

Unschooling School with Heather MacTaggart

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Caprice: Welcome to Humans Rising where we have conversations to raise awareness, increase well-being, and unleash your creativity. Today I am talking with Heather MacTaggart who has been working tirelessly for the past 23 years to change the education system and to create a system that works for people and doesn't block our creativity and our ingenuity. Welcome Heather. I'm so excited to have you in this conversation today.

Heather: Thank you. I'm very happy to be here.

Caprice: So Heather MacTaggart is up to something truly remarkable in this kind of historic moment in human history with creating Unschooling School. I'd really like to learn Heather - How did you come to co-found Unschooling School? What is that all about? How can people get involved? So tell me what is Unschooling School?

Heather: So, Unschooling School is really a movement, a gathering place online, a set of resources and a community hub to help put power back where it belongs and that's in the hands of learners and their families. And to say, "okay, we have the public education system. It's full of resources and materials and caring teachers. Why don't we use it so that it benefits kids? Why don't we use it in the service of kids?" And what this is about is kind of creating that idea in people's minds. And having them say, "Yeah why don't we do that? Because we don't like a lot of what's going on right now." So let's say, "Sorry, we're in charge and we are going to insist that the public resources be used for the good of children".

Caprice: I think that that's remarkable. Because most people just look at the institution of school and feel somewhat distanced from it. It seems like the institution has done a good job of telling parents that they do not have the know-how or the capacity to educate their kids. So they kind of trustingly just hand them over to this institution and you're trying to wake people up to a different understanding.

Heather: Absolutely. Not only do we hand over, we tend to think, "Oh teacher said this - I must do it. Oh, the system thinks this. We have to do this. Oh if you don't get a high school diploma, your life is ruined. Like. These are dire things that we've somehow mostly bought and swallowed. And most of them, you know we stated on the website. It's nonsense. There's a lot of what we believed is just nonsense.

Caprice: So what do you think are some of the strongest beliefs that are just keeping the system frozen in place? You know frozen in a way that really doesn't serve children?

Heather: Well I mean all of the structures are self-reinforcing. So a fair bit of them are the same things that dominating cultures have used to colonize different places. So you take children

away from their family. First of all, you divide them by age groups so they can't really learn from each other because they're only with seven-year-olds. You provide information that says there's a right answer and a wrong answer. So you're not allowed to be yourself and think differently. You have to just follow the rote process that we should all do the same things at the same time. And that there is a set of knowledge that, if you have it, you will succeed in life. And none of that is true.

Caprice: No. None of that is true. In fact, it seems like by forcing kids just to sit still in process information, they slowly lose their - they don't lose it - but they lose the connection to their imagination and their creativity and their problem solving. So yeah that is interesting when you start looking at schooling as a process of colonizing individuals and colonizing the mind. And we're just kind of complicit if we keep sending our kids to that system.

Heather: Well, and the problem is that not everybody can do unschooling. Not everybody can homeschool. Not everybody can find a really cool alternative like Sudbury Valley or an Agile Learning Center and send their kids there because there's an economic factor and also you know a single parent factor. So in the long journey of things I've tried in order to get the education system to change - including, here in Canada, having meetings with multiple Ministers of Education, multiple directors of education.

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Heather: Now, at one point, I had a handshake from the Minister of Education for a province in Canada saying we will have a contract in place, we will work with you to change the system. That was 14 years ago. I've tried everything else. We've run projects on first nations reserves with first nations communities for 10 years showing that alternative methods do work. But the problem with that kind of work is that the situation in most reserves is not healthy. You know it's not a good situation. So you can't just create a little island of academics that works in a sea of a community that is dysfunctional. So you know and the part of the reason for doing that was to say, "Look there's been a lot of damage done here and we all need to work together to create solutions for that. And while I still believe that is true, I think that we have to change the education system writ large in order to solve some of the larger problems that we've got in the world today - both in Canada and the US and in Australia and New Zealand. You know the situation with indigenous people is a big issue and it behooves all of us to focus on it. But you know maybe we need to get kids educated in a different way; in a way that hasn't killed their creativity and ingenuity so that they can figure this out because we're doing a pretty bad job of it as the adults. As the adults in the room, we have not solved it.

Caprice: Exactly, I don't think most people connect the dots between the problems that we see in the world and society with the way that people have been - I don't even want to say educated - not educated but schooled. And they just they think, oh, well, you know more school is better.

Heather: Exactly. Exactly. So you know that I love all the alternatives that have sprouted out. But when I tell people that you know Sudbury Valley school has been around for fifty years with phenomenal results and spawned probably four to five hundred other kinds of similar schools around the world and yet most people don't know about it. So how I mean us in our bubble, the bubble that you are in, we know all about this and we have so many friends that know about this but then you talk to just somebody randomly and they have no idea. They have never heard the term self directed education or unschooling. And so if we don't somehow really, seriously move the needle in public education, I think it's hundreds of years before we have enough independent schools to actually make a big change.

