

## Unschooling, Then and Now

By: Kellie ROLSTAD & Kathleen KESSON

---

### Abstract

While the accountability and standardization movement continues to narrow curriculum in the US, unschooling families are redefining learning and recreating community in an atmosphere of love and trust. As professors of education and unschooling mothers, Rolstad and Kesson compare their unschooling experiences in two different eras, one in the early days of unschooling (1980s), and the other in the first decade of the 21st century. Kathleen Kesson was an unschooling pioneer when her children were unschooled in the early 1980s, and her children are now adults. She describes what it was like to unschool then, to do what she terms ‘old school unschooling.’ Only a generation later, Kellie Rolstad began unschooling her three children, in a world transformed by the Internet and ease of access to both information and social networking, key components of unschooling today. Rolstad describes how her unschooling children connected play in real and virtual worlds, exploring ideas differently in many aspects from how Kesson’s children played and explored, and yet fundamentally and remarkably the same. In this article, Rolstad and Kesson share their experiences of trusting children, of giving them the space and the resources to learn and grow in the ways that are best for them, comparing along the way what it was like to unschool then and what it is like to unschool now, in this era when our society has come to distrust children more than ever.

---

As accountability and standardization continue to narrow curriculum, unschooling families are redefining learning and recreating community across all sorts of real and imagined historically-determined boundaries, including racial, cultural, economic, geographic and educational divides. These families choose to free themselves and their children from the expectations and demands of school so that they can live, work and play in the wider world outside of school, aided by technological advances in social networking. The growing unschooling phenomenon has reached mainstream U.S. news media, with several stories highlighting unschooling families reported on national television and in national newspapers (e.g., Dr. Phil, 2006; Good Morning America, 2010; Wilson, 2011 [CNN U.S.]). Dozens of popular books written by and about unschoolers have been published (e.g., Dodd, 2011; Griffith, 1998; Holt & Farenga, 2003; Llewellyn, 1998; McGrath, 2010; McKee, 2002; Ricci, 2012). In addition, books have been written that document how autonomous learners flourish in democratic schools, such as Summerhill in the UK, and the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, the two oldest, continuously-running such schools in their respective countries (Avrich, 2005; Greenberg et al., 1995; McCaig, 2008; Miller, 2002; Neill, 1960;

However, little scholarly research has been conducted involving unschooling families and communities. Thomas and Pattison (2007) interviewed 26 families, British, Irish, Canadian or Australian, where parents described their children's learning as 'informal;' the families reported a wide range of how children spent their time, from more-structured to less-structured activities. While Thomas and Pattison do not use the term 'unschooling,' they describe the powerful informal learning engaged in by the families that imposed the least school-like structure on their children's activities, and found that informal settings and conversations best promoted

autonomous learning (Thomas & Pattison, 2007). Samuelson (2004) and Bertozzi (2006) have also conducted small, rich studies of unschoolers and their learning, but research in unschooling remains in its infancy (Thomas & Pattison, 2007). Few education researchers know enough about unschooling to clarify the goals and outcomes of this growing phenomenon, as illustrated by the flawed homeschooling study conducted by Martin-Chang, Gould & Meuse (2011), where the researchers concluded that young unschooled children were unsuccessful learners because their learning was not captured by a standardized test.

The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning was founded in Canada in 2008 by Carlo Ricci to provide a venue for scholars to share their work that might not be reviewed for publication in more traditional education research journals, and has authored and edited several books and journal articles on unschooling (e.g., Ricci, 2012; Mintz & Ricci, 2010). Another Canadian scholar, Matt Hern, has edited two volumes dedicated to unschooling and alternative schools with contributions from many of the foremost proponents of unschooling or deschooling, and has authored other books about deschooling (Hern, 1996; 2003, 2008). Evolutionary psychologist Peter Gray maintains an unschooling blog and has recently authored a book on unschooling (Gray, 2013).

Definitions of unschooling vary widely, and the philosophies and activities of unschooling families also vary tremendously. Further complicating large-scale research efforts, unschooling families can be difficult to locate and study. While homeschooling is legal in all 50 U.S. states, and has been slowly gaining in social acceptability, homeschooling families are still sometimes faced with hostility, and tend not to volunteer information about their educational status or activities. This is even more true of unschooling families, whose activities least

resemble school, and are therefore least likely to volunteer their children for scrutiny by potentially prejudiced or judgmental observers. Unschooling families learn to navigate through the cracks and around the edges of what is considered to constitute ‘appropriate’ child experiences.

Scholars interested in conducting research about unschooling are also navigating along the edges of education research; instead of measuring academic outcomes, we are interested in documenting how the lives of children and families are enriched and expanded by an unschooling lifestyle, posing research questions of a more holistic, much larger scope than those addressed in traditional academic outcomes research, and at the same time, pointedly uninterested in measuring traditional academic outcomes in conventional ways. The goals of unschooling scholars are different; we seek an alternative way to understand a lifestyle in which learning is not valued for its own sake, but as part of living satisfying lives, where intellectual development is not more highly valued than family relationships, where academic studies do not take precedence over artistic studies, where children’s development is seen as natural rather than as a process requiring intervention. Scholars interested in unschooling must first learn to recognize authentic, situated learning before they can begin documenting it. In the words of Eliot Eisner (1997), this alternative approach to studying the data of interest and how to represent the data is concerned with “exploring the edges and reexamining the meaning of research” (Eisner, 1997, p. 7). While autonomous learning has thrived in homeschooling families since at least the early 1980s, and in U.S. free schools since the late 1960s, unschooled learning has only rarely been documented by education researchers, partly because the outcomes of unschooling are untraditional and defy our definitions of curriculum-based education. Mainstream education

## Unschooling, Then and Now

researchers have not been particularly interested in unschooling, and have lacked appropriate methods for studying these families and their lived experiences; again, in Eisner's words, "We tend to seek what we know how to find" (Eisner, 1997, p. 7).

Despite a tremendous gap in the research literature and a dearth of empirical or philosophical support from academic experts, many families in the U.S. and elsewhere are choosing an unschooling approach to their children's education. The unschooling movement has developed in opposition to the goals and outcomes of institutionalized instruction (Holt, 1976; Gaither, 2008). Unschooling rejects the entire apparatus of school, and the paradigm on which modern schooling is based, which seeks to predict children's future needs and to prepare children by imparting to them, in advance, the skills and knowledge that children may, or may not, need in the future, but for which children themselves have not yet found a need (Holt, 1983; 1989). According to the unschooling philosophy, the belief that children's predicted possible needs should be canonized in a predetermined curriculum and taught to children on a standardized schedule based on age, with concomitant expectations that specific milestones be met, is misguided at its core (Holt, 1989). While some schooled children meet teachers' and parents' expectations and milestones, and some exceed them, many more children struggle and ultimately fail academically, for reasons that may have little or nothing to do with children's inherent abilities or motivation, with parental support at home, or with teacher quality (Holt, 1983). Punishing and/or rewarding children, teachers and schools, the current goal of U.S. mainstream schooling, will not improve the education system in any meaningful way, because the fundamental problem remains unaddressed: institutionalized schooling creates a context which renders opportunities for learning, particularly joyful learning, difficult or impossible and which teaches children that they cannot be trusted (Gatto, 2005; Holt, 1983; 1989).

Wendy Priesnitz (2009) describes why some families choose to live their lives without school, encouraging their children to live, learn and play fully in the world, rather than spending their entire childhoods set apart from the world in a school building. As she describes unschooling or what she prefers to call “life learning,” the movement involves primarily progressive families:

Some progressive parents are dissatisfied with not just the problematic particulars of contemporary public schools (high stakes testing, classism, bullying and other violence, etc.) but also with the current mainstream educational model in general. They are the forefront of education change, choosing to help their children learn without school.

