

Conference Program

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Session Overview

Session

B.02.a: Critical unchooling and the decolonisation of education: Ideas, challenges and practices of collective liberation for social justice (A)

Time: Tuesday, 04/June/2024: 9:00am - 10:45am

Convenors: Elena Piffero (LAIF – L'Associazione Istruzione Familiare, Italy); Gina Riley (City University of New York, Hunter College, School of Education)

Presentations

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Education and Schools (plus HE) as Abusive and the Responsibility for Inner Safety

Helen E. Lees

Light on Thinking, Italy

Education has a role to play in a life lived in a "carceral" world of the Agambean "camp," whether we like it, or choose it, or not (Peim, forthcoming). Wide-ranging, globally relevant and found research evidence points to mental and physical ill-health (these also being highly connected), social unrest, inequalities, injustices and other negative impacts emergent in the lives of people who attended "schools" (schooling and higher education) for education. Any and all of these impacts affect the person within. They are affecting in ways that only an individual might be able to fully report. With this we see a relationship between the school and a person's inner world, that being their personal experience both of self and other, as well as of reality. What we know of the inner world from psychotherapy is that negative experiences from outside, that are traumatic (beyond a person's scope to cope with at the time) impact subsequent experience and how a person behaves with self and other in the long term, unless healing of that trauma occurs.

This is harm. If people have no choice about the school in their lives then the school has a responsibility to do no harm. The school must be ethically bound to not capture people and abuse them. The "offer that is no offer," as Peim (ibid) has it, should not inflict traumatic experiences. I am not saying all school experience does this, but I am saying harm is possible, even likely in some way, and that this should not and never happen, in the same way that a doctor must swear to do no harm in the Hippocratic oath.

To achieve a no harm principle in schools the whole system would need to change. Harm avoidance would constrain a number of current practices such as hierarchical grading outcomes of success and failure, or forms of punishment instead of patient listening and compassionate responses. The school system is not designed to do this, so a new approach (not necessarily system) is required for a no harm experience.

In essence the school should be a place and experience where the inner world of a person feels and is safe. Such an environment is not education as we currently know it, particularly, despite some areas of good, harmless practices and people. For education (in schools) to be safe inwardly, then the natural goodness of that inner world (Neill, 1968) would be required as a guiding principle.

To trust and to be trusted has been established as a suitable educational principle to follow via a variety of schooling projects that are far from mainstream and governmental (Lees & Noddings, 2016).

The idea of education and schools as being first about safety within is what I will explore in this paper from the perspective of a no harm principle informing any and all educational decisions, rather than any desires or agenda being sought to be followed.

Critical Unchooling: an Educational Choice for Self-Determination and a Challenge to the Dominant Concept of Success and Well-Being

Valeria Melloni

LAIF – L'Associazione Istruzione Familiare, Italy, Italy

There are many studies that demonstrate the harmful effects of school in increasing the state of anxiety and discomfort in children and adolescents who attend it. The survey conducted in 2022 in Emilia Romagna on a sample of 15,023 young people aged 11 to 19, residing in the regional territory, reveals an anxious state that affects all schools of every level and that shows how school is a place of discomfort that largely contributes to undermine the foundations for a serene development of students, weakening their autonomy and self-determination, increasing the concern for the future and the low confidence in their own potential.

In school, the prevailing feelings are rather negative and anxiety dominates with 77.4% of students who indicate it as a constant and continuous mood. Along with anxiety, these young people also show other negative feelings: boredom (55.9%), insecurity (48.9%) and sadness (33.3%).

As we know from the evidence emerged from neuroscience studies, these feelings of anxiety and anguish certainly do not favor learning, which is instead effective in contexts where the individual is relaxed, feels safe and free to express himself without the fear of making mistakes or being judged negatively.

If the main objective we have in mind is to maintain the passion for learning, grades undermine this intent in a decisive way.

Starting from these data, we will reflect on the opportunity that unchooling offers as a tool for self-determination, self-knowledge and self-construction, development of critical thinking and challenge to the dominant model of personal success and development.

