
Homework in Waldorf Education

Meeting Your Child through the Years



**Waldorf School
OF BEND**

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Abstract:

This report is intended to inform prospective and current parents about the approach to homework within a Waldorf School. Focusing on child development, this report will highlight the history of homework in mainstream education, the history of Waldorf education and its approach to homework, the general effectiveness of homework at different ages, and what parents can do at home to support their child's education.

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List of Abbreviations

WSB – Waldorf School of Bend

Definitions

Astral Body: In Waldorf education the astral body is defined as the soul body. It envelops the emotional life of the child. Near the onset of puberty, we see the freeing of this body. With new found emotional expression, children of this age desire different types of social relationships.

Etheric Body: In Waldorf education the etheric body is considered the life body and is freed around the age of 7. This is when the child is ready for formal education. Their memory forces are now freed to accomplish the academic work required of them.

Holistic: This refers to the treatment of the whole person: mentally, physically and socially.

Patriarchal: During Roman times, patriarchs were considered descendants of the first men of Rome. Only the descendants of these first patriarchs sat upon the counsel and had formal education

Self: For the sake of this report this is defined as the developing individual.

Will (Force): This is the determination of an individual. It gives a person the strength to pursue completion of a task and the ability to follow through.

Introduction

The word homework can evoke many different emotions for people. For some it can evoke fear and trauma, while in others it can be a source of interest and inspiration. For parents, homework can be a check in regarding the education of their child. It can be a way to assess the child's progress and to support their education. Yet for many parents it can be a source of stress and contention with their children. Over the years since the implementation of homework in education, many studies have been done regarding its efficacy. Most show us that it can be effective when given appropriately at the right age. This report will look at some of these studies to show the efficacy of different homework styles and how this relates to the homework given at the Waldorf School of Bend.

This report informs parents about the effects of homework in the lower grades, how it is addressed at the Waldorf School of Bend (WSB), and shares some ideas of how parents can support their child's education at home. Most of the parents at WSB appreciate our approach to education, but don't always understand the reasons and research behind our choices. This report explains the reasons we give little homework in the lower grades. In this way parents can inform themselves about the learning styles and philosophies regarding homework at WSB.

Sometimes homework can be perceived as "busy" work. This type of homework tends to be ineffective. The homework style at WSB is different than what most people experience in the mainstream of education. It can be inspirational and exciting. Students in 6th grade may have to observe and chart the rising sun over the course of a week. Third graders may have to build a shelter for a report during their shelter block. In the 1st grade, students may be asked to see if they can find a word that starts with "B" to share with their classmates the next day. These lessons are extensions of the classroom. In these lower grades we do not include any math sheets, vocabulary lists, or grammar exercises. In order for the child to feel successful, interactions between parent and child need to feel supportive regarding homework. This report will give examples of homework at WSB and how parents can support their child's education.

To better understand the development of education, homework and Waldorf education, this report also includes a short summary of the history of these topics. Through the study of history we have an opportunity to learn how society has arrived at the current development of the topic at hand. Formal education, as we know it, has not existed very long. Yet to those of us alive today, education feels like a societal norm. This report provides inspiration for the reader to consider current constraints regarding education, and to question how we have arrived at our current practices regarding homework. After considering the history, the studies and the efficacy, we have an opportunity to create what we feel is healthiest for our students moving into the future.

History of Waldorf Education

Waldorf Education was founded in 1919 by Rudolf Steiner and Emil Molt. Steiner was an Austrian scientist, thinker and philosopher. Steiner's lectures about social renewal at the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette factory inspired its owner, Emil Molt, to ask Steiner if he would establish and lead a school for the children of his factory. Steiner agreed after setting a few conditions unheard of for his time. He wanted the school to be free and equal to all students, covering a span of 12 years. He also felt it was important that the teachers lead and administer the school as they have the closest contact with the children and therefore are most able to set policies regarding their health and well being (Barnes). Mr. Molt agreed to these conditions and thus the first Waldorf School opened.

