

The Construction of Non-Formal Education: Philosophy Analysis in Ivan Illich's Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of non-formal education (NFE) through the philosophical perspective of Ivan Illich, particularly his critique of institutionalized schooling as articulated in *Deschooling Society*. Amid growing concerns regarding the limitations of formal education, such as standardization, credentialism, commodification, and the reproduction of social inequality, non-formal education has emerged as a viable alternative that emphasizes flexibility, learner autonomy, and community engagement. This research employs a literature review approach by systematically identifying, screening, and synthesizing scholarly works addressed to non-formal education and Illich's de-schooling philosophy. From an initial pool of 45 relevant publications, 26 articles were selected based on explicit thematic relevance, analytical depth, and alignment with the study's objectives. The findings indicate that Illich's critique reveals the exclusionary and monopolistic tendencies of formal schooling, particularly its dependence on credentials and institutional authority. Nonformal education responds to these challenges by promoting constructivist and liberal educational principles that prioritize active participation, self-directed learning, and contextual relevance. Furthermore, empirical and pragmatic perspectives highlight the role of community-based learning, participatory governance, and lifelong learning frameworks in strengthening the implementation of non-formal education. This study concludes that Ivan Illich's philosophical ideas remain highly relevant in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in addressing educational inequality and fostering more democratic, inclusive, and human-centered learning systems.

Keywords: Non-formal education; deschooling society; Ivan Illich; philosophy of education; lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

Education is an inseparable dimension of human life, extending beyond institutional boundaries into everyday experiences and social interactions. Philosophers of education have long emphasized that learning is not confined to formal schooling. Immanuel Kant's assertion that "man can become man only through education" highlights education as a lifelong and holistic process rather than a strictly institutional endeavor. In contemporary societies, however, education is often narrowly equated with formal schooling, certificates, and standardized curricula, despite the availability of alternative learning pathways (La Belle, 1982).

Formal education systems, while successful in expanding access through compulsory schooling, have increasingly been criticized for their rigid structures, standardized assessment regimes, and hierarchical pedagogical relations (Giroux, 2021). Formal education is organized through structured levels, standardized curricula, and certification mechanisms, culminating in the award of diplomas and degrees. While this system has expanded access to education through compulsory schooling programs, it has also attracted significant criticism. Traditional formal education tends to prioritize teacher-centered instruction, uniform assessment, and standardized outcomes, often neglecting learners' diverse potentials, interests, and sociocultural contexts. Such systems often prioritize efficiency, uniformity, and measurable outcomes, thereby constraining learner agency and limiting the relevance of education to diverse socio-cultural realities (Biesta, 2015). Scholars argue that institutionalized schooling tends to reproduce social inequality by privileging learners with access to cultural,

economic, and symbolic capital, while marginalizing those who do not conform to dominant educational norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). These structural limitations have intensified scholarly and policy interest in nonformal education as an alternative and complementary educational pathway. Non-formal education emphasizes flexibility, learner-centered approaches, voluntary participation, and contextual relevance, making it particularly responsive to the needs of marginalized communities, adult learners, and lifelong learning contexts (Hoppers, 2006; D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Rather than functioning merely as a residual mechanism for those excluded from formal schooling, non-formal education represents a distinct educational paradigm with its own philosophical, ideological, and practical foundations (Rogers, 2005).

Critics argue that such institutionalized models of education restrict creativity, limit critical thinking, and reinforce hierarchical relationships between teachers and learners. Learning processes are frequently reduced to the transmission of knowledge, positioning teachers as authoritative subjects and students as passive recipients. Beyond pedagogical concerns, formal education has increasingly become entangled with economic and political interests. The commodification of schooling, where education is treated as a marketable good rather than a public right, has exacerbated social inequalities. Access to quality education often depends on socioeconomic status, thereby marginalizing learners who lack financial or institutional privilege. In this context, formal education risks functioning as a mechanism of social reproduction rather than social transformation.

This approach not only diminishes learner agency but also undermines the democratic ethos of education. Paulo Freire's concept of problem-posing education, for example, challenges this banking model of learning by advocating dialogical, reflective, and emancipatory educational practices. These limitations have intensified interest in non-formal education as an alternative and complementary learning pathway (M. Johnson & Majewska, 2024a). Non-formal education offers flexible structures, learner-centered approaches, and contextualized learning experiences that respond to the needs of diverse populations, including marginalized and excluded groups. The ideological findings underscore a fundamental tension between institutional control embedded in formal schooling and the emancipatory potential of non-formal education. Drawing on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) theory of cultural reproduction, formal education often functions as a mechanism that reproduces dominant social norms and legitimizes unequal power relations (Giroux, 2021; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In this context, learning becomes a regulated process governed by curricula, assessment regimes, and professional authority.

