannot quite solve with their existing mental structures, and as they work on the problems, they create new structures. Their minds expand. Because children's spontaneous interests vary, teachers need pay attention to those of each child, looking for the inner sparks that lead to active efforts to solve problems.

While traditional schooling has often ignored children's spontaneous interests, homework is becoming so tedious and burdensome that it frequently destroys their interests altogether. As a parent says in Bennett and Kalish's recent book, *The Case Against Homework* (2006), "My first grader used to love books and

being read to. But now she has to read so much for homework that she rarely picks up a book that's not assigned" (pp. 16-117). Another parent reports that her high school son doesn't read for pleasure because "he associates reading with homework, so he doesn't find it enjoyable. It feels too much like a punishment" (p. 117).

Independent Thinking

Piaget prized independent thinking. Indeed, Piaget believed that children do not truly grasp concepts unless they figure them out on their own. When teachers simply hand down concepts to children, children learn mere "verbalisms." They repeat the words the teacher has given them without understanding the concepts behind the words (Piaget 1969, 40, 140-164).

This does not mean, in the Piagetian view, that adults cannot provide any help at all. But they must abandon the common tendency to be directive — to give children directions and explanations and correct their work. Instead, they can best foster thinking by asking questions or presenting tasks that arouse the child's curiosity, and then stepping back to allowing the child to work on the solution herself.

A modern master at this approach is the Piagetian educator Constance Kamii, who pioneered constructivism. Kamii suggests, for example, that teachers can find many opportunities to stimulate independent thinking in the course of daily school activities. If a kindergarten child wants to serve juice to the class, the teacher might ask the child if he has just enough cups for all the children (Kamii

& DeVries 1977). The teacher's question sets the child's mind in motion, and then she steps back and lets the child independently work on the problem.

Although some psychologists are highly critical of constructivism (e.g., Mayer 2004), research does provide support. Generally speaking, children who solve math problems on their own perform nearly as well as children in traditional classrooms on standardized tests. But the children who have figured problems out for themselves do far better on measures of conceptual understanding (Cobb et al. 1991; Kamii 1989, Ch. 10; 1994, Ch. 13; 2004, Ch. 10).

The main drawback to Kamii's constructivist approach is that it takes time. Consider, for example, an elementary school lesson on specific gravity. Children regularly predict that a pin will float in a bucket of water because it is small, whereas a block of wood will sink because it is much larger. They are therefore surprised when the opposite occurs. The teacher is tempted to step in and give the explanation, but Kamii urges the teacher to give the children time to experiment with different objects and come up with the answer themselves. They might not be able to do so right away, but it is far better, Kamii says, for the children to keep thinking and wondering than "to be told the answer and to learn incidentally that the answer always comes from the teacher's head" (Kamii 1973, 225).

But today's teachers have little opportunity to try Kamii's approach. There is so much pressure to cover the curriculum and get children ready for high-stakes tests that teachers rarely have time to allow children to do their own thinking and make their own discoveries.

After school, the difficulty is compounded by parental involvement in homework. At the highest levels, government officials and educational organizations promote parental involvement as if it were a *summa bonum* (Kralovec & Buell 2000; Kohn 2006, 50). They don't consider the possibility that adult assistance can stifle children's independent thinking. To be sure, some parents worry about this, and they would prefer to let children do their own problem-solving. But their children often have so much homework to complete before bedtime that the parents must step in. Because their children feel so overwhelmed, parents must prod, cajole, and nag their children to do the work. Then the parents proofread, edit, and correct it. (In many school districts, the parents are actually required to certify that their children produced the right answers.) Increasingly, parents simply do the homework themselves. This is especially true in the early grades, where homework assignments are routinely so far beyond the children's capacities that they cannot possibly do the work by themselves (Bennett & Kalish 2006, Ch. 3). The upshot, then, is that homework forces adults to micromanage children's learning, robbing children of the opportunities to learn on their own.

Free Play

Reading Piaget, one is soon struck a sharp contrast. On the one hand, he writes in an abstract, difficult language. He even presents much of his theory in logical-mathematical terms. On the other hand, many of his examples are from children's ordinary lives, especially their free or unsupervised play.

It is easy to underestimate the importance of the examples. Free play, I believe, is central to Piaget's conception of cognitive development. Children need

free play to fully develop their cognitive potentials. Let us look at how this is so in Piaget's first three general periods of development.

Period I. Sensorimotor Intelligence (Approximately Birth to 2 Years Old)

Infants and toddlers are consumed by exploratory play. They energetically examine objects, pour water in and out of containers, drop things from different heights, and so on. In the process, they develop sophisticated ways of dealing with the physical world that provide the foundation for later logical and scientific thought. For example, toward the end of the sensorimotor period, a child might drop her father's keys from different heights in order to observe the louder and softer sounds the keys make when they hit the floor. In Piaget's (1968b) view, the child's physical actions foreshadow the experimental approach that an adult scientist uses on a mental plane (as when a scientist thinks, "I wonder what would happen if I doubled or tripled the amount of salt in this liquid").

Nearly all, if not all of children's exploratory play during this first period occurs without any adult instruction; babies and young toddlers develop their cognitive structures while they are happily playing by themselves. And because parents don't often send children this young to school (at least not yet), the issue of homework does not arise. I call attention to this early exploratory play because it demonstrates the central role of free play in Piaget's conception of how the mind develops.

Period II. Preoperational Thought (Approximately 2- to 7 Years Old)

The critical feature of this period is the use of symbols. Children develop many symbols as they master their society's language. For example, an English-speaking child might use the word "tree" to symbolize an object, a tree, that isn't present. But Piaget emphasized that young children develop symbols in other ways, too, and he called special attention to their make-believe play (Piaget 1962, 89). When, for example, a 2-year-old moves a stick and says, "Horsie," the child has invented a symbol, a stick, to represent a horse (Piaget 1962).

Make-believe play is prominent at least until the age of six, and psychologists are beginning to appreciate how intricate and imaginative it can be. Psychologists also are learning about young children's spontaneous accomplishments in other symbolic realms, such as drawing (Crain 2003, Chs. 2 and 4). The child at the preoperational stage still has a long way to go before she can organize symbols into logical and scientific structures, but symbolic thought is the essence of human cognition, and it emerges strongly through free play.

Period III. Concrete Operations (Approximately 7- to 11 Years Old)

During this period, the child makes significant progress in organizing her symbols into a logical system. Piaget demonstrated this achievement through many experiments, the most famous of which has to do with the conservation of liquid. A child is shown two glasses containing equal amounts of water. Then one glass of water is poured into a shorter, wider bowl. In the previous (preoperational) period, the child thinks the amount of water has changed. The child says things such as, "The bowl doesn't have as much because it is lower." During the new period of concrete operations, the child can consider *two* dimensions — not only the change in the water's height but also the change in its

width, and how the two changes cancel each other out. The child says things such as, “It’s lower here but it’s wider here, so it’s still the same amount.” Through such reasoning, the child “masters conservation,” recognizing that the amount is conserved.

Piaget pointed out that a parallel process occurs during children’s free play. When children play with their peers, they sometimes get into arguments and learn that there is more than one perspective on a topic. Sometimes they reach compromises between the two positions. They also learn to coordinate perspectives in other activities. If, for example, two 7-year-olds are playing in sand, instead of just separately digging their own holes, they might coordinate their digging to create a tunnel that joins in the middle. This capacity to consider and coordinate two perspectives during play is the same that is involved in logical reasoning on tasks such as conservation. Thus free social play promotes the development of rational thought (Piaget 1968a; 1968b, 204).

Piaget believed that children learn more about differing perspectives in interactions with peers than with adults. This is because they are impressed by the authority of adults and accustomed to thinking that only the perspective of the adult is valid. With peers they feel freer to consider the different sides to an issue (Piaget 1968b, 205; 1965).

During this period children take a keen interest in social games and rules. Piaget (1965, 50) described how a group of eight 10- and 11-year-old boys, preparing for a snowball fight, spent considerable time dividing themselves into teams, debating the process of electing captains, deciding the distances of the shots, and discussing the appropriate sanctions for violations of their rules.

According to one account of this episode, the boys were called home before they got a chance to begin to snowball fight, but all seemed content with their afternoon (Ginsburg & Opper 1988, 98). What really interested them was the discussion of the rules. Children in this period are like little lawyers, discussing what is fair and right. In the process, they develop their conceptions of justice.

Thus Piaget pointed out how free play, whether it takes the form of make-believe play or the peer interactions of later childhood, contributes significantly to mental development. But as schools assign more and more homework at younger and younger ages, the opportunities for free play are rapidly shrinking.

Period IV. Formal Operations (Adolescence and Beyond)

The fourth and final period in Piaget's theory, which begins in adolescence, is that of *formal operations*. During this period, young people develop their powers of purely abstract and hypothetical reasoning. In their leisure time, they often like to engage in philosophical discussions about the existence of God, the nature of love, and ideal societies. They like to discuss the kinds of people they are and their plans in life. Piaget assumed that these discussions would spontaneously occur, but they require unpressured time — time that the burden of homework is making increasingly rare.

Positive Possibilities

In the Piagetian view, then, children develop their minds when they pursue their spontaneous interests, solve problems on their own, and engage in a good

deal of free play. In adolescence, they broaden their minds through intellectual discussions in their leisure time. I have indicated how homework routinely curtails each of these activities.

But must homework always be detrimental? Can homework be designed to actually foster the activities that Piagetians value? It would seem that it can, especially if it gives children choices, allows them to pursue their deepest interests, and permits them to work at their own pace (see Kohn 2006, 178-181). For example, the Kino school in Tucson, Arizona, doesn't assign traditional homework but tries to give students activities that they find so interesting that they want to continue with them on their own at home. According to one school administrator,

> I think it's an ideal that we achieve pretty often — a student starts reading a book and can't put it down; students continue a discussion in the evening via instant messaging; band members get together to jam or rehearse; film crews film over the weekend or over the summer; a current events class leads to volunteering in a political campaign; parents are persuaded to buy an iguana…. (Kohn 2006, 159)

Still, from a Piagetian perspective, children need ample time for unstructured activities that have nothing to do with school — time to talk with friends about personal issues and to invent their own games, such as a snow ball fight.

At the same time, free play — especially free outdoor play — has become problematic today. Teachers and parents informally report that when their children do get time to play, they are at a loss. They don't know what to do (see Almon & Jarrett 2004). It seems that a number of factors — the reduction of

recess, increased homework, and the lure of the electronic media, and an increase in adult supervised sports — have combined to limit children's unstructured play to such an extent that when they get time for it, they don't know how to initiate it.

In this situation, a degree of adult intervention may be necessary. For example, playground directors and camp counselors might introduce children to some play possibilities, including some of the childhood games of past eras. I realize that, from a Piagetian perspective, any adult involvement carries a risk; it can stifle children's initiative and independence. But if adults keep in mind the importance of children's independence, and quickly step back once children have begun to play, the adult interventions could be helpful.

