

**Swidler, Stephen A. (2004). *Naturally Small: Teaching and Learning in the Last One-Teacher Schools*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.**

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The influence of school and class size on student learning has been an important concern of those attempting to improve American public schools. For example, it led to Tennessee's large-scale *quantitative* STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio) research, which monitored the differential achievement of children *randomly* assigned to small and large classes. In *Naturally Small* anthropologist Stephen Swidler (2004) takes a different tack: small-scale *qualitative* examination of two *naturally* occurring cases of "small" in the one-teacher schools in rural Nebraska, with painstaking recording and interpretation of classroom and community interactions.

### **Swidler's Ethnographic Methodology**

In Chapter 2 of *Naturally Small*, Swidler describes his meticulous ethnographic methods:

My methodology employed long-term participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and artifact and documentary examination. Data collection included participant-observation at Bighand School and then Upper Rill School for the first six months of the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 academic years. During this time I spent at least two full days per week and made several return visits later in the school years. I attended monthly school board meetings and conducted in-depth interviews with the teachers, students, school board members, parents, administrators and community members. I endeavored especially to interview the students, individually and in groups. I conducted follow-up interviews with students, parents, the teacher and school board member, formally and informally (sometimes 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

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documentary artifacts and symbolic tracings of the school “means.” Though I gathered a good deal of observational data, yielding hundreds of pages of fieldnotes, and ended up with a large corpus of recorded interviews, a great amount of what I consider precious data comes from the several hundred small conversations I had with the students and the teachers during everyday school activities: sitting next to students as they worked, in musty basements during lunch, on the school grounds in games of *Andy*, *Andy Over* and kickball (where I was *everlasting pitcher*), and during dizzying rides on ancient country school merry-go-rounds. I spent a good deal of time writing their words in my field notebook.

Swindler’s careful qualitative studies of the recitation-based pedagogy of Mrs. Hoffman at the Bighorn School and the sharply contrasting “learning to think” curriculum of Teacher Will at the Upper Rill School - all proper nouns are pseudonyms - demonstrate that while small size classes *can* promote active (and presumably more effective) learning, there is no guarantee that they will do so.

### **Mrs. Hoffman’s Pedagogy**

Swidler describes Mrs. Hoffman’s orientation as follows :

Mrs. Hoffman faces a classic problem of the country school teacher: How to organize academic work for twelve different children, at six grade different grade levels, across multiple subject areas that is acceptable to the school board, parents, administrative authorities, community members (who are often graduates of one-teacher schools and Bighand School) and her own sense of proper education? . . . . Mrs. Hoffman defines the problem in terms of ensuring students complete an identifiable grade-level curricular program. In the absence of a graded classroom and a graded school culture around her, Mrs. Hoffman sees that her primary tasks are to make sure that the individual students are demonstratively “at grade level” and that they are “keeping up with,” and possibly exceeding, students in a large graded elementary or middle schools in [surrounding areas]. . . .[She] organizes with and for a modified, academic standardization. She states emphatically her belief in “a strict adherence to a fixed curriculum . . . . organized exclusively around commercially produced textbook and workbook series that are grade specific. . . .textbooks and workbooks have for her face-validity and represent reliably the grade levels they are designed for because major textbook producers are established companies and the books are in widespead use.

Swidler records an exchange between Mrs. Hoffman and her second grade reading class consisting of Christine and David. They had been informed the day before that they should come to class prepared to read aloud *The Picture* by Marshall (1989). Richard, an unruly second grader, is also at the table but is not supposed to take part in the discussion. Mrs. Hoffman wants him nearby in order to monitor his reading of another story, and discipline him if necessary without shouting across the room. In the exchange below, words in italics represent verbatim oral reading of the text, and “MH” stands for Mrs. Hoffman):

MH: Let’s get to your story.

Richard: Tah dah . [opening his own reading book, announcing to MH that he is ready to do his own work.

MH: Christine go ahead and start.

Christine: *One day rabbit came to the beach. “Wow,” he said, I must paint a picture of this beach.”*

MH: Did he like the beach?

