

Unschooling and Social Justice/Multicultural Education: (Un)Realized Potential

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Abstract *An online survey of unschooling families (student-directed form of homeschooling) sought to discover whether and how unschooled children experience a social justice curriculum (one that seeks equity between cultures, ethnicities, genders, classes, and sexualities). The 2016 survey asked about unschooled children's relationships with/recognition of people different from themselves, their degree of critical analysis of systems and institutions in society which created, maintain, and perpetuate inequities, and whether they had opportunities to envision and work for a just and equitable society. The philosophical tenets of unschooling complicate this query, and are explored. Findings illustrate that unschooling's educational philosophy of "curriculum-as-lived" (as opposed to "curriculum-as-plan") (Aoki, 2004) has the potential (though not realized by all unschooling families) to provide a unique approach to social justice/multicultural education, allowing unschooled children to learn about minoritized cultures, systems that led to the minoritization, and the possibilities and pathways to a more equitable society.*

Keywords unschooling, multicultural education, social justice, student-directed learning, homeschooling

Introduction

Unschooling defined

Student-directed learning in the home, termed unschooling (Farenga, 1999), is a form of education in which parents eschew a formal or standardized curriculum and instead allow their children curricular freedom. In unschooling, "the learner's freedom and autonomy [is] limited as little as possible, ...learning always starts with the individual's needs, goals, and desires, and not with any supposed body of knowledge or societal demands" (Miller, 2004). Peter Gray and Gina Riley (2013) described unschooling in the following way:

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Unschoolers do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, they do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and they do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. Life and learning do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of a cultural environment, and unschooling parents help define and bring the child into contact with that environment. (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 7)

The research question

Given the nature of unschooling as defined above, as well as understanding that homeschooling is generally a white, middle-class phenomenon (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), I was curious whether unschooled children experience any sort of social justice curriculum when their educative experiences are primarily focused on themselves and their interests. In other words, do unschooling children examine the lives of marginalized or minoritized “others,” analyze systemic oppressions, and/or engage in actions aimed at creating a world that is just, fair, and characterized by equitable opportunities for all? And if so, to what degree?

Contextualizing the research

Student-directed/child-centered learning

Child-centered or student-directed learning has its roots in the progressive philosophy of education. The progressive philosophy was a reaction to more conventional, teacher-directed forms of education. It gained in popularity in the early 20th century, waned after Sputnik in the late 1950s, revived for a time in the 1960s and 1970s, and went into decline at the onset of the standards and accountability era in the early 1980s (Semel, Sadovnik, & Coughlin, 2016). The child-centered or student-directed learning strand of the Progressive education philosophy has been succinctly defined in Ron Miller's (2004) “Educational Alternatives: A Map of the Territory.” In student-directed learning

The learner's freedom and autonomy should be limited as little as possible, even not at all.... learning always starts with the individual's needs, goals, and desires, and not with any supposed body of knowledge or societal demands. For these [freedom based] educators, the ideal education embraces the exact opposite of transmission: It centers on a learner's entirely self-motivated exploration of whatever the world has to

offer that seems relevant to the learner's own life. (para. 9)

In this form of education, students develop their own curriculum and individual projects, and take part in decision-making for the school (if they are involved in one; or in the case of homeschoolers, the home) (Bennis, n.d.). Student-directed learning can happen in a school setting and has historically emerged in non-public/independent/private schools. Examples include Summerhill School in England (Neill & Lamb, 1992), Albany Free School in New York (Morrison, 2007; Mercogliano, 1998), and Sudbury Valley School in MA (and duplicated in other parts of the US and world) (Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1998). Student-directed learning can also happen in a home setting, where it has been termed unschooling, the definition of which was discussed in the introduction.

The phenomenon of unschooling has been gaining more scholarly attention in the past decade, especially with the launching, in 2006, of the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning (JUAL)* and the 2012 inception of *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*. In the past decade, unschooling has also been included as an entry in a number of encyclopedias related to education topics (Collom, 2007; Kapitulik, 2013; Kunzman, 2014; Mayberry, 2007; Ray, 2012). A review of articles on unschooling, particularly in *JUAL*, reveal a research base including personal narratives, surveys, or case studies of specific families exploring motivations, challenges, and benefits of unschooling, ways in which unschooling ideas can be brought into conventional education, and some in-depth examinations of the philosophical grounding to this educational approach. There also exist philosophical discussions of what constitutes a curriculum in as well as critiques of self-directed learning (however, mostly directed at progressive pedagogical approaches and free schools). It is to these discussions and critiques, especially as they relate to unschoolers engaging in social justice-related learning, that we now turn.

