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HOW UNSCHOOLERS CAN HELP TO END TRADITIONAL READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Unschoolers can help end traditional, de-contextualized reading skills instruction, a change which might create other beneficial ripple effects. An unschooling parent and early childhood teacher educator, the author describes how his children learned to read without formal instruction. Next is a description of how prospective and practicing teachers react to this example, to examples of how children learned to read in alternative schools, and to reading research that clearly favors a more natural approach to learning to read. Five ways in which the unschooling model can influence others are described, and three specific suggestions for advocacy by unschoolers are outlined.

> "A child whose confidence in her learning ability has not been degraded or shattered (by someone else's judgment) will master reading or math as rapidly and successfully as they learned to walk, when she is interested."
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> - *Joyce Reed (in Albert, 2003, p. ix).*

Imagine a world in which children in typical schools learned to read through wonderful children's literature, play, writing cards and signs, and through exploring and re-creating real

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life. Imagine children smiling and laughing as they learn to read, and imagine no boring drills on letter-sound correspondences, on prefixes and suffixes, on spelling or grammar—just natural, joyous, and meaningful learning. Imagine no scripted reading instruction, no flashcards on reading subskills, and no panic over reading tests, but instead, children curled up in cozy places around the classroom, reading marvelous books and writing stories. This is a wonderful dream, and unschoolers can help make it come true.

Why would *unschoolers* want to make this dream come true? Aren't we busy enough? One reason is altruistic—we would be happy if the school experience was better for the millions of schoolchildren around the globe, and we believe that this improvement would make the world a better place. The second reason is more self-serving—the same changes in thinking that would be needed to make more schools look like this would probably lead more families to choose unschooling or alternative schools. Imagine how life would change if many more families chose unschooling, relaxed homeschooling, or alternative schools.

Transforming reading instruction in this way might seem like a pipe dream, but there are good reasons for optimism. That is, as I detail later, learning to read is one of many areas in which research provides stronger support for the natural learning approach followed by unschoolers than it provides for the de-contextualized direct skills instruction favored by schools. With tight educational budgets worldwide, policymakers and citizens may become receptive to re-thinking expensive educational approaches that simply do not work.

Because of their unique perspectives and experiences, unschoolers can play an important role in helping end traditional reading instruction and promoting more natural learning in schools and homes. In this article, I briefly describe how our own unschooled children learned to read and then describe how hundreds of prospective and practicing teachers have responded to

hearing about our unschooling approach to our children's reading and relevant reading research. Next, I summarize the research on reading instruction, and describe how the experiences and example of unschoolers might help to displace formal reading instruction with healthier and more natural approaches to learning and reading. This analysis comes out of the context of test-driven accountability in the United States, a movement that has led to a marked decline of play, child-initiated learning and use of quality children's literature. Schooling in many other nations reflect test-driven accountability and teacher-dominated instruction to varying degrees.

Throughout, I use an expansive definition of "unschoolers," one that includes free schools such as Sudbury Valley Schools. I am well aware that this liberal use of the term will not sit well with some family-based unschoolers. However, what goes on at a school such as Sudbury Valley School is as much unschooling as what my family or many other unschooling families do.

How Our Children Learned to Read

Both our children attended preschool, and our son attended half a year of kindergarten, but neither child was close to showing any signs of reading at the time we started unschooling. So how did they learn to read?

My wife and I did not provide our children with any formal reading instruction. We provided no lessons on letter-sound correspondences, no flashcards or quizzes, no phonemic

awareness instruction, no electronic devices to sound out words for them, and no skill-focused books with carefully controlled vocabulary. Upon hearing this, some people might think that maybe we were uneducated or didn't have confidence in our ability to instruct our children, or perhaps we didn't know the research on "scientifically-based reading instruction," or maybe we were just lazy and neglectful. In fact, we both have taught young children, both have doctoral degrees in education, we have decades of combined experience as teacher educators, and we both know a great deal about children's motivation, development, and yes, even reading research. So, the real reason we didn't provide formal instruction in isolated reading subskills is that we believe that such instruction undermines the healthy, long-term development and learning of the whole child.

