

NINE ASSUMPTIONS OF SCHOOLING - and Twenty-one Facts the Institution Would Rather Not Discuss by John Taylor Gatto

I'll start off bluntly by giving you some data I'd be shocked if you already know. A few simple facts, all verifiable, which by their existence call into question the whole shaky edifice of American government compulsion schooling from kindergarten through college and its questionable connection with the job market. The implications of this data are quite radical so I'm going to take pains to ground it in the most conservative society on earth, the mountain world of Switzerland. You all remember Switzerland: that's where people put their money when they really want it to be really safe.

The Swiss just like us believe that education is the key to their national success, but that's where our similarity ends. In 1990 about 60% of American secondary school graduates enrolled in college, but only 22% did in Switzerland; in America almost 100% of our kids go to high school or private equivalents, but only a little over a fifth of the Swiss kids do. And yet the Swiss per capita income is the highest of any nation in the world and the Swiss keep insisting that virtually everyone in their country is highly educated!

What on earth could be going on? Remember it's a sophisticated economy which produces the highest per-capita paycheck in the world we're talking about, high for the lightly-schooled as well as for the heavily schooled, higher than Japan's, Germany's or our own. No one goes to high school in Switzerland who doesn't also want to go to college, three-quarters of the young people enter apprenticeships before high school. It seems the Swiss don't make the mistake that schooling and education are synonyms.

If you are thinking silently at this point that apprenticeships as a substitute for classroom confinement isn't a very shocking idea and it has the drawback of locking kids away from later choice of white collar work, think again. I wasn't only talking about blue-collar apprenticeships - although the Swiss have those, too - but white-collar apprenticeships in abundance. Many of the top management of insurance companies, manufacturing companies, banks, etc., never saw the inside of a high school, let alone a college.

Is that possible? The highest per capita income in the world and every single citizen also trusted by government to own dangerous weapons. [I forgot to tell you that the largely unschooled Swiss (by our standards) also demand universal gun ownership.] Ownership. If it puzzles you what connection I might be drawing between great prosperity, freedom from forced schooling where it is clearly inappropriate, and a profound mutuality, you think about it.

Well, shocking is the word for it, isn't it? I mean here you are putting away your loot in a Swiss bank because it's safe over there and not so safe here and now I've told you the bank president may only have a sixth grade schooling. Just like Shakespeare did.

As long as we're playing "did you know?", did you know that in Sweden, a country legendary for its quality of life and a nation which beats American school performance in every academic category, a kid isn't allowed to start school before the age of 7? The hard-headed Swedes don't want to pay for the social pathologies attendant on ripping a child away from his home and mother and dumping him into a pen with strangers. Can you remember the last time you worried about a Swedish Volvo breaking down prematurely or a Swedish jet engine failing in the air? Did you know that the entire Swedish school sequence is only 9 years long, a net 25% time and tax savings over our own 12-year sequence?

Exactly in whose best interest do you think it is that the *New York Times* or every other element of journalism, for that matter, doesn't make information like this readily accessible? How can you think clearly about our own predicament if you don't have it?

Did you know that Hong Kong, a country with a population the size of Norway's, beats Japan in every scientific and mathematical category in which the two countries compete? Did you know that Hong Kong

has a school year ten and one half weeks shorter than Japan's? How on earth do they manage that if longer school years translate into higher performance? Why haven't you heard about Hong Kong, do you suppose? You've heard enough about Japan, I'm sure.

But I'll bet you haven't heard this about Japan. I'll bet you haven't heard that in Japan a recess is held after every class period.

Or did you know that in Flemish Belgium with the shortest school year in the developed world that the kids regularly finish in the top three nations in the world in academic competition? Is it the water in Belgium or what? Because it can't be the passionate commitment to government forced schooling, which they don't seem to possess.

Did you know that three British Prime Ministers in this century including the current one didn't bother to go to college? I hope I've made the point. If you trust journalism or the professional educational establishment to provide you with data you need to think for yourself in the increasingly fantastic socialist world of compulsion schooling, you are certainly the kind of citizen who would trade his cow for a handful of colored beans.

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Shortly into the 20th century American schooling decided to move away from intellectual de-velopment or skills training as the main justification for its existence and to enter the eerie world of social engineering, a world where "socializing" and "psychologizing" the classroom preempted attention and rewards. Professionalization of the administrative/ teaching staff was an important preliminary mechanism to this end, serving as a sieve to remove troublesome interlopers and providing lucrative ladders to reward allies and camp followers.