Can what happens in unschooling really be called a "curriculum"?

When many people think of the word "curriculum," the main thing that seems to come to mind is the idea of "curriculum-as-plan" (Aoki, 2004). In this conception of curriculum, the curriculum is pre-planned and presented in a sequential and/or developmental fashion, it is an explicit curriculum filled with particular content and knowledge, and there is an effort to impact children's characteristics and dispositions.

This inherently purposeful nature of curriculum might be at odds with the unschooling philosophy of education, which is more aligned with the view of curriculum as "self-actualization" (Eisner & Vallance, 1974), "curriculum-as-lived" (Aoki, 2004), or a "cultural curriculum" (Pattison & Thomas, 2016). In these conceptions of curriculum, the children/students and their self-chosen pursuits are

the focus rather than a pre-determined set of subjects, and the aim of the curriculum is “providing personally satisfying consummatory experiences for each individual learner. It is child centered, autonomy and growth oriented, and education is seen as an enabling process that would provide the means to personal liberation and development” (Eisner & Vallance, 1974, p. 9). There is no set content that all children are expected to learn; rather, information is “learned through direct engagement with the practices of everyday life” (Pattison & Thomas, 2016, p. 137). This research embraces this latter view of curriculum, arguing that unschooling children do experience a curriculum, just not one that is pre-planned or overly regulated by outside entities.

Is social justice ever a focus in self-directed learners’ curricula?

“But you don’t know what you don’t know!” This is a common protest against self-directed learning for children. Critics claim that allowing students to choose for themselves what, how, and when they study will result in great swaths of important information going unexplored simply out of ignorance of their existence (*Breaking Point*, 2003). For example, how might one know if she has a passion for chemistry if she is never exposed to it in any way? And even beyond the “basics” of a core curriculum, will people who never themselves experience, examine, or even notice others’ oppression ever seek to educate/enlighten themselves on social justice issues? Can a more student-directed approach to education effectively foster a commitment to liberty for all people?

In 1932, George Counts posed essentially this same question to the Progressive Education Association (and later in an article in *Progressive Education*). His speech illuminated a division within the progressive philosophy and pedagogy of education between the child-centered strand of G. Stanley Hall and the more socially reconstructive strand (Semel et al., 2016). While he stated his agreement with progressive pedagogical values (such as learner interest, active learning, individual growth), he also believed this was

...not enough. It constitutes too narrow a conception of the meaning of education; it brings into the picture but one half of the landscape. If educational movement, or anything else, calls itself progressive, it must have orientation, it must possess direction...[it must have] clearly defined purposes. We cannot...be all things to all men. (Counts, 1932, p. 257-258)

He argued that a truly good education cannot be separated from “some conception of the nature of the good society” (Counts, 1932, p. 258) and that “the weakness of Progressive Education...lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare, unless it be that of anarchy or extreme individualism” (Counts, 1932, p.

258). He worried that the people who sent their children to progressive schools were too focused on their own children's happiness and growth and only theoretically committed to issues of social justice.

[They] favor in a mild sort of way fairly liberal programs of social reconstruction,...are full of good will and humane sentiment,...have vague aspirations for world peace and human brotherhood,...are genuinely distressed at the sight of unwonted forms of cruelty, misery, and suffering;...but...in spite of all their good qualities, [they] have no deep and abiding loyalties,...possess no convictions for which they would sacrifice over-much,...are rather insensitive to the accepted forms of social injustice,...are content to play the role of interested spectator in the drama of human history,...refuse to see reality in its harsher and more disagreeable forms...At the bottom they are romantic sentimentalists...[who believe that] education should deal with life, but with life at a distance or in a highly diluted form. (Counts, 1932, p. 258-259)

Counts believed that a good education would be one in which students examine social issues; explore life even when that involves inequity, brutality, and oppression; and work with and for the overall good of the community. He expressed his rejection of simply building an education focused on students' interests and stated

If life were peaceful and quiet and undisturbed by great issues, we might, with some show of wisdom, center our attention on the nature of the child. But with the world as it is, we cannot afford for a single instant to remove our eyes from the social scene. (Counts, 1932, p. 259)