Caprice: I agree because I co-founded a Sudbury school in 2004 and we ran it for several years but could not get it to a point of financial sustainability. Because there really is this monopoly of the public school system. It's compulsory. It's required by law. Which a lot of people think - Oh, you know they have freedom while you will get in a lot of trouble if you don't educate your kids in a legal manner. So tell us more about the Unschooling School movement. Because as you said, you know you're not trying to start another private school or learning center. You're really trying to fundamentally change this system and empower communities to change the systems. So how does that all work?

Heather: Well you're right - empowering is the correct word. Bcause what we're trying to say to kids and to parents is, "This is your system. You pay for it, You attend it. So, get educated in terms of what does this all mean." And you could spend several days on the UnschoolingSchool.com website and learn all about schooling and self directed learning and how the brain really works and find the research and all that. So that's really the first step. We want people to understand what's out there and understand that there is an option that is not only viable but much, much better. And so once they understand that then what we're saying with Unschooling School is - Fill out the paperwork to become a free learner. And a free learner is somebody who's decided to take responsibility for their own education within the education system. So we have quite a large section under the Free Learner Tab. We've developed something called the Free Learner IEP - individual education plan. So we are, in a sense, co-opting some of the terminology that's commonly used in schools so that educators will understand it. Oh, they've got an IEP. Yeah, I guess. I guess we have to listen to that. But this is an IEP that is determined not by some outside expert, but by the children themselves with support of their parents.

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Heather: And it says - here are the things that I'm going to participate in school. So for example, I love science class. And I love music but I have no interest in English Literature and I don't like the gym classes. So I'm not going to attend those classes. And instead, when classes are doing something that I'm not interested in, I will go to the library and read up on science material or I will stay in the art room and continue with my art project. And the IEP also has a pretty large

section for free learners on responsibility. So we say on the website with great freedom comes great responsibility. And if you are going to take responsibility for your education, then that means that you also need to be responsible for yourself in the context of the school community. And just because you don't have to do the math lesson, doesn't mean you can pester the living daylights out of the kid beside you who is doing the math lesson. So what we've tried to do, and this is like a living system. Right it's not - Okay. It's done. Everybody go do it.

Heather: We've got tools and resources to help people. And what we hope happens as people engage in this, declare themselves or their child a free learner, to go in and have conversations with the school. This says I'm a free learner. This is what this means. This is what this looks like. Then, they will probably think - Oh if I'd only had this or if I'd had the answer to this question and that might have helped me. So that's where we have a lot of feedback opportunities on the site to get in touch with us. My phone number is there and anybody can call me anytime. I will help walk them into the process.

Heather: So that is really kind of the core of it is to realize that we have agency. And that we don't need to listen to a system that has told us this is what you must do. This is the order you must do it in.

Caprice: That is brilliant. I mean I've always thought that every person should have an individual learning plan or you know as you say an IEP because we're all wired differently, we come in with different gifts and different talents. And to march kids through a standardized curriculum at the same time at the same pace, it doesn't make any sense. It really doesn't. So this is an opportunity for K-12 students, is that right?

Heather: I mean certainly university students could take the same path but that's not where we're going at this point. It's closer to what university already is, right? If you're taking a class and you hate it, you quit and go to another one. The statistics are something like 110% percent of kids changed their major in university. That's because several of them change it many times. Right. That's okay.

Caprice: And so I can see how this would be pretty smooth for elementary and middle school. But then when you hit high school, every state has their graduation requirements. So as you're putting together an IEP in the state I live in, you need 4 years of English and 3 years of math and 3 years of science. Are you helping the families, the individual learner, figure out how they would meet those requirements in a way that really honors their interests and how they like to learn?

Heather: Well, there are several ways to go. So I mean some people may say, okay, how can I do exactly that? How can I still meet the requirements but do it in a way that works more for me? What can I negotiate with the school? You know we all know that in life negotiation and persuasion are incredibly important skills to have. And we don't provide enough opportunity for kids to practice those except for you know at home - I'm not gonna eat that and this is going to

bed. But in school, where the stakes are higher and where it's not your family, to learn how to become good at saying - this is my case and this is what I want and persuading others to go along. So that's one route, the other route, and there's a pretty significant section about this on the website, is no high school diploma at all. Are there other ways to demonstrate that you have the attitude, skills, and knowledge you need for whatever is next in life for you? Other than a diploma. And the short answer is, yes. We have also outlined the process of what we call a Free Learner Diploma - which is really an exercise in readiness. So we sort of outlined a process where you say to yourself, "Am I ready?" And it's a little along the lines actually modeled on the Sudbury Valley kind of thesis exit diploma. The student would create a thesis that demonstrates to themselves and to the world that they are ready for whatever's next in their life.

