

Conversation and Control: Emergent Progressive Pedagogy in the Last of Nebraska's One-Teacher Schools

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This article describes the teaching practices at Upper Rill School, a 1-teacher school in rural Nebraska. With its 8 students, grades 1 through 8, the teacher considers the school's size and continuity of student enrollment flexible and generative. Subject matter and grade levels are regularly integrated though common curricula. Instruction is carried out in conversations with individual students and in same- and mixed-grade groups. The pedagogy at Upper Rill has emergent qualities of progressive instruction, reflecting the ambitious teaching reformers call for. Small-scale schooling arguably enables a teacher to enact this kind of pedagogy.

Joseph Featherstone (1984) writes that we are the United States of Amnesia, neglecting our own pedagogical past as we grope along in present-day school reform. We can extend this criticism to include our neglect of contemporary examples of school traditions that may still offer insight. There is a modern rendering of a traditional genre of schooling that we currently fail to see, use, and learn from: the one-teacher schoolhouse. While certainly diminishing in number, they are still part of the American educational landscape. When America began consolidation of small country schools over 70 years ago, many assumed that increased size, class differentiation, and economies of scale were progress. Bigger must be better the old faith went. But, current reforms—urging school smallness—give pause to reconsider these assumptions. This paper considers one of the last one-teacher schools in rural Nebraska. It describes how one teacher capitalizes on the small size, continuity of student enrollment, and multiage dynamic. The analysis specifically looks at an instance of literature instruction and how the small setting presents the teacher with an opportunity to develop more student- and idea-centered instruction.

Reform and School Size

The research reported here is drawn from the second of a pair of comparative case studies designed to examine issues of school size (Swidler, 2000). School size is now

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indisputably an important reform issue (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lynn, 2000). Drawing upon decades of research, beginning with Barker and Gump's *Big School, Small School* (Barker & Gump, 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 for students and their learning (Cotton, 1996; Gladden, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1996). School restructuring research, for example, has shown size as a feature of urban schools' capacity for "academic press" that has important consequences for low income and minority children (Lee & Smith, 1999). Small school size, though, is no policy panacea (Lee, Smerdon, Alfredo-Liro, & Brown, 2000). Raywid (1996), while hopeful, offers a cautionary view of small-scale schooling. Benefits of small schools vary according to social and academic organization, enactment of pedagogical vision and a critical capacity to build knowledge and dispositions necessary to capitalize on smallness. Nevertheless, smallness is thoroughly implicated in robust school improvement (Clinchy, 2000). Consequently, we hear reformers and policymakers call for schools to "scale down" (Elmore, 1996); to "restructure" (Newmann & Wehlage, 1996) into small, multiage units; and to create "schools within schools" (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

It is not uncommon to hear some modern school reformers in the "small schools movement" informally invoke at research conferences the image of the one-teacher country school as inspiration for their efforts. Journalists seem to make regular, sentimental visits to one-room schools. However, contemporary rural, one-teacher schools continue to be overlooked by educational researchers. Small country schools and school districts appear in larger quantitative

studies (see Fowler, 1995; Howley, 1989), which ratify what we already know from other more powerful mainstream studies that are not exclusively rural: Smaller is better. Scholarly, descriptive accounts of contemporary, small, public rural schools, and one-teacher schools in particular, are exceptionally thin. What makes rural, one-teacher schools of theoretical interest and reform concern is that they are naturally occurring instances of small-scale schooling. Their size is a function of social and historical circumstance, not reform intervention. The one-teacher school is the quintessential rural institution where most children of rural America were first educated. Rural depopulation and a hegemony of economy of scale ideologies have both contributed to widespread closure and school consolidation. This research has been undertaken to look at the practices of the remaining one-teacher schools, what might be learned from them, and if or how, in the words of Nebraska filmmaker Joel Geyer (1995), we might capture a glimpse “of our future in this remaining piece of our past.”

Theory and Methods

Since my interests are in Nebraska’s remaining one-teacher schools as naturally occurring instances of small-scale schooling, I employ a theoretical orientation and research methodology appropriate to the study of sociocultural phenomena in natural settings. Ethnographic analysis is suited to attend holistically to the details and subtleties of natural settings, particularly when the insiders’ perspectives are vital to understanding those settings (Geertz, 1983; Wolcott, 1995). While no institution is truly “natural” (they are human creations), the rural one-teacher school is, in educational and institutional terms, not an intervention; it is “just so.” Treating it as a mundane cultural setting allows me to examine how school constituents come together to share symbols and to create and coordinate rights and duties. These, in turn, frame practices that structure how the constituents “do school” that is small in scale.

The data collection and analysis for this study take an interpretive perspective derived from educational anthropology (Erickson, 1986; Mehan, 1979). To borrow from legendary anthropologist Edward Sapir (1921), school is a cultural setting composed of “the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives” (p. 21). The texture of school life is in large part shaped by what teachers and students do when they come together around school subjects in that thing called “instruction.” Culturally speaking, school practices take on symbolic properties that are, in Geertz’s (1973) terms, “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 my struggles to read over the shoulders of the teacher and his students, who are the “natives” in Upper Rill School, I focus specifically on

their co-construction of instructional practices as important features of school culture. This study is thus bound (Stake, 1995) by a focus on instructional practices.

Data collection for this study included participant-observation in the first seven months of the 1999-2000 academic year (August-April) for no less than 2 days per week and in several return visits the last month. These visits resulted in narrative field notes from Upper Rill School. I attended monthly school board meetings and interviewed board members. I conducted individual, in-depth interviews with parents, administrators, and community members who had no children at the school. I interviewed the teacher monthly. I endeavored especially to interview the students, individually (at least twice) and in groups (at least 10 times). I conducted smaller, follow-up interviews with students, parents, the teacher, and school board members, formally and informally (sometimes in telephone calls), to verify emergent assertions and to contribute to the building of a working hypotheses about “what is going on” at the school. I also reviewed textbooks, curriculum guides, and written school policies as documentary artifacts and symbolic tracings of what the school practices mean. Much of the data I gathered comes from hundreds of conversations I had with the students and the teacher during the ordinary school day: as I sat next to them, as they engaged in individual and group activities, at lunch in the basement, and in my role as unofficial recess monitor and everlasting kickball pitcher. These conversations ranged from genuine field interviews to brief exchanges.

