

THE GOODLAD OCCASIONAL PAPERS

About Our Schools: No. 3

Ignorance and Opportunity

August 2012

[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.]

My initial motivation for the Goodlad Occasional Papers Series is concern for the degree to which the purposes of public schooling are slipping away from the interests of parents and their children. In Paper No. 1, I note the 1909 observation of educational historian Ellwood Cubberley: “Each year the child is coming to belong more and more to the State and less and less to the parent.” Once upon a time, our schools were an integral part of families and communities and they of their schools. I stressed the importance of the populace – especially parents – becoming more aware of the degree to which comprehensive education of the young has dwindled and must be brought back – by and for the people.

Strangely, since 1968, the annual Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitude Toward the Public School has remained high. How come?

Much of the answer is embedded in history. I wrote in Occasional Paper No. 2 that it is not alone poor management, teachers’ incompetence, inadequate funding, and other complaints that trouble the keen analyst of the nation’s public schooling. *It is widespread adult ignorance.* I quoted professor Jeffrey R. Henig regarding the degree to which we rely “on tradition, comfort, and experience to justify . . . things the way they are.” I join him in his concern regarding the degree to which we ignore the knowledge available to us (“How Education Schools Can Take Back Their Role in Policy,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 2, 2011, p. A3).

Ignorance is not a synonym for stupidity. Indeed, it often provides a path leading to wisdom. But philosopher Hannah Arendt made it clear that there is an enormous gap between having good ideas and implementing them (*The Human Condition*, 1958). All fields of human endeavor are troubled in varying degrees by this gap, but, I believe, the fields of education and schooling are particularly so. This is a topic for a scholarly treatise far beyond the scope of my Occasional Papers.

Nonetheless, the degree to which schooling and education scratch and engulf one another necessitates my

addressing both to some degree. For example, the question of what schools are for and the response that they are for the education of the young surfaces again and again. Addressing the question helps us understand the “how come?” that I raised above regarding the long-term differences between the general public’s and reformers’ attitudes toward our public schools. The former want and think they are getting for their young social, academic, personal, and vocational education, but they are not.

There are three educating components of schooling: what children bring from their homes and communities, the zeitgeist of the school they attend, and the culture of classrooms. Together they constitute *the learning potential* of each school – for good or bad and everything in between. For more than a century, some of our wisest human beings have not only taught us this but have also warned us against the steady erosion of the first two of them and the careless neglect of the third. Today, *education* in schools scarcely exists.



Alfred North Whitehead

A couple of years ago, I managed to calm my anger regarding the considerable idiocy of current school reform. Anger should be reserved for very rare, troubling circumstances. What I have been reading over the past few days is bringing me close: the proposal that grade three (whatever that is) become a cutoff for children of poor academic performance!

To cool off a little, I re-read several pages of one of my favorite educational books, pausing on page 25: “When one considers in its length and in its breadth the importance of this question of the education of a nation’s young, the broken lives, the defeated hopes, the national failures, which result from the frivolous inertia with which it is treated, it is difficult to restrain within oneself a savage rage.”

Was this the writing of a fellow colleague in the social sciences expressing her or his recent anger about the dismal schooling of our culture? No, it is what the much-respected philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote in *The Aims of Education* in 1929. With anger cooling, he wrote a superb sequel on childhood development and its accompanying educating stages.

Whitehead’s ideas may have been discussed in teacher education classes along with those of other social scientists, but they did little or nothing to strengthen what might be called the intellectual side of schooling. Whitehead and a steady stream of other social scientists seeking to advance the wisdom of the nation’s people have been largely ignored.

Earlier I wrote that the *educational potential* of schooling is considerably more than it delivers. For years, schooling has reached about a third of this potential, most of the rest slipping away over the years without public fuss. The more I think about this, the more I think this situation is more than passing strange – and outrageous!

I go back to the “how come?” question of page one: How come the public gave high marks for more than

forty years to the PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public School? Why is it that the extensive school reform analyses of the last fifty years focus almost entirely on what Stanford University scholars David Tyack and Larry Cuban refer to as the "grammar" of schooling – the detailed ways of providing deliberate education in the classroom (*Tinkering Toward Utopia*, 1995)? Why did parents take so long and fuss so little about the outrageous No Child Left Behind enterprise? And why are We the People so complacent about the agency or control of our public schools settling in the nation's capital?

