

**Unschooling;  
How Learning through Living Leads to Happiness**

**Mini-Thesis**

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

Believing that the present-day institutionalized education system as it exists in most Western societies is broken beyond repair some families choose an alternative form of education referred to as “unschooling.” Unschooling is a form of homeschooling in which parents facilitate their child’s learning through real world experiences without following any prescribed curriculum. By focusing on the thoughts and experiences of Sandra Dodd, an unschooling mother of three, and her associates, this study addresses the questions: 1) How do unschoolers address the pressure of mainstream schooling society? 2) What do unschoolers learn? And 3) How do unschoolers measure success? In general, the findings of this study indicate that unschoolers, through individual agency, overcome the discourses of power imposed by Western mainstream schooling society to joyfully live always learning. It appears unschoolers are able to choose this alternate educational path in part due to the empowered decisions making ability of their parents, and especially mothers.

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## RESEARCH FOCUS

“Radical Unschoolers” are parents and children learning through living. Unschooling is a style of homeschooling in which parents facilitate their children’s natural desire to learn in the real world with the intent of raising happy, kind, mindful human beings. Unschoolers distinguish themselves from other homeschoolers in that there is no set curriculum which must be completed within a certain period of time. To unschoolers, learning is a lifelong process that is best achieved by living, being curious, and being respectful participants in the world community.

Albuquerque, New Mexico, appears to have a large and long established unschooling community. Sandra Dodd, a renowned unschooling mother, author, and speaker, who resides in Albuquerque, has lovingly shared her experience and advice with other unschoolers, in New Mexico and around the world, for over twenty years. She has been interested in the way people learn since she was a small child. The focus of this study is specifically Sandra Dodd’s and her associates’ unschooling ideas and experiences.

I first met Sandra Dodd about twenty years ago when her three children were small. I was a college student when we met, in my early twenties without children of my own, and could not believe that any intelligent parent would not immediately begin teaching their children to read as soon possible. As I got to know Sandra and her family, I observed the brilliance in the radical unschooling way of parenting through the apparent happiness, curiosity and kindness of her children and the family as a whole.

I love to learn, but “schooling” was a very emotionally and philosophically painful experience for me. My experience significantly influenced my decision not to have children, as I would not want to put anyone else through the same torturous experience of institutionalized

education. Through this study, I hoped to learn: 1) How do unschoolers address the pressure of mainstream schooling society? 2) What do unschoolers learn? And 3) How do unschoolers measure success?

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The term “unschooling” was first used by American, education reform advocate and author, John Caldwell Holt (1923-1985) in 1977 “to mean learning that does not look like school learning, and does not have to take place at home” ([www.holtgws.com](http://www.holtgws.com)). John Holt was, among other things, an elementary school teacher, who after many years of observation concluded that the existing childhood education system is broken beyond repair. Holt wrote ten books addressing the issues related to childhood learning. The central message of Holt’s first book, *How Children Fail*, first published in 1965 is summarized by author Roland Meighan as “most children fail in school and indeed, the model on which we set up school, could hardly do anything else” (Meighan 1995:1). By 1981, Holt was encouraging parents to take their children out of school in his book *Teach Your Own*.

Holt supported a style of homeschooling in which parents are facilitators of children’s natural desire to learn. Pam Lariccia, an unschooling mother of three children who lives in Ontario, Canada, describes unschooling as follows:

“...Learning through real experiences, going to real stores with real money instead of practicing with play money...set up in school...Hiking in real parks, looking for signs of wildlife...instead of looking at pictures in textbooks. Figuring out how to measure and map out their room to see if the new bed they want now fits...not when the curriculum says it’s time for say, a unit on calculating area...One of the best things about learning through unschooling is being able to follow a child’s interests, giving the child freedom to learn when their interest and engagement is piqued, for as long as they are interested, and in the manner they prefer” (Laricchia 2011:1).

In 1977, Holt began publishing a bi-monthly newsletter out of Boston, MA, which later became a magazine, entitled “Growing Without Schooling.” The magazine continued to be published many years after his death, in 1985, until 2001 ([www.holtgws.com](http://www.holtgws.com)). In its thirty-four years of publication, “Growing Without Schooling” shared ideas on how to “help children learn in their own ways...” (Farenga 2012)

With the advent of the internet, people around the world could access information and participate in discussions on homeschooling on a daily basis. At about this time, “John Holt wasn’t the loudest voice among homeschoolers...” according to Sandra Dodd, renowned unschooling mother, author, and speaker ([www.sandradodd.com/terminology](http://www.sandradodd.com/terminology) ). As participation in internet groups grew, it became necessary for unschoolers to distinguish themselves from the popular conservative Christian school-at-home movement of the time. Even among unschoolers, there were different philosophies as to the best practice. Thus, the term “radical unschooling” came into use to distinguish those families who “went all the way with it” from others ([www.sandradodd.com/terminology](http://www.sandradodd.com/terminology) ).