Over the past 100 years Waldorf schools have continued to open throughout the world. Parents seeking an alternative educational model eventually find their way to Waldorf education, as it offers a program and education unlike many other options available. The holistic approach focuses on educating the whole child: head, heart and hands. Development of the child's individual will forces is as important to education as the development of thinking capacities. Incorporation of the practical arts into the curriculum helps to develop will forces. Due to these unique factors, Waldorf education continues to grow exponentially throughout the world.

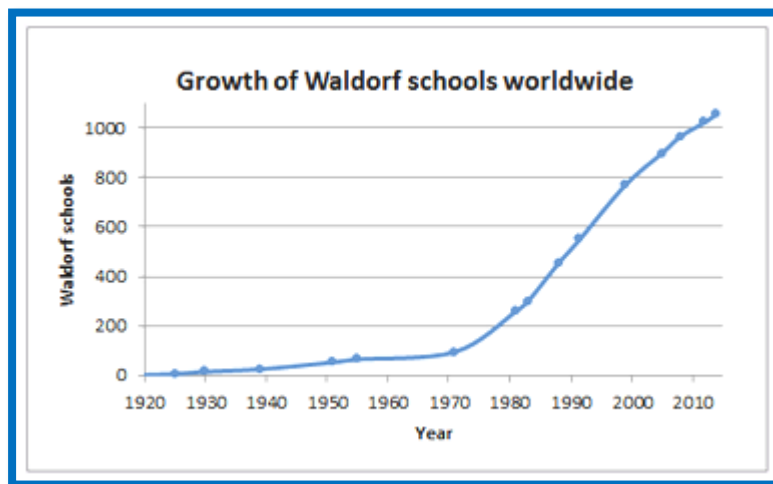


Figure 1: Growth of Waldorf Schools Worldwide

Waldorf Curriculum

The goal of the Waldorf curriculum and teaching method is to unlock the true potential living in each child, the true “Self,” which gradually awakens to its natural and human-cultural environment and its true “Self” and abilities (Schmitt-Stegmann 1). Each stage of development is regularly studied amongst Waldorf teachers, as they work towards a deeper understanding of this “Self” that lives within each child. The art of teaching becomes the ability to unlock this mystery and help the child in the true becoming of this individual identity.

Certain stages have become widely understood within Waldorf Education. An understanding of these stages informs teachers and parents how to better meet the needs of their children, thus helping the child to unravel the mystery of “Self.” The Waldorf curriculum has been developed to meet the child at each of these critical stages.

- **From birth to age 7** – Learning takes place through doing, and the Waldorf educational focus is on bodily intelligence, play, oral language, and practical activities.
- **From 7 to 14 years** – The emphasis is on a perception and understanding of the natural and human environment. Learning is focused on reading and storytelling, rhythmic activities, practical activities, and the physical sciences.
- **High school years** – Focus is on fostering moral responsibility, social consciousness, and independent thinking through integrating arts and crafts, story/history/ geography, and sciences.
(Schmitt-Stegmann 1)



*Figure 2 – Main Lesson Book Work: Often finished up at home in 5th – 8th Grade.
Source: Why Waldorf Education Works*

History of the Development of Homework

Formal education itself began in the time of ancient Greece and Rome when tutors worked with individual students. Only the privileged students from patriarchal families were able to afford such luxuries. Most children during these years lived in servitude, laboring for those wealthier and with more power. After the advent of agriculture the education of children was, to a considerable degree, a matter of squashing their willfulness in order to make them good laborers (Gray).

The idea and practice of universal, compulsory public education developed gradually in Europe, from the early 16th century on into the 19th (Gray). Most businesses and politicians saw schooling as a way to make good citizens and future employees. The general public saw schools as children's work, meant to be hard and tedious to prepare them for the working world. In recent times, the methods of schooling have become less harsh, but basic assumptions have not changed. Learning continues to be defined as children's work, and powerfully assertive means are used to make children do that work (Gray).

