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## CONCLUSION

*Ten Alternative Classrooms*

William Ayers

John Taylor Gatto (1992) taught in New York City public schools for 26 years and in 1991 was elected New York State's Teacher of the Year. At the awards ceremony—the ritual in which the happy-face sticker is placed on the honoree's chest—Gatto put a pie in the face of the self-congratulatory assembly by saying, in effect, that schools murder the souls and minds of children *by design*, and that he has been fighting a guerrilla war against genocide in the classroom his whole life—a war that he believes he is losing badly.

Streetwise and blunt, Gatto pulls no punches: "The lesson of report cards, grades, and tests is that children should not trust themselves or their parents but should instead rely on the evaluation of certified officials" (p. 11). "Children will follow a private drummer if you can't get them into a uniformed marching band" (p. 12). "It is the most important lesson, that we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives" (p. 8).

Gatto outlines in excruciating detail the real lessons of American schooling, things like hierarchy and your place in it, indifference, emotional and intellectual dependency, provisional self-esteem, and the need to submit to certified authority. For many students, the experience of schooling is just this: Nothing of real importance is ever undertaken, nothing is ever connected to anything else, nothing is ever pursued to its deepest limits, nothing is ever finished, and nothing is ever done with investment and courage. This may not be the intention of policy makers, politicians, or administrators: it is certainly not the hope of most parents and teachers. Yet it is often what children live and learn.

John Taylor Gatto is not alone in his condemnation of American schooling, nor in his search for positive alternatives. Rita Tenorio,

Wisconsin Teacher of the Year in 1990, Adela Coronado-Greeley, Illinois Teacher of the Year in 1994, and thousands of thoughtful, experienced teachers whose names are not in the newspapers share a deep belief that the structures of schooling stand in the way of teaching and learning. Bell schedules, tests, grades, the press of time, the large numbers of students expected to do the same things at the same time—all these and more reduce teaching to monitoring and controlling and make school a kind of large sorting machine. This was not what most of us had in mind when we chose to become teachers.

There are endless approaches to creating alternatives to this dismal picture. Here, for example, are 10 sketches of what could be done by teachers today:

1. *Classrooms could be lived in the present tense.* Teachers could provide opportunities for rich experiences and powerful interactions *right now*. Teachers could decide that the best preparation for a meaningful future life lies in creating a meaningful present life. Further, teachers could realize that the best way to entice youngsters to participate positively—to show up and to engage fully—is to provide opportunities for relevant and vital experiences every day. The work of school, then, would not be constructed as bitter medicine, hurriedly swallowed on someone else's promise that it will be profitable to you "someday." In fact, "preparation" would no longer frame issues of teaching and learning; preparation would be bracketed, and school work would not be justified by reference to it. The work of school would be valuable in its own terms.

2. *Classrooms could become workshops for inventors.* Children are human beings (not human becoming), and human beings are by nature inventors. Of course, only some of us invent famous machines or technologies or institutions, but all of us create works as an expression of our consciousness. The young child learning to speak, the older child working at an easel and discovering the color purple, the class inquiring into employment and neighborhood housing and finding revealing patterns based on race—these are all examples of inventors at work. Since everything is on some level a human invention—literature and the arts, of course, math and science, but also racism, sexism, and even childhood itself—school could become a place in which people would be expected and encouraged to be inventors, where participants would regularly explore together the consequence of human inventions both for the growth of children and for the society we want to build.

A classroom for inventors would look more like a laboratory than an assembly line, more like a workshop than a factory, more like a discovery center in a museum than a mini-lecture hall. The focus would be on activity, experimentation, problem solving, and surprise. There would be multiple entry points into an adventure in learning, depending on the knowledge, skills, know-how, and experience students bring with them to school. There would also be a wide range of media, materials, and literacies available to challenge students to attend to broader horizons and to different (perhaps deeper and wider) ways of knowing. In these classrooms, big questions would be followed to their outer limits because the pressure to "cover the curriculum" would be pushed back, and the *pretense* of coverage would be rejected. These are places that would encourage curiosity and engage mystery.

3. *Classrooms could become fearless.* School should be made safe—both physically and emotionally—because we know that fear destroys intelligence. But classrooms could also be designed for risk taking. School could be a community that discourages *acquiescence*, the passive dullness that is the hallmark of most schools, in favor of building collective *consent*. Teachers here would likely believe that although you can have compulsory schooling, compulsory education is an unworkable contradiction. Education and learning require assent, some personal act of courage and will and affirmation, and so teachers would struggle to construct a place where matters of paramount importance are developed and pursued in a compelling way, a place that draws students' interest, attention, and consistent presence on its own basis.

4. *Classrooms could honor diversity truly and fully.* Although diversity has many dimensions, consider race as a central example. In a good school, race and racial differences would not be the basis for privilege and oppression, but neither would they be ignored or dismissed. Rather, race, racial differences, and racism would be explored and studied. They would be studied because these constructions have defined so much of our history and continue to motivate and power so much of human thinking and action today.

The assumption in this school would be that racism hurts all people and is a force that can degrade education and stunt growth; that stratification along racial lines blocks progress and the fulfillment of potential; and that simply because grown-ups can't talk or work sensibly around issues of race doesn't mean that it can't be a schoolwide focus of inquiry and action. To the extent that this focus

draws people of different races together in a common cause, the school would also attend to internal questions: What expectations do we have of one another? How do we work in a way that acknowledges and respects the contributions of each? What are the formal and informal "rules of the house," and who decides what they are? How do we create a productive tension between comfort and discomfort in our process and in our study?

