

Unschooling

Homeschools Can Provide the Freedom to Learn

Kristan A. Morrison

To truly respect the individual, we must allow her to find her own life's meaning.

Imagine a school in which there is no common curriculum, where all students study what they want, when they want, and how they want. At this school, there are no classrooms, no set-in-stone schedules, no grades, and no age-segregation. Students are free to mix with children of other ages, and they are often out in the community. Most people would have a hard time imagining such a place and might even balk at calling it a school. When people think about school, they typically envision the conventional model, one with distinct classrooms, regimented schedules, and lessons that are mandated by state or federal authorities. In this conventional model, students have little to no choice in the subjects they take. What choice they do have comes in the area of electives, but there, too, choices are limited by the courses offered. Students have limited freedom of movement; they must ask permission from the teacher to leave their assigned classroom, and even within the classroom, students are expected to act and move as the teacher requires.

For people who attended traditional schools, it can be difficult to envision alternatives. But alternatives do exist, and they need to be examined and brought to public awareness. This is particularly important in light of current political policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, that call for choices and options in education. Unfortunately, these choices are often defined narrowly in education, such as new ways of preparing for workforce readiness and global competition. As a result, the idea of choice is actually much narrower than the rhetoric implies. Careful consideration of alternative models of education is needed in order to broaden the gen-



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eral public's understanding of what education can be. The unschooling model is one alternative.

Unschooling: Historical Background

Unschooling, sometimes referred to as de-schooling, is the homeschool version of freedom-based education, in which children are free to decide what they study, and how and when they study it. Freedom-based schooling has a number of historical antecedents. Dana M. Bennis (2006) argues that one antecedent is found in most pre-industrial societies. In these societies, children are actively engaged in society and learn skills and knowledge by means of imitation, apprenticeship, modeling, and conversation rather than through formal schooling. According to Bennis, freedom-based education is also rooted in the Western philosophical traditions of the ancient Greeks, and Romantic thinkers like Rousseau and Froebel; in the Libertarian-Anarchist Tradition; in the Transcendentalist movement of 19th century America; and in the 20th century free school movement (such as A. S. Neill's Summerhill School and the many U.S. free schools that cropped up during the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s). John Holt is widely credited with being a catalyst for freedom-based homeschooling known as unschooling (See Ron Miller [2002] for an in-depth examination of Holt's legacy).

Unschooling is grounded in the same premise as all free schooling — that children are naturally curious and have an innate desire to learn and grow. If left unfettered, uncoerced, and unmanipulated, children will vigorously and with gusto pursue their interests, and thus learn and make meaning on their own and in concert with others (Dennison 1969; Hern 1996; Holt 1972, 1989; Illich 1971; Llewellyn 1997; Mercogliano 1998; Neill 1992). Proponents of freedom-based education argue that children who are given freedom to pursue their own interests will become better democratic citizens because they will know themselves, and will have learned how to negotiate with others and to overcome obstacles. (For an in-depth examination of the connections between freedom-based education and democratic citizenship, see Morrison 2007).

A Case Study

The following is a case study of a family that homeschools three children, using the unschooling model of education. I spent approximately 20 hours, over four visits, observing the mother, Sally Smith, and her three children: William, age 12; Christina, age 9; and Rebecca, age 7. The observations took place at a park, a Home School Science Fair, the local library, and the family's home. Sally and her children were engaged in various activities. In one setting, the library, William was involved in a computer search class. I also conducted a separate interview with the mother, Sally. In both my observations and verbal communications, I was seeking to discover the ways in which unschooling differs from the conventional model of schooling.

Scheduling

I asked Sally to describe a typical day in the life of her home school. She responded,

Typical day? There is none.... In the morning, we all get up when we're rested (every now and then, we have to go somewhere early in the morning, but that is rare), and have breakfast when we're hungry. Mostly, William and Christina fix their own breakfasts. Sometimes, William goes back upstairs to read or play a video game with breakfast, or he may stay downstairs to watch something on TV or get on the computer during his breakfast, and sometimes we sit at the table and all eat breakfast together. We have a "morning clean-up," where the children are supposed to bring their dirty clothes to the laundry room, and their dirty dishes to the sink, and I remind them if someone may be coming over that day, in case they want their rooms picked up before our guest(s) arrive, or not. Lots of time, the children want to draw in the morning, and sometimes play a game or have me read a story, although it's getting rarer and rarer for William to want his mother to read to him. He'd rather just read it himself now. If, in checking my emails, I find a news article that may be of interest to one or more of the children, I'll call them over, and we'll read it, and perhaps talk about it.

