

Equal Time for Freethought

Interview with Alfie Kohn by Arnell Dowret

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Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

Arnell Dowret: Hello, Alfie Kohn, and thank you for joining us on Equal Time for Freethought!

Alfie Kohn: My pleasure! Glad to be back.

Arnell Dowret: Alfie, over the years you've challenged many of the primary notions upon which our entire educational system rests, such as the value of high-stakes testing, grades, textbooks, punishments and rewards. But now, with [The Homework Myth](#), you challenge one of education's most sacred cows: the value of homework itself. Why so?

Alfie Kohn: Well, I devoted about one page to this subject in the book you mentioned a few minutes ago, [The Schools Our Children Deserve](#), and decided it was a topic worthy of exploration in its own right. Especially since more and more homework is being piled on younger and younger children. And at the same time, research consistently fails to support the idea that it's beneficial. So, I'm always interested when research points in one direction and our practice is moving headlong in another. Specifically, what I found is that no study has ever demonstrated any benefit, academically speaking, to homework below the high school level. In fact, at the elementary school level, there isn't even a correlation between standard measures of achievement, for what they're worth.

Arnell Dowret: But yet, it seems that statistics and studies are often bandied about, that there's a good case for homework, and people always seem to be pointing to some statistic that makes it seem like there are such studies.

Alfie Kohn: Well, whenever you see someone say casually "studies show..." about this or any topic, it makes sense for us to ask "Which studies, exactly, did you have in mind? And how and when were they conducted; and what was the outcome variable?"

The only thing you can find to vaguely support the value of homework is that at the high school level, there's a correlation. That is to say, a lot of the same kids who do a lot of homework also get good grades and test scores. But the correlation is pretty weak, and it tends to vanish completely when you apply more sophisticated statistical techniques. And more importantly, it's only a correlation! There's no proof of a *causal* relationship. That is, there's no proof that the kids who get better grades and test scores do so *because* they did more homework.

Basically, homework is forcing kids to work a second shift, after they spend an entire day in school. And all parents know about the frustration the kids experience, the exhaustion, the family conflict, the fact that kids don't have enough time to spend on things they care about when they finally get home from school, and, I guess most disturbingly, the possibility that kids are being turned off to learning. Their curiosity is evaporating in the face of all these worksheets that spill out of their backpacks. We assume it's worth it. We take it on faith. For me, even though the book is mostly about homework *per se*, I see it sort of as a case study.

An example, one of many, of how we just don't question a lot of the precepts, the premises, the practices in our educational system and our society more generally.

In fact, in trying to figure out why homework continues to be accepted and assigned, despite the lack of evidence supporting its benefits, I offer half-a-dozen reasons. And one of them is just a failure to get to the heart and ask the radical questions. So even parents who complain with each other at the playground or the birthday parties about their kids' homework will then go into school and ask questions like, "Can they have a red binder instead of a green binder?" Or, "Can they use the Internet for this assignment?" Instead of asking, "How much say do the kids have in making this decision, that this had to be done at home?"

Arnell Dowret: And what proof is there?

Alfie Kohn: Yeah, what proof is there that *any* homework was necessary here? We tend not to want to rock the boat. And even people with radical politics, or close-to-radical politics in other arenas, become remarkably passive and compliant around their children's schooling. Just assuming, well, you gotta do your homework, honey! Even though there may be no benefit to it.

Arnell Dowret: I mean, part of it is that it seems that those who are proponents of homework just keep on rehashing that "studies show". I was handed, recently, an article from *NUEA Review*, January 2007, education newspaper from a New Jersey-based organization, by Dr. Ray Heitzmann. Of course, he agrees that busywork isn't such a good idea, but *targeted* homework, he says. And then he says, "Well, there are these four main categories." It gives: practice; preparation; extension; and then creative enhancement. And he just basically rehashes all of the thinking that "studies show this is effective".

