Deschooling Society, Re-embodying Education: A Contemporary Reading of Ivan Illich on Differences, Genders and Pedagogical Frontiers

Descolarizzare la società, restituire corpo all'educazione: Una lettura contemporanea di Ivan Illich su differenze, generi e frontiere pedagogiche

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ABSTRACT

More than fifty years after the publication of Deschooling Society, Ivan Illich's work continues to provide valuable critical insights for understanding contemporary transformations in education. This article proposes a reading of Illich's work through the interconnected lenses of bodily differences, genders, and educational plurality. Moving beyond interpretations that reduce deschooling to the rejection of formal schooling, the paper argues that Illich's broader critique concerns the institutional production of normality and the standardization of human experience. Drawing on Illich's Deschooling Society, Tools for Conviviality, and Gender, the article explores how contemporary educational systems continue to shape the ways in which differences are recognized, categorized, and governed. Particular attention is devoted to gender as a privileged terrain through which embodied differences become intelligible within educational contexts. While increasing attention has been devoted to diversity within educational policy and practice, many efforts at recognition remain anchored in classificatory frameworks that risk transforming difference into deficit, vulnerability, or deviation from an assumed norm. In dialogue with perspectives on embodiment and educational difference, the article advances the notion of re-embodying education as a pedagogical challenge for the present. Re-embodying education does not imply abandoning educational institutions, but rethinking them as convivial spaces capable of welcoming plural ways of inhabiting bodies, identities, and relationships. Revisiting Illich from this perspective allows us to imagine pedagogical frontiers in which differences are not normalized, corrected, or merely included, but understood as constitutive dimensions of democratic educational life.

A più di cinquant'anni dalla pubblicazione di Deschooling Society, il pensiero di Ivan Illich continua a offrire strumenti critici per interrogare le trasformazioni contemporanee dell'educazione. Il presente contributo propone una rilettura attuale dell'opera illichiana attraverso le lenti delle differenze corporee, dei generi e della pluralità educativa. Superando interpretazioni che riducono la descolarizzazione a una semplice critica dell'istituzione scolastica, l'articolo sostiene che il nucleo della riflessione di Illich riguarda più ampiamente i processi attraverso cui le istituzioni producono normalità, definiscono bisogni e standardizzano l'esperienza umana. A partire da Deschooling Society, Tools for Conviviality e Gender, il contributo esplora il modo in cui i sistemi educativi contemporanei continuano a modellare le forme attraverso cui le differenze vengono riconosciute, classificate e governate. Particolare attenzione è dedicata al genere come terreno privilegiato attraverso cui le differenze corporee diventano intelligibili all'interno dei contesti educativi. Sebbene le politiche e le pratiche educative dedichino oggi una crescente attenzione alla diversità, molti processi di riconoscimento restano ancorati a dispositivi classificatori che rischiano di trasformare la differenza in deficit, vulnerabilità o deviazione da una presunta norma. In dialogo con le correnti prospettive sul ruolo centrale del corpo nell'esperienza educativa e sulle pedagogie delle differenze, l'articolo propone il concetto di "re-incarnazione dell'educazione" quale sfida pedagogica del presente. Re-incarnare l'educazione non significa abbandonare le istituzioni educative, bensì ripensarle come spazi conviviali capaci di accogliere la pluralità dei corpi, delle identità e delle relazioni. Rileggere Illich in questa prospettiva consente di immaginare frontiere pedagogiche nelle quali le differenze non siano normalizzate, corrette o semplicemente incluse, ma assunte come dimensioni costitutive della vita educativa democratica.

KEYWORDS
Ivan Illich, Deschooling, Embodiment, Gender, Conviviality
Ivan illich, Descolarizzazione, Corporeità, Genere, Convivialità

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1. Introduction

More than fifty years after the publication of *Deschooling Society* (1971), Ivan Illich's work continues to provoke educational reflection. Although often associated primarily with his radical critique of institutionalized education, Illich's thought extends far beyond the school as a specific institution. Across his analyses of education, medicine, welfare, and professional expertise, he consistently questioned the tendency of modern institutional apparatuses to expand their authority over human experience, redefining needs, dependencies, and forms of knowledge through increasingly specialized and standardized interpretative grids.

