

The One-Room Schoolhouse Today

Living History, Looking Forward

By Kevin J. Smith

Past, Present, and Future in the One-room Schoolhouse

In March of 2003, our close, perhaps old-fashioned, and possibly quirky, young family decided to get rid of our TV. Now, instead of watching television, we spend time playing games, hiking, or sometimes simply sitting around the kitchen table talking. Even in today's fast-paced and technologically saturated world, we've found there's a certain special-something about living contemporarily with the remnants of the past. I'm not talking about rejecting the future, or becoming hopelessly enamored of the past, I'm simply saying that we think there are some great experiences to be had as a family when we consider the lived experiences and practices of those before us and discover ways to incorporate these aspects of social life and interaction into our current ways of living. I even decided to apply this approach to the ways in which I would conduct research for this chapter on the one-room schoolhouse.

Several years ago I spent four months in Carmarthen, Wales, lecturing at Trinity College University and conducting research for my dissertation at a local secondary school. I was interested in how culture is communicated through the curriculum at that school, and in order to gather data for the study, I needed a vast array of electronic devices. I packed a laptop computer, a digital camera, and video recorder, as well as CDs, DVDs, flash drives, and audio recording/editing software. It was the qualitative

researcher's equivalent of "packing for bear." Traveling with this equipment, either through airports or even walking to the research site, got old fast and there was a tremendous amount of time and energy that went into collecting and maintaining the data with this equipment. In considering this experience, I asked myself, "How can I make this new project different?" The focus of my research for this chapter was to gain an understanding of how curriculum is experienced in a contemporary one-room schoolhouse, a concept that resonated with me both personally and intellectually. Considering this theme, and my previous research experience, I decided to take a different approach to this project by going "old school."

Instead of checking a suitcase filled with electronic equipment and dragging a carry-on bag with my computer onto the plane to visit a one-room schoolhouse site for my inquiry, I stripped down to the bare essentials. I grabbed a plastic shopping bag and filled it with extra socks, underwear, and a few toiletries. I would be wearing a suit to the research site, so I grabbed an extra shirt and a tie, folded them nicely, and slipped them into the bag. I glanced at my computer, and then grabbed a couple of pens and a small, college-ruled composition notebook – the kind with the imperial to metric conversion tables on the inside of the front cover, and I was on my way. You might ask yourself, "Did this help?" or "Was it necessary?" and I'd have to say that I'm not sure on both accounts, but I can say that simply making the acknowledgement that I wanted to engage the topic of my research in an atypical manner, a manner which tried in some respect to align myself with the notion of doing things "the old way," helped me to orient myself to this research project with a reflective and questioning disposition. Now, I'm not suggesting that a plastic shopping bag is a historically authentic form of luggage – but it

did make me feel a little like Tom Sawyer; like I had wrapped-up all of my belongings in a bandana, tied it to a pole, and slung it over my shoulder. As a result, in some small way, I felt I was placed into a particular frame of mind that helped me to focus on what the purpose of my research was and why I felt it was important.

My Goals and Preparing to Meet Them

The purpose of this study is not to argue that schools should return to a “golden age” of education (or even that one ever existed), or that one-room schooling is somehow methodologically superior to contemporary approaches to delivering school experiences. Rather, I wanted to look at a specific educational setting and discover what elements of that setting – whether practices, places, or people (or a combination of all three) – made that curriculum “great.” But what do I mean by great? Great often is understood as “the best” or something close to it. However, there are so many things we call great that don’t really mean they’re the best or that they’re something we would want to experience (such as when people refer to “the great war”). With that in mind, I don’t position the concept of “great” solely in terms of “good and bad.” Instead, I think of it as possessing a type of significance or distinctiveness, and in terms of curriculum, I think of it as a quality that helps us to engage in curricular theorizing that is active, meaningful, and robust – to think about curriculum in complex and compelling ways. From this type of complicated consideration, I developed a list of questions that I used in exploring the concept of “great” in terms of curriculum and the school experience in the one-room school I would study:

- What is it about the lived experience at this school that creates a significant contribution to the students' personal, academic, and civic development?
- What happens at this school in terms of the planned, enacted, and lived (Marsh & Willis, 2006) curriculum that makes school a meaningful, engaging, and efficacious experience?
- What is the purpose of education according to the educators in the school and members of the local community, and how does this understanding of education shape the students' educational experience?
- Does the community value the school, and if so, how do they illustrate their care and why?

These questions were derived from Marsh and Willis (2007) who suggested there are three fundamental question-types used when thinking about curriculum. These question-types can best be summarized as being concerned with 1) what knowledge is worth knowing; 2) how a curriculum should be developed; and 3) how a curriculum should be experienced. Marsh and Willis then categorize these questions into three relative domains: the planned curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the lived curriculum (p.4, 2007). The questions guiding my research were built upon this framework and were developed prior to my arrival at the one-room school. These questions evoke age-old themes in education, and I'm sure each question could be the subject of its own chapter. Nonetheless, these questions shaped my inquiry and approach to collecting my data, and although I may not have been able to answer each question to the fullest extent possible, asking these questions did lead to other inquiries that

illuminated my understanding of how education in this one-room schoolhouse takes place. In addition, new questions emerged from my time spent at the school.

So those were my goals in undertaking this project, but how did I prepare myself in terms of orienting myself to the discourse of the one-room school and in meeting those goals? It's a complex topic, the one-room school, because it possesses an iconic disposition in terms of both Americana and education. When I first considered researching a one-room school, my mind instantly conjured up images of the frontier town in *Little House on the Prairie*, and apart from the generalized nostalgia of the one-room schoolhouse that is occasionally referred to when discussing American education, that is really all I knew about this type of schooling. I needed to learn more about one-room schools, not only in terms of the characteristics of the buildings, locations, students and teachers, but more specifically, in terms of what were the educational *experiences* of students and teachers the one-room schools. How did the lived curriculum "happen?"

An interesting article by Barker and Muse (1986) details the decline of the one-room schoolhouse in America and provides a description of the remaining schools and their locations. However, these descriptions focus largely on demographic data including categories such as the number of students per school, the percentage of female teachers working in these schools, the geographical locations of the schools, and the educational attainment of the teachers. In fact, many of the academic articles I found treated the one-room school in this way, that is by taking a scientific and somewhat sterile perspective that is useful to some degree, but largely eliminates the social aspects of teaching and learning in a one-room school. There are hundreds of books regarding one-room schools covering topics ranging from architecture, to religion, and even to political issues. From

these works, I found a handful of sources that provided me with a distinct representation of life in a one-room school, a perspective that the academic articles I encountered could not provide.

These works included historical/autobiographical accounts such as *The Thread That Runs So True* (Stuart, 1998) and *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska* (Jacobs, 1995). In addition to accounts of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse, curricular texts like Jackson's *Life in Classrooms* (1967) and Kaestle's historical *Pillars of the Republic* (1983) helped me in making theoretical and historical connections to the topic at hand. In addition, I also looked for additional resources online and within my own community. There are dozens of historical societies throughout the US striving to locate and maintain one-room schoolhouses as historical landmarks and museums, but these groups tend to focus on buildings that have not had students or teachers learning and teaching in them for decades. I needed to stay focused on resources that would help me meet my goal of understanding the one-room school as a living curricular experience.

