

WinkWorld January 2003

Putting HOME Back into Homework

Recently, we had the opportunity to focus on homework when Andrea, a fifth grade teacher, asked us to suggest literacy activities for homework for the struggling readers in her class. This simple question triggered our reflections.

Joan's Reflection

As parents, we dreaded homework, which Dawn and Bo brought home. It was usually meaningless and invasive for our family. Homework seemed to mean that we had to stop living and "do" something because it was required the next day. Of course, at that time, I would never have mentioned this outside of our family, as homework was perceived to be honorable. If we didn't like it, the problem must have been with us, and not the work.

Of course, we did all the homework; remember, I was a teacher, and in our little family unit, we had several college degrees, in addition to which, my husband and I both grew up on the Northern Prairies—we were weaned on character-building experiences....

As a teacher, I assigned homework, and I continued to dread it. I spent hours and days collecting homework; reading homework; recording homework; and looking for lost homework. When I think of homework, I remember Alicia, who was a marvelous student. She was very involved in all school activities. Her classmates and I spent considerable time that year, simply looking for her homework, which was often misplaced in the depths of her book bag or somewhere in her messy desk. We knew that if we could find it, it would be fantastic, but finding it was the challenge. Her classmates adored her, and must have felt that she needed their help. I have fond memories of the daily and loving search for Alicia's homework, so I could record it in the grade book. Did she learn much from my homework? I doubt it. It is the love and camaraderie of the search which I remember.

I also remember Danny, who never brought his homework because he had not done it. The best part of Danny's life was the safe time he spent in school with us. When the school day ended, chaos and pain consumed his life. Homework was completely irrelevant.

Slowly, I began to realize that homework privileged a particular type of student: those who are safe, well-fed, and surrounded by supportive families. I also came to realize that the 6 hours a day (or, for those of us with secondary experiences, the hour a day) is the only human and learning time we are guaranteed with students. In addition, I came to trust the fact that sometimes, it is enough. For example, I am sure most of us have been profoundly enriched by one teacher in our past, who only was with us for an hour a day.

Now, as a grandparent, we watch with discomfort, as we see Dawn having similar experiences. Each day it is a long process of checking the book bag for instructions; filling in the blanks; circling the words; recording which book was read when, always followed by the obligatory parental signature; looking for the right paper on the right day and getting it into the right folder and book bag again. Of course, the irony is that Dawn typically reads with her children 2-3 hours that day, and when she is not reading with them, they are snuggled in the book nook reading alone.

We realize that questioning homework is heresy, so we are always so pleased to read others' reflections. While writing this short piece on homework, the following reflection popped up on email this morning.

As the year whines down the postings suggest that education remains one of the most crucial issues. I think about these things more personally lately as I see what I do for my kids and marvel at the obvious difference such efforts make. Examples: We ask about homework and keep track of it; what of the kid who does not get asked (for whatever reasons)? I spent hours in IKEA with the kids this weekend trying to find a good desk set up and new bookcase for the boys; what of the child who has no dedicated space to study, or someone who makes that kind of investment in their education? We bought the kids many books for Christmas; what of the kids who never get books and have none in the house? I read every night to my sons (Where the Red Fern Grows is the current selection); what of the child who never has this experience? And so on. We all know the difference these things make; the implications of my own investments (or the lack of such investments) just become more clear to me lately and it makes me feel like I must better understand those factors (in the classroom) over which I do have control and which can make a powerful difference in my students' lives. (J.Burke, in personal communication, 12.30.02)

Funwork, as opposed to homework, has been suggested by Enright & McCloskey (1998) and captures the concept that our learning together within family units can be fun, interesting, and pedagogically sound. Ada (2003) extends this idea to say that homework should not be additional schoolwork, but rather that it is homework because it requires the interaction of students with their families.

Reflection to Action

Initially, Andrea's question lead to our reflections. Our reflections lead to these five suggestions for ways of putting home back into homework.

- Interview a family member and write a short biography. Questions can be generated in class to begin the interview process. Time in class needs to be arranged so that the students read their written biographies of family members. Below we are listing a few examples of interview questions which Dawn has used, when she was teaching.
 - "Tell me about the funniest thing I did as a baby."
 - "Tell me about the funniest thing that ever happened to you."
 - "Tell me about my grandparents."
 - "Tell me about where you grew up."
 - "Tell me about what you did as a child."
 - "Tell me about your favorite memory."
 - "Tell me about how you and Dad/Mom met."
 - "Tell me about your favorite book and why it is your favorite."
- Students choose books from the classroom or the school library to take home to read with parents; or students can choose reading materials from their public library or reading materials, which are in the home. Arrange for time in class for students to share orally their reading experiences at home. Celebrate the students who are reading with families at home.
- Students write about projects or experiences they have with their families in the evenings. Students create a book, which captures their families. In school, time is arranged to share their individual books.

- Students write about the various literacy activities at home. Students list all of the contexts of literacy in their life, for example: comic books, magazines, how-to books used at home, grocery lists, computer activities, reading mail at home, etc. Arrange time in class to chart the home reading activities of all students. o Students, with family members at home, write letters to extended family members outside of the home.

Thank you, Andrea, for asking the question. We look forward to working with you as we generate more ways of putting HOME back into homework.

References:

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Enright, D. S., & McClosky, M.L. (1988). *Integrating English*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.