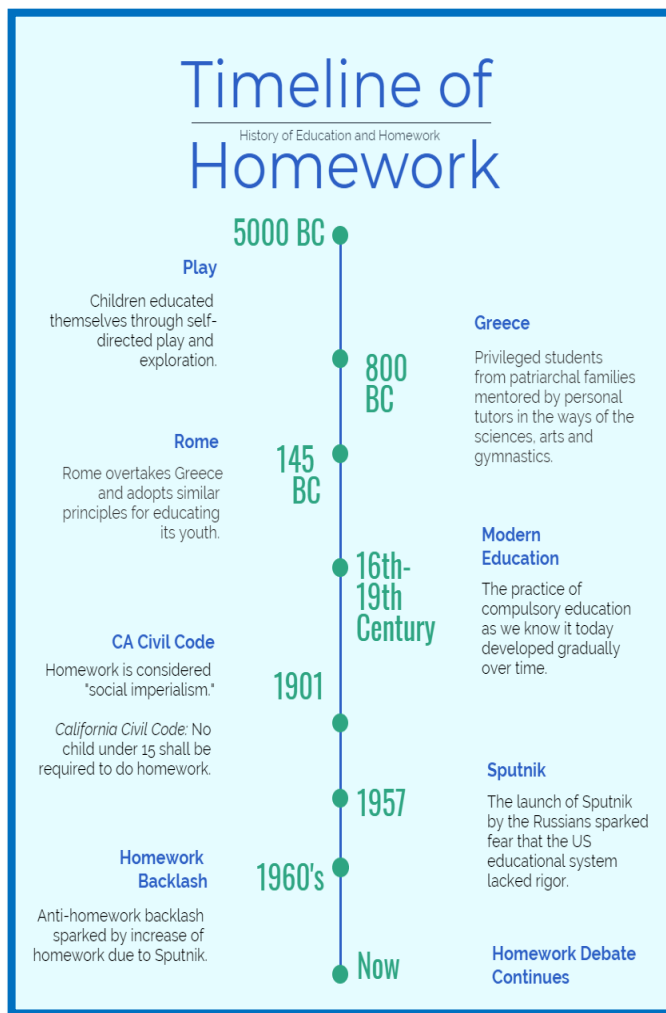


Figure 3

As schools evolved so did the idea of homework. In 1901 the California Civil Code included the following: "No pupil under the age of fifteen years in any grammar or primary school shall be required to do any home study." (Kralovec 4) Most were concerned that the lack of fresh air and sunshine, along with carrying heavy bags, was not healthy for children. Educators and researchers believed the value of free play outweighed the value of homework.

Not until the launch of Sputnik in 1957 by the Russians, did homework become a prominent part of education. The public worried that education in the United States lacked rigor and that it left students unprepared for complex technologies (Cooper 34). Homework seemed to be the answer to accelerate the mathematical and scientific education of American students. This event sparked a constant pendulum debate about homework which has lasted ever since.

Approaches to Homework

The approach to homework can be as vast as there are styles of education and teachers. Most homework within mainstream education takes the approach of extra work done at home. The work created from this approach produces assignments in which skills practice is the focus. Waldorf has a foundationally different approach in which inspiration is the goal.

- *Mainstream*

According to Wikipedia homework is defined as a set of tasks assigned to students by their teachers to be completed outside the classroom. Common homework assignments may include a quantity or period of reading to be performed, writing or typing to be completed, math problems to be solved, material to be reviewed before a test, or other skills to be practiced (“Homework”).

- *Waldorf*

Waldorf approaches homework as a source of inspiration. Rudolf Steiner once stated that, “Homework ought to be set as a voluntary task, not as a duty. Homework should never be set unless you know that the children are going to be eager to show you their results” (Kardel 49). In this way we are meeting the developing will of the child with the inspiration of the teacher.

Steiner also said that, “homework is often a hidden cause of poor digestion” (Kardel 47). Children who are not interested or inspired by their work can feel stress regarding assigned work. When we experience stress our sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) will take over. When this happens the body puts focus on the muscles and senses. All the energy is taken from other systems, such as the digestive system, thus causing digestive issues.

