

Reflection Article/Essay

Producing meanings from and with the school: Ivan Illich's contributions to occupational therapy in the field of education

Produzindo sentidos a partir da e com a escola: contribuições illichianas para a terapia ocupacional na área da educação

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Abstract

This essay offers a reflection on the theoretical-methodological frameworks of occupational therapy in education, exploring its interface with social contexts and considering the regulations and parameters related to professional insertion and the practices established in this field. The theoretical-conceptual study on occupational therapy and education was enriched by readings on school institutions and by philosophical and sociological foundations of education, with the aim of ultimately contributing to the field. The results indicate that, although Ivan Illich's social and pedagogical thought does not stand out as a theoretical-methodological framework in the field in the same way as Paulo Freire's, his historical dialogue with Freire on school, schooling, and social transformation remains relevant. Thus, an effort was made to understand to what extent Illich's idea of the radical *deschooling* of society and his educational proposals could offer contributions to professional actions within the school context, considering informal education as a crucial dimension of everyday life, the exchange of knowledge and practices as an activity accessible to *all*, and advocating for formal education as a social right to be guaranteed *for all*, promoting a truly open, participatory, and socially transformative school.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy. Education. Schools.

Resumo

Este ensaio oferece uma reflexão sobre os referenciais teórico-metodológicos da terapia ocupacional na educação, explorando sua interface com contextos sociais e considerando as regulamentações e os parâmetros relativos à inserção profissional e às práticas previstas nessa área de atuação. O estudo teórico-conceitual sobre terapia ocupacional e educação foi somado com leituras sobre as instituições escolares e por

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fundamentos filosóficos e sociológicos da educação, com o objetivo de, ao final, agregar contribuições à área. Os resultados indicam que o pensamento sociopedagógico de Ivan Illich não se destaca como um referencial teórico-metodológico na área da mesma forma que o de Paulo Freire, embora seu diálogo histórico com Freire sobre escola, escolarização e transformação social seja relevante. Buscou-se, portanto, compreender em que medida a ideia de *desescolarização radical* da sociedade de Illich e suas propostas educativas poderiam oferecer aportes para as ações profissionais no contexto escolar, considerando a educação informal como uma dimensão crucial da vida cotidiana, a troca de saberes e fazeres como uma atividade realizada *por todos*, e defendendo a educação formal como um direito social a ser garantido *a todos*, promovendo uma escola efetivamente aberta, participativa e socialmente transformadora.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional. Educação. Escola.

Introduction

This reflective essay emerged from an academic study on the theoretical and methodological frameworks of occupational therapy in education, at the interface with social contexts, as characterized in Resolution n. 406/2011 of the Federal Council of Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy (COFFITO) (Brasil, 2011)¹, in addition to considering the specific parameters and procedures of this field of professional practice.

In fact, Resolution no. 445/2014 of COFFITO, which establishes the occupational-therapeutic care parameters in the form of services, programs, and formal and non-formal educational projects, describes the procedures conducted by professionals and their respective objectives. Among these objectives are the development of potentialities, preparation for work, and the promotion of social participation and citizenship for children, young people, adults, and older people, both in urban and rural areas, including traditional communities. The focus is on inclusion and overcoming inequalities, with a view toward educational equity (Brasil, 2014).

It is worth clarifying that, regarding types of education, the term “non-formal” is used by some scholars as a synonym for “informal.” Formal education refers to that developed in schools, with predefined content, while informal education refers to learning that occurs during the process of socialization, whether within the family, the neighborhood, with friends, among others, conveying inherited values, cultures, senses of belonging, and feelings. Non-formal education, on the other hand, is learned “in the world of life,” in processes of shared experiences, especially in collective spaces and in everyday actions (Gohn, 2006, p. 28)².

¹ Article 3 – To practice the professional specialty of occupational therapy in social contexts, mastery of the following major areas of competence is required, including acting in educational contexts, both formal and non-formal, for the development of life projects and programs aimed at the participation and citizenship of children and young people in urban and rural environments. Article 5 – The areas of practice for the professional specialist in occupational therapy in social contexts include education, among others (Brasil, 2011).

