

When Is Homework Necessary?

by

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Homework is as controversial as it is unwanted, but is it really necessary? This is a never-ending story, it seems, which is again and again subject to debate and discussion. Our magazine, Erziehungskunst, dealt the last time with this topic was in an article by Diedrich Wessel in vol. 9, 2002. We are resuming this discussion now with the following article by a very experienced Waldorf teacher.

In my opinion, the issue of homework still presents problems and lacks solutions. This author has arrived at the conclusion that there should be no mandatory homework. This viewpoint is supported by manifold comments of Rudolf Steiner. So far so good.

We can draw two conclusions here. The first one: I will not assign obligatory homework. I merely will inspire the children by suggesting what they could do at home to complement the class work at school – provided they want to do that. That way I am being a good Waldorf teacher and, on top of it, I avoid trouble. As a teacher one can indeed try to create homework assignments which the students will complete joyfully and out of their own free will. For that we need skillfulness and educational artistry.

The ideal case: The children come home and are on fire to record, repeat, expand or practice what they have absorbed in school. In the approach outlined above, we find only indirect hints about how to accomplish this feat. The question is: which homework assignments are fun, and how must they be formatted to be enjoyable? Here I would like to insert a few more or less poignant examples from my past experience.

I was still a child and had just started to learn to write, unfortunately not at a Waldorf school. I remember being told that the children in a class (it may have been a third or fourth grade) at the Waldorf school in Stuttgart were allowed to write a book. They all were enthusiastic and wrote and wrote for several days. It was definitively very skillfully arranged by their teacher. How different would have been the effect if he had demanded an essay about a certain topic. This teacher reached even me, an outsider: I began to write a book. I illustrated it with many pictures and loosely hand bound it; this little book still exists today.

Many years later when I was a class teacher and found it necessary for my students to practice writing essays, I suggested creating a collection of animal stories for the school advent fair. Many lovely stories were put to paper, based on the personal experiences of the students (or on their imaginations) – they were copied, bound and offered for sale. I must say, though, that I was not able to spark quite as much enthusiasm as my colleague had been able to ignite.

Another time I had to teach the history block “Discoveries and Inventions,” one of my favorite blocks, by the way. The main lesson books were supposed to be illustrated. I bought linoleum and the necessary equipment and suggested that the students could create linoleum cutwork. The class started to buzz and several amazingly beautiful linoleum cutwork pieces were produced. We chose the best ones and printed quite a few of them. Students who wanted to do so could paste these pictures – or their own – into the appropriate spaces in their main lesson books. This was of course a voluntary activity during the creation of the required main lesson book. I believe we were all very happy during and after this main lesson block.

More and more often we teachers discover in the main lesson books pictures which are copied from books. I would like to voice serious doubt whether that constitutes a true activity. And can we really consider the creation of a main lesson book as an assignment that is completed joyfully, orderly, and as a matter of course? That would be ideal. Should not the teacher occasionally support the students by reminding them or supervising their progress, especially when the end of the block is approaching on the following day? In either case the teacher ought to review and acknowledge the homework that the children did with or without “being forced.” Once in my seventh grade, a girl did not come to school for three days, and I had not received an excuse; so I called the mother to ask how the daughter was doing. I found out that Sabine¹ had left home as always and had returned at the usual time. So she had been playing hooky. During the next faculty meeting I was allowed to present this case. My colleagues contributed their own observations as well. We could not arrive at a solution for the problem and were basically clueless about what to do. The next day, when Sabine had once again not done her math homework, I reprimanded her: “Sabine, it can’t go on like this!” When I came home my wife held up the telephone receiver: It was Sabine’s mother. Had I once again been too strict? The mother asked, “What have you done with my daughter? Sabine came home and was just radiant. She said, ‘Mr. Kraul really likes me! And all other teachers too! I like going to school again.’ ” Now Sabine is grown and a mother herself, and her children go to the same school where she thought the teachers didn’t love her.

