



UNSCHOOLING: A DIRECT EDUCATIONAL APPLICATION OF DECI AND RYAN'S (1985) SELF DETERMINATION THEORY AND COGNITIVE EVALUATION THEORY

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Abstract:

Unschooling is a variation of homeschooling where, instead of following a set curriculum, children learn through everyday life experiences. As an increasing number of families are choosing to unschool, it becomes important to further study the workings of this philosophical and educational choice. It is estimated that approximately 12% of families who homeschool, unschool their children. The unschooling environment itself tends to provide space for self-directed and intrinsically motivated learning, and seems to be a direct educational application of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory and Cognitive Evaluation Theory. Within this paper, the author describes and expands upon how the unschooling environment is a modern example of true, intrinsically motivated learning. The author also discusses how unschooling families tend to naturally provide the three psychological needs developed within Cognitive Evaluation Theory, specifically the needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Keywords: unschooling, homeschooling, self directed learning, Self Determination Theory, Cognitive Evaluation Theory

Introduction

The number of families choosing to homeschool their child has grown tremendously in the past decade. In 2017, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that approximately 1.8 million students were homeschooled in the United States, and that number continues to increase. As the number of homeschooling families in the U.S. grows, there becomes variety in the way families choose to homeschool their children.

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Unschooling is a variation of homeschooling where, instead of following a set curriculum, children learn through everyday life experiences. These experiences are generally, of their choosing, and tend to match their strengths, interests, and personal learning styles (Wheatley, 2009). The percentage of homeschoolers who consider themselves unschoolers can be estimated at approximately 12%, and that number continues to grow at a slow and steady rate as unschooling increases in popularity (Pat Farenga, personal communication, January 10, 2018).

Unschooling itself is not a well-researched form of education. Gray and Riley (2013) provided the first large scale study of unschooling, exploring how families defined unschooling, why they chose unschooling, and the benefits and challenges of unschooling itself. The results of that study led the researchers to wonder how unschoolers themselves felt about the unschooling experience, and thus two studies focusing on the outcomes of grown unschoolers were completed and published (Gray & Riley, 2015; Riley & Gray, 2015). Journals such as *The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* and *Other Education* have published peer-reviewed research on unschooling, but other research on unschooling has yet to find its way into a mainstream journal of education.

Self Determination and Cognitive Evaluation Theory

Deci and Ryan (2008) have stated that motivation is what moves individuals to think, act, and develop. The central focus of Deci and Ryan's research is on intrinsic motivation and the conditions and processes that enhance performance, increase persistence, and facilitate growth. Ryan and Deci (2000) define intrinsic motivation as performing an activity solely for inherent satisfaction. When an individual is intrinsically motivated, he or she is energized and passionate about the task being performed, and after it is done, feels a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment. The concept of intrinsic motivation can be understood within the theoretical framework of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self – Determination Theory (SDT).

Although researchers point to intrinsic motivation as an inherent quality, the maintenance and enhancement of this motivation is dependent on social and environmental conditions surrounding the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan's Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) specifically addresses the social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation and point to three significant psychological needs that must be present in the individual in order to foster self motivation. These needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Within this paper, the author will describe and expand upon how an unschooling environment is a pertinent modern example of true, intrinsically motivated learning. The author also discusses how unschooling families tend to naturally provide the three psychological needs developed within Cognitive Evaluation Theory, therefore facilitating an environment of self-determined learning.

Unschooling and Intrinsic Motivation

John Holt, an American educator and theorist who coined the term unschooling and popularized this form of education beginning in the 1960's, has said that, in children, "learning is as natural as breathing" (Holt, 1967). This matches seamlessly with Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's definition of intrinsic motivation. As Ryan and Deci (2017) state "Intrinsic motivation is clearly a manifestation of our natural human propensity to assimilate and integrate knowledge. Characterized by curiosity and interest, intrinsic motivation represents the prototype of an active and willing acquisition and integration of knowledge" (p. 354).

