Secondary schools track students. Courses which appear to be similar are often very different in content. Teachers decide what to teach based on their own experiences and interests. In this interview by Ron Brandt, Executive Editor of Educational Leadership, John Goodlad talks about his reactions to these and other findings from his monumental “Study of Schooling.”

EL: What findings from your Study of Schooling surprised you the most?

Goodlad: One is students’ reactions to their school subjects. A relatively large proportion of students—about 50 percent—seem to like all their subjects. I was surprised to find that the three most liked subjects were the arts, vocational education, and physical education. At the secondary level, we usually think of English, social studies, mathematics, and science as the basic four subjects. They have payoffs for admission to college. The other three don’t, yet they are the most liked.

Another surprise for me was the amount of tracking in high schools. All 13 of the high schools in our sample track students in the academic subjects; eight of them track in English, social studies, math, and science; and the other five schools track in three of the four subjects.

Another interesting finding is the great diversity in the content of courses in the subject fields. Social studies for student X and social studies for student Y may be very different in the same school.

EL: Teacher preferences play a part too, don’t they? Reports of your study say the main influence on what teachers teach—as reported by teachers—is not curriculum guides, state requirements, or consultants. Sources of teachers’ decisions are the interests and needs of students and the interests and experiences of teachers themselves, particularly the latter. Is that desirable?

Goodlad: Only if we have a profession with very high preparation and ability. That’s the situation at the university level now—not universally, but close to it. What that finding suggests to me, is that the professional preparation of teachers ought to be of the highest order. I don’t think it’s right to turn out teachers with the expectation that they’ll get the bulk of their professional preparation at a later time. Medicine doesn’t do it; law doesn’t do it. We should be turning out teachers with one professional degree representing high level preparation. After that, they wouldn’t have to get any more degrees because they would have an adequate professional base; they would keep themselves up to date through inservice education.

EL: Another surprise mentioned in your reports is that the amount of class time spent on instruction, as perceived by teachers and students, is fairly high—70 to 75 percent. The report also says the figures can be misleading because they don’t “at all speak for the type of instruction which goes on during that time.” Does that refer to the quality of instruction? Is there an implication that some of the observers weren’t too impressed with what they saw?

Goodlad: Well, we weren’t evaluating. The fact that instructional time was high did not mean, for example, that student involvement was equally high.

EL: The National Assessment reports on mathematics say that


2 Ibid., p. 247.
students do pretty well on simple computation but not at all well on problem solving. From what you've learned in the Study of Schooling, what might be some reasons for that?

Goodlad: That could be answered if we had more knowledge of what actually goes on in schools. Our study is not intended to answer questions of that sort just yet, but to get basic information about the processes of schooling. We expect to get some clues from our observational data but they are not yet adequately analyzed.

EL: The reason I asked is that in your preliminary reports, you refer to "an emerging pattern of teacher talk and student passivity."  

Goodlad: One thing we're interested in is whether or not we'll find differences among the subjects in that respect. It's clear, for example, that subjects like physical education, vocational education, and the arts are characterized less by teacher talk and students' physical passivity than are some of the more academic subjects. But perhaps the academic subjects require a different kind of involvement or engagement.

EL: Observers for the National Science Foundation studies reported seeing little individualization and little inquiry teaching, but a lot of effort to get students to know the contents of textbooks. Did your observers find the same thing?

Goodlad: Our preliminary analysis of the observational data suggests that in the academic subjects there is a lot of telling and questioning of students and a heavy reliance on textbooks and workbooks.

EL: In your reports you stress that schools in your study are not a random sample of all schools across the United States. Still, the schools you chose are fairly representative, aren't they?

Goodlad: Representative is a good word for it. Most people should be able to identify with our schools because some of them are urban and predominantly black, some have mostly Hispanic students, some are relatively large suburban schools, and so on.

EL: What, then, can be said in general about these representative American schools? Is the picture disappointing or encouraging?

Goodlad: It's hard to generalize about that. The picture is one of considerable divergence, particularly at the secondary level. In some schools there is emphasis on the intellectual life. Students say so, teachers say so, and parents say the same thing—and perhaps most of them feel that the school is providing a pretty good education. In other schools the atmosphere is more social in character; you don't find the same intellectual press. And in some schools, respondents say the school is not providing adequately for intellectual development. We are finding significant differences among schools particularly at the high school level.

EL: And apparently some major differences in satisfaction of parents and students with their schools.

Goodlad: There is a range, but interestingly enough the range is not as great as some people might expect. For example, we asked parents, teachers, and students to rate their school on a five-point scale, A to F. The rankings tended to be highest at the elementary level, a little lower at the junior high, and a little lower still at the secondary level. But no school was rated less than C—.

EL: Data from other sources suggest that people who don't have children in school have a lower opinion of schools than those who do.

