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# ILLICH, EDUCATION, AND *THE WIRE*

ERIN E. BUZUVIS\*

## INTRODUCTION

Philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich died in 2002, having exposed the counterproductive, hypocritical, and destructive nature of numerous social institutions. That same year, HBO aired the first of five seasons of David Simon's critically acclaimed series, *The Wire*.<sup>1</sup> Surely if Ivan Illich had lived a little longer, he would have really liked the show. This paper will explain why, and in so doing, demonstrate both how television can help us understand Illich, and how Illich can help us understand society.

Both Illich and *The Wire* are concerned with the role of social and government institutions in perpetuating the myth of salvation through capitalism. Illich critiqued such institutions as education, health care, and labor for their inevitable production of alienation, pathology, segregation, and inequality.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, *The Wire* examines the way various institutions such as law enforcement, organized crime, labor, politics, education, and the media cultivate these same harms by promoting the mythologies of individualism, personal responsibility, free will, and success that is proportionate to effort.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, this Article will focus on two texts—first, Illich's 1971 *Deschooling Society*, which calls for abolishing institutionalized education in favor of decentralized, personalized relationships that promote intentional learning; and second, *The Wire*'s fourth

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1. *The Wire: About the Show*, HBO.COM, <http://www.hbo.com/#/the-wire/about/article/about.html> (last visited May 24, 2012).

2. See e.g., IVAN ILLICH, *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY* 1 (Ruth Nanda Anshen ed., Harper & Row 1971) (“[I]nstitutionalization of values leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence . . .”).

3. E.g., David Simon, *Introduction*, in RAFAEL ALVAREZ, *THE WIRE: TRUTH BE TOLD* 4-6 (2009) (“At best, our metropolises are the ultimate aspiration of the community, the repository for every myth and hope of people clinging to the sides of the pyramid that is capitalism.”).

season,<sup>4</sup> which is particularly focused on the exercise in futility that is the Baltimore public school system. Read together, these texts explore the problem of institutionalized education and the solution Illich proposes of intentional learning communities.

## I. THE PROBLEM: INSTITUTIONALIZED EDUCATION

According to Illich, schools and other educational institutions commodify learning, creating dependency on and constructing demand for only the type of learning that institutions can provide.<sup>5</sup> This demand and dependency both derive from and are reflected in the universality paradigm—the idea that the state has the obligation to educate everyone, coupled with society’s expectation that everyone receives an institutionalized education.

The universality paradigm stems from the belief—Illich would call it “myth”—that institutionalized education is the great equalizer, and as such, its universality is an essential foundation for our democratic ideals.<sup>6</sup> Education can convert rags to riches for all who are willing to work hard in school and apply themselves. Yet schools are not the salvation from poverty we assume them to be. In fact, according to Illich, institutionalized education undermines the interests of economically disadvantaged people for several, related reasons.<sup>7</sup> First, schools themselves fail many students.<sup>8</sup> As resource-intensive as institutionalized education is, schools will never have the resources to successfully educate everyone in their mandate.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the model of education that is feasible to provide is one that is rooted in generalizations about the optimal learning environment, such generalizations as: the best age to learn is when you are young; the best place is a classroom; the best person to learn from is a teacher.<sup>10</sup>

These assumptions do not work for everyone. In fact, the optimal learning environment supposed by institutionalized education only works for students who already benefit from economic privilege. This privilege may be parents who do not have to work two

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4. Chris Barsanti, *The Wire: Season Four*, FILMCRTIC.COM, <http://www.filmcritic.com/reviews/2005/the-wire-season-four/> (last visited May 24, 2012).

5. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 37.

6. *Id.* at 12, 37.

7. *Id.* at 6-7, 26-33.

8. *Id.* at 28; *see also* J.J. Hermes, *Report Shows Stunning Failures in High-School Graduation Rates*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC. (Apr. 1, 2008), <http://chronicle.com/article/Report-Shows-Stunning-Failures/40728>.

9. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 9, 28-29.

10. *Id.* at 26.

jobs and can spend time supporting their children's education. It may also be the life environment that supports learning, everything from regular, nourishing meals to extracurricular stimulation. So much of our learning happens *outside* of school that even if schools could serve every student equally, they could never compensate for the extracurricular disparities that exist outside its scope.<sup>11</sup>

Students who do not already have access to this privilege will not get ahead in school.<sup>12</sup> Instead, many will fall behind, drop out, and then suffer the discrimination inflicted by a society that has accepted institutionalized education as the *sine qua non* of learning. While students are in school, they are alienated by a system that requires them to sublimate their own agency and accept the institutional values and expectations inherent in a standard curriculum. At the same time, this curriculum normalizes and creates the expectation for the future alienation students will experience as workers.<sup>13</sup> It sells to students a variety of myths that serve only to promote the institution of education and allow it to continue its marginalizing work.