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Heather: And then to assemble a committee of people that you admire and respect that are going to read that and question you on it like you would when you're doing a PhD or something like that. So it's a pretty darn rigorous process. And that means, as a young person, you have to know what is next for me and be sure that I have what I need to get there. And if you don't, then go do that. So in some cases that might be, yes, you do need a high school diploma. In other cases, it may be - take some open university courses to prove that you're already at the university level and use those courses to transfer into a university or college they want. That's just one way. I believe that there are on some of the websites we reference 11 different ways to get into higher education without a high school diploma. Seriously.

Caprice: I think that's the big carrot and stick that also keeps the K-12 system frozen. Once Harvard said you need Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2, all the other universities followed suit and it became high school requirements. So I mean even in middle school they start telling kids you've got to do this or you won't get into college. And if you don't get into college, you're going to end up homeless, in a ditch, flipping Burgers, It's just so fear based.

Heather: It's completely fear based. And what I found, because I've tried for over twenty years to unravel this. What I found is everyone blamed everybody else. So the high schools, the school system, will say, "We have to do this because this is what universities or colleges expect." And then you go to ministry and they say, "well, this is what the colleges want". And then you go to the colleges and they say, "well, this is what the high schools give us. It's not really what we want". But we have to kind of use their terminology to try to get what it is that we really want. You know, and then you'll have universities saying, "well, this is what employers want you know, what society expects." They've stopped singing that tune. Because I think they've realized that you know the 4 Cs, what we're now saying the 6 Cs or what's really important. And we're realizing when the World Economic Forum realizes it's not the skills that are coming out of the regular system. Then maybe that's another opportunity to say look at this differently.

Caprice: So what are the six C's?

Heather: So the four that are generally recognized and starting to be more recognized are creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking. And when you extend a little beyond that, because that's all quite individual focused, the other two are compassion and community. So, they add up to you know - if you could say as a mother that your children had those 6 Cs, you'd be pretty darn happy.

Caprice: Now having followed the self directed education route, I can confidently say that they do. And I can see that the school system - not only does it not foster these 4 Cs - but the system and this structure really prevents a lot of it. I mean communication - you're not allowed to speak. You can't have conversations. You're not allowed to collaborate - that's cheating. Giving the right answer is the antithesis of creativity. That's interesting. But how do people stop just talking about these 4 Cs and actually change the system to promote them?

Heather: I guess that's what Unschooling School is all about. Because we know that the way to do that is to let kids learn what they're interested in. To provide the beautiful environment where they can educate themselves. You Peter Gray. How many times does he need to say that we are biologically born to educate ourselves? And driven to succeed in the society into which we are born. And all we need is access to the tools to do that and supportive, caring, loving people. We have all that in schools. We just need to say, "You know what? We insist that we be able to use it for that purpose. In the service of the child. Not in the service of a system." Which is how it seems to be running right now.

Caprice: Well and I love that this movement is uniting learners, parents, educators, and community leaders towards the service of - what do children need to be ready for what's next? Because when people are honest, they don't know what's next.

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Heather: No they absolutely don't. I think there's a recent report saying that - I think this was out of the World Economic Forum as well - that for kids entering primary school right now 62% of them will be in jobs that don't even exist right now. So, how can we possibly say, "Here's the curriculum. Here's what you need." When we really have no idea.

Caprice: Right, and how can we burden adults to continue pretending that they have the answers? I mean they have to step into this role of - Oh I know what you're going to need in 15 years. But I think what it comes down to for me and I would think for you as well, is the understanding that children already have everything they need inside of them to become the best versions of themselves. And as you said, we're not saying we're just going to throw them into the school building. You know it's Not Lord of the Flies here. We're still having mentors and support and guidance and resources, but it's being chosen by the children right rather than being forced upon them.

Heather: Absolutely. And I'm so happy you mentioned Lord of the Flies. You probably had this experience. When I read that in school, it made me so angry. Because all I can think of is - this is absurd. If I was on this island, there would have been a little area that was safer for younger children to play. There would have been teams organized for who's doing fishing today and it would not have looked like that. I saw it in the Guardian in the UK. There is a story called "The Real Lord of the Flies." And there was a group of kids that set off from one of the islands near Tahiti and they took a boat when they weren't supposed to and they got lost and they were marooned on an island. I believe it was eight months. And when they were found, nobody was dead. Nobody was injured. They had taken care of themselves. Taking care of each other. It was a multi age group and it had operated like a perfect little community. And it was all boys. So even little boys can be together. You know the author of that was a very depressed man and so he gave a very depressed version of humanity and that's that's not what kids are really like. Kids, given their own druthers, will figure it out. Because, as you say, that is that is who we are.

Caprice: Right. But I think that's the belief. Okay. If you let children direct their own learning, if you let them follow their interests, they're going to sit around and eat twinkies and play video games and not add any value. It's a toxic myth.