So, what *did* we do? First, we read to our children every day from infancy onward—wonderful, magical children's books, fiction, non-fiction, and historical fiction. Thanks to endless trips to local libraries with my wife Amy, our children have spent years swimming in the "book flood" that is so important in supporting reading and love of reading. As I write this, it is nearing midnight in our house, and our daughter has insisted on reading a few more pages of *Sammy Keyes and the Wedding Crasher* before going to sleep. Second, we provided models of reading and writing in that Amy and I both read and write regularly and talk about what we are reading and writing. Third, we had fun with language—singing, making up rhymes and silly songs, and playing word games. When reading to our children, if they lost interest, we changed books or stopped reading. Fourth, we talked a lot with our children about all sorts of things, from the street sweeper trucks or squirrels in front of our house in the early years to elections and the Occupy Wall Street movement now that they are in middle school. Fifth, we provided opportunities for them to write, from writing cards to friends and relatives to making menus for

when they played restaurant. Sixth, we expressed strong faith in their ability to figure out how to read without instruction, and didn't rush them or pressure them to learn to read. Seventh, we answered their questions when they asked. When asked what sound a letter made or how to spell something or what the squiggly thing was at the end of a sentence, we simply told them. That's what we did, and they did the rest.

In the interest of full disclosure, when our son was in first grade, I lost faith in this approach for two days, and while he was in my lap for our nightly storybook reading, I started asking him if he knew what sound this letter made, or what that word was. Immediately, I could feel him withdrawing from the activity, as if some wonderful experience had suddenly taken a bad turn, which it had. I tried the same thing again the next day, with similar results. If "reading" was now to be this kind of quiz and instruct activity, he wasn't interested. I quickly stopped trying to instruct or assess him. A few months later, after we had read a few dozen Magic Tree House books to our children, our son made a big leap into independent reading.

Not surprisingly, the clearest evidence our son was moving into independent reading came with something in which he was passionately interested. Excited about receiving a computer game for making amusement parks (Roller Coaster Tycoon), he got frustrated when he couldn't figure out how to make it work. He asked us to print out the 80-page instruction manual, and spent hours lying on his bed with the instruction manual, until he figured out how to make the game do what he wanted it to do. For our daughter, at some point she simply started reading beginning readers without help and then moved on to books about fairies and Junie B. Jones.

So, instead of expensive materials for reading instruction, we followed seven guidelines, had a well-used library card, and had things to write with. That's it, and the result was children who read long complex books, enjoy reading, and understand what they read. By learning to read

this way, our children have primary ownership of the accomplishment of learning to read. This is crucial, because knowing that they figured out reading largely by themselves supports their confidence that they can figure out other things for themselves, or with just a little support. A great many other unschooling parents without our educational backgrounds have also reported similar results from this approach, suggesting that this approach is very do-able and requires no special training.

Supporting children's learning to read in this more natural way is *not* rocket science, it doesn't require expensive instructional materials, and does not require time-consuming instruction that crowds out play, physical activity, and meaningful and joyful learning from life. However, this approach does require faith in children and a focus on long-term effectiveness for the whole child. Fortunately, unschooling families tend to have these qualities in abundance.

How Prospective and Practicing Teachers Respond

I teach prospective and practicing teachers of children aged 3-8, and as I tell my students, and I have shared this information about how our children learned to read with over 700 prospective and practicing teachers in forty university courses in the last six years. Their responses follow a predictable pattern. In a class of 20-25 students, a handful of students will quickly remark that this fits perfectly with their experience—they read to their children or to children they taught regularly and the children figured out how to read without any formal instruction. Another 5-7 students will approve of the general idea of making reading fun and learning in a more natural way, but they have no relevant experience. Another roughly half dozen students will directly question this approach, and some of these will usually say it seems

wrong to not directly teach children to read or comment that they have been told in other classes that direct instruction is proven more effective than more natural, interest-based approaches such as whole language. To them, not providing formal reading instruction seems like an uninformed or neglectful decision. The remainder of the students will remain silent on the issue, but someone soon asks the question of how practical this approach is in a school with dozens or hundreds of other people's children.

Acknowledging that this is a perfectly fair question, I then introduce the example of Sudbury Valley Schools (www.sudval.org), a democratically-operated school in which all learning is based on children's interests. I ask students to watch a video posted on the Sudbury website and read a Dan Greenberg article posted there called "Why Force Reading?" The fact that Sudbury provides no reading instruction and all children there learn to read provides broader evidence of the potential for children in a group setting to learn to read on their own, as long as they are immersed in a literate and supportive community. Many of my students will say that they find the totally interest-based Sudbury approach too extreme, but several are always surprised and interested to hear that the Sudbury students turn out quite well, and that all the children there learn to read without any reading instruction. This example clearly shakes some people's thinking.

