



## Ivan Illich perspective of deschooling society and the right of education

## Perspectiva de Ivan Illich sobre a desescolarização da sociedade e o direito à educação

## Perspectiva de Ivan Illich sobre la sociedad desescolarizada y el derecho a la educación

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### ABSTRACT

For over a century, schools have been able to institutionalize the value behind learning and “earning” an education. Ivan Illich argues that most learning was not the result of instruction, but of active engagement in a meaningful setting. He questions the system that encourages everyone to access an education that is guided by socio-economic relations, as pre-formatted product. This study aims to investigate if the theory of education proposed by Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* is feasible, legal, and how can it influence the creation of better models of education. The paper addresses the right to education according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to what extent a parent has the ultimate authority to direct a child’s education. Using the review literature methodology, it investigates what is the role of school and what is the proposition of Ivan Illich for an alternative system of education. By reflecting on problems and contradictions of the tradition school system the paper discusses if schools contribute to a more democratic and egalitarian society, or if they reinforce inequalities. As a conclusion, Ivan Illich believes that the biggest obstacle to achieving a society that really educates is the existing imaginary that is conditioned to schooled thinking. Illich advocated for the decentralization of education and the empowerment of individuals to take control of their own learning processes. He promoted informal learning through community-based initiatives, apprenticeships, and self-directed study. This perspective has influenced alternative education movements and contributed to the development of concepts like homeschooling, unschooling, and self-directed learning. Alternative models of education can bring creativity and innovation to the learning process and should be encouraged and celebrated, especially if guided by an emancipatory approach and not by a neoliberal market logic that reinforces inequalities.



**Keywords:** Deschooling Society. Right to Education. Models of Education. Human Rights. Homeschooling.

## RESUMO

Durante mais de um século, as escolas conseguiram institucionalizar o valor por detrás da aprendizagem e da conquista da educação. Ivan Illich argumenta que a maior parte da aprendizagem não é o resultado da instrução, mas do envolvimento ativo num ambiente significativo. Ele questiona o sistema que incentiva o acesso de todos a uma educação orientada pelas relações socioeconômicas, como produto pré-formatado. Este estudo tem como objetivo investigar se a teoria da educação proposta por Ivan Illich em *Sociedade Desescolarizadora* é viável, legal, e como ela pode influenciar na criação de melhores modelos de educação. Este artigo aborda o direito à educação de acordo com a Declaração Universal dos Direitos Humanos e até que ponto os pais têm a autoridade final para dirigir a educação de uma criança. Utilizando a metodologia de revisão de literatura, investiga qual o papel da escola e qual a proposição de Ivan Illich para um sistema alternativo de ensino. Ao refletir sobre os problemas e contradições do sistema escolar tradicional, o artigo discute se as escolas contribuem para uma sociedade mais democrática e igualitária, ou se reforçam as desigualdades. Como conclusão destaca-se que Ivan Illich acredita que o maior obstáculo para alcançar uma sociedade que realmente educa é o imaginário existente que está condicionado ao pensamento escolarizado. Illich defende a descentralização da educação e a capacitação dos indivíduos para assumirem o controle dos seus próprios processos de aprendizagem, como a aprendizagem informal por meio de iniciativas comunitárias e estudo autodirigido. Esta perspectiva influenciou movimentos de educação alternativa e contribuiu para o desenvolvimento de conceitos como educação em casa (homeschooling), *desescolarização* e aprendizagem autodirigida. Modelos alternativos de educação podem trazer criatividade e inovação ao processo de aprendizagem e devem ser encorajados e celebrados, especialmente se forem guiados por uma abordagem emancipatória e não por uma lógica de mercado neoliberal que reforça as desigualdades.

**Palavras-chave:** Desescolarização da Sociedade. Direito à Educação. Modelos de Educação. Direitos Humanos. Educação Domiciliar.

