

Notes on a Country School Tradition: Recitation as an Individual Strategy

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This ethnographic case study describes one Nebraska teacher's response to the multiage conditions of this naturally small institution in her use of "recitation" lessons. The form of the country school recitation, with its predictable student-teacher interaction and emphasis on independent work, appears as a sensible practice for curriculum and student management. I investigate the residual form of the recitation in a modern one-teacher school in rural Nebraska as a patterned response to the conditions of smallness. Conservative in its orientation toward knowledge and student learning, the recitation is explored as a functional response to the context of smallness, implicit parental and community expectations, inevitable student transfer to large graded middle and secondary schools, and its symbolic defense of community at a time of rural social and economic decline.

The one-teacher country school regularly faces the challenge of a wide range of grade levels and academic growth. One response to the multiage conditions of this naturally small institution is a teacher's regular use of "recitation" lessons with individual and small groups of students. This pedagogical device is a common legacy of the one-teacher country school. The old country school recitation conjures up images of children sitting on a hard bench, or standing at attention, orally recounting memorized texts or answers for the teacher while other students prepare quietly and independently for their own impending recitation performances. Accurately memorized and correct-answer recitations were then taken as proxies for learning. While very few would advocate this as an acceptable model of instruction in public schools today, the *form* of the country school recitation, with its predictable student-teacher interaction and emphasis on independent work, nonetheless appears today as a sensible practice for curriculum and student management. Here I investigate ethnographically the residual form of the recitation in a modern one-teacher school in rural Nebraska. I look at this patterned instruction as an established response to the conditions of smallness. I explore how, in its conservative orientation toward

knowledge and student learning, the recitation is nonetheless a functional response to the context of smallness, implicit parental and community expectations, and inevitable student transfer to large graded middle and secondary schools.

Reform and School Size

The research reported here is drawn from the first in a series of comparative case studies designed to examine issues of school size. School size has gained currency in educational reform conversations. Drawing upon decades of research, beginning with Barker and Gump's *Big School, Small School* (1964), and upon articulate practitioner portraits (e.g., Meier, 1995; Snyder, Lieberman, MacDonald, & Goodwin, 1992), contemporary reformers argue strongly that smaller schools are generally better than larger schools for students and their learning. Despite these findings, small school size is no cure-all. Benefits of smallness vary according to social and academic organization and enactment of school purpose. Nevertheless, smallness is thoroughly implicated in robust school improvement (see Lee & Smith, 1997). Consequently, we hear calls for schools to "scale down" (Elmore, 1996), to "restructure" into small, multiage units, and to create "schools within schools" (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

It is not uncommon to hear some progressive school reformers in the "small schools movement" (see Fine & Somerville, 1998), typically urban, invoke the image of the one-teacher country school as inspiration for their efforts. However, contemporary rural, one-teacher schools continue to be overlooked by educational researchers. Small country schools appear in larger quantitative studies (see Fowler, 1995; Howley, 1989), which ratify what we know from other large, mainstream studies that are not exclusively

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rural: Smaller is better.¹ Descriptive research of contemporary small, public rural schools, and one-teacher schools in particular, is exceptionally thin.² What makes rural one-teacher schools of theoretical import, in relation to larger reform concerns, is that they are *naturally occurring* instances of small-scale schooling. Their size is a function of social and historical circumstance, not of reform intervention. The one-teacher school is a peculiarly, some might claim quintessentially, rural institution that has waned with population decline in rural communities and a hegemony of "economies of scale" ideologies, both contributing to widespread consolidation.

The present study was undertaken to look at the practices of some of the remaining one-teacher schools, what might be learned from them, and if or how we might capture a glimpse "of our future in this remaining piece of our past" (Geyer, 1995).

Theoretical Frame and Methodological Concerns

Since my interests are in Nebraska's remaining one-teacher schools as naturally occurring instances of small scale schooling, I pursue a theoretical and methodological orientation appropriate to study of sociocultural phenomena in natural settings. Ethnographic analysis is best suited to attend holistically to the details and subtleties of such settings, especially when insider perspective is crucial to understanding those settings. While no school is truly "natural" (they are human-made institutions), the rural one-teacher school is, in educational and institutional terms, not a design for change. It is *just so* as a traditional rural institution. I treat it as a mundane cultural setting, where school constituents come together and form and coordinate rights, duties, practices, and shared symbols as a way to "do school" that is small in scale.

In data collection and analysis, this study takes a more or less mainstream symbolic-interpretive perspective on the school as a cultural setting (Erickson, 1986). The school is thus viewed, in Geertz's (1973a) words, as "an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (p. 452). In struggling to read over the shoulders of the "natives" in this school, I assume that there is a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1973b, p. 89). Here, I consider specifically the patterned meaning of the recitation as a central feature of a school. My concerns center on how, as cultural settings, these traditional institutions cohere and connect to their rural circumstance.

Consequently, this inquiry employs the ethnographic staples of long-term participant-observation, interviews, and

artifact and documentary examination. My data collection has included participant-observation and narrative field-notes from Bighand School³ for the first 6 months of the 1998-1999 academic year (August-February), at least 2 days/week and in several return visits. I attended monthly school board meetings and conducted in-depth interviews with the teacher, students, school board members, parents, administrators, and community members. I endeavored especially to interview the students, individually and as grade level groups, as most have experienced no other form of schooling and no other teacher in their educational biographies. I conducted follow-up interviews with students, parents, the teacher, and school board members, formally and informally (sometime in telephone calls), to verify emergent assertions and to build working hypotheses about "what is going on" at the school. I also reviewed various textbooks, curriculum guides, and written school policies as documentary artifacts and symbolic tracings of what the school "means." Much of what I have learned has come from the hundreds of conversations with the teacher and students during the regular school day: in the classroom sitting next to students as they work, in the musty basement during lunch, on the playground in a game of *Andy, Andy Over*, and during dizzying rides on an ancient country school merry-go-round.

