

EXPLORING UNSCHOOLERS' EXPERIENCES IN LEARNING TO READ: HOW READING HAPPENS WITHIN THE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Unschooling is a form of homeschooling where learning occurs not through the following of a set curricula, but instead through real life experiences. Unschooling parents do not try to replicate school or school-like activities at home. Instead, children are in charge of their own education, and that education usually naturally fits with their own intrinsic motivations, preferences, and learning styles. This is quite different from what we may see or experience in the public school classroom, where curriculum is strictly adhered to, and testing is the way a student's learning is assessed. In this study, how and when unschoolers learn to read without a set curriculum will be explored. Twenty eight unschooled adults (age 18 and older) were interviewed and asked to recall their experiences with reading and learning to read. Through these interviews, the author sought to explore how reading can be learned naturally, without adult intervention; and how this may effect later motivation for reading, writing, and other academic endeavors.

Keywords: unschooling, reading, late reading, cultural transmission

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Introduction and Literature Review

Educators spend a significant amount of instructional time in the primary grades teaching students how to read. In many schools, phonetics, decoding, sight word recognition, and comprehension are all explicitly taught and reviewed. When students don't learn to read in a specified time, they are sometimes sent for formal evaluation to a psychologist or school psychologist, possibly for a diagnosis of dyslexia or a reading difficulty. What if, however, reading was seen as a natural process instead of something to be taught formally? Can individuals learn to read without formal instruction? How does this fit into the realm of public pedagogy? According to Lancey, Bock, and Gaskins (2014), cultural transmission happens without teaching. What if reading was seen as a cultural practice instead of a cognitive skill? (Pattison, 2016).

Unschooling is a form of homeschooling where learning occurs not through the following of a set curricula, but instead through real life experience. John Holt, an American educator and theorist, coined the term "unschooling" beginning in the early 1960's (Holt, 1967). Unschooling parents do not try to replicate school at home. Instead, children are generally in charge of their own education (Gray & Riley, 2013). In this study, how and when unschoolers learned to read without a set curriculum was explored.

Unschooling itself is not a well-researched form of education. Dr. Peter Gray and myself (2013) provided the first large scale study of unschooling, exploring how families defined unschooling, why they chose unschooling, and the benefits and challenges of unschooling itself. The results of that study led us to wonder how unschoolers themselves felt about the unschooling experience, thus two studies about grown unschooling outcomes were born (Gray & Riley, 2015; Riley & Gray, 2015). Since our first study,

numerous others have written about unschoolers, unschooling, and other self directed forms of education.

In 2010, Peter Gray wrote an article on his blog, Freedom to Learn, based on an unofficial study of eighteen unschoolers. In surveying these unschoolers, he came up with seven principles that provided some understanding about how individuals learn to read without formal schooling. Included within these principles are the ideas that there is no critical period for learning to read; that intrinsically motivated, non dyslexic children can go from non reading to fluent reading quickly; and that reading may be socially learned through shared participation in activities that involve reading.

In 2013, Dr. Karl Wheatley published an article within the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* describing how his children learned to read without formal instruction. Within this article, he also asserts that taking a deeper look at the unschooling process can help reframe thoughts about traditional education, learning, and teaching as a whole, including mainstream ideas regarding how children learn to read. This thought was also reiterated in work by Csoli (2013), who reflected on how tenets of what she termed “natural learning” could also be helpful when instructing children with learning disabilities. Csoli specified that it is important allow children with learning disabilities the space to learn and develop at their own pace, providing as much autonomy as possible within the structured school environment (2013).

Harriet Pattison (2016) provided the first major study of how children learned to read outside an institutionalized setting. The families in her study practiced different forms of home education, including unschooling. In her study, 311 home educating parents were surveyed on how their children learned to read. Although some parents

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explicitly taught their children how to read, other parents took a less formal role in teaching reading. Some did not teach their children at all, allowing reading to develop organically.

Methodology

The following study is the first qualitative study exploring unschoolers' experiences in learning to read. In May of 2016, I was awarded a PSC – CUNY Grant to research how unschoolers learn to read. CUNY Hunter College Institutional Review Board approval was awarded in July of that same year. In August of 2016, I put out a call for research on Facebook and Twitter, and sent a broadcast email to leaders within the unschooling community. A copy of the call for research can be found in Appendix A.