The philosophical critique of institutionalized education articulated by Ivan Illich provides a critical lens for understanding the emergence and significance of non-formal education. In *Deschooling Society*, Illich argues that formal schooling monopolizes learning, reinforces dependency on credentials, and undermines autonomous and community-based knowledge production. His concept of "learning webs" envisions decentralized, peer-oriented, and voluntary learning networks that challenge the authority of institutionalized education systems. These ideas resonate strongly with contemporary discussions on non-formal education, community-based learning, and digital knowledge networks.

This article aims to analyze the construction of non-formal education through the philosophical perspective of Ivan Illich. By synthesizing ideological, empirical, and pragmatic dimensions derived from a systematic literature review, this study examines how Illich's critique of schooling informs non-formal education as a substitute, supplement, and complement to formal education systems. In doing so, the study contributes to international debates on educational alternatives that promote equity, learner autonomy, and democratic participation within lifelong learning frameworks.

Illich proposed the concept of "learning webs" as an alternative framework, enabling individuals to access knowledge, skills, and mentors through decentralized and community-based networks (Grazia Viloba, 2024). This vision aligns closely with the principles of non-formal education, which emphasize self-directed learning, community participation, and flexibility in curriculum design. In contemporary educational discourse, Illich's ideas have gained renewed relevance in light of digital learning platforms, open education initiatives, and community-based education programs that challenge conventional schooling models (Bruno-jofré, 2012).

METHOD

This study employed a literature review approach to analyze the construction of non-formal education through

the philosophical perspective of Ivan Illich. A literature review was selected because it enables researchers to systematically collect, evaluate, and synthesize existing scholarly knowledge in order to develop conceptual understanding, identify theoretical patterns, and examine the relevance of philosophical ideas within contemporary educational contexts (Suve, 2024). This research follows structured procedures for identifying, screening, and analyzing academic publications relevant to the research focus (Kitchenham et al., 2009). Systematic literature review designs are widely used to enhance transparency, rigor, and replicability in qualitative and conceptual research.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using international academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and open-access peer-reviewed repositories. The search process took place between December 28, 2024 and January 9, 2025, ensuring the inclusion of recent and relevant scholarly discussions.

The keywords used in the search process included:

1. “*non-formal education construction*”
2. “*Ivan Illich*”
3. “*deschooling society*”
4. “*philosophy of education*”
5. “*alternative education*”

The selected keywords were intentionally chosen to reflect the conceptual focus and analytical scope of the study. The term “non-formal education construction” captures the study’s emphasis on non-formal education as a socially and philosophically constructed paradigm rather than a technical programmatic category. “Ivan Illich” and “deschooling society” were included to anchor the analysis within Illich’s critical framework of institutionalized schooling. Keywords such as “philosophy of education” and “alternative education” were employed to capture broader theoretical discussions and interdisciplinary perspectives relevant to non-formal learning models. The use of multiple keywords and databases was intended to capture a broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives on non-formal education and Illich’s educational philosophy (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Screening and Selection Process

Following full-text screening, 26 articles were selected as the final analytical corpus. Selection criteria included: (1) explicit engagement with non-formal education as a conceptual or practical framework; (2) direct or interpretive reference to Ivan Illich’s critique of schooling, deschooling theory, or learning webs; and (3) analytical depth addressing ideological, empirical, or pragmatic dimensions of alternative education. Articles that discussed non-formal education purely descriptively or without theoretical engagement were excluded.

Data Analysis Technique

The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, focusing on identifying recurring concepts, philosophical arguments, and educational implications. The analysis was organized into three major themes:

1. Ideological perspectives, including constructivism and liberalism in non-formal education;
2. Empirical approaches, emphasizing community-based learning and participatory practices;
3. Pragmatic considerations, addressing governance, implementation challenges, and lifelong learning.

Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for philosophical and conceptual studies because it allows researchers to interpret meanings, patterns, and relationships across diverse sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To interpret the

findings, this study employed Ivan Illich's critique of institutionalized education as the primary analytical lens. Illich's concepts of *deschooling society*, *learning webs*, and learner autonomy were used to examine how non-formal education functions as a substitute, supplement, and complement to formal education systems. Illich's philosophical framework is widely recognized as a critical foundation for analyzing alternative and community-based education models.