A discussion of such tactics is, of course, largely theoretical at this point. Tactics for stimulating free play hardly matter as long as children lack time for it. Our first task, then, is to create leisure time for children. And to do so, nothing is more important than reducing the homework burden that weighs so heavily upon them.

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Do the Math

Redesigning Homework to Create More Time for Learning

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A little before three-o'clock the final bell sounds at Central High School where Maisha, a junior, rushes off to the gym for two hours of varsity volleyball practice. On the shorter days when she does not have a game, she usually manages to catch the 6:30 bus home. On game days her volleyball commitment can last until anywhere between 8 and 9 in the evening, depending on where the game is held. On the days she does mange to catch the 6:30 bus, she is home before 7:30. After she helps with dinner, eats, and does her part of cleaning up the

kitchen, it is well past 8:00. If she is able to resist the temptation to call, text message, or email her friends, she is able to settle into the chair at her desk and open her first book before 9:00. If she has been assigned the research-recommended amount of homework, 10 minutes per grade (Cooper 2007), then a little before 11:00 she can begin to relax and get ready for bed. On these "good" days she falls asleep before midnight, leaving her with about six hours to sleep. Optimally, 15- to 18-year-olds need 9¼ hours of sleep (Carskadon 2002). So by Friday she will have been deprived of at least twelve hours of the sleep she needs to stay healthy and alert.

Maisha lives in a middle class neighborhood with tree-lined streets, smooth sidewalks, and landscaped front yards. She lives in a freshly painted house with a two-car garage and two loving parents, one of whom works part-time to be at home when Maisha's two younger sisters arrive home from school. Most nights the entire family sits in the dining room and eats together. She has her own room with a desk, a computer, and window seat strewn with stuffed animals where she likes to read. She attends a school with small classes and teachers who stay year after year.

Maisha's story is as good as it gets, and yet even when we imagine her most ideal day, the numbers tell us she is putting her health at risk. Unlike the ideal day described above, most of her days are extended by the need to cram for a test, finish a paper, or attend to any number of personal- and/or family- related commitments. Maisha's days regularly stretch out until 2 or 3 in the morning. She and her peers pull "all-nighters" a few times a month. This schedule leaves her sleep deprived, anxious, and feeling behind in everything.

Maisha's less affluent peers are at even greater risk. Their commitments beyond the six hours they spend in class are not voluntary. They have jobs to earn income needed to cover rent and put food on the table. They care for younger siblings in order to help working parent(s) who are busy putting in 10 to 12 hours each day commuting and working. Even when they can manage to find free time, they do not have a safe quiet place to learn or simply relax. Their world is a chaotic roller coaster of adult-like responsibilities, random schedules, poor nutrition, and the anxiety that comes from a feeling of hopelessness.

Some argue Maisha and her peers must be prepared for the way things are in the adult world. They claim we all compete with time. Our freeways are filled with breakfast-eating commuters. Cell-phone-talking, PDA-checking, e-mail-responding multi-taskers fill coffee shops. We are a nation consumed by busyness. Work is a 24/7 phenomenon thanks to inventions that promised us freedom. Our relationship to time twists ever tighter with each new responsibility. While it is true that the current recommendation of 10 minutes of homework per grade (Cooper 2007) — 110 minutes for an eleventh grader — may prepare privileged eleventh graders like Miasha for modern life, such a position assumes schooling is about preserving the status-quo. At its most insidious level, homework is assuring that Maisha and her under-resourced peers remain worlds apart simply because of the differences between the situations into which they happened to be born.

Homework at the secondary level is often assigned with no consideration for students' lives outside the classroom. High school students are under extreme pressure. Whether students attend an under-resourced school or an elite private school, our unwavering commitment to the Puritan ethic of hard work and our blind

faith in progress continue to expose all students to an assembly-line approach to education that reduces learning to little more than a to-do list.

Nobody ever developed a love of literature or history by “reading to page thirty for Monday.” Nobody ever developed a love of math or science by “answering the questions at the end of the chapter.” All students struggle to play the homework game, yet the education pundits continue to be divided. Progressives call for the practice to be abolished (Buell 2004; Kohn 2006; Kralovec & Buell 2000). Conservatives defend the practice by claiming it “can foster positive character traits such as independence and responsibility” (U.S. Department of Education 2003). While assigning homework and administering quizzes is an efficient and widely accepted means of leaving no child behind, it is also a practice which finds little if any credible support from the research (Kohn 2006). Teachers who find themselves caught between school policies and the real world must navigate the paradoxical landscape of the classroom where theory encounters a ticking clock.

For high school students much of the wonder and imagination they demonstrated as younger students is replaced by a more “serious” and less authentic approach to learning. Lists of books are prescribed. Hours of homework are assigned. Quizzes are taken. Grades are recorded. Learning becomes busywork. Bluffing, skimming, and copying become necessary methods of coping with the workload (Sizer & Sizer 2000) assigned by teachers who have never taken the time to sit down and “do the math” to determine how much time their students actually have outside of class or how much quality learning time is actually spent in class.

A Better Approach

There must be a mindful (Langer 1997) alternative to blindly following the recommended dosage of ten minutes of homework a night per grade level. Discussions of homework cover a wide range of topics, but we need to consider how to use homework in a way that ties into the school day and permits more time for comfortable learning.

Consider this snapshot of first period in a typical high school class. The first bell rings at 7:45; the second bell rings at 7:50; and the bell to begin learning rings at 7:55. The tenth graders in Mr. C's classroom settle into their seats by 8:00. Mr. C finishes walking up and down the aisles checking off the homework in his green grade book by 8:10. Once directions for the day's assignment and an example are presented at the board, students are instructed to begin doing math. It is 8:20. Nearly half an hour has passed without students learning content. Just under 20 minutes later Mr. C calls for everyone's attention so he can assign the homework. The bell to end class rings at 8:50. Mr. C and his students have 55 minutes a day to learn math. Thanks to the "busyness" associated with homework, when things go smoothly and there are no schooling interruptions like announcements over the P.A. system, Mr. C's students spend just over 36% of their time actually doing math.

What if teachers assigned homework that is determined by how much time students actually have in and out of class to learn? What if teachers and students collaborated to design homework with the aim of improving the quality of the time they spend in class? What if teachers engaged their students in discussions around learning as a lifestyle? Such a collaborative and deliberative approach to

homework could help us move away from a banking system (Freire 1997) of education which treats students as empty vessels to be filled with content. What if we joined with students to design homework that could actually add quality and quantity to the time spent learning in class? Surely the average 6.7 hours (U.S. Department of Education 2002) students spend in school each day is enough time spent learning academic knowledge and skills for one day.

There are those who call upon schools to ban homework (Buell 2004; Kralovec & Buell 2000). They describe the way homework harms family life and leaves students with no time to pursue non-school interests. While these critics make valid points, they can lead teachers to feel they have permission to dismiss homework completely, thus pitting them against their administrators who must enforce district level policies shaped by the popular belief in the necessity of homework. Such either/or thinking is too radical. Few would disagree that busy work should not be assigned, that sleep deprivation should be avoided, or that quality family time is important. But before condemning the tradition of homework out of hand, we should consider the ways homework might help us address the one thing teachers and students ask for consistently: more time.

A new approach to homework must avoid distracting myths. A major myth is that the problem is teenage procrastination. Today's teenagers are depicted as text-messaging, cell-phone-talking, instant-messaging machines. The distorted lens of memory frames a picture of a generation of students who just do not have the discipline of earlier generations. But when we look out how adolescents spend their time, a very different picture comes into focus.

While much has been written already about the way homework impacts life beyond the classroom (Kralovek & Buell 2000; Buell 2004; Kohn 2006; Bennett & Kalish 2006), there are some pretty basic numbers to crunch regardless of where you fall in terms of your opinion about the value of homework. Time is a finite resource and something which cannot be changed, so it makes sense to begin by establishing exactly how time works for students.

Developing a thoughtful approach to homework can begin by doing the math on the time students spend each day. We can begin our calculations by looking at how much time students need to be healthy. Based on recommendations, students should spend about 12 hours a day maintaing their basic health (nine hours a day sleeping; two hours sleeping; and an hour exercising).

The next consideration is how much time is actually spent engaged in structured activities. Six hours is spent in school; two hours in after-school activities (sports, art, work); an hour in commuting — for a total of nine hours.

Once we have accounted for the 21 hours needed to maintain health and engage in structured activities, students have three hours of discretionary time available on an average day. Of course that assumes the day is without unexpected glitches or distractions. Factor in a conservative 30 minutes twice a day for hygiene/waking up/winding down and you are down to two hours unaccounted for each day.

Given the overwhelming research on the importance of reading, we would be inclined to set aside one hour for reading. Now we are down to one hour a day for school-age children to play, relax, or just spend down time with friends and

family. Regardless of the recommended 10 minutes of homework per day per grade (90 to 120 minutes for high school students), even if we eliminate "personal time," today's high school students only have one hour each day to spend doing homework. So now the question becomes what, if anything, can be done in one hour to enhance the quality of their education.

In terms of the quantity of learning experienced by students, rather than adding time after school, we could think of ways to add time during school. The business associated with homework consumes a considerable amount of time in class. Homework is typically assigned, collected, and reviewed during class. While it might be argued that reviewing or correcting homework is quality learning time, it cannot be argued that assigning or collecting homework is time spent learning. Even if assigning and collecting homework only takes five minutes per class session (classroom observations suggest the amount of time is closer to seven minutes), based on an average of five classes per day that adds up to 25 minutes a day.

When we look at the way time is spent in class, it also becomes apparent that considerable time is spent repeating directions. Consider a classroom in which the teachers spends 11 minutes delivering and repeating directions. Those 11 minutes account for nearly 25% of the time left in class after subtracting five minutes for the time we allotted for the "busyness" of checking, collecting, and distributing homework. In this scenario over 30% of the "learning time" students have in class is spent on activities during which students are not engaged with the content. If we add to this the seven minutes spent in a class dealing with school-related tasks like taking

attendance and making announcements, then we reach a point where during a 55-minute class almost 42% of the time is spent not learning. Clearly there is a problem with how time is used in classrooms, the question is how educators might redesign homework so the one hour students have to spend on it translates into more time spent learning in class?

Intentional Attendance: An Alternative Design for Homework

John Dewey's (1938, 67) belief in the "importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process" offers us a frame for rethinking our approach to homework. And for Dewey, even student participation is not enough; what is called for is intelligent activity, which gives direction to what would otherwise be the blind pursuit of desire. Consider how this phenomenon of doing without thinking plays out in classrooms where students do activities with little or no understanding of why. While students may appear to be "on task," they are merely doing as they have been told in order to earn some external reward whether it be a grade, praise from the teacher, or simply avoiding punishment.

