

Many cited the importance of homework in bolstering what they perceive as a flagging educational system.

## Homework Is a Sacred Cow

Ronald Milito 1997

Be sure to see the 2007 follow-up article, Postscript to Homework Is a Sacred Cow, available at [mathsciencehelp.com](http://mathsciencehelp.com)

**T**o make a clean breast of it right at the start, I have been giving homework for many years, but over these same years the rightness of it has become more and more questionable to me. The milk from this sacred cow may once have been sweet, but it is sour now. Sometimes cows are turned into hamburger, and it pleases a number of people, but here we are talking about a sacred cow, so I know that I am treading on dangerous ground. I could lose my credibility and ultimately my credit-ability. If I am accused of being a radical, I can find some comfort in the words of Thomas Paine: "A long habit of not calling a thing *wrong* gives it a superficial appearance of being right and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom."<sup>1</sup> America was founded on common sense, and I hope that this essay is permeated by this true American principle.

We could demand that more homework be given, and the students would groan and moan under the increased burden. The administrators, teachers, and parents could all feel righteous about some sound, old-fashioned authority in making children do what is good for them. Let's face it, homework is not exactly considered a fun thing in our society, but most believe it is good for you. I call this view of homework the cod-liver oil approach. Some might go so far as to say that if a medicine is really effective, it should taste bad. But does the medicinal effect of homework really live up to its therapeutic claims, or is it just snake oil in disguise?

For starters, we might ask how many persons of the cod-liver-oil school have continued to take it as adults. Did all the forced homework assignments cultivate a real love of reading and study? As adults do these former victims read and study every night after work, or do they now assign themselves a nice hefty load of TV, videos, and snack food? And just think how pleased they would be if their bosses insisted on sending work home with them at night that had to be completed and returned the next day. In all fairness, I must admit that cod-liver oil was for ensuring that children grew properly and had little role to play in adulthood. Similarly, one might argue the case for homework, but clearly its purpose is not to inspire devotion to the material. In any event, I think it is true to say that those of the cod-liver oil school have little belief that others could come to love what they themselves had to be compelled to do. And it is just on this point that the spirit of common sense can ferret out the reality of compulsory homework. Compulsion works

against the development of spontaneous interest and can snuff it out, even leading to a dislike of the subject, not to mention feelings of resentment.

In order to soften this resentment, some cod-liver oilers have modified their approach to homework by dangling a carrot in front of the child as a reward for swallowing the medicine. Finish your homework, and then you can watch TV, play, or whatever. What we have here is a simple and straightforward application of the operant conditioning of behaviorism, which when stripped of its jargon comes down to the old carrot-and-stick approach. The carrot dangled in front of the horse draws him forward along with your wagon. The stick is applied behind if he loses interest in the carrot. The behaviorists have tried to soften the blow by telling us repeatedly that reward works better than punishment in shaping behavior. This is claimed to have been experimentally proven and, luckily for the behaviorists, allows them to pass themselves off as humanists. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if it had turned out the other way, with punishment being more effective than reward. In any event, it is an indisputable fact of life that behaviorism has infiltrated our whole culture, especially the realm of education. This worries me for many reasons, not the least of which is that the carrot-and-stick approach is only appropriate for animals. The early behaviorists were able to make animals do what appeared to be very complicated tasks and concluded that all human behavior was shaped by conditioning. Is it not conceivable that we will make human beings more animal-like by applying methods of behavior control that are carry-overs from the animal trainers? And if this happens, the behaviorists will pass off as discovery what in fact they will have created. We already apply the term "kids" (young goats) to our children. What does this imply?

As behavioristic research infiltrated our society and schools, a very interesting phenomenon was discovered. It was found that students who were taught to work for rewards often had their interest in the subject diminished. Rather than reinforcing interest in the subject, the behavior modifiers were reinforcing interest in the reward. The jargon has now been extended. When the horse pulls the wagon forward in order to get the carrot, the carrot is an extrinsic reward. If the horse finds pulling the wagon rewarding in itself, then this activity is said to be an intrinsic reward. I surmise that the latter-day behaviorist has to use extrinsic rewards in order to make an activity

intrinsically rewarding, but when a theory becomes that contradictory, it may be time to give it up. What really bothers me is that after having addicted a generation of children to extrinsic rewards, the behaviorists didn't even say, "Oops! We're sorry."

