

PODS IN ACTION:

My Reflection Matters

A VIRTUAL VILLAGE WHERE BIPOC FAMILIES “UNSCHOOL” TOGETHER

By Melissa Steel King and Heather Casimere

In 2020, twin forces inspired large numbers of U.S. families of color to look outside traditional schools for their children’s education. First, as the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools to shift in and out of virtual or hybrid instruction, many parents [looked for other options](#) because they were concerned about keeping their children safe or were dissatisfied with the quality of instruction. At the same time, the racial reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd sparked a national conversation about systemic racism. For many parents of color, this included questions about whether it would be healthier for their child to be educated outside a system they viewed as replicating injustices.

The [My Reflection Matters](#) (MRM) Village provided the answer that some of those parents were seeking. MRM Village is a nationwide, virtual network of parents, students, and educators, formed with a mission to “cultivate a space that provides the supports, conversations, and healing required to decolonize adults’ beliefs and practices around learning and parenting in order to raise free people.” Initially an in-person, local organization, MRM launched its virtual “Village” platform in August 2020 to connect and support primarily Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families. By summer 2021, MRM Village had amassed a membership of more than 600 parents, students, and educators across North America seeking a radically different, identity-affirming alternative to traditional schooling.

In addition to the free Village membership, families also can choose to join the more specialized Co-learning for Liberation community (CLLC), which “supports caregivers that have opted out of the traditional system of schooling.” Monthly fees for membership in this group are on a sliding scale. The CLLC currently includes approximately 60 members looking to cocreate “customized learning experiences or internships via an optional, virtual cooperative with other families and vetted, socially conscious (majority BIPOC) facilitators, healers, and mentors.”

KEY LESSONS:

1

Rather than replicating the traditional structures of school (such as grades or curriculum), CLLC provides a collaborative space where parents and students of color can take ownership over their own learning.

2

For families in this self-organized learning community, a belief in student-directed learning is intimately tied to a desire for racial liberation and freedom from systems “rooted in white supremacist beliefs and practices.” The belief that BIPOC students deserve learning environments where they are valued and their families’ expertise is honored is a prime motivator.

3

Both parents and students find the MRM community and supports to be uniquely affirming. For parents, MRM offers access to like-minded adults and liberation-minded activities and advice. For students, MRM offers safety and joyful exploration within a primarily BIPOC environment.

4

CLLC’s virtual format is both a strength and a challenge. The group’s online platform allows BIPOC parents of self-directed learners across North America to access a like-minded community and critical supports that they struggle to find elsewhere. But a virtual format also can be at odds with the hands-on philosophy of learning that many community members espouse.

KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:
WATERBURY, CT*

*with students
joining virtually
from across
North America

600+

STUDENTS
SERVED

STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

ONLINE OR IN-PERSON; SUPPORT FOR HOMESCHOOLERS

In search of something different: An affirming community for self-directed, decolonized learning

MRM was founded in Waterbury, Connecticut, in 2016 by Chemay Morales-James, a former teacher, antiracist educator, and facilitator, as an in-person homeschool co-op for BIPOC families. Members shared a commitment to education that is self-directed and liberation centered, which the organization defines as being free from “institutions and systems that are rooted in oppressive, white supremacist beliefs and practices.” Participating families, all of which were educating their children outside of the school system, would gather at a physical location to build community and cocreate learning experiences together, led by other co-op members or community members.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic meant members could no longer meet in person, MRM decided to shift to a primarily virtual format. With the launch of its online MRM Village platform in August 2020, MRM enlarged its reach beyond any one region and soon attracted BIPOC families looking to pursue self-directed, “decolonized” education and parenting from as far away as California and Alberta, Canada.

The virtual MRM Village is intentionally designed to be nonhierarchical, operating as a community of individuals working together to serve the whole. This environment is designed so BIPOC students and families around the country can collaboratively design an education program that meets the unique needs of students on their own terms.