In Waldorf Schools, the point of homework is not to have school work at home. When homework is called for, its purpose is to extend a meaningful experience from what was learned during the school day (“The Role of Homework in Waldorf Schools”). Often work started at school will be finished up at home. (See Figure 2 and 4)



Figure 4 – Shelter Project Third Grade: Often done as homework in addition to school work in Waldorf Schools.
Source: David Bergler at Brighwater Waldorf School

Effectiveness of Homework

- *Productivity of homework at different ages*

Looking at the developmental stages of school children we can discover a healthy approach to homework. In the first few years of school, children struggle to convey information from school to home or vice versa. Memory at this age is still quite spatial and contextually defined (Karvel 49). This explains why parents are usually given the answer, “Nothing,” when they ask their children about their day. Around the 9th year, or near 4th grade, children awaken to the world around them with new and unveiled eyes.

Grade level	Recommended Homework	Percentile gain
Primary grades	30 minutes	little to none
4-6th grade	45-90 minutes	6
6-8th grade	90-120 minutes	12
High School	120-180 minutes	24

At this stage they should begin to experience a sense of obligation to work through again at home what they have done in school (Kardel 50). This is an age in which homework can be more productive, and where we see a shift in its effectiveness. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5 Source: Eric Folks

Many studies have been done on homework over the past 15-20 years. The most interesting result from these studies was the dramatic association between grade level and homework’s effectiveness (Cooper 35). It was discovered that homework can improve results on final exams in the middle grades, but is most effective in the upper grades. In elementary schools, however, homework would not help the students surpass other schoolmates (Cooper 36). This information is reflected in the chart above, which shows little gain from homework in younger students. The chart below regarding math scores shows that too much homework can actually create the opposite effect, lower test scores, especially in younger students. (See Figure 6)

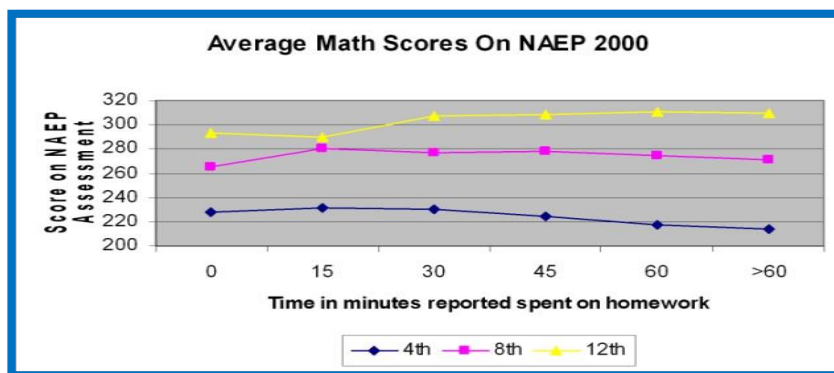


Figure 6 Source: Alan Shaw

- *Styles of homework*

The styles of homework that have proven to be most effective are those that meet and inspire the students. This is in alignment with Waldorf education and the ways in which Waldorf teachers approach school work.

- Worksheets: Standard Review Questions
In this typical homework style there are multiple choice questions, fill in the blank, and short answers. This type of homework is given to support a student in passing a quiz or test in the near future. In a study at the University of Mississippi, a student stated, “When I did the standard review questions I would just try to find the answer and copy the sentences right out of the book. I didn’t really have to read the whole section” (Alber 182). In this same study it was found that worksheets which focused on a broad spectrum of the topic more readily prepared the students for the test. In either case the homework given is directly in relationship to the test, not the student’s long term knowledge.
- Innovative Approaches
Joyce Epstein discovered in her research that when teachers design homework to meet specific purposes and goals, more students complete their homework and benefit from the results and more families remain involved in their children’s educations through the middle grades (Epstein 191).