Nebraska’s Remaining One-Teacher Schools

Nebraska continues to have more existing one-teacher schools than any other state in the U.S. From the most recent data on U.S. one-room schools (DeWalt, 1997; Muse, Hite, Randall, & Jensen, 1998), I estimated that there were roughly 350 remaining one-teacher public schools in the U.S. at the time of data collection—down from 143,391 in 1931 (Leight & Rhienhart, 1992). For the 1999-2000 school year, Nebraska had 100 one-teacher schools; in 2001-2002 fewer than 80, most of which, contrary to popular understanding, are located in the eastern part of the state.

Call for their dismantling and consolidation from various interest groups is perennial political sport in Nebraska. It comes under the guise of compassionate renovation of school financing and long overdue “modernization.” However, the one-teacher schools are variants of “Class-One” school districts. These districts are kindergarten through grade 8 only (i.e., those that have no high school). In the 1999-2000 school year, there were 283 Class-One school districts, and these made up more than half of the state’s districts. The one-teacher schools, like all Class Ones, comprise their own districts and have their own three-person school boards. They have statutory support to exist. To eliminate entirely the

Table 1
Students at Upper Rill School This Year

Grade	Student
Pre-K	Danny
1st	Anna
2nd	Marlon
2nd	Mary
4th	Dylan
4th	Penny
5th	Nate
6th	Paul
7th	Nora
8th	Danielle

remaining one-teacher schools in the state would require legislative action on school redistricting, which would require considerable political will to overhaul the current system. These schools thus remain part of Nebraska's educational geography. Nevertheless, rural population decline, ongoing legislative and local tax struggles, extremely inequitable state aid distribution, popular ideologies of economies of scale (i.e., bigger is better), and sociopolitical pressure from both rural and nonrural school districts all contribute to endemic pressure on communities to close the small, Class-One schools.

Research Site: Upper Rill School

I visited Upper Rill School 2 years prior to data collection. I asked the teacher, Will, if he would permit me to spend the better part of an academic year at the school. I asked Will specifically because his teaching seemed to contrast with the conservative textbook and recitation-based instruction that I saw dominating other one-teacher schools. He also seemed thoroughly committed to making academic life interesting. At the time of my visit, Upper Rill had three students. Far from a random selection, this school provides a keen contrast in teaching practices to the first case I considered earlier (Swidler, 2000).

Upper Rill School is located in the rich farming prairie of eastern Nebraska. The school is situated between four communities and school districts of various sizes. It is located 10 miles from the large city of United; 5 miles from the village of Dark Glen, whose elementary school is consolidated with the town of Portage, 5 miles west; 12 miles from the town of Benefit; and 6 miles from the village of Nickels. It is literally in the country, on a dirt road that is a 35-mile extension of an arterial street from United. The property is bordered by hay fields owned by acreage residents. Across the road is a large milo field and drying bin, and the school board treasurer's cornfield lies kitty-corner. North of the

school, and up a hill 100 yards, are railroad tracks that are in heavy use. The school building vibrates several times a day from long trains carrying coal from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming. The train engineers almost always blow the horn when the students are outside the building waving. When approaching the school from the east, a driver kicks up dust and maneuvers under a viaduct; passes the school treasurer's farm; and comes upon an unattractive, plain white, one-story building. This building is an old, prefabricated "portable" school acquired in 1980 from a large district in the Omaha area. The old Upper Rill school building had been located in a semi-wetland until it burned down after its chemical toilet caught fire. The school has two acres of field, enclosed by a 3-foot high chain-link fence. There are makeshift kickball sites and a concrete basketball court, a swing-set, a new jungle gym, and an antique county school merry-go-round that, as dangerous as it looks, gets plenty of use without injury.

State historical archives reveal that the Upper Rill School District was formed in 1870 and almost retains its original geographic configuration. It takes its name from the small creek that flows through the district. The school district encompasses no population centers. The land in the district is composed of mostly family farms and some residential acreage property. The 1999 census indicates that there are 56 residents in the district and eight school-age children, but only two are enrolled at Upper Rill.

Students at Upper Rill This Year

In the 1999-2000 school year, Upper Rill School had 10 students (see Table 1) and served four families (see Table 2). However, seven of those students did not reside in the district and were "option enrollment" students. Nebraska has an enrollment law that permits parents to place their children in any public school in the state as long as there is room at the school, the parents can provide transportation, and school desegregation plans are not compromised.

The parents of Upper Rill students reflect a diversity of occupational and educational backgrounds. The Ereck-sens' mother and father are college educated. None of these families consider themselves poor, though certainly none consider themselves well off.

The Erecksen family resides in the Portage School District and options six children into Upper Rill. The Ereck-sens present an interesting twist on option enrollment in this particular setting. They are devout Missouri Synod Lutherans, a conservative, fundamentalist-leaning wing of the Lutheran Church. They have 10 children total; the youngest is 1 year old and the oldest a high school junior who attends classes through a local high home-school consortium. Until 1998, the mother, Nicole, home-schooled their children. While Nicole worked to coordinate with other home-school families in the area, the task of educating her children at home became

Table 2
Upper Rill Family Data

Student (Grade)	Parent Occupation		Parent Education (highest level achieved)	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Erecksons:				
Anna (K)	Stay at home.	Farmer	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree
Mary (2nd)	Part-time music teacher			
Penny (4th)				
Paul (6th)				
Nora (7th)				
Danielle (8th)				
Marlon (2nd)	Registered nurse	Welder, Truck driver	Associate's degree	Associate's degree
Danny (pre-K)				
Dylan (4th)	Office manager for family business	Self-employed, demolition company	High school	High school
Nate (5th)	Hospital technician	Stepfather: Warehouse laborer Biological father: Real estate agent (out of state)	High school	Stepfather: High school Biological father: Unknown

overwhelming. Scott and Nicole were concerned that they could not properly attend to the education of all of their children. Unlike most religious home-schooling families, the Erecksons' reservations about public schools are not so much about curricular content (e.g., secular humanism or evolution), but about what the organization and culture of school would do to their children. Their religious values find fullest expression in the primacy of family unity. While the Erecksons are a "farm family" and carry values of shared obligation of upkeep of home and farm, unity of and attachment to the family are predominant values for them. They claim that it is biblical. Nicole and Scott were concerned that public schooling, with its emphasis on graded classrooms, would separate their children from one another and erode the family structure. "We were concerned that the school would divide the kids, put pressure on them to be in cliques and not be brotherly or sisterly," Scott told me. Scott and Nicole felt that the graded school system would impose division on the children, urge them to become members of cliques, encourage resentment and sibling rivalry, and generally make them accustomed to a peer and popular culture that they would value more highly than their family.