There is an old saying: "Actions speak louder than words." Common sense should make it very obvious that when we offer extrinsic rewards for homework we are telling the child that it is so boring you will need something to get you through it. There is also a deeper message that may be more up front with the hard-line cod-liver oilers, and that is, "If you don't do well at school, you're going to find it tougher to make a decent living." Don't let the behaviorists fool you! No matter what they say, the stick is there whether we spell it school or \$chool.

Let us turn our attention to homework with the concepts of compulsion and intrinsic reward in mind. In this regard I would like to offer the following quotations from Rudolf Steiner on homework and education, taken from shorthand notes recorded during conferences with teachers from the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany.

*R. Steiner: Homework ought to be set as a voluntary task, not as a duty. 'Whoever wants to do it!'<sup>2</sup>*

\* \* \* \* \*

*A teacher: I wanted to ask a question about the teaching of algebra. It seems to me it would be good to give the pupils homework. In this subject it seems to be especially obvious that the children ought to be doing sums at home.*

*R. Steiner: The principles of a sound education must come first. 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. Homework should never be set unless you know 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. One way of doing it would be to give them a task arising out of the particular subject matter you have just been dealing with, and tell them, "Tomorrow I will be dealing with the following kind of sums." 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 children's own willingness to do something from one day to the next.*

*A teacher: Can't we give them exercises in multiplication, etc., too?*

*R. Steiner: Only in this way. Exercises could be given them in other subjects, too, any amount of them. Then we will get pale children. What we must aim at is to master our own teaching material so well that lesson time is all we need for it.<sup>3</sup>*

Quite simply, we must not allow the possibility for

students not to do what we ask them, but not because it would interfere with our schedule of operant conditioning. It is because of the human relation that we are forming with the student and the sensitive nature of the child's development. As teachers we have to cultivate the children's eagerness, liveliness, aroused activity, and enthusiasm. Then we can challenge the students to take up an assignment. Compulsion destroys this whole mood. If we can't get the mood, then that is what should be addressed. It may not happen overnight, and it may not happen every day, but it does happen. To abstractly insist on so many assignments per week ruins the rhythmic swing that builds enthusiasm's momentum. You have to be creative and take a risk or there is no adventure. How different from the behaviorist, who stands in front of the class ticking off his behavioral checklist, plotting behavior frequencies, and revamping reinforcement schedules.

Readers unfamiliar with Steiner should know that he is the greatest champion of the human spirit and of freedom in the twentieth century. He characterizes them truly in his philosophical works and defends their reality against attacks from all quarters. In his writings about society, he characterizes the arrangements needed to protect and foster them, and in the educational system he founded, he gives practical guidelines for fostering their development in the growing child.\* In opposition to Steiner stands the main behaviorist, B.F. Skinner, who relegates man's nature to the animal level and literally says good riddance to such silly notions as human freedom.<sup>4</sup> It has always boggled my mind that the ideas of a man who doesn't believe in the human spirit or freedom, let alone a supreme being, could become so pervasive in a nation that was "conceived in liberty" and that prides itself as the defender of freedom in the world. What irony that the state, which runs the public schools and compels millions of students to pledge allegiance to a republic "with liberty and justice for all," fosters a teacher training based on a philosophy that denies the reality of human freedom.

