

WHO MEWORK

HOW TO GET THE MOST
OUT OF HOMEWORK
WITHOUT REALLY SETTING IT

MARK CREASY

PRAISE FOR UNHOMEWORK

This book offers an inspiring alternative to the setting of homework for homework's sake. Mark shows us how to turn the sometimes dubious exercise of ritual homework-setting into a genuinely useful and positive experience. He demonstrates how homework can play a significant role in pupil progress, so that it is no longer seen as a bolt-on activity by learners or their teachers.

Written in a lively and accessible way, Mark's theory of Unhomework makes differentiating for every learner both simple and tactful. His innovative approach is sensitive to all three faces of the homework experience – learner, teacher and parent.

Isabella Wallace, education consultant, author and presenter, founder and managing trustee of Reach Out 2 Schools

Unhomework furnishes a philosophy for all primary and secondary teachers with a reliable array of homework tactics, resilience and thought. This book re-kindles the value of home-learning and fosters the process from a creative-curricular experience. This completes the perfect homework utopia. Using project-based learning, Creasy shuns the traditional homework-setting and chasing methods and shares his epiphany millisecond (which you may also have experienced) that transformed his thinking about homework altogether! *Unhomework* promotes inspiring, well-thought-out and differentiated homework that has stirred my own practice. This will add value for all individual teachers and students alike in any school and, in reading this book, you will secure a classroom experience that lowers teacher-workload, yet heightens student grit and independence.

Creasy showcases 'enquiry within a context'; learning beyond the classroom and equipping students to think, in order to take responsibility for themselves to increase rewards both emotionally and intellectually. He quite rightly berates the worksheet and advocates self-selecting timeframes and missions. *Unhomework*, full of intrinsic values to shift school policy, has thoughtful analogies: 'When I

do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad!' In a nutshell, *Unhomework* is the passport to 'free children from the straightjacket of standardised homework'. I cannot wait to get back into the classroom to mutate my plans from homework to Unhomework. A brilliant read that I want to devour all over again!

Ross Morrison McGill, teacher and author of *100 Ideas: Outstanding Lessons*

I was hooked from the off, as the book was inspired by a child's comments, not dreamt up due to government reform or an Ofsted checklist – although I am sure it would satisfy both. Mark draws on many sources, from Pablo Picasso to Vicky Pollard, yet it is children who have clearly been his defining teachers and inspiration throughout.

I continued with a wry smile as another savvy pupil exposed the flaws in setting traditional homework, only completing it when he thought it was for his benefit not the teacher's – 'Sneaky!' Like any good educational book, this held up a mirror to my own practice and made me question whether I was merely obeying the homework policy, checking that task off and moving on the learning, without allocating quality time for children to reflect. Am I allowing opportunities for them to develop and show off their strengths as they complete homework, or just confirming what I already know?

Mark continually reinforces the need for consistency and trust in the children, with his philosophy of the 5Rs at the heart. The students can then take responsibility for their own learning with the teacher as the trusted 'guide at the side'; 'unGoogleable' tasks are set but the teacher is there to support children as they wrestle with their own insecurities or fear of failure.

I loved reading the personal and shared successes through scripted anecdotes, particularly where children had surprised themselves, their teachers and/or their parents. Also, the wonderfully moving tales of pupils empowering each other through praise and constructive criticism, modelled by their 'guide at the side': children hailing their peers as the motivation to challenge themselves further, 'I didn't know what I could do until I saw others doing it – they inspired me.' It is child-led learning at its most powerful, as they set the time-frame and success criteria, which they can then use to assess against. And it will be completed because they want to – they understand the responsibility that this freedom brings.

Now is the perfect time to reflect on your own practice as educational policy puts homework back into the hands of head teachers. Unhomework is purposeful and stimulating, a chance for children to develop their learning skills whilst exploring the new knowledge-heavy curriculum: this is truly a platform for children to prepare socially and emotionally for the unknown challenges of the twenty-first century.