Alfie Kohn: Right. Although it would be interesting to see which studies he cites. I mean, I'm skeptical even if you were able to find some evidence that homework, for example, raises standardized test scores, because standardized tests tend to measure what matters least. There's another body of research indicating that in general, you find a correlation between high test scores with kids who think in a more superficial and shallow fashion. It's not a one-to-one correspondence, but high test scores are not a good sign. Mostly what high test scores in a given area tell you is the size of the houses near the school. So for example, if you find that kids who do a lot of homework are getting better grades and test scores, you're not looking at any benefit to homework, you're looking at affluence.

But we don't ask these questions. And you're right, we keep getting this recycled stuff with the same sort of easy, thoughtless, knee-jerk prescriptions in magazines: make sure your kids have a well-lighted, quiet area; and that you work with them to make sure that they planned out. And when you point out the evidence to people, and say, "Look, there are *no* data demonstrating that homework, especially for younger kids, but arguably even for older ones, has any benefit at all" — it doesn't help them learn better; it's all pain, no gain — then they fall back on a claim about homework's *nonacademic* benefits: that it teaches good work habits, and independence; responsibility; self-discipline. I would call this an urban myth, except that people in the suburbs take it at least as seriously.

But then, you want to go even further, you ask: what exactly are these benefits and are they beneficial? And then you start running into hidden political assumptions. What does it mean to say homework develops good work habits? Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that there was a shred of evidence to demonstrate homework actually did so.

What does it mean to develop these "good work habits"? What is it teaching kids? Well, it seems to be teaching kids that when a whole day of work is over, you should expect to do more work at home, that you should expect to be rewarded or punished based on mindless obedience. *Cui bono*, as the Latins ask. Who benefits? From inculcating in kids.

Arnell Dowret: Yeah, I heard an interview that you had done. A student emailed and said that when her parents come home and do four hours of work, they're considered workaholics, but if she *doesn't* come home and do four hours of work, she's considered a slacker. There's such a double standard. But yet, even otherwise progressive, sensible people, like my colleague here, Neil Murphy, who is a teacher in a New Jersey high school, who handed me the article which had those points that I had made to you, believe that homework does valuable good. I think, Neil, you wanted to ask a question.

Neil J. Murphy: I appreciate you saying I'm progressive and sensible before you wrote the question. As opposed to "This mean jerk is gonna ask you a question". Mr. Kohn: I am myself a high school history teacher at Jersey City, New Jersey. I don't know if you're familiar with that area. I agree with you in the sense that giving rote memorization for homework is not homework. In fact, I agree with you in the sense that that's pointless. So in that point, I have agreement. The only thing that I would have a disagreement with, or raise a question: one of the assignments I once gave my students is to write a historical hindsight letter on how you could have prevented World War II. Now something like that, it would seem, requires time and effort to write out, in an essay: introduction, body, conclusion, et cetera. And it seems that targeted homework — in other words, higher-level, creative homework; as opposed to lower-level, rote memorization. My question that I want to throw at you is this: what is the problem with critical thinking, targeted homework, that has students apply higher-level thinking skills? Do you have a problem with that type of homework?

Alfie Kohn: There's different ways to come at this.

First, there's a value question. How much time should kids have to take in their lives, on a given day, to do academic stuff? They've had six or seven hours in school, and then they want to do other stuff. What is the larger picture here? The assumption if you're not focused in, as a high school teacher, about what kids should have to do during the day? Whether we also want them to develop artistically, and socially, and physically, or whether it has to be about academics even after school is over? That's not a question research speaks to. It's a question about values. And related to that is, who should decide what happens during family time? The families themselves, or the schools?

Second question: even though you're talking about better quality homework, for me the overriding question is: how much say do your students have in deciding, with you, which topic really needs to spill over into the after-school area? It's a matter of simple respect to bring them in on the decision. But it's also the single greatest predictor of whether the homework assignment is going to be beneficial. No matter how clever and higher-order and targeted it might be, the real question is whether it's imposed on them by you, or whether they played a part in thinking about it.