The reflection begins by analyzing the important role that free play has in the construction of one's own identity and in the development of autonomy, highlighting how a constant decrease in the time dedicated to this activity has coincided with an increase in psychological distress in children (Gray 2011).

We will then analyze the quality of learning that derives from intrinsic motivations rather than that motivated by external elements (grades, punishments, predefined programs that do not take into account the specificity of each individual child or student).

We will focus on the learning times of children who almost never follow a linear, continuous but rather irregular and spiral trend, which involves different areas of knowledge at the same time, which is more experiential rather than theoretical: from this it emerges that unschooling is the philosophy that most closely resembles the natural way of learning of children, which allows them to know themselves, to dedicate time to their interests and to study the different areas of knowledge, dealing with the same topics several times from different points of view, as long as they want (Piffero 2019).

Finally, it will be interesting to analyze the results emerged from the testimonies of those who have personally followed this learning path, to understand what were the advantages and benefits deriving from this approach for the young people now adults who were the protagonists and their families (Peter Gray and Gina Riley, 2013)

Free Play And Its Benefits For A Democratic Society

Marco Leali

LAIF - L'associazione Istruzione Familiare, Italy

The process of an individual's understanding of its surrounding world is a complex phenomenon. From the very earliest infancy, the human mind is designed to capture and process an incredibly large number of stimuli. It is perfectly natural for a human infant to understand and compare all information it is confronted with, in a genuinely scientific manner, with the utmost ease and satisfaction (*J. Holt, 1967*).

Humans are, in essence, naturally and autonomously self-teaching, they have an instinct to educate themselves and make sense of the remarkable elements they perceive. There is no process in which this happens as frequently and effectively as in free play. Through it, humans exercise the whole spectrum of their capabilities: in solving problems and in creating their own view of the world (*J. Holt, 1989*). We train our conscious and unconscious decision-making process, as well as our self-esteem. And we strengthen our aptitude towards democratic decisions: free social play is the most democratic activity humans can engage in (*P. Gray, 2013*).

This notion of free play is one of the foundational elements of Critical Unschooling practices.

Research has also proven that our species learns more, more creatively and more efficiently when subjects are not conscious of receiving any award for their effort (*Lepper et al., 1973*); they produce better results when they enjoy their activity (*Howard-Jones et al., 2002*). In other words, mental and physical skills are acquired optimally when this activity is perceived as play (*P. Gray, 2013*).

In contrast, this attitude is not present in any way in standardized and compulsory schooling. In this approach, pupils are heavily dependent on the plans and dogmas of their teachers, who are considered superior. The pupils themselves have no opportunity to direct their own activities. Information gets imparted on the students, which they are expected to merely memorize, without any form of critical reception, without the chance to find their own way to solve tasks. Learning is presented to them as work, depriving it of any fun, mirroring the structure and the ideas of Prussian schools and assembly-line factories (*P. Gray, 2013; 2018 [online]*). As a result, schooled individuals often lose their creative ability to autonomously gather information and process it in a critical manner. They lose confidence in their own thoughts and actions, since they lack significant experience in autonomous decision-making (*P. Freire, 1970*).

It can therefore be concluded that free play, as the natural way for humans to create and expand their knowledge, offers necessary elements for a non-stagnant society and a non-hegemonic approach to education; free play as an educational method has the potential to enable many individuals, as well as collective entities, to actively take part in the management and modification of the various situations they live in. Free play and its consequences empower us to experience the world and human community from different perspectives, giving us many tools to strengthen what we most value, aiding us to build a more organic and democratic society.

Critical Unschooling: Practicing Unschooling and a Closer Look

Morena Franzin

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If we look at Italy, unschooling experiences are not very numerous, but they exist. There are some very recent publications which open minds to this possibility of self-guided learning (Elena Piffero, 2019 e Nunzia Vezzola, 2020). Writings that testify that the choice of natural learning can also be achieved in our country.

On this occasion, I would like to provide some evidence of what our children have been experiencing (and are still experiencing to this day) for 9 years now. This is about taking a look at the evolution of children, now teenagers, who have been gifted this opportunity to grow through self-guided learning.