This critical perspective appears particularly relevant in contemporary educational contexts. Over the last decades, pedagogical research and educational policies have devoted growing attention to bodies, identities, genders, vulnerabilities, and differences. Issues once considered marginal have become central to educational debate, reflecting broader concerns with inclusion, recognition, equity, and social justice. At the same time, however, the growing visibility of difference has often been accompanied by an increasing proliferation of classificatory descriptors, diagnostic labels, and institutional protocols intended to identify and manage diverse educational trajectories.

This development raises an important pedagogical question. To what extent do contemporary educational systems recognize difference, and to what extent do they contribute to producing the very categories through which difference becomes intelligible? While these processes may serve important functions in guaranteeing rights, resources, and visibility, they may also risk transforming lived experiences into administrable identities, reducing the complexity of embodied existence to predefined schemes of interpretation. Although the body does not occupy a central place within Illich's pedagogical reflection, his critique of institutionalization offers valuable tools for addressing this tension. Rather than focusing on bodies as such, Illich questioned the broader processes through which institutions define what counts as learning, health, competence, normality, and need. Revisiting his work today makes it possible to explore how similar processes operate through bodies, genders, and differences, becoming visible in current educational practices and policies.

This article argues that Illich's reflections on deschooling can be reinterpreted as a critique of the institutional processes through which embodied differences are categorized, normalized, and governed. From this perspective, educational institutions do not simply include or exclude subjects; they also participate in shaping the frameworks through which bodies and identities become recognizable. Building on this insight, the article proposes the notion of "re-embodying education" as a contemporary pedagogical challenge. Re-embodying education does not imply abandoning educational institutions, but rethinking them as convivial spaces capable of welcoming the plurality of bodies, genders, and lived experiences without reducing them to deficits, diagnoses, or exceptions.

The article is organized into three sections. First, it revisits Illich's critique of institutionalization through *Deschooling Society* (1971), *Medical Nemesis* (1975), *Disabling Professions* (1977), Toward a history of needs (1978), and *Gender* (1982). Second, it explores how educational systems regulate and normalize embodied differences through classificatory dispositifs. Finally, it advances the concept of re-embodying education as a possible pedagogical response, capable of extending Illich's critical legacy while opening new pedagogical frontiers.

The article addresses two questions: How can Illich's critique of institutionalisation inform a contemporary analysis of the ways educational institutions produce and regulate embodied difference? What pedagogical orientation can be developed from this critique while recognising difference without reducing it to deficit or fixed identity?

Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual-hermeneutic reading of selected works by Illich. The corpus comprises Deschooling Society (1971), Tools for Conviviality (1973), Medical Nemesis (1975), Disabling Professions (1977), Toward a History of Needs (1978), and Gender (1982). These works were selected because they address institutional authority over learning, needs and professional expertise, health and disability, gender, and convivial forms of social organisation. Tools for Conviviality is considered in particular in relation to the article's discussion of educational conviviality.

This is a selective theoretical interpretation, not an exhaustive account of Illich's oeuvre, a systematic literature review, or an empirical study of contemporary schools. The pedagogical implications proposed below should therefore be read as a conceptual framework for discussion and further investigation, rather than as an evaluation of specific interventions.

2. Bodies, differences and institutional categories: reading Illich through contemporary concerns

Few themes have acquired as much visibility within contemporary educational debate as the body. Questions related to gender identities, sexualities, disability, migration background, vulnerability, mental health, wellbeing, trauma, and inclusion increasingly occupy the centre of pedagogical reflection (Burgio & Lopez, 2023; Crenshaw, 1991; Lopez, 2023). Bodies, once largely absent from educational discourse or treated as secondary to cognitive development, have become crucial sites through which educational inequalities, recognition processes, and democratic participation are understood and addressed (Ahmed, 2006; Barone, 2004; Butler, 2004). In this article, *embodiment* is understood as the lived, relational, affective, cognitive, and social dimension through which human beings experience, interpret, and inhabit the world. Bodies are therefore understood not as passive objects of educational intervention, nor merely as physical presences in social contexts, but as the primary condition through which educational experience is lived and meaning is produced. Embodiment thus refers to the inseparability of bodily, emotional, cognitive, and relational processes, challenging dualistic conceptions that separate mind from corporeality and subject from experience. This understanding is consonant with phenomenological accounts of the body as the lived condition through which a world is perceived and acted upon (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Enactive approaches likewise understand cognition as emerging through embodied engagement between an organism and its environment, rather than as the activity of a detached mind (Varela et al., 1991). Italian pedagogical scholarship on "*pedagogia del corpo*" and lived corporeity further helps articulate the educational implications of this position (Gamelli, 2011; Iori, 2006).