Nebraska's Remaining One-Teacher Schools

Nebraska continues to have more living one-teacher schools than any other state. From the most recent aggregated, national data we have on one-room schools (DeWalt, 1997; Muse, Hie, Randall, & Jensen, 1998), I estimate that there are roughly 350 one-teacher schools in the U.S. at the time of data collection for this study. (In 1931, there were 143,391 [Leight & Rhienhart, 1992].) For the 1998-1999 school year, Nebraska had 125 one-teacher schools.⁴ Calls from various interest groups for their dismantling and consolidation are perennial in Nebraska. However, the one-teacher schools are variants of "Class One" school districts. These districts are K-8 only (i.e., those that have no high school). In the 1998-1999 school year, there were

¹E.g., the National Educational Longitudinal Study (see Lee, Smith, & Crominger, 1995)

²By this I mean systematic qualitative research. Here, perhaps unfairly, I exclude oral history, reminiscence, memoir, autobiography and scores of journalistic accounts. To be sure, there is much to be mined in these, but none of them represents systematic inquiry into living, *contemporary*, one-teacher, public schools.

³All names presented here are pseudonyms to guard confidentiality.

⁴Data on Nebraska Schools come from the Nebraska State Department of Education Data Center and from the advocacy Group Class Ones United.

320 Class One school districts in the state. The one-teacher schools, like all Class Ones, comprise their own districts with their own three-person school boards. They have statutory support to exist; to eliminate entirely the remaining one-teacher schools in the state would require a legislative act on school redistricting. However, rural population decline, ongoing tax struggles, extremely inequitable state aid distribution, and sociopolitical pressure from rural and nonrural school districts, celebrating economies of scale, all contribute to local decisions to close the small, Class One schools.

The Research Site

Bighand School is located in the rolling prairie of eastern Nebraska, where corn, soybeans, and winter wheat cover the landscape during the growing season. The school is situated 3 miles from the unincorporated village of Johnville (pop. 170), 7 miles from the town of Sparta (pop. 1,700), and 12 miles from the county seat, Riverview (pop. 6,600). It is literally "in the country," on a dirt state highway. "Not enough rich people live on it to be paved," one parent remarked. It is located on a hill crest and, approaching Bighand School from any direction, one sees an utterly conventional building. Constructed in 1981, the current 30' x 40' building is one story, with white aluminum siding, a storage shed, an old water pump, a detached tornado cellar, two swing sets, and a small merry-go-round. County archives indicate that the school was founded in 1868, a year after Nebraska ceased to be a territory, and remains one of the oldest living schools in the state. Like a great portion of eastern Nebraska and western Iowa, the region in and around Bighand School was homesteaded and settled primarily by German immigrants in the 19th century. The vast majority of the registered voters, as well as all of the students and the teacher at Bighand School, bear German surnames attesting to this historical backdrop. It took the name Bighand sometime in the 1880s, apparently from the name of the farmer whose original homestead property sat next to the school and who served on the school board.⁵ In a county that encompasses 19 separate school districts, 9 of which are Class One, Bighand is 1 of the 5 remaining one-teacher schools this year.

Bighand School district encompasses no population centers. Of the residents, most are retired farmers. The land is presently farmed by family farmers or tenant farmers, with a small number of incorporated and consolidated farms. The 1998 school census indicates that there are 66 residents in the Bighand school district and 17 school-age (K-8) children, with 8 of those attending Bighand School. The district has weathered decades of school district reorganization and witnessed neighboring rural districts close and consolidate. Once composed of 10 square miles, Bighand district now includes approximately 25 square

miles, some of which is noncontiguous. In the mid-1980s, as part of a state-wide effort to equalize the property taxes, rural landowners were required to declare their association with a school district, and a high school if that district was a Class One. Later in 1990, each Class One school was to formally "affiliate" with one or more high schools or to become a subset of a Class Six, high school only, district. (Bighand is affiliated with 3 high schools.) The current Bighand district configuration is the effect of these landowners' choices.

The political and some social boundaries of the community are effectively defined by the school district. Because there are no economic or formal social centers in the district itself, constituents take up shopping and church in the surrounding towns and villages. At least one parent in each of this year's school families is employed in one of these neighboring towns or villages. One parent referred to the school as the "capital" of the community. With no tax advantage in retaining a separate rural school district, and no high school, the preservation of the Bighand district has seemed peculiar to many in the county. In 1981, a regional electric utility's newsletter found it odd yet delightful that while the rest of the state's one-teacher schools were closing and consolidating, Bighand's school board proudly paid \$50,000 to replace the deteriorating, 100 year-old building with one that "boasts such amenities as a full basement, fluorescent lighting, a 30-gallon electric hot water heater, an electric cook range, and a new 20-kilowatt electric furnace." A Bighand student, quoted in Riverview's newspaper, said enthusiastically of the new building, "It's bigger, more attractive and it has a drinking fountain and indoor plumbing!"

Bighand Students This Year

Bighand School has 12 students, spanning kindergarten through eighth grade (see Table 1). Eight of these children reside in the school district.⁶ The four whose families do not reside are "option" students. Nebraska statutorily allows "option enrollment," where parents can place their children in any public school in the state as long as they provide transportation, there is room at the selected school, and school desegregation plans for that school are not

⁵Descendents of Wm. Bighand still own farm property in the district. The name Bighand is the Anglo transliteration of the German "Grossehand."

⁶There are nine other eligible students in the district. They attend either a private school in Riverview City, are home schooled, or "optioned" into a neighboring Class One district. One of these nine is Daisy's brother Tom, a seventh grader at Riverview Middle School. His mother transferred him last year from Bighand partly because she said he was restless, "unchallenged" and because he was the only boy his age at a school with five older girls.