## RESUMEN

Durante más de un siglo, las escuelas han podido institucionalizar el valor detrás de aprender y “ganarse” una educación. Ivan Illich sostiene que la mayor parte del aprendizaje no fue el resultado de la instrucción, sino de la participación activa en un entorno significativo. Cuestiona el sistema que anima a todos a acceder a una educación guiada por las relaciones socioeconómicas, como producto preformateado. Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar si la teoría de la educación propuesta por Ivan Illich en *Deschooling Society* es factible, legal y cómo puede influir en la creación de mejores modelos de educación. El documento aborda el derecho a la educación según la Declaración Universal de Derechos Humanos y hasta qué punto un padre tiene la autoridad última para dirigir la educación de un niño. Utilizando la metodología de revisión de la literatura, se investiga cuál es el papel de la escuela y cuál es la propuesta de Ivan Illich para un sistema alternativo de educación. Al reflexionar sobre los problemas y contradicciones del sistema escolar tradicional, el artículo analiza si las escuelas



contribuyen a una sociedad más democrática e igualitaria, o si refuerzan las desigualdades. Como conclusión, Ivan Illich considera que el mayor obstáculo para lograr una sociedad que realmente eduque es el imaginario existente que está condicionado al pensamiento escolarizado. Illich abogó por la descentralización de la educación y el empoderamiento de los individuos para que tomen el control de sus propios procesos de aprendizaje. Promovió el aprendizaje informal a través de iniciativas comunitarias, aprendizajes y estudios autodirigidos. Esta perspectiva ha influido en los movimientos de educación alternativa y ha contribuido al desarrollo de conceptos como educación en el hogar, desescolarización y aprendizaje autodirigido. Los modelos alternativos de educación pueden aportar creatividad e innovación al proceso de aprendizaje y deben alentarse y celebrarse, especialmente si están guiados por un enfoque emancipador y no por una lógica de mercado neoliberal que refuerza las desigualdades.

**Palabras-clave:** Sociedad Desescolarizada. Derecho a la Educación. Modelos de Educación. Derechos Humanos. Escuela en Casa.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Ivan Illich was one of the education thinkers who contributed to dynamize the educational debate in the 60s and who laid the necessary foundations for a school conception that was more attentive to the needs of its environment, the reality of students and the transmission of adapted educational content to the social life. In his book “Deschooling Society” of 1970, he proposed a theory that questions education as a pre-formatted product that ignores individuality. For him, schools were manipulative institutions that possessed an unfair monopoly of educational activities through their power to assign credentials that were required by employers in the labor market. He explained that while students become educated and are led to confuse teaching with learning, obtaining degrees with education, teachers get used to the transmission of content and not the construction of knowledge, they are unable to approach and deepen topics relevant to different realities that are experienced locally.

Recently, after the breakout of the COVID pandemic in 2019, we could witness a change in the traditional model of education as many families were forced to change the traditional model of education based on school classrooms to their homes. Even though schools were closed students continued to be educated by their teachers in an online learning environment. However, education



in a home environment does not necessarily mean the achievement of the model of education proposed by Illich in *Deschooling Society*.

This paper intends to investigate if the theory of education proposed by Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* (1970) is feasible and legal. To that intent, the study will explore the right to education and to what extent a parent has the ultimate authority to direct a child's education. Also, I will discuss what is the role of school and what is the proposition of Ivan Illich for an education that is not based on schools. This study will also explain the differences and similarities among *deschooling*, homeschooling and unschooling, and if these alternatives contribute to a more democratic and egalitarian society.

The main contribution of this investigation is to understand the role of schools in our society and to think about alternatives to the traditional school system. By reflecting on problems and contradictions of the tradition school system I would discuss if schools contribute to a more democratic and egalitarian society, or if they reinforce inequalities.

## 2 WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS?

For over a century, schools have been able to institutionalize the value behind learning and “earning” an education. Schools positioned themselves to be unique banks of knowledge (Illich, 1970). Illich understands that educational institutions are self-reproducing, as well as contribute to the reproduction of a certain type of society: “we cannot go beyond the consumer society unless we first understand the obligatory public schools inevitably reproduce such a society, no matter what is taught in them” (Illich, 1970, p. 55).

