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Romances with Schools: A Life of Education

By John L. Goodlad and Stephen J. Goodlad

Reviewed by James F. Lane
University of Phoenix

In *Romances with Schools: A Life of Education*, educational philosopher, researcher, and reformer John Goodlad walks his readers through the turbulent and recursive history of educational reform within the United States, framed in the context of his rich personal and professional experiences. Neither truly an autobiography nor memoir, Goodlad presents both philosophical and practical observations, forged in the experiential fires of his life in schools. Nor is the book a manual for school change. It is more a *mélange* of inspirational guidelines, framed by the stimuli of their evolution. The book was intended, per son Stephen's prologue, as "another building block, another tool, to help others find their way in this difficult and many-faceted arena of purposeful endeavor that we call education" (p. xviii).

John Goodlad's original version of *Romances* was published in 2004. This 2016 edition includes the original text with a prologue and epilogue to place his work "in the context of today's educational environment" (p. xiii). According to son Stephen, while the original publication was well received, his father felt the book did not make the impact he was hoping for. Perhaps he was discouraged that little had changed across the national education landscape in that decade. Schools continued to labor under the strictures of No Child Left Behind legislation and its foci on testing and regimented curricula. Doubtless he was also dismayed by Congress's and state legislatures' growing enthusiasm for school vouchers and charter schools at the expense of public schools.

Regardless, John Goodlad began editing the original manuscript for a new edition. Some of his planned edits included further revisions of the final two chapters. Sadly, his declining health and death in 2014 prevented these changes. Stephen and colleagues decided that, rather than make additional changes, the best course would be to allow "John's own words [to] prevail" (p. xix). The subsequent panorama John Goodlad paints for educators presents no less than "the struggle for the soul of the American public school" (p. 237).

The book is loosely chronological, with Goodlad (from this point, the name "Goodlad" will refer to John) using vignettes to reflect on larger issues of K-16 education. He mentions key life and career events only in passing: his own father's death; his marriage; the publication of landmark works like *The Non-Graded Elementary School* (1959) and *A Place Called School* (1984). The details of his life serve to frame an educational philosophy grounded in specific and poignant experiences.

Embedded within these accounts are rites of passage with which all educators will identify: student teaching, first classrooms, first and last days of school, students who succeeded, students who did not, memorable colleagues, memorable schools, significant successes, and major mistakes. We have all known the characters he describes, or we have been them ourselves. The

strength of this book, however, lies in the kernels of wisdom and the observations he shares. Goodlad's reflections are rooted in key themes to which he returns throughout. These include

- the failed “regularities” deeply embedded within school infrastructure;
- the negative impact of outside political forces and special interests on local schools;
- the superiority of non-graded and flexible infrastructure, with pedagogy celebrating the individual differences of children;
- curricula based on projects, the arts, and non-competitive extra-curricular activities;
- school culture embracing reform that evolves organically from within; and
- the democratic imperative for vibrant community schools.

The next section highlights events that stimulated the evolution of these ideas. This is followed by a summary of Goodlad's insights and their implications for the current state of public PK-12 education.

Biographical Highlights and Thematic Evolution

Goodlad begins *Romances* describing his childhood spent fishing, wading in creeks, and walking through woods and meadows in the bucolic countryside of British Columbia. Because he rarely assigns dates to events, scenes are sometimes difficult to track in time. Born in 1920 in Vancouver, his first experience with formal schooling was the rural North Star School, where he attended grades one through four. This was presumably the latter part of the 1920s and early 1930s. It was at North Star that he began forming concerns that would guide his career about what he terms the “regularities of schooling.” He views these as procedural norms of school governance and infrastructure that are often insensitive, inflexible, and ill-informed, and cites numerous examples to support his claims, lamenting, “The one-size-fits-all school that took its shape in the 1930s was a poor fit with reality. . . . School, then as now, did not merely reflect inequities, it generated them” (p. 49).

When Goodlad reached the fifth grade, his parents moved a few miles into the city of North Vancouver, where he attended the Ridgeway School for the next four years. Remembering his own trauma of leaving a familiar habitat and friends, he posits, “How traumatic moves to other places and schools must be for children who differ in language and color” (p. 28). Herein lies the germination of his thought that school should be “a place of both learning and joy” (p. 164). He muses, “What would the passage from home to school be like if we designed it with the children in mind?” (p. 8).

By the completion of twelfth grade in 1937, Goodlad was an aspiring elementary school teacher. He took advantage of a government program that allowed high-achieving students to matriculate to a fifth year of high school, intended to simulate a freshman year of college, and completed a second year of post-graduate study at a nearby “normal” school, designed for teacher preparation.

