

Teachers' Experiences in One Room School Houses

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Introduction

The first structured form of teaching in Canada was the one room school house which began to emerge in the 1840s. This new curriculum was structured by Egerton Ryerson in the mid-nineteenth century and was created to include many important subjects at the time such as grammar, civics, and arithmetic (Cochrane 2001: 10). He had traveled Europe in search of the best educational system and molded Canada's education system to model Germany's as well as created free education for all Canadians (Shepherd 2005). Ryerson help created our school system become what it is today by fighting for the right to free, good quality education. This is when that teachers began training to educate children rather than teaching right out of high school. The following is an analysis of the teacher's experience in the one room school house, focusing mainly on their education as well as the education they were administering to children in the mid-1900s. Through interviews, archival research as well as through a review of the historical literature on rural education in Ontario, the experiences of many teachers has been compiled and examined to better understand how they lived and taught at that time. There were some important aspects that were discussed during the research period which include their experiences in Normal school, how they dealt with troubled children and disciplined them as well as how the teachers taught their class. I also analysed their daily lives in order to better understand the impact teaching had upon them. Each teacher interviewed had unique stories of their rural school house experiences and were very open to sharing their many tales of teaching in a rural community. The following are the results of the analysis of teachers in rural one room school houses.

Training at Normal School

Normal school was how teachers were trained before teacher's college. Originally, teachers only had to know how to read, write, and calculate due to the lack of teachers (MacDonald et al. 1997: 17). Ontario opened its first Normal School in Toronto in 1847 (19). It was a year of training, which gave the graduate a temporary certificate. Teachers then had to complete a university English course as well as at least one summer course while teaching for at least three years in their one room school house before they received their permanent certificate. After the teachers who were interviewed had been teaching for a little, requirements were not as strict due to the need for teachers (Carr 2005). In Normal school, teachers were taught how to discipline the students. Alec McLeod (2005), a former one room school teacher, explained he was taught how to administer the strap in normal school. They were told the proper way to use it but also to not use it unless absolutely necessary. Most experiences of Normal school were very similar; they were taught curriculum as well as lesson preparation (MacDonald et al. 1997: 20). It seems that what the teachers were taught in Normal School was very unhelpful in a way. They seemed to get most of their learning from their practicum, for which they were sent to a rural school to teach for a week, and the rest that they learned in Normal school was fairly basic. Eventually a university degree as well as Teacher's College became the form of education that is needed to teach in all schools. All of the teachers spoke briefly on their experiences in Normal school but none had negative remarks to make, therefore it is easy to believe their experiences helped make them better teachers.

Boarding and Integration into the Community

Many teachers who were brought into a new community to teach boarded at a house close to the school, usually a farm. When boarding at a house, meals were made for the boarder, including their lunches which they would take to school. Milburn Jones (2005) paid \$4 a week from Monday to Friday at his boarding house or \$6 if he stayed for the weekend. As well he spent most of his time in his room doing work because he had such a large workload. Most of the time when a new teacher came into the community it was a large affair. Some teachers were integrated into the new communities they joined; others felt they were kept at a distance. According to Milburn Jones (2005), most teachers were invited to social functions and usually asked to emcee or just say a few words. He felt he was included into the community by the families he taught. Teachers were seen as leaders in the community since they were shaping the minds of the youth. It was also a race to see who would get to date the teacher first (Carr 2005). Many women teachers settled in the area because they fell in love with and married men from the community. Some teachers that came from the cities found it a bit harder to become involved in the community. Alec McLeod (2005) always felt he was held at a distance from the community; he felt they thought he was “too uppity” for the community. In I Remember the One-Room School, teachers remember their experiences boarding from living in haunted houses to hosts setting up noisemakers to see what time they arrived home (Fair 1979). Although it was not the same for Mr. McLeod, in most cases teachers were integrated into the community without a problem and enjoyed their time spent there, including some who settled in the area they taught.

The Classroom and Daily Activities

The daily routine in one room rural schools was very similar to any other school. It started at 9 o'clock but the teacher had to be there earlier to start the wood stove to warm up the room. The day started with morning exercises, which included the Lord's Prayer, a reading from the Bible, and God Save the King/Queen until O Canada became our national anthem. In the archives at Trent University there is a daily register for Public School from 1896 that describes what religious studies will be included into the classroom. The register states that one must open school with the Lord's Prayer and close with the Lord's Prayer and a scripture. It also states that the Ten Commandments must be repeated at least once a week but it does allow persons of different religious beliefs to retire during these times (Hamilton Township 1896). Throughout the day, the teacher would give out assignments to each grade rather than teach lessons; there was the odd time when a teacher would give a lesson to one or two grades at a time or the whole school, especially when it came to special events. They had two 15-20 minute recesses, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, as well as a break at lunch from 12 to 1. At the school in which Milburn Jones taught, the ladies in the community, whether they had children or not, would take turns each day making a hot lunch such as a soup. He would warm it up at noon on the wood stove at the back and they would all line up with their bowls or mugs; this would be the only thing some students would have for lunch (Jones 2005). Their school was quite lucky because many rural communities during this time would not have been able to supply the children with a meal; farming communities were very poor. Some teachers felt that teaching in a rural school was much more relaxing

because they were their own boss and were able to outline their lessons and assignments how they saw fit. As well, they did not have any problems teaching more than one grade at a time because most had attended one room schools themselves as children. McLeod (2005) was the only teacher interviewed who did not attend a one room school and found he had to adjust to the different style. The students were dismissed at 4 o'clock and the teacher usually stayed a little later to finish work as well as brought work home to finish in their room.

