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"Oh, It Was Different Then!" Case Stories of Unsought Change in the Lives of Three Retired Elementary School Teachers

Mary Phillips Manke
National-Louis University

I interviewed three retired teachers who began their careers in Wisconsin one-room schools and retired as teachers in a large suburban elementary school. These case stories explore the three women's experience of and responses to change. I suggest that their positive attitudes call into question assumptions in the school change literature about teacher resistance to change.

"When I look back to how different everything was then, I can't believe it was really me, really the same person." That's something my mother used to say as the 80s of the century and the 70s of her lifetime wound down together. She'd look back to the years of her childhood in a small town on the North Dakota prairie. She'd recall horses pulling the sleigh to Christmas at grandmother's farm; winters without a fresh fruit or vegetable on the table, so that a Christmas orange was something to be excited about; her young, strong father dying of pneumonia in the flu epidemic after World War I.

Then she'd look around her as she sat in her daughter's house in Santa Monica. Family members flew across the world in jet airplanes, eating Chinese one night and pasta salad the next. She had a cataract removed through laser surgery. And she found it hard to connect the two worlds.

Her talk about this feeling raised in my mind a disconcerting image of my mother as a small, stable point, around which the world was spinning and swirling as it changed. The sensation was somewhat like that of looking up at the sky on a day when the wind is strong, seeing the clouds moving faster than clouds should move. It makes you feel off-balance for a moment, as though the earth you are standing on could blow away too.

In reality, my mother was a voluntary participant in the change she lived. Moving from North Dakota to California and then to New Mexico, Illinois, and Florida; traveling to every state but Alaska, to Mexico, to Canada, and to Micronesia; leaving the political and cultural space of her North Dakota relatives behind—she chose to live far from her origins.

Thus I was intrigued when, working on a study of the beliefs of retired women teachers (Green & Manke, 1994), I interviewed three women whose experiences had been quite different from my mother's. Unlike her, they really had "stayed put," while the world was changing around them.

These three retired teachers taught for many years in Dutchville,[1] now a suburb at the northwest edge of Milwaukee County. Their careers had a single pattern. All retired from a large suburban school, Jo Foster Elementary, between 1981 and 1991. They had long and enjoyable lives as teachers; the oldest began teaching in 1932, the others during World War II. Each interrupted her career to have children; each returned eagerly to the classroom. All retired when family pressures required it; none said she was glad to leave the classroom. At first glance, their lives and careers seemed exceptionally stable and without incident. "I taught, I married, I raised children, I returned to teaching, I loved it, I finally had to retire because of my family's needs," they said.

But as I talked with them, I realized that they had in fact experienced enormous amounts of change, while literally staying in one place during their entire careers. Each began teaching in a one- or two-room rural school not far from Jo Foster Elementary. Some of the schools they taught in during those early years were merged into the larger school; they were moved to Jo Foster as it grew and their small schools were closed.

When they began teaching, Dutchville was home to dairy cattle, cornfields, and pigs. Small village centers had a store and a couple of churches; most people lived on working farms. Suburban growth began in the 1960s, but

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mary Phillips Manke, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Curriculum and Instruction, National-Louis University, 325 North Corporate Drive, Suite 200, Brookfield, WI 53045.

[1]Pseudonyms are used throughout.

the real population explosion was related to the desegregation of Milwaukee's public schools in the mid-1970s. An exodus of White residents from Milwaukee's north and northwest side naturally pushed into this northwestern suburb. Jobs followed them, and Dutchville now has retail centers, office complexes, and light industry. Improved highways make it easy for Dutchville residents to travel to work all over Milwaukee.

Many residents today, then, are not from Dutchville, and have their roots in Milwaukee's old ethnic neighborhoods. But the three teachers I interviewed all sat in Dutchville while change came to them.

Meanwhile, many changes were happening elsewhere that affected these three women as they remained in Dutchville. As one of them said during an interview, "Oh, it was different then!" There was structural change from one-room to two-room to four-room and, finally, to graded elementary schools; change in educational levels and credentials of teachers; change in technologies available to assist their work; change in the curriculum they were expected to teach; change in expectations of schools, students, and parents; change in the relationship of teacher to community; and change in the lives of students and in society.

All three teachers, perhaps surprisingly, expressed a positive response to much of the change they had experienced. They did not "bitterly resent" change as Fullan (1991, p. 35) and others would expect (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1982). On the contrary, they said they had welcomed it, and sometimes seemed almost embarrassed to talk about the way things were in the early part of their careers.