These beliefs have allowed schools to monopolize the education system and exercise an expert positionality to teach the masses the need to be taught, and that students and their families should be reliant on these institutions for economic prosperity. In short, school exists as nothing more than an institutionalized enterprise. (Bartlett; Schugurensky, 2020)

Schools position themselves as vault-keepers, the only ones able to reveal the secrets to life's success, and students and their families are to submit to the educational institution with unquestioning dependence. The resulting



commodification of knowledge certificates is in turn linked to the “exercise of privilege and power” and the aspirations of the lower middle classes to gain entry to the professions (Torres; Morrow, 1995).

To assert the value myth behind schooling, schools as institutions have often question the value of self or community learning that is viewed as unreliable and without a clear return on investment. Illich describes this as the “myth of institutionalized values” with schools packaging curriculum, progress, and expectations as the merchandise to be distributed by formal, certified teachers (Illich, 1970, p. 38-39).

Schools and society have created the narrative of standardization to explicitly affirm that the value of student learning increases with the amount of institutional input. According to Illich, educational institutions rely on the axiom that all learning is a direct result from the teaching taking place in school classrooms and that education should be viewed as a public service.

### 3 IVAN ILLICHS'S VIEW ON EDUCATION

Illich reveals the inefficiency of the school at all its levels, as an institution of confinement. He questions the system that encourages everyone to access an education that, guided by socio-economic relations, is directly linked and dominated by the vision of education as a pre-formatted product. Illich argues that schools are manipulative institutions that possess an unfair monopoly of educational activities through their power to assign credentials that are required by employers in the labor market. As a result of this monopoly, schools indoctrinate students to confuse “teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new” (Illich, 1970).

Illich (1970, p. 12) reframes learning to be the acquisition of skills or knowledge gain, not simply the earning of a promotion or certificate deemed as deserving by schools and teachers when it is dependent on the fulfillment of another's (usually the teacher's) opinion or expectation. He calls for schools to cease in obligatory rituals like grade levels and standardization, attendance, and curriculum. Learning, in this perspective, must be linked to pleasure and not to obligation, that is, it must base its foundations on a web of spontaneous social relationships and not on institutionalized



compulsory confinement. Knowledge can be acquired in different learning spaces that exist outside a school. As a matter of fact, “the most potent teachers of our day are not in the schoolrooms. They are the masters of the mass media, the major professions, government, those who design our cities, organize our work, make our music and movies” (Torres; Morrow, 1995, p. 229).

The need to “*deschool*” society consists in the fact that the school limits the imagination of the students who is inserted in an environment that homogenizes thought. Illich believes that the school system is based on the condition that learning is the result of teaching, and the society “institutionalized wisdom” continues to accept this stance, despite evidence on the contrary. As a result, not only education, but the social reality itself became schooled – precisely due to the monopoly of thought arising from the institutionalization of life that lies at the root of the “modernization of poverty”. This, in turn, is a universal phenomenon and promotes underdevelopment as it combines “the lack of power over circumstances with the loss of personal strength” (Illich, 1970, p. 18).

Illich reports that most Latin American countries find themselves tied to this school system that rarely allows a poor child to match a rich child in terms of knowledge, even though both attend schools of similar quality. The poor children “will be at a disadvantage because they depend on school to progress or learn” (Illich, 1970, p. 21). Thus, it is clear that the school model is increasingly based on a technical view of education, as a supplier of work labor to meet the existing industrial market demand while its curriculum privileges the initiation into a consumer society.

Such context while allows a growing application of public funds for a qualified education of a few, subordinates the rest to a societal control established by this institutionalized system. Consequently, in any reality in which poverty is an object of study, it is noted that the mere existence of schools discourages the poor from taking control of their own learning. The school's failures lie, therefore, in its reduction since it makes society polarized. Equality of opportunity in education is a desirable goal and Illich claims to be achievable, but the author emphasizes that it cannot be confused with the compulsory school system, because schooling cannot become an end in itself.



