This is a repository copy of *Raising people*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/174570/

Version: Published Version

Article:

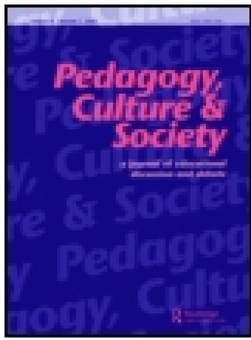
Allen, A. orcid.org/0000-0003-0533-6251 (2022) Raising people. Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 30 (4). pp. 613-616. ISSN 1468-1366

https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1921361

Reuse
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can’t change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/



Pedagogy, Culture & Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpcs20

Raising people

Ansgar Allen

To cite this article: Ansgar Allen (2021): Raising people, Pedagogy, Culture & Society, DOI: 10.1080/14681366.2021.1921361

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1921361

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 25 Apr 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 39

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rpcs20

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REVIEW ESSAY

OPEN ACCESS

Raising free people: unschooling as liberation and healing work, by Akilah S. Richards, Oakland, CA, PM Press, 2020, 142 pp., £12.26 (paperback), ISBN 1629638331

Radical critics of schooling often resort to the same old targets so that the critique of schooling risks becoming a caricature of itself. According to *Bluff your way in Teaching* – a satirical take on the school first published back in 1987:

> The secret of successful teaching lies in mastering a classroom technique that will keep the children still and quiet. It is one of life's richer ironies that, although you are employed as a teacher, you are judged as a police officer. If the children fail to make any academic progress, that may be passed off as their fault. If they shout, spit, throw things, fight, and run in and out of the classroom, that is your fault. To guarantee success as a teacher, therefore, you need the charisma of a showbiz megastar and a limitless arsenal of plastic bullets and CS gas. (Yapp 1991, 19)

These criticisms are not unlike arguments made by unschoolers online, who claim that schools are not concerned about learning, who say that schoolteachers are principally engaged in crowd control, and state that classrooms are exclusively driven by standardised testing. Teachers either have no regard for the wellbeing of children or they are ill-equipped to provide for them. In sum, the school is a hostile environment and learning does not happen.

In such an context, where summary dismissals of schooling are too easy, and too readily made, Akilah S. Richards' book *Raising Free People*, is to be welcomed. It offers one of the more carefully crafted, and compelling popular accounts of unschooling currently out there. Richards is unstinting in her critique of schooling. Schools, she argues, are founded on the idea that children do not need to give their consent when it comes to their learning. Schools teach children that it is socially acceptable, and ethically defensible, not to seek their permission for what is done to them, for all the choices that are made on their behalf, all the decisions they have to follow. Children are shown that it is okay to force and coerce others without permission. The school teaches all this by example, by the brute force of its presence, by the demand it makes that pupils are obedient, that they abide by rules they had no role in constructing. For Richards, this basic lesson – the one that teaches *your consent is not required* – is surely the worst and most damaging basis upon which a society might be built.

Richards is also extremely critical of the more popular and widespread homeschooling movement for being insufficiently radical and critical of its own practices. Homeschooling, Richards argues, often just repeats schooled assumptions in the context of the home. Learning may appear to be happening in the context of home education, but homeschooling is, in most cases,

> a bona fide monster, constructed from the cadavers of standardized education notions and the good intentions of the people creating it and not much else. (2)

As the pandemic forced homeschooling further into the mainstream, it revealed, Richards claims, just how poorly-equipped most people were to rise to the challenge it presented. Pandemic homeschoolers were not simply lacking in preparation, in materials, perhaps in technology. Richards goes much further, arguing that pandemic homeschoolers were also

lacking the basic interpersonal skills they would require to homeschool successfully. She claims that the pandemic revealed the 'severely underdeveloped social and emotional skills' (3) of most families, that years of dependence on schools have helped produce. This is an extraordinarily severe judgment, and it is worth pausing for a moment to consider its ramifications.