Arriving at the One-room Schoolhouse

I arrived at the airport with my plastic bag in hand, picked up my rental car, and went straight to my hotel. When I arrived, I tossed my "luggage" onto the bed and called the teacher at the schoolhouse. She gave me directions to the school and we made arrangements for my visit the next morning, but I couldn't wait until the next day. I was eager to see the school and village, so I thanked her for her help and was soon out the door and back on the road. The schoolhouse was roughly an hour away from my hotel and in that time I thought a lot about curriculum and how I was to approach this project.

My little blue car wound its way up the old highway, which was undergoing major construction, and I paused frequently to give the construction vehicles the right of way. I was in a thoughtful mood and didn't even think about turning on the radio. I sat in near silence as I made my way to the school, and it was during this somewhat Zen-like state that I began to reflect upon my life as a teacher, and more specifically my interactions with curriculum.

This pleasant drive in the New England sun was a perfect opportunity to take Freire's advice and reflect upon my own methods, practices, and pedagogy as I actively engaged in my efforts to develop a more conscientious approach to understanding of curriculum (Freire, 2006). As a result, I began to reflect upon the circumstances of my life, both in and out of the classroom, that have enriched my understanding of curriculum. Thinking about curriculum in this way allowed me to "get inside the past" (Clandinin and Connelly, p. 20, 1988) and to explore a history of personal moments that contribute to my identity, performance, and cognizance as a teacher and learner. Pinar (1995) uses the term *currere* to describe the autobiographical connections among a person's curricular experiential history, their present understanding, and their expectations and projections for the future, and it is through the retelling and application of the theories derived from these interactions that we can actively and meaningfully participate in the praxis of understanding curriculum both as teacher/students and students/teachers.

The hour I spent driving to the research site was helpful in allowing me a chance to autobiographically construct my own orientation to curriculum (Pinar, 1995), but I knew that I would need to adopt a different approach to writing about my observations at the one-room school. Instead of drawing solely upon my own account of the curriculum

that was generated through my past experiences and present understandings, I would need to collect data regarding the curriculum as it was experienced in this school. I thought about how I would need to recount my observations and the responses to my questions and interpret important passages, cues, and themes that inform how the teachers and students at the one-room schoolhouse experience curriculum (Kreuger, Evans, Korsmo, Stanley and Wilder, 2005). I would then incorporate those elements with my own understandings in communicating what makes a particular curriculum great. I wondered exactly how I was going to accomplish all of this when I saw the exit sign in the distance that would lead me to the village school.

I soon reached the exit and turned off of the highway onto a quiet country road. There were a series of small towns on my way to the village, and each town held its own particular New England charm. As I entered the village, the schoolhouse stood on the right side of the road. Its redbrick exterior stood out in stark contrast to the whitewashed siding of the municipal building that stood next to it. I slowly pulled onto the gravel parking area and stepped out of my car. I could hear the voices of young children through the series of six tall windows that lined the sides of the school. Over 200 years ago the windows would have provided the main source of light for the scholars sitting on the hard, wooden benches. The school had always housed young students, and today the school accommodated grades 1-3 with a kindergarten class held in the municipal building next door. I wondered what other aspects of the school had remained the same over the course of more than 200 years. I looked up and noticed a small enclosure on top of the building near the edge of the roof. It must have once held the school bell that called the children to school in the morning and sang to them on their way home at the end of the

day. A diminutive porch protruded from the side of the building with the number *1780* displayed in bright, silver numbers. This school was constructed in 1780 and was undoubtedly one of the many common schools, or public schools, that were spreading throughout the new United States (Kaestle, 1983). I must admit I was a bit awestruck by the fact that this school had been in continuous use, serving the residents of this small country village, for over 200 years. If only these walls could speak. And they did.

The next day I arrived at the school to observe the classroom and to speak with the teacher and community members. As soon as I entered the building, I stepped into a small kitchen area. The walls were lined with cabinets and pegs for the students to hang their coats and backpacks. On the far side of the room were two bathrooms, and between these doors were a sink and a counter along with a refrigerator and a stove. To my right was a doorway that led to the classroom area. The walls were painted white, and the windows along each wall were outlined in a sage-green paint. The floor was covered with a burgundy/maroon carpet that was slightly aged. The ceiling appeared to be painted tongue and groove slats with a series of large, unpainted wooden beams that ran perpendicular to the tongue and groove planks. Thick iron bolts held the wooden beams in place.

The classroom was lined with bookshelves and chalkboards. There was an eclectic collection of desks, chairs, and tables in the classroom representing many different eras of education in this little schoolhouse. The teacher's desk was nestled in a corner of the room. On the far side of the room, opposite to the teacher's desk, were two computers for student use. As I soaked in the details of the room, I thought to myself how similar, yet different, this school was to a contemporary educational environment.

Of all the reading I had done in preparation for this trip, there were a number of books that held a particular significance for me as I stood in this school, including Stuart's *A Thread That Runs So True*, Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic*, and Jackson's *Life in Classrooms*. There were elements from all of these texts that flooded to mind as I soaked in the ambiance of this little one-room school.

Both Stuart and Kaestle provided a kind of personal-historical perspective on schooling that was beneficial considering the nature of this school, but for some reason Jackson and his treatment of the "hidden curriculum" in *Life in Classrooms* resonated with me in profound ways during my visit to this tiny village school. When we encounter the words "hidden curriculum," it's easy to think of the "hidden" as something insidious – lurking silently, hidden-away and waiting with a dark and sinister purpose. However, the hidden curriculum is comprised of both good and bad elements, as well as just about everything in between, and it is an aspect of education that cannot be excised from the school experience. Although there are a number of ways to approach and interpret the curriculum of this school, I will draw heavily on Jackson's *Life in Classrooms* because that text featured prominently in my mind during my time at the one-room school.

Experiencing the Curriculum of a One-room School

While I was at the school, I furiously collected data as I observed and interacted with the people working and learning there. In the first chapter of his book, Jackson (1968) describes the standardized nature of education. He mentions an over-emphasis on what Marsh and Willis (2007) would call the planned curriculum, as well as the expected behavior of the students in regard to the enacted curriculum. I referred to Jackson often

as I analyzed my data because I felt that his project was similar to mine to some degree and would provide a meaningful perspective on the lived curriculum of the one-room school. So far, I have written about my visit to this school chronologically. However, in what follows, I will separate my experiences into sections based on certain themes that emerged from my data. I believe these themes help to describe certain aspects of the village school and speak to the notion of a “great” curriculum.