Consider the way students enter a classroom. Even when they manage to arrive on time with the necessary materials, they do so with the intent of following school rules, not with any type of intellectually minded intent. This lack of intent manifests itself in the way they spend their time prior to receiving direction from the teacher. Students who enter a classroom without a plan are simply doing time. No wonder teachers waste so much time repeating directions. Students arrive as blank slates with no other agenda, under the best circumstances, than

to do as they are told. Following directions is not learning. One can argue students are lost in their classes. They are like passengers who have boarded a bus with no understanding of where that bus is going or why they have climbed on board other than because the bus arrived and opened its doors. Like travelers without expectations, students struggle to pay attention and make any meaning out of their experiences.

In order for students to become engaged and take some ownership of what they do in classrooms, they need time to reflect and make sense of what they will be doing during that time. This need for reflection prior to action suggests the need for students to be aware of the purpose of class well in advance of the class.

This call for student ownership and reflection suggests a way students might use the hour a day they have for homework. Rather than using homework to reinforce learning and extend classroom learning, we can think of homework as a time to formulate learning intent. Such a shift would call for students to give some thought to what they will be doing in class so they walk into the classroom with a plan.

When homework is designed to ensure students are prepared to learn during class, and students are expected to arrive to class ready to engage with content from bell to bell, then the need to add on more time at home decreases. Such a practice along with steps taken to remove school-related business from class time could nearly double the amount of time students spend learning in class. This would remove the need for students to spend so much time learning outside of class. If the classroom minutes currently being spent on clerical and school

business-related tasks were replaced by time spent learning, then roughly two hours of recommended homework could be replaced by sleep, family time, recreation, or down time, which might enable students to arrive to class well rested with greater knowledge and skills to contribute in class.

What would a 5- to 10-minute homework assignment designed to develop learning intent look like? With 5 to 10 minutes assigned per class, students in a traditional schedule would have between 20 and 50 minutes of homework per night. Given the amount of time students report having to spend on homework, an average of 45 minutes per night, such a homework load seems manageable.

Small chunks of time doing homework per class does not allow for any learning that requires critical thinking. Five- to ten-minute assignments would have to be more procedural in nature. What if homework took the form of directions aimed at helping student arrive to class ready to participate in a learning activity? If class time were designed for more active learning by students, then homework could mean reading directions to become familiar with what and how they will be expected to learn during class.

What if students spent all of the available time learning during a 55-minute class? Over the course of one school year, given that students currently spend less than half their time doing a subject in class, that adds up to 375 hours a year which, based on the roughly five hours students spend in class each school day, is the equivalent of 75 extra days of school per year. That is the equivalent of 2½ more years of learning over the span of a K-12 education.

This approach to homework could free teachers from giving directions so they could provide students with more formative feedback.

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Hazardous Homework?

The Relationship Between Homework, Goal Orientation, and Well-Being In Adolescence

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Studies on homework have often focused on the links between amount of homework and academic achievement, with mixed results. Some researchers have indicated a positive relationship, some negative, and some have reported no relationship (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye & Greathouse 1998; Cooper & Valentine 2001). However, only a few studies have explored the links between homework and well-being (e.g., Kouzma & Kennedy 2002). We were interested in further examining this link, particularly in suburban schools, where many students experience stress over schoolwork (Galloway, Pope & Osberg 2007; Pope 2001; Lucile Packard Foundation 2006).

Though research is limited on the relationship between homework and well-being, more research has been conducted on the links between students' approach to learning (known as goal orientation) and their well-being. Recent studies show that adopting a *mastery* goal orientation, where students seek to learn and improve, is linked to learning, and feelings of hope and pride in their work; and that adopting a *performance approach* goal orientation, where students seek to outperform others, can also be associated with feelings of pride (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier 2006). However, in suburban schools, the pressure to excel and get into selective colleges may particularly heighten students' fear of failure and their attempts to avoid looking like they cannot do the work (a *performance avoidance* goal orientation). This fear of failure can impact their mental and physical well-being. When individuals fear failure or adopt a performance avoidance goal orientation, they are more likely to experience general anxiety, test anxiety, hopelessness, and shame (Middleton & Midgley 1997; Pekrun, Elliot & Maier 2006; Skkalvik 1997). Additional studies show that performance approach goals improve school performance, while performance

avoidance goals have been linked to poorer school performance (Elliot & Church 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto & Elliot 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer & Elliot 2002).

These studies indicate a need for understanding the relationships between homework, well-being, goal orientation, and achievement. Our study aimed to help fill this gap, with particular attention to the experiences of suburban high school students. Three research questions guided our study: (1) Do students report homework as a primary source of stress in their lives? (2) Is amount and quality of homework related to students' mental and physical health? (3) How do students' goal orientation and achievement play a role in academic-related stress and general mental health?

Method

Participants

A sample of 496 students from two upper middle class suburban high schools (one private all-girls school and one public school) participated in the study. The private school participants had a distribution of 9th (24.8%), 10th (34.4%), and 11th (40.8%) graders. The majority of the students reported their ethnicity as European-American (57.6%) or Asian (19.2%), with a small percentage of students reporting their ethnicity as mixed (4.8%), Hispanic (4.8%), Native American (1.6%), African American (0.8%), or other (8.8%). Three students did not report their ethnicity (2.4%).

The public school sample was 64.4% female, and spanned all four grades, with a distribution of 9th (37.2%), 10th (30.5%), 11th (26.7%), and 12th (5.7%) graders. The majority of the public school students reported their ethnicity as European-American (47.8%) or Asian (35.8%), with a small percentage of students reporting their ethnicity as mixed (2.7%), Hispanic (1.9%), African American (0.8%), Native American (0.3%), or other (10.7%). Five students did not report their ethnicity (1.3%).

Procedure

Students with parental consent completed a 40-minute survey during the school day. School staff administered the surveys with the help of the authors and a doctoral research assistant. Teachers at the schools were given a common script to read to students prior to the survey administration, which informed students that their school was taking part in a survey in connection with Stanford University, with the goal of gaining an understanding of student experiences at their school. Students were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that their answers would remain confidential. They were also asked to read and sign an assent form if they were willing to participate. Once survey administration began, the researchers traveled to classrooms to answer student questions while students completed the survey.

Measures

The survey assessed students' self-reported mental and physical health, stress over schoolwork, homework load, perceptions of homework usefulness,

goal orientation, school achievement, and perceptions of home and school climates. This paper does not include analyses on the climate scales.

Mental health. Mental health was measured through a self-report 5-point Likert scale with 8 items, including internalizing symptoms (e.g., “During the last six months how often have you felt hopeless?” 1=never to 5=almost everyday) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., “During the last six months how often have you felt that you couldn’t control your temper?”). These items were drawn from the Symptoms Checklist-90 (Derogatis, Rickels & Rock 1976; Roeser, Eccles & Freedman-Doan 1999). We also asked students to report on the following open-ended question: “Right now in your life, what would you say causes you the most stress and why?”

Physical health. Physical health was assessed by whether students had experienced any of seven stress-related physical symptoms in the past month (sweating, headaches, exhaustion, weight loss, weight gain, stomach problems, and/or sleeping difficulties). Each was a dichotomous variable: students answered that they either had or had not experienced the reaction because of stress. One additional item asked whether students had ever been forced to drop an enjoyable activity or hobby because schoolwork took too much of their time.

Stress over schoolwork. Stress about schoolwork was measured in two ways. First, students completed a set of items on academic worries. This scale included seven items such as, “How often do you worry about school assignments?” Second, we asked one item on stress over school work: “How often do you feel stressed by your schoolwork or academic experience?” (from 1=never to 5=always).

Homework. Homework load was measured by students' response to the following question: "On a typical day, how many hours do you spend on homework (Do not include time spent taking breaks, instant messaging, etc.)?" Homework usefulness was assessed by two items: "In general, how useful is your homework for helping you learn the material?" and "In general, how well does your homework prepare you for tests, papers, or projects?" Students rated these items from 1=not at all useful/well to 5=very useful/well. These items were used to create a homework usefulness scale.

Goal orientation. We looked at three different goal orientation dimensions, all of which were based on Elliot's (1999) achievement motivation scale. We used three Mastery Goal items (e.g., How important is it to you that your schoolwork challenges you to think?), five student Performance Approach goal items (e.g., How important is it to you to get better grades than most of the students in your school?), and three Performance Avoidance Goal items (e.g., How worried are you that if you ask questions in class, the teacher might not think you're very smart?). Students rated their responses on the mastery and performance approach items from 1=not at all important to 5=very important. On the three avoidance items, students rated their feelings from 1=not at all worried to 5=very worried.

School achievement. School achievement was measured by students' self-reported GPA on their last report card. We also asked students to report the number of regular and AP courses they took.

Demographic information. Demographic information was gathered at the end of the survey. Students reported on gender, ethnicity, grade in school, and age.

Results

Hours of Homework and Mental and Physical Well-Being

The first question we explored was whether students in our sample felt that schoolwork was a stressor in their lives. When we asked students to list what caused the most stress in their lives, the majority of student comments (67.8%) were related to schoolwork, homework, and tests. Responses included stress over deadlines, essays, tests and finals, general homework, projects, grades, and fear of failure. On a separate item, about two-thirds of the students in our sample (65%) reported that they were often or always stressed by their schoolwork. These data confirm that homework, and schoolwork more broadly, were primary stressors in these students' lives.

The students spent an average of 3.04 hours per night (*SD*=1.40) doing homework, with the number ranging from 0 to 8 hours per night. A majority of the students (56%) reported that they had dropped an activity or hobby they enjoyed because schoolwork took too much of their time. The majority of students (77.4%) also reported having experienced one or more stress-related physical problems in the month prior to the survey, with more than 50% reporting headaches, difficulty sleeping, and/or exhaustion.

We expected these deleterious outcomes to differ based on the amount of homework that students completed each night. To examine this question, we split the sample into three groups: those who reported doing two or fewer hours of homework per night (35.2% of the participants), those who reported doing between 2.1 and 3.5 hours per night (32.9% of the participants), and those who

reported doing more than 3.5 hours per night (31.9% of the sample). The deleterious physical symptoms were particularly high for students who reported spending 3.5 or more hours on homework per night (See Table 1). A series of chi-squared analyses showed that this group of students was significantly more likely than expected to drop out of an activity because of the stress of schoolwork ($p<.001$), experience exhaustion ($p<.05$), and gain weight ($p<.01$). In addition, this group indicated getting significantly fewer hours of sleep ($M=6.39$, $SD=.99$) than students who reported doing 2.1-3.5 hours per night ($M=7.10$, $SD=.98$) and students who reported doing two or fewer hours of homework per night ($M=7.38$, $SD=1.26$). This difference was significant, $F(2,478)=34.91$, $p<.001$.

To Access Table 1 on the Internet, click here.