Ivan Illich's critique of institutionalized schooling functioned as the primary analytical lens guiding the thematic analysis. Specifically, Illich's concepts of deschooling, learning webs, and learner autonomy were employed as interpretive categories to examine how non-formal education challenges institutional authority, credentialism, and standardized pedagogical relations. Rather than treating Illich as a historical reference, his philosophical framework was used to interpret ideological orientations, empirical practices, and pragmatic implications identified across the reviewed literature.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To enhance analytical credibility, the study applied source triangulation by comparing philosophical texts, empirical studies, and contemporary educational analyses (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach strengthens the trustworthiness of literature-based research by reducing interpretive bias and ensuring conceptual consistency.

RESULT

This section presents the findings of the literature review and philosophical analysis regarding the construction of non-formal education (NFE) through Ivan Illich's perspective. Based on the systematic selection and thematic analysis of 26 relevant publications, the results are organized into three major thematic categories: (1) ideological foundations of non-formal education, (2) empirical patterns in non-formal education practices, and (3) pragmatic dimensions related to governance and lifelong learning. These themes reflect recurring patterns identified across the reviewed literature and align with the analytical framework illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Mapping of Scholarly Discourse on Non-Formal Education

The systematic literature review reveals a consistent scholarly concern regarding the limitations of formal education systems in addressing diverse learning needs, particularly in contexts characterized by social inequality, cultural heterogeneity, and rapid socio-technological change. Across the reviewed literature, formal schooling is consistently critiqued for its excessive standardization, credentialism, and institutional rigidity, which limit learner autonomy and reduce education to measurable outcomes. Recent Scopus-indexed studies emphasize that such structural constraints hinder contextual relevance and marginalize learners whose experiences do not align with dominant institutional norms (Illich, 1971; Biesta, 2015)

Within this discourse, non-formal education emerges not merely as an auxiliary educational pathway but as a flexible and context-responsive learning system capable of addressing gaps left by formal institutions. Several studies emphasize that non-formal education prioritizes learner agency, community participation, and experiential learning, positioning it as a critical space for alternative knowledge construction (Rogers, 2004). Conversely, non-formal education disrupts this ideological structure by decentering institutional authority and repositioning learners as active agents in knowledge construction. This shift reflects Freire's (1970) rejection of the "banking model" of education and supports dialogical, participatory learning practices. The discussion of learning webs in Illich's framework further reinforces this ideological departure, emphasizing voluntary association, peer learning, and decentralized knowledge exchange as foundational principles of meaningful education.

This ideological contrast is not merely theoretical; it has tangible implications for educational equity and democratic participation. By enabling learners to define their own learning trajectories, non-formal education opens spaces for marginalized voices that are often excluded or silenced within formal institutions (M. Johnson & Majewska, 2024b). Learning in non-formal settings emphasizes participation, collaboration, and relevance to real-life contexts, fostering a more humanistic and inclusive educational environment. The philosophical foundations of non-formal education resonate strongly with the ideas of Ivan Illich, a radical critic of modern institutionalized education. In *Deschooling Society*, Illich argued that formal schooling monopolizes learning,

reinforces social stratification, and inhibits genuine intellectual freedom (Igelmo Zaldívar, 2015). He contended that true learning emerges from autonomous engagement, peer interaction, and meaningful experiences rather than compulsory institutional instruction. Illich's critique extends beyond pedagogy to address the broader social consequences of schooling, including dependency on credentials, technological dominance, and the erosion of communal learning traditions.

Illich proposed the concept of "learning webs" as an alternative framework, enabling individuals to access knowledge, skills, and mentors through decentralized and community-based networks (Grazia Viloba, 2024). This vision aligns closely with the principles of non-formal education, which emphasize self-directed learning, community participation, and flexibility in curriculum design. In contemporary educational discourse, Illich's ideas have gained renewed relevance in light of digital learning platforms, open education initiatives, and community-based education programs that challenge conventional schooling models (Bruno-jofré, 2012).

