

BOOK REVIEWS

Unschooling: Exploring Learning Beyond the Classroom

By Gina Riley

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Reviewed by Ryan Cowden, Indiana University, USA

Homeschooling has grown at an exponential rate over the past decade. Despite its popularity, the premise of homeschooling remains foreign to many in our society. Gina Riley's *Unschooling: Exploring Learning Beyond the Classroom* is the first academic book on unschooling, lending historical, philosophical, and empirical support to this practice. Riley argues that, despite its recent popularity, the unschooling movement draws upon a long and rich intellectual history.

Unschooling is one form of homeschooling where there is no fixed, explicit curriculum. This means there are no formal assignments, curriculum, or assessments for the student to follow. Instead, the student is encouraged to follow their interests, with the parent acting as a guide or collaborator. An important and related theme is that of intrinsic motivation. According to the author, public schools often rely on extrinsic punishments and rewards to entice learning. Throughout the book, Riley argues that unschooling is uniquely positioned to develop the intrinsic motivation of students, in ways that traditional schooling and homeschooling do not.

The entire book, especially the first few chapters, reads as an apologetic for unschooling. Riley traces the intellectual foundations of unschooling all the way back to the hunter-gatherers, who taught primarily through cultural transmission rather than formal instruction. The author also shows how the unschooling philosophy draws on prominent educational thinkers such as Rousseau, Dewey, A.S. Neill, Ivan Illich, and John Holt, as well as more recent theories like Self-Determination Theory, Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Attachment Theory, and Multiple Intelligences.

This section explicitly services the central aim of this book, which is “adding legitimacy to the notion of unschooling as a viable educational option” (Riley, 2020, p. 6). The research

on unschooling has been criticized as “fraught,” with much of its support coming from advocates who have a personal stake in movement (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020, p. 269). The extensive reliance in this book on history and theory reads as an attempt to deepen this conversation by establishing an intellectual foundation for unschooling. Nevertheless, Riley’s openness about her positionality is another strength of the book. She describes dissonance within her own stance on this issue, resulting from the tension between her career in public education and experiences of unschooling her son at home. Riley’s personal reflections, and an open letter from her son, colour this book as a labour of love, adding a personal tone which complements the scholarship therein.

Much of the rest of the book provides an overview of the unschooling movement. Riley tackles a number of themes, such as the growth of homeschooling, reasons families decide to homeschool, and different branches of the movement. As the author contemplates the future of unschooling, she clarifies the overall desirability of this approach. Unschooling is not meant to replace formal schooling, but to provide a viable alternative for those who don’t fit the traditional model. In the end, Riley predicts that the philosophy of unschooling will transcend the homeschool community, becoming the future of education reform by inspiring new forms of student-led learning in schools.

Throughout the book, Riley frames the costs and benefits of unschooling in individualistic terms. Costs and benefits alike are framed in terms of their impact on the student and family unit. Missing here is the recognition of a broader, communal impact of a family’s decision to unschool. Rob Kunzman (Kunzman, 2006) views the public school as a place where conversations between diverse students can help prepare students for life in a pluralistic society. Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (Hess & McAvoy, 2015) argue that political discussions in public schools help prepare students for life in a democratic society. Riley’s most community-facing argument may be that society needs to provide alternative options for students who do not fit the traditional model of schooling (Riley, 2020, p. 148). However, this book never claims to be the beginning and the end of this debate. Riley has produced a work here that can be brought into dialogue with others, such as Kunzman, Hess, and McAvoy, about the broader social impact of unschooling.

Readers may also be curious about the intellectual support behind the radical notion of unschooling, student-led learning that does not include an explicit curriculum. Riley provides a positive argument for how this happens in chapter seven and follows this up with findings on the outcomes of unschooling in chapter nine. Such findings may need to be taken with a grain of salt, as researchers who are not advocates of the movement sometimes come to different conclusions (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). Readers may also wish for a more sustained treatment of these particular questions. However, Riley is noticeably restrained with her claims, arguing in chapter seven that the data proves learning without direct instruction “is possible (Riley, 2020, p. 79).” This subtopic, while important, is only a part of the broader project of adding legitimacy to the notion of unschooling.

What is perhaps most noticeably absent from Riley’s book are the very recent culture wars which may be influencing the homeschooling movement. Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict*

Option (Dreyer, 2016) encouraged Christian families to homeschool in response to changes in society. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, forced experiences with learning from home and increasing tensions between parents and school districts have many considering alternative forms of education. While the book does not mention these controversies by name, it most certainly speaks to them. Riley presents homeschooling, and particularly unschooling, not as a reactionary impulse to current events, but as a legitimate, rational alternative with deep historical and philosophical roots.

This book is not just for families considering whether or not to homeschool, or how to specifically unschool their children. This book is for anyone interested in the past, present, and future of education. This book is also for those curious about the rational arguments justifying a vibrant wing of the homeschooling community. Riley's work here speaks directly into the present with a long view of time, providing a work meant to outlast the current culture wars by providing a deeper intellectual exploration of unschooling as a perennial issue in education.

References

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