The school privileges continuous knowledge of the opinion of others, reapplied in any given context that was not experienced. Thus, schooling is not able to promote justice or even learning because it provides only instruction, without linking its relevance or shared competences. Therefore, Illich suggests that the unschooling of society would imply the recognition of the dual nature of learning: the acquisition of skills and obtaining competences to apply them. The school nowadays, however, performs both tasks poorly, in part, because it does not know how to distinguish between them.

For the philosopher, the school system performs a triple function at the same time: (1) the repository of the myth of society; (2) institutionalization of the contradictions of this myth; (3) and the place of the rite that reproduces and involves the disparities between myth and reality. He understands that true educational reform must take place only when we understand that neither individual learning nor social equality can be enhanced by the scholastic rite. This rite translates into the modern myth that schooling produces value, and, with that, production creates demand and moves the market. Because instruction and knowledge are believed to be produced by “learning at school”, the mere existence of school produces a demand for schooling which, in turn, creates fragmented learning that is the result of repetition rather than understanding. And because the value of learning increases proportionally over time, this pattern reinforces a vicious cycle that is measured by certificates that enhances rivalry between peers. Therefore, all schools are compulsory, endless, and competitive.

For Illich, a good educational system should fulfill three goals. Firstly, it should provide all those who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives. Secondly, it should empower all those who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them. Finally, it should equip all who want to present a challenge to the public with the opportunity to make their issue known. In his proposal, this system should not force learners to follow a compulsory plan of study and it should not discriminate against those who do not possess a diploma. It should be based on free speech, free assembly, and a free press, using modern communication technology. (Bartlett; Schugurensky, 2020)

Some scholars believe that Illich has been ‘silenced’ for denouncing compulsory schooling (Bartlett; Schugurensky, 2020). Ivan Illich did not suggest a



society without any schools or any arrangements and resources for learning. However, in a “*deschooled* society” nobody would be compelled to go to school, neither by the law nor by the threat of poverty, discrimination, and exclusion from society. No one would be punished or disadvantaged for not going to schools, or for wanting and trying to learn in other ways. He believed that most learning was not the result of instruction, but of active engagement in a meaningful setting. He argued that most people learn best through experience and collaboration. “Education for all means education by all” (Illich, 1970, p. 22).

Illich proposes a form of solution, which he calls a convivial society. “Convivial is a society in which man controls the tool” (Illich, 1973, p. 13). A convivial society does not imply that existing institutions are totally absent – essentially manipulative institutions, according to Illich – or that some goods and services cannot be enjoyed. The author suggests a balance between the institutions that generate the demands that they can satisfy and the institutions that aim to respond to the needs and development of individuals.

#### **4 ALTERNATIVES FOR TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS: DESCHOOLING X UNSCHOOLING X HOMESCHOOLING**

John Holt was also convinced that school was not the place that taught students everything they needed to know. His thoughts were closely aligned with Illich because neither understood school as the only avenue for learning, since students learn consistently through other means and experiences, such as exposure to the natural world.

Holt coined the term ‘unschooling’ in the 1970s after realizing that the term “*deschooling*” was perceived as too radical by many people. He conceptualized unschooling as a strategic step towards *deschooling*. Unschooling was about taking children out of school, and *deschooling* referred to changing laws and policies to make schools non-compulsory. For Holt (1977), unschooling was both about social reform and about social change, therefore unschooling should create or reclaim spaces for people of all ages to learn and live together.

Unschooling is a particular approach that is focused on child-focused learning without a formal structure, in which families have little reliance on the





formal curricula. It is premised on the assumption that children are naturally curious and will follow their interests with enthusiasm (Bartlett; Schugurensky, 2020). Some families embrace daily tasks such as cooking, gardening, and shopping as opportunities for learning. Other embrace the exploration of topics via online learning in the form of videos, blogs, and sites that offer modules (e.g. Kahn Academy, National Geographic).