We also examined the possibility that hours of homework were associated with students' academic worries, mental health problems, and stress from schoolwork. As Table 2 indicates, those who did more homework reported more problems. Although we do not report the inferential statistical analyses here, the group differences on academic worries, mental health problems, and school stress based on hours of homework per night were statistically significant.

To Access Table 2 on the Internet, click here.

Usefulness of Homework and Mental and Physical Well-Being

Quantity of homework was only one element we expected to be associated with student well-being. We also asked students to report on the *usefulness* of

their homework, that is, how well their homework helped them learn the material and prepare for tests. As we can see in Table 3, students' perceptions of homework as useful were modestly but consistently related to fewer academic worries, lower incidence of mental health problems, and fewer stress-related physical symptoms (such as headaches and exhaustion).

To Access Table 3 on the Internet, click here.

School Stress and Mental Health:
Relationships with Homework, Goal Orientation, and Achievement

Using hierarchical regression analyses, we examined how four sets of variables were related to academic worries and mental health. The variables included homework variables, goal orientation variables, student achievement, and student demographics.

Table 4 presents the results. Most of the associations were modest. Out of all variables, students' report of performance avoidance goal orientation was most strongly associated with academic worries, indicating that those who wanted to avoid looking bad at their schoolwork reported more worries. GPA and hours of homework were also associated with academic worries: Students who reported higher GPAs had fewer worries, but those who reported more hours of homework indicated more worries. We also found a relationship between gender and worries and ethnicity and worries: Females reported more academic worries than males, while European-American students reported fewer academic worries than Asian students.

To Access Table 4 on the Internet, click here.

Generally speaking, students' ratings of their mental health were most strongly related to gender, GPA, and grade level: Females reported poorer mental health than males, students with higher GPAs reported better mental health than those with lower GPAs, and 11th graders reported poorer mental health than 9th and 10th graders. Students' perceptions of homework usefulness and students' performance goal orientation were also significantly related to mental health. The more useful students found their homework, the better their mental health; the more they wanted to avoid looking bad at schoolwork or sought to outperform classmates, the poorer their mental health.

Conclusion

This study corroborates previous research suggesting that homework and schoolwork are significant causes of high school student stress. In our sample, students reported an average of over three hours of homework each night. Students who spent the most hours on homework each night experienced more stress-related physical symptoms and poorer mental health than the other groups. These students were more likely to drop activities or hobbies that they enjoyed because of the amount of time they needed to complete their schoolwork. Additionally, these students were more likely to report that they experienced exhaustion and weight gain than students who completed less than 3.5 hours of homework per night. The results indicate that suburban high schools need to examine homework load and the total number of hours students spend on school-related work. When students spend 6 or 7 hours in school and another 3 or more hours on homework, they face a longer workday than most adults. We

recommend that schools regularly monitor homework load and consider policies that set a maximum number of homework hours each day or a maximum time on task per assignment.

Our findings also indicate that school homework policies and reform efforts need to address usefulness and relevance of homework, not just time on task. Previous research has shown that relevant and purposeful schoolwork is linked to increased student motivation (see Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn 2003). Our study extends this connection to positive mental and physical health. When students perceived homework as more useful for their learning and preparation for tests and projects, they reported fewer academic worries, fewer stress-related physical symptoms, and more positive mental health. While these relationships were modest in magnitude, they were generally consistent. Useful homework assignments may be fundamental not just to students' engagement in school, but also to their overall well-being. Schools should consider homework policies that strive to eliminate "busy work" and that are explicit about the purposes of the work sent home each night.

While other researchers have recommended a specific maximum for hours of nightly homework (see Cooper 2001; Cooper, Robinson & Patall 2006), we hesitate to provide a hard and fast rule, given that quality homework is more strongly associated with students' mental health than homework load. Rather, we recommend further research to determine the health risks associated with high amounts of "useful" homework. How much "useful" homework can still be considered healthy?

Another important finding was that students doing over 3.5 hours of homework each night were more likely to drop activities or hobbies that they enjoyed because of the amount of time they needed to complete their schoolwork. Research has shown significant benefits for students who pursue extracurricular activities (Larson 2000; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles & Lord 2005). Schools should enable students to maintain a healthy balance between schoolwork and extracurricular pursuits by carefully monitoring homework load and revising homework policies.

Furthermore, our study corroborates previous research that suggests that students who have lower GPAs and students who adopt a performance avoidance goal orientation (avoiding looking incapable) are more likely to experience school anxiety and report poorer mental health (Kaplan & Maehr 1999; Middleton & Midgley 1997). Creating purposeful homework assignments may be particularly important for students who fall into these categories. For example, other studies have shown that offering variety and choice on assignments can reduce the likelihood that students will compare their work to their peers (see Stipek 1996).

Finally, the regression analyses demonstrated that Asian students had more academic worries than European-American students, yet did not indicate poorer overall mental health. This finding deserves additional research attention (see also Crystal et al. 1994; Elliot, Chirkov, Kim & Sheldon 2001).

Although our data are limited by student self-reports alone, the results of the present study have significant implications for both research and practice. Given the hazards of homework observed in this study, we recommend that

researchers, educators, policymakers, and parents work together to pursue a more balanced workload for high school students.

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The Homework Trap

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While educators consider the pros and cons of homework policy, most children go to school, learn, and enter adult life better for their education. If society has gone mad with modern homework practices, it may not matter to most parents. Their children are demonstrating the values of hard work and respect for authority as schools prepare them for future success. Although parents worry about the stresses their children feel, most will accept that educators know best and expect that their children will comply. If things work, they work.

Unfortunately, there are numbers of children for whom the system does not work. At early ages, these children start falling behind. They appear lazy, inattentive, and unmotivated. They don't know their assignments, complete little work, and often don't hand in the work that they have done. Late work means points off, and work not done garners zeroes. Their grades decline, setting into motion a number of actions by the parents and the school, with counteractions (usually inactions) by the children themselves. The problem is cumulative and colors the experiences these children have with school, affecting their attitudes and performance in later years.

These children are in a *homework trap*. This paper will look at *what* is happening, *why* it is happening, and outline some steps that can be taken. The paper is based on my observations as a clinical psychologist. I have come to believe that school problems in general, and homework problems in particular, contribute heavily to emotional and behavioral difficulties often seen in children, adolescents, and disabled adults.

This paper analyzes the situation using principles from organizational and behavioral psychology. It explains how common practice worsens rather than resolves homework problems, and proposes a model for intervention.

What is the Homework Trap?

The homework trap refers to a condition in which the child fails to complete the assignments; the problem significantly affects the child's grades; the child does not respond to standard consequences; the parents are called in to collaborate with the school; and parent-teacher efforts have little or no effect.

These conditions put the child at significant risk because they lead to declining grades; a negative self-image; negative attitudes toward education; lack of preparedness for the higher grades; general behavioral problems; and a risk of movement toward undesirable peer groups.

As common practice (understanding that school districts differ, some with unusual and creative ideas), attention is directed on the child's behavior with the goal of getting him or her to conform. In the process, opinions are offered and assessments made about what might be wrong with the child. These assessments can address a range of personal, familial, emotional, and educational factors, and may lead to interventions such as

- Increased monitoring by the parent of the child's work at home;
- Increased communication between parent and school (including daily to weekly progress reports);
- Having parents and teachers sign off on the assignment book;
- Instituting at-home penalties for work not done; or
- Employing outside resources, like a therapist or a tutor.

Often, the most important factors leading to homework-noncompliant behavior are not considered. These are problems with systems, problems with learning, and issues related to time.

The Systems Problem

Children belong to two distinct, primary social organizations: the family and the school. Each system has its own operating terms and interacts with the other. The school sets standards which the parents generally endorse. Parents enjoy latitude in how they raise their children. There are formal venues for parent-teacher contact (Back-to-School and Open House Nights, report cards, and parent-teacher conferences) with additional opportunities for parents to get involved (in Parent Teacher Organizations and as classroom helpers). None of these was specifically created with any particular child in mind. For the most part, teachers run the school while parents are in charge of their homes. This natural division of power and authority is the societal norm and works well for most children.

Homework is an anomaly that traverses the boundary between family and school. It is a standard created at school for behavior to take place in the home. There is no other area in a child's life where an authority outside the parent has so much influence on policies and practices in the home. The child may have other activities such as piano lessons, religious training, or sports team participation that create some requirements and demands. But in those cases, the activity leader's authority is completely contingent on the parents' support. School, in contrast, is mandatory, and homework has become a presumed extension of that legal mandate. Whether or not homework is important as an educational practice, there is still a serious question about what it means for the school to exert control over what happens in the home.

As long as the child does well, this hierarchical quirk may not get noticed. For the child who fails to do the work, the dynamic looms large. After all, parents are charged with addressing problems that arise for their children in their own homes. Without full latitude to use their own judgment (whether it involves putting further pressure on the child to do the work, or making a decision to back off and reduce the demand), the sheer loss of authority under one's own roof is a significant dynamic for both the parents and the child.

How Systems Change for Homework-Trapped Children

There are three parties to a homework problem: the school, the child, and the parents.

The School. The school is a complex organization that exists independent of any particular student. It has policies and procedures, of which homework may be one. Members of the school team work together for a common purpose — the education of children — and relate to each other according to agreed upon structures. Typically, teachers work in buildings where a principal is in charge. There are departmental influences outside the direct line between the principal and the faculty. There are peripheral forces that influence classroom practice, such as individualized plans constructed by a Child Study Team. There are public policy initiatives like No Child Left Behind that influence how teaching is done. There is also a culture of academic freedom that gives teachers leeway in how to run their class. Further, the system grows increasingly complex in the upper grades as children are assigned to more subject-specific teachers.

The school will have an organizational chart to describe how staff should relate to each other. Schools may differ in how their charts are formally configured and in how the staff members actually act. Sometimes power and influence follow the formal lines. Sometimes they do not. As a general principle, employees will function best when lines of authority are identifiable and clear; they have power to make decisions they can capably make, and the atmosphere is supportive and friendly. Under such conditions, staff will focus on the tasks they are assigned.

As with any organization, there will be people working for the school who are content and those who are not. Tensions can be pervasive throughout an organization or isolated to particular people or to certain work stations. Regardless of the particulars, it is predictable that workers under duress will be less productive than those who are not. When workers are under serious and ongoing threat (e.g., when they could lose their jobs), they watch their backs more than their work while considering how to get out (or possibly get back at the source of the threat). Dynamics of this sort may be taking place in any school at any particular time. Against this backdrop, we can consider what happens with the child and the parents.

