

John Goodlad Responds: On Dogma and Straw Men

It is the mark of an educated man and the proof of his culture that in every subject he looks for only so much precision as its nature permits.

—Aristotle*

A cardinal principle of book reviewing is that one reviews the book that was written, not some imagined alternative. A second is that one reviews it within its own genre. In his review of *A Place Called School*, Mr. Waxman ignores or violates these and several other basics of criticism. Clearly wedded to the notion that there is only one legitimate form of scientific inquiry, Waxman is unable to rise above a slavish adherence to confirmatory research, the hypothetico-deductive model and the magical powers of statistical significance-testing in his attempt to critique an inquiry effort growing out of a very different research perspective. Perhaps it is only human to do what is most familiar and comfortable. The result, however, is highly selective reading, myopic interpretations, and the construction of the usual straw man arguments.

Indeed, figuring out what Waxman thought he was reviewing is in itself a challenge. He starts out to review a book, yet most of his critique laments the methodology of *A Study of Schooling* (ASOS) about which he apparently knew little or nothing (more on this point later). Waxman's own confusion is nowhere more apparent than in his statement, "... it is difficult and per-

haps unfair to view this book as a research study. . . ." But, undaunted, he does so anyway, confirming in the process his own self-fulfilling prophecy of both the difficulty and the unfairness and, simultaneously, revealing the absurdity of being preoccupied with statistical inference when dealing with thick descriptions of a small, representative sample of schools.

What is perhaps most troubling and inexcusable is the way in which Waxman creates his own story line from short, highly selective, out-of-context quotes from the Preface, with which he is excessively preoccupied. The result conveys a hollowness to Waxman's self-righteous concern for scholarship.

Waxman begins the process of setting up what he intends to knock down later by selecting fragments of sentences as stating the book's purposes. As a service to readers who might take seriously Waxman's overreaction to terms he has taken out of context (such as "generalization"), I'm including here that portion of the Preface, in its entirety, that lays out three global purposes of the book.

The primary purpose of what follows is to assist in this necessary understanding of the place called school. Since the schools selected for description and analysis are only illustrative of the genre, we must not approach succeeding pages with the expectation of understanding all schools or even the school where our own children go. And, since descriptions and analyses are unavoidably incomplete and of a period in time, we must not assume that we will fully understand either the schools selected or those principals, teachers, students, and parents whose perceptions my colleagues and I sought to obtain. Yet, I am confident that

readers who stay with me through the first eight chapters will understand schools and schooling much better than they do now. Further, they will be well on their way, I think, to sorting out the priorities for an agenda of school improvement.

This brings me to a second purpose: the development of such an agenda. The agenda put forward in Chapters Nine and Ten goes beyond the listing of topics to include recommendations for both the substance and the process of improvement. Readers of the preceding chapters probably will come up with many of the same topics but frequently will bring to them quite different values. Consequently, their recommendations may differ markedly from mine. But at least we will share a very similar awareness of critical issues and an understanding of their nature based on data.

This brings me to a third purpose: that of impressing on us the importance of bringing to the process of improvement data relevant to a particular school. I believe that the problems emerging in what follows are to some degree experienced by most schools. But they are not experienced similarly everywhere; indeed, the evidence suggests that schools vary widely in almost all of their characteristics. It follows, then, that no single set of recommendations applies to all schools. Yet, commissions on school reform frequently put forward recommendations as though they were equally relevant to the schools of the entire nation.

You, of course, will form your own perceptions from these statements. To me, they don't conjure up the impression of a researcher bent upon wild claims of statistical generalizability, causal connections, and the determination of what, in fact, is going on in *all* schools across the nation.

As for Waxman's obsession with literature reviews and his accusations regarding selectivity, let's see what I actually say:

*See *The Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. J. A. K. Thompson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 27-28.

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"A Place Called School is, I hope, sufficiently free of the trappings of research to appeal to those nonresearchers who make policy. . . ."

Although I endeavor to keep the number of references to a minimum, this does not mean that these were the only ones consulted. In the course of our work, my colleagues and I reviewed the literature relevant to the particular topic or theme addressed. . . .

There are those who will be frustrated and annoyed simultaneously by the general absence of description and discussion of the methods used at various stages of the Study. They are directed to the technical reports, listed in numerical order in Appendix A, where some of their questions perhaps will be answered.