Even though unschooling was originally conceptualized as learning in the community and in the world, in practice it often manifests as homeschooling. Homeschool can be understood as a place of learning, where parents can choose the type of method of education they will apply. It could be in a more flexible and freer environment (or not). Parents control the location of their children's education but usually are still guided by a prescribed curriculum, textbooks, and grade assignments. They act like the teachers in the classroom, although they have more autonomy than teachers and can add supplemental materials and personalized learning experiences. Students learning at home often can allocate more time and pacing between lessons and assignments. In this environment students are less in contact with peers but sometimes join other homeschooled students for fieldtrips and similar informal learning opportunities. In the United States, around 2 million children (3.5% of the overall K-12 population) are currently homeschooled, with numbers projected to reach as many as 10 million by 2021 (Bartlett; Schugurensky, 2020).

In a homeschool environment the teaching-learning process may have been removed from the school buildings, but do not necessarily challenge the emphasis on certification and the reliance on standardized curricula and technology to deliver an educational experience.

Even though homeschooling is a movement that has been growing today and spread across several countries, there are also, in an equal or greater proportion, those who strongly condemn such practices. They consider schooling, with its established systems, one achievement of the last centuries that brought unquestionable progress to society and that there are several physical and relatively socializing limitations of the home environment (especially with children from different socioeconomic groups, cultures and backgrounds) that would be unlikely overcome. For them, any alternative that breaks with the traditional school



format would be unacceptable, even though they recognize that improvements on the quality of the school are always necessary. These critics also point out that education at home can be a challenge to the fundamental idea of the right (and public obligation) of education that must be met, at least in part, through cooperative exchange within a community. Also, the risk of elitism (as many parents do not have the experience, knowledge, and resources, including devices and connectivity) and that these children may miss many curricular contents that would be very useful in adult life. (Bartlett, T., Schugurensky, D., 2020).

## 5 THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

When we start thinking about different models of education one of the main questions that might arise is: to what extent a parent has the (ultimate or full) authority to direct their child's education? Especially if in one given country, the "State" thinks that the education being given – or that might be given – to a child does not meet the State's based standards. "All systems of education and what constitutes a proper or right education are based on presuppositions and, in the end, faith in something that is not ultimately provable against an absolute standard upon which every person in a society agrees" (Weishart; Joshua, 2016).

The right to education is one fundamental human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 establishes in art. 26 that "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory".

However, education does not mean the same as schooling. We can see in the art. 26.3 of UDHR that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children". In fact, the primary responsibility of parents for the education and development of their children is exactly what the Convention on the Rights of the Children guarantees (art. 18.1) in the best interests of minors. Furthermore, there are different spheres of action for education: on top of the State's responsibility to guarantee access to basic education for all, parents have the right and responsibility to educate their children at home and/or to choose a model of education that best suits the needs of the family.



Therefore, from the perspective of the international system's protection of human rights, there is no conflict between the state's responsibility to guarantee universal access to education and the primary responsibility of parents to guarantee the education and integral development of their children. There is no incompatibility between the obligations of the States and the parents on education because they are conceptually different things, and from a legal point of view the norms are not antagonistic to each other.

The United Nations (UN), in the report of its special educational mission to Germany in 2006 stated that the right to education cannot be reduced to mere *attendance at school* and, consequently, that home education must be considered as a valid method of education under art. 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Weishart, Joshua E., 2016).

Families that opt for homeschooling point to the need to rethink the role and existence of the school, whether public or private. Schools' spaces should be encouraged and celebrated, especially if they are guided by an emancipatory approach and not by a neoliberal market logic that reinforces inequalities. Thus, the emancipatory project also requires a democratic and inclusive public education system as well as innovative pedagogical models (Hooks, 1994).

## 6 CONCLUSION REMARKS

Ivan Illich was a prominent Austrian philosopher, social critic, and theologian whose book "Deschooling Society," published in 1971, made significant contributions to both science and society.