Table 1
Students at Bighand School, 1998-1999

Grade	Student
K	Haley
K	Andrew*
1 st	Samuel*
2 nd	Christine*
2 nd	Richard
2 nd	David
5 th	Kimberly
6 th	Daisy
6 th	Deborah
8 th	Mary
8 th	Loretta*
8 th	Molly

*Children who reside in another district and are "option enrollment" students.

compromised. Samuel, Christine, and Andrew are from Johnville. Loretta is from Sparta. Though the parents of these students have different reasons for "optioning" their children into Bighand School, they express a common reservation (all use the terms "fear" or "afraid") toward large, graded schools of the Johnville-Sparta Consolidated School District. They believe that, in a country school, discipline is enforced and children get personal attention from the teacher. Every parent and community member whom I spoke with or interviewed uses the phrase "one-on-one" to describe a major benefit of country schooling. This concern for personal attention, surveillance, and discipline is part of a larger set of values discussed below.

The parents of Bighand's students are mostly skilled laborers and high school educated (see Table 2). Only Mary and Deborah's parents and Loretta's stepfather have a college education. None of these families considers itself poor. While they never refer to each other as wealthy, I have, though, overheard hushed, reproachful comments as to Loretta's mother's displays of wealth in her clothing, hairstyle, dress, and automobiles. If there is any class consciousness, or resentment, it is buried and ill-defined. (I once heard Loretta call Kimberly "a rich kid," when her own family's income is clearly higher than any other family's in the school.) Finally, 75% of the school is made up of four families: Haley and Molly, Christine and Samuel, David and Kimberly, Mary and Deborah are siblings

Ruralness and Intimacy at School

The school these children inhabit has a "rural" quality. It is commonly referred to as "the one-room school

north of Johnville." The school board president and secretary farm for a living. The school is deeded on a corner of the board president's farm. Most of the families and the teacher have some substantial connection to agriculture in their family histories. For example, Haley and Molly's father farmed until a decade earlier when he calculated the economic risk was too great and went to work for a prosperous mining company. Daisy's mother "grew up a farm kid" not far from the school. Furthermore, the teacher, parents, school board members, and students make regular and firm distinctions between "country" and "town" schools (small and multigrade vs. large and graded) and imply the inferiority of the latter. Though only one of the school's families currently farms for a living (Deborah and Mary's),⁷ the location and social history of its constituents give the school a decidedly "rural" flavor.

This rural flavor is accompanied by a peculiar intimacy. Walking into the one-room setting at almost any given time, one will see students preoccupied with preparing for their recitations with the teacher. With its dingy linoleum floor, blond pine book cases, and white painted walls, the school appears quiet and emotionally detached to outsiders like me. Students regularly express an indifference, and sometimes harshness, toward each other in their classroom and playground interactions and in their interviews with me. For instance, Daisy says to me that she "can't stand the younger kids" and snaps to Samuel, "Sit down, be quiet, and stop bothering me" when he squirms in his chair. Mary accuses Kimberly of stealing things from coat pockets and backpacks and calls her "stuck up." Loretta refers to David as a "brat." Defending her brother, Kimberly returns the sentiment and tells that Loretta is "nothing but trouble." And Mrs. Hoffman regularly harangues Richard to "sit down, get to work, or otherwise you will lose your recess," and bluntly tells a crying Deborah that "the older girls pick on you because you sometimes ask for it."

But the apparent coolness these people hold toward one another belies certain facts. Apart from Richard, a newcomer this year, and Loretta, who option enrolled in the middle of her sixth grade year, Bighand School is the only school these students have attended. Moreover, since she is in her 11th year at the school, Mrs. Hoffman is the only teacher they have known. Consequently, the teacher and students have a protracted familiarity with each other. Molly reports that she and the other older students regard Mrs. Hoffman as a cantankerous "old aunt," and the students frequently call her "Mrs. H." It is an oblique intimacy that Alan Peshkin (1978/1994) describes as knowing, and being known by, others through long-term, mundane interaction characteristic of small and rural communities. At Bighand School, the students know each other through their

⁷Not entirely, though. Their mother works as a social worker and their father owns a feed store in Riverview.

Table 2
Bighand Parent Occupations and Educational Levels

Student	Parent Occupation		Parent Education (highest level achieved)	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Haley (K) Molly (8 th)	Stay at home	Mining laborer	High School	High School
Andrew (K)	Fast food assistant manager	Small factor laborer	High School	High School
Samuel (1 st) Christine (2 nd)	Stay at home	Small factory laborer	High School	High School
Richard (2 nd)	Factory laborer	out of state (divorced)	High School	unknown
David (2 nd) Kimberly (5 th)	Seamstress	Power company supervisor	High School	High School
Daisy (6 th)	Lumber company clerk	Meat packing laborer (divorced)	High School	High School
Deborah (6 th) Mary (8 th)	Social worker	Farmer, feed store owner	Undergraduate University	Undergraduate University
Loretta (8 th)	Stay at home	Optometrist (stepfather)	High School	Postgraduate

own everyday interactions, what their brothers and sisters say to them about other students, what they hear from their parents about other students and their families, and so on. When you know someone well, and your school work is centered on working quietly, strenuously, and individually on assignments, sometimes there is not that much to gleefully talk about. And there are some things you want to keep to yourself in such an intimate environment. The people at Bighand School have simply, to paraphrase Lerner and Loewe (1959), grown accustomed to each other's faces. They know each other very well, may not say that they like each other often, but are nonetheless regular parts of each other's lives.

The Teacher

Mrs. Hoffman is in her 11th year of teaching at Bighand. She returned to teaching not long after the sudden death of her husband. Now in her early sixties, she was originally educated in what was then a normal school in the 1950s. After completing a relatively short course in teacher edu-

cation, she received a provisional teaching certificate at the age of 18 with the stipulation that she ultimately complete a 2-year teacher certification program. She took up her first teaching job in a country school for 4 years. Like many women of her generation, she left teaching to marry and raise children. Between those early years and her 11-year tenure at Bighand, she has worked as a fraternity house mother, a social service provider, and a seamstress at a retail clothier. She still works part-time at a clothing retailer in Riverview to make ends meet (her salary is less than \$19,000). Mrs. Hoffman returned to that same normal school, which had become a 4-year college, to obtain her certification in the early 1980s.