Jeffrey R. Henig and S. Paul Reville

About two years ago, I was attracted by an article in an educational paper that I happened to pull from a crowded bookshelf. The first sentence read "Paradoxically, the proposition that nonschool factors influence education performance is simultaneously treated as both obvious and inappropriate for mentioning in serious policy debates." The third paragraph begins with this sentence: "But in polite education reform circles, drawing attention to community and other nonschool factors is met with impatience, resigned shrugs, or a weary rolling of the eyes" (Jeffrey R. Henig and S. Paul Reville, "Outside-In School Reform: Why Attention Will Return to Nonschool Factors," *Education Week*, May 25, 2011).

The juxtaposition of these two sentences suggests to me a very bright but somewhat frustrated pair of scholars. I hope that several assumptions I make bring me into their intellectual domain. I believe that the subtitle of their article is telling us that much of what they are now

calling nonschool factors must and will return to schooling.

Further reading of the Henig and Reville piece suggests to me that the nonschool factors to which they refer are not school factors of the past. Their reference to "nonschool" embraces child-related programs such as in the health domain that need to be connected more closely to schooling. They write:

When schools do what they are supposed to do – and what the public historically has asked them to do – payoffs are not limited to school performance; they include an array of human- and social-capital outcomes that help communities and the nation compete in a global economy, handle stresses of multiculturalism, eliminate the costly social byproducts of poverty, and build a more informed citizenry.

Yes, indeed!

If I understand the subtlety of Henig and Reville, they believe that what they refer to as school and nonschool factors will return as one. That causes me to take the liberty of assuming that the whole will embrace the three major components of the comprehensive school to which I refer above. But their account of the "education reform cycles" they encounter adds to my belief that what they envision will take a long time in coming if we are to endure continuing eras of imposed school reform.



About two years ago, I was invited to write for “The Answer Sheet” (online) of *The Washington Post* three papers on school reform of today, yesterday, and tomorrow. Online comments and email quickly told me that respondents were with me in disappointment regarding the present era of school reform – indeed, disappointment with the very concept of school reform. My old *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines reform as “amendment of what is defective, vicious, corrupt, or depraved.” I do not think I have ever observed or experienced a schooling culture imposed from without that became a renewing culture within (see Seymour B. Sarason, *Revisiting “The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change,”* 1996).

A powerful question has emerged: Have we missed something important during the last fifty years? Yes, we could have had with “The Answer Sheet” interesting discourse regarding the Coleman Report of 1966, the Rutter Report of 1979, and a great deal of research in between addressed to finding out what schools do best. And we might have wondered why between 1981 and 1982 the National Commission on Excellence in Education did not prepare a counter report to the frightening one going out to the American people in 1983 that stated: “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.” (see Theodore R.Sizer, “Back to *A Place Called School,*” in Kenneth A. Sirotnik and Roger Soder, *The Beat of a Different Drummer,* 1999, p. 108).

These largely forgotten enterprises provide interesting information, but today, if presented, would receive

“impatience, resigned shrugs, or a weary rolling of the eyes.” Worse, the inquiry of social and behavioral scientists into education over many years is largely ignored by policymakers, dismissed by many influential pundits, and too little attended to in the curriculum of future teachers and the conduct of schooling.

A century ago, Alfred North Whitehead expressed a blistering view of the inertia and neglect of educating the young and its impact on the nation’s well-being. But he mastered his anger and gave us what he called the “rhythm of education,” beginning in infancy and continuing through adulthood. The process is one of shaping and implementing ideas, not just having them.

Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is above all things harmful. . . . Except at rare intervals of intellectual ferment, education in the past has been radically infected with inert ideas. That is the reason why uneducated clever women, who have seen much of the world, are in middle life so much the most cultured part of the community. . . . Every intellectual revolution that has ever stirred humanity into greatness has been a passionate protest against inert ideas (*The Aims of Education,* pp. 13-14).