The Child. The child goes to school to receive a service, an education. To accomplish this, the child is expected to show up every day, do work, receive performance reviews, and stay 13 years. Even though the child is technically a client of the school, these expectations define, for the child, a role which is more like that of an employee. Although the child does not appear in the school's staff directory or on its organizational chart, the child can still be

expected to behave as if he were. Like happy employees, successful children focus on their tasks. Like unhappy employees, children under threat do not work harder, but work more defensively while looking for ways out. Because of this, the avoidant behaviors that are so characteristic of homework-trapped children are actually expected and predictable responses. When this process is not noticed, the interventions used to correct such "bad" behavior actually resonate with the avoidance-dynamic and reinforce its continued use.

The Parents. If there are no homework problems, the parents have no place on the school's organizational chart. Rather, they relate to school staff as leaders of a different entity with a common interest. When school problems do emerge, there is increased need for contact between the parents and the school. If the problems were not related to homework, parents and teachers would retain their independent roles as the major authorities in the child's life, coming together to discuss a shared concern. Since the problem is homework, it brings into question who has final say over what happens in the home. As long as the school's power to assign and penalize remains intact, the parents are drawn into an implicit place on the school's organizational chart. Their place is necessarily above their own child, but *below* the school staff.

The problem gets worse as the process goes on, and more and more people get involved. As noted before, the school is already a complex organization with teachers trying to focus on the task at hand, teaching children, with multiple influences from above (the principal and school administration), indirectly above (departmental, regulatory factors and IEPs), and to the side (other subject teachers). Without the problem child, these parties can work together through the

formal and informal systems that have evolved. For the problem child, they need to come together and establish new mini-teams geared toward creating individualized solutions.

It is these shifts in structures — not just questions of educational practice and philosophy — that fuel the problem and create frustrations for parents and teachers alike. While the complexities of intra-school staff dynamics go beyond my expertise and the scope of this paper, it is clear that homework-trapped children and their families would be well served by re-affirming the natural boundaries that exist between the family and the school. Educators could freely research the topic, debate different policies, and establish their own standards free of parental complaints, if they only did it with the full acceptance of those who hold power in the home.

There are other authors who touch on this problem without necessarily putting their ideas into this conceptual frame. In *Ending the Homework Hassle,* John Rosemond (1990) recommends that parents detach themselves from the homework task and return responsibility to the child. He suggests that half of all homework problems will be resolved this way. Although he gives useful suggestions, his approach for the other half, the truly homework-trapped children, is strikingly similar to what is currently done and does not work.

In *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents,* Cooper (2001) suggests giving homework but not grading it. In the current author's experience, Cooper's suggestion is far from "common ground." If his recommendation were acceptable to teachers, it would contribute greatly to resolving

homework problems since it would leave teachers with authority to construct the curricula without the power to enforce behaviors at home.

In their review of homework policy, Bennett and Kalish (2006, 261) cite nine specific schools and school systems for having "admirable homework policies." Although these policies tap into different factors needed for positive change, only one (The Beacon Day School) acknowledges the importance of parental authority in their own homes. One other (Piscataway Township School District) sets policy against grading homework.

If educators would *ask for* rather than demand time at home to support classroom practices, the boundaries between home and school would return to their natural states. I predict that this would quiet the public homework debate while allowing educators free reign to research and debate educational policy. I believe that many parents would comply when reasonably asked to do things at home to support their children's education.

The Learning Problem

The current system operates on the assumption that homework problems are ones of motivation. This is implicitly supported through the grading system that metes out penalties for work that is not done. It is also conveyed through interpersonal communications, either directly stated (for example, "You could be an A student if you only tried"), or indirectly through facial expressions and body language. This notion, that the child can do the work but won't, is not well founded. Further, it is not particularly useful even when it is true.

Teachers form opinions of what children can do from what happens in class. There, they see both the child's efforts and the product of her work. For homework, they see the product alone. It's natural to assume that the child's capabilities at home match what the teacher sees in school. Yet, this involves a presumption that fails to account for differences in context. Teachers cannot really know why a child who succeeds at school is having trouble at home. They lack observational data.

The only source of direct data on what the child does at home is the parent (and to some extent, the child herself). But parents cannot be effective observers if they feel they must constantly nag, coerce, and intrude upon their child. To develop an effective model for helping homework-trapped children, parents should be observers rather than enforcers of homework behavior. Although teachers understandably may question the reliability of the parents' perceptions, there is no other source to see what is going on. On this basis, the choices are to trust parent perceptions, give parents models to better organize what they see, or simply accept the fact that the work will not get done.

Even if the child *can* in theory do the work, this is not a particularly functional notion. There is an interaction between motivation and skill. People develop skill in the things they like to do. They become more interested in the things they do well. Continued and unabated penalties create neither motivation nor skill, but serve to foster avoidant responses. By the time the child is homework-trapped, the prospects that consequences will have any positive effect has become quite low.

As a result, it is a functional decision to shift gears, completely bypass motivation, and instead refocus attention on educational issues. For this, there

needs to be careful consideration of the child's learning problems, even those that do not reach criteria for a learning disability, combined with a reduction in both the assignments and the penalties.

Learning to Do Homework

In addition to educational issues, there is a question of learning *to do homework* and understanding what reinforces homework-avoidant behavior. For this, we look at the three major models of behavioral learning theory: classical conditioning, operant learning, and social modeling.

Classical Conditioning

Classical conditioning is particularly important once the child is in a homework trap. As parents feel alarmed by the child's low grades, they become consumed with the child's homework problem. It dominates their thoughts and taints their relationships with their children. Often, parents can talk about very little else. The child's play and ordinary family life get interrupted with questions and reminders about homework. Over time, the word "homework" becomes classically conditioned as a painful stimulus, setting off avoidance the moment the topic comes up.

As a first step in a homework remediation plan, it is critical to reduce the frequency with which the word "homework" is said. When homework must be mentioned (the author here recommends no more than twice a day — at the start and stop of the designated homework time), this should occur with neutral affect. For many parents, this necessary step cannot occur unless the grading system is modified first.

Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning is another model of behavioral learning that has bearing on the homework problem. In fact, current educational policy has roots in operant notions of punishment and reward. The child gets good grades for work that is done and poor grades for work that is not. This practice is well supported in the experimental lab.

When considering homework problems, it is important to note that avoidant behaviors learned through aversive conditioning are difficult to unlearn. *Shaping* is the method by which an organism, in the laboratory, learns to approach a target that previously delivered aversive stimulation.

Children in homework traps have usually developed powerful strategies to avoid their work. Unexplained “bad” behaviors like lying, forgetting, arguing, procrastinating, and misplacing are actually well reinforced strategies to deal withaversive experiences with their parents and teachers. Unwittingly, coordinated efforts between school and home have only added to the strength of these responses. To help the child relinquish avoidance, it is crucial to shape positive homework-doing behaviors. This necessarily implies providing full reward for partial success. Again, this cannot take place without modifications to the grading system.

Social Modeling

The final major component of human learning is social modeling. Human beings mimic the behaviors of others. The homework-successful child and

academically successful adult are people who belong to peer groups that value scholarly pursuits. College students are reinforced for successful schoolwork because they are in a setting with others who share this value.

Common homework policy often separates homework-noncompliant children from their peers. The separation may be psychological (e.g., lowered grades, shame, and humiliation) or physical (missed recess, after school detention, self-contained class or alternative school placement).

In the elementary school, the child experiencing shame may seek a new role like “class clown” to establish a place among his/her peers. Even when the work is done, the child may not hand it in for complex reasons, including the fear of breaking from an established role.

By middle school, concerns will increase about the child’s future. In a last-ditch effort to prepare for high school, the child may move to more basic classes to remediate deficits (likely to have developed because of an overemphasis on homework). For the child who “could be an A student if he only tried,” this may entail separation from peers who are similarly bright and capable of engaging in complex and stimulating discussions.

By high school, the child-athlete may get further split from peers with academic eligibility requirements keeping that child out of sports. The child who has felt defeated throughout by the academic system now loses the one remaining vestige of pride and success. At an age where sports participation is intricately tied to school (there are often no other venues where the child can

play), this child gets separated from old peers, and often seeks out contact with other youth who do not value education.

The Notion of Time

Time is central to any homework discussion. Ten minutes, per night, per grade is a common standard that school districts use (Cooper 2001). Many schools have Back-to-School Nights where teachers inform parents of what to expect. Although this time standard may be shared, there is rarely a discussion of what to do when the *time is up*.

Children work at different paces. Although the reasons vary (energy, attention, reading speed, handwriting skills, the home environment, life circumstances), the implications are the same. The slower a child works, the longer it takes to get the assignments done. Further, the extremely slow child may be given incomplete work to finish at home.

In school, the day starts and stops by the clock. At home, it does not. Teachers plan their lessons using only the time they have. At night, the child is expected to devote to the work all the time he or she needs.

It is a curious phenomenon that although problems with processing speed are often the reason for learning disabilities, the typical accommodation gives the child *more time* instead of less work. This operates on the notion that this extra time exists. During the school day, the source of extra time is clear. It comes from other assignments during the school day.

For the college-bound student, extra time may come on Saturday afternoons as the student works on a goal (e.g., preparing for the SAT) he has personally set. In this case, *choice* is a central factor in finding the needed time.

In contrast, the slow-working child has no ready resource for extra homework time other than time that would be spent with family or at play. The demand to use this time is ongoing and without regard for the family's or child's choice. This is an emotionally assaulting state of affairs that creates negative feelings toward school. In the end, the practice diminishes rather than enhances learning.

Time of day is an issue, too. This may be particularly important for the inattentive student, including those diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These children do not function uniformly from morning to night. For many, it can be trying for them to sustain their attention during the school day. They often come home more exhausted or more wired than other children who do not have this condition. They may take medications that are short-acting, that cause problems with appetite and sleep, and often cannot be given to cover homework time. It is unlikely that ADHD children, observed during the day in their medicated states, can function after school in a comparable way.

Central to any resolution of chronic homework problems, it is critical to set time (rather than content-based) limits and to observe the child's functioning based on time of day. As noted before, this cannot take place as long as assignments and penalties remain unabated.

A Model for Homework-Trapped Students

There is an adage in medicine: “First, do no harm.” As a clinical psychologist who has met with large numbers of disabled adults, it is my belief that the common homework system is causing some people harm. The harm starts in the early grades, with long-lasting implications to self-concept, even if adjustments are made later on. To correct that, I recommend formulating solutions based on the following principles:

- *Respect the difference between school and home hierarchies*. Even if teachers have the legitimate authority to assign students homework, they have to relinquish their power and defer to parents when it appears that the system is causing harm. Teachers need to accept that homework poses a hierarchical anomaly with the school, creating demands for behavior in the home.

- *View homework avoidance as predictable behavior.* Children with homework problems are under constant stress. They have a role vis-à-vis the school that causes them to function like disgruntled employees. “Bad behavior” is actually adaptive behavior which will only increase under a punishment paradigm. Strategies for homework remediation will not work unless based on an accurate understanding of this dynamic.

