

A View of A Place Called School

Goodlad's new book, though not perfect, is a landmark in American education because it combines professional experience, research data, and reality.

SAM P. WIGGINS

Significant and well-developed, *A Place Called School* is, in my opinion, John Goodlad's most far-reaching, substantial contribution to educational literature. I believe all educators should take the time to examine this weighty report—ten chapters with an average 70 pages per chapter. Goodlad designed it for professional and lay audiences: he avoids special professional language, and covers some background material that may seem redundant to professionals; but, all in all, he balances content and style well for his audiences.

I would recommend, before reading this new publication, browsing through a couple of his earlier works: *Behind the Classroom Door* with Frances Klein and associates, 1974, was a forthright attempt to discover what was really going on in a sample of American schools, and *What Schools Are For*, 1979, provides a tip-off of the Goodlad philosophical "bent" as it unfolds in this publication.

Background of the Report

To know the full meaning of this book, one must have a general understanding of Goodlad's "A Study of Schooling." The study was motivated by the very simple yet fundamental belief that "as our understanding of schooling increases, both the pressure and our ability to improve schools will become greater." In the early 1970s, skeptics told Goodlad that the data he sought were already available. But the kind of "thick" holistic study of a nationally representative group of individual schools was nowhere to be found, and Goodlad's efforts to mount a study took

form. He was convinced that "most efforts to improve schools founder on reefs of ignorance . . . of the ways schools function in general and ignorance of the inner workings of selected schools in particular."

After three years of conceptualizing an in-depth study that would encompass a variety of public schools, Goodlad and his associates selected a sampling of schools around the nation. They agreed on seven states, each representing a major region of the U.S. Within each of these states two communities were selected. Then, within each community, they chose a senior high school, a middle (or junior high) school, and an elementary school, the lower schools normally serving as "feeder" schools to those of the upper grades. The one exception to this three-layer pattern was a combined junior-senior high school, so that the total sample consisted of 38 schools, or 13 "triples," as they were called in the study.

Beyond this geographical diversity, the design further ensured selection of schools from urban, suburban, and rural populations. Within these categories more than 1,000 public school classrooms of America became the ultimate sample of the observation dimension of the study.

The data gathering process consisted of questionnaire surveys to parents, students, teachers, and principals; extended interviews; and carefully structured classroom observations by trained observers. It was an authentic "immersion" study, but researchers who like the sanitation of "hard discrete data" would call it a fuzzy or "contaminated" inquiry, and it would drive behavioral objectives zealots up their well-defined walls. But the heart of Goodlad's position is that you can't learn much from a test-tube analysis of discrete parts of schooling unrelated to what he calls the general "ambience" of schooling. The study team hoped that the interconnecting array of data, once sorted out, would provide insights into and understanding of schools beyond anything yet available. Their criticism of data already available was that it was piecemeal, disconnected, and largely dysfunctional in an organic or unitary sense.

I marvel that Goodlad and his associates were able to mount and sustain such a mammoth undertaking to its full-term conclusion. It takes super salespeople to persuade 14 independent philanthropic foundations and public funding agencies to engage in a single educational venture, especially when there is no promised or even intended direct product in the form of demonstrable educational improvement.

Their second accomplishment was enlisting the active cooperation of the 38 schools who would receive no public recognition, good or bad, because their anonymity had to be protected. The only evident value accruing to them would be the assurance that data regard-

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ing their respective schools would be furnished to them promptly upon its acquisition. It would be interesting to know how much or how little these data were subsequently used by the schools; a question not developed in this publication, perhaps because it is premature.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the organizational and management feat. With its three years of gestation the study extended over a period of a decade or more; the data gathering concentrated over the latter half of the 1970s. There was the eminent advisory committee headed by Ralph Tyler and numerous graduate assistants "passing through"; there were transient faculty, parents, teachers, and students, and boards of education whose support was essential in initiating, conducting, and concluding the study. The orchestration of these many parts in a sustained manner is a credit to Goodlad and his associates.

Understanding Specific Schools

Goodlad's primary purpose—to illuminate the reader's understanding of the specific schools under study—constitutes the first eight chapters of the book. He concludes each chapter with a summary and discussion, each of which easily stands on its own. For readers with a penchant for good lean prose, this Reader's Digest "cheating" will sometimes be sufficient. For those more deeply interested in the details and verbal embroidery, the entire book reads with a good flow and cumulative effect.

In his opening chapter, Goodlad does not generate any big surprises for experienced school personnel. He emphasizes the familiar theme of the individual school as the basic unit for improvement and stresses the theme of "caring" professional school personnel for school health and educational improvement. This "caring" theme is buttressed by a deeper understanding of broad educational needs. In a general sense, Goodlad advocates a comprehensive "needs assessment" at the individual school level, but a more organic and unifying one than prescribed by others. I feel one shortcoming of "A Study of Schooling," and hence of this report, is that the perceptions of non-parent taxpaying citizens were not solicited in the data gathering about what the schools are and what they ought to be. Although the omission was deliberate, a rationale should have been developed. These taxpayers are clients also and resent being overlooked.