Participants, aged 18 and older, who had unschooled throughout their elementary and middle school years, were asked to participate in the qualitative study. This study contained sixteen questions, and was posted on the online survey software site Survey Monkey. The complete survey can be found within Appendix C. Participants were required to read through an online consent form and consent to participation prior to starting the survey. The online consent form can be found within Appendix B.

Results

Twenty eight respondents total replied to that call for research, agreed to the informed consent criteria, and participated in the study. In terms of gender distribution, 10 males, 16 females, 1 transgendered individual, and 1 gender queer individual responded to the study. The participants varied in age from 18 – 52, with the mean age of respondents being 26.62. All respondents were unschooled throughout their elementary

and middle school years. Zero respondents in the study were ever diagnosed with dyslexia or another learning disability. Questions were carefully coded based on the main ideas of each participant's response.

Participant's response to variations in the practice of unschooling:

In previous research on unschooling, Gray and Riley (2013) found that people who identify themselves as unschoolers vary in their educational practices. Gray and Riley (2013) categorized these variations in practices into three forms of unschooling, defined in this research as “relaxed homeschooling”, “unschooling” and “radical unschooling.” According to Gray and Riley, those who would consider themselves radically unschooled had full control of their own lives and education, with little to no parental guidance, except at the child or teen's request. Radical unschooling tends to be fully self directed and intrinsically motivated. Those who consider themselves unschooled may have had a bit more direction from parents or guardians when it came to educational endeavors. Relaxed homeschoolers tend to have parents with some specific educational goals for their children or teens and may use curriculum in a loose or flexible way (2013).

In Question 5 of this study, participants were asked, “Would you consider yourself relaxed homeschooled, unschooled, or radically unschooled?” The majority of participants identified themselves as unschooled (46.43%), with 32.14% defining their education as relaxed homeschooling, and 21.43% considering themselves radically unschooled.

Overall Experience with Books or Printed Literature:

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In question 6 of the survey, participants were asked to recall and discuss their overall experience with books or printed literature as a child. Specifically, participants were asked a) if there were books in their home; b) if they recall being read to; and c) if they recalled seeing the adults around them read.

In every case, participants reported their being books in the home, and the majority expressed that there were lots of books in their home. Libraries were mentioned frequently as an additional source of books; and each participant also recalled being read to each and every day. A majority of participants (20 participants; or 71.4%) specifically mentioned witnessing adults around them read.

A sample of participant responses to this question can be found below:

Books everywhere! My dad read The Three Musketeers to me – unabridged – when I was six. I read it on my own constantly over and over; it was falling apart when I took it to summer camp at age 8. Around the same ages, my mom read me science fiction novels by Ursula LeGuin and Anne McCaffery. My sister and I would often get in trouble for reading when we should have been doing our chores. No TV at our house, so reading was our only entertainment.

I loved books as a child. Both of my parents greatly encouraged reading and often read aloud to me. They were both avid readers and we had a huge home library. I remember my excitement at getting my first library card.

Our home was always full of books. My mum and dad always had books they were reading personally, and mum would read to us individually and read chapter books to all

us kids together. Mom would also often read to us in the car when we went on a holiday. We visited the library often and would go to bookstores as a treat, with everyone being able to choose a book.

There were books in every room of our home. I have vivid memories of seeing my parents reading newspapers, magazines, and books. Trips to the library and the local bookstores were really common and something I always looked forward to. A big part of my day to day experiences as a child were mom or dad reading aloud to myself and my siblings. It was a big part of our family time together.

How unschoolers learned to read:

Question number 7 of the survey asked “Do you remember how you learned to read? If so, describe how you recalled learning to read.” Out of 28 respondents, nine were coded as “Taught” in some way. This just referred to learning based on facilitation, either by a parent, family member, or other. The facilitation itself could have been formal (through use of workbooks or flashcards), or informal (through the use of games). For those whose learning was assisted or facilitated (coded in the above question as “taught”), it was generally the mother who was the primary facilitator (as responded to in Question 8 of the survey). The same participants that were coded as “taught” also considered themselves relaxed homeschoolers as opposed to unschoolers or radical unschoolers.

Examples of responses that were coded as “Taught or Facilitated” included the following:

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My mom and dad taught me. I remember sounding out the words in my Highlights for Children magazines.

