

TOWARD A CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

Abstract: This paper outlines the theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical framework for critical unschooling. Critical Unschooling is a student-centered and autonomous teaching and learning praxis rooted in decolonizing human rights education. Unlike homeschool, unschooling de-centers the hegemonic power dynamics inherent to essentialist and traditionalist approaches to formal education in favor of a student-led educational milieu in which learning is decompartmentalized and can occur at any place and time. Critical unschooling draws upon literature rooted in ethnic studies, postcolonial feminism, and human rights education, to propose conceptions of self-directed and community-based learning that develops students' radical agency and critical consciousness.

Keywords: unschooling, decolonizing, pedagogy, self-directed education

The unschooling movement is a beacon of hope for the evolution of teaching and learning. Through self-direction and autonomy, students and teachers can break the bonds of educational modalities rooted in colonial and industrial power structures in pursuit of a more equitable and democratic society. As more families choose to unschool, however, it is important to develop theoretical and pedagogical frameworks of self-directed learning that situate the pursuit and creation of knowledge as an act of resistance. Though it may seem counterintuitive to prescribe theoretical frameworks and educational outcomes to the practice of unschooling, self-directed, student-centered, and community-based learning models untethered to an ideology of solidarity and resistance will result in students being submerged by the structures and systems of neoliberal capitalism without the necessary contexts needed to analyze and engage with their unjust realities.

Though formal education can be rightly critiqued for its role in the reproduction of hegemonic discourses, education equally functions as a site of postcolonial protest in which historically minoritized, racialized, and marginalized people are able to critique the oppressive systems under which they exist and imagine more just and humane realities. The philosophy of critical unschooling is informed by this appreciation for the emancipatory potential of education and sounds a call to students, teachers, and administrators to eschew the inextricably interconnected hegemonies of white supremacy, neoliberal capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and their necessary bedfellows: exploitation, inequality, genocide, and war. The critical unschooler (which comprises of student-teachers and teacher-students in the Freirean sense) must instead intentionally, and center the hxstorical¹ contexts, epistemologies, and lived experiences of womxn, people of color, queer and trans folx, indigenous communities, and those engaged in the struggle for human rights.

Though theoretically heady, the intentionality of critical unschooling can be manifested in simple ways. The first step that practitioners of critical unschooling must take is to transform the oppressive power dynamics between teachers and students. This is partly accomplished by doing away with what Freire (1970) calls *banking methods* of education, in which teachers are regarded as omnipotent sources of wisdom and students as empty vessels to be molded and shaped. A critical unschooling praxis recognizes that adults have much to teach children but departs from essentialist conceptions of education by recognizing that children have just as much to teach adults. As such, critical unschooling necessitates that parents embody the teacher-student role and ensure that

¹ The letter x is used in this paper to de-gender words (such as hxstory and womxn) that in their common spelling are gendered in a way that centers masculinity.

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access to knowledge is unrestricted based on preconceived notions about appropriateness or a child's capacity to understand certain concepts.

The theoretical framework of critical unschooling consists of three pillars: 1) a critical interrogation of the role of education in capitalist societies, 2) the reclamation of pedagogy and educational practice as a tool for decolonization, and 3) the demand for transformative action is based upon critical reflection inspired by human rights education. In practice, critical unschooling is an autonomous and learner-centered approach to education that turns the world into a classroom and divorces education from the coloniality of its underlying power structures. Critical unschooling deploys this philosophy to equip students with the cognitive and experiential tools needed to practice environmental stewardship, to understand, promote, and defend universal human rights, and to build solidarity with marginalized people.

Critiques of Education

Critical unschooling is rooted in critiques of education that identify the essentialist, perennialist, and formal practice of education in capitalist societies as what Althusser (1971) termed an ideological state apparatus (ISA). ISAs constitute the loci of authority that a repressive state may deploy without resorting to violence. The role of education as an ideological state apparatus is thusly to convince citizens of the state's authority and necessity. To achieve the state's cultural and political hegemony, ideological state apparatuses work in concert with repressive state apparatuses, or the more overtly violent mechanisms of social control at the state's disposal, such as the military, police force, and the criminal justice system (Althusser, 1971).