Confined at home, many families discovered how hard it was to live together under these conditions. Adults and children found they could scarcely manage to be in one another's company for extended moments in time. This, for Richards, shows that they did not have the skills to negotiate living well together, and so did not have the skills that would be the necessary basis of learning together. For this reason, it was not possible, in most cases, for the pandemic to prompt or kick-start a new era in educational provision. There could be no revolutionary shift to homeschooling, or even to unschooling, under these conditions.

The central concern of unschooling is to *unlearn* many of the habits that may have been acquired through socialisation and through schooling. This is what makes unschooling a lifelong pursuit. It is not simply an activity designed to educate children. Unschooling is designed so that adults can begin to re-educate themselves by putting some of their 'habits and ideas away and claiming or reclaiming others' (4). This is important, and worth emphasising, because of the tendency to misrepresent unschooling as an approach to education that just lets children get on with it. Children are not simply left to their own devices, to learn experientially by, say, digging beetle dung out of a log. They are clearly still supervised.

The role of the teacher is clearly being deconstructed, at least to some extent, in the work of unschooling, where teacher-student relationships are understood as basically oppressive. The role of the teacher is easily taken up by the parent, and so the challenge of unschooling is to help children learn without the adult becoming that person, the authority figure who declares what must be learnt, when it must be done, and how.

Looking after children, and facilitating their learning, presents constant challenges, questions, and dilemmas for those involved. These challenges are to be welcomed, Richards argues. Those who look after children should be engaged in a process of asking what it means to supervise children, what it means to relate to children and to one another, in free, open, and enabling ways. For instance, if a child refuses, how should the adult respond? A key concern for unschooling, is to identify and question the role of coercion in relationships. The most obvious example would be physical force, or violence, and Richards dwells on this quite a bit. But it is worth pointing out, I think, that coercion appears in other forms too, through moral coercion, for instance, which relies on shame or guilt, or simply the look of the disappointed or 'wounded' adult. Coercion also functions through the whole repertoire of passive aggression, manifested by acting sullen, or through sarcasm, or simply by withholding affection. And most difficult to identify of all, coercion takes hold at its other pole through positive action, as the efforts or activities of the child are celebrated and encouraged, with the encouraged norms and behaviours thereby reinforced. For those seeking to remove coercion from interpersonal relationships, there is an enormous amount of work to be done.

Richards is at pains to make clear that the pursuit of 'anti-oppressive, personally driven learning' (4) is ongoing and difficult, and involves considerable work to escape unhealthy practices. Unschooling involves a kind of critical introspection, a type of self-inspection, that is designed to get rid of, or transform, these unhealthy habits, and unhealthy thoughts. This is why unschooling

> can look like going to therapy or quitting a soul-sucking job, leaving a toxic relationship, or deciding to learn how to finally trust ourselves as worthwhile and whole, even when we're being told or shown that we are not (good, smart, rich, pretty, handsome, whatever) enough. (5)

Despite its basis in criticism, as a practice unschooling offers itself as extremely positive, and affirming in its intent. As Richards presents it, unschooling is also designed to affirm a 'whole self', an 'authentic self', a healthier personhood. Unschooling is about acquiring the skills needed to enable oneself, and those one spends time with, to develop that kind of authenticity and independence (as these terms are understood). This relies on the development of 'tools for having a healthy relationship to boundaries, to conflict, to communication' (5). The process can be difficult, and at times painful. But it is definitely worth it, in Richards' view. Actually, the development of healthier relationships is, as Richards presents it, essential for the sake of society, and indeed 'our planet' (5). The project of unschooling is one that seeks to develop a form of community life that combines mutual respect with self-directedness and sustainable living.

Richards writes very much out of her own childhood experience, and her experience as a parent and educator of her children. She connects the work of unschooling to the labour of confronting systemic racism, white supremacy, and what she calls the colonisation of childhood. Growing up in Jamaica, Roberts recalls how her own childhood was colonised. She recalls absorbing the message that she 'could ... and should be Black and proud – but not if that interrupted being Black and educated'. What this meant, was that she would have to 'tuck away' aspects of her personhood in order 'to excel at studenthood'. When her family moved to South Florida, this continued with 'straight A's, straight hair, and a fast disappearing non-American accent' (9). She found herself once more 'performing intelligence for adults' and submitting to 'mandatory lesson plans administered in classrooms, all without my input or consent'. The key idea which justified all this, was the belief that doing well in school equated with doing well in adult life. This was how schooling presented itself as 'the vehicle for liberation' (10), which in some respects it could be, of course, leading a select few to greater wealth and opportunity. As a parent she initially continued the work of schooling until reaching a crisis point that caused a switch to unschooling, to the first and continuing challenge of unlearning so much of what she had been taught. This was the ongoing 'liberation work', as she puts it, of 'pivoting away from oppressive, control-centered relationships' (14) to ones that placed consent and community at their heart.

