

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling:
Relevant Studies and Contemporary and Indigenous Definitions of Unschooling

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Abstract

Many Canadian homeschool families use different methods of learning at home, including unschooling. The methods and definitions can be challenging. The author's review of the literature identifies both contemporary and Indigenous definitions of unschooling. As a Metis family that is learning at home without a curriculum, the researcher questioned where are other Indigenous families who are learning the same way. Using auto-ethnography to illustrate how the author's family came to learning at home, this paper explores relevant North American studies of homeschooling. The research reveals that most data are limited to enrollment data by provinces and territories. The concluding result of the study determines that Indigenous ways of teaching and learning is unschooling.

Keywords: Unschooling, Indigenous, Métis, teaching, learning, ways of knowing, holistic education

A passionate public school teacher, I recall the day approaching when families would line up for the 44 coveted kindergarten spots in the all day program. My own son would be enrolling in kindergarten for Fall. I was asked by a parent about when I would arrive to wait in line or if as

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

staff I would have a preferential spot. I actually thought she was asking for advice on what time she should also get in line on the upcoming cold January morning of a winter ski resort town and was shocked to find out that rather than enrol her child, she was going to homeschool.

I knew little about homeschooling at that time. It was 10 months later that homeschooling crossed my path. We ended up moving out of the ski resort town and back to our home in the woods. Towards the end of my son's kindergarten year, the school announced that they would be closing up the following year if they did not secure an acceptable enrolment number. A rural area where there are many families, many children, yet, there are few who enrol in school. Without a school, my son would be expected to spend around four hours each day on the bus. Will we have to move? Certainly homeschooling is not an option!

Reflecting on homeschooling has been for my family, it has become clear that many people practice different methods of teaching and learning in their homeschool journey. It has been rare to find Indigenous families who homeschool, even rarer to find Indigenous families living off the land in a minimalist way learning by unschooling in any of its definitions. The lack of Indigenous voices in unschooling has led me to wonder, where are Indigenous parents in the teaching and learning journey of unschooling in Canada? What scholarly studies are available? Reviewing literature about unschooling in North America and distinguishing between methods of homeschooling to define unschooling has been an important understanding in my research and my experience as a homeschool parent. Determining Indigenous ways of teaching and learning as unschooling is the result of examining relevant studies leading to unschooling and contemporary and Indigenous definitions of unschooling.

Relevant Studies Leading to Unschooling

According to LaVallee, Troupe, and Turner (2016), “As Métis community members and scholars, we understand that there are different kinds of knowledge and different ways of acquiring that knowledge. One can learn through theory and one can learn from the practical application of theory” (p. 168). From this idea, I reflect on how my life has changed drastically becoming a homeschool mom, researcher, and post secondary educator; along with these changes, our methods for learning at home have also changed. While in a broad sense, we identify as a homeschool family as we don’t want to upset anybody, but there is no longer teaching and learning that entails any sitting at the table with curriculum; it has been years since there has been any “schooling” in the learning activities.

According to Kunzman and Gaither (2013), “homeschooling scholarship suffers, however, from a number of limitations” (p. 5). I have found that there are few studies of unschooling, let alone unschooling families, and the studies that are published are predominantly in the United States or other areas of the world. Fraser Institute continues to be a limited source of evidence and research on homeschooling in general for Canada. Looking at the growth of Canadian homeschooling, Fraser Institute (2017, para. 3) concludes that:

A recent study of student enrolments in Canada found that homeschooling enrolments, although modest in size, are growing across Canada. In fact, nine of 10 provinces saw increases in the numbers of students being homeschooled between 2007/08 and 2014/15.

MacLeod and Hasan (2017) state that homeschooling is “the choice of parents to provide their children’s education themselves” (p. 19). Manitoba is noted to be the province with the largest number of homeschoolers at 1.5% of the province’s total learner enrolments. Whether you wish to homeschool or enrol your child in independent education, the Fraser Institute (2018)

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

confirms that Alberta is the province with larger choices and funding. Furthermore, Fraser Institute (2018, para. 2) states that:

Parents in every province are legally entitled to educate their child at home. Some provinces allow parents more discretion in their choice to home educate, solely requiring a notification to the local school board, while others require approval plans prior to beginning homeschool, as well as periodic reports on student's progress.

Many families believe that by homeschooling they will be provided with funds to offset the cost of learning at home. MacLeod and Hasan (2017) state that only British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan offer some funding. In British Columbia, my son receives \$650 for resources this year and it is very limited in what he can purchase; in contrast, a special education homeschooler may receive over \$14K for support providers and special education materials, extra curricular activities, memberships, day passes and other fun activities.