Mrs. Hoffman calls herself "country schooled." She tells that when she transferred from a small country school to a village high school, with a graduating class of 15, she experienced "culture shock." Culturally and educationally speaking, she has deep roots in country schooling and in the region. For example, she was born and raised in a small town 30 miles south of the school in the same county. She currently lives in Sparta. She went to country schools and

recalls vividly a grandmother who taught in country schools ("I learned everything from her"). Before school starts in the mornings, she ordinarily and amicably talks with the school aide (the board president's wife) about mutual friends and acquaintances in the community. She had coursework and practica on country schooling in her early teacher education at the Normal School. The previous board secretary (Molly and Haley's mother) indicated that Mrs. Hoffman was selected from a pool of 30 applicants because the board assumed she understood country children and "schools like these." In Mrs. Hoffman's words, "teaching in a country school is in my blood."

A Pedagogical Challenge and Textbooks

A primary challenge Mrs. Hoffman faces is not new to the country school teacher: How to organize curriculum and instruction to accommodate twelve different children, at six different grade levels, that is acceptable to the school board, parents, administrative authorities, and her own sense of a proper education? This challenge involves, at a very basic level, what she sees as the importance of students completing a curricular program, persuading them to attend to their individual work, documenting individual student "progress," disciplining an array of ages, and otherwise helping them "get through" their school work.

Specifically, Mrs. Hoffman is concerned that students are "at grade-level," that they are "keeping up" with, and possibly exceeding, what she determines they may otherwise be doing in a large graded elementary or middle school in town schools like Sparta and Riverview. She is further concerned that the students not get an alien curriculum, but one that feeds into, or is compatible with, what the students will encounter in secondary school and for some who transfer early to middle school (such as Daisy and Kimberly, who will transfer next year to Riverview).

To do this, Mrs. Hoffman organizes her curriculum exclusively around commercially produced, standardized textbook and workbook series. Mrs. Hoffman uses those produced by major textbook publishing companies and is not limited to one company or series. (These include Houghton-Mifflin; Scott/Foresman & Co.; Silver Burdett & Ginn; Holt, Rinehart, & Winston; and Saxon Math.) She communicates with other country school teachers in the county and is informed by the school's contracted administrator (a retired, part-time, off-site principal) and the county superintendent (a part-time, elected official) of the textbooks that neighboring school districts use. However, these inform, not dictate, the choices she makes.⁸

Mrs. Hoffman puts a great deal of faith in these texts for her curricular organization. The specific content of the textbooks is not a major preoccupation for her. In her view, textbooks and workbooks have face validity and represent reliably the grade levels for which they are designed. After

all, major textbook producers are established companies and their books are in widespread use. The county superintendent and the principal simply presume the dominant place of these textbooks as curriculum organizers, and they support and approve of Mrs. Hoffman's usage of the books. Their concern is that the books be up to date. They all agree on their importance of using curricular materials comparable to those in surrounding school districts; they speak of "uniformity" or "compatibility" with these districts in describing one goal of Bighand's curriculum. Because these textbooks and workbooks are directed at a generalized and *de facto* national curriculum, their use is a primary way that Mrs. Hoffman and the administrators demonstrate to the school's constituency that they are concerned with students getting a portable education.

Organization of Curriculum and Teaching

The usage of textbooks and, in Mrs. Hoffman's words, the value of "a strict adherence to a fixed curriculum" is, of course, not limited to country schools. But, how textbooks are used and implicated in her teaching practice, as a way of coping with her instructional challenge is particular to a one-teacher school circumstance. For instance, this school is not composed of all second or sixth graders who ostensibly go through the same subject matter at the same time, as might be found in a large and graded school. Rather, there are six different grade levels, and up to three individuals in each of those, not to mention the individual differences within those grades levels. In teacher parlance, excluding kindergarten, Mrs. Hoffman has at least five "preparations" for each subject.

"Classes"

In this school, there is no whole class instruction in any subjects. It is carried out entirely in what are locally called grade-level "classes." At the outset of the school year, I was struck by the almost frenetic pace at which the students cycle through "classes." This involves small groups of students of the same grade level, or individuals, sitting at the teacher's table for short periods of interaction, rarely more than 15 minutes. It is the shared understanding between the teacher and student that these "classes" are designed as occasions for the teacher to check student work; briefly introduce a new subject topic (which is invariably the next chapter, lesson, or unit within the presently employed textbook); direct students to the next assignment within the chapter, lesson, or assignment; listen to students read aloud (excerpts from textbook passages or assignment

⁸She told me she went one summer to an auction at a country school that had closed, where she picked up some textbooks that were "up-to-date."

Table 3
The "Daily Program" Posted in the Front of the Classroom

Begins	Duration	Grade	Recitations In	Tuesday-Thursday Kindergarten
Morning				
8:30	10 min.	All	Opening	
8:40	35 min.	1 st -6 th	Reading	Reading Readiness
9:15	15 min.	8 th	Literature	Free time
9:30	30 min.	1 st -8	Spelling Tests-Friday	Math
10:00	15 min.	All	Recess	
10:17	20 min.	1 st -6 th	Phonics (Ind. Work)	Phonics
10:20	55 min.	1 st -8 th	English	Quiet Activity
11:00	15 min.	1 st -8 th	Writing-Journals	Computer
	30 min.	K-2 nd	Computer	Individual Time
11:15	15 min.			Storytime
11:25		All	Wash hands	
11:30	30 min.	All	Lunch	
Afternoon				
12:00	15 min.	1 st -2 nd	Reading	Rest
12:00	15 min.	5 th -8 th	Free Reading	
12:15	40 min.	1 st -2 nd	Math	
12:55	50 min.	5 th -8 th	Math Tue-Wed Test	Free Quiet Activity
		5 th -8 th	Computer Time	
1:45	10 min.	All	Recess-P.E.	
2:00	55 min.	1 st	Health	Science
2:00		8 th	Science Mon and Wed	
			Science Experiments	
2:00	55 min.	All	Social Studies Tue-Thurs (workbooks)	Map Skills
2:00	55 min.	1 st -8 th	Art-Friday	Kindergarten: Art Thursday
2:55	5 min.	All	Jobs	
3:00		All	Dismiss	

directions); and monitor student work. While these short classes take place, those students who are not "in class" work independently on their assignments at their desks, sometimes at the computer (as a reward for completing all assignments, leaving them with extra time), or with the teacher's aide. At one point, I counted a dizzying 28 classes in one day. Mrs. Hoffman reports to the school board that she has had 30 classes in one day. From my data, the average number is around 23.

