

**DESCHOOLING SOCIETY 50 YEARS LATER:  
REVISITING IVAN ILLICH IN THE ERA OF COVID-19**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the COVID-19 era, most governments around the world closed schools to mitigate the spread of the virus. Students, educators and families had to navigate uncharted learning landscapes. Alternative models of delivering education proliferated. In this context, we revisit Illich's educational ideas through the lens of pandemic-related shifts. We pay particular attention to four educational models occurring beyond school buildings: remote learning, homeschooling, microschooled (pandemic pods), and unschooling. To what extent do they constitute a step forward toward Illich's radical proposal to deschool society? Which are closer to his conceptualization of learning webs as convivial spaces? Can schools still make a contribution to freedom, equality, and participation? After exploring these questions, we conclude that an emancipatory educational project should include two simultaneous tasks: the continuous development of prefigurative pedagogical experiments outside schools such as cooperative learning webs and other collaborative arrangements, and constant efforts to democratize schools and educational systems.

**KEY WORDS**

Ivan Illich; deschooling; unschooling; COVID-19; learning webs; school democracy.



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# **A SOCIEDADE SEM ESCOLAS 50 ANOS DEPOIS: REVISITANDO IVAN ILLICH NA ERA DA COVID-19**

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## **RESUMO**

Na era da COVID-19, governos de todo o mundo decidiram pelo encerramento das escolas para combater a proliferação do vírus. Estudantes, educadores e famílias tiveram, assim, de percorrer paisagens educativas até então inexploradas. Proliferaram modelos alternativos de atividades de ensino/aprendizagem. Neste contexto, revisitamos as ideias educativas de Illich, recorrendo à lente das mudanças provocadas pela pandemia. Prestamos especial atenção a quatro modelos que se concretizaram para além dos muros das escolas: educação a distância, ensino doméstico, *microschooling (pandemic pods)*, e *unschooling*. Até que ponto estas alternativas podem constituir uma aproximação às propostas radicais de Illich de uma sociedade desescolarizada? Que propostas mais se aproximam da sua noção de redes de aprendizagem como espaços de convivencialidade? As escolas poderão ainda contribuir para a liberdade, igualdade e participação? Uma vez exploradas estas questões, concluímos que um projeto educativo emancipatório tem de concretizar duas condições em simultâneo: o desenvolvimento contínuo de experiências pedagógicas realizadas fora da escola, tais como as redes de aprendizagem cooperativas e outras atividades colaborativas; e perseverar nos processos de democratização das escolas e dos sistemas educativos.

## **PALAVRAS - CHAVE**

Ivan Illich; desescolarização; *unschooling*; COVID-19; redes de aprendizagem; democracia nas escolas.



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# LA SOCIEDAD DESESCOLARIZADA 50 AÑOS DESPUÉS: REVISITANDO A IVAN ILLICH EN LA ERA DEL COVID-19

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## RESÚMEN

En la era de COVID-19, la mayoría de los gobiernos del mundo cerraron las escuelas para mitigar la propagación del virus. Estudiantes, personal escolar y familias tuvieron que navegar por paisajes de aprendizaje inexplorados. Modelos alternativos de impartir educación proliferaron. En este contexto, revisitamos las ideas sobre educación propuestas por Illich a través de la lente de los cambios relacionados con la pandemia. Prestamos especial atención a cuatro modelos de educación que ocurren más allá de los edificios escolares: aprendizaje remoto, educación en el hogar, microescolarización (*pandemic pods*) y *unschooling*. ¿Hasta qué punto estos modelos podrán ser un paso adelante hacia la propuesta radical de Illich de una sociedad desescolarizada? ¿Cuáles están más cercanos a sus ideas sobre las redes de aprendizaje como espacios de convivencia? ¿Podrán las escuelas todavía hacer una contribución a la libertad, igualdad y participación? Después de explorar estas preguntas, concluimos que un proyecto educativo emancipador debe incluir dos tareas simultáneas: el desarrollo continuo de experimentos educativos prefigurativos fuera de las escuelas - como redes de aprendizaje cooperativo y otros arreglos colaborativos - y perseverar en la democratización de las escuelas y los sistemas educativos.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Ivan Illich; desescolarización; *unschooling*, COVID-19; redes de aprendizaje; democracia escolar.



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# Deschooling Society 50 Years Later: Revisiting Ivan Illich in the Era of COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, in the midst of a horrific pandemic, most governments around the world closed the doors of educational institutions. Suddenly, over 60% of the world's student population stopped attending schools and universities. Indeed, with the onset of COVID-19, cascades of school closures have swept across countries, cancelling in-person classes, closing campus amenities, and even urging or mandating students living on higher education campuses to move out. In many countries, school closures lasted several months. Some countries, like Kenya, took a more drastic approach: the government canceled the entire school year and ordered the students to start over in 2021.

