

To Homework or not to Homework? That is the Question

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The role of homework in the education of the child is a perennial issue that has been exciting educators and parents for a long time. The idea that after-school academic assignments are essential to learning and high achievement has been, and remains, an article of faith in mainstream public and private education in North America. On the other side of the issue, critics have long offered convincing negative assessments of homework. And in the midst of the fray stands Waldorf Education with its own, as usual, somewhat idiosyncratic approach: “no homework, but . . .”

Critics of Homework

The controversy goes back more than a century. In 1900 Edward Bok, editor of the then very influential monthly magazine, *The Ladies Home Journal*, launched an anti-homework campaign. Bok argued that homework interferes with a child’s natural development and that play and self-guided exploration much better serve the child’s healthy maturation. He maintained that children under the age of fifteen should have no homework. In response to this campaign, the state of California—ever on the cutting edge—actually banned homework in its public schools for some years.

A contemporary counterpart of Bok is Alfie Kohn, an outspoken critic of current parenting and educational practices. In his recent book, *The Homework Myth*, Kohn argues that not only does homework fail to provide any academic benefit, but it sours children’s attitudes toward school. Homework wastes

children’s time, strains the parent-child relationship, damages children’s interest in learning, and undermines curiosity. “Homework . . . may be the single most reliable extinguisher of the flame of curiosity,” he writes. Kohn calls for the abolition of homework except for special activities such as interviewing parents on family history, doing “kitchen chemistry,” and reading at home.

More and More Homework

Despite such critiques, the trend nowadays is to more and more homework. A national survey by the University of Michigan in 2004 found a 51 percent increase in time spent on homework since 1981. Most of that increase has

been with children ages six to eight. Another academic study found that early elementary school students are assigned an average of 128 minutes of homework a week. In some schools, this practice has even extended to the kindergarten. With the “No Child Left Behind” federal education program, the move to more homework is likely to continue to increase.

This push for more homework has led researchers to take a closer look at the effectiveness of out-of-school assignments as an educational tool. In an exhaustive review of the research on the topic, Duke University professor Harris Cooper has concluded that homework does not measurably improve academic

performance for grade school children.

Furthermore, he found that more than sixty to ninety minutes of homework for middle school or two hours for high school students is associated with lower scores on standardized tests. Cooper is the author of *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2001).

In several countries, such as Denmark and the Czech Republic, where students routinely outperform American students on achievement tests, there is substantially less homework than in the United States. Even Japan,



A Waldorf fourth grader does her homework . . .

long the homework “king,” recently has recognized that the stress of excessive homework actually hurts academic performance and has reduced home assignments in its schools.

Despite the research results, Cooper, like many parents, is in favor of homework. He feels that, even if there is no academic benefit, homework helps to build study habits, self-discipline, and time-management skills. Some who share his view add that doing homework is better than the typical free-time activities of today’s children, such as playing video games and watching television. These commentators ignore the wholesome free-time activities like sports, artistic activities, dance classes, and musical instrument practice that children can and do get involved in during after-school hours, as well as the value of free, creative play.

One public school principal, Scott Hartland (quoted in the online journal “Slate,” www.slate.com/id/2149593/), sums up the status quo situation as follows:

It has been drilled into our collective psyche that rigorous schools assign rigorous homework. I recognize that this is a ridiculous thought process . . . but it’s hard to break the thinking on this one. How could we be a high-achieving school and not assign homework?

Homework in Waldorf Schools

One striking feature of Waldorf schools

is that the children, certainly those in the lower grades, get little or no homework. This goes back to the founding of Waldorf Education. Rudolf Steiner, in starting the first school in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919, initially stipulated that there should be no homework at all and later commented (with some satisfaction, perhaps) that the school was widely



... plays with a friend after school

considered to be “stingy” in giving out after-school study tasks for the children. Nearly all Waldorf school children in the early grades leave academics behind when they go home from school at the end of the day. Home assignments usually begin somewhere in the middle school years and typically are rather light. Waldorf parents, even those totally convinced of the Waldorf approach,

can find this disquieting. The idea that homework is essential to learning and to intellectual development is deeply ingrained in our society.

Rudolf Steiner’s attitude toward homework was based on practical considerations and on his understanding of the true needs of the developing child.

In excluding homework from the first school, he cited academic assignments after school as not only unnecessary but even harmful. He was concerned that homework can dampen the child’s love of learning and reduce motivation. Steiner’s ideal was that, in the educational context, a child’s freedom must be upheld and that the impulse to learn must be allowed to shine from within, not be imposed from without. Furthermore, he held that the stress that can come with homework is an unrecognized cause of digestive problems for children.

Steiner continued to hold this view regarding younger students—who at that time only started first grade at age seven—but later said that homework could be useful for older children, especially after middle school. He insisted, however, that the homework not be abstract and that the child should do it out of his desire to learn more. Homework should be related to what the children are learning in school and

should excite their interest and enthusiasm. Steiner understood that children learn and absorb material when their enthusiasm is aroused. During a botany block, for example, the children might be asked to collect a plant specimen after school, write a phenomenological description, and, using botanical references, try to identify it.

In a conference with the teachers at the first school on January 1, 1920, Steiner emphasized

voluntary motivation, saying: "Homework ought to be set as a voluntary task, not as a duty. Whoever wants to should do it!" (Rudolf Steiner, Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner [Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1998], 62)

In another conference with teachers on September 11, 1921, he explained:

"Homework should never be set unless you know that the children are going to be eager to show you their results. The thing must be alive and should be done in a way that makes them more active and not in a way that kills their enthusiasm." (Ibid., 285)

In another context, Steiner modified this stance a bit. He said that if a child did undertake a homework assignment, then it is necessary that it be brought to completion.