The expression "*re-embodying education*" does not simply mean bringing the body back into educational discourse. Rather, it refers to a pedagogical orientation that rethinks

education from the complexity of lived experience, recognizing that learning, identity, participation, and difference are always mediated through embodied existence, which inevitably exceeds the institutional categories designed to describe it (Butler, 2004). Its aim is to preserve the openness, plurality, and transformative potential of human experience against the tendency of institutional classifications to stabilize identities into fixed and administrable forms (Barone, 2004; Todd, 2001).

This growing attention has undoubtedly contributed to making visible experiences and subjects that have long remained marginalized within educational institutions. At the same time, however, the recognition of difference has been accompanied by an expanding proliferation of categories through which human beings are identified, interpreted, and governed (Butler, 1990). Educational systems increasingly encounter individuals through classificatory indicators that seek to recognize specific needs, vulnerabilities, risks, identities, or conditions (Foucault, 1975; Massa, 1986). While they may provide access to resources, rights, and forms of protection, they also raise a pedagogical question that deserves critical attention: what happens when embodied differences become primarily intelligible through institutional classifications?

Educational systems are increasingly called upon to recognize diversity. Yet recognition is never a neutral process. As several scholars have observed, educational categories do not simply describe realities; they actively participate in producing the subjects they seek to identify (Ahmed, 2012; Popkewitz, 2008). Labels associated with vulnerability, special educational needs, inclusion, risk, resilience, or diversity may facilitate the access to resources and rights, but they can also contribute to defining how individuals are expected to understand themselves and be understood by others. Educational discourse thus operates not only as a language of recognition, but also as a language of intelligibility and definition (Fricker, 2007; Spivak, 1988).

This tension is not limited to educational contexts. Across our societies, bodies are continuously interpreted through institutional logics. In schools, bodies are observed, assessed, disciplined, included, or normalized; in medical settings, they are medicalized; in psychological and psychiatric contexts, they are diagnosed; in welfare systems, they are registered as vulnerable, fragile, or at risk; within penal institutions, they may be corrected, controlled, or confined. Although these processes pursue different goals, they share a common tendency to translate human experiences into categories with the aim of rendering them administrable, but also open to monitoring, redirection, and normalization through institutional practices (Foucault, 1975; Rose, 1999).

It is precisely here that Ivan Illich's work acquires renewed relevance (Mitcham, 2023; Samerski, 2018). Although he never developed a systematic pedagogy of the body, his critique of modern institutions offers valuable tools for understanding how categories emerge, expand, and acquire authority. Across works such as Deschooling Society (1971), Medical Nemesis (1975), Disabling Professions (1977), and Gender (1982), Illich repeatedly questioned the tendency of institutional systems to redefine human experience through expert knowledge and bureaucratic logics. His concern was not simply that institutions exercise power, but that they progressively colonize the ways in which individuals understand themselves, their needs, their relationships, and their possibilities for action. The school does not merely organize learning; it comes to define what counts as learning. Medicine does not simply treat illness; it increasingly determines what counts as health, suffering, and normality. Professional expertise does not only provide support; it may also redefine needs through the language of dependency and intervention. Even gender, in Illich's controversial reading, becomes a privileged site through which modern institutions reorganize differences within abstract and administrable frameworks (Illich, 1971, 1975, 1977, 1982). In Gender (Illich, 1982), Illich distinguishes between what he calls vernacular gender and industrial gender. By vernacular gender, he refers to historically situated ways of organizing social life through differences embedded in everyday practices, relationships, and local cultural worlds. Industrial society, in his view, progressively dismantles these vernacular forms and replaces them with abstract categories that can be standardized, managed, and regulated across populations. Of course, Illich's position has been the object of substantial feminist criticism. Several authors have argued that his distinction between vernacular and industrial gender idealizes pre-modern social arrangements underestimating the forms of hierarchical oppressions, exclusion, and subordination historically experienced by women (Bowles, 1983; Scheper-Hughes, 1983). Nevertheless, beyond the accuracy of his analysis, Illich's reflections remain valuable for the broader pedagogical question they raise concerning the relationship between lived differences and the institutional categories through which they become acknowledged. Whether or not one accepts Illich's thought about traditional gender roles, his analysis highlights a concern that remains highly relevant today: modern institutions tend to transform lived differences into administratively recognizable identities. What was once experienced through situated relationships and embodied practices increasingly becomes the object of classification, measurement, and regulation. Gender thus emerges as a privileged example of a more general institutional dynamic through which differences are categorized and governed.