Unhomework addresses how to involve everyone – I will be sending out Mark's list of how parents can help develop their child's learning skills at home and adding my own. There are even examples and resources to help practitioners, from NQTs to head teachers, get started. Again I was moved at how the children had inspired colleagues and convinced parents, as a unit, using the 5Rs; a personal reminder to share my own and my class's successes, not by preaching but ensuring I don't become an 'educational Gollum'.

Ruth Saxton, primary teacher, AST in creativity and chair of the National Association for the Teaching of Drama

Avoiding stagnation at all costs, and maintaining an enviable passion for children and the learning process, Mark Creasy is a teacher who thinks outside the box, outside the classroom and outside the norm. He transcends the perimeters of the classroom walls and takes his students with him! Fanatical about teaching and learning, he endeavours to make learning exciting, meaningful and memorable for the students. He seeks strategies that give his students opportunities to investigate real-world knowledge, taking learning to the next action-packed level. Think maverick innovation, the unexpected, movement-oriented and a little bit crazy ... then you'll be on the right track.

Both as a teacher and a parent in daily contact with adolescents, I believe the ability of young people to engage in rigorous analytical thinking, creativity and problem-solving has been eroded. It would seem to me that Mark's *Unhomework* addresses all of these skills. *Unhomework* stresses that the role of a teacher is crucial in not only guiding young learners in their search for information, but also in providing the tools to evaluate the usefulness and veracity of that information and to formulate their own thoughts and arguments on the basis of it. At a time when a curriculum and exam-driven education system straitjackets even the most dynamic teacher, so that schemes of work and lessons often become stifling and not stimulating, *Unhomework* inspires the practitioner not only to facilitate thinking skills and PLTS but also to build in opportunities for young learners to become creative, critical thinkers: room to make lots of mistakes, to build resilience and to know *how* to learn anything they choose to. *Unhomework* emphasises the need to give all young

people a huge 'toolbox' of thinking skills – a toolbox they can dip into at the most appropriate moments. Mark Creasy reminds us that it doesn't mean we don't teach the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, but that we can choose skills-driven methods to allow children to see the different ways there might be to learning things.

Sarah Noble, head of department, modern foreign languages

With this book, Mark Creasy has tackled an area of education (homework) which has long needed addressing. As a Year 4 teacher, I can readily connect with his ideas and the thinking behind *Unhomework*. I am sure that other teachers will do the same.

The book's informal style makes it enjoyable to read whilst dealing with what can sometimes be a 'touchy' subject between teachers, children and parents.

Mark has used some catchy chapter headings to engage the reader and in each chapter he 'says it how it is', in real-life situations. Interspersed with the theory are snippets of Mark's humour and wit. Each chapter leads effortlessly on to the next.

Not only will this book appeal to teachers but it will also interest parents. As I am sure Mark will agree, when it comes to homework, getting parents on board is half the battle.

Davina Suggett, Year 4 teacher

Mark Creasy expertly steers you away from the trials and tribulations of homework and into the realms of *Unhomework*! This book is not just about making the most of lost opportunities for additional learning; it really gets to grips with how and why children learn and how the traditional concept of homework does not necessarily do what it is supposed to. As a teacher or school leader there is much to

consider here. Be prepared to read this book, reflect on your own experiences of homework, be convinced there is a better way of doing things and then go to school and make some changes!

Allow Mark to help you with ideas and inspiration for making a difference to your children's learning. Allow him to inspire whole school policy on learning and explore the true benefits of *Unhomework*. When you read this book, and you should, you will see how important it is to make the most of learning opportunities in school and at home.

As a parent, I often get frustrated with the standard and relevance of the homework my own children receive. Maybe at the next parents' evening I should casually leave a copy of *Unhomework* on the desk and see what transpires!

Unhomework will give you the inspiration and practical guidance you need to break free from the 'curse of the worksheet'.