The third response is to look at what some teachers have found. For example, in *The Homework Myth*, I quote a guy I talked to out in California, who is also a public school, high school history teacher. He said, "When I started teaching, I gave a lot of homework. And that was because I wasn't very good as a teacher. And over time, as I got better as a teacher, I was able to phase out the homework. Until, now I give none. Because I'm able to get what

needs to be done, done during the class time. We start reading something together in class. And I want them to read it when I'm there, to guide, observe, and discuss; not have to do it on their own, where there's no one to support them." This is what a lot of teachers have told me in response to the idea that there's just not enough time. They make the time, because they want them to do it in class. And he said, over the time period where he phased out the homework, he began to realize two things: one was that his kids were doing fabulously well, even by conventional measures like AT scores, when they had zero homework. And the second thing he noticed is, when he spared them from traditional homework, even the allegedly targeted kind, they were starting to read the newspaper. They were making connections spontaneously between current events and the history they were learning in the class. The kind of real thinking that they *never* would have done if they had to come home and do various assignments that the teacher made them do.

Neil J. Murphy: My only response would be, at least as I interpret it in my classroom: I still think that certain targeted homework is necessary only because I think to have time is necessary. And while I understand the point you're making about values, I still think that in small amounts it can be effective in the classroom. But, I see the value of your argument.

Alfie Kohn: I would hope that you're an empiricist. That's a fair hypothesis you have, as long as it's a hypothesis, and not taken as religious faith. The hypothesis is: giving some targeted homework is beneficial. So test it out! For the next two weeks, give no homework, and see what happens. What does it do to the kids' attitude about your subject, about the climate in the classroom, and about the quality of learning? If you're right, then you'll have to give homework again, because something was missing. If I'm right, then you will have discovered that your hypothesis was incorrect.

Arnell Dowret: Alfie, you raise many, many other points about the way this is just accepted as gospel by people without question; partially because of underlying attitudes that we have in our society about children, and basically about people and human nature in general, being basically kind of lazy and unmotivated. And you talk in your book about the Theory X versus Theory Y. And I thought that that really compressed this whole question that almost is the basic difference between a progressive understanding of human nature and one that's much more traditional.

Alfie Kohn: Yeah, that nomenclature comes from a management theorist named Douglas McGregor almost fifty years ago. He was referring to attitudes that managers have about their employees. This is in an age when people were starting to talk about humanistic psychology, whether it was relevant to the classroom and the workplace and so on.

Theory X means that people will do as little as they can. They're good-for-nothing, lazy, selfish, so-and-sos, and you gotta dangle rewards in front of them, or threaten them with a stick, and watch them every minute. Otherwise they'll just sit there. And Theory Y says that basically nobody comes to work in the morning to do a crappy job. That people want to do work they can be proud of, if you give them the opportunity. And if people are cutting corners, it may say something about the system they're in, rather than about human nature.

Arnell Dowret: Now, even though you go on to say that Theory X has been thoroughly refuted by studies and empirical evidence, it seems that Theory X is completely

dominant in our culture.

Alfie Kohn: It is. It absolutely is.

The example for me, in the last few months, is on the topic of homework. And I would say the single most common question I get is not "Wow! Tell me more about this evidence showing that there's no benefit to homework", or "How can we give it then?" Rather the question is "Aren't the kids just gonna play video games if you don't give them homework?" First of all, it's an interesting assertion, because what it's basically saying is: even if homework has no value, we should continue to assign it just to be able to compel kids to do something we tell them because we don't trust them to decide how to spend their free time. So despite the fact that teachers almost uniformly deny ever giving busywork — everyone's against that — the video game argument means that homework is literally being used as busywork. A way to keep the young'uns moral after school. But the cynicism here, that we can't trust children, and in some cases by extension human nature, means that those with more power must have to structure the time of those with less power to keep them from doing stuff that we don't think they oughta do!

Arnell Dowret: And the cynicism is really striking, in the view you're talking about, Alfie. And there also seems to be this kind of wanting to understand the educational experience, it seems, or wanting to structure the educational experience to create docile workers. You've spoken about that as well.

Alfie Kohn: Yes. And I think there's also a fundamental lack of understanding about how children learn. So you end up with people offering slogans, folk wisdom basically, like "practice makes perfect" or "homework reinforces what was taught in class", without really thinking about the implication, the theory of learning, and of child development, and human nature that underlies these.

