

TRUSTING CHILDREN: LIFELONG LEARNING AND AUTONOMY WITHIN THE UNSCHOOLING MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the concept of autonomy in the context of education and analyse the complex features of unschooling, a particular movement within the home-based education paradigm. This study will aim to link the significance of autonomy and unschooling and place them within the wider discourse of contemporary lifelong learning (LLL) theories. Under the tenets of humanistic education theories that underline self-driven and intrinsic motivations for learning, this article will highlight the unschooling movement as an example of a subaltern pedagogical approach that is deeply rooted in institutional and ideological autonomy. More importantly, this study intends to challenge the way LLL is conceptualised and propel the international discourse surrounding it beyond the boundaries of institutional education.

Keywords: Unschooling, autonomy, lifelong learning, subaltern pedagogy

*Trust Children. Nothing could be more simple – or more difficult.
Difficult, because to trust children we must trust ourselves – and
most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted.*

John Holt, How Children Learn (1983: xii-xiii)

Introduction

With this article, I aim to explore the following issues: firstly, I will take a critical and in-depth look into the different theories that underpin the concept of autonomy in the context of education and learning. After summarising these findings, I will then analyse and highlight relevant literature surrounding home education, and the unschooling phenomenon in particular. The main section will then outline the role autonomy plays within the context of unschooling vis-à-vis the concepts and theories of autonomy in leading lifelong learning (LLL) theories and explore the different ways in which unschooling is challenging and broadening the notion of LLL itself. Ultimately, I intend to answer the following questions: What can be understood by autonomy in education? In what way is the unschooling movement rethinking and reconceptualising autonomy and LLL? And finally, why is it important to delve into the possibilities for LLL beyond formal institutions in the 21st century?

Background and rationale

As I develop this topic, I will attempt to critically analyse different theoretical perspectives in order to elucidate the concepts at hand. Before I begin, however, it is important to provide a brief yet meaningful rationale as to why I have chosen subaltern pedagogical trends as a topic for research. A key reason for my interest in this area is my personal experience with a subset of home education: I consider my educational background from early childhood until university to be within the broader philosophical spectrum of unschooling, and as such, I believe that I am able to approach the subject with a distinct perspective and certain insight into this realm of learning that remains on the periphery of mainstream learning systems. I consider it not only possible to tackle studies in this field, but rather necessary in order to broaden the discourse and be inclusive of subaltern pedagogies,

systems, educators and learners in wider educational studies. My experiences as an unschooled learner – although considered somewhat rare – are by no means unique to me. Indeed, there are many of us born following the primarily Western ideological shift of the 1970s and 1980s that could be considered outcomes of a similar educational vein: one of a radical rejection of establishment, institutionalisation, and government-mandated curricula tethered to formal educational systems (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Therefore, I intend for this study to shed light on what I believe to be a vastly underrepresented field within education, and a movement that I was – and continue to be – a part of. Ultimately, this article aims to provide alternative insights and contribute to the emerging literature in the field.

It is important to highlight that the definition of subaltern pedagogy that I utilise in this paper stems in part from postcolonial critical theory, which denotes the term as something existing outside of any hegemonic power structure (Chakrabarty, 2015; Igelmo Zaldívar, 2015; Mignolo, 2000). It is only fitting, then, to adapt its use when describing a form of pedagogy that is on the outskirts of dominant understandings of education and draw on the concept in order to develop new conceptualisations of what learning is and the spaces it takes place in.

Understanding autonomy in education

Next to the right to life itself, the most fundamental of all human rights is the right to control our own minds and thoughts.

John Holt, Instead of Education (1976)

Autonomy is a term used with ubiquity in education, oftentimes in congruence with wider notions of liberal democracy, which presupposes that all citizens would have the equal capacity to make their own decisions regarding their life (Mackenzie, 2007). Prior to addressing autonomy within the unschooling and LLL paradigms, it is important to clearly

define the concept to then be able to contextualise it in the literature surrounding subaltern pedagogies and LLL.