I remember being sat down on the couch with my mom holding up a spelling book and telling me it was time to finally learn. I was a really stubborn kid, so I refused to read until that point, at age six. I remember the first words I learned were mom, cat, dog, and god. (I only knew god because it was dog backwards. I wasn't raised religiously or anything).

My mom showed me the basics – I remember discussing and laughing about the multiple sounds of a, and she taught me diphthongs. We also had alphabet charts up in our learning room and alphabet blocks we played with....Finally, we had a set of amusing readers that we all went through with her. She let us color the pictures in the books...

...I know my sister learned to read on rollerskates. She's a kinesthetic learner. My mom would hold up phonics cards and my sister would do laps around the kitchen table and on skates and read one card per round.

I consulted with my mom...here's how we think it happened. When I was 6 and a half, my family moved from Israel to the US, and I wasn't reading Hebrew then, and I could barely speak English. I started learning English just by being surrounded by the language, and my older brother would help translate things for me often. When I was 7, we started playing the trading card game Magic: The Gathering, and my brother would

read cards to me and explained how everything worked. I seem to have mostly learned to read by playing Magic...by the time my mom started introducing to chapter books when I was 7 and a half, I was already reading fluently.

I remember spending nights with my mother slowly reading words with her help...learning how a few basic letters sounded so I could get half the word right before needing her help for the rest. My little sister was trying to learn too...I didn't like when she was doing well. I remember going to bed alone one night frustrated with the situation with my sister. I picked up the book and tried reading. I remember it feeling magical. I could read the basic book we were learning with! The words that looked alien before suddenly made sense in my brain.

In thirteen out of 28 (46.4%) respondents, reading seemed to happen naturally, with little to no teaching. For example, one respondent stated:

I kinda remember trying to follow along while being read to, and I think one day it just kind of clicked.

This is very different from what happens in schools, where students are explicitly taught letters, sounds, and decoding skills. Pattison (2016) notes that maybe the “reading naturally” we see in unschooled or homeschooled students may denote that maybe, reading is more a cultural practice instead of a cognitive skill, as cultural transmission happens without teaching.

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Examples of responses that were coded “Reading Happened Naturally” can be found below:

There was no rote learning, phonics, or memorization involved. I learned to read the way a child learns to speak – by doing and observing it. My parents read to me a lot, and I assume I picked up reading in that way.

I can't really recall or define 'how' I learned to read. I spent a lot of time carrying books around and being read aloud to....It's more like one day I woke up and couldn't read, and the next day I woke up and could read.

I don't remember, but I was told I was upset that my mom wouldn't re-read Harry Potter to me so I just started reading it.

What was interesting about responses to this question was that out of the 13 respondents that were coded natural readers, 8 stated that they “didn't remember” or “couldn't recall” exactly how they learned to read (whereas out 8 out of 9 coded as “taught” clearly remembered how they learned to read). This may be because 7 out of 8 of those individuals reported reading at or before the age of 5. The memory factor is indeed a limitation of the study, as this study was based on self report, and is expanded on within the discussion section.

For 3 of the participants, reading was a struggle and not an intrinsic interest. This is important to acknowledge, especially considering the myth of the unschooled “genius”, or the myth that parents may choose unschooling for their child because they are intellectually or creatively exceptional. In their words:

I didn't really gain a real interest in reading until in my mid 20's. I now love to read mostly because of the information I learn through reading.

I remember it being a slow, frustrating process. It didn't come quickly or naturally to me. I very much wanted to be able to read but learning was not fun.

I learned bit by bit...I caught on as I had an interest to try.

Age of Reading and Social Concern:

Question 9 of the survey asked “At approximately what age did you learn to read?” Answers ranged from age 3 through the “early teen years.” Out of 28 participants, four participants reported reading before the age of 5, fourteen participants reported reading between the age of 5 and 7.0, five participants reported reading between the age of 7.1 and 8.0, two participants reported being over 8; and 1 reported learning to read in their early teens. Two participants reported that they couldn't recall the exact age they learned to read.

When a student isn't reading before the age of 7 in a public school, generally, an evaluation for special education is considered, specifically, an evaluation for dyslexia.

