

Solidarities of Resistance: Liberation from Education

Reflections on education, colonization, and freedom

by [Mike Jo Brownlee](#), [Carla Bergman](#)

[originally published at [dominion.ca](#) and
autonomously adapted to printable form]



Active, community level unschooling can be liberating and anti-colonial.

Photo: [Arlin ffrench](#)

VANCOUVER—In today's society, school is sometimes spoken about as a necessity for a happy life and as an inherent good. The concept of education is thought to be synonymous with learning, and separates those who are knowledgeable from those who are deficient. This is true even in radical pedagogy circles, where education is portrayed as a universal need and a means of liberation. Only at the edges of radical movements are

people calling the very concept of education into question, creating a culture of school resistance they say rejects the commodification of education and its connections to state building, and even genocide.

“Education is a concept that co-evolved with capitalist society, which has long been known by dissenters to be a tool for streamlining capital accumulation, with classrooms that resemble factory floors, and bells that mirror the break-time whistles,” says University of Victoria professor Jason Price. In his book *In Lieu of Education*, Ivan Illich pointed out that the word “education” only appeared in the English language in 1530, at which time it was a radical idea and a novelty.

“Schools have been functioning for some time to create students with obedient minds, rarely pondering beyond the controlled learning habits they promote,” says Dustin Rivers, an Indigenous youth from the Skwxwú7mesh Nation.

Before the process of education was commodified, says Rivers, “learning was present everywhere in my traditional culture. Even our word for 'human being' can be deciphered into a 'learning person'.”

Important skills were demonstrated through mentorship, and were inseparable from culture. “Some of these aspects of the traditional culture remain” says Rivers, “but it often does so in spite of institutions like schooling, politics, and occupations attempting to dissuade or direct focus towards lifestyles that don't reinforce traditional ways of life.”

A look back through history indicates that the separation of learning from community and

the natural world is not only intertwined with the rise of capitalism, but also with the formation of nation-states. “All nation-states practice a continual effort to homogenize, using for this purpose the institutions and particularly education,” writes Gustavo Esteva, author of *Escaping Education*.

In his book, Esteva notes that of the 5,000 languages left in the world, only one per cent exist in Europe and North America, the birthplace of the nation-state and where education is most prevalent. Thus, says Esteva, where education goes, culture suffers.

A Mexican study shows one impact of education on culture: In San Andres Chicahuaxtla, Oaxaca, 30 per cent of youngsters who attend school totally ignore their elders' knowledge of soil culture, and their ability to live off the land; 60 per cent acquire a dispersed knowledge of it; and 10 per cent are considered able to sustain, regenerate, and pass it on. In contrast, 95 per cent of youngsters in the same village who do not attend school acquire the knowledge that defines and distinguishes their culture.

Schooling as a tool to homogenize Indigenous youth into national patterns is especially obvious in Canada and the United States, writes Ward Churchill in his book *Kill the Indian, Save the Man*. In both countries, says Churchill, genocidal policies designed to “compel the adoption of Christianity, reshape traditional modes of governance along the lines of corporate boards, and disperse native populations as widely as possible” were carried out through compulsory boarding schools. According to Churchill, these schools were administered with such vigour that the survival rate of children was roughly 50 per cent. According to the Assembly of First

Nations, the last Canadian residential school closed in 1996.

“What came down through compulsory schooling was very harsh, very damaging, and very brutal for our communities,” says Rivers. “It still is to this day, because it is all a part of the assimilation process. There is a responsibility for us to find new paths, and new ways.”

“I have a lot of suspicion about the entire school model,” says Matt Hern, a long time advocate for school resistance. “I think pretty much all its basic premises and constructions are suspect—bound up with a colonial and colonizing logic aimed at warehousing kids for cheap and efficient training of industrial inputs.”

School resistance is a movement that attempts to undermine dominant narratives around school, and to broaden the deschooling movement to create new ways of engaging and learning together. “I strongly believe we need counter-institutions, ones that can support people and their passions, assist different types of learning, introduce people to new subjects and experiences, pass knowledge down (and up!), provide meaningful work, pay fair wages if possible, build a community infrastructure, reach out to people from different backgrounds,” says filmmaker Astra Taylor.

There are many people in the deschooling community who are doing just that. Hern co-founded the Purple Thistle Centre with eight youth 10 years ago. Today, the Thistle is a thriving deschooling centre in Vancouver.

“We need to be building alternative social institutions—places for kids, youth and families that begin to create a different set of

possibilities,” he says. “Something new that begins to describe and construct a different way of living in the world, and a different world.”