One reason for their acceptance of change seems to be that they viewed change as modernization. Living through a period of drastic change in the world around them, they had little trouble accepting the idea that the schools and classrooms they taught in must change too. The interview transcripts reveal a little nostalgia here and there, but mostly pride in their ability to adapt to change, along with responsibility to be critical of changes when they were proposed. As Cora Ulm said,

> Well, I think you just accept it as a part of progress, because you know that those one-rooms schools weren't going to stay, and they were becoming a vanishing thing. I remember when we graduated from Dodge County Normal, we went to visit a few schools up there and there were a lot of those that didn't have any electricity or anything. How long some of those lasted, I don't know. I mean, we felt that was backwards country.

Methodology

This study is of a type described by Biddle and Anderson as a "case story" (1993, p. 238). Its credibility is based on the extent which the reader, assisted by the author, can make connections with the lives and ideas of the subjects. For that reason, I seek to write in a way that engages the reader and that provides details that support such connections.

Rather than being an investigation of a particular research question, my study is based on the presence of a salient theme in an existing body of data. The interviews on which it was based were conducted for a study of the views of retired teachers on the changing image of teachers during their careers and years of retirement. That study (Green & Manke, 1994) used material from interviews of 11 teachers to illustrate their ideas about the importance of dedication to teaching and its rewards, financial and intrinsic.

The other eight teachers in that first study were urban teachers. As I and my coauthor analyzed the 11 interviews, I recognized that the 3 Dutchville teachers, whom I had interviewed, had a special experience that related to the way change had come into their teaching lives. When the initial study was finished, I began to reread the transcripts of these three interviews, trying to understand the meaning that change, and their response to it, had for them.

For this paper, I have focused on that aspect of the interview transcripts, producing an analysis which, although not assuming wide generalizability, does raise some questions. As pointed out by many philosophers of science (cited in Moss, 1996), research cannot produce knowledge claims resting on unshakable foundations. However, it can produce challenges to widely accepted hypotheses. This article, through its account of the lives and beliefs of three rural teachers, foregrounds "new insights and understandings" (Biddle & Anderson, 1993, p. 238) that challenge some views about teachers' response to change appearing in the literature on change in schools.

Long interviews with each of the three retired teachers, recommended to me by practicing teachers in the Dutchville schools, were the heart of these case stories. I conducted the unstructured interviews in the teachers' homes during the winter of 1991-1992. They were tape recorded and fully transcribed. I began each interview by asking a "grand tour" question (Spradley, 1979): Each teacher told the story of her teaching career. When the grand tour had reached the teacher's retirement, I asked several follow-up questions about the teacher's views of change in the image that others have of her profession. As I read and interpreted the interviews, I spoke with the teachers by telephone whenever their meaning was unclear to me.

Up to this point, I have spoken as though these three women were almost interchangeable members of a matched set, and it is true that there were great similarities among them and their experiences. But, of course, they were three unique individuals. At this point, then, I wish to introduce

each of them, hoping to give some flavor of their personalities.

Sally Tate. Sally's house is way out in winter-dreary country, at the intersection of two county roads, which have evidently been widened to take away part of her front yard. Inside, though, the house is warm and cozy, and she serves me tea—bought, she says, at the Laura Ingalls Wilder shop in Winona, Minnesota—in a china cup. The oldest of the three teachers, she was born in 1914 in East Bank, Wisconsin, a few miles north of Dutchville. She lives alone in her small house, since her husband died of a stroke 8 years ago. But she continues to spend time in schools as a substitute teacher and volunteer. One of her friends is Cora Ulm (another of the three teachers); Sally taught Cora's children, and she sometimes goes to family events with Cora.

Sally was born on a working farm, but her mother was a teacher from Chicago, and her "teaching friends" would come to visit her in summer. They sometimes brought additions to the library of "classics" her mother had brought to the farm. Sally remembers that in the evenings, when supper was ready and her father still finishing the chores, her mother would read aloud.

> She would sit in the big chair, one or two in her lap. . . . The biggest ones—I was always one of the biggest ones—we hung over the back and the arms of the chair. Then she would rock the baby's cradle with her foot, and she would read and read and read. You know, we all like to read. It was mother.

