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Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

# PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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# PROCEEDINGS

Vol. 1  
**Inequality,  
Inclusion,  
and Governance**

Organizers and partners

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# UNSCHOOLING IN ITALY: NAVIGATING IDEALISATIONS, CONSTRAINTS, AND DE-COLONISING PROMISES

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Unschooling represents a philosophy of education that challenges conventional paradigms, advocating for learner autonomy and a departure from institutionalised schooling. This paper offers reflections informed by research insights and framed within an anthropological perspective, focusing on the unschooling experience in Italy. It explores the tensions between the idealised principles of unschooling and the realities of their implementation. Drawing on mixed-methods research, the study highlights how home-educating families navigate “pedagogic compromises” as they reconcile their aspirational visions with sociocultural and institutional constraints. Key challenges identified include the deschooling of entrenched behavioural patterns, negotiating societal integration, and meeting formal assessment requirements. Rather than interpreting these compromises as shortcomings, the paper reframes them as dynamic and generative spaces for educational transformation. The findings suggest that the potential of unschooling lies not in rigid ideological adherence, but in creative adaptations that foster personalised learning, challenge dominant epistemic frameworks, and advance more equitable educational possibilities.

Unschooling, Home education, Educational transformation, Child-led learning, Deschooling

## 1. OUR POSITIONALITY: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE ON UNSCHOOLING

Our reflections on the phenomenon of homeschooling are framed within an anthropological perspective. Adopting an anthropological gaze on the world of

schooling and unschooling means engaging in an analytical approach rooted in a well-defined intellectual stance. This approach consists primarily in denaturalising educational representations and practices, that is not taking them for granted, obvious, necessary but subjecting them to a critical reflection. Throughout its long history, anthropology has demonstrated, through field research conducted in diverse contexts, that all educational practices—without exception—are the result of specific historical dynamics, expressing contextual visions of:

- Childhood (Who is the child? Who is the adult? What is their role on the educational scene?);
- Society (What is the task that society entrusts to “education”? What place does it assign to it?);
- Knowledge (What is to be taught? How?);
- Ethics (What is right and what is not to be taught?).

By adopting this perspective, anthropology does not judge an educational system as “good” or “bad”. Instead, it applies a critical and deconstructive lens to every form of experience that societies define as “educational”. This approach facilitates critical distancing, allowing for a nuanced examination of both schooling and unschooling as historical constructs that warrant interrogation.

Starting from this distancing and reinforced by this distancing, anthropology observes that the proposals brought by unschooling into the space of public discussion are particularly interesting because they question an entire system and an entire educational ideology (the western school system) today deeply in crisis.

We therefore believe that understanding these experiences and giving them a voice, without celebratory emphasis but with a critical gaze, can be an important moment for the construction of a generative dialogue of awareness and social transformation. Such dialogue can foster collective awareness and contribute to social transformation. Anthropology can provide an interpretive framework to listen to and understand diverse educational perspectives, which may offer innovative responses to the global educational crisis (UNESCO, 2021).

For instance, overcoming the process of “othering” alternative forms of education (as suggested by Pattison, 2018) requires acknowledging the potential of unschooling to radically deconstruct the mainstream educational system. This model raises critical questions about:

- Age-appropriate norms, which often enforce uniform and standardised learning rhythms, sidelining individual developmental trajectories.
- Power dynamics inherent in teacher-student relationships, frequently structured within hierarchical and authoritarian models.
- The symbolic violence embedded in traditional school curricula, which tends to marginalise diverse voices and perspectives.
- The role of education as a tool for assimilation into neoliberal and capitalist societal models, prioritising competition and productivity.

However, we encourage a critical reflection on unschooling while avoiding its uncritical celebration.

## **2. RESEARCH-INFORMED INSIGHTS: UNSCHOOLING BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND COMPROMISES**

A recent mixed-methods study (Chinazzi, 2024a; Chinazzi & Fensham-Smith, 2024) conducted within a doctoral programme spanning from 2020 to 2024, has provided insights into the Italian homeschooling and unschooling landscape. The study combined ethnographic and netnographic fieldwork (Bove & Chinazzi, 2023); semi-structured interviews and surveys with home-educating parents and other key informants.

Unschooling is often viewed as a liberating approach to education, emphasising child-led learning and the importance of nurturing a child’s natural curiosity and interests (Gray & Riley, 2013, 2015; Riley, 2020). It can be defined “as learning without a curriculum, where the child directs and facilitates the learning” (English et al., 2024, p. 144).