As Richards points out, the challenge of unschooling for adults and Black children, is only deepened in the context of systemic racism. Parents of Black children will wrestle with the problem of how to bring their children up to live safely in a society where they will not be treated equally and could well become victims of police violence. There is a strong temptation, Richards claims, to be strict with one's children, to be controlling out of love and fear, so that children learn to keep out of sight and are protected from harm: 'For many Black people, keeping our children and our neighbors' children in line and out of the way of the powers that be is how we helped each other survive', she writes.

> Just as children are groomed to show up, both at home and in public, in ways that make adults comfortable, Black folks in the countries I grew up in, Jamaica and America, have also been groomed to show up in ways that make the people who are in positions of greater power than us ... comfortable – socially this means White people ... As Black children, we needed to show good White folks that we could behave, and that we could keep our Blackness to ourselves, where it belonged. (63)

The work of undoing all this is clearly enormous. It is also performed at some considerable risk. The work of unschooling will also be unwelcome, to some, because it confronts the basic assumption (and hope), that at least schools are places where people of colour can excel. It is for this reason, Richards claims, that 'for many families of color, the term unschooling is unsettling and even offensive' (63).

These arguments demonstrate, I think, the extent to which as an advocate of unschooling Richards feels that basic assumptions need to be unpicked, and human relationships, habits and frameworks of understanding need to be rebuilt to make learning possible again, in the full, open sense in which Richards understands that term. They show the extent to which human relationships are, from this perspective, infected, and distorted 'schooled' mentalities. The very mentalities that unschooling seeks to combat, and remake, are those mentalities that extend and reproduce the oppressive interpersonal relationships of a schooled society, a society that is driven by narrow instrumental incentives, hollow institutionally sanctioned achievements, and vast inequalities in opportunity and basic human dignity. Richards' criticisms also make plain the fact that unschooling is based on severe judgment, levelled not merely at schools and systemic racisms, but households too. Here, indeed, unschooling represents a movement of its own, with its own expectations for how learning should happen. Although unschooling is presented as an open, liberating practice, it makes its own set of demands. It arrives with its own prescriptions and words of advice, that seek to remake interpersonal relationships and do the necessary 'healing work' (47).

Unschooling offers a perspective on contemporary living that casts a very unfavourable light on contemporary society. As a radical movement, unschooling demands a set of adjustments, not simply at an institutional or political level, but in how people relate to and see one another. It is perhaps necessary here to labour the obvious point that the work of unschooling will only be realised (in its own terms) once a society that builds schools no longer exists. This is worth dwelling upon, precisely because unschooling places such a heavy ethical burden on its own advocates and practitioners. The rhetoric of unschooling places much of the weight of healing society on the healing of interpersonal relationships, on the pioneering work of a (currently) small number of unschoolers. These unschoolers are encouraged to view their work in these epoch-making terms, as Richards makes clear. It seems almost inevitable under these conditions – where the future of humanity is at stake in how, say, a mother relates to her child – that family relationships will become a conduit through which a new set of ethical demands will impose themselves on individuals as necessary and urgent. Of course, from the perspective of a radical unschooler, these demands are entirely defensible and there is too much at stake in not heeding them. As a movement, unschooling presents itself as a necessary invitation, an offer, or an awakening. In the radical work of unschooling, Richards' book is clearly an excellent place to start.

Reference

Yapp, N. 1991. *Bluff Your Way in Teaching*. Horsham, UK: Ravette Books.

Ansgar Allen
University of Sheffield
a.allen@sheffield.ac.uk

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1921361