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In the second chapter, "We Want it All," Goodlad reports parents' reactions to what the schools should be doing and seeks to formulate a system of priorities or "preferences" within these task areas. In the categories of academic, vocational, personal, and social-civic objectives, all objectives are rated as being worthy of inclusion within the schools. Goodlad concludes that many policymakers have been misinterpreting parents' expectations for schools and have overreacted to their misinterpretations. The present furor over "back to basics" provides a case in point. Whatever else the sample schools were doing, they were pouring on the basics in a highly traditional manner.

In discussing the goals of education and the responsibilities of the separate states for providing leadership and direction, Goodlad chides state leaders for the "disordered array of topics and forms of presentation" of educational goals. Although his occasionally caustic pen seems to have produced a gratuitous "overkill," the criticism takes a constructive turn when he develops his own suggested model of goals for schooling in the U.S., in the framework of academic, vocational, personal, and social-civic categories.

Beyond the academic sphere, students, parents, and teachers were asked to identify and rate their concerns about the schools. Student misbehavior ranked near the top, and at the secondary school level the use of alcohol and drugs vied for top ranking among students, parents, and teachers.

Parents, teachers, and students were asked to assign their schools a traditional letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F. No school averaged F or D, and none attained a grade of A. However, from the B+ to the C- range, the levels of

rated satisfaction corresponded almost directly with other more specific indicators of effective schools, such as the congruence between what schools ought to be doing and what they are perceived as doing.

The fourth chapter, "Inside Classrooms," reports results of observations made by Goodlad's team as they went into a thousand classrooms. It also reports the perceptions of teachers and students about the quality and process of classroom instruction. It may come as a surprise to some that the areas most liked, in grades four through twelve, were consistently physical education, the arts, and vocational education. These were also the subjects observed as focusing less on lecture-recitation and textbook learning, and "involving a little more participation of students in decisions affecting their learning, greater student enthusiasm, less time on instruction, and a little more variation in pedagogical procedures."

A glaring omission, in my mind, in the description of classroom teaching is the lack of description or discussion of the mainstreaming movement, one of the most significant developments in American public schools since about 1977. Goodlad only indirectly addresses the general issue when he discusses the weaknesses in "tracking" students and extols the concept of mastery learning, with attention to peer tutoring and the like.

Chapters five through eight consider diverse issues such as equity and quality of opportunity for learning or "access to knowledge"; issues related to teaching and the circumstances of teaching, in which Goodlad advocates the reduction of actual instructional time—as in universities and, Japanese schools—to 15 hours per week; issues involving the

explicit and implicit (or hidden) curriculum, in which he stresses the subtleties of what we are or may be teaching unintentionally; and pointing out salient likenesses and unique qualities of individual schools—their “ambiance” or their subculture.

Making Recommendations

Goodlad's second purpose, developed in the two concluding chapters, is to formulate dozens of recommendations that he considers both beneficial and attainable in financial terms. No great new sums of money are needed, he insists, except for bettering the financial circumstances of professional school personnel. The key changes are a reallocation of resources as the schools are restructured. He recommends, for example, a new approach to differentiated staffing that uses paraprofessionals and volunteer workers in a team teaching arrangement.

Chapter nine focuses on improving the schools as they are, within the constraints of today's reality. Chapter ten is his version of “pie in the sky” (my wording, not his). Goodlad believes that

his recommendations apply to private as well as public schools, even though “A Study” was limited to the public sector. One of his proposals, sure to draw fire from teacher organizations, is that pre-service teacher education field experiences should concentrate on centers of excellence (in other words, atypical school settings) or we perpetuate rather than improve the present level of “emotionally flat” teaching observed in most of the 1,000 schools.

As a former laboratory school principal, I see merit in gaining a vision of optimum learning arrangements, to the extent that they are actually reflected in such centers, but, realistically, beginning teachers are not apt to become dynamic change agents and need first to win acceptance in their school setting. Unless Goodlad's approach is coupled with a study of the science and art of educational change, his proposal could lead to teacher education for maladjustment.

Goodlad also recommends a 12-year pattern of schooling beginning at age four and ending with 16-year-old high school graduates. His neatly developed rationale for the premise and logic mer-

its analysis. Goodlad even charts the way to incorporate the last year of nursery school and a year of kindergarten into his new 12-year scheme.

The Third Reason

Goodlad's final purpose is to emphasize the importance of bringing data to the school improvement process that are directly relevant to each particular school. Here he could have been more specific, as he was for state boards of education, and drawn up a model of both the process and substance of gathering relevant data for individual schools that grew out of the successes and shortfalls experienced in “A Study of Schooling.” Educators could refer to some of the technical reports already prepared or other data available through ERIC, but more likely, Goodlad concluded that unless each school developed its own strategy and format, the data gathering effort would be an exercise in futility.

A Place Called School is a valuable contribution to the educational literature in language understandable to the educated citizen and with a deeper meaning to professional educators. □

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