

De-schooling the de-schoolers

and Unschooling my Illusions

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

Schooling in an authoritarian society is often demeaning and determined to inculcate ignorance and obedience. When schooling fails, we deem it a social disaster. But without a viable alternative, the subversion that sneaks inside the doors and out from under the rugs—thanks largely to autonomous students, radical parents, and anti-authoritarian teachers—might partially redeem public schooling for now.

De-schooling can be a process and not a place. But if it is a process only available to those of race privilege and class comfort, then the place matters. If de-schooling society only takes place on the rural fringes and in the suburban co-ops, it is liberation only for the liberals, free schools for the children of economic freedom.

Clearly, a free school movement beginning in the cities and based on neighborhood and community control of learning spaces suggests the potential for liberation. But if the free school does not emerge due to lack of like-minded comrades and limited economic means, if the private school costs too much, if the public school requires uniforms and is run by cops pretending to be football coaches, what are radical parents to do? Rather than subject their children to the manifold humiliations of the kid prison known as “regular school,” many families choose autonomous home-schooling or unschooling in relative isolation from other families or the larger community.

In his book *Alternative Schools* (a 1980s revision of a 1970s book called *Free Schools*), Jonathan Kozol levies a rigorous indictment on the rural, commune-and-homestead-based, free-school movement.

“In my belief, an isolated upper-class rural Free School for the children of the white and rich within a land like the United States and in a time of torment such as 1972 is a great deal too much like a sandbox for the children of the SS guards at Auschwitz. [...] At best, in my belief, these schools are obviating pain and etherizing evil; at worst, they constitute a registered escape valve for political rebellion. Least conscionable is when the people who are laboring and living in these schools describe themselves as revolutionaries. If this is revolution, then the kind of people who elected Richard Nixon do not have a lot to fear.”

The same could easily be said of many in the alternative teaching and parenting milieu today. In the current American race and class structure, I do not see how unschooling can fully compensate for issues with socialization and exposure to diversity. It may even contribute inadvertently to loneliness, alienation, and exceptionalistic individualism.

At its worst, de-schooling at the nuclear family level can be sexist, racist, and authoritarian. Mothers frequently take on more responsibility than fathers, making it more difficult for women to pursue their own lives. Fathers often assume that teaching the young is not their job. Home-schooling can limit the opportunities of young people to be exposed to other-race families. And some children grow to be experts at testing and pushing the fairest boundaries, sometimes nudging parents into the role of perpetual police force. Some strong-willed children will actually rule their parents.

Undisciplined parents might unschool themselves so much that the blending of work and play simply becomes an unrewarding routine calling itself “free” but being nothing but a monotonous void. Subsequently, giving children the freedom not to learn might severely limit their freedom later in life.

Of no minor consequence, parenting itself takes much time and energy; some full-time, unpaid, home-schooling parents with less time for themselves could become bitter and self-sacrificial martyrs, which does nothing to nourish the health of parent, student, or community.

While I remain impressed with and humbled by many experiments in single-family de-schooling and understand that every child, community, and family situation is unique, I am not convinced that home-based de-schooling is the best expression of an anti-authoritarian approach to educating young people. As a parent, I have clearly seen the benefits and drawbacks of many different approaches.

In lieu of truly cooperative, racially diverse, and creative community-based free schools for everyone, which remain an ideal and a goal, parents and young people will compromise and participate in the public schools. How best to illuminate our anti-statist and anti-authoritarian attitudes in that context?

—Sunfrog, August 2004

by Ruby Jazz, age 10

“I’ve been home schooled for most of my life. Just last year, I started a public school. Fortunately, my best friend was going to that school, too. Each morning, she would help me find my way to the classroom (I got it after a few weeks). When I was home schooled the ‘classroom’ was only a few feet away from my room. I also was the only ‘student.’ In school, we had to do so much homework. At home school, I did not have much work at all. When we went on field trips (at school), there were too many rules.”

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