LEARNING AND THE ONE-ROOM COUNTRY SCHOOL
by
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Children attend school to learn social and scholastic skills to aid them in becoming responsible and thoughtful citizens. Schools thus strive to carry out the injunction of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote:

> I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.[1]

Most one-room country schoolhouses stand empty today. They are lonely figures on the plains, or dilapidated objects hidden in groves of trees. A few still abound with children at recess; some remote places hear the bell ringing on an early morning. Only a few hundred one-room schools still operate in remote rural areas from New York to California.[2] The majority of rural American children today are educated in consolidated or town schools.[3]

During the past 150 years, thousands of rural schoolchildren have been educated in one-room, ungraded country schools. Children in these schools learned in a system based on individual instruction by the teacher, with older students helping those younger than themselves. In the one-room school group interaction was constant in the learning process. There was a spirit of democracy; and cooperation rather than competition prevailed. Despite these virtues American public education has vigorously sought to close the one-room country school, and in the words of many modern educators, to provide efficient and standardized education for children. Professional educators, assisted by a massive population shift during the twentieth century from farm to city, have pushed to close rural schools in favor of consolidated, graded schools, where students associate only with those of the same age and skill levels.[4]

Horace Mann began the assault on the one-room school in the 1840s when he wrote that children needed to be separated by grades and taught systematically and efficiently. His message was well received. According to John Goodlad, "By 1870, graded classes, graded content, graded textbooks, and even graded teachers meshed together in a school mechanism that has undergone little redesigning to the present." Not one-room schools, however. They remained ungraded and inventive. Ungraded in the one-room school meant the children progressed at their own pace, with much individual attention and group tutoring. Many former one-room school students attest to being in both the "first and second" grades in their first year, because, according to them, they overheard lessons for the older students, and were motivated for later learning. Avoiding age grouping in the same classroom was extremely beneficial to the five-year old in proximity with eight- and ten-year old students.[5]

The Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction declared in 1908 that grading (separating children according to age) led to more efficient schools. Professional educators of that time postulated that fewer teachers would be needed if one teacher could teach 35 to 40 children all of the same age and grade. Of course, the teacher must be supervised by

an effective principal. Not so for the one-room, autonomous schoolteachers.[6]

Testing developed by Binet and Simon in 1905-1906 followed grading. This intelligence measure subsequently led to tests that further calibrated grading and classifying schoolchildren. The "average" child became the focus of all teaching, and teachers taught to that mythical child and graded all the other students accordingly. This was not the case for one-room schoolchildren, who were graded on their individual abilities.[7]

Grading, classification, and testing inevitably heightened competition, which made some students successful and others failures. Peer pressure was injected into students' lives. Consequently, older students lost a sense of responsibility for the younger ones. Teachers who worked in both ungraded, one-room schools, and graded, consolidated schools, confirm greater cooperation (working for mastery) in the former, and stronger competition (working for grades) in the latter.[8]

Researchers have studied competition versus cooperation in the classroom. University of Minnesota professors David and Roger Johnson gathered statistics and studies from 1924 through 1981 on the relationship between achievement, competition, group work, and individual study during the past 50 years. Their findings suggest that cooperative group study, followed by individual study, stimulates greater learning. They also confirmed that problem solving, one of the most important aspects of learning, is best taught by cooperation.[9]

Their findings are completely verified by Benjamin Bloom of the University of Chicago. From studies on mastery of a subject, he concluded that students learn best in groups, and that problem solving (a vital part of reasoning and thinking) is enhanced by group learning, which is then followed by individual tutoring when necessary. Bloom also suggested that today's teachers "telegraph" their judgments of a student's ability. This is unavoidable when the focus is on class rank instead of mastery of course content. "It's hard to think of any place in our society that is as preoccupied as the schools with comparing people with one another," Bloom observed.[10]

A hallmark of the ungraded, one-room school was individual recitation--teacher with student--followed by older students helping the younger with lessons. The spirit of cooperation that existed aided learning. The one-room schoolteacher knew that the best teaching mode was older students assisting younger ones, and that learning was best done in a non-threatening and cooperative environment.[11]