Education, through classrooms, schools, and school districts segregated on de facto bases along racial and economic lines, reproduces the social stratification of neoliberal capitalism at-large. Though under-resourced students and educators often find ways to succeed, the role of

education in capitalist societies is nevertheless to indoctrinate students into accepting narrowly defined societal roles, as well as the notion that one has no choice but to sell one's labor in order to access basic resources and liberties (such as food, water, shelter, healthcare, and the freedom of expression) that should be unconditionally conferred upon them as human rights. Public education in the capitalist state also paradoxically conditions its subjects to accept their self-exploitation whilst simultaneously accepting the inequitable transfer of power and capital from one generation of nonproductive elites to the next (Bowles & Gintis, 2011).

Gramsci (1971) notes that the traditional teacher-pupil relationship is predicated upon a power dynamic in which the teacher is tasked with passing on evergreen cultural knowledge and values. This relational dynamic, having been internalized by citizens through years of formal schooling is then reproduced on a societal scale "...between the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and led, the vanguard and the body of the army" (p. 350). A decolonizing philosophy of education recognizes that the learning experience ought to instead subvert the prescriptive and traditionally repressive teacher-pupil dynamic in favor of collaborative processes that enrich teacher and student alike, thereby halting the reproduction of hegemonic societal, institutional, interpersonal, and discursive relations in educational spaces. As Nyerere (1968) notes:

The education provided by the colonial government in the two countries which now form Tanzania had a different purpose. It was not designed to prepare young people for the service of their own country ; instead it was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society and to train individuals for the service to the colonial state. (p. 46)

In mapping the direction of education in post-colonial Tanzania, Nyerere (1968) points to how pre-colonial African societies did not have schools, yet young people, through their interactions with their communities, elders, and peers, were still educated in their respective societies' values, norms, and knowledge bases. It was not until the advent of colonial rule that

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education in Africa began to bear the hallmarks of an ideological state apparatus. This interrogation of the history of education in Africa highlights the settler-colonist violence that undergirds much of the discourses surrounding Western education paradigms and the dire need for community-responsive alternatives.

Giroux (2001) notes, however, socialist critiques of education often fail to propose such alternatives, in spite of their compelling analyses of the myriad problems with education systems in capitalist societies. As such, it is imperative that community-responsive and decolonizing philosophies of education move beyond critique to inspire action and integrate contemporary literature produced by scholars and activists from the communities most affected by social stratification and institutionalized exploitation. The pedagogy and praxis of postcolonial feminists, ethnic studies scholars, and queer theorists is thusly positioned as the second of critical unschooling's three pillars as these works serve as the philosophy's ideological center.

Postcolonial Feminism, Ethnic Studies, and Queer Theory

The second pillar of a pedagogy of critical unschooling consolidates a wide breadth of scholarship from a variety of fields, but I have chosen to focus on several works that have most directly impacted me as an educator. These works fall primarily under the umbrellas of postcolonial feminism, ethnic studies, and queer theory, but embody the intersections of numerous strands of scholarship and identity. This specific combination of influences is integral to the philosophy of critical unschooling (and to autonomous and decolonizing philosophies of education in general) because it establishes the steadfast intent of critical unschooling to emphasize and uplift the emancipatory struggles and cultural perspectives of historically marginalized and colonized communities.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (2014) writes “...I recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices have been neither heard nor welcome. My pedagogy has been shaped to respond to this reality” (p. 84). Due to the intentionality of the ideological state apparatus’s silencing of dissenting voices, the act of teaching in the manner that simply recognizes the experiences of marginalized groups in general and black women in particular is revolutionary in itself. As hooks (2014) notes, black feminists have published research and have composed critiques in every academic discipline imaginable, yet established researchers in these fields often seem to ignore or devalue these contributions by virtue of the dominant societal discourses of race and gender that reductively conflate blackness with childlike masculinity and feminism with moneyed whiteness. As Davis (1981) demonstrates, an approach to education that centers black women’s experiences and trusts in their agency has the potential to foster solidarity through education. By examining the advocacy of white women such as Myrtilla Miner, the Grimke Sisters, Prudence Crandall, and Margaret Douglas, who recognized that education for black women not only served the goals of the abolitionist and suffragist movements but uplifted all of society, Davis (1981) offers up history as a blueprint for resolving the rifts ingrained in contemporary race and gender relations.