Upper Rill effectively solved that problem for the Erecksons. Nicole and Scott are the only Upper Rill parents who are college educated and Nicole has a teaching credential in music. In their informed judgment, the school allows

them "to be together as much as possible." And when they visited with the teacher the summer of 1998, before their children's enrollment, Scott says that they "kind of interviewed the teacher about his philosophy, and when he said that he wanted kids to think, we felt, 'How can you argue with that?'" The teacher explicitly informed them that there would be no room for religious instruction and Scott and Nicole readily agreed. "Teaching religion is a family and church matter anyway," Scott says.

This was good news for Upper Rill which in 1998-1999 was facing another year of low enrollments. Every Class-One school in the state must "affiliate" with at least one district that has a high school. Upper Rill affiliates exclusively with the Portage district. Each high school district carries budgetary authority over its affiliated Class One. These affiliated district school boards thus approve each Class One's budget. However, these high school districts do not have the political or moral power to close the schools down. Closure requires a majority of a formal vote by either the Class-One school board or the registered voting residents within the Class-One district. The affiliated high school districts can, and do, bring public pressure to close the schools if a Class One's enrollment remains low and the per-pupil costs exceeds that of the affiliated district. The Upper Rill School Board determined, with their part-time contracted principal, that they needed to average 12

students a year to be in rough parity in per-pupil cost with the Portage School District and to justify remaining open. The general sentiment within the Upper Rill district is that if there are enough school-age children who have parents that want their children there and if the total enrollment is close to 12, then there is no reason to close. The Portage Schools' superintendent has stated repeatedly in public settings that he would like Upper Rill closed, primarily for property tax revenue that his district would absorb. By all indications the Upper Rill treasurer, who attended Upper Rill (as did his son and as do his grandchildren), carries enough clout in the community to effectively thwart this challenge. From the point of view of Upper Rill School, there is effectively no reason to directly confront the Portage superintendent, only the need to sway the majority of the Upper Rill community members that staying open is worthwhile.

Of the students at Upper Rill this year, Nate has been a student since the first grade. He had lived in the district until 1997, when his mother remarried and moved to United. He is now an option student and makes the 15-minute drive to the school. Nate is currently the only student to receive special education services through a traveling special education teacher and speech pathologist who each come twice a week for 1 hour. Dylan is new this year. His parents purchased property in the school district and built a new house. They previously resided in Dark Glen. His parents indicated that they were happy about the transfer because Dylan had been identified as a potential special education student and was having behavior problems at Dark Glen Elementary School.

The only children that reside in the district are Marlon and his brother, Danny. Both their mother and father attended Upper Rill. Their grandfather also attended the school and is currently the treasurer (and unquestionable power broker) of the school board. Danny is not a formally enrolled student. He turned 5 in January, and thus missed the October birthday cut-off for kindergarten eligibility in Nebraska. He did not attend the school the first semester. Danny had been attending preschool in United, where his mother works as a nurse. She asked the teacher if Danny could attend the school when he turned 5 as a "semi-kindergartner," with the idea that he would attend kindergarten full-time the following year. This was both a matter of convenience and of education for the Schmidts. The sheer proximity made Danny's custodial care easier. Like the Erecksens, the Schmidts felt it important that Danny be with his older brother. Additionally, they felt that he could get a head start at kindergarten, making "real kindergarten" an easy transition. The teacher agreed, and decided with the parents that he would do some "basic stuff" with Danny such as writing his letters and numbers, letting him sit in on oral readings with the first and second graders, and having him read some age-appropriate books with older children.

Rural and Intimate

Like many country, one-teacher schools, Upper Rill School has a combination of ruralness and intimacy. In addition to being in an agricultural community "in the country," and, historically, the school for the area's farm children, Upper Rill currently enrolls children who have a connection to agriculture presently or in their recent family histories. The Erecksen family is the only Upper Rill family that farms for a living, and their children make up over half of the students. Marlon's and Danny's mother and father grew up farming. Their father still helps out his father, a full-time farmer, with harvest. Marlon says one of his favorite things to do is to ride in the combine with his grandfather during harvest. Until Nate moved to United after his mother's remarriage, he lived in his mother's family farmhouse.

An intimacy accompanies this rural living. The intimacy derives from at least three sources. One, the Erecksen children bring what is to an outsider like me a palpable emotional attachment to one another. They spend nearly their entire waking hours around each other, including at school. What was evident from the first few days of getting to know the Erecksen children at Upper Rill was the sense of mutual obligation they have toward one another. They have explicit family rules about the younger siblings deferring to the older children and about the older siblings caring for the younger ones. The children and their parents informed me that the children are instructed on sibling obligation, "to look out for another," to "help the younger ones if needed," and to make sure "everyone stays out of trouble." The more immersed I became in the life of the school, the harder it became for me to imagine one Erecksen child isolated from another. This family tightness and their collective presence has not, however, isolated them from the other students.

Second, Upper Rill is the only school that Marlon has ever attended, and Nate has been a student there since first grade. These two boys have known each other and have interacted closely in school for 4 years. Two years prior to this study there were only three students at Upper Rill, and two of whom were Marlon and Nate. It is hard for either of them to think of their schooling without thinking about each other and the one full-time teacher they have had. Nate, Marlon, and their teacher have created for each other the stability of sustained school relationships.

Lastly, because of the small number of students, school relationships are shaped through the students' and teacher's daily cohabitation of a rather small space for over 8 months of the year. They are simply regular parts of each other's lives. They cannot avoid each other in either their academic or nonacademic interactions. They play, eat, and do academic work together. It is through these everyday interactions that they become familiar with each other. It is an intimacy that comes from what Alan Peshkin (1994) describes as knowing, and being known by, others through

sustained, mundane interaction that is characteristic of small and rural communities.

"Teacher Will"

The teacher, Will Tomlinson, is in his 5th year at Upper Rill. The students affectionately refer to him as "Teacher Will." It is not uncommon to hear students (and parents and board members) call him "Will," or sometimes just "Teacher." His three-syllable surname, along with the title "mister," makes it cumbersome for the students to pronounce. As Nora says of the name Teacher Will, "It's just easier to say. He doesn't mind." Marlon implies it is a term of endearment, "It shows we like him. He doesn't care that we use his first name."

Will came to teaching after an 18-year career as a railroad brakeman. He started college after high school but dropped out after a semester. He returned to college in 1993 at a vocationally oriented liberal arts college. He says he pursued teaching because it was something that he always wanted to do. Though relatively well paid as a railroad worker (his salary was nearly 3 times what he makes as a teacher), Will notes the intense boredom, intermittent danger, and sheer physical burden of railroad work that led him to pursue a second career. Before coming to Upper Rill, he spent a year teaching kindergarten in another Class-One, two-teacher school in the same county and with the same principal. As soon as it became available, he immediately applied for and won the position at Upper Rill. His only professional teaching jobs have been in small country schools.