Dave Whitaker, executive principal, Springwell Community Special School and Barnsley PRU

Unhomework is an interesting concept and one which may strike fear into a few colleagues who cling on to the security blanket of the worksheet-style approach to homework – after all, it is a rare constant in this ever-changing educational landscape! At a time when a new curriculum is being introduced, this book suggests how we may grasp the chance to try something new and 'dovetail' it into a creative approach to all that we do in school. This is a golden opportunity to truly let pupils lead their own learning and follow trails of enquiry that will motivate and engage them. Not only that, it will also increase the chances of getting parents on board. This is a book with plenty of ideas for teachers and practical ways for parents to support their children.

Beverley Dandy, head teacher, Outwoods Primary School

Whenever I run a parents' session about homework, the results are almost always the same. Some parents believe that schools should be chastised for setting second-rate homework, such as 'finish off what you were doing in class' or, just as bad, MOTS (more of the same) and so miss an opportunity to stimulate additional learning in their children. On the other hand, some parents question the value and purpose of homework as a substitute for the many exciting things they could be doing with their family instead. Still others believe the school is trying to turn them into teachers, at best, or dictators, at worst, who police the quality and quantity of their child's homework. For any child caught in the middle, this can be extremely frustrating, but for a highly able child it can be nothing short of torture. Imagine having all those ideas going round in your head and being told to do something far more boring and meaningless! I was therefore delighted when I was asked to read and review Mark's book about Unhomework. The structure it suggests for challenging children so that they go as far as their potential allows is so interesting that I would recommend it to every teacher and challenge them, whether they are in primary or secondary school, to implement it for just one term and evaluate the results. I will certainly be including references to his approach in our future workshops on homework.

Denise Yates, chief executive, Potential plus UK (formerly the National Association for Gifted Children)

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First published by

Independent Thinking Press

Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK

www.independentthinkingpress.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135109-3

Mobi ISBN 978-178135154-3

ePub ISBN 978-178135155-0

ePDF ISBN 978-178135156-7

Edited by Peter Young

Printed and bound in the UK by

Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

For Deryn, Jessica and Thomas, thank you for your inspiration

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book wouldn't have been possible were it not for a huge cast of people. Firstly, Deryn and Jessica, you are the reason I do everything I do. You inspire me every day to try to be better than I was the day before; thank you for your love, support and unstinting encouragement. Also, to my mum and dad, who'd have thought a council estate boy from Hayes (correctly pronounced 'ayes) would have a book? Thanks to you I do!

I can't name every colleague I've ever worked with, but I have to give special thanks to Daryll, Shirley and Rhett – you made such an impact at the key times in my professional career – and to Andrew B for your encouragement and guidance when I needed it most. Similarly, it's impossible to list every child I have ever taught who has inspired, challenged, provoked, spurred and taught me, but this book is for you all and those who follow.

Finally a huge thank you to Ian Gilbert, Caroline Lenton and Peter Young for seeing potential in the idea of 'Unhomework' and supporting me through the entire process; without you the book wouldn't have been written. To anyone else who thinks they should have been mentioned, I apologise; it wasn't done on purpose – well, probably not!

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UNHOMework VS HOMEWORK

Homework

Benjamin Franklin famously said, ‘Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.’ In my experience, and from the feedback of children I have spoken to during my teaching career across six schools, this is not how children view homework. Unfortunately, the following scene is more common:

The bell rings.

Teacher (*over the shuffling of feet and scraping of chairs*): Right, I want you to get down today’s homework.

Class: (*Collective groaning, some not even bothering to get homework diaries out ... again*)

Teacher: It’s not my fault; you know it’s the rule!

Class: (*Groaning louder*)

Teacher: Right, it’s there on the board. I want it in next lesson.

The class’s next lesson.

Teacher: Where's your homework?

Child: What homework?

Teacher: The one I set at the end of last lesson.

Child: I forgot to write it down as I needed the loo before next class.

Teacher: Well get it to me tomorrow then. (*To another child*) What about yours, why is it in that state?

Child: I've done it!

Teacher: But it's not what you're capable of, is it?

Child: But I did it – isn't it good enough?

Teacher (*in desperation, grateful it's been done and realising time is ebbing from the lesson*): Of course, it's just I'd like it to be neater to show more care and pride.