In Italy, despite occasional references to unschooling within the broader literature on home education, no dedicated empirical investigation has yet examined this approach in depth. Existing ministerial records (see Chinazzi & Fensham-Smith, 2024) currently treat home-based learning (“istruzione parentale”) as a monolithic category, failing to differentiate between its diverse philosophical approaches and pedagogical practices. Our research insights suggest that unschooling is embraced by a small but growing number of parents who advocate for a more personalised and flexible educational experience, free from standardised curricula and assessments. However, our research also revealed a nuanced reality, where unschooling often exists more as an aspirational ideal than a pure practice. Families frequently engage in what might be termed a “pedagogic compromise”, balancing their educational ideals with

practical considerations. Many parents reported experiencing a dissonance between their envisioned ideal model of (home-)education and the realities of their day-to-day practices. Parents engaging in home-education practices navigate between structured and unstructured approaches, creating what might be termed a hybrid educational space that responds to both ideal aspirations and contextual considerations.

Through an analysis of parent narratives, we identified different sources of “pedagogic compromises” that define the gap between ideal aspirations and practical realities:

- The deschooling challenge,
- Societal integration concerns and mainstream expectations,
- Assessment-driven adaptations
- Other contextual, pragmatic, and personal reasons-

A very common challenge intrinsic to the transition to the home-education practice, especially within unschooling approaches was the need to overcome one’s own interiorised behavioural patterns and ingrained convictions about education. In open-ended survey responses, parents reported that to “homeschool” (and particularly to “unschool” children) entails “leaving what is safe and familiar”, “deschooling ourselves as educators”, “a change of mindset”.

The deschooling process is said to be essential for parents transitioning to the unschooling approach, requiring them to move beyond the traditional teaching-learning paradigm. This process involves letting go of the conventional understanding of education as a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to passive learner. Instead, deschooling emphasises a more flexible, child-centred approach that recognizes the importance of self-directed learning and individual autonomy. Despite identifying as “unschoolers” or not, home educators in Italy often prefer to describe themselves as “facilitators” of their children’s learning rather than traditional “teachers”. This perspective aligns with Ivan Illich’s assertion (1971) that learning should not be a top-down process where knowledge is transmitted from an authority figure to a passive learner. Instead, Illich advocates for a more decentralised and individualised approach to education, emphasising that learning is a complex process driven by personal curiosity and exploration. However, this change of mindset is not straightforward, as the following quotes illustrate:

I've noticed it in many families, also among those who recently embraced this choice: it's instinctive to replicate what you experienced in school, like textbooks and exercises. However, if you can be open and let the child express their passions, anything is possible from that passion. (I., former home-educating mother, phone interview, 22nd April 2022)

Deschooling oneself also requires overcoming the fear of nonconformity: as many participants reported, the home-education decision may be challenging due to the prejudices of relatives, friends, and society. It requires individuals to navigate the uncertainty that arises from embracing less-travelled routes:

We must be able to inhabit a space that breaks free from conventional practices. This means embracing uncertainty. (C., home-educator, video interview, 19th October 2022)

The second source of compromise stems from home-educators' awareness of broader societal expectations and the potential challenges their children might face in conventional settings. This compromise reflects a deeper tension within the unschooling movement: the challenge of maintaining educational autonomy while preparing children for potential integration into mainstream society. Parents often find themselves balancing their critique of traditional education with pragmatic considerations about their children's future social and academic inclusion. As one mother explained:

I have always integrated a bit of everything [pedagogic approaches], so that the child – if she returned to the traditional system – would feel comfortable. (...) I am open and flexible because I realised that (...), eventually, the reality they find themselves in might be different, and they could feel uncomfortable. (...) I certainly didn't want to cause them any issue. So, I can say that I actually used a traditional method. (P., former home-educating mother, phone interview, 5th October 2022)

Another recurring type of compromise revolves around the annual assessment requirements in the Italian system. Recent legislative changes have introduced annual mandatory assessments for home-educated children, raising concerns among home educators about the implications for their pedagogical autonomy and the essence of home education. The debate surrounding annual assessments for home- and unschooled students in Italy reflects a complex intersection of educational freedom, accountability, and the evolving legislative landscape. While for some home-educators, annual assessments serve as a valuable tool for accountability, for others they conflict with the fundamental

principles of educational freedom, undermining the individualised learning experiences that home education, and particularly unschooling, is designed to promote. Critics argue that such requirements could lead to a bureaucratic oversight reminiscent of traditional schooling, which many families sought to escape by choosing home education. As one mother expressed her frustration:

These exams make no sense at all, given that the choice to home-educate, at least for me personally, is to distance my children from the whirlwind of traditional school that has only caused harm. (Home-educating mother, open-ended survey response, Autumn 2022).

