

A Place Called School

An Analysis of the Book by John Goodlad

Reviewed by Reuben Hilde

You are sitting in the waiting room of a physician's office. Several present and prospective patients sit quietly, yet nervously, reading magazines and newspapers. Suddenly the doctor bursts out of his office screaming, "That guy in there is sick! Somebody ought to do something about this!"

Imagine the patients' reactions! Their confidence in the doctor is shattered. And perhaps their confidence in the work of almost *any* physician is considerably shaken.

Follow the continuing plight of the patients. Some transfer to another doctor. Here the setting is far more calm. This doctor demonstrates confidence in his methodology and determines that he will not only cure diseases, but also prevent them. He has heard from his patients, from the media, and from "experts who ought to know" that he needs to treat all patients alike. He therefore decides that since they all have human bodies—with liver, heart, lungs, et cetera—they consequently all need the same treatment. With that "logical" background he puts every patient on the same regimen of three pills a day of one type of medicine, three pills of another

kind, and four pills of yet another kind.

Any physician reading the above illustration, or anyone else for that matter, would react, "How ridiculous!" Though seemingly preposterous, this illustration is analogous to the actions of education critics today.

Nineteen eighty three was a year of major reports evaluating the American public school systems. The reports ranged from those with overtones of panic to ones that offer sound and sensible counsel. Along with newspaper articles, magazine features, and other

media reports on education, these reports can be aligned along a continuum of opinions. At one extreme we see panic and outrage. Moving toward the center, we hear the stentorian tones of those who feel they have a solid solution. Toward the right of center appear those who represent older, more traditional philosophies, such as "back to basics." Turning toward the other extreme, we encounter those who endorse open and even "free" schools.

In my opinion John I. Goodlad's book *A Place Called School* presents one of the finest major

Picture
Removed

Dr. Hilde currently serves as Dean of the Loma Linda University School of Education, Riverside, California. He previously held a number of positions at various levels of education, including Associate Director of Education at the General Conference of SDA.

reports on the American school today. This evaluation is not based upon the comforting thought that he approves of what is going on; he does not. Readers discover that he addresses the problems and the issues by examining the schools themselves, evaluating what is going on, and making definitive studies of the schools in operation. He does not settle for the opinions of severe academic critics, nor does he add to the cacophony of the panic-stricken.

The serious student of education would do well not only to read Dr. Goodlad's book, but also to analyze its message minutely.

The Basic Message

First, Dr. Goodlad states concisely the purpose of his book. He desires to (1) help the reader understand this place called school, (2) develop an agenda for school improvement, and (3) emphasize the "importance of bringing to the process of improvement data relevant to a particular school."¹ His third purpose should not be lost sight of. Goodlad believes firmly that no single prescription will assure the health of all schools. Each school should be studied and analyzed individually, with plans for improvement being based only on the data that are relevant to a particular school.

In the opening sentence of the book Goodlad makes the reader feel as if he or she has suddenly been doused with a bucket of ice water—

American schools are in trouble. In fact, the problems of schooling are of such crippling proportions that many schools may not survive. It is possible that our entire public education system is nearing collapse.²

But he reassures us throughout the remainder of the book, which serves much as a large beach towel with which we are rubbed down and invigorated. The net effect is to invigorate us to accept the chal-

lenge to bring new life and meaning to this place called school.

While admitting that our schools are in serious difficulty Goodlad presents one premise that is right on target. "The current wave of criticism [of the schools] lacks the diagnosis required for the reconstruction of schooling."³ He follows up this assertion in much the same manner an Adventist educator would by declaring that the home and the church were in "seriously weakened condition by the 1970s."⁴

First Understand, Then Change

One theme runs throughout the book—we must first understand schools before we can expect to improve them (page 17). Specific application of this theme suggests that it is necessary to understand the individual school in order to improve it.

Goodlad expands on this principle in a delightful manner:

Alike as schools may be in many ways, each school has an ambience (or culture) of its own and, further, . . . its ambience may suggest to the careful observer useful approaches in making it a better school.⁵

The "back to the basics" theme gets little support from Goodlad. After reviewing the history of education in America, he looks at those who "want to go back to an earlier, simpler time . . . when the 3 Rs were the sole expectation for schools." However, he bluntly declares, "there was never such a time. I doubt that this time has now come."⁶ At this point Goodlad's position resembles that of SDA education, with its purpose of developing the whole person. He strengthens his stand by citing from the vast amount of data he has gathered, data which indicate that students, teachers, and parents agree that the major goals of schools involve social, intellectual, personal, and vocational devel-

opment. (On pages 51 through 56 he gives a definite outline of what these goals may include.)