Let us look at the idea of compulsion from Steiner's perspective. In the preface to the first edition of his chief philosophical work, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*,<sup>5</sup> we find one of the basic tenets of his educational thinking:

*Our scientific teachings, too, should no longer take a form that implies their acceptance to be a compulsion. Today no one should give a scientific work a title like that Fichte once gave a book: "A Pellucid Report for the Broader Public concerning the Essential Nature of Recent Philosophies. An Attempt to Compel the Reader to Understand." Today no one is to be compelled to understand. We demand neither accep-*

\* For more on the Waldorf School, please refer to "How the Waldorf School Grew Out of the Threefold Social Movement" by Herbert Hahn in this issue. Also, see "The Threefold Social Order and Educational Freedom" by Rudolf Steiner, Issue No. 1, Summer 1989, and "The Founding of the Waldorf School" by Emil Molt, Issue No. 2, Winter 1989.



tance nor agreement from anyone unless his own particular, individual need urges him to the view in question. Today even the still immature human being, the child, should not have knowledge crammed into him; rather we should seek to develop his faculties so that he no longer needs to be *compelled* to understand, but *wants* to understand.\*

And in his first philosophical work, *A Theory of Knowledge Based on Goethe's World Conception*,<sup>6</sup> we find Steiner defending thinking itself against those who say it is compelled from within:

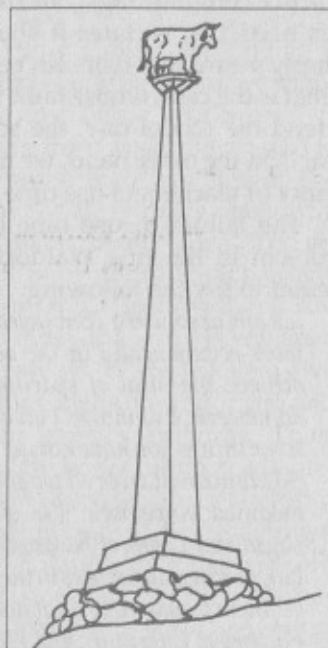
*It is generally supposed that the reason why we unite certain concepts into greater complexes, or why we think at all in certain ways, is because we sense a certain inner (logical) compulsion to do this....But how can this be harmonized with the transparent clearness with which our whole thought world is present in consciousness? We know nothing in the world more thoroughly than we know our thoughts. Must we, then, assume a certain connection on the ground of an inner compulsion when everything is so clear? What need have I of the compulsion when I know the nature of what is to be united—know it through and through—and can guide myself according to this nature? All the operations of our thinking are processes which come to pass by reason of insight into the essential nature of the thoughts, and not according to compulsion. Such compulsion contradicts the nature of thinking.*

Until we can gain enough confidence to grasp the essential nature of man and the world, we shall continue to cause harm where we truly wish to do good. Let us turn again to the *quotation* on homework where Steiner warns us of pale children. Some of us may find this amusing or prescientific, but I would ask those holding this derisive attitude where they would have stood when the pale children of Manchester, England, were suffering from rickets caused by light deprivation during the Industrial Revolution. What did medical science have to say then? And here is a case where some cod-liver oil would really have done some good, but it wasn't scientific then. We had to let generations suffer until scientists unravelled the intricacies of vitamin D metabolism and bone development before a folk remedy was recognized. When Steiner warns us about pale children, he is letting us know that education can really affect the circulation and metabolism of man for better or worse. Much more could be said about the connections between the education of children and their state of health in later life. In a century of epidemic-scale chronic diseases, when modern medicine has little to offer, our minds should be open and unprejudiced. Insofar as homework is inserted im-

Editors' Note: We have taken the liberty of correcting the translation of the last phrase ("but *understands*" in Stebbing); the German reads "sondern verstehen *will*." Steiner is contrasting compulsion with desire.

properly into education, its bearing on the children's future health must be taken into consideration.

In regard to this issue, I found it very interesting to hear the opening speaker at a recent conference on the middle school.\* He painted a powerful picture of what he saw one day at his school. As he watched the middle schoolers leaving at the end of the day, he realized that they were literally weighed down under enormous bags of books. He touched his listeners deeply as he shared his musings of that day: "What are we doing to them? They



Hans Schumm

are just children!" This became a turning point that sensitized him to the inner life of his students. His heart flowed out to them, and he wanted to lift their soul burdens. I believe that the audience of middle school teachers was moved, and many left with a renewed resolve to help their students through this difficult phase of life. But nobody at the time raised the question, "Who was loading the children down?" I have made this observation for myself a number of times since that conference, and I must say that it truly is amazing to see a small middle-school girl literally staggering under her load. I have even noticed students walking tilted to one side after they put their bags down. At times I've thought that this may be a sort of back-up training so that in the event some students don't succeed in the college pathway, they can fall back on unskilled manual labor. Lately, out of sympathy I've taken to carrying these heavy school bags out to the bus for the tired-looking students and the smaller ones.