Intrinsic motivation creates a different environment for learning. Instead of learning because "they have to", children learn because "they want to". This is exactly what happens within an unschooling environment. In unschooling, children learn through their everyday life experiences, and are in control of their own education (Gray & Riley, 2015). It is the ultimate form of self determined, intrinsically motivated learning.

Competence

Unschooling families generally facilitate intrinsic motivation, unknowingly, by using Cognitive Evaluation Theory as a basis for their lifestyle. Think competence, for example. According to Deci and Ryan, (1985), a sense of competence comes from success experiences and overall positive feelings about activities, and fosters feelings of intrinsic motivation. Children, by nature, are driven by a need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Young children will often experiment with and manipulate objects around them, and the joy on their faces when they figure it all out is demonstrative of intrinsic satisfaction (Holt, 1964). Think of a child who puts together their first puzzle, or a teen that finally solves a Rubic's Cube. Success is sweet! These same individuals will also test their knowledge by assimilating concepts they have already mastered with new stimuli, creating personal challenges for themselves (Piaget, 1952). Levin – Gutierrez discusses the concept of competence and challenge in unschoolers using her daughters' interest in the computer game Minecraft. She states: "*As my daughters continue to build their way around the Minecraft game, they share with me how the previously uninhabited island has attracted more builders (other online players) and developed a town. The need for shops, museums, and gardens has grown...*" (2015, p. 38). Through a computer game, a sense of true competence has been found.

More broadly, competence is facilitated within unschooling environments because those who are unschooled have more unstructured time to explore talents and interests. Generally, more time exploring interests equals greater competency developed in these areas (Gray & Riley, 2013). In fact, this enhanced competency of unschoolers is frequently stereotyped in media, hence the myth of the homeschooled or unschooled genius (Houseman, 2011).

Autonomy

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), in order for intrinsic motivation to flourish, a sense of competence must also be accompanied by a sense of autonomy. When an individual is given a sense of choice, an acknowledgement of feelings, or an opportunity for self direction, feelings of intrinsic satisfaction are enhanced (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In Gray and Riley's 2015 study, grown unschoolers were asked what they perceived as the greatest benefit to being unschooled. Ninety five percent mentioned advantages coded as "Time to Pursue One's Own Interest" and "Freedom and Independence". In fact, unschooling is also sometimes termed "autonomous learning", due to the freedom inherent within the unschooled environment (Parkes, 2016).

An example of this freedom is found in the daily life of an unschooler. Imagine waking up every day with the ability to freely decide how your time will be spent. Sandra Dodd, a parent of grown unschoolers and author, calls these typical unschooled days "*the best ever Saturday...the day people dream about when they are not in school*" (Sizer, 2012), and one can find many examples of these days when reading blogs or books about unschooling families.

Unschooling families generally focus on creating choices and opportunities for self directed learning. Ryan and Deci (2017) define this as "autonomy support", and state that autonomy supportive environments tend to foster greater intrinsic motivation and higher quality learning. Within the realm of traditional education, several studies have been done focusing on autonomy support, with results that can indeed be extended to those who unschool. As examples:

Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci (2009) performed a study on 156 teenagers (mean age = 14.6) from Israel. The purpose of the study was to compare the parenting practices of positive and negative conditional regard as well as autonomy support. Those teens who reported feelings of autonomy support also reported feeling an increased sense of choice and were observed by teachers as having a high level of interest-focused engagement.

Williams, Hedberg, Cox, and Deci (2000) performed two studies examining adolescent risk behaviors and extrinsic versus intrinsic aspirations. In the second study, 271 high-school students were asked to complete a series of questionnaires regarding health-related behaviors. The series of surveys included the Perceptions of Parents Scale (Robbins, 1994), which measured perceived autonomy support. Williams et al. concluded that adolescents who perceived their parents to be autonomy supportive had stronger intrinsic aspirations for personal growth, meaningful relationships, and work within the community (2000).