Christine: Yes.

MH: He thought it was beautiful. What do you think this is? [addressing Christine, pointing to the picture in the textbook]

Richard: That’s a weird beach. [MH does not respond]

Christine: Mmm. [shrugs shoulders]

MH: Where do they grow palm trees?

Richard: Cocoa nuts.

MH: And where would they, where would you go to see palm trees?

David: The beach!

MH: What country would you go to? Or what state you go to?

David: Virginia Beach.

MH: Might be. Why don’t they, how about Hawaii?

Richard: Hawaii, yea!

MH: That would be nice, wouldn’t it.

Christine: [resumes reading] *So he sat down. Soon he painted the sky and water.*

Richard: That looks weird, green water.

MH: This is kind of over here green to [pointing to the sky].

Christine: [resumes] *“This is a lot of fun” he said. “I really liked my picture.”*

MH: Richard get your reading book out.

Richard: [mumbles] Alright.

Christine: *Just then a dog walked by. “Oh no” said the dog. “That’s not – That’s not right the sky is too blow – blue. Put in more white.”*

MH: Alright. Look how dark it is. If you add some white to it's going to get lighter. It will look more like that [points to the page].

Richard: Cause if it is dark it will look more like winter.

MH: Mmm. It will look like a storm coming. Okay here are [pointing to Richard's page, reminding him that he is supposed to be reading a different book].

David: *"No thank you," said the rabbit. "I like it my way. Very well," said the dog. It's your picture and she went away. "No thank you" said the rabbit. I like it my way. Nobody's been* [inaudible]. [pause]

[In Swidler's book another page of exchange follows, consisting primarily of Christine and David taking turns reciting from the text, with occasional short interjections from MH and interruptions from Richard.]

Swidler points out that Mrs. Hoffman initially tries "to ask some questions of Christine and David, apparently about getting them interested in the story, about beaches and painting colors. But these fade away and she seems to barely attend to anything other than whether the students are reading and taking their turns. . . . [This recitation] form of instruction is highly effective when viewed against the local understandings of the purpose of education that lead Mrs. Hoffman to define her teaching problem in particular ways. In this locally important educational scheme, students must 'get through' their textbooks and 'keep up' with the town school kids and demonstrate their readiness for secondary school."

### **Teacher Will's Pedagogy**

A sharp contrast to Mrs. Hoffman's methods is portrayed in the learning-to-think pedagogy of Teacher Will at Upper Rill School. Swidler describes Teacher Will's approach to literature instruction:

Will adopted the *Junior Great Books* (JGB) series in the Fall of 1999 as part of his reading and literature curriculum. He informs that he has always been quietly frustrated with what he determines is low quality literature in the commercially produced basal (textbook) readers. He still uses these for supplementary reading and as indicators of students' progress and if they are at grade level. For him the basal stories were 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." Will does not express any

particular theory of literature that he works from such as “reader response,” nor New Criticism [the evident intellectual cradle of the Great Books Foundation < <http://www.greatbooks.org/typ/> >], or literacy for that matter, such as “whole language,” though he is clearly aware of whole language via his own teacher education (and the teacher educator who promoted it, whom he came to dislike intensely) and he ridicules phonics-based instruction. Nor does he propound any political stance, from the culture wars, over the preference for a “canon” of great Western literature, implied by the very name “*Great Books*.” However, Will does have a belief that there is better and worse literature and that there are better and worse ways to engage children in literature.

One of the readings discussed by Swidler is *Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay*, designated by *Junior Great Books* as a 4th grade story. But Will elicits active participation from seven of his second through ninth grade students: Anna (1st), Marlon (2nd), Mary(2nd), Dylan (4th), Penny (4th), Nate (5th), Scott (6th), Nora (7th), and Danielle (8th). Swidler describes *Wisdom’s Wages and Folly’s Pay* thusly:

The story was published in 1895 from Howard Pyle’s 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.