Unschoolers do not believe in separating learning or learners from society at large, nor do they believe that compulsory teaching produces real learning or approve of the need to institutionalize children. Although often thought to be a subset of the homeschooling community, unschoolers are passionately involved in their communities and dedicated to creating profound and progressive change in the way society views childhood, parenting and education (Priesnitz, 2009).

Unschoolers report regular engagement in joyful learning experiences, in all sorts of contexts (Dodd, 2011; Griffith, 1998; McGrath, 2010; McKee, 2002; Ricci, 2012). As part of unschooling families’ goals of maximizing their children’s opportunities to play, interact with people of all ages, and actively learn and socialize in the world, unschoolers gather regularly in local parks and other public settings, as well as for larger field trips, conferences, dances, and campouts, often drawing national and international participation. Through social networking and the technological savvy of this information-sharing generation of children, unschoolers develop

multiple, overlapping “affinity groups,” in the sense of Gee (2003), based on wide-net interest- and information-sharing rather than on perceived surface similarities. Social networking sites are helping children to cut across historically-sanctioned boundaries as they seek out interest-based friendships with people unlike themselves in myriad ways. What, if anything, can schools and the educational mainstream learn from the unschoolers?

How do unschooling families find and forge community? How do unschooling families gain access to information and meet and socialize with other, often very culturally-different, families? By what means do children find and explore their interests, and what paths do they take on their journeys of intellectual development? What can we learn from the early unschoolers, now grown, and how have the opportunities for learning and socializing changed since the inception of unschooling in the late 1970s?

Using a narrative research approach (Barone, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2007), Kellie Rolstad and Kathleen Kesson reflect on their own stories as parents, educators and scholars to gain insight into unschooling as an alternative approach to traditional schooling. As Polkinghorne (2007) notes, “narrative research is the study of stories” (p. 1). Narrative research, Polkinghorne (2007) explains, holds that education research, and social science more broadly, needs to

explore and develop knowledge about areas of the human realm that fell outside the limits of what had conventionally been thought to be accessible to validation. These areas included people’s experienced meanings of their life events and activities (p. 14).

Sharing their stories, Rolstad and Kesson invite the reader to contemplate the “transformation of their experiences from the personal to the public,” and to join them in considering “what we can

learn from each of these transformations” (Eisner, 1997, p. 7). The authors, both professors of education, compare their experiences of unschooling in two different eras, one in the early days of unschooling (1980s), and the other in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Kathleen Kesson was an unschooling pioneer when her children were unschooled in the early 1980s, and her children are now adults. She describes what it was like to unschool then, to do ‘old school unschooling,’ as she first phrased it to Kellie, and provides a vivid description of how her young son Shaman explored the world and fed his passion for geography, cartography and hands-on learning in his “year of maps.”

Kellie Rolstad began unschooling her children a mere twenty years later, but in a world dramatically changed by the Internet and the onset of the Information Age. She describes how quickly and easily her family was able to locate and join a large community of other unschooling families, and the ease of networking via the internet to form and participate in a variety of extremely diverse affinity groups. She provides a closer look at how her unschooling children created overlapping communities, and how they connected videogaming, playing with miniaturization, and whole-body play in multiple exploratory iterations of the fundamentally-similar ideas each child happened to be passionate about at approximately the same age as Kesson’s son, Shaman. Crucially important in both families has been the recognition that children can and should be trusted; trusted to know what interests them most, trusted to develop the skills they need to pursue their interests, and trusted to ask for precisely the help they need from adults, more knowledgeable peers, or family members.

### **Unschooling Then**



In the late 1970s, John Holt (1977) introduced the term ‘unschooling’ to describe an approach to child education that was not at all like ‘schooling.’ He had worked as an elementary-school and high school teacher, and had been a close observer of children from pre-school age on up, keeping detailed journals of his observations of how children learn naturally. Holt was very interested in the strategies that young children use to learn about the world, and commented on how scientifically-based children’s natural learning behaviors are. He compared the powerful learning that very young children engage in as they learn to walk and talk, undirected by adults, to the weak and even negative learning that he saw happening in schools when learning is directed and controlled by teachers. While some families of that era were opting to homeschool their children, homeschooling is often thought of as “doing school at home,” an approach that merely replaces direction from the teacher with direction from the parent (Holt, 1981). Holt saw direction by others as interfering with child learning, which drove him to promote ‘unschooling,’ the rejection of approaches to education that gave control over learning to anyone other than the child (Holt, 1977).

Not a parent himself, Holt (1981) imagined and described a vision of how unschooled children could be nurtured and freed to pursue their own interests in the bosom of a caring family. Unschooling pioneers often took their first steps toward facilitating their children’s unschooled development as they learned about and began implementing then-novel approaches such as breast-feeding and attachment parenting (Dodd, 2011).

Sandra Dodd, who also had worked as a teacher, began unschooling her children with the support of two other unschooling families she knew from La Leche League, a breast-feeding support group (Dodd, 2011). Dodd describes scouring thrift stores on the lookout for interesting

objects, books, games and activities that she thought might delight her three children, which she would then ‘strew’ around the house in case anyone might take an interest (Dodd, 2011). Dodd networked with other unschooling parents, developed an internet presence, and became a source of information and advice for unschooling families around the world, speaking at conferences, writing books and maintaining an unschooling listserv, blog and website.

While John Holt wrote, traveled and spoke to parents and teachers about unschooling in the US, parent, author and editor Wendy Priesnitz, also initially trained as a teacher, was working in parallel with John Holt to promote self-directed learning in Canada. She founded The Alternate Press to publish books and the *Natural Life* magazine with her husband Rolf in 1976, and she went on to found The Canadian Alliance of Homeschoolers in 1979. Holt had begun publishing his *Growing Without Schooling* magazine in 1977, which continued to be published until 2001. When *Growing Without Schooling* ceased publication, Priesnitz founded *Life Learning Magazine*, which has become the leading magazine for parents interested in facilitating their children’s self-directed learning.

In these early days, Kathleen Kesson was also working to revolutionize education, first for University Without Walls and later by unschooling her own children. She documented her family’s activities and conversations, focusing her observations on the ways in which play, long known to be critical to learning and developing cognition in early childhood, continues to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for lifelong learning to occur. The importance of pleasure in learning, called “central to human happiness – to an engaged and vital life” (Olson, 2009), drove Kathleen to focus on periods when her children were pleurably engaged. In one such period of engagement, her six year old son became happily involved in drawing maps for

the better part of a year, an activity which led to the informal acquisition of innumerable advanced geographical concepts (area, perimeter, population, boundaries, borders, equator, continents, hemispheres, latitude, longitude, etc.) as well as advanced mathematical skills (calculating sums and comparing values using all four of the basic mathematical operations into the millions). In addition to the journals the author kept as her children were growing, she provides detailed information on the paths the children took on their way to becoming successful adults. Her story follows.

Kathleen: In the 1970's, I worked with the Universities Without Walls, an umbrella organization for the "alternative education community." UWW was part of a consortium of colleges set up by the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities, representing the spirit of innovation that characterized the 1960's. The 'Universities Without Walls' were a loosely affiliated and varied set of programs, some twenty-one of them, trying to break down the literal and metaphorical walls of the traditional university, awarding credit for travel, internships, prior life experience, and other sorts of "real life" activities. The program I worked with, for example, was located in the former "Indian territory" at the heart of the Cherokee Nation, and we were engaged in a Foxfire-type of program, learning traditional arts and crafts from local elders, studying Native American history and culture, and working with groups like the American Indian Movement on issues of self-determination and cultural revival.