² It is worth noting that the text of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB) (Law no. 9.394/1996), in its first article, clarifies that education “encompasses the formative processes that develop in family life, human interaction, work,

Considering the intersection between the analysis of the social question and the Brazilian educational reality – especially regarding school dropout or abandonment motivated by the need to contribute to family income, educational gaps, among other factors – the field of education has presented specific demands to the occupational therapist. These demands are assumed as the professional's technical, ethical, and political responsibility, requiring actions based on the defense of the universalization of citizenship rights and the expansion of social support networks, especially for low-income adolescents and young people (Lopes & Silva, 2007). These demands have been addressed through theoretical and methodological propositions specifically aimed at such issues, using a set of participatory social resources and technologies appropriate for confronting vulnerabilities, exclusions, and violence (Lopes et al., 2014), with the goal of ensuring school education as a right for all, following a directive of radical inclusion (Lopes & Borba, 2022).

From the perspective we have adopted, the school can be seen as a protective social space, a formal educational environment, and a space for the circulation of knowledge stemming from non-formal education. In addition to promoting the teaching of scientific knowledge, the school is expected to be a space for experiencing different forms of learning, embracing diversity, practicing more collaborative forms of social interaction, and preparing for active participation in community life. To understand the possibilities of care and the methodological strategies needed to achieve these goals, questions were raised about what education is and its various forms, the current social function of the school, why it is important to engage individuals in school education, and the meaning they attribute to their continued presence in the school institution, considering its different levels and modalities (Brasil, 2017).

In the field of philosophical and sociological foundations of education, the subversive thought of Ivan Illich stands out, author of *Deschooling Society* (1971), *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), *Medical Nemesis* (1976), among other works (Gajardo, 2010). A contemporary and interlocutor of Paulo Freire, Illich was a critic of the school's segregationist and punitive dynamics, as well as its social function of mass control and reproduction of consumer society. Through an anarchist approach (Silva, 2016), Illich dissociated school from education, based on two logical-argumentative movements: the first consists of demystifying the idea that the school institution is the only space for acquiring knowledge; the second is the proposition of a free and autonomous education, to be realized through "learning webs" – a collective mobilization strategy based on the encounter between partners for the exchange of skills, knowledge, and information, and free access to what Illich calls educational tools or resources (Illich, 1985).

Based on the bibliographical framework on social occupational therapy in public schools and adopting a critical epistemological and social perspective, the understanding followed that the school is an institution that disseminates produced knowledge and, consequently, produces values, and that education is a praxical human activity, essential to the processes of self and environmental transformation, which cannot be dissociated from the society in which it develops (Francisco, 2001).

educational and research institutions, social movements and civil society organizations, and cultural manifestations," and that the law governs only school education, the one that predominantly develops through teaching in dedicated institutions (Brasil, 2017).

Education, in addition to being a social, cultural, and historical practice, is fundamentally an action that mobilizes individuals and enhances the human praxical dimension – reflective, creative, and active. As an everyday activity, education is something that all people can engage in and should be guaranteed to everyone. In this sense, occupational therapists can contribute, through their field of knowledge and practices, to the realization of a truly open, participatory, and socially transformative school.

Ivan Illich: Deschooling Society, Conviviality, and the Reinvention of Education

Ivan Illich (1926-2002) and Paulo Freire (1921-1997) were contemporaries, they met when Illich visited Brazil, and engaged in an intense dialogue on schooling, education, and social transformation. Both had a significant influence on the development of critical Latin American educational thought³. In fact, Illich was one of the main figures responsible for disseminating Paulo Freire's thought outside Brazil (Silva, 2015). In *The Celebration of Awareness* (1975), Illich mentions the discussions he had with Paulo Freire and how closely aligned their views were. They agreed on social criticism, the role of school education in serving the capitalist system of production, and the proposals for new pedagogical practices aimed at freedom and the formation of new men and women – builders of a new society based on conviviality, dialogue, and solidarity (Mesquida & Ferreira, 2020).

However, in their differences of perspective, while Freire proposed the “deschooling of education” through cultural circles, grounded in the defense of democratic ideals and the fight against social oppression, Illich suggested the creation of conviviality networks as a strategy for the “deschooling of society” (Mesquida & Ferreira, 2020). While Freire battled against banking, hierarchical, non-dialogical education, disconnected from the oppressions generated by the capitalist system of production, Illich focused his criticism on the school institution, viewing it as inherently manipulative and shaping individuals to fit into a market-driven society. One could say that Illich saw the school as responsible for producing “teacher-distributors” of pre-packaged knowledge and values, and “student-consumers” (Illich, 1985, p. 54).