Read from a contemporary standpoint, Illich's critique reveals a recurring logic. Institutions progressively translate human experiences into categories that allow them to be recognized, measured, evaluated, and administered.

The common distinction itself between bodily and psychological suffering illustrates the performative power of institutional definitions. Educational and social institutions provide many examples: a young person experiencing sadness, uncertainty, or existential distress may become apparent primarily through psychological repertoires and diagnostic descriptors. A student facing linguistic difficulties after migration may be identified through categories of special educational need or educational vulnerability. Gender diversity may become recognized through designations conceived to ensure visibility and rights – or, unfortunately, their contrary. In each of these cases, institutional categories can serve positive functions, yet they also illustrate a broader process through which complex lived experiences become recast into legible forms. While such distinctions may be practically and clinically useful, they also contribute to separating and compartmentalizing experiences that are interconnected and inseparable. Illich's critique invites us to examine not only the content of institutional categories, but also the processes through which complex human experiences are fragmented into manageable domains. His concern was not that institutions classify, but that classification may gradually come to substitute for experience itself. What begins as an attempt to heuristically recognize a situation can become a dominant

Human Experience	Institutional Translation	Dominant Institutional Domain
Learning	Schooling, certification, measurable achievement, standard tests	Education
Bodily suffering	Medical diagnosis, treatment protocols, pathology	Medicine
Psychological suffering	Psychological assessment, diagnosis, therapeutic categorization	Psychology / Psychiatry
Need	Professional intervention and dependency on expertise	Helping / Care professions
Vulnerability	Risk assessment, protection protocols, targeted intervention	Welfare systems
Difference	Classification, labeling, categorization	Educational and social institutions
Gender plurality	Identity categories, administrative recognition, regulatory frameworks	Educational, legal and social institutions
Deviance	Correction, surveillance, confinement	Penal institutions
The embodied subject	A set of administrable categories	Across institutional domains

frame through which individuals are expected to understand themselves and be understood by others. Suffering becomes diagnosis, difference becomes label, vulnerability becomes protocol, and the embodied subject risks appearing primarily as an object of control and intervention.

These dynamics become particularly visible when considering bodies and genders. As contemporary reflections on embodiment have shown, bodies are not pre-social entities waiting to be recognized; they are continuously produced through networks of meanings, relations, technologies, and institutional practices (Haraway, 1991). They are read, interpreted, and valued through social, cultural, and institutional classifications that establish what is considered normal, healthy, educable, vulnerable, productive, or deviant by social structures, including peers (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2004; Burgio, 2012, 2022; Di Grigoli, 2023; Héritier, 1996). Furthermore, decolonial scholarship has shown that sex and gender cannot be understood outside the historical intersections of coloniality, race, and power (Chiappelli, 2026b; Lugones, 2008; Quijano, 2000). Across different institutional domains, the body becomes the privileged site through which categories acquire concrete form:

- at school, the body is disciplined, assessed, classified, and normalized;
- in medicine, it is medicalized;
- within psychological and psychiatric contexts, it is diagnosed;
- in welfare systems, it is categorized as vulnerable, fragile, or at risk;
- within penal institutions, it is corrected, controlled, or confined.

Far from representing separate processes, these practices reveal a common tendency: the categorization of embodied experience into administrable forms of knowledge and intervention.

Table 1. From lived experience to institutional categories.

As Barone suggests, however, the body always exceeds the figurations, representations, and educational dispositifs through which institutions attempt to define it (Barone, 2004, 2024). More than merely objects of intervention, bodies are sites of experience, meaning-making, resistance, and possibility. This irreducibility is pedagogically significant because it reminds us that no system of descriptors can fully encompass the complexity of human existence.