In rural schools, many teachers tried to include fun into their daily routines. They played spelling and arithmetic games with their classes. Students also played many games during their lunch break and recesses. They played games that are still around today such as Duck, Duck, Goose which they called Fox and Hound as well as Red Rover. Another game that was prominent in rural schools was Ollie, Ollie, Over where you throw the ball over and whoever catches it on the other side gets to come over to your side. Another memory that the teachers interviewed remembered were the smells of the classroom. One smell which each of the teachers mentioned was the smell of children who had not bathed. Most children were only able to bathe once a week and because most of them lived on a farm and had chores to do, they smelled of manure. Another common smell was the smell of the wood stove burning and the smell of wet wool drying by the stove.

Special Events

In rural classrooms, special events were important to the students as well as the teachers. It gave them the chance to learn new things yet they had a lot of fun participating in them. Two of the most common special events mentioned from rural school houses were Christmas concerts and Arbour day. Arbour day is the last Friday in April; there was never any school work done on this day. Everyone brought in rakes and other items to clean up the school ground (Arbourday.org, Carr, Jones). As well the girls sometimes dusted and cleaned inside the school while the boys were cleaning up outside. After cleaning up the yard and school house, the class would go out into the woods and bring back a tree to plant on the school ground. This not only gave the teachers another lesson to teach about nature and protecting it, it gave the students something to be proud of. The idea of Arbour day came from J. Sterling Morton of Detroit in 1872 who had suggested it to his State Board of Agriculture; he made Arbour day fun by giving out prizes to the counties who planted the most trees (Arbourday.org). This idea was adopted across North America and was an extremely important event to the students in one room school houses in rural Ontario.

Christmas concerts in the rural setting were large events. They started practicing in November and each student had their part regardless of how small they were (Carr). They were held in the school house and all of the community came out to watch the children perform. There were always entertaining situations that happened around this

time. Milburn Jones (2005) wanted to make sure that his class was heard when the community came to see them perform. In order for them to project their lines he decided to send them out to the cold coat room with the door shut and they had to yell out their lines until he could hear them at the front of the classroom. It improved the students' projection skills and the families thanked him after because they were finally able to hear the concert, whereas usually they cannot hear the children speak.

Training School Boys and Other Outsiders

In most rural communities there were training school boys who had been sent to live with a family, usually to help out on the family farm. These boys were to go to school in one of the nearby communities while living in the area. Although they were sometimes seen as a bad child, not all of the boys were trouble makers in their new homes; there were many who got along with everyone in their new home and at school. It usually took the boy a little time to adjust to the new area and school but many eventually fit in with the other children. Teachers were only supposed to have one training school boy in their class but many times there were more (Jones 2005). Jones (2005) also mentioned that many had dual personalities; they would be very good and proper in the home they were staying and then at school they would be terrors. This was perhaps a way to receive attention since they were not getting any. It is unknown what happened to a training school boy after he left the community; it would depend on the reason he was leaving the community, for example whether it was because he was causing trouble or

because the family was selling their farm. But the majority of the time, the boys were accepted into the communities after a brief adjustment period.

It was not often that there were outsiders in rural communities, but those who did join communities and were from different backgrounds experienced the same adjustment period as the training school boys. Many of the communities in rural areas were built on certain common values or a common religious background. As Fraser Carr (2005) shared, Cavan area was founded by Irish who immigrated to North America to seek refuge from the Catholics of their homeland. It was a Protestant community and did not accept Roman Catholics very enthusiastically. When a Roman Catholic family moved into the community, he said that it was evident that the other children in the community's parents were talking about this family. It took a little time for them to fit in but eventually they did. There were also instances where people were being taken out of the community. Edith Carr, Fraser's wife, remembers a young girl becoming pregnant by a family member while she was in school (Carr 2005). The young girl was taken away from the community and it is unknown what happened to her after. This is an experience that usually would not be discussed or recorded because of the scandal it would have caused throughout the community.

Discipline

Discipline is the worst part of being a teacher; things would be much easier if there was no need for it. Each teacher had a different way of disciplining his or her students. Many used writing lines as a form of punishment although it did not usually

help the situation. As well some teachers restricted their students from going outside during recesses and lunch as a punishment. Many teachers would also sit down with the student to find out if there is a problem occurring which could perhaps be the reason the child is acting out. Fraser Carr (2005) remembers the teacher he took over for who was his teacher in public school, used to give the student a good shaking and a cuff on the ear to punish them. This is definitely not a form of discipline that would be used in a school today. Another form of punishment, which is no longer used, is the strap. As stated above, teachers were trained in Normal school on how to use the strap. Although most teachers used the strap, it was used only as a last measure if absolutely necessary and the students were always given a warning first. Many children who got the strap did not resent the use of it but when they went home they usually got it again from their parents (McLeod 2005).

Conclusion

A teacher's experience in a one room school house was primarily a positive one. Most lived within the community and were usually accepted by all. Many found it easy to move to a new rural community because they had already experienced the lifestyle, but those who were brought up in towns or cities found it more of an adjustment. As well, those who went to a rural one room school did not find it hard to teach more than one grade level at a time because they had grown up that way themselves and were very much used to it whereas again there was an adjustment for those who went to a grade school. Many teachers boarded in a home in the community and most of them felt included in the

family, enjoying living in the house in which they boarded. Normal school was very straight forward, teaching them the curriculum and how to teach it. They were also taught how to discipline students. They learned different punishments to use as well as how to administer the strap; it was only used if absolutely necessary and the children always received a warning. The daily schedule that they followed was not strict since they did not have a boss. Many found this a more relaxing way to teach since a bell did not restrict them nor did booking of classrooms for special education such as physical education. One event that everyone discussed was Christmas concerts; bringing the children and community together was very important to all. They practiced for at least a month before to ensure that the concert went well. Teachers in rural one room school houses worked very hard and in most cases worked most of the day but all who I interviewed cherished their jobs , claiming it was a great learning experience.

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