The work of ethnic studies scholars builds upon the framework of honoring the voices and experiences of the oppressed by acknowledging the fact that colonized people may not even know what their truths are, due to their cultures and ancestral knowledge bases having been destroyed or distorted by the centuries of horror perpetuated upon their communities by the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial project. The praxis of *Pinayism* (Tintiango-Cubales, 2005) is a critical touchstone for the pedagogy of critical unschooling due to the way it establishes a theoretical framework for the deconstruction and transformation of the *pinay* (or Filipina-American)

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experience. Tintiangco-Cubales's praxis serves as a blueprint for the praxis of postcolonial transcendence which can be practiced by all people. *Pinayism* creates an intentional and closed discursive space for Filipina-American women to engage with what it means to be many things, such as *pinays* who are not defined by their relationship to *pinoys* (Filipino-American men), feminists who are not defined by their relationship to white feminism, and Americans who are not defined by their families' immigrant experiences or a yearning for assimilation. Tintiangco-Cubales (2005) also positions the *pinay* engagement with colonial mentality, such as internalized misogyny, white supremacy, and the perception of other *pinays* as rivals, as a vehicle for Filipina-American women to build solidarity with one another. Tintiangco-Cubales (2005) terms this solidarity a "sistahood" forged through "a repetitive process of reevaluation, reconstruction, retransformation, re-transgression, and, especially, relove for one another." (p. 147)

Building upon this foundation of postcolonial feminist critique rooted in black feminism and *Pinayism*, the second pillar of my philosophy is rounded out by a critical interrogation of gender itself. By *queering* pedagogy and praxis, critical unschooling demands that systems of learning deconstruct and transform the binaries that limit the possibilities of existence and experience. Sokofsky-Sedgwick (1990) contends that society as currently structured is based on absurd and deterministic prescriptions of gender norms and gender relations. One's chromosomal sex at birth (male or female) is assumed to determine a host of unrelated characteristics, choices, and even occupations. These prescriptions, which conflate female chromosomes with fragility and male chromosomes with rationality and strength, form the basis of societal institutions and relations and are thusly enforced and reproduced in all aspects of mainstream society. These deeply held gender biases are especially reproduced in education, as evidenced by the widely studied

phenomenon of teachers and administrators systematically discouraging girls from pursuing “rational” and, therefore, masculine fields such as mathematics and engineering (Haraway, 1988).

Butler (1990) contends that these dominant understandings of gender are inherently flawed, as assumptions and ascriptions of attributes related to chromosomal sex are not rooted in biological or physiological fact. Gender, due to the morass of societal assumptions ascribed to it, is not so much a biological or empirical reality, but rather a sustained *performance*. Still, deviation from the socially accepted script comes with dire, violent, and often fatal consequences. Lugones (2007) adds further nuance to established queer theory by tracing the origin of these rigid gender norms to colonialism and the reclassification of the world and its people to serve the needs of European imperialism. Lugones (2007) contrasts the more egalitarian gender relations prevalent in pre-colonial societies (such as the Yoruba in West Africa) with the strictly prescribed assumptions of both gender and race that reordered these societies under colonial rule. Lugones (2007) notes that colonial-era records regularly describe bourgeois white women as virginal and frail whilst enslaved black women were viewed as both sexually perverse and “strong enough to do any sort of labor” (p. 13). Lugones (2007) uses these records demonstrate that the colonial hierarchies of gender and race were not designed to protect any sort of universal dictate that all women were to be venerated by virtue of their femininity. Rather, colonial authorities had no qualms conscripting white women’s minds to unquestioning subordination whilst dehumanizing, enslaving, and brutalizing the bodies of black women. Gender and gender norms ultimately should thusly cease to be understood as objective realities but as products of the colonality of power, or the brutal and intentional ways by which the colonial project reclassified human beings in order to most efficiently exploit them. As such, the philosophy of critical unschooling contends that it is incumbent upon students, educators, and all engaged in the process of learning to disentangle the

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coloniality of power from the pursuit of truth and knowledge. To begin this process, educators must engage with decolonizing approaches to pedagogy and praxis that, at the very least, question the validity of commonly held beliefs related to gender, race, and the intersections thereof.