Ideological Dimensions: Critique of Institutionalized Schooling

The ideological analysis of the reviewed literature demonstrates a strong alignment with Ivan Illich's critique of institutionalized education. Formal schooling is widely portrayed as an apparatus that legitimizes social stratification by equating learning with certification and institutional attendance rather than meaningful knowledge acquisition. This ideology reinforces dependency on professionalized instruction while marginalizing self-directed and community-based learning practices (Bruno-jofré, 2012; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In contrast, non-formal education is ideologically framed as a space of emancipation that disrupts hierarchical teacher–learner relations. Learning is conceptualized as a socially embedded process rooted in interaction, collaboration, and shared experience, resonating with Illich's concept of *learning webs*, where individuals connect voluntarily to exchange knowledge and skills.

Empirical Patterns: Functions of Non-Formal Education

Empirical findings across the reviewed studies indicate that non-formal education functions in three interconnected roles: as a substitute, a supplement, and a complement to formal education systems. As a substitute, non-formal education provides access to learning opportunities for marginalized groups excluded from formal schooling, including migrants, rural communities, and adult learners (Unesco, 2020).

As a supplement, non-formal education enhances competencies insufficiently addressed in formal curricula, such as life skills, civic engagement, and cultural literacy. Meanwhile, as a complement, non-formal education operates in synergy with formal institutions by contextualizing theoretical knowledge through experiential and community-based learning activities (La Belle, 1982; Rogers, 2014).

Pragmatic Implications: Relevance to Contemporary Educational Challenges

The pragmatic analysis highlights that non-formal education is particularly responsive to contemporary educational challenges, including digital transformation, lifelong learning demands, and community resilience. Unlike formal education systems that often struggle to adapt quickly to social change, non-formal education demonstrates structural flexibility and contextual sensitivity (OECD, 2020).

Furthermore, the literature indicates that non-formal education supports learner motivation and engagement by emphasizing voluntary participation and relevance to learners' lived experiences, aligning with humanistic and constructivist learning paradigms.

Philosophical Synthesis: Reconstructing Non-Formal Education

The synthesis of ideological, empirical, and pragmatic findings culminates in a philosophical reconstruction of non-formal education as a learner-centered, community-based, and ethically grounded educational paradigm. In line with Illich's vision, non-formal education is not positioned as an inferior alternative to schooling but as a legitimate and autonomous learning system that restores the intrinsic value of learning beyond institutional boundaries.

This reconstruction underscores that non-formal education embodies principles of autonomy, mutuality, and social responsibility, offering a critical response to the over-institutionalization of learning in modern societies.

DISCUSSION

Reframing Non-Formal Education Beyond Institutional Deficiency

The results of this study challenge the dominant perception of non-formal education as merely a residual or compensatory mechanism for deficiencies within formal schooling systems. Instead, the findings demonstrate that non-formal education constitutes a distinct epistemological and pedagogical paradigm grounded in learner autonomy, social interaction, and contextual relevance. This reframing resonates strongly with Ivan Illich's critique of institutionalized education, which argues that schooling systems tend to monopolize knowledge, legitimize social stratification, and reduce learning to credential accumulation. From a dialectical perspective, the crisis of formal education, characterized by standardization, commodification, and bureaucratic rigidity, serves not only as a problem statement but also as a historical condition that enables the emergence of nonformal education as a legitimate educational response. This aligns with (Biesta, 2015) assertion that contemporary education systems increasingly prioritize measurable outcomes at the expense of meaningful educational experiences, thereby marginalizing forms of learning that resist quantification.

Non-formal education, as evidenced in the reviewed literature, offers an alternative logic of learning that privileges purpose, agency, and social relevance over institutional conformity.

The ideological findings underscore a fundamental tension between institutional control embedded in formal schooling and the emancipatory potential of non-formal education. Drawing on Bourdieu & Passeron, (1990) theory of cultural reproduction, formal education often functions as a mechanism that reproduces dominant social norms and legitimizes unequal power relations. In this context, learning becomes a regulated process governed by curricula, assessment regimes, and professional authority. Conversely, non-formal education disrupts this ideological structure by decentering institutional authority and repositioning learners as active agents in knowledge construction. This shift reflects (Freire et al., 2013) rejection of the "banking model" of education and supports dialogical, participatory learning practices. The discussion of *learning webs* in Illich's framework further reinforces this ideological departure, emphasizing voluntary association, peer learning, and decentralized knowledge exchange as foundational principles of meaningful education. This ideological contrast is not merely theoretical; it has tangible implications for educational equity and democratic participation. By enabling learners to define their own learning trajectories, non-formal education opens spaces for marginalized voices that are often excluded or silenced within formal institutions.