Empowering youth and parents as colearners

A distinguishing feature of MRM is that, rather than replicating the structures of traditional school like grade levels and formal curriculum, the community empowers each individual student to take ownership over their own learning, at their own pace, with the support of caring adults. MRM parents embrace the concept of “unschooling,” a version of homeschooling based on a learner-centered philosophy of education that dates back to the 1970s. An unschooling approach is not organized around a prescriptive curriculum; rather, adults tap into a child’s interests and guide them to pursue self-directed learning. Estimates vary, but as many as [10 percent](#) of the nation’s estimated 2 million homeschoolers are unschooled.

Consistent with the unschooling philosophy, youth participating in the CLLC group play an essential role in selecting, designing, and delivering learning experiences. The community collaboratively determines which classes will be offered: member adults and students come together and create a list of possible classes, and the majority decides which ones to pursue. Students are encouraged to lead classes themselves, with support from adults when necessary.

“I really appreciate it,” one parent said, “because for the most part, the young people in the class series were the ones who led the cooking class, and they get our support when there are parts where they need help.”

CLLC students have led classes on topics such as cooking, Lego building, and Minecraft, as well as a course called Monster Club, where children come together to talk about different mythical creatures. If they want, children also can participate in adult-led classes in subjects such as business, Spanish conversation for families, flower arranging, arts and crafts, archery, or dance, as well as a teen group. Classes may be free or require a small fee.

None of the participating students attend traditional school. Some parents supplement CLLC classes with home-based or online lessons in traditional academic subjects such as reading, writing, and math. Others follow an entirely student-directed approach, in which they only

engage in learning that the child chooses through MRM, community resources, or individual inquiry. The critical aspect for MRM parents is to let their children choose what they want to learn. Such learning, one parent said, is “about consent and not forcing things on him, but rather him leading his own learning.”

Support for like-minded adults

Another element that sets MRM apart is that adults are active participants and learners alongside their children. MRM offers many ways for adults to participate in learning and supporting the community. Members attend virtual workshops, presentations, family music and art sessions, special events such as a Juneteenth celebration, and monthly Village check-ins, among other things. Parents also can join cohorts that serve the community in different ways, such as the Welcoming Team, Events Team, Mutual Aid Team, and Care Team. The teams are staffed by parent volunteers “trying to support all the work that needs to be done for it to be a community that isn’t necessarily a hierarchy,” an MRM parent said.

Parents expressed deep appreciation for the resources and relationships they find in MRM, which support their efforts to raise empowered and liberated children of color. Most parents said they were not able to find such support within the traditional school system or in homeschooling co-ops, which typically are predominantly white.

Several parent interviewees explained that they participate in the virtual community even more than their children do. Some reported they often attended MRM Village meetings more than once a week, while their children’s participation ranged from one or two classes to just the occasional event.

Parents also said that MRM’s empowerment of BIPOC youth to advocate for themselves, name their interests, and see themselves as leaders from a young age provides students with a strong sense of agency and power. That opportunity was something that their parents found to be lacking, or even actively undermined, in traditional schools. Similarly, parents’ roles as partners within the community empowers families to forge alternative learning experiences that stand apart from the standardization, controlling practices, and institutionalized racism they experience in traditional schooling approaches.

A village goes virtual: Reimagining unschooling for BIPOC students

The launch of the virtual MRM Village and CLLC community during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 provided a unique opportunity for families who view traditional schooling as harmful to their children’s self-identities both as learners and as students of color. For these families, a self-directed learning approach is integrally tied to liberating their children from white supremacist and colonizing systems of education. MRM fills a critical gap because it cultivates learning based on student interest while also centering and affirming the experiences of BIPOC students and families.

In interviews, CLLC families shared in-depth accounts of the perceived benefits and challenges of MRM. We explore these in detail below.

MRM parents embrace unschooling as freedom from traditional schooling practices

Like others in the unschooling movement, MRM parents believe conventional schooling practices are controlling and stifle children’s natural inclination to learn. The [Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#) describes traditional schools as “coercive schooling,” which is “generally

aimed at enhancing conformity rather than uniqueness, and it operates by suppressing, rather than nurturing, the natural drives of curiosity, playfulness, and sociability.”