Holec (1981) defined *learner* autonomy as a state of willingness to take charge of one's own learning process, as well the capability to determine and evaluate content, objectives, methods, and procedures of learning. He argued that autonomy is an ability that can be acquired in two distinct ways: deliberately and systematically through formal and institutionalised learning, or otherwise by more 'natural' means (ibid.: 3). In Holec's view, learner autonomy is a powerful emancipatory tool used to increase awareness and strengthen an individual's ability to transform their environment.

Similarly, Little (1991) posited that autonomy is the capacity to make decisions and take independent action, and in the context of education, it enables an individual to critically reflect upon their learning and develop a relationship between the process and content of learning. To this author, autonomy implies taking sole responsibility for the process of learning and acknowledging that any level of success depends on the individual rather than a larger system. However, rather than being a burden to the learner, this responsibility is driven by a fundamental intrinsic motivation to understand their surrounding world (Little, 1991). Therefore, it could be argued that a learner becomes more autonomous as they develop the necessary skills for self-directed reflection and motivation, and that the more autonomous the learner is, the more efficient and effective their learning is.

On a more philosophical level, the concept of autonomy can be traced back to Kantian critiques of reason and judgement (1790). According to Kant, the capacity to build one's own rules is inextricable to the concept of autonomy, and this autonomy is therefore a reaction against institutional heteronomy. However, there is a risk in assuming that learner autonomy is a universally desirable goal – there is considerable debate on whether learner-centred models of education that promote autonomy are heavily influenced by Western ideologies

and are therefore less likely to take into account differing cultures, attitudes and the values (Karlsson et al., 1997; Nah, 1999). Although this essay does not explore the differences between learner-centred and teacher-centred approaches in education, it is nevertheless important to maintain awareness of the different contexts through which autonomy is defined.

Unschooling: A radical movement?

Children want to learn about the world, are good at it, and can be trusted to do it without much adult coercion or interference [...]

John Holt, Teach Your Own (1997: 44)

Some pedagogies are divergent enough from the core of what most societies are accustomed to that they remain largely out of the educational spotlight. There are many terms that have been used to define the different types of home-based pedagogical practices that are relegated to the margins due to a relative minority of practitioners: homeschooling, home education, home-based education, flexi-schooling, unschooling, holistic education, and alternative education, to name a few. However, conflating these terms as ‘alternative’ pedagogical approaches implies that they are virtually detached from the main concepts of education, and lack any distinction amongst each other. In this section, I will attempt to clearly distinguish between three different models of subaltern educational approaches: homeschooling, flexi-schooling and unschooling. I will do so primarily by drawing from the development and research that has emerged from North America, a region with a distinct historical background in this field and the highest recorded concentration of home educators (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013).

Families have been consciously choosing subaltern pedagogies as a form of protest against mainstream education and society and as a defiant political movement for decades (Gaither, 2008; Rothermel, 2015). However, the research and data surrounding many of these

systems are often limited due to the deinstitutionalised nature of the phenomenon.

Nonetheless, there has recently been emerging research that suggests that subaltern learning systems are a growing phenomenon around the world, and there is mounting evidence of different subaltern pedagogical practices found across various country contexts (Gray & Riley, 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Lines, 2000; Rothermel, 2011).

A brief glance at the historical and contemporary contexts of subaltern education suggests that as a movement, it has existed in some shape or form since the onset of accessible (and later compulsory) public education (Gaither, 2008). Indeed, in many cultures, the family and home were the primary and most significant learning environment that children were exposed to (Knowles, Marlow, & Muchmore, 1992). Moreover, subaltern pedagogies developed in parallel to centuries of educational reforms around the world, albeit on a marginal level. It was not until the worldwide turbulent political period of the 1960s and 1970s, however, that the educational status quo began to be categorically challenged.

Several influential thinkers have been credited with providing the ideological underpinnings of the emerging subaltern educational movement. One author in particular, Ivan Illich, constructed a strong critique against schools in a ground-breaking publication called *Deschooling Society* (1973). Throughout his prolific writing and research, Illich went on to illustrate schools as corrupting institutions that inevitably reverse their original intended purposes, and portrayed mass and compulsory schooling as the vehicle for a consumer-driven, pre-packaged, highly institutionalised – and therefore impoverished – life. Illich was a fierce critic of the centralised, bureaucratic and rigid nature of public schooling and the ways in which schools arguably harboured inequalities amongst learners (Gajardo, 1993).