One-room schoolteachers had the autonomy to create their own schedules, yet their consistency and discipline occurred similarly in each school. "Well, we opened with a flag salute . . . and a prayer," recalled Beth Muilenburg, a retired Kansas one-room schoolteacher who went on to teach at the College of Emporia. "I read to the children every morning," added Kansan Wilma Highe, also retired. Many teachers, who had been students in one-room schools, followed the pattern they had learned as children. One-room country schoolteachers were quite young, and many did not have college training. From 1890 through 1910 in Lyon County, Kansas, the average age of teachers was 21. In Nebraska during the 1914-15 school year, 50 percent of the rural teachers were between 17 and 20. Training classes in high school were the main foundation for these teachers, many of whom started teaching at 17.[12]

Children received the most attention during their first and second school years, when one-room schoolteachers (again with marked similarity) sensed that the young students needed a good start. Students at

the same assignment level did not exceed two in most schools, and so competition was minimized. Nevertheless, the children were eager to achieve.[13]

"Teacher, I can!" exclaimed a recently arrived German boy of seven to Beth Muilenburg. It was nearly Christmas, and he had learned the flag salute in English well enough for the class to understand. Although she studied German in college, Muilenburg found the language barrier great, but the small boy learned English with the help of Miriam, an eighth-grade student who spoke German. He was proud to be an American, and Muilenburg reflected that his recitation of the flag salute was a highlight of her teaching career.[14]

Constructive influence of older students was confirmed by Ruth Geier Rice, Montana rancher and former county commissioner. She was both a student and a teacher in the one-room setting. As a new teacher at one school, she encountered a problem with the children throwing spitballs. She reminded the children that it was their school and that they should treat it like they would their homes. The next day, older students stopped the younger children when they tried to throw spitballs.[15]

Schools had scholastic games such as spelling bees or geography matches, which were usually reserved for Friday afternoons. All students participated and sometimes a neighboring school joined in. A first grader could see how well he measured up against a fourth grader. This was something the children looked forward to with glee. Each hoped to be the last standing, having spelled the word correctly or found the right place on the map. This was the closest children came to competition in the whole school year.[16]

Extra work was often necessary for eighth grade examinations, which were very difficult. Several retired teachers testified about the rigor of the tests, which were given in town, and often took two days. According to Margie Thomas, retired Montana one-room teacher, many hours were spent preparing students for these tests, which covered reading, mathematics, spelling, writing, geography, and history, and which demanded a certain average score to pass.[17]

Just as students worked hard at lessons, they played hard at recess. Games played in one-room country schools were often based on the principle of the winning side "capturing" the loser, who then became part of the winning team. "Annie Over," "Dare Base," and "Fox and Geese" were examples of these recess games. Most involved a lot of chasing that quickly used a great amount of energy. The youthful teacher occasionally participated in recess games, but as a player, not a referee. Children learned to settle their own disputes and they learned to recognize fairness, although it did not always abound.[18]

A most joyous event in the country schools was the Christmas pageant or play. Children eagerly made decorations for it, and often spent all their spare time making colorful paper chains. Bettye Coughenour, former one-room teacher in Kansas and now principal of Wellsville Consolidated School, recalled that one of the fathers in each district would bring a tree, set it in the corner away from the woodstove, and the children would decorate it. All the children performed in the Christmas program, according to Margie Thomas. This was the first big accomplishment for some of the students, and the program provided rewards and motivations. All the families came for the program, visited afterward, and shared sandwiches, cake and coffee with neighboring farmers and ranchers. Although the small building usually became extremely crowded, no one seemed to mind.[19]

Families with children who had slight learning handicaps were helped by the cooperative classroom. Thomas recalled one sweet and helpful little girl who learned slowly, but "she would make a good and productive citizen." When the child transferred to town school at seventh grade, the school authorities promptly and needlessly placed her in a class for the retarded. Thomas recalled her shock and hurt and that of the child.[20]

