


AN IDLE EXERCISE

HOMEWORK — just like death and taxes, it can't be avoided. That's why every last one of us has ugly memories, no matter how hazy and blurry a box you choose to put them in — of running the homework gauntlet. Most put it down to a rite of passage. Others still wince at its very utterance; even now, as the experts pronounce its futility. Educationalists, and in particular Dr Naoisé O'Reilly of the Homework Club, are not only saying too much homework is worthless, but are decrying the traditional prescription of hours of after school work as harmful. Yet, with such insights, why hasn't there been wholesale changes to the education system? And — in an ideal world — what alternatives are there to burying children and young adults under loads of assignments and essays? "Homework is actually creating bad habits for life in our nation's children," says expert, Dr O'Reilly. And in this professional's opinion, teachers are prescribing it like a useless drug — in massive amounts. To make matters worse, she believes that not only is the Irish education system stuck in a time warp, parents hold antiquated expectations of the amount of work being given. "Teachers have told me that if they don't set a lot of homework, parents feel like there's nothing happening in class. It's almost like a benchmark to decide what you've done, rather than how the students are really doing," says Dr O'Reilly. Her own engagement with parents through the after school tuition centre she founded — the Homework Club — has confirmed what she has encountered elsewhere. "Extensive research in this field at home and abroad has led me to the opinion that homework, as we know it, is a pointless exercise that is eroding family life and family time, with weekends being eaten into as a result," she says. "Perhaps parents should start asking how doing homework helps you get on in life." Tommy Walshe, president of the National Parents' Council (post primary) said he would love to see a change in the education system. He also believes there is a fixation on homework. "We're losing sight of spending time with the family, and learning in that context." Aine Lynch, chief executive of the National Parents Council (primary) says: "There's an acceptance of homework because it's been there forever. We should look at the way we set it though. To ask what's the point of it. "We do see it as having a value when it provides a home-school link because the biggest impact on a student's educational outcomes is parental involvement. But if it's creating stress in the home — we've got to question it." Should homework be scrapped so? "Yes, I think the way it is at the moment. Yes," says Dr O'Reilly. "It's more to do with what teachers are doing in class than students actually evaluating their own learning or progressing or doing anything constructive. Students are so stressed out about the homework they've got to get done for the next day, it's very hard for them to get space to learn the things they need to learn." "Even for pupils as young as six or seven ... I'm finding parents are

Educationalists now believe homework is worthless and even creates bad habits. **David Young** asks if it is as pointless as it seems



Dr Naoisé O'Reilly has been told by teachers that if they don't give homework, parents think nothing is being done in the classroom.

stepping in to do a lot of reading and writing work. Or are expected to. And that's based on the assumption that parents can always do something like that," says Dr O'Reilly. She cites the findings of the National Adult Literacy Agency — up to 25% of the Irish population experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy. "So, there's at least a quarter of students being sent home where there isn't anyone to support them." Add to that, the fact students are charged with homework that focuses primarily on rote learning, and the case for keeping the status quo weakens rapidly. Dr O'Reilly explains: "It shouldn't be about learning things off. Writing things out ... over and over. Ideally, students should be engaged by what they do in class." If so, there would be no need for homework per se, she concludes. Instead, Dr O'Reilly sees an education system where pupils, teachers, and parents too, are somehow trapped in lockstep. It is a system where desks are pinned side by side, and learners remain in a passive block, trying to absorb as best they can from educators constrained by a curriculum. And she estimates "there are as many

DOES SCHOOLWORK EQUATE TO SLAVERY?

NO child wants to serve a counterfeiting apprenticeship in their school years — churning out uniform workbook tasks. Just ask young New Yorker, Ben Berrafato. Only a few years ago, as an elementary school-goer, he challenged the establishment to stand over the utility of homework, pressing: "Where has it been proven, in these many centuries of this work, that it has been good for anyone? Homework is assigned to students like me without our permission. Thus, homework is slavery. Slavery was abolished with the passing of the 13th Amendment to the US constitution. So every school in America has been illegally-run for the past 143 years." He upped the ante, citing research that "school should stay at school ... when it's brought home in a backpack, it causes problems." Little did the then 11-year old realise that his essay equating homework with slavery would wind up on the op-ed page of the New York Daily News. Nor did he twig how it would cast him onto the talk-show circuit.

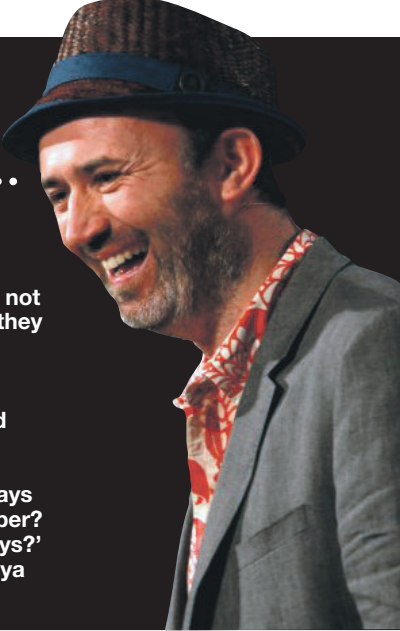


Ben Berrafato: aged 11, he challenged the education department to prove that homework was beneficial and not 'slavery'.

