

Re-imagining School Public Educators & Unschoolers May Have Much in Common By Eva Swidler

As much as unschoolers dislike the idea of compulsory schooling, a growing number believe that finding common ground with progressive school teachers is the key to creating real educational change.

You're homeschooling??!! Many of us in the progressive political world are familiar with the double take inspired by saying that our kids don't go to school. Isn't homeschooling for supporters of the extreme Right, creationists, militia members, libertarians, child abusers? Doesn't homeschooling mean also supporting the privatization of public schools, school voucher programs and the creation of unequal access to skills, training and credentials? How can a progressive be a homeschooler?

Well, leaving aside a dissection of the media presentations and sensationalism, let's first remember that homeschooling isn't actually much of a descriptor; at base, all it really means is that children aren't going to school. Are there deeply reactionary homeschoolers who want to protect their children from rubbing shoulders with Black people? By all means. Are there homeschoolers who are peace activists, social justice workers or feminists? Yes, actually, there are many of us. In fact, by some estimates and despite most news stories, the proportion of homeschoolers who self-identify as members of the Christian Right is about the same as the proportion in the U.S. population in general. Just as those who send their kids to school run the gamut from Republicans to communists, homeschoolers, too, span the political and cultural spectrum. And actually, many of us homeschoolers consider ourselves radical educators. So while I don't pretend to speak for homeschoolers as a body, when I say "we" I really am referring to a whole world of progressive homeschoolers like me and most readers of *Natural Life* – homeschoolers who seem to be beneath the public radar.

Some progressive parents – those who are dissatisfied with not just the problematic particulars of many contemporary public schools but also with the current mainstream educational model in general – opt for unconventional free schools, democratic schools or other kinds of alternative yet institutional educational options. Or such parents might also instead decide to homeschool, simply as a fall-back choice preferable to participating in an alternative private school that is too socially exclusive or too expensive. But many other progressive parents homeschool as an active choice that we would make in any social circumstances, not just because we are feeling forced out by the troubled details of the current educational system.

Unschoolers have fundamental disagreements with the concept of separating learning from society at large and with the premise of institutionalizing children, as well as with the idea that compulsory education produces real learning. But while such disagreements get a lot of press, the potential overlaps between progressive homeschoolers and progressive public school teachers in pedagogical approach, social vision and unconditional support for public educational space are surprisingly large. I know that public school teachers and progressive homeschooling parents could draw more support and inspiration from each other, and I'd really like to see that happen. Many progressive homeschoolers already avidly read educational theorists, peruse teacher resource and book lists and follow local school politics. And I think that, in turn, we'd have some insights and possibilities to offer teachers. (Yes, maybe prime among these offerings is the idea that those students who aren't going to flourish in school might just do better if encouraged to go home.) But to get our offerings heard, we have to distinguish ourselves from the public image of homeschoolers as ardent Rightists.

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Homeschoolers who specifically don't engage in what is known as a "school at home" model, (one which faithfully reproduces conventional school and is most typical of homeschooling political conservatives), are sometimes variously known as unschoolers, deschoolers or life learners. Sometimes, like me, they just throw up their hands and don't call themselves anything at all. Such homeschoolers draw inspiration from well-known educational theorists such as Ivan Illich, John Holt, or Frank Smith. They share some of the foundational assumptions of learner-centered education, place-based education, progressive education, service learning. They also share many other pedagogical theories that also circulate among many school teachers: that meaningful and positive learning is an active process, which must proceed by the choice of the learner, that real learning starts from the reality of the learner and builds outward, that learning is an emotional as well as intellectual activity. They reject the banking theory of education, student sorting and grading and the idea that life is a competitive race. Staying out of school and, instead, being in the world (not really "at home" at all) is a logical extension of those understandings and values.

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But for all of our well-grounded critique of school, we progressive unschoolers also know that school is realistically where the vast majority of kids are and, most especially, kids from working class households or families of color whose parents often have multiple jobs to hold down and insufficient time to be with their families. And we aren't willing to walk away from those kids and leave them to the grim realities of the system until that Grand Day of School Abolition. In fact, public school teachers are well represented among us homeschoolers, or at least among the parents in our local support group ranks. (My husband just started his sixth year as a high school science teacher in the Philadelphia public school system.) We want the schools that do exist to give all their children as good a life as possible. We want schools to be nurturing, caring and inclusive. We want them to be exciting, stimulating and thought-provoking. We want them to confront race and class and gender, to promote social and ecological justice. And we want them to be free and public, not accessed by tuition or run by corporate and religious

sponsors.