Child (*walking off, muttering*): Maybe you show the same and don't set it in two minutes, after the bell.

This scene was the reality for a Year 10 geography class I was in the process of observing for peer support of the teacher. It hit at the very crux of the homework dilemma: we set what parents, peers and children expect. It also hit at the heart of the teacher's issues too: time management and trying to do everything, without giving the children ownership of their learning – but that is another story.

An alternative problem also derives from the best practice of many teachers, advocated in all six of the schools in which I have worked: setting the homework at the start of the lesson. Here are two exchanges from different classes, one recounted from a child's perspective and another I observed, which show how this can also be fraught with problems:

My conversation

I was mentoring Year 11 students, trying to raise aspirations and make some of them realise how able they were, as well as delivering a swift kick up

the backside for others! As Jake sat down I smiled inwardly. For the past three years he had been able to get to the heart of pretty much any issue in the school; in fact the head would often ask why the senior leadership team (SLT) was required when all we needed to do was to leave Jake in charge! Essentially, he was the school's Huggy Bear. If you wanted 'the word on the street', Jake knew it, intimately! Always able to dance on the right side of the school rules, he was a loveable rogue who used charm where his ability failed him. He was already being spoken of by some of us as a potential head boy in the sixth form – much to the amazement of others, who had not encountered Jake in full flow!

After looking at target grades, progress and what Jake expected to do after Year 11 the conversation, as was scripted, turned to the section 'How can the school help me more in my learning?' This was the bit I knew would prove enlightening, though I was concerned whether the half-side of A4 box I had would be enough! I posed the question and waited ...

Jake (*shifting in his seat, looking at me seriously*): Mr Creasy, it's simple.

MC: Really?

Jake: Yeah, I reckon it could be solved in three, maybe four simple ways.

MC: You've thought about this Jake, so what are they?

Jake: You might not like the answers, you know.

MC: If I wanted only answers I liked I wouldn't ask!

Jake: Okay, hmm, where to start ... Okay ...

Jake then led me on a critical analysis of what needed to be done, starting with the simple, 'If you want children to behave better, get the teachers to be on time and meet us at the door with a smile, not bark down the corridor, or from inside the room shout "In" because *they're* late.' He provided more detailed

analyses of lessons, commenting on pace, variety and learning styles: 'Why can't I use my art skills in more lessons? I could make notes in pictures. Shouldn't it be *my* decision how I want *my* revision notes to look, not the teachers?'

Until finally he said, 'The last thing, er, how many is that now?' After hearing this was point nine of the original three or four he smiled:

Jake: Homework.

MC: Homework?

Jake: Yep. Now I'm giving away some serious secrets here, but I trust you!

MC (*laughing inwardly at his naivety*): Thank you!

Jake: Well, you know the school is divided into three groups of teachers, well four, but one group is split in two.

MC: I didn't, Jake, how so?

Jake (*without pride or bravado, just matter of fact*): Well, first, since Year 9 I've pretty much done no homework, you know.

MC: What? Now I know that's not true, I teach you.

Jake: Well, you don't count really.

MC: Thanks!

Jake: Don't take offence, it's a compliment!

MC: Hmm, we differ on compliments then!

Jake (*smiling*): Let me explain, then you'll see! The first group are the late setters, you know the ones, bell rings and they've forgotten to set it 'cos they've focused on the starter, main and dessert.

MC: Plenary.

Jake: Whatever! Well it's easy. I always sit at the front, so for them I say I didn't copy it down as I had left the room. They believe me! So I don't do their work and if they think to ask me to do it the

following week, we discuss if it's fair for me to do double and agree it's not!

MC: Okay, the second group?

Jake: Oh, they're even better! They set theirs at the start of the lesson and this is the two part group. The first of these is to complete the worksheet. Somehow I always lose it, forget it or something else. Or if it's a look-it-up-on-the-Internet, my computer is broken – it never is though!

MC: Okay, what about the second part of that group?