Since the family didn't have much money for college, Sally went to County Normal school for a year and then was hired to teach eight grades in a one-room school two or three miles from her home. She was 18, and the oldest student was 17, "but he wasn't very smart," Sally said. She taught for 3 years before marrying, and then, "I was married, I taught a year . . . and then I was pregnant. . . . Even though it didn't show, if they found out I was pregnant . . ." (In those days, a teacher could continue her work if she was married, but not after she became pregnant with her first child.) Sally had three sons, and it was for their benefit that she returned to teaching in a two-room school when the oldest was ten. Over the years, she went from teaching four grades at a time to two and then to teaching only first grade.

Her story is full of the courses she took, starting with "a couple of night courses that had been offered in the area," going on to correspondence courses where "you wrote those themes at home . . . [and] sent them to Madison . . . and they graded them," to night courses in Waukesha when her husband was home in the evening. "When our oldest child was old enough to take care of the rest in high school, I used to go to summer school, and I got my degree. . . ." And all the time she kept on teaching. She finally "went to Cardinal Stritch [College] for my master's degree, but my husband just couldn't see much sense in spending all that time and all that money. I should have finished . . . because I like going to school." Sally retired in 1981 because of her husband's illness; after his death 18 months later she "did a lot of long-term subbing," and still subs about one day a week, volunteers in the classroom where her granddaughter is the teacher, and teaches religion classes at her Catholic parish.

Cora Ulm. Cora still lives on a working farm in rural Dutchville, just a few miles from the one where she was born. Her house is a modern ranch-style with a warm feel; her son and daughter-in-law live in the old farm house next door. She lives alone now, since her husband died in 1988. Cora was born in 1922, and in 1940 she began 2 years at Dodge County Normal School. She lived with two other girls in a tiny apartment, heating up canned food brought from home, and going out for a hamburger once a week.

Her first teaching job was in the same two-room school that her father had attended. During World War II, she split wood, lit the fire, went out with the children to collect milkweed pods for the war effort, and put on Christmas programs. One vivid memory is of dressing up "one of the little fellows" in an Army uniform, "and he'd be sitting on stage writing letters, and we'd sing 'I'll Be Home for Christmas.'"

Married to a returning soldier after the war, she raised her children until 1962, when she "started over at Jo Foster." Like Sally, she "started going to school, . . . took courses, . . . extension courses that we could get around here; but then also in summers we would go up to get on-campus credits at [the University of Wisconsin at] Oshkosh and that's where I got my degree." Cora found that third-graders were her favorite, and that's the grade she taught until she retired to take care of her mother-in-law. Now she helps the men whenever she can, and gives her grandson breakfast every day before he takes the bus to Jo Foster.

Dot Miller. Dot's blue-carpeted living room reminds me of an expensive gift shop; she said many of the knick-knacks were gifts from students and their families. She and her husband live on a rural highway in Johnson, Wisconsin, just north of Dutchville. She also was born in 1922, and her first ambition was to be a beautician, but her father encouraged her to go to normal school. Dot said that when she started to work with kids she was "hooked real fast." She had 2 years at Dodge County Normal School; then Dot taught for 7 years in a one-room school in Golden Dell, Wisconsin. She married, but continued to teach until she was pregnant with her son. She took off a year and a half with her first child, since you "couldn't teach if you were showing." When her daughter was born she went back af-

ter only 6 months; her childless stepmother wanted to take care of the baby.

Dot taught second grade almost every year after Jo Foster became a graded school; she put in a total of 45½ years before retiring. Like Cora, she took extension courses and went to the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh to complete her bachelor's degree. Then she took enough courses for a master's, but never completed that degree. Dot retired reluctantly in 1991, just 6 months before I interviewed her. "I had my husband take me by the hand and tell me," she said, "that you are writing your resignation — and take me to the school board office. Or I'd still be there!"

To convey the wide range of changes these three teachers had to respond to, I've arranged the remainder of this paper by themes: (a) changes in the educational level and credentials of teachers; (b) changes in curriculum and technology; (c) changes they saw in the children and what was expected of them; and (d) changes in what was expected of teachers and in the community's view of them.

Changing Educational Levels of Teachers

This change appears again and again in the teachers' brief biographies. They'd begun teaching with one or two years of postsecondary education, but they valued education highly, and saw continuing education as a necessary part of their jobs. Dot said flatly, "Well, teachers use the summer to go to school and learn more." Others may see teacher education as unhelpful or irrelevant, but not these three. They didn't go to school just to get credentials or to keep their teaching jobs; they valued what they learned. And they looked back at their educational beginnings with some dismay. Sally said,

> I went to school, let's see, one year and then you were supposed to teach eight grades. I really didn't know very much. I think my mother taught me more. . . . I wasn't very qualified, but no one knew the difference then.

