


# Globe Focus & Books

EDUCATION » TUNING IN AND DROPPING OUT





Carlo Ricci teaches Karina, 5, centre, at home in Toronto. Annabel, 7, goes to regular school. 'We treat young people too much like cogs in a larger machine,' he said. JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

As their peers head back for another year of teachers' dirty looks, a select but growing group of children never darken a classroom. Their parents believe in 'unschooling,' and they make their kids' curiosity and experiences their main educational guides. It may sound flaky but, as **Kate Hammer** reports, the movement's ideas are going mainstream, even in the school system

# SCHOOL'S OUT – FOREVER

It has been Saturday in the Laricchia household for nearly a decade.

The family's three teenagers, Michael, Lissy and Joseph, have known nothing of alarm clocks, races for the school bus, arguments over homework or report-card angst since their parents started "unschooling" them in 2002.

The small but growing movement the Laricchias have joined is known by many other names, including de-schooling, life learning and edu-punk. At base, unschooling is home-schooling returned to its postwar progressive roots, far from the Bi-

ble-thumping mould that has come to dominate the modern image of home-schoolers.

Unschooling takes children out of schools, but, unlike a lot of home-school approaches, it doesn't import the classroom into the home. It does away altogether with educational clutter such as curricula and grades.

Unschoolers maintain that a child's learning should be curiosity-driven rather than dictated by teachers and textbooks, and that forcing kids to adhere to curricula quashes their natural inclination to explore and ask questions.

To an outsider, unschooling may sound like pedagogical tofu: a shapeless, idealistic substitute for an education. But there's a growing consensus that unschoolers might be on to something. Their ideals have been quietly infiltrating public education.

"An unschooling family mostly just looks like a family living life ... hanging out on the weekend," says mother Pam Laricchia, a former nuclear engineer who lives in Orangetown, Ont. "But there is lots of learning going on when you take the time to look at it from the kids' point of view."

Home-schoolers – and un-

schoolers in particular – are by nature difficult to count. But observers say that, thanks in part to social networking and the blossoming of Internet resources, their movement is growing.

One sign is that dozens of unschooling families will converge near Ms. Laricchia's home this weekend for the fifth annual Toronto Unschooling Conference. Another is that since 2002, unschoolers have had their own publication, *Life Learning Magazine*. (More recently, it has metamorphosed into *LifeLearningMagazine.com*.)

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## QUEBEC'S LOST BOYS

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Why are so many male francophone students dropping out of school? Sean Gordon investigates a disturbing trend and goes inside a school that's trying to turn the tide. Page 7 ➤

Anita Roy and her husband, Mehdi Naimi, of Nanoose Bay, B.C., 'unschooled' their sons, Kian, 17, left, and Zaman Naimi-Roy, 20, centre. Their other son, Bashu, 19, not present, was the youngest student ever to enroll at Malaspina University-College when he was 12. HEYDEMANN ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Gretchen Theakston-Larabee, seated on the couch, watches over the 'unschooled' studies of her children, left to right, Sarina, 12, Silas, 7, and Samantha Theakston, 14, at home in Toronto. KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/ THE GLOBE AND MAIL

# 'Awesome,' sure, but wh

» Meanwhile, school boards and education ministries are embracing experiential learning.

There was a time when students were drilled and heavily tested on rote memory, such as the names and dates of British sovereigns. But research suggests that this is a temporary, limited form of learning: Kids gain more when they can ask questions and learning is tied to emotion.

The change in thinking has been slow, but it surfaces in the expansion of high-school co-op programs, or the emphasis on play in the new full-day kindergarten curriculum Ontario launched this week.

Some children thrive in the classroom and others don't and, despite the best of intentions, the system sorts them into winners and losers.

Recent initiatives by education ministries and school boards to shrink dropout rates, promote alternative schools and improve kindergarten are all fundamentally an effort to reduce the sorting. Unschooling's underlying idea is that all kids are winners.

## A LIBERATION MOVEMENT FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING

The foundational tome of the unschooler is *How Children Fail*, the first book by an American teacher named John Holt published in 1964. The writer suggested that smart children struggle "because they are afraid, bored, and confused.

"They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang over their heads like a cloud."

Mr. Holt supports his thesis with observations from a sort of classroom diary he kept throughout the 1950s and 60s. He concludes that "a child who is learning naturally, following his curiosity where it leads him, adding to his mental model of reality whatever he needs and can find a place for, and rejecting without fear or guilt what he does not

need, is growing - in knowledge, in the love of learning, and in the ability to learn."

The idea puts a lot of faith in children, their innate interest in learning and in their intelligence. It also restores faith in parents, returning some control over their children's growth that they handed to educators and politicians more than a century ago.

This was the philosophy behind home-schooling when it emerged in the 1960s and 70s as a way for children to learn from the world around them. Then, in the past few decades, home-schooling was embraced by the Christian right, which saw it as a way that kids could be shielded from the secular world.

Then the Internet galvanized unschoolers. It provided a support network for parents seeking alternatives, and made satisfying the whims of a child's curiosity a lot easier. Why is the sky blue? Google it. How do you make a baking-soda volcano? Ask YouTube.