We plan most of our outside activities in the afternoons, and there is generally only one, maybe two days a week when we don't go somewhere that day. We seem to all like and need a certain amount of "downtime."

Most of what William does all day is play around on the computer, read, draw, play video games, skate in the backyard on the ramps, and play with the dogs, and talk to friends (online and on the phone). Although that doesn't seem like much, I think he's learning quite a bit on the computer. He's put together his own web site. He found some Japanese on-line language lessons that he's been learning from, he's writing (in email, in instant messages, and in chat rooms with his friends), he finds games that stretch your mind and help you to think things through logically, and his decision to learn how to "do division better" came about because of some computer game that he wanted to be able to play better, and he knows that he needs division skills in order to do that. We also found a brand-new 4-H project booklet about computers that he was excited about, because it told how to build your own computer, and things like that, so he thinks that may be his 4-H project for the year. He wants some specific books about Manga art, and how to draw in that style.

Right now, as a family, we've begun a 4-H project about hiking, which will include us learning how to make beef jerky, fruit leathers and such, and then planning several small hikes, and at least one big, overnight hike (preferably in the mountains).

I'm (almost) always available for answering questions. I only ask that when I'm on the toilet or the phone, that people refrain from asking me questions. Sometimes on afternoons when we're going nowhere, or in the evenings, we'll watch a movie together, which is great for discussions, whether it be an historic movie, or a Discovery or Animal Planet show, or a show that deals with modern issues.

We've had days where we unashamedly watched TV or movies all day, and had a great time with it (like when we watched almost all of "Roots" in one sitting!). We've had days where

we've been gone all day, going from one activity to another. Some days we planned on doing nothing but errands, and end up in Wal-Mart with the guy who takes care of the fish, and he talks and answers the kid's questions for 30 minutes (at least) about the fish, then get a can of paint, and the children ask the guy mixing it all kinds of questions about the paint mixer: how does it work, etc. Days when friends come over and the children just play, occasionally building and then mapping elaborate forts with every piece of furniture in the house. Days when we spend our time going to the doctor or dentist (and end up looking at the anatomy charts on the walls, and discussing where everything is, and what it's called). Days when we've spent a good portion of the day doing nothing that looks remotely educational, then about 9 p.m. you end up reading for several hours to the children, who keep asking for "just one more" chapter. And, yes, even days where the children decide they want to work on some workbooks, and do a timed math drill. Days to explore outside, with lots of jars for caught critters, with Mom waiting inside, having pulled out all the insect guides, just in case they may be needed. And days when it just must be a full moon or something, because everybody is fighting, from mom and dad, brother and sisters, even the cat and dogs, and everyone just needs to go to their own space to have quiet time to think and mull things over. (The turtle, though, never fights. Only an occasional hiss.)

Not only is there not a set, prearranged schedule that is duplicated from day-to-day, as in most conventional schools, there is also no clear delineation between weekdays and weekends, or between the school year and vacation. This is especially beneficial in this family where the father, John Smith, has a job that requires him to work some weekends and evenings. Sally noted that

If these children were in school, they would only see their Dad three days a month. He works late, and they would be in bed before he got home most nights, in order to get up early for school. In the mornings, Dad would be

sleeping while the children were getting ready and leaving for school. He only has one weekend and one extra Sunday off per month. Instead, we all stay up later, and get up later than most people, but it works out much better for us, and makes for a much healthier family life.

Curriculum

Unschooling is rooted in the basic premise that education should honor the dignity and autonomy of each individual by allowing her to freely discover her own life's meaning through the exploration of her interests, rather than being made to study some pre-arranged sets of knowledge at a standard pace. Thus, unschooling embraces no set curriculum, nor does it compel students to study particular subjects at a fixed time or age. What the children study is up to them; the curriculum is largely student-directed. I asked Sally about her role in the children's curriculum. She responded that

