

Echoes of Illich in Sustainability Education

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Some 20 years ago as I write, I met a vicar at a party. When he asked me what I did, and I responded – the university education of pre-service teachers – he said, ‘Ah, Ivan Illich!’. He had studied to be a teacher himself in the early 1970s. As it happened I was, at that time, the only person I knew who persisted in introducing student teachers to Ivan Illich, against an inexorable tide of technicism. I told him so, and he was confirmed in his belief that there was still some good in the world. Twenty years later, I strongly suspect that no prospective teachers will ever be given space in their top-down, wall-to-wall training for Illich. More’s the pity, because his prescience still rings as true now as it did decades ago.

When Illich wrote that ‘[i]t is now generally accepted that the physical environment will soon be destroyed... unless we reverse current trends in the production of physical goods’ (Illich, 1971, p. 9), it was not, in fact, generally accepted. Indeed, even today, when such giants as Professor Tim Jackson echo Illich’s cry, it remains controversial. Transfer such insights to the worlds of sustainability education and the ‘training’ of our teachers (ITT), and Illich’s great theoretical legacy, are astonishingly marginal. Or is it astonishing? In a field dominated by the paradigm of *Education for Sustainable Development*, calls for degrowth, like deschooling itself, still swim counter to that inexorable tide.

That schooling sits at the bedrock of a culture of excessive, not to say ecocidal consumption is an insight so disruptive that it is seldom heard outside of radical (anarchist, Marxist...) circles. It is worth reminding ourselves of the words which have redounded within such realms these last few decades:

School initiates, too, the Myth of Unending Consumption. This modern myth is grounded in the belief that process inevitably produces something of value and therefore, production necessarily produces demand. School teaches us that instruction produces learning. The existence of schools produces the demand for schooling. (Illich, 1971, p. 38)

And so, the unquestionable myth that the graded outputs of the industrial model of education, now so unfit for the dawning Anthropocene, justify the means of their acquisition, dominate to such an extent that the UK government’s 2019 ITT Core Content Framework can make no mention of nature or sustainability. There is no sense that learners and their teachers may need to fit themselves to a collapsing world of finite and depleted life-support systems, rather than seek to fit that world to their infinitely excessive demand.

Over recent years, a debate has raged over whether it is prudent or merely politically expedient to maintain the myth that our global economy can continue to strive to ‘stay within safe limits’, to prevent global heating in

excess of the two degrees beyond pre-industrial levels that current trends suggest we are now likely to exceed as soon as the 2030s. *Points of no return* represent politically very dangerous territory, so it is perhaps unsurprising that talk of global tipping-points rarely features in debates on schooling and its purpose. But, for those who cared to listen, again, the cries were raised more than half a century ago, and these too have continued to redound:

Many people are just awakening to the inexorable destruction which present production trends imply for the environment, but individuals have only very limited power to change these trends. The manipulation of men and women begun in school has also reached a point of no return, and most people are still unaware of it. (Illich, 1971, p. 50)

Presenting a seemingly insuperable challenge for all of us, Illich alerts us not only to earth systems' points of no return, but to our own: points from beyond which we know we cannot return, yet passing which we cannot stop, on single-tracks of self-sabotage, self-defeat and self-deceit. The traces left in men and women by their socialisation through education, in Illich's sense, render us largely powerless to step away from those tracks.

We face into times of scarcity. In education, we are all too aware that the institutions we have tasked with the business of socialisation can never meet the demand of each generation's learnt expectations. The Growth in which belief is fostered, and the demand produced by our governments and institutions for better, always better results and achievements, must run aground on the rocks of those infinite wants. It is in this context that education is understood as underfunded, because on it has been rested an unsupportable burden. Learning, when understood as taking place solely within the walls of the always swollen institution, is the very definition of 'education' as Illich

understands it (Illich, 1992). This is the sorry collapse of learning into schooling, where education, too, rather than arising from free, convivial, social creation, is subject to scarcity in the exclusivist means of its production.

So, does education for sustainable development (ESD) too, enshrined by the United Nations and promoted globally through its sustainable development goals, ultimately bind us tighter to unsustainable expectations? I believe it may. A faith that, definitionally, ESD must yield developmental outcomes can only reproduce the cycle of demand, expectation, dissatisfaction, more, ever-more schooling towards that asymptotic value, sustainability.

References

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About the contributor

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