Soon, someone politely suggests that although many children *can* learn to read this way, isn't a direct instruction approach proven to be *better*, especially for children who are behind or at-risk. Now, because I start each course by asking what we really want for children, what goals we really cherish, we have established that our top goals for children are goals such as love of learning, creativity, initiative, social skills, respect for self and others, critical thinking and to be healthy and happy. We have also established that within subject matter, we consider

understanding, real-world competence, and continuing motivation to learn to be more important than test scores of low-level knowledge and skills. Finally, we have established that what matters more is what works best in the long run, not narrow or short-term gains that wash out over time. This context of shared goals for children is enormously important, and it is in this context that we discuss what the research *really says* about the effectiveness of direct and de-contextualized reading instruction versus more natural, contextualized and interest-based approaches.

The Research on Direct, De-contextualized Reading Instruction

As I have discussed in great detail elsewhere (Wheatley, 2012), when one takes a closer look at two U.S. policy documents—the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and the National Early Literacy Panel Report (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008)—one finds no evidence that direct reading instruction is necessary or yields meaningful long-term benefits. The supposed benefits of direct and de-contextualized reading instruction are limited to studies in which direct reading instruction proved better for boosting reading subskills than did activities unrelated to reading, or direct instruction proved more effective in very short studies, or proved more effective than approaches that were labeled as whole language but which were not (also see Coles, 2003). However, evidence of broad, long-term effectiveness—for reading comprehension, love of reading, and other outcomes—is entirely lacking.

Interest-based whole language consistently yields similar or better reading comprehension than does direct instruction, while also yielding better attitudes towards reading (see Coles, 2003), as well as better writing (e.g., Brennan & Ireson, 1997). Also, direct de-

contextualized reading instruction is often very time-consuming, sometimes taking as much as half of the classroom day, thus displacing activities such as exploration and independent study, play, recess, and even science and social studies. In contrast, whole language is an integrated approach that seamlessly integrates with other meaningful activities and subjects, and that is closer to what unschoolers and relaxed homeschoolers do.

Direct instruction consistently yields better subskills scores on reading tests, but these scores consistently don't confer any real-world advantages. When substantial direct and de-contextualized skill instruction was faithfully implemented in the United States through the Reading First program, the Reading First classrooms had higher scores on tests of isolated subskills, but had no better reading comprehension than students from comparison classrooms (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2008). Even with children with disabilities, the only such longitudinal study I am aware of found that preschool children with disabilities who experienced a more meaning-based, constructivist approach to learning to read in preschool read just as well at age 19 as did children who experienced a direct instruction preschool program (McDonald & Cornwall, 1995). In short, direct and de-contextualized reading instruction is unnecessary, even for preschoolers with learning disabilities and delays.

Furthermore, children from whole language classrooms have been found to define reading as meaning "reading a lot" and "understanding the story," while children from classrooms with direct and de-contextualized skills instruction defined reading as "paying attention to the teacher" and "knowing their place in the book" (Freppon, 1991). Clearly the former view of reading is preferable.

There is also a growing body of research on free voluntary reading, the kind of reading that characterizes life in unschooling homes and alternative schools. In a nutshell, this research

reveals that children and adults find free voluntary reading more enjoyable than traditional reading instruction, and that free voluntary reading is consistently as good or better than traditional reading instruction for fostering reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and writing (see Krashen, 2011, for a review). Most significantly, the longer the studies are, the more that free voluntary reading outperforms traditional reading instruction (Krashen, 2011).

In sum, given the range of goals we value most for the whole child, the approach to learning to read that is most effective in the long run in classrooms is interest-based learning that is connected to real life and that has large doses of freedom and choice. That is, while traditional reading instruction is actually one of the leading causes of reading problems, what works best in classrooms is what unschoolers do.

