

Homework – Obligation or Free Task?

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How do we stand on freedom in education? One point comes immediately to our attention. Young people of all age levels today demonstrate a high degree of self assuredness and independence that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. We support them in this quite a bit – for various reasons. But every so often a ‘little dictator’ awakens in us when the adolescent stands opposite us and does not share our wishes and ideas. A general reason for that is parental concern that the children might not be able to stand their ground in the competition of life if they have not passed certain school exams. Accordingly, they exert pressure. The parents themselves yield to this pressure; it prevents them from considering that there may be individual difficulties that indicate an alternative path for their child. Essentially their trust for the child’s destiny is shaken.

Rudolf Steiner notes in the introduction to the second edition of *The Philosophy of Freedom*: “No longer should our scientific teachings be formulated as if their acceptance were a matter of irrefutable necessity. Nowadays, nobody would like to give a scientific treatise a title like Fichte once did: ‘Crystal clear report to the wider public about the intrinsic essence of the new philosophy. An attempt to compel the reader to understand.’

“Today, nobody is supposed to be *forced* to understand. We no longer want to stuff insights down anyone’s throat – even if they are still immature or childlike; rather, we try to develop their abilities so that they no longer need to be *forced* to understand, but *want* to understand” [emphasis by Steiner]. Here is the first mention of themes that would later be integrated extensively into Waldorf education. This leads us to the question of trust.

Trust versus homework?

Does trust need to be practiced first, or is it not enough to put it into practice? It would be enough if we did! Frankly, we do the opposite. We practice mistrust! We meet this undisguised mistrust in the motto: The child must be assigned required homework. Some parents and teachers become adamant: Homework has to be given from first grade on so that the child learns to do his/her duty from the beginning.

That is nothing more than a fabrication of the individual teacher, and it can indeed be found in Waldorf schools but never in Waldorf pedagogy.

Rather it is diametrically opposed to Steiner's educational indications. We find this contrast already appearing in the first generation of Waldorf teachers. Requiring homework demands consequences for the students who do not complete the assignments; otherwise the teacher would lose credibility. So now the student brings the punishment upon himself.

If we think like that, then we completely lack trust in the will of the child to do what he/she can. That means that one may even try to push one's own will and ideas onto the child against his/her own potential. We must not forget that already in infancy we can observe an irrepressible will to imitate the environment, to finally get up and walk just like the people that surround the child. As he develops further the child consistently finds the urge to practice that which is discovered and to learn new things. This can be observed on every visit to a playground. Individual differences in siblings can be observed from the very first days on. From the beginning and in each developmental phase, the child needs the loving attention of the grown-up. This insight is gaining popularity today, at least in theory.

Afterwards, we can often notice a change in this positive attitude of the child. Why is that happening? And when? Normally we can observe that in first grade the children are happy to be treated just like the older students by being allowed to do homework. It only becomes a problem when later this "duty" is not fulfilled for one reason or another, not even after a conversation. Bad feelings spring up between the student and teacher and the relationship is impacted negatively. Those students whose talents allow them to experience homework as a normal, enjoyable challenge would do it also without being coerced by the concept of "fulfilling one's duty." This concept is simply a nuisance not only in the lower grades but also for several more years to come. Then there are quite a few children who really go through varying degrees of torture to accomplish their homework. The full burden of punishment is unloaded onto those few students who completely falter or simply refuse to do their homework. In this climate of coercion one really cannot expect a sensitive treatment now: trust is lacking – the belief in indispensable homework rules!

Free assignments

Obviously the school of today cannot be the same as the school of the 1920s. Steiner compromised with the state and the teachers. He did not "butt his head against the wall." Otherwise we would possibly not have Waldorf schools today. Rather this educational model has proved its vitality for over eighty years now. Would we modernize it if we were to follow the currents of the time and agree with the opinions of our day? Certainly not.

Further development of Waldorf education can only be achieved if we bring thusfar unrealized aspects of this educational system into the light of consciousness and work with them, and for this subject that would mean: required homework or free assignments? And I add: trust or mistrust?

What would be more natural to a free school than to trust the will of the students to grow in every respect and to master life? There is a point at which the teacher is powerless anyway. In class, children only take in what they can absorb, and only if their interest has been awakened. “We no longer want to stuff insights down anyone’s throat – even if they are still immature or childlike.” According to Steiner, all coercion is futile. Awaken the interest!

About the current situation

Parents who send their children to a Waldorf school know there will be, and mostly is, obligatory homework. Even though this was not the main factor in their school choice, now we cannot implement a change without their cooperation.

It is a different situation if the faculty is willing to make changes right away in a first grade class and in the years to follow. In that case of course it is just the teachers’ decision, because the parents are informed right from the start that there will be no obligatory homework.

In this context we can rightfully question the legitimacy of continuing the antiquated system of required homework in Waldorf education. Has this practice ever supported the development of young people in the process of coming to know themselves, of self-actualizing? With this practice are we not always at odds with the educational principles of Steiner? Can strictness and coercion ever serve as principles of education?

“Education is healing” is the leitmotif of Waldorf education. “All instruction should make whole and healthy so that the spirit-soul dimension of the children can harmoniously integrate with their physical nature,” writes Walter Riethmüller in his introduction to volume 5/2003 of *Erziehungskunst* which is dedicated to the topic “Salutogenese.” How long will we continue to violate this motto? Or do we think our way of dealing with homework is congruent with these positive models?