Some Ideas Suggested by Epstein

- 1) **Homemade Homework:** Parents and children design a family-related activity for students to conduct based on important activities and responsibilities at home (Epstein 190). In these activities students become responsible for their work.
Examples:
 - Write a letter to a relative.
 - Plan an activity and create a budget for it.
 - Start a collection of critical reviews of movies or restaurants.
- 2) **Assignments in which students have to work with other students on a project after school.**
- 3) **Homework notebooks:** Students keep notebooks of ideas drawn from family events, photographs, characters, and other activities as the basis for writing stories, essays, and poems in class (Epstein 190). These notebooks can help students to improve their observational skills.

The Importance of Play

Play engages both sides of the brain. In his article about Waldorf education, Jack Petrash quotes Jane Healy from her book *Endangered Minds*. She states, “All thinking, even language processing, calls upon both hemispheres at the same time. Their ability to interact is probably the ultimate key to higher level reasoning of all kinds (44).” Play naturally integrates both hemispheres. One of the unique capacities of scientists like Albert Einstein, Alexander Fleming, and Barbara McClintock was imagination (Petrash 45). Playfulness and imagination are characteristics that co-exist in the minds of innovative people. If children have too much homework, they do not have adequate time for play. To encourage time for play, Waldorf requires less homework.

For the Elementary Student

In many Waldorf lower grades classrooms you will find wooden toys, dolls, silks, jewels, rocks and several other simple tools that spark the imagination. As Jack Petrash states in his article, “These tools allow young children the creative play experiences that will enhance their problem-solving ability by fostering divergent and imaginative thinking (45).” In figure 7 we see an imaginative game incorporated into a math lesson in a first grade classroom at the Waldorf School of Philadelphia.



Figure 7: Moveable Waldorf Classroom Source: The Waldorf School of Philadelphia

For the Upper Grade Student

Play in the upper grades appears different than that of the lower grades. Students become more social, “playing” with how to integrate their ideas and thoughts with those of their peers. In Waldorf schools we meet this developing astral body with group activities. Waldorf high schools are small schools with required curriculum that is both diverse and integrated (Petrash 45). This diversity may come in the form of required choral singing groups, sports, theater, group artistic projects, and instrumental music groups. These required activities give the students a chance to “play” together with their peers as they work towards an ultimate group goal.

Parents and Homework

- *How can parents help with homework*

By understanding the general approach to homework in a Waldorf Schools, parents can better support their child at home. In this way parents can have realistic expectations for their child, without causing undue stress.

1st Grade – No daily homework

2nd Grade – Read to parents, or, have parents read to you.

3rd Grade – Read, practice spelling words.

4th Grade – Math, violin, reading and spelling practice.

5th Grade – Math, violin, reading, spelling practice, and Main Lesson Book completion work.

6th, 7th, 8th Grade – Main Lesson Book completion work, research for papers and essays, studying for tests, math practice/worksheets

This outline of potential homework may vary in each class. A unique aspect of Waldorf education is the freedom teachers have to meet the needs of their students. Although no homework may be assigned in the 1st Grade, a teacher may ask students to find words that start with a letter, such as “B.” Lower grades students may be asked to find something from nature or draw a picture. A 3rd Grade student may be asked to find clothing made of different fibers. Most children get very excited about these types of “assignments.”

As a child develops through the grades, the expectations regarding homework will shift. With no marks or letter grades given in a Waldorf school, there is not direct repercussion for not finishing an assignment. In this way, the child’s work is voluntary. The teacher tries to instill a sense of pride in completing the work. In this way it becomes the will of the student to complete homework, rather than the will of the teacher.

- *What can parents do at home to support their child’s education*

1. *Create rhythms that provide space for school work and plenty of sleep.*
2. *Follow through with tasks at home.* Completion of all tasks at home can help to encourage this habit in other aspects of their life.
3. *Provide a good example of a healthy work life.* Put work away if it is causing stress. Coming back to it after a good night’s sleep can sometimes be the best option.
4. *Encourage your child to complete homework without doing it for them.* If your child is not able to complete the work, encourage them to ask the teacher for clarity.
5. *Help your child create organizational methods to keep them on task.* This becomes integral as the progress through the upper grades.
6. *Allow them space to play and imagine.* The way this is expressed will change throughout the years. Giving your child the space to foster the ability to tinker with their ideas and imagination will give them the support they need to more deeply explore the curriculum they experience during the day at school.

