In the U.S., education is the symbol of success and the epitome of wealth and achievement. To many, education is “the way out” whether it be from poverty, a low income neighborhood, or any other economical/social roadblock. However, the question is, _where do you receive an education?_ For the majority of us, the answer is public schools. Some may argue, however, that public schools are not the best place to receive an education, in fact, they consider it to be the worst.

John Taylor Gatto, a former New York City teacher himself, argues that public schools exist to fulfill six covert functions meant to manipulate and control populations of children (149). In other words, according to Satirist H.L. Mencken, “public education does not fill the minds of children with knowledge and awaken their intelligence, instead it aims to reduce as many individuals—our children— as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry” (144). In “Against School”, Gatto describes public education as a brain-washing tactic used to keep “children as children” so they can be easily controlled in the future as adults. He uses various literary methods, many of which I find very interesting, to get this message across. Gatto’s very blunt and straightforward language fully delivers his message to the reader. Like distasteful medicine, Gatto’s message can be hard to swallow. However, it is intended to “heal” the reader from blissful ignorance and open their eyes to tactics of the U.S. schooling system. Gatto uses many tools of writing to craft his piece. Within his argument are bits of graphic figurative language such as metaphors, similes and paradoxes, all of which are used to portray his message and piece it together as a whole. These observation have led me to question his implications when he uses these various methods of writing. How do they link together?
In the beginning of “Against School,” Gatto describes the state of boredom that had been prevalent throughout his childhood and teaching experience.

Boredom was everywhere in my world, and if you asked the kids, as often as I 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...Boredom is the common condition of schoolteachers, and anyone who has spent time in a teacher’s lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there (Gatto 142).

As we can see, this “boredom” had taken over schools completely. Both children and teachers were under the spell. Why is it that Gatto mentions this state of boredom as an opener to his argument? Is there more to it than we think? Looking further into the piece, we see that Gatto has had a childhood experience with his grandfather that not only changed his outlook on boredom, but also his outlook on life, and public education as a whole. Gatto had complained to his grandfather about how bored he was at the tender age of seven, however, his grandfather turned his complaining into a learning lesson. If there was anyone to blame for being bored, it was himself. He told him that amusing and instructing one’s self is your own responsibility and no one else’s. Bored people are childish people (142). As a result, Gatto states, “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 student” (142). As we can see, the idea of boredom had become the starting point for Gatto’s argument and reasoning. This seemingly insignificant experience with his grandfather had ignited an idea in his mind that would later on erupt into a theory. It was this notion of boredom that led him to believe that the public school education system was no good. As a matter of fact, Gatto later states that public schools are, “Virtual factories of childishness” (143). It is here where the first comparison between factories and public schools is made.
The idea of boredom can be likened to the starting point of a factory’s [school’s] merchandise production where boredom is the source. “Thinking [of] the ‘problem’ as an engineer might” (143), Gatto formulates questions that ponder the real purpose of public schooling. These questions are meant to invoke thoughts into the reader’s mind. He asks, “Could it be that our schools are designed to make sure not one of them [children] ever really grows up?” (143) Similar to an engineer of a factory who is trying to determine the answers to a problem, Gatto, a former employee of the public schooling system, is trying to determine the answers to the problems concerning public schools. He implicitly points out the systematic timeline a child would have to follow in a public 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 necessary?” (143) By doing so, Gatto portrays public schooling as an unappealing system with “long-term, cell-block-style[d], forced confinement” (143). This description can be compared to the work-site of a factory employee from the Industrial Era. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Industrial Revolution took over the United States. Factories and industrial complexes were in full swing. Factory workers—men, women, and children—were confined to cramped spaces, and were forced to work for long hours. Could it be that Gatto is purposefully comparing public schools to factories from the Industrial Era? Ironically, Gatto lists the names of a few individuals such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, who did not receive a public school education, yet were huge contributors to the Industrial Era. Perhaps he is trying to emphasize how public schools prevent children from reaching their highest potential and become great leaders like these individuals. Instead of being confined to a classroom and forced to think inside of the box, Carnegie and Rockefeller had the freedom of self-discovery. They were able to gain knowledge and understanding of their abilities on their own, and reach their highest potential. They had the power to think outside of the box. This method of thinking led them to their success.
In order to help his audience understand and know the true purpose of public schooling, Gatto gives the reader the sugarcoated purpose of public schooling, and the actual purpose of public schooling. Gatto states that many Americans believe public schools have three simple purposes: “To make good people, to make good citizens, and to make each person his or her personal best” (144). However, according to Mencken, “...nothing could be further from the truth” (144). The U.S. educational system is said to be “an educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens…” (145). Its actual purpose is broken down into six basic functions discovered by Alexander Inglis. The first function is “The adjustive or adaptive function,” its purpose is to “…establish fixed habits of reaction to authority.” The second is “The integrating function,” its purpose is to “…make children as alike as possible.” Children who obey authority and adapt to the public school setting are predictable and therefore easier to be manipulated and harnessed by those looking for control. The third is “the diagnostic and directive function,” which states, “school is meant to determine each student’s proper social role”. The fourth is, “The differentiating function,” which says, “...children are to be sorted by role and trained only so far as their destination in the social machine merits once their social role has been diagnosed.” In other words, children are systematically put into social classes within their public school setting where they are trained and maneuvered according to their class. The fifth is, “The selective function,” which says, “Schools are meant to tag the unfit... clearly enough that their peers will accept them as inferior and effectively bar them from the reproductive sweepstakes. That is what all those little humiliations from first grade onward were intended to do: wash the dirt down the drain” This means that once children are placed into their social classes, these classes will compete and undergo “survival of the fittest.” Inferior social classes [students] will be treated as inferior not only by the public school system, but by their peers and fellow classmates as well. This is intended to further sort the weak from the strong. Last but not least, the final function, “The propaedeutic
function,” states, “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...in order that government might proceed unchallenged and corporations might never want for obedient labor.” This means that outside of the inferior class of children, are a group of elite who are selected and taught to further control, manage, and manipulate a population of students. (Gatto 146)