For future and practicing teachers to grasp these findings, it helps to point out to them that the term "reading achievement" is very misleading. Within the world of formal education, the word "reading achievement" usually only means short-term scores on standardized reading tests, and such tests usually contain some reading comprehension but also a lot of other subskills that may or may not signal any real progress towards real reading. When children are taught using direct reading skills instruction, their learning of these subskills races ahead of their real reading comprehension, and thus, these tests of "reading achievement" overestimate how well these children read in comparison to children who learned more naturally. In sum, most reading tests and the resulting indicators of "reading achievement" are untrustworthy indicators of children's real-world reading competence and are blind to other positive or negative outcomes resulting from differing approaches to learning to read (e.g., poorer motivation, less science learning). More generally, single-subject research is generally an untrustworthy guide for those

interested in whole-child education because greater cognitive gains in one subject when using a particular approach often come at the expense of lesser gains in other subjects or losses in social, emotional, physical, and motivational development. These "big-picture" points about education and educational research help some of my students see how narrow and short-term research can be very misleading about long-term effectiveness for the whole child.

Making the Familiar Strange

By this point, some of my students shift to seeing a natural, interest-based approach to learning to read as the logical option, but they simply can't see how they *can* teach this way in schools that are focused on narrow and short-term test scores. What's interesting at this point in the semester-long conversation is that instead of natural learning, unschooling, or whole language being on the defensive, suddenly traditional schooling and traditional reading instruction are on the defensive. "Why use formal reading instruction when it doesn't improve reading comprehension and turns kids off to reading? Why won't schools focus on the goals that parents and employers consistently say they value most? Why follow an approach that crowds out recess, play, child-initiated, and even traditional core subjects such as science and social studies? Why waste taxpayers' money on tests and instructional materials that do not improve real-world competence?" There is clearly something deeply wrong with an educational approach that invites such questions, and many of the teachers and prospective teachers in my classes clearly recognize this.

Recently, one student in my curriculum class, troubled by the worksheet-dominated classrooms where she will likely be placed for student teaching, wondered why she couldn't be

placed for student teaching in the unschooling/relaxed homeschooling co-operative created by my wife, myself, and three other unschooling parents. Another of my students had her third-grade son opt out of the high-stakes state testing, despite two calls from the district superintendent, and also told her son's reading specialist that she would not do the boring reading instruction drills with her son. Instead, she was confident that if he just kept reading and she made it enjoyable, her son would be just fine. Other students have re-introduced quality children's literature into their classrooms. Of such small beginnings, happening here and there across the globe, big changes are possible. Indeed, if a large minority of parents simply opted their children out of the high-stakes tests used to judge students, teachers and schools, this would make the remaining results useless, and bring to a screeching halt our current preoccupation with test-driven education.

In sum, through exposure to examples of more natural and enjoyable approaches to learning to read, backed up by a closer analysis of reading research, many practicing and prospective teachers come to see the unschooling approach to learning to read as a logical approach and see de-contextualized reading skill drills as what is strange and troubling. They may be unsure that they will stand up for these ideas once they are in the classroom, and may still lack the skills to do this approach well, but they have a new view of the issue.

I want to put into perspective my contribution to these prospective and practicing teachers' changes in thinking. Although I know a great deal about research on curriculum, motivation, child development, and reading, the main ideas that prove influential in changing people's minds are ideas that I also read in unschooling books all the time. In fact, when my wife and I were considering homeschooling, we sat and read lots of books on homeschooling and unschooling, and I was struck by the fact that unschooling parents correctly portrayed all the

main ideas about healthy motivation, development and learning that I share with my classes. In short, unschooling parents and children have a powerful tale to tell.

The Role of Unschooling in Changing Minds About Reading

In the 40-odd university courses that I have taught in the years since our son and daughter learned how to read without reading instruction, there is no question that for many prospective and practicing teachers, hearing the research that formal reading instruction doesn't improve meaningful reading outcomes was crucial in influencing their thinking. However, there is also no question that examples from unschooling and from "unschools" such as Sudbury Valley were also crucial. Some people need statistics, but all of them benefit from hearing the stories, and I think the stories and real-life data from unschoolers can influence people's thinking in five ways.

First, unschoolers provide a unique and powerful critique to the echo chamber of American educational policy and practice, a place in which the need for greater accountability, more rigorous standards, more standardized data-driven curriculum is rarely questioned. While many academics strongly criticize test-driven accountability, their critiques often stop at saying that we need a broader curriculum and need less emphasis on testing. Few suggest that a day filled with separate subject instruction in which the teacher attempts to teach all children the same thing at the same time is totally misguided. Very few suggest that much or most of a school day should be child-initiated learning, and even fewer are actively engaged in doing an alternative approach to education with real children, so their critiques are easily dismissed as impractical ivory tower theorizing. However, unschoolers and those from alternative schools can back up their critique of test-driven education with real life examples of happy, healthy,

competent children who love learning and are well-adjusted, and who became so without any formal schooling whatsoever. Most of all, while educators tend to provide critiques that only tinker with the status quo, unschoolers boldly proclaim that our current approach to education is fundamentally misguided and that the only hope ultimately lies in transforming all aspects of the system simultaneously. This broad critique of the overall paradigm of factory-style schooling is an essential foundation for understanding critiques of particular schooling practices such as de-contextualized reading skills instruction.

