

THE GOODLAD OCCASIONAL PAPERS

About Our Schools: No. 2

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[Note: I set aside in the Goodlad Occasional Papers series the academic practice of listing many citations to support conclusions, observations, etc., by providing reference to only one or two scholars whose work is highly respected and frequently cited. I recommend your reading at least once the Introduction paper of this series in order to help answer questions about the literary mechanics of those that follow.]

Health and wisdom are the major pillars of a strong and good society. All others are derivative. Because of their importance to both individuals and their culture, they generate controversy. In what follows, I primarily address education, the almost ubiquitous path to wisdom.

Unfortunately, this ubiquitousness is largely lost to schooling, which is referred to as if it were synonymous with education. Consequently, schools again and again become scapegoats for the wrongdoings or mistakes of others. This abuse is one of several that generate mythical school reform or unproductive tinkering. The major changes needed years ago, backed by solid inquiry, rest in peace.

More than a century and half ago, Horace Mann, secretary of the Massachusetts board of education, declared public schooling to be the greatest discovery made by man. It

became a major part of the American Dream, ultimately joining private schools in the requirement that children and youths attend to the age of sixteen. As a consequence, having been there, nearly every adult thinks she or he knows what school is all about – what is good and at least something that could be better.

The major symbols of schooling were established, and its deep structure hardened into place by the 1930s. The continuation of these symbols and structure became so established and expected that the mistaken observation became “a school is a school is a school.”

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the American people heard or read very little that was good about their public schools. There was increasing criticism from policymakers, business leaders, and reformers. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell in 1981, stirred the nation with a thunderclap in its report: “If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war” (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983, p. 5).

The Commission’s rhetoric provided a quite comprehensive list of school weaknesses and recommended “that citizens across the Nation hold educators

and elected officials responsible for providing leadership necessary to achieve these reforms" (p. 32). But it did not recommend an initiative comparable with this rhetoric (see TheodoreSizer, "Back to 'A Place Called School'" in Kenneth A. Sirotnik and Roger Soder, eds., *The Beat of a Different Drummer*, 1999, chapter 8).

The Commission reinforced the existing purposes and conduct by calling for teachers to do much better with existing curricula, strengthened by more attention to mathematics and science. The long-established deep structure and symbols of schooling remained intact. The present version of yesterday in today's school reform era is blessed by the largest-ever budget for education of the federal government. So far, its use continues to remain within the long-standing boundaries of what Stanford University scholars David Tyack and Larry Cuban call the "grammar" of schooling—the detailed ways and means of trying to provide deliberate education.

A question often raised is why so little regarding schooling has changed over the years while so much else has happened in America, especially during the past half-century. The essence of knowledge and its wise use are embedded in history. Tyack and Cuban set out to study the trajectory of schooling over the twentieth century. The apt title of their story is *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995).

They wondered whether our schools might have been better served by local communities' having greater agency over their purposes and conduct. The so-called No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 commandeered curricula, classes, students, and stewards of the nation's

schools. Where art thou Founding Fathers and your grandchildren?

Failure to pay attention to human conduct from generation to generation is the common path of ignorance. The primary cause of the myriad shortcomings of the nation's schools is not inadequate funding, poor management, teachers' incompetence, or any other of the charges made by current critics and would-be reformers. *It is widespread adult ignorance.*

Ignorance is not a synonym for stupidity. Even the most brilliant among us are ignorant of a great deal. What we should not be ignorant about is the education of our children—the process of their becoming *unique individuals*, each "discharging everyone's moral obligation to lead a good life and make as much of one's self as possible" (Mortimer J. Adler, *We Hold These Truths*, 1987, p. 20). Or, as historian Lawrence Cremin paraphrased philosopher John Dewey, "the aim of education is not merely to make citizens, or workers, or fathers, or mothers, but ultimately to make human beings who will live life to the fullest" (*The Transformation of the School*, 1961, pp. 122-123).

Judging the teaching of a teacher or a school only by children's performance on academic tests is stupid. Judging a child's educational becoming by her or his performance on academic test scores is immoral. For parents not to rise individually or collectively to challenge these practices is irresponsible.