His “romance” with non-graded schools began with his first job at Woodward's Hill School, where he served as teacher-principal for 34 students in grades one through eight. He remembers, “Nothing in my entire career has contributed more to my views on the conduct of schooling than

my brief apprenticeship in a one-room school” (p. 105). His experiences at Hill launched a varied teaching and administrative career that included experiences in single and mixed-grade classes in a range of communities, rural and resort, poor and affluent. Pivotal experiences stretched over a four-year term at the British Columbia Industrial School for Boys (BISCOQ), a residential institution for incarcerated boys. Of BISCOQ, Goodlad says,

I quickly became aware of a major fact of individual differences: The range of academic achievement within one student often approaches the range of a ‘graded’ class. Just as the range in tested reading achievement in a sixth-grade class is at least six grades, the spread between reading and mathematical scores from some individual pupils...is as much as six grades. (p. 128)

Goodlad notes that his experiences were shaped more by serendipity than choice, driven by both a need to earn more money to support his new wife and growing family and a passion to learn more about his profession. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees through correspondence and summer sessions, and his only experience as a traditional student came after BISCOQ, when he entered the doctoral program at the University of Chicago.

His thoughts about nongraded schooling developed significantly through a seminal experience, the *Englewood Project*. While at the University of Chicago Goodlad had become good friends with Bob Anderson, another doctoral student, with whom he shared a passionate interest in nongraded schools. Anderson and Goodlad would later co-author *The Nongraded Elementary School* (1959, 1963, 1987), which offered landmark perspectives on school restructuring. Goodlad joined and then succeeded Anderson in directing the nongraded Englewood School in rural Sarasota County, Florida. His multi-year relationship with Englewood inspired the publication of *The Nongraded School* in 1959, and he remembers, “Englewood School was as close to Bob Anderson’s and my conception of nongrading, organizationally and philosophically, as any school claiming such that I have seen” (p. 187).

His next school romance took him to the University of California-Los Angeles, where he served first as the director of the University Elementary School (UES), a noted laboratory school, and later as dean of UCLA’s Graduate School of Education. It was during this period that he directed *A Study of Schooling* (1979), a comprehensive work investigating more than 1,000 classrooms and questioning many more teachers, parents, and students. The result was *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (1984), a detailed resource for school reform. The study emerged amid a plethora of formal calls for education reform. Goodlad notes that several of these appeals, including *A Place Called School*, the federally commissioned report *A Nation at Risk* (1983), Boyer’s *High School* (1983), and Sizer’s *Horace’s Compromise: Redesigning the American High School* (1983), “provided GPS maps for comprehensive renewal of the nation’s policies and practices” (p. 231). Unfortunately, he notes, those recommendations were disregarded.

Instead, the schools were called upon to do more intensively what they were already doing in order to strengthen the nation’s position in the global economy. Teachers and their young charges were to do it. But the nation neglected to give our schools the tools for the proposed crusade. (p. 231)

Thus formed another recurring theme of his career: the inability of progressive outside forces to compel school reform.

After leaving UCLA, Goodlad moved to the University of Washington. Later work involved the creation of the Center for Educational Renewal and the National Network for Educational Renewal, through which he and colleagues published the report *National Network for Educational Renewal: Agenda for Education in a Democracy* (1994), and then the Institute for Educational Inquiry, all of them umbrella organizations for conducting research and promoting education reform. John Goodlad ended his romances with schools in 2014, a love affair that spanned nearly 94 years.

Discussion of Key Themes

From these musings emerges Goodlad's prescience regarding today's turbulence, when the place of the public school within a vibrant democracy may never have been under more scrutiny and more dispute. Perhaps the most resounding message throughout the book is the danger he sees in what he calls "the regularities that cause critical observers to say that a school is a school" (33) and that he believes impede school change: "The sharp distinctions between grade levels, the daily roll call, the isolation of miscreants as punishment, the keeping 'after school' of the tardy, the dependability of the timing of the bell ... winners and losers" (p. 122). Goodlad sees these as inflexibilities that serve administrative efficacy, rather than the best interests of students. One does not need to be an experienced educator to recognize these placeholders, and that, he argues, is their danger. We are comfortable with the status quo, even as it has regularly and predictably delivered mediocrity on a grand scale. The most common solution has been to double down to do more of the same, and that has never worked to stimulate student success *en masse*.

