

## Book Review



Citation: Howley, C. B. (2005, December 31). [Review of *Naturally small: Teaching and learning in the last one-teacher schools*]. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 20(21). Retrieved [date] from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/20-21.pdf>

**Naturally Small: Teaching and Learning in the Last One-Teacher Schools.** Stephen A. Swidler. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing: 2004, 118 pp., ISBN 1-59311-122-3.

Reviewed by

Craig B. Howley  
Ohio University

*Naturally Small* presents ethnographic case studies of two one-teacher schools in rural Nebraska, “Bighand” and “Upper Rill,” led, respectively, by the redoubtable “Mrs. Hoffman” and the more approachable “Teacher Will.” Mrs. Hoffman is what some readers might call “very traditional,” whereas Teacher Will might be characterized by some readers as a “standards-based” educator. Swidler astutely avoids such assessments, and this restraint helps him take seriously the real issues of curriculum and pedagogy that animate two very different schools. This is the intellectual move that makes this book particularly rare and particularly valuable. At 118 pages, moreover, it belabors neither the obvious nor the obscure.

Mrs. Hoffman intends to get her pupils through a received curriculum, in order for them to “keep up.” Teacher Will intends to help his students think, and he’s dissatisfied with the received curriculum and with most of what he experienced in his professional training. *Naturally Small* takes educator-readers of this book, however, beyond their defensible prejudices. I’d want my own kids with Teacher Will, but these sorts of reactions to this sort of text are nearly irrelevant. Swidler’s ultimate point is that many teaching practices are defensible, and that aspirations for doing better can hardly be imposed, no matter how commonplace such impositions may be—and they are so commonplace as to be part of everyday evasion and resistance in every school in the land. Both teachers in this book, in fact, exhibit such

evasions. Mrs. Hoffman is not revising her “traditional” approach, and Teacher Will is pursuing his own quest, as Swidler makes evident, quite apart from the official professional development “opportunities” that confront him. Both evasions, in fact, are reinforced by the respective administrators who supervise these two teachers.

*Two Gifts*

*Naturally Small* makes two very important gifts to rural education researchers and activists. The major gift is a rare problematizing of teaching in really small rural schools; this gift is unusual because one-teacher (or “one-room”) schools are nearly always presented as if they were antiquarian artifacts, possibly quaint, useful in trade (i.e., to sell books) as nostalgic adornments, but no longer relevant to the aspirations of living communities, students, and teachers.

The second gift is of more modest scope, but it is extremely forceful and practical; that gift is the deft phrase “naturally small.” What is its force and utility? Small rural schools have been elsewhere disparaged as “small by default” to distinguish them from newly established city and suburban schools celebrated as “small by design.” The presumption behind the invidious phrasing—small by default—is the ignorant view that small rural schools are not sites of protracted and often valiant struggle. But they are such sites; almost any school that can be characterized as “small” in rural America is a survivor. Beyond this invidious misuse of language, the real offense is that survival has been, and remains, so difficult for such schools. Instead of killing them, inquiry and policy should sustain them and help them to flourish. Tarnishing them as the “default” position of American school practice remakes them as already dead wood—which might as well be trimmed, for instance, through closure and consolidation. If these schools, however, can be understood as “naturally small,” they can be appreciated as already being organic creatures that deserve nurture. They might be seen as having established vigor, a quality that is difficult for any entity that is merely “designed” to achieve.

---

Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to Craig B. Howley, Ohio University, McCracken Hall, Athens, OH 45701. ([howleyc@ohio.edu](mailto:howleyc@ohio.edu))

The spirit of critique and doubt is alive and well, in clear evidence, in *Naturally Small*. It wisely avoids easy conclusions and glib recommendations.

*Two Ways of Being, Treated with Two Kinds of Restraint*

Although the Bighand and Upper Rill Schools, as Swidler suggests, are inevitably “shadows” (p. 98) of their strong teachers, the critique that grounds this study and makes it valuable for readers in all schools, is this:

Instead of simply comparing these schools, and their teachers’ intentions and arrive at an early, naïve judgment . . . it is worth considering what is obtained symbolically by the forms of teaching that occur in each school. While I present each school as having its own model of instruction . . . I hold neither as an ideal model for instruction. (p. 98)

This confession centers the critique, but it is remarkable also for exhibiting two kinds of restraint.