Second, unschoolers are models of thoughtful, caring parents who concluded that their children didn't need formal instruction in general or reading instruction in particular, and had the courage to take that leap of faith. While the decision may have seemed obvious for some of us, for parents filled with anxiety that their children will be left behind if they don't fill their lives with reading drills, this model is an important one. This model shows parents and others that this approach is reasonable and workable, and the more unschoolers there are, and the more visible they are, the more that this approach to reading and education will be viewed as a legitimate alternative. Because modern schooling is largely designed around fear, an important part of the model that unschoolers can provide to others is modeling the courage to take the road less traveled by.

Third, unschoolers are models of *how* to do it, and parents and teachers need a clear alternative to direct and de-contextualized skill instruction if they are to change. Significantly, unschooling is becoming a more and more important model for parents and teachers seeking an alternative to test-focused drill, because as schools increasingly become homogenized test-prep institutions, there are fewer and fewer places where parents and educators can observe an alternative in action. Indeed, in the United States, with many of the leading figures of progressive

education having passed away or being well past retirement age, and with even many programs for even 3-5 year olds becoming narrowly academic and highly-structured, there is a palpable sense that child-led, interest-based learning for children is threatened with extinction. Many of the teachers who host our teacher candidates in their student teaching experience report that they have no time in the year for *any* curriculum that is responsive to children's interests! Thus, many of my college students have never seen or experienced *any* integrated learning that is responsive to children's interests. Given this harsh reality for children, parents and teachers will often have to look to unschoolers and alternative schools to model ways to be sensitive and responsive to children's interests.

Fourth, unschoolers naturally speak a different language than educators do—about children, learning, motivation, curriculum and education, and unschoolers' language has great potential to re-frame discussions and debates about education. Language powerfully shapes thought, and the language of modern-day educational debates traps educators' thinking within the confines of authoritarian, test-driven, factory-style schooling. In contrast, the language of unschoolers immediately transports us outside of dreary test-prep factories and into the woods, or to children building a Lego robot or discussing civil rights or making music. Simply grasping the language of unschoolers—that children are naturally good at learning, that children behave as well as they are treated, that learning usually does not require instruction—requires listeners to think outside of the box of schooling. Using this language creates an entirely different discussion about education.

Fifth and finally, unschoolers and those who attend alternative schools are like the explorers of old, reporting back to their home nation on fabulous and different lands they visited. What unschoolers can report—of wonderful learning experiences through play or investigation—

provides inspiration and information about what learning and life could be like if we moved to a new paradigm of education.

Why are these alternative visions so important? In three ways, formal schooling creates a world in which it is enormously difficult to see what life and learning would be like if children were given much more freedom. First, schools fill children's days with academics and nights with homework, and when children are done, children understandably want to collapse on a couch and watch Spongebob. This doesn't mean that children are naturally lazy TV addicts: Rather, it means that schooling uses up children's daily time and energy so that we cannot see how children would act if life were otherwise. However, unschoolers can tell you, because they have days and years filled with the freedom for exploration and self-initiated creation. Second, schools define learning in narrowly academic terms of those things that are easily tested and create a thought-world in which everyone assumes that things like sorting cards with short "e" and long "e" words into baskets is a necessary step in learning to read. By contrast, our daughter learned to read fluently without learning what a syllable or consonant was, let alone what "short e" words were. Because of this experience—only available to me because we are unschoolers—I am able to report to others that there's a whole other world of learning in which you discover that many of the things deemed essential in schools are either optional or are obstacles to learning. Third, external control makes children more passive or rebellious, so once children have experienced large quantities of formal schooling, they behave in ways that make it difficult to believe that children would make much happen if left to their own devices. Taking these three issues together, teachers are correct in stating that, within the educational world where they live, children are often unmotivated and disruptive, and learning often seems terribly difficult.

Unschoolers can acknowledge this reality while sharing an inspiring world of different possibilities for children, teachers, and families.