Those of us setting up free schools and alternative education conferences understood the connection between the larger social/ political changes we were immersed in (the civil rights movement, the burgeoning ecology movement, women's consciousness raising, etc.) and what we termed the "education/ indoctrination system." I read each of Ivan Illich's books as they were issued (1970, 1971, 1971) and in ensuing years was influenced by a variety of philosophies

loosely coupled around the ideas of educational freedom, learning through real life experiences, and learner-directed learning. I shared Illich's criticism of modern bureaucratic institutions as purveyors of conformity, pollution, mindless consumerism, war and a host of other social evils. Like many in my generation, I was swept away by the possibility of creating whole new structures from the ground up: alternative architecture, agriculture, politics, education, diet, lifestyles – you name it; it was all up for grabs. Home schooling, following the birth of our four boys, seemed a logical extension of this wider commitment to building a new society by rejecting participation in mainstream institutions. I had not, at that time, come across the word unschooling. It is only in hindsight that I can identify what we did as more closely related to the unschooling end of the spectrum.

I was most definitely influenced by the Romantic idea (Rousseau, 1762/1979) that kids possess an inner compass to guide them on their educational journey, and the notion that genuine learning must be grounded in rich and meaningful experience. My politics and those of my husband were decidedly left wing, unlike many of the self-sufficient, socially conservative populists/survivalists of today. We were committed environmentalists – members of Friends of the Earth, etc., dedicated to living lightly on the land, being “locovores” before this term for ‘eating locally’ was invented, learning the skills of self-sufficiency (house building, clothing construction, food growing, animal raising, etc.) We were most surely not isolationists, but strongly involved in the local community. We started food coops, supported the home birth movement, edited and published an alternative broadsheet, were anti-nuclear activists, and committed members of the local peace and justice group. A central contradiction for us at this

## Unschooling, Then and Now

time was the vast divide between the consumer society the local public schools seemed to be preparing children for, and our vision of the “good society.”

I guess we could have been called “semi-Luddites” in that we were trying to minimize our technological/ecological footprint. The operative term for us was “appropriate technology” and we focused a lot on the use of manual tools when we unschooled: hammers, drills, pliers, wrenches, and other building tools; shovels, rakes, and other gardening tools, cooking tools, sewing, knitting, and crochet tools (I was enough of a feminist to think that boys should have the opportunity to develop such ‘domestic arts’), magnets, mirrors, solar panels, calculators, scales, solar photography kits, electronics kits, blocks, rulers, microscopes, magnifying glasses, stop watches, and of course art and design tools. We took apart and put together clocks, bicycles, lamps, radios, and built models of virtually everything.

Recently, I interviewed my two oldest sons, both of whom are extremely adept at electronic technology – one is a professor, one a senior negotiator with the federal government—to see what they recalled about the role of technology in their unschooling days. The eldest, Steve, says, “It was better then, in a way, you had to work harder. If it wasn't in the World Book you had to either find someone with knowledge or go to the library or something.” (How different is that from the ‘facts at your fingertips’ we have now!) We were on the cusp of the home computer revolution, and someone had bestowed on us a little Texas Instruments machine—a primitive thing—long before the days when apps and programs were available. The same son, my oldest, went on to say, “And you almost had to learn a computer language just to get a computer to do anything.” He and I did enroll in an evening computer course at the local Vocational-Technical school and learned word processing and Excel. Mostly, my boys played

various computer games at the home of another set of home schooling boys whose parents were academic physicists and so were a bit ahead of the curve technologically speaking. Recounting this, my son said, “I remember that while I was home schooling Josh and I entered a computer programming contest and won by a ridiculous margin. We mostly played various games at their house, but were starting to get into modems and Bulletin Board systems and extremely light hacking. I am sure we all could have gone on to have lucrative careers in computers, if we had cared to.” And in fact, one of these friends of theirs did just that, at Carnegie-Mellon. As a side note, they might also have had lucrative prison sentences, as these physicist parents gleefully facilitated the kinds of chemistry experiments—rocket launches, smoke bombs, stink bombs, homemade fireworks, minor explosions, and solar fire starting—that would worry today’s authorities, should they happen upon a rural unschooling site where children were being taught to blow things up!

I am currently writing a memoir about our experiences, titled *Unschooling in Paradise: Why We Need To Unlearn Everything We Think We Know About Education*. One of the things that intrigues me as I look over my notes from those days is the way that my kids often figured out how to teach themselves what they needed to know. Here’s an excerpt from a chapter about my second eldest, Shaman (six years old at the time), who had initiated a study of geography and map-making that began with basic directional orientation, involved endless hours of building cities with blocks and other materials and resulted in the creation of about 200 maps of increasing complexity:

In December, he shifted from the states and regions of the U.S. to other continents, working into the wee hours of the night drawing maps of Africa, Australia, South America, North

America, and more. Asking thousands of questions (*What kind of government does Nicaragua have? How long is the Amazon River? Which way does it run? How are mountains made? Is China our ally? Why do the borders change on different maps?*) Children's capacity to question astounds me and I can't figure out why we don't construct the entire school curriculum around their wonderful questions (I have, in fact, in my twenty years of working with teachers, met an amazing few who do just this, with extraordinary results). Shaman went through reams of paper drawing maps of every conceivable spot on this planet. My desire to save trees battled my fascination with this journey he was on. Here's a journal description of a typical day:

*Tuesday December 6*

*Shaman got started on map drawing with a fervor this morning. Indeed, it was difficult to drag him to the breakfast table for a pancake breakfast! He did four maps this morning—one of the United States, one of the U.S., Alaska and Canada (with provinces), one of Australia, and one of the world (a sphere). This last one was particularly interesting to me because he drew the globe from the perspective of the sun at 3:00AM (our time.) This launched a discussion about which way the earth spins, why we have time zones, what causes the seasons, etc.*

I'm not sure why my entry sounds so blasé—I mean, I *was* trying to be “objective,” merely recording events without a lot of interpretation in case the authorities ever wanted to know what we were up to. But I should have been jumping up and down! In just three months, a six year old child had gone from learning the cardinal directions while standing in the middle of our dirt section road to representing the planet in its geographical entirety (from memory), and further, he had figured out the spatial and temporal relationships between Spaceship Earth and its Mother

Ship (the sun). And indeed, his interests expanded to astronomy and the solar system from this point on. But that's not the whole of Shaman's earthly geography story.

Early on, in October, Shaman began studying the atlas in earnest, initiating conversations with me about big concepts such as area, perimeter, population, and boundaries. He took special pleasure in comparing states and countries by size and population, and found it necessary to learn alphabetical order (a discovery he made on his own) while doing this. I would find him late at night, poring over the atlas in the top bunk of the bed he shared with his younger brother Räm. *What could he possibly be doing?* I wondered. Turns out what he was doing was making a self-initiated quantum leap in his mathematical abilities.

His math "curriculum" to that point had mostly involved playing around with math manipulatives—creating colorful equations with Cuisenaire Rods, designing geometric art with pattern blocks, and working out the four arithmetic operations with chips or cubes. What I knew about teaching math I learned from reading about the British Infant Model of education (Silberman, 1973), which called for students to have lots of experiences "messing about" with objects. I hoped to generate an ease and comfort with math through a more experiential approach than my own rote, paper and pencil learning of the subject had provided me. We casually worked on concepts when they came up in the course of play: cardinal and ordinal numbers, more-than and less-than, odds and evens, place value, measurement, and simple fractions, most often with games or objects and whenever possible within the context of some meaningful experience like measuring the garden to build raised beds for vegetables or baking a cake (at the top of his list of favorite things to do). He occasionally enjoyed doing some paper and pencil work with numbers in a workbook.



Despite this relaxed approach, within the course of that year he taught himself to calculate sums and compare values using all four of the basic mathematical operations... into the millions...through studying the atlas. I AM NOT KIDDING! He relished working out comparative math problems that he generated from looking at lists of populations, areas in square miles, and other demographic details. Here's an example:

*Wednesday May 2*

*This morning Shaman started out reading the selection on Rhode Island in the World Book. He got out his solar calculator and was working with it for a long time while looking at the encyclopedia. He was adding up the populations of all the counties, and then subtracting that figure from the total population to find out if the resulting figure corresponded to the total population of the unincorporated areas.*

Now this is not a math problem that you would generally find in a first grade math workbook. The fact that he generated the problem himself is a powerful argument for “interdisciplinary curriculum” (in this case, exploring mathematics and geography alongside each other) but even more than that, it convinced me that when children need to know some particular skill in order to understand something they care about, they will grab hold of it. In this case, his efforts to compare geographical entities, whether in terms of their size or their population, simply could not be accomplished without some further skill development with numbers. So, with very little input from me, he quickly mastered a number of relevant mathematical concepts.