Illich challenged the conventional notion of schooling as the primary means of education. He argued that institutionalized education often restricts learning, creativity, and personal development rather than facilitating them. His critique led to a reevaluation of traditional educational systems and sparked discussions about alternative forms of learning. He argued that most learning was not the result of instruction, but of active engagement in a meaningful setting. Even if the school is not the only modern institution that restricts the human vision of reality, it does so in a more profound way because it is credited with the primordial function of forming critical capacity (even if the learning framework relies on a prepackaged



process). In addition, the school has become the largest and most anonymous employer, succeeding corporations in similarity with them, being considered a variable of the political and economic structure of a given society.

To replace schools, Illich recommended an alternative system of educational webs to heighten opportunities for learning, sharing and caring. He believed that most people learn best through experience and collaboration. He calls for schools to cease in obligatory rituals like grade levels and standardization, attendance, and curriculum. This perspective has influenced alternative education movements and contributed to the development of concepts like homeschooling, unschooling, and self-directed learning.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, some are arguing that the *deschooling* of society proposed by Illich has finally happened, not so much through policy design, but through the proliferation of technologies that made possible the online learning. However, this is not exactly *deschooling* as formulated by Illich, which consisted of a new educational approach organized collaborative and in a dialogical manner by the community. What we witness today is remote learning that constitutes an extension of traditional school and is done with the content and the guidance provided by a teacher. Even if the children do not physically attend the school, the school is still at the center of the process by prescribing standards and certifying achievement.

Illich points out that the biggest obstacle to achieving a society that really educates is the existing imaginary that is conditioned to schooled thinking. He suggests that the assessment of the educational level of a given society is exactly the degree of its effective political participation, that is, in the way individuals relate to the spheres that represent (or govern) them. As a way out he believes on unschooling of society as an alternative approach to education, that depends on the leadership of those raised in school.

Ivan Illich believes in a promising future that will depend on choices that encourage a life of action instead of a life of consumption, on the human being's ability to produce a lifestyle that will foster spontaneity and independence instead of maintaining a lifestyle restricted to making and unmaking, producing and consuming.



The main objective of this study is to propose a reflection on the alternative models of education proposed by Illich: after centuries of institutionalized education, is the school the ideal place to educate?

Using Illich's insights we can conclude that alternative models of education can bring creativity and innovation to the learning process and should be encouraged and celebrated, especially if guided by an emancipatory approach and not by a neoliberal market logic that reinforces inequalities. Illich emphasized the importance of personalized education tailored to individual needs and interests rather than standardized curriculum and assessments. This focus on individualized learning has influenced educational theories and practices aimed at catering to diverse learning styles and preferences. Nevertheless, this emancipatory project requires a democratic process to achieve an innovative pedagogical model to the public education system. It should include cooperative learning webs, unschooling practices and other collaborative arrangements. To promote a more equitable, democratic, and free society we should foster the implementation of educational systems that are more dialogical, learner-centered, and project-based pedagogical approaches.

Illich's work extends beyond education to broader social critiques of institutionalized systems, including medicine, transportation, and development aid. His ideas have inspired social activists and scholars to question the assumptions underlying various societal structures and to envision more equitable and sustainable alternatives.

Ivan Illich's "Deschooling Society" has had a lasting impact on both science and society by challenging conventional wisdom about education and promoting alternative learning approaches. By reflecting on his ideas, we intend to encourage societal critical reflection on the relationship between technology, institutions, and human flourishing.

This study does not aim to exhaust discussions on the subject, on the contrary, we wish to shed light on such an important and necessary topic for society and to foster further studies and discussions on the subject. We live in a time when new technologies and artificial intelligence permeate our learning environments. In this moment of dislocation of the school spaces to remote learning and alternative forms of education, the society is invited to reflect on



the necessary changes we expect to see in the educational system in the future. It is time for us to take meaningful action to bring about space for the education we want for people, inspired by the principles of freedom and the ideals of human solidarity.



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