We also support the public educational ventures that model the non-compulsory offerings we'd like to see expand (and hopefully someday replace compulsory school): public libraries, community and recreation centers and classes, park Nature centers. In the recent battles to protect Philadelphia public library funding, homeschoolers were among the groups that sent the most letters and showed up at the most rallies. All these hopes for the content and structure of public schools, as well as other public services, are the shared visions of unschoolers and progressive school teachers, and I believe that these points of unity are core.

But our support for public resources and humane schools seems to be poorly recognized and rarely heard. Many supporters of public schools instead fear homeschooling is a Trojan horse, leading the way for vouchers, privatization or other forms of undercutting a general cultural commitment to freely available education; for them homeschooling is also a racist venture which will end up denying the social provision of education to people of color. Unfortunately, there are doubtless homeschoolers whose views fit these descriptions. And perhaps those of us whose views don't fit them haven't lived up to our responsibility to be vocal and present in the public discussions, clearly identified as dissenting homeschoolers.

Many progressive homeschoolers, on the other hand, counter that the history of public schooling is not a benign history of social equalizing. Instead, they see the invention of compulsory schooling as an elite strategy to socialize a restless populace to dutiful national loyalty. So while we may advocate for public schools as they currently exist to confront the power inequities and injustices of society, we prefer to reject the premise of the system entirely as our first choice. As the Black homeschooling author and radio show co-producer (Radio Free School) Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko says, "But why not consider raising them for an entirely different paradigm? The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, Audre Lourde wrote."

Public school advocates frequently take on the mantle of alleged protectors of opportunity for the children of poor and oppressed communities. They justify their dismissal of – or even attacks on – homeschooling as a necessary part of advocating for their underserved students; if homeschooling flourishes, the reasoning goes, then education for students in exploited communities will inevitably suffer. But a review of the assorted websites and list serves of African American, Native American or Latino homeschoolers shows an intense consciousness of racial dynamics and a highly politically-considered decision to opt out of public schooling rather than reform it.

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Certainly, homeschooling parents want their children to have the tools they need to make their way in a society that values only certain skills and only certain dialects. Parents from oppressed social groups live this social reality every day and don't need educational authorities to point out these harsh facts to them. However, they also know that many of their children will be permanently turned off from acquiring exactly these skills by moving through the compulsory educational system. Public schools will not present standard English, for instance, as a useful dialect to be mastered for strategic reasons, but rather as the "right" way to talk instead of students' own "defective" speech. Telling children that they must go to school to really learn, because their own culture isn't good enough to teach them, elicits the natural and devastating classic response from so many of the most lively children: "Then I won't learn from you."

On the most practical of levels, protecting children from these negative side effects of cultural self-defense motivates many parents to homeschool. In a positive way, however, many parents approach homeschooling as a way to pass on their own values, history and community in a commodified and institutionalized world that leaves increasingly little space for independent social networks and discussion. Homeschooling affirms the worth of what children learn in the bosom of their communities and their families, however defined. It rejects the governmental claim of the culturally deprived, linguistically impoverished Black community or the portrayal of "cultures of poverty" as the main enemy of success for the poor. Homeschooling is the ultimate in cultural self-determination, that often touted but poorly observed human right. Keeping our children out of governmental institutions can be a way of keeping them in our community's cultural commons.

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But here we approach a crucial fork in the road. Whoever we are, rejecting the government (and increasingly corporate) rearing of our children via compulsory state-run education doesn't have to necessarily mean supporting privatization, whether in the form of corporate sponsorship, for-profit schools or vouchers supplemented by cash (as they are to be used in the U.S.) Compulsory institutionalization in state schools (with a governmentally determined agenda that we the public might hope to influence or re-create) and a private free market in education (with no possibility of public input) are not the only two alternatives out there. John Holt and Ivan Illich laid out visions of socially funded, universally accessible, free – i.e. truly public – learning outside of any kind of compulsory school system decades ago. These offerings they hoped for would be far different from just making public schools non-compulsory; they instead would reflect what the public wants and not what the government wants. Their de-schooled hopes for the future were far from privatization or vouchers!

But in the meantime, while we work for and wait for such a new system of freely accessible, non-compulsory public offerings of knowledge and learning, I believe that we have to remember where the kids are. The vast majority of children are in schools. Since the children of so many citizens attend public schools, there is widespread social support and potential power to pressure those schools to serve the interests of the public, not the interests of the government. We unschoolers can and should be part of that

kind of support for public schools – a support that works to make public schools public in the best sense of that word.