Jake: Oh, them? They're my favourite! They set it at the start, telling us that we'll understand it by the end of the lesson. I start off by interrogating the sheet with all the 'how, what, where' questions I can. Then, at the end of the lesson, when they're doing that plenary thing, I can go through what I don't understand about the lesson and how I can't do the homework.

MC: But surely they offer to help you out?

Jake: They do, but that's the beauty of it. I ask them why I'm being punished for not understanding the lesson and have to give up my time to do the homework. That always throws them! They get all flustered and say they'll give me some help next lesson and not to worry about the homework.

MC: Very clever!

Jake: And actually most staff just think 'Oh, it's Jake' and don't even worry about my homework.

MC: Perhaps that explains some of your grades?

Jake: Harsh!

MC: But fair! So what about the final group then?

Jake: Oh, that's easy, it's you!

MC: Me?

Jake: Yeah, the way you set homework, making us think for ourselves and making us responsible, you make me not want to let myself down and if I don't do it it's my fault! That's sneaky!

MC: Ah, now I see why it was a compliment earlier.

Jake: Yeah, just don't tell the other teachers – you're the only one I do homework for.

MC: No Jake, *you're* the only one you do homework for!

Jake (*grinning*): Fair enough, you got me there!

When the mentoring was fed back to staff, Jake's comments were highlighted. Some staff were shocked, but for others it helped them to look into changing their way of setting homework so that Jake was soon doing more homework than just for me!

My observation

Class enters, sits down and gets on with the starter activity. All good so far. They have clear routines and set expectations, and follow them. The teacher then directs the children to the freshly powered-up PowerPoint which has the homework on, which they duly

copy into homework planners as the teacher hands out the sheet they are to complete. The instructions say: 'Fill in the sheet below, highlighting any answers that you had to look up.' It is due the next lesson. The task is a cloze exercise and there are three different types of sheet being handed out, so on the surface differentiation is being covered.

After the lesson, which went well, with the children making good progress, the teacher outlined her frustration about the homework. She knew it was better practice to set it at the start of a lesson, but then, so that she didn't miss covering what the children needed for completing the work, she would have to set prosaic work, or review previous learning or set up future tasks. Any of these, whilst providing summative or formative assessment, might also put some children off. In the case of reviewing work, trying to maintain true differentiation for the entire class to meet all of their needs was a practical impossibility. This had led to the cursory three-tiered approach to differentiation I had witnessed in the observation. As for setting work yet to be undertaken, the

colleague had found that many children panicked with things they had not encountered in class. This led to the homework taking too long and causing parental complaints or to it not being done at all as children felt like failures, or becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy when the lessons on that topic began. Instead of being a true reflection or baseline of the children's ability, the opposite was true with her homework. Here was a colleague, somebody liked and respected by staff, parents and children alike, who was feeling bowed by the expectations of homework. We discussed her thoughts and I explained how Unhomework worked – she knew it would make a real difference.

What is the problem with homework?

There is increasing research evidence which supports my long-held view that there is no point to the traditional form of homework. I have become increasingly frustrated with the inadequacies of the traditional homework system, and have made numerous small changes in the way I allocate homework in the classes of children I have been teaching; however, my Unhomework approach is still developing, given all the input I receive from colleagues, children and parents. Unhomework is designed to address all of the points above, as outlined in my conversation with Jake and the scenarios at the start of the chapter. It has shown itself to be of greater benefit than traditional, routine and formulaic homework in that it truly meets the needs of children's learning.

Whilst parents, teachers, lecturers, employers and ministers may disagree on the form of education children should receive and the requisite skills they

should possess when they leave school, the common ground appears to be the necessity for employability skills. Therefore, the myth about homework being 'life preparation' is over-simplistic; we need a twenty-first-century workforce to cope with the technological, social, moral and philosophical challenges we face (for further reading on this subject, see Thomas L Friedman's *The World is Flat*).