Looking towards the United States, the study by Gray and Riley (2013) is highly cited and led to Gray and Riley publishing two articles surveying 75 young adults who were unschooled in 2014 and 2015. Prior to these, Kirschner's (2008) anthropological doctoral research studied the unschooling movement. Grunzke (2012), an anthropologist, compared the lifestyles of American unschooling mothers with the lifestyles of mothers who choose traditional homeschooling or enrolling their children in school. While not focused on unschooling specifically, an American study by Kunzman and Gaither (2013) reviewed 351 English-language academic texts on homeschooling and determined that homeschooling literature is limited by being predominantly qualitative in nature and lacking demographic information. In addition to this, registration requirements vary from State to State in the US offering anything from diligent records to no records at all. Kunzman and Gaither (2013) also claim that:

A second limitation of the literature is that much of it is politically motivated, particularly in the United States context. A large number of studies, especially those most frequently cited in popular accounts and in the media, have been performed under the auspices of a prominent homeschooling advocacy organization. (p. 5)

Looking at both motivation and US numbers, Morrison's (2016) research identifies that researchers have determined that motivation to homeschool is due to religion or families being against the public school system; "conservative estimates argue that 1 million children are homeschooling in currently, while others argue that this number is much higher" (p. 50). Gray (2013a) furthers homeschooling as being chosen over traditional schooling; in 2011, the number of homeschoolers in the US reached 2M and 30% chose homeschooling because of religion. The preliminary findings in Gray (2013a) reveal that negative effects of school actually caused 1/3 of families who homeschool to withdraw their children from school. Also intriguing evidence is that half of these surveyed families started their homeschool journey with a curriculum then let go of the curriculum to learn without a curriculum. "Conventional homeschoolers do school at home, and apparently many do it quite well, but unschoolers live their lives without, in general, doing anything that looks like school" (Gray & Riley, 2014, p. 10).

Gray and Riley's (2013) qualitative study of 232 unschooling families seeks to define unschooling, investigate why unschooling is chosen and what challenges and benefits have been discovered. While the research does not distinguish how many are unschoolers, an estimated 10% of two million American homeschoolers are unschoolers who are learning without curriculum (Gray & Riley, 2013; 2014).

The purpose of our study was to survey a relatively large sample of unschooling families to learn how they define unschooling, why they chose the unschooling path, and what

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

they perceive to be the main challenges and benefits of this path” (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 4).

Gray and Riley (2013) describe that unschooling became the method of choice by some families whose experience in traditional school was not positive, while other families tried a more structured method of learning at home before embracing unschooling. Gray & Riley (2013) claim that Gray’s blog offered the initial invitation to unschool families to participate in the research and was shared on the social media of two other researchers; the respondents were 80.1% American, with only 19 families from Canada. “The reported benefits included, for the children, improved learning, improved attitudes about learning, and improved social and emotional wellbeing; and, for the whole family, greater closeness, harmony, and freedom” (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 18). Consequently, Gray and Riley (2014) claim that “no firm data exist concerning the number of unschoolers, but the number appears to be growing at a fast pace, at least in the United States, where homeschooling overall is growing rapidly” (p. 9). In agreement, Morrison (2016) claims that there is very little research available on families who unschool, thus, leading her to a research study investigating how mothers felt confident to embrace unschooling.

Morrison (2016) collected data through interviews of unschooling mothers who have self-identified this method of homeschooling. Morrison (2016) notes that “the majority of the women interviewed were college educated” (p. 53) and identifies other data sources such as blogs and research literature, mainstream literature, and made field notes at an unschooling conference. Morrison (2016) indicates important limitations to this study including bias of voluntary participation, and something that I had been inquisitive about, “issues of social class, race, marital status, and sexual orientation” (p. 78).

In relation to Morrison's (2016) study of mothers in the unschooling movement, to conclude, Kirschner (2008) investigates the unschooling movement in the United States through the anthropological lens with 22 unschooling families. She details challenges with State regulations, yet her research highlights benefits of homeschooling and recognizes "dimensions of lifestyle (namedly parenting practices, temporalities, spatial arrangements, interpersonal relationships, and consumption) as principles and practices" (p. 7). Kirschner (2008) describes that her study:

provides insight into how a particular countercultural endeavour, unschooling, works through an examination of some of the possibilities and challenges that unschoolers face as they create, enact, and legitimate a lifestyle that takes childhood as its target of critique and innovation. (p. 394)

Overall, many of the studies are related to American homeschooling, and only 16 participants of the most cited study by Gray and Riley (2013) responded as being Canadian. Furthermore, in Canada, we rely on enrolment data to decipher the number of learners who are choosing to learn at home in Canada, but the number of learners that identify as unschoolers is not separated.

