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Characteristics of Good Schools

The emergence of schools enjoying reputations of goodness derived from their industry is not a new phenomenon. It is the growing numbers that carry our thoughts beyond explanations of happy accidents. Yes, the name of a particular leader or school tends to be attached to schools of the past and to some in the present. But there are now too many for this precise identification to be attached to each. Often there is a patron—a James Comer, Howard Gardner, Henry Levin, TheodoreSizer, or philanthropic foundation. Often, too, there is a network—perhaps one sponsored by the patron, or Carl Glickman's League of Professional Schools,¹² or the network of I.G.E. (Individually Guided Education) schools growing out of the work of the Institute for Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A) when it was the education arm of the Kettering Foundation, or the network of the Research and Development Center at the University of Wisconsin. And these individual schools are being heard from and about. An interesting surge in the past several years has been the number of mini-case studies appearing in professional journals or reported at conferences. These probably would not have appeared a decade ago, because they did not fit the canons of legitimate research. But today, doing something about educational ideas has become fashionable.

When we were pulling out of our findings several years ago some heuristics regarding the nature of good schools, we found ourselves nodding over the degree to which these conclusions squared with much of what already was in a kind of collective experience regarding such schools: our own, our exchanges of anecdotes with others, novels, case studies, biographies, and the literature of educational inquiry (particularly the growing body of qualitative research).¹³ None of the schools in

the representative sample we studied possessed anything close to a composite of what were emerging as desired characteristics, nor did any we heard about. But many were struggling with a kind of vision of what might be. Reality fell far short, but each piece being worked on fit into a conception of the whole.

My guess, given what has transpired in regard to the emergence of good schools since then (circa 1982), is that we would today nod far more vigorously on seeing each of our heuristics line up with accumulating insight into the nature of good schools. Without going into detail, I endeavor to summarize below some of the generalizations about good schools that appear to be standing up over time.

- First, a good school is a good school in virtually all respects. The converse is equally true for a poor school. A school is a kind of organic thing—a system of organs and connections. It appears that neither a good school nor a bad school is a creature made up of both good and poor organs and connections. Most school reform tends to be narrowly focused on a part, in ignorance and neglect of the ecosystem. Consequently, the results often are akin to putting more pressure on frozen pipes.
- Second, where elementary schools feed into middle or junior high schools that, in turn, feed into senior high schools in a unified school district, the level of goodness tends to persist (while simultaneously fading with progress upward). This suggests that conditions of the school district itself impinge upon the quality of individual schools. Good schools tend to enjoy district support. The question is, Is it this support that helps to make them better, or do good schools manage to shape a kind of protective peace with the district? The degree of consistency in the levels of goodness maintained by schools connected as described above suggests some power to influence in the district itself.
- Third, a good school is self-conscious of its culture. A poor school virtually trips over itself each day, seemingly unaware of the nature and magnitude of its malaise. This usually means that the good school frequently resorts to principle

in discussing students not doing well and relations with parents, for example. The poor school uses up human energies in coping with problems; there is no time for reflection.

- Fourth, a good school takes care of its business. There are orderly ways of handling routines that most people appear to understand, accept, and follow. Processes of dialogue, making decisions, taking actions, and following up evaluatively regarding these actions are built into the culture of the school. Bad schools, on the other hand, appear to run on an ad hoc basis. It is interesting to note that the range of faculty participation in decision making from good school to bad school appears to be quite consistent. It is lack of ambiguity in regard to the authority of the principal and the teachers, respectively, that is a vital factor in a school's being good. In poor schools, there appears to be considerable ambiguity with respect to who does what—and a good deal of unhappiness with whatever way responsibility comes down.
- Fifth, a good school seems to have come to terms with external standards by developing an internal sense of its educational role and the importance of academic work. "Smart kids" are not looked down upon; indeed, they often are elected by their peers to leadership positions. Teachers in good schools are conscious of the importance of quality learning time; they get more instructional time out of the school week than do teachers in poor schools. Students in good schools appear to be much more in harmony with teachers' efforts to have them learn than are students in poor schools. Interestingly, many students in poor schools—those who appear to be part of, if not the whole of, the cause of poor student performance—are resentful of the fact that their school appears not to be providing them with a good education.
- Sixth, a good school is characterized by an array of positive human connections. Teachers are viewed by students as not having favorites and not using sarcasm. In poor schools, that is much less likely to be true. Teachers in good schools view their peers as professionals who know what they are doing. Teachers in poor schools are not so positive in their views,

tending more to question the professionalism of their peers. Principals in good schools take a positive view of the teachers, viewing them as professionals who perform well in their classrooms. Principals in poor schools frequently perceive the teachers as the major problem.

- Seventh, the good school appears to be connected to homes and parents in positive ways. Parents report knowing their children's teachers and meeting with them. They claim to know what the school is doing, in part because of school efforts to keep them informed. Parents in poor schools are more likely to report not knowing or talking to their children's teachers. They claim not to know much about the school their children attend and complain that the school does little to keep them informed.