- *View homework non-compliance as an educational, not behavioral, problem*. The system of penalties and rewards operates on the implicit notion that the child is capable of doing the work. Even if this is partly true, it proves an unproductive hypothesis for the homework-trapped child. By the time a child becomes homework-trapped, it is predicted that the child will do better by focusing on skills, rather than “bad” behavior. This capitalizes on the notion that interests breed skills and skills breed interests.

- *Employ parents as sources of information*. In the current system, parents of homework-trapped children feel pressured to make sure their children do their work. This causes conflict because they are assuming an untenable role. They could be much more useful to teachers by simply observing the child at work. This would reduce conflict at home while providing the teacher with vital information the teacher does not otherwise have.

- *Factor in time as a structural component*. Homework time should be measured by a clock, not by a volume of work assigned. Consideration should be given to the fact that not all children can function well by the afternoon.

- *Modify penalties for work not done*. All recommended changes demand modifications of the penalty structure. As long as there are grade-threatening consequences, parents will feel dominated by their children's homework problems. Children will continue to dig in deeply with their homework-avoidant strategies.

Applying Homework Principles

The above principles are offered for both the construction of a rational homework policy and to help those children who are homework-trapped. To the degree that homework policy remains unchanged, the following are some possible strategies for implementing an individualized homework remediation plan.

- Homework assignments should be based on time (e.g. 10 minutes per grade per year or any other standard reasonably set for a particular student). Possible strategies include parental certification that the child

worked the required amount of time, and modification of the assignment by a fixed percentage based on an understanding of how quickly the child can work (e.g., the child is required to do every other problem).

- Parents should be observers not enforcers. Parents should describe what their child did without fear that they will be judged by the school. Teachers should provide parents with tools to identify those variables that may be helpful in devising educational plans.

- Modify penalties to limit the impact of homework noncompliance on the ultimate grade. Give higher grades to shape homework-doing behavior (e.g., full credit for partial success). Recalibrate penalties to reduce the effect that they have on the child's grades (and hence the parent's response).

- For students in middle school, assign a *lead* or *study skills* teacher to monitor a small, structured study session; teach study skills on an individualized basis; serve as the primary contact for the parent; prioritize assignments among different teachers; and maintain authority to waive requirements to comply with the time-based principle.

- For high school, create options for homework-challenged students to do well despite their homework non-compliance. These could include a homework-free course selection; modified penalties for missing assignments (e.g., recalibrating homework grades on a scale of 60-100 instead of 0-100); individually recalibrated weightings of homework to class work; and negotiated grading at the end of marking period with only minor penalties (e.g., a half to a full grade) for failure to do homework.

Summary

Whether or not homework has value, there are still numbers of students who experience harm from the system in place. Common practices designed to help these children often worsens the problem. By high school, many of these students have lost all interest in school with significant implications for later adult life.

The problem starts with the system and how homework policy affects the natural hierarchies of home and school. As parents and school respond jointly to the homework non-compliant child, that child predictably becomes more avoidant. This reaction, typically viewed as problematic, is actually an adaptive response. As a result, efforts to pressure the child to change only increase the child's need to avoid.

To facilitate homework compliance, it is necessary to de-condition the negative associations, shape homework-doing behaviors, and support participation with a group of homework-compliant peers. To accomplish this, parents need to function fully as heads of their households and assume new roles as observers instead of enforcers. Assignments need to be modified so that homework can be bound by time. There must also be a modification in the penalty system so that parents are not driven to over-react and the child can experience reward for partial success.

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The Homework Revolution

Susan Ohanian

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Note: This article was originally printed in *Paths of Learning* magazine and is also available on CD-ROM as part of the complete collection of articles from the magazine <https://great-ideas.org/PathsCD.htm>.

It's 10 p.m. Do you know where your child's homework is?

A parent in a northern Vermont village (who doesn't want to be identified for fear of offending the teacher) notes that her 5-year-old son is always on the go — playing with building blocks, improvising scenarios with model cars and trucks, or engaging in other active, imaginative play. Sitting quietly at school has been a challenge for him. When he brought home a 37-page skill packet for homework, Mom was stunned and Son was stubbornly recalcitrant. And why shouldn't he be? It is a travesty that the kindergarten, which began in Germany as a children's garden, should now send home huge stacks of worksheets.

In Los Angeles, Micaela receives a packet of worksheets every Monday. She must work on them at home and return the completed packet on Friday.

The assignments are meant to help her meet this school year's expectations, such as writing a story that follows a logical theme and recognizing and spelling at least 35 words (Jacobson 2004).

Micaela is in kindergarten.

In a Chicago suburb, ten-year-old Marie wants to take dancing lessons, but since homework takes her two or three hours a night, there's no time for such extras. Marie doesn't watch any TV, but she gets to play on weekends if she finishes her homework. Marie's mom feels she can't participate in the church choir because she has to keep tabs on her daughter's homework.

In New York City, Cora is in third grade; according to a 2004 article in the *New York Post,* she spends three hours a week in an after-school test prep

course and an extra hour a night at home cramming for the impending test. Her dad confides that Cora is "[s]ick with worry that she'll fail the high-stakes test and be left back."

Virginia mom and cofounder of PAVURSOL (Parents Across Virginia United to Reform SOLs) Mickey VanDerwerker reflects that her 62-pound son's 41-pound book bag caused the sixth grader to fall backwards off the bus. Mickey comments, "He does homework from 5 to 9 each night, with a 25-minute break for dinner. He has gone to bed crying twice this week because, in addition to everything else, he is doing a 1000-word research paper on what the walls of the U. S. Capitol would say (from 1800 to 1900)."

In 1901, the California legislature passed a law abolishing homework for grades one through eight. Maybe we're again on the cusp of homework meltdown when the American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons (AAOS) finds it necessary to issue guidelines on recommended weights of book bags. AAOS says 20% of the child's body weight is the point at which book bags become a clinical problem. Maybe it's time for parents to ask for a consult from the American Psychiatric Association. What's all this homework overload doing to kids' psyches?

Unfortunately, even if parents receive support from medical experts, they're not likely to find support from the federal government, which has no sympathy for parents who are slackers. Following the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the U.S. Department of Education published *General Homework Tips for Parents*, which includes these injunctions <www.nochildleftbehind.gov>:

- Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework. Avoid having your child do homework with the television on or in places with other distractions, such as people coming and going.

- Help your child with time management. Establish a set time each day for doing homework.… Think about using a weekend morning or afternoon for working on big projects.

- When your child does homework, you do homework. Show your child that the skills they are learning are related to things you do as an adult. If your child is reading, you read too. If your child is doing math, balance your checkbook .

When your child does homework, you do homework. Indeed. Plenty of parents disagree. Increasingly, they are outraged by the directives from the federal government via the school that dominate their home lives.

Some parents want to turn the tables, as we see in the following apocryphal exchange, with which most parents certainly can identify. It comes from the website of Birmingham, Alabama, philosopher-photographer Rick Garlikov <www.garlikov.com>.

> Mrs. Teacher: Suzie did not have time to finish her math in school today, so I have sent it home with her to finish; please give her time to do it.
>
> Mrs. Mom: We did, but that did not give her time to do all her household chores, so we have sent some laundry to school with her to fold; please give her time to do it.

Dr. Garlikov makes the point that parents just might decide they have better things to do with their family time than follow a blueprint sent home by the school.

Jane, a mom in suburban Cleveland, had the same idea. She took on homework head-on. She recounts,

> I finally had enough of the homework interfering in my time with my family, and decided to give them a taste of their own medicine. I walked into each of my children's classes this morning and told their teachers that I needed to take my children home for a little homework. I told them, "It won't take very long. I just need to reinforce our home values."

Jane laughs, "You should have seen the looks I got. I took the kids out for breakfast, and we had a great time."

Jane said that her son's teacher gives homework on weekends. When Jane contacted the teacher at home with some questions, the teacher told her, "I'd prefer that you wait until Monday. I'm off on weekends."

Emboldened, Jane replied, "So is my son. We do not do homework on weekends at our house."

In Vermont, the *Burlington Free Press* (2002) editorialists, known for their strong Standardista stance on standards and testing, draw the line on homework:

> Many parents laugh at the suggestion that they should have time to sit down and talk to their children about their school day or share a pleasant game of chess. Hah! They're too busy barking out orders. "Eat your dinner! Turn off the TV! Do your homework!"

> When whole families feel stressed over a child's homework starting in about fourth grade and insist they have no time to relax or exercise or have fun together, then there is too much homework.

In 2000, the school board in Piscataway, New Jersey, took a strong stand against homework invasion, voting unanimously to set a limit of 30 minutes for children in elementary school, two hours for high schoolers. They also "discouraged" homework on weekends.

In 2001, parents in Arlington, Virginia, pushed the school board to impose a limit of 50 minutes of nightly homework for second-graders and three hours a night for high-school students.

On the other hand, Paul Vallas, superintendent of schools in Philadelphia, has taken at least one idea with him from his former position as schools chief in Chicago: schools issue report cards on parents. One of the categories in which parents are graded is their children's homework production.

> Teachers will mark either "satisfactory" or "needs attention" in categories including: child appears well rested; child's homework assignments are complete; child has necessary supplies; and parent/guardian responds to notes, phone calls, and requests for conferences (Dean 2002).

In *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* (2001), Etta Kralovec and John Buell invite parents to question the assumption that a greater amount of homework leads to higher academic achievement. In reality, children may be much better off spending

would-be homework time playing, pursuing extra-curricular interests, and even doing household chores. A reviewer on Amazon.com offers this perspective:

> I was 11 years old when Sputnik went up in 1957, and I remember very well its impact on education. I went through elementary school with no homework and plenty of time to walk to the local library and read books of my own choosing on which I did not have to write reports. I developed the lifelong habit of reading for pleasure. As described in this book, Sputnik launched a national panic about education and the homework was piled on. By ninth grade, I was lugging at least four very heavy textbooks home every night, and agonizing over whether I could do my homework and also read the books that interested me. Homework was never about the free exploration of ideas! It was about obedience.

Philadelphia child psychiatrist Robert Kay advises parents, “Never ask about homework. Help your child only if she/he asks for help.” Kay adds, “The parent-child relationship gets exponentially better when the parents get out of the school business.”

I’ll end by citing from one of the best critiques of the homework problem I’ve come across. It is offered by motivational speaker and author of *Touching Hearts: Teaching Greatness* (Andrews McMeel, 2001), Tom Krause, in a piece entitled “My Child Still Belongs to Me.”

> Letter to a Local School District,
>
> I just wanted to state, for the record, that contrary to popular belief — my child still belongs to me. I am unaware of the law that gives control of all my son’s time to a local school district. When you have my child in your classrooms, please allow him to work on homework during class time.… My child needs time

> with me. He needs to play catch with me. He needs to eat supper with me. . . He needs to watch movies, or yes, even just watch TV with me.… After all, my child still belongs to me.