Discussion and Next Steps

After three decades in education, I know that there is no one miracle cure to heal education, and also know that many people have zero interest in hearing what unschooling families and those from alternative schools have to say about children, education, and learning to read. As Upton Sinclair observed, it is difficult to get someone to understand something when his or her paycheck depends on not understanding it. Many of those in schools are locked in a titanic struggle to raise test scores—or else. The threats are real, as failure to earn higher test scores often gets teachers, principals and superintendents fired. For these people, the idea of free choice learning centers or free voluntary reading are utterly alien ideas that are totally at odds with what their principals and superintendents *demand* that they do. More significantly, focusing on long-term effectiveness rather than short-term test scores seems like a luxury they can ill afford. In this context, efforts to change reading instruction or our overall educational paradigm seem like hopeless tilting at windmills.

However, working with teachers year round, I have seen how stories of unschooling and research on interest-based learning combine to shake many people's belief in factory-style schooling while gaining faith in more natural, holistic, and interest-based ways of learning to read. Internationally, in countries with an intensification of top-down control and high-stakes testing, we have seen how education is becoming terribly punitive and massively unpleasant, and people are resisting such oppressive conditions. Leaders in Korea are complaining about the

damage caused by their obsession with test scores, while China, with the longest history of high-stakes testing, is trying to escape the grips of test-driven education so they can pursue quality education that fosters creativity (Zhao, 2009). In the United States, we are seeing test-driven, factory-style education taken to its logical extreme, and it has failed. Learning has not improved any more than before this experiment, the esteemed National Research Council has scolded politicians for basing policy on ideology rather than evidence, promising teacher candidates often leave the field over the lack of autonomy and creativity in their work, and shortages of qualified principals and superintendents are increasing. I believe that top-down, test-driven, factory-style education will ultimately be seen as a failure in the same way that fad diets are now seen as a failure. Then, people will search out more holistic alternatives that work better for the whole child and for society in the long run—while reflecting rather than undermining freedom and equality. If it is always darkest before the dawn, the recent intensification of oppressive education may well telegraph the imminent collapse of this outdated approach.

However, sometimes history needs a little nudge, and unschoolers can help give history that nudge by engaging others in civil discussions about education, and sharing our unique experiences and perspectives. This might involve taking advantage of more openings to engage others in informal discussions about education, posting more comments in on-line discussions, or holding informational sessions about unschooling at the local library. Whatever forum we choose, unschoolers can do three concrete things to help end traditional reading instruction.

First, we can share our own experiences—experiences that both model the courage to approach learning and reading in a different way and that also embody practical ideas for supporting more child-initiated and natural approaches to learning and reading. People often feel defensive about their parenting choices, so it is important to acknowledge that homeschooling

and unschooling are not for everyone. This puts people more at ease and makes them more willing to hear and learn from the stories of what is possible when we follow children's interests. It is crucial for unschoolers to remember that traditional schooling creates a context such that most people are simply unaware of what children are capable of under more supportive and free conditions.

Second, we can consciously avoid using the language of traditional schooling and traditional reading instruction and provide new language for talking and thinking about education and reading. Conceptual frames such as "reading achievement" both reflect and reinforce a particular view of education, and because these frames get established through repetition, it is crucial that we avoid using the very frames that communicate a worldview that we reject. Unschoolers are not so interested in what educators mean by "reading achievement," because that mostly means scores on tests that largely assess low-level reading subskills. Thus, when others talk about "reading achievement," we can say that low-level skills are the wrong focus, and that we really need to focus on "reading comprehension and love of reading." When you tell educators that "student achievement" is the wrong goal for schools, it opens up a whole new conversation. Then, when others talk about reading "instruction," we can note that the best way to "learn to read" requires little or none of what most people would consider instruction. Yes, children need opportunities and support and modeling, but they generally will learn better without formal instruction, because as long as their basic needs are met, children are naturally good learners. Repeating such language every chance we get will gradually erode the façades that have protected formal, de-contextualized reading instruction from being exposed for what it is—incredibly expensive and unnecessary.