I think that it's pretty even between what is child-initiated, and mom-suggested. Of course, if I suggest something, and nobody wants to do it, then we scrap it, and go on to something else. I do tell the children about different activities in the home educators' association that they might be interested in, as well as looking through various publications that offer classes, programs, etc., to homeschoolers or the public in general, and ask the children if they are interested. At the library, the children are free to pick out anything they want, and I also bring home books, DVD's, books on cassette, etc., that look interesting to me, or that I think the children may like. Photography books are great for initiating conversation about things and places they may not otherwise see or be aware of. I just leave everything within reach, and sometimes ask if anyone would like to look or watch, or listen with me. Some things that were definitely not my idea included ballet classes, Irish Step Dance classes, video games, DragonBall Z, Japanese animation, Lee Middleton dolls, volunteering at the animal shelter, being a foster parent for mama dogs and puppies from the animal shelter, and creating a web page. I've found that it isn't possible to just plan things and tell the chil-

dren that they have to do it, because they simply won't do anything that they don't want to do. William makes it absolutely miserable to take him anywhere that he doesn't want to go, so I try to greatly eliminate times like those. I also keep a personal journal to record what books the children read, books I read to them, places we visit, movies we see, things they do on a day-to-day basis. I frequently look back over the journal, and make notes to myself of anything that I think may be lacking, and I will attempt to expose the children to whatever is missing, and they may either accept it or not. If so, great. If not, then I know that we can always come back to it another time.

A frequent criticism leveled at unschooling is that children, if given their choice on curriculum matters, will "do nothing." John Holt countered that children will get involved in a number of things "once they trust us [adults, parents, teachers] and believe that we respect their interests" (1972, 96). Holt argued that the tendency to believe that students will just "goof off" if given free choice of activities stems only from observations of students within conventional models of education, where they have been well-trained to wait for someone else to tell them what to do, and have been made to understand that their own choices cannot be trusted. Sally echoed Holt's ideas, arguing that her children are actively involved in a great many activities. She stated,

All of my children have very specific passions. William goes from one passion to another, throwing himself into whatever he's interested in so much that he talks of little else. Right now he's very into Japanese animation, computers, and skating. In years past, he's gone through such passions as insects, *Star Wars*, the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, dinosaurs, Brian Jacques books, cooking, *The Hobbit*, time travel, *Animorphs* (books, then TV show), and other things that I can't think of at the moment. Christina has always loved baby dolls, and has gone on to collecting Lee Middleton dolls. But, of course, her main passion right now is with animals. She went through a horse stage, a wolf stage, dog and cat stages, times when she HAD

to watch *Emergency Vets* and *Vet School Confidential* every day, and now, she must learn all she can about guinea pigs. Rebecca's passions are always things creative: dancing, drawing, dress-up, make-believe, pretending to sing opera, creating stuff out of junk, and recently, an interest in photography.

Sally added that because her children are free to learn about whatever interests them, they have a keen love of learning. Because they are free to choose their own curriculum and their own pace, they are not made to feel inferior if their pace is different from someone else's — a situation which could curtail their love of learning. An example of this individualized curriculum pacing is that nine-year-old Christina is not reading yet. Most traditional educators would be concerned that a nine-year-old is not reading and would suggest evaluation and remediation, which could well result in her developing feelings of inferiority and a loss of her enthusiasm for learning. But this isn't happening. Sally is not worried that Christina is not reading yet, and so neither is Christina. Sally says she has faith that Christina's reading will come together ultimately, when *Christina* feels that it is necessary and important. Sally is beginning to see that her daughter might be getting to that point, for not only has Christina remarked on at least one occasion that her lack of reading ability is "getting in her way now," but she has also requested that her mom help her with some formal phonics lessons. Sally said, "recently every time I turned around, Christina was putting a book in my face, saying 'Read the next chapter.' She usually doesn't want for me to read all that much to her, so this was a change for her."

When I asked Sally how she responds to the criticism that if the children study only what interests them, they will miss out on certain academic subjects and thus not be terribly well-rounded, she responded that the curriculum in this model of schooling touches on virtually all traditional "academic" areas, but often in a much less fragmentary way than in traditional schools. Not only are the subjects closely connected to the learners because the children study what interests them and has meaning for them at a given moment in their lives, they are also not fragmented (alienated) from the students themselves, nor are they are fragmented or artificially divided from each other. In

other words, the natural connections between subjects are not lost. For example, when the children did a stained-glass stepping-stone project with me, they were learning about properties of glass and about the conversion of a liquid into a solid (cement), both of which could be termed "science concepts." They were also learning about aesthetically pleasing color combinations (an "art concept"), and about measurement (a "math concept").