Heather: It is a completely toxic myth. I read so many things lately, I can't remember where I read this. I think it was Grace Llewelyn's work and she talked about a study that was done where kids were allowed to eat whatever they want to. On each plate, was broccoli and a piece of fish and a piece of chocolate cake at the same time. And they found that after they done this for a while, kids went for the broccoli just as often as they went for the piece of cake. So I call it the allure of the illicit. When we make something illicit, like chocolate cake or you have to eat your vegetables or you can only have so much time on the screen or you can only play video games for so long, then we want more and more of that. Because it's naughty. And when we take that away. Then you know your natural instincts. I mean, we need to move around. You know sitting all day long and looking just at a screen is not natural. But when there's nothing forbidden about it, it becomes less sexy. And kids can move back to who they would naturally be, which is whole and balanced.

Caprice: I see adolescents, because I have two. And they want to do real work. They want to add real value to society. They don't want to be locked up, doing make work or being forced to compete in this artificial academic game. And you know adolescence didn't use to exist right? It was invented.

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Heather: Well you know the interesting late because we were talking earlier about the book that I wrote many years ago with John Abbot from the UK. And one of the main points was that adolescence used to be a time where, I mean we do know that brain wise. You know it's I believe 12% of the connections that had been established in childhood are breaking apart and

looking for new connections. And that's there so that the human species progresses and is different from the previous generation. You know we don't we all say that we want our kids to be like this but none of us will say, "Oh, I, want to be exactly like my mother." No matter how great my mother was. So the purpose of adolescence is actually differentiation from your parents so that we could go on and do new things. You know when we all came from the, you know the Fertile Crescent, you know you the tribes there only were in a certain area. It was adolescents that said, you know what I want to go further. No, no, no, it's dangerous. We don't know what do. And there's a belief that that's how humanity spread around the globe - is with the sort of unrest and the desire to do something different and maybe, even dangerous that the kids have.

Heather: So, one of the stories we talk about is that there's a code in British Columbia Puget Sound. And it was named after one of the captains of the ships that came over from Britain. And the first time that this boy Peter Puget came he was twelve years old and he was a cabin boy, he was a servant. By the time he was 14, he was the captain of the ship.

Caprice: Wow. Fourteen.

Heather: I mean there's a reason kids can't sleep at night. It's because they're meant to be up like watching the flock to make sure the wolves don't come. I mean these things, you know these biological things, are in this. There's research that indicates that we don't change genetically; it takes ten thousand years for a genetic change. So we are still all hunter gatherers. And our instincts in even men's and women's is different because of the different roles that people had for so so so long. And so to say, we shouldn't let adolescents do real things is absolutely against their nature. That they should be out there. That's why they're so interested in sex, drugs, and rock and roll - because we won't let them do anything else. But. If we had jobs that they could do, work... That's another thing to think about down the road is - how do we change these age restrictions? You know kids, if they're able, should be allowed to work -- not forced to work of course. Age restrictions were put in for kids own good. And that's why we've got a lot of education just it's for your own good. But times change. We need to change the structures because they end up hurting people.

Caprice: So, if we could embrace the natural inclinations of these young adults, these really creative, restless young adults. If we could unleash all of their capacities versus what we're doing now, which is just reinforcing the status quo - what would that look like? And because you're saying, "okay, you don't really need a high school diploma" and I agree. There's the mastery consortium, which is the top tier of private schools in the United States, are ditching the grade-based report cards and showing mastery and competence in portfolios. But you know it'll probably take decades before that would trickle into the public school system. Those are the institutions that are creating the future leaders and they see the futility of this subject based learning and the grading methods. So if a community said, you know this sounds really great I want to approach my school and see if we can create an environment for free learners. I want my kids to be free learners. As you said, you go to the website. Do you start having conversations with your friends? I read an article by Peter Gray in Psychology Today recently

that was saying that people, because we're social animals, we want to be perceived as normal. Even if I see that my kid hates school, that their their love of learning has gone out of them their spark is dimming - I'm still going to do what's normal. How do we make Unschooling School the new normal?

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Heather: I guess well, I think we start with the people who don't care. Don't care about how they look. So we we don't think this is a movement that is going to catch on overnight with everybody. We think there's probably about one percent of people who are right this very moment are absolutely ready for this. And their kids don't care what other people think about them in the same way you know that the peer pressure is like I don't care. You know I'm going to wear my hair in five ponytails at the top of my head today and I don't care if anybody likes it. It's that kind of kid that is going to be brave enough to just say free learner - great! Parents, let's get on board. Let me do this. And, it's also going to take a certain kind of family who would say - all right. We understand the research. We looked at this. We know school is not not serving you the way it should, and we're behind you. And then we really strongly encourage them to try to find other like minded people. Because when you've got a group, voice is amplified.

Heather: Now do we think that there's towns or cities here and there or schools here and there with a single child who is brave enough to do this on their own? Yup. I would have. I would have done it. No problem and my mother would have been behind me. And I wish I had thought of it then. Because I found school beyond hellacious. The way this is going to happen as a movement is if people joined together, people start having friends over for coffee and talking and saying, "Hey, you know we're thinking of doing this with Georgie. What do you think?" And having conversations in and saying, "Yep, let's go all in and meet with the principal." In a group of five of us or a group of three.

