Does boredom define the modern experience of being a student? And if so, who or what is to blame for this? Posing the provocative question "do we really need school?" long-time educator and educational critic John Taylor Gatto offers a stinging rebuke to the practices and assumptions that underlie what passes for modern education. Gatto was born in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, and before becoming a schoolteacher and educational critic he held a number of jobs, including scriptwriter, taxi driver, and hot dog vendor. In 1991 he was named New York State Teacher of the Year. His books include Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling (1992), Different Kind of Teacher: Solving the Crisis of American Schooling (2000), and, most recently, The Underground History of American Education (2001). He is now retired from teaching and is working on a documentary about compulsory education called The Fourth Purpose. The following piece originally appeared in the September 2003 issue of Harper's.

I taught for thirty years in some of the worst schools in Manhattan, and in some of the best, and during that time I became an expert in boredom. Boredom was everywhere in my world, and if you asked the kids, as I often did, why they felt so bored, they always gave the same answers: They said the work was stupid, that it made no sense, that they already knew it. They said they wanted to be doing something real, not just sitting around. They said teachers didn't seem to know much about their subjects and clearly weren't interested in learning more. And the kids were right: their teachers were every bit as bored as they were.

Boredom is the common condition of schoolteachers, and anyone who has spent time in a teachers' lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there. When asked why they feel bored, the teachers tend to blame the kids, as you might expect. Who wouldn't get bored teaching students who are rude and interested only in grades? If even that. Of course, teachers are themselves products of the same twelve-year compulsory school programs that so thoroughly bore their students, and as school personnel they are trapped inside structures even more rigid than those imposed upon the children. Who, then, is to blame?

We all are. My grandfather taught me that. One afternoon when I was seven I complained to him of boredom, and he batted me hard on the head.
He told me that I was never to use that term in his presence again, that if I was bored it was my fault and no one else’s. The obligation to amuse and instruct myself was entirely my own, and people who didn’t know that were childish people, to be avoided if possible. Certainly not to be trusted. That episode cured me of boredom forever, and here and there over the years I was able to pass on the lesson to some remarkable students. For the most part, however, I found it futile to challenge the official notion that boredom and childishness were the natural state of affairs in the classroom. Often I had to defy custom, and even bend the law, to help kids break out of this trap.

The empire struck back, of course; childish adults regularly confute opposition with disloyalty. I once returned from a medical leave to discover that all evidence of my having been granted the leave had been purposely destroyed, that my job had been terminated, and that I no longer possessed even a teaching license. After nine months of tormented effort I was able to retrieve the license when a school secretary testified to witnessing the plot unfold. In the meantime my family suffered more than I care to remember. By the time I finally retired in 1991, I had more than enough reason to think of our schools — with their long-term, cell-block-style, forced confinement of both students and teachers — as virtual factories of childishness. Yet I honestly could not see why they had to be that way. My own experience had revealed to me what many other teachers must learn along the way, too, yet keep to themselves for fear of reprisal: if we wanted to we could easily and inexpensively jettison the old, stupid structures and help kids take an education rather than merely receive a schooling. We could encourage the best qualities of youthfulness — curiosity, adventure, resilience, the capacity for surprising insight — simply by being more flexible about time, texts, and tests, by introducing kids to truly competent adults, and by giving each student what autonomy he or she needs in order to take a risk every now and then.

But we don’t do that. And the more I asked why not, and persisted in thinking about the “problem” of schooling as an engineer might, the more I missed the point. What if there is no “problem” with our schools? What if they are the way they are, so expensively flying in the face of common sense and long experience in how children learn things, not because they are doing something wrong but because they are doing something right? Is it possible that George W. Bush accidentally spoke the truth when he said we would “leave no child behind”? Could it be that our schools are designed to make sure not one of them ever really grows up?

Do we really need school? I don’t mean education, just forced schooling: six classes a day, five days a week, nine months a year, for twelve years. Is this deadly routine really necessary? And if so, for what? Don’t hide behind reading, writing, and arithmetic as
a rationale, because 2 million happy homeschoolers have surely put that
banal justification to rest. Even if they hadn’t, a considerable number of
well-known Americans never went through the twelve-year wringer our
kids currently go through, and they turned out all right. George Washing-
ton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln? Someone
taught them, to be sure, but they were not products of a school system, and
not one of them was ever “graduated” from a secondary school. Throughout
most of American history, kids generally didn’t go to high school, yet the
unschooled rose to be admirals, like Farragut; inventors, like Edison; cap-
tains of industry like Carnegie and Rockefeller; writers, like Melville and
Twain and Conrad; and even scholars, like Margaret Mead. In fact, until
pretty recently people who reached the age of thirteen weren’t looked upon
as children at all. Ariel Durant, who co-wrote an enormous, and very good,
multivolume history of the world with her husband, Will, was happily mar-
rried at fifteen, and who could reasonably claim that Ariel Durant was an
uneducated person? Unschooled, perhaps, but not uneducated.