If Waxman wants *research* reports and literature reviews pertaining to the themes of the observed narrowness of instructional practices and the use of classroom time, for example, he might want to consult Sirotnik (1982, 1983). If he wants *research* reports and literature reviews on the themes of tracking and inequity, he can consult Oakes (1982 a, b). If he needs more in the way of a conceptual overview of A Study of Schooling, including the rationale for not obtaining student achievement data, for deciding when and when not to use tests for statistical significance and so on, he can consult Goodlad and others (1979). In fact, as a literature buff, he will not want to overlook the rest of the 30 or more technical reports (all available from ERIC) replete with references and detailing methodology (Overman, 1979), psychometric analyses (Sirotnik, 1979 and 1980; Sirotnik, Nides and Engstrom, 1980), teaching and learning (Wright, 1980), goals and functions of schooling (Overman, 1980; Klein, 1980), and so forth. In Appendix A and elsewhere in the manuscript, I reveal my dependence on these documents. To suggest that I include all of this background work in one volume conveys the naivete of one who has not yet attempted to write a synthesis of a comprehensive study for the diverse audience intended by this book.

Regarding the book's audience, Waxman complains about my omission of researchers. This was an act of commission, not an oversight. *A Place Called School* is, I hope, sufficiently free of the trappings of research—including an overstuffed bibliography—to appeal to those nonresearchers who make policy, including policy directed to the support of research. In regard to Waxman's arrogant assertion that "most researchers . . . will find this book frustrating and annoying" (emphasis Waxman's), I am

convinced that *most* researchers and practitioners are considerably more sophisticated regarding the variety of legitimate forms of scientific inquiry than Waxman gives them credit for being.

Waxman sets a new mark in straw man argumentation with a rather pedantic account of sections in what appears to be his favorite textbook on experimental and quasi-experimental design (Cook and Campbell, 1979). The facts that ASOS was not a study of this genre—nor was *A Place Called School* intended as a research report—were so obvious, even Waxman had to acknowledge them first, before proceeding to pick apart the straw. ASOS was a cross-sectional survey, interview and observational study conducted on a small, purposive sample of schools. The exploratory stance of this design and caveats regarding generalizability are amply spread throughout all documents pertaining to ASOS, including not only the Preface of *A Place Called School* but in other chapters as well. For example, in Chapter 1, readers will find these statements:

We recognized from the beginning that gathering any significant amount of data in a sample representing all the different kinds of schools in the United States—a random sample—is impossible. Instead, we sought maximum diversity and representativeness in a sample of small size. . . . Just 38 schools produced data from many individuals—8,624 parents, 1,350 teachers, and 17,163 students. So far as I am able to determine, no other single study has made detailed observations over 1,000 classrooms. We cannot generalize to all schools from this sample. But certainly, the thick descriptions compiled from several different perspectives raise many questions about schooling and about other schools with which you and I have some limited familiarity.

My first reaction to Waxman's critique was to let it stand unchallenged as its own testimony to confused, biased criticism. What changed my mind following a second reading is the danger inherent in a review that neglects to seriously reflect upon and evaluate the corpus of ideas generated in *A Place Called School* and fails to communicate the results of this process to potential readers. A thoughtful analysis would not fail to recognize, for example, the "multivariate nature" of the synthesis presented and the many technical reports upon which the book is based. (There are enough canonical analyses and discriminant functions in many of the

above referenced articles and technical reports to whet the appetite of even the most sophisticated of methodologists.) Moreover, an in-depth reading would reveal the profound basis for my argument against the parochialism inherent in the view that achievement outcomes are the sine qua non for judging effective schooling. Instead of becoming defensive about the research on time-on-task and effective schooling, a serious critique might wish to focus on the implications for equally valuing the social, personal, and career functions along with the academic functions of schooling.

To critique what a book is not—contrary to everything the author says it is—is not only silly and in bad taste from a scholarly point of view, it is destructive to the kind of dialogue about educational improvement that is so sorely needed. My hope remains that *A Place Called School*, when taken seriously by all concerned with education, will stimulate the thoughtful inquiries I called for throughout the manuscript. □

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