

# Unschooling and Free Schools

So education can begin

Marike Reid-Gaudet

2013

I'm interested in unschooling because it's an applied philosophy rather than a teaching method. This philosophy, which I strive to use daily with my son, who is now 16 years old, is also the one used in free schools. For me, this approach to life and to children's development encourages independence, confidence, and pleasure in living. Experiencing unschooling with my son has permitted us to go beyond the simple accumulation of knowledge.

A.S. Neil comes to mind when discussing freeschools. A radical educator, psychoanalyst, and friend of Wilhelm Reich, he founded Summerhill school in Suffolk, England in 1921 which continues operating to this day. The founding principles of this free school were freedom and self management, with the child being the master of their learning.

Neil believed that children only learn things when they want to learn them. He also thought that traditional education forms created easily manipulated and docile individuals who conform to the needs of consumer society. The freedom at Summerhill is the rejection of the expert, of the teacher who possesses all knowledge.

Ivan Illich, the remarkable critic of industrial society and author, was also interested in the link between school and society. In 1961, he established the Centro Intercultural de Documentacion Cuernavaca, Mexico. Illich considered descolarization necessary for freeing people from the consumerist ideology taught in schools in advanced capitalist societies, and he postulated the idea that one should try to imagine the separation of school and the state.

His Cuernavaca workshop, until he closed it in 1976, was an incubator where many revolutionary educators, including Paul Goodman (anarchist writer and poet, author of *Growing Up Absurd*), Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and author, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and John Holt, (American proponent of home schooling who coined the neologism, "unschooling"), discussed how to change society.

Holt was a fervent promoter of educational reforms. After teaching in Colorado for several years in the 1950s, he moved to Boston to participate in a study about how children learn. For a year he didn't teach, but only observed classes to see children in learning situations.

Following his experience as a researcher and teacher, Holt wrote *How Children Fail* in 1964, emphasizing that children live in fear in school, afraid of giving the wrong answer, afraid of not being good enough. Besides fear, lack of interest in subjects imposed on children explained the level of failures at many schools.

In 1967, in *How Children Learn*, Holt demonstrated how children's natural learning process is short-circuited by schools. Believing that schools couldn't be reformed (he equated them with prisons), Holt sought a true alternative to the educational institution, and spent the rest of his life trying to imagine and create ways of changing the educational paradigm. In 1977, he launched the magazine *Growing Without Schooling*, whose articles focused on how to go from schooling to unschooling.

The term unschooling defines how families live and learn outside of schools and their compulsory and institutional curriculums. Holt did not exclude the possibility that unschoolers use curriculums or follow courses with a traditional approach to teaching. But the determining factor is that the child chooses what, when, why and how they want to learn; the child is responsible for and controls their learning.

This approach postulates that learning, like motivation, is intrinsic in each individual; that learning begins and ends with oneself and should not be subjected to a predetermined corpus of knowledge that responds to a demand made by the society. The role of parents is to encourage children's curiosity, to assist them in their projects and experiments.

The term unschooling, according to Holt, could also be known as self-directed learning, centered on the child's interests, or as natural or organic learning, and later became associated with a type of education at home that doesn't use a fixed and standard curriculum. He defined unschooling as according children the maximum freedom in the context of learning, within the limits of where their parents are comfortable.

For Holt, it meant living and learning together, following interests and questions as they appear, learning the way we do before we go to school and the way we do after leaving it—following interests that lead children and adults to read texts, take classes, and initiate projects.

The significant difference is that activities are freely chosen and realized by the learner. They are not dictated or imposed through a curriculum that determines at which specific moment and at which specific place learning must take place, even though parents will certainly influence and guide their children.

Learning how to read or to resolve complicated math equations is not natural, but unschooled children decide to learn this type of material when it makes sense for them, and not at a predetermined age. School is based on the memorization of what teacher and the state mandate must be learned.

Our educational system is formatted on the industry model, with the bell, the desks in a row, and children separated by age. Born with the beginning of industrialization, this model exists for producing the factory workers and consumers of the capitalist system. Because the free school believes in the child as a natural learner who should be in charge of their own education, they and unschooling philosophy are a way to change the old paradigm.

Developing children's critical sense allows them to develop independent thinking. Cornelius Castoriadis, a libertarian socialist who was one of the founders of the group, Socialism or Barbarism in 1946, which influenced many anarchists and Situationists, wrote that autonomous thinking is, more than anything, questioning.

According importance to my son's questions (numerous!), taking the time to listen when they're asked (even if I have one foot on a ladder or am absorbed in my book), helping and guiding him in his research, assisting him in his experiments, and seeing his pleasure in validating, invalidating, nuancing, complexifying his solutions and answers—this has given me the privilege of observing the birth and formation of his critical thinking, his personality, his being.

Illich, in *Deschooling Society*, saw the function of alienation in schooling, that is being a prisoner of the scholastic ideology, people renounce the responsibility for their own growth, and this abdication leads to a kind of intellectual suicide.

Creating concrete alternatives to the indoctrination of the official educational system has always been a priority for anarchists. Whether in the area of reflection about education, like Max Stirner and William Godwin, or by experiments by Sebastien Faure, Paul Robin, and Francisco Ferrer, these eloquent examples from the past carry hope for the future.

And, they stimulate us to roll up our sleeves and act.

Marika Reid-Gaudet has a background in anthropology and the sociology of education. She is currently the president of AQED (Homeschooling Association of Quebec) and dreams (and works with other dreamers) about having a free school in Montreal.

See [summerhillschool.co.uk](http://summerhillschool.co.uk)

# fifth Estate

Marika Reid-Gaudet  
Unschooling and Free Schools  
So education can begin  
2013

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/388-winter-2013/unschooling-and-free-schools>  
Fifth Estate #388, Winter, 2013

**[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)**