Aspects of the Hidden Curriculum

I didn't know what to expect prior to entering the one-room school. I assumed that since it was a building well over 200 years old that there would be some striking differences in regard to what I've come to know as elementary education. As I stepped through the threshold of the little school and into the small kitchen area, I immediately thought of a passage from Jackson's *Life in Classrooms*, “Even the odors of the classroom are fairly standardized... If a person stumbled into a classroom blindfolded, his (sic) nose alone, if he used it correctly, would tell him where he was” (Jackson, p.7, 1968). The smell of the school *was* the same as those found in my daughter's school of more than 600 pupils. There's a particular odor that elementary schools seem to share. It's pungent, but not particularly unpleasant. The scent of the carpet, the walls and furniture, and even the school supplies (like glue and ink) mix with the faint smell of the students' perspiration in creating a slightly acrid aroma that is softened by the teacher's air fresheners, cleaning products, and mom's fabric softener. I don't want to suggest that all schools smell pleasant, that would be an overly romanticized notion of the school experience. I, for one, specifically remember times as an elementary student when the

classroom smelled like soured sawdust and urinal cakes. However, the students at this school were lucky enough to be spared that particular sensation (at least for today) and they energetically went about their business seemingly oblivious to the sights and smells that I found so intriguing.

Even the sounds of the school were roughly the same, although different in volume. Prior to the start of school, the students chattered excitedly to each other about all sorts of things – video games, music, and, of course, which of their classmates was the subject of a weekly crush. When I peered from the kitchen into the classroom, I saw the familiar trappings of an elementary classroom that I mentioned above; whiteboards and chalkboards lined the walls. Colorful posters and examples of students' work could be found there as well. Desks, chairs, and worktables were arranged into small groups and a variety of bookshelves were placed throughout the room, holding just about every type of book and magazine that you'd expect to find in a classroom.

In the middle of this somewhat cluttered room stood the teacher managing and directing the lively but ordered chaos of the first few minutes of the day. The teacher was animated and engaged with the kids in the room. She smiled a lot, and spoke in a clear voice that could cut through the din of pre-school excitement without sounding abrasive or cross. She seemed to me to be a woman who was very comfortable in her role as teacher. In any educational environment, these elements (and others) come to represent pieces of the hidden curriculum of a school, which represents the unnamed types of knowledge that exist in education and are veiled by our all too narrow focus on what we think is important in education (Jackson, 1968). These elements present a portion of the whole-school experience and help communicate to us what schooling is, and how it

looks, feels, and even smells. These elements help communicate how we are to act and be acted upon in the classroom. These elements, to a degree, even shape the way we interact with what is taught in schools and how we come to understand this knowledge.

This classroom is a particularly busy room. With students from three different grade levels, two paraprofessionals, a teacher, and the occasional volunteer(s), this small room seemed to almost burst with activity. I stood in the kitchen area waiting to speak to a member of the community about the school when I heard the teacher tell the students to settle down. A few moments later the familiar strains of the Pledge of Allegiance could be heard coming from the classroom. This was the beginning of what seemed to be a well-practiced series of rituals in the classroom. The students seamlessly moved from preparing for school, to reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, to listening to the teacher describe the upcoming events of the day.

This is part of the “daily grind” that Jackson (1968) discusses. Minds and bodies are conditioned into a course of action that facilitates what we’ve come to know as “school” and it is a common element that is repeated day in and day out throughout thousands of schools in American without much notice. As I thought about the opening of the school day, I also thought about the role of teacher-power as a component of the schooling experience, and how it is often taken for granted. Even with all of this activity, there were focused loci of control and power in the room. Obviously, the teacher exerted her power and influence in ways including her methods of instruction, classroom management, and even curricular design. The paraprofessionals also possessed their own power and authority, but they each exercised this power and authority in varying ways. I wondered how the reality of working in a one-room school has influenced the ways in

which they exercise their power. This line of questioning brought me back to Jackson (1968) and his description of the four responsibilities of a teacher: [1] deciding who speaks and who does not; [2] acting as supply sergeant; [3] granting of special privileges; and [4] officially keeping time (pp.11-14). I wondered how these seemingly standardized responsibilities of being a teacher would be articulated in this environment and how the execution of these responsibilities in this environment can inform my own praxis as a teacher/student- student/teacher (Freire, 2006) in the classroom.

Power, Authority, and Voice

Deciding who speaks and who does not is a necessary role of a teacher yet, as Jackson suggests, there is the possibility that the implications of this responsibility go unnoticed. Many social, political, and cultural factors can contribute to the ways in which teachers decide who speaks and who does not, and these factors directly relate to the teacher's philosophy of power and authority in the classroom. Through my observations I noticed the teacher used strategies that countered the traditional centering of power, authority, and voice in the classroom.

For example, the students had separated into groups to work on math. The older students went into the kitchen area, and the remaining students divided into groups and placed themselves into different areas of the room. The teacher sat in the corner of the room with a group of students who were working on calculating the mass of an object. During their discussion of this concept, many of the students were chiming in freely with suggestions and comments about the task at hand. It seemed to me that the act of sitting on the ground in a small group with their teacher almost made raising their hands to

speaking irrelevant. However, after observing them for a few minutes, I recognized that the students and teacher seemed to regard each other in such a familiar way that they could anticipate when and how to interact. I can compare it to experiences with my family. There are times when we are all engaged in a particular project, and when conditions are right, the patterns of communication are implicitly noticed and observed. There is less effort and energy spent in guiding communication – it just seems to “happen.” This allows us to worry less about how we “do things” and instead allows us to think more about the “thing” itself.

In addition, the teacher also allowed the students the opportunity to choose how they would like to complete the worksheets for calculating mass. The students chose the option of working in a group without the teacher walking them through the process step-by-step. This was another example of how this teacher has negotiated the responsibility of deciding who speaks and who does not in a way that was responsive, dynamic, and shifted the power of communication from the sole domain of the teacher to a shared responsibility by the students. Does this mean that the teacher never asked students to raise their hands? No, but it does suggest that the teacher and her paraprofessionals negotiate the responsibility of voice in the classroom in ways that might differ more regularly than the traditional classroom.

When the students separated into groups, the noise level increased slightly. Most of the noise came from the students quietly discussing the tasks they needed to complete. Occasionally students would leave their group and walk over to the teacher in an attempt to get her attention. The teacher quickly told them to go back to their group and work with the other students until she could arrive. Competition for the teacher’s attention, as

well as speaking to the teacher, was high in this setting. This is another example of deciding who can speak and when, as well as the concept of delay (Jackson, 1968). This proved somewhat frustrating for the girls who wanted to complete their project.

However, as the teacher came over to them and looked at their work, it became clear that these students did not complete all of the assignment. The noise in the room jumped dramatically as they protested having to complete the second side of the worksheet. Small outbreaks like this happened occasionally, and the teacher would periodically announce that the room was getting noisy. At these remarks the students would quickly quiet down. It seemed that volume control was an important consideration for the teacher. I found this to be interesting, not only as an observer, but as an observer who is also a teacher. I thought that the room was *pleasantly* noisy and the occasional swelling in volume was simply the way that school should sound. However, I also know that many teachers walk a dangerous line with a “noisy” classroom. In some schools, a “noisy” class is perceived to be a misbehaved class, and a misbehaved class is the sign of a bad teacher.