What intrigued me further about these classes is that they echoed old country school "recitations" as described by educational historians (Cuban, 1994; Theobald, 1995). What triggered this connection for me was the "Daily Pro-

gram" posted in the front of the room (see Table 3). The prominent display of the poster, according to the county superintendent, is required by law in Class One schools. It was the heading *Recitations In*, where conceivably the term "subject" might be, that led me to consider whether "classes" were vestiges of the old country school recitation manifest in this modern one-teacher school.

Organization of Classes

In Bighand School, the organization of instruction is the organization of classes. It appears rather straightforward. Students sit in uneven rows facing the blackboard,

what is considered the front of the room. Mrs. Hoffman sits in the center of a U-shaped table at the left-hand corner of the front, facing the students. Her table acts as her desk, with teaching materials, grade and plan books, and small piles of student work. It is more significantly, from the students point of view, where classes take place. While she can oversee the entire school from her desk, she is typically preoccupied with classes and record keeping. She relies on students to “discipline themselves” and each other through adherence to long-standing and unwritten rules about “no talking” to each other outside of classes; “no more than two people [walking] on the floor at one time;” and requesting permission to go to the toilet, the library (bookcases in the back of the room), the computer, or to another student for help. These rules, she tells, are so that students can concentrate on their work and be ready for their classes. During classes she is in closer proximity to, and direct interaction with, students around their academic work. She is central in the interaction, leading students through their assignments, having them show that they have done the assigned work, and occasionally checking for evidence of student learning, or “getting what they are supposed to.” Her table is understood as a special place for a specific kind of interaction.

There is a generalized pattern to the classes that cuts across subjects or the “recitations in.” Mrs. Hoffman usually calls students of a particular grade to class and the students sit in the chairs facing her. Sometimes students will individually approach the table, anticipating their class and stand waiting for her to authorize them to sit down. Once seated at the table, Mrs. Hoffman usually returns the previous day’s assignment, quiz, or test that is invariably from a standardized textbook series. She has graded these papers, and students immediately look for their scores on the assignment or test. Mrs. Hoffman has an implied minimal standard of around 85% for passing these assignments, quizzes, or tests. As she returns these, she *always* points out the missed questions or problems, even if it is in a very brief remark (e.g., “You missed a couple. Look them over”). However, Mrs. Hoffman rarely tells students *in class* of the inadequacy of their work. She usually tells them well before class—publicly, in front of the entire school—in order to give the student the chance to correctly complete it. If she determines that the student has failed miserably, Mrs. Hoffman will hold a special class for the individual student for remediation. Otherwise, this opening sequence of the class involves mild praise for successful completion of student work. By doing so, Mrs. Hoffman reinforces her evaluative authority over the students in a close, face-to-face setting.

After this opening sequence, Mrs. Hoffman declares that it is time to proceed to the next chapter, unit, or lesson in the textbook at hand. This sequence involves Mrs. Hoffman directing a student to read aloud the introduction

of the new material. In the case of reading, the first classes in the morning, she directs students to the next story in the basal reader. She will ask the students to start the story, and have them read aloud, in round-robin fashion with students alternating paragraphs, until she determines their time is up. She directs students to complete the reading and points out “Comprehension Questions” at the end of the basal story chapter they are to answer in writing. In other subjects, Mrs. Hoffman then directs a student to read the directions for the textbook/workbook assignment, and then asks that student or another to read aloud through the sample exercises. Mrs. Hoffman then directs them to complete the assignment for the following day’s class. Mrs. Hoffman writes down in her red plan book the lesson or chapter that is to be completed and the assignment or exercise to be completed.

One Afternoon’s Fifth Grade Math Class

To give some sense of the form of this instruction, the following excerpt of the fifth grade math from one afternoon’s math classes is presented. Although Kimberly is the only fifth grader, Mrs. Hoffman still refers to Kimberly classes as “the fifth grade.” The fifth grade math class took place on what I consider a typical day and a typical series of classes (see Table 4). There are 25 classes on this day, and Kimberly’s math class takes place at 1:15 in the afternoon.

Mathematics classes follow the same pattern described above. Students understand that they are to work quietly and independently on their assignments, hand those assignments in to the teacher, come to class where Mrs. Hoffman informs the students of the acceptability of an assignment or test, be directed to proceed into the next assignment, have students read aloud directions and examples, and then return to one’s desk in order to complete and “get through.”

It is important to note that the mathematics curriculum for Bighand School is organized around two separate and very different math textbook series, Scott/Foresman & Co. and Saxon Publishing. Those of Scott/Foresman can be characterized as mainstream mathematics that has some conceptual orientation. Saxon is characterized by isolated skills that recur, or “spiral,” within separate lessons or units. The emphasis in Saxon math is on repeated exercise or drill of skills. Mrs. Hoffman added the Saxon series the previous year at the urging of the county superintendent, because he said ambiguously that math was “becoming important.” In effect, Bighand students are progressing through two different math programs simultaneously. And even though she has some reservations about Saxon Math, she views it as ultimately helpful in student achievement. Math classes are thus geared around getting through these two series. These textbooks are not used in complementary fashion around particular mathematical concepts or as thematic resources, but as ends in themselves. This coordi-

Table 4
Classes for Wednesday, February 17, 1999

Time	Duration (Minutes)	Subject	Grade/Student
8:36 a.m.	3	Reading	1 st grade — Samuel
8:40	8	Reading	2 nd grade — Christine alone
8:49	9	Reading	2 nd grade — David, Richard
8:59	10	Reading	6 th grade
9:10	16	Reading	8 th grade
9:37	22	Spelling	2 nd grade
10:45	2	English	6 th grade
10:47	6	English	1 st grade
10:54	5	English	6 th grade
11:05	7	English	8 th grade
12:05 p.m.	4	Reading	1 st grade
12:10	9	Reading	2 nd grade — David, Richard
12:21	8	Reading	2 nd grade — Christine alone
12:35	7	Reading	2 nd grade — David, Richard cont'd
12:47	7	Math	2 nd grade
1:01	6	Math	8 th grade
1:15	5	Math	5 th grade
1:21	2	Math	6 th grade
1:25	4	Math	1 st grade
1:35	10	Social Studies	2 nd grade
2:00	8	Social Studies	6 th grade
2:15	7	Social studies	1 st grade
2:24	12	Science	8 th grade
2:38	8	Science	6 th grade
2:48	5	Science	5 th grade

nates with her working philosophy of the benefit of quantity or saturation, that more academic work will lead to more learning, or what she off-handedly calls “piling it on.”