“With unschooling we are shifting away from traditional behaviors, practices, and ideas,” said MRM founder Morales-James. “That doesn’t mean we are anti-school. MRM is not necessarily against the concept of a school. We are against coercive, oppressive learning practices. Unfortunately, schools tend to perpetuate those practices.”

Some MRM parents had been practicing unschooling long before the pandemic. But other parents were inspired to [look for an alternative learning environment](#) by their and their children’s learning experiences during the pandemic. Virtual instruction gave many parents an unprecedented opportunity to observe firsthand how teachers interacted with their children, and many were dissatisfied with what they saw.

For example, one parent explained that she had long been frustrated by the lack of opportunities for critical thinking or critical social theory classes in her daughter’s urban school. Once the school switched to virtual instruction, she observed that the teachers relied on “very rigid policing and controlling methods that also were not really providing any learning.” As the pandemic continued, the parent noticed one of her daughter’s teachers was increasingly verbally rough with the students, despite the collective trauma they were experiencing. Eventually, the parent asked to pull her daughter out of school for a week to do digital art research.

Based on that experience, she found it far better to be with her daughter and see her engaged in learning she enjoyed, rather than force the girl to attend a school in which she felt policed every day. It was at that point that the parent began to look for a better learning environment, one that uplifted and affirmed her daughter’s cultural identity and prioritized learning based on her daughter’s interests.

“I was just to the point where I realized children learn best when they’re doing what they love and when they’re free to make decisions and when they’re free to be in that discussion of more of a communication,” she said, “rather than, ‘You’re going to do this.’”

MRM parents seek liberation from systems centering white perspectives

Just as MRM parents were looking to break free of the structures of traditional schooling, they also were seeking an environment that was affirming, safe, and welcoming for students of color and other marginalized groups. Many parents expressed concern about the impact of students’ not seeing themselves represented in predominantly white school environments and in curriculum that was, as one parent said, “told by the perspective of one group of people that have been in the majority for so long.”

Parents also observed that being in spaces that centered white perspectives was harmful to both their own and their children’s sense of self and mental health. “I felt that if I really wanted to make a change for myself and my home and my community,” one said, “I couldn’t continue to be in spaces that were dominated by white supremacy or dominated in a way that really didn’t uphold my child or didn’t really honor him as an individual.”

Many parents had been searching for a BIPOC-centered learning environment for their children for some time before finding MRM. However, many found it difficult to find a local group of other people of color who also embraced the unschooling approach. As one parent explained, in her community, “Homeschooling situations are purely white.”

MRM’s launch of the virtual MRM Village community during the pandemic allowed many more parents across the country to access a network that provided both the cultural representation and liberation from traditional schooling that they were seeking. As one parent in California

said, “I was looking for groups with just brown and Black people, to be honest, and MRM was really the only one that I could find. I would find out what they’re doing in Connecticut and I was like, ‘I’m so jealous.’ When they opened up online, I was like, I’m there. I’m in.”

In MRM Village, parents found a virtual community that was supportive of unschooling practices while also, as Morales-James explains, focused on intentionally “shifting away from white supremacist beliefs, ideologies, and practices.” For members of MRM, this desire to “decolonize education” is central to why they are drawn to unschooling—a framing that they would not be able to find in predominantly white homeschooling groups.

Parents and students find MRM’s BIPOC-centered community healing and engaging

Parents consistently expressed deep appreciation for the affirming and supportive relationships they had made with other BIPOC unschooling parents in the virtual community. For parents who have had negative or even traumatizing experiences in white-dominated institutions—both personally and through their children—it is healing to have the emotional space to process that with other parents from marginalized perspectives and to trade resources and tools to educate their children in a BIPOC-centered way.