One of these is the myth that knowledge can be measured, quantified, and rank-ordered, such as by standardized tests,<sup>14</sup> a myth that helps promote the stratification of students and the allocation of resources in a stratified manner. Schools also promote the myth that progress requires schools to continuously update and invest in new educational resources, such as new textbooks to replace the earlier editions out of date, or the bigger, better football stadium deemed/accepted as necessary. Thus, institutionalized education diverts huge financial and social capital from other potentially beneficial endeavors—educational and other support for other citizens including infants, adults, and the elderly<sup>15</sup>—and sinks them

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11. *Id.* at 27-28. In support of this claim, contemporary research demonstrates that the achievement gap for verbal and reading skills widens during the summer months, because some students have access to enriching influences and others do not. Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle & Linda S. Olson, *Schools, Achievement, and Inequality: A Seasonal Perspective*, 23 *EDUC. EVALUATION & POL'Y ANALYSIS* 171, 183 (2001); see also Harris Cooper, *Summer Learning Loss: The Problem and Some Solutions*, *EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER DIGEST* (May, 2003), available at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED475391.pdf>.

12. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 6 (finding that since education is an expense that does not produce benefits for disadvantaged students; “the poorer student will generally fall behind so long as he depends on school for advancement or learning”).

13. *Id.* at 47. Illich calls this pre-alienation. *Id.*

14. *Id.* at 40. Illich calls this “The Myth of Measurement of Values.” *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 8-9, 28.

into a project that not only fails to educate poor students, but then stigmatizes them for it.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, Illich's description of education supports Marxist critic Louis Althusser's inclusion of education as an ideological state apparatus (ISA), a social institution that reproduces the power of the capitalist state by attracting adherents to a dominant ideology and inducing them to voluntarily submit to beliefs and adopt behaviors that are antithetical to their individual interest.<sup>17</sup> Even setting aside the capitalist curriculum students encounter within the educational institution, education promotes capitalism by creating a demand for itself, attracting adherents to the belief in education as salvation. These adherents then, individually and collectively, voluntarily forgo alternatives to alienation and social stratification. And they willingly accept the alienation and stratification that education necessarily produces.

The problems of institutionalized education that are identified by Illich are vividly conveyed in season four of *The Wire*, which follows several adolescent characters as they navigate the often-conflicting influences of life within and out of school. As other readers of the show have observed, season four portrays the boys' formal education—within the walls of fictional Edward J. Tilghman Middle School—as well as their informal education on the corners of their West Baltimore neighborhood which serve as the ground zero in the city's drug trade.<sup>18</sup> Essentially, *The Wire* presents a tale of three classrooms. Two are institutional; one, the street, is not.

### A. *Prez's Class*

One of the institutional classrooms featured is Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski's eighth-grade math class. Prez, an ex-cop teaching for the first time,<sup>19</sup> brings naive ambition to his new job, where he is

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16. *Id.* at 7 (determining that economically disadvantaged individuals "are schooled in a sense of inferiority toward the better schooled"); *Id.* at 29 (finding that economically disadvantaged individuals "are robbed of their self-respect by subscribing to a creed that grants salvation only through school").

17. Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, in *LENIN AND PHILOSOPHY AND OTHER ESSAYS* 130-34 (Ben Brewster trans., Monthly Review Press 1971).

18. Ralph Beliveau & Laura Bolf-Beliveau, *Posing Problems and Picking Fights: Critical Pedagogy and the Corner Boys*, in *THE WIRE: URBAN DECAY AND AMERICAN TELEVISION* 91 (Tiffany Potter & C.W. Marshall, eds. 2009).

19. See *The Wire: Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski*, HBO.COM, <http://www.hbo.com/the-wire#/the-wire/cast-and-crew/roland-prez-pryzbylewski/index.html> (last visited May 24, 2012).

stymied by classroom violence,<sup>20</sup> school district bureaucrats, and pressure to produce the indicia of success on the statewide standardized achievement test.<sup>21</sup> He manages to educate two of his students in some fashion—Duquan Weams, to whom Prez gives a basic education in personal hygiene as well as computer literacy, and Randy Wagstaff, to whom Prez teaches probability using the dice game craps<sup>22</sup>—but despite his efforts (or even arguably because of them) both boys suffer major betrayal by the school system that irrevocably impair the trajectory of their lives.

Duquan's plotline supports Illich's skepticism of education as the salvation for poverty.<sup>23</sup> So poor is Duquan's family that he has no clothes or food. One day, Duquan returns home from school to discover that his family has been evicted for failing to pay the rent, and that they have left him behind to fend for himself on the street.<sup>24</sup> It seems inevitable to everyone but Prez that Duquan is that child left behind—how can he thrive in school without such basic needs? Prez makes heroic efforts to help Duquan, bringing him food, clothes,<sup>25</sup> and even loaning him money. The computer he appropriates for his classroom captivates and inspires Duquan. But these efforts are not sustainable. Prez cannot do enough to truly help Duquan. Assistant principal Marcia Donnelly speaks truth when she tells him “the kids in this school aren't yours”<sup>26</sup>—a brusque reminder that he cannot save everyone. Duquan is socially promoted to high school, reflecting what Illich identifies as an artificial assumption inherent in institutionalized education that one's chronological age is determinative of one's appropriate educational

20. The chaos that is Prez's classroom is demonstrated by one scene in which Laetitia, a female student, attacked another student, Chiquan, with a blade after Chiquan antagonized her by using a piece of jewelry to reflect light into Laetitia's eyes. The wound required an ambulance ride and 200 stitches. *The Wire: Home Rooms*, 39:55 (HBO television broadcast Sept. 24, 2006).