Unschooling also allows parents to learn a fair amount. It helps us see our children's learning journey and the world through a different perspective. Since we have all been (for the vast majority) school-educated, it will be about cleaning up our beliefs, our habits that have been consolidated over the years at an early age. A huge opportunity to discover the world of natural learning, its biological characteristics and timeframes and increase your own confidence in your children.

Thanks to the amazing opportunity that unschooling gave us, as parents, we were able to observe some common characteristics in both of our children, who were very different from each other. The main characteristics that emerge from this learning experience are: passion, perseverance, dedication and determination in achieving certain goals that everyone sets for themselves over time. Furthermore, learning in this way allows the notions, experiences and knowledge of certain skills to take root over time in the young person, not learned by heart solely for an upcoming test (as it happens in the school context in most situations).

Additionally, self-guided learning respects the physiological times of growth. Nature teaches us what's most important, and we should recall this more often, despite the frenzy of our current society. In fact, in nature the times are often slower or, still different from one plant or animal to another. As they should be from one individual to another. Sometimes, even in free learning, it seems as though nothing is happening, but it truly isn't the case... with patience and faith you will see the results of what you've worked for. Our family is witnessing the growth of beautiful, healthy and strong seedlings and the promise of future mature adults, aware and responsible.

We can testify that this experience of unschooler parents is a challenge to the "colonial" conception that children can only learn if they are taught, and can only grow to be fully capable adults by following the path that society has defined for them. Children and teenagers, on the other hand, show us that they are full of precious and innate resources which we cannot even begin to understand ourselves.

As adults (currently parents) who have had a free learning experience also testify (André Stern, 2014), critical unschooling can offer benefits, challenges and above all, increased mental openness to different points of view.

Unschooling in Italy: Navigating Idealisations, Constraints, and Decolonising Promises

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In our contribution, we will raise some questions for a potential research agenda on unschooling, with reference to the extent to which unschooling can be a viable decolonising practice, as opposed to a culture of education in which schooling is interpreted as a coercive, oppressive, market-oriented, uncritical act.

We will ground our discussion upon some insights of a recent mixed-methods study conducted in Italy, shedding light on the prevalence of unschooling within the realm of home education (HE). While unschooling functions as an influential aspirational benchmark within Italian communities, HE parents included in the survey study (n=91) predominantly described their approach as "semi-structured", with regard to instructional scheduling and design (Chinazzi & Fensham-Smith, forthcoming). Qualitative data further suggest that, despite the widespread influence of unschooling principles (notably associated with John Holt), the actual practices of these families are often the result of a compromise between their pedagogical ideals and situational considerations. Their decision-making processes are influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and pragmatic factors that tend to compel them towards a relatively more structured and formalised approach. Recurrent rationales include the perceived difficulty in navigating the paradigmatic shift that this approach would entail and concerns about adequately preparing children for assessments, facilitating their transition to formal educational settings, and integrating them into broader societal contexts.

These insights illuminate potential constraints, as perceived and reported by home-educating parents and their positioning, to the implementation of the unschooling approach.

However, the theoretical and empirical scholarship on these topics is still in its infancy; many questions remain unanswered regarding the conceptualisation and practice of unschooling (in Italy and beyond). Relevant questions to be addressed further research could be, particularly through the lens of critical unschooling theory:

- Are parental compromises towards a more structured teaching style the result of an ingrained “colonised” mindset? If this is the case, what reflections does this generate on the broader culture of education within which these families are embedded?
- Despite the self-identification of parents’ teaching styles, could the implementation of “semi-structured” (Neuman & Guterman, 2017) or “relax unschooling” (Riley, 2020) practices be interpreted as expressions of critical unschooling?
- How do the policies and the administrative praxis concerning home education in Italy (“istruzione parentale”) impact the implementation of a critical unschooling theory agenda?

While unschooling may seem like a novel concept, its principles actually share common grounds with ideas put forth by renowned philosophers, albeit under different terminologies (Riley, 2020). On the opposite, the idealisation of unschooling by some HE parents as a desirable but unattainable option may inadvertently promote a perception of it as “strictly unregulated or oppositional”, rather than recognising its potential as an “engaged, liberating, community-responsive, and decolonising” practice (Romero, 2018, p. 68).

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