The question facing contemporary pedagogy, thus, is not simply how to include difference, but how to prevent recognition from becoming reduction. The issue is not whether categories should exist, since they are analytical tools to conceive the world, often necessary at social level for visibility, protection, and the enjoyment of rights. Rather, the crucial issue is to avoid treating them as natural and essentialized, fixed, exhaustive, or self-evident descriptions of human experience. Categories are themselves historical, relational, and evolving constructs; they emerge within particular social contexts and should remain open to revision, contestation, and transformation. Educational practices therefore need to pay special attention not only to what categories reveal, but also to what they inevitably leave at the margins, unresolved. This is where Illich's critique intersects with contemporary concerns about embodiment. If institutions tend to transform differences into legible bureaucratic identities, pedagogy is called upon to cultivate spaces in which plurality can emerge without being fully absorbed by institutional definitions. It is within this tension between recognition and normalization, visibility and enclosure, stability and becoming, that the horizon of re-embodying education emerges.

3. Re-embodying education: beyond labels and enclosures

Section 2 has traced how categories can turn recognition into reduction. Here, "enclosure" names the interpretative effect of that process: symbolic and institutional boundaries that shape in advance how individuals can be recognized, understood, and expected to act. The notion of enclosure should not be understood merely as an external barrier or a mechanism of exclusion. Enclosures also operate at the level of interpretation. They concern not only social inclusion or exclusion, but also the conditions under which subjects can speak, be heard, and become intelligible within dominant frameworks of knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Spivak, 1988). Contemporary reflections on secularly inspired pedagogy similarly emphasize the need to preserve plurality and critical autonomy, avoiding the transformation of difference into destiny—as per thesis 1 of the *Manifesto della pedagogia laica* (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026). They emerge when the categories created to recognize and support individuals begin to delimit the range of meanings through which subjects can understand themselves and be understood by others. In this sense, enclosure involves a narrowing of possibilities: plurality is translated into predefined identities, open trajectories into predictable pathways, and complex biographies into administratively intelligible profiles (Chiappelli, 2026a; Fricker, 2007). What becomes enclosed is not only the landscape of possibilities open to subjects, but also the range of meanings available to experience itself. From an Illichian perspective, the pedagogical task is therefore not simply to open institutional doors, but to preserve the possibility that subjects do not conform to whatever categories society attempts to impose. What initially serves to identify a need may gradually become a dominant interpretative grid through which the subject is interpreted. In this case, they become forms of identity enclosure, confining individuals within predefined understandings of who they are, who they are expected to be, and who they are expected to become.

Thus, educational recognition risks slipping into processes of labeling (Becker, 1963), where the category increasingly overshadows the person it was meant to support. To avoid it, pedagogical practices should be constantly confronted with the tension between recognition and reduction. Recognition requires naming differences; reduction occurs when those names come to exhaust the complexity of lived experience. The task therefore consists in maintaining an open relationship between the subject and the categories through which the subject becomes socially visible, preventing any form of pre-definition from eclipsing the person.

Nowadays, in many contexts, educational institutions increasingly recognize bodily differences, gender identities, vulnerabilities, disabilities, and diverse trajectories of development. Some contemporary school systems offer a particularly revealing example as they seek to recognize and respond to diverse forms of difference through categories intended to guarantee support, care and inclusion. Students may be identified as having special educational needs, specific learning disorders, migrant backgrounds, linguistic vulnerabilities, or other conditions requiring particular forms of attention. Such categories often play a crucial role in ensuring access to resources, accommodations, educational and social opportunities that might otherwise remain unavailable. But, at the same time, they raise an important pedagogical question: how can institutions recognize difference without reducing subjects to the definitions through which recognition is granted? Illich's critique asks educators to hold both sides of this process in view: categories may secure recognition and resources, yet can become the predominant interpretative frame and obscure the singularity, unpredictability, and irreducibility of lived experience. Recognition remains an important achievement, especially in contexts historically marked by exclusion and invisibility, but it does not by itself guarantee educational justice; bodies can become visible while being locked within definitions that delimit what they are, need, can aspire to, and may become.