Even the word homework is unhelpful, given the wide number of tasks it encompasses. Here is a sample from the past two weeks at my current school for Year 5 and 6 children:

- ✦ Memorise (the French alphabet and spellings)
- ✦ Answer (maths booklet)
- ✦ Research (a wife of Henry VIII)
- ✦ Read (to the end of a chapter for English)
- ✦ Write (a factfile for a famous scientist)
- ✦ Create (a model of the water cycle)

- ✦ Complete (the sentences using synonyms)
- ✦ Match (words to their synonyms)
- ✦ Interview (someone about recycling)

This list is clearly not exhaustive. It says nothing of discussing, drawing, baking (yes, baking!), viewing, listening or other tasks which I have not included here. Therefore, the issues are:

- ✦ No teacher can be reasonably expected to provide quality, differentiated homework for their entire class – certainly not each and every week (and if they do, they need to get a reality check on what the children are learning).
- ✦ Not all parents are experts in every subject, nor are they able to assist their child adequately or match the current teaching methodology. Instead, they may only have their own school experience to base things on, and that may not have been a good one!

- ✦ Teachers should be focusing on making learning inspiring and engaging, and treating homework as an essential part of the learning process.
- ✦ Children need some time to develop their own pursuits and interests, which will make them well-rounded, rather than spending all their free time within the confines of academic education.
- ✦ Traditionally set homework does not inspire lifelong independent learning; it is more often a tick box assignment (and then forgotten).
- ✦ Children know well enough what they are capable of and should be taught to address this for themselves.
- ✦ Children should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their talents and present their work in a way that engages them and creates interest in others.

And then comes the battle over completing inane, uninspiring, insipid homework. In many cases, all it does is provide succour to the question raised in the

title of Ian Gilbert's *Why Do I Need a Teacher When I've Got Google?*, as this is the destination for many homework tasks. Staff may set a task to meet the expectations I have spoken of but it will not really develop the children as they can simply access Google and find the answer. Need to research Henry VIII? Google will give you reams of information. Want to know about recycling in your area? Google searches will give you text and charts for this. Need a factfile on a famous scientist? A Google search, probably via Wikipedia, will provide more information than you need – or can understand if you're in Year 5 or 6! As Ian Gilbert points out in his book, it's not just about fact learning and memorising, but about inspiring and instilling a love of the subject, which traditionally set homework doesn't lend itself to. I am not blaming the teachers for setting such homework, it's just that this process has become a rather hackneyed game being played out in classrooms all over the country. What saddens me is that they haven't thought of, or had time to think of, an alternative.

The homework game is played according to some or all of the following 'rules':

- 1 The teacher sets the homework – preferably at the start of the lesson so the children can write it down in time.
- 2 The child completes it during the intervening period before the next class, with or without help from colleagues, parents and so on. Their output is differentiated from other pupils by their ability to complete the task at hand (or rather, whether or not they can copy and paste adequately, or whether they use their own words for what they've read online).
- 3 They hand it in, or the teacher chases them to get it, or punishes them for not handing it in.
- 4 The teacher marks it using some kind of intellectual template, where evaluation appears in the form of stock phrases and clichés, given they've all used only the first or second website from their Google search list.

- 5 The teacher hands it back.
- 6 The child only looks at the mark or grade.
- 7 The teacher encourages the child to read the comments.
- 8 There is no adequate use of the feedback, as neither you nor the child have allocated quality time to do anything with the comments because the curriculum demands we need to move on to the next theme/topic. So we return to stage 1, but we congratulate ourselves that we have met/obeyed the school homework (and marking) policy.

That is not to say that some teacher colleagues do not try hard to resist this and develop a more creative approach. I know many do, but too many fall prey to this hamster-wheel existence, if only to get by.

This is where family life can potentially break down. Parents, wanting the best for their children, support, encourage or enforce the doing of homework at the

expense of enjoying quality time with their child. It may escalate into the nightly battle many friends describe to me. They may even agree with their child's complaints about its pointlessness, but as this fits the model they were exposed to at school, it makes sense to continue with it as, by and large, it didn't do them any harm. Hence, their time to cherish and nurture their child is dissipated and they are dragged onto a similar hamster wheel to the teacher, but do so whilst juggling their own work, home and family requirements, as well as trying to find time for themselves. And none of this provides any benefit for the children.