Changes in Curriculum and Technology

As the three teachers looked back to their one- or two-room school beginnings, they saw substantial differences from the curriculum in a graded school. Some of these they viewed as negative. For example, lessons had to be prepared each night for children at every level. And not only that, they had to be written out by hand. There were text books, but no work books, no black line masters, no typewriters or word processors, no copiers or even mimeograph machines. Cora said,

> I worked hard when I had all eight grades. You wrote question sheets out for social studies because you had three kids in a grade, you wrote them all by hand because you didn't have the equipment, and you had all different papers to check and all that.

All the teachers felt the adaptations they made to teach two, four, even eight grades had worked well. Sally said,

> We sort of integrated our subjects. I always thought it was a waste of time to teach one topic in reading and different words in spelling. It seemed like the children liked it better and I felt they would learn better. . . .
>
> And the older children would always help the younger ones. When the older child was finished, they would take over and help the little child finish it up. I could have never taught eight grades if they didn't help me. . . .
>
> And they would learn reading the first year and learn it again the second year. It didn't seem to hurt them at all, they were just that much better. And one year you might teach one subject and the next another subject. If you had agriculture this year, next year you might have nature study.

They all looked back with longing to the fun they had—the Christmas programs, the dress-up wedding enacted on the school steps, the plays, and the singing. "We didn't have as much time for that later," said Dot.

On the other hand, they were pleased with the chance to focus their teaching on one grade level and learn to do that work well, with the increase in available resources and supports, with the coming of secretaries to do some typing for them. Sally talked about carrying a box of books back and forth to the school offices, making a list of the children's interests and carefully choosing the books they would like best. Those were the only books other than texts available in these classrooms.

Changes in Children and What's Expected of Them

"They're just more worldly now," Cora said. "They know so much more." Cora, Sally, and Dot were not so much critical of the changes they saw in children today as accepting of them. They were impressed with the increased knowledge of the world that children are bringing to their classrooms, with children's ability to work with computers, "not even thought about years ago," with children's curiosity about a wider world. They were sometimes a bit dismayed when that wider knowledge and increased worldliness were about sexuality and violence, when "the language gets a little more vulgar because of what they see on

TV," but they were quick to point out that the children were still children. "They are still little kids, they like somebody's arm around them," said Dot Miller.

The three teachers said that what was expected of children had changed in two ways. First, children today were expected by everyone to work much harder and learn much more. Second, they were no longer expected, by their parents, to offer automatic respect to teachers. The teachers' acceptance of this second change surprised me. Rather than expressing anger at the lack of respect they received or heard of others receiving, they offered the lack of parental expectation of respect as an explanation for changed behavior on the part of children, behavior they had to deal with. As Cora said, "You had to think a little farther into how to deal with some of these situations that never happened before."

This response typifies the willingness of these teachers to accept and deal with change as it came to them. If parents were raising their children differently, that would mean that teachers would have to interact differently with children. They did express nostalgia for the more relaxed atmosphere of schools in their early years of teaching; they didn't express it for the way children were expected to behave in those days.

Still, they recognized a real change. Cora told a long story about a boy who was suspended from elementary school in her first teaching years. The local school board removed him temporarily because he was driving the other children crazy with his "pestering and fooling around" on the playground and in class. Cora pointed out that what he did was "nothing compared with what kids try nowadays." Yet her response to "what kids try nowadays" was to "think further into it."

Changes in Expectations of Teachers

The three retired teachers saw many changes in what was expected of them through their careers, and these changes moved in a variety of directions. As I've already indicated, they saw great changes in the educational level and preparation expected of teachers, and they accepted the idea that more teacher education was a good and even an essential thing.

Cora pointed out that a significant difference between the one- or two-room school of her early career and the graded school was that in the early schools the teacher worked on her own, with perhaps one colleague. In the larger building, she said, "there was a principal right there, that you checked in and out with on certain things," and there were so many other teachers that you had to get along with and think about. Dot referred to tensions when teachers think that a lower grade teacher is not properly preparing the children for the new grade. This tension was non-existent when she began her career, teaching 7 or 8 grades in one room and all on her own.