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However, for non schooled children, there may be no critical period or “best age” for learning to read (Gray, 2010). Question 10 of the survey asked “If you read after the age of 8, do you recall sensing any parental worry or concern OR concern from neighbors or peers regarding reading?” Five participants (17.8%) did report either parental worry or concern from others. In their own words:

By 8, I could read, but nonetheless I do remember my mom starting to get a little more insistent as time passed. I know she felt that if I could just make the leap to reading comfortably, I would be so happy.

There was some peer pressure around the ages of 5 – 6 because my schooled friends were learning to read at that time, and it would come up during ‘mom’ talks.

I remember numerous times being really anxious or ashamed of myself because girls younger than me were reading better than me. I felt bad, but it almost made me want to learn more. Reading was never pushed on me so I never realized how important it was until I was put in those uncomfortable positions, which made me want to do better.

My grandma was concerned and offered monetary bribes for each book I read.

My parents were not worried about it at all, and neither were my older brothers. We were in a community with a lot of other homeschooled kids at the time, and no one thought it was any big deal. Actually, people kind of took care of the kids that didn't read yet, in a

really thoughtful way. They would make sure that kids who didn't read or write yet did not get put on the spot. Also, if anyone needed a scribe to write down stories or ideas, there was always a parent or older sibling to help do that. I had a few times in community groups where people thought it was strange that I did not read, like at Cub Scouts.

Motivation to read:

When asked “Did any specific book or experience motivate you to learn to read?” participants gave varied answers. Over 10% of participants stated that video games and video game guidebooks motivated them to learn to read. As an example, one participant stated:

Oftentimes, information on where you needed to go or what you have to do in a video game is relayed through written dialogue. To be able to know what I needed to do in games motivated me to learn (to read), and it was easy.

35.7 percent of participants specifically mentioned the role of family in motivation to learn to read, in various forms. As examples:

My earliest reading memories are my mom reading A Wrinkle in Time to us out loud, and I snuck the book away and read ahead. Also, I remember being gifted the entire Little House series and reading them on my bedroom floor...

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I had a lot of familial exposure to the idea that reading was 'cool'. I would also get frustrated when I saw adults or older children reading and understanding things I couldn't read or understand. I wanted to know what signs said, what books said, etc. I also got a lot of positive reinforcement when I showed off my reading abilities as a child and that further cemented the idea of 'reading is a cool skill'.

...at the end, I was very motivated to learn since I wanted to start reading before my sister.

I had a favorite book that I would have my parents read aloud to me as often as possible. But sometimes they were busy and there was no one to read it to me. So I tried to memorize the story. I remember taking this book and pouring over each page, telling myself the story over and over – and then listening intently to my parents when they read aloud until I pretty much had it memorized. One day I had the book open and I was paging through it, it was about halfway through the book that I realized I was no longer relying on my memory to tell me what happened on each page, but instead I was actively reading the words on paper. I ran upstairs and told my mom that I could read! I went immediately to other books, and went a bit slower through them, as I hadn't mastered all the words/sounds yet, but I definitely felt like I'd unlocked the key to reading.

Differences between how unschoolers and schooled peers learned to read:

Question 12 of the study asked “Did you see specific differences between how you learned to read as compared to how schooled peers learned to read?” When coding

responses, the theme that most often came up was that the unschoolers who participated in the study were able to learn at their own pace and in their own way (78.57% of participants). This ability to learn at one's own pace and one's own way also allowed them to have specific choice in the books they read (specifically mentioned by 17.9% of participants); and created a more comfortable realm for being able to comprehend the books they were reading. As examples:

I was able to learn at my own pace, and I think this has helped me to now be able to retain a lot of what I read because I do it out of genuine want for the information I am reading. It is possible if I were forced to read, I still may not enjoy it now.

I had zero idea how most people learned to read until I started working in schools as a young adult. What surprised me most was how many children read by rote and didn't absorb any of the meaning of what they were reading. Reading comprehension was the entire reason for my learning to read – memorization was meaningless.

It seems that most traditionally schooled kids were forced to read books they did not care about, whereas I was allowed to read what I liked, even though it was unusual.

Being self taught, I learned language on an intuitive level. I did not formally learn what a noun, verb, or adjective was until taking a (formal) foreign language class. Strangely enough, my reading scores were always the highest....but if you start asking me about sentence structure and clauses, I draw blanks and glaze over.