21. As Prez explains to a colleague, this practice of manipulating statistics to manufacture the appearance of success is identical to what the police call “juking the stats” to make crime statistics appear low. *The Wire: Know Your Place*, 35:40 (HBO television broadcast Nov. 12, 2006). In fact, the whole show is about the complicated, ambiguous truth lurking below such surface indicators—whether they be crime stats, standardized test results, port manifests, or Pulitzer prizes. In Episode 47, a school official tells Prez that “from now until they're done, everything is about the tests.” *The Wire: Misgivings*, 7:04 (HBO television broadcast Nov. 19, 2006). This includes a strategy of keeping the heat on high so that the students are too drowsy to misbehave. *Id.*

22. *The Wire: Unto Others*, 52:45 (HBO television broadcast Oct. 29, 2006).

23. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 7-8.

24. *The Wire: That's Got His Own* (HBO television broadcast Dec. 3, 2006).

25. *The Wire: Margin of Error*, 18:16 (HBO television broadcast Oct. 15, 2006).

26. *That's Got His Own*, *supra* note 24, at 22:00.

setting.<sup>27</sup> Alienated from his mentor Prez and his classmates—his only friends or family—Duquan drops out to slowly embrace the life of drugs and danger that awaits him on the streets.<sup>28</sup>

Randy Wagstaff is also failed by the system in a different way. In trouble with the assistant principal, he decides to save himself by telling her that he knows about a neighborhood murder, committed by henchmen in the name of local druglord Marlo Stanfield.<sup>29</sup> The principal reports this information to the police, who try to use Randy as a witness to build a case against Stanfield.<sup>30</sup> But druglords are not kind to snitches, and despite Prez's efforts to protect him, Stanfield's people succeed in ruining Randy—they set fire to his foster mother's house, and when she is killed,<sup>31</sup> Randy ends up back in the group home he had come from. He hardens and turns violent,<sup>32</sup> suggesting he is on track to demonstrate the accuracy of the so-called school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>33</sup>

The pipeline seems apparent enough to Randy. He is convinced, perhaps from his own experience or that of his peers that getting into trouble in school will cause him to be re-institutionalized in the group home. It is equally obvious to him that this trajectory will inevitably produce an interaction with the criminal justice system, as either a victim or perpetrator of violence. The pipeline theory is not expressly addressed by Illich, but it is certainly another example of the way in which the institution of education contributes to the subordination of the lower class. To support what Illich

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27. *Id.*; see also ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 23 (writing approvingly of “a group of junior-high-school students in the process of organizing a resistance movement to their obligatory draft into the next class”).

28. *The Wire*: -30- (HBO television broadcast Mar. 9, 2008).

29. *Margin of Error*, *supra* note 25, at 25:56.

30. *Unto Others*, *supra* note 22, at 43:25.

31. *That's Got His Own*, *supra* note 24.

32. *The Wire: Final Grades* (HBO television broadcast Dec. 10, 2006).

33. Here is the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) description of the school-to-prison pipeline:

[A] disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished and pushed out. “Zero-tolerance” policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while high-stakes testing programs encourage educators to push out low-performing students to improve their schools' overall test scores. Students of color are especially vulnerable to push-out trends and the discriminatory application of discipline.

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, *School-to-Prison Pipeline*, ACLU.ORG, <http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-pipeline> (last visited May 24, 2012).

would call the myth of progress,<sup>34</sup> schools adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards various disciplinary infractions in order to winnow out “problem” students who will likely underperform on the standardized tests that determine the school’s level of state and federal funding.<sup>35</sup> Rather than truly helping students whose life circumstances make it both difficult to follow the rules and to perform well on standardized tests, schools use the pipeline to manipulate the appearance of (relative) success.<sup>36</sup> Students like Randy are (threatened to be) sacrificed so that his school can receive more state funding to support the education of his more-privileged peers. Rather than promoting equality, Tilghman Middle School promotes the myth of equality while “inevitably polarizing society.”<sup>37</sup>

### B. *Colvin’s Class*

The second institutional classroom is a special, experimental classroom run jointly by university sociology professor David Parenti and his consultant, former police major Howard “Bunny” Colvin.<sup>38</sup> Parenti and Colvin convince school administrators to let them hand pick the ten most violent students at Tilghman Middle School for a special pilot program,<sup>39</sup> which will allow Parenti to test

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34. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 42.

35. Deborah Gordon Klehr, *Addressing the Unintended Consequences of No Child Left Behind and Zero Tolerance: Better Strategies for Safe Schools and Successful Students*, 16 GEO. J. ON POVERTY L. & POL’Y 585, 602 (2009).

36. In a similar manipulation of the data that measures success and performance (or what the show thematically refers to as “juking the stats”), Tilghman Middle School hires “freelance” truant officers to round up students who don’t regularly attend, but only on the one day that the headcount is reported to the state for the purposes of determining funding. *The Wire: Refugees*, 22:42 (HBO television broadcast Oct. 1, 2006).

37. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 9.

38. *The Wire: Alliances*, 8:11 (HBO television broadcast Oct. 8, 2006).