When Will started teaching, however, the country school setting was new to him. He grew up in United and attended large, graded elementary schools. His teacher education was oriented toward graded elementary schools. All his practical experiences in his teacher education program were in larger schools. He still lives in United with his family, including his grown children. Will, at first blush, appears an oddly gruff character. His avocation is martial arts and he frequently refers to it as a source of educational edification (e.g., self-discipline, hard work, courtesy, and respect). That he is a male makes him a peculiarity in the world of Class-One and one-teacher schools in Nebraska, not to mention elementary school teaching in general. Tall and middle-aged, he wears Birkenstock sandals and, when it is warm, Hawaiian shirts and shorts. Culturally and educationally, Will's experience is removed from rural Nebraska, the Upper Rill community, and one-room schooling. As he says, "there is nothing rural about me."

The students uniformly report a strong affection for Will. While they describe him as quietly demanding, they see him as good-natured (all use the word "nice"). Nate laughs when he tells that Teacher Will "does not stand for bull . . . oney." And, these students say that Will truly believes in the

two signs posted in the school. One that adorns his bulletin board, directly behind his chair and slightly above his head, has the encircled word CAN'T with a diagonal line running through it. On the opposite wall is a 12" x 18" placard that reads THINK.

One Thursday during my observations early in the school year, Will was visibly frustrated with Dylan's lack of effort to complete a social studies assignment. Dylan repeatedly claimed that he could not complete the review exercise at the end of the chapter. It is worth noting that Dylan's transition to Upper Rill had not been completely smooth. Will told me that he was convinced that Dylan had "learned how to give up" at his previous school (in neighboring Dark Glen) and that his teachers accepted his excuses, letting Dylan conclude that "he was the fat kid who couldn't learn." Will claims that, deep down, the teachers at Dark Glen did not care about, or at least did not care to understand, Dylan and relegated him to "low achieving" status and "on the fast track to special ed." In other words, Will suspected that a self-fulfilling prophecy had been created for Dylan. He said he felt that Dylan had acquired a habit of manipulating his teachers into feeling sorry for him, lowering their expectations, and ultimately letting him get out of doing his academic work; that he was effectively "set up to fail."

Will went over the social studies question with Dylan several times, telling him that it was straightforward and something that "a second grader could do." Will asked Dylan, "Are you jerking my chain?" He then said to Dylan, from his desk and in full hearing range of all students, "Dylan. Listen to me. Helplessness is a learned behavior. I want you to think about that today as much as you can." Will gently repeated "Helplessness is a learned behavior" four more times to Dylan, who nodded his head affirmatively. When I asked Dylan later what he thought that meant, he shrugged his shoulders.

To an outsider visiting this school, this interaction between Will and Dylan might appear coarse: a teacher sarcastically berating a 10-year-old boy in one of those unintended power struggles that teachers neither intend nor enjoy. But this small event reveals a deeper aspect of the school, the sense of attachment and obligation the teacher and students have toward one another, specifically the rights and role of the teacher at Upper Rill. This reflects part of the students' shared understanding—a kind of unstated social contract—that Will has a right to push students because he cares about them and, in the end, because he is "nice." This is induced largely by the small setting, where the teacher and students are together almost constantly. Consequently, in Nate's words: "There's no place to hide; Will knows what you're doing constantly." Dylan emphatically says there is "not no way I'm going back to D-Glen [Elementary School]. They're mean." He went on to say that "Teacher Will cares

about me, even though he gives me [a] hard time sometimes. He knows I was jerking his chain."

When I asked him to describe his teaching philosophy, Will was rather reticent, as if somehow embarrassed by the lack of an articulated, systematic view about what he believes in and is seeking to accomplish at the school. He says his primary goal is summed up in the phrase, "Getting kids to think." He goes on, "I want kids to know about something and what lies behind it, why something is the way it is. I want them to do more than just get through the assignments, not just spit back answers. It's about the why." This working philosophy for Will is rooted in his disillusionment with schooling as a mindless activity, "kids not thinking" and "making decisions that are stupid" or decisions that "make them look stupid." These comments sound unrefined, and indeed they appeared to me that way when I first heard him speak them. But, as banal as these sound, they represent the view that animates his teaching. He bemoans that the bulk of his own teacher education was built around writing lesson plans and "using the latest jargon" like "whole language." He jokes that there was a string of contradictions in his teacher education. On the one hand, his instructors preached "constructivist" teaching. On the other hand, they also emphasized a behavioral model of curriculum and lesson planning. He quips that in his teacher education program, "Madeleine Hunter was king." Such precise lesson planning, he notes, "leaves the illusion that you know what is exactly going to happen for each kid, for each lesson, for each day, for each unit. That's ludicrous." It appears that he conscientiously avoids using reform jargon, preferring to remain with "thinking" and "working hard."

The Pedagogical Task

Teacher Will is presented with the age-old problem of the country school teacher: how to organize curriculum and instruction that accommodates 10 different children at seven different grade levels, and that is acceptable to the school's board, the principal, parents, and his own sense of a good education. Will has presented himself with an ongoing dilemma of what constitutes a successful student, successful learning, and a satisfying educational experience.

To deal with this, he employs a hybrid of practices. These practices are a mixture of individualized conventional textbook-based curriculum and some of the more ambitious instruction that is conversation-based and student-centered, directed at "getting them to think" and exploiting the diversity of student ages. For instance, conventional grade-level textbooks and workbooks are used as devices for the organization of curriculum. Their usage accomplishes two things for Will. For one, he sees them as a way for him to have some general idea of students' progress at their respective grade levels. This is important because the students frequently interact around common activities and common

readings such as the *Junior Great Books* series. Second, it is a marker for parents, and Will can tell them where students are at academically.