This list of seven macro-characteristics of good schools is sufficient for my purposes here (although there are many more, including a host pertaining to organizational, curricular, and instructional matters). There are two major observations I wish to draw from them that have major implications for the education of educators and school improvement efforts.

First, there is a connectedness here that would become even more apparent with the addition of more generalizations and further development, with examples, of each characteristic on the list. This connectedness is made up particularly of two general factors. There is ongoing discourse regarding all of the components of schooling by the people most affected by them on a daily basis: the responsible educators (principal and teachers), the students, and the parents. Further, this discourse is marked by civility. Not just civility in the sense of politeness but civility as an outward manifestation of deep moral respect for self and others: teachers and students, students and students, teachers and teachers, parents and teachers, and so on. This is at the heart of any healthy ecosystem or culture. A good school is a healthy ecosystem marked by these manifestations of moral connectedness.

The second observation is that the conditions marking a good school—a *truly* good school, not just a school that achieves

high test scores—are those within the power of those people closely associated with it to shape. Nowhere in any state mandates are there requirements that these conditions be met. Nowhere, until recently, have there been school accrediting criteria requiring that these conditions be put in place. I say “until recently” because in the mid 1980s, a small team of leaders in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools reflected on my observations and conclusions in *A Place Called School* and pondered the relationship between these and extant criteria used by the association in accrediting schools. They drew from the book some fifty-five criteria of good schools and chose two dozen of these as representing processes of renewal to be encouraged in pilot schools interested in pursuing an alternative route to accreditation. Whether this kind of approach to school improvement and accreditation becomes standard remains to be seen.¹⁴

There were clear differences in the way the schools in the top and bottom quartiles on the criterion of satisfaction in our sample took care of their business and in the quality of daily school life exhibited. We were unable to identify demographic factors that might have accounted in large part for these differences. It is significant, I think, that the smallest schools in the sample were in the top quartile, the largest in the bottom. It is not impossible for a large school to be satisfying, but it seems to require greater effort. In a small school, it is easier to cultivate the properties of human connectedness productive of satisfaction.

Careful examination of the seven generalizations regarding schools with high and low levels of satisfaction reveals no mention of the very heart of schools as educational institutions: curriculum and instruction. The heavy reliance on frontal teaching—lecturing, telling, and questioning—in secondary schools and the heavily textbook-oriented curriculum reported in *A Place Called School* characterized our sample generally. Variations from this pattern appeared in some classrooms scattered across the entire sample, and there was more variability in the primary than in the higher grades. But no such variations differentiated the top quartile of schools from the bottom.

Several different explanatory hypotheses emerge. There may be some power in all of them together. One having appeal

for me is that there are no impositions from outside in regard to the quality of life to be created inside a school. A determined principal can make a good deal of headway in shaping the way students, teachers, and parents work together in eliminating abrasive factors and conducting business in an orderly, sensitive manner. Districts that move principals around in the hope of "shaking things up" probably convey the wrong message and inhibit the desired leadership.

But why did not the able principals in the top quartile of our sample effect the curricular and instructional changes that would have marked their schools as different in these areas from those in the bottom quartile? One possible explanation is that external forces tend to regulate the curriculum. Our data showed a heavy dependence of teachers on textbooks and district (more than state) curriculum guides. Teachers also reported their own experience as a source of the curriculum they delivered; they tended to pass on what they had received. And so it tends to be with their methods of teaching: teachers teach the ways they were taught in schools and colleges; these were the ways we documented consistently in all but a few classrooms.

There also appears to be some of the taboo in the K-12 system that prevails in higher education regarding administrative tampering with teaching. Most of the principals in the most satisfying schools in our sample credited the teachers with knowing what they were doing in the classroom and said that *they left them alone* to do it. This view does not augur well for taking teaching out from behind the classroom door to make it an agenda item for school improvement. It is of interest to note that the theme of "the principal as instructional leader" found its most hospitable context in elementary schools, where teachers traditionally have had less autonomy than in secondary schools and universities.

In preceding chapters, I have written a good deal about the mission of schooling and the mission for the education of educators that emerges from it. Let us now consider the relationship between mission and function. *Mission* pertains to goals and directions — what is desired and to be sought. *Function* pertains to actual use. If a watch could be energized by a mission,

it would be to provide an accurate portrayal of time, within the extant convention of time, under all circumstances. Improvement would generally be seen as enhancements in its ability to do this. Its quality would be determined on its precision in performing this time-telling *function*. But what if other criteria enter in (as they do)? Many watches are now purchased with little regard to the time-telling mission. What is dominant in the mind of the buyer is an aesthetic function. A watch could cease functioning as a timepiece on a wrist and still be valued for the function of dazzling with the shape, color, and brilliance of its decorative diamonds. What does this tell us about education? For schools to become very good, the relationship between mission and function must be considerably closer than it currently is.