

Unschooling and the Willed Curriculum

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The willed curriculum nurtures body, mind, spirit, and emotions in authentic, organic, and genuine ways, and prepares learners for a full and rich life.

One of the things that attracts me most to unschooling is my interest in child advocacy. In fact, I primarily see myself as a child advocate. Unfortunately, we can do things to young people that we would never dream of doing to adults. In part, I believe that because we have so little trust in youngsters. Fortunately, there are people who are setting up spaces and places where young people can be raised and learn with love, respect, trust, care, and compassion. I believe that we can learn a lot from the learner-centered democratic worldview and that we should look to them as powerful examples of how to treat young people and have them learn in gentler ways.

To illustrate how disrespectfully we treat our young, Epstein (2007, 11) concludes his study of adolescence with the following:

One would think that military personnel — obligated to follow orders without question — and prisoners — stripped of most of their rights by the criminal justice system — would be far more encumbered than noninstitutionalized teens. But that's not what I found.... Teens appear to be subjected to about twice as many restrictions as are prisoners and soldiers and to more than ten times as many restrictions as everyday adults.

Although Epstein's study focused on teens, the same disrespect applies to those even younger.

Unschooling is not a recipe, but a worldview. At its simplest, unschooling is a learner-centered democratic approach to education. Unschooling understands that young people are not lazy, but rather are very eager and capable of learning. Unschooling is based on the idea that all learners should be empow-



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ered and have a substantive say in what, when, where, and how they learn. Unschoolers should not have to give up control over their own learning simply because they decide to enter a school, but unfortunately that is often the case. In addition, unschoolers should decide whether they would like to remain in a formal school or whether they would prefer to opt out. To clarify, I am using the terms “learner-centered” and “democratic” in the way that Jerry Mintz (2004) does. He defines learner-centered education as “an approach that is based on the interest of the student rather than curriculum driven, where someone else has the idea of what you ought to be learning,” and he defines democratic education as “education where students are actually empowered to make decisions about their own education and, if they are in a school, their own school.”

I have two daughters. My eldest decided to attend school largely, I believe, because her good friend did, while the younger has currently decided not to attend school. Although, I would prefer that my daughters not attend mainstream schooling, ultimately the decision is theirs. I may disagree with their decision, but as a believer in the right for children to make substantive decisions about their lives, I consent and do whatever I can to support them. My schooled daughter and I have deep conversations and I try to mitigate the damage and wounds that I see that the mainstream schooling system inflicts on her — as I believe it does to all of us who walk through its doors, young and old, employees and employers, and volunteers. Of course, people are doing schooling in learner-centered democratic ways without bells, assignments, tests, age segregation, report cards, competition; without an externally imposed curriculum, without rules that are created in a top-down fashion, and without punishments. In short, there are schools that are much more democratic than mainstream schools.

I have been fortunate enough to visit a number of these free schools and I can honestly say that of the many schools I have visited in my life, I have never seen more learning and a more positive ambience than when I enter these learner-centered democratic spaces. It is difficult to walk even a few steps without being intrigued at what activities people are engaged in. Some students are inside and some are outside. Some are working alone, others in groups. The activi-

ties that they engage in range from playing cards to using cell phones, computers, musical instruments, writing, reading, other traditional school subjects, and athletics. One powerful learning strategy they use that is often ignored in mainstream schooling is conversation. They talk with each other, and in doing so, learn a lot and become very skilled in the art of conversation. To see people of all ages freely interacting with each other, rather than being segregated by age, is simply magical.

This is not to say that problems never arise in such schools, but when they do they are dealt with in a very gentle, fair, and democratic manner. And most important of all, the rules are created by the community and can be changed by the community. Unlike mainstream schools where the rules are created and enforced only by those in positions of power, learner-centered schools ensure that those within their community are empowered in real and substantive ways.

As an unschooling family my children have never been punished. They have never experienced timeouts or any other form of externally imposed directive. They are treated with love, trust, respect, care, and compassion. This does not mean that we never disagree, but when we disagree we deal with it in democratic ways usually through dialogue and conversation. This has given me tremendous respect for how capable young people are. Often, because of these conversations, although I initially believed that I was correct, I later realized that I was wrong. This happens often and it is not a weakness, but a strength. We are not in competition with each other, but we should be working together to solve real-life problems. Often, when solutions cannot be reached, someone agrees to stand aside, knowing that we were all working together to try and find a solution and could not. If someone later comes up with a solution, we can always revisit the situation. This leaves little room for conflict because if we cannot collectively find a solution, we simply cannot. Of course, this is very rare and usually we can come up with something. Since, we can usually come up with solutions, the times we cannot are easier to stomach because we have shown over and over how committed we are to meeting all of our needs, and so when we can't, doing something you would rather not is easier to accept.

We are modeling what it means to be accommodating by being accommodating. As Noddings (2003, 80) suggests about care, "I have a picture of those moments in which I was cared for and in which I cared, and I may reach toward this memory and guide my conduct by it if I wish to do so." The more moments we have that we can picture, the better prepared we are to care or love or trust or respect. If we want a world with better adults, we have to provide better moments for young people to picture.