I have witnessed this first-hand and have had it recounted by colleagues across Britain. In France, homework is banned in primary schools – it has been since 1956, though recently French parents felt the need for action as teachers were ignoring this legislation and sending tasks home. In fact, the Fédération des Conseils de Parents d'Elèves (FCPE – the French Parents' association, with representatives in almost all French schools) has led a nationwide boycott of *devoirs* (homework exercises), which 'put pressure on children' and cause a burden to their parents who 'do not have sufficient knowledge' to help their children. However, I am not for a moment arguing for a move towards the French system. Unhomework offers a different approach and actually allows children to develop themselves, at the same time providing parents with opportunities to support them properly and enjoy the feeling of fulfilment and purpose when they do.

One simplistic solution to the routine homework problem would be to treat all the teachers setting such homework in a similar manner – not as individuals, but part of a homogeneous mass with no consideration of their individual needs. Just imagine the response in a staffroom to that! In fact, forget imagining it – think back to the most recent poor INSET you've received. You know the type: all staff, irrespective of role/responsibility/experience/interest, get the same delivery – invariably PowerPoint being read to you! Now, how did you like that? Were you excited, thinking, 'Wow! I can't wait to try that out!' or were you more along the lines of, 'That's x minutes

of my life I'll never get back'? Now ask yourself: why don't my children deserve what I expect? What's stopping me from giving them a better deal? So, towards this end, I want to be supportive and offer solutions to the problem. What Unhomework can deliver, which traditionally set homework cannot, is individuality and purpose for every child, whilst not expecting miracles from teachers to achieve it.

The curse of the worksheet

Something similar needs to happen to worksheet-based homework, which could be any of the following: fill in the blanks, complete a crossword, do a word search or tick the box exercises. Or, the most demeaning, colouring in. All of these are clearly designed to say, 'I've set the homework as the policy states (but I can't be arsed to make it meaningful!).'

I am not saying that these kinds of activities are inappropriate for younger children. I know from Key

Stage 1 and Foundation Stage colleagues that there can be some merit in these approaches. For example, supporting the weaker speller with multiple choice options of words can prevent demotivation and underpin their knowledge of how words are used correctly. Similarly, I have seen my own daughter, who has struggled with times tables, enjoy a colouring exercise where all of the numbers from a specific table created a picture, thus showing differentiation and recognising that she is a creative girl and that a bare sheet of sums would not engage her. However, from personal experience in observing my colleagues and as a parent, I too often feel that the homework set only serves to prove John Abbott's observation: 'Teachers do what they believe in extraordinarily well, but what they are told to do merely to a mediocre standard.'¹

Perhaps the greatest irony is the use of worksheet homework for topics such as 'The Rainforest' or 'The Environment', where children are taught about deforestation, yet still we cut down trees and waste paper

¹ <http://www.21learn.org/uncategorized/the-making-of-teachers/>

in setting homework! This can then be compounded when the child researches the work on Wikipedia and, as they have not been taught to do otherwise, or maybe as they're at home without a limit, they print the entire webpage to hand in. After all, why copy and paste, let alone read and rewrite, when you can simply click 'Print' to show how much research you have done? That is not to blame the child; in my opinion, some blame must be apportioned to the teacher for setting work that can be answered in this way and/or not teaching correct website researching. The child will reason out the following:

- What have I got to do?
- What else do I want to be doing?
- Which is my preference?
- What is my maximum output for my minimum input?
- Can I get away with this and leave myself with more time for friends, sport, clubs, gaming, music, shopping, etc.?

If the answer to the last point is 'yes' then the system breaks down. This is especially true, given how many parents are relieved to hear those magic words, 'I've already done my homework.' This eases their burden and the need to take to the battleground. Now they can choose to believe (however vaguely) that this is one thing they can tick off their list after their hard day at work.