I wondered if my presence in the room brought those concerns to the attention of the teacher in some small way, and perhaps her attempts to keep the room quiet as often as she did was a result of my being there, or if it was simply a management strategy – something of a series of preemptive strikes to manage classroom noise before it got out of hand. The teacher never told the students to “be quiet,” or to imply that the students couldn’t or shouldn’t speak. Rather, she told them to work quietly and respectfully. The students quieted down a bit, and the teacher continued moving from group to group helping the students with their work. I sat near the teacher’s desk and heard all of the

hushed discussions in the not-so-quiet whispers that kids possess. To my right was a second grade student who had completed her work and was allowed to work on another project. She quietly sang to herself as she fastidiously colored inside the lines of her worksheet with her oversized crayons.

There was only one occasion while I was in the school that the noise in the room became a problem, and that situation was handled by the teacher in much the same way as the other changes in volume. In these instances, the decisions of who can speak, as well as when and how they can speak, were guided by unspoken factors that are shared by all classrooms, but in the one-room school, the teacher understood two important factors: (1) the students must communicate in their groups, and even between their groups; and (2) since those discussions had to occur in a single, small room, they had to be manageable. There weren't any walls that separated the first grade, second, and third grades – they were all in this together.

It was apparent to me, as I watched the teacher and her students, that the close-knit relationship they shared was a consequence of living in a small, rural town, and learning and working in the one-room school. As the old saying goes, “Necessity is the mother of invention,” and life in this one-room schoolhouse seems to consist of exploring alternatives to certain limitations (i.e. staff, space, and curricular requirements) that requires the teacher and students to develop ways of interacting that foster respect, encourage interaction, and provide opportunities to express their individual voices. This is not a condition that is guaranteed for all one-room schoolhouses (the experiences of Jesse Stuart in his book *The Thread That Runs So True* make that clear) but it does suggest that the nature of the one-room schoolhouse, more so than contemporary multi-

grade (meaning multiple classrooms and grades) schools, possesses a greater opportunity for students and teachers to transform the dynamics of power, authority, and voice in the classroom.

Teacher As Supply Sergeant

Anyone who has been a teacher can appreciate the role of “supply sergeant.” As I sat in the classroom and observed the students, the teacher moved quickly from group to group. At one point, the doorbell to the school rang and the teacher quickly disappeared, leaving her paraprofessionals to work with the students. A few moments later, the teacher reappeared carrying a case of paper. She then slipped through the doorway and returned with one more case. She would repeat this until a tower of five cases of paper was standing in the classroom by the teacher’s desk. In addition to receiving deliveries, the teacher was busy managing math manipulatives, pens, glue, and just about every other sort of school supply. As I watched the teacher piling up the cases of paper, I realized that she was much more than a teacher/supply sergeant. She was a teacher/supply sergeant/secretary/purchase officer/nurse/administrator/disciplinarian/librarian/cook and surrogate mother. Although she had the help of two paraprofessionals and the occasional volunteer, the many multiple responsibilities that are taken for granted in a contemporary school are vividly clear to a teacher in a one-room school. Whereas some teachers in traditional schools may feel at times like a ship tossed about on the ocean, this teacher, even with the help of the paraprofessionals, was an island in a sea of potential problems that constantly lapped at the shores, and although there were times when she may have seemed a bit daunted, she was never defeated.

In describing special privileges, Jackson describes the small things that teachers assign to students that help the teacher and provide structure to the classroom without being tied to a specific aspect of the planned curriculum. Examples include cleaning the erasers, safety patrol, and distributing supplies (Jackson, 1968). In this setting, these “special privileges” seem less special and more mundane. It is a reality of this type of environment that students become more active (and willing to be active) so that the teacher can better meet the needs of the students. I’m sure there are special privileges that are to be had in this environment, but I did not witness any while I was in the classroom. Perhaps it may be easier to observe special privileges in traditional schools because so much of what happens in that space is controlled and compartmentalized by the teacher.

At this school, compartmentalization of the curriculum is less noticeable as the teacher is not simply managing a single lesson plan, but is typically executing three (or more) lesson plans simultaneously. Not only are there students of different grades in the classroom, but as in other schools, there are students with certain exceptionalities that must be addressed, as well as students with varying levels of performance within each grade. It should be noted that most of the time, the assigning of special privileges occurs without being specifically brought to the attention of the students or teacher (or in this case, the researcher as well). With this in mind, it is highly likely (if not certain) that the assignment of special privileges was occurring, but that I had not developed the sensitivity to notice this behavior in the classroom.

Timing and Delay

The fourth responsibility Jackson defines is “time keeper.” During my visit to the school, I was convinced that time behaved differently than in any other school. For example, as I was taking notes I suddenly had the realization that I was very tired. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I looked up at the clock. I had only been at the school for an hour and I was already exhausted. The students in the room chatted and worked on their respective projects. The phone rang frequently. The teacher and paraprofessionals were constantly on the move. I thought about my own experience teaching at a high school in Cincinnati. I could last an entire day in my classroom and not feel tired, yet here I was worn out after an hour. I had no idea how the teacher could do this day in and day out. I watched the teacher also look up at the clock. Her eyes widened a bit and she came over to her desk. “Welcome to organized chaos,” she said as she flashed a smile, and with that she started collecting the students for their mid-morning snack.

As it turned out, much of the teacher’s thoughts were consumed by a change in schedule. The students were to go to music class in the municipal building next door, but a change in the schedule had altered the normal course of the day. I realized in this situation that such disruptions to the school schedule could be common. In a small school with a small staff, it wouldn’t take much to upset the normal flow of events. However, the teacher seemed ever-ready to shoot from the hip and make adjustments whenever necessary. This involved variations of delay that I mentioned earlier. On occasion, the teacher had to delay the recognition of students and their desire to be heard or to express themselves in order to give all of the students what she felt to be a fair and equitable learning experience. This involved having the teacher shape the flow of the

classroom into stages. These stages did not seem fixed. Rather, they were pragmatically designed and implemented to make the best of any given situation.

When students were delayed in speaking or gaining the teacher's attention, they were often redirected in a way that kept them actively engaged in some activity. In traditional settings many times the pace of learning in the classroom is affected by different factors including the ability of some students to engage with the concepts that are presented to them. However, in this school the teacher can mitigate this effect by allowing students to transgress the borders of grade divisions and work with other students closer to their ability level or with a common interest. In some cases, students who demonstrate a greater understanding of the task at hand can assist in the teaching of their peers. Not only does this assist the teacher in managing the staging of the curriculum, but it also addresses issues of compassion, positive social interaction, and respect. These are values that are held in high regard at this school.