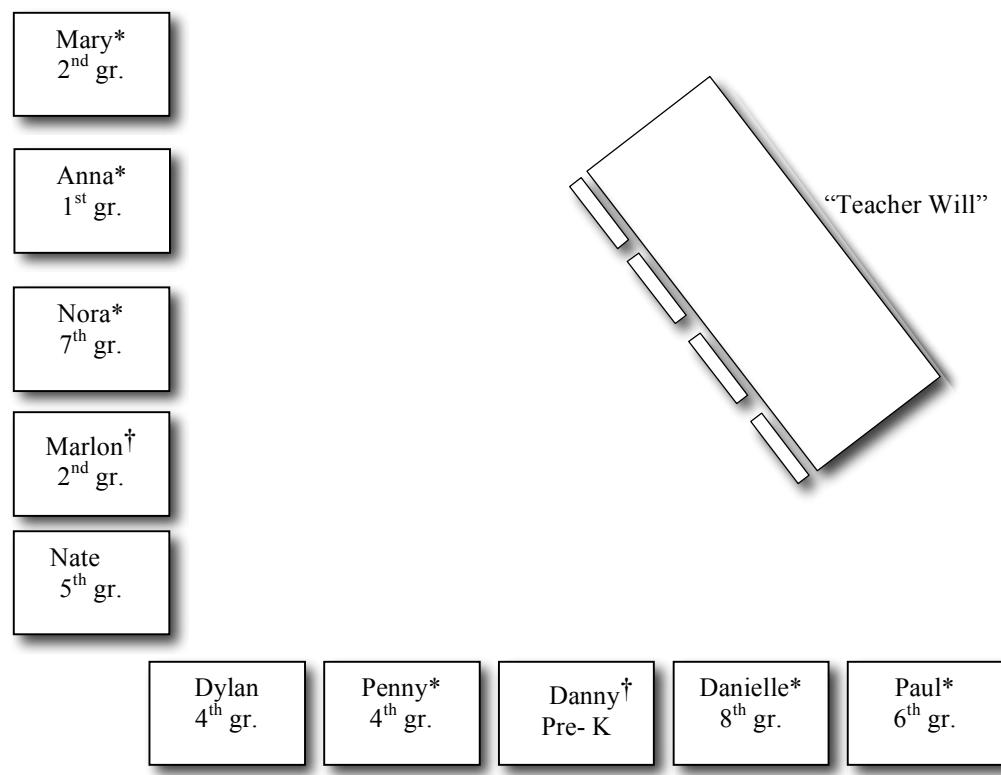
However useful it is, this approach troubles Will. He regularly notes his concern for there being "something better" that "gets kids to think, not just do the worksheet." Moreover, he has some concerns about separating students in their individual work. Therefore, the textbooks have become a loose guide for curriculum organization for individual students. He prefers to have students work cooperatively in activities; and, consequently, Will is preoccupied with considering how he can use textbooks, workbooks, and activities as common curricula, even with children across vast grade levels. When, for instance, the sixth grade social studies textbook (Paul's) has something about bananas, bananas becomes the focus for the social studies activity of the day, centered on the sixth grade worksheet. Will determines that there needs to be a proper mixture of older and younger students working together so that they all can complete the activities and the questions on worksheets. Similarly, for his literature units, he uses a fourth-grade-level story from the literature series, but the fourth-, fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students (and sometimes even the second graders) will read it and participate in the discussion of the story.

Instruction

Flowing from Will's working philosophy, his coping with the small and multiage setting, and the subsequent defining of his teaching task, instruction is carried out with individual students, and small same-age and multiage groups. Instruction occurs mainly while everyone is at their desks in a large triangle with Will occupying his own corner (see Figure 1 for classroom map), but sometimes the students sit across from him in the chairs immediately in front of his desk. (He doesn't move around much due to sore knees from years of railroad work.) To outsiders, this all seems rather laid back, as if he were presiding over an ongoing seminar. Will tells me he thinks in 1- or 2-week "chunks" of time with respect to getting through particular tasks or curriculum units, which often related to the standardized curriculum. Moreover, he exploits every opportunity for cross-age interaction.

There is no typical day at Upper Rill, though there are days that are typical Upper Rill. To gain some sense of the curriculum and instruction in a school day, it is helpful to look across some randomly selected days (see Figures 2a and 2b). There is no posted schedule in the school. The only predictable scheduled items at Upper Rill are morning and afternoon recesses, music on Fridays (taught by Nicole Erecksen), spelling tests on Monday mornings, and lunch.

While the schedule may not be predictable, there are expectations and local rules of and for student conduct in the



*Siblings Erickson family

†Siblings

Figure 1. Map of Upper Rill classroom

school in and around academic work. It is extremely rare to see student resistance at the school (e.g., acting out, refusing teacher requests). Ultimately, the students have a shared understanding that they are to actively “do their work” and participate in the cooperative activities. And when a student is not doing something sanctioned by the teacher or not working at the assigned activity, Teacher Will immediately sees this. The students understand this near-constant surveillance and how it plays into the rule of ultimate deferral to the teacher. And when one does not know what to do, the rule is that the student must go to Teacher Will to figure out what to do. The students come to understand the flow of the day and of the week, as Teacher Will says. What appears to be unstructured activities are in effect highly organized in terms of the implied rules students are to follow.

Teaching Literature

Teacher Will’s working philosophy of “learning to think” and cross-age interaction finds its fullest expression in his literature instruction. Will has adopted the *Junior Great Books* series this year. He had become frustrated with

what he saw as low-quality literature in the commercially produced basal (textbook) readers, which he retains for supplementary reading. For Will, basal stories are weak and not conducive to “thinking” and learning about “why things happen the way they do” in literature. As Will puts it, “I want them to look beyond what the plot is, who did what and when, and so on. That’s baby stuff. There’s more to it than that.” It is not clear from Will’s remarks what “more” is. He does not subscribe to any particular theory of literature instruction (e.g., New Criticism, with which the *Junior Great Books* program is obviously aligned, or “reader response” theory). However, he does have a belief in better and worse literature and in better and worse ways to engage children in literature. His criticism doesn’t seem to be derived from his teacher education. This reflects, though, his own desire that students have “something better” than the basal readers that he finds rather simplistic. Whether Will’s assessment is accurate is not as important as the fact that he developed his own educational critique of school-based literature instruction. He recognized an opportunity to do something better with literature and felt he could carry that out at Upper Rill. Will convinced his board to purchase the

Friday, November 5, 1999	
8:35 a.m.	Literature, <i>Junior Great Books</i> Danielle reading downstairs to Anna, <i>The Shoemaker and the Elves</i> . Nora reading aloud downstairs to Marlon and Mary, <i>The Magic Listening Cap</i> . Teacher Will in conversation with Penny, Dylan, Paul, and Nate about the story <i>The Little Humpbacked Horse</i> .
9:00	Anna reads silently at her desk. Nora works on a her crossword puzzle (she is creating it for spelling) at her desk. Mary is reading silently at the back table. Danielle searching library for a book. Marlon reading alone by the fish tank.
9:45	Recess
10:15	Teacher Will resumes conversation with Penny, Dylan, Paul, and Nate, the story <i>The Little Humpbacked Horse</i> . All others resume individual reading.
10:38	Danielle and Nora join in the conversation with Penny, Dylan, Paul, and Nate, the story <i>The Little Hump-backed Horse</i> .
11:00	Danielle's science lesson (for all students) downstairs, "Will Saturn float in a tub of water?"
11:35	Lunch
12:45 p.m.	Resume Danielle's science lesson—activity weighing displaced water.
2:30	Music (Caroline Erecksen is music teacher)
3:25	Get ready to leave.

