

Third International Conference of the journal “Scuola Democratica”

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Conference Time: 17th Apr 2024, 05:16:03pm CEST

Conference Program

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Session Overview

Session

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

Time: Tuesday, 04/June/2024: 11:15am - 1:00pm

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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Critical Unschooling: A Conscious Psychosocial Strategy Against the Influences of Individualism and Neoliberalism And For a More Compassionate Society

Elena Piffero

LAIF - L'Associazione Istruzione Familiare, Italy

Notwithstanding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the last decades have shown little progress in peace, equality and social justice worldwide. Our thesis is that critical unschooling can radically challenge the socio-psychological mechanisms behind the reproduction of the exploitative dynamics leading to inequality and conflict. First, we will recall Gilbert's evolutionary analysis on the development of two main resource-distribution strategies within human communities: “care and share” versus “control and hold” (Gilbert, 2020). Caring behavior, evolved through parent–infant investment, became the central social discourse in hunter-gatherer societies, where individualistic, self-focus, and self-promoting accumulative strategies were shunned and shamed. With the relatively recent advent of agriculture, resource accumulation was made possible and necessary, and the “control and hold” behaviour became dominant and is still embedded in the neoliberal socioeconomic paradigm. According to the most recent studies in interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel 2020), these social relationships co-regulate the functioning of our brains and minds, which have a contextual nature. Hormones such as oxytocin and vasopressin, as well as the autonomic nervous system and frontal cortex, evolved with, and tune us naturally into, caring behavior, but the social context we live in has epigenetic effects and can modify our individual behavioural phenotypes (McDade et al., 2019). Developing trust, empathy and a sharing disposition is counterproductive if the environment is competitive, callous, full of threats; in these contexts the “hold and control” behavioural phenotype become prevalent.

We will then highlight the role of schooling in the internalisation of this behavioural model from a very early age through the neoliberal meritocracy narrative (strive and achieve), the focus on individual performance, the constant evaluation and the fear of failing and/or a punitive authority, which reinforce children's perception of self as competitive agents and increases their vulnerabilities to shame and self-criticism. Depression, anxiety and mental health issues, and in some cases substance abuse, often follow.

When the source of depression is social, it requires psychosocial interventions (Able and Clarke 2020): we will argue that the praxis of critical unschooling represents a form of psychosocial resistance and change. This family choice, mostly stemming from attachment parenting (Grey and Riley, 2013), de-centers the hegemonic power dynamics inherent to essentialist and traditionalist approaches to formal education (Ismail 2019): from the psychological point of view, it provides children with a pressure-free, caring environment which has positive effects not only their learning experience, but above all on their physical health, happiness and prosocial (“sharing and caring”) behaviour (Gilbert, 2009; Brown and Brown, 2015, 2017). Beyond the immediate family, empirical research has confirmed that critical unschoolers proactively engage in building local communities based on supportive and caring connections (unconditional acceptance, affection, attachment) (Ray 1999; Arai 1999). By practicing, promoting and spreading the “caring and sharing” mentality, the critical unschooling movement has the potential to trigger a radical compassion-focused social change which is actually hindered by mainstream schooling. Raising awareness about this legitimate but still largely unknown educational option is the key to allow families to embrace the possibility of such a change.

Critical Unschooling For A Democratic Idea Of Childhood And Adolescence

Nunzia Vezzola, Carlo Leali

LAIF – L'Associazione Istruzione Familiare, Italy

Anthropologically, the idea of childhood and adolescence is culturally conditioned.

There are many reasons why we can speak of a hierarchical, undemocratic idea of childhood and adolescence in contemporary Western culture. In particular the mainstream idea of childhood and adolescence is based on the dominance of adults, on compartmentalisation, control, prohibition, imposition, rewards-punishment dynamics, age-based separation and discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion of “minors” from

decision-making and responsibility. Compulsory education is not only part of this mainstream idea of childhood (segregation in classes, authoritarian and taxonomical setting); it's also organised in a way to steady it and to guarantee it for the future generations.

This kind of perception of childhood and adolescence can't provide neither social justice nor democracy; it is unsustainable.

But, this idea of childhood and adolescence is not the only possible one. More democratic ideas are possible. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights recognise children some fundamental rights, such as the right to maintain a direct relationship and a contact to both parents, to express their views freely and have them duly taken into account.

Critical Unschooling is rooted in this kind of more inclusive, respectful and democratic perceptions of childhood and adolescence. While providing informal, self-directed and community-based, not-structured education, critical Unschooling can weaken adult hegemony and power. It also requires a parental awareness based among other things on human rights education.

Instead of formal, adult-centred education (typical for schooling), critical Unschooling de-constructs knowledge and learning. Knowledge doesn't need to be divided in subjects (taxonomical setting), nor organised in classes or degrees (age-based segregation): it's experience-based, transversal through subjects and age-independent. Learning processes and praxis can happen anywhere and at any time, beyond and through subjects and age-based degrees.