As a result of this pandemic (which, as *The Lancet* recently suggested, may be considered a syndemic), not only have millions of students been impacted, but school employees, educators, and students' families experienced an educational culture shock. In response to address school closures, alternative teaching methods and spaces are being explored and employed by teachers and students' families alike. Schools and teachers have now come to depend on online educational platforms to provide connection and access to formal, standardized content, and at the same time many families are taking up informal learning opportunities in their homes and communities. What are the positive and negative impacts of these new initiatives? To what extent will these new practices reconceptualize notions of learning and education in years to come? To what extent do they constitute a step forward toward Illich's radical proposal to deschool society half a century ago?

In order to address these questions in a historical context, we organized this paper in five sections. In the first one, we present a short biographical account of Ivan Illich. In the second section we provide a summary of the main arguments of *Deschooling Society*. In the third section, we discuss three salient themes of *Deschooling Society*: the value of schooling, schools as tools for social control, and learning webs as convivial institutions. In the fourth section, we revisit *Deschooling Society* with the insights of five decades, including some of the critiques raised by other educators. In the last sections we return full circle to the current context of COVID-19 and describe some emerging alternatives to the school system like remote learning, homeschooling, microschooled and unschooling, and analyze them in the context of the learning webs proposed by Illich. In the conclusions, we argue that an emancipatory project requires the constant experimentation with alternative models of education that nurture collaborative spaces similar to learning webs, but we don't give up on schools. In fact, we believe that it is still possible to transform educational systems into more democratic institutions that promote equality, freedom and participation, on the one hand, and more creative and engaging pedagogical approaches, on the other.



## IVAN ILLICH (1926-2002): PRIEST, PHILOSOPHER AND SOCIAL CRITIC

Ivan Illich was born in Vienna in 1926. His mother was a German Jew who had converted to Protestantism. His father was a Croatian Catholic. In 1941, at age 15, Illich, his mother and two younger siblings escaped the Nazis (they were considered half-Jews) and moved to Italy. By then, his father had passed away. Illich spent the following years in Florence, Rome and Salzburg, studied history, philosophy and theology, and in 1951 was ordained a Catholic priest. At that time, his main mentor was philosopher and political thinker Jacques Maritain, who was the French Ambassador to the Vatican and was involved in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1951 Illich moved to New York, where he did pastoral work. Between 1956 and 1960 he served as vice president of the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Puerto Rico. At that time, he was able to speak eight languages: Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Latin, Italian, German and Croatian. He later learned other languages, including Hindi and Ancient Greek.

In the early sixties Illich did missionary work in Latin America and established the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This center, which received the support of Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo, was a combination of a training school, a conference center, a free university and a publishing house. In a few years, CIDOC trained hundreds of missionaries from the United States, Canada and Europe. Among the visitors to CIDOC were Paulo Freire, Paul Goodman, Erich Fromm, Susan Sontag, Peter Berger, John Holt, André Gorz, Jonathan Kozol and Joel Spring. For the rest of his life Illich travelled constantly, especially between Cuernavaca (Mexico), Penn State (United States) and Bremen (Germany), where he died in 2002 at age 76. Because he never had a home since his childhood, Illich called himself a Christian pilgrim, a wandering Jew and an errant.

In his work, Illich questioned some of the practices of the institutionalized Catholic Church and also the pervasive impact of several modern Western institutions and systems. In a series of books published in the 1970s and early 1980s, he criticized education (*Deschooling Society*, 1970), transportation (*Energy and equity*, 1974), medicine (*Medical nemesis*, 1976b), and work (*The right to useful unemployment and its professional enemies*, 1978; and *Shadow work*, 1981). His main argument was that schools were hindering learning, that cars are unsustainable, wasteful and immobilizing, that modern medicine makes people sick, and the justice system generates crime (Illich, 1973). Throughout his life, Illich demonstrated an openness to challenge popular ideas and his own assumptions, a courage to question authority, and a capacity to think about social life in unusual, imaginative and original ways.

It is difficult to pigeonhole the complex ideas of Ivan Illich in a simple ideological box. He has been referred to as a utopian anarchist intellectual who wanted to break down the modern state, as an extremist and a radical, and a left libertarian (Cyr, 1990; Greer, 1971; Zaldívar, 2011). He has also been associated with liberation theology, which emphasized a preferential option for the poor and the political and social liberation of oppressed people. Interestingly enough, free market libertarians have also used his ideas to promote school choice and vouchers (Liggio, 1971). While Illich never referred to himself as an anarchist, he was closely associated with major figures in left-anarchist circles of the mid-20th century, particularly Paul Goodman (1911-1972), who published *Compulsory Mis-education* in 1964, and unschooling advocate John Holt (1923-1985), who published the widely popular *How*



*Children Fail* in 1964 and *How Children Learn* in 1967. Likewise, while he did not label himself a liberation theologian, he associated himself with many references of the liberation theology movement, including Mendez Arceo, Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Helder Camara and Camilo Torres (Hartch, 2015).