Caprice: Right. That's more powerful. The truth is there's never been a better time for this movement to just you know expand. Decades of research that come from psychology and neuroscience and biology show that humans are designed to be free learners. That's the natural state. They're not designed to be these computer like information processors. Do you appeal to people's rational thinking with the research or do you appeal to their emotional understanding of their kid's not happy? As you said, school for me was very hellacious. I was a good student, but I was just bored to tears.

Heather: So I was at the other end. I was a bad student and frustrated. The kindergarten teacher said to my mother. "Oh Heather is brilliant. She should really be going straight into grade two." By two they said, " Heather is an imbecile. She might end up in an institution." Literally. That was said to my mother. And I didn't learn to read until grade six. I mean I just had one issue after the other. But for some weird reason, I knew in my soul - It's them. Not me. I'm fine. I mean I felt bad. I was taunted by other kids because I wasn't doing what you're supposed to be doing. But inside me, I didn't feel diminished. I don't know if that's because I was born like

that or because I had a loving, supportive family and didn't have a day of hunger in my life. And you know, in many things of being born into a privileged situation. I was good at dance and I was cute. So I got good feedback from those things despite the fact that my marks were beyond abysmal. And then it all came together at university. I got straight As. So how does that make sense? I barely got there. And then I get straight As. But I think it's because I was interested in what I was studying. And I was much more in control of it. So why the heck are we waiting for that long? You know why does somebody have to be 18 or 19 or 17 years old until they can really truly pick their courses in the areas that they're interested in? It doesn't make any sense.

Caprice: No. It doesn't make any sense. And so you're saying - you don't really need a high school diploma so I guess that of course follows that you don't (except for maybe a few professions) need a college degree. And I see kids all around the United States saying - I'm definitely going to defer, I'm not going to go to college or university in this crazy situation. So, if you start with what's next, what do you want to do and you reverse engineer it, it seems like the education path is so different doesn't it?

Heather: Absolutely and I love that term "reverse engineering". I think that everybody should think of their life in that way. Where do I think I want to go and how do I backwards design a process that might get me there?

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Heather: I don't know if you heard Peter's great talk at the AERO conference earlier in the summer. And his new book is going to have sections around what are we actually biologically designed to do in different phases in our life. He talks about not going directly to university or college, but instead have a period where you try on careers. So if you think and my argument, you mean would be, let's do this when kids are 13, 14, and 15, they don't even need to wait till 17 or 18. So if you think you want to be a doctor. You know - go find a hospital or a doctor's office where you can volunteer; take people's coats; bring them glasses of water; do something so that you can be in that environment and see if you like it or not. Because that's a whole lot of education to find out I don't like hanging around sick people.

Caprice: That is exactly right. I think everyone could take that approach and it doesn't mean that what you think you want to do when you're 14, 17, or 18 is going to be your life. Because I think that's the other myth. That lives and careers are linear. I read a book by Catherine Bateson and she was talking about how your life is like a quilt and you're working on one patch at a time but you don't know where it all fits. But at least, if you point yourself in the direction of your dreams and you're courageous and you don't feel limited by other people's negative opinions of you, something magical is going to happen I believe.

Heather: Absolutely. I love that. That's a wonderful analogy. Life is a quilt and it's each piece at a time. I mean, if somebody had told me when I was in high school that I was going to end up in

education, I would have said you're out of your mind. That is not going to happen. So you know the thing is not to try to figure out what the end goal is but really what's next and what do I think might be next. So I think might like to be in the medical profession. So let's try that on. Okay. Now I don't like that. You know but while I was at a doctor's office, somebody came in and was building a new wall. That looks cool. I think I might like to be a carpenter. Well, let me go see what that is like. And to have that experimentation period during the teen years- with real work and real things. So you can figure that out. And then you might say, "Oh. Wow. I need to take biology and chemistry and functions and how can I do that? Is that course being offered at my school? Do I need to go online? Do I need to hire a tutor? Do I need to work a part time job so I can hire a tutor? Like how am I going to do that? That exercise of problem solving, for how you're going to get what you want, is exactly the kind of skill we need children to have as they enter adulthood.

Caprice: You know that is exactly right and then if you are doing biology or chemistry because it's part of your path, it's going to be meaningful. You're going to remember it. You're going to not just forget it after the test. And you know it reminds me of what's taken. You know in the corporate world everybody's talking about design thinking. And it's all about - fail fast and iterate. So why aren't we doing that with our own lives? Because our lives are so much more important than any product or company.