All three teachers welcomed wholeheartedly the changes in expectations for teachers—and for women—that, as Dot put it, "let us have a personal life." Dot described an incident in which

> one of the fellows on the school board came to see me about something, and the next day one of the women across the street came over, and she said, "Were you entertaining last night?" Now, nobody thinks anything of it, but you had to be careful. I mean, now people realize that teachers are human and have frailties which other people have too. And I think that's good.

Each of the women had been forced to leave a teaching job because of her pregnancy, and they thought that was simply silly. Sally had taken a short-term substitute teacher's position when she was pregnant, and she told how

> one day, all three of those men came to school at the same time and they informed me that one of the girls said I was pregnant. I guess they could see it. They were going to hire me for another couple of weeks because the teacher couldn't get back, but then I couldn't teach because they felt I would be such a bad influence on those girls.

It was Dot who told about going with her stepmother when she was in high school to a "church that had a school, and next to the school was a little building. I said, 'I wonder what that little building is for?' She replied, 'That's for married teachers!'"

Because of their strong belief that teachers deserve a private life, as they put it, they had mixed feelings about changes in community attitudes toward teachers. In the past, they had received more respect for just being teachers and had often had a secure and happy place in the community. Cora, for example, told of how many children's family birthday parties she was invited to in her early teaching years. But they saw clearly that they had paid for this respect in the coin of lack of privacy, having to mind your p's and q's, not taking risks about who to date or what to do on Saturday night. Each one stressed that she was a decent person and never really wanted to do anything questionable, but none seemed comfortable with the idea that the community could tell her what to do.

They were ambivalent, too, about changes in the work that was expected from teachers, and in the expectations parents had of them. As described above, these three women remembered working hard as new teachers, and were grateful for technology that eased their tasks. Yet they felt that there was much more pressure in the curriculum in recent

years and less opportunity to do things they and the children really enjoyed.

They had mixed feelings, too, about teacher's pay. Dot quoted a parent as saying that with all his tax money that went to education, he couldn't even get an appointment to talk with his child's teacher. Perhaps surprisingly, she was sympathetic to his point of view. She, Cora, and Sally all felt that teaching was a well-paid profession. They compared their pay to that of secretaries, nurses, and factory workers, and found that, as Dot said, "There's good money in teaching; your salaries are not shabby." This was certainly a change from the early part of their teaching careers, when they were paid less than $1000 for a year's work. Also, they had all been able to retire in comfort from their teaching jobs.

Conclusion

The literature on change in schools suggests that teachers are generally resistant to change. Historians like Tyack (1974) and Cuban (1984) stress the deep stability of the profession and its aims and methods. Reform-minded authors like Rogers and Freiberg (1994) ask why it is so difficult to get teachers and schools to change. Sociologists like Fullan (1991) and Sarason (1982) conclude that change is hard to create in schools because of the deep resistance of teachers. Another sociologist, Lortie (1976), found that, in his large sample of teachers, an outstanding characteristic was their positive sense of their own schooling experience, and their desire to replicate it—thus avoiding trying new things.

But for these three teachers from Dutchville, change had a strong positive value. They often saw change as analogous with improvement; always, they said, they saw it as necessary and inevitable. They accepted change as good, smart, and American. "Old-fashioned" was a pejorative term for them. As Cora said, speaking of one-room, rural schools, "I mean, we felt that was backwards country."

As historians and biographers analyze the reasons behind the stability of institutions, it may be important not to project onto our predecessors the feelings we may now have about change. Many people now—and I am often one of them—feel a fear of change, a fear of the future. The death of the rain forest, the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, overpopulation—all these seemingly uncontrollable changes are feared by many, and these feelings may lap over into their emotional response to other changes. Perhaps it is for this reason that since the 1970's, nostalgia for the past has been a strong theme in American cultural life (Manke, 1993). Kitchens are decorated with wooden geese and "oldies" are heard on the radio.

But this "nostalgia" theme in our culture arose long after these three women were settled in their lives as teachers. When they looked back they focused on the hard work and inconvenience of their early teaching years, rather than on how cute their one-room schools may have been.

Those who have attributed the failure of change in our schools to resistance by teachers might think about the views and experiences of Sally Tate, Dot Miller, and Cora Ulm. The case stories of these three teachers cannot refute these beliefs, but they can raise questions about whether teacher resistance to change is as widespread as has sometimes been assumed.

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