Contemporary and Indigenous Definitions of Unschooling

When my son started learning at home, it was an enormous process to set up a school space. We shopped for a whiteboard, chalkboard, and even smaller versions of whiteboards and chalkboards for learning at the 1900's desk that an elderly neighbor gifted him for the real school room feel in the living room. My son set up a bookshelf, chose his school supplies and we even looked for some curricula to use in his new school space. When September arrived, school at home started. I say "school at home" because we had made the effort to replicate many aspects

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

of a school in our home. What we didn't anticipate was that in a classroom of children, it certainly can take 5 days of the week in order to get through the required curriculum. Our immediate experience is that after around 40 minutes each day, the number of worksheets that he would have completed in one day in a classroom, were already completed. What next?

The second challenge we quickly realized is that sometimes a learner wants to keep on learning in the subject strand rather than change to another subject area completely. For example, my son loved measuring. He quickly finished his required unit and wanted to move to the next grade. A fortunate aspect for learning at home is that this was an option, but I know from my experience as a teacher that the likelihood of differentiation for one learner's passion in a particular subject area would likely not be accommodated. Within 3 months, my son finished his grade level curriculum. I was at my wits end of what to do next. I began asking questions in our local homeschool group and came across a large number of families who don't buy or use curriculum at all. What is this about?

Contemporary Definitions of Unschooling

Moving away from a curriculum based method is often a struggle for parents who feel learning at home must look similar to learning in a school. I have found that there are different methods of homeschooling. In fact, many families are not "schooling" at all, which has led me to use learning at home as terminology rather than homeschooling. Looking towards methods of learning at home without a curriculum presented the fact that there are different definitions of unschooling. Gray (2013a) argues that children are capable of making their own learning decisions and this is a concept that should be encouraged. By deciding that my son could make his own learning choices and follow his passions, I was letting go of my curriculum based

homeschooling method and allowing my son to demonstrate his capability and make his own learning decisions.

“Unschooling is sort of letting go and fundamentally a life long voyage of learning--to trust that learning is a natural phenomenon of living, around us all the time” (Ekoko, 2007, p. 61). From Gray (2013a), unschooling is presented as an option where parents allow children to initiate their own learning paths rather than use curriculum. Gray (2013a) further proposes that trust is built in the relationship where learners direct the ideas, “trustful parenting” (p. 227). Gray (2013a) references John Holt as the creator of the term unschooling sourcing this from a 1970’s newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*. Gray (2013b) posted an announcement on his blog, *Freedom to Learn*, seeking participants for a survey which defined unschooling:

Unschooling is not schooling. Unschooling parents do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They may, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. In general, unschoolers see life and learning as one.

After the term unschooling was coined, Pat Farenga joined the unschooling movement in 1981 and became the publisher of John Holt’s magazine, *Growing Without Schooling*, after Holt’s death. Father of 3 unschooled daughters, he addresses the definition of the term unschooling in his keynote speech at the 2016 Irish Unschooling Conference in Dublin, Ireland:

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

Many of you are at this event because you are already familiar with the term, but for those of you who aren't, unschooling is a term first coined by *the* John Holt to mean learning and teaching that does not resemble school learning and teaching. I broadly define unschooling as allowing your children as much freedom to explore the world around them in their own ways as you can comfortably bear; I see unschooling in the light of partnership, not in the light of the dominance of a child's wishes over a parents' or vice versa. (Farenga, 2016, para. 2)

Instead of unschooling, Ekoko (2007) uses the term authentic learning to describe learning that is initiated from her children's interests rather than from curriculum materials; she further argues that learners learn from curiosity, and interests can change over time rather than be hindered by being mandated. Ekoko (2007) also cites John Holt for developing the trust of letting children learn. Laricchia (2016) references the origins of the term unschooling to Holt as well as defines it further as "learning without a curriculum" (p. 9). Previously, Larrichia (2007) introduced an applicable definition of unschooling as "learning through life" (p. 1). Rather than following a homeschool or provincial curriculum, Larrichia (2007) argues for following a learner's passion illustrating this through examples of her son's passion for role playing games, which led to extensive opportunities in language, mythology, algebra, and art. For the author's daughter, an interest in Harry Potter increased proficiencies in reading and writing and led to learning in textiles, jewelry, and experiencing learning through online communities. Larrichia (2007) observes the unschooling learning of her children and how pursuing "unschooling passions" encourages learners to follow their own interests which has resulted in an increase in achievement and cross curricular learning. Subsequently, Laricchia (2016) argues that unschooling is the answer for parents who want to nurture their child's learning.