In the field of education, Illich is still discussed today by scholars and practitioners interested in exploring alternatives to the educational system, and many of them consider him one of the main 'revolutionary' pedagogues of the 20th century (Rudolph, 2020). Some authors, like Gabbard (2020) argued that Ivan Illich has been 'silenced' (that is, excluded from educational discourse and thus largely forgotten) for committing the heretical act of denouncing compulsory schooling. However, in August 2020, a Google scholar search of "Ivan Illich" produced 32,700 results, with half of those citations being from the last ten years. Likewise, a google search of "Deschooling Society" produced 8,560 results, and approximately half of these citations (4,180) are from the last ten years. This suggests that although Illich may have been marginalized from educational discourse in some moments of the past, there is renewed interest in his work. Moreover, in the current context of COVID-19 and the sudden closure of schools around the world, many observers are rediscovering the ideas of Ivan Illich, particularly *Deschooling Society*.

## DESCHOOLING SOCIETY: A SUMMARY

*Deschooling Society* was the first book of Ivan Illich, and it immediately received widespread attention, with portions of it reprinted in influential magazines like *Les Temps Modernes*, *New York Review of Books* and *Social Policy*. The first draft of the book was published in 1970 in Mexico, in the Cuadernos de CIDOC collection, under the title of *The Dawn of Epimethean Man and Other Essays*. Illich had written most of the chapters of the book for a seminar on alternatives in education organized by Everett Reimer in 1968 (Bruno-Jofré & Zaldívar, 2012). The book contained seven chapters: "Why We Must Disestablish Schools," "Phenomenology of School," "Ritualization of Progress," "Institutional Spectrum," "Irrational Consistencies," "Learning Webs," and "Rebirth of Epimethean Man."

In those seven chapters, Illich provided a powerful critique of compulsory schooling and a proposal to create learning opportunities outside the school system. Unlike other scholars who believed that schools could be reformed, Illich argued that the only way to overcome the oppressive structure of the school system and free humanity from its damaging effects was to dismantle it. With the insights of a theologian, Illich argued that schooling had become the world religion of a modernized proletariat and made false promises of salvation to the poor. He contended that schools were manipulative institutions and possessed an unfair monopoly of educational activities through their power to assign credentials that were required by employers in the labor market. As a result of this monopoly, Illich claims, 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" (1970, p. 1).

Illich defines schools as "age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum" (1970, p. 26). For him, this mass compulsory schooling system creates a public dependency on the commodity of education by teaching the need of being taught and thus curtailing people's desire to learn and



develop independently. Hence, schools prepare people for the alienating institutionalization of life. Another function of schools is to persuade people that the status quo is not only unavoidable but also necessary. In his words, “school is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is” (1970, p. 113). Last but not least, schools convince the poor that their inferior socio-economic status is justified and discourages them from taking control of their own education.

However, Illich went beyond criticizing the compulsory schooling system. Given that he did not believe in the possibilities of reform, he called for disestablishing the school system, because in his view deschooling would be “at the root of any movement for human liberation” (Illich, 1970, p. 24). To replace schools, he recommended an alternative system of educational webs to heighten opportunities for learning, sharing and caring. He argued that most learning was not the result of instruction, but of active engagement in a meaningful setting. Like Dewey, he believed that most people learn best through experience and collaboration. Interestingly, in his proposal for the creation of “learning webs” or “learning networks” Illich anticipated by several decades the possibilities of computers and telephones to connect people and knowledge outside of educational institutions.

During the seventies, the ideas posed in *Deschooling Society* were the subject of intense discussion in educational circles. The first division was between those who defended educational institutions and those who criticized them. The second division, among those who were critical of schools, was between those who agreed with the deschooling argument and those who believed that it was possible to democratize the school system. Today, with the impact of COVID-19 on school closures and the recent growth of homeschooling, unschooling, microschooling and “education savings accounts” (vouchers), the ideas of Ivan Illich are being discussed again in both left and right educational circles.

## THREE THEMES IN DESCHOOLING SOCIETY

### THEME 1: THE VALUE OF SCHOOLING

For over a century, schools have been able to institutionalize the value behind learning and “earning” an education. Schools uniquely positioned themselves to be the banks of knowledge, doling out inequitable opportunities to those who can buy into state-legislative mandates of learning (Freire, 1970; Illich, 1970). Termed as the great equalizers by Horace Mann, schools continue attempts at maintaining this reputation in loaning out counterfeit hopes and promises that attending and passing school ensures a socially constructed successful future (Cremin, 1957; Gintis, 1972). These beliefs have allowed schools to monopolize the education system and exert an expert positionality in having taught the masses the need to be taught, and that students and their families should be reliant on these institutions for economic prosperity. Playing into the capitalist pipeline (Gintis, 1972), educational institutions have come to condition students and families to attend school for a competitive advantage. Like a banking institution, schools have created a hierarchical system of knowledge transfer, deeming all other activities in



life to stem from and depend on them (Freire, 1970; Illich, 1970). In short, school exists as nothing more than an institutionalized enterprise.