Goodlad: Yes, and parents themselves rate the quality of schools and schooling in general lower than they rate their own school. They might give a B to their own school, but when asked about schools in general they would rate them a C. Which suggests that polls create as well as survey public opinion. But according to our sample, the local school appears to have a fair amount of parent approval.

EL: You said your study emphasizes what goes on in schools rather than outcomes. Why did you feel it was important to do that kind of study?

Goodlad: I believe educators and the public have become preoccupied with one way to evaluate education. We cannot judge the quality or lack of quality of an educational system by looking only at test scores. We need to be more interested in what students are studying in school, how instruction is proceeding, how young people perceive their school environment. We must look at balance in the school program, the kinds of...
materials being used, and so on. Of course we're interested in the product as well. We want youngsters who can read, write, spell, think, engage in problem solving, and a whole lot of other things.

EL: It's important eventually to establish some association between the processes you refer to and the outcomes, isn't it?

Goodlad: In the long term we cannot build a science of education until we define those relationships.

EL: At this point, though, you say it's premature. Why?

Goodlad: There hasn't been enough contextual inquiry—enough of the kinds of studies we're doing. Our methods are still relatively primitive. We hope they will soon be out of date because there will have been so much interest in this kind of inquiry that the methods will have been improved. Eventually we'll need to get outcome measures on a large enough sample of schools, along with descriptive data from observers and perceptual data from the people who are there, and then begin to analyze some of the variables to see how they relate.

EL: Several articles in the October issue of Educational Leader-
ship summarized the recent research on teaching. Some of the authors say that certain kinds of teacher behaviors are more “effective” because they result in better test scores. What comments do you have on that?

Goodlad: We’re beginning to see some progress in that kind of research. The Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study\(^8\) and other studies deal with important variables. But we have to develop concepts of quality that are not based only on perceived causal relationships between means and ends. If good teaching is defined as producing certain kinds of outcomes but the environment of the classroom encourages cheating, that’s not a good educational setting no matter how high the measured outcomes are. We have to concern ourselves with the values which pervade the instructional process as well as with measurable outcomes.

EL: You’ve said it’s a mistake to picture schools as instrumentalities for accomplishing something else.\(^9\) Isn’t that the role of education—to prepare people for other purposes?

Goodlad: Social institutions play an instrumental role. But in education we have to be concerned about developing qualities in the individual. Education has aims, all right, but the most important ones are not found outside of the process itself; the main aim of education is to educate. I’m very worried about the attitude that takes training for jobs as the primary goal of education and schooling. We have so overstressed the instrumental role of schools that we seem to believe the production of measurable behaviors and workers for available jobs is what education is all about.

EL: We talked earlier about some of the findings that surprised you. Which ones are you most concerned about?

Goodlad: One that we haven’t explored deeply enough yet is related to the amount of tracking and the differences in curriculum I referred to. At one time in this country we had the notion that there was a common set of experiences all students ought to have in school. I’m concerned about what has happened to the concept of the common school. Another concern is closely related. When there is tracking, a differentiated curriculum, and separation of vocational from academic education, schools which have been desegregated by social policy are not integrated by educational policy or practice.

I’m also concerned that at quite an early age students may be placed in a position which allows no second chance. They are tracked into programs leading only to relatively low paying jobs and have no way to get a broader education.

A fourth worry for me is that in the name of individualization we may have given up on a lot of individuals. When we decide that some students can participate successfully only in the lower tracks, we give up on their individual potential. We have too much individualized the substance and content of education and too little individualized the methods of teaching.

EL: From the data you have so far, what recommendations would you make to curriculum administrators?

Goodlad: I can be firm and precise about only two recommendations at this point. One would be to think seriously about the context of each school situation. Raise questions: Are we providing a balanced curriculum? Are we providing a range of instructional methods? Are we providing the kinds of materials we should be?

Are we providing enough direct experiences? Are we involving students in planning their own programs? Then ask: How do we get answers to such questions?

A second recommendation would be to start gathering data about the kinds of education students are getting in each local school. What subjects do they take? What differences in programs are there from student to student? How do students perceive their lives in school?

Raise the questions, gather the data, and then proceed to set an agenda for reconstruction. So far, attempted reform has been too little enlightened by relevant data.

EL: The methods of the Study of Schooling are more sophisticated than most people could use in a single school district, but it may provide a model for the kinds of information that should be collected.

Goodlad: We hope to refine some of our instruments and make them appropriate for use at the local level. With the necessary funds we could develop a simplified data gathering system which a local school could use with the help of the district research office or other agencies.

EL: How can people find out about availability of the instruments?

Goodlad: We intend eventually to make them available at cost through I/D/E/A. Also, in addition to our final report, we will have an array of technical reports on many topics. For more information educators can write to: Robert Daley, Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Suite 300, 5335 Far Hills Avenue, Dayton, Ohio 45429.

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\(^9\) Goodlad and others, op. cit., p. 12.