

WHAT PRICE HOMEWORK?

By DAVID EARLE LEWIS

WE are today avalanched by innumerable articles put forth by stringent psychologists and child experts (who in a startling number of cases turn out to be wallowing in a state of unmarried bliss) who advocate that homework is essentially detrimental to the welfare of the child. It has become almost embarrassing to advocate the merits of homework, for fear of being labelled as one of the more sadistic and scurrilous Squeers' of the teaching profession. They have maintained, and demanded, that the child has the right to "express" himself, without bothering about the lugubrious preliminary of providing the child with something to "express"—thus making disrespect, impertinence and inanity an end in themselves, and helping to deliver the death-blow to the already anemic virtues of respect, civility and common sense.

In an age when it is considered normal, and even smart, to do the minimum of work and let George do the rest, it is more than a little frightening to see this insidious influence seeping into the philosophies of many of our modern educationalists. Already there is more than a tendency in our schools to sacrifice certain academic standards to meet the deficient attempts of teen-agers whose basic excuse for attending school at all is a combination of postponing indefinitely the ordeal of fitting into our economic society, and of remaining eligible for the family allowance. This article does not, for a moment, maintain that any child should be denied the opportunity and encouragement of as much academic instruction as he desires—it is merely an observation that if values and ethical standards are to be sacrificed, the reason should be as valid as possible.

Certified education is rapidly becoming a relative matter. At one time not too distant in the past, a Grade XI certificate indicated a certain level of academic development. Today it is a cynical but irrefutable comment that many possess a college degree without in the least having endangered their adolescence or fourteen year mental age.

The complex society in which a child is born today does demand much more time and energy and preoccupation than it did several years ago. At the moment, the tendency seems to be that the sacrifice should be made at the expense of the school's demand on the child's time. From the point of view of the school, it must be admitted that few children can observe the required quantity of information during class periods to the degree where they do not need to supplement it with homework. Many teachers, caught with their pride down, and in a macabre

mood, will agree that even *with* homework the task seems futile. Thus the problem, posed by the advocates of non-homework, seems to be that the adjustment must be made in the quantity of work done in the school, an adjustment so that the child will be able to cope with the work during school hours only. This in turn insinuates that much of the work done in school is superfluous, inapplicable to life, unnecessary to the pupil.

The school has already made adjustments to this theory—the gradual disappearance of Latin, the introduction of “electives” in the school curriculum. By arguing that some academic topics treated in the curriculum are unnecessary, there has developed the argument that the school’s purpose is to prepare the child only for the practical, material problems of life. A truck-driver has no need of calculus or an appreciation of Keats, it is argued. This presumes that our future generations aspire no higher than being truck-drivers. It might well be argued that we are putting the materialistic horse before the academic wagon, and producing generations who are little equipped to be anything else but truck-drivers. It also presumes that because one is a truck-driver, that the entire world of music, literature, art—anything, in fact, beyond the limits of the dance hall and the pool room—are to be forever excluded from his range of experiences. Many have already come to the conclusion that our modern “progressive” goals are even more frightening than our modern “progressive” methods.

There has been much ridicule and denunciation of old methods of instruction such as the rote method. Harrowing and uninspired though these be, they did, however, often produce results. If there is a short cut to teaching the rudiments of arithmetic and English grammar, the teachers would be the first ones to offer up the prayers. But today the teachers too often find themselves in the position of trying to teach algebra to pupils who can’t do basic arithmetic, and of trying to unveil the subtleties of English literature to pupils who can’t differentiate between a noun and a semi-colon. In any field of endeavor, the individual attempting to enter that field, either to participate or to appreciate, must be familiar with the fundamental skills and tools of that field. There is no shortcut to experience, and efficiency and skill come only after much practice and painstaking application. Today we seem to apply to education the modern tendency to emulate such modern advertisements as “Learn How to Play the Piano in Ten Easy Les-

sons," or "YOU too can Write Novels without Learning Grammar."

Education is not merely a painful interlude between nine a.m. and three-thirty p.m. It is a co-operative affair between teacher, child and parent. It cannot do its work in isolation. The child must meet the school half-way, and that means accepting certain responsibilities of his own. Homework is part of that responsibility. It is justified not only by the actual good it does to the child, but because it acts as the only liaison between the school and the home, between the teacher and the parent. Homework, of course, requires a rational and understanding control. No one advocates burdening the child with endless assignments, or with work which has not been adequately covered in the classroom. Homework must be allotted in accordance with the age and learning ability of the child, and not one of its lesser advantages is that it allows the child to study at his own speed of learning.

Important as homework itself is, the habits and behaviour patterns it develops in the child are even more vital. Through homework the child develops a self-reliance, a sense of responsibility, a realization that one must meet life half-way. In this way the school IS preparing the child for life, in a far more vital and basic way than in mere practical "tips"—it is doing what it can to provide for society new members who have matured into accepting their responsibilities of that society.

The argument that the child has many interests outside the school which must demand much of his time is a common one. It is a significant, qualifying argument as to whether many of these "outside" interests are of the type which SHOULD demand the time and interest of the child. It is not coincidence that the pupil who whines about homework eating into his spare time activities is the very one that can be found spending entire evenings in pool halls, in restaurants hugging a juke-box and sucking a perpetual "coke," or attending every movie indiscriminately. Schools today provide in their curricula most of the activities which should interest and stimulate the child. Gymnasiums are lavishly equipped, activity programmes run the gamut from dramatics to square-dancing. The school has met these interests of the pupils to the extent where these activities are not extra-time considerations, but an integral part of the curriculum. It seems only logical and fair that the child should co-operate in meeting these chocolate coatings to his academic pills by doing some work at home.

Under the arguments pro-homework might well be included the responsibility of the parents toward their children. Too many parents seem to feel that they have fulfilled their obligation by conceiving them and keeping them alive until they are of school age. Then they are handed an armful of tools and sent to the school for the teachers to do the job. A child's attitude, and to a great degree, his capacity to react to the school environment, is determined in the home. Any teacher can pick out the pupils in her class who come from homes where there is a stimulating, intelligent atmosphere. There might well be more emphasis placed on an attempt to make the parents realize that *their* obligation and responsibility toward their children does not end with the material factors of clothing and feeding them.

In an age when the slogan "let George do it" seems to run rampant, the school finds itself in the dubious position of valiantly trying to revive the "Georges" from becoming an extinct race.