Human Rights Education

The final pillar of critical unschooling is rooted in the theory and praxis of human rights education (HRE), which envisions learning as a tool for promoting and defending human rights by practicing education that not only expounds upon the content of human rights law but affirms universal human dignity through progressive, student-centered, and community responsive teaching methods. HRE embodies the action- and service-oriented compulsion of critical unschooling and enables any adherent of this philosophy to transform theory into action and mere practice into praxis.

Tibbits (2017) defines HRE as “a deeply practical expression of the high-minded ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)- a deliberate attempt to foster a worldwide human rights culture” (p. 69). The praxis of HRE is three-pronged, the first of which is education *about* human rights, or the specific history, principles, and instruments of human rights law. HRE then demands education *through* human rights, which encompasses learning and teaching methods that validate the rights of both teachers and learners. Lastly, HRE is education *for* human rights, which transforms educational spaces and processes so that all persons are granted the opportunity to “enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others” (p. 71). The goals of HRE, even at face-value, signify a radical departure from the goals of education (social reproduction, the inequitable distribution of generational wealth, capital, and power, simple conformity and obedience) as identified by socialist, feminist, and postcolonial scholars of pedagogy.

HRE can take on multifarious forms, in formal and non-formal educational contexts, and is used to address a wide-range of social and political issues. Bajaj (2017) describes how HRE initiatives in India, through comprehensive approaches toward education and equity, uplift and empower even the most extremely marginalized students. The programs Bajaj (2017) studies specifically serve students from the Dalit caste who are considered “untouchable” by Indian society and enjoy limited opportunities for prosperity and fulfillment. Bajaj (2017) documents the multifaceted approaches of non-governmental HRE organizations to serve Dalit students and to ensure that their schools provide opportunities for them to learn and grow. The approaches taken on by HRE organizations include the use of course content that dispels the notion of Dalit inferiority, basic coursework on universal human rights, student-centered teaching methods that include performing skits and engaging in facilitated discussions as opposed to prescriptive lecturing, and instruction in the students’ mother tongues. Mother tongue instruction itself departs from the dominant practice in Indian schools of submerging indigenous codes and non-dominant languages, thereby forcing already-vulnerable students to learn in what is often a completely foreign language. The classroom content is augmented by non-curricular reforms that rid schools of practices outside of the classroom that nonetheless perpetuate the oppression of Dalits and other vulnerable groups. This included the common practice of forcing Dalit children to clean bathrooms while other students were in class. Courses were also desegregated and boys and girls alike were taught to cook and practice healthy sanitation routines, thereby fostering a palpable sense of equality in these schools.

Though decolonizing, community-responsive, consciousness-raising pedagogies have been proposed and practiced for generations by the likes of A.S. Neill, Paolo Freire, and John Dewey, HRE represents an important development in the universal application of such

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methodologies because it draws from a comprehensive and codified legal framework to inform its practice. By rooting the authority of its praxis in universally accepted agreements such as the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), HRE bears a legitimacy that goes beyond a singular scholar's opinions and observations on how education should be. By tethering its praxis, theory, and research to the voices of the world's most vulnerable communities and the legal instruments designed to protect them, HRE represents a workable blueprint for developing systems and philosophies of education that will create and sustain equitable societies and the conditions of true justice.