To assert the value myth behind schooling, schools as institutions have often posited self or community learning to be 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 (1970, pp. 38-39). This assertion positions schools and teachers 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. These unrealistic expectations are not wholly the fault of teachers, as their own knowledge banks to impart learning are restricted by state mandated curriculum and teaching standards. Also, in this time of schools struggling with retention and understaffing, many teachers’ energies are often vaporized with additional duties such as custodian, secretary, nurse, preacher, and therapist. Illich claimed that schools want students and their families to believe that invaluable learning taking place within the walls of classrooms is a direct result of students attending school (p. 32). For example, if a student does not pass or graduate from school, then it is the student’s and family’s fault, not that of the institutionalized inequalities that exist pervasively throughout society. Likewise, many schools, especially those who serve students of lower socioeconomic status, communicate the narrative that compulsory attendance in schools will result in promotion and certification in relation to earnings and worth. Overall, educational institutions have become less concerned about what students are learning and more concerned with accolades, recognition, and the passing of grades and grade levels. In unequal societies, schools can be conceptualized as fields of distinction (Bourdieu, 1977) with certain sets of practices and knowledge that set the tone for competitive, polarizing struggles (Illich, 1970). This scenario has recently played out in parents paying off high school and college officials or fraudulently applying for college admissions.

At the same time, the entire realm of achievement has been artificially engineered. There have been numerous attempts to measure every element of education, most markedly student growth and achievement. Schools and society have created the narrative of standardization to explicitly ascertain that the value of student learning increases with the amount of institutional input. 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 (Illich, 1970). Therefore, learning in schools has become increasingly quantifiably measured for effectiveness by administering standardized tests, assigning grades, and distributing certificates and diplomas. A myriad of state-led measurements of students and schools have created a rating and ranking competition driving perceived values, without taking into account who is setting the value standards. The competitive edge lens of standardized test scores, school letter grades, awards and accolades have fed into formulating social rankings based on attendance to elite educational institutions. These arbitrary measurements of schooling have come to represent a perception of quality and have resulted in an unequal distribution of resources, including funding for schools and students.

Although there exists a connection between costs and expenditures with student learning outcomes, schools alone cannot boast having a commodity on learning. Instead, schools only provide governmentally compliant learning, lacking in scale and student choice. Schools tout their educational monopoly status without regard to the incidental learning students are privy to and able to access every day while students actually undertake a great deal of their learning outside the educational institution of school and

without a formal teacher. Such learning is often not quantifiable and cannot be easily measured against any institutionally driven curriculum or assessment, or compared to the learning outcomes demonstrated by other students.

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 blanket expectation. He calls for schools to cease in obligatory rituals like grade levels and standardization, attendance, and curriculum. Drawing from the field of social pedagogy, it is pertinent to acknowledge the knowledge acquired in different learning spaces that exist outside a school. As Illich argued, informal learning milieus often fare better than formal learning spaces at fostering social and emotional skills, group participation skills, and observational critical thinking (Illich, 1970). Recent educational trends of increasing career and technical education programming and skills-based learning driven by student choice have emerged in response to the value propositions set forth by educational institutes.

## THEME 2: SCHOOLS AS TOOLS FOR SOCIAL CONTROL

Educational institutions have long attempted to guide not only value systems and acceptable societal norms, but also the learning of specific curriculum and content. For Illich, schools are masters at monopolizing an abundance of resources and utilizing political funding and support to their advantage. It is through these measures that schools have been able to impart unto citizens the belief that they are guided by scientific knowledge and are both efficient and benevolent (Illich, 1970, p. 4). Through legislative backing, schools have determined what kinds of education is necessary for the masses. In this regard, Illich (1970) points to parents undergoing schooling alongside their children in order to be exposed to indicators of normativity in value and belief systems and behavioral obedience.

The controlling practices of schools, however, have pitted students and families against one another, the state and its policies. Similar to Durkheim's "social facts", schools divide the social world into two: what the state and school deem as education, and what students and families learn through their own educational processes. Fallacious beliefs have positioned families, most notably those of families of color or low socioeconomic status, as incapable of providing educational experiences and drawing from their own communities' resources in order to do so (Illich, 1970). Educational institutions impart cultural capital expectations as means of othering and creating disparities (Bourdieu, 1986). The idea of schools as means for social control have also been discussed as cultural invasion (Freire, 1970), reproduction of capitalist relations (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and indoctrination (Cyr, 1990). A key concept in examining the role of schools in social control is the hidden curriculum. In *After deschooling, what?*, Illich (1976a), noted that the hidden curriculum teaches all children that economically valuable knowledge is the result of professional teaching and that social entitlements depend on the rank achieved in a bureaucratic process. Indeed, beyond the curriculum-based, standardized objectives set forth through organized lessons, the hidden curriculum allows schools to inculcate the academic and behavioral expectations of students and their relations with peers and teachers. The hidden curriculum adds



prejudice and guilt to the discrimination which a society practices against some of its members and compounds the privilege of others (Illich, 1970). In low-income schools, the hidden curriculum tends to emphasize definable and predictable behaviors like obedience and punctuality, leaving little room for exploratory, student-centered learning, teamwork and collaboration. In those schools, the emphasis on skill and drill and on teaching to the test furthers the notion of playing the game to succeed. All this creates constraints on independence, critical thinking, and creativity with the imagination being “all schooled up” (Illich, 1970, p. 23; see also Anyon, 1980; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Snyder, 1971). Moreover, although educational institutions function under the guise that schools know what is best for students and families, the unstated values of schools are often based on Eurocentric beliefs and practices, with limited cultural consciousness and significant biases and silences. The hidden curriculum is also not only experienced by students, but also by their families, who internalize underlying assumptions and expectations of how to interact properly with school officials, support their child, and play a passive role in the school system.

