

WHY SCHOOLS DON'T EDUCATE

BY JOHN GATTO

JOHN GATTO HAS BEEN NAMED NEW YORK CITY'S TEACHER OF THE YEAR FOR 1990. HE TEACHES SEVENTH GRADE AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL 54 ON MANHATTEN'S UPPER WEST SIDE. THE FOLLOWING IS THE TEXT OF THE SPEECH HE GAVE ON BEING NAMED TEACHER OF THE YEAR.

We live in a time of great social crisis. Our children rank at the bottom of nineteen industrial nations in reading, writing and arithmetic. The world's narcotic economy is based upon our own consumption of this commodity. If we didn't buy so many powdered dreams the business would collapse — and schools are an important sales outlet. Our teenage suicide rate is the highest in the world — and suicidal kids are rich kids for the most part, not the poor. In Manhattan seventy percent of all new marriages last less than five years.

Our school crisis is a reflection of this greater social crisis. We seem to have lost our identity. Children and old people are penned up and locked away from the business of the world to a degree without precedent; nobody talks to them anymore. Without children and old people mixing in daily life, a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present. In fact, the name "community" hardly applies to the way we interact with each other. We live in networks, not communities, and everyone I know is lonely because of that. In some strange way school is a major actor in this tragedy, just as it is a major actor in the widening gulf among social classes. Using school as a sorting mechanism, we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway trains begging and sleep on the streets.

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my twenty-five years of teaching — that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes, or politicians in civics classes, or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aides and administrators, but the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual

contributions. Although teachers do care and do work very, very hard, the institution is psychopathic; it has no conscience. It rings a bell, and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell, where he learns that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor.

Our form of compulsory schooling is an invention of the State of Massachusetts around 1850. It was resisted — sometimes with guns — by an estimated eighty percent of the Massachusetts population, the last outpost in Barnstable on Cape Cod not surrendering its children until the 1880s, when the area was seized by militia and children marched to school under guard.

Now here is a curious idea to ponder. Senator Ted Kennedy's office released a paper not too long ago claiming that prior to compulsory education the state literacy was ninety-eight percent, and after it the figure never again reached above ninety-one percent, where it stands in 1990.

Here is another curiosity to think about. The home-schooling movement has quietly grown to a size where one and a half million young people are being educated entirely by their own parents. The education press reports the amazing news that children schooled at home seem to be five or even ten years ahead of their formally trained peers in the ability to think.

I don't think we'll get rid of schools anytime soon, certainly not in my lifetime, but if we're going to change what's rapidly becoming a disaster of ignorance, we need to realize that the school institution "schools" very well, but it does not "educate" — that's inherent in the design of the thing. It's not the fault of bad teachers or too little money spent. It's just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing.

Schools were designed by Horace Mann and Barnas Sears and W.R. Harper of the University of Chicago and Thorndyke of Columbia Teachers College and others to be instruments of the scientific management of a mass population. Schools are intended to produce, through the application of formulae, formulae human beings whose behavior can be predicted and controlled.

To a very great extent schools succeed in doing this. But our society is disintegrating, and in such a society the only successful people are self-reliant, confident, and individualistic — because the community life which protects the dependent and the weak is dead. The products of schooling are, as I've said, irrelevant. Well-schooled people are irrelevant. They can sell film and razor blades, push paper and talk on telephones, or sit mindlessly before a flickering computer terminal, but as human beings they are useless — useless to others and useless to themselves.

The daily misery around us is, I think, in large measure caused by the fact that — as Paul Goodman put it thirty years ago — we force children to grow up absurd. Any reform in schooling has to deal with its absurdities.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to sit in confinement with people of exactly the same age and social class. That system effectively cuts you off from the immense diversity of life and the synergy of variety. It cuts you off from your own past and future, sealing you in a continuous present much the same way television does.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to listen to a stranger

reading poetry when you want to learn to construct buildings, or to sit with a stranger discussing the construction of buildings when you want to read poetry.

It is absurd and anti-life to move from cell to cell at the sound of a gong for every day of your youth, in an institution that allows you no privacy and even follows you into the sanctuary of your home, demanding that you do its "homework."

"How will they learn to read?" you say, and my answer is, "Remember the lessons of Massachusetts." When children are given whole lives instead of age-graded ones in cellblocks, they learn to read, write, and do arithmetic with ease if those things make sense in the life that unfolds around them.

But keep in mind that in the United States almost nobody who reads, writes, or does arithmetic gets much respect. We are a land of talkers; we pay talkers the most and admire talkers the most and so our children talk constantly, following the public models of television and schoolteachers. It is very difficult to teach the "basics" anymore because they really are not basic to the society we've made.

Two institutions at present control our children's lives — television and schooling, in that order. Both of these reduce the real world of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice to a never-ending, non-stop abstraction. In centuries past the time of a child and adolescent would be occupied in real work, real charity, real adventures, and the real search for mentors who might teach what one really wanted to learn. A great deal of time was spent in community pursuits, practicing affection, meeting and studying every level of the community, learning how to make a home, and dozens of other tasks necessary to becoming a whole man or woman.