The concept of enclosure helps illuminate this risk. Enclosures do not necessarily operate through exclusion; they may also emerge through inclusion. Subjects can be welcomed, helped, protected, *accepted*, yet within boundaries that delimit the conditions of intelligibility available to them. Difference is acknowledged, but also managed and regulated. Identity is affirmed, but may become fixed. Vulnerability is recognized, but risks being transformed into a permanent condition rather than a contingent experience, and so on. This is where re-embodying education acquires pedagogical relevance. Since bodies have always been present in educational institutions, re-embodying education does not simply mean reintroducing the body into educational discourse; rather, it means recognizing bodies as lived sites of experience, agency, relation, imagination, meaning-making, reinterpretation, and transformation that exceed the pre-established institutional confines through which they are identified, classified, and conceived, and not merely as objects of assessment, diagnosis, or intervention (Barone, 2004, 2024). Such excess is not a failure of categorization but a constitutive feature of human experience: subjects are always more than the classifications, diagnoses, identities, or vulnerabilities through which they become institutionally visible.

Re-embodying education therefore implies a shift from the management of differences to the experience of plurality. Instead of asking how differences can be accommodated within existing conceptual boxes, pedagogy is called upon to create conditions in which different ways of inhabiting bodies, identities, and relationships can emerge without being reduced to predefined identities. In this sense, bodily and gender differences are not problems to be solved, nor identities to be fixed, but constitutive dimensions of educational life itself.

This reflection resonates with Illich's notion of conviviality (Illich, 1973). Here, conviviality names the possibility of relationships in which plurality can be experienced without becoming hierarchy, deficiency, or exclusion, and signals a critique of institutional monopolies that constrain the openness and unpredictability of embodied experience.

From this point of view, re-embodying education means defending the necessity that bodies, genders, and differences are never reducible to those categories through which they are recognized. Educational institutions may continue to name and classify, but they should never forget that no category can exhaust the inextricable richness of human experience.

4. Towards Re-embodying Education

Revisiting Ivan Illich today does not mean nostalgically returning to a critique of schooling developed more than fifty years ago. Rather, it means recognizing the enduring relevance of his questions in a historical moment increasingly marked by the proliferation of categories through which bodies, identities, vulnerabilities, and differences are recognized and governed. Although contemporary educational systems have undoubtedly expanded opportunities for inclusion and recognition, they continue to face the challenge identified throughout this article: how to acknowledge differences without reducing them to administrable identities.

The notion of re-embodying education represents, in our view, an attempt to extend Illich's critical legacy rather than merely reproduce it. Re-embodying education does not imply rejecting institutions, expertise, or educational categories. It means preserving the openness of embodied experience against the risk of enclosure, ensuring that recognition does not become reduction and that support does not become fixation. Educational differences should neither be ignored nor transformed into definitive descriptions of subjects. They should instead be understood as processual dimensions of human experience, continuously shaped through relationships, contexts, and trajectories of becoming, rejecting essentialist understandings of identity and recalling Vattimo's hermeneutic conception of being as openness and interpretation (Vattimo, 1988).

Such a perspective also invites a renewed reflection on the persistent separation between mind and body that continues to inform many educational practices. Despite increasing attention to embodiment, educational systems often privilege cognitive performance, measurable outcomes, and abstract forms of knowledge, while bodily experience remains marginal or instrumentalized. Re-embodying education therefore requires overcoming dualistic understandings of learning and recognizing the inseparability of cognitive, emotional, relational, ethical, and corporeal dimensions of educational experience. The body is not simply the object of education; it is one of the primary conditions through which education is lived, interpreted, and transformed.

This pedagogical position resonates with several traditions of transformative education. Freire's (1970) conception of education as a practice of freedom, together

with later developments in critical adult education (Mayo, 1999), Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, and more recent participatory, dialogic, and co-constructive approaches (Flecha, 2014) all share a concern for subjects' capacity to critically reinterpret their experiences rather than merely adapt to predefined roles. Similarly, participatory methodologies and communicative approaches disrupt the primacy of expert knowledge by recognizing learners and communities as legitimate producers of meaning and knowledge. In this sense, re-embodying education implies not only acknowledging bodily differences but also creating conditions in which subjects can actively participate in defining the meanings attached to their experiences.

At the level of pedagogical design, conviviality points toward learning environments that sustain plurality, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. Such environments need not require conformity to a single norm or erase difference in the name of sameness; they make room for diverse ways of inhabiting bodies, genders, identities, and relationships to coexist and contribute to democratic life.

