

# Methodological Problems in *A Place Called School*

Weaknesses in Goodlad's research make his  
conclusions and recommendations questionable.

HERSH WAXMAN

John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* reports the findings from his massive, primary study entitled "A Study of Schooling." Goodlad points out that his book is a "discussion of what appears to be the current state of schooling in our country, made real by the illustrative use of data carefully gathered from a small, diverse sample of schools" (1983, p. 5). He also points out that he "endeavored not only to be highly selective, but, also, to pull together related chunks of data so as to create generalizations" (p. 6). My purpose here is to examine the methodology of the study, the logical processes from data to conclusion and implication, and the coverage of previous related research—all of which should be of interest to informed policymakers and practitioners who desire to see not only conclusions but their logical and empirical basis.

Goodlad states that he seeks "to reach an audience of persons seriously interested in knowing more about schools and improving them" (p. 7), but in his extensive list of concerned persons, he avoids mentioning educational researchers. Furthermore, he admits that "some researchers who choose to read the book will be frustrated and perhaps even annoyed" (p. 7). It is more than likely that most researchers, as well as most seriously concerned educators and policymakers, will find this book frustrating and annoying. Aside from the methodological problems with the study, which will be discussed later, it is difficult to consider this book a scholarly piece of research because of its limited review of the literature.

## Arbitrary Selection of Related Research

Goodlad frequently draws upon related research in drawing conclusions and

suggesting implications, but unfortunately he "chose deliberately to select only representative studies and papers" (p. 6). Such an arbitrary selection of studies leaves the review open to systematic bias and leads one to suspect that the author is either trying to repress contradictory results or select studies that support his contentions. For example, Goodlad points out that "few studies of schools are reported simply because few have been conducted" (p. 7). He does mention a few studies that have received much coverage in the popular press, such as Coleman and others (1966), Jencks and others (1972), and Rutter and others (1979). However, major school-effectiveness studies such as Brookover and others (1979), Edmonds and Frederiksen (1978), Wynne (1980), Murnane (1975), Summers and Wolfe (1975), Phi Delta Kappa (1980), Stallings and Mohlman (1981), and Levine and Stark (1982) are totally ignored.

In addition, there is no mention of recent syntheses and reviews, such as Edmonds (1979); Bridge, Judd, and Mook (1979); Centra and Potter (1980); Benbow (1980); and Glassman and Biniaminov (1981), that have tried to summarize hundreds of small- to large-scale studies and suggest their policy implications. Nor are more specific reviews

discussed such as Monk's (1981) on the allocation of educational resources, Anderson's (1982) on school climate, Weinstein's (1979) on the physical environment of the school, and Leithwood and Montgomery's (1982) on the role of the elementary school principal in program improvement. Furthermore, although nearly three years were spent conceptualizing the study, a variety of successful school improvement programs that have occurred in several major U.S. cities in recent years remain uncited (see, for example, the December 1982 *Educational Leadership* for a description of such programs).

The selected bias of the author appears to be even more prevalent in his discussion of research on teaching. Goodlad, for example, suggests that the prevailing mode of instruction found in most of the classrooms, direct instruction, is harmful and inappropriate. In this light, he neglects to mention current research reviews that have found this mode of instruction to be significantly related to increased student learning (see, for example, Brophy, 1979; Good, 1979; Medley, 1977; and Rosenshine, 1979). Although Goodlad's philosophy about effective pedagogy may be correct and theoretically sound, evidence that empirically tests such tenets is needed. But the study neither tests nor verifies many of the important hypotheses that Goodlad raises throughout the book. Examination of the prior research on schooling, moreover, is in order before mounting another large primary study.

## No Data on Student Achievement

Another problem with the study is the failure to obtain student achievement data. Goodlad maintains that "preoccupation solely with student achievement

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Hersh Waxman is Post-Doctorate Fellow,  
Learning Research and Development Center,  
University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

takes away from the current state of curricular offerings, pedagogy, student-teacher relations, school and class climate, principal-teacher relations, parental satisfactions and dissatisfactions, and a host of other highly important matters" (p. 5). However, as Goodlad actually points out in the study (pp. 87-88), academic goals, including the mastery of basic skills and fundamental processes are one of the major goals for schooling in the United States. Since one of the major purposes of the study is to indicate the importance of using improvement data relevant to particular schools, it seems curious that Goodlad would fail to include information on student learning, one of the major goals of schooling. The failure to obtain achievement data prevents Goodlad from empirically testing many of his hypotheses. For example, we don't know if the decrease of corrective teacher behavior and guidance in high school classrooms negatively affects student learning. Similarly, we can't assess the possible trade-offs involved in enhancing affective outcomes at the expense of learning outcomes.

#### **Methodological Validity Assessments**

Although it is difficult and perhaps unfair to view this book as a research study, the following sections evaluate the methodological validity of the study as reported in the book. Following Cook and Campbell (1979), methodological problems with the study will be addressed under the headings of four categories: statistical conclusion, internal, construct, and external validity threats. These validity threats point out the weaknesses in the research design and the inferences that are drawn from results of the study.