But here is the calculus of time the children I teach must deal with:

Out of the one hundred sixty-eight hours in each week, my children sleep fifty-six. That leaves them one hundred twelve hours a week out of which to fashion a self.

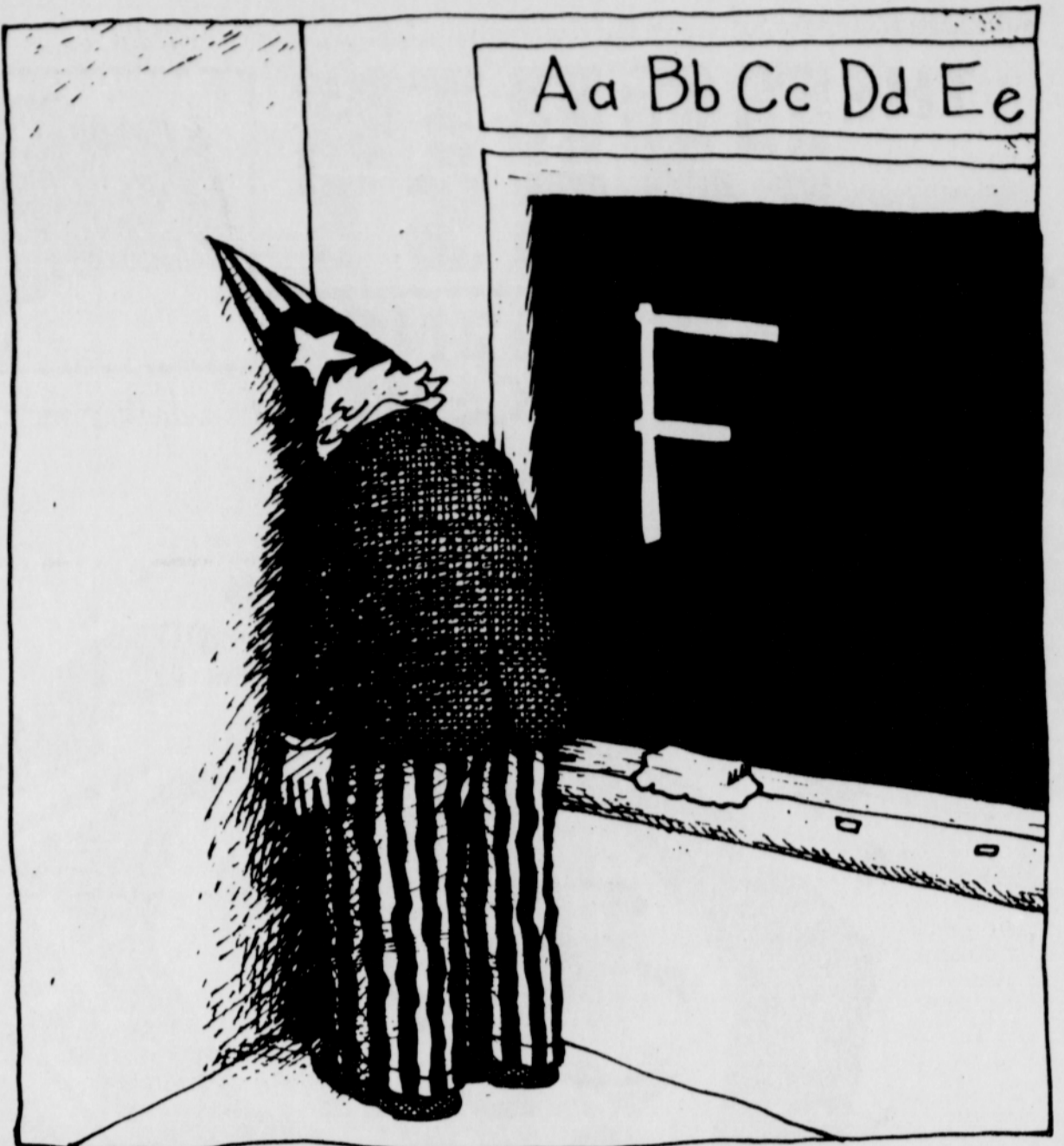
My children watch fifty-five hours of television a week, according to recent reports. That leaves them fifty-seven hours a week in which to grow up.

My children attend school thirty hours a week, use about eight hours getting ready, going and coming home, and spend an average of seven hours a week in homework — a total of forty-five hours. During that time they are under constant surveillance, have no private time or private space, and are disciplined if they try to assert individuality in the use of time or space. That leaves twelve hours a week out of which to create a unique consciousness. Of course my kids eat, too, and that takes some time — not much, because we've lost the tradition of family dining. If we allot three hours a week to evening meals, we arrive at a net amount of private time for each child of nine hours.

It's not enough, is it? The richer the kid, of course, the less television he watches, but the rich kid's time is just as narrowly proscribed by a broader catalogue of commercial entertainments and his inevitable assignment to a series of private lessons in areas seldom of his choice.

And these things are, oddly enough, just a more cosmetic way to create dependent human beings, unable to fill their own hours, unable to

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