The Power of Goodlad's Message

The basic strength of Goodlad's message lies not only in its use of extensive data that are accurately analyzed and applied, but also in the fact that Goodlad does not settle for cosmetic solutions. A number of the current reports on education, including the Federal Government's study called *A Nation at Risk*, settle for these types of solutions. For example: Some of the studies call for increasing certain requirements such as (1) lengthening the school year, (2) lengthening the school day, (3) increasing the years required in math, science, English, et cetera, and (4) increasing teacher pay.

Whereas serious educators and an equally concerned society may see several of the above elements as essential to school improvement, the thoughtful Dr. Goodlad looks beyond these proposed solutions to principles that are even more fundamental.

Some Adventist educators may be uncomfortable with the expression *humanizing knowledge*, but we all might profit by a close look at what Goodlad views as the central requirement of teaching:

Philosophers and historians have addressed the school's responsibility for humanizing knowledge. They have in mind a process of organizing and presenting humankind's knowledge and intellectual tools in such fashion as to make them accessible to all. This is the central requirement of teaching. The pattern of circumstances just summarized for the classrooms of our sample of schools acts, I believe, against the fulfillment of the process.

The process of humanizing knowledge in schools so that all students gain access to it appears to have two central components. The first is made up of a teacher's personal attention—interest in both the learner and the subject matter which is to be conveyed to and internalized by students. The second is made up of pedagogical traits—all those techniques designed to keep the student

(To page 42)

A Place Called School

(Continued from page 11)

overtly or covertly engaged in the learning. Both are educable.⁷

In these two comprehensive paragraphs Goodlad not only identifies the central issue of teaching but also sets forth a definite hope of fulfillment in three words—“Both are educable.”

Ability Grouping—An Indictment

Goodlad's data and analysis reveal two unfortunate developments as students progress through grades K through 12. First, the *desired* teacher traits and methods

“Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions. . . . Why are our schools not places of joy?”

(use of diagnostic tests, praise, personal attention, early feedback, active student participation, et cetera) declined steadily from the early elementary grades through the senior high school years (see pages 125 ff). Second, where students are grouped (in the later high school years), the more capable students receive better teaching techniques than students in the lower group. As a result, the gap between the ability, learning, and curriculum opportunities experienced by the upper and lower groups increases rather than narrows. These results are contrary to what grouping was designed to accomplish. The indictment of our schools becomes even more severe when we discover that the lower groups *do not have access to the*

knowledge made available to the more capable student. Because the data strongly reinforce Goodlad's study results, let us note some of his conclusions:

There is some evidence in the literature to suggest that the upper groups experience a richer body of curricular content and that the lower groups experience more drill and rote learning.⁸

Goodlad describes this trend as a “steady decline in both the variety of teaching methods employed and the amount of teacher support, feedback, and corrective guidance provided with progression upward through the grades.”⁹

The problem is compounded by further evidence that tracking differentiates between “students in regard to their *access to knowledge* and, further, doing so disproportionately for minority students, especially poor minority students, as compared with white students.”¹⁰

In his categorical stance against tracking, a system that denies certain students “access to knowledge,” Goodlad doesn't stand alone. The majority of the recent reports on public education take the same position. (See bibliographical list at the end of the article.) These reports declare, essentially, that American education in the common schools (K-12) is to be available to all.

In the practice of tracking, such availability or accessibility no longer exists. Goodlad says, based on extensive research, that “effective instructional practices were found to be more characteristic of high than of low classes.”¹¹

“Back to the Basics” or More Progressive Views?