**Statistical Conclusion Validity Threats.** Statistical conclusion validity refers to the extent to which the study is sensitive enough to permit reasonable statements about the covariation or relationships between variables (Cook and Campbell, 1979). It should be pointed out initially that there is a general absence of the description and discussion of the research methodology used in this study. Scholars and informed practitioners should be able to examine the inference processes from observation to generalization and implication rather than taking them *ex cathedra* or from authority. It is also difficult to assess the

psychometric properties of the instruments used in the study because Goodlad and his colleagues "modified existing techniques for systematically observing classroom practices" (p. 30) and adopted them for their own purposes. Subsequently, statistical-conclusion validity threats, such as reliability of measures and low statistical power (see Cook and Campbell, 1979, for a description of these and other validity threats) cannot be adequately assessed from this study since the methodology is not made explicit. However, one serious threat that is prevalent in the study is the failure to look at the "multivariate nature" of the research. Goodlad generally reports bivariate correlational relationships between variables without considering the fact that the impact of many classroom processes on students are interdependent and vary together.

In a similar vein, Goodlad also fails to consider the possibility that the relationships between classroom process and products are likely to be nonlinear, a fact that has been demonstrated by several researchers (see, for example, Borich, Kash, and Kemp, 1979; Dunkin, 1979; Helms, 1980; Soar and Soar, 1979). Finally, since Goodlad reports that many comparisons were analyzed and only a few significant ones reported, it is curious to know how many of these would be expected by chance to be significant at the .05 level. Exploitation of a few chance findings among many tested is an obvious threat to the conclusions.

**Internal Validity Threats.** Internal validity refers to the extent to which the study is sensitive enough to permit reasonable statements about the causal relationships between the treatments and outcomes (Cook and Campbell, 1979). In school effectiveness terms, internal validity is concerned with whether the school and classroom processes make an actual difference in the desired outcomes, or whether extraneous factors or variables account for these differences. Because this study is correlational, rather than experimental, the research is threatened by a variety of internal validity threats.

Ambiguity about the direction of causal influence is one such threat that is frequently violated in the study. Many of the hypotheses that Goodlad raises are based on a model in which the flow of influence is assumed to be unidirec-

tional; that is, the teacher is seen as an independent variable affecting student behavior, the dependent variable. This is despite the fact that several researchers have established support for the notion that students' behavior affects teachers' behavior (Emmer, Oakland, and Good, 1974; Fiedler, 1975; Klein, 1971; Noble and Nolan, 1976). For example, Goodlad points out that teachers in upper-track classes are more enthusiastic in their teaching and better teachers than teachers in low-track classes. However, he fails to point out that the students in the upper-track classes may be more enthusiastic, too, and thus affect their teachers' attitudes towards teaching. Several such causal assertions are presented throughout the book, despite the fact that the relationships reported are merely bivariate correlations.

Selection is another internal validity threat that is prevalent in the study. It is unclear to what extent schools either volunteered to participate or were randomly chosen for selection in the study. Similarly, selection is a concern because only 31 percent of the parents responded in the sample. Goodlad admits that this may "somewhat overrepresent the more educated and affluent" (p. 60). This selection problem also creates external validity problems, which will be discussed in a later section.

**Construct Validity Threats.** Construct validity refers to the approximate validity with which one can make generalizations about higher-order or theoretical constructs from the research operations used in the study (Cook and Campbell, 1979). In other words, construct validity is concerned about the extent to which the research operations in the study represent the psychological properties that we actually want to measure. It is difficult to assess these threats in the present study because of the lack of information involving the psychometric properties of the instruments used and the measurement of certain variables. However, it should be pointed out that there is some ambiguity in the study involving the explication of constructs or the extent to which terms used in the study are operationally defined.

**External Validity Threats.** External validity refers to the extent to which one can generalize the obtained results to other populations. As previously discussed, there are several problems in this study that make it difficult for one to

generalize the results to other populations. For example, the fact that the response rate to the parent questionnaires varied widely from school to school (from 16 to 57 percent) makes it difficult to generalize from those results. Although Goodlad and his colleagues stratified their sample population by several contextual variables (such as, school size, socioeconomic status), they failed to take these variables into account when analyzing their outcomes. There are also a variety of other contextual classroom conditions (class size, composition of the class) that need to be considered (that is, tested for significant differences) before assessing the results.

### Replication Essential

Goodlad maintains that "A Study of Schooling" was motivated in part by [his] belief that most efforts to improve schools founder on reefs of ignorance—ignorance of the ways schools function in general and ignorance of the inner workings of selected schools in particular" (p. 27). Schools do need information on how a variety of educational factors interact with each other and subsequently on how they affect educational goals. Unfortunately, very little importance can be attached to the aberrant generalizations and findings reported in this study unless they are replicated in future research. On the other hand, research syntheses are beginning to help policymakers make important decisions about the consistency and importance of a large number of educational factors. Research syntheses point the way toward improvements that seem likely to increase schools' effectiveness and productivity. Goodlad is correct in pointing out that staff members of each school must concern themselves with the resolution of their own specific problems, but prior research and research syntheses (see many references cited earlier) can point to several important indicators that schools should monitor and tailor to fit their own needs. □

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