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I didn't do any skill and drill with phonics or anything like that. I think that even standard performing children in traditional schools feel pressure to read, since it is such a focus and such a big deal if you aren't reading 'on time'. It is hard to not get pressure when something seems so big and important. I didn't feel any pressure, just a desire to read that was fueled by my own interests.

I had next to no formal reading instruction, unlike schooled peers. I also had free access to any and all books on any topic. When I was 12, I was reading The Lord of the Rings while my schooled peers were being told which books were 'appropriate' for their reading level. No book was off limits to me (even if I was asking my parents to read it aloud to me), and I think this is a big difference in how I learned to read in comparison to others.

Some of the most obvious differences that I have noticed is that I seem to enjoy reading for my own enjoyment much more than my school educated peers....most of them will only read if it is required of them, whereas I will often read books that I am interested in purely for my own enjoyment despite being a college student who has to do a lot of reading during the school year.

Defining oneself as a reader:

Question 13 in the study was “what type of reader do you consider yourself to be now?” 53.57% of unschoolers considered themselves avid readers, while 25% considered

themselves to be occasional readers. None of unschooled participants considered themselves to be non readers. As a follow up to that query, question 14 asked “Do you think there is a specific relationship between how you learned to read and the type of reader you are now?”

Twenty three participants out of twenty eight total participants responded to Question 14. Fourteen out of twenty three participants responding (60.8%) stated that yes, there was a relationship between how they learned to read and the type of reader they are now. As examples:

I've always loved books and I do think that my parent's (mostly) relaxed approach to learning to read helped keep reading fun. The most important thing is that my parents continued reading to me regardless of my own ability to read until I fully outgrew the need (at about 10 – 11 years old). So, regardless of my own ability to decipher the words, I always had access to wonderful stories. Feeling that my parents valued reading time and spent so much time reading to me helped make me appreciate reading as I grew up.

Being surrounded by books let me come into reading in my own time. I felt I could read whatever I wanted but also try things and discard them if they weren't me. When reading became easier, I was so excited by all the information that could be obtained by reading. Now I love reading information. Life is so interesting and I love learning new things. I also love reading fiction. Books are just so much more than any other type of entertainment. No special effects can match the human imagination.

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Absolutely. I think that the lack of pressure to read and the full engagement in stories and novels and information we wanted to learn made me WANT to read. I never felt reading was something I HAD to do; it was just something that we LIKED to do....

Because I was given a lot of freedom throughout the learning to read process, I have always enjoyed reading and still do to this day. Reading has never felt like something that I have to do or am supposed to do, unless it is required (I am in college). I was also allowed to read many different books (my book choices were never censored) which definitely made me a much more open minded person as well as a voracious reader.

Five out of twenty three participants responded “Maybe” with regards to relationship between how they learned to read and the type of reader they are now; and four out of twenty three participants responded “No”. Examples of these responses can be read below:

I'm not sure if there is a specific relationship between the learning techniques I used and my reading now, but I do believe that the culture of reading I grew up in certainly shaped my reading as an adult...From about 9 – 10 all the way through to college I would read for hours every night, and my parents always encouraged it (even if that meant staying up until 2am). There was absolutely no suppression of or control over my reading habits. I could read more or less what I wanted for however long I wanted all throughout my childhood.

I would say that it mostly has to do with being surrounded by literature in my formative years, but my older brother was raised pretty much the same way and similarly learned to read in a really easy way at a slightly younger than usual age, and he isn't really as into reading as I am. So I guess I don't know...

*It's possible. I love to read, but I don't feel like I **have** to read. I think that attitude comes more from how your family approaches reading, and what relationship they have with it.*

No. I think my current reading habits have no reflection on how I started. I learned to read playing games, and I play a ton of games now, but causality runs the other way.

I feel like I didn't miss a beat with reading. At 9 or 10 when I learned to read I think I quickly matched the level of reading of my peers I don't think it affected the type of reader I am now.

Did reading enhance interest in or motivation for writing?

Question number 15 asked “Did learning to read enhance your interest in or motivation for writing?” This question came from the fact that within traditional education, learning to read and learning to write tend to go together. Twenty five out of twenty eight participants responded to this question; with 13 participants coded as “yes” (52.2%); six participants coded as “no” (24%) and six participants coded as “other/maybe”. Participants coded as “yes” stated with absolute assuredness that learning to read enhanced interest and motivation for writing. As examples:

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Yes! I think when you read a lot it inspires you and encourages creativity.