Figure 2a. Sample of Upper Rill daily schedule

Junior Great Books series over the summer. He attended the program's workshop in the fall of 1999 and started using the series immediately.

The *Junior Great Books* series is the school version of the Great Books Foundation program for adult readers. Started over 50 years ago, the goal of the program is for adults to read and discuss the so-called great works of western literature. As indicated on its web site (The Great Books Foundations, 1999), the foundation's goal is "to instill . . . the habits of mind that characterize a self-reliant thinker, reader, and learner" (¶ 1). Their description goes on to say that "Great Books programs are predicated on the idea that everyone can read and understand excellent literature—literature that has the capacity to engage the whole person, the imagination as well as the intellect" (¶ 1). The school series begins with kindergarten and goes through ninth grade, and can include another series for high school as well. The stories selected are an eclectic mix of well known "children's

classics, folk tales and fairy tales, poetry, and modern short stories from cultures around the world" (The Great Books Foundation, 2003, ¶ 1). The teacher who employs the series is apparently required to take it on faith that the literature selected is worthy of the designation "great." And Will does have faith that the literature is better than that found in basal readers.

The underlying philosophy of the *Junior Great Books* series (The Great Books Foundation, 1999) is termed "shared inquiry." It is described as

a distinctive method of learning in which participants search for answers to fundamental questions raised by a text. This search is inherently active; it involves taking what the author has given us and trying to grasp its full meaning, to interpret or reach an understanding of the text in light of our experience and using sound reasoning. (¶ 2)

Thursday, February 24, 2000	
8:35 a.m.	Erecksons not here yet (uncharacteristic, they are always punctual). Marlon sitting with Danny in the stuffed chair, reading to him <i>Why the Opossum is Gray</i> . Nate reading marine biology book by himself.
8:39	Erecksons arrive. Teacher Will informs that since the traveling special education teacher is coming to work with Nate today, that the students have until 9:00 to clean out their desks and then read quietly or do other work.
8:40	Dylan arrives (not uncommon for him to be late)
8:45	Mary takes out a shell fossil from the classroom collection and starts to scrape off the dirt. Marlon comes over and helps.
9:00	Special education teacher arrives and begins work with Nate at the back table. Teacher Will has math activity worksheets “Animal Antics” and “Animal Kingdoms” Student work in pairs: Dylan (fourth) and Mary (second); Marlon (second) and Penny (fourth); Nora (seventh) and Danny (pre-K); Paul (sixth) and Anna (first grade).
10:00	Recess. Kickball.
10:45	Anna helps Danny write his letters (“He stops at J”). Mary and Marlon working in math textbook, separately, occasionally conferring on multiplication. Paul, Dylan, Nate, and Penny are reading <i>Time [Magazine] For Kids</i> .
11:00	Anna doing a math test.
11:30	Lunch/Recess. Basketball (“gym”).
1:00 p.m.	Students resume the works they were doing prior to lunch.
1:30	Board games: <i>War</i> for Nate, Nora, Paul, and Danny; <i>Clue</i> for Dylan, Marlon, Penny, and Mary. Anna reading by herself.
1:30	Teacher Will hands out math worksheets for each student from their respective grade level textbook series. He has group and individual meetings with students on their math.
2:00	Teacher Will hands out worksheets to everyone pertaining to the <i>Junior Great Books</i> series one “good pride” vs. “bad pride” from the level 4 series story <i>How the Tortoise Became</i> .
2:20	Teacher Will leads a discussion of the worksheet “good pride” vs. “bad pride,” asking students to look for evidence in the text for the following day’s discussion.
3:25	Get ready to leave.

Figure 2b. Sample of Upper Rill daily schedule

The program informs a teacher that “as a shared inquiry leader, you do not impart information or present your own opinions, but guide participants in reaching their own interpretations. You do this by posing thought-provoking questions and by following up purposefully on what participants say” (¶ 3). This description ends with:

In shared inquiry, participants learn to give full consideration to the ideas of others, to weigh the merits of opposing arguments, and to modify their initial opinions as the evidence demands. . . . the shared inquiry method promotes thoughtful dialogue and open debate, preparing its participants to become able, responsible citizens, as well as enthusiastic, lifelong readers. (¶ 4)

This philosophy squares with Will’s working pedagogical philosophy of learning to “think” and, more importantly, it demonstrates why this program appealed to him when he first saw reference to it. Moreover, not only does this appeal to Will because it is supposedly “inherently active” and involves a “search for answers” in a text, but it also calls for a “shared,” conscientiously dialogic instructional process. This implies a conversation with students across grade levels, something suited to Will’s pedagogical disposition.

Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay

Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay, written by Howard Pyle, is part of *Junior Great Books* level 4 (fourth grade). The story was published in 1895 from his book, *Twilight Land*. It is set somewhere in Old World Europe and concerns the relationship and travels of two neighbors, one a wise man, who is a doctor and a magician, the other the “simpleton of simpletons.” The wise man, Simon Agricola, asks the simpleton, Babo, if he would like to be his companion traveling the countryside and making their fortune through performing feats of benevolent magic. Babo agrees. Simon Agricola eventually tires of Babo’s bumbling and thwarting of potential fortunes and he sends Babo off with the admonishment, “Think well! Think Well! Before you do what it is you are about to do, think well!” (p. 131). Later, when he is alone, Babo repeats the admonishment to himself, angry at his own blunders. He is unaware that some nervous thieves with a pot of stolen money are nearby. Thinking that Babo is an agent of the king warning them, the thieves get scared, drop the stolen loot and flee. Babo becomes a hero and is rewarded by the king. In the end Babo gets rich and the wise man, Simon Agricola, stays poor.

The excerpts below give some sense of how Will uses the *Junior Great Books* series and adapts it to his one-teacher situation. The general process of the shared inquiry, as Will has adapted it, involves an oral reading of the entire story. Will sometimes has students read the story before, and some-

times he has them read it after, he has read it aloud. (For the younger students—Marlon, Mary, and Anna—Will often has Nora and Danielle read the stories to them.) Teacher Will asks the students to pay attention as he reads the story and to take notes on where in the text they felt “someone was being smart or being stupid.” Immediately after the reading, discussion begins.