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Book Review

Reading Against Democracy

The Broken Promises of Reading Instruction

by Patrick Shannon

Published by the Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2007

Reviewed by Esther Fusco

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Beginning this review was a struggle. I kept asking myself the question, is it appropriate to open a book review with terms like “Wow,” or “Yes”? Or, is it better to start with a generic opening statement? While I read extensively, it has been a very long time since I was wowed by a book in my discipline. *Reading Against Democracy: The Broken Promises Of Reading Instruction* is a page turner. It should be at the top of reading lists for government officials, educators, and parents. The book outlines the events and influences that business interests and

government have had on reading instruction and the complicit support of professional organizations. The book centers on the commitment to profit and the loss of our commitment to civic responsibility. It tells "how political ideologists of three presidential administrations found common ground in the rejection of American liberalism," enabling science and business to work to establish the "one best" method of teaching reading in U.S. classrooms (p. 97).

Patrick Shannon is passionately concerned about the teaching of reading. He convincingly asserts that *there is no such thing as one method of reading*. He also argues that administering a test as an indicator of reading achievement is a pretense designed to disguise the government's agenda to withhold federal funds from children with special needs and those in poverty. Shannon's message is that we as an educational community must expose this charade and restore the promise to educate America's children.

Shannon begins to unravel the pretense by describing the impact of Reading First and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) on schools and the elimination of ideas and philosophies like Whole Language. He also describes the set of qualifications prescribed by NCLB that teachers and schools must meet and the threat to our democratic process. For each of these topics, Shannon brings a historical perspective that eloquently reveals the smoke screen that currently blinds the country. He describes how the federal government's current stance has reduced reading instruction to its lowest functional form. Government and business have broken the promise that was made long ago to our citizens. Shannon systematically details how the educational community has allowed this to happen and he identifies the key figures involved in this change.

In the first four chapters of the book, Shannon looks at the initial goals and promises regarding literacy. He examines the beginnings of reading instruction and the gradual involvement of the federal government in classrooms. Shannon draws a connection between classroom instruction and the influences of Rice's 1880 study (p. 14) on reading instruction, Andrew Carnegie, and Edward Thorndike. He explains that our current concerns come from "Rice's report that public schools were unprepared and unable to help Americans adapt to the changes caused by rapid immigration" (p. 17). Shannon suggests that Rice's mechanical perspective on education supported Carnegie and Thorndike's view that education should be more scientific and objective in its approach to shaping human intellectual development. This orientation has triumphed over the vision of the likes of John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, Jennette Veatch, John Holt, Sylvia Ashton Warner, Donald Graves, Frank Smith, and Ken and Yetta Goodman. We have traded the ideal of child-centered education for a profit-driven factory model.

For a brief period of time during the 1990s, the work of George Dennison reconnected to the ideals of Dewey and the notion "that the answer to how to teach children to read and write could not be found in instructional materials or standard curricula; rather, the answer could be found only through the interaction between teachers and students" (p. 83). The administrations of the first President Bush and Bill Clinton set the stage for the neoliberals to begin to influence reading instruction. The neoliberals, responding to *A Nation at Risk*, argued that old levels of achievement were no longer adequate to meet the challenges of the new world economy (p. 111). Thus, Clinton's America Reads Initiative set the stage for George W. Bush's galvanizing conservative platform.

Under our current system, basals have become the key to reading instruction, and their adoption by any of the "big three" states of Texas, California or Florida represents a financial windfall for the textbook company. The new testing has spawned an annual $2.3 billion budget, of which 90% goes to five companies: Pearson Education Measurement, ETS, CTB/McGraw-Hill, Harcourt Assessment, and Houghton Mifflin. Not only do these corporations produce the tests, but they produce the materials to support the test preparation (p. 141). Our goals of educating our citizens have been supplanted by incentives for business and sanctions for schools under NCLB.

Does Shannon feel that we should give up? Has our government frozen the model for education? Is the reading war really over? Has our profession come to consensus about this? Is the basal reader really the answer for all children? Has the factory model devoid of individual interests and teacher talents become the future for education? Can reading ability be measured solely by tested skills? The book addresses each of these questions and details how the government has shaped the reading debate. Shannon provides an example of the government's influence on the demise of Whole Language.

Ken Goodman is credited with creating the Whole Language Umbrella and "connecting it to the social context and acknowledging the competence of the learner, and advocating an inversion of authority in the classroom" (p. 84). From a Whole Language perspective, meaning resides in the text and in the individual's interpretation of that text. The religious fundamentalist rejected this because it left the door open to the idea that religious texts were open to individual interpretation. They also rejected the Whole Language ideas that

teachers could become experts as they reflected on their practice. This implied that authority rested with the teacher and not the text. Beginning with the introduction, Shannon tells us that having teachers and administrators in charge of instruction was not going to be appreciated by the current Bush administration.

Shannon describes the "new promise" of this administration, which he says directs our attention exclusively to the economic possibilities and consequences of reading. The new promise limits our relationships to text (and therefore each other), reducing [reading] to the accumulation of skills in order to raise our human capital, later to be sold to others in employment" (p. x). In short, freedom for teachers to explore their teaching and to encourage students to bring meaning to text is not tolerated and Whole Language was silenced.

Shannon points out that while No Child Left Behind and the Reading First Initiative propose to achieve equity for socially and economically marginalized groups, this is merely rhetoric (p.169). These federal programs force schools districts to compete for needed funds rather than having them available based on need. In addition, Shannon challenges the premises underlying evidence-based reading and the promise of higher test scores. In reality, Shannon says that

> There is no scientific basis to the structure of NCLB or the Reading First Initiative — no research that suggests that higher standards create a totally literate populace, that annual testing raises reading test scores or that quotas for gains in achievement scores will improve teachers' reading instruction or students' test scores. (p. 212)

The author argues that what is really driving change in our education system is a market-driven attitude, which promotes the commercialization of curriculum and instruction. The current practice is to water down the state standards to a skills model where success is measured only by test results. Shannon observes that while there have been some problems with reading instruction in our country, NCLB, Reading First, and the Reading Excellence Act falsely claimed that our reading scores had dropped before they took action. With this assertion, the Bush administration discredits teachers and punishes schools if they do not make their annual yearly progress. Wielding the flag of failing test scores allows the government to reorganize schools or take them over. We only have to look at the case of Philadelphia when the Edison Schools, a private corporation, came in and took over some of the schools. To date, there is no evidence to suggest that privatizing schools has produced a better outcome for the children of Philadelphia. In all the schools that were designated as in need of improvement because too many students remained below proficiency on the PSSA reading tests, these schools still remain below proficiency (p. 119).

According to Shannon, the alienation of teacher and student, who are both asked not to think but to perform and conform to the testing model, is one of the bleak consequences of NCLB. Shannon believes that “NCLB means discrediting, reduction, deskilling and reskilling of teachers to an extent unimaginable” (p. 168). The U.S. Department of Education maintains that it wants “highly qualified teachers” but without proper funding and incentives, “highly qualified teachers” (p. 121) will not be attracted to our schools.

Shannon says, “In the end, NCLB only provides more justification that the existing social, economic and political hierarchies in America are valid, legitimate and normal” (p. 210). Passing scores determine who will be considered acceptable. The idea that everyone will be proficient ignores the the economic and social condition of each student who arrives at the schoolhouse door. Shannon asserts that NCLB is putting an end to public school teaching and higher-level thinking, and he predicts that, ultimately, only those children who pass the tests will be fit to be educated.

From my direct observations of NCLB in local community schools, I concur with Shannon’s appraisal, but I think his use of words like “discrediting” and “deskilling” are too kind. From the beginning, the whole idea that every child will come to school ready to learn has been an affront to our educational system. Teachers across the United States know that about 25% of the children in our country live in poverty. We talk about emulating the European model but when it comes to taking care of the nation’s children, but we are only slightly better than Mexico in keeping our children out of poverty (Luxembourg Income Study 2000). Teachers are very aware that children come to their classrooms with very different needs and the schools deal with these needs based on where they are located. For example in New York, if you work in an affluent district, and there are many of these, you have smaller class sizes and teaching assistants in kindergarten classes. If you work in a high-needs school district, you have larger class sizes in kindergarten and more often than not, there is no teaching assistant to help with the students who need help. NCLB supports the development of poverty. Rather than assume responsibility for those in need, the government has shifted the responsibility to the school and the classroom

teachers. It does not matter how the child arrives at school, the teacher will move the child along or be penalized for the failure.

By accepting the premises of NCLB, we have allowed a free market philosophy to dictate the curriculum for schools. What's more, by equating learning to superficial test results, we have abandoned the goal of developing reflective students who grow into democratic citizens.

To accomplish its goals, the government must discredit the public schools and blame them for moral and economic decline. Fear of decline is a powerful weapon. The story goes that we need world-class students to meet the demands of the global market. Yet according to the Department of Labor, most new jobs will be created within the service sector (p. 126).

Perhaps most difficult to understand are the many reading experts and professional groups who have supported the government's efforts in these changes. Shannon reminds us that many of those who supported the government in the takeover of reading have profited from their support. The profits have come in the form of grants, textbook editorships, and commercial successes.

While schools should produce predictable results that enable all students to learn to read, the reality is that America has never truly offered equal opportunity for all. While NCLB pretends to address inequality, it will deepen the differences among groups in an economy where many more people are expendable. Shannon argues that the purpose of NCLB is "to provide scientific evidence that the historical inequalities in America are legitimate, justified, and natural" (p.

193). He presents a case study of how the current structures of reading instruction will eventually provide the data to reorganize public schools according to high-stakes tests that purposely exclude some social groups from higher levels of schooling. “In this way, the biases of the past are furthered by NCLB, which provides scientific justifications for American history” (p. 193).

Shannon concludes that we cannot continue to allow the interference of the federal government in our educational system. He concurs with Rebecca Powell and Carole Edelsky that we need to return reading to its social nature; an activity that forms the moral core of democratic citizenship (p. 221). School should be a place that allows all students the opportunity to grow and understand how the promise of education was established for all. This book inspires the reader to become rededicated to the efforts to support the right of all children to learn to read and become contributors of the community.

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Book Review

Reclaiming Assessment

A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda

by Chris W. Gallagher

Published by the Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2007

Reviewed by Shael Polakow-Suransky

SHAEL POLAKOW-SURANSKY is Chief Academic Officer for the Empowerment Schools at the New York City Department of Education. Prior to this position, Shael has worked as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and Leadership Academy Facilitator in New York City. He has founded two successful small high schools, most recently Bronx International High School a school designed for at-risk recent immigrant students.

Chris Gallagher, in *Reclaiming Assessment*, passionately argues for a different approach to school accountability, one rooted in a process that empowers teachers, school communities, and districts to design and use their own assessment tools. He sketches a rich portrait of Nebraska's response to the Federal NCLB legislation under the leadership of State Education Commissioner Doug Christensen. At the heart of Nebraska's response is a belief that in order for assessment to meaningfully impact student learning it must be embedded in the daily practice of teachers in the classroom. Thus, the

system developed in Nebraska is built from the classroom level up, designed by the educators who have to use it and tightly integrated into the professional culture and practice of each school.