We have been taught (that is, schooled) in this country to think of “success” as synonymous with, or at least dependent upon, “schooling,” but histori-
cally that isn’t true in either an intellectual or a financial sense. And
plenty of people throughout the world today find a way to educate them-
theselves without resorting to a system of compulsory secondary schools that
all too often resemble prisons. Why, then, do Americans confuse education
with just such a system? What exactly is the purpose of our public schools?

Mass schooling of a compulsory nature really got its teeth into the
United States between 1905 and 1915, though it was conceived of much
earlier and pushed for throughout most of the nineteenth century. The
reason given for this enormous upheaval of family life and cultural traditions
was, roughly speaking, threefold:

1. To make good people.
2. To make good citizens.
3. To make each person his or her personal best.

These goals are still trotted out today on a regular basis, and most of us
accept them in one form or another as a decent definition of public educa-
tion’s mission, however short schools actually fall in achieving them. But
we are dead wrong. Compounding our error is the fact that the national lit-
erature holds numerous and surprisingly consistent statements of com-
pulsory schooling’s true purpose. We have, for example, the great H. L.
Mencken, who wrote in the *American Mercury* for April 1924 that

the aim of public education is not to fill the young of the species with
knowledge and awaken their intelligence.... Nothing could be further from
eschoolers have surely put that idea to rest. A considerable number of students do not go to high school, yet the myth persists. Inventors, like Edison; scientists, like Tesla; soldiers, like George Washington; Abraham Lincoln? Someone had to wring the truth. The aim is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States... and that is its aim everywhere else.

Because of Mencken's reputation as a satirist, we might be tempted to dismiss this passage as a bit of hyperbolic sarcasm. His article, however, goes on to trace the template for our own educational system back to the now vanished, though never to be forgotten, military state of Prussia. And although he was certainly aware of the irony that we had recently been at war with Germany, the heir to Prussian thought and culture, Mencken was being perfectly serious here. Our educational system is not Prussian in origin, and that really is cause for concern.

The odd fact of a Prussian provenance for our schools pops up again and again once you know to look for it. Orestes Brownson's hero of Christopher Lasch's 1991 book, The True and Only Heaven, was publicly denouncing the Prussianization of American schools back in the 1840s. Horace Mann's "Seventh Annual Report" to the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1843 is essentially a paean to the land of Frederick the Great and a call for its schooling to be brought here. That Prussian culture loomed large in America is hardly surprising, given our early association with that utopian state. A Prussian served as Washington's aide during the Revolutionary War, and so many German-speaking people had settled here by 1795 that Congress considered publishing a German-language edition of the federal laws. But what shocks is that we should so eagerly have adopted one of the very worst aspects of Prussian culture: an educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellectuals, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens in order to render the populace "manageable."

It was from James Bryant Conant — president of Harvard for twenty years, WWI poison-gas specialist, WWII executive on the atomic-bomb project, high commissioner of the American zone in Germany after WWII, and truly one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century — that I first got wind of the real purposes of American schooling. Without Conant, we would probably not have the same style and degree of standardized testing that we enjoy today, nor would we be blessed with gargantuan high schools that warehouse 2,000 to 4,000 students at a time, like the famous Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado. Shortly after I retired from teaching I picked up Conant's 1959 book-length essay, "The Child, the Parent, and the State," and was more than a little intrigued to see him mention in passing that the modern schools we attend were the result of a "revolution" engineered between 1905 and 1930. A revolution?
He declines to elaborate, but he does direct the curious and the uninformed to Alexander Inglis's 1918 book, Principles of Secondary Education, in which "one saw this revolution through the eyes of a revolutionary."

Inglis, for whom a lecture in education at Harvard is named, makes it perfectly clear that compulsory schooling on this continent was intended to be just what it had been for Prussia in the 1820s: a fifth column into the burgeoning democratic movement that threatened to give the peasants and the proletarians a voice at the bargaining table. Modern, industrialized, compulsory schooling was to make a sort of surgical incision into the prospective unity of these underclasses. Divide children by subject, by age-grading, by constant rankings on tests, and by many other more subtle means, and it was unlikely that the ignorant mass of mankind, separated in childhood, would ever re-integrate into a dangerous whole.