Non-intellectual, non-skill schooling was supported by a strange and motley collection of fellow travelers: from unions, yes, but also from the ranks of legendary businessmen like Carnegie and Rockefeller, Ford and Astor; there were genuine ideologues like John Dewey, yes, but many academic opportunists as well, like Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia; prominent colleges like Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago took a large hand in the deconstruction of American academic schooling as well as a powerful core of private foundations and think tanks. Whether they did this out of conviction, for the advantage of private interests, or any hybrid of these reasons and more I'll leave for the moment to others for debate. What is certain is that the outcomes aimed for had little to do with why parents thought children were ordered into schools; such alien outcomes as socialization into creatures who would no longer feel easy with their own parents, or psychologization into dependable and dependent camp followers. Of what field general it wasn't clear except to say that whoever could win undisputed control of hiring and curriculum in a school district would have a clear hand in selecting and arranging the contents of children's minds.

In those early years of the 20th century a radical shift was well under way, transforming a society of farmers and craftspeople, fishermen and small entrepreneurs into the disciplined work-force of a corporate state, one in which ALL the work was being sucked into colossal governments, colossal institutions and colossal business enterprises - a society whose driving logic was comfort, security, predictability and consensus rather than independence, originality, risk-taking and uncompromising principle. In the gospels of social engineering this transformation was leading to a future utopia of welfare capitalism. With the problem of "production" solved, the attention of professional intellectuals and powerful men of wealth turned to controlling distribution so that a "rational" society, defined as a stable state without internal or external conflicts, could be managed for nations, regions and eventually the entire planet. In such a system, if you behave, you get a share of the divvy and if you don't, your share is correspondingly reduced. Keep in mind that a small farmer, a carpenter, a fisherman, seamstress or Indian fighter never gave undue attention to being well-behaved and you will begin to see how a centralized economy and centralized schooling box human behavior into a much narrowed container than what it normally would occupy and you will begin to see why intellectual development for all its theoretical desirability can never really be a serious goal for a society seeking comfort, security, predictability and consensus. Indeed, such a fate must be actively avoided.

Anyway, once this design was in place - and it was firmly in place by 1917 - all that remained to reach the target was a continual series of experiments on public schoolchildren, some modest in scope, many breathtakingly radical like "IQ tests" or "kindergartens", and a full palette of intermediate colors like "multiculturalism", "rainbow" curricula and "universal self esteem". Each of these thrusts has a real behavioral purpose which is part of the larger utopia envisioned, yet each is capable of being rhetorically defended as the particular redress of some current "problem".

But the biggest obstacle to a planned society is parents. Parents have their own plans for their own kids; most often they love their kids, so their motivations are self-reinforcing, unlike those of schoolpeople who do it for a pay-check, and unless held in check even a few unhappy parents can disrupt the conduct of an educational experiment. The second biggest obstacle to a planned society are religious sects, each of which maintains that God has a plan for all human beings, including children. And the third biggest obstacle is local values and ethnic cultures which also provide serious maps for growing up.

Each of these three is an external force bidding for the loyalty of children against the directions of the political State which owns the schools. One final obstacle - and a colossal one - is the individual nature of each particular child. John Locke pulled a whopper when he maintained that children are blank slates waiting to be written upon. He should have asked a few mothers about that. The fact is that if you watch children closely in controlled conditions as I did for 30 years as a school-teacher, you can hardly fail to conclude that each kid has a private destiny he or she is pulling toward wordlessly, a destiny frequently put out of reach by schoolteachers, school executives or project officers from the Ford Foundation.

In a planned society individuality, cultural identity, a relationship with God or a close-knit family are all elements which must be suppressed if they cannot be totally extinguished. The Soviet Union was an object lesson in this utopian undertaking and the United States has been going down the same road, albeit with more hesitations, at least since the end of the first world war. To accomplish such a complex transformation of nature into mechanism the general public must be led to agree to certain apparently sensible assumptions - such as the assumption, for instance, that a college degree is necessary for a high-status career - even though Swiss corporations and the British government are often run by managers without college training. The security of the school institution depends on many such assumptions, some which by adroit concealments worthy of a card sharp seem to link schooling and future responsibility, and some which serve to exalt the political State, diminish essential human institutions like the family or define human nature as mean, violent and brutish. I'd like to pass nine specimens drawn from these latter categories of assumption in front of your minds to allow each of you to gauge which ones you personally accept, and to what degree.