Counts' critique of child-centered/student-directed learning has resonance today, particularly when examining the most child-centered forms of education currently existing— free schools and the home version of free schooling, unschooling. Do the children who experience these child-centered/student-directed forms of education generally deeply understand the lives and perspectives of others and work against inequities in our society? Can a child experiencing a self-directed education not only focus on his/her immediate needs and interests, but also gain a critical understanding of the world as it is, as well as the motivation and knowledge of how to work to bring about a new, more equitable, social order? (Hicks, 2005). While evidence does exist that some schools which practice more child-centered approaches have/do focus on social justice issues (e.g. Morrison, 2007; Semel et al.,

2016), there has been minimal direct exploration of this question with unschoolers. This paucity is, in part, what motivated this research.

Social justice and/or multicultural education defined

The terms multicultural education and social justice education can and have been defined and conceptualized in myriad ways (Banks & Banks, 1997a; Bennett, 2001; Gay, 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Nieto, 1999; North, 2006; Picower, 2012; Sleeter, 1996). Cho (2017) provides an excellent, in-depth overview of these similarities and differences in her analysis of theoretical frameworks and varying models and elements of social justice and multicultural education. In this piece, she argued that there is a “high degree of coherence among the substantive meanings of social justice...[and]...multicultural education” (Cho, 2017, p. 2-3). For the purposes of framing this study, I have simplified and combined the goals Cho (and the many authors she reviews) outlined for social justice and multicultural education into three categories of ways that social justice/multicultural education can be approached.

1. Engaging in exposure to “others” (people different from oneself in various ways, including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual identity and orientation) and the tangible/surface aspects of their cultures (e.g. food, dance, music, art, language, literature).
2. Critically analyzing systems and institutions (historical and present-day) in our society which created, maintain, and perpetuate inequities.
3. Envisioning, and being inspired and empowered to create a better world: a just and fair society with equitable opportunities for all.

Methods

Data source

Using the three categories above, I designed an online survey for unschooling parents to detail their children’s experiences with learning about minoritized “others” (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or identity, social class, and gender). Specifically, after asking about demographic information, I asked the parents to describe:

- any literature or imagery in their home that depicts the experiences of people of color or other minoritized groups;
- activities that their family takes part in with the purposeful intent of gaining exposure to and/or understanding of others who are culturally different from them;

- the ways in which their unschooled children have explored the experiences (past or present) or perspectives of people who are culturally different from themselves;
- the ways in which their family is active in social issues in which the end goal is related to issues of equality; and
- specific conversations they have had in which they discuss issues of “otherness” with their children.

I disseminated a call for unschooling parents to engage in this study to publishers of sources serving this population (e.g. unschooling magazines, blogs, listserves) and also to an informal unschooling network of scholars and unschoolers, of which I am a part and which was initiated by *JUAL* founder Carlo Ricci in 2013. In the call for participants, I identified myself and the research purpose and directed them to an online, open-answer survey, which began with an IRB-approved consent form. Ninety-four unschooling parents responded to the survey; each respondent, however, did not respond to all questions. The majority of respondents were from the United States, non-Hispanic whites, and families ranged from actively being involved in unschooling their children to recounting their experiences with their now-grown unschooled children. A small number of respondents were from Canada and from Australia (perhaps due to some unschooling magazines having an international audience).

Data analysis

In retrospect, I should have inquired as to the country in which the family resided. I incorrectly assumed that most respondents would be from the United States, but I discerned from the contents of a small number of the open-ended responses that some respondents were from either Canada or Australia. I decided to keep these respondents as part of the data set because both these countries, like the United States, struggle with issue of marginalization of certain populations (though to different degrees).

Answers to the five survey questions detailed above were coded using the lens of the three social justice/multicultural education categories detailed above (exposure, analysis, action). Responses that seemed to fit multiple categories were coded in all applicable categories except when membership in one category implied membership in another. I then developed descriptive themes within each category, which are explored in the findings below.

Findings

Exposure seems to be the dominant focus in unschoolers' social justice/multicultural education

In my coding of the survey responses, the "exposure" category was dominant numerically (213 out of 405 responses, approximately 53%). Unschooling parents reported that this exposure to others happened in a multitude of ways which I have distilled into two broad categories – personal or "live" interactions and exposure to others, and secondary or "mediated" interactions and exposure. The degree to which unschoolers had "live" or "mediated" exposure depended on such things as the family's geographic location (rural or urban, for example) and access to resources (e.g. money for travel and other experiences, public libraries, internet connection, international food markets, etc.).