Members say they are able to learn about issues they care about and grow their parenting skills in a way they haven’t found in any other space. ““It’s just ‘find your tribe,’ as they say, finding people that are with you, just that support and the energy,” one member said. “We talk about issues that other groups aren’t talking about, social justice, LGBTQ+ issues, and discrimination, issues that we should be talking about, but a lot of people don’t or you don’t find that with white groups. You’re homeschooling with these white families and they’re not talking about that.”

Parents also report that MRM provides critical support in their journey to embrace a “peaceful parenting” approach, which has a deep impact on their relationships with their children. An example of this approach was described by one parent as inviting their children into conversation and discussion around decision-making rather than dictating or commanding children to do things they don’t agree with or understand.

Another parent said she thinks MRM “saved my relationship with my child.” She gained the resources and skills to slow down, listen to her son’s needs and interests, and move at his pace rather than forcing him to engage in activities defined or prescribed by society. Other parents echoed this sentiment, describing “less friction” between themselves and their children because unschooling requires that they let go of traditional ideas of what “should” be done and follow their children’s lead.

Across the board, parents also reported that their children find the MRM community uniquely affirming of their identities. In keeping with the theme of liberation, parents feel that participating in MRM has shifted their children’s self-perceptions and has allowed them to be themselves in a way that other spaces have not.

This was meaningful to parents of color, such as this mother:

“Even though we were not in a lot of white spaces, she was getting the message that she should want to be white and white was better. . . . So MRM, I think really, really for her has changed that . . . being in a space where she has pretty much all black women leading, and leading classes and consciously talking about blackness really is the focus, I started to hear her be proud of her hair and draw pictures where she really looked like herself, even her skin tone, claiming her own skin tone.”

A parent of nonbinary students also appreciated the inclusive culture, saying that MRM is “truly the only space” where nonbinary kids are not perceived as gendered and have to constantly correct their pronouns.

In addition, members of MRM say that participation has improved their children’s engagement in learning. Parents say that MRM offers a joyful learning space where children are able to freely discover their passions and pursue learning on their own terms. As one parent puts it, “He’s able to do things that he wants. He’s really into science, and now he gets to explore and [direct] his time toward science.”

The Village’s virtual community is both a strength and a challenge

Parents report that MRM Village’s virtual community provides benefits for them and for their children that they cannot access anywhere else—certainly not in traditional schools. Parents feel energized and supported in their journey to raise self-directed and racially liberated children, and they see their children thriving as learners and in their BIPOC identities through MRM. At the same time, MRM members acknowledge that as the pandemic wanes and opportunities for in-person interaction with other families increase, their children may become less interested in online activities. This tension between the healing power of a supportive, virtual BIPOC community and the commitment to hands-on, real-world learning experiences raises interesting questions for the sustainability of MRM beyond the pandemic.

In particular, the virtual setting of MRM Village can be at odds with a philosophy of hands-on, real-world learning. Parents acknowledge that there are some aspects of the MRM model that are challenging, particularly in a virtual environment. Some find that their children—especially younger children—are less interested in attending online classes than doing real-world activities or find it more difficult to lead a class effectively online without the support of an adult.

“That’s the one downfall, I think, with MRM, just if your kid is not into Zoom or online it’s hard for them to meet regularly,” one parent said. “So it’s mostly for me. MRM is mostly for me.”

As pandemic restrictions eased in many parts of the country during the summer, many MRM families have returned to in-person experiences, such as unschooling supported by public and community resources such as libraries, day care centers, or YMCA programs, rather than relying mainly on online learning opportunities. This reality highlights a tension in MRM’s virtual community: although the network is designed to function as a “village” where parents and children meet, exchange ideas, support each other, and learn together, it is hard to recreate the experience of an in-person village online. One parent said that their child has lost interest in learning that is primarily online and has become more interested in learning in real time. As more people begin returning to in-person experiences, the question remains whether MRM Village will continue as a space centered on student learning versus one more geared toward supporting adults in their intuitive parenting and unschooling journeys.