Unschooling is simply defined as life-learning. Unschoolers spend their time exploring, learning and doing their passion, often with rigour and on their own time. Unschooling does not mean anti-intellectual; in fact, according to proponents, it is the opposite. “Unschooling is that very moment when you are really sucked into something, whether it's an idea or project and you just want to study it or be involved in it, master it,” says Taylor.

There is certainly a strong emphasis on deschooling at the Thistle, but that does not mean the centre is only run and used by youth who are unschoolers. In fact, most of the youth are local schooled kids. Of the 25 youth on the collective, five are unschoolers, and a few have college degrees. Out of 200 plus youth who use the space, the ratio is the same.

The Thistle is not anti-school per se, rather it is about creating something new, according to Hern. “We wanted to rethink it all—rather than start with 'school' as the template—let's start over entirely and create an institution that is for kids, by kids, has their thriving in mind, and takes that idea seriously, however it might look,” he says.

While there are also alternative schools with mandates aimed at undermining and changing conventional school, Hern says they are often part of the problem. “These schools are inevitably lovely, nurturing inspiring places, but if they are providing one more great opportunity for the most privileged people in world history, then they are regressive, not

progressive projects. They are making the fundamental inequities of the world worse.”

Even the schools that challenge that status quo in a meaningful way are subject to corporate and government interference, he says.

Although Taylor and Hern describe deschooling as a collective, grassroots effort, it is still very much on the fringe of society and social consciousness. The reasons are many; primary is the belief that school is inherently good for us.

“The stigma around drop-outs and incomplete graduations is daunting, and you rarely hear of a positive outlook on leaving school,” says Rivers. Despite this, he left school and became a thriving unschooler who has spent the past few years reconnecting and building his community. He currently runs Squamish Language workshops for his community on his reserve.

Indigenous people face an especially difficult stigma for resisting school. Cheyenne La Vallee, from the Sk̓wxwú7mesh Nation, also left school to become an unschooler. “It's considered shameful if you don't finish high school,” she says. “In my experience, I did face a lot of resistance to the idea of unschooling from family members and friends.”

La Vallee knew that schooling and colonization went hand in hand, but she had never “thought it through that the act of unschooling can be a direct link to begin the process of decolonization.”

“Once I left school I found a deep love for my family and myself, my community and culture, life and my landbase, where I got to actually learn my culture, language and land,” says La Vallee. “Going back to my land taught me about how my ancestors lived and I saw that

as a way to decolonize.”

“As an unschooler I felt very empowered as a citizen—I volunteered, I wrote a zine, I protested, I read widely, I made stuff—but when I briefly attended public high school I suddenly became a student, my interests were compartmentalized and my sense of agency was dramatically diminished,” says Taylor.

Schools can be a barrier to ones own cultures and values. “School does everything in its power to make you feel disempowered and ashamed for being Indigenous, for being a youth, for being alive,” says La Vallee.

But leaving school isn't easy for many to imagine. “Narrowly describing de/unschooling as simply 'getting out of school' tends to privilege those with resources, time and money. Generally, middle-class, two-parent, white families,” says Hern.

The same can be said for homeschooling, says Hern. “I think there are some things that many schools do well and are worth considering and respecting. Schools tend to put a lot of different kids together and when you're there you are forced to learn to deal with difference: people who don't look, act, think or behave like you do. That's really important, and often deschoolers end up hanging out with a lot of people who are very

similar to themselves.” Which is why he thinks deschooling needs to be a form of active solidarity and activism.

An important part of decolonizing education can come from settler communities. “The solidarity work would have to begin at promoting, or help promoting, this ideological alternative to the status-quo way of perceiving education,” says Rivers. The youth who are already thriving without school can go public and undermine the importance of school in society. “The prejudice will need to be challenged. In achieving this, the hope is more families will identify with the obvious wrongs and injustices within schools, and look seriously into alternatives,” says Rivers.

As Esteva writes in his call for liberation: “We join in a call for solidarities of resistance; of liberation and autonomy from the tools, technologies, and economics of the educated. It has taken us decades to decolonize our minds; to start seeing with our own eyes; to learn how to take off the spectacles of the educated.”

Carla Bergman is an activist, and the co-director of the Purple Thistle Centre in East Vancouver. Mike Jo Brownlee collaborates on projects at the Purple Thistle Centre and is a writer and activist.

THIS AND MORE AVAILABLE ONLINE AT
ALearningCommons.noblogs.org