### THEME 3: LEARNING WEBS AS CONVIVIAL INSTITUTIONS

A third major theme set forth by Illich in *Deschooling Society* is the need to re-imagine learning as a collective endeavor in convivial institutions. For Illich (1973), convivial institutions are those that foster a sense of interrelatedness among those individuals who spontaneously and voluntarily participate in them. He envisioned convivial institutions that would help to shape a different type of social experience and social reality. In a deschooled society organized around convivial institutions, people could choose for themselves action-oriented lives instead of lives constrained by the logic of consumption. Some authors, like Hedman (1979) have interpreted this proposal as a form of participatory socialism. In such a society, schools do no longer exist but learning flourishes, as individuals participate in learning “webs” in which everyone could be both a teacher and a learner, and in which they freely follow their passions and their curiosity. In convivial institutions relationships among people are marked by collaboration and community reliance rather than addictions to institutions. In the deschooled society that Illich proposed, institutions are cooperative and relational, structures increase the opportunity and desirability of human interaction, and goods engineered for durability rather than obsolescence (Illich, 1970, p. 63). In such a society, the worlds of work, leisure, politics, family and community life are the natural classrooms. Learning, therefore, occurs in and of the world and individuals define themselves their own learning needs and the learning that they share with others, and also pursue common interests. In his own words,

I believe that a desirable future depends on our deliberately choosing a life of action over a life of consumption, on our engendering a life style which will enable us to be spontaneous, independent, yet related to each other, rather than maintaining a lifestyle which allows us to make and unmake, produce and consume ... a style of life which is merely a way station on the road to the depletion and pollution of the environment. (Illich 1970, p. 52)



In the learning webs, the terms “teacher” and “learner” take a broader meaning, in an ecological system of concentric circles (Brofenbrenner, 1974; Illich, 1970). Learning webs ensure equal opportunity for learning and teaching by providing public access to spaces and resources. Among these resources he mentioned educational objects, skill exchange models, peer-matches, and educators-at-large in the form of elders and community members (Illich, 1970, p. 76). By creating and defining their lives free of the predetermination of bureaucratic and hierarchical institutions, participants of learning webs are open to the surprises found within friendship, vocation, and critical and transformative engagement in the world (Stuchul & Kreider 1997). This formulation is important, because Illich did not just propose to disestablish schools, but to replace them with convivial and cooperative learning institutions (Gabbard, 2020). Indeed, for Illich (1970, p. 22), “education for all means education by all”. For him, 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.

## REVISITING *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY*: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Much has been said and written since the publication of *Deschooling Society* in 1970, both by readers of the book and by Illich himself. Some ‘pragmatic’ readers quickly disqualified the ideas of the book as utopian, meaning unrealistic, without any practical implications. Others, inspired by the winds of change of the 1960s and 1970s, embraced effusively the proposals put forward in the book. Many readers, particularly those who worked in the educational system, found the book challenging. They perceived schools as benevolent institutions and themselves as part of the solution to many of the world’s problems and not as central protagonists of the problem, as Illich claimed (Zaldívar, 2011). Accepting his proposal would challenge their own identities as professional educators because it would ask them to abandon their vocation and commit some sort of “suicide”. Some structural Marxists criticized Illich for focusing on education and paying little attention to the economic, social and political structures of capitalism, particularly to ownership of the means of production (Gintis, 1972). Neo-marxists argued that schools were contradictory institutions where hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects often coexist, and that schools, even with all their limitations, remain locations of possibility (Noonan & Coral, 2015). Communitarians endorsed the theses of conviviality learning webs but in the context of grassroots groups struggling against modernity oppression, particularly peasant movements, urban collectives, and indigenous organizations (Esteva & Suru Prakash, 1998).

Even free-market libertarians found some inspiration for their policy proposals in the book, especially the idea of educational vouchers à la Milton Friedman (Liggio, 1971) and more recently the education savings accounts (ESAs) that cover a variety of educational options, including private school tuition and fees, online learning, private tutoring, higher



education expenses and other approved customized learning services and materials. Because ESAs expand educational choice beyond schools and give parents the power to choose from a broad menu of educational options to decide what is best for their children, their advocates claim that Ivan Illich would have offered his enthusiastic endorsement. This is an interesting hypothesis, but what these authors omit is that Illich was opposed to neoliberal policies and to a consumeristic, individualist and competitive approach to education. They also omit that his proposal of learning webs was based on communitarian educational and convivial spaces.