In Illich's critique, both the school and the university are presented as hegemonic environments for obtaining knowledge, structuring levels of instruction and education that perpetuate dichotomies such as lower education/higher education and graduated person/failed person, among others. These institutions monopolize learning resources and even go so far as to institutionalize imagination. Like totalitarian asylums, the school functions as an “advertisement agency” (Illich, 1985, p. 123) that convinces us that we need society as it is, turning the alienation of young people into a preparation for life, isolating them from broader society within school walls, and discouraging them from autonomous learning, while relinquishing responsibility for their own learning process.

³ Between 1963 and 1976, Ivan Illich was the coordinator of the Intercultural Documentation Center (CIDOC), based in the Mexican city of Cuernavaca. This center became a reference space for debate and the exchange of ideas on “deschooling,” a critical movement in pedagogical thought. Paulo Freire was at CIDOC between the late 1960s and early 1970s, participating in lectures, seminars, and debates on education with Illich (Silva, 2015).

Despite this, Illich believed that it is possible and necessary to create less controlled (and controlling) educational institutions that promote learning in a deschooled environment, facilitating more anarchic, creative, and autonomous encounters. Such institutions would allow the emergence of values distinct from the competitive and destructive ones propagated by industrial society, fostering convivial values instead⁴. To achieve this, we must first dismantle the illusion that learning is solely the result of teaching or formal schooling, since most people acquire a significant portion of their knowledge outside of school, from family members, neighbors, and peers, and from the things and resources present in everyday life.

Learning is the human activity that least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction but of unhampered participation in meaningful settings (Illich, 1985, p. 52).

Recognizing that a significant portion of learning happens outside of school, informally, within the home, community, political life, and more, Illich considers local communities and neighborhoods as valuable and effective spaces for creative exchanges among people. Educational webs, by connecting individuals with similar knowledge and skills, expand the opportunity for each person to turn every moment of their lives into instances of learning, participation, and care in social interactions. In this framework, both skill exchanges and partner encounters rely on the assumption that education for all means education by all: “It is not the recruitment to specialized institutions that leads to a popular culture, but rather the mobilization of the entire population” (Illich, 1985, p. 36).

Deschooling is seen as the foundation of any process aimed at human liberation (Illich, 1985, p. 60). In the light of the “crisis of education,” highlighted by the dropout rates of both students and teachers, Illich questions whether the school of the future will be redesigned to expand its capacity for “doing,” in the productive, industrial, and alienated sense, or to enable greater “action” or “praxis” – as an autonomous, free, imaginative, creative, active, and truly revolutionary activity. Illich envisions a different dynamic for schools – one that is not dominated by instrumental rationality (Carvalho, 2021) –, and proposes an education based on exchange, recognition, and the value of knowledge and skills acquired in everyday life.

Thus, by valuing different forms of knowledge, including the so-called popular or traditional knowledge characteristic of the peoples of the South, Illich adopts an epistemic pluralism, or a polyphonic epistemology, which subversively and radically seeks to transform education outside of the established system – Eurocentric and oriented toward the North⁵. This system merely produces individuals who are incapable of valuing their skills and learning autonomously and mutually in everyday life, thereby advocating for a more “organic” learning process in which everyone can simultaneously be teachers and learners (McCowan, 2022). By subverting the current order, opposing

⁴ Ivan Illich's convivial utopia would not completely exclude the existence of school institutions, but it would prevent them from monopolizing knowledge and acting as operators of social control. Therefore, what Illich proposes is, in a more precise sense, not a society without schools, but a deschooled society – the most faithful translation of the original *Deschooling Society* (1970) (Estimado & Santos, 2014).

⁵ In this regard, it is possible to draw a connection between the thoughts of Illich and Boaventura de Sousa Santos within the context of the Epistemologies of the South (Leonídio & Leão Neto, 2019).

bureaucratized and repetitive institutional processes of school instruction, Illich asserts: “The learning I prize is immeasurable re-creation” (Illich, 1985, p. 53).

Ivan Illich's Thought and Contributions to Occupational Therapy in the Field of Education as a Social Context

In our reflective journey, as we investigated the theoretical-methodological frameworks from the field of education, Paulo Freire's pedagogy stood out, being widely present in the literature on occupational therapy (Gontijo & Santiago, 2018; Farias & Lopes, 2022; Gontijo et al., 2022). However, we believe it is also possible to incorporate the contributions of Ivan Illich's critical educational thought into occupational therapy in education, at the intersection with social contexts, as his thinking directly aligns with the goals of developing potentialities, valuing knowledge and ways of life, encouraging conviviality and interdependence in practice, promoting belonging, participation, and inclusion, mobility within the territory, creating territorial networks, and engaging with community resources and systems (Brasil, 2011).