Additionally, he cautioned that if knowledge was reduced to a possession, it could then be exploited as a commodity, and ‘like any commodity that is marketed, it becomes scarce’

(Illich, 1975: 73). Indeed, there are some key aspects of Illich’s deschooling theories that are

echoed in modern informal learning and LLL research, and his critiques can be linked to current debates on the marketisation of education within a neoliberal society (Giroux, 2007; Leadbeater, 2000; Smith, 2011).

As the subaltern educational movement continued to expand and gain momentum in the U.S., Van Galen (1988) identified an important contrast in practices. She described there to be two broad groups of practitioners: the ‘ideologues’, typically dissenters in favour of conservative religious education; and the ‘pedagogues’, who more often decried formal educational institutions, secular or not, for limiting learner potential (Van Galen, 1988: 54). The dichotomy between these two diametrically opposed constituencies – the counter-cultural left and the religious right – led to more radical voices joining the discourse in the 1960s and 1970s. One such influential voice to join the debate was John Holt, a schoolteacher-turned-educational theorist who published a series of books and a magazine entitled *Growing Without Schooling* that advocated for parental and learner autonomy and school decentralisation. Holt abandoned a career in teaching in disillusionment of the U.S. education system, and became a staunch critic of compulsory schooling. He is often credited for coining the term unschooling, which he did in an effort to describe a type of education that was learner-directed, respectful, non-institutional, and ultimately trusting (Farenga, 1998; Priesnitz, 2012).

Given this background, it is helpful to outline three noteworthy paths that contemporary home education has taken since its outset: first, there is the more well-known approach of homeschooling, which is often used as an umbrella term to describe all types of education outside of a physical school or institution. However, the term itself can be misleading, as it arguably implies that the practice of homeschooling is simply a ‘transference of the activities of a public school to the environment of the home’ (Knowles, Marlow, & Muchmore, 1992: 196). Gaither (2009) posited that homeschooling mainly

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emerged due to a shift in ideological reasoning rather than the more pragmatic reasoning of the past, when access to schools and labour needs prevented many from attending public schooling. As of the 1970s, homeschooling represented the alternate choice against compulsory institutionalisation (Igelmo Zaldívar, 2015).

The flexi-schooling phenomenon was described by Meighan (1995) as a subaltern approach that allows for learners to traverse through an existing system and gain credentials via multiple avenues. It is arguably more versatile in nature than other forms of subaltern pedagogies: it maintains one foot in the public schooling arena by effectively establishing an agreement between families and schools, and at the same time attendance is flexible and content can be tailored to suit individual needs.

Unschooling is considered to be a radical outlier of both of these, one that can be viewed as a completely foreign concept when following the nearly universal pedagogical consensus of formal schooling and even more formal methods of homeschooling. Of the three variants, it is the one whose primary features least resemble those of state-mandated and more traditional forms of schooling (Rolstad & Kesson, 2013), and aims to have learning be entirely self-directed and free from external influences (Taylor-Hough, 2010). While the conceptual mapping for unschooling was laid out in the 1970s, it has been argued that it only began as a structured movement in the late 1990s and that its overarching goal was not so much to be in opposition to formalised and institutionalised schooling – as with the case of homeschooling – but to the entire process of 20th century Western pedagogy (Igelmo Zaldívar, 2015).

Despite its relatively low incidence, I have purposefully selected unschooling as the focus of this article due to the fact that out of the three subsets mentioned here, unschooling has recently been garnering more attention from educators and policymakers alike on an international level (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Gray & Riley, 2013; Igelmo Zaldívar, 2015). This

suggests that scholarship on subaltern pedagogies is growing, albeit at a slow pace, and that further research is needed in order to expand the knowledge surrounding the unschooling phenomenon.

Autonomy, unschooling, and lifelong learning: Beyond the institutional structures

What we need to do is [...] give children as much help and guidance as they ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.

John Holt, How Children Learn (1983: 293)

Having discussed the concepts of autonomy and the subaltern pedagogical approach of unschooling, I will now explore the possibilities for LLL beyond formal institutions and how the concepts of autonomy and unschooling fit within the LLL paradigm.