39. In season 3, Major Colvin applied a similar segregationist approach to the city’s drug problem, setting up a special district, nicknamed “Hamsterdam,” where the police exchanged leniency on nonviolent drug trade for the dealers’ confinement of their business to that area. James Trier, *Representations of Education in HBO’s The Wire, Season 4*, TEACHER EDUC. Q., Spring 2010, at 187-88. Despite the many benefits of Colvin’s Hamsterdam, including improved quality of life throughout the city, as well as the improved distribution of social services to the occupants of Hamsterdam, the political ramifications of “legalized drugs” proved too much for the city’s politicians, who pulled the plug and forced Colvin to retire. *Id.* Hamsterdam is an obvious parallel to Colvin and Parenti’s special class in season 4. *Id.* at 186-88 (calling the special class “Hamsterdam for Tilghman”). Both of Colvin’s projects involve isolation and containment of “problem” individuals and present ambiguous answers to the question of whether those individuals are being sacrificed or helped. Both prove politically controversial because they appear oriented, however realistically, toward harm reduction



whether isolation and radical teaching methods can change at-risk students' behavior and keep them from their apparent destiny on the street, the inevitable rising of the ranks in the drug trade from their current status as corner boys.<sup>40</sup>

At first, containment is the only accomplishment this experiment can claim; all ten selectees are neither on the street nor wreaking havoc in their home classrooms. But when Colvin starts incorporating classroom topics that the students actually care about and find relevant, a writing assignment on "what makes a good corner boy,"<sup>41</sup> the students become engaged, better behaved, and Colvin seems poised to convince at least a few of them, in particular Namond Brice, to realign their behavior toward the right track. But the school district eventually pulls the plug on the special class,<sup>42</sup> fearing the negative public perception of a program that appears to leave children behind because they are not being groomed to succeed on the statewide standardized test.

Several aspects of Illich's critique of institutional education are illustrated in Colvin's classroom. According to Illich, institutional education constructs the classroom as a magical enclave, a "womb" that is separated from the real world by a "hidden curriculum" of values of conformity and discipline.<sup>43</sup> These values penalize students' behavior in ways that are inconsistent and disproportionate to the way that behavior would be viewed in the real world, and stigmatizes students who do not conform to the behavioral expectations that are unique to the classroom.<sup>44</sup>

Namond, to be sure, is a rude and disruptive student. Referencing Prez's prior career as a police officer, Namond tells Prez to "get your police stick out the desk and beat me. You know you fuckin' want to."<sup>45</sup> This is a terrible thing to say, and Prez kicks Namond out of class for saying it. But viewed in the context of Namond's "real world," where cops and corner kids are at war,

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rather than perpetuating the myth of the absolute solution (eliminating the drug trade, educating all students) that the politicians feel obligated to endorse.

40. *Alliances*, *supra* note 38, at 8:11.

41. *The Wire: Corner Boys*, 7:24 (HBO television broadcast Nov. 5, 2006).

42. *Final Grades*, *supra* note 32, at 54:00.

43. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 32, 74.

44. *Id.* at 32 ("The distinctions between morality, legality, and personal worth are blurred and eventually eliminated. Each transgression is made to be felt as a multiple offense. The offender is expected to feel that he has broken a rule, that he has behaved immorally, and that he has let himself down. A pupil who adroitly obtains assistance on an exam is told that he is an outlaw, morally corrupt, and personally worthless.")

45. *Alliances*, *supra* note 38, at 9:25.

these comments are mere trash talk. In the world outside the classroom, Namond could say things far more hateful and disruptive and still be constitutionally protected from civil and criminal sanctions.<sup>46</sup> But in school, Namond's behavior is so aberrant that his isolation is required. Parenti, the sociologist, expresses concern about pulling students like Namond out of their regular class to participate in their experimental classroom: "won't they be stigmatized?,"<sup>47</sup> he asks. Colvin responds that they are stigmatized already as bad kids and troublemakers.<sup>48</sup> Whatever consequences this experiment may have, creating a stigma is not one of them because school has done that already.

Like Prez's classroom, Colvin's classroom also portrays Illich's criticism that school presents a painful illustration of the ways schools promote the illusion of equality and universality to the detriment of the real thing.<sup>49</sup> Colvin's experiment was on shaky ground from the start, as school officials feared that it could be perceived as the "warehousing" of children, an image that would undermine the myth of universal expectations.<sup>50</sup> And when the goals of Colvin's class conflict with the administration's goals of preparing students for the statewide test, it is the class that is sacrificed.

No one cares that Colvin's intervention is seemingly making a real difference in these students' lives, that they are not only better behaved by classroom standards, but also more engaged, analytical, and self-aware. Are they counting on the fact that, without the intervention of Colvin's class, students like Namond will get themselves expelled by test day? It is fitting for this suggestion of the school-to-prison pipeline that what Illich calls "an enforced stay in the company of teachers,"<sup>51</sup> Namond calls "gen pop."<sup>52</sup> Both Illich and Namond agree: school = prison.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps unpredictably, Namond is the only Tilghman student whose plotline ends on a hopeful note. Colvin and his wife effectively, if not formally, adopt him and raise him in their home.<sup>54</sup> The

46. See, e.g., *Snyder v. Phelps*, 131 S. Ct. 1207, 1216-17 (2011) (extending First Amendment protection to a religious order's protest of a serviceman's funeral that included such messages as "'Semper fi fags' and 'Thank God for Dead Soldiers'").