The "staging" of the curriculum in a traditional setting is supported by the structure of the school. Much of what occurs in school, and when it occurs, is dependent upon who is doing the instruction and where. For instance, in a traditional school the pacing and segmentation of what is learned might be coordinated with other classes that need access to resources such as the gymnasium, music room, or lunchroom. At this school, much of what the students do is located at the school – in their classroom, with the one noted exception being the music lesson which is held for the students at the municipal building next door. Much, if not all, of the staging this teacher provides occurs within the four walls of this room, and much of that staging can be described as whole-class shifts, meaning the entire class stops a task and moves on to the next, or segmented

shifts, where groups within the class, for instance by age or by assignment/topic/project, move from one task to the next.

The ability to manipulate and transgress the artificially imposed boundaries of the curriculum is one of the most significant aspects of the one-room schoolhouse. Granted, “artificially imposed” is a strong term, and I don’t mean to belittle or diminish the work curricular theorists and developers have done in understanding how curriculum should be developed and implemented. However, at the same time, we must recognize that the reality of life in classrooms (to borrow Jackson’s term) often eludes the most elegant of theories. In these instances, individuals living and learning in these schools must develop their own understanding (through their praxis) of what education means and how they will undertake such an endeavor. I have used the four responsibilities of teaching described by Jackson (1968) above in describing some of the ways in which the curriculum of the one-room schoolhouse helps students, teacher, and even members of the community make meaning out of the experience of school, and although each of these dimensions are important, I believe they are all predicated upon one significant theme.

Concepts of compassion, social interaction, and respect are held in high regard at this school and can be summed up in the word “family” – a term each individual in this study used in discussing the school. This theme serves as the foundation of the educational experience in this one-room school and, although the notion of family may be a prevalent theme found in many classrooms, it acts as a central, differential factor here. As such, it adds a significant dimension to the characteristics of living and learning in a one-room schoolhouse and sets it apart from the learning experiences generally found in contemporary, multi-grade schools.

Family, Friends, and Community

There was a stark contrast in the atmosphere of the room once the students left the school to attend music class at the municipal building next door. The room was quiet, still, and empty. The teacher and one of the paraprofessionals sat down with me to talk about the school and life in this little village. We were eventually joined by a second paraprofessional. Earlier that morning, I had spent some time with a volunteer who had children attending the school. She had given me a lot to think about in terms of what she saw as the value of this one-room school, and I was curious to see if these were values that the teacher and paraprofessionals also recognized. The people who work at the school are an interesting mix of individuals. Both of the paraprofessionals lived in the town. One of had worked in the school for six years and the other for 14. I got the feeling that they were insiders, “townies.” The volunteer told me earlier that morning that there were two types of people who lived in this village: (1) those who aren’t long-time inhabitants or aren’t as involved in the goings-on in the village; and (2) “townies,” long-time residents who have an interest in the village, and most likely, the school.

The teacher lived in a city further up the valley and commuted to work everyday. This was her second year teaching at the school, and I got the distinct impression that even with her apparent love and care for the students and the people with whom she worked, she and the paraprofessionals both felt that she still may be regarded by some as an “outsider.” The paraprofessionals were in their mid-to-late 30s and the teacher was in her early 40s. Judging from the way they moved around the room and teased each other, they were comfortable working together and they laughed and joked with one another. They seemed to have a healthy and happy working relationship, although they also let me

know that it wasn't trouble-free. Like any other group of people who work closely together, they have their occasional disagreements.

Service and the Curriculum of Compassion

As I mentioned earlier, a volunteer had met with me in the morning. She had a child who attended the school. She was friendly and amiable, and seemed genuinely excited to speak with me about the school. I asked her "what is the purpose of education?" and she responded by saying the purpose of education is to prepare students for the workforce and to live in a democracy. She then added, "The kids learn the difference between wrong and right, and then that's reinforced here at the school." I asked her what she meant by that and she responded saying that the students learn what it means to care for each other. "The kids are taught about bullying and about other people's feelings. This school teaches them how to get along with each other and how to accept each other."

She continued, saying that a variety of factors contribute to the ways in which students learn these lessons. She believed having the students together in one-room created a situation where they would need to develop good social skills just to "survive." The constant close proximity caused students to learn how to get along. They had to develop strategies that gave them the ability to accomplish what they needed to accomplish while still considering the wants and needs of those around them. They couldn't retreat from the reality of the situation by returning to "home room" or to another class.

The volunteer also believes that the older students are "...taught to care for the younger kids because they get the experience of helping them out with their work. They learn to serve each other." These opportunities to serve not only help the younger students in learning the concepts, but they may also instill within the older students a larger capacity for compassion and a greater appreciation for finding opportunities to help those who need it. "They really see each other as kind of brothers and sisters in a large family." The volunteer said, "They may understand there are certain differences, but those differences don't matter that much because they're 'all in it together'."

Not only does the volunteer believe the one-room school helps to develop close-knit relationships founded on concepts of compassion and service, but she also believes it opens up social opportunities for students and removes artificial barriers that exist in multi-grade schools. For instance, she told me about how her experiences in a multi-grade school, and how she felt that the multiple classes and grades made it difficult for the students to "cross grades," meaning that when interacting in or outside of school, the students' social lives were usually kept within their grade levels. In her experience, the division of students by grade extended to social relationships and interaction outside of school. Here, at this school, the students didn't have that division because all of the grades were kept together. The volunteer also mentioned that she felt that in addition to respecting each other, the students also learned to "respect their elders." I asked her to tell me what she meant by that, and I was slightly surprised by her answer. I anticipated the traditional, authoritative view, but instead she said, "...to respect their elders, to think of them later in life. They're our future voters!" I was intrigued by her mention of raising future voters, a discourse that as a teacher I find seriously lacking in public education. I

knew there was something behind this, that somewhere there was a story that contributed to this statement, so I decided to dig a little deeper.

Democracy and Education and the One-room Schoolhouse

I asked her about the relationship between the community and the school. The volunteer mentioned that it was a fairly positive relationship, but that it had changed over the years. The community was no longer comprised by a majority of long-term, multigenerational residents. Instead, a larger number of newer and part-time residents have come into town. In addition, the population has aged, with fewer families having young students who attend the school. As the population changed, so did attitudes towards the schools. Concerns over the cost of maintaining a one-room school feature prominently in debates regarding the future of the village school. To make matters worse, the current economic downfall has added a sense of urgency and credibility to the arguments posed by those who want to close the school.

At the same time, those who want to maintain the school make their arguments with an understanding that a commitment to this type of schooling experience now comes at an even greater cost. Reminders of the tension regarding the school are ever-present in the village. “There’s a guy with a bumper sticker on his truck that says, ‘It takes a school to bankrupt a village,’” the volunteer said with a troubled grin on her face. “We may not see the effects of the recession as prominently here,” she added, “but we’re not recession proof.”

Economic tension is felt in the village, particularly when the school is brought into the conversation. As of March, the school was forced to take serious budget cuts.