The first person, or personal/"live" exposure to people unlike the unschoolers happened through their attending ethnic or cultural festivals or ceremonies (often as invited guests in the latter); travelling to others' communities, whether those be ethnic enclaves within the immediate geographic area in which the unschooling family lived, or travel outside their community nationally or internationally; or by the more mundane parts of simply living their lives (e.g. going to professional appointments – doctor, dentist, etc., seeing something on TV and engaging in an impromptu discussion, taking public transportation, attending to family errands such as grocery shopping, etc.). This final category of exposure included visiting with family members who were themselves "other" (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual identity or orientation, etc.), participating in community activities (e.g. sports or special classes), volunteering, playing in public parks, etc.

In the "mediated" exposure, unschooling children encountered the products, experiences, or representations of others' cultures without personally encountering the makers, experiencers, or represented people. This came in the forms of watching films or documentaries or reading (the videos and readings often were about the "heroes" of social justice/multicultural education, including such notables as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Anne Frank, Harriet Tubman, Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, etc.); viewing exhibits/artwork at museums or performing arts events; listening to music; playing with toys (e.g. dolls) and games representative of other people and cultures; and cooking the food of other cultures.

Analysis of social justice/multicultural issues happens amongst unschoolers, but not that often

While the majority of unschooling parents' responses to the survey questions revolved around their children's *exposure* to issues related to multiculturalism/social justice issues, there were also a number of responses (approximately 63 out of 405, or roughly 16%) which I coded in the *analysis* category. In these responses, the parents seemed to be communicating a deeper

level of engagement with social justice/multicultural issues than the responses coded at the exposure level. These responses coded as *analysis* seemed to be infused with “various perspectives, frames of reference, and content...that [would] extend understandings of the nature, development, and complexity of ... society” (Banks & Banks, 1997b, p. 237). The terminology used and topics discussed in many of these responses illustrated a more sophisticated level of analysis and thinking about social justice/multicultural issues than those coded as simply exposure (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Terminology and topics discussed related to social justice/multicultural education

Terminology used	Topics/content discussed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appropriation ● Cultural identity ● Dominant civilization ● Historical inaccuracies written by ruling class ● Institutional racism ● Internal or unconscious biases ● Intersectionality ● Multiculturalism ● Systemic inequalities/oppressions ● White privilege ● Whitewashing history ● Howard Zinn’s publication <i>A People’s History of the United States</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● affirmative action ● apartheid ● Black inventors and unequal recognition ● Black Lives Matter movement ● Civil Rights Movement ● colonialism and native peoples ● differential media representations (and invisibility) ● injustices (e.g. residential schools for Native Americans, Japanese Internment, segregation, gender/LGBTQ, judicial system) ● police brutality ● private prisons ● racial profiling ● refugees ● school to prison pipeline ● unequal access (to healthcare, education, etc.)

The above terms and topics can be discussed superficially or in a way that is ignorant of others’ perspectives, and thus not represent true *analysis*-level social justice/multicultural education. However, the following representative sampling illustrates, and perhaps justifies, these coding decisions.

We have discussed, more than once, native peoples and colonialism around the world. What languages are spoken where and why, the horrendous treatment of those that lived various pieces of land that were then slaughtered and the land stolen. Not just Native Americans but Mexico and other territories around the world

When we were in Chaco canyon, and she was drawing a perspective of the landscape while sitting on top of an ancient building, I read her stories of the people that lived there--- why they might have all left that region, where they came from, etc. She tied that in to other global situations of one group of people making another group of people go away because they were different...was it fair that all the names of places around there had Spanish names---what about the people who were there when the Spanish came to town....

We've also read quite a bit from *A Young People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, which does a lot to center the stories of people and communities of color in American History.

We require all of our kids to deeply embrace other cultures [primarily through living in other countries] and to extend themselves in understanding the different challenges faced by people who face a variety of global misunderstandings.

We, and most that I have become acquainted with in this [unschooling] movement, are aware of our privilege and seek to uplift, expand the beliefs of, and opportunities for, any and all.

We read and have read hundreds of books specifically about people different from us because we feel it is important to foster empathy and deep understanding of the underlying power structures in place in our society. We believe that without such an understanding we don't have the power to change it.