Heather: Yeah Yeah, exactly. It's the whole idea of failure. You know that is perpetuated as a bad thing. Failure is a great thing. Just as you say, do it faster. Try it. If it doesn't work, do something else. Let's do something else. You know. And being able to drop out or opt out or decide you're not going to stick with something in school is a good thing. We have this false notion that, "Oh, well, if they aren't made to take certain courses, how are they going to learn to stick something out.?" Well, you learn to stick something out when you're passionate about it. You know, I am not a techie person at all. It is not a natural thing for me. The little animated video on animals on my website. And I am not a writer. The little animated video on the beginning of the UnschoolingSchool.com website. I made it. I learned how to use the program. I did it. It was frustrating and many bad words were spoken aloud in my kitchen. But I did it. Because I needed to. There was nobody else to do it. So I figured it out. And that's what creates stick-with-itness. Is you have a personal need to do something.

Caprice: Right. Right and that's true self agency. This needs to get done. I'm going to do it. So I love that on the Unschooling School website you're inviting people to be responsible subversives.

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Heather: Yes. Particularly educators. So the Responsible Subversive is actually a term from my book with John Abbott which is a quote from a European situation where people were trying to get out of the Soviet bloc and they would act like good civil servants every day, but then at night

drop leaflets out of windows so they would be caught by the wind and distributed to everybody to say, we need to change this regime. So we kinda keep the lights on, but you work for change.

For example, the core group of 6 people that are North American wide and Derry from England, between those six people we have 229 years of experience in the education system at every level. In 45 towns and 11 countries. So, there is depth of experience there in terms of what people have seen and know. And this group has said you know what? This is the way we think the change can happen. We empower students. We empower parents. And we let teachers know - look this is a great thing. You can come along with this. Because there wouldn't be so many. I mean, in our core group, I'm the only one that didn't go to teacher's College. So it's all people who have been in the system and know that needs to change. And we know there are lots and lots of them out there. And so you know one of the reasons you often hear teachers say well, I can't change because parents, you know, they want higher standards. They want to see those marks on the report card. They want their kid to go to Columbia. They want these things and so we have to keep toeing the party line. Well, it would be a very, very different conversation if that's not what parents were pushing for. The educators they get and would be able to say, Oh, this is great. What can we help? How do we support you? How do we help make this happen? How do we spread this?

Caprice: So the opportunity for learners is to become free learners. The opportunity for educators is to become a responsible subversive. And so on your website is there a path for educators to follow as well?

Heather: Yes there is. It's on the far right top and it says educators, and then it goes into responsible subversives. It is also a section that we would like to do more on it. It gives them links and other support and resources and other books that are in along these lines. including a new one that has recently out called School Transformation by Wayne. His last name suddenly went out of my mind. Hold on, I will get it again in a minute. But School Transformation is the book and it's very good. It is really you know for educators. Wayne Jennings.

Caprice: Because what I've seen in public education is you'll get kind of an enlightened principle that will join a school and have a big vision of transforming the school and will do it for a few years and then the principal moves on and another person comes in and all of the changes are then undone. So I think that's the challenge. If the system is so rigid. And everything that's done serves that rigid system. But what you are really calling for is - Okay. This system was designed to serve people you know.. And the people need to say, Hey, it's not serving our needs

Heather: Exactly. Just stand up and say, no, we don't accept this. And I mean I think there are probably very few exceptions where reasonable people come together politely but firmly and say, "this is what we're doing, and this is what our child's doing not doing. This is what our group of children are doing or not doing." You're not going to have police come in and arrest five families. Because they've decided to opt out of the standardized test. There is fear of that kind of thing. But I think, I mean certainly in Canada that would never happen ever. And I, even I

think even in the states it's so unlikely especially, if you have a group, you know that saying this is what we believe. In fact, it would be super media attention. In a positive way. To have that happen because that's the system. You know, there's no such thing as a system. There's only people. And collectively, they have bought into a certain way of thinking.

00:45:01 - 00:50:04

Heather: And in almost every school and every school board and ministry across certainly North America, there is somewhere a statement that says, "children are the center of all we do". I've never seen a place that actually operates that way in the regular system. So what this is saying, Okay, great. Find a line in your child's school statement. Find a line in the Ministry or the board that is aligned with what we're talking about. And go and say, "Hey. We've decided to operate according to this". Because ultimately people go into education because they love kids and they care about them. And then they get caught up in the rules, and the regulations, and the structures. And I think it's very freeing. This is a very freeing concept for educators as well. For many of them. And then, if they have the support and the encouragement and the nurturing of kids and families. Then, they'll be able to exercise very interesting freedoms themselves.

Caprice: Then it seems to me that it comes down to a conversation about values. What do you value? And when I was trying to start the charter schools in California, I would go to multiple school board meetings, and the only thing they ever talked about was test results and money. And I don't think that most parents value that. I think that they would prefer the well being of their children. And when I look at the skyrocketing rates of anxiety, stress, depression, and suicide in high school, and college. I think - we're definitely doing something wrong here.