Sandra Dodd, who resides in Albuquerque, NM, and who is a former teacher herself, first began homeschooling when it appeared that her oldest son (born 1986) who was four years old did not “seem ready for group situations” ([www.sandradodd.com/interviews/successful](http://www.sandradodd.com/interviews/successful) ). Sandra’s family knew four other homeschooling families at the time: two structured and two unschooling. Sandra writes that she and her husband “knew we wanted to have the kinds of relationships with our children in which communication is open and flowing and children are close and kind with each other that the unschooled families had.” ([www.sandradodd.com/interviews/successful](http://www.sandradodd.com/interviews/successful)) Each of her three children separately chose unschooling.

The first solely unschooling conference was held in 1986 in Waltham, MA ([www.holtgws.com/gwsconferences.html](http://www.holtgws.com/gwsconferences.html)). Unschooling has been a subgroup at many homeschooling conferences throughout the United States. In 1996, the Eastmountain Unschoolers Club held its first conference in New Mexico, at which Sandra Dodd gave the keynote speech. In the years that followed, unschooling conferences were held across the western United States in California, Texas, Ohio, Oregon and Nevada. 2002 saw the first truly inter-regional conference (Live & Learn Unschooling Conference) held in Columbia, SC. The internet has enabled unschooling families to create a truly international community and conferences are now held worldwide.

### RESEARCH PLAN

Public education policy is in the forefront of many New Mexican's minds these days. A spokesman for New Mexico Governor, Susana Martinez, recently responded to the latest U.S. Census report indicating New Mexico is the poorest state in the U.S. by stating, "Reforming our education system to make it more accountable and responsive to struggling students must be the cornerstone of reducing poverty over time..." ([www.lvdailytimes.com](http://www.lvdailytimes.com)). On the other hand, the National Academy of Science reported in 2008 that New Mexico has "the highest number of Ph.D.s per capita of any state..." (National Academy of Sciences 2008). These two statements seem to be in conflict. For some New Mexicans, the "education system" itself is a problem. Unschoolers have already reformed education for their own families by eliminating the "system." My research focuses on these questions: 1) How do unschoolers address the pressure of mainstream schooling society? 2) What do unschoolers learn? And 3) How do unschoolers measure success? Each of these questions is addressed in my study with respect to regulatory and cultural perspectives.

## Methodology

1. Research Setting: As the nature of unschooling is that it is not institutionalized in any form, there are no regular, formal meeting places. However, regular online discussions and blogging by unschooling parents and children occurs constantly and extensively. Research generally involved reading archived discussions, articles and blog entries. Since unschooling is a worldwide practice, and my funds and time for travel are limited, additionally my research was conducted via electronic mail and telephone conversations.

2. Positionality: I have known Sandra Dodd and her family for almost twenty years. We met through our mutual participation in The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) ([www.sca.org](http://www.sca.org)). Sandra's three children were school-age (if you include pre-school) when we first met and I was a college student, in my twenties, with no children of my own. I had never before known any homeschoolers, especially not "radical unschoolers." Over the years, I have interacted with the Dodd family a couple times each year on mostly SCA-related projects and events. I have been to the Dodd's home on a few occasions prior to this study. I did not know any other of the participants in this study prior to the start of this project. I have no children of my own. The only experience I have facilitating children's learning is the few summers in which I taught swimming lessons and coached a recreational swim team for school-aged children.

3. Research Participants: Sandra Dodd is an unschooling mom of three children, author and speaker, who resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Before her children were born, she was a public school teacher during the 1970s. She was inspired by the writings of education reformer John Holt to try an "open classroom" (Suber 1998). Sandra's time in the classroom gave her a unique opportunity to test some of the principles of unschooling prior to allowing her children to make the decision to be unschooled. She and her husband both have college degrees and are



economically middle income. Other participants will be family members and associates of Sandra's.

#### 4. Research Methods:

A. Participant Observation: I have participated with the Dodd family in SCA events on many occasions over the years. Our interactions have included but not been limited to singing historical ballads, planning and cooking medieval feasts, philosophy discussions, erecting medieval tents, sharing communal camping chores.