We discussed race and racism many times. At first the topic largely came up through read-alouds of fiction books. For instance, reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, we were exposed to some pretty blatant anti-Native-American statements out of the mouth of "Ma"; reading *Moccasin Trail*, by Eloise Jarvis McGraw, there was a lot of positive stuff about Native Americans, but also a rather complex admiration for the attitude of

white settlers and, ultimately, a favorable view of Christianity over heathen religions

When the kids experienced interpersonal problems with friends or even strangers, we often discussed what might have motivated XYZ behavior from others. I tried to raise my kids to go the extra mile in trying to understand other people's perspectives, baggage, etc., but not to shirk responsibility for their own actions or words with excuses.

We have talked about historical factors involving race and current factors –including privilege, policies such as affirmative action, civil rights, law enforcement and authorities' approach to people of different races, how race is a cultural construct more than a genetic one, how racial minorities are seen in different parts of the US and in the world etc., the extent to which we are/aren't/moving toward a color blind society.

As I have attempted to illustrate with the chosen examples above, the 63 out of 405 (roughly 16%) responses which I coded at the *analysis* level seemed to have been made by parents who are informed by critical theory and a conscious self-exploration. Their children are thus enabled to “view concepts, events, issues, problems, and themes from the perspectives of diverse groups” (Banks & Banks, 1997b, p. 245). Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, the percentage of these sort of responses is relatively low overall.

Social action on social justice/multicultural issues is rare amongst unschoolers. Lower still are the number of responses coded at the *action* level. Only 9 of 405 responses (roughly 2%) indicated any particular action taken by unschoolers to “make decisions and take actions related to the concept, issue, or problem” being analyzed (Banks & Banks, 1997b, p. 239). The few examples that were offered of any kind of social action included:

- offering volunteer services to various outreaches (e.g. combating hunger, sponsoring refugees)
- listening to others at events in order to better understand others' experiences and viewpoints
- participating in protests (e.g. against police brutality)
- standing up for/assisting people who had fewer privileges in a given situation (e.g. “One of our children became fluent in Spanish and used it on his job ... He was frequently in a position to incidentally ‘help’ Spanish speakers who needed assistance.”)

- having discussions about how change was brought about (and thus in future can be brought about)

Some unschoolers are doing nothing in regard to social justice/multicultural issues. Not only do the above findings indicate that most social justice/multicultural education amongst unschoolers hovers at the “lowest” levels (exposure versus analysis and social action), there was also a significant handful of responses (60 out of the 405 or, approximately, 15%) indicating that nothing was being done in regard to multicultural education. There were also families who indicated that they felt they could do more than they were currently doing in this area. For example, one parent wrote “we could definitely add more of this in our lives” in reference to looking at issues of equity; and other parents, in response to whether their children were exposed to literature or imagery of or about cultures different from their own, wrote “not enough” and “too few.” Reasons were not always provided for this lack of attention to issues of multiculturalism/social justice, but when they were, parents indicated such things as their children being too young, limited space in living quarters (for physical social justice/multicultural resources), their geographic location (in a very white area), and that unschooling parents are not meant to ensure that such issues are touched on. This last reason opens up the door to discussing the many complexities inherent in exploring the issue of social justice/multicultural education within the unschooling approach.

Discussion

Why exposure may be dominant

The quantitative results discussed above, which found examples of exposure being dominant numerically, parallel the findings of research regarding social justice/multicultural education in the United States’ public preK-12 schools (Jupp & Sleeter, 2016; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Miner, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2018). This predominance of exposure and minimal attention to analysis and social action may be a consequence of the ways in which surface-level issues of multicultural education and social justice issues have penetrated the popular culture. In other words, white and middle class families (which make up the majority of homeschoolers, and thus unschoolers as a subset) (The National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016) likely find it relatively easier to encounter the more culturally tangible “heroes and holidays” of minoritized groups than engaging in deep analyses of oppressions or developing notions of how one might actualize more equity in a society.

Unschooling might be philosophically incompatible with a purposeful social justice/multicultural education

When the researchers/theorists/advocates mentioned earlier (Banks & Banks, 1997a; Bennett, 2001; Cho, 2017; Gay, 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Nieto, 1999; North, 2006; Picower, 2012; Sleeter, 1996) discuss social justice/multicultural education (generally within the context of conventional education forms), there seems to be an implicit assumption that this curriculum is shared with students in a “sequential and developmental fashion” (Banks & Banks, 1997a, p. 237), that it is an explicit curriculum filled with particular content and knowledge, and that there is an effort to impact children’s characteristics and dispositions (both in school and in life outside of school).