It is pertinent to mention that Ivan Illich himself revisited the main ideas of the book on several occasions. His first regret was related to the title of the book and the confusion that generated among readers. Very quickly he published two commentaries to clarify his position, first in "The Alternative of Schooling," published in *Saturday Review* in June 1971, and soon thereafter "After Deschooling, What?" published in the journal *Social Policy* in September 1971. In those pieces he acknowledged that the title of his book may sound to many ears like treason to the enlightenment, he argued it was enlightenment itself that was being "snuffed out in the schools", and that deschooling would be "at the root of any movement for human liberation" (Illich, 1970, pp. 24 and 47). He also explained that his intention was not to end schooling, but to liberate education, to liberate it from the state and move the control to socially organized grassroots movements (Bruno-Jofré & Zaldívar, 2012). He later clarified that he "never wanted to do away with schools" (cited in Cayley, 1992, p. 64), and by the end of the 20th century he said that he hoped that his criticism of schooling may have helped some people reflect on the unintended pernicious effects of that institution and perhaps pursue alternatives to it, but at the same time he started to realize that his views were naïve and that he was "largely barking up the wrong tree" (Illich, 1995, p. vii).

In revisiting *Deschooling Society*, it is relevant to mention, even if briefly, the main similarities and differences between Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich on this matter. Illich and Freire had interesting discussions on education that included agreements and disagreements about the potential role of educational institutions to democratize society (Freire & Illich, 1975). To begin with, both were highly critical of the educational establishment. Both criticized the traditional school for its bureaucratic structures and practices, agreed that the educational system produced student alienation, concurred that educational projects should promote creativity and autonomy, and were ardent humanists who put a high value on freedom.

However, they had different proposals to address the anti-democratic nature of schools. Illich had little hope about the possibilities of democratizing the school system and called for its disestablishment, whereas Freire proposed to democratize it as part of a broader program of societal democratization. Freire also argued that Illich conflated the tool (the institution) and the ideological orientation of the educational system. For Freire, schools are social institutions and as such can be subject to reform (Bruno-Jofré & Zaldívar, 2012). Indeed, whereas Freire acknowledged the problems with schools described by Illich in his book and was aware of the role played by the educational system in reproducing social inequalities, he argued that schools were still one of the few avenues of upward mobility for the poor. Moreover, whereas Illich painted schools as monolithic, bureaucratic and unredeemable institutions, Freire considered them as historical and social agencies where conflicts take place and where change can happen. For Freire, then, the task of progressive reformers was not to eliminate schools altogether but to make them more democratic, inclusive, relevant and joyful (Schugurensky, 2015).

Moreover, Freire noted two problems with the deschooling proposal. The first related to the prerequisites to engage in the learning webs. In order to study a subject, access information on a computer, find a learning mate, or establish communications with a specialist, learners were expected to have access to a computer and have some basic level of education, including an acceptable command of numeracy and literacy. For Freire, the 'learning webs' proposal failed to recognize the different levels of cultural, social and economic capital existing in society. This connects to the second problem identified by Freire, which related to the actual operation of the learning webs. Freire argued that by abandoning universal public education and leaving learning activities to informal social interactions, the model had a bias in favor of more advantaged social groups. A third problem with the model of learning webs was later discussed by Ursula Zbrzeźniak in *Equality and emancipation in education and politics* (2017), where she noted a tension between the revolutionary and the conservative sides of the proposal. She argues that Illich conceptualized the learning webs as democratic, egalitarian and convivial institutions, but at the same time retained the old concept of mastery and the traditional model of knowledge transfer in which the master is at the center of the process. A fourth and final concern about the learning webs is that over time they can fall into the same pattern of schools and eventually take on the same bureaucratic nature to address issues like attendance and grades (Birchall, 1974).

## DESCHOOLING SOCIETY AND COVID-19: REMOTE LEARNING, HOMESCHOOLING, MICROSCHOOLING AND UNSCHOOLING

For five decades, many readers of Ivan Illich's book, regardless of their sympathies or disagreements with its main premises, believed that the proposal to deschool society at a massive scale was a pipe dream. Suddenly, in 2020, in the midst of the largest pandemic in a century, most schools around the world closed their doors, and millions of children took up learning in their own homes. In this context, some are currently arguing that the deschooling of society proposed by Illich finally happened, not so much through policy design, but through the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the last two decades and the brutality of a highly infectious virus in 2020. These commentators contend that COVID-19 has fulfilled most of Illich's framework demands, premonitions and recommendations. What many of these observers are missing is that what is happening in this unusual year is not exactly deschooling in the way formulated by Illich, which consisted of a new educational approach organized communally in a collaborative and dialogical manner (De Meneses Sousa, Soares, & Mariz, 2019; Teräs, Suoranta, & Teräs, 2020). Instead, what we are witnessing today is the spread of a variety of related but distinct alternatives to conventional (in-person) schooling that were already growing, especially *remote learning*, *homeschooling*, *microschooling* and *unschooling*.