Not only do these functions double that of the traditional ones mentioned earlier, they also are much more complex and harder to understand. These six functions can represent six different stations in the “virtual” public school factory. They intend to harness, manipulate, sort, train, diagnose, and conform children. Gatto, includes these extreme and somewhat paradoxical functions in his argument to paint a broader picture. He “shows” and “tells” the reader the actual purposes of traditional public schooling by first blatantly listing the six functions of public schooling, and then expanding on these ideas.

Another example of this would be where he states, “…there are two groups of people who can always be convinced to consume more than they need to: addicts and children” (148). Gatto, makes this paradoxical and controversial statement in order to emphasize how children are seen as; and therefore trained to become, marketable consumers. Following this is another eye-brow raising statement which I believe ties up the public school factory analogy. Gatto quotes Ellwood P. Cubberly, who says, “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 specifications laid down” (148). This statement clearly states that schools “are” indeed factories. These factories shape and fashion children by the use of the six functions mentioned earlier in this piece. There are, however, specifications that need to be followed. According to Gatto, these specifications resulted in today’s immature society. Gatto says:
Easy divorce laws have removed the need to work at relationships; easy credit has removed the need for fiscal self-control; easy answers have removed the need to ask questions... We buy televisions, and then we buy the things we see on 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 (148).

Gatto’s repetition of the words “Easy” and “We buy” show how public schools, produce “products” that are robotic, and clone-like. Children grow up to become adults who live life in a repetitive cycle. Their habits and actions are based off of their wants and needs, self-control is stripped away, and they end up becoming impulsive consumers. Fortunately, Gatto presents a solution to the public schooling dilemma. He presents the solution similarly to the way he presented the results of public school specifications. “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” (149). Gatto’s repetition and use of “School trains...teach your own” is very ironic because many people believe that schools teach children. Gatto, on the other hand, claims, “school trains children.” Gatto suggests that parents rid their children of mandatory schooling and allow them to be adventurous, think critically, and think independently. He believes that parents should allow their children to manage [teach] themselves (149). This was the solution. It is simple yet also complex. We can easily choose not to send our children to school. However, how do we get our children to teach themselves?

After exploring this argument, I found that many of Gatto’s ideas and statements could be connected to a theme; the metaphors, comparisons and paradoxical statements alluded to the idea that schools are factories. The notion of boredom can be compared with the state of individuals who work in factories. Gatto mentioned that not only were the students bored, but school faculty and teachers (public school “factory” workers) were bored as well. The six functions of public schools (stations in the
factory), mold and fashion children (products) into adults (robotic beings) who are easily manipulated and controlled to do exactly what they are told: to buy, to consume, and to be dependent individuals. Their minds have been experimented on, and therefore programmed to behave in a way that a corporate society demands. (Gatto 149) This discovery has led me to develop a deeper hypothesis of what Gatto is trying to imply. Could it be that public schools are modern day factories from the Industrial Era? Ironically enough, the Industrial Era was a time period where children didn’t go to school, they worked and toiled in factories for hours. Public schools were supposed to be the solution to the child labor issue. However, the only difference today is that children, who once created products, are now the products.
Works Cited