47. *Alliances*, *supra* note 38, at 9:13.

48. *Id.*

49. ILLICH *supra* note 2, at 6.

50. *Alliances*, *supra* note 38, at 9:01.

51. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 17.

52. *That's Got His Own*, *supra* note 24, at 27:03.

53. *Margin of Error*, *supra* note 25.

54. *Final Grades*, *supra* note 32, at 45:00, 56:00.

last television viewers see of Namond, he is making Colvin proud by delivering an award-winning speech in a city-wide student competition.<sup>55</sup> But the fact that such an extreme and unusual intervention was required to turn Namond's life around makes it the exception that proves the rule and demonstrates Illich's point: school does not provide a way out of poverty for anyone else.<sup>56</sup>

### C. *The "Classroom" of the Street*

*The Wire* also portrays the non-institutional "classroom" of the street, where all kinds of learning is going on. For example, a teenager named Sherrod tries to augment his fifth-grade education by apprenticing with an ex-addict street entrepreneur named Bubbles.<sup>57</sup> Another eighth grader, Michael, thrives under the tutelage of a drug kingpin's hitmen, Felicia "Snoop" Pearson and Chris Partlow.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, a reformed drug henchman named Dennis "Cutty" Wise opens a boxing gym for the corner boys, where he tries to role model alternatives to the drug trade.<sup>59</sup> Like Prez and Colvin, Bubbles, Snoop, and Cutty are all educators, demonstrating Illich's point that learning is not limited to classrooms, and is not the exclusive domain of individuals hired as teachers.<sup>60</sup> But where the institutional classrooms require that student-centered learning (such as Prez's probability lesson based on dice, or Colvin's writing assignment based on corner-boy values) be sacrificed in the service of myth-making that is the standardized test,<sup>61</sup> the classroom of the street is not encumbered by artificial measures of success.

Compare the artificiality of the standardized test that defines success in the institutional classroom to the assassination simulation that Michael must pass to progress in his lessons with Snoop and Chris and to demonstrate the proficiency required to partake in the real thing.<sup>62</sup> Michael's exam is highly relevant and narrowly tai-

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55. *The Wire: Late Editions*, 27:00 (HBO television broadcast Mar. 2, 2008).

56. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 5 ("Educational disadvantage cannot be cured by relying on education within the school.").

57. *The Wire: Soft Eyes*, 15:01 (HBO television broadcast Sept. 17, 2006).

58. *Alliances*, *supra* note 38, at 23:18.

59. *Soft Eyes*, *supra* note 57, at 51:31.

60. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 12, 27.

61. In Episode 50, Prez is ecstatic that the test results show progress and "proficiency"—until he learns that proficiency (in another example of education constructing the myth of universal success) is just a euphemism for two grades below level. *Final Grades*, *supra* note 32, at 60:06.

62. In the opening scene of Episode 49, Chris and Snoop put Michael through a training program in a vacant warehouse. Armed with paint balls, Michael passes his mentors' test when he corners Chris and brings him to his knees. Snoop asks him

lored to the skills that he will be required to use. Also, in contrast to the standardized test, which only succeeds at attaching the arbitrarily defined label of “proficient” on Prez’s students,<sup>63</sup> Michael’s education in assassination proves an incontrovertible success when he is able to use what he has learned to save his own life—he realizes that Snoop is setting up on him and takes her out instead.<sup>64</sup> Finally, in contrast to Prez’s students who have no connection to the material that Prez must drill into them for test, Michael is internally motivated to partake of the education that Snoop and Chris are providing him,<sup>65</sup> something that cannot be said for Prez’s lessons on probability, or even Cutty’s attempt to reach him through the ring.<sup>66</sup>

In another example that demonstrates the failure of compulsory education, well-meaning Bubbles, not recognizing himself as the teacher that he is, enrolls Sherrod in Tighlman Middle School so that Sherrod can receive the education Bubbles never did.<sup>67</sup> But Sherrod cannot adjust to the confinement of the classroom. So he only pretends to attend and instead spends the school day dealing drugs. When Bubbles discovers that Sherrod is on the corner instead of school, he tells Sherrod that he cannot stay with him anymore. Separated from his tutor/mentor, Sherrod develops an addiction that ultimately gets him killed.<sup>68</sup>

## II. THE SOLUTION: DEINSTITUTIONALIZED LEARNING

Illich proposed deinstitutionalized learning as the solution to the social problems caused by compulsory, institutionalized education.<sup>69</sup> He proposes what is essentially a grassroots system of edu-

“what’s next?” and Michael replies to Snoop’s delight, “one to the head, I keep it quick.” *That’s Got His Own*, *supra* note 24, at 2:30.

63. *Corner Boys*, *supra* note 41.

64. *Late Editions*, *supra* note 55, at 50:29.

65. See ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 15 (describing how quickly people learned Spanish when there was a glut of much-needed jobs for those who could speak it).

66. Two details about Michael’s character explain why learning street toughness was relevant to Michael in ways that learning math and learning boxing were not: that he is fiercely protective of his little brother Bug, *Michael Lee*, HBO.COM, <http://www.hbo.com/the-wire/cast-and-crew/michael-lee/index.html> (last visited May 24, 2012), and that he was apparently sexually abused by his stepfather.