*Remote learning* is the latest expression of distance education modalities that have been in use for over a century since its origins as correspondence studies, and later via radio and television. Whereas distance learning has been mostly asynchronous in nature, remote learning relies heavily on the internet and allows for synchronous interactions between teachers and students, and between students and students. Whereas the distance education of the 20th century was implemented mainly in adult and higher education, the remote learning of the 21st century—especially as a result of the current



public health crisis—has widened its reach to children and youth. In this case, remote learning constitutes an extension of traditional school instruction, and is done with the materials, 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-based curriculum, organizing the weekly schedule for the student, and certifying achievement. Due to the synchronous dimension of remote learning via internet, students can see the teacher and other students onscreen. This model of learning relies on a variety of technological communication platforms that provide online instructional meeting space, and instruction is often delivered through videos, modules, discussion boards, and student presentations. To track accountability and grades and communicate with the families, teachers use different portals. The remote learning model has mushroomed in response to COVID-19. As schools moved to remote learning, they faced challenges in addressing device and broadband accessibility, and internet companies have had to partner with schools and communities to offer more public hot spots, lowered rates, and even blankets of open connectivity across low-income neighborhoods. Today, remote learning has become a common conduit for formal education delivery and has made an important contribution to protect the safety of students, their families and school personnel. However, with a few exceptions, remote learning has not significantly innovated out of what in-person schooling offered or mandated.

In a *homeschooling* environment, parents control the location of their children's education but are still guided by a prescribed curriculum, textbooks and grade assignments. Parents 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 within the homeschool model often can allocate more time and pacing between lessons and assignments. In this model, homeschooled students are less in contact with peers in a classroom setting 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 (Horn, 2020; McDonald & Gray, 2019). In the wake of the pandemic, many families opted to pursue a homeschooling model in lieu of a stringent school-sponsored remote learning model. Considering family work schedules and demands during the pandemic, the homeschool model allows students and families to create learning opportunities and schedules that are flexible. However, from a critical perspective, homeschooling has three main shortcomings that have deleterious impacts on democracy. First, homeschooling requires a home infrastructure that nurtures the learning experience of the student and a variety of learning opportunities. Hence, given significant asymmetries in cultural, social and economic capital in society, homeschooling can contribute to the reinforcement of educational inequalities. Second, in homeschooling children only know the values, habits and beliefs of their home, without encountering other value systems. This is contrary to Illich's conception of learning webs as spaces to expose learners to a myriad of cultures, pedagogies, and belief systems. Third, homeschooling provides limited opportunities for socialization with peers and for social emotional learning and may reinforce individualistic approaches at the expense of group work and collaboration.

*Microschooling*, a more recent phenomenon that started around 2010, is a hybrid between homeschooling and private schooling. This model has thrived under pandemic conditions, with online groups organizing what are now being called pandemic pods or learning pods in many localities. It could be considered a reinvention of the one-room schoolhouse of the past, congregating 4 to 12 students brought together by a small group

of like-minded parents who are seeking alternatives to the traditional school system. It has no dedicated location, and it usually functions on home rotation. Microschools can hire a tutor (e.g. an accredited teacher) or parents can rotate as teachers in a co-op mode. Microschools offer an alternative to parents who believe in homeschooling but appreciate the value of peer interactions, or do not have enough time to manage the homeschooling demands due to work schedules. The curriculum is usually derived from local education institutions but could be supplemented with additional materials. During the pandemic, the number of microschools grew significantly because it aligns with the cluster model, hence minimizing exposure between families while allowing socialization and learning experiences for the students. In 2020, there has also been an influx of online companies offering assistance in organizing a microschool or pod, including the coordination of partner families, curriculum, and tutor hires. Like in the case of homeschooling, the microschooling model can have negative effects on democracy because many families are unable to participate in the pod due to limitations to offer resources (time and money), space (large enough gathering area in home), and subject knowledge (either to teach or hire a qualified tutor). Moreover, the microschooling model tends to bring together families who belong to the same socio-economic groups and hence provide limited opportunities for out-group interactions.

*Unschooling* is a particular approach to homeschooling in which families have little reliance on the formal curricula and students choose what, when, how and why they want to learn. Unschooling is premised on the assumption that children are naturally curious and will follow their interests with enthusiasm (Griffith, 2010). Similar to the Montessori approach, unschooling fosters child-driven learning and parents take a back seat in the curriculum choice and instruction process. Some families embrace daily tasks such as cooking, gardening, and shopping as opportunities for learning. Other modes embrace the exploration of topics via online learning in the form of videos, blogs, and sites that offer modules (e.g. Kahn Academy) or resources centered around specific topics (e.g. National Geographic). It is estimated that around 20% of homeschooling families use an informal 'unschooling' approach with little to no reliance on formal curricula (McDonald & Gray, 2019). For some families during the current school shutdowns, an unschooling approach was adopted by default. Due to the need for some adults to work outside the home, many children have been left to their own creativity and online learning and entertainment choices. Without some guidance and facilitated exposure to desired learning objectives or educators-at-large, the overall goals of unschooling like creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, exposure to exploratory learning and the like fall by the wayside.