"Mainstreaming" was not even thought of in the one-room school, according to Sally Smith, author of *No Easy Answers: The Learning Disabled Child*. In the one-room schoolhouse of the past, the disabled student matured at his or her own pace, remained with his or her schoolmates, and in fact, was tutored by them and the teacher. "Putting learning disabled or educationally handicapped children back into the classroom is not applicable to country schools, for these children were never excluded," said Smith.[21]

Besides its obvious task of providing basic learning, the role of the school in the rural community was threefold: it provided identification with a community, bonded individuals within the community, and provided a gathering place for social activities. Rural people often identified themselves by their school name, in much the same fashion that town people used their town name. Rinker Corner, in north Lyon County, Kansas, for example, is so named because of its proximity to Rinker School. The school closed years ago, but the neighborhood is still called "Rinker Corner."[22]

One way school districts raised money for the schoolhouse was to hold a box social. Proceeds were spent on extra luxuries, such as a set of encyclopedias, a new clock, or treats for the Christmas program. Women and girls carefully decorated boxes or baskets, which were filled with delicious food. Cupid occasionally made his presence known among the young men and women because by buying the basket of a young lady, the buyer also had the privilege of eating supper with her.[23]

Most one-room schoolteachers were concerned friends of the community. Teachers not only roomed and boarded within the community, but they made the rounds of all families to have dinner. This was an opportunity for the teacher, family and student to discuss school problems. President Herbert Hoover recalled that his childhood teacher was so close to his family that she wanted to adopt him when his parents died, but the choice went instead to an aunt and uncle in Oregon.[24]

According to Andrew Gulliford, historian and former one-room teacher:

> The teaching and learning that took place in country schools was, at best, a fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson's vision of public education and, at worst, a haphazard process. In all cases, the quality of education was determined by the local community's resources and the students themselves.[25]

Many students who graduated from these small, isolated buildings were truly educated. A 1932 study by the University of Nebraska revealed that of the students graduated from a single one-room school in Jefferson County, Nebraska, during the drought and crop failure years of the 1890s, "Eleven . . . graduated from college, and three from a conservatory of music. Twelve became teachers, one an attorney, one an engineer, one a noted eye specialist, one a prominent artist, and two were widely known musicians. Several were successful farmers . . . ."[26]

The one-room schoolchildren succeeded

in work and life because they were educated not only in academics, but in creativity and responsibility, and they could think. Beth Muilenburg specifically recalled that the little German boy and his two sisters did quite well. The older girl became a NASA scientist, the younger a nursing supervisor, and the boy became a successful farmer.[27]

Children who attended these schools learned independently and progressed at their own pace. By the time they reached third grade, they knew what to expect, because they had heard older students--often their brothers or sisters--recite the year before. This may account for results of a 1924 study by professor C. W. Odell, University of Illinois, which found that, despite the youthful age of their teachers, one-room school students worked at a more accelerated pace than their consolidated counterparts.[28]

Wayne Fuller, author of *The Old Country Schools*, claimed that one-room school education ". . . made the Middle Border the most literate part of the nation through the years." This is borne out by statistics, released by General Lewis B. Hershey in 1950, on inductees to United States military service. States with the greatest number of one-room schools had the lowest illiteracy rates, and states with few or no one-room schools had the highest illiteracy rates, by as much as 5 to 15 percent.[29]

Studies of the past 50 years verify both the high academic results achieved and the validity of the methods used in the one-room school. As an example, Nebraska, which had the greatest number of one- room schools in operation (286), ranked fourth in the nation on standardized achievement tests in 1986. Perhaps the success of the one-room country school was the support system that included the community, the family, the teacher, and the student. Despite their demonstrated virtues, one-room schools could not resist "progress," and so with few exceptions, they finally succumbed to consolidation.[30]

Professional educators were pivotal in the consolidation movement, and efficient use of economic resources was the central theme of their campaign. But there were other forces at work simultaneously. Demographics played a part both in the post-World War II rural-to-town population movement, and in the opening of job markets (other than teaching) for women. Also, the small, autonomous school boards and teachers had roles in school consolidation. Faced with shrinking tax bases and rising maintenance costs and salaries, many boards regarded consolidation as a way to ease financial burdens. Even many of the idealistic teachers were beguiled by promises that they would be "true" professionals in a consolidated system and paid accordingly.[31]