Legislated rules make clear that we do not "own" our children. We have the pleasure and responsibility to take care of them during their childhood and adolescence and to love them for life.

In this paper, I draw from apparent reality, grounded action, and belief attained by both the empirical-inductive method of inquiry and the theoretical-deductive mode of thought that still engage scholars in heated disagreement. Years ago, James B. Conant neatly gave credence to both, even though he was a chemist. “Both modes of thought have their dangers; both have their advantages. . . . Above all, the continuation of intellectual freedom requires a tolerance of the activities of the proponents of the one mode by the other” (*Two Modes of Thought*, 1964, p. xxxi).

I was both angry and harsh in the italicized paragraph above, which warrants explanation. Long ago, before beginning the first grade, I was reading a little, having learned from family conversation, breakfast food packages, streetcar advertising, playing with friends, etc. A little later, I was adding the just-begun, look-see Dick and Jane first-grade method of learning reading. A few months into the year, the principal visited the class and told us to behave for the substitute who would teach us for several days while our regular teacher was elsewhere. On her first day back, our regular teacher began teaching reading with the method she had been learning at the workshop – the phonics method – which I later referred to as “hieroglyphics.”

Nearing the end of the school year, I took home with me one afternoon a sealed envelope (a major means of school-home communication in those days). My teacher was informing my parents that I would not be going to the second grade the next year; I would be in the first grade again with her as my teacher. The reason: I was not able to read.

For the only time in my life, my father intervened with my schooling – he met with the principal and teacher. He thought it odd that I was not reading and requested that I go into the second grade the next school year. He would take full responsibility should there be negative consequences.

The principal approved the request; the teacher said that no good would come from it. I passed without difficulty the second grade and then, the following year, both the third and fourth grades.

During that second-grade year, a boy (I’ll name him Albert) who had spent two years in the first grade and I became good friends. He was quite often suspended, usually for a week at a time. For a large part of each such day, he hovered at the outside edge of the school grounds, and I often talked with him at recess time when the watchful janitor (next to the principal in importance in those days) was not in sight to scold me.

After school, Albert and I often walked together to the Lonsdale Road intersection where sometimes my mother would be waiting for me to help her carry the groceries, mostly uphill, to our home several miles away. Albert and I parted company there. My mother liked him a lot and, I think, would have sought to adopt him had his mother, who paid little attention to him, left him entirely. Had I not such a caring mother and father, and had I flunked first grade, would I have spent with Albert many of his expulsion days and earned my own? Would anyone have cared?

You are probably wondering why I am taking up so much time on this little story and thinking or saying “get on with

it, John.” But this series, which I hope you will perceive later, is in part a pathway to major components of the schooling situation largely ignored by school reformers, policymakers, business leaders disgruntled with our schools, parents and their neighbors, and a large chunk of the teaching profession.

After graduating from high school, I spent a year in a normal school preparing to teach. My experience with two quite different classes and schools in student teaching planted in my mind educational hypotheses that, years later, grew into beliefs. One of these hypotheses concerned the shortcomings of the traditional grade structure of schools. (See my “Developing an Educational Ecology of Mind” in Carl Glickman, ed., *Those Who Dared*, 2009, pp. 83-114).

A year as principal and sole teacher of an eight-grade, one-room school carried my mind a long way. After a month with Ernie, his bony knees still sticking out into a first-grade seat where he had sat for seven years, not yet reading, and softly moaning, I moved him to join with the girls and boys he had started the school with – and to one of their larger seats. It was unlikely that he would learn to read there, but he stopped moaning and laughed with his old colleagues every day. (The rest of this story is in my book *Romances with Schools*, 2004.)

Twenty years later, the book *The Nongraded Elementary School* (Goodlad and Anderson, 1959) caused quite a stir. My colleague, Bob Anderson, and I could have been richly rewarded on the speaking circuit every day. Teachers College Press published a revised edition in 1987, which I think is still alive. And it

has been translated into several languages.

Nongrading was not a new idea. We found a district that in the 1930s was engaged in “ungrading.” Recently, a school in Colorado stirred considerable attention to nongrading as an interesting, new idea. So far as I know, it was and perhaps still is viewed as such. There have been over the years critiques of nongrading that have had to address the concept without the practice in the absence of its implementation.