This inherent purposeful nature of social justice/multicultural education might be at odds with the unschooling philosophy of education (at least as interpreted by some unschooling families). In previous research on unschooling, I have attempted to ascertain parents’ end goals for unschooling their children (Morrison, 2016a, 2016b).

Some parents indicate that they are seeking for their children to self-actualize and find themselves, others indicate that they hope to nurture individuals who can challenge the status quo systems in society, and further others indicate that the above two goals are both achievable and not mutually exclusive. Some unschooling families in this study (presumably those focused solely on self-actualization) seemed to balk at any overt attempts to “teach” their children social justice/multicultural content or encourage the development of specific characteristics and dispositions. For example, a number of respondents, when answering questions that inquired about activities or discussions “with [a] purposeful intent” or an “end goal” pointed out that their daily activities were “natural” as opposed to contrived to seek any particular end goals. One parent wrote, for example, “Taking them out for the specific purpose of ‘hey, we’re going to learn about diversity today’ doesn’t happen.” They further articulated that any exposure to social justice/multicultural education was a side effect/benefit. For example, phrases such as “as it comes up” and “it often happens through...” came up in responses, and one parent succinctly wrote, “we don’t seek out [diversity issues] as much as welcome it.” Some parents even indicated an unwillingness to impose their interpretations and experiences on social justice/multicultural issues onto their children. One parent wrote, “I am waiting for [my son] to discuss the subject when he feels the need. I just want the conversation to be from him with his questions not me telling him what I know based on my experiences” and another stated “I don’t pressure [my kids] to think certain ways.”

There are other respondents, though, who did purposefully facilitate a social justice/multicultural education by choosing books, materials, and experiences to share with their children. One parent wrote about choosing books, “So it’s not

child-centered at that point. I think of it as my way of exposing them/strewing that information and perspectives in their path, since they don't run into it a whole lot in their surroundings." And another parent wrote, "We rotate monthly which culture is dominant in our home. I try to expose my family to all human cultures (from every continent) from indigenous arctic to ancient eastern to classical western and others."

Thus, depending upon how one interprets the unschooling philosophy of education and one's particular end goals for this educational approach, the concept of social justice/multicultural education as a distinct entity with a child's education may or may not exist. The complication described here between social justice/multicultural education and the unschooling philosophy is, at least, a consciously-recognized one by many unschooling parents. But another, more complex, issue seems to reside under the surface of consciousness for other unschooling families.

Are all unschooling families cognizant of their subjectivities?

Social justice/multicultural education exists, in large part, to challenge the hegemony of dominant discourses within a society, and to offer up alternative ways of understanding the world, power, and knowledge. If one only has exposure to dominant discourses, can she question and challenge the political, economic, and ideological forces that have shaped her consciousness? (This is related to the famous question, "Does a fish know it is in water?") And if she can question and challenge these, what would prompt her to do so?

Research conducted by Lundy and Mazama (2012, 2014, 2015) has examined the phenomenon of homeschooling among African-Americans and is relevant to this discussion. In this work, the researchers have focused on how African-American homeschoolers emphasize challenging dominant discourses and hegemonic views of the world within their children's educations at home. The argument is that the parents in these families are aware of or have directly experienced oppression in the dominant systems and fear that these systems will oppress their children and/or keep their children ignorant of alternative perspectives, and so they choose to purposefully engage their children in an empowering, social justice/multicultural education. But what of the white homeschooling families (the majority race/ethnicity represented in homeschooling) who are relatively comfortable within the systems as-is (Kapitulik's 2011 dissertation asserts that there are many such families)? Do these families have the same degree of awareness and desire to disrupt the status quo as it relates to minoritized others? And if white, middle class children who engage in unschooling ever pose questions or raise subjects that would lead in the direction of examining unjust systems, are their parents equipped to take these children in social justice/multicultural education-oriented directions?

In that the unschooling philosophy of education is a radical disruptor of educational systems, one might be inclined to think that unschooling parents also seek to disrupt other societal systems (Kirschner, 2008). And that inclination is supported by data found earlier in this article; there were unschooling respondents who seemed to consciously recognize that we exist in an inequitable society, and that to be a force for change, one must understand these inequities and the experiences and perspectives of those unlike oneself. But there were also a number of other respondents who seemed to evidence a lack of criticality about their own subjectivities. They expressed meritocratic or deficit viewpoints about capitalist/democratic culture:

We have successful black families, white families, Hispanic families, Asian families, just like we have unsuccessful ones! It's the attitude and determination of an individual to rise above a situation and become, say, president, or a wildly successful entrepreneur.