Absolutely, and both made me want to increase my vocabulary.

Yes. I write a lot of poetry now, and that certainly came from my early experiences reading poetry.

Absolutely. I would write similar stories to the books I read.

Five out of six participants coded no stated that they started writing before or during the time they started reading. As examples:

I started writing using invented spelling long before I could read. I continued writing throughout my childhood.

No. I really enjoyed writing as a child and I 'wrote' before I was literate. Both reading and writing developed together.

Actually, I would say that it was the other way around. My mom treated words as very important. We often made books together and she wrote down rhymes I made up or stories I told. We learned different ways to bind books. We even had an artist friend come over and show us how to make paper and how to stitch or staple pages together. I think

that making my 'writing' into books....was part of what helped me learn to read. As I wrote down the letters and words (sometimes just one or two word phrases), I was actually learning to sound things out. I was never required to do this. We just had all these materials around and everyone was reading and writing and had stories to tell.

The six participants coded as “maybe” either didn’t remember if learning to read enhanced their motivation to write, or didn’t connect the relationship between learning to read and motivation to write. As an example:

I love to write. I'm not sure if that related to my reading until I was older, though. I don't necessarily connect the two because I like to write nonfiction, and I mostly prefer to read fiction, and I think the styles are very different (although perhaps they shouldn't be).

Unschooler's experiences with reading

The last question in the survey was an open ended question, and asked participants to share any other thoughts they may have had about their experience with reading and being unschooled. Twenty four out of twenty eight participants responded to this question. This question brought in a variety of responses, and gave the unschooled participants a voice to communicate any other thoughts, experiences, or comments regarding their experience of learning to read. Some comments are shared below:

Although it took some 20 something years for me to fully start reading and writing, I think being allowed to lean on my own timing has allowed me to 1) develop other parts of

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my brain that work really well (creative problem solving) and 2) I grew to enjoy something that I may not have if I was forced into it. Although I have never been to school or university, I now proofread and scrutinize the written work of university graduates in my professional role.

Although I would have been considered a late reader in school, once I could read I could read just as well as anyone else. I caught up very quickly and was reading Dickens when I was 13.

Though I didn't become an author like I used to dream, my love of reading and language did take me to graduate school for linguistics. I love orthographies (my personal specialty in the field), and can speak and read/write Japanese fluently. I also dabble in Russian, Korean, Chinese, all the major Germanic languages, and Gaelic. I firmly believe that many of the foundational skills I acquired as a child learning to read (phonetics, word structure, sentence diagrams, etc.) greatly inspired my current academic pursuits.

I think in modern society, reading is such a big part of life in general. Everywhere you go there are things to be read. So I would think we are at a stage now where reading would be a completely natural thing like walking and talking.

I attribute my sustained enjoyment of learning and knowledge to my unschooled days. I got to explore my interests young, and didn't have education structured and forced on

me. Having to teach myself definitely made me more appreciative of teachers and schools once I went to high school.

Being read to was really helpful for encouraging me to enjoy consuming books. I also have poor vision, so I read slowly, and my parents encouraged me to listen to audiobooks which has kept my joy of reading up throughout my life, even when my vision has been very discouraging.

While being unschooled certainly played a role in my relationship to reading, even more so I think was the fact that we didn't have TV or video games until I was 13.

The best thing about my childhood is that for the most part, I was able to choose the things I was interested in. Having books available that suited me was so important. I have a sister who learned to read at 4 with the Goosebumps series. I have a brother who learned to read at 11 with the Tintin books. The right books at the right age. My eight year old son is learning to read with computer games. Reading isn't a race.

...I don't understand how people can watch babies learn to talk in the natural, experiential based way that they do, and then assume there is no way that could also apply to reading. People's fears about this makes no sense to me...

...I have read some thing about unschoolers (at 8, 9, or 10) not testing very well when you compare them to kids at school....with the relaxed approach, so many of my friends

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really became academic at 12 or 14, and they are doing well in community college as teens, like I am. Of course people who do not 'do school' will not do well on things that measure how well you 'do school' at a young age. I hope you will try to point this out. Also, I do not remember any celebration of my reading or anything. I just started to read and it grew, and everyone was happy they could now suggest books for me, but it was not a big deal. I'm glad I learned to read this way. I have actually thought that I learned to read the same way most people learn to talk, or the way people learn a foreign language by going and living in a country where that language is spoken.