Fifth grade math begins with Mrs. Hoffman calling Kimberly to the table. Standing about four and a half feet tall, Kimberly has a lanky, rail-thin preadolescent figure, with hands, feet, and a toothy smile that look disproportionately large for her body. When she carries her books or a backpack, it is as if she is towing a third of her own weight. This contrasts with her deep, nasal voice that is eerily reminiscent of her mother's. As Kimberly sits down, Mrs. Hoffman hands her a test she took yesterday and simply starts the class by saying: “Page 253 for tomorrow. And that is more fractions, and you have fractions on your test. Alright?” Kimberly responds, “OK.”

After Mrs. Hoffman hands Kimberly the test she completed yesterday, she does not point out Kimberly's grade (a 100). She does notice, however, that Kimberly looks straight for the grade, marked in red at the top of the page. Kimberly cracks a small smile of satisfaction as she sees this. “Page 253” refers to Kimberly's Scott/Foresman math

textbook and the exercises on multiplication of fractions for the next day. She merely assumes that Kimberly knows what she needs to do. After sharply admonishing Richard, Mrs. Hoffman moves right on to the Saxon math:

MH: [to Richard] What did I say to do?! I won't say it again. Please! Richard sit down in your seat. I am going to have to write a note to mom if I do not see something happening here very soon. I am going to have to send home a report today. [to Kimberly] Simplifying decimal numbers. What does [your book] say? Go ahead and read that. Mine says the same.

K: [Reading from her textbook, indicated in italics] *When we write numbers, we should write them in the simplest form. When we simplify a number, we change the form of the number, but we do not change the value of the number. We learned how to simplify*

fractions by reducing. We can often simply. [restarts] We can often simplify decimal fractions as well.

MH: [correcting] *numbers as well*

K: *numbers as well. We simplify decimal numbers by removing unnecessary zeros. We will explain this by simplifying, twenty ahh, twenty-hundredths.*

MH: Right.

K: *The decimal number twenty-hundredths has a 2 in the tenth's place and a 0 in the hundredths' place. The zeros in the hundredths' place mean no hundredths. If we remove the zero from twenty-hundredths, we get two-tenths. The number two-tenths also has a 2 in the tenths place and 'no hundredths.' Thu,*

MH: [correcting] *Thus*

K: *Thus twenty hundredths...*

MH: Means "however." *Twenty hundredths equals*

K: *Twenty-hundredths equals two-tenths.*

MH: Even though we say it differently.

K: *That we say that twenty-hundredths simplifies to two-tenths. We can remove zeroes from the front of the whole numbers and from the back of the decimals numbers. We remove zeroes until we come back to a digit that is not a zero or until we come to a decimal point. Below we have simplified [printed in book as 02.0100, 20.0, and 0.200] zero 2 and one-hundred, twenty and zero tenths and 2 thousandths*

MH: *Two-hundred thousandths by removing*

K: *by removing the unnecessary zeros.*

MH: OK. *Simplify each decimal number in problems A through B. Do you have that?*

K: Uh.

MH: Right there (pointing in K's book). These seem to be the same [their books]. OK so what are we going to change this to? Three and

K: Three and two tenths.

MH: [Speaks quietly to herself as she writes down the pages of this assignment in her planbook for documentation of Kimberly's math work.]

MH: Alright. Sixth graders.

This constitutes a fifth grade math class, "Simplifying Decimal Numbers" on this particular day. Mrs. Hoffman directs Kimberly to read the definitions and description of the Saxon math "lesson." This lesson has no connection to the multiplication of fractions in Kimberly's Scott/Foresman textbook and test. She reads through orally the first of the four sample problems, to the satisfaction of Mrs. Hoffman ("Three and two tenths"). She simply ends by marking in her planbook Kimberly's Saxon math assignment and calls the sixth graders up for their math class. Kimberly returns immediately to her desk and quietly sets to work on her assignment. This class took around 5 minutes.

The Recitation as a Functional Tradition

The old country school recitation involved the teacher calling upon individual and grade level groups of students (Cuban, 1994; Theobald, 1995). They often stood or sat on a hard bench. This instruction involved little more than the teacher lecturing and students reciting memorized passages or orally answering a series of questions as directed by the teacher's textbook guide (Thayer, 1928). Student learning was determined through the accuracy of the recitation and appropriateness of responses to teacher questions. Students were then introduced to the next topic and their assignment in the textbook. They were expected to work quietly and individually on their preparations for recitations.

Here in Bighand School, it is possible to see the basic outline of this form of instruction. Most importantly, the textbook is still the unquestioned guide for curricular organization and student progress. Instead of orally quizzing students on whether they can recite a memorized text, or go through question-answer routines, Mrs. Hoffman relies on written performance on lessons and tests for indicators of student learning. Like the old recitation, she uses the class to introduce sequential topics in, and keeps track of student progress through, textbooks. But the oral component involves not memorization or right-answer responses,

but supervised or guided reading of printed text that introduces the student(s) to the next topic or lesson. The oral component is front-loaded in Mrs. Hoffman's scheme, to see if students understand what they are supposed to do, not what they have done, as represented in Kimberly's math class.