67. *Soft Eyes*, *supra* note 57, at 48:29.

68. *That’s Got His Own*, *supra* note 24, at 8:24. Sherrod’s addiction leads him to steal a shot of dope from Bubbles, not realizing that Bubbles had laced it with sodium cyanide as part of a plan to protect himself from a street bully who had been regularly stealing from Bubbles and beating him up. *Id.*

69. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 1, 73.

cation, in which teachers and learners are fluidly defined, not restricted by age and formal credentials, and matched for specific learning projects that are self-selected and customized.<sup>70</sup> To have a truly democratic system of education, resources must be redirected away from the failed experiment of institutionalized education and instead invested in the infrastructure to promote a wide range of “learning webs.”<sup>71</sup> As Illich puts it, “[t]he most radical alternative to school would be a network or service which gave each man the same opportunity to share his current concern with others motivated by the same concern.”<sup>72</sup> Directories can help match people who are willing to share their skills with those who wish to learn them, and can also help learners find like-minded peers.<sup>73</sup>

Groups of peers and skill models can convene in person or virtually for live discussion or demonstrations (Illich might suggest chat rooms and YouTube<sup>74</sup> for these purposes if he was writing today, so long as computer and Internet technology are democratically available). Public funds could be redirected from formal educational institutions and into “skill exchanges” where they could be used to compensate skill “models” for their mentoring work.<sup>75</sup> Alternatively or in addition, a “skill exchange” could allow skill models to receive credit that they can use to partake in learning themselves.<sup>76</sup> And rather than requiring compulsory education for youth of a certain age, a flexible education credit could allow indi-

70. *Id.* at 17-18, 75-76.

71. *Id.* at 72, 98.

72. *Id.* at 19.

73. *Id.* at 79. Illich may have foreseen social media when he called for technological advances that would “create institutions which serve personal, creative, and autonomous interaction and the emergence of values which cannot be substantially controlled by technocrats.” *Id.* at 2.

Let me give, as an example of what I mean, a description of how an intellectual match might work . . . Each man, at any given moment and at a minimum price, could identify himself to a computer with his address and telephone number, indicating the book, article, film, or recording on which he seeks a partner for discussion. Within days he could receive by mail the list of others who recently had taken the same initiative. This list would enable him by telephone to arrange for a meeting with persons who initially would be known exclusively by the fact that they requested a dialogue about the same subject.

*Id.* at 19.

74. *About YouTube*, YOUTUBE.COM, [http://www.youtube.com/t/about\\_youtube](http://www.youtube.com/t/about_youtube) (last visited May 24, 2012) (“YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe. . .”).

75. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 79.

76. *Id.* at 65.

viduals to customize their educations by redeeming that credit at whatever age and for whatever skill they desire.

Illich's proposal for grassroots education also addresses the problems he identifies with schools' monopolization of educational resources and materials—textbooks, microscopes, maps, etc.<sup>77</sup> For one reason, they are only available to a subset of potential learners. For another, they are artificially overpriced (as anyone who has actually bought a textbook recently can surely attest) and the high cost of educational materials further restricts students' access to them. The “markup” on objects designated “educational” puts schools in the position of only being able to acquire a limited quantity and variety, and puts administrators in the position of limiting students' access to resources “as a defense of costly public equipment against those who would play with it rather than learn.”<sup>78</sup> For these reasons, Illich encourages society to recognize the inherent learning potential in everyday objects and places.<sup>79</sup>

Educational objects should be liberated and dispersed in a variety of public and private institutions such as libraries, museums, and laboratories, where they can be accessed by a wider variety of learners.<sup>80</sup> Such efforts would curtail the arms race in educational spending, as would a greater recognition of the inherent educational potential of existing objects and our existing environment. For example, Illich cites places like factories, airports, and farms as places where education can and should occur.<sup>81</sup> And he recognizes the educational potential of simple objects like dice, which Illich offers as an example of the educational potential of ordinary games—“simple, cheap, and—to a large extent—can be organized by the players themselves.”<sup>82</sup>

In Illich's paradigm of grassroots education, learning becomes more effective and accessible because it is disaggregated from several limiting presumptions—that only youth are students, that only credentialed teachers can be instructors,<sup>83</sup> that only a constructed

77. *Id.* at 80.

78. *Id.* at 80.

79. *Id.* at 80-81, 85.

80. *Id.* at 78, 84.

81. *Id.* at 78.

82. *Id.* at 81.

83. A corollary of Illich's ideal of deinstitutionalized education is the idea that anyone with a skill can be a teacher of that skill. The irrelevance of formal teacher training is certainly a hard thing for a law professor to dispute, given the lack of any formal teacher training or prerequisites in this area of academia. In fact, most law professors learned to teach by the very method that Illich espouses as the ideal learning

environment can serve as the locus for learning, and that only objects packaged and marketed as “educational” can serve as educational resources.<sup>84</sup> Illich’s proposal democratizes education by calling for the elimination of these artificial, restricting, and cost-inducing barriers. Moreover, his system provides a better bulwark against shortages of skilled persons than our current system, which “indoctrinate[es] [the public] to believe that skills are valuable and reliable only if they are the result of formal schooling” and in so doing, squeezes out of the job market individuals who have acquired their skills through other means.<sup>85</sup> By displacing the institutional degree as the *sine qua non* of educational attainment, Illich’s model eliminates the stigma that attaches to those who have not attained a particular degree,<sup>86</sup> as well as the class stratification that results when such bias operates to limit their career choices and full participation in public life.