Because I was given the space and freedom to read what I was interested in, and I never felt pressured or forced to read, I have always enjoyed reading and continue to enjoy it to this day. I feel that if I were forced to strictly follow a curriculum I would not enjoy reading and would probably even despise it.

Discussion

One of the major limitations of this study is that it relied on self report and recall of early childhood memories. In some responses to questions, some participants would state "I don't know" or "I don't remember." This was an honest response, especially since some participants stated they started to read "as soon as they could remember" or at "3 or 4." Debate regarding the accuracy of early childhood memories has existed since the mid 1800s. Researchers state that although some of the earliest autobiographical memories can occur at approximately 3.5 years of age, adult-like memory recall most likely comes later in the primary years (Bauer & Larkina, 2014; Wang & Peterson, 2014).

It is also important to note that as individuals' age, development of 'life narrative' comes into play, which affects the way individuals may recall certain memories (Wang & Peterson, 2014).

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size. Although it is approximated that around two million children are being homeschooled today (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), there is no way to know how many of those individuals consider themselves unschoolers, although estimates lie at around 12% (Pat Farenga, personal communication, January 10, 2018). The majority of the participants of this study were unschooled adults (mean age 26.62), who were unschooled in the 90s and 2000s, when the numbers of individuals who reported being homeschooled (and unschooled) were significantly smaller, therefore explaining the lesser sample size within this study.

One of the most noteworthy conclusions that came out of this study was that most unschoolers believe that learning, and particularly learning to read, can happen naturally, without adult interference. This is interesting to explore within the realm of public pedagogy, as, in the researcher's experience, this is the opposite of what happens in traditional schools. Teachers tend to spend much instructional time in the primary grades directly teaching students to learn to read, either using a phonics or whole language approach. When this direct instruction does not work by the age of 7, teachers and administrators may then spend significant time and effort performing a "response to intervention" on the child prior to getting parental permission for more formal psychological evaluation. Although the majority of participants in this study did report learning to read between ages 5 and 7, eight participants reported reading after age 7;

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with one reporting learning to read in their early teens. These eight participants may have been evaluated had they attended traditional school, even though they report no reading issue as adults.

Another significant finding is that most of the unschoolers participating in this study grew up in an environment rich in reading materials; and in families that valued reading, both independently and together. One participant explicitly stated that she grew up in a "culture of reading." Educators must also remember to express that literacy itself isn't just "being able to read." Instead, it is creating a culture where words are valued, whether those words be in written form or in other forms (such as audiobooks, or storytelling). Not all of the unschoolers in this study read early or well right away, but most reported being read to, or exposed to books in many forms. Interest in reading and the written word came from one's individual intrinsic motivation and one's overall environment; and not from book clubs, book counts, or extrinsic rewards for completion of books.

Book choice is also something to discuss. Within the traditional education realm, leveled books are generally an important part of curriculum. Students are encouraged, or sometimes even forced, to choose reading materials that match their current reading level, as measured by quantitative and qualitative reading assessments. Participants in this study did report that one of the biggest benefits of reading within an unschooling environment was the choice they had in books and reading materials. Books were rarely censored, and unschoolers were free to choose books they wanted to read/had an interest in, regardless of reading level. Many participants shared that they frequently read books above their level as an personal challenge. As stated in previous studies (Gray & Riley, 2013; Riley,

2015), one of the biggest benefits of the unschooling is reported as autonomy and choice; and book choice is an important part of the intellectual freedom unschoolers consistently report.

Conclusion

The most important conclusion gleaned from this study is that many times, reading can happen naturally, not unlike the way babies start walking and toddlers start talking. The process of reading is generally a result of one's intrinsic motivation to read, specifically when no learning disability or diagnosis of dyslexia is present. However, the environment does seem to play a big role in this transmission, as most of our unschooled participants lived in situations where reading was a natural and important part of every day life. Although it would be difficult to replicate an unschooling environment within schools, we can take note that allowing children more freedom in how they learn to read, and when they learn, can be helpful; and that children, in most cases, do not need to be extrinsically motivated to read, especially if they are reading what they want to be reading. Many of our unschooled participants found joy both in reading and hearing stories being read, and it is that joy we want to capture and recreate in all educational environments.