The twentieth century has given us rich and surprisingly fresh ideas regarding virtually everything educational in the components of our nation’s culture. Of these, the educational development of the young is most critical, each step forward happening only once. Little do our policymakers, pundits, agents of schools, and parents know that

the cognitive style exhibited by an eighteen-year-old is established at about the age of eight. *And at least half of that learning was learned out of school.*

One Saturday morning, not long ago, I was shocked to read that three schools of education in universities were dropping what for many years had been a basic part of their teacher education programs: “educational foundations” – commonly courses in the philosophy and history of education. Then I realized that the primary work of teachers today is teaching the subject matter that they are given and on which the students are tested. Nearly all else of students’ learning is nonschool. The scholars of yesterday can help us embrace all three of the major components of a comprehensive school I referred to earlier: what children bring from their homes and communities, the zeitgeist of the one they attend, and the culture of classroom teaching. But the scholars of yesterday are rapidly being discarded.

John Dewey

I address only a very small piece of the comprehensive scope of John Dewey’s influence: a slice of schooling stretching from elementary through secondary, tertiary, and beyond. I begin with 1902 and then go back a few years, late in the nineteenth century.

Like Whitehead, Dewey valued institutional education as a contribution to the nation’s communities. Both men viewed schooling as a means to prepare business leaders, physicians, educators, researchers, politicians, etc., to raise the intellectual level and improve the cultural situation of our democracy. Within this context, Dewey warned against the

frequent organizing and sustaining of schools as “something comparatively external and indifferent to educational purposes and ideals. . . . The manner in which the instruction bears upon the child . . . really controls the whole system” (*The Educational Situation*, pp. 22-23).

Dewey was a model of not just shaping ideas but of implementing them. In 1896, he was addressing the complications of launching a laboratory school and planning a department of pedagogy at the University of Chicago where he was a professor of philosophy. (Regarding the former, see educator Laurel Tanner’s *Dewey’s Laboratory School*, 1997). Had President Harper and the board of directors approved his plan for the latter, I believe that the sequence of elementary, secondary, and tertiary schooling would make a lot more sense than it does today. Dewey’s intellectual blueprints went with him to Columbia University in New York when he left Chicago in 1904 and matured in the 1920s at the peak of his career (see his *The Sources of a Science of Education*, Southern Illinois University Press, vol. 5, 1929-30).

The cultivation of his garden still awaits us. A department of education like no other remains badly needed. But this would be only a relatively small part of what, in time, would be the most popular four-year college of our major universities today. But I am not proposing that we seek to replicate the educative contributions of John Dewey and other wise scholars. We are in a new century, needing to learn a great deal about why so many of our young people fail to fulfill “the moral obligation to lead a good life and make as much of one’s self as possible” (Mortimer Adler, *We Hold These Truths*, 1987, p. 20).

Abraham Flexner

There are two major pillars in the well-being of the United States of America – health and wisdom. Of course, when push comes to shove in the need for attention, the former wins. Years before Abraham Flexner took on the study of both in 1908, he had settled into high school teaching. “When the opportunity came in 1892 to risk his steady course and try his hand at running a school of his own, he did not hesitate,” wrote his biographer. Like some other innovators over the years, he threw out many longstanding perennials such as grading and prescribed curricula. “Take hold of a boy where he’s strong, not where he’s weak. I’d say to myself now what the dickens is he interested in? And I’d feel my way around until I found out” (see Thomas Neville Bonner, *Iconoclast*, 2002).

Today, the criticism of Mr. Flexner’s school would be that graduating high school students would never get into the colleges they wanted. But all of the first hundred graduates were admitted to the institutions they sought. President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard was so impressed that he urged Flexner to write an article explaining his ideas for a national college: “Your doctrine should be brought home to every school committeeman and college trustee in the country.”

Flexner is best known for the Flexner Report, a study of the 155 *medical schools* in the United States and Canada. It was issued by the Carnegie Foundation in 1910 with a superb introduction by its president, Henry S. Pritchett. Flexner had a vision of graduates of medical schools being the best educated people in their communities. Year after year he scolded the deans and professors for falling short

in teaching the humanities. Similarly, philosopher John Dewey envisioned in the University of Chicago the preparation of teachers of teachers in a comprehensive curriculum of the social and behavioral sciences that would make them the best educated people of their communities.

It is compelling that three highly regarded scholars – Whitehead, Dewey, and Flexner – during the first thirty years of the twentieth century regarded schooling as a primary educator of the community. Today it is primarily a classroom activity providing 30 to 40 percent of a school’s potential educating, much of it in settings away from the children’s home communities and reached by yellow buses.