(February 15, 2000)

Teacher Will: This was Penny’s story and Dylan’s story so let’s start with them, okay. Penny, where is a place you marked?

Penny: I marked on (flipping pages) on [page] 131.

TW: Who’s being, oh, is somebody being smart or stupid?

Penny: Babo.

TW: Babo? Is he being smart or stupid?

Penny: Smart.

TW: Okay.

Penny: It’s about the last paragraph.

TW: Last paragraph.

Penny: (quoting from the text) “When the two thieves heard Babo’s piece of advice, they thought that the judge’s officers were after them for sure. And so they dropped the pot of money and away they scampered as fast as they could.”

TW: How is that evidence of Babo being smart?

Penny: He’s being smart because he says advice to the, um, the um, the thieves so they would drop the money and they would not steal it.

TW: Why did he say what he said? Why did Babo say, “Think, think well, think before you do what you’re about to do, think well.” Why did he say that? Did he give them advice? He’s giving them advice, Nate?

Nate: No.

TW: Why not, what do you mean?

Dylan: No, because he had voices that woke him up and he thought, “where would it be?” so he said the advice that the doctor had gave him.

TW: Oh, so you don’t think that he, you think that this is just the first thing that popped into his head?

Nate: Um-huh.

TW: Do you have any evidence of that?

Nate: Well, when he just woke up . . .

TW: Where does it say that in the story? Where does it say that? Where’s your evidence?

Dylan: Teacher Will, I have one.

Paul: I know where. I know where. I know where.

Um, um, where like

Nate: (reading from the text) "They squabbled and bickered and angry till the noise they made woke Babo, and he sat up. Then the first thing he thought was the advice the doctor had gave him the evening before."

TW: Oh. So, Penny, what do you have to say?

Penny: Like Nate.

TW: Well, I mean, do you see where Nate's coming from with this?

Penny: Yes.

TW: Do, has it changed your mind at all? Or do you still think that this was, was an example of Babo being smart?

Penny: Well.

TW: Or do you think it was Babo consciously being smart or that it was just the first thing that popped into his head and he said it?

Nora: I have that spot marked too.

TW: Oh, you all have it? Okay, so for everybody, I guess my question is, do you agree with Nate?

Dylan: I don't.

TW: Well, you may not, but you can listen, and you can contribute to this. The question is, do you think this is an example of Babo being smart or do you think it's an example of him just saying the first thing that came into his head? Now, Penny, you thought it was an example of being smart and Nate disagreed with you.

Nate: No, I said it was something smart too.

TW: Oh, you think that's an example of Babo being smart?

Nate: Yeah.

TW: Nora, what do you think?

Nora: I say smart, because sometimes things don't just pop into your mind, you have to think about it. I mean, like if we were to be discussing the matter on how deep the Indian Ocean was, somebody would say, um, "I had waffles for breakfast this morning." You wouldn't just say that.

TW: Well, no, I see where you guys are coming from. I see your point. So you all think it's an example of Babo being smart? Okay? If you look up at the top of the page, on page 131. "Here it is," said Simon Agricola, "Think well. Think well. Before you do what you are about to do, think well." Do you think that that is an example of, Simon Agricola being smart?

Multiple: Um-huh.

Nora: Yes.

TW: In what way? Why is that an example of Simon Agricola being smart?

Nora: He's giving advice because . . .

TW: He's giving advice, but was it good advice?

Nora/Paul: Yes.

TW: Simon Agricola is giving Babo good advice?

Is that what you're saying?

Multiple: Um-huh.

Dylan: Yeah, because he, um, he didn't go to the thieves, that's why. So then, um, then he, then Babo was walking around with the money and then the king's guard and he, um, told it to the king and then the king asked for his advice and then, um, the next day he paid for it.

Paul: But, um, if, um, Babo was the first one to think of the, um, um, the advice, um, he, he, so like if Agricola was in Babo's place, um, then he would have thought the advice and um, um . . .

TW: Did you lose your train of thought a little bit Paul?

This segment of discourse took less than 10 minutes. Five minutes or so after this, Will moves to involve the second grader, Mary, who is vigorously waving her hand.

Teacher Will: Mary, you found something?

Mary: Uh-huh. [page] 120. (Begins reading) Then I will show you, said Babo. He . . .

Nora: (whispers) spread

Mary: . . . spread the bed of

Nora: (whispers) of cold

Mary: . . . of cold, dead . . .

Paul: (whispers) ashes

Mary: . . . ashes upon his . . .

Paul: (whispers) palm

Mary: . . . palm. Now, said he, I will take the umber . . .

Nora/Paul: (whispers) ember

Mary: . . . ember upon that.

TW: Is that an example of something of Babo being smart or stupid?

Mary: Being smart.

TW: Being smart, okay.

Paul: Being smart because, um, he's taking the dry ashes to make sure he doesn't get burned by the coals.

Nate: Actually . . .

TW: What Nate, I'm sorry, what?

Nate: Actually the ashes burnt him.

TW: I don't know.

Nora: You can't set fire to ashes on ashes.

The discussion about ashes goes on for another 7 minutes. The entire conversation took over 50 minutes, continued the following day for roughly an hour, and lasted another 50 minutes the day after that. In the world of elemen-

tary school academic conversations, this kind of sustained “talk about text” (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996)—within and across school days and involving children across several grade levels—is remarkable.

These excerpts give some indication of the contingent give-and-take of Will’s conversation-based model of instruction. The classroom discourse reveals a good deal of pedagogical complexity. The story, *Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay*, is not straightforward and does not simplistically yield the answer of whether Babo was smart or stupid. There is a particular irony in that the simpleton literally and mindlessly repeats out loud to himself the intelligent advice of the wise man, and then becomes rich. There is a dispute among the students about intelligence and stupidity, giving some indication that they can understand that someone can be smart and stupid simultaneously, depending on one’s point of view. Point of view is an important aspect of understanding literature, especially the modern novel. We can see Will maneuvering to encourage students to offer interpretation. He also consistently presses for them to find evidence in the text to support their interpretations instead of relying on their “feelings” or their “reader’s response.” Moreover, this conversation substantially involves two fourth graders, Dylan and Penny; a fifth grader (Nate); a sixth grader (Paul); and a seventh grader (Nora). The second graders (Mary and Marlon) are listening in. Mary actively participates in one stretch, with the help of her older siblings, and Anna floats in and out of paying attention while she colors. In other words, practically all of the students are involved in this conversation.

