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# The Gears of the Hidden Curriculum Revisited

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THE BOOK, *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling* by the school teacher John Gatto (2005) immediately ignited the reader to unfold the pages to find out the reasons of such a provoking title. In fact, this book raises many considerations about schools and the American education system, particularly because of the similarities between schools of today and those of a time when they were first institutionalized.

Gatto courageously invites educators and researchers to reexamine the American educational system, particularly its formal school settings. He critically demonstrated how the conventional education converted its focus to rule-following instead of arousing inquisitiveness and problem-solving abilities. Instead, schools prepare students to fulfill positions in society, creating an illusion that they are in school to learn. In fact, an invisible curriculum is taught, spreading patterns of segregation, persistent surveillance, lack of privacy, and disclosure. A hidden curriculum teaches students rules of behavior to ensure, above all, obedience and flexibility so that the workforce that is being shaped meets the demands of corporate capitalism. In between the lines, the curriculum is structured to serve economic and political interests more than learning objectives and students' needs.

As a renowned contemporary critic of education and pedagogy, Gatto started his book with a very captivating chapter presenting his acceptance speech for Best Teacher Award, entitled *The Seven Lesson School Teacher*. He sincerely spoke that his success as a teacher and the award he received can be explained by his compliance with the structure of the current school system that teaches children about confusion, cruelty, indifference, class position, dependence, passivity, thus, shattering their self-esteem. In effect, he attributed his success to employing constant evaluation, grades, the system of bells, in addition to a variety of forms of coercion and punishment needed to ensure conformity and stupidity. The author stressed that the hidden curriculum represents a significant hindrance to personality development, producing destructive results in children due to its anti-educational methods. As Gatto proposed, "nobody survives the seven-lesson curriculum completely unscathed, not even the instructors" (p. 17).

Actually, by reading this book, one can easily recall Foucault's (1975/2007) main concepts of power, control, discipline, and punishment related to education. Indeed, as explained by Foucault (1975/2007), many elements that emerged with the birth of schools in the sixteenth century are still present, such as time as a central element of control through the establishment of schedules, as well as the classroom setup that ensured discipline and students' submission. Also, power and control exerted by students being closely watched, rewarded, or punished according to their performance are existing practices in schools of today. Like in the sixteenth century, today's schools' employment of hierarchical observation and examination techniques are good examples of surveillance over children. From one side students learn, from a very young age, to adapt to the established behaviors by observing older students and avoid being punished. From the other side, exams of all sorts are applied to test students' attitude, cleanliness, and conduct, to assure their compliance with the rules. Therefore, individuals must be visible so that all kinds of mechanisms to adjust students *malfunctioning* is applied to identify incorrect behavior and inflict the appropriate punishment. Consequently, a type of knowledge is built around labels that define students as *problematic*, *undisciplined*, or praise them for their *good* behavior. Thus, the student's body is transformed into an object of manipulation and conditioning because the mechanics of stating discipline is the foundation for the fabrication of submissive, docile, and exercised bodies to achieve economic purposes and ensure political obedience (Foucault, 1975/2007).

Therefore, moving forward from the institutionalization of schools with their process of disciplinary reorganization, rationalization, and control of instruction, there was a change of discourse on childhood and education (Luke, 1989), supported mainly by industrialists who considered schooling essential to create better workers. Schools would – and, as Gatto proposes, they still do – prepare students to endure work by teaching them basic reading and writing skills, to follow orders, to be punctual, and to tolerate long hours of monotonous subjects to prepare them to endure work (Guttek, 1991).

In another speech for accepting the New York City Teacher of the Year award in chapter two, Gatto linked the crisis on education to a greater social crisis that reveals an identity loss by American community values. He believed that educational philosophy must turn to meaning beyond consumerism, material desires, and indifference, that is, in values that lie in family, friends, nature, curiosity, compassion, generosity, independence, and privacy.

Gatto's defense of families and communities emerged in chapter four to oppose the growing importance of networks in today's society. The network societies are reinforced by the use of social media in which the online environment becomes highly attractive to people's interests, wherein their subjectivity becomes objectified, gaining a status of actual existence in their lives, over their face-to-face relationships with their communities, friends, families, and organizations (Halpern & Halpern, 2018). In Gatto's view, networks split and isolate people, disconnecting generations and families by reinforcing performance as a measure of success. Consequently, individuals face a never-ending pursuit of abstract achievements represented, in the schools, by a letter grade alienating people from community life. For that reason, Gatto maintained that family education should be the cure for the disease that has contaminated and spread in education, because communities and families require the whole person, functioning in a more participatory manner. Therefore, families should be strengthened to support children, and repair education and schools.

Gatto's acknowledges that his discoveries about the purpose of education in dumbing students down may create a disturbance in the chain of command of the current American education system. The system reacts to any sort of antagonism, like critical thinking that challenges the hegemonic ideas. Accordingly, it must vilify anyone or anything that refuses to comply with

its rules by framing “bad teachers, poor textbooks, incompetent administrators, evil politicians, ill-trained parents, bad children” (p. 88). As a result, the current educational landscape, mainly the standardized practices experienced in American schools, seems to run counter to promoting authentic, holistic, qualitative, and continual learning practices and assessment typical in constructivism (Halpern, 2017). For that reason, he stated that it is impossible to reform schools because, by exposing their central myths and beliefs, they would not be able to function as intended. He argued that adventures, apprenticeships, community service, experience, and independent studies are cheap and effective strategies that could help children develop their individuality and independence. However, powerful interests are at play to prevent change from happening, mainly because education has turned into a business favored by institutions to ensure economic success.