My introductory paper to this series provides information regarding some of the shortcomings of today’s schooling and why it is so important for more of us to pay attention to the education of our young people. Future Occasional Papers will describe over time a sequence of schooling from nursery school to university graduate school that differs considerably from what is common today. They will endeavor to support the steady improvement rather than the abrupt reform of the nation’s schools.

At the turn of the twentieth century, neither medical nor schooling education provided much for the two pillars of America’s health and wisdom. The latter was reading, writing, and arithmetic through elementary public school (private for the well off). University presidents

such as Harper and Eliot pushed hard for public secondary schools. Departments and schools of teacher education became part of some universities, commonly not welcomed by professors of the arts and sciences. Two or three decades later, future teachers probably were reading the books of Dewey and Whitehead while the deep structure and grammar of schooling were hardening into place without the benefit of their wisdom.

It is no surprise that the Flexner Report of 1910 changed over the years the balance of America's pillars of health and wisdom. Flexner and Pritchett, president of the Carnegie Foundation, had high expectations for medical education. There was considerable argument within the foundation and beyond regarding the attention that should be given to ill-prepared practitioners (many of whom had not graduated from high school). Pritchett held firm, and they were left to fade away.

Flexner's visits to medical schools convinced him that admission requirements should be substantially raised and expanded in liberal education. "The physician is a social instrument," he said, "whose function is fast becoming social and preventive rather than individual and curative." Physicians, Pritchett agreed, are to become educational leaders in their communities – shades of Dewey and Whitehead. Over the years from 1920 to 1950, medical education romped in change and innovation. Schooling tinkered.

Frequently, I hear or read that there should be a Flexner-like report addressed to schooling. I fear that it would turn out to be something akin to *A Nation at Risk*,

the report of the National Commission for Excellence in Education of the early 1980s. The two pillars of the nation's well-being are very different. Money might be better spent on addressing several major components of the health field that warrant attention. The schooling we have must not be left to wither while we attempt to re-create it. And we must do the best we can with the educational trajectory and daily call of the millions of children and youths who come through school doors five days a week for nine months each year.

Meanwhile, we must support the creativity required to bring together the human infrastructure necessary to integrating the three major pieces of the comprehensive school I have referred to earlier in this paper, each its own system. Systems theorists such as Stephen Johnson, Fritjof Capra, and Stuart Kauffman had their day during the second half of the twentieth century. Whitehead wrote the following in 1929:

When I say that the school is the educational unit, I mean exactly what I say, no larger unit, no smaller unit. Each school must have the claim to be considered in relation to its special circumstances. But no absolutely rigid curriculum, not modified by its own staff, should be permissible.

In the *Aims of Education*, he was hovering around the edges of deep ecological theory. Again and again, we refer to America's system of schooling. We have no such thing. A system is "a complex whole, a set of people or things working together as a mechanism or interconnecting network" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The largest unit of schooling

that meets this criterion is the single school. Understanding schools is prerequisite to improving them – *one by one from the inside*.



Many years ago, I directed, with a wonderful research team, what has been widely described as the largest and most comprehensive study of schooling ever conducted in the United States. My report, *A Place Called School*, was highly praised, and its first review began on the front page of the *New York Times*. It was published in 1983, a few months after *A Nation at Risk*. The well-received book *High School*, by Ernest L. Boyer, had been published several months before, and Theodore R.Sizer's book, *Horace's Compromise*, would come along several months after mine.

My guess is that schooling in America never before or after received so much attention. Pundits thrived. UCLA was so overwhelmed by telephone calls that, after a few days, the campus operator transferred all calls to its laboratory school, which I had administered but had just left. My wife and I were then living in our cottage in the state of Washington. We were tracked down, and our phone rang daily for weeks.

Two interests prevailed. The major one was questions for more evidence that our schools were terrible and were putting the nation at risk. The second, much smaller, had to do with my credentials. Clearly, the evidence and knowledge of three major analyses of America's schools were of little interest to

those who provide informational fingerposts to the populace.

I still receive from social scientists an interesting question: Would the schooling of America be better today if the National Commission on Excellence in Education had not existed? My answer was that it probably would be only a little different. The fact that, after many decades, there is still only tinkering with the deep structure and expectations for schooling is not encouraging.

