



General Certificate of Education  
Advanced Level Examination  
June 2014

## Critical Thinking

## CRIT4

### Unit 4 Reasoning and Decision Making

## Unseen Source Material

The material consists of one source (**Document J**) for use with **Questions 7 to 9**.

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### Document J

#### Homework pendulum swings to a new tune of disapproval

1. Homework, we all know, is a good thing. It bolsters reading and writing, boosts test results, develops independent learning and encourages self-discipline. It is a good thing if the Government laid down exactly how many minutes of homework children should do each week, and schools are judged on, among other things, how well they enforce their homework policies.
2. But, oh dear, now word comes from the United States that we've got it all wrong. Homework is not a good thing. In fact, it is very bad. It does nothing for academic results and makes children's lives miserable. Some top schools are already taking it off the menu while parents elsewhere are demanding that their schools do the same.
3. So who is right? Is homework healthy? Or is it just a waste of children's time? The answer, of course, is neither. But since moderation and common sense rarely feature in education debates, the real lessons from this new swing of the homework pendulum will almost certainly be lost among the mad media chatter.
4. The fuss stems from a book due out in the spring in which the American academic Alfie Kohn argues that the returns on homework are too small to warrant the family stress it causes, and that children would be better off having fun after school. He draws on the work of Harris Cooper, professor of psychology at Duke University, North Carolina, who reviewed homework studies in the 1980s and found that its benefits were very limited.

Turn over ►

5. Last year, Professor Cooper published an update in which he concluded that the only significant benefits to homework at primary level came if children practised reading, or if they were drilled for specific tests. In the middle-school years, there was no benefit to pupils doing more than a hour and a half of homework a night, and at high-school level the limit was two hours a night.
6. In short, the findings were a thumbs-up for common sense. They said: don't get hung up on homework for young children. Encourage them to read, and don't worry too much about anything else. As for older children, by all means give them homework, but not too much of it, and don't ever think it's going to turn your average teen into a Harvard-bound genius.
7. Professor Kohn's argument pushes this to extremes and calls for homework to be abolished, but then he does have a book to sell and presumably wants to cause a stir. But if, in doing so, he gives pause for thought to those ambitious parents who would nail their children to their desks for 10 hours a night to get them into an Ivy League school, or Oxbridge, then good for him for doing so.
8. All that really needs to be taken on board from this is that homework isn't all that important for younger children, and that homework for homework's sake at any age is pointless. Quality matters more than quantity, and teachers need to consider carefully the work they set and why. Meanwhile, back at home, parents should calm down and avoid homework friction if they don't want any learning benefits to be cancelled out by the stress and tension of daily rows.
9. Professor Kohn's book will, of course, bolster the case of those who believe, with some reason, that homework widens the divide between advantaged and disadvantaged children and that it should be banned outright. But the bigger fallout is likely to be that, as primary schools rush to accommodate a new homework zeitgeist, they will jettison all kinds of useful tasks in a frantic search for family fun and togetherness.
10. So it's bad luck for all the poor primary parents who will soon have to trade hearing their children read for baking muffins, building models, finding Venus in the night sky, and growing sunflowers.
11. But they needn't worry too much. It won't last. Before too long, there will be someone to argue that spelling lists and maths sheets should be the homework of the future. And then we'll all be back where we started.

Source: Article by Hilary Wilce, published in TES Newspaper, February 2007  
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