Morission (2016) describes that “unschooling is a form of homeschooling pedagogy in which the student is primarily self-directed. The child is able to decide what is studied, when, and how” (p.51). In agreement, McDonald (2019) describes that:

learning is most effective, most fulfilling, when it is self-directed: when the freedom to learn is provided, when the resources are available, when the time and space for learning are offered, and when knowledgeable and supportive facilitators are available to help if needed. (p. XX)

Furthermore, Morrison (2015) adds that the learner is able to choose their learning experiences. Wheatley (2009) describes how families are able to foster an environment of development through unschooling arguing how unschooling is a solution to the woes of education found in American Schools and describes unschooling “to refer to families who primarily or entirely let children learn about whatever they are interested in, and use little or no formal adult-chosen curricula” (p. 28). Moreover, Wheatley (2009) describes “the most important aspect of unschooling is that it allows children to learn from experiences and activities that are matched to their own abilities, interests, rate of learning, and learning styles” (p. 29). Gray and Riley (2013) cite Wheatley (2009) who identifies that “unschooling is often considered to be a branch of homeschooling” (p. 2).

Unschooling comes to families in different ways, just as we chose learning at home because of school closure, then we chose learning at home because of school dissatisfaction. How unschooling looks in our family does not have to look the same for other families.

McDonald (2019) emphasizes that:

Every unschooling family will look and act differently. Every unschooling cooperative or learning center will create a distinct culture. Every self-directed school or camp or

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

community program will have its own essence. Some may think that their approach is better, kinder, purer. None is perfect. Diversity is a strength of the unschooling approach. Unschooling is both a philosophy and a lifestyle - an ideal and a practice - and therein lies its blessings and its burden. The ideal is to give children freedom to learn without coercion, following their own interests, using the full resources of their community. The practice is to do this within a complex web of interpersonal relationships, social dynamics, family values, cultural realities, and community responsibilities. Practice is the key word. (p. 25)

Gray (2013a) draws on his own experience, embracing unschooling when attending school no longer worked for his own son, the result of a negative event in the Principal's office not only changed educational choice, but also changed his research focus towards learning. As Gray (2013) observed his son's self-directed learning, he began to question "What aspects of human nature cause each new generation of human beings, everywhere, to acquire and build upon the skills, knowledge, beliefs, theories, and values of the previous generation?" (p. xi). A notable chapter of Gray's (2013a) book, *Free to Learn*, is "Trustful parenting in our modern world." In this chapter, Gray (2013a) describes his son's learning experience of giving in to permit his son to travel to London alone; at 13 years old, Gray's son travelled for 2 weeks to London and saw countless sites, visited many museums, and walked all over the city.

As mom of a keen trip planner, I am encouraged to know that 1982 was a different time and I won't be faced with the same decision. My son is not old enough to enter London alone, as we found out this year from his own planning and adventure over to England. As someone who had never even been on an airplane, allowing my son to plan his own adventure, even if his mom

had to follow along, was a fantastic learning experience. A few months ago, my son decided he would like to visit Dublin. I am not the least bit hesitant to see how this unfolds.

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

Finally, defining unschooling is connected to my ancestry and my background in anthropology as well as what I know as the roots and definition of unschooling as an Indigenous person: Indigenous ways of teaching and learning are actually unschooling. The evidence of unschooling as Indigenous ways of teaching and learning can be found in three key concepts: finding life (Cajete, 1994), educating the whole person (Miller, 2019), and the fact that holistic education originated with Indigenous people (Four Arrows as cited in Miller, 2019). Thinking how far back Indigenous people have been teaching and learning on this land, Steckley and Cummins (2008) describe the peopling of the Americas theory and how 12000 - 19000 years ago First People came to the land we now know as Canada. In looking at the roots of unschooling in Canada, we must understand how Indigenous people lived and learned for thousands of years before colonization and the creation of modern schools as we know them today. Eshet (2015) illuminates the “disruption” of Indigenous way of life:

In Canada (as in other colonies of Europe), long before the effects of a modern economy were recognized, indigenous ways of life were profoundly and violently disrupted by the arrival of the European traders, fishermen, missionaries, and settlers. The effects of these changes left indigenous communities without their traditional livelihood, on the one hand, and without the skills and resources to take on a more European lifestyle, on the other. (p. 40)

Cajete (1994) argues that traditional Indigenous education as “finding life” is a process of teaching and learning that has happened for thousands of years, since the peopling of the

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

Americas. Looking towards what education for Indigenous people was before modern school was introduced by Europeans, Cajete (1994) describes that:

the living place, the learner's extended family, the clan and the tribe provided both the context and the source for teaching. In this way, every situation provided a potential opportunity for learning, and basic education was not separated from the natural, social, or spiritual aspects of everyday life. Living and learning were fully integrated.

The ideals of this process naturally became founded on the continuous development of self-knowledge, on finding life through understanding and participating in the creative process of living, on direct awareness of the natural environment, on knowledge of one's role and responsibility to community, and on cultivating a sensitivity to the spiritual essences of the world. (p. 33)

Subsequently, Cajete (1994) provides over 40 foundational characteristics of Indigenous education. Of these characteristics, each definition of contemporary unschooling can be found within the notions. Two notions that are highly connected to learning at home in my family are that "it is always grounded in the natural basics of life" (p. 31) and that "it honors each person's way of being, doing, and understanding" (p. 30). As a family, we are able to embrace both finding life as a chosen learning method for learning at home and for contemporary unschooling. The challenge of having two ways of knowing is best described by Donald (2012) explaining the challenges of identity and belonging when you come from both an Indigenous ancestry and one of European settlers. Indigenous métissage allows researchers to "hold seemingly disparate standpoints together without necessarily choosing sides" (p. 535).

Recently, in the revised edition of *The Holistic Curriculum*, Miller (2019) introduces conversation with Four Arrows, also known as Donald Trent Jacob, and argues in confirmation that Indigenous people have always embraced teaching and learning of the whole person. In the transcript of conversation between Four Arrows and Miller (2019), Four Arrows establishes that holistic education originated with Indigenous peoples. Having already described the contemporary definitions of unschooling, one only needs to look at the contemporary definition of holistic education for comparison of similarities. Miller (2019) states:

The focus of holistic education is on relationships; the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and the relationship to our souls. In the holistic curriculum the student examines these relationships so that he or she gains both an awareness of them and the skills necessary to transform the relationships where appropriate. (p. 89)

In relation to unschooling, we are able to live off the land in a cabin in the woods cultivating wild raspberries in a way that honors relationships to community, earth and souls; we are able to follow our Indigenous roots of “finding life” and follow the contemporary ideas of self-directed learning, following passions, authentic learning, learner-led learning, and even follow our learning travel adventures. The key is that unschooling is not schooling at home, it’s allowing the learning to unfold in different ways unique to the learner’s family, environment and even ancestry and in ways connected to our holistic way of living and Indigenous ways of teaching and learning as unschooling.

Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

Conclusion

In culmination, Gray and Riley (2013) suggest that “the key ingredient to an unschooling education is time, for parents and children alike; time to explore, think, and make one’s own decisions” (p. 22).

The freedom for anyone, young or old, to choose why, what, when, how, and from whom to learn things is a key element in John Holt’s work. In short, if you don’t have the freedom to choose what to think about then you are in a mental slavery; or course, we can choose to subordinate ourselves to teacher (the master-pupil relationship) in order to accomplish or learn something, but that relationship only works well if the student wants to learn that subject or work with that teacher. (Farenga, 2016, para. 3)

Wilson (2008) asserts that “the foundation of Indigenous research lies within the reality of the lived Indigenous experience” (p. 60). Embracing the experiences that, as Indigenous parents of unschoolers, we can foster and encourage is a rewarding experience. Creating a learning environment with choice so that learners can follow their passions while immersed in Indigenous ways of teaching and learning plays a role in allowing learners to engage in learning in a meaningful way while also having time with family, community and culture.

In my path to unschooling, letting my son quit school was not part of my plans, but neither was “homeschooling” my son. “The space and therefore the relationship between people or between people and their environment is seen as sacred a key concept within many Indigenous peoples’ spirituality” (Wilson, 2008, p. 87). Space, relationships, and environment are key components of my Métis life and learning, but all of these have been made possible in my life through Indigenous ways of teaching and learning as unschooling.

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Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning as Unschooling

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