Also noteworthy is that this conversation-based pedagogy is not explicitly teacher-centered or textbook-centered. To be sure, Will plays an important mediating role, but this is not a *convergent* teacher-dominated conversation—that is, one that directs students to simple, correct answers. The text does not yield simple answers to questions of Babo’s and/or Simon Agricola’s intelligence or stupidity. And readers need to take on multiple points of view to understand the ironic stupidity in *Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay*. Instead of using literature to preach to children about being good, honest, and hard working; being nice or making friends—whatever moral is built into *Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay* comes through in the oblique situation into which the story’s characters are thrown. This kind of pedagogy resembles the “authentic” literary analysis one finds in a university English seminar, and it echoes the sort of ambitious instruction literacy that reformers support (e.g., Florio-Ruane, Berne, & Raphael, 2001).

Thinking About School Size: Getting It vs. Getting Through It

It is certain that Will’s choice of the *Junior Great Books* program bears some relationship to Upper Rill’s school size

and social organization. However, it is unwarranted to claim that the small-scale setting and multiage circumstance in any sense “caused” this pedagogy to happen. Rather, for a teacher like Will, who has an operating philosophy of “getting them to think” and a recognition that the cross-age interactions are generative and useful in classroom organization and management, the small setting presents an opportunity. In other words, this teacher had some desire to enact a pedagogy that was more substantive than merely getting children through textbooks and workbooks; the cross-age interaction and small-scale setting aids him in accomplishing that. The school setting is a resource that Will can draw upon to deal with his self-defined pedagogical task; he makes this resource viable.

Toward the end of the school year, Will and I had the following conversation about these issues (which I have reconstituted from my field notes):

Steve: When you think of the *Great Books*, what is it you are trying to accomplish in particular? Why use these books instead of a standard basal like the other Class-One teachers you and I know?

Teacher Will: I guess I would kind of look at it this way. I know that the kids have to get through their materials for a particular grade they are supposed to be in, and parents should expect that. They need to know. But I really want students to “get it,” to be thinking about a story. The *Great Books* help do that, I would say. Better than that Houghton-Mifflin crap I had before—know the characters, read the story, answer the questions at the end, fill out some worksheet, take a test and then you are supposed to have read and know a story [rolls his eyes]. You know how I feel about that.

Steve: I do. Too low-level? Kids are capable of doing more than that?

TW: Right. They’re not stupid.

Steve: You might say that you see it as a matter of having kids “get it” versus “getting through it”?

TW: Yes. Kids “getting” the complexity of a story, not just getting them through it.

And when I asked Will about the relationship between his operating philosophy and how it is expressed in the *Junior Great Books* for his literature curriculum, his answer is that this is self-evident. He points and waves at the students’ desks and calls it “this stuff.” He simply refers to it as “older kids looking out for younger kids, helping them with their work” and the “younger kids learning from the older kids.”

Steve: Is this natural to you [i.e., to have kids of different ages working on the same tasks]?

TW: Ah, well [laughs], here it is almost essential.

Steve: Aren't you tempted to simply put kids through their textbooks and workbooks at their grade levels?

TW: I can see that, and we do some of that. But they'd be missing out on this [points and waves at students' desks, referring to the interaction that happens there].

Steve: I can imagine some educators saying that the older kids are not getting ahead when they have to read a younger kid's story; or a younger kid being frustrated that the story might be over his head.

TW: I know what you're saying. I'm not sure that holds water for me anymore. I think the younger kids benefit from being with the older kids, seeing how they think about things and do their work, learning how to be more mature.

Steve: Is there anything you worry about?

TW: Um. [long pause] Sometimes I wonder, "What if I'm wrong?" I guess I have them next year if I find out that they've missed out on something.

In this thoughtful and candid moment of reflection, Will is pointing out what has become an ethical dilemma in his teaching universe. He sees that at Upper Rill the students have a fluid inclination and clear capacity to work together across age levels. The conversation around *Wisdom's Wages and Folly's Pay* offers some strong evidence of that. Yet, American school culture is a graded school culture, the "factory model" legacy of mass schooling. Time committed to multiage instruction seems to run up against a standardized, "grade appropriate" curriculum as organized in textbooks, testing, and promotion policies. This leaves Will with some nagging doubts. "What if I'm wrong?" he asks.

Will is dealing with competing senses of what it means to be good to students in this setting. He has his immediate experience with these children and, then, what the larger school world says is important. One of the reasons that he is able to cope with this day-to-day is because there is no graded school culture around him communicating regular, implicit, institution-wide expectations about standardization. Moreover, the students' parents and the (off-site) principal are uniform in their satisfaction that Will is maintaining discipline (a key value for them) and that the children are learning. He is also comforted by the small size of the school and the realization that he will see students the following year and can make up for whatever deficiencies a student may have. This comfort and control with respect to curriculum and students alike allows Will to have his conversation-based curriculum using *Junior Great Books*.

Some Conclusions

This look at Upper Rill indicates that small schools enable teachers to develop particular forms of curricula and instruction according to perceived and negotiated limits and possibilities. Small schools with a wide range of ages and a few teachers, for instance, may maintain conservative practices for what they see as very sound reasons, as described in the first case in this study (Swidler, 2000). The small setting—and the absence of a large and graded school culture—may be liberating or limiting to the country school teacher. A country school teacher may see several students spread across several grade levels as requiring large amounts of preparation for individual students and the development of ritualized interactions such as grade-level lessons and recitations. That teacher may then maintain conservative, teacher- and textbook-centered practices as efficient, rational responses to this situation in order to "get through" a curriculum (Swidler, 2000).

Ever since educational researchers began investigating instruction, they have reported consistently that most is dull and that the intellectual demands are modest (Cohen & Hill, 2001). Rural schools are not immune to this criticism. There is no broad-based research that offers evidence that instruction in small, rural schools is, or ever has been, any more ambitious than it is in large, graded town schools (Cuban, 1994). In fact, it is much more plausible that the pedagogy in rural schools resembles that in urban schools; it does not tilt toward the "adventurous" that romantics and reformers alike crave (Cohen, 1988). A teacher like Will Tomlinson can view, and create, the one-teacher school as a liberating context that permits the generation of local forms of progressive pedagogy. Moreover, this study suggests that such a progressive pedagogy can have emergent properties. These properties do not have to be directly induced by reform initiatives, school district inservicing, or teacher education. They can spring from a teacher's own sense and imagination of what is achievable in a small-scale setting and what is compatible with parental and community expectations for schooling. An ordinary teacher in a small, rural school can do extraordinary things. Yet, we continue to view these schools as problems to be solved through closure and consolidation; thus terminating a rich pedagogical legacy that might have been.

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