In his study of teachers, Goodlad found that the majority lean more toward the “back to the basics” end of the continuum than toward more progressive beliefs.¹²

Separate
Article
Removed

However, teachers seem to endorse traditional and progressive beliefs simultaneously. The author made much of this fact, linking it to his assertion that teachers suffer from

[Goodlad] addresses the problems and the issues by examining the schools themselves, evaluating what is going on, and making definitive studies of the schools in operation.

working so much in isolation. The classroom is their “cell” and they have too little opportunity for professional dialog and interaction. At the same time, understandably, “the classroom is indeed the teacher’s domain, and here, . . . teachers perceive themselves to be quite autonomous.”¹³

Goodlad’s examination reveals some startling data regarding what schools teach. He suggests that the teaching of several subjects does “not rise above a pedestrian level.”¹⁴ After surveying the teaching practices in all the major subject areas, Goodlad identifies two serious deficiencies that “stand out in all aspects of the curricula we studied.”¹⁵

The first is a failure to differentiate and see the relationships between facts and the more important concepts facts help us to understand. The second . . . is a general failure to view subjects and subject matter as turf on which to experience the struggles and satisfaction of personal development.¹⁶

In one particular area Goodlad reveals a frightful misunderstanding. He declares that “For years, schools and teachers have been criticized for their neglect of the fundamentals.”¹⁷ But his research shows that “teachers are very preoccupied with trying to teach children and youth precisely what we

blame them for not teaching.”¹⁸

Goodlad, on the other hand, becomes incisive when he attacks another problem—the practice of failing students: “I wonder,” he reflects, “. . . about failure that leads individuals to feel that they are not good at all.”¹⁹ Then he tells us what we have already suspected, “A small percentage of students receive a large percentage of the failing grades, year after year.”²⁰

Possibly the worst indictment of the schools (our schools?) appears in Goodlad’s declaration followed closely by his question: “*Boredom* is a disease of epidemic proportions. . . . Why are our schools not places of joy?”²¹ Why, indeed!

Goodlad’s Agenda for School Improvement

Adhering to one of his purposes for writing his book, Goodlad sets forth his agenda for school improvement. The reader may not agree with all his recommendations, but each is worth examining.

In a careful, analytical journey, Goodlad takes the reader through a step-by-step process of identifying the people, the government levels, and the institutions responsible for “improving the schools we have.”²² After identifying the tasks of each level he concludes that “the school must become largely self-directing.”²³ This decentralization does not, however, cut the school loose from the districts and the state; it merely emphasizes the paramount importance of the school in the educational network.²⁴

Goodlad’s curriculum proposals (pages 285 ff) are somewhat startling but do merit careful consideration. Before setting forth his ideas of curriculum structure for secondary schools he reminds us (as he has repeatedly) that these curriculum changes may even have negative results “if not accompanied by

substantial improvement in pedagogy.”²⁵

A Recommended Secondary Curriculum

Here is his suggested high school curriculum:

1. He endorses the general education of the Harvard report in which the “five fingers” of human knowledge are set forth: (a) mathematics and science, (b) literature and language, (c) society and social studies, (d) the arts, and (e) the vocations (see pages 286 ff).

2. The maximum total of the “five fingers” plus physical education would not represent more than 90 percent of a student’s program. Goodlad may be almost too precise in recommending the percentages of the program allotted to the five fingers plus physical education. He suggests: Up to 18 percent for mathematics and science, up to 18 percent for literature and English, up to 15 percent of each of the remaining fingers, and up to 10 percent for physical education.

3. Goodlad next recommends that within the five domains about two-thirds of all students’ programs would be taken in common. All students would experience a curricular core. In this sense a basic, general education would be available to all learners.

*One theme runs throughout the book—
we must first
understand schools
before we can expect to
improve them.*

4. Ten percent of the student’s program would be what Goodlad calls the “sixth domain.” Minimal specifications in the five domains could be met, thus freeing a larger percentage of time for this area. The sixth domain is the “special interest domain.” This portion of the curriculum is left unspecified; it “would be to develop and refine an area of individual interest and talent development.”²⁶

Goodlad adds two significant observations to his curriculum proposal regarding the sixth domain. First, the time allotted is not to be for remedial purposes; here he is adamant, “This simply must not be a permissible action.”²⁷ (Remediation may be done under the

time allotted to the “five fingers” of general education—see No. 3 above.)