Kathleen and Kellie: Shaman's passionate engagement with mathematics and geography taught him a great deal about math and geography, of course, but it also gave him the experience of teaching himself, and the self-respect and confidence that he developed in himself as a learner could not have been achieved in any other way. As she watched Shaman learn and grow over the course of this year, Kathleen also learned a great deal; she came to see how powerful self-directed learning can be, and the tremendous potential of unschooling.

### **Unschooling Now**

While Kathleen's children had access to a wide variety of books, maps, manipulatives, and other materials in the 1980s, the advent of the Internet has created an explosion of resources available to unschooling children today. As an adult, Kathleen's older son Steve comments that the old days of unschooling were more beneficial to learning and character-building, because he had to find and develop resources himself, reinforcing his resourcefulness and tenacity. In early conversations between Kathleen and Kellie, Kathleen expressed some reservations about the prevalence of video-gaming and computer-based activities among children today, and possible ill effects on child development. Kellie, however, has observed very closely the fascinating dynamics of children and computers, and has been deeply influenced by the powerful and positive results of computer-based play and activities she has seen children engage in. Seymour Papert, who invented Logos in the 1970s to enable children to program computers (but expressed disappointment that schools failed to permit children to do so), argues compellingly that we are experiencing an epistemological revolution caused by our ability to personalize how we learn as individuals through the use of technological media, "[b]ut it is children who have most visibly

demonstrated the energizing effect of media that match their intellectual preferences” (Papert, 1993, p. ix).

Children born after the development of mobile information technologies (I-Phone, I-Pod, etc.) have been labeled the I-Generation or I-Gen, the ‘I-‘ standing for both ‘information’ and ‘individualizable,’ because their childhood has been so powerfully influenced by their ability to individualize and customize all aspects of media and information-sharing to suit their own purposes and desires (Rosen, 2010). Unschooling constitutes a revolution in the way parents and educators think about learning, which parallels the revolution currently underway in internet-based information sharing. I-Gen children engage the world in ways similar to the highly successful learning principles that guide videogame design, which Gee argues are superior to those underlying school instruction (Gee, 2003); I-Gen children seek and receive information “just in time” and “on demand” (Gee, 2003), unlike the way information is pushed in schools: “just in case” and “in advance” of interest or need.

Schooled I-Gen children have ready access to information everywhere, and in every part of their lives, except during the many hours they spend in school. Unschooled I-Gen children, freed from the demands and constraints that school places on schooled children, spend their time engaged in their own pursuits, many of which involve playing with technology, whether designed for play, such as videogames, or for seemingly more serious purposes, such as computer programming. YouTube videos provide an astonishing array of learning opportunities as well, with “how-to” videos on almost anything imaginable, e.g., how to gut a fish; how to speak ancient Greek; how to calculate angular refraction, how to apply anime-style makeup, etc. It’s also important to point out that many of these instructional videos are created by children and

teens, not only by adults. Alarmists bemoan children's fascination with videos and video games, often without offering negative evidence at all, instead relying on popular assumptions that "some time spent playing is bad, and more is worse" as in the following:

Think your kids spend too much time playing video games? You could be right.

From toddlers to tweens to teens, more than one-third of kids in the United States are spending more time playing video games today than they did a year ago (Consumer Affairs, 2007).

Contrary to fears that children spend too much time playing virtual games and that growing up with unlimited access to virtual worlds will cause children to disengage from the real world, Kellie has observed extremely positive effects of unlimited video-gaming. Kellie's story follows.

Kellie: When my children were very young, my husband and I felt strongly that they should be discouraged from playing with toy weapons, as we wanted them to value peace and learn to seek peaceful resolutions to conflicts. By the time our oldest son, Sander, was three years old, it had become clear to us that depriving him of toy weapons had only forced him to create his own, and that he was determined (biologically perhaps?) to engage in armed-combat play despite our adult disapproval of such play. This sweet, gentle, 3-year-old boy would use a stick as an imaginary gun to shoot everyone in sight, with a delighted grin that would light up even brighter if his victims would fall down "dead." At the same time, he was extremely gentle with his younger siblings and other children, and tender-hearted with all forms of life, insect,

animal and plant. Through many years of pretending to shoot and kill various creatures and people, in his teens Sander remains as kind and gentle as ever.

Sander taught us to trust him, and to trust his instinctive engagement in imaginary play, even when it struck us as ‘violent.’ When he was 10, he changed the spelling of his name to Xander (because, he said, it looks cooler), and he began to play an online video game called World of Warcraft, an online role-playing game, with his older cousins who lived in other U.S. states. Not knowing much about video gaming, my husband and I were initially concerned about possible ill effects of video gaming, and we began to research the topic. We found claims that video gaming is isolating and promotes anti-social tendencies; that video games that feature violent themes cause children to become pathologically violent teens and adults; that video gaming dulls the mind; that it keeps children indoors when they ought to be outside engaging in whole-body play and learning about nature; that it is addictive; that it causes obesity and poor health, and so forth.

However, in speaking with our colleague Jim Gee, who researches video gaming and literacy, we learned that precisely the same negative claims had been used to argue against reading only a few decades ago. This struck a chord with me, as I had grown up hearing my mother’s sad stories about how she was never allowed to sit and read a book when she was a child. Her parents viewed book-reading as goofing off and wasting time, as anti-social, mind-numbing and bad for her health. My mother loves to read, and felt vindicated as an adult when educators began touting the benefits of reading, and promoting reading time for children. One never hears from education and psychology experts today that reading is bad for children; we hear exactly the opposite, from massive, national campaigns urging children to read.<sup>i</sup>

As reading became increasingly recognized as a valued activity for children, there was an initial prejudice against literature that was not considered “educational,” but was merely read for pleasure. Reading comic books and novels was discouraged. Research has shown, however, that content is irrelevant to the development of reading skills, and it is less common today to hear educators or parents arguing that comic books and novels are inappropriate reading materials for children (Krashen, 1993).

My children had attended school, starting in kindergarten, in a Spanish immersion program, where most of the children knew Spanish and were learning English, while my children knew English and were learning Spanish. Half of the instructional time was dedicated to Spanish and half to English, and children were encouraged to become bilingual and biliterate. Instruction in such programs must be heavily hands-on, since the children cannot listen or attend for long periods of time when the teacher is speaking a language that the children cannot yet understand well. These programs are intended to last at least six years, as it takes time for bilingualism and biliteracy to develop (Rolstad, 2008). However, the situation in Arizona was such that these programs became illegal during the time that my children were in them, and I felt that school had little to offer my children, if they could not be actively engaged in learning another language while there. My children were de-enrolled from school so that they could be homeschooled, but they quickly convinced my husband and me through the intensity of their interests and pursuits that “homeschooling” in the sense of parent-led instruction was unnecessary and undesirable.

Once my children were de-enrolled from school, I looked online for homeschooling groups in our area, so that we could meet and interact with other families. I quickly located many homeschooling groups, and encountered the term ‘unschooling’ for the first time; I was

## Unschooling, Then and Now

lucky to meet and talk with Sunday Cote, an unschooling mom living in my city who had presented on unschooling at Rethinking Everything, a conference for unschooling families. I learned that many homeschoolers are in fact ‘unschoolers,’ meaning that they refused to instruct their children unasked, or to follow any sort of curriculum. At the first homeschooling event my family attended, we met several more unschooling families, and it was clear to me that unschooling was what my children were eager to do. We were instantly caught up in a dynamic group of families with whom we attended weekly ‘Park Day’ meetings and frequent gatherings for activities and field trips; one day at the park, we extracted DNA from strawberries with the help of an unschooling scientist mom; another day we collected small containers of shampoo and toothpaste to donate to a local homeless shelter. Depending on areas of interest, we might gather with this group of families one day so that our small group of teens could work on forging their own swords as apprentice blacksmiths, and with another group of families the next day for a used book and clothing exchange.