First, we see the repudiation of cant. *Cant* is the thoughtless repetition of conventional or unconsidered opinion. Thus, the contemporary professional cant holds that “standards-based” instruction is inevitably superior to “traditional” instruction. You can hear such cant anytime you set foot in a professional venue above street-level; indeed, such cant is so pervasive you can often hear it earnestly spoken at street-level (though the natural skepticism is stronger *there* than say, in any college of education). When Swidler declines the cant, he verges on professional heresy. That is the sort of trouble that skepticism always harbors for those capable of embracing it, and which grant-makers seldom like to see. *Naturally Small* does not acknowledge any funder, and so the presence of this sort of critique in this study is not likely accidental.

The second sort of restraint is every bit the equal of the first. Swidler eschews models, whereas grant-givers love them and educators often embrace them. The two schools, as his data suggest, endorse very different ways of doing school; and the differences are truly remarkable, as he notes, precisely because the two communities in which the schools are lodged seem so very similar. Again: “I hold neither,” Swidler writes, “as a model for instruction.” Perhaps this statement merely expresses the odds that in two cases, neither is likely to constitute a paradigm. That’s one reading, but Swidler’s refusal to read either case in this way perhaps constitutes a rejection of common commercial and academic habit. The habit in question is curriculum development *from the center*—by textbook companies, certainly, but also by any remote authority willing to set itself up as the guardian of universally “best practice.” Many practices are effective, and fewer are truly decent—but the habit of proclaiming “best practice” is a bad one. In education, “the best” seems

to alter from decade to decade and from regime to regime. Swidler’s position is at least consonant with such a reading of the reality in which our struggles as researchers exist.

*Diversities and Ironies*

*Naturally Small*’s general statement, one might argue, is that diversity of practice makes sense in schooling. If this is the case, then Swidler is in step with several astute critics of 20th century improvement schemes, including James Scott, Jane Jacobs, and Stephen Arons. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*, Jacobs’s *Dark Age Ahead*, and Arons’s *Short Route to Chaos* each charge that “seeing like a state” (to use Scott’s phrase) is a form of blindness. One of the victims, according to Jacobs, is science. Swidler’s consistent skeptical intent renders his account more scientific than much of what passes in the quantitative mode for science.

Where does the diversity of schooling in two very similar communities come from? The two communities in this book negotiate with their teachers the operant construction to be imposed on the idea of “schooling,” with diverging results. For instance, in Bighand, according to Swidler’s analysis, a conservative pedagogy is actively defending the community.

The ideology in play among the patrons of Bighand school entails (a) preparation for life and (b) doing your work, even when difficult, and Swidler concludes that, given the very real assault on rural lifeways, that

country schooling, in this community and at Bighand School, conceivably symbolizes a defense of the community and a way of life from social and economic siege. When viewed against these larger socio-cultural and economic features, the values of independence, hard work, following through, and self discipline take on a deeper hue,” and that it is “[too] easy to criticize school practices when viewed free from culture, history, and contemporary politics and economics. (p. 105)

These are conclusions based on a measured reading of real people’s real struggles, rather than on unconsidered commitments to professional cant or on dreams of abstract betterment disconnected from any place. The school patrons are helping to create something that makes sense to them; furthermore, their children negotiate high school life successfully and score well on tests. Despite professional condemnation of the sort of schooling practiced in Bighand, this study shows it to be functional, locally responsive, and effective.

This interpretation of events at Bighand is easily read as an endorsement of diversity because Bighand blithely violates the precepts of contemporary professional cant. Forms of schools that are functional (efficient), responsive to

community, and objectively effective (test scores) can readily be judged worthy when a skeptical disposition analyzes the data. This is what happens here, but readers should not hurry to a misguided conclusion: The same skeptical outlook would find bigotry, fear, and thoughtlessness wanting. The position repudiates models, not alternatives, especially not alternatives to dubious cant.