In 1984, my wife and I were just getting settled again in the Northwest after raising two children and having been attached to three good universities in three vibrant cities – Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Much to my surprise, the University of Washington (UW) offered me a professorship that I could not resist. Retirement drifted away. A few months later, the director of a foundation of a major corporation asked me if I would take on a national study of teacher education. A five-year grant came to the Center for Educational Renewal that I was creating in the College of Education of the university.

I needed a team. Kenneth Sirotnik who had been a major player in the Study of Schooling at UCLA soon joined me. In those days, I was always looking for and storing in my mind the names of talented individuals who might some day be interested in joining a project. I had been spending some time with Roger Soder, who was assisting the dean of the College of Education at the UW. He joined with enthusiasm.

The magnitude of the earlier Study of Schooling, ultimately funded by a dozen philanthropic foundations, had got

me thinking about some of Dewey's writing in 1929, specifically regarding educational research: it should rise out of practice, and its findings be returned to practice, he wrote. But it had appeared to me over the years that "the returns" almost entirely have been articles in educational journals, rarely read by classroom teachers, school principals, and other practitioners.

Ken, Roger, and I had pow-wows endlessly. We were driven by the belief that educational institutions had to be continuously engaged in renewal: identifying both problems and opportunities, participating in dialogue, agreeing on doable enterprises, and taking action. Roger had read *A Place Called School*, so the three of us were very much aware of the data regarding the almost complete absence of this essential process in a very comprehensive sample of the nation's schools. (I plan to address in Occasional Paper No. 4 what I might well call the phantom education of America and quote Alfred North Whitehead again regarding "the frivolous inertia with which it is treated." Might it have wrong agency at the point of delivery?)

We learned a lot from our frequent discussions of the Study of Schooling as we planned the Study of the Education of Educators. Roger met with the heads of other professions and read about their problems and their procedures for improvement. Ken took the lead in informing the heads of teacher education about things we wanted to know prior to our visiting their universities. Both critiqued the nineteen "postulates" I wrote describing the conditions of an excellent teacher education program. One more postulate was added later.

I plan to describe the conduct of the Study of the Education of Educators, some of its connections with the Study of Schooling, and some of the aftermath in Occasional Paper No. 5. I close No. 3 with a short description of how we endeavored to bring research into action – perpetual action still under way after a quarter of a century.

Roger, Ken, and I visited universities every other week and then, during the in-between weeks, analyzed our data, compared our findings, wrote papers, etc. Another group of three with different charges visited the schools where future teachers from those universities were engaged in practice. When we all came together to share data and interpretations, we were surprised by the extent of agreement.

Several of our sessions together were satisfying; some were exceedingly disturbing. Our most disturbing finding was the lack of communication among the three groups that should work closely together in the education of future teachers: faculty members in the arts and sciences, the colleges and departments of teacher education, and the elementary and secondary schools.

Ken, Roger, and I were convinced that bringing together these three necessary components of teacher education was a sound response to Dewey's (and our own) concern that research in practice was not being adequately returned to practice. We set out to create a tripartite structure of educational renewal, bringing together the three components referred to above, with each also engaged in self renewal. We decided further that we would create a network of common endeavor in a

number of states: the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER).

The Study of the Education of Educators came to an end in 1990. For the next two years, we had widespread support in organizing ten settings of the Network that then took responsibility for adding new members. In September 2007, the NNER became an independent nonprofit organization that is now looking forward to decades of university and school educational activity and the prospect of strengthening relationships with their communities.

Parents and your friends and neighbors: Thanks for bearing with me and reading what you might well consider to be overly academic. Ironically, although the fields of human endeavor depend upon academic-like knowledge, the young are steadily losing the schooling that gives them education and are instead receiving training. I am not asking you to be a scholar, but I am asking you to think deeply about the implications for today of what Whitehead, Dewey, and Flexner wrote yesterday.

And then think about the implications for schooling in this description of education written just a few months ago by Jeremy Delamarter, a teacher of English from Bellevue, Washington:

This is the true power of education: to open the mind to worlds that have yet to be, worlds in which we might play meaningful and dynamic roles. Education allows us to rethink our places in the cosmos, to imagine a future different from the past, to wrestle with the ideas and misconceptions that have bound us and to move beyond them. To be educated is to be free, which is the origin of the term “liberal arts education” (“The Noble Power of Education,” *Seattle Times*, 4 May 2012).

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