I was curious to know whether we had just been lucky to live in an area where there were so many interesting and diverse families engaged in homeschooling and unschooling, or whether the phenomenon was more widespread. Through Google and YouTube, I located dozens and dozens of unschooling groups across the US and Canada and abroad, including in the UK and Europe, Australia, Indonesia and Columbia, among others. I found groups formed to support African American unschooling, and Christian, Jewish and Muslim unschooling; there are unschooling video gamer groups and groups seeking to form unschooling intentional communities. It seems our large, diverse, overlapping groups of unschooling and homeschooling friends were not unique, but another example of a growing grass-roots movement of families.

I saw other unschooling parents and children doing and learning exciting, interesting things. Families from every socioeconomic level were represented among unschoolers; two families in our group were independently wealthy, most were middle- or working-class, and one homeless unschooling family, headed by a single mom, joined our group. This family had recently made their way from out of state, living in their car, and had moved into a homeless shelter. The mother was determined that her four children would remain unschooled, as she sought employment and more permanent lodging. Several unschooling families took turns hosting this family in their homes for a period of several months, until the mother had secured employment and an apartment. The children had been fully involved, meanwhile, in the gatherings and outings with other homeschooling and unschooling families.

The ethnic diversity of unschoolers and homeschoolers roughly reflected the norm in our area, except that we met very few Native American or Spanish-speaking families among homeschoolers and unschoolers, considering their large numbers in the Southwestern US. The families we knew and interacted with included Latinos, Whites, African Americans, Asians, immigrants from Israel and Iran, Christians, Jews and atheists, among others. There was a wide variety of other interests and lifestyles represented; there were gay and lesbian parents and children in our groups, vegetarians and vegans, pagans, athletes, people who liked bowling or raising chickens; there were other parents who were college professors, or veterinarians or homemakers. This joyful diversity was not unlike that described by Southern California unschooler, Pam Sorooshian,

My homeschooling group includes Moslem, Jewish, Quaker, Baptist, Messianic Jews, Pagan, Baha'i, atheist, Catholic, unity, evangelicals, other protestant denominations, and



probably more. We have African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Middle Easterners, and other minorities. We have stay-at-home dads and single mothers. We are FAR more diverse than the neighborhood school I pulled my oldest child out of 10 years ago (Sorooshian, quoted in Gaither, 2008, p. 223-224).

Some parents expressed and exhibited philosophies of unschooling that were more ‘radical’ than others; such parents allowed their children tremendous latitude in making decisions, including when or where children sleep, or what types of video games children could play, and for how long. I was curious to see how my children would react to such a lack of restriction. My children experimented with staying up all night, and found themselves out of sync with friends and activities for the next several days; they rarely chose to stay up so late after that. I watched as my children began playing video games with fantasy violence, and saw them remain gentle, compassionate, thriving and happy, despite my angst stemming from my prejudiced views about video gaming. An unschooling mom suggested I read Jones’ (2002) *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*; Jones’ arguments for allowing children to play out their thoughts and fears was reflected in all I had observed in my children’s experiences with violence-themed play and games. I began following the advice of other unschoolers to trust my children, and not to shy away from my children’s seemingly-violent play, not to show any revulsion or hint of reproof of their games. My children developed an even deeper trust in me, as I gave up my fears and trusted them to know the difference between fantasy and reality.

I began joining my children in playing World of Warcraft, and came to a more profound understanding of the joy a gamer feels when immersed in the game, getting a glimmer of the

feeling of ‘flow’ described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). I let my children decide if and when the themes and/or images of a game were too violent or otherwise inappropriate for them, each child counseled by friends and relatives who knew the games. It was the same strategy I had followed when Xander was very young, starting when he was only three years old, as his grandmother read the Harry Potter series to him. I knew the books became increasingly dark and frightening, and was sharing my concern with a colleague at Arizona State University, Karen Smith, who asked, “If he finds the story getting too scary, can he ask his grandmother to stop reading?” “Of course,” I replied. “Then let him decide,” said Karen.

At 14, Xander still engaged in imaginative play, both video gaming and whole-body, live-action role-playing (LARP)-style games. His favorite such activities took place in medieval settings, run by the international Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). The SCA recreates medieval life, revisionist-style to suit modern needs and tastes, and members engage in all sorts of arts, crafts, cooking, weapon-making and armor-making for combat, and so forth. SCA members are mostly adults, but children also participate. Child and youth divisions permit young people to spar against each other, medieval style, with foam-wrapped weapons and shields. While strength and agility are valued, chivalry is equally important, and fighters carefully avoid hurting each other.

Xander was often joined in combat by his younger brother Skye. It was fascinating to watch the boys playing video games, where they would create avatars with specially-selected characteristics and abilities. They carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the characters they created to role play, debating and deciding on the various skills, abilities and attributes they valued most in a wide variety of situations. The videogames inspired the boys to

create live-action scenarios, taking turns as game master to imagine the scenario for that event, which they would then enact outdoors with a group of friends, using their whole bodies, often in slow motion, to play out their imagined scenarios.

Their sister, Katalina, joined them as well, though she rarely engaged in physical combat in those days. The game master would create elaborate scenarios, involving mysteries and puzzles for players to solve. Non-combatants could choose to take sneaky assassin roles, with conditions for success or failure in their missions that did not rely on force or weaponry. When Kat was not engaging in these medieval-style games outdoors, her interest in medieval play ran more toward the arts, domestic and fine. She enjoyed designing and sewing medieval period clothing, studying medieval calligraphy and architecture, and writing stories.

Kat also enjoyed video gaming, playing World of Warcraft (WoW) with her brothers and cousins, and playing Spore and Sims. Her brothers had begun playing WoW some time before, and she wanted to join them. She was slowly working her way through the game landscape and learning to use the controls, when Skye wanted to help, saying, “Let me just show you how this part works.” “No!,” replied Kat emphatically, “I want to figure this out for myself, because that’s the whole fun of it!”

When Katalina was 11, she wanted to build a tree house, and loved searching out trees she could climb. In those days, we lived in the desert, where large, climbable trees were relatively rare, and homeowners associations were known to remove all branches within reach of children in an attempt to protect themselves from liability were a child to fall from a tree. Kat mused, “I wish we had a tree in our backyard that I could climb.” I suggested that she climb the

play structure with climbing wall that was in the yard already. She all but rolled her eyes, and said,

But it's *made* for kids to climb! There are handles all over it! The fun of climbing trees is that you never know when you're going to fall. Some branches snap, some branches wobble, and some are unexpectedly strong!

That struck me as an apt metaphor for the undesirability of a predetermined curriculum, all safely mapped out in advance. Where is the fun in that? I thought to myself, sarcastically, "Gee, maybe I should just climb the tree for her too, to protect her from wobbly branches!" When children learn for themselves which *sources* of information, like branches, are likely to be wobbly and which are strong, they've gained something far more valuable than just another bit of information.

When unschooled children search for information online, which they frequently do, they counsel each other on the reliability of sources and web sites, just as they do regarding the information they get from each other and from the adults they know. Here is an example of such a counseling 'session:'

Skye was googling 'Teutonic history' because the video game he was playing involved Teutonic knights. A list of web sites appeared on screen, and Kat said, "Just click on the Wikipedia one, because that's the best one. You never know what silly things some other people might say, if you don't know why they're saying it." Skye replied, with some irritation, "Everyone knows *that*."