Goodlad sees nongraded schools, a cause to which he contributed a significant amount of his time and energy, as a solution. He explains,

The considerable differences in the academic progress of children . . . simply do not fit into the age-graded structure of our schools. The question of whether promotion or nonpromotion more favors children's well-being is simply the wrong question. The right question pertains to how to organize a school so as to best foster the steady, continuous, satisfying progress of children in all areas of their development. (166)

He links these concerns with additional concerns about static curricula—individual subjects disconnected both from other subjects and from connections beyond the classroom. Goodlad promotes the idea of a practical curriculum that is supported with a critical understanding of classic thinkers. While Goodlad argues for a rigorous academic curriculum, he also questions "Shouldn't what one does in school each day help one deal with that larger part of life outside school?" (p. 72). He suggests as alternatives project-based assignments that he learned about from his experiences in multi-grade classrooms. Remembering a project in a such a classroom in rural British Columbia, he explains, "When we got into mining, lumbering, farming, and fishing, students of all ages brought books, pamphlets, photos, and more. They read and they wrote; the

two were intertwined” (p. 103). This is an example of the vision he has for all levels of education.

Crucial for Goodlad is school culture. Enmeshed within the deep structure that we accept, “School is conducted as a highly individualized, competitive affair with goals that bespeak democracy and teamwork” (p. 116). He believes it vital that educators address the “incredibly difficult (task) to develop learning cultures within our schools” (p. 154).

He argues for research-based teacher education programs, noting, “Good teachers are made, not born,” and finds it ironic that the substantial body of school research that supports his proposals has been largely ignored. He laments that medicine and other professions are grounded in the research cultures of the universities for “all major professions but ignored for the personal, social, vocational, and academic development of the nation’s young” (p. 229).

He rails against the intense pressures that outside political forces and special interests place on local schools. “When schools are drawn away from local control and debate, the more public schooling is regarded as not serving the public and failing. The more it is regarded as failing, the more people are drawn toward divisive privatization” (p. 250). Goodlad recognizes that reform must evolve organically over time. It will “require a collaboration of the citizenry, educators, policymakers, philanthropists, and sectors of the business community around a common school mission of a kind not yet experienced in this work in progress we call democracy” (p. 224).

As the United States government begins a new administration with a Secretary of Education whose commitment to public education seems tenuous at best, Goodlad’s admonitions regarding the importance of local public schools seem more relevant than ever:

Private schools of choice, home schooling, district choice, parent-run, charter. . . .
What now are to be the prospects for public schooling to bind together the people of an America of ‘multiple communities defined by different interests, races, ethnicities, regions, economic stratifications, religions, and so forth? Or is this not necessary in a nation to which people swear common allegiance? (p. 230)

What will be the fate of public schools as the Trump administration redirects resources into charters and private school vouchers? One effect may be to further separate subgroups within our society. Current policies may expedite the segregation of the affluent and privileged, leaving other disenfranchised groups further behind. That would not be the future Goodlad hoped for, although it may be the dystopian reality that he feared.

This book is an energizing infusion of the premise that we can change our schools. Goodlad fears that privatization of schools is driven by special interests, rather than by a desire to foster an inclusive democracy. He does not argue specifically against private schools or charter schools, although he believes that for the most part they reinforce deep structural problems, rather than provide models for improvement. It seems that his preference, however, would be for every school to be designed to meet the unique needs of its learners.

This book holds many quotable gems. Goodlad often shares the same thoughts recursively in different wording. One senses that he is searching for the best phrases to frame his arguments.

While those seeking brevity might find this redundant, those searching for impetus for school reform will welcome the various nuances of significant ideas. One can understand the editors' two initial clarifications: first, that Goodlad had not completed editing the book before his death, and second, that they did not feel it appropriate to edit for him, but rather to maintain his original words. The result is a collection of powerful statements that capture his predominant themes.

Final Thoughts

Throughout this book Goodlad presents himself as the smart, sober voice in the room. He keeps us grounded, reminding us of the key issues, the monsters in the night, the things we must remember. One chapter is titled "Tidying the Mind in an Untidy World," and this is what Goodlad does in his writing. All educators have their own romances with schools. It is difficult to read this book without recalling our own experiences as educators and relating our experiences to his. He takes on the issues that we educators—whether novice or seasoned—have struggled with and will continue to face, and shows us how to fight and win. This book marks the vitality of these ideas, shows how important they are to our democracy, and elucidates how quickly they might slip away. We always recognize the fear of change. The danger of not changing, however, should be the greater terror, and that is the moral imperative the thoughtful reader of this book must take away.

Both teachers and students "have a fundamental right to the romances with the learning our schools must provide" (p. 272). Goodlad longs for schooling to become "a romantic rite of passage for all children" (p. 9), as it was for him. *Romances with Schools* is a fitting paean to his life's work: the education of our youth and those who teach them.

Author Notes

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