Taking a look at the current LLL landscape, it is increasingly apparent that the concept has moved far past its initial aims of being the ‘master concept’ upon which systems of education would be shaped (Faure et al., 1972: 182), and is becoming more institutionalised at its core (Singh, 2004). In order to understand the different reasons why institutions are trying to develop, manage, formalise – and sometimes control – LLL practices, we must first look at how LLL came to be part of a global policy rhetoric; only then will it be possible to link and contextualise the pedagogical practices that occur on the margins of the wider LLL discourse, and thus be able to discern the challenges that these types of practices face.

Authors such as Yeaxlee (1929) and Lindeman (1926) were some of the first to offer an intellectual basis and a comprehensive understanding of LLL, and these were largely based on the notion that education is a continuous process that extends far beyond a certain age and any institution. These broad ideas, while adaptable to any country context, were also widely open to interpretation, thus leaving the notion vulnerable to serve different political

interests (Smith, 2001).

LLL soon became a central concept endorsed by UNESCO in 1970, taking on a policy-ready meaning following the publication of two seminal texts: *Learning to Be: The world of education today and tomorrow* (Faure et al., 1972) and *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors, 1996). The latter report was the first to introduce the concept of the four fundamental pillars that could be leveraged to reshape education: learning to *know*, learning to *do*, learning to *live together*, and learning to *be*. Under the pillar learning to be, the author outlined one of the main goals as ‘develop[ing] one’s personality and be[ing] able to act with ever greater autonomy, judgement, and personal responsibility’ (Delors, 1996: 86). This concept of autonomy as embedded into the philosophy of education throughout life further highlights how LLL and theories of self-driven and intrinsic motivations for learning often found in home education literature are interlinked (Farenga, 1998).

A brief look at the contemporary directions in LLL demonstrate the different ways it been interpreted and applied in global educational policies (Green, 2002). One example is how LLL has been adopted as a key strategy in improving skills, knowledge, and competences in European educational policies (Lüftenegger et al., 2012). Furthermore, LLL is currently at the forefront of UNESCO’s 2030 agenda regarding quality education, which states that ‘all people [...] should have access to inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities’ (UNESCO, 2015: 6).

Where do subaltern pedagogies exist within this new educational paradigm? In order to answer this question, we must first attempt to reconceptualise LLL entirely outside of the sphere of institutions. LLL policies and practices have seen a considerable growth in the global educational sphere, and this growth has meant that international organisations, governments, and other institutions have drawn on the concept as a means to formalise, institutionalise, and measure learning (OECD, 2010). Here, I put forward the argument that

the greater the institutionalisation, the greater the degree of power these institutions have over the definition, development, control, monitoring, and implementation of LLL practices, thereby relegating any subaltern approach to LLL even further to the margins. As Murphy (2014: 245) stated, there is still a very ‘thin empirical knowledge base’ when it comes to home-based education as a social phenomenon, and as the influence of international policies and research related to institutionalised LLL grows, there will continue to be a widening gap between that research and the body of knowledge concerning grassroots movements and subaltern pedagogical approaches in education.

Concerning institutionalised education, the argument in opposition to it that is echoed in the unschooling movement ranges from the institution’s inability to perceive its own deficiencies and therefore acting as an oppressive force (Taylor, 2007), to claims that institutions and governments take a hypocritical stance that seemingly promotes student-centred learning within the system, yet still maintains a stronghold on the underlying institutional agenda (Todd, 2012). Others argue that in most institutional settings, the important decisions are almost always made directly by educators and other external actors, therefore diminishing the student’s ability to practice autonomy (Sun & Chen, 2010). Whereas a child enrolled in an institutional programme must adhere to its constraints of schedule, curricula, classroom, and more, unschooling affords families a rare chance at varying and personalised degrees of autonomy (Anthony, 2015). There is a primary critique that is behind all forms of subaltern education, and that is the critique against educational institutions themselves.