For example, consider for a moment the fact that almost all kids really dread and hate homework. And even those who aren't filled with anxiety see the homework as something to be gotten over with as soon as possible, so they can get on to things they enjoy doing. Now, what does it mean when we dismiss that, as most adults do? "Well, of course the kids hate it. That doesn't matter. We expect that, it's predictable." But what does it mean to say that we think homework will be effective regardless of how the children view it? We seem to assume, then, that kids are like vending machines, where you put in more homework and you automatically get out more learning. And that mechanistic view of human beings flies in the face of everything we know about human psychology.

Arnell Dowret: Yes. Let me ask you something: in terms of neuroscience, I know that we're learning more and more about human memory and the way in which we process information. Is there anything informative that sheds light on the question of at what intervals we're more receptive to new information that's given to us, and whether there's a big value learning something in the morning and then doing homework related to it again at night?

Alfie Kohn: I don't know, because I'm by no means an expert on that field. I do have a sentence, that the relevance to human behavior and motivation of things that go on at the neuronal level or at the level of, say, laboratory animals on which much of this field is based is a little bit dubious. Moreover, I get the sense that there's enormous variation from person to person, in terms of how we learn and at what time of day and so on. So I'd be, for

various reasons, including my own incompetence, very leery of simply making a statement that neuroscience demonstrates the following practice relevant to classroom.

Arnell Dowret: Right. I'd like to just finally touch on the larger question of what motivates learning, and ultimately what motivates the kinds of behavior that we'd like to see in our students and in our children. Because you not only talk about education, you talk about parenting.

Alfie Kohn: Last year, I wrote a book called [*Unconditional Parenting*](#), which argues, first, that the real problem with parenting in our society is not permissive parenting, but the fear of permissiveness that leads us to overcompensate by overcontrolling kids. And the fact that on the one hand, we have the maybe religious reactionaries refusing to spare the rod, and using harsh physical punishment, doesn't change the fact that a lot of groovy people are using subtler means of control, like saying "Good job!" when their kids act in a way that they like. It's still a way of doing things *to* kids, rather than working *with* them. It's still about conditional parenting: giving kids the message that they have to please us, or impress us, in order to be spared a love withdrawal technique, like time out, or debt, some kind of positive reinforcement.

All of this is really about manipulation. There's the kind of red-meat control — "your butt's gonna be sore when your father gets home"; then we have to be equally concerned about what might be called, I don't know, vegan control, where people who would never dream of striking their kids are nevertheless, in some cases, micromanaging their children. Some of the most controlling people you'll ever meet, where the kids are like wholly owned subsidiaries of themselves, still thwarting a child's autonomy, still failing to help kids learn to make responsible decisions, and to be concerned about the well-being of those other than themselves.

Arnell Dowret: Right. And you've talked about reframing a behavior that we like, like a child sharing, in a way that kind of makes it all about the reward or the praise, so that in the future, they're less likely to do that on their own. They're more likely to just do it only if someone's there to praise them for what they do.

Alfie Kohn: Right. And in fact two studies have found that the more kids are rewarded or praised, the more they tend to be self-centered. The less helpful/generous they tend to be; because all reward, including praise, teaches them about self-interest. So the kid starts to ask, in effect, "What do they want me to do, for any reason or no reason, and what do I get for doing it?" Even if what they get isn't a sticker or a dollar, or an A, but a pat on the head, and some praise. So it's not a matter of finding groovier or more progressive techniques for controlling kids, which is what a whole bunch of books, articles and seminars are offering; because no one likes to think of him- or herself as punitive; it's a matter of rethinking compliance as the primary goal; which is something, sadly, that you tend to find in parents across the political spectrum.

Arnell Dowret: Well, Alfie, we're really fortunate to have you with your work out there that is causing even those of us who consider ourselves progressive to have to rethink. And that's the way it should be. If we really are progressive, we are gonna rethink and keep on recalibrating what is good parenting. And I really thank you for your work and for being with us tonight on Equal Time for Freethought.

Alfie Kohn: Well, my pleasure, and thanks for making *The Homework Myth* a party favor.

Arnell Dowret: Thank you so much, and we hope to have you again on real soon.

Alfie Kohn: I hope so. Thanks.

Arnell Dowret: OK. Thank you.