Dialogic and participatory educational practices, including universal, evidence-based, and transferable Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) identified by the INCLUD-ED project (Flecha, 2014; Mancaniello & Chiappelli, 2025), are particularly valuable because they do not assume that subjects coincide with the categories through which they are recognized. On the contrary, they create spaces in which the multifaceted positioning of each person can emerge through dialogue, interaction, collective meaning-making, and participation. Rather than focusing primarily on deficits, diagnoses, vulnerabilities, or predefined identities, these approaches foster educational environments in which diversity becomes a resource for learning and democratic coexistence. In this sense, recognition is achieved not through labeling, but through participation and reciprocal engagement. Evidence emerging from research on such practices suggests that participation-oriented approaches can promote agency, belonging, and educational success without reducing learners to deficit-based categories (Chiappelli, 2025). Particularly in contexts characterized by cultural diversity, migration, and social vulnerability, SEAs such as Interactive Groups and Dialogic Literary Gatherings show how recognition can be organized around shared learning and the co-construction of knowledge, with students participating as contributors rather than being approached through deficit categories.

This does not imply the disappearance of educational needs or social inequalities. Rather, it points toward pedagogical environments in which categories do not become the primary way through which students are perceived. A person experiencing a form of difficulty remains recognized in their specific circumstances without being identified with them. Such practices suggest the possibility of educational contexts where support and recognition coexist with openness, allowing subjects to appear not only as recipients of intervention but also as participants, contributors, legitimate producers of knowledge. From an Illichian perspective, these experiences are significant because they preserve a space for what escapes from strict definitions, affirming the irreducibility of persons to the categories through which institutions seek to understand them.

The pedagogical meaning of such approaches lies precisely in their capacity to preserve what may be called the *excess of experience*. Human biographies, aspirations, relationships, embodied experiences, and processes of becoming can never be fully exhausted by diagnoses or classifications. Pedagogy, therefore, becomes the art of keeping open this *space of excess* without renouncing the necessary instruments of recognition and support. In this regard, *excess* must be conceived as the very condition that makes educational transformation possible. All transformative and emancipatory educational traditions share a commitment to creating educational processes in which subjects can critically reinterpret their experiences rather than simply adapt to externally imposed definitions. Re-embodying education, from this approach, means creating educational environments capable of recognizing differences while preserving the multiplicity and unpredictability that characterize concrete human experience.

- *Principle 1 — Treat categories as provisional tools.* In teacher education, this means examining how diagnostic and administrative categories can enable support while also narrowing expectations. Individualised plans can be reviewed regularly with the learner and relevant adults so that a category does not become a fixed description of the person. In classroom practice, teachers can keep routes to participation flexible and revise assumptions when a learner's circumstances or preferences change.
- *Principle 2 — Start from situated embodied experience.* Teacher education can prepare educators to examine how space, sensory conditions, emotion, movement, and relationships shape each learner's participation. Individualised plans can bring each learner's own account of the bodily and relational conditions that support participation into dialogue with formal assessments. Classroom practice can provide varied ways for everyone to take part bodily—through movement, gesture, handling materials, sensory engagement, spoken or alternative communication, and shared activities—so that no single bodily or communicative mode is treated as the norm.
- *Principle 3 — Co-construct recognition and support.* Teacher education can prepare educators to interpret learning needs through dialogue and shared planning with learners, families, and other professionals. Individualised plans can be co-written and revisited with the learner and, where appropriate, family members and other professionals. In class, students can help shape questions, activities, and decisions, bringing their needs, interpretations, and preferences into the co-construction of shared learning.
- *Principle 4 — Make participation and convivial relations central.* Teacher education can focus on designing collaborative settings in which learners contribute to shared work. Individualised plans can include goals for agency, relationships, and participation, not only needs or accommodations. Classroom and community practices—including dialogic inquiry, peer-supported activities, and SEAs such as Interactive Groups, Dialogic Literary Gatherings, and the educational participation of families and communities—can involve learners and their communities in co-constructing knowledge.

Ultimately, what is at stake is neither the rejection nor the uncritical acceptance of categories, but the capacity to approach them as contextually grounded, revisable, and historically situated tools of interpretation. Educational practices require remaining attentive to when categories enable recognition and support, when they need to be transformed, and when

they may need to be abandoned altogether. Above all, education requires preventing them from becoming destinies. If *Deschooling society* made us aware of the risks of institutionalizing learning, re-embodying education invites us to imagine educational practices capable of recognizing differences without enclosing them, supporting subjects without defining them, and fostering plurality without transforming it into deficit. In this sense, Illich's work continues to offer a critical and generative resource for imagining new pedagogical frontiers.

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