One of the Sims games Kat enjoyed was the medieval version, not surprisingly. Part of the appeal of the medieval period for many people is that the technologies that were used in the

Middle Ages are accessible to nearly anyone, child or adults, with the most basic tools. Even the youngest child can see for herself how a trebuchet or catapult works, and can join in building one. The opportunities for hands-on learning are many and varied, ranging from leatherworking to jewelry-smithing to cooking and baking to jousting on horseback, and at the same time, the capacity of these projects for inspiring the imagination is tremendous.

The importance of playing, whether the mode of play is real or virtual, is compellingly argued to be a crucial foundation for social organization; indeed, the future of our society may depend on it, according to McGonigal (2011). Play provides opportunities that transcend mere skill building, affording emotional well-being, social cohesion, societal problem-solving and the sort of creative innovations and inventions that we will need if we are to address our current global problems, not to mention as-yet-unknown problems that we are bound to encounter in the future. Children who are invited and encouraged to address global problems develop in all sort of important ways, sometimes actually coming up with viable solutions, and they learn along the way, incidentally, all the basic skills and knowledge that traditional schools and teachers insist should be the sole focus of children's energy and time (Weil, 2011). Children want to learn, but they want to learn what matters to them to learn (Holt, 1989).

Children learn about an astonishing variety of topics through video gaming and talking with others about video gaming. They decide for themselves how deeply to engage in the various topics they encounter, and take off on all sorts of tangents that bring them to pursue further topics. Duckworth (2006) relates the intensity and joy that children experience when they have 'wonderful ideas' rather than receiving from teachers the required information on a curricular platter. When he was 10, Skye was playing Age of Empires, sitting at a computer desk

in the kitchen. He paused a moment and turned to me, asking slowly and thoughtfully, “Did Genghis Khan, Joan of Arc, and William Wallace live at about the same time?” “I don’t know,” I replied, because, well, I didn’t know! I’ve never played with history games or learned about history in any way that particularly captured my fancy, except for history related to language and linguistics.

With no further word from me, Skye proceeded to Wikipedia, where he spent the next several hours reading and comparing the history, geography, and politics of Mongolia, France and Scotland. He then engaged an unschooling friend in a long discussion of the topic, which ended when they decided to watch a video portraying a fictionalized account of Joan of Arc, all the while commenting where they thought the fiction departed from reality, or was not substantiated by documentation.

It is difficult to imagine 10-year-old Skye engaging in such an extensive study of history, geography and politics as the result of some school assignment directing him to do so. All he did was play a videogame where these topics caught his interest. He had his own ‘wonderful idea’ to pursue his own question, and found his own answers, which he was able to share with a fascinated peer. His friend did not require that Skye write and file a report, though Skye certainly was knowledgeable enough to do so by the end of his research project. Had this been a school assignment, he would have been forced to follow through to the academic goal of ‘publishing’ a paper, whether he wanted to or not, and despite the likelihood that his interest would have flagged early on. This sort of forced follow-through of a school project that may not have piqued a child’s interest in the first place can kill the joy of research and learning in any child. It would be helpful for educators to know about and observe the intensity and joy that

these unschooled children exhibit as they willingly learn about what interests them, even when the topics that fascinate them are of the most academic, specialist or arcane nature.

Video gaming launches children into reading highly sophisticated and specialist language varieties, and as Gee (2004) points out, there is no “achievement gap” in the gaming world; as long as they have access to computers and videogames, children of poverty, children of color, girls and boys all learn and achieve in much the same way and to the same extent. Children engaged in video gaming develop sophisticated reading abilities and acquire new vocabulary, in the most authentic way; they become members of “affinity groups” where they apprentice into specialist domains of interest and discourses, learning the language ways of the group (Gee, 2004). Children who have not succeeded in developing readings skills through instruction have been documented to acquire high levels of literacy through video gaming, where demands on reading ability can be considerable (Skogen, 2012). Sugata Mitra has astounded the world with his Hole in the Wall Experiments, showing some of the world’s poorest children learning and helping each other learn all sorts of highly-complex scientific and technological concepts, as they acquire English and computer literacy skills along the way, simply by being allowed to play with a computer embedded in the wall (Mitra, 2013).

I would like to share an example of a child learning specialist language and less common vocabulary items through video gaming. In the following exchange, notice not only how the vocabulary items are acquired, but the child’s metalinguistic awareness of his vocabulary acquisition process. Skye, age 9, acquired a ‘staunch hammer of power’ in WoW, playing on his gnome character. I asked him, “What does ‘staunch’ mean?”

I don't know exactly, but I think it's 'hearty, sturdy' or something like that, because it shows up highlighted in green, which means it's a rare item, so I assume it's something good, and a good hammer has hardness, strength, or weight. Hammers are very important to gnomes, because they are engineers and builders.

I then asked him, "How do you get a new hammer?" He patiently continued, "You can come across them, but you can also make them. If I find a copper vein, I can mine the copper ore and smelt the ore to make things like hammers." "How did you learn what 'smelt' means? I don't think I have ever used that word!" I said, laughing. Skye explained,

I saw in my inventory that I had an ability called 'smelting,' and I clicked on the icon, and it was a picture of fire. The description said 'turn a chunk of iron ore into an iron bar,' but when I tried to do that, it said it required a forge in order to make it, so I went and found a forge, and it was like a lava pit thing, and when I clicked on the forge, it made, like, melting sounds. I figured smelting was like melting metal so it gets all gooey and then I could turn it into a bar, and then when I have enough bars I could make a hammer, or whatever I needed.

Cato the Elder (234-140 BCE) gave this advice: "Grasp the subject, the words will follow." By engaging in interesting activities, children learn the concepts and the words that constitute authentic discourse; there is no reason to teach 'the words' in advance, as schools so typically do. Another example of school's tendency to put the cart before the horse was highlighted by George Bernard Shaw: "What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child."



## Unschooling, Then and Now

As these unschooled children excitedly pursued knowledge, learning more about videogames and game design, they also developed facility in modifying the games, sharing computer codes, and even redesigning and rebuilding their computers. It is common to see unschooled children consulting YouTube videos and other online sources to see how things work, and then to try things out at home; many of these videos are created by children and teens who have developed expertise and enjoy sharing their knowledge and skills. Xander wanted to make a knife, so he watched a Youtube video on how to make a knife from a steel rasp. He carefully and laboriously filed the rasp with an electric grinder into a knife blade, and then needed to temper it in a fire. He had experience with a forge, having taken a course a couple of years ago when a group of unschooling teens contracted with a local blacksmith to teach them to forge their own swords. Xander made a fire in our fireplace in order to temper his knife, but found the level of heat inadequate. He then modified the shape and structure of his fire to make it more forge-like, to contain and build the heat, aided by a bellows he adapted on the spot. He then carved a piece of a branch into a handle, inserted the blade into the handle with steel pins, and stained and finished the handle – each step having been shown clearly in one or another of the videos he had consulted.

Kat is also very skilled at finding what she needs on Youtube, including videos showing popular songs performed in sign language by American Sign Language (ASL) speakers. Kat began intently learning ASL through YouTube music videos, and after about a year, began asking to take a college course in ASL. She was 13. It didn't work out at the time for her to take the course, but she continued studying ASL, and found a neighbor who could teach her more.

Xander did take a college course when he was 13, at the local community college. He had been playing guitar and taking lessons for several years, and was very interested in early rock and roll. He enrolled in The History of Rock and Roll, where he read textbooks, wrote essays and easily earned an A in the course. He had never written an essay before taking this course, having left off writing instruction after 4<sup>th</sup> grade, when he began unschooling. His grandparents, who had been rather worried about him not attending school, and confused by his eagerness to be taking a college class, asked him why he didn't just go back to elementary or middle school. He explained as follows:

Well you know, in school when the teacher asks you a question, she doesn't really care what you think, and neither does anyone else in the class. In college, when the teacher asks a question, he really is interested in what you say, and what he says is interesting. And the other students in the class listen to what you say, and they say really interesting things too. College is just so much more real than school.