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Nine Assumptions of Schooling

1. Social cohesion is not possible through other means than government schooling; school is the main defense against social chaos.
2. Children cannot learn to tolerate each other unless first socialized by government agents.
3. The only safe mentors of children are certified experts with government-approved conditioning; children must be protected from the uncertified, including parents.
4. Compelling children to violate family, cultural and religious norms does not interfere with the development of their intellects or characters.
5. In order to dilute parental influence, children must be disabused of the notion that mother and father are sovereign in morality or intelligence.
6. Families should be encouraged to expend concern on the general education of everyone but discouraged from being unduly concerned with their own children's education.
7. The State has predominant responsibility for training, morals and beliefs. Children who escape state scrutiny will become immoral.
8. Children from families with different beliefs, backgrounds and styles must be forced together even if those beliefs violently contradict one another. Robert Frost, the poet, was wrong when he maintained that

"good fences make good neighbors."

9. Coercion in the name of liberty is a valid use of state power.

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These assumptions and a few others associated with them lead directly to the shape, style and exercise of school politics. And these primary assumptions generate secondary assumptions which fuel the largely phony school debate played out in American journalism, a debate where the most important questions like "What is the end that justifies these means?" are never asked. I once had dinner in Washington at the same table as Fred Hechinger, education editor of the *New York Times*. When I raised the possibility that the *Times* framed its coverage to omit inconvenient aspects of school questions (such as challenging the presumed connection between quantity of money spent and quality of education) Mr. Hechinger became very angry and contemptuously dismissed my contention; almost the same thing happened on a different occasion, also in Washington, when I had dinner at the Council for Basic Education at the same table with Albert Shanker of the AFT. With that history of failure in opening a dialogue with some of the powers and principalities of institutional education (and I could add Lamar Alexander, Bill Bennett, Joe Fernandez, Diane Ravitch, Checker Finn and many other luminaries who seemed to hear me with impatience) I've been driven to trying to catch the ear of the general public in meeting the assumptions schools rely upon with contradictory facts open to formal verification - or the informal variety grounded in common sense. What follows are 21 of these disturbing contradictions raised for your contemplation:

21 Facts About Schooling

1. There is no relationship between the amount of money spent on schooling and "good" results as measured by parents of any culture. This seems to be because "education" is not a commodity to be purchased but an enlargement of insight, power, understanding and self-control almost completely outside the cash economy. Education is almost overwhelmingly an internally generated effort. The five American states which usually spend least per capita on schooling are the five which usually have the best test results (although Iowa which is about 30th in spending sometimes creeps into the honored circle).
2. There is no compelling evidence to show a positive relationship between length of schooling and accomplishment. Many countries with short school years outperform those with long ones by a wide margin.
3. Most relationships between test scores and job performance are illegitimate, arranged in advance by only allowing those testing well access to the work. Would you hire a newspaper reporter because he had "A"s in English? Have you ever asked your surgeon what grade he got in meat-cutting? George F. Kennan, intellectual darling of the Washington elite some while ago - and the author of our "containment" policy against the Soviet Union - often found his math and science grades in secondary school below 60, and at Princeton he had many flunks, "D"s and "C"s. "Sometimes," he said, "it is the unadjusted student struggling to forge his own standards who develops within himself the thoughtfulness to comprehend." Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's Secretary of State, graduated from Groton with a 68 average. The headmaster wrote his mother, "He is...by no means a pleasant boy to teach." Einstein, we all know, was considered a high-grade moron, as were Thomas Edison and Benjamin Franklin. Is there anybody out there who really believes that grades and test scores are the mark of the man? Then what exactly are they, pray tell? Q.E.D.
4. Training done on the job is invariably cheaper, quicker, and of much higher quality than training done in a school setting. If you wonder why that should be, you want to start, I think, by understanding that education and training are two different things, one largely residing in the development of good habits, the other in the development of vision and understanding, judgment and the like. Education is self-training; it calls into its calculations mountains of personal data and experience which are simply unobtainable by any schoolteacher or higher pedagogue. That simple fact is why all the many beautifully precise rules on how to think produce such poor results.