For most parents, however, these intrapersonal, interpersonal and other pragmatic factors appear to intertwine dynamically over time, influencing their evolving decision-making processes as home-educators.

Some home-educating parents risk romanticising unschooling as an idealised but seemingly unattainable approach, which paradoxically reinforces traditional educational binaries. This idealisation can inadvertently frame unschooling as a purely oppositional or marginalised practice, rather than recognising its transformative potential (Romero, 2021).

Rather than viewing these compromises as failures of unschooling ideals, we propose understanding them as generative tensions that reveal both the possibilities and limitations of educational transformation within existing social structures. As one participant noted about their adaptable approach:

What I see in Italy is truly a huge variability; there are very subtle nuances even within the same group...When it comes to studying together, it often happens that we may tackle some topics together, so we blend our learning methods. (A., home-educating mother, phone interview, 22nd April 2022).

This blending of approaches suggests that the decolonising potential of unschooling might lie not in pure implementation of ideals, but in the creative adaptations and resistances that emerge through practice. The “pedagogic compromise” becomes not merely a concession to conventional education but a space for negotiating new educational possibilities within existing constraints. Rather than being seen as an isolated and fixed “alternative”, unschooling can be positioned as a dynamic philosophy that engages with ongoing discussions. This perspective encourages a re-evaluation of parents’ daily practices, inviting them to consider, as anthropologists do, that the current school model is not the only viable option.

### 3. FINAL REMARKS

Unschooling emerges as a “radical” pedagogical approach and philosophy that fundamentally challenges not only the content of traditional education but also its underlying assumptions. It fundamentally challenges conventional educational epistemologies by explicitly dismantling the binary logic that equates education exclusively with institutionalised schooling. By rejecting standardised curricula and imposed learning structures, unschooling compels a profound reconsideration of entrenched social and cultural narratives regarding learning, childhood, and knowledge production—resonating with the anthropological habitus of deconstruction.

In other words, unschooling invites a reevaluation of educational paradigms by emphasising individualised learning experiences that respect children’s autonomy and promote lifelong curiosity while simultaneously calling into question the societal norms that govern traditional education, including epistemic authorities, conventional methods and content of instruction.

The Italian unschooling experience reveals some practical challenges of implementing non-conventional educational approaches: its implementation requires navigating a delicate balance between ideals and constraints stemming from sociocultural norms and regulatory frameworks. Families reported that they navigate these compromises because it is difficult to “deschool” oneself and to confront ingrained assumptions about education. This process also involves challenging societal prejudices and opinions regarding non-traditional learning, which can be particularly daunting in a culture that largely values conventional educational pathways. Additionally, parents must prepare their children for the expectations of conventional social and academic life, including annual exams, which can create tension between the unschooling philosophy and the demands of the broader educational system.

The challenge for researchers and practitioners alike is to recognise how these compromises might strengthen, rather than weaken, unschooling’s potential for educational transformation. By acknowledging and working within these tensions, families may create educational spaces that are both responsive to individual needs and cognizant of broader social realities.

Aligning with the critical unschooling praxis proposed by Romero (2021), unschooling should be repositioned from a purely “reactive” stance to a proactive, generative educational philosophy. This perspective emphasises that unschooling is not solely driven by “push” factors—such as dissatisfaction with

traditional schooling—but also incorporates “pull” factors that embrace the intrinsic motivations and interests of learners. In this perspective, unschooling can be meaningfully conceptualised as a philosophy that challenges traditional educational paradigms while promoting a holistic approach that emphasises decolonisation, student agency, community engagement, and social justice. By moving beyond civics and citizenship, unschooling may provide a lived experience of democracy for young people (English et al., 2024). As the most “radical” branch of homeschooling, unschooling serves as a catalyst for questioning conventional practices and exploring alternative, more flexible, humane, and personalised approaches to education, potentially contributing to the discourse around equitable educational opportunities (Chinazzi, 2023; 2024b).

The unschooling pathway, as the most flexible approach within home education, is not a linear, predetermined trajectory. Intrinsically open-ended in its epistemological and ontological premises, it emerges as a fluid and dynamic threshold where families continuously negotiate and reconfigure educational boundaries striving to improve their own practice—a paradoxical “gateless gate” (Lees, 2011). This ongoing negotiation highlights the potential of unschooling to serve as a generative and thought-provoking space for educational transformation. However, to fully understand unschooling’s actual implementation and its potential impact within the Italian context, further research is essential.

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