“Everything is done here on a village basis,” the volunteer said, “Everyone has his or her own opinion; some want to close the school because they think it will be cheaper and others want to keep it. I want to keep it.” The volunteer views the school as an investment. “These are the kids who are going to vote in the future,” she adds, and again I’m reminded of the importance of individual participation in the democratic process. “We don’t do things by ballot here,” the volunteer continued, referring to the way citizens vote on things like the school budget. “We take care of everything in the town meetings. If you’re not there, you don’t get to vote.” The volunteer mentioned the last election in March. “We had a full house of about 60 people.” She said. This meant that approximately ten per cent of the residents in this village went to the meeting to vote.

I found democracy to be an important theme in this little school. I thought about John Dewey and his laboratory school in Chicago. Dewey had once written that, “A democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, p. 87, 1916). To a degree, I felt that life in this one-room school, and in the village, matched Dewey’s description of a democratic community. Like other schools, this learning experience involved members of the community and was intersected by the political struggles of that community. However, themes of community were privileged in this school to a large degree, and the very nature of the curriculum and how it was both planned and enacted seemed to foster respect and a willingness to not only share one’s ideas, but to hear the ideas of others as well. The volunteer mentioned that the students’ experience a sense of camaraderie and integration. She added that she felt they were more integrated and learned to support each other and work as a group. More important, she felt that although they were often working in

groups, the students were also “allowed to be unique,” which suggested that there was a certain level of tolerance and acceptance possessed by the students in this little village school. I felt like these were important concepts as I wrestled with the notion of a “great curriculum,” and Dewey also recognized these concepts as he defined what he meant by a “good” form of associated living that was:

...to be judged good when it contributes positively to free intercourse, to unhampered exchange of ideas, to mutual respect and friendship and love – in short, to those modes of behaving which make life richer and more worth living for everybody concerned; and conversely, any custom or institution which impedes progress toward these goals is judged bad. (Westbrook, 1992, p.247)

I use this quote from Dewey to describe aspects of this one-room school and its potential to further meet this definition. The volunteer whom I interviewed definitely believed that attending this one-room school made life richer and worth living. She beamed about the care and compassion demonstrated by the students. The teacher and paraprofessionals also echoed this sentiment stating that the students seem to overlook certain issues when working with each other.

They also noted times when problems between students arose. However, they mentioned that these situations were few and far between, and that when they did arise the teacher was able to approach the issues with students in ways that spoke to the relationship they have as students in the school; that somehow their association as classmates was more than simply an association via education, but rather the basis of the association was as members of a community that recognized the individual and his or her humanity. This notion stood in direct conflict with Jackson’s observation of students learning to be “alone in a crowd” (Jackson, p. 16, 1967). It was almost as if everyone knew in this school that they were too small to survive if they approached life in their

classroom as individuals alone in a crowd. I thought about my own teaching experiences and the large, cosmopolitan schools that my children attend, and wondered how they would hold-up as sites of “associated living” when compared to this one-room school using Dewey’s criteria of evaluation.

Family

As the volunteer spoke about the kids, the school and the community, one word kept coming to mind – and then she said it.

”It’s like a family.”

I smiled at her as we both confirmed that there was definitely something “family-like” about this school. I kept this notion of family in the back of my mind as I sat down to speak with the teacher and the paraprofessionals. Normally, music class allowed the teacher a time to regroup and prepare for the rest of the day, but today she and the paraprofessionals graciously answered my questions about the school. I asked the teacher what it was like teaching in this school. She mentioned that the first year was difficult because she had very little notice before being offered the position and had little time to prepare for the new environment. During her first few weeks in the one-room school, she learned to develop a pragmatic approach to the problems that arose in the classroom. By this she meant that she sought solutions for each individual situation in a thoughtful and analytic way, knowing that there was no guarantee that “what worked” in similar situations during her previous experience as a teacher would work here.

She jokingly described the environment in the school as “controlled chaos.” I understood what she was saying because I was there, but I didn’t know how I would

convey that to the reader. The term was oxymoronic, yet it did describe an essential characteristic of the one-room school. Teaching, as in any classroom with 25 students under the age of 10, requires a certain level of control. However, at the one-room schoolhouse, factors such as the difference in students' ages, space limitations, and the expectations of the planned curriculum, affect the way in which this control is exercised and maintained. Even more important was the emphasis on caring and respect that permeated the entire curriculum. I felt as if there was a broad understanding of "control" as it applied to what happens in the school, and that within this broad framework was a level of flexibility and sensitivity that allowed for this particular type of education.

I'm sure the teacher established her "ground rules" at the beginning of the year, and these rules most likely operated in ways similar to those in contemporary multi-grade schools. However, ultimately the ground rules had to be flexible. They had to allow for the unexpected interruptions and modifications that often occur, as well as the individual contributions students make to the learning environment. The negotiation of *enacting* a caring curriculum from a *planned*, state-endorsed curriculum, the complexity of teaching across multiple grade-levels and ages, and the monumental task of managing the minutiae of life in the one-room schoolhouse all become manifest in a contained, entropic state. This controlled chaos is governed through the joint recognition that "We are all in this together."

So, to a large degree, the teacher relies on the students and paraprofessionals as much as they rely on her. While there was a structure that governed how school was conducted here, it was a structure that allowed for unplanned and unexpected eruptions in how the students and teachers would learn from, and teach, each other.

An important feature of the education that occurs within this controlled chaos is choice. In describing how teaching in the one-room schoolhouse differs from other environments, the teacher said that she has more choice in regard to what she wants to teach and how she wants to teach it. She feels that choice empowers students and gives them ownership to engage the material in ways that encourage learning. This also speaks to the democratic atmosphere of the school in that students must learn to communicate their choices amongst the voices of the other students and teachers. In regard to the teacher, the freedom to utilize the curriculum of three grades provides her greater choice and maneuverability. However, there are conflicts. The state has mandated the use of a math program that teaches certain concepts by grade, which means she can not “blur the lines” between grade designations for math, and this is a source of frustration for her considering the nature of this school.

I then asked the teacher and paraprofessionals about the relationship between the community and the school. They mentioned many of the same concerns the volunteer had mentioned earlier that morning. One of the paraprofessionals added that the parents in the community “are concerned about if their kids will be ready to go to the ‘other’ (traditional school in the town down the road) school.” The other paraprofessional responded by saying that the students from this one-room school generally do better socially and academically than the students from other elementary schools. My visit with the superintendent later that afternoon corroborated this claim by mentioning that students from the village school generally are “at the top of their class” by high school and are “almost always” captains of the football team or “recognized as being leaders.”

I then asked the teacher about the political atmosphere in the village, particularly as it pertained to the school. The teacher mentioned the recent budget cuts and the normal “growing pains” that are associated with a new teacher in an established school. From their conversation I gathered that, although the teacher was primarily responsible for the education of the students at the village school, many of the community members considered her an “outsider,” and instead would approach the paraprofessional who had been with the school for 14 years.