Empirical Convergence: Non-Formal Education as Substitute, Supplement, and Complement

The empirical patterns identified in the results support a multidimensional understanding of non-formal education that transcends binary classifications. Rather than positioning non-formal education in opposition to formal schooling, the findings reveal a more nuanced relationship in which non-formal education operates simultaneously as a substitute, supplement, and complement. This conceptualization aligns with (La Belle, 1982) holistic framework and UNESCO's lifelong learning agenda, which emphasize the interdependence of diverse learning pathways.

As a substitute, non-formal education provides access to learning for populations systematically excluded from formal education systems, including adult learners, migrants, and rural communities. As a supplement, it enriches formal education by addressing competencies such as civic engagement, cultural literacy, and social skills that are often underemphasized in standardized curricula. As a complement, non-formal education contextualizes formal knowledge through experiential and community-based learning, thereby enhancing relevance and learner engagement (Dankunprasert et al., 2025). This convergence challenges policy discourses that treat non-formal education as peripheral. Instead, the discussion suggests that non-formal education should be recognized as an integral component of national and global education ecosystems, particularly within the framework of lifelong learning and Education for Sustainable Development (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The pragmatic implications of the findings are particularly salient in the context of rapid social, technological, and economic transformation. As education systems confront challenges related to digitalization, workforce precarity, and lifelong learning demands, non-formal education demonstrates adaptive capacity and contextual flexibility that formal systems often lack. OECD (2021) highlights the growing importance of social and emotional skills, which are frequently cultivated more effectively in non-formal learning environments than in conventional classrooms. Furthermore, the voluntary and learner-centered nature of non-formal education fosters intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement, supporting (Knowles, 2005) principles of andragogy. This reinforces the argument that non-formal education is not only relevant for marginalized groups but also increasingly essential for broader populations navigating complex and uncertain futures (Hoppers, 2006).

Theoretical Contribution: Revitalizing Illich's Thought in Contemporary Contexts

This study contributes theoretically by revitalizing Ivan Illich's critique of schooling within contemporary educational discourse. While Illich's work has often been dismissed as utopian or impractical, the findings demonstrate that his ideas resonate strongly with current debates on learner autonomy, digital learning networks, and community-based education. The philosophical reconstruction of non-formal education presented in this study positions Illich not as an opponent of education but as a critic of its institutional monopolization (Teräs, 2022).

By integrating Illich's philosophical insights with empirical and thematic analysis, this study advances a critical yet constructive framework for understanding non-formal education as an ethically grounded and socially responsive educational paradigm (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). This synthesis underscores the continued relevance of deschooling discourse in reimagining education beyond institutional boundaries. However, this study also acknowledges that non-formal education is not inherently emancipatory. Without ethical grounding and inclusive governance, non-formal learning initiatives may reproduce exclusionary practices or serve neoliberal agendas under the guise of flexibility (Ball, 2017; Apple, 2019). This concern aligns with contemporary critiques cautioning against the instrumentalization of alternative education models in policy discourse (Selwyn, 2023). Therefore, the emancipatory potential of non-formal education, as envisioned by Illich, must be understood as contingent upon democratic participation, learner agency, and community accountability (Rogers, 2005; Hanlin, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the construction of non-formal education through the philosophical perspective of Ivan Illich by synthesizing ideological, empirical, and pragmatic dimensions derived from a systematic thematic literature review. The findings demonstrate that non-formal education cannot be reduced to a secondary or compensatory educational pathway; rather, it represents a distinct and legitimate educational paradigm grounded in learner autonomy, community engagement, and contextual relevance. By recontextualizing Illich's critique of institutionalized schooling within contemporary educational discourse, this study highlights the continued relevance of deschooling theory in addressing the limitations of formal education systems, particularly those related to standardization, commodification, and social inequality. The analysis shows that non-formal education functions dynamically as a substitute, supplement, and complement to formal schooling, reinforcing its strategic role within lifelong learning frameworks.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the philosophy of education by extending Illich's ideas beyond their historical context and demonstrating their applicability in contemporary debates on digital learning, community-based education, and democratic participation. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers and educators should recognize non-formal education as an integral component of inclusive and human-centered education systems. Future research is encouraged to explore empirical applications of Illich's learning webs in diverse socio-cultural contexts and to examine the governance mechanisms that sustain the emancipatory potential of non-formal education.

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