What is striking about this form of instruction is its sheer utility and refined functionality for this one-teacher setting, apropos Mrs. Hoffman's goal of getting students through a textbook-based curriculum. It is a convention that helps Mrs. Hoffman organize her work with students and helps them to organize their own work. It requires a good deal of self-discipline on the part of the student. "Doing school" for the students means continually keeping up with one's work, knowing that you will face the teacher regularly, and understanding that neither is a choice. It is traditional in the sense that it presents itself as common sense, or just the way things are done. When I asked Mrs. Hoffman if she had considered organizing her curriculum in ways other than with classes like these, she shrugged her shoulders and looked almost dumbfounded by the question. "I mean," she asked, "what other way can I do it?" It is the most sensible way she can conceive of her instruction.

Tempering Critique

It is easy for reform-minded educators, urban and rural alike, to criticize this form of pedagogy. It is intellectually conservative, textbook-based, and teacher-controlled. Student interest and intention are epiphenomenal pedagogical concerns. It is possible to claim that it is not academically demanding and does not press students for "higher order thinking." It embodies a concept of knowledge that it is created elsewhere by experts and codified in textbooks, implying a passive theory of student learning. It does not involve any "place-based curriculum" that many rural school reformers claim is the inherent value or potential of rural schools (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). The language of curriculum development and reform of the last decade, such as "constructivism," does not emerge in the talk of the teacher, contracted principal, or county superintendent. Students do not interact with each other around their assignments. There are no sustained common projects in which students of varying age levels engage. Academic work is composed entirely of discrete assignments in content areas that have no connection to one another. And, it is easy to name the usage of classes as expedient classroom management rather than some product of Mrs. Hoffman's professional reflection.

Any analysis of schooling cannot simply avoid possible criticisms such as these, especially as reformers seek to link size to school effectiveness. In seeking to understand the coherence and sensibility of this kind of practice, I find that there are important things to consider before leap-

ing to a deficit critique. First, I believe this pedagogy is quite consonant with the conservative nature of teaching in public schooling generally, and in graded schools with centralized curricula (e.g., Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996). Conservative, textbook-centered instruction is hardly the exclusive possession of small country schools. The traditions of conservative teaching generally would seem to influence Mrs. Hoffman's pedagogy (see Cohen, 1988). More importantly, a culturally sensitive analysis would take into account the larger rural context of the school and Mrs. Hoffman's practice and it to this that I now turn.

Community Values as Context of Pedagogy

The structure of instruction at Bighand School is infused with community values, including respect for and assent to adult authority (i.e., the teacher as manager and academic organizer), independence, hard work, following through, and self-discipline (i.e., completing your work, no matter what you think of it). These values could be described as rural or agricultural, and they are frequently referred to as a "work ethic" by community members and parents. For instance, Mary and Deborah's father, Tom, describes the differences between Bighand School and "town schools" this way:

Well, I think the work ethic is different, especially in a rural school like this because you're in a farming community and, you know, when you farm, you've got to enjoy the work because there is no money in it. The rewards are not financial. And I think the kids see this, and it helps them for a little bit better work ethic because it makes them realize that you have to do something to earn something. Now, all of the kids in this school do not come from farm families, but they see it.

And when reflecting upon the relationship between his children's experience at Bighand School, farm life, and the values of "following through" and "hard work," Tom avers:

Well, I mean, they're living in it. They're living in the middle of it. They have come to accept the fact that there are tractors in the spring of the year and it's a very busy time and things are happening very quickly. And they come to realize during the fall, during the harvest season, that the combines are rolling, and you know, at ten, eleven, twelve o'clock at night. The guys across the road are combining. There are trucks on the road all of the time. They know it is another busy time of the year. They've come to realize that this is how they get paid. If they had two very critical times of the

year and that sets the basis for their yearly wages. *You got to get the crop in the ground and you've got to get it out* (emphasis added). And I think that concept carries over to the school and [Mrs. Hoffman] understands this.

It is not simply the case that the adult community members, school board, and parents view school as “instilling” these values. For them, the school does do that. But, from a cultural point of view, children’s socialization into these values is intertwined with larger community and parental concerns. These include, in ascending order of abstraction, secondary school success, suspicion of youth culture, and symbolic defense of community and a way of life.

Secondary School Success

From my conversations and interviews with school board members and especially parents, what they want from school seems no different than what most parents want for their children: that school somehow prepare them for life. But more immediately, they are concerned that the school prepare children to cope with life in large, graded middle and secondary schools to which their children will inevitably enroll. There is a pervasive lore in the Bighand community that graduates of the school do very well in secondary school. The families who have students in high school who are graduates of Bighand, and those who have transferred to middle school, regularly indicate that their children are “ahead” and know how to do school work. The county superintendent reports that Bighand students’ scores for the Iowa Test of Basis Skills “are well above the median” for Class One schools in the county and that its “students never become an academic problem.” The superintendent of Riverview Schools, himself a Class One school graduate, is effusive about the small schools that are affiliated with his district: “The kids from the one-room, Class One schools we get do an outstanding job. We have had no problems with kids from the Class Ones.” The superintendent of Sparta-Johnville Schools, who considers Bighand a revenue drain from his district, grudgingly admits that Bighand’s graduates are successful high school students. This information and these sentiments circulate in the Bighand community. For the adults and parents in the community, one learns to be a good student by the standards of middle and secondary town school organization.

The habits of self-discipline and following through on one’s work learned at Bighand would seem to help one get through middle and secondary school and be a good student. In the large graded middle and secondary, students have little consistent and close contact with their teachers like they do in Bighand and this creates one of the bumpy points of transition for students. For instance, Mary and Deborah’s big sister Kayla, a graduate of Bighand and now

a sophomore at Riverview High School, says that one of the hardest things in the transition to high school is the lack of regular personal contact with her teachers. She was perplexed about how she had to make appointments with the teachers, sometimes days in advance, about what were for her immediate concerns (e.g., how to complete a particular assignment). Yet, ironically, she was able to cope with this predicament precisely because she felt that she had learned to stick with her work and not give up in frustration. Her mother, Julie, describes how she sees the organization of Bighand school helping Kayla:

At the school there is more than one grade that the teacher has to work with and so she can’t just devote the attention to all of them on an assignment and make sure that they do it. [Students] do have to do some planning and organization and some self-management skills, which again is important when you get older. And, of course, they have to be more self-motivated to complete their work on their own. And they don’t . . . well just from being in the public city schools, I know that isn’t the way it is. The teacher really organizes your day for you . . . [Kayla] had to be responsible to get her work done and she had to organize what she was going to do and when. She did not get distracted.