Inglis breaks down the purpose — the actual purpose — of modern schooling into six basic functions, any one of which is enough to curl the hair of those innocent enough to believe the three traditional goals listed earlier:

1. The adjustive or adaptive function. Schools are to establish fixed habits of reaction to authority. This, of course, precludes critical judgment completely. It also pretty much destroys the idea that useful or interesting material should be taught, because you can't test for reflexive obedience until you know whether you can make kids learn, and do, foolish and boring things.

2. The integrating function. This might well be called "the conformity function," because its intention is to make children as alike as possible. People who conform are predictable, and this is of great use to those who wish to harness and manipulate a large labor force.

3. The diagnostic and directive function. School is meant to determine each student's proper social role. This is done by logging evidence mathematically and anecdotally on cumulative records. As in "your permanent record." Yes, you do have one.

4. The differentiating function. Once their social role has been "diagnosed," children are to be sorted by role and trained only so far as their destination in the social machine merits — and not one step further. So much for making kids their personal best.

5. The selective function. This refers not to human choice at all but to Darwin's theory of natural selection as applied to what he called "the favored races." In short, the idea is to help things along by consciously attempting to improve the breeding stock. Schools are meant to tag the unfit — with poor grades, remedial placement, and other punishments — clearly enough that their peers will accept them as inferior and effectively bar them from the reproductive sweepstakes. That's what all those little humiliations from first grade onward were intended to do: wash the dirt down the drain.
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6. The propaedeutic function. The societal system implied by these
rules will require an elite group of caretakers. To that end, a small fraction
of the kids will quietly be taught how to manage this continuing project,
how to watch over and control a population deliberately dumbed down
and declawed in order that government might proceed unchallenged
and corporations might never want for obedient labor.

That, unfortunately, is the purpose of mandatory public education in
this country. And lest you take Inglis for an isolated crank with a rather
too cynical take on the educational enterprise, you should know that he
was hardly alone in championing these ideas. Conant himself, building
on the ideas of Horace Mann and others, campaigned tirelessly for an
American school system designed along the same lines. Men like George
Peabody, who funded the cause of mandatory schooling throughout the
South, surely understood that the Prussian system was useful in creating
not only a harmless electorate and a servile labor force but also a virtual
herd of mindless consumers. In time a great number of industrial titans
came to recognize the enormous profits to be had by cultivating and
tending just such a herd via public education, among them Andrew
Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.

There you have it. Now you know. We don’t need Karl Marx’s concep-
tion of a grand warfare between the classes to see that it is in the interest
of complex management, economic or political, to dumb people down,
demoralize them, to divide them from one another, and to discard them if
they don’t conform. Class may frame the proposition, as when Woodrow
Wilson, then president of Princeton University, said the following to the
New York City School Teachers Association in 1909: “We want one class of
persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons,
a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privi-
leges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult
manual tasks.” But the motives behind the disgusting decisions that bring
about these ends need not be class-based at all. They can stem purely from
fear, or from the by now familiar belief that “efficiency” is the paramount
virtue, rather than love, liberty, laughter, or hope. Above all, they can stem
from simple greed.

There were vast fortunes to be made,
after all, in an economy based on mass
production and organized to favor the
large corporation rather than the small
business or the family farm. But mass
production required mass consumption,
and at the turn of the twentieth century
most Americans considered it both un-
natural and unwise to buy things they
didn’t actually need. Mandatory schooling

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was a godsend on that count. School didn’t have to train kids in any direct sense to think they should consume nonstop, because it did something even better: it encouraged them not to think at all. And that left them sitting ducks for another great invention of the modern era — marketing.

Now, you needn’t have studied marketing to know that there are two groups of people who can always be convinced to consume more than they need to: addicts and children. School has done a pretty good job of turning our children into addicts, but it has done a spectacular job of turning our children into children. Again, this is no accident. Theorists from Plato to Rousseau to our own Dr. Inglis knew that if children could be cloistered with other children, stripped of responsibility and independence, encouraged to develop only the trivializing emotions of greed, envy, jealousy, and fear, they would grow older but never truly grow up. In the 1934 edition of his once well-known book Public Education in the United States, Ellwood P. Cubberley detailed and praised the way the strategy of successive school enlargements had extended childhood by two to six years, and forced schooling was at that point still quite new. This same Cubberley — who was dean of Stanford’s School of Education, a textbook editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Conant’s friend and correspondent at Harvard — had written the following in the 1922 edition of his book Public School Administration: “Our schools are . . . factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned. . . . And it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down.”