Gallagher has spent the last several years studying Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS). His concise description of the STARS model is written for teachers and seeks to highlight the key strengths of a school improvement system that is built on collaboration with teachers and aims at simultaneously producing a good assessment system and building school-level assessment literacy.

Gallagher begins by laying out a case against NCLB and the models of accountability it has generated across the country. He sets up a sharp dichotomy between "accountability" and "engagement," arguing that traditional forms of accountability are purely transactional, and thus, undermine both student learning and teacher practice. He traces the roots of the problem to the increasing influence of business and corporate interests in education policy and reform. In his view, the current expansion of high stakes testing as the key measure for school success dis-empowers teachers, students, and parents in ways that fundamentally weaken schools.

> Assessments that actually help teachers and students make good decisions in classrooms are sacrificed in favor of tests designed solely for accountability purposes, even though the latter are often of questionable quality … and on top of this, recent comparison of states with and without high stakes testing indicate these testing regimes don't even do what they are intended to do — raise achievement levels (pp. 24-25).

The broad portrait Gallagher paints of the national shift to high stakes accountability, while a useful foil for the work he describes in Nebraska, fails to acknowledge that STARS would not exist without the accountability movement he critiques, which, after all, was the impetus that led the Nebraska legislature to create a state assessment system in 2000. He also conflates accountability with top-down approaches to education reform. While they often go together, school systems are complex mediated environments with lots of conflicting cross-currents that allow for both top-down and bottom-up approaches to co-exist at the same time. New York City is a good example of this complexity. In New York, we have the largest experiment in the country in school-level autonomy and an accountability system that relies heavily (though not exclusively) on standardized tests to measure school success. For educators, outside Nebraska, to learn from and use the lesson learned there, it is critical to dig into the details of the work that Gallagher describes and connect it to the opportunities that exist in our own environments.

The STARS Model

The STARS model requires each district in Nebraska to present an annual portfolio of work that includes both *student performance* data and *assessment quality* documentation. On *student performance*, multiple measures are used including data from locally designed assessments, which measure students' performance on state standards; data from a state writing test given to all students in grades 4, 8, and 11; and limited data from national standardized tests.

Assessment quality evaluates districts on how well their locally designed assessments meet Nebraska's Six Quality Criteria:

- Assessments align to state or local standards.
- Students have the opportunity to learn the content.
- Assessments are free from bias or offensive language.
- The level is developmentally age-appropriate for students.
- There is consistency in scoring.
- The mastery levels are appropriate to subject and grade level. (p. 42)

Each district gets substantial support and training as they develop their assessments. The process for this is understood to be developmental with clear improvements in assessment quality emerging over time. Gallagher details steady improvement on district scores for both student performance and assessment quality over the past five years with close to 100% of the districts achieving mastery on assessment quality by the fourth year of the initiative. Feedback gathered by Gallagher from Nebraska educational leaders suggest high levels of support and satisfaction with this model.

Gallagher goes on to highlight in some detail the value of the assessments as an instructional tool. Interviews suggest that the data that emerged from these assessments was used to eliminate curricular gaps, individualize instruction, and engage students in assessing their own progress. Gallagher highlights vignettes

authored by teachers as evidence of the powerful ways in which the assessment work is playing out in the relationship between teachers and students. For example, Edward Montgomery (pp. 69-70) reports that

> My classroom is process based, as I think every writing class should be … rather than have students write to meet the needs of the rubric, I teach students to use the rubric to meet their needs as writers and readers. We do this by scoring pieces of literature according to the same rubric the students are scored by. They discover and describe the strengths and sometimes the weaknesses, of using a rubric for producing and evaluating writing.… As a result of this activity students become self-assessors….

Gallagher asserts that a critical component of STARS success was the development of "assessment literacy" at the school level. In order to build this capacity Nebraska engaged universities and external providers, including Rick Stiggins' Assessment Training Institute, to build the capacity in each school for faculty to develop instruction-driven assessment embedded in the curriculum. The professional development approach was embedded in schools and relied heavily on teachers teaching teachers.

This form of professional development generated regular focused conversations about student learning among teams of teachers. It generated increased commitment on the part of teachers and began to break down the traditional isolation and fear of taking risks that stymies the spread of effective practice in most schools. One teacher (p. 86) interviewed described his conversion to this approach.

> Six years ago when I moved here (from Texas), I said, "Why do we have to do all this? Why don't we just give a state test?" ….Now six years later I've taken a change because I've seen what kind of information you can gain from tests that are written to your curricula, that you have written and that the teachers have said is important to them…. I wouldn't want to be in any other state right now, even though it's a lot of work….

The dramatic increase in teacher capacity around developing and using assessment data stands out as the most important success of the STARS initiative. It is also the most challenging element to replicate and, while Gallagher gives good narrative evidence from his qualitative research, he does not go into much detail about the process of training school-based staff. Instead he returns to the accountability/engagement dichotomy, arguing at length against using dis/incentives and external controls to influence teacher behavior. While most educators would agree that "building capacity" is more likely to lead to sustainable change than "designing controls," examples of effective large-scale efforts that do this are few and far between. Nebraska represents one such example, and it is a shame that Gallagher did not devote more space to the "how" of Nebraska's professional development process.

This issue relates to a broader concern I have with Gallagher's approach. His argument is first and foremost an ideological one: His focus on convincing the reader that the current national trend toward greater "accountability" is "the problem" diverts his own and the reader's attention away from the details of the real story he has to tell. In every policy, however misguided, there are pitfalls and opportunities. Too often progressive educators spend tremendous amounts of energy arguing the ideological points, and overlook the opportunity to act that is

already there. What makes Nebraska stand out is its decidedly anti-ideological stance on this issue. Commissioner Christensen and other leaders pragmatically took advantage of a local political culture that deeply values autonomy and linked this with educators' natural desire to shape the decisions that affect their work. This combination allowed Christensen to use the pressure of NCLB and the national trend toward greater accountability to focus the Nebraska educators on designing a rigorous, useful, and progressive assessment system that they own and know how to use.

Deborah Meier in her forward writes, "Chris Gallagher has brilliantly laid out the story for us, now it's up to us to act on it" (p. xii). I would frame this charge in a slightly different way: The increasing focus on accountability across the country presents an opening for educators to do the hard detailed work of creating their own accountability models, assessments tools, and capacity building efforts. While it helps, it is not essential to have a leader like Christensen at the helm of the State Education Department in order to take up this challenge.

In New York City, there are three powerful and pragmatic accountability initiatives that mirror and connect to the efforts underway in Nebraska. In the first initiative, over 140 schools have received approval from the NYC Department of Education to design their own formative assessment systems as part of New York City's accountability initiative. Multiple projects have taken root over the past year and a half.

- Long Island University is working with a group of progressive elementary schools on using adapted versions of Pat Carini's descriptive review process to structure conversation among and between teachers, students,

and families about student progress, integrating both qualitative and quantitative assessment tools.

- The International Partnership Schools have developed a teacher-designed qualitative formative assessment system for new English Language learners that generates very specific information about student progress on both language development and content knowledge.

- NCREST, at Teachers College, has been working closely with a network of secondary schools on developing strong formative assessments in writing, reading, and math that are in the process of being customized by teachers so they have meaningful value at the school level.

- An effort spearheaded by the New York City performance standards consortium, a coalition of schools that have a waiver from New York State for most of the high school exit exams, graduate their students by portfolio. The consortium has begun to work backwards from their summative portfolio-based assessment tasks to create formative assessment tools for use by teachers and students that generate meaningful information about student learning periodically throughout the school year.

- The Urban Assembly network of schools, in collaboration with David Conley, has designed a hybrid of qualitative and quantitative formative assessments that go beyond the relatively low standard required by New York state assessments. Instead, they target the more rigorous goal of preparing students with the skills and habits they will need to successfully graduate from college.

In each of these cases, teachers in these schools have worked to develop assessments that are embedded and aligned with the curriculum and goals of the

school, while at the same time helping students to be successful outside of the school community.

In tandem with this assessment initiative, the New York City Department of Education is providing extra funding for each school in the city to create a school-based inquiry team composed of the principal and key leaders on the faculty. For this second initiative, the inquiry team conducts an action research project looking at multiple forms of data from student work, to descriptive classroom observations, to item-by-item analysis of tests in order to understand the experiences of a targeted group of 15-30 students who are not doing well in the school. Based on this research, the inquiry team leads school improvement efforts to accelerate learning for these students and others outside the school's sphere of success. For example, in many New York City high schools, 15-20% of their entering ninth graders cannot read above the third grade level. Inquiry teams, in some high schools, have developed new assessment tools and professional development to help high school content area teachers, who are not familiar with how to teach reading.

New school development represents the third initiative. Instead of simply reacting to the sanctions in the NCLB law, New York City has taken a proactive approach to revitalizing unsuccessful schools. Using multiple measures that, as of this year, include teacher, student, and parent surveys, qualitative school reviews, and a nuanced analysis of testing and graduation data, the Department of Education identifies schools that need to be phased out and replaced with new schools. The clear message in every case is that the teachers and kids in failing schools are not failures. The structure they are embedded in has failed and needs to be rebuilt from the bottom up to support their learning and growth. Over

the past four years, dozens of large failing schools have been replaced with over two hundred small public schools. These small schools are averaging a 74% graduation rate compared to the large schools they replaced which graduated about 35% of their students. This unprecedented increase in graduation rates coincides with school cultures where teachers are given meaningful autonomy. They make decisions about what to teach, and how to teach it, and what type of supports they need in terms of professional development and assessment resources like those described above.

The power of the Nebraska STARS program and the accountability initiatives in New York City, are both examples where educational leaders have chosen the more difficult path of engaging school communities down to the teacher level in a process that empowers them to answer the question, “What are you willing to be held accountable for?” This path, combined with meaningful autonomy to develop different responses to this question, generates deep and thoughtful work on the part of teachers, which, in turn, fundamentally shifts their practice. Just like good education for young people, these policies are differentiated and are viewed as developmental. Schools are not all expected to do the same thing simultaneously. While these policies are harder to manage and messier than simplistic top-down models, the hard work pays off as teachers and students re-engage deeply and passionately in the work of school.

Nebraska’s Commissioner Doug Christensen argues that “informed decisions and informed conversations are the heart and soul of democracy” (p. 107). I could not agree more. If we are truly invested in strengthening public schools as a core institution of our democratic society then we must approach this work in a

manner that reproduces the skills required of active citizens. School leaders, teachers, students, and families all need to actively engage in informed conversation about what they are willing to be accountable for, what support they need to meet these goals, and how good is good enough when we look closely at the work students produce.