In any case, despite this ad hoc situation, it could be argued that, out of the four models that we are discussing in this section (remote learning, homeschooling, microschooling and unschooling), unschooling is the one that has more ideological affinities to the ideas that Ivan Illich developed in *Deschooling Society*. There is a reason for this: the conceptualization of unschooling was originally developed by John Holt, a close associate of Illich who visited him several times at CIDOC in Cuernavaca and shared with him a critical approach to schooling and an orientation to designing an alternative model. However, Holt believed that they had distinct missions. He saw Illich as a visionary prophet and himself as a practical tactician with the capacity to transform Illich's vision into reality (Sheffer, 1990).

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, and in this regard argued that unschooling should create or reclaim spaces for people of all ages to learn and live together. Following the ideas of Dewey, Lindeman, Illich, Holt and others, contemporary unschoolers contend that education should be coterminous with life and reject what in their view is an artificial separation of educational and non-educational activities (Dodd, 2019).

While unschooling may be the closest practice to Illich's ideas about deschooling society and to his proposal of learning webs, a few problematic issues can be raised. The first issue is that, although unschooling was originally conceptualized as learning in the community and in the world, in practice it often manifests as homeschooling. In this respect, we can find in unschooling several of the criticisms that have been raised towards homeschooling. Among them are the relatively scarce opportunities for socialization with other children (especially with children from different socioeconomic groups, cultures and backgrounds), the risk of elitism (as many parents do not have the experience, knowledge and resources—including devices and connectivity—to guide their children to pursue their own interests) and that children may miss many curricular contents that would be very useful in adult life.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

With many countries still reeling from COVID-19 or anticipating a second or third wave, the expansion and fluctuation of and within these models is to be expected. The various learning models schools and families have taken up during the pandemic, however, have yet to fulfill Illich's outline of deschooling. These models, with the probable exception of unschooling, may have removed the teaching-learning process 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. Technology, of course, is not intrinsically good or bad. As Illich warned, technology can either foster "independence and learning or bureaucracy and teaching" (1970, p. 77). Schools should not be gatekeepers to learning resources but many families, especially low-income, rely on schools for guidance, devices and connectivity. The models discussed in the previous section (with the exception of some unschooling practices) still adhere to formalized learning objectives in some shape since students are bound by state or national standardized testing policies to pass for credentialing—a practice Illich staunchly rejected. In most instances, in these models a certified individual is sought after to deliver learning content and provide educative experiences for students thus upholding the banking of knowledge (Freire, 1970) and positioning knowledge as conditional on a diploma or credential. Without access to peers and diverse learning opportunities, the siphoning of social interactions and limiting of democratization strategies also occur. Each of these learning models bear some resemblance to some of Illich's visions around deschooling, and the needle may slowly continue to move that direction, but the jury is still out.

Writing 50 years ago, Ivan Illich could have not predicted all these alternatives to the traditional school system, and some that may emerge in the future, even in a post-pandemic world. If he were alive today, it would be interesting to know what he would say about these alternative models. Are they a passing fad, or are they going to continue



growing in size and popularity? More importantly, from a normative viewpoint, are they a step closer to the learning webs that he envisioned, or a step away from them? Do they contribute to a more democratic and egalitarian society, or do they reinforce inequalities? What is going to be the societal impact of families infusing their own cultural and political values into the younger generations, with limited possibilities for students to listen to different ideas? Will these new practices resulting from these experiences reconceptualize notions of learning and education in years to come?

We suggest that some of these emerging alternatives (particularly unschooling) can have positive contributions to the autonomous development and to the empowerment of the participating learners, but at the same time we acknowledge that they may detract from the collective project of emancipation, understood as the redistribution of opportunities and the renewal of social, economic and cultural goals to build a more just, deliberative, equitable and democratic society (Wildemeersch & Salling Olesen, 2012). Alternative models can certainly bring energy, creativity and innovation to this project, and should be encouraged and celebrated, especially if they are guided by an emancipatory approach and not by a neoliberal market logic that reinforces inequalities. However, the emancipatory project also requires a democratic and inclusive public education system as well as innovative pedagogical models (Emdin, 2016; hooks, 1994).

In closing, we contend that an emancipatory social and educational project should include two simultaneous tasks. The first task consists of nurturing the development of creative prefigurative experiments outside the school system like cooperative learning webs, unschooling practices and other collaborative arrangements. The second task is the implementation of more dialogical, learner-centered and project-based pedagogical approaches and the democratization of educational institutions and educational systems in order to promote higher levels of equality, freedom and participation. As Arnove (2020) recently observed, this moment of great social dislocation gives us an opportunity to imagine more equitable societies and education systems, and, to the extent possible, take meaningful action to bring about that desired future.

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