Ironically, the government appears to be in (partial) agreement with this standpoint on the futility of setting homework simply because we have to. Michael Gove announced in March 2012 that there would now be no government guidelines about how much homework a child should do each night and that this, instead, should fall to individual head teachers.² This was a clear change from the previous expectations of an hour a week for five- to seven-year-olds, building to 2.5 hours for up to sixteen-year-olds.³ I'm sure that head teachers will like this, for, as we know,

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/9121048/Michael-Gove-scraps-homework-rules.html>

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/17255075>

they clearly have nothing better to do (especially in the current education climate). From now on it will be much easier, thanks to the direction the new curriculum appears to be taking: all homework needs to be fact-based rather than stimulating!

The Department of Education claims that this decision apparently came as the result of parental comments and complaints about their child's lack of time to do sports and other activities and their need to spend time with their families. Although Michael Gove may be frequently criticised for failing to listen to the views of others, especially when contrary to his own, I hope this decision will be carried out, given that in the same month 70% of responders to an online *Guardian* survey believed children get too much homework.

What is Unhomework?

Unhomework is a philosophy and process for ensuring that the work your class completes outside of the classroom is relevant, purposeful and engaging for them, whatever their age or phase of education. I established it to extend the way in which I work with the children in my class into the way they can work in their own time. My aim was to allow them to develop those attributes and enhance their learning through self-motivation. Furthermore, it was designed to allow them to recognise and show off their strengths, rather than just meeting the requirements of the work which had been set. If done properly, under conditions that allow it to flourish, Unhomework will support children in addressing their areas for development too, giving them the confidence and security to try different things.

Unhomework can be defined as 'homework without really setting it'. It is work that the children are inspired to complete without being told to. This is

because it relates to their learning and empowers them to confirm their understanding by taking the lesson further or in a different direction, or, better still, by applying it in their own way. The children actually state upfront what they intend to do (unless they decide to take on an exploratory ‘mission’) and then produce the evidence of their endeavours in the given time. The children will agree the timeframe for completion with the teacher, based on what it is they are going to produce, and they will also state the criteria against which it will be marked, usually with due reference to Bloom’s Taxonomy. So the evidence will demonstrate knowledge or understanding, analysis, application or evaluation, or even synthesise the learning. From this, the evidence (which is presented in any appropriate form, decided by the child) is shared with the class, then self- and peer-assessed against the criteria, before being checked by the teacher. Once this process has occurred, or even during it as discussions abound about what each child is doing, the work can be built on by the individual. This can be done for either depth or breadth of

study, not only for the child whose work it is, but for the whole class, as they are inspired by their peers.

This concept builds on the ideals of the Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS – see Appendix 1) in striving to support the children in becoming:

- Creative thinkers
- Reflective learners
- Team workers
- Independent enquirers
- Effective participators
- Self-managers

To me, these are essential attributes for learners to develop, and they go hand in hand with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority’s (QCA) Big Picture⁴ which despite unfortunately falling out of

⁴ http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20080806121643/http://qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/Big_Picture_2008.pdf

favour with the coalition government, provided the three excellent fundamentals of the curriculum, supporting children in becoming:

- ✦ Successful learners
- ✦ Confident individuals
- ✦ Responsible citizens

The QCA wanted to ensure that the curriculum children were to receive supported these ideals, and believed that everything flowed from there. This seems a perfectly reasonable aim, because who wouldn't want their child or class to achieve this? I have also found that when I introduce how I want to work with a class and what my aspirations are for them, these six simple words sum it all up. The PLTS are there to amplify them and Unhomework thus becomes easier to comprehend, as it is not clear how children can really become self-managing creative thinkers if we simply prescribe routine homework. How can they become reflective learners if the homework they complete is never developed further?

Therefore, Unhomework finds natural support from the creative curriculum, enquiry-based learning and project-based learning. It is designed to free the children from the straitjacket of standardised homework. Unhomework allows the children greater autonomy and, in addition, eases the teachers' burdens. However, this is not a simple rebranding job. Unhomework relies on being properly introduced and appropriately modelled for the children's understanding, ensuring that the children fully realise the extent of the freedom they are being given – alongside the responsibility this brings.