Troublesome Youth Culture

A persistent theme running through my conversations and interviews with parents is their distrust of “youth culture.” This distrust seems to grow from a mixture of media images and personal knowledge of kids who have gotten into trouble in and out of school. One evening I had dinner at a Riverview diner with the Bighand Neighborhood Club. It is an informal descendent of the old agricultural extension women’s club, now composed of the “young mothers” (those with school-age children and younger). The dominant topic of our conversation was their very real anxiety about the sexualized atmosphere of schools, in the way girls dress and what they sense to be sexual activity among younger and younger girls. They lament what they view as a “lack of basic values,” a skyrocketing teenage pregnancy rate, and a fear of loss of control over their own children to a decadent youth culture.

Schooling at Bighand offers two things to parents who are concerned about this. For one, it offers separation from, and postponement of entry into, the youth culture they see as troublesome. More importantly, they view life at the school, which means life with recitations, as providing their children with a small scale schooling experience that helps them learn to get along with others and the self-discipline to resist a troublesome youth culture and avoid, as Molly’s

mother said, “leaning toward trouble.” That is, the orderly, quiet atmosphere of the school, required of a recitation-based curriculum, and the self-discipline required to succeed in Mrs. Hoffman’s system, helps students to cope with the pressures of the youth culture they will inevitably encounter.

Loretta’s mother is clear about what she sees as the “social benefits” of Bighand School. As noted, Loretta transferred in the middle of her sixth grade year, after getting into discipline trouble at the elementary school in Sparta. Nancy was deeply concerned about Loretta’s peers as a bad influence and that Loretta was becoming “a bad girl.” She was worried about the preoccupations of early adolescent culture and its corrosive values. When I asked Nancy to describe the distinction she saw between Bighand School and Sparta Middle School (from which Loretta transferred) and what kids learn there, she responded emotionally that children at Bighand are:

much less self-absorbed, I would say, much less preoccupied with how they look. I mean, I can just think of, say the girls here, they probably have chores . . . Where city kids, they go home from school, and they read Teen Magazine or Young Miss and watch a lot of television and are just much more caught up with what’s popular rather than just functioning of life. A big difference. And with that I think the country kids are a lot kinder. Just the way, and I’m not trying to make it sound like they’re Amish or anything, but I think they do just live a different life and just have more kindness, and you learn to be kinder and maybe stay out of trouble. And the kids [at Bighand] have to get their work done or else.

Defending Community and a Way of Life

A capacity for students to cope with youth culture and the community’s confidence in their secondary school success, provided by the curriculum and instruction of Bighand School and epitomized by the “class,” take on further symbolic meaning in this country school. The late 1990s has presented rural America, and rural Nebraska in particular, with another farm crisis. Commodity prices have bottomed out. 1998 in particular saw a widespread and rapid new wave of consolidation of small family farms into bigger farms and bigger agribusiness entities (Drabenstott, 1999). This economic trend has been underway for some time, but the current rapidity of consolidation is “producing [social] geographic shifts and dramatically changing agriculture’s linkages to local communities” (Drabenstott, 1999, p. 71). Consequently, rural farming communities are experiencing more intensely a sense of social and economic siege. Bighand’s school board members repeatedly com-

plain that the State continues to add confusing rules and regulations for the school to follow and that the neighboring school districts, particularly Sparta-Johnville, want them to close down to appropriate their property tax revenues for school funding. Even their own state senator, who is understood as a pro-farm/pro-rural politician and well liked in the Bighand community, does not hide his disdain for small country schools nor his belief in school consolidation. As the school board secretary said during a school board meeting on a dreary February night, “they want to make it hard for us to hang on.”

There seems to be an air of resignation in the Bighand community that the family farm and the small farming community are on the wane, never to recover. In this subtly shared sentiment, only those big and strong enough can, and ought, to survive. This seems representative of a general sentiment in the state. Many farmers in the state seem to accept as inevitable the passing of the family farm and, with it, “a way of life” (Hassebrook, personal communication, April 7, 1999).

Yet, the Bighand community is “hanging on” to its school at a time when it would be just as easy for it to close and send its children to the affiliated school districts. Some families in the community already do this precisely because their children will ultimately attend and finish school in these districts and want them acclimated to the schools. But for those who continue to put their children at Bighand, this that can be viewed as a way to inculcate some values they hold dear, that are country, rural or agricultural—the way of life that is under siege and on the wane. These values appear to be what they want their kids to have as they enter large graded middle and secondary schools, over which they feel they have no influence or control and is composed of youth culture of which they are deeply suspicious. Country schooling, in this community and at this school, conceivably symbolizes a defense of the community and a way of life from social and economic siege.

When viewed against these larger sociocultural and economic features, the values of independence, hard work, following through, and self-discipline, take on a deeper hue. Moreover, the primary role of modern recitation instruction of socializing children into these also takes on a deeper hue. It is easy to criticize school practices when viewed free from culture, history and contemporary politics and economics.

Concluding Thoughts

It has been my goal to offer a more complicated picture of the modern appearance of the recitation in the form of “classes” at a single one-teacher school. In that they seem consonant with the old country school recitation and with the general forms of conservative instruction in the U.S., it is not hard to theorize that a similar version of “classes,” as

I observed them during the 1998-1999 academic year, are part of a more general phenomenon in small country schools (see Muse et. al, 1998). Serious reform involving country schools must take into consideration the larger cultural context of rural one-teacher schools generally and the specific communities in which they exist. Their matrices of community values and desires may lead community members and their educators to rationally resist changes that they sense may undermine what their schools do for their children and how they may defend their ways of life.

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