B. Semi-Structured Ethnographic Interviews: I interviewed Sandra Dodd over the telephone and corresponded with her multiple times via electronic mail. Additionally, I interviewed via e-mail a twenty-one year old woman who was always unschooled. Further, I reviewed transcripts of interviews and online discussions previously conducted and made available online. My interview questions were open-ended and related to interaction with mainstream schooling society, learning, and measuring success.

C. Demographic Survey: I was able to gather limited information as to parents' educational level, civil status, approximate household income, parental employment, and residential area. I did not elicit a formal survey from participants.

D. Document Analysis: I analyzed personal essays, research papers, books, online blogs, and magazine articles related to unschooling. There are many years of "Growing Without Schooling" issues archived online as well as online blogs maintained by unschooling parents and children.

#### Ethical Measures

Participants were fully informed as to the scope and intent of my project as an undergraduate Anthropology student learning how to conduct and present ethnographic research.

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout my research and in my final paper by using a name other than the participant's own unless otherwise authorized. Much of my work draws from already public documents. My work has been stored on my personal computer which requires a password to access. Participants may have concern that my research will portray them and their families in a manner that they consider unflattering or in some way not complying with state educational requirements. In order to eliminate the risk of harm to the participants, I have invited them to review and edit my findings and conclusions prior to final submission. I will not include any statement or portion thereof which any participant finds objectionable. From time to time, I will seek the advice of my instructor who is an experienced ethnographer.

I hope that in some way my research or I personally may provide benefit to the participants of my study. I am not sure as to how I might do so at this time. It may be that my study brings new light and/or ideas to families struggling within the current public education system and gives them alternatives to consider. I would like the opportunity to "learn through living" by further sharing in some activity with the participants of my study.

### ETHNOGRAPHIC RESULTS

The American education system is governed by federal and state laws. It is highly institutionalized with little, if any, customization to the interests and abilities of the individual student. Parents have almost no input as to the content of their child's education in the American public school system. For these reasons, school culture is significantly influenced by the institutions which regulate it. Unschooling parents empower their children to take control of their own learning by removing the child from the direct influence of the institutionalized education system. In doing so, unschooling families have created their own learning culture, which is distinctly different from mainstream institutionalized education.

It appears that unschoolers mostly live and interact in mainstream society and therefore, encounter issues relating to their nonconformity. How do unschoolers address the pressure of mainstream schooling society? This question is really a generalization of three other more specific questions: 1) How do unschoolers address the legal requirements for education? 2) How do unschoolers address critical family members, friends and/or neighbors? 3) How do unschoolers address their own enculturated concept of education?

Each State has its own legal requirements with regard to homeschooling. Therefore, unschoolers address the specific legal requirements for the state in which they live. New Mexico has very limited reporting and no testing requirements for homeschooling. Other states require an academic curriculum or portfolio to be submitted and/or some form of testing. Some unschoolers believe these schoolish legal requirements are not only contrary but harmful to the unschooling way of living and learning. However, some unschoolers have developed ways to comply with the laws applicable to their state that render the legal requirements less harmful and share these methods with other unschoolers. Such methods include sharing generalized curriculums containing broad language, tips for creating/keeping educational portfolios and blogs, and allowing children to take required tests but not reviewing the results.

It appears that unschoolers often socialize with other homeschoolers and form their closest relationships with unschoolers. This seems to follow the idea that people with similar interests and ways of thinking coalesce. It does not appear that unschoolers experience an inordinate amount of criticism from friends. Some unschoolers adopt strategies to detour critical questioning by persons unfamiliar with unschooling. For example, when one informant, was asked by her then twelve-year-old peer how she was to learn scientific formulas, the informant requested her inquisitor provide an example of a scientific formula. Unable to do so,

the questioning peer responded that she had already been tested on scientific formulas and no longer knew any, to which the unschooler replied that if she should remember one, to let her know and she would then answer the question. The informant says her peer, with whom she is still friends, never questioned her again about the validity of unschooling (Participant interview November 4, 2012). Similarly, skeptical family members are often placated when provided with data such as various academic articles evidencing the success of methods employed by unschoolers. Alternatively, critics are simply ignored.