“Can you tell me what this school means to you?” I asked, and the teacher responded by saying that she wanted all of her kids to succeed and excel in what they learn at school. She wanted them to be prepared to move on. She also mentioned the word “family.” She mentioned how her relationships with the students who were in first and second grade last year (her first year at the school) are different now one year later. This is a distinct characteristic of this school in that the teacher will remain with students for three years of their educational career, and the relationship they develop together is undoubtedly different from those relationships with students and teachers in traditional schools. Both the teacher and students are able to develop a better understanding of each other over the course of the three years they spend together living and learning in the one-room schoolhouse.

Both of the paraprofessionals agreed with the teacher regarding the feeling of family at the one-room school. “It’s like my home,” said the paraprofessional who had been with the school for 14 years. “Sometimes I’ll take the kids next door for music lesson, and when it’s all over I’ll say, ‘Alright, let’s go back home!’” Her eyes started to water as she spoke. “The kids know I don’t mean *home*, I mean the school.”

All eyes were on this woman as she spoke passionately about the type of education that happens at this school. She went on to describe how the combination of the history of the school, the small community, and the relationship with the students create a special type of education. While there are challenges in working in this environment, she felt the rewards outweighed the costs. As she described her experiences at the school, it seemed to me that she felt that instilling within the students a desire to learn and helping them develop the ability to respect and care for others, was a task that was undeniably unique to learning in the one-room school. “They don’t get that at any other school,” she added with emphasis. Unfortunately, this would be her last year at the school, and I felt the weight of that reality as she spoke about her desire to go to school and get her teaching license. At the time, I was happy to hear that she decided to get her licensure. It was obvious she was passionate about teaching, and perhaps some day she could passionately practice her love of teaching at this school. But again, I sensed there was another chapter of this story that was yet to be told.

I thanked the teacher and the paraprofessionals for letting me visit their school. I had enjoyed every minute of it, and to be honest, I didn’t want to leave just yet. However, I was invited to meet with the district superintendent, who was a principal at the one-room school for several years, and I wanted to hear what she had to say about this one-room school nestled in this quiet, little, New England village. I was curious to see how an administrator, and particularly an administrator who didn’t spend everyday in the one-room school, would talk about the one-room school. Feeling somewhat conflicted about leaving, I hopped into my car and drove to the district offices that were only a few minutes down the road.

I pulled into town and met with the superintendent who graciously invited me to lunch. We sat at in a booth at a local pub and talked about what I had discovered so far. The superintendent wasn't surprised. "It's a lovely school." She said, with a smile. I thought about the *untold story* that I felt existed every time I asked about the relationship between the community and the school. The superintendent acknowledged that the relationship had been strained, and that the source of that strain was ultimately due to finances. I asked her about the town meeting, and she corroborated the number of people in attendance. "There were 68 people in that meeting, I believe, but only six of those people voting had students in the school." I was shocked. "Where were the other parents?" I asked, but she didn't have an answer. This was part of the untold story. This is part of the reason why the volunteer was so concerned about raising students who were socially and civically aware and active. The superintendent then revealed the final chapter. The paraprofessionals at the one-room school had both lost their jobs due to the recent budget cuts. What I mistook as a voluntary decision for one of the paraprofessionals to leave the school and earn her teaching license was actually a forced departure. This affected me in a profound way, not only because this woman was losing her livelihood, but also because she was also being forced to leave her "extended family."

I thanked the superintendent for her time and for approving my request to visit the one-room school. As noted earlier, there are precious few one-room schoolhouses in America. The majority of these schools are scattered through the vast, rural expanse of the Midwest, and these schools operate primarily out of necessity rather than choice. Issues such as student transportation to and from school make the contemporary multi-grade school model financially unfeasible for many of these districts. I had contacted

over half a dozen of these one-room schools for the purposes of this study, and only this district responded to my request. After a careful and extensive waiting period, I was finally granted access, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to come to this school. Although I didn't have a particular one-room schoolhouse in mind, this school was special in that it didn't *have* to exist. The students at this school could very easily attend one of the other elementary schools down the road, but there was something special about this school. With that in mind, I walked to my car and plopped into the driver's seat. A few minutes later I passed through the sleepy little village and peered out the window at the one-room schoolhouse one last time.

Leaving the One-room Schoolhouse Behind

As I slowly drove past the one-room schoolhouse I realized it contained (and facilitated) a special approach to education and an educational lifestyle that was rapidly fading away. For this study, I wasn't interested in dissecting methods or evaluating outcomes. Instead, I wanted to experience something that was distinctive and unique, and that challenged my assumptions of the aims, purposes, and practices of schooling — that is a great curriculum. At this tiny school, I experienced a milieu of controlled chaos, political intrigue, and a unique family-like culture that seemed to permeate every aspect of the school. That is what made it great. These characteristics exist to some degree in all public schools, but what differentiates this little schoolhouse from the typical American school is that these features situate it at the heart of this tiny community. The school is as much the community as the village itself. For all intents and purposes, the school serves as the crucible through which the civic discourse and disposition of the community is

smelted, forged, and refined. Here, apart from the teaching of the “official” curriculum, I recognized a commitment to introducing students to a life of democratic engagement and service. I wondered about the members of the community who attended the meeting in March, and more important, about those people who didn’t. Do the members of that community understand that teaching first, second, and third grades in one room is nothing like the experience of teaching a single grade in a single room? The managing of the curriculum and dealing with children at different developmental stages is a challenge in and of itself, but when those challenges are enlarged through a combination of a one-room learning environment, financial difficulties, and the pressures of politics – it’s an almost impossible situation. More important, I wondered if they understood the feelings of family and community that made this school a distinctive learning environment. Here, the teacher and paraprofessionals, along with the volunteers who assist them, continue to work in maintaining a school that appears to be both unique and effective. Apart from serving as an icon of American education, the school struggles with maintaining its own pedagogical orientation while keeping with the demands of a state-mandated curriculum. It is a school that possesses a group of people who are concerned with social and civic development as much as academic achievement, and yet in light of all this, it is a school which stands at the brink of extinction.

As I drove down the winding road that led out of the valley, I thought a lot about this little one-room school and the obscure legacy I was leaving behind. Did this school employ a “great” curriculum? Yes. I believe so, if simply because beneath the academic experiences of schooling in this small town were infused with a concern to democratically address the tensions rising from the interposition of public and private

concerns in social life. This caused me to think about schooling in terms of the social relationships that we in education (as parents, teachers and administrators) often take for granted. The curriculum of the one-room schoolhouse has, at its heart, a concern for the development of community. The emphasis on care and respect exhibited by the volunteers, teachers, *and* students contributes directly to the establishment of civic compassion and engagement. At this school, the academic development of the students is complemented by a desire for communal solidarity and responsibility. Ironically, the curriculum of this one-room schoolhouse speaks to communal solidarity, while at the same time the schoolhouse represents the greatest source of discontent in the village.