Goodlad’s second recommendation relating to the “special interest domain” is highly significant:

Just how much of the instruction in the sixth domain would be provided directly by the school is dependent largely on the school’s setting, the resources available in the community, and like manner.²⁸

He follows the logical observation with his most startling recommendation—“that students be given vouchers with which to exercise their choice.”²⁹ He follows up this suggestion with a series of options as to how the student might use the vouchers. While the concept of vouchers has been around for a long time, it is novel to see it introduced as a segment of the regular school program.

A Three-tiered System

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Goodlad’s agenda for SDA educators to accept is his proposal to divide the 12 years of elementary and secondary school into three phases of four years each. He proposes an earlier beginning and ending: the primary phase, ages 4 through 7; second phase (elementary), ages 8 through 11; and the third (secondary), ages 12 through 15.

As Goodlad sees it, many children now attend 14 years of schooling (he included nursery school and kindergarten). In his three phases he endeavors to streamline the schooling experiences by removing “soft spots” and providing real opportunities for personalizing instruction.

His ideas for having students start school at the time of their birthdays, rather than waiting until autumn, could dismay many teachers. Nevertheless, he argues that the entry of two or three students in a given month and the exit of a

comparable number could be handled quite nicely by a school that plans for such transitions.

The reader may be tempted at this point to turn away from Goodlad’s recommendations, but his ideas relating to these three phases merit further attention. Goodlad suggests that “each unit at the elementary and secondary levels be nongraded,” and adds “This removes the cumbersome process of promoting or retaining each student a year and a grade at a time.”³⁰ He resurrects the word *mastery*, endorsing the approach for the more structured subjects like mathematics. It would be difficult to refute the following assertion:

[Goodlad] concludes, “And, indeed, education is as yet something more envisioned than practiced.”

And after all, the learning we do outside of schools—where we spend the bulk of our lives—is not organized by years and grade levels. The criterion of worth becomes possession of the requisite knowledge and skills, not grades completed and marks attained in schools.³¹

Reflections on Goodlad and Us

Goodlad closes his book with a plaintive reflection, “to think seriously about education conjures up intriguing possibilities both for schooling and a way of life as yet scarcely tried.” And in a quiet, yet startling manner he concludes, “And, indeed, education is as yet something more envisioned than practiced.”³²

This book deserves the attention of serious Adventist parents and educators. Through careful study, educators may gain the additional joy of seeing how Dr. Goodlad

supports many of the educational principles outlined by inspiration. The following illustrate but a few of these principles: (1) the education of the whole person; (2) cooperative learning in which the more able student helps the less capable, (3) the paramount concern of the teacher for each learner; (4) the right of all children to the best education possible, and (5) teaching students to be thinkers and problem solvers, capable of decision making, who, having learned how to study, transfer their experiences into the realities of a vibrant, meaningful life. The reader will note also the support Goodlad gives to small schools and their potential as places of learning.

One could not view *A Place Called School* as the educator’s Bible, but it does serve as an excellent, prescriptive commentary. □

FOOTNOTES

Note: All references are from John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984).

- ¹ Page xvii.
- ² Page 1.
- ³ Page 2.
- ⁴ Page 7.
- ⁵ Page 81.
- ⁶ Page 50.
- ⁷ Page 125.
- ⁸ Page 158.
- ⁹ Page 159.
- ¹⁰ Page 157. Italics supplied.
- ¹¹ Page 155.
- ¹² Pages 173 ff.
- ¹³ Page 188.
- ¹⁴ Page 236.
- ¹⁵ Page 237.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Page 243.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Page 242.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Page 242. Italics supplied.
- ²² Chapter 9.
- ²³ Page 276.
- ²⁴ See page 277.
- ²⁵ Page 285.
- ²⁶ Page 287.
- ²⁷ Page 289.
- ²⁸ Page 287.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Page 331.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Page 361.

RELATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

A Nation at Risk. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April, 1983.
Boyer, Ernest L. *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. New York:

Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983.
Coleman, James S., Thomas Hoffer, and Sally
Kilgore. *High School Achievement*. New
York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1982.
Sarason, Seymour B. *Schooling in America:
Scapegoat and Salvation*. New York: The Free
Press, 1983.
Sizer, Theodore R. *Horace's Compromise: The
Dilemma of the High School*. Boston: Hough-
ton Mifflin Company, 1984.

Separate
Article
Removed