Considering recent works on the theoretical contributions and care and education actions of social occupational therapy in the field of education (Pan & Lopes, 2020, 2022), key themes include inclusive education, arising from the global movement for social inclusion, the view of the school as a social structure that is part of the support network, and the occupational therapist as a coordinator. Notably, it was affirmed that occupational therapists' intervention in education has not been focused on the school community or the school itself and its processes, but rather on specific groups and individuals requiring “school inclusion” (Pereira et al., 2021, p. 20).

Concerning the theoretical-methodological frameworks of practice, the proposition of replicable social technologies (Activity Workshops, Dynamics and Projects; Individual and Territorial Follow-ups; Social Resource Coordination; Network Mobilization) as occupational-therapeutic strategies were highlighted to ensure social participation and access to education, as well as to health, culture, and other citizenship rights (Lopes et al., 2014). Additionally, participatory methodologies of a socioterritorial community nature, with a critical epistemic and praxis-based orientation, were emphasized (Moreira, 2022).

In fact, in the field of occupational therapy, within a broad spectrum of the profession's theoretical and epistemological frameworks, education is characterized as significant occupation; a human, social, and occupational right; a process of acquiring information and knowledge; an experience of self-awareness; a means for producing autonomy and developing emancipatory life projects; an opportunity for socialization and contact with diversity; and, finally, a dimension of everyday life that is enriched by the informal and spontaneous learning that occurs day by day.

From these understandings, we follow the conception of everyday life as an educational space-time and adhere to the idea of learning as a praxical everyday activity. Thus, the school, as an educational social space, should primarily foster free, creative, and autonomous action, rather than the uncritical reproduction of values and a practice restricted to technical execution and the completion of pre-programmed tasks, in a rigid manner disconnected from the educational process, context, and students' realities. In other words, the school should, through its structure and dynamics, foster the praxical

potential of all involved in the teaching-learning process, in line with the principle of conviviality. In this perspective, praxis, as action, according to Illich and based on Aristotelian philosophy, inherently carries an ethical-political dimension, distinct from *poiésis*, which is related to production (*techné*), directed at an object to be produced, of which technical production would be one type (Illich, 1985, pp. 74-75).

Thus, in addition to valuing the knowledge and practices stemming from everyday life and viewing praxis as a key lens for analyzing educational activity, Illich's thought also contributes to a critical socio-institutional analysis of schools, reflecting on the current role of the school, the values it propagates, and its real contribution to social transformation, reintroducing the debate about the professional's role not only in technical terms but also in ethical-political terms.

We observe that, in almost all cases, therapists have always aimed to develop human autonomy. However, it is also noted that none of them recognize that their work, by treating humans as ahistorical, idealized organisms, aims at maintaining the social structure, preserving alienation by training humans for submission, obedience, and conformity (Francisco, 2001, p. 62).

In this regard, as a professional working in the field of education, the occupational therapist can contribute to the dynamics of the school institution through practices that build bridges between the school and the community, bring individuals closer together, and foster the convivial exchange of knowledge and practices, as well as the exercise of collective autonomy. It is essential to understand that recognizing the learning acquired through informal education processes, such as those occurring in everyday life, can be a radical strategy for maintaining engagement (in the sense of active participation) in school activities, giving the school greater significance in and for the lives of those involved.

Thus, weaving networks within the school environment, as a convivial technology replicable at different levels and modes of education, incorporating moments of immersion in the territory, identifying knowledge, practices, and learning interests, and proposing praxis-based workshops with collaborative experiences of convivial exchange and the exercise of collective autonomy (with joint decision-making on what to do, with whom, why, and which values to strengthen), can be an occupational-therapeutic strategy for recognizing and valuing the individuals involved in the educational process, based on their everyday repertoires as well as their family and community networks. Additionally, this strategy primarily promotes critical reflections and creates meaning for staying in school today.

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Author's Contributions

Adriana Belmonte Moreira and Lais Thaina Nenemann Kreutzer contributed equally to the design of the study, critical analysis of the sources and writing of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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