Homework advocates argue that it is impossible for students to learn a subject properly without doing school work at home because there isn't enough time in school for the teacher to cover all of the material or for the students to practice what they have learned. As to the former point, recall Steiner's challenge to the teacher at the end of the first *quotation*, homework that "we must endeavor to master our subject to such an extent that we need nothing outside the school hours." Does the failure to reach this mastery reflect an insecurity or a hidden laziness? Is the teacher who is compelled to follow a clearly delineated set of daily objectives drawn up for him by the behavioral educationist going to become a wellspring of creativity? I can agree that students need to

\* The American middle school can include grades five through eight.

practice certain things, but there is nothing intrinsic in this need that dictates it should be done at home. It simply means that there isn't enough time in school, and if that is the case, whose fault is it? Why can't we simply extend the school day, the school week, or the school year? On the other hand, we may seriously question the ability of teachers to use time effectively.

The failure to use time effectively was already a problem in the first Waldorf School, and led Rudolf Steiner to say the following:

*...I am absolutely convinced of the fact that if you work economically in the actual lessons you could achieve the ideal of sparing the children of tiring homework. But it won't all be equally interesting. In some things you have not yet acquired the experience. So I think that after all we shall have to have a kind of modified homework. We shan't give the children pages and pages of homework to do for Arithmetic, but, making allowances in the case of some individuals, set them problems to do at home, and also do this with History of Literature and History of Art. Encourage the hard workers to practice and make sure we don't overtax them. They mustn't have the feeling that they dislike homework; they must do it willingly. And here it is of tremendous importance how the work is set.<sup>7</sup>*

While there is no intrinsic need for the students to do school work at home, there are a number of intrinsic drawbacks. The first potential pitfall is that teachers are often shifting part of their task to parents, parents who may not be able to help. They may not know the subject. They may know it, but not be very good at explaining it or explain it in a way that confuses the child. They may know the subject, but not like to teach. They may know the subject, like to teach, but not have the time, due to the demands of their jobs—that is, they have their own homework to do. For some parents, supervising homework is a nightmare. Every assignment given to the child is actually an assignment given to them. Having lived through the experience of dealing with an emotionally disturbed, learning-disabled child at home, our family came to dread homework. Listening to the experiences of other families, we have found that we were not alone in this experience. We felt deeply that once the assignment was given, it was very bad for the child not to do it, but the difficulties we went through were not good for our family life. The following comments on homework by Steiner throw some light on the dilemma we were struggling with:

*I have already told you that we aim at achieving "soul economy" in our teaching and, consequently, we believe it to be beneficial for our pupils if we restrict learning to the classrooms. This means that we give the pupils as little homework as possible. This principle is prompted by yet another motive. Certainly one should aim at developing in the child a feeling of duty, of responsibility and, later on, we shall speak*

*about how one can try to bring this about. But what is very damaging is, if the teacher makes certain demands upon the pupils which they do not fulfill. And homework—is very conducive to this effect. Parents often complain to us that their children are not given enough homework to do. But we have to consider the fact—and this is absolutely clear to anyone with sufficient insight—that too much homework will cause some pupils to be overtaxed, while others will be tempted to produce slipshod work or simply evade such tasks. Sometimes it is simply beyond the children's abilities to fulfill the teacher's demands. But the worst thing to happen is that children do not carry out what the teacher has told them to do. Therefore it would be better to ask less of them than to risk letting them get away with not fulfilling their set tasks. All expectations and demands regarding the training of memory as well as those involving homework need to be dealt with by the teachers very tactfully.<sup>8</sup>*