It’s perfectly obvious from our society today what those specifications were. Maturity has by now been banished from nearly every aspect of our lives. Easy divorce laws have removed the need to work at relationships; easy credit has removed the need for fiscal self-control; easy entertainment has removed the need to learn to entertain oneself; easy answers have removed the need to ask questions. We have become a nation of children, happy to surrender our judgments and our wills to political exhortations and commercial blandishments that would insult actual adults. We buy televisions, and then we buy the things we see on the television. We buy computers, and then we buy the things we see on the computer. We buy $150 sneakers whether we need them or not, and when they fall apart too soon we buy another pair. We drive SUVs and believe the lie that they constitute a kind of life insurance, even when we’re upside-down in them. And, worst of all, we don’t bat an eye when Ari Fleischer tells us to “be careful what you say,” even if we remember having been told somewhere back in school that America is the land of the free. We simply buy that one too. Our schooling, as intended, has seen to it.

Now for the good news. Once you understand the logic behind modern schooling, its tricks and traps are fairly easy to avoid. School trains children to be employees and consumers; teach your own to be leaders and adventurers. School trains children to obey reflexively; teach your
own to think critically and independently. Well-schooled kids have a low threshold for boredom; help your own to develop an inner life so that they'll never be bored. Urge them to take on the serious material, the grown-up material, in history, literature, philosophy, music, art, economics, theology — all the stuff schoolteachers know well enough to avoid. Challenge your kids with plenty of solitude so that they can learn to enjoy their own company, to conduct inner dialogues. Well-schooled people are conditioned to dread being alone, and they seek constant companionship through the TV, the computer, the cell phone, and through shallow friendships quickly acquired and quickly abandoned. Your children should have a more meaningful life, and they can.

First, though, we must wake up to what our schools really are: laboratories of experimentation on young minds, drill centers for the habits and attitudes that corporate society demands. Mandatory education serves children only incidentally; its real purpose is to turn them into servants. Don't let your own have their childhoods extended, not even for a day. If David Farragut could take command of a captured British warship as a pre-teen, if Thomas Edison could publish a broadsheet at the age of twelve, if Ben Franklin could apprentice himself to a printer at the same age (then put himself through a course of study that would choke a Yale senior today), there's no telling what your own kids could do. After a long life, and thirty years in the public school trenches, I've concluded that genius is as common as dirt. We suppress our genius only because we haven't yet figured out how to manage a population of educated men and women. The solution, I think, is simple and glorious. Let them manage themselves.
DISCUSSION

1. Gatto repeatedly associates conventional compulsory schooling with entrapment. To what extent does this reflect your feelings and experiences? Has school ever made you feel trapped?

2. Gatto draws a distinction between helping children “take an education” and “receive a schooling.” How do you understand the difference between the two? In your view, which of these phrases defines the superior model of education? Why?

3. “Childishness and boredom,” writes Gatto, are too often “the natural state of affairs in the classroom.” To what extent do you think this is true? And what factors account for why these things have come to stand as our current educational norms? What, in your view, would it take to denaturalize them — to get teachers and students to regard them as something other than “just the way school is”?

WRITING

4. At the heart of the problems around contemporary schooling, argues Gatto, is its compulsory nature. Think back on your experiences in school. How much of what typically defined your role was compulsory? What are some of the scripts (for how to act, talk, even think) that were required? Write an essay that argues in favor of or against the validity of implementing these particular requirements. What educational goals did they seem designed to accomplish, and were they worth it?

5. Gatto lists the three objectives that, he contends, we typically assume underlie contemporary education: “to make good people,” “to make good citizens,” “to make each person his or her personal best.” Create a lesson plan that, in your view, would actually help fulfill these goals. What activities or assignments would it include? What would be the roles for teachers and students? Then, in an additional paragraph, sketch out an analysis of the ways this lesson plan would rewrite the script that you think more typically characterizes the modern classroom.

6. Much of Gatto’s critique revolves around the charge of standardization. Modern American schools, he says, have become “factories” bent on mass-producing unimaginative, conformist, mediocre students. How do you think Alfie Kohn (p. 472) would respond to such a statement? Write an essay in which you compare each author’s opinion on the state of education. What are the key problems each sees? Do you ultimately agree with their assessments of the education system? Why or why not?