Unschoolers have adopted public national parks and public libraries as our own; why not public schools? While homeschoolers (and unschoolers perhaps in particular) have many important battles of our own to fight, as long as by law (and often by household financial necessity) our society's children and especially our poor children are in school, for me there is a moral imperative to support the struggle for a generous and humane public education which responds to and serves them. Supporting and restructuring the public schools may yield merely reforms rather than the radical rethinking of education that we ultimately strive for, but ignoring the lives and needs of the children that are there can boil down to elitism.

In supporting the fight for really public education, unschoolers can not just do the right thing, but also potentially contribute our insights and philosophies to the open-minded among the teachers and administrators in public education. In fact, there are a number of ways in which I see progressive homeschoolers potentially aiding progressive public educators and the students in public educational institutions. And though this coalition may seem unlikely to ever flourish, in a post on his website, Pat Farenga (formerly publisher of John Holt's now-defunct *Growing Without Schooling* magazine) recently highlighted a joint "reimagining education" three-day conference and on-going project in Michigan started by unschoolers and attended by public school superintendents, principals and teachers. At this event, he writes, "The school officials weren't trying to get homeschoolers to conform to their model of school, but instead were asking homeschoolers, along with the others who were present, for ideas they could use to help the children in their districts learn more effectively."

There is possibility! But how can we work to move the possible to the actual? First, homeschoolers have created culturally independent educational models – many different models, in fact – based on very different pedagogic forms and content than the compulsory schools, which are necessarily shaped by governmental mandates. Being able to mingle in a welcoming homeschool world of alternative educational outlooks might yield a multiplicity of inspirations and new insights for progressive educators. And if we want to be heard by those educators, it will be up to us to create a publicly visible unschooling discussion that actively rejects the media image of privatizing homeschoolers and instead invites in the progressively minded public school workers.

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Next, homeschoolers also support public space and resources for all children outside the compulsory and regimented school walls: libraries, parks, rec centers, museums, etc. We can be mindful that our advocacy for these resources should include assuring their accessibility and relevance to all children, including those currently institutionalized. We progressive homeschoolers also frequently have an abundance of a resource scarce in 21st century society: time. We often use it to celebrate and strengthen the cultural or cognitive commons that form the alternatives for all of us to massification and the corporate conquest of popular culture. With our time and unschooling consciousness, we can particularly work to form a bulwark against commercialization for all children. And finally, of course, we can offer unschooling as the ultimate refuge for some of the smartest, most rebellious kids, those who just say no.

Do I want to see compulsory public schooling disappear? Absolutely. Do I feel an obligation to support public education against its privatizers? Without question. Do I see a contradiction between advocating for public support for all learning spaces and being a confirmed unschooler myself? Not at all.

Eva Swidler lives in Philadelphia with her husband and daughter, who has never been to school. One of the places where she teaches is Goddard College in Vermont. Goddard has been a self-directed learning, low-residency college, based on progressive education principles – no grades etc. – since the 1960s.

In public media, his research has been featured in the Washington Post, The Atlantic, and National Public Radio. This year, he was named an Editor of the historic journal, Men and Masculinities. A critical reimagining of Black boyhood, the authors contend, demands that educators, policy makers, and community advocates pursue pedagogical and policy interventions that create spaces for Black boys to construct and experience robust childhoods. Further, a (re)commitment to critical research on Black boyhood should inspire inquiry that asks young Black boys who they are, what they think, and what they desire in their lives now. August 2021. Sun. See more ideas about education, learning, unschooling. Re-Imagining School as Unschoolers. Unschoolers have a duty to share what they have learned about democratic education. Psychology Today Freedom Self Education Learning Homeschooling Projects. Ideas. If you're nervous about public speaking, you're not alone—it's so common a fear that it even has its own name: Glossophobia. A 2013 StatisticBrain survey Student Teaching Teaching Resources Teaching Ideas Teaching Philosophy Kindergarten Projects. Unlike school, or more traditional types of home education, there's no curriculum, no imposed learning, no testing. The children set the agenda and pace; the aim is to learn through living. For Alice Khimasia, mother to Zephan, Noah, Josiah and their 14-year-old brother, Elias, this is an antidote to school. Anecdotally unschoolers appear to be increasing. If you mean people taking their kids out of school and not teaching them in a structured way, that's definitely on the rise, says Simon Webb, author of Elective Home Education in the UK. On most of the lists and the Facebook sites you can see that's the trend, to not have to teach them as they do in school. But some parents might not understand this method, so the child drifts, not doing much.