The beginning of this <sup>quotation</sup> again emphasizes the need for completing all instruction in school because of the extreme destructiveness for the students of not meeting an assigned task. It is so destructive, and there is so much temptation for distraction at home, that compulsory homework should be avoided. Steiner also points out the other side of the coin, that is, the students who overwork themselves. I observe this problem less often than that of the work shirkers, but it is still a very real one. We may be amused by the child eager-beaver, but we all shake our heads at the adult workaholic who ignores his family. My family has lived through this situation, too, with a very academically gifted child who can't rest until the school assignments are completed well. This also brought tension to our family, since we felt that chores should be done as part of home life and that children need a certain minimum amount of sleep. Our child's loyalty to the teacher who gave the large assignments was a touching thing to observe and was more easily dealt with than our former problem. Again we see how easily things can develop in a bad way when the child is doing work away from the teacher.

Many of these problems could be drastically minimized if the schoolwork assigned to students in school were supervised by the teacher who assigned the work. Without the observant teacher, the work done at home or even outside of class in study hall can be done in a half-hearted or shoddy way. A mechanical approach may be adopted. Mistakes and bad practices may become ingrained. Students may use a calculator when they are supposed to develop mental skill. Students may begin to convince themselves that poor quality work is good quality. They may become deceitful about having parents do the work for them, and so on.

There is much talk today about home and family. I have already pointed out how homework can impinge



on the family and would now like to elaborate on this theme. Let us assume that the students in a particular school are given a half-hour of homework in each of five subjects. Allowing five-minute breaks between these half-hour sessions yields a total of *two hours and fifty* minutes. In our family we had a long-standing tradition of reading a story after dinner and cleanup, but that phase of our lives has become very difficult to maintain ever since the homework started to increase rapidly in the middle school years. Some teachers feel that keeping them busy at home will keep them away from TV or get them to read, but in our case we didn't watch TV, and we read good literature. What homework did for our family was to disconnect us.

Some people may still feel that aside from all these issues, homework is an important way to develop a sense of duty and that we should get children to do their homework out of a sense of duty. In response to a class seven teacher's statement that by class seven children should have a feeling of responsibility toward their homework, Rudolf Steiner said:

*You must arouse in the children a feeling of curiosity about their homework. If you give the children the sort of questions that make them curious to know what kind of answers they will find, you will arouse their initiative. I should do it like that. They will not develop a sense of duty until you teach them the significance and consequences of the concept "duty"....Duty takes such a long time to understand, and it is such a difficult subject, that you must start discussing it in childhood. You must introduce it with examples. You must teach them about the kind of people who have a sense of duty and those who haven't.<sup>9</sup>*

Steiner is still calling for the rousing of curiosity in the seventh grade, for duty can only be grasped slowly. By allowing the students to hear these descriptions, an affinity for duty can be developed, but we cannot appeal to a sense of duty if it simply is not yet present. Part of the exceeding destructiveness Steiner mentioned earlier is that when a student does not do a homework assignment, he may end up lacking a sense of duty as an adult. Furthermore, we see that moralizing about duty is bound to fail. We have to make a living picture of it that strikes a chord in the child if we want it to reverberate into adult life.

An analysis of the word *homework* shows part of its absurdity. Webster gives its first meaning as "work done at home." Its second, "lessons to be studied or schoolwork to be done outside the classroom." Since "outside the classroom" is generally home for most students, we might say that homework is schoolwork that is done at home. Then by symmetry we should have the term *schoolwork*, "work pertaining to the home that is done at school." Thus, when my child says that she cannot do her chores because she has too much homework, I can send in some ironing to school with her and a note for the teacher explaining that this is called "schoolwork" and

should be done at school. And since, in these days of harping on family values, many families are finding it necessary for both husband and wife to have jobs, we might call what the parents have to do at home "workwork."