Gatto harshly criticized the education-business saying that it misleads people into believing that performance and metrics are necessary means (Biesta, 2009; Senechal, 2014) to guarantee that students (future workers) will prosper. He daringly exposed the web of countless agencies and organizations involved in this business, from teacher colleges to material suppliers to textbook publishers, which are profiting from compulsory schooling. To that list, Gatto added advisors, testing corporations, state departments of education, researchers, and even certified teachers as a horde of profit-seekers that take advantage of the school-business.

Regarding recommendations to solve education’s issues, in chapter five, Gatto asserted that a change could come if people realized that America’s central problem is the pursuit of an unattainable unit. In his opinion, to maintain a national curriculum is to seek for further standardization of education, strengthening the ties with textbook publishers and the standardized teacher training. For that reason, he believed that education should be privatized, teachers decertified, and schools deinstitutionalized.

One of the highlights of the book was in chapter three when Gatto described his childhood in Monongahela by the river, and how the lessons he learned resulted from his experiences interacting with everyone and everything. Most anything could be quickly and naturally memorized and assimilated because each piece of information could be framed, making sense in that particular context. In other words, it could be grasped because it was relevant and emotionally meaningful. More than teaching, anonymous boat riders and riverboats advised, inspired, and lectured Monongahela inhabitants. As Gatto said, the river was his laboratory from where he observed, learned, and attained conclusions about life. Life lessons were assimilated from different sources because of their ability to deeply transform and inform, enabling a comprehension that was palpable because it could be correlated and associated with the experience itself.

Amongst many episodes of his life that he shared with his readers, Gatto narrated how being caught by the police taught him lessons about geopolitics. Ultimately, his experiences were a testimony of his learning. It was no surprise when he declared that Monongahela was the place where he learned how to teach; or more importantly, where he learned how to learn. Gatto’s experience in Monongahela taught him how to learn by heart, to understand by experiencing life, and to apprehend knowledge holistically.

Besides the challenges Gatto faced as a substitute school teacher, “the riverboats and trains of Monongahela were working inside” (p. 40). Traditional assignments (or sub assignments) were far from a means to educate; they were not like the river. Despite that, a little girl put him back on track to find his significance as a teacher. Gatto recounted how her apparent inability to read inspired him to challenge the system. Miraculously reminding him of his true nature as someone from Monongahela River, this experience made him recall and reaffirm his teacher vocation. For

Gatto, Milagros, or "Miracle" in English, made him experience this word's etymological meaning, which is to marvel. Indeed, based on Gatto's perspectives one can grasp that true teaching and learning can perform magic because education has the power to transform people's lives (Banks, 2014), rather than convert them to performance results and metrics (Biesta, 2009; Padilla, 2014).

This book reflects the author's personal and professional trajectory. By sharing his vast experience as a school teacher, this reading brings awareness to the reader about the dynamics that take place in educational institutions as well as the entire education system. Notably, he stressed the mechanisms of control, discipline, power, and punishment, as well as the understanding of how the curriculum is affected by such elements and how they influence students' learning.

Undoubtedly, one could say that this book has shortcomings. Gatto's recommendations may sound utopic, mainly that education should be privatized, teachers decertified, and schools deinstitutionalized. Besides, he did not clarify how his proposed changes could be implemented, considering that the current education system is founded under deeply rooted social, economic, political, and historical foundations and cannot be easily changed. Education, as part of human culture, is understood by its relationship to a larger, overarching structure that surpasses its praxis (Morgan, 2005).

Based on the structuralist perspective, just like every aspect of human experience, education is constructed; in other words, it is determined by the structure that sustains it. In fact, the dominant ideology acts upon all sorts of organizations aiming for socioeconomic domination (Braverman, 1981; Morgan, 2005). It is worth mentioning that the institutionalization of schools and compulsory schooling began in the sixteenth century, following the emergence of capitalism, and the development of urban areas and the modern society (Foucault, 1975/2007; Mulhern, 1959). Therefore, educators must be aware of the dynamics that take place in educational institutions concerning their mechanisms of control, discipline, power, and punishment, as well as how they affect students' learning. Moreover, Gatto's and Foucault's (1975/2007) ideas combined prove that curricular content is not necessarily developed to teach content to students, but mostly to mold them to become part of a greater gear that moves political and economic interests. For that reason, it is also crucial that the teacher education programs prepare teacher candidates to deal with the complexities of the political and sociocultural context to which their practice is emerged, encouraging their creativity and problem-solving skills (Essary & Szecsi, 2018).

In this sense, as Gatto admitted, the system will always aim for self-regulation and seek to restore balance in the face of pressure for change. Hoyle's (1985) consideration that the system's transformation only occurs following its "intrinsic" laws is aligned with the idea of the system's auto-regulation, allowing limited changes within; thus, it will not likely change as Gatto intended. Hence, he revealed the mechanisms and purposes of the hidden curriculum in the current education system, bringing us back to the unparalleled and transformative experience of learning by experimenting and interacting with the world around us but reminding us of how to play this "game."

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