

Ivan Illich

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Born in Vienna in 1926, Ivan Illich attended a religious school for ten years and completed his secondary studies at the University of Florence in Italy. After studying Theology and Philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome, he obtained his doctorate in history from the University of Salzburg.

Illich is recognized as one of the educational thinkers who gave life to the educational debate of the 1970s and laid the foundation for the evolution of a school, which is more tuned to the needs of its environment, to the realities of people's lives and to the efficient acquisition of socially relevant knowledge. Many of his ideas have universal validity, both for the school system and other related institutions.

For educators, Illich is the father of '**deschooled education**', who condemned the school system and the schools for exercising anachronistic functions that fail to keep

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pace with change and protect the structure of the society that produced them.

It was between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s that Illich published his principal works in the field of education. His writings are made up of collections of articles reproduced in various languages as well as books that were distributed worldwide. In his most famous article, 'School: The Sacred Cow' published in 1968, he criticizes public schooling for its centralization, internal bureaucracy, rigidity and the inequalities that it harbours. His most important work, however, is 'Deschooling Society' first published in English in 1970 and later in Spanish in 1973. In this book, he puts forth the four central ideas that suffuse the whole of his work on education:

- a) Universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools.
- b) Neither new attitudes of teachers towards their pupils nor the proliferation of educational hardware or software....., nor finally the attempt to expand the teachers' responsibility until it engulfs the pupils lifetimes will deliver universal education.
- c) The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse; educational webs which heighten the opportunity for learning, sharing and caring.
- d) The ethos, not just institutions, of society ought to be 'deschooled'.

Illich developed his aversion for schooling after he met Everett Reimer in Puerto Rico in 1958. As he says, "*Until we first met in Puerto Rico in 1958 I had never questioned the value of extending obligatory schooling to all people. Together we have come to realize that for most men the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school.*"

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According to Illich, the prestige of the school as a supplier of good-quality educational services for the population as a whole rests on a series of myths. These myths are:

- 1) The Myth of Institutionalized Values: This myth, says Illich, is grounded in the belief that the process of schooling produces something of value, and thus generates a demand. It is assumed that the school enables learning. Illich, however, feels that learning is a human activity that least needs manipulation by others; that most learning is the result not of instruction but of participation by learners in meaningful situations.
- 2) The Myth of Measurements of Values: Illich avers that the institutionalized values that the school instills are quantified ones. Stating that personal growth cannot be measured by the yardstick of schooling, he asserts that once people have the idea schooled into them that values can be produced and measured, they tend to accept all kinds of rankings. As he says, *"People who submit to the standard of others for the measures of their own personal growth soon apply the same standard to themselves. They no longer have to be put in their place but put themselves into their assigned slots, squeeze themselves into the niche which they have been taught to seek, and in the very process, put their fellows into their places, too, until everybody and everything fits."*
- 3) The Myth of Packaging Values: The school sells curriculum, according to Illich, and the product that is produced through the curriculum production process appears like any other staple product. Here the pupil is the consumer of that product and the teacher is the distributor who delivers the finished product to the consumer i.e. the pupil, whose reactions are assessed to provide research data for the preparation of the next model, which may be "ungraded", "student-designed", "visually-aided", or "issue-centered."
- 4) The Myth of Self-perpetuating Progress: Illich not only talks about consumption, but also about production and growth. He links these with the race to secure degrees, diplomas and certificates that enhance one's chances of securing a good

job. For Illich the working of consumer societies is founded on this myth, and its perpetuation is an important part of the game of permanent regimentation. To smash it, says he, "would endanger the survival not only of the economic order built on the co-production of goods and demands, but equally of the political order built on the nation-state into which students are delivered by the school. The pupils who are the consumers are taught to adjust their desires to marketable values, even though this cycle of eternal progress can never lead to maturity."

Putting forth his case for deschooling education and teaching, Illich says, "Schooling, the production of knowledge, the marketing of knowledge, which is what the school amounts to- draws society into the trap of thinking that knowledge is hygiene, pure, respectable, deodorized, produced by human heads and amassed in a stock. I see no difference between rich and poor countries in the development of these attitudes to knowledge. There is a difference of degree, of course; but I find it much more interesting to analyze the hidden impact of the school structure on a society; and I see that this impact is equal or, to be more precise, tends to be equal. It doesn't matter what the over structure of the curriculum is, whether the school is public, whether it exists in a state that has the monopoly of public schools, or in a state where private schools are tolerated or even encouraged. It is the same in rich as in poor countries, and might be described as follows: if this ritual that I consider schooling to be is defined by a society as education....then the members of that society, by making schooling compulsory, are schooled to believe that the self-taught individual is to be discriminated against; that learning and the growth of cognitive capacity, requires a process of consumption of services presented in an industrial, a planned, a professional form....that learning is a thing rather than an activity. A thing that can be amassed, the possession of which

is a measure of the productivity of the individual within the society. That is, of his social value."

One of the major works of Illich that followed *"Deschooling Society"* is *"Tools for Conviviality"*. In this, he proposes a rival strategy that limits the growth of industrialized societies and suggests a new kind of organization for them, to be achieved through a new concept of work and 'deprofessionalization' of social relations including education and the school. According to him, a convivial society *"does not exclude all schools. It does exclude a school system which has been perverted into a compulsory tool, denying privileges to the drop-out. I am using the school as an example of a phenomenon to be elsewhere in the industrial world... this claim is analogous to my observation on the two types of institutions of society.... In every society there are two ways of achieving specific ends, such as locomotion, communication among people, health, learning. One I call autonomous, the other heteronomous. In the autonomous mode, I move myself. In the heteronomous mode I am strapped into a seat and carried. In the autonomous mode I heal myself, and you help me in my paralysis, and I help you in your childbearing..... In every society and in every sector, the efficiency with which the goal of the sector is achieved depends on an interaction between the autonomous and the heteronomous modes."*

Today, Illich's thoughts have found their way into the education system under a variety of labels viz. non-formal education, lifelong education etc. It can never be denied that his ideas and thoughts on education influenced a considerable number of educators.