In Swidler's telling, Upper Rill's pedagogy, which would ordinarily be applauded without reserve in an academic presentation like this, harbors some interesting ironies. First, whereas Mrs. Hoffman is born and bred in the country, Teacher Will is the product of town schools, and he doesn't live in the country. His connection to place, in other words, is presented as tenuous.

Swidler regards the pedagogy at Upper Rill, in fact, as "buffered" (p. 107) from the community. Nonetheless, Teacher Will's way of keeping school is viewed by patrons as orderly and as effective, with pupils also performing well on tests. Teacher Will's partially invented curriculum, moreover, is no more connected in its content to these rural places than Mrs. Hoffman's standardized one.

As "cases" Bighand and Upper Rill present considerable challenges to the thinking of mainstream educators, and to the thinking of rural educators. So far as can be judged from these two cases (and from other rural case studies in the published research literature), it seems that small rural schools are rather receptive places to pedagogical and curricular alternatives. Swidler believes that large scale gets in the way of authentic and organic change, an insight that Scott, Jacobs, and Arons echo in their works. Big schemes and "best practice" these authors seem to say, strike at the vigor that animates real change.

#### *Two Parting Thoughts About Place*

For this reviewer, "place" is synonymous with rural. Other locales are not only more generic in their cultural manifestations (suburbs, for instance, are much the same across the nation), but in locales other than small towns and the open country, real-time phenomenological connections to land and to land forms (i.e., emotional, material, spiritual, and, yes, intellectual connections) are rare. In this sense, the connection of these two schools to place is clear to anyone who drives up to them.

On a recent visit to Nebraska, I was driven to a Nebraska "Class One" school. (Upper Rill and Bighand are both Class One schools, K-8 districts that have recently been mandated to affiliate with a K-12 district, arguably presaging their eventual elimination, through consolidation with affiliated K-12 districts.) Country roads in eastern Nebraska are wide, well ditched, and graveled rather than paved. The sky is huge, as are the fields. These schools are surrounded by land and sky, and they are patronized by people who talk to land and sky.

What's always problematic, however, with rural schooling is the relationship of the curriculum and pedagogy—the things studied and the way they are studied. It's not clear that in this age of "standards-based" hooey that we who study rural schools, and like rural places, will ourselves foster such thinking very widely, but with "model-building" rejected, that's not really the aim of our work. A better aim is to help educators and community people realize that they are already party to an on-the-ground (i.e., in place) struggle to realize rural schooling not merely as a more thoughtful enterprise but as one that more thoughtfully and more actively embraces the future of rural communities.

Rural communities are under siege. So are their schools. The connection to be made to community via curriculum and pedagogy is therefore hardly esoteric or obscure. People in rural places already understand the possibility of this connection. Educators are less certain, and this includes rural educators. Making the connection does require inventiveness, disgruntlement (there is plenty of that in rural places), and great effort to fashion rural schooling as a more community-minded (public-spirited) project. Teacher Will, disconnected as he might be from local place, has some of the required qualities; and so does Mrs. Hoffman.

It seems doubtful that there is a one-best-way to proceed with this engagement, with this struggle to connect what is taught and how it is taught to rural communities. There is something that can be counted upon, however, in all this: Rural communities will continue noisily to resist the removal of their schools. If rural educators made explicit connections—inevitably varied, or "speciated" as David Sobel likes to call it—to rural communities via what is studied and how it is studied, however, these defenses would be more powerful.

#### *Addendum: A Caveat to Publishers*

A chief responsibility of those who would publish is to copy edit and proofread manuscripts. There is no evidence that the publisher performed this work, so numerous are the errors in this text. Publishing is a cut-throat business—maybe. But cutting one's own throat is not the way to succeed.

#### References

- Arons, S. (1997). *Short route to chaos: Conscience, community, and the re-constitution of American schooling*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press
- Jacobs, J. (2004). *Dark age ahead*. New York: Random House.
- Scott, J. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms and communities*. Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society.