The book by Bob Anderson and me summarizes findings and analyzes my earlier study, “Some Effects of Promotion and Nonpromotion upon the Social and Personal Adjustment of Children.” My inquiry was a study of two groups of children, one of whom had just been promoted from the first to the second grade and the other in the same schools and district who had not been promoted. My purpose was to compare the two groups on social and personal criteria near the end of the school year. This required not only comparing them on these criteria near the beginning of the year but also on other criteria including academic performance.

I realized that securing the number of pupils I believed necessary for validity would require testing nearly all at the required age in a large district. I got agreement from the Fulton County district, a large one adjoining Atlanta, Georgia. Nonetheless, I barely found the number I needed. The process of assembling the two groups was enough on its own to reveal how ridiculous (I hate the word “stupid”) it is to retain the graded school, year after year, in spite of the evidence against it.

There is no such thing as, for example, a fifth grade. How many thousands of pupils would one need to test in order for a district to create one *fully graded* elementary school? How many fifth-grade classes would one need to test in order to change the existing reality of a spread in reading from third-graders to seventh-graders to every student being only at the fifth? Even if we sent the top readers home for the year, we still would not have all the others performing at the fifth-grade level, unless we stopped some of the remaining ones from learning.

Both the research strategy and the findings are in the Goodlad and Anderson book referenced above, published in 1959. My major conclusion is that the promotion-nonpromotion process served neither group well, leading Bob and me to recommend the nongraded concept. That was a half-century ago!

There is a bundle of research about children's intellectual development and its variability, but a reasonably sensible adult should not need it to know this. Yet, recently, I read in a major educational journal how pleased the author was that, at last, standards for kindergarten would ready children for the first grade. All the horses would leave the starting gate equally ready! Such rubbish. Surely parents know better. But, of course, they have been nearly out of the schooling loop for decades. As historian Ellwood Cubberley wrote a century ago, "Each year the child is coming to belong more and more to the State and less and less to the parent" (*Changing Conceptions of Education*, 1909, p. 63).

Over the past century, the people closest to children and their schools and those best prepared (even though modestly) for their agency have been eased away from their traditional roles. Jeffrey R. Henig, professor of political science and education at Columbia University, wrote the following:

Some of the loudest voices in education reform declare teaching to be the linchpin for educational achievement while simultaneously seeming to disparage insights and input from teachers and education scholars with years of practice in the field.

There seems to be more than a bit of ideological and partisan maneuvering underlying the battles over what constitutes good educational research. Declaring themselves to be the only true reformers, critics of the status quo accuse traditional insider groups – teacher unions, education schools, affluent parents who use calls for local control as a weapon to stave off equity-oriented reforms – of relying on tradition, comfort, and experience to justify their calls to keep things the way they are ("How Education Schools Can Take Back Their Role in Policy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 2, 2011, A3).

Henig does a superb job of identifying the major groups constituting the education-policy roles and debates and their impact on schooling and the interest of our democracy. And he identifies important questions requiring informed deliberation and authoritative

action pertaining to students' learning, teachers' assessment, etc.

Medical education was able to bypass addressing the myriad questions and issues of early twentieth century practice because there were not millions of children and youths entering hospitals each morning. Backed by the Flexner Report, substantial foundation philanthropy, powerful non-federal leaders, a few emerging pioneers, and time, a new model was born that added much more to the physician-patient relationship.

Even if the present education-schooling-policy debate produced agreement, action would, at best, encompass only the grammar of schooling – with most of the attention being given to the teacher-pupil relationship. My estimate is that this happy outcome would address no more than 40 percent of the educative potential of the nation's schools. And, since my

story is about schools and schooling, I am leaving out a very powerful educator: friends.

Every school has, for better or worse, two powerful domains of educating the young in addition to its grammar. These are the major subject of Occasional Paper No. 3, yet to come. As with Occasional Paper No. 1, I leave you with your thoughts. But I leave you also with the hope that you will draw the attention of others to these papers and engage in conversation about them. Together, we must bring back to our communities the discourse and agency that more and more have been usurped by what Cubberley referred to as "the State."

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