We also discussed how being of any particular color did not and should not give one an advantage over others based on 'affirmative action' which is reverse discrimination and as bad as any discrimination in the past. That people need to succeed or fail on their own merits and not on the color of their skin or their ethnicity.

Some referenced issues of inequality in the past tense, perhaps implying that everything is equitable now (Kohl, 2007). For example, “we discuss the differences in skin color and how some people feel/think about those differences, as well as laws in our history that affected people based only on their skin color,” and “I've basically told my older daughter that sometimes people haven't been nice to [people of color]” (*brackets in original*). Others, for various reasons did not see much value in adopting a critical stance; for example, one parent wrote, “No [we do not discuss issues of race]. We always found these 'social issues' caused more divisiveness rather than bringing people together.”

Interestingly, some respondents were aware of their lack of criticality about their own subjectivities. For example, mentioned earlier were parents who answered “not enough,” “too few” and “we could add more of this in our lives,” when queried about their exposure and analysis of “others,” and another parent wrote, “Never really thought of seeking out black or Asian or other communities actually. So, either because we are already immersed OR are in our comfort zone? Hmmm.” Perhaps in some way, this survey acted as a push poll for some parents to question their approach (or lack thereof) to nurturing certain types of individuals.

Conclusions, limitations, and future research

Limitations

While the survey could have functioned for some as a push poll to help them examine their unschooling practices and beliefs, it also, like any computer-based survey instrument, had significant limitations. Selection/sampling bias always exists within surveys of this sort—often the most active and critically engaged unschooling families are the ones who are motivated to respond, thus skewing the data in a particular direction. Further, the open-ended questions included in this survey asked respondents to take quite a bit of time to detail their experiences; and since time is often a scarce resource amongst unschooling parents, there was the risk that a parent ran out of time in answering the questions, thus omitting important details which would help in better understanding the viewpoints and experiences of the respondents and their children. A final limitation is my failure to connect respondents to identifying/demographic information (such as their education level, social class background, current family income, etc.), which would help us in understanding the influence of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) on their lives and decisions.

Potential (un)realized

Even though some unschooling parents do not see their role as being a facilitator of social justice/multicultural education, and some don't consciously recognize the need for a social justice/multicultural education in the first place, unschooling may offer a better chance of children becoming oriented toward social justice and equity than if they were enrolled in our current public education system.

Radical critics of the public education system have argued that all institutional forms of education plant ideas into the minds of all those who go through that institution (Gatto, 1991; Illich, 1970; Spring, 1998). An example of such an idea is a belief in a color-blind, post-racial society that offers equal opportunities to all and is thus meritocratic (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Wise, 2010). Implicit in this implanted idea is an ignorance regarding social justice/multicultural education. If the majority of people attend or have attended our public schools, it stands to reason that this idea came, in part, from our system of public education (or at the very least, this idea was not effectively challenged by the public schools).

If, then, we unmoor education from its current institutionalized form and embrace a more student-centered education philosophy, like unschooling, wouldn't more social justice/multicultural education (and the outcomes thereof) emerge? There are certainly no guarantees that this would happen, and it would be illogical to argue that since public schools haven't been successful at social justice/multicultural education then *anything else* would be better. Perhaps, though, the small pieces of evidence found in this study and earlier ones (Morrison, 2016a, 2016b) have illustrated that potential and space exist in unschooling to nurture

equity-oriented individuals. Unschooling can potentially provide more high-quality opportunities for children to experience democracy face-to-face, examine the world as-is, and imagine a world that could be. Because unschooling removes children from the school context (which often implants inaccurate notions of equity and oppression, as mentioned above) and because unschooling enmeshes children in a different social context, one untainted by influences of inequitable social norms, it perhaps follows that unschooling has a potential for “naturally” fighting inequity. The data in this study is inconclusive on this point and thus further research is needed to more unequivocally reveal the potential that unschooling has. Examining such things as how much the “average” (whatever that might be in this context) unschooling parent has examined his/her own racial identity and societal structures, or the content and quality of resources used by many unschooling families may reveal an abundance of possibilities heretofore overlooked.

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