

## Unschoolled: A Book Review

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### Abstract

The prevalent thinking is schooling, and education are the same. This, however, is not true. One can be educated without being in school. *Unschoolled* can help people understand that. This book aims to shed light the not-so-familiar concept of unschooling. The author, Kerry McDonald, is an education policy writer and an unschooling supporter. She even does it with her own family. A proud mother of four unschooled children, she is an adjunct scholar at the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute. Composed of 11 chapters, *Unschoolled* is an eye-opener to an alternative route to the common mode of education—and a great resource for educators, parents, and other stakeholders.

*Keywords:* Unschooling; Homeschooling; Educational Freedom; Unschoolled

### **Unschooler: A Book Review**

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Lamentably, many people have confused education with schooling. However, it is a truism that one can have education without undertaking the pathway of traditional schooling. The problem is not everyone understands this or is open to exploring other educational alternatives because of the reliance and the wide acceptance of the dominant mode of acquiring education. Going away from this seems intimidating. However, if one truly wants to venture into the path of education without the constraints of mainstream schooling, McDonald's *Unschooler* is a book that can empower people and families who would like to endeavor into the lesser-known unschooling. The author, Kerry McDonald, is an education policy writer and, especially, an advocate of unschooling. In fact, she even practices that in her own family. She is a proud mother of four unschooled children. Moreover, she is an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, and a board member at the Alliance for Self-Directed Education.

Chapter 1, *Playing School*, starts with the interpretation of what schooling looks like and how it can restrict the learner's capability to learn independently. It shows that learning in school is not equal to education in which students can fully exemplify their passion and pursue what they like to become—but rather it is just a game of order and compliance. Furthermore, the author pinpoints that instead of creating an environment for learners to grasp the idea of what they want to pursue for their future, schools bound their opportunities by creating a structured curriculum and education that focuses only on what the students should learn, rather than what they want to learn. As a result, the view of schooling can be seen as a game that which whoever follows, obeys, and comply with the school's

curricula, rules, and regulations will be recognized, rather than having a free will to learn and pursue one's passion. Furthermore, McDonald explains that schooling is not the only way to educate children—environment and the society can be a great source of education where children can be engaged in some educational pursuits while letting them discover and understand independently the things that capture their interests.

Chapter 2, *What is Unschooling*, focuses on the definition of unschooling that learning occurs not only in a classroom but rather in any environment where someone can interact, observe, and immerse themselves toward discovery and interests. Unschooling is defined as the freedom and free will of learners to follow and grasp anything that piques their curiosity, leading them to explore every facet of their fondness. Unlike schooling, unschooling does not follow any structured curriculum but rather enables the learners to identify what they want to learn as they are supported by other factors—such as their family, friends, community—and materials that lead to further engagement and spontaneous learning without external force and control. In unschooling, learners are not forced to learn something that they are not interested in, but rather they have an opportunity to explore their passion which leads them to fully involve themselves in the process of learning. McDonald explains that the word “unschooling” can be often viewed negatively, resulting to dislike or unacceptance of some people in this mode of education. She clarifies that unschooling is more on the natural process of learning, where individuals learn because they are allowed to follow their desire to know, rather than performing what has been taught.

Chapter 3, *The Roots of Unschooling*, shows that unschooling is already an option for many parents. In past centuries, some families practiced unschooling their children and were bolstered by how unschooled children became successful. While many philosophers argued about unschooling as an effective way of enabling children to grasp education, McDonald contends that philosophers are not the reason why this has become known—parents, in fact,

became the main factor why unschooling continues to progress. Many parents have seen how unschooling can become a way of educating their children—and have noticed that children produce good outcomes when learning process takes place spontaneously and is aligned to the children's passion and interest. She maintains that unschooling enables the learners to have the freedom to choose and pursue what they want, but responsibilities are still embedded in these learners. As many schools conduct different teaching and learning approaches, unschooling focuses smooth flow of knowledge driven by the personal interest and passion of the learners.

Chapter 4, *Child Isn't What It Used to Be*, discusses how the educational system has changed the children's way of living, in contrast to how children lived and enjoyed their lives before schooling has been widely adopted. As schooling progresses, some children that are meant to enjoy their lives exploring and unfolding what lies around them are forced to focus narrowly on what the school wants based on its set curriculum. McDonald thinks that schooling negatively impacts the children's physical and mental health, as well as manifested in the increasing number of children diagnosed with mental disorders. She asserts that unschooling is a better way of aiding the children to authentically learn, disregarding the common school problems (e.g., anxiety, pressure). Children are supposed to enjoy their lives, hence giving them the freedom to explore their interests can put wonder in their lives. McDonald states that children are not what they used to be—for children now must study most of the time, rather than enjoying their youth.

Chapter 5, *Natural Literacy and Numeracy*, explicates that in some instances, many children learn how to read through teaching and reading exercises. However, not all children have the capability to learn following others' learning capabilities. As a result, children are categorized in schools as slow learners and fast learners. McDonald elaborates that all children possess a diverse timeframe of learning, and that learning should not be forced. She

emphasizes schooling categorizes whether a child is normal or has a learning disability based on performance by their year level or age. She argues that learning how to read, and do math is an innate talent of a child, and learning such things is much more fun and easier if interest lies within the process. Furthermore, the author accentuates how unschooling helps children to fully grasp literacy and numeracy organically, without the pressure. Through interest and free will and with the help of a supportive environment, learners can thrive.