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that would lead, in short order, to structural changes in the old economy so profound it is not likely to be allowed to happen because the social effects are impossible to clearly foretell.

5. In spite of relentless propaganda to the contrary, the American economy is tending strongly to require less knowledge and less intellectual ability of its employees, not more. Scientists and mathematicians currently exist in numbers far exceeding any global demand for them or any national demand - and that condition should grow much worse over the next decade, thanks to the hype of pedagogues and politicians. Schools can be restructured to teach children to develop intellect, resourcefulness and independence, but that would lead, in short order, to structural changes in the old economy so profound it is not likely to be allowed to happen because the social effects are impossible to clearly foretell.

6. The habits, drills and routines of government schooling sharply reduce a person's chances of possessing initiative or creativity - furthermore the mechanism of why this is so has been well understood for centuries.

7. Teachers are paid as specialists but they almost never have any real world experience in their specialties; indeed the low quality of their training has been a scandal for 80 years.

8. A substantial amount of testimony exists from highly regarded scientists like Richard Feynman, the recently deceased Nobel laureate, or Albert Einstein and many others that scientific discovery is negatively related to the procedures of school science classes.

9. According to research published by Christopher Jencks, the famous sociologist, and others as well, the quality of school which any student attends is a very bad predictor of later success, financial, social or emotional; on the other hand the quality of family life is a very good predictor. That would seem to indicate a national family policy directly spending on the home, not the school.

10. Children learn fastest and easiest when very young; general intelligence has probably developed as far as it will by the age of four. Children are quite capable of reading and enjoying difficult material by that age and also capable of performing all the mathematical operations skillfully and with pleasure. Whether kids should do these things or not is a matter of philosophy or cultural tradition, not a course dictated by any scientific knowledge about the advisability of the practice.

11. There is a direct relationship between heavy doses of teaching and detachment from reality with subsequent flights into fantasy. Many students so oppressed lose their links with past and present, present and future. And the bond with "now" is substantially weakened.

12. Unknown to the public virtually all famous remedial programs have failed. Programs like Title I/Chapter I survive by the goodwill of political allies, not by results.

13. There is no credible evidence that racial mixing has any positive effect on student performance, but a large body of suggestive data is emerging that the confinement of children from subcultures with children of a dominant culture does harm to the weaker group.

14. Forced busing has accelerated the disintegration of minority neighborhoods without any visible academic benefit as trade-off.

15. There is no reason to believe that any existing educational technology can significantly improve intellectual performance; on the contrary, to the extent that machines establish the goals and work schedules, ask the questions and monitor the performances, the already catastrophic passivity and indifference created by forced confinement schooling only increases.

16. There is no body of knowledge inaccessible to a motivated elementary student. The sequences of development we use are hardly the product of "science" but instead are legacies of unstable men like Pestalozzi and Froebel, and the military government of 19th century Prussia from which we imported them.

17. Delinquent behavior is a direct reaction to the structure of schooling. It is much worse than the press has reported because all urban school districts conspire to suppress its prevalence. Teachers who insist on justice on behalf of pupils and parents are most frequently intimidated into silence. Or dismissed.

18. The rituals of schooling remove flexibility from the mind, that characteristic vital in adjusting to different situations. Schools strive for uniformity in a world increasingly less uniform.

19. Teacher-training courses are widely held in contempt by practicing teachers as well as by the general public because expensive research has consistently failed to provide guidance to best practice.

20. Schools create and maintain a caste system, separating children according to irrelevant parameters. Poor, working class, middle class and upper middle class kids are constantly made aware of alleged differences among themselves by the use of methods not called for by the task at hand.

21. Efforts to draw a child out of his culture or his social class has an immediate effect on his family relationships, friendships and the stability of his self-image.

Well, there you have them: nine assumptions and twenty-one assertions I think can be documented well enough to call facts. How are we all as a society going to get to a better place in schools than the one we've gotten to at the moment? The only way I can see after spending 35 years in and around the institution (53 if I count my own time as inmate) is to put full choice squarely back into the hands of parents, let the marketplace redefine schooling - a job the special interests are incapable of - and encourage the development of as many styles of schooling as there are human dreams. Let people, not bureaucrats, work out their own destinies. That's what made us a great country in the first place.

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