

How Meaningful Is Homework?

by

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“People often complain that the Waldorf school is quite stingy when it comes to homework. There are good reasons for this. An education that strives to remain true to the realities of life cannot afford to focus itself on abstractions, even those that are common in the mainstream. It has to take into account everything that is at work in human development. That means, more than anything else, that we cannot be loading down our children with homework. Homework is often a hidden cause of poor digestion. These things may only show themselves later in life, but they are nonetheless present.”¹ This statement, which Rudolf Steiner made in a talk to doctors, is something I stumbled across a number of years ago. Since then I have paid more attention to the question of homework. How meaningful is it? What forms should it take? How should it evolve during the course of a child’s development?

Points of light in the eternal grayness

An unprejudiced perusal of biographies, either one’s own or those of others, can often be a valuable help in solving educational riddles. When doing this one can observe one’s own memories rising to the surface, cloaked in feelings and emotions. My own memories of doing homework are immersed in a uniform grayness, which as I grew older was pierced only periodically by moments of light-filled joy and happiness. If I look back with the care of an unbiased observer, I see that it was usually the voluntary, self-chosen tasks that were tackled with the most élan. But there were also rare assignments that I was able to make my own. Today I know that many of these exercises and topics anticipated and prepared central themes of my biography that would surface much later in metamorphosed forms.

It is rare to find biographies in which school is characterized as being a totally happy experience. Yet in almost all memoirs, we find such ‘moments of light’ which have deep meaning for the future destiny of the individual. Without exception, these revolve around projects or exercises which arise out of joyful independence and from the trusting love of the teacher who initiates them. Carl Spitteler, the Swiss writer, describes it this way: “This Moeckli (his drawing teacher), although he was not famous, was an exceptional artist. I can still see him using a soft pencil to conjure forth an oak tree for fun during a drawing lesson. We boys watched him as though he were a magician. In addition, he was an extraordinary teacher whom I

remembered longingly for many years. He was the only one of our teachers who taught us something worthwhile and important, something we wanted to learn and by which we felt challenged. Ah, the incredible insights, how shadow and light share the face of a sphere, how light appears from behind the invisible back of the sphere, blurring its contours. The blessed instructions as to the difference between sharpening a pencil and sharpening a colored pencil. The different ways to use charcoal, crayons, and pencils to do shadowing, and so on.”²

A few pages later we find another example, from another school:

“How were the drawing lessons? The boy, whose eyes were filled with the most majestic images of nature, was planted firmly before the drafting table, and was met with parabolas, squares and parallel-rules. Straight lines, something the masters themselves do not always achieve without losing something of their magic, was the first goal. One was fortunate if all one’s courage and joy did not vanish at the outset. Then we were turned loose on ornaments. Year-in, year-out we doodled with French curves, finishing lines and parallel shadowing in the indents. Four, or if things went well, six ornaments would be finished in a year, some on blue, some on brown paper, some done in pencil, some in chalk. And all for the vanity of the parents, the boasting of the examiner and the regrets of the talented youth who in the meantime had filled hundreds of sketchbooks out of pure artistic joy. The exams, the central hypocrisy of school, was the focus of every task, even in drawing class.”³

This is the approach to teaching drawing that is least likely to inspire a pupil to do extra work. Yet these two passages show clearly what the challenge is. On the one side we see a guiding hand, leading lovingly, without pressure, allowing the student to take things up in freedom. On the other side, students are forced pedantically to do exercises which never reach their actual goal. Pupils feel themselves to be “without guidance and with no-one to answer their questions,” although it would appear as though the path were clearly laid out. The first teacher is completely immersed in the process that he wants his students to experience. He continues to practice with enthusiasm the skills that the students need to learn, and they follow him willingly. The second teacher is focused on the purely technical aspects of drawing and expects results that can be measured by an examiner. This is an approach that doesn’t leave much room for human freedom, nor does it stimulate individual will.

As teachers, we find ourselves constantly between these two poles: How wonderful are those moments when the students joyfully plunge into a lesson, further it with their own contributions and actively help lay the groundwork for what will come. But then how easily one finds oneself as though in the shoes of the latter, whether trying to cover all the content laid out in a lesson plan, trying to bring all of one’s pupils up to the expected standards (often under perceived parental pressure) or in anticipation of future exams – an expectation shared naturally by all those involved.