The circumstances of the school, its finances, and the complicated relationship with the community that it serves reinforces my understanding that education is always at the intersection of political action – whether that is through the political wrangling of elected officials or the negotiations of associated living between teachers and pupils. As the teachers and students in the school engage in their endeavors to learn and promote compassion and solidarity, the reality of villagers campaigning against the school, the apathy of parents in terms of their voting responsibilities, and the difficulties in managing the costs of this extraordinary educational experience, all endanger the future of the one-room schoolhouse.

What is lost if the village closes the school? For starters, the students will be exposed to more students and teachers, which will result in more opportunities to develop social relationships. The opportunity for them to use updated materials and technology while learning will likely increase, and they may be offered more resources in terms of tutoring, special education care, and economic support. However, at the same time, the

students will leave their village to go to school at a contemporary multi-grade school down the road. They will spend one year with a teacher instead of three consecutive years, and chances are members of their community will spend less time serving as volunteers in their school. More important, they will experience a paradigm-shift in terms of how they experience education, as the curriculum of this one-room schoolhouse delivers, to a greater degree than larger, multi-grade schools, a contextualized school experience that arises from specialized attempts to meet the students' academic and social needs.

And yet, it is the debate as to what the needs of the community are that threatens the one-room schoolhouse. How can the citizens of the village reconcile the fiscal needs of the village and the existence of this truly distinct educational experience? Will the democratic process that seems to feature so prominently in the lives of the members of the community preserve this great curriculum or eliminate it? Although this little school emerged from the ravages of the revolutionary war, its greatest challenge will be found in the political struggles that will either allow it to survive as a contemporary institution with a living-history, or as an expired relic of a forgotten past.

Response by Tom Poetter

I was thrilled that Kevin wanted to take on the study of a one-room schoolhouse. In terms of access, we didn't know in the beginning that it would be so hard to gain it. The main issue is the rapid deterioration for support that many of the remaining one room schoolhouses are feeling so poignantly early in the 21st century. They are nearly extinct now, and I fear that they may be completely extinct by the time the next decade rolls

around. The school Kevin studied is distinctly threatened by the economy today and the problem of scale that the one room schoolhouse poses to the public. Perhaps to be studied, even when calling something “great,” constitutes too big a risk for so many in such threatening situations at this time. We therefore extend great gratitude to the Croydon Village School for allowing Kevin to interact with them, for allowing us to write about them here, and for allowing us to call what they do “great” (Akpan, 2009).

I had known about the incredible power of the one-room schoolhouse concept and practice for a longtime, because my mother attended one in rural Kansas as a child and still speaks reverently and passionately about it, and because I had read about it in iconic books by Stuart (1998) and Breece (1995), and as a result of interacting over the years with one of the great proponents of the valuable things that can happen educationally in a one-room schoolhouse, John Goodlad. Goodlad (2004) has written extensively about the one-room schoolhouse, with the power of someone who claims that a long, distinguished career as a teacher, scholar, and voice for public schooling and democracy began with his experiences of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in Canada. For me, the one-room schoolhouse has always posed the most astounding set of possibilities, because it’s small enough for the teacher to honor the developing hearts and minds of each child, while using the presence of students across an age spectrum to develop a working, living community of learners that can act like a microcosm of our social and political democracy.

Of course, the one-room schoolhouse, as the common school made its way across the frontier, could be a violent and threatening place, too, not one conducive to much learning, especially if the schoolmaster or schoolmarm happened to dislike children or

the job altogether. There are plenty of stories of early school life in this country – especially when the one-room schoolhouse served a significant portion of our population in rural areas – that would make your toes curl or blood boil, and maybe both all at the same time. But there also exists a certain practical romanticism that comes with the ideal and practices of the one-room schoolhouse that capture notions of “great” and that should be highlighted as they are in Kevin’s chapter and here.

For example, the notion of setting up a school in a non-graded manner, not in the sense that formal grades aren’t given to students (though that might be up for grabs as well in terms of best practice), but in the sense of not dividing students up to receive a school program merely in term of experiences with age peers only, does have significant appeal and merit, both in terms of helping all students reach significant academic ends as well as social ends.

In terms of the academic ends, non-graded settings in which students learn together in multi-aged groupings often provide the kind of rich cross-age experiences in which older students support the younger and vice versa. Of course, many teachers know that the best way to learn something is to teach it. Learning for older students is often reinforced when supporting the learning of early concepts by younger students. And younger students bring fresh ideas to the table, and often influence the thinking of older students simply by interacting with them around intellectual material.

And in terms of the social ends, a sense of community develops, almost always in the most positive of ways, when students across ages interact with regard to ideas and on significant projects that build a sense of belonging, support, and mutual benefit for all involved. Children have an incredible capacity to honor each other and their gifts when

they have a chance to work together on significant projects. And they have the chance to build experiences of working through conflict, interacting with adults and peers to make decisions of import, failing, taking risks, and making a real difference in people's lives on a daily basis based on what they decide to do or not to do. This all contributes to the figurative heartbeat of a person participating in democratic life.

There is no doubt that aspects of progressive education embody the structure and lived experience of the one-room school house, and the remaining progressive schools of a larger scale such as Central Academy Non-graded in Middletown, Ohio, as chronicled in this book. The inspiration that both give lies in the fact that engaging students individually and providing the opportunity for students to build a social life together on purpose are possible in both the small and larger scales. It can be done in schools, and it doesn't take the isolation and romance of a one-room schoolhouse to do it. The fact remains that the power of the one-room schoolhouse lives on in our culture and in our practice of public education, not only in our collective memories of bygone days spent learning in one-room schools, but also in real one-room schools that live on, as well as in the best progressive schools of the day that work hard to embody the commitments to individual and group education and that help society fulfill the moral purpose of preparing students to function and thrive in the political and social democracies of this great land.

A Final Word by Kevin Smith

I'm grateful to Tom for this opportunity to explore the curriculum of a one-room schoolhouse in a contemporary setting, and I agree with his assertion that the power of

the one-room school house lives on. For some, the concept of the one-room schoolhouse is relegated to the past. The buildings exist as museums, meeting places for historical societies, or as derelict structures on the outskirts of town. However, for many, the one-room schoolhouse continues to represent the essence of American education. It exists in its iconography. Caricatures of little red buildings with tiny bell towers adorn packages for school supplies. They're found on the Parent Teacher Organization stickers that moms and dads wear when volunteering at their child's school, and they are regularly used by state and federal agencies in the educational materials they produce. Simply put, the one-room schoolhouse is an enduring educational legacy, but conceptually it represents so much more.

In the case of the Croydon Village School, this one-room schoolhouse served to foreshadow the current national debate regarding economy, curriculum, and the aims and goals of public education. Although I visited the school over a year ago, the arguments for and against the one-room school then are now being played-out on a much grander scale in federal and state legislatures, as well as local school districts throughout the country. Although other schools at the time were undoubtedly involved in the same struggles, I find it fitting that I was introduced to these debates here, at the one-room schoolhouse. For me, the greatness of this school not only exists in its distinctive curriculum and culture, but also in its powerful representation of the institution of public education in America. This institution not only creates the possibility of democracy, it is the only institution that can create and maintain democracy as a social reality.

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