5. *Classrooms could begin with high expectations and standards for all.* Standards would not be reduced to immutable laws or benchmarks for testing but would be construed as principles and values around which to reflect and raise questions. In fact, standard-setting would become part of the conscious, stipulated work of the school. Standards, of course, would be developed close to the classroom, by the students and the teacher, and close to the family, by the children and the parents. They would not be held outside or above the concerns of those most intimately involved in the growth and development of children, and therefore they would not easily be thoughtless, lifeless, or disfiguring.

A core question, one that is dynamic, ever-changing, and alive for each person and that guides much of the work of a good school, would be this: What knowledge and experience are most worthwhile? In order to adequately grapple with this question, teachers need to know each student well, to know how each is doing in terms of growth, development, and the acquisition of skills or capacities or dispositions of mind.

In this school, teachers would acknowledge the human impulse to value and to express preferences and, further, would treat values as if they matter.

6. *Classrooms could be places where adults tell children the truth.* Most schools live on half-truths and lies, and dissembling is the sad, often exhausting, always deflecting norm of behavior. One pervasive example is the notion that standardized test scores are a fair measure of student intelligence, achievement, or worth.

Think what would happen if students were told that the single most powerful predictor of academic success, including scores on these tests, is family income and class background. Furthermore, think what would happen if students were told that the scoring of tests is structured so that half of all test takers *must* fail. Suddenly the all-powerful Oz would be revealed for the old fraud that he is. This could lead to a range of interesting investigations, projects, and activities—all based on simply pushing back the hidden screen and looking at who's pulling the strings.

7. *A classroom could be an intimate community where children find unconditional acceptance.* In many schools, nothing about children—not their lives and experiences, nor their families and communities—is deemed valuable. Their very presence is seen as a burden, an encumbrance, an obstacle. And their presence is always contingent: Students are sorted, classified, graded, moved along. By contrast, a good school would be a place where students feel that they have a right and a responsibility to be present, a place that could not function without the contribution of each particular kid. Teachers in this school would challenge themselves to see each student as a fellow creature with his or her own experiences, knowledge, skills, dreams, expectations, and hopes. Seeing the student as complex, changing, dynamic, and worthy would guide teachers to avoid easy summary evaluations in their search for the next teaching question: Given what I know now, how will I teach this child? This would be a touchstone for trust and hope.

8. *Classrooms could become thoughtful places that honor the thinking and work of teacher and students.* They could also become places that consciously provide opportunities for the community to enact its values: compassion, curiosity, justice, openness, humor, or creativity. In this school, teachers would resist the pressure to push out all that is most important and worthwhile in learning and living in favor of a narrow, instructable, and easily testable agenda. Rather, they would struggle to create the conditions that would allow the entire community to experience and enact its values and to recover a language of valuing that has been weakened through disuse.

9. *Classrooms could be places that breathe biography and autobiography.* Reading about lives, writing about lives, and collecting life-history narratives are all powerful ways to understand and participate in the great human story unfolding all around us. Biography and autobiography live at the crossroads of individual lives, history, and culture. They are all about the big, enduring issues: love and passion, freedom and control, society and identity, the personal and the political, life and death, you and me. Reading and writing biography could be the essential core of an educational experience, providing opportunities to take intellectual stock, to develop a sense of agency and embeddedness, to create an empathetic, responsible culture for learning.

10. *Classrooms could be fair places where people make a difference.* Citizenship would be considered a practical art here, and it would therefore be practiced rather than ritualized. Students would struggle to extract knowledge from information, to consider the com-

mon good, and to link consciousness to their own daily conduct. This school would be characterized by activity, discovery, and surprise rather than passivity and rote repetition.

A good school would stand in critical opposition to much of the schooling we see all around us today. Based on a different vision of human life and potential, such a school would be a radical alternative. And radical alternatives are desperately needed for the lives of our children today and for the hope of creating a better tomorrow.

Teachers capable of creating these kinds of classrooms begin by rejecting the notion that teaching is something simple or settled, something easily grasped in a college classroom, painlessly practiced with 30 students, and (if there are problems) quickly remediated by some supervising expert. They begin then to conceive of teaching as fundamentally ethical, political, and intellectual work, the task of people willing to plunge in alongside their students and search for ways to nourish a wide range of interests, needs, and aspirations. They recognize teaching as a creative act that, like all creative acts, is characterized by uncertainty, mystery, obstacle, and struggle.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Getting a Life: A New Teacher's Guide*

Joseph Featherstone

Here are some suggestions about how to develop yourself intellectually as a beginning teacher and also create a life for yourself outside the classroom. Both are necessary for vital, creative work. What interests and pleases you is an important thread to follow in finding what will lure students into learning. One step toward being interesting to students is to develop some interests of your own. New teachers end up discovering themselves, but discovery can also be a way of making and inventing. You choose—no one could do everything that follows, but someone who doesn't develop any cultural interests at all will probably be a dull teacher and may end up covered with aluminum siding.

Your aim should be to become a practical intellectual, able to show students the uses and pleasures of culture and help students learn to make ideas and meanings. You can think of culture as a series of conversations you want to be part of, as habits and practices, and as a series of tools for inquiry, thought, and entertainment. By simplifying culture to such basics, you can begin to make cultural development practical for yourself and your students. There's nothing mysterious about developing cultural interests. One of the best ways to develop them is through talk—because whatever else teachers may teach, they are always working with words and language. If you expect kids to talk in class, you should learn how to speak well about subjects that matter and are interesting. Conversations include current and past debates: Did you see *The Age of Innocence*? Who killed JFK? Is *Huckleberry Finn* racist? Is this movie better than the book? The main thing is finding conversations to be part of in some way,