lost teachers in the system as students. Still, there isn't a coherent structure coming out of schools," Dr O'Reilly argues. "Especially in the Junior and Leaving Certificate years. Because students are being constantly set homework. Right up to the button, and they are not being given space to revise topics for the tests themselves. Even conscientious students are doing four to five hours an evening. And they still don't feel like they're doing enough." But what's missing? "There's no plan across the subjects," says Dr O'Reilly, indicting the entire system, especially the approach to state exams. "It's still not looking at key topics. Like — how did you answer the questions? What questions will come up on the paper? What do the exam words mean? How do you have structure in writing? How do you get your points down best in history or geography or English? What's the best quote to use?" While heads may reel at such an inventory of considerations, Dr O'Reilly also presents working variations on well-worn themes, depending on students' learning styles. "For example, the whole Shakespeare course can be represented in stick men cartoons," she explains. And to boot, the

language, which she believes is the hardest part to navigate, can be paraphrased into "common everyday slang". The ultimate objective is to convey the meaning, and not just proffer another memory technique. But what happened to the notion that those who studied the most did the best? There's still a kernel of truth in that very idea

but there's also more to be considered according to Dr Harris Cooper, a professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University in the US. America's foremost scholar on the subject of homework says it is a critical part of the learning process. Duke University researchers reviewed more than 60



TOMMY TIERNAN ON HOMEWORK ...

Homework in Primary school? ' ... not only did they want to rob the day they wanted to steal some of the evening aswell!

"Homework? I had running around to be catching up with."

"And do you remember those essays you'd have to write every September? 'What I Did on My Summer Holidays?' Like the fuckers were only letting ya out on parole or somethin'!"

MORE INTERESTING THINGS THAN HOMEWORK

Dr Naoisé O'Reilly set up the Homework Club in Blanchardstown, Dublin, in February 2009 to help young people, especially those with dyslexia and other conditions, to succeed in exams. The club teaches by using auditory, visual and practical and kinaesthetic inputs and its methods have piqued more curiosity elsewhere: "In Finland," she says, "they seem to have one of the best education systems in Europe. And they've got a lot less contact time. And they're interested in my research." So, how do the Finns do it? "They have a huge emphasis on family time," she explains. "So, they don't have as long a school time as we do. And they don't send students home to do hours of homework. They tend to work more efficiently. Each school is allowed to set their own curriculum and syllabus. So, schools have a lot more say in what they're doing." "I think there's far more interesting things that can be

done at home, even sitting around the kitchen table debating politics in the evening," she adds. "We should be teaching independent learning and research skills and time management and all these things," Dr O'Reilly says, in one breath. "That's why we traditionally wanted to set homework. But in its current state — that's not what's happening." Instead, as she describes, opportunities to find out what we're interested in, or even good at, from drama and dance to the arts and any number of other activities, are being lost. The culprit? You guessed — homework. "Our teenagers are giving them all up ... for study," says Dr O'Reilly. But that doesn't mean she won't be advancing her case with Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn. That remains part of her plan — to establish a platform that can be of benefit to educators and learners alike, nationwide. (www.purplelearning.ie)

research studies on homework between 1987 and 2003 and concluded it does have a positive effect on student achievement. The caveat for educators though, is in its administration: too much can be counter-productive for students of all ages, at all levels, he says. "Even for high school students, overloading them with homework is not associated with higher grades," says Dr Cooper, who advises teachers to follow the 10-minute rule — a practice in which teachers add 10 minutes of homework as students progress through the school levels, which would equate to nine and 10-year-old pupils doing in the region of 40 minutes a day. Students in their senior cycle would do no more than two hours based on Cooper's research. But why not? The reason is quite simple — spending more time at homework does not translate into higher achievement. "The bottom line really, is all kids should be doing homework, but the amount and type should vary according to their developmental level and home circumstances. Homework for young students should be short, lead to success without much struggle, occasionally involve parents and, when possible, use out-of-school activities that kids enjoy, such as their sports or high-interest reading," he advises. How did we get to overloading? Researchers at the University of Michigan compared the amount of homework assigned to elementary-level pupils in the early 80s with those from the late 90s. To their amazement, they found that homework had trebled for children aged six to nine years. And as for nine to 11 year olds, they were now doing more than three-and-a-half hours a week. Why? American teachers were hoping to ready students for the global marketplace — by upping the homework quota. Seemingly, once the Soviets launched Sputnik, all sorts of warnings were issued about American educational mediocrity. This was to be picked up by Ronald Reagan's administration — stoked of course too by a strong dose of Cold War insecurity and paranoia. Reagan assembled a Commission on Excellence in Education, which compiled a report entitled A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. In doing so, the then president's policy ramped up perceptions that schools were failing to prepare their pupils. And ever since, kids have been getting more to do, to prove the contrary. "Teachers should devote energy to creating homework that is stimulating and provocative rather than banal," says Howard Gardner, Professor in Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "And parents or mentors should go shoulder-to-shoulder with youngsters, helping to motivate them, thinking of ways in which to help them without giving the answer, and being aware of the child's special gifts and weaknesses." That's all well and good for those who live in a perfect world. What happens when real world pressures come to bear on both teachers and parents? Is it possible to somehow substitute quality for quantity? "Before assigning homework, one needs to have clear goals, share those goals with children and parents, and make sure that those goals are being achieved. Otherwise homework is an idle exercise," says Prof Gardner.