When people return home from work, they expect to be in a place where they can let their hair down. The notion that your home is your castle is a very reassuring principle. Here is the space that you can control. You set the tone. No one can break in or abuse your privacy. Nobody can tell you what you must do, how much you must do, and how long you must do it, unless you are a child and must obey your parents. When teachers give homework they are intervening in the home domain and are actually supervening the parents' authority. Thus, the teacher's ability to regulate home life may actually violate the constitutional right to privacy. I can't help but think that this sense of invasion adds to the resentment of so many students. Many in education today are concerned about the clarity and consistency of the messages we give to students, but implied messages are just as important as the ones we state. I think it would be most clear and distinct to say, "Work hard at your job, work hard at school, and then retire to your castle. Get deeply involved in each area." From Steiner's perspective it doesn't make sense to split your learning in the day. What you do in class starts to sink into the subconscious and finally should be taken through sleep. The next day it has to be revived and reworked. The rhythm of forgetting and reviving the work helps to build inner faculties. If we give homework in each subject, the child has to repeat the school day at night just when the activity started in the day is about to enter the realm of sleep, and the process is broken. If we did a similar thing with digestion we would have to regurgitate and chew again, which is good for cows, but not for human beings. Yet the homework givers take it as an undeniable truth and in no need of scientific proof that their split dose of learning is the best way. More could be said about this, but it is at least thinkable that one deeper, prolonged session of study followed by relaxation may be superior. Some may argue that if the latter is really the case, we should discourage children from doing schoolwork at home if they elect to do it spontaneously. In reply we must point out that eagerness arising within the child to do schoolwork at home is arising out of the very inner process of learning itself, and in that sense it could foster the total experience. In other words, the process itself is telling us what it needs. Here we are dealing with something that is very subtle, and it would be naive to expect a strict rule that applies in all cases. Again we see how destructive compulsion can actually be.

When some of the quotations cited in this article were first brought to my attention, it was very exciting indeed to find that my own independent thoughts were confirmed by a thinker I hold in highest regard. Based on my experiences as a teacher in two Waldorf schools and

my experience at a number of Waldorf teacher and science conferences, I have found little sympathy with these ideas. Good friends of mine teach at Waldorf schools and simply don't agree with these ideas. I generally hear that the middle school children need homework to get them ready for high school, and that the high-school students need homework to get them ready for college. Also, I am told that parents expect homework and that enrollment would be jeopardized if none were given. But why can't we educate parents? It seems to me that our primary responsibility is to the children and not to the misguided impulses of parents or colleges. If we got outstanding results with the children, there would be no problem. But how will we get these outstanding results if we compromise the basic principles needed to achieve them? How paradoxical and counterproductive such compromise is! In this regard I would like to offer one more quotation from Rudolf Steiner:

*Sometimes some of you slip back into the usual school routine. If our method is applied, it has its results.... So I really do think it is necessary that we always ask ourselves how we should do our work according to our different standards.... If we continue applying the same old standards, and thinking the same old way, we shall get nowhere.... We must also bear in mind that homework must be done willingly. They must feel the urge to do it. If you were teaching at state schools where compulsion is applied, where nothing matters, and your behavior is that of a slave driver, you would be in a different position. If a child does not do his homework he is punished. If we were like that, the pupils would run away. We must create a situation in which the children enjoy doing their homework.<sup>10</sup>*

How interesting that the Waldorf teachers are being chided for subconscious neglect. And they had Steiner in person for support and advice. The last sentence of this *quotation* could easily be misconstrued if it were taken out of context. It's all right to have students doing homework if it's done out of free interest, not compulsion, and in moderation.

In conclusion, I hope that sharing these thoughts will stimulate their being taken up by others who can make them fruitful. I sympathize with the parents I know, whose children are in both Waldorf and non-Waldorf schools, who have struggled with this issue of homework, and hope that these thoughts will serve them. I realize that most teachers are compelled to give homework if they wish to hold their current positions. I myself am in a situation where I have to compromise to carry on my heartfelt profession, but the compromise is a thorn in my side and the sides of the children too. Perhaps these thoughts will serve to make that compromise uncomfortable for those who see positive virtue in compromise itself.<sup>11</sup> As for myself, I will gladly pluck out this thorn, if I ever get the opportunity, and put the sacred cow out to pasture. ▲

#### NOTES:

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10. *Rudolf Steiner's Conferences with the Teachers of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart*, Volume Three, 1922-1923, p. 42. Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, Forest Row, England, 1988.
11. See editorial by Gary Lamb, "Making Compromises with the State," *Threefold Review*, Issue No.2, pp. 42-44.

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