This type of experiential learning suits boys and concrete learners in particular, who "are set up to fail in the regular school system," according to Ron Hansen, a professor at the University of Western Ontario.

He says the school system favours abstract learners, the half of the population who find it easy to think in symbols and signs, for whom written work comes naturally. Concrete learners "need action, they need projects, they need to be tactile as well as using their eyes and their ears."

Although Mr. Hansen believes that unschooling might not work in every home, he thinks its emphasis on experiential learning is laudable and has a thing or two to teach public education.

There is an obvious objection, and one familiar to home-schoolers of any stripe: Does any kid who hangs out all day with his parents and who lives by the whims of his own curiosity have any hope at being anything less than a dork?

Though unschooled children tend to have highly developed critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, some find it difficult to socialize with large groups of children, according to Paige Fisher, an instructor in education at Vancouver Island University who has observed unschooled children.

Another concern more specific to unschooling is if children's education is formed by their own interests, or solely by those of their parents, there are likely to be gaps.

"Individual children might be happy, but it's not clear that this makes for an autonomous or well-rounded adult, or for a better community," Christopher Lubienski, an associate professor at the University of Illinois, writes by e-mail.

Structured learning, with external direction, "can force people to experience things that they wouldn't otherwise, and quite often find new interests. ... Ones that may also have some wider social value."

## OFF THE BUS, BUT NOT ENTIRELY OFF THE GRID

This week, as most children kissed their parents goodbye and boarded yellow school buses, a group of home-schooling families gathered in a park in Toronto's west end for a Welcome Back to Not-School party.

They represented a fair cross-section of the city's home-schooling community, and most would place themselves somewhere on the unschooling spectrum.

Generally white and well-educated, the unschoolers were the kind of middle-to-upper-middle-class parents who don't dream of a home in Rosedale or their kids graduating from medical school.

They didn't fit any other stereotypes, except that all were able to stay home at least part-time. And they knew their kids' daily lives in a detail that made the average helicopter parent seem negligent.

They stood in clusters, discussing current events and their children, who buzzed

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# ere's the socialization – and math?



about from swings to picnic tables in swarms of mixed-age groups. The sight was a bit jarring to eyes accustomed to traditional school playgrounds, where kids tend to stick with their classmates.

Carlo Ricci, an associate professor at Nipissing University, was pushing his younger, unschooled daughter, Karina, 5, on a swing. His older daughter, Annabel, 7, attends Grade 2. He had gradually figured out the differences that made one girl prefer unschooling—while the other was drawn to the classroom.

"[Annabel] is like a movie star when she goes to school. She gets a lot of praise," he said. Karina is more shy.

John Day's 10-year-old daughter, Brenda, has never seen the inside of a classroom. Still, he specified, "I'd say we're part-unschoolers."

Mr. Day, an engineer who holds graduate degrees from Oxford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford, lets his daughter's interests drive most of her

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Jason Price, an assistant professor at the University of Victoria

ing Artemis Fowl fan fiction, watching the pop science program *Mythbusters* or a trip to the Ontario Science Centre.

"It's awesome," said Brenda, a spindly pre-teen with sun-bleached hair. "I spend more time outside and I see my friends every day."

However, Mr. Day added: "I think potentially one of the problems with the unschooled kids is they haven't been prepared with the basics." So on top of her self-directed learning, Brenda follows a math curriculum and solves problems in graded workbooks.

#### **THE MANY SCHOOLS OF UNSCHOOLING**

There are other factions within the movement, from the radical unschoolers, who extend the philosophy beyond education to parenting, to those who reject the term unschooling altogether.

Some unschoolers will refer to the occasional exercise book for math lessons. Others will never consider a number outside a speedometer or a grocery receipt. Some are ve-

gans, while the unschoolers who let their children eat more liberally quietly refer to them as the Granola Gestapo.

"There's everything from very earthy grassroots people to very educated professional people," says Judy Arnall, a Calgary-based author on parenting who has unschooled her five children. She is on the phone from Newfoundland, where she is dropping her 18-year-old son off at Memorial University.

"I think the one thing everyone agrees on is that we want our kids to foster a love of learning that's intrinsic."

"Unschooling is an acknowledgment that schools and education are in many ways contradictory, that there's an implicit tension between them," says Jason Price, an assistant professor at the University of Victoria.

"Education is about the production of more democracy, production of peace, production of happiness whereas schooling is often the production of global economic competitiveness."

In Orangeville this weekend, over campfires and potluck dinners, unschoolers will discuss ways of supporting their children's learning at Ms. Laricchia's Toronto Unschooling Conference.

Throughout the day, guest speakers will address quandaries such as the ways kids learn math without a textbook and how to transition your children out of the regular school system – a sort of psychological-detox process known as deschooling.

When the conference is over, Ms. Laricchia will return to collaborating on building an online business with her son, Michael, 13. Her daughter, Lissy, 16, is a photographer who was recently invited to participate in a show in New York.

The oldest child, Joseph, has turned 18 and is no longer being actively unschooled. His mom happily admits that the change has had almost no effect on his day-to-day life.

» Kate Hammer is *The Globe and Mail's* Education Reporter.