Children in school are often quizzed, so that the teacher can gauge whether the students are getting the 'right' answers, are following the prescribed path. Xander immediately perceived this difference between the authentic intellectual engagement that is typical in college and the predetermined, predigested content and activities of school. It is worth noting that his comments satisfied his grandparents' concerns, and they continued taking delight and an active role in their grandchildren's quests for knowledge, interesting activities and experiences.

Recently, Xander and Kat both have turned to Khan Academy, a free, online video lecture website that provides academic lectures and demonstrations on a wide variety of topics.

Xander is following a series of statistics lectures and practicing calculating statistics. Kat is currently interested in geometry, and is using Khan Academy lectures to discover principles that will support her design and building of a tree house. (Yes, she is still intent on building a tree house, and now lives in a place that has trees that will support her planned structure.) Kat has taken repeated, precise measurements of the site, has drafted a site plan on grid paper, and has created two scale tree house models using grid paper, toothpicks and tape. When she first began her design, she was obliged to create her own grid paper, painstakingly drawing out a tiny-sized grid on a large piece of paper so that she could proceed with her design. She worked on this into the night, so it was not until I woke up the next morning and saw what she had been working on that I realized she needed graph paper, and made a quick trip to the store to get some for her. A primary role of an unschooling parent is to provide materials when needed, as much as practical given each family's constraints.

While I often hear exclamations from adults who think that providing a child with the materials they require must be difficult, expensive, and even constitutes 'spoiling' the child, I found the reality quite the opposite. When Kat asked if we could get a pet elephant, I said that I didn't think it would fit in our yard, but I began a conversation to find out what lay at the heart of her request, since it is always possible that some aspect of her request could be fulfilled. We talked about whether she might like to learn more about elephants, to volunteer at the zoo or at an animal shelter, whether she felt the need to be around large animals more generally, or whether she might like to explore owning and taking care of some smaller, more manageable pet.

Kat decided that she wanted to go see an elephant at the zoo, after which she sculpted an elephant with modeling clay, watched a series of YouTube videos showing cross-species

friendships, starting with Tara and Bella, an elephant and a dog who were best friends, and ending with Owen, an orphaned baby hippo who was adopted by Mzee, an old tortoise. She then talked about designing and sewing stuffed zoo animals, but ended up at the 99 cent store buying a handful of socks and gloves that she then cut up and sewed into funny little imaginary creatures. The next day, she formed a sewing circle with several unschooled friends, and they all worked on sewing little things that came from their own imaginations. The sewing group comprised four girls, ranging in age from 9-13 and one 11-year-old boy. Several of the children were not able to bring materials, so the materials Kat and another friend had brought were shared around the group. As they snipped and sewed, they talked about animals and funny animal behaviors, about psychology and communication in animals and humans.

Suddenly, it occurred to one of the sewing children that it would be beneficial to include a heart in their creatures, so an interesting surgical process was initiated to retrofit their creatures. The game was at one point extremely serious, with one girl acting as main surgeon, aided by technical nursing staff, and all contributing to the grave tone of the activity: “Hand me that scalpel, if you’re certain it has been adequately sterilized!” “It definitely has, Doctor – you know our policies on sterilization!” “Please be sure to keep count of the stitches, so we’ll know how many will need to be removed later.” Then the surgical team would dissolve into giggles, as they appreciated their own ability to engage in their version of medical specialist discourse. “In this case, Nurse, I think we’d better leave the stitches in permanently, considering that without stitches, this creature would fall apart,” an admonition that was followed by still more hilarity.

While schooled children are trained to exhibit behaviors that simulate academic learning and to react to instruction in specified ways so as to make their learning observable and

measurable by experts, unschooled children are not trained this way. Instead, the activities of unschoolers may appear to alternate between “just playing” and “wasting time” (Holt, 1976; Thomas & Pattison, 2007). A casual observer might ask of any of the games described here, “Of what utility can any of that play possibly be? They’re not really learning anything.” Closer observation, however, reveals the depth and complexity of much of what these children are exploring through play, and how their play lays a solid groundwork for future, more academic learning. Unschoolers argue that learning through play need not cease in favor of formal learning, and that the most meaningful learning happens outside of school (Ricci, 2007).

Many unschooled children have attained high levels of technological literacy which they use in innovative ways to customize their experiences with media and information. The ability of these children to learn from and interact with not only a wide variety of media but also a wide variety of people from all demographics is astonishing; it appears that unschooled children are succeeding in breaching our society’s most significant, long-standing and worrisome social barriers, including the typical barriers of age, race, gender, and economic status.

Early unschooling families faced an array of challenges that complicated their ability to facilitate their children’s learning, challenges ranging from keeping abreast of legal requirements to establishing networks with other families for the purpose of socializing and garnering mutual support to helping their children gain admission to university or to other career-enhancing experiences. While some of the early unschooling challenges are still being grappled with by unschoolers, other challenges can be resolved via technological advances, such as internet social networking.

Research that documents unschooling processes and outcomes remains rare, but education experts must come to grips with the apparent paradox of children learning without instruction. The experiences and successes of unschooling families provides a rich source of evidence of how easily and joyfully learning can take place among children who are free to pursue their passions. Telling our stories, sharing our narrative approach to thinking about unschooling, we hope to encourage a new heuristic vision of child learning. The more we observe unschoolers in action, the more we begin to wonder - what else has been missed by education research, because it wasn't the focus of attention? A generation ago, 'old school unschooling,' as initially practiced by pioneers such as Kathleen Kesson, Wendy Priesnitz, and Sandra Dodd, already provided a viable alternative to school's conventional, curriculum-driven, externally-managed, compulsory approach to children's education and development; then it was one alternative among several that were possibly beneficial for children. At this point in time, it can be argued that the ever-more stringently institutionalized, accountability-based education that is being so heavily promoted and financed today has become entirely irrelevant, and is altogether failing to meet the needs of i-Generation unschoolers, who are simply doing an 'end-run' around school.

As long as policy makers are determined to further narrow, constrain, and standardize the curriculum while holding children accountable to the requirements of policy-makers and educators, it is likely that families will increasingly flee schools in favor of educating their children for creativity and the love of learning. The inability of the educational establishment - schools, administrators, policy makers and education researchers - to consider that the elaborate, control-based apparatus of institutional schools may be obsolete and unnecessary to the project

of facilitating children's learning will only keep schools mired in the Industrial Age, unable to respond to the needs of the post-modern unschooling families and children who seem to be learning and growing wholly and successfully without them. It is our hope that our narratives will provide a broader context for understanding this potentially revolutionary approach of trusting children to live and learn naturally, contributing philosophical support both to families who choose not to school their children, and to the unconventional, innovative schools that strive to be welcoming, nurturing places where children have the freedom to develop their own interests, in their own ways, and who are accountable to no one but themselves, the law that governs us all, and their chosen communities.

**Professor Kellie Rolstad** joined the faculty of the University of Maryland College of Education in 2012, and previously served as Associate Professor of Education in the Mary Lou Fulton Graduate School of Education at Arizona State University. Professor Rolstad earned her PhD in Education at UCLA, where she also earned degrees in Linguistics (BA) and Applied Linguistics (MA). Her teaching interests include educational linguistics and alternative learning and democratic schooling. She has conducted research on the language of schooling, language diversity, digital and unschooled learning and literacy, homeschooling, and democratic education. Her work has appeared in the *Bilingual Research Journal*, *Bilingual Review*, *Teachers College Record*, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *Educational Policy*, and in edited collections.

**Email:** [rolstad@umd.edu](mailto:rolstad@umd.edu)

**Kathleen R. Kesson** is Professor of Teaching and Learning and Chair of the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at LIU-Brooklyn, where she teaches courses in the foundations of education and teacher research. She is co-author, with James Henderson, of *Curriculum Wisdom: Educational Decisions in Democratic Societies* (2004) and *Understanding Democratic Curriculum Leadership* (1999), and editor, with Wayne Ross, of *Defending Public Schools: Teaching for a Democratic Society* (2004). She is also the author of numerous book chapters, book reviews, and academic articles in *Educational Researcher*, *Teachers College Record*, *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, the *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies*, *English Education*, *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, and the *Holistic Education Review*. Her interests are in the areas of democracy in education, critical pedagogy, aesthetics and education, and teacher inquiry and reflection. She has recently completed a book of narrative non-fiction entitled *Unschooling in Paradise: Why We Need to Unlearn Everything We Think We Know about Education*.