Some of the components of Illich’s proposed “deschooled” society are also reflected in season four of *The Wire*. Prez, the eighth-grade teacher, directly confronts Illich’s critique of the school for monopolizing and limiting access to educational resources. After watching his students play craps in his classroom during lunch break,<sup>87</sup> he is inspired to use the game to teach them some math skills, in particular, probability.<sup>88</sup> His hunt for dice on school

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scenario: highly motivated to learn the skill of teaching, by virtue of either having received or deciding to pursue a job in legal academia, we sought out other classroom teachers to serve as mentors and received one-on-one advice and instruction from them. Law professors are not the only educators who are not required to receive formal instruction in teaching yet are accepted as educators nonetheless. Most states do not require a parent to have formal teaching credentials in order to home school their children, and many private schools hire teachers who do not have the license or credentials the state requires of their public school counterparts. The idea of continuing to require credentials of teachers makes even less sense in Illich’s paradigm of deinstitutionalized education, as much of today’s formal teacher training addresses skills that would be irrelevant—such as how to manage a classroom, motivate students, and select curriculum.

84. *Id.* at 28, 80, 84, 102.

85. *Id.* at 89. Certification requirements and ever-increasing degree requirements for many skilled jobs help ensure that skills are scarce. For example, Illich points out that the rising popularity of four-year nursing degree programs devalues the credential of a two-year degree. “Women from poorer families, who would formerly have enrolled in a two- or three-year program, now stay out of the nursing profession altogether.” *Id.*

86. Illich would bolster this with a disestablishment principle applied to education: government entities, employers, and other relevant social actors must be agnostic to an individual’s education, as they are to an individual’s religion. *Id.* at 11-12.

87. *Unto Others*, *supra* note 22, at 14:00.

88. *Id.*

grounds takes him to the storage closet where he is pleased to find shelves of board games, which he raids for their dice.<sup>89</sup> But he makes other startling discoveries as well: a brand new computer, still in its box, as well as the current edition of the same textbook of which the school had provided him old copies of an earlier edition.<sup>90</sup> He realizes that this brand new equipment is being warehoused in an attempt to protect it from the intended beneficiaries, the students themselves. He quickly appropriates these items for his classroom, and the computer becomes a source of inspiration for Duquan in particular.<sup>91</sup> Illich could have written this scene. For one thing, Prez's discovery of the unused computer and textbooks directly implicates Illich's concern that our narrow construction of "education materials" makes them so limited and costly that they are best not used by students.<sup>92</sup> And the fact that Prez goes hunting for dice particularly evokes Illich, as that was his own paradigmatic example of educational everyday objects.<sup>93</sup> But Prez could only partially liberate the educational potential of the dice, and of the computer. Had he been able to deinstitutionalize them altogether, rather than just relocate them to another institutional setting, his classroom, he might not have been hamstrung in his efforts to use them as real objects of learning.

Bubbles and Cutty, two street characters featured in season four of *The Wire* could have been what Illich would call an effective "skill model[s]" in a world of deinstitutionalized education.<sup>94</sup> Both characters tried to be teachers and mentors to younger characters, and while the show does not suggest that they were better at it than Colvin or Prez, but if we could imagine their efforts existing in a society that was willing to invest in the kind of education that they were willing to provide, we can also imagine that they would have been able to avoid many of limitations that the show's classroom teachers had to face.

Bubbles,<sup>95</sup> to be sure, is a challenging role model to defend. He is a drug addict, at least off and on. He is homeless. He is victimized by street bullies. His schemes for procuring money and

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89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

91. *Corner Boys*, *supra* note 41, at 28:30.

92. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 80.

93. *Id.* at 81.

94. *Id.* at 97.

95. See *The Wire: Bubbles*, HBO.COM, <http://www.hbo.com/the-wire#/the-wire/cast-and-crew/bubbles/index.html> (last visited May 24, 2012).



selling drugs are not always legal. But the fact of his survival is a testament to his skills, which include ingenuity, charisma, and entrepreneurial creativity. For the right mentee, Bubbles would be the perfect role model. As he demonstrates through his relationship with his one-time apprentice Sherrod, Bubbles is patient and generous with his time, as he teaches him the operation of his mobile grocery store, called “Bubble’s Depo [sic].”<sup>96</sup> Bubbles was not just role modeling how to acquire inventory, make sales, and count change; he was role modeling survival by legitimate means, an alternative to dealing drugs. Yet Bubbles does not recognize himself for the teacher that he is.

As a result of his internalized stigma of his lack of formal education, he encourages Sherrod to attend school,<sup>97</sup> which is clearly a bad fit for him, rather than keep him close—a decision that ultimately leads to Sherrod’s demise.<sup>98</sup> But reenvision this plotline in a world where formal education is not the expectation for every individual. Bubbles is not stigmatized or discredited due either to his lack of formal credentials or the unorthodox nature of expertise in the subject of street smarts. In this world, Bubbles could capitalize on his skill, feel validated for modeling it, receive some compensation, either through government money redirected from schools, or in the form of education credits that he could use to further his own education, a desire suggested by the passionate way he encourages Sherrod’s education. Could this different paradigm of education have produced a way out of poverty for him, and for Sherrod as well? Seems it would have given them a better chance than that provided by a world with compulsory, institutionalized education.