Sally stated that her children are in no way deprived of learning the "canon" of subjects. They, like traditionally schooled children, learn about science, math, reading, art, movement, sports, history, music, and countless other subjects. In addition to this "academic" curriculum, these children are also experiencing a "social curriculum." They are involved with a home schooling network of families, with a 4-H club, and they are also active in doing service projects, such as taking care of preschoolers, serving food at soup kitchens, and helping out at the animal shelter. Thus, they learn to interact with all sorts of people in all sorts of settings.

What looks on the surface to be no curriculum, upon closer inspection, seems to be a rich, deep, extensive academic and social curriculum. The key is that there is no "one size fits all" approach to timing of subject choice and skills development, and there is no sense of urgency about getting everything "covered" in 12 years. The Smith family recognizes that learning can (and should) go on throughout one's lifetime, and to ensure this, they are trying to instill in their children a love for the learning process by allowing the children a high degree of choice in what is studied, when, and how.

Teaching Methods

From the description of the curriculum, one can see that the teaching methods are many and varied, and that the teachers are not just Sally and John Smith. The children are sometimes exposed to traditional teaching methods (such as lectures, workbooks, high levels of teacher direction/supervision), as when William heard a lecture on search engines in his computer research class at the public library, or when Rebecca performed exercises in a phonics workbook. But such methods do not make up the majority of the children's learning experiences; rather, they experience teaching

methods that focus predominantly on active participation and hands-on manipulation of resources. For example, at our preliminary meeting, in which I introduced the idea of doing a stained-glass project, the children right away began designing patterns. Similarly, at the Home Educators Science Fair, the children ranged freely from exhibit to exhibit, often taking part in the designed hands-on activities. The children also take part in a number of cooperative learning activities, as when William coaches the girls on how to navigate around the computer, or when the girls play with two other girls, one age 3, and one age 7, in a sandbox making a "cake."

Sally, John, other adults, and/or children who become the "teachers" of the Smith children are not just planners of activities for the children (although they can be). Rather, they are resources, facilitators, "midwives" (to borrow a term from Mary Field Belenky et al. 1986) for the children's learning. They take an active role when asked, but often will step back and let the children experience for themselves with their *own* lenses, not someone else's. The parents hope that a likely outcome of such teaching methods is that the children become active creators of knowledge, rather than passive consumers of information.

Resources

As I have briefly noted, this homeschool uses a wide variety of resources, ranging from traditional school resources such as workbooks, texts, fiction, computers, art supplies, and science equipment, to resources that are rarely available in conventional schools — especially the resources of the community.

The Smiths use the many city and county parks for outings for both play and nature study. They go to the museums in the city, state, and region. They take classes offered by the public library or community and church groups. They are members of a local 4-H club and go to area farms and make use of the 4-H lending library. The children volunteer at local social service agencies such as a food bank, hospice, and animal shelter. They have toured the transit authority, recycling center, and the local news station. They have traveled to major cities outside the state, and they have gardened in their own backyard. With no limitations on what the children study and when

they study it, this homeschool is free to use all the resources that capture the children's interests.

Evaluation of Learning

The Smith family and other unschoolers reject the idea that children should all be the same and held to the same standards or criteria. Thus there is no ranking or grading. Sally believes that she gets the feedback she needs by simply interacting with her children, and she continually modifies her interactions based upon this feedback rather than any she might receive from a formal assessment instrument such as a standardized test. Sally stated that

As the years go by, when you are side-by-side with a person for years and years, you can see where their strengths lie, and encourage them to grow more; and where the weaknesses or gaps may be ... you gently help in that area or introduce things that may help fill in that gap.

Furthermore, the motivational function of grading becomes unnecessary. A's and F's are not needed as carrots and sticks. Unschooling families argue that if students are free to choose what they do and study and learn, then it is unlikely that a student will be "unmotivated."

Sometimes grades are defended as tools of self-knowledge. By grading children we give them knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses. But the Smith children possess this knowledge and are quite often working on their weaknesses, as when William works on his division skills to get better at playing a computer game, or Christina works on her reading skills because not reading is "getting in her way now." Moreover, Sally provided a good means of self-evaluation when she suggested that William

put his ideas in a binder, along with keeping track of the books he's read, places he's gone, movies he's watched, video games played, and projects completed. I thought that this would be a good way for him to look back and remember what he's done this year, and will help him in the years to come, in case he wants to put together some sort of transcript for college one day, and a practical way to get him to write something. When I suggested it, he thought it was a good idea, especially writing down his

ideas, because he admitted that sometimes he really does want to do something, but forgets easily, and so it would be a good way to remind himself. He also came up with the idea of rating the movies and books with 1-4 stars, depending on how much he liked them. I sit down with him about once a month, and we go over his binder to see if there's anything he would like to do that he forgot, and to update his information.