Following the *Junior Great Books* (JGB) procedure, the students were to have read, or to have read to them, the story the day or night before. Then in the same class, from which the excerpts below were taken, Will reads the story aloud (italics indicate verbatim quoting of the JGB text; TW stands for Teacher Will):

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.

Scott: 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: So, 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.

[In Swidler's book another page of exchange follows in which the students argue as to whether or not either Bobo or Simon Agricola is "smart," including a section in which second-grader Mary becomes involved with some help from other students and TW.]

According to Swidler, "this kind of sustained 'talk about text,' . . . within and across school days and involving children across several grade levels is rather remarkable (see Gavelek & Raphael, 1996). This is a departure from conventional classroom discourse, which is characterized by getting students to correctly answer factual questions posed by the teacher (and in things like workbooks), not the literary text. . . . This kind of pedagogy resembles 'authentic' literary conversation found, for instance, in a university English seminar and echoes the kind of ambitious instruction literacy reformers argue for (e.g., Florio-Ruane et al. , 2001).

## **Conclusions**

In the last chapter *Naturally Small*, Swidler thoughtfully sets forth his conclusions. Since they are consistent with my own experience in attempting to improve introductory physics instruction and my study of the K-12 research literature, I cannot do better than simply repeat his concluding essay:

If anything, this book offers portraits of teaching in the last of our one-teacher schools. It is my hope that these portraits leave some impression of the complexity of teaching and the utter coherence and symbolic values that teaching practices can have, even those we may ultimately conclude are not desirable. The coherence of teaching practices also point to the complexity of changing them. In each school that I studied, what came so simply and naturally to the teachers belies a complexity I think escapes even their own consciousness.

Mrs. Hoffman's recitation system is indeed elegant in its efficiency. That it happens so routinely masks particular knowledge needed to carry out *this kind of recitation instruction*. We must bear in mind the kind of knowledge and skill it takes to teach the way she does as we edge toward asking teachers to modify practices like hers. Mrs. Hoffman is capable of complicated teacher thinking That her teaching connects so deeply to the school community's values would point to a great deal of un-learning *and* a need to persuade a community that there might be, in Will's words, "something better."

In many ways this reveals the problem of all public education reforms: a need to persuade a critical mass of constituents that something needs changing *and* that change can happen. I think we learn from Upper Rill, Teacher Will, and his principal Cal Booker, that this critical mass is so small, when compared to any large graded school and consolidated school district, that envisioning change is not so far fetched, or as daunting as I first suggest. Consolidation, to pick one policy, increases the critical mass and therefore the challenge to change.

And this is what we can see at Upper Rill. Will's conversation-based pedagogy comes just as easily to him as the recitation comes to Mrs. Hoffman. He seems almost perplexed when I tell him what he does is rather remarkable in the big current and historical schemes of teaching practices. His modesty masks the complexity of teaching and his own learning needed to make it happen. Will calls himself an ordinary teacher. If we take him at his word, then what this study shows is that, in the right circumstances, an ordinary teacher can do extraordinary things.

Unfortunately, reform projects based on Swindler's study would probably be flagged aside at the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), where randomized control trials (RCT's) are regarded as the gold standard of educational research. On the other hand, California's costly class size reduction (CSR) program, based on Tennessee's highly regarded [Mosteller (1995), Mosteller et al. (1996), Finn & Achilles (1999)] RCT experiment STAR, might well have been lavishly funded by USDE. But according to the latest report of the California Class Size Reduction Research Consortium (CCSRRC



2002), California's CSR program yielded *no conclusive evidence of increased student achievement*. One reason appears to be that there were simply not enough teachers in California to support any substantive class size reduction without deterioration of teaching effectiveness.

In my opinion, veteran educator Larry Cuban (2003) has it right: “. . . I know from both experience and research that the teacher is at the heart of student learning and school improvement by virtue of being the classroom authority and gatekeeper for change. Thus the preparation, induction, and career development of teachers remain the Archimedean lever for both short- and long-term improvement of public schools.”

NOTE (added on 28 May 2006): For a good review of *Naturally Small* by a rural education expert see Howley (2005).

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