Cutty is an ex-drug dealer who decides to start a boxing gym in the neighborhood in an attempt to provide for neighborhood boys an alternative to drug business that he never had.<sup>99</sup> It is ironic, then, that the principal investor is the wealthy local druglord, Avon Barksdale,<sup>100</sup> and that Cutty has to cater to crooked politicians to maneuver the red tape that stands between him and an operating permit.<sup>101</sup> Cutty teaches his clientele not only boxing skills and related personal traits like discipline and perseverance, but he models

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96. *Soft Eyes*, *supra* note 57, at 14:33.

97. *Id.* at 21:30.

98. *That’s Got His Own*, *supra* note 24.

99. See *The Wire: Dennis “Cutty” Wise*, HBO.COM, <http://www.hbo.com/the-wire#/the-wire/cast-and-crew/dennis-cutty-wise/index.html> (last visited May 24, 2012).

100. *The Wire: Middle Ground*, 26:00 (HBO television broadcast Dec. 12, 2004).

101. *The Wire: Slapstick* (HBO television broadcast Nov. 21, 2004).

more important skills like nonviolent conflict resolution. For example, Cutty apologizes to the boys for having flirted at the gym with some of their female relatives, which he acknowledges was disrespectful and inappropriate.<sup>102</sup>

Given the portrayal of these boys' lives outside the gym, where acts of disrespect are handled violently as a routine matter, this may have been the first genuine apology these boys have ever witnessed. And the apology succeeds at diffusing tension and restoring harmony at the gym. In a deschooled society, perhaps public resources, not drug money, would have been available to promote education in such an "everyday" place as the gym, and Cutty would not have had to reach out to criminals to support his efforts. A deschooled society would respect the mentoring efforts of an individual like Cutty, who lacks credentials, but is offering to teach real skills to a constituency of individuals for whom those skills are lacking. A deschooled society would support Cutty's gym as one valid alternative to formal classroom, where students whose interest matches Cutty's skills can come together and learn. Cutty's clientele were not going to box their way out of poverty. But his gym stands a better chance than the classroom of being the locus for inspiration and the starting point for lifelong, self-directed learning.

#### CONCLUSION

David Simon's *The Wire* portrays realistic relationships between citizens of Baltimore and its various social institutions, including that of education in the show's fourth season. The show depicts how statistics and other false indicators of success promote the mythology of progress and divert resources away from programs and initiatives that could improve the lives of those affected by crime and poverty. In this way it provides a perfect companion to Illich, in particular *Deschooling Society*, which also seeks to expose the mythologies inherent in social institutions like education which operate to promote rather than dismantle social inequality.<sup>103</sup>

But while both texts help us understand the shortfalls of institutionalized education, neither is particularly prescriptive when it comes to undoing the current state of affairs and weaning our society off of institutions, like education, on which we have grown dependent. Standardized tests are becoming more, not less, relevant

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102. *Unto Others*, *supra* note 22, at 20:20.

103. ILLICH, *supra* note 2, at 1, 76.

in determining schools' resources and prestige; newspapers have even been using test results to create and publish teacher rankings.<sup>104</sup> Rather than democratizing the educational resources and freeing them from the confines of constructed institutions, we are enforcing those constructions so vigorously that we would criminally convict a mother who used a grandparent's address to get her children into a "better" school district.<sup>105</sup> Even with increasing popularity of classroom alternatives, as evidenced by the rising popularity of homeschooling,<sup>106</sup> and the free school movement,<sup>107</sup> it is clear that society is not going to deschool itself easily or any time soon. This exercise of reading Illich with *The Wire* does not solve the problem or provide a roadmap to an institution-less world, but it does help crystallize what is at stake and make more persuasive the case for radical re-envisioning of education.

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104. See Jason Felch, Jason Song & Doug Smith, *Who's Teaching L.A.'s Kids?*, L.A. TIMES (Aug. 14, 2010), available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/14/local/la-me-teachers-value-20100815>.

105. See Timothy Williams, *Jailed for Switching Her Daughters' School District*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 26, 2011), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/us/jailed-for-switching-her-daughters-school-district.html>.

106. Over 2 million students were homeschooled in 2010, according to the National Home Education Research Institute. Brian D. Ray, *2.04 Million Homeschool Students in the United States in 2010*, NAT'L HOME EDUC. RES. INST. (Jan. 3, 2011), <http://www.nheri.org/HomeschoolPopulationReport2010.pdf>.

107. For example, at the Brooklyn Free School, students are encouraged to pursue learning at their own pace, on topics of interest to them. They are not assessed, but entrusted to judge their own progress and take responsibility for structuring their learning environment, which is not limited to the school itself but which "takes full advantage of the tremendous diversity of individuals, businesses, organizations, and communities that the City of New York, and the entire Metro area, has to offer to build on students' interests." THE BROOKLYN FREE SCHOOL, *Mission Statement*, BROOKLYN-FREESCHOOL.ORG, <http://brooklynfreeschool.org/mission/index.html> (last visited May 24, 2012).