Relatedness

Early evidence of the impact a sense of relatedness has on intrinsic motivation is seen when reviewing Bowlby's (1979) theory of infant attachment. According to Bowlby, an

infant's intrinsic motivation to explore is more evident when the infant shows a secure attachment to his/her parents. By allowing the child to balance his/her attachment needs with the need to explore, a parent is paving the way for later development of self-esteem, self-concept, and competence (Moss & St. Laurent, [2001](#)). Although Bowlby's theory of infant attachment is a bit different from what William Sears terms attachment parenting (2001), researchers have noticed a relationship between attachment parenting as defined by Sears and later unschooling. (Sears' definition of attachment parenting includes techniques such as extended breastfeeding, babywearing, and co-sleeping). Kirschner's (2008) ethnographic doctoral dissertation on the unschooling movement noted that the unschooling lifestyle commonly included a history of attachment parenting. English's study of unschooling families in Australia (2015) concludes that there is indeed a link between attachment parenting and the decision to unschool one's children.

Attachment and a sense of relatedness do not only occur during infancy and toddlerhood. A similar dynamic is seen throughout the lifespan, as an individual's intrinsic motivation is more likely to flourish when individuals feel a sense of security and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, [2000](#)). Deci and Ryan ([2009](#)) stated that relatedness is based upon "*interpersonal affiliation, authentic care and the sharing of enriching experiences*" (p. 570). In students who are unschooled this affiliation tends to be strong, even through the teen years (Gray & Riley, 2013; Gray & Riley, 2015). Specifically, one of the great benefits of unschooling, according to families who unschool, is the increase in relatedness/family closeness. As one parent expressed in Gray & Riley's study: "*Hands down, the relationship with our kids has flourished. We have never gone through the typical teen angst or rebellion so often touted as normal. I don't think it is. If you build up your family life where members work together and help one another, where the focus is on happy learning, it's hard NOT to get along and enjoy each other's company!*" (2013, p. 16 and 17).

Success of Unschooling

So, with all this focus on self determination and intrinsic motivation, the question then becomes, how do unschoolers turn out? Quantitatively, the answer is "we don't know". There has been no large scale study of the academic success of unschoolers, although Martin Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) performed a study comparing the standardized test scores of children who homeschooled versus traditionally schooled children. When doing the study, they found that 12 homeschooling families described their methods as relaxed and unstructured, and defined them as the unschooled group. In this more exploratory part of their original study, Martin Chang et al. compared the scores of the "unstructured homeschoolers" with those of the other two groups and found the scores to be lower than those of the traditionally schooled group.

The results of this study tend not to surprise unschooling families (Gray & Riley, 2015). First of all, it is assumed that traditionally educated students would perform better on standardized tests, simply because the assumption is that they have been

prepped to take standardized tests. As Gray and Riley purport: "Any real assessment of the effectiveness of unschooling would have to take a longer view: What are these young people like as adults? Do they have happy, successful lives? Or, even more á propos: How do they define happiness? How do they define success? Their definitions might be along lines not measured by standardized test scores or income" (2015, p. 12 - 13).

Although quantitatively, the answer is "we don't know"; a large scale qualitative study of adults who have been unschooled tells a different story (Riley & Gray, 2015). Of 75 adults who had been unschooled within the study, 83% had completed some form of higher education, and reported little difficulty getting in to the college or university of their choice. Unschoolers also reported adapting well to the academic responsibilities inherent in higher education. With regards to mainstream success, a large majority of the grown unschoolers surveyed were gainfully employed and financially independent. "Most felt that their unschooling benefited them for higher education and careers by promoting their sense of personal responsibility, self-motivation, and desire to learn" (Riley & Gray, 2015, p. 1).

Unschooling and Intrinsically Motivated Learning

As an increasing number of families are choosing to unschool, it becomes important to further study the workings of this philosophical and educational choice. The unschooling environment itself tends to provide space for self directed and intrinsically motivated learning, and seems to be a direct educational application of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory and Cognitive Evaluation Theory. Unschooling is one example of a successful self directed learning environment, and stakeholders within the realm of education should pay increased attention to this growing countercultural movement.

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