Heather: And we know it's getting worse. I mean it's what is it 80% up from from the fifties? I mean it's a huge huge problem. And Peter Gray's research indicates that it absolutely correlates to a lack of free play time for kids and increased schooling. Increased schoolisation of everything. So you can't just have a kid group of kids together in a street and block off the street and they start playing soccer or baseball or go to their local park and do this. Because everything's organized. Everything's you now, what are you doing next and there's no freedom and you know the belief that a child is going to be abducted at every turn is an absolutely incorrect belief. We know that statistically the chances are unbelievably minute. But we've reorganized our whole society around this. So what we do know though is that schools are safe places. And so if we just change how we look at them and how we take advantage of the services and the resources in the environments that they provide, then they could be places of free play and exploration and gathering together with kids in multiple age groups. And saying to an adult in the room or in the building "hey, we all want to learn about this, who's an expert on amphibians that can come talk to us about this?" These kinds of things would obviously come up naturally as you've seen with your homeschooling your kids. I love the story about your own daughter being so interested in STEM. You know lots of people are interested in STEM. You can't make somebody who doesn't care about STEM interested in it simply by forcing them to do

it.

Caprice: No. I mean, it was incredible because I'd just get her all these Basher science books. And she was maybe five years old and I walked by the bathroom. She was standing in the bathroom, looking in the mirror and she had just cut her arm or her hand. And she looks in the mirror and he goes, "B Cells, T cells get to work. Heal this cut."

Heather: How old was she?

Caprice: She was like four or five. And if I would have sat down and said, we're going to study biology and how the human body works today, she would have been like no thank you.

Heather: Well I totally understand that. My son was, as a little boy, very interested in bugs and in nature and leaves, digging in the dirt, in all these things. And I thought, "ha! after two artsy fartsy kids, I'm finally going to get a scientist". And as soon as they started learning about it in school, I'd say, "Oh, you're taking science. It must be pretty cool." He said, "No I don't like it anymore". It just killed his interest. The repetition and the memorizing and the structure of it just killed his interest. And it stay killed.

00:50:04 - 00:55:07

Heather: It's not ever come back. You know he's twenty six. So, it can can really do damage. And I thought that there was a natural inclination to that. But after fifteen years of schooling, and that can get rid of anything. It really can can squash any passion.

Caprice: I love Carol Black talking about how she had to keep all of her interests and passions out of school so they didn't kill it. And what you're advocating for on Unschooling School is not just that they're using the resources and the facilities at the schools after hours, but they could actually carve out a mini school within the school. I'm trying to envision how this might work in a community.

Heather: So the school within a school concept is exactly where we think this could go in fairly short order. You know if you had 10 or 20 kids in one school that were all declared free learners and you know were picking and choosing what they were doing or not doing, pretty quickly the school would say - We've got fewer kids in class or we've had to rearrange how the sort of the the movement of kids. There's X Room over here. Why don't we make that the Free Learner Room? And you know we can put books, and computers, and resources and things in it. And then it's - who are free learners? And when they're in a class that they don't want to participate in, they can just go to the free learner room. That kind of thing would spread and spread and spread until we have a point where half the school is operating on a regular basis and the other half is operating as free learners. But the great thing is that the free learners will opt into the classes being taught in the regular system based on their interest. And pretty quickly, the system finds out no one seems to be opting into this class. I wonder what that means. Maybe no

one cares or maybe this teacher is doing a horrible job and everybody's over here. You know in Mrs Fields class. This must be really right.

Caprice: Now I mean that is so exciting to me. I mean just thinking about those three things. If you had every kid in the school do a free learner plan, if they were able to opt in just to the classes that were interesting to them around their path, and if there was a free learner room. Just those three things would, I think, create so much transformation and so much good for the kids. And also for the teachers who would be like, "I'm not enjoying teaching this class that nobody's interested in. Let me do something I'm interested in teaching." They have passions as well.

Heather: Absolutely and you know the anxiety and depression rate around kids is not dissimilar to teachers. I mean, it's a very stressed group. You know there's research on the increase in anxiety and depression amongst teachers. Because it's tough. You're constantly making people do what they don't want to do. It's like being the poor woman that hands out the parking tickets. Everybody's mad at you all the time.

Caprice: Yeah. A woman reached out to me who is living in California. She just went back to teaching three days of kindergarten a week. And she just said, "I need to talk to you Caprice. Because the level of control that I have to exert is just killing my soul. I don't want to be doing this.

Heather: The wonderful description "everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten". We can't say that anymore because we've schooled kindergarten. Wrecked it. It's horrible. That was the final Straw for me. I mean, there has been a movement in Ontario and other parts of Canada to undo some of that. You know add free play. There's still a lot of structure and there's still an insane report card for a child in kindergarten. Spends X amount of time. Can build a block stack three blocks high. You know. Good Grief. Child had a good day today and they get along well with other friends. They're fun and inquisitive. Done. There's your report card.

Caprice: Right. And back to values. If we wanted an education system that preserved children's wholeness, their wellbeing, their curiosity, their creativity, their imagination. Like all of these things that make humans amazing, then it would look completely different. So it's really what do you value? What do you want for your children? I've given talk, mainly to homeschooling groups. But the main thing they say is they just want their kids to be happy.