Chapter 6, *Tech-Enabled Unschooling*, puts forward that as technology continues to progress, this can become an impetus for almost everyone to gain access to any information they seek. Such a tool greatly helps enable people, especially children, to explore their curiosity-driven interests. Technology can enhance the effectiveness of unschooling, resulting to access to any information that catches their interests. McDonald explains how technology greatly contributes to unschooled children and even to anyone. Before, access to information is only limited to those who can acquire books. Now, information can be obtained easily by sampling clicking—and hence this opens to new opportunities for children to learn without any limitations. Furthermore, McDonald discusses unschooling via self-driven learning experiences of children through wide informational access supports the learning process. She believes that that unschooling can be much more effective because technology provides an opportunity to gain information that supports one's interest without following a structured curriculum, and limitations.

Chapter 7, *Unschooling Resource Centers*, discusses that unschooling is based on the premise that kids can say no to a subject or a task if it does not interest them. This puts forward authentic and natural learning for it taps into the inherent capacity of humans to become self-educative. Hence, unschooling resource centers are styled in a manner where coercion is not invited; the author pinpoints that resources—facilitators, technologies, and materials—are placed bountifully so that they can have access to topics that they are curious

about. Various resource centers have different requirements and expectations. As an example, the author observes that while some centers have no-screen policies, others have unlimited access to digital technologies. She views that despite the differences of unschooling resource centers, the commonality is they all share the same commitment in educational freedom, non-coercive learning, and involvement of parental posture.

Chapter 8, *Unschooling Schools*, centers about unschooling schools; they are licensed and legal operating schools, different from self-directed learning centers—this means they are required to comply with regulations of the state in terms of attendance, health protocol, etc. These schools do not adhere to the factory model of schooling for they are styled to support curiosity and learning. The atmosphere encourages psychological safety, openness, and freedom. The author says that facilitators in unschooling schools do not make the rules and respects parental beliefs and expectations. In these schools, the author observes that age mixing is evident; grades are not required; and peer learning is not boxed. Moreover, autonomy is emphasized since the belief of these schools is learners can educate themselves through their inherent curiosity and supportive environment. She observes that in unschooling schools, young people also have a say on how things are run, being equal with other school members (e.g., teachers and administrators). This can help them become active participants in the context in which they are in, which can lead to bolstering civic efficacy and initiative. Moreover, she emphasizes that unschooling schools do not advance freedom amorphously, but it is coupled with responsibility.

Chapter 9, *Unschooling Teens*, discusses that teenage angst, perceived as normal, is not organic, and it is caused by schooling. Using studies, McDonald claims many students become stressed, depressed, and even suicidal because of schooling—which severely limits freedom, autonomy, and the capacity to express authentic selves. She further adds that teens misbehave and become rebellious when they are in a restrictive and artificial environment

like schools, and contends that instead of Ritalin or other drugs, teens should be given freedom. She also pinpoints that unschooling also promotes connection with others which is crucial for teen development. In her interviews, McDonald finds out that many teens who were together in the schooling journey became neighbors, friends, and even lovers. While some pursued college, others chose to build careers out of their passions. She contends that releasing teens from the restrictive school environment to an authentic community can make them thrive and become active members of the community.

Chapter 10, *Out-of-School Unschooling*, pinpoints that childhood play is becoming more orchestrated and structured which limits children freedom and independence. For those who, for some reasons, cannot choose unschooling but adhere to unschooling principles, McDonald recommends that self-directed summer camps can provide children more chance to reclaim their childhood. These camps promote unrestricted play and facilitators provide an atmosphere where resources and activities are bountiful. Here, children are the ones who choose tasks and quit if they intend to. She also suggests community-based free play where the inspiration is the adventure model play—workers ensure safety and facilitate not interfere in their games. In sum, she pinpoints that unschooling is a frame of mind and that parents can help empower student freedom and independence if they value unsupervised play.

Chapter 11, *The Unschooled Future*, asserts we should shift from schooling to educating and discusses that though many of the innovative ideas are made to our advance the welfare of schools, we should be brave enough to abandon outdated models that are restrictive and conforming, leading to diminishing the natural inclinations of children such as creativity, curiosity, and inventiveness. Since the dominant style of schooling is factory-based which is not effective anymore in this current age, McDonald encourages that children should be helped to make their learning more authentic in the real world by supporting their autonomy. She says that public museums, libraries, parks, community centers, and other

institutions can be an avenue of learning and must be utilized to promote self-directed learning. She believes that while teachers should be supported in their projects to break the status quo in the educational system, entrepreneurs should be supported in their bold visions of transforming education, and parents should be open to alternatives alternative ways of education and possibilities of learning.

Overall, this book has exhaustively explained unschooling and has given elucidation on an alternative path of education which, though many are not familiar, is powerful, interesting, and learner centered. Not relying on her own insights, she has incorporated interviews from parents and stakeholders about its success. She also has cited words from philosophers and educationists that fortify the credibility of her work. An eye-opener, this book is a great resource for educators, parents, and other stakeholders.

Meanwhile, we have some insights that may be considered in the next edition of its publication. We see that schools are far from faultless and admittedly have systemic flaws and disadvantages, but it is fitting to recognize their positive implications like efficiency and diversity. However, schooling has been portrayed negatively all throughout the book. It is understandable because she utilizes schooling as the opposite of learning. Therefore, to be fair, we suggest that she at least give due credit to schools in terms of human development and societal impact.

Given McDonald's enthusiasm in explaining the idea of unschooling, we understand that she focuses on its pros, it would be helpful also if she would be able to discuss some disadvantages that one may encounter along the way as unschooling is implemented. It must be noted that no mode of education is perfect. Therefore, exploring its possible hindrances are useful to better help unschooled students and their parents so they can prepare for what might come up. Additionally, there are barely any books on unschooling discuss on such a topic—



and hence this can be an opportunity to bridge that gap in the literature. Involving intricate challenges and solutions would be of benefit to the readers, also.

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