**Email:** [Kathleen.kesson@liu.edu](mailto:Kathleen.kesson@liu.edu)



## References

- Avrich, P. (2005). *The modern school movement: Anarchism and education in the United States*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Barone, T. (2007). A return to the gold standard? Questioning the future of narrative construction as educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(2), 454-470.
- Bertozzi, V. (2006). *Unschooling media: Participatory practices among progressive homeschoolers*. Unpublished masters thesis, MIT. Retrieved from <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/Bertozzi2006.pdf>
- Consumer Affairs (2007, October 27). Kid spending more time playing video games. Retrieved from [http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2007/10/video\\_games\\_time.html](http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2007/10/video_games_time.html)
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Wilson, J. (2011, August 3). Unschoolers learn what they want, when they want. *CNN U.S.* Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/08/03/unschooling.sudbury.education/index.html>
- Dodd, S. (2011). *Sandra Dodd's big book of unschooling*. Self-published: Lulu.com.
- Dr. Phil. (2006, November 24). Great school debate: To school or not to school? Retrieved from <http://www.drphil.com/shows/show/796/?preview=&versionID>
- Duckworth, E. (2006). *The having of wonderful ideas*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E.W. (1997). The promise and perils of alternative forms of data representation. *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 26, No. 6. (Aug. - Sep., 1997), pp. 4-10.
- Gatto, J.T. (2005). *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Sense Publishers.
- Gaither, M. (2008). *Homeschool: An American history*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gee, J.P. (2003.) *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gee, J.P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. London: Routledge.
- Good Morning America. (2010, April 19). Extreme parenting: 'Radical unschooling' [Video file] Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Parenting/video/extreme-parenting-radical-unschooling-10413158>
- Gray, P. (2013). *Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life*. New York: Basic Books.

Greenberg, D., Greenberg, M., Brilliant, A., Palmer, C. (1995). *Free at last: The Sudbury Valley School*. Sudbury Valley, MA: Sudbury Valley School Press.

Griffith, M. (1998). *The unschooling handbook: How to use the whole world as your child's classroom*. Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing.

Hern, M. (1996). *Deschooling our lives*. Hern, M. (ed.). Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers.

Hern, M. (2003) *Field day: Getting society out of school*. Vancouver, B.C.: New Star Books.

Hern, M. (2008). *Everywhere all the time: A new deschooling reader*. Hern, M. (ed.). Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Holt, J. (1976). *Instead of education: Ways to help people do things better*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.

Holt, J. (1977). *Growing without schooling*. Retrieved from <http://www.holtgws.com/growingwithoutsc.html>

Holt, J. (1981). *Teach your own: A hopeful path for education*. New York, NY: Dell.

Holt, J. (1983). How can education be changed? Radio broadcast retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1yAGsX1DJk>

Holt, J. (1989). *Learning all the time*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books.

Holt, J. & Farenga, P. (2003). *Teach your own: The John Holt book of homeschooling*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

Illich, I. (1970). *Celebration of awareness*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.

Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. London, UK: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd.

Illich, I. (1971). *Tradition and revolution*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada.

Jones, G. (2002). *Killing monsters: Why children need fantasy, super-heroes, and make-believe violence*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Krashen, S. (1993). *The Power of Reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Llewellyn, G. (1998). *The teenage liberation handbook: How to quit school and get a real life and education*. Eugene, OR: Lowry House Publishers.

Martin-Chang, S. Gould, O. & Meuse, R. (2011). The impact of schooling on academic achievement: Evidence from homeschooled and traditionally schooled children. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 43, no. 3 (July 2011), pp. 195-202.

- McCaig, M. (2008). *Like water: The extraordinary approach to education at Fairhaven School*. Upper Marlboro, MD: Fairhaven School Press.
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- McGrath, S. (2010). *Unschooling: A lifestyle of learning*. Self-published: Lulu.com.
- McKee, A. (2002). *Homeschooling our children, unschooling ourselves*. Madison, WI: Bittersweet House.
- McNeill, L. (1986.) *Contradictions of control: School structure and school knowledge*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Meighan, R. (1995). Home-based education effectiveness research and some of its implications. *Educational Review*, 47, pp. 275-87.
- Mercogliano, C. (1998). *Making it up as we go along: The story of the Albany Free School*. Portsmouth, N. H.: Heinemann.
- Merry, M. & Howell, C. (2009). Can intimacy justify home education? *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(3), 363-381.
- Miller, R. (2002). *Free schools, free people*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mintz, J. & Ricci, C. (2010). *Turning points: 35 visionaries in education tell their own stories*. New York: Alternative Education Resource Organization.
- Mitra, S. (2013, February 27). Build a school in the cloud [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3jYVe1RGaU>
- Neill, A.S. (1960). *Summerhill: A radical approach to child-rearing*. New York, NY: Hart.
- Olson, K. (2009.) *Wounded by school: Recapturing the joy in learning and standing up to the old school culture*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Papert, S. (1993). *The children's machine: Rethinking school in the age of the computer*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(2), pp. 1-15.
- Priesnitz, W. (2009). Understanding life learning/unschooling. *Life Learning Magazine*. Retrieved from [http://www.lifelearningmagazine.com/understanding\\_life\\_learning.htm](http://www.lifelearningmagazine.com/understanding_life_learning.htm).
- Ricci, C. (2007). Are important and authentic teachers members of our family? *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, pp. 1-7.
- Ricci, C. (2012). *The willed curriculum, unschooling, and self-direction: What do love, trust, respect, care, and compassion have to do with learning?* Toronto, Ontario: Ricci Publishing.

Rockmuller, S. & Houk, K. (1996). Deschooling and parent involvement in education: A11PIE-A learning network. In M. Hern, *Deschooling our lives*. (Ed. pp. 103-105). Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: New Society Publishers.

Rolstad, K. (2008). Immersion education. In J. Gonzalez (ed.), *Encyclopedia of bilingual education*, pp. 259-264. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publishers.

Rosen, L. (2010). *Rewired: Understanding the I-generation and the way they learn*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Rousseau, J.J. (1762/1979). *Emile, or on education*. New York: Basic Books.

Samuelson, B. (2004). I used to go to school, now I learn: The discourse of unschoolers. In J. Mahiri, (ed.), *What they don't learn in school: Literacy in the lives of urban youth*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Shirky, C. (2009.) *How social media can make history*. Invited talk for Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED), Oxford, UK, June 2009. [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/clay\\_shirky\\_how\\_cellphones\\_twitter\\_facebook\\_can\\_make\\_history.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history.html)

Silberman, C.E. (1973). *The open classroom reader*. New York: Vintage Books.

Skogen, R. (2012). The boy who learned to read through sustained video game play: Considering systemic resistance to the use of 'New Texts' in the classroom. *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, Vol 6, Issue 12, pp. 53-81.

Thomas, A. & Pattison, H. (2007). *How children learn at home*. London, UK: Continuum Publishing.

Weil, Z. (2011). The world becomes what you teach. Invited talk for Technology, Entertainment and Design TEDxDirigo [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5HEV96dIuY>

---

<sup>i</sup> Canada's reading campaign: <http://nationalreadingcampaign.ca/about/>, the UK reading campaign: [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/practical\\_resources\\_info/728\\_national\\_reading\\_campaign\\_1999-2009](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/practical_resources_info/728_national_reading_campaign_1999-2009), examples of US reading campaigns: <http://www.getcaughtreading.org/>, <http://www.pearsonfoundation.org/pr/091008-readfortherecord.html>, <http://www.gradelevelreading.net/>