Subaltern practices face enormous challenges when it comes to legitimisation and acceptance (Murphy, 2014). In some countries, such as Germany and Sweden, subaltern pedagogical practices are deemed as administrative offences punishable by the law, and any form of subaltern education is tantamount to child neglect (Spiegler, 2015). In reclaiming the

notion that LLL should be inclusive and representative of any type of learning (at any age, in any context, within or outside an institution, for any purpose, and for the betterment of the individual), it would seem that such strong efforts to regulate and even outlaw unschooling are difficult to justify. Any legal provisions put in place to safeguard legitimate concerns over child labour violations or abuse in any given country context should not prevent subaltern practices from existing, but rather they should further ensure that all education, in any form, be acknowledged at an equal level. Furthermore, it could also be contended that institutions that appropriate LLL as a mechanism to control and exclude and that maintain a dominating and hierarchical position of privilege are counterproductive to the inherently democratic values of LLL (Smith, 2001).

Furthermore, I would argue that autonomy in the context of a controlled setting that is ultimately managed by an institution bears a different meaning than autonomy in the context of unschooling. There is a historical imbalance of power relations within institutional educational settings, where learners are very rarely involved in decision-making or have a choice in how, what and when they learn and how they are assessed (Karlsson et al., 1997). Additionally, the larger educational structures at local, regional and global levels tend to undercut the political power and autonomy of the learners. Illich (1973) went as far as to question how realistic the expectation was that schools can teach democratic principles in an effective manner if they themselves are authoritarian institutions.

Learner autonomy within an institution inevitably means that despite any ideological shift towards a more learner-centred curriculum design, it still must answer to a higher authority, be that the government, the board of directors, or others (Grunzke, 2010). The relationship between a teacher and learners, however learner-centred the environment may be, is arguably still one of dependence. If autonomy demands freedom from all external

constraints, then it could be argued that it is a concept that cannot fully thrive within the confines of an institution such as a school.

There are various sweeping statements behind the choice to unschool: it suggests that society does not need institutions, or the people supporting the institutions, or even teachers, but that they only need what is essential to develop autonomy: the learner (Cooper & Sureau, 2007). Beyond an expression of disaffection with a larger educational system, it could be regarded as a statement about the condition of society itself (Knowles et al., 1992). Given that unschoolers elude not only public or private schooling, but even other forms of subaltern pedagogies, they are arguably managing to effectively mould their own new social reality (Todd, 2012). Ultimately, what unschooling tries to achieve is a type of autonomy that removes the dimension of power where an authority is dictating what, where, when and how to learn. Holt described this idea further:

We are very unlikely to learn anything good from experiences which do not seem *to us* closely connected with what is interesting and important in the rest of our lives. Curiosity is never idle; it grows out of real concerns and real needs. Even more important, we are even less likely to learn anything good from coerced experiences, things that others have bribed, threatened, bullied, wheedled, or tricked us into doing. (2004: 12, italics in original)

[...] When one person holds power over others there is not likely to be a very honest conversation between them. (ibid.: 26)

Conclusion

With this study, I set out to have a better grasp of the concept of learner autonomy, as well as on the unschooling movement. My initial goal to link these concepts with broader LLL theories made it possible to explore whether and how learning can be reconceptualised outside of institutional structures, something closely linked to the fundamental ideas of unschooling.

In determining why it is important to de-institutionalise the concept of LLL in the 21st century, the results of this study suggest that thinking outside of the proverbial box is increasingly important when it comes to the field of education in general. Because unschooling so profoundly rethinks deeply entrenched educational structures, the movement maintains an inherently low-profile, which in turn makes it prone to being ignored (or perhaps worse, vastly misunderstood). By highlighting the fact that there are radically different ways to interpret learner autonomy, pedagogical approaches, and LLL, it opens the doors to challenge deep-seated and out-dated terminologies and practices, and invites further research to change the terms of the debate and to widen the discourse.

Although the title of this article alludes to a child's right to take control of their learning from early on, what the concept of LLL allows for is to embody the 'cradle to grave' perspective on learning (Braathe & Otterstad, 2012: 2506). It is important to open up a dialogue between institution-based thinkers and radical thinkers, because behind each debate within education, there is a story: a personal perspective that enriches, strengthens, and is an intangibly part of the fabric that makes up a movement.

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