Third, and finally, unschoolers could familiarize themselves with educational research that helps back up many of the ideals they hold dear, while challenging factory-style education in general and formal reading instruction in particular. Like many unschooling parents, I love reading John Taylor Gatto (e.g., Gatto, 2005), both for affirmation about the problems with traditional schooling and to get energized about unschooling. However, for other audiences, there are many authors whose work provides clearer and stronger research evidence that test-driven factory schooling is not the answer, and that interest-driven, life-based education works better for the goals we value most. Many very readable books provide strong research evidence that traditional schooling pursues the wrong goals (Wagner, 2008) is a less effective and outdated educational paradigm (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kohn, 1999; Ravitch, 2010) and creates widespread collateral damage (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Within these books, one can read of a German study of 50 play-based versus 50 academic kindergartens, which found that the children who experienced the play-based kindergartens did better than the children from the academic kindergartens *on every single indicator* in 5th grade—including reading, mathematics, the other subjects tested, as well as creativity, intelligence, oral expression, and industriousness (see Tietze, 1987, in Darling-Hammond, 1997). One also reads of a classic study in which researchers found that the students who experienced the most *non-traditional* high school were the ones who did the best in college (Chamberlin, Chamberlin, Draught, & Scott, 1942). Research such as this provides evidence that traditional schooling is simply the wrong way to approach education. Also, there are very readable books providing strong evidence that the coercive motivational approach at the heart of factory schooling and instruction is ultimately counterproductive (Deci, 1995; Pink, 2009). Furthermore, many good books de-bunk so-called scientifically-based reading instruction (Allington, 2002; Coles, 2003; Garan, 2004; Gallagher,

2009) and detail the superiority of free voluntary reading over traditional reading instruction (e.g., Krashen, 2011). The longer the studies go, the greater the advantages of free voluntary reading over traditional instruction—which is a powerful trump card in discussions (see Krashen, 2011). Finally, there are good, research-based books outlining the general benefits of play and playful learning (Brown, 2009; Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003; Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2009), and on the centrality of play in learning to read (Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Further evidence and arguments can be found in the blog by psychologist Peter Gray (http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn) and from the accounts of the experiences and successes of free schools (Greenberg, 1995; Mercogliano, 1998).

I know that many unschooling families are quite happy doing what feels right for them, and don't need the external validation that such research might provide. However, I also know that as unschooling families, we sometimes have doubts about what we are doing, and we are often challenged by relatives or the media about why they approach learning as we do. Thus, one side benefit of reading a few of these books is being armed with stronger evidence that supports autonomous learning and living.

Ultimately, unschoolers and all those who endorse more natural learning might view their efforts to help others learn about the problems with formal reading instruction as a first step in helping others engage in more powerful systems thinking about the big problems in life. Humankind is facing a day of reckoning, because our approaches to energy, eating, health, population, the economy, and to education are all unsustainable in the long run. The common Achilles heel of our current approaches in these areas is that our current approaches make one or two things better in the short run while making many things worse in the long run. Formal, de-contextualized, direct reading instruction has the same fatal flaw—boosting reading subskills

faster in the short run while disrupting the curriculum, reducing learning in other areas, undermining initiative and love of learning, and ironically, creating lots of reading problems.

Learning that those practices that are superficially effective and expedient in the short run are often broadly counterproductive in the long run is an essential aspect of the wisdom needed for solving the major challenges facing our planet. Through helping to end traditional, de-contextualized reading instruction, unschoolers may spread some wisdom that helps people improve the world in many other ways. Whether these changes come rapidly or gradually, a healthy (r)evolution in learning to read can help to promote healthy (r)evolutions in other areas of our lives. Let's begin this important work.

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He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in curriculum, graduate courses in child development, the Seminar in Early Childhood Education, and a doctoral course in motivation. Scholarly interests: motivation, teacher efficacy beliefs, healthy development and learning, student outcomes, child-initiated learning, play, progressive education, homeschooling, and educational reform.

He is writing a book that exposes the myths behind the accountability movement and explains how to replace test-driven education with healthier alternatives consistent with American values. His model of "Big-Picture Education" focuses on our top goals for children, what is effective in the long run for the whole child, and what strengthens democracy and improves the world.

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He is currently writing a book that exposes dozens of myths behind the educational accountability movement and explains how the main ideas of the accountability movement (e.g.,

accountability, student achievement, standardization, quantifiable outcomes, testing, a manufacturing model, etc.) undermine educational quality. The book also describes alternatives to test-driven education that are healthier, work better, and are more consistent with American values. Finally, the book describes how to re-frame educational debates to help replace high-stakes testing with healthy, "big-picture" education.

Wheatley has developed a model of "Big-Picture Education" that focuses on our top goals for children, what is effective in the long run for the whole child, and what strengthens our democracy and improves the world.

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