Much of the homework assigned in

mainstream public and private schools is in the form of "worksheets"—drill exercises related to material to be covered in standardized tests, rather than to classroom topics. Such compulsory, quasi-mechanical work is not what Steiner had in mind when he spoke of homework.

Waldorf's Secret Weapons

Rudolf Steiner gave Waldorf teachers a number of "secret weapons" to help



... and practices the violin at home.....

children with learning and with retaining material. These pedagogical techniques, properly and effectively used, may develop in the child what homework is meant to develop and thus obviate the need for out-of-school academics. Most of these practices are unique to Waldorf schools.

Teaching in Blocks

In Waldorf schools, the major subjects are taught in blocks. A major subject—history, literature, mathematics, sci-

ence—will be the focus of the ninety-minute to two-hour morning main lesson for two or three weeks. Then it is set aside and another subject becomes the focus of study. Steiner held that allowing a period of consolidation after focusing on a subject intensively for a period helps the child assimilate and retain the material.

Teaching to the Temperament

Steiner also encouraged Waldorf teachers to individualize their instruction by teaching to the temperament of the child. Each child has a dominant temperament—choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, or melancholic—each with a particular, optimal way of learning. By presenting material in a varied manner that appeals in turn to each temperament, the teacher can stimulate learning and memory in all the students in the class.

Modern educational practice has begun to pay attention to temperament, mainly in terms of recognizing children's differences. Steiner was much more specific in his recommendations for awakening interest and inspiring individuals in their learning styles by

communicating with them through their own temperament-language.

In relating the story of Alexander the Great, for example, the teacher can hold the interest of the restless and fiery choleric by including vivid depictions of particular battles. The aesthetically gifted and detail-oriented melancholics will relish elaborate accounts of the art and cultural treasures taken. And the phlegmatic children, always with a lively interest in food, will be held spellbound by descriptions of the lavish victory ban-

quets held. When the teacher makes history alive in this way, appealing to each temperament, the stories become vivid experiences that stay with the children.

Rhythmical Education

According to Rudolf Steiner, the child learns and retains best when within a predictable, rhythmic environment. Thus the Waldorf school day, school week, and even school year is designed so that classes, events, and other elements of the schedule appear and then reappear in a regular manner. (Parents can, with benefit, provide a similar supportive environment at home.) In addition, the Waldorf class teacher—and the specialty teacher as well—works with rhythmical repetition in the presentation of each individual lesson. The guiding pattern is review of the previous day's lesson, presentation, recapitulation, and review. (Please see my article on rhythm in the Fall/Winter 2006 issue of *Renewal*.) This aspect is so central that Waldorf Education could justifiably be renamed "Rhythmical Education."

Freedom of the Teacher

Waldorf class teachers are free, within reasonable limits, to interpret and adapt Rudolf Steiner's indications about homework to the particular needs of their students. My older son's teacher,

with the enthusiastic approval of many class parents favoring "rigorous education," began giving regular homework in the fourth grade. Rudolf Steiner did indicate that, developmentally, children become ready to practice drills (like repeating times tables in arithmetic) and even eurythmy exercises at this stage. However, my son, a rather slow and methodical worker who was involved in school sports and practiced the violin every day, was distressed by the assignments and was up very late a number of evenings completing them. In contrast, my younger son—now in the fifth grade—has rarely been assigned homework. Jealous of his brother's home assignments, he has cajoled his teacher into giving him extra math problems, which he attacks with great enthusiasm.

The Waldorf teacher is concerned with respecting the child's free spirit and creative zest. Nevertheless, there can be compelling reasons for beginning to assign homework. It does foster self-discipline and good study habits. For some students, homework can strengthen deficient academic skills and for others provide challenges that keep interest and enthusiasm alive.

For certain teachers, making homework voluntary and optional is a healthy compromise between form and freedom. Ex-

pectations and perceived pressures from parents sometimes play a role in the teacher's decision, especially in Waldorf schools in very competitive academic communities. In most schools, though, by the eighth grade homework is an accepted tool in learning. In Waldorf high schools, of course, the students have daily and substantial homework. "To homework or not to homework? That is the question." But the answer is not a black or white one. For some children and for certain classes, homework may be appropriate as early as the fourth grade. For other children and groups of children, home assignments should perhaps come much later and be optional. The answer ideally comes through the teacher's recognizing the true needs of the students and helping them achieve a balance between freedom, creativity, and self-exploration on the one hand and structure, academic skills, and self-discipline on the other.

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Muffins for Chengdu

Mansfield Rudolf Steiner School is a small rural school in the foothills of the High country in North East Victoria, Australia. Our Class One students with their teacher, Jeanette Medley (first year teaching) wanted to offer support to the Steiner school in Chengdu following the earthquake; they spent two days making a variety of muffins to sell at morning tea time to queues of enthusiastic customers. Following their lead the prep children decorated candles to sell to apprecia-

tive parents, the Class 4 & 5 children allotted funds from their lunch money fund and Class 6 & 7 held a pancake day. Following an advertisement in the local newspaper under the heading – Think



globally, Act locally we were given a donation of ingredients for muffins from the local supermarket and \$50.00 from an anonymous member of the wider community. Our school has 110 students from Little Kinder to Class 7, we are still a relatively small Steiner school but our growth is steady, our community supportive and stable and our heart is big. Only this year we have embarked on a Year 7 stream with Year 8 to follow in 2009. From little seeds big things grow!