Conclusion: Critical Unschooling and the Future of an Autonomous and Decolonizing

Human Rights Pedagogy

As a site of resistance and tool for liberation, education should not be compartmentalized or understood to be separate from the process of engaging with one's community, environment, and history. As a parent of young children, I have deep misgivings about the purpose of education and the influence that dominant approaches to teaching and learning will have on the cognitive and experiential development of future generations. Dominant approaches to education have achieved the mandate of the ideological state apparatus and have created wide swathes of people who will defend the notion that students in schools ought to learn how to obey instructions, speak only when spoken to, demonstrate unwavering fealty to arbitrary and illegitimate authorities, and that their intellectual contributions are only valid if they can safeguard the continued generation of wealth. The status quo has led to a world in which people are subordinate to profit and where demagogues and madmen can whip a scared populace uninformed of their rights or the rights of

others into a reactionary frenzy². The three pillars of critical unschooling- socialist critiques, decolonizing feminist pedagogies, and the theory-into-action mandate of human rights education, naturally coalesce into critical unschooling, or an alternative approach to education designed to combat the discourses of hatred, fear, and complicity engendered by capitalist education systems.

Critical unschooling is predicated upon the notion that human beings, even children, can and must be trusted to develop into the best possible versions of themselves. Inspired by the precolonial learning systems described by Nyerrere (1968) and Lugones (2007), critical unschooling contends that education need not take place in a classroom, but there is no reason why an engaged and passionate educator cannot practice critical unschooling in a formal setting with a large number of students. To unschool critically is not simply to practice nontraditional teaching methods. Rather, critical unschooling is the embarkation on a journey of unlearning, deprogramming, and undoing the generational trauma visited upon our communities by the discourses of colonialism and the colonality of power. More than likely, however, the autonomous pursuit of decolonization and solidarity-building would be hindered in a formal environment informed by the demands and expectations of education as an ideological state apparatus.

As such, critical unschooling differs from the traditionally accepted definition of unschooling, which “is often considered to be a branch of homeschooling. While other homeschoolers may do “school at home” and follow a set curriculum, unschoolers learn primarily through everyday life experiences- experiences that they choose and that therefore automatically match their abilities, interests, and learning styles” (Gray & Riley, 2013). Though informed by the

² This statement is based upon a forthcoming paper (Romero, 2018) in which a quantitative study was undertaken and suggests that US adults have limited knowledge of human rights law, regardless of gender, race, level of education attained, income. This lack of human rights knowledge was even demonstrated by respondents with high orientations toward gender equity and antiracism.

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learner-centered ethos of traditional unschooling, critical unschooling calls for its facilitators and practitioners to embrace an intentionality informed by socialist critiques of education, decolonizing feminist pedagogy, and HRE in order to create engaged scholars living to grow, transform, and resist. In a sociopolitical environment dominated by discourses of neoliberalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy, it is not enough to simply let unschooled students loose in an unjust world with no context for how it came to be. As such, I propose the framework of critical unschooling, which couples self-directed learning with the intentional centering of epistemologies of resistance, in order to address the potential pitfalls of ideologically unmoored unschooling. In short, critical unschooling defines “everyday experiences” as specific acts of deimperializing resistance and declares that value of educational content should be measured by its usefulness as a tool in the decolonizing process.

In order to unschool critically, students and educators must divorce learning from the coloniality of power, to see communities and networks where formal educations would only allow for hierarchies, and to work specifically for the advancement of their own human rights as well as those of others. This process enables students to immerse themselves in their current and historical realities of their communities and engage in praxis in pursuit of positive and sustainable change. Critical unschooling builds upon the practice of traditional unschooling by calling upon parents, educators, and community members to recognize formal systems of western education as ideological state apparatuses and instruments of colonial reorganization. From this analytical vantage point, critical unschoolers will guide students toward a conception of learning that centers the voices of the most vulnerable and historically marginalized communities, that educates *by, for,* and *through* human rights in a learner-centered fashion that encourages students to create knowledge that affirms their interests, ignites their passions, and addresses their most pressing

concerns. Through critical unschooling, the disparate strains of socialist critique, postcolonial feminism, and human rights education converge into a foundation from which students are able to develop the critical consciousness needed to engage with the world and the radical agency needed to change it.

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