Heather: And we have not put any value really on that at all, as a system. At all. My middle daughter, who really is a big part of my sort of motivation for all of this because.

00:55:07 - 01:00:12

Heather: She had some of the same issues that I did in terms of not doing the regular things at

the regular time. And I remember her in tears and me saying, "Honey. This is not you. It's them. It's the system. You're fine. You're great exactly as you are. You know but it's system, and that's what Mommy's working to do." and I heard crying and saying "Can you hurry up?" And that change did not happen. And she struggled and went down many bad roads because of this. And then sort of woke up one day at 18 years old and said, "I'm going to you know I'm going to get my life together." And she's a sommelier at the top restaurant in Canada. And that takes a lot of studying. A lot of studying to know you know - where does this grape grow and grape is it? And what's the tear noir? And all of that in chemistry off of the soil and all these things that she had absolutely no interest in when somebody was trying to teach them to her. When she decided, she was in control and realized she was in control, she was rabid about it. You can barely have a conversation with her because she was so busy studying. And I thought why? Why did we have to go through all the hell that we did for her in adolescence? With with other people telling her what to do and a system that said you're stupid. When she could have skipped over that part and gone straight to a life where she was empowering herself to do things.

Caprice: Yes I mean I talked to Kirsten Olson who wrote *Wounded by School* where she set out to see - how did all these wildly successful people - what did their school experience do to prepare them? And she found the opposite. That they just survived school. And they were all wounded in different ways. So I think it's really time to have this conversation about the damage that schooling is doing. And that we have the capacity to create a system that works. And, you know, who cares that the textbook manufacturers aren't going to make as much money. Or the testing system and company's make less. Because I point out in my book it's a \$1.35 trillion dollar industry here folks that were trying to disrupt. But it's time. I agree we can't wait another generation for this disruption.

Heather: No and I will not. I will not allow my, as of yet unplanned, unconsumated, and unborn future grandchildren, participate in the system as it is. I am rabid about helping to create opportunities for doing otherwise. And you know as much as there are many really bad things about COVID and people are suffering because of it. There are also opportunities because it is a disruption. So why not seize this opportunity. So okay, we can't send our kids back to school as usual. Good. Good. How else can we do it? And what and what can we learn from the unschooling movement about how do you have kids come together at certain times but maybe not all the time. How do you distribute them more widely over the school building? You know if we just said this year - You know what? 2020-2021 we're just going to take a year off of curriculum. We're just going to let that one thing go. Maybe except for kids in their grade twelve year- that might be a bridge too far right now. But we're just going to, for the rest of the systems, we're just going to say we're not going to have curriculum. We're going to let kids gather around themes and ideas and areas that are of interest to them. And the teachers that are around are going to support them either online or in person. Can you imagined the change that just that would have? The pressure that it would take off the system? I'm actually sorry for the administrators and the teachers that are trying to do the normal thing in a situation that is so far from normal. Because, they're still trying to say, "okay. But what about math 20 and what about

this class and what about these outcomes?" Just. Let it go. Let it go just for this year. Let's see what happens.

Caprice: Yes if you could just let it go for one year. Trust that humans are designed to learn and the natural learning process is beautiful. It does not need to be controlled. Then amazing things could really happen.

Heather: It's in some ways you think okay maybe that's it. Maybe there, there always are silver linings to clouds. No matter how dark clouds are there. There's always an upside down. And can we look at that? At the situation that we're in now and say, all right, how do we really step back and think about what's important here. And I've seen good evidence of ministries and boards coming out with statements of saying things like -- let's focus on the health and well being of kids right now.

01:00:12 - 01:02:17

Heather: Let's really put that as our main priority. So great. And what we're hoping to do with the idea of people being designated free learners is to expand on that. And even if parents said, "you know what? Let's try this for a year. Let's start right now for the year because going to school as usual is tough. So we're going to be free learners." And "education system, this is what we're going to participate in and not." And I bet we'd find a lot of teachers coming on board and saying "Well, okay, great. These fifteen kids are taken care of in this way. I'll support them." It's much easier to support them in conversation groups online and some things in person than it is to try to run 35 kids through exactly the same thing every day.

Caprice: That's true. And I know that these kids are just really starving to have conversation and connection. So that would be, even if just started with fifteen kids, I agree. Thank you so much Heather. I'm going to point people to the UnschoolingSchool.com website where you and your team with 229 years of experience in education have put together really phenomenal resources. And as Heather said, she is available. If this conversation has sparked your curiosity, reach out to Heather or someone on her team directly, and they will guide you through the process of bringing Unschooling School into your local school and your community.

Heather: Absolutely.

Caprice: Okay well thank you so much Heather. And if you've enjoyed listening to this podcast, please subscribe to let me know. And people find me on iTunes if you leave a review and they can learn about it. And I think, as you've seen, what we're talking about today is very important. We want to help people like Heather expand their impact. So thank you for listening. Thank you.