Besides excessive costs of one-room schools, professional educators stressed that rural education was poorly supervised. In the 1917-18 *Biennial Report*, the Kansas State Superintendent wrote that the rural school "is the most backward and undeveloped element of our school system . . . Expert guidance . . . is almost wholly lacking."[32] J. M. Foote of the National Education Association reflected in 1923 that consolidation had its ". . . justification . . . wholly on administrative conditions prevailing in the centralized school." He claimed the superiority of consolidated school elementary instruction over the one-room school was in the administrative difference.[33]

Proclaiming that "The most pressing educational problem today is the rural school," the Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction expanded the campaign in 1908 to consolidate rural schools. An

August 22, 1957 headline in the *Emporia* (Kansas) *Gazette*, read "Another Landmark Fades Away . . Ruggles Schoolhouse Sale Closes a 50-year Chapter." Within 50 years, the consolidation of rural one-room schools was almost completed in Kansas and across the Middle Border and Great Plains states.[34]

Frances Jones, retired Lyon County Superintendent and overseer of the auction of Ruggles School, recalled there were 67 one-room schools in Lyon County when she began her term of office in 1953. When she retired in 1963 there were just six. Beth Mullenburg similarly recalled that during her tenure as county superintendent from 1945 through 1951 in Howard, Kansas, the number of school districts shrank from 90 to 16. Paradoxically, the same office of superintendent originally charged with supervising and training the youthful one-room teacher closed the one-room schools.[35]

In the 1880s, when the population was sparse and mostly rural, there were 100,000 school districts in the United States. These three- to four-mile square districts were administered by three-man school boards. Today, with a population near 225 million, the nation has only 16,000 school districts, with some encompassing whole counties. Technically administered by a school board, these districts are, in fact, governed by professional educators in the state departments of education, whose injunctions sift through the superintendents of the districts to the school principals. At the bottom of the chain are the teachers.[36]

As recently as 1985, Jonathan P. Sher, former Assistant Dean of Education at North Carolina State University, remarked that a "conspiracy" would be needed to retain one-room schools still in operation. His statement was graphically appropriate with the closing of 64 such Nebraska schools in 1985 and 1986. His sense of futility reflected his conclusion that "Much education policy is about making educational systems more convenient for administrators and policy makers."[37]

"The American public school system founded a century and a half ago was a bold and magnificent dream, the most democratic and charitable achievement of any people in recorded history . . . Today public education is in trouble." This appeared in Frank Popplewell's 1981 autobiography of his 47-year teaching career in Missouri.[38]

Other authors concurred. Leslie Hart, author and educator, denounced the "classroom disaster," and laid the blame on the organization of schools for administrative convenience rather than learning. One-room schools closed by professional educators over the years, Hart wrote, came closer to accomplishing what they set out to do than any other institution in the history of American public education.[39]

Public literacy has been one casualty of rote learning and the dull pedagogy of the standardized and graded system. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education acknowledged 60 million illiterate or functionally illiterate Americans.[40]

According to teacher and author Jonathan Kozol, the situation is actually far worse. A 1984 survey ranked the United States 49th in literacy among the 158 members of the United Nations. Fully one third of the adult American population is illiterate or functionally illiterate--using Kozol's definition of functional illiteracy as reading below the eighth grade level. From the early 1970s through the mid-1980s the number of illiterate and functionally illiterate multiplied three times.[41]

Illiteracy is not the only legacy of the 150-year old public education dream. In the modern classroom, many teachers' lives have become nightmares. Today's teachers spend their time--not in instruction and individual

attention to students--but in counting milk tickets, marching children from class to class, and coping with disruption. This has stifled learning and estranged teacher from pupil. Threats and physical attacks on teachers--a result of this atmosphere--are becoming much too common.[42]