Parents are invested in MRM Village for the long term

Some parents discussed the challenges of upholding the principles of a nonhierarchical model, particularly in a widely dispersed virtual network. The Care Team was created to help provide care for community members, as well as address conflicts that inevitably arise in a nonhierarchical community of members with differing viewpoints and perspectives. Care Team members are developing approaches to navigate conflict in a way that reflects the decolonized, communitarian values of MRM. While the team continues to be a source of support for those experiencing conflict, team members acknowledge that this is an area in which they are still learning and growing.

Morales-James has indicated MRM Village may bring on an experienced facilitator of healing and restorative practice to address these issues.

One parent member of the Care Team said that it's a challenge to deal with conflict, because "solutions that we're used to are very problematic and harmful. . . . We're not really experts in restorative practices and stuff, but it's needed. And then there's questions of, 'Okay, what if someone on the Care Team is part of a conflict? What if the leadership is part of a conflict?' I feel like I get really nervous thinking about that because I could see communities falling apart around that."

For now, parents feel that MRM offers them immense benefits, and they anticipate being members for the long term—even if their children do not remain active participants. Even parents who participate in MRM more actively than their children believe that the group has given their children a strong foundation as self-directed learners and as proud BIPOC youth.

Looking to the future, parents remain open to the possibility that, depending on their interests, their children may choose to return to a more traditional schooling environment one day. The seven parents interviewed had children whose ages averaged 8.5 years old. When asked about the decision to extend their student's learning through high school, college, or beyond, most parents advised the decision will be one made in conjunction with their children. Should the children choose to pursue traditional schooling again at some point, the MRM Village members feel that participation in MRM has provided their children with a strong sense of self and an improved ability to advocate for themselves as learners. Furthermore, parents themselves feel that the MRM experience has better equipped them to support their children in advocating for the educational experience they want.

One mother imagined supporting her child in new ways if they go back to traditional school and don't want to do homework or speak up. "I think it's really my role as an advocate, when she decides to go back to school, if she does, that it will look different. I'm going to expect them to stand up for what they believe in, to stand up for what they want, and direct themselves."

In the long term, critics of the unschooling movement [raise doubts](#) about whether the approach sets children up well for successful outcomes in college and life beyond the home. One concern is that an education solely derived from student interest may create gaps in learning, hindering students' ability to succeed in the "non-village" real world they face in adulthood. For example, unschooled students may find themselves missing critical math or reading-comprehension skills they need to be successful once their self-directed studies end and they begin enrolling in college or seeking employment. Few studies have investigated academic and life outcomes for unschooled students, though [some survey research](#) indicates that many unschooled adults report that they were successful in college and feel very satisfied with their unschooling experience.

For MRM parents, however, college and traditional education pathways are not necessarily the goal. Parents anticipate their children will use whatever resources are available to them to continue to take charge of their own learning as they progress to adulthood. They may decide to enroll in postsecondary education, take a certification course, find an apprenticeship or internship, or forge their own path in any number of other ways. The key is that parents want their children to continue to pursue what interests them in any way and to feel happy, engaged, and fulfilled.

That said, none of the parents interviewed are planning to send their children to traditional school any time soon. Whether they had already been engaging in unschooling for many years or made the shift during the pandemic, they embrace the benefits of a BIPOC-centered unschooling approach that they see for their children, themselves, and their relationship with their children. For both parents and children, MRM represents a powerfully healing philosophy of learning and living that they do not want to give up.

Conclusion

In creating an environment where students and parents come together to cocreate their own education, one that centered on BIPOC families and was shaped by parents' and students' lived experiences, MRM has provided an innovative unschooling environment that provides a safe, affirming space; allows for parents and students to take ownership over learning; and frees participants from systems rooted in systemic racism.

Although this community is not without the challenges that accompany virtual learning, the culturally affirming, safe environment parents and students have created is one in which parents can see their children—and themselves—thriving for years to come. If parents feel any discomfort from not knowing where their children's cumulative education may lead in the future, that is overshadowed by the cultural safety, affirmation, and liberation MRM parents and children are creating for themselves in the present.



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