It seems that the most difficult pressure for unschoolers to overcome is their own ideas of what learning looks like and how it is measured. Most unschooling parents went to school themselves. As a result, they have certain indoctrinated concepts as to what constitutes an education. The internal conflict arises when unschooling parents realize that their core philosophy about how learning is best achieved (unschooling) is in direct conflict with what they have experienced in mainstream schooling society. It is difficult to step outside of one's familiar and expected path to explore another way of learning. Unschooling parents offer support and guidance to one another through online discussions, newsletters, and other ways of meeting together. A main concept in dealing with preconceived notions of education employed by unschoolers is generally referred to as "deschooling." Deschooling refers to the time in which a formerly schooled child needs to decompress and recover from the damage inflicted by time spent at school and also to parent's actively changing their thinking "about the nature and purpose of education" (Paine 1999) One unschooling mother writes about the first time she realized her own need for deschooling when at bedtime one night after homeschooling for three years she asked her thirteen-year-old son, "What have you learned today?" (Donahue-Krueger, 1998)

What do unschoolers learn? In addition to reading and writing, unschoolers learn an inexhaustible list of skills and subjects as they relate to each individual's own personal goals and interests, such as karate, computer gaming, playing musical instruments and writing fiction, without the restrictions imposed by institutionalized instruction. Unschoolers learn to analyze situations and make choices through their personal experiences in the real world. Because unschoolers are not limited by the mandatory curriculum imposed by schools, they are free to explore their own interests, joyfully guided along by their parents.

More appropriate questions are: How do unschoolers learn? When do they learn? The core philosophy of unschooling seems to be that unschoolers are "always learning." This philosophy is easily demonstrated by the practice of "Learn Nothing Day." Unschoolers purport that it is practically impossible to live a day and *not* learn something, although they keep trying annually on July 24<sup>th</sup>. Every time a person turns on the television, picks up a newspaper or magazine, has a conversation with a friend, logs onto the internet, goes to the store, plays a game, and so on, they are gathering information and incorporating it into their knowledge base. Unschooling parents utilize this practice of learning through living to inspire and guide their children's natural desire to learn. Unschooling parents practice "strewing" various material objects around the house in order to invoke their children's interest. Strewn objects might include natural objects such as rocks or feathers, a funny cartoon, new food, etc. The concept of strewing is also applied to ideas and experiences. Parents take children to places where they are exposed to things that they do not experience in their homes, for example construction sites, flea markets, ethnic grocery stores. The intent of strewing is to create a rich and interesting environment in which children are always learning.

There are many ways to define success. Unschoolers measure success not by grades and degrees, but in the peace and joy experienced in the daily lives of both parents and children. Unschoolers are not concerned with whether or not a child is “reading at grade level” or able to pass standardized educational assessments. When asked how she would know if her son was “behind”, Sandra Dodd replied that she was sure he was behind in some things and ahead in others. Unschoolers define success in terms of happiness. Happiness is a result of the freedom to pursue one’s interest and access to the resources necessary to do so. This is unlike the belief by mainstream society in which success is thought to bring happiness. Mainstream society seems to equate success with the American Dream in which a great education guarantees a high paying job which in turn affords the individual to buy a nice house resulting in complete happiness. It is all too obvious to unschoolers that the American Dream is merely a myth (Fetteroll 2004). That does not mean that unschoolers do not set goals for themselves. However, those goals are based on an individual child’s desires and abilities and not standards impressed by educational institutions according to age group. When asked, “How to unschooling parents measure success?” Sandra Dodd replied, “Happiness. Ease. Communications. Thoughtful decision-making. Compassion for others. Sometimes there’s bonus stuff, above ‘success’ - jobs, college admission, the praise of others” (Carletta 2009).

### APPLYING THEORY

No single anthropological theory can be applied to explain the findings of this study of unschoolers. There are too many variables among individuals within the unschooling community to generally state that all are operating in or influenced by any one mode. There seems to be a few broad anthropological theories which influence unschoolers to various

degrees. The findings in this study indicate that, unlike mainstream schooling society in which the subjects of study and standards of success are determined by the institutionalized education system, unschoolers establish their own focus of interest and standards of success. In this way, it appears that the ideas of French social theorists Michel Foucault, that society is shaped by those in power, and Pierre Bourdieu, that individuals shape society through their own actions, can both be recognized in this study. Further, since it appears that mothers are the primary facilitators in unschooling, empowering themselves and their children, the findings of this study have feminist undertones.