Love, Trust, Respect, Care and Compassion, and the "Willed Curriculum"

Love, trust, respect, care, and compassion for me are the cornerstones of unschooling. I have recently finished writing a book, in which I flesh out these terms and their connection to unschooling. My book is tentatively titled *The willed curriculum: What love, trust, care and compassion have to do with learning*. These four qualities are not linear or hierarchical in any way; in fact, they are holistic and are separated only for the purposes of discussion.

Love

I believe that love is critical to learning. If we have love we no longer need manipulation, coercion, and violence. Learning can happen in very gentle and powerful ways if learners love what they are learning, are in a loving place, and if they love themselves, the world, and all beings and things within it. The problem is that learners are often forced to learn things that are externally imposed, that they have no interest in or motivation to learn about. We create these artificial hierarchies and what really amounts to an arbitrary curriculum, and then force people to drink from a pool that ends up being a mirage. Instead, with love as the guide and the learner in charge of their own education — whether it be piano, or physics, or hockey — we will nurture body, mind, spirit, and emotions in authentic, organic, and genuine ways, and prepare learners for a full and rich life. We need to remove obstacles, not create them. We need to understand that every human is a gift, and has gifts to offer and we need to allow them to explore their gifts and not try to fit them into a standard mold.

Trust

We need to trust that young people can decide what they want to learn. In fact, they are the only ones who know best what their inner being craves, desires, and what within them is waiting to unfold. Not only must we trust the learner, but the learner needs to trust us and most importantly her/himself. Unfortunately, far too many adults believe that young people cannot be trusted to make these substantive decisions, using the poor choices made by some youngsters as proof. They forget that such behavior often reflects the negative effects of their mainstream educational experiences. Ultimately, as Holt (1989, 157) writes, "Living is learning. It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some would even say unconscious) without constantly learning things."

Respect

We have to respect learners enough to understand that they can determine what they need to learn and how and when and where and whether. In fact, they are the only ones who can make this decision. This does not mean that they can never learn anything from others or should not want to; what it means is that they should always have ultimate control over their own learning. Respect needs to be mutual and tone must respect oneself.

Care and Compassion

Care and compassion lead us away from focusing only on ourselves. Thinking about others and the community is critical and I believe that unschooling is the best way to prepare people to understand the importance of care and compassion and the global "us." We need to provide moments of kindness for them to picture when it comes time for them to act and make decisions.

The Willed Curriculum

These four qualities bring us to the "willed curriculum." The most powerful way to learn is to be interested in and internally motivated to learn something; the willed curriculum ensures that this can happen. Learners need to learn what they will and however they will. Learning happens all of the time. Just imagine if we took this seriously and lived as if we understood that learning happens naturally, as

Holt suggests, all throughout our lives. Many believe the myth that there are critical periods of learning, but as Worden, Hinton, & Fischer (2011, 11) explain,

While there is evidence for limited critical periods in brain development in limited domains (such as the strength of vision in the two eyes), no evidence supports a critical period for academic skills.

When learners are ready and motivated to learn something is the best time for them to learn. There is no point even learning to read if there is nothing you want to read. Reading should happen when you want to read. Of course, unschoolers know that reading in a print culture happens naturally, seamlessly, and holistically, not because of regimented externally imposed formulas. The result is that when people have a reason to read, they enjoy it. It is not a chore, but a willed activity. Kate Hammer (2011) recently wrote,

The reason the American approach doesn't work? If children are pushed to read, for example, they might learn at an earlier age but research suggests they are also more likely to become disinterested in reading by the age of eight.

Hammer quotes Marilyn Chapman, an early learning expert at the University of British Columbia: "At the end of the day they don't like reading and writing and then they don't want to do it unless they're forced to; what's the point?" Indeed, what's the point?

The term "unschooling" is perhaps not the best one to use when explaining what this worldview entails. Others have coined different terms that essentially get at the same thing: "life learning," "natural learning," "organic learning," "open source learning," and "holistic education." However, the what terms are used are not as important as the positive lived experience that results from learner-centered democratic worldviews.

Unschooling, I believe, is the most powerful example of how authentic, genuine, and organic learning can happen. Unschooling is not new; it is, in fact, older than mainstream schooling; it is not something that we have to learn to do, but something that we naturally do all the time. We simply need to be more mindful of how we have been making use of this powerful learning philosophy and increase its use

and value within our lives. The more my personal experience, research, and contacts with other unschoolers increases, the more convinced I am that this is a valuable and worthwhile worldview. I have met unschoolers from various demographic, financial and family backgrounds, including single parents, and they all find imaginative and creative ways to make it work, and work it does. One of the frustrating things I have to contend with is people, even academics, who have never heard of unschooling or met unschoolers, but who think they know one thing about it and that is that it cannot work. Rest assured that it can and does work and that it is working for many families. Perhaps John Holt (1999, 121) has provided one of the clearest examples of what unschooling means:

Almost a century later John Dewey was to talk about "learning by doing." The way for students to learn (for example) how pottery is made is not to read about it in a book but to make pots. Well, OK, no doubt about its being better. But making pots just to learn how it is done still doesn't seem to me anywhere near as good as making pots (and learning from it) because *someone needs pots*. The incentive to learn how to do good work, and to do it, is surely much greater when you know that the work has to be done, that it is going to be of real use to someone.

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