One underlying problem is crowded classes. Leslie Hart, in 1969, wrote that "no educator has come forward to claim that twenty-five or thirty is a grouping desirable for basic education purposes."[43] Modern teachers cannot offer individual instruction with classes that contain 35 pupils, all one grade, and all one age. Yet 60 years earlier, the Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction wrote:

> The fatal weakness in these (one-room) schools lies in their size. It is impossible that schools so small as many of these are should do the best work. With but a handful of pupils no teacher can secure the best results. The pupils themselves miss the incentive and inspiration that comes with numbers.[44]

Teachers today have not attained the professional status that they thought would be accorded them in the consolidated school. They often have slight influence on the curriculum and may have extremely limited authority in the classroom. Students often have fared even worse under the graded and consolidated system. A teacher can quit if dissatisfied; but the child has no choice. Leslie Hart stated that the class-and-grade system necessarily imposes conformity on the individuals within each class. Compliance is demanded in the name of order. "If we really intended to teach children practical democracy or the art of getting along with others," Hart wrote, "putting them into a highly regimented, autocratic situation would seem an odd way to go about it.[45]

On academic learning, Hart further criticized the standardized, graded system:

> A recent research project on the "Head Start" preschool experience for deprived children showed that the substantial gains many made through this program vanished soon after they entered regular school. Throughout school, a child who shows enthusiasm for any academic interest becomes somewhat remarkable. Most enthusiasms lie outside the classroom. The classroom school was never designed to arouse or permit individual interests. The basic idea was what we would now call thought-control. If children are to be handled constantly as groups, they must perforce be told what to think, when to begin thinking it, and when to stop.[46]

Students experience humiliation and defeat in the system of standardization and consolidation. Author and teacher Herbert Kohl wrote that many teachers he has been acquainted with through the years became teachers to "negate the wounds" received when they were students in school. They want to counter the racism, sexual put-downs, and all the other humiliations they suffered with new and freer ways of teaching and learning.[47]

Taking into account the illiteracy rate, teacher burnout and the failure of some children before they reach fourth grade, it would seem appropriate to question the standardization and consolidation of schools, to review the class-and-grade system, and to reconsider the use of competition, peer pressure and threat in the learning process. Herbert Kohl, author of *On Teaching*, described an experimental high school operated during the 1930s that allowed

students to teach other students, permitted interdisciplinary pursuits, and had volunteers impart their expertise to students. Kohl noted that the follow-up 20 years later indicated success rates similar to those achieved in the Nebraska community during the 1890s.[48]

The history of the one-room school verified many principles of human nature and learning. Author and educator John Holt summarized the immutable axioms of education that typified the one-room school, and which public education needs, in part, to rediscover. Because humans are naturally learning animals, he posited that "what we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and the classroom; give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking . . . We can trust them to do the rest."[49]

Other cultures have educated their young in a much gentler, less competitive, and less humilating manner than our present public education system. For instance, in 1930, Chief Plenty-Coups of the Crow Nation reflected on his childhood:

> My people were wise . . . Our teachers were willing and thorough . . . All were quick to praise excellence without speaking a word that might break the spirit of a boy who might be less capable than others. The boy who failed at any lesson got only more lessons, more care, until he was as far as he could go.[50]

Thomas Jefferson had a dream of a literate nation that could exercise well the responsibility of governing. In order to do so, we need smaller schools, cooperative learning environments and community involvement--all of which existed in the one-room school.

END NOTES

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24. Herbert Hoover, *Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), 5.

25. Gulliford, *America's Country Schools*, p. 47.

26. Fuller, *Old Country School*, p. 3.

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28. C. W. Odell, "Educational Research and Statistics," *School and Society*, XIX (3 May 1924): 531.

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of Schools, Lyon County Courthouse. The cost efficiency advocated by the professional educators was not always so well served. Because consolidation required transporting children to school, the proposal was made in 1908 by the State Department of Public Instruction in Kansas that a person (preferrably a high school student) could be hired to drive the wagon and carry the children to and from school. This would entail an estimated four hours a day, and it was recommended the driver be paid $30 per month. Ironically, in that same year (1908) teachers in Lyon County, Kansas one-room schools were earning $42.50 per month.

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