Conclusion

Homework is an aspect of education that can support the growth and development of children. Homework that is inspirational and relative to the work presented in class supports the students in developing their understanding of the material. Over the years we have seen homework develop a more central role in education. Sheila Alber discovered in her research that evidence indicates schools currently assign substantial amounts of homework and those amounts have increased over time (Alber 173). This increase in homework has not proven to be beneficial to the education and development of our students.

Children change as they grow and their relationship to homework is different. The Waldorf curriculum was designed to meet the developing child throughout these stages. Students in the lower grades learn primarily through doing. Recall of their day is usually based on the setting around them. At home, they cannot immediately perceive what was understood in the classroom. Once they develop past the age of 9, the capacity of recall grows and develops. Homework can become more meaningful, but only if they are enthusiastic and inspired by it.

Most homework should be inspirational and not given unless we know the child will gain a meaningful experience from it. Play can be a way in which a child can develop this meaningful experience in relationship to what was introduced at school. This imaginative transformation of the material may manifest differently in students across the years, but it is their way of tinkering with the development of their understanding of the material. In this way they develop a deeper understanding of the subjects introduced in school.

Dorothy Suskind suggests in her article about homework that successful individuals in the future will be the childhood tinkerers; those that have the creativity to make a multiplicity of connections that are not evident within the boundaries of their own disciplines and instead adapt, view and combine perspectives previously thought of as unrelated (54).

Parents can support the development of their children within the Waldorf School by developing a deeper understanding of the approach to homework used in their student's classroom. Providing good examples of a healthy relationship to work and related stress will help children to develop a healthy relationship. Creating space for play and imagination throughout the years will support children as they grow and develop their own individuality.

Homework is a tool used to support the education of your child. It is not meant to develop stress or antipathy towards learning. If parents see these characteristics developing in their children this should be discussed with the student's teacher. As adults working to create a supporting environment for the growth of children, we must work together to create the best opportunities for their development.

Recommendations for Further Reading

- Books

1. **Education Towards Freedom**, Frans Carlgren
An introduction to Waldorf education. The evolution of the child from the preschool to high school years is described in detail in terms of psycho-spiritual development and curriculum.
2. **Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can do About It**, Jane M. Healy, Ph.D.
This book traced the roots of America's escalating crisis in education. Drawing on neuropsychological research, Jane M. Healy, Ph.D., examines how television, video games, and other components of popular culture compromise our children's ability to concentrate and to absorb and analyze information.
3. **The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting Children and What Parents Can Do About It**, Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish
Bennett and Kalish draw on academic research, interviews with educators, parents, and children, as well as their own experience as parents and successful homework reformers to offer detailed advice to frustrated parents.
4. **The Child's Changing Consciousness as the Basis of Pedagogical Practice**, Rudolf Steiner
These lectures are ideal for anyone first approaching Waldorf education. Using language that any teacher or parent can understand, Steiner goes into the essentials of his educational philosophy, providing many examples and anecdotes to convey his meaning.
5. **The Essence of Waldorf Education**, Peter Selg
Peter Selg speaks from a deep knowledge of Anthroposophy and from his extensive experience as a child psychiatrist. He returns to the original impulses behind the first Waldorf school to show their continuing validity and how they still respond to what we need.
6. **The Homework Myth: Why our kids get too much of a bad thing**, by Alfie Kohn
A compelling exposé of homework – how it fails our children, why it's so widely accepted, and what we can do about it.
7. **The Kingdom of Childhood**, Rudolf Steiner
A lecture series given by the founder of Waldorf education in 1924. Full of insight on the developing child, especially in relation to classroom work.
8. **The Way of the Child**, A. C. Harwood.
An excellent introduction to Waldorf education; particularly valuable for its clear explanation of how Waldorf education is integrated with the fundamental stages of child development.
9. **Waldorf Education: A Family Guide**, Pamela Johnson Fenner and Karen L. Rivers.
An overview and deeper understanding of the Waldorf curriculum from 1st grade through high school.

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