In my opinion at least one subject absolutely requires repetition through practice: mathematics. No matter whether math is done at home or in school – practicing it should be enjoyable. How can we accomplish that?

One day the teacher of a third grade was out sick and I had to substitute; my colleague had asked me to introduce decimal point calculations. As usual I had assembled a practice sheet for the first day with simple problem examples for homework. Since I was not familiar with the students and their math abilities, I closed the lesson fifteen minutes before the bell rang and told the children they could start on their homework. They started their calculations with wild enthusiasm and even before the class time was over, some children had completed their work. But they were not satisfied: “Are we allowed to solve more problems at home?” Fortunately I had several copies of the practice sheets left over and they could take them home. But that was just the beginning.

In the evening I got a call from one of the mothers whom I knew well. She told me that her daughter had been doing math all afternoon while the other children had played outside. She still was not done with her homework. I told her about what had happened at the end of the lesson. The mother became concerned about her daughter’s being so slow, but we agreed that Johanna should stop working on her math homework for the day. Two years later I had to substitute in this class again and this time I was supposed to introduce fractions. I had prepared problems whose solution produced an infinite series. I pointed that out to the children when I asked them to do some further calculations at home. The questions came: “How many fractions in the series should I do?” “Up to ten.” “And I?” “You can keep going up to twenty.” That allowed them to figure out where they ranked. In the evening the same mother called me again. “Johanna worked on her math problems all afternoon again, but this time she enjoyed it,” she reported. The next morning I asked Johanna how many fractions she had produced. “Up to forty-two,” she answered. By now Johanna has long graduated and studies medicine.

In the traditional math text books there are usually very few simple beginners’ problems and then immediately “more interesting” ones, which are more difficult. But it is much more helpful to the children to give them a lot of simple problems in the beginning. Those who have some difficulties can still arrive at the correct solutions and enjoy the practice again and again. In everyday life simple calculations are dominant anyway. For the gifted students we have more challenging problems ready, possibly some that contain tricks or even traps.

Here is a story about the joy that one can experience while doing math homework: The second day of my substituting I announced the correct solutions. Each time Karin had found the right answer she jumped onto the chair and cheered in delight, throwing up her arms. At present she is a colleague in the Waldorf school.

I also have had good experiences with ‘series assignments’ whose results show certain patterns, e.g., 1 - 3 - 5 - 7 - 9 - 11, the odd numbers. It is satisfying to be able to continue the series. But something is lacking here – there is no element of surprise – it is too easy to guess the next step. So I choose, for example, the series 1 - 3 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 9.

Creating such assignments requires effort and time. During the school year it can be difficult. So I have assembled two math problem booklets that many colleagues have also found helpful for text problems and work with fractions. The observations given above have been considered in making these booklets. Many colleagues and students have told me that the exercises helped to make learning math fun. The booklets also provide space for recording the answers. The advantage: there is order and no loose sheets to fly about. Solving all the problems in such a leaflet is also satisfying.²

Here is another experience in this context: Around ten o'clock one morning my telephone rang. A youthful female voice complained that the fraction math booklet was unreadable. I asked if maybe a page was misprinted and offered to send her a new copy at no charge. She did not give me a clear answer, but rather I picked up that the other party was very upset. The background noises sounded like ones that I am used to hearing during school breaks. The conversation ended abruptly. Shortly after that, another similar call came through. Afterwards I realized what must have happened: a dear colleague at some school had distributed my math booklets and asked the students to get to work right away. There were at least two girls who found this to be an imposition, and during the break they called me on their cell phone to let me have it. I have no idea how the situation was resolved.

One thing is clear: It is extremely difficult to attain the ideal of having an entire class do their assignments joyfully, without compulsion and driven by sheer enthusiasm. I do find homework necessary in mathematics, though. And with classroom time being continuously reduced, with free Saturdays, ever longer and more frequent field trips, workshops in industrial, agricultural, and social skills, I ask myself how we can offer the students a full range of learning material without homework. Those are all valuable activities. But whenever I get an old main lesson book into my hands, I am amazed at how much knowledge was transmitted.