Critical Unschooling is often related to attachment parenting and provides strong intergenerational relationships instead of age-based separation. It puts children and adolescents into an active, participative role in their families/groups and within their own learning process instead of excluding them from decisions and responsibility. It considers them capable of leading their own self-learning process instead of obliging them to uncritical obedience and instead of putting them into a class where they become like numbers, only allowed to obey and follow teachers' decisions.

Critical Unschooling is based on confidence, empathy, negotiation, compromise, dialog, absence of judgement, respect of growing times and individual characteristics, instead of external control, prohibition, imposition and rewards-punishment dynamics.

In this way, critical Unschooling can concretely contribute to social justice and democracy.

Critical Unschooling: Practices and Experiences by a Teenager

Aurora Reolon

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At the beginning, when I was invited to write down this abstract my mind went blank. I didn't know what to say. Because...what is there to say?? I grew up being homeschooled, or, better yet, unschooled. It's my reality, and it's second nature by now.

It certainly is nothing new to me. You could call this writer's block or, well...anything, really. But truth is, that got me thinking.

That's exactly *why* I need to tell my story. Because it's normal to me. Because so many kids my age need to know that going to school is not the only way someone can learn plenty to last you a lifetime. And because you can get *very far* in life, trust me, even without going to school or whatever.

My "education" journey started just like it does with most kids: I went to kindergarten, then went on to attend a "normal" elementary school like everyone my age did. Nothing "*abnormal*" there. I even used to attend catechism classes, which in the end proved to be utterly useless, but that's beyond the point.

Now, why do I say words like *normal* or *abnormal*? The truth is that school is mostly considered standard procedure for kids all over the world (although that depends on what parts of the world). It's considered normality. But that's just a perception, something that over the decades has been apparently set in stone- at least in Italy.

But who says that's normality? Normality is often overrated. I can't wait for what else life has in store for me.

Unschooling Students with Disabilities

Gina Maria Riley

CUNY Hunter College, United States of America

As the number of families choosing to homeschool continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to study different ways in which families choose to homeschool their children. Unschooling is a variety of homeschooling where children learn through everyday life experiences and through their own intrinsic motivations. The percentage of homeschoolers who consider themselves unschoolers can be estimated at approximately 20%, and that number continues to grow at a steady rate as unschooling increases in popularity (Blanding, 2018). As the population of homeschoolers increases, the number of parents who choose to unschool their children with disabilities has also risen. Many find unschooling to be an ideal educational alternative because of its self-directed, self-paced approach. Within this study, fifty parents completed a survey regarding their experiences unschooling a child or multiple children with disabilities. Overall, most parents saw unschooling as a healing environment that provides a more personalized learning environment for students with disabilities as compared to school. However, the unschooling parents in this study did report significant time/career sacrifices, as well as a need for more respite. Also reported was a need for more unschooling friendly practitioners and service providers, a more inclusive unschooling community, and increased normalization and legitimization of unschooling as a choice through further research.

Benefits Of An Unschooling Experience

Jacopo Silvestre

LAIF (L'Associazione Istruzione Familiare, Italy), Italy

When you become part of a big system often it happens you limit yourself to follow the flow, your mind becomes lazy and you start to only do what other people ask you to do.

Instead if you choose a different path you have inevitably to find your own way, without predefined rules. That's why the school system should be more based on the individuality of his students and that's why my unschooling route helped me to choose my job and deal with it.

During my personal experience I noticed that in the world of freelance workers, it is strictly necessary to have good improvisational skills and, above all, a willingness to always put yourself out there. In unschooling you are forced to find your own rhythms and schedule, maybe with your parents help, but always having yourself as your own leader. This allows you to be more ready and efficient in the work world, always knowing your limits and needs.

We are used to think that kids (and adults too) are bored by studying and working, but I think that's totally untrue. Work is a fundamental trait of all the living beings and none of us can find happiness by doing nothing with our lives. We only "simply" have to do what we like, obviously there are always many trials and challenges, but if you are truly following your willness you'll find the way to overcome them. Unschooling allowed me to search and find my true passions and turn them into a job.

Obviously unschooling doesn't mean loneliness at all. In my life I had (and I still have) many mentors and masters, in addition to my parents, that helped me find my personal way. We can't claim to reach the summit without other people lending us a hand. Knowing different kind of people helps you to have more resources, and allows you to see the world from different perspectives. Indeed, the school system permit to know many people, but tends to surround you with an unchanging group of faces that talk and think in very similar ways. If you take advantage of the benefits of unschooling and approach your life with an open mind you will be able to surround yourself with inspiring and beneficial people.

In conclusion; unschooling aided me to gain independence, the social skills and to form my personal path that led me to publish my first book. That's why I think unschooling should be more widely recognized as a functional method of learning by the institutions.

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