Mandatory or voluntary

Let us take a closer look at voluntary motivation. In his meetings with the teachers of the first Waldorf school, Rudolf Steiner speaks about it repeatedly: “Homework ought to be set as a voluntary task, not as a duty. ‘Whoever wants to do it!’ ”⁴ “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.”⁵

He goes on to say how math homework should serve in part to prepare students for what will be covered on the next day. With seeming nonchalance, he continues: “And then wait and see whether the children have the initiative to do the preparatory work at home. Some of them will volunteer, and that will make others want to do it too. You must get the children to do what they ought to do for school because they want to do it. It should come from the child’s own willingness to do something from one day to the next.”⁶

Discussions in later conferences bear stark witness to just how difficult it was even then to awaken the will of the pupils. But Steiner continued to emphasize that children “should be spared from tiring homework” and should not be made to fill “notebooks with homework. They should never have the feeling that they are about to collapse under the homework.” But then he comes to the concept of a kind of “modified homework.” We want to “[make] allowances for some individuals, set them problems to do at home. Encourage the hard workers to practice at home, and make sure that we do not overtax them. They must not have the feeling that they dislike homework; they must do it willingly.”⁷

We can find many passages in a similar vein. And then there is this one: “A fundamental principle is that we must make sure they do their homework, and see to it that it never happens that they don’t do it.”⁸

We should keep in mind that each of these passages is in response to concrete questions from individual teachers working with specific age groups. There is, however, a common thread: The kind of teaching that is being striven for is one which finds the right balance between freedom and commitment, between voluntary participation and taking responsibility for working as part of a group and, finally, between individualization and the participation of the whole class. This is the goal. What capacities does a teacher need to acquire in order to reach it? My own experience has led me to approach the question of homework differently at different ages.

A developmental approach

During the first few years of school children have trouble building a bridge between the experiences they have in the classroom and their home life. Memory at that age is still quite spatial and contextually defined. A child quite often only remembers what happened in class one day when he or she returns to the classroom the next. At home, the memories tend to sink

into the depths of a child's soul, giving parents a rather sketchy sense of what the children are actually learning. How in the world can we expect children at this age to summon the presence of mind needed to do homework? At this age, however, love and devotion can move mountains. If the teacher says something like, "It would be wonderful if someone would bring in this form drawn again beautifully on another piece of paper tomorrow," the inner connection most children have with their teacher is so strong, that they rarely forget to prepare this gift for him or her.

In the course of the fourth grade, this approach should go through a process of transformation. The children's relationship to the work they do at home should emancipate itself from their connection to their teachers, and they should begin to experience a sense of obligation to work through again at home what they have done in school. The teacher can stimulate children to do certain exercises to address specific weaknesses. If these initial steps are successful, most children in the fifth, sixth and seventh grades will do their exercises faithfully, if for no other reason than out of a sense of community. That children at times complain about homework is par for the course at this age. An essay from a sixth grader (written voluntarily about the use of conjunctives) gives us some insight into the labile balance between freedom and necessity: "If we were to be given no homework, we would have more time in the afternoon. However, the result would be that we would either have to do all our work in school or not do any work at all. We would have less time to practice, and would have to understand everything much more quickly. This would be good for those students who only do work under pressure and do not get any enjoyment out of it. More time would be available for hobbies. Perhaps one would then write essays now and again just for fun and the teacher would find her pupils to be more enjoyable."

It is only when pupils reach puberty, in the eighth grade, that a truly independent, intentional approach to homework begins to be possible. Individual life motifs begin to surface, and here and there we see pupils begin to cultivate their own style of working. This individualization has to be approached carefully, because the youngsters still have a strong notion that each should receive the same treatment as everyone else. If one wishes to encourage some children to do more, or allow others to do less, one finds that this can only succeed if the class community has been properly prepared. It is only in high school that a student discovers an individual sense of duty. "The sense of duty cannot be developed before a youngster can grasp the significance and consequences of the concept 'duty.' An understanding of child development lets us recognize that this is a task for the third seven-year period in a child's life."

If, by approaching homework in the nuanced, developmental manner sketched out above, we can lead a pupil towards the tasks that lie before him, we will also have strengthened his life-forces. Uncertainty, nervousness and a lack of self-confidence are widely seen today to lie at the root of various illnesses. And we will have nurtured the possibility that he or she takes up

‘duty’ through choice, or, as Schiller says, out of sympathy, and, in doing so, places his or her own will freely within the context of the universe.

Endnotes:

1. GA 313.
2. Spitteler, Autobiographischen Skizzen.
3. Ibid.
4. Conference January 1, 1920.
5. Conference September 11, 1921.
6. Ibid.
7. Conference June 21, 1922.
8. Conference September 11, 1921.
9. Originally printed in *Erziehungskunst*, December 1989.