After a geography block a student once came to me and asked if we could give him an old map that was no longer needed; it was in our storage room where the large maps were kept. He wanted to hang it up in his room as a wall ornament, a poster, so-to-say. I was able to fulfill his wish. Currently he works in a publishing house for travel guidebooks.

Every day during a main lesson I would call students up to the front, where the large maps hung, and ask them, for example, "Which cities are situated on the Rhine? Name them in correct order." The student would answer first while standing with her back to the map, then turn around and point to the cities she had named. They eagerly competed with each other to be called up. As a preparation I recommended the repeated study of the maps in an Atlas. I was amazed to learn that several families did not own an Atlas, but my suggestion that each family should have one was not unanimously welcomed at the parents' meeting.

That is why our schools should have well-stocked libraries for the middle school grades. When the class teacher is teaching a certain topic she can

come to class the next day with the corresponding books under her arm and present them: “Here I have a few books about Copernicus. Who wants to read one?” Sure, this approach costs money and time, but it is worth it. The children get started on subject-oriented reading and the requests for a textbook become muted. We even have annotated books lists, which can be recommended for this kind of study.³

Finally, I would like to relate an interesting story. In my middle school class I had a boy who was peculiarly laid back. He consistently and intensely tried to figure out how he could write any assignment with the least amount of effort and without skipping anything essential. Richard was elected class president. One day he came to me and said, “I am supposed to tell you that you give too much homework. But I don’t think so.”

Sometimes life corrects itself. I had a student who just would not do math dealing with percentages. “I don’t need that – I’ll be a pediatric nurse,” Erika pronounced. She left school after tenth grade and immediately got an apprenticeship at the prestigious Schwäbinger Hospital in Munich. I lived in that vicinity. One evening the doorbell rang and there she stood. “I received my first assignment in the dairy kitchen, and all amounts in the recipes are expressed in percentages!” After two evening sessions the problem was solved. A short while ago I met a mother in a Waldorf kindergarten. She gave me greetings from her grandmother Erica, who had told her that once I had taught her how to work with percentages.

With these remarks I hope I have injected some life into the topic of homework. We can see that it is not so easy. It is certainly apparent that our students do not always want to be handled with kid gloves. In the lower grades children are allowed to do homework assignments by completing or practicing things they started in school. They usually like to do that for the beloved teacher. In middle school, towards the end of the classroom teacher time, things change considerably; the teacher has to extend more effort and only in secret the children are glad for a serious talking to by teachers and parents.

The issue of homework is met creatively not only in Waldorf circles. Some time ago I heard an interesting radio report about an upper Bavarian village school where four teachers, in powerful cooperation, got the children to engage in their work so eagerly that “they didn’t even notice that they were learning.” However, that required extensive preparation – sometimes the entire village supported the process. Every child there gets a written assignment each week that has to be completed. The children seem to be enthusiastic about it.⁴

Practical experience teaches us: Whether by force and duty or matter-of-course and enthusiastically completed, there is no black and white in matters of homework. Let us make an effort to try to find the appropriate path in each case! That is not an easy matter. The recipe is easily given. The teacher dives so intensely into the subject matter that she/he can pass it on to the children with infectious enthusiasm.

Endnotes:

1. All names have been changed.
2. Available at Walter Kraul GmbH, Neufahrner Weg 2, 82057 Icking, Germany, tel (*from USA*): 011 49 8178-44430.
3. "Literatur zur Waldorf Schule," an anthology edited by Ursula Kilthau, available at the Association for Free Waldorf Schools (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen), Wagenburgstr. 6, 70184 Stuttgart, Germany
4. "They don't even notice they are learning; the success story of an upper Bavarian village school." Broadcast on July 13, 2002, by the Bayerische Rundfunk in the program 'Saturday Notebook' (Notizbuch am Samstag). The manuscript is available by sending a pre-addressed, stamped envelope (letter size) to: Bayerischer Rundfunk, Rundfunkplatz 1, 80335 Munich, Germany.