The reporting-to-parents function of a formal evaluation/assessment system also is unnecessary in the Smith's homeschool. When children get to choose what they study, they don't keep that information to themselves. They are eager to share with anyone who will listen what they're pursuing or spending their time on. Sally wrote, "I know when my children learn something because I live with them everyday, and they come to me and tell me things that they've learned (and don't stop talking about it!)." In the time I spent with them, the Smith children generously shared the information and skills they'd learned. William, for example, demonstrated Manga art techniques in drawing an original stained-glass pattern. Rebecca demonstrated that she knew many letters and numbers when creating templates for our stained-glass project. Christina demonstrated her knowledge of turtles (and her consideration for me) when, after I touched the turtle's shell she squirted some anti-bacterial gel into my hand saying that turtle's shells can carry the salmonella bacteria. In their play, their conversations, and their "academic" activities, the Smith children clearly demonstrated that they had mastery of interpersonal skills, academic skills (like memorization, concentration, categorization, etc.), creative skills (dance/movement, drawing, etc.), physical skills (climbing, skating, running, jumping, etc.), that they had active imaginations, and that they had a solid base of content knowledge on a wide variety of subjects. An A, B, or C was not needed to "prove" that these children have learned something. The proof was the children themselves.

Conclusion

At the end of my time with the Smith family, I asked Sally what she liked best and least about this model of educating her children. She responded:

What I like least ... is the lack of understanding by so many other people about it, including other home schoolers. What I like best is the incredible amount of freedom. We are free to plan our lives around our schedule, and not the school schedule. We are also free to learn about whatever interests us, and free to actually keep a love of learning, and not be ashamed about that. I've met lots of children in schools who didn't think that learning was "cool," or who had already lost their love of learning. We are free to express our creativity. Only a small handful of students in schools keep their creativity, although we were all born with some amount of it. It just gets squashed out by schools, in many cases, often by having to only create what the teacher says to create, or by being ridiculed by other students about things created. I don't think that my children will flounder about in the years to come, not knowing who they are. They will have had plenty of time of making their own decisions in life, and presented with many different options in life, and will probably not say "I don't know what I want to do with my life. I don't even know what I like, or what my interests are." Sadly, many adults say exactly that, for they've always had someone else making decisions for them, and haven't had much time to figure out how to think for themselves. Time. Time to play. Time to be children. Time to ponder things over in your own head. So many children today have no time, or at least very little, to call their own. They go to school, they go to after school activities, they do homework. Freedom to eat when we're hungry, sleep when we're tired, and to learn how to tell these things, and to know our body well enough that we can keep ourselves healthy. Being able to go to the bathroom when we need to, and not when someone else says we can. Being able to converse with people older and younger than ourselves, and to be okay about that. And peer pressure is practically eliminated.

She ended her answer by showing me a Langston Hughes poem that she had copied into one of her scrapbooks:

A lion in a zoo
Shut up in the cage
Lives a life of smothered rage

A lion in the plain
Roaming free
Is happy as ever
A lion can be

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PRACTICAL GUIDES TO MORE EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

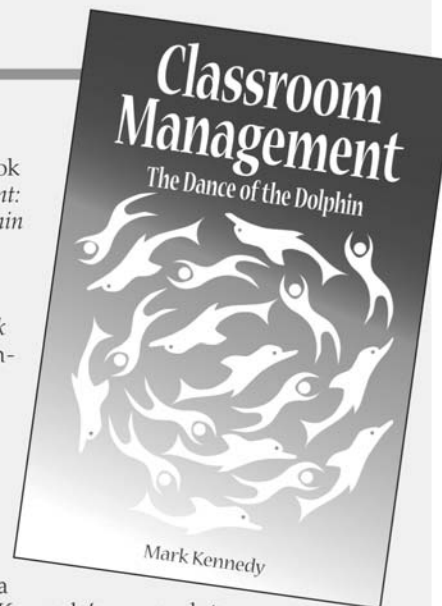
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