Gina Riley, Ph.D. is a Clinical Professor and Program Coordinator of the Adolescent Special Education Program at City University New York - Hunter College. She has written widely within the field of homeschooling, unschooling and other self directed learning environments. Her other research interests include Self Determination Theory, Cognitive Evaluation Theory, and intrinsic motivation.

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Appendix A: Call for Research

Hi all!

My name is Gina Riley, Ph.D. I am a clinical professor at CUNY Hunter College. I primarily research issues related to homeschooling, unschooling, self determination and intrinsic motivation, and have co authored 3 studies with Dr. Peter Gray on unschoolers and young adult unschooling outcomes. A synopsis of my research can be found here: <https://chestnyc.academia.edu/ginariley>. Currently, I am doing a study on how unschoolers learn to read. This is a qualitative study, open to participants ages 18 and older, who have unschooled throughout their elementary and middle school years. If you are interested in participating in the study, feel free to read through the consent form found at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RK8WWPL> (copy and paste link onto browser).

If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to email me at griley@hunter.cuny.edu.

Feel free to forward this call for research participants to anyone who may be interested.

Thank you so much!

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Appendix B: Consent Form

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Hunter College Special Education

INTERNET BASED INFORMED CONSENT SCRIPT

Title of Research Study: Exploring unschoolers' experiences of learning to read

Principal Investigator: Gina Riley, Ph.D. Clinical Professor of Adolescent Special Education

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you are an unschooled adult over the age of 18. The purpose of this research study is to explore unschoolers' experiences of learning to read. If you agree to participate, we will ask you to:

-Review the informed consent form, and ask any questions you may have to Gina Riley at griley@hunter.cuny.edu.

-If you have reviewed the consent form, and agree to participate in the study, you will be sent to the survey. The survey contains 16 questions, and should take approximately 30 – 40 minutes to complete.

-Participants can choose to freely leave the survey at any time.

Because this survey is online, there is minimal potential risk. The only risk of the research is the potential harm from a breach of confidentiality because of the online nature of data collection.

You will not directly benefit from your participation in this research study, however, a potential benefit to society may be greater information regarding unschoolers and reading, as well as increased knowledge regarding how reading may be learned naturally, without adult intervention; and how this may effect later motivation for reading, writing, and other academic endeavors.

The principal investigator will make our best efforts to maintain confidentiality of any information that is collected during this research study, and that can identify you. I will disclose this information only with your permission or as required by law.

We will protect your confidentiality by:

- Asking no identifying information except for age, gender, and unschooling history on the survey.
- Keeping all data on a password protected computer on a password protected document. - Access to data will only be available to the principal investigator.
- Abiding by all ethical and IRB rules for storage of data.

CUNY Oral Informed Consent Script Template Last Updated: June 24, 2014 CUNY
University Integrated IRB

Appendix C: Survey

- 1) Gender
- 2) Age
- 3) Were you unschooled throughout your elementary and middle school years?
- 4) Were you ever diagnosed with dyslexia or a learning disability?
- 5) Would you consider yourself relaxed homeschooled, unschooled, or radically unschooled?
- 6) Please discuss your overall experience with books or printed literature as a child? (I.e.: were there books in your home? Do you recall being read to? Do you recall seeing the adults around you read?)
- 7) Do you remember how you learned to read? If so, describe how you recall learning to read?
- 8) Did someone assist or facilitate in that learning? If so, who?
- 9) At approximately what age did you learn to read?
- 10) If you read after the age of 8, do you recall sensing any parental worry or concern OR concern from neighbors or peers regarding reading?
- 11) Did any specific book or experience motivate you to learn to read? If so, please expand.
- 12) Do you see specific differences between how you learned to read as compared to how schooled peers learned to read? Please expand.

- 13) What type of reader would you consider yourself to be now? (non reader, occasional reader, avid reader, other)
- 14) Do you think there is a relationship between how you learned to read and the type of reader you are now (feel free to expand).
- 15) Did learning to read enhance your interest in/motivation for writing?
- 16) Please share any other thoughts you may have about your experience with reading and unschooling.

Thank you so much for your participation!