Michele Foucault (1926-1984), a French social theorist, writing in the 1970s, characterized all relationships between people as being shaped by “discourses of power” in which some people dominate and some people are subjugated (Erickson and Murphy 2008: 184). This theory seems to apply on many levels to mainstream schooling society. For example: lawmakers subjugate parents and children by making education compulsory; administrators subjugate teachers by standardizing the curriculum; and teachers subjugate students by limiting their focus of study. Foucault further theorizes that the dominant party “controls the economic and ideological conditions under which “knowledge” or “truth”...are defined” such that people are instructed “to ‘be’ a certain way...” (Erickson and Murphy 2008:184). In this study, the pervasive ideology imposed by mainstream schooling society is that a good education leads to success. This is an example of how Foucault theorized that authoritative discourses have the power “to shape and define what people accept as the objective truth” (Erikson and Murphy 2008: 186). Foucault’s ideas are implicit in the three questions addressed in this study relating to unschoolers dealing with the pressures of mainstream schooling society. Each questions is

characterized by the dominate ideology of institutionalized education attempting to impose some influence on unschoolers.

However, the results of this study indicate that individual agency prevents unschoolers from being subjugated by the powerful discourses of mainstream schooling society relating to education and success. Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), another French social theorist writing in the 1970s and 1980s, theorized that social relationships are created by the talk and action of individuals (Erickson and Murphy 2008:187). Bourdieu believed that individuals, not powerful systems, create symbolic capital (Erickson and Murphy 2008:188). Bourdieu's theory is applicable to the findings in this study that unschoolers have redefined "a good education" and "success" through powerful discourses (not "discourses of power") and action.

The findings in this study have undertones of feminist anthropology. Although the study does not specifically address the issue, it appears that in many unschooling families the parent who is the primary facilitator of children's learning is the mother. These women appear to be traditionally "well-educated" and have achieved what mainstream society would define as "success." Further, the primary participant in this study, Sandra Dodd, and most of the written sources for this study are authored by women. One interpretation is that the mother's empowerment as a result of her education and success permits her to empower her children.

There are likely other anthropological theories which can be applied to this study. All ethnographic research is subjective. No two people will derive the exact same interpretation of a shared observation.

### IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

My research on unschooling generally supports the idea that a good education leads to success. However, the unschooler's definitions of a "good education" and "success" differ



significantly from that of mainstream schooling society. For unschoolers, pursuit of the concepts and skills which are interesting and useful in living one's life is education enough to happily achieve whatever goal an individual might set for himself. Parents, not institutionalized educators, facilitate a child's life of learning.

Although it appears that unschooling is a natural and ideal way for children to learn, not all families have the means to effectuate the practice. It seems that parents must possess a certain knowledge level and financial means to be able to offer an unschooling life to their children. By that, I do not mean that parents must have obtained high academic achievement of their own and have great monetary wealth, but that there appears to be a certain minimum cognitive ability and income level that affords families the unschooling way of living. It seems reasonable to argue that unschooling parents have achieved some level of what mainstream society would equate with success in order to re-define success for their children.

Some families obviously make financial choices which others might consider sacrifices in order to permit at least one parent to be home and available for the children. Other families are able to live comfortably on the income provided by one working parent. I would be interested to further research the minimum financial means necessary for a family to afford an unschooling life. My research sample was too small and did not focus on family income to make any sort of analysis in this regard. It seems likely that incomes of unschooling families vary widely but meet some minimal amount to afford the unschooling lifestyle.

Further, unschooling parents must know how to access resources and expose their children to a wide variety of concepts and experiences. Without some minimum knowledge and analytical ability of their own, it seems unlikely that unschooling parents would be able to adequately expose and guide their children toward a rich and diverse life of learning. It would

be interesting to further study unschooling parents to see if there are certain personal characteristics which are prevalent among them. For example, do unschooling parents tend to be more curious and self-driven than the general population? There is likely some psychological means of evaluating personality traits which could be employed for this analysis. It would seem that analysis such as IQ tests would likely be offensive and inappropriate to a group of people that particularly avoid such quantitative and qualitative analysis of their children.

If we are able to identify the necessary means for natural learning that unschooling allows, can these means be implemented or somehow encouraged nationally and/or globally without becoming “institutionalized”? It is fairly common to hear of the importance of education in any conversation about ending world poverty. Institutionalized education in the western world was created for the purpose of bringing the masses to some minimal level of literacy and knowledge. It is apparent that institutionalized education is not the only way to learn. Obviously there are individuals in many societies around the world who are “educated” and “successful” without having ever attended an institutionalized school. Is unschooling a strictly western concept? Is it an industrialized nation concept? How and what do people learn in those societies where there is not compulsory institutionalized education? How does the way they learn and what they learn compare with unschooling practices? Like unschoolers, I believe that the Western institutionalized education system is broken beyond repair. Thus, it is important to identify other methods of learning.

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