

# One-Room Schools

## Myth and Reality

PAUL STORTZ AND E. LISA PANAYOTIDIS

The ubiquitous one-room school in Canada is a thing of the past. Nestled in oft-times idyllic natural surroundings and pristine northern wilderness characterized by pure running streams, gentle breezes, tall majestic pines, and a bounty of wildlife whose business never seemed intrusive, the one-room school seemed an oasis of humanity, of progress. A marker of civilization, it bespoke a desire to spread the merits of education to the rugged labourers and their families in even the most remote areas of rural Canada. This historical vestige, particularly in the early-to-mid 20th century, painted a promising and reminiscent picture of a country where not even the most sequestered area was beyond the reach of sound British values. As education was a prime institution for acculturating individuals to the principles of Canadian nationalism, an effective form of social organization came into the wild that was embodied in the very structure of the one-room school. Throughout the 20th century, the one-room school was a proud and powerful national image, representing the north and the qualities of virtue associated with it. Reminiscent of the best prose and jargon of the early Canadian Romanticists – writers and poets who approached the Canadian north as “honest,” “chaste,” “masculine,” “challenging,” and “unrelenting” – Canadians still look on the one-room school as an icon of Canadian initiative and industriousness.

Undoubtedly, the one-room school was the product of much hard work and desire on the part of local communities that wanted the best for their children and families. These schools were constructed by local people who cleared the land, gathered and manufactured the materials, assembled the structure, built the accompanying teacherage, and supplied pedagogical accessories such as desks, blackboard, and writing utensils. Until the Second World War, this was no small feat, considering the limited resources of many of the smaller settlements that dotted the Canadian north. The national myth of the assiduous settler was based on the sturdy backs of real men, women, and children who realized the benefits of an education that taught children to be literate and critical participants in rural local life and in the larger urban centres to the south.

However, upon closer investigation, the realities of the

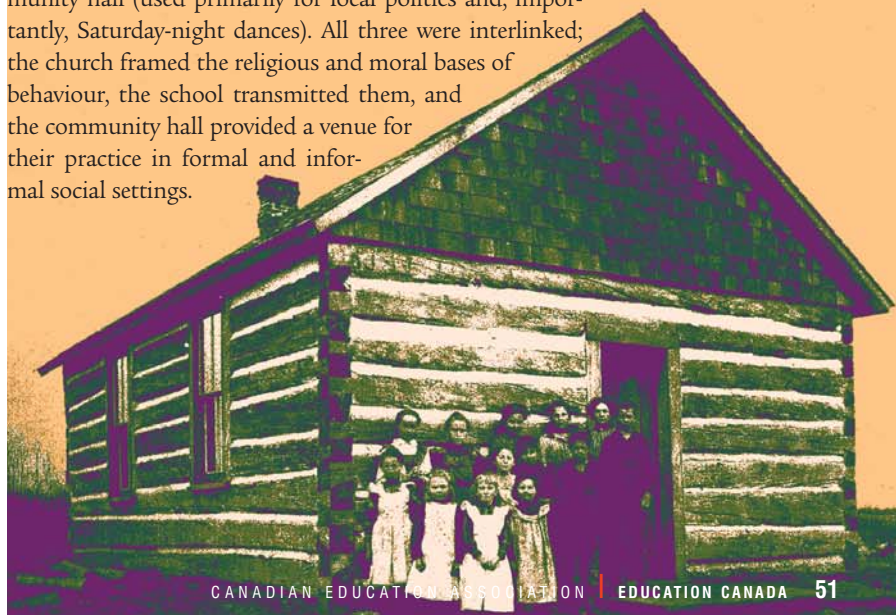
one-room school tell a different, more complex story. Historians of education have long understood that, although it was a labour of love and valuable in inculcating social values and skills to local communities and children, the one-room school described above was a myth. If we assume a contemporary perspective, attempt to understand the local historical voice of the people, and analyze the effect of the school on the lives of community members, we see a radical and surprising narrative in which impoverished and politically-torn communities struggled to maintain their schools. Decision-making was often based on wealth: the location of the school or who was to greet the teacher from the local landing might be determined by the family with the most livestock or the one with the best piece of land. Remote regions were dependent on the vagaries of temperamental weather and local economic conditions, and school attendance was highly irregular due to seasonal or temporary agricultural, natural resource, or other occupational activity. The schoolhouse itself reflected this uncertainty and financial want: blackboards might be made out of painted wood; desks might be boxes or kegs; teacherages were extended closets at the back; running water was from the local stream; heat was intermittent; light was from candles; floors were of clay or dirt. The playground might have been strewn with brush, stumps, thistles, and mud; instead of a bell, bears and snakes could signal an end to recess.

Understanding the one-room school is crucial to understanding the development of rural cultures in Canada. The school was, in a sense, a microcosm of broader social organization, as pupils of scattered families throughout the region worked under one roof within a common intellectual environment for socially-stipulated objectives. In general, the first institution established in rural Canadian society was the church, followed by the school, then by the community hall (used primarily for local politics and, importantly, Saturday-night dances). All three were interlinked; the church framed the religious and moral bases of behaviour, the school transmitted them, and the community hall provided a venue for their practice in formal and informal social settings.



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Because of the sheer distance of the communities from each other, each settlement was a social and political island, a small group of people defining themselves through transferred ideologies and mores. In north-central British Columbia, for example, until World War I the best communication technology was smoke signals; this was indeed a world unfamiliar to outsiders. Local newspapers (if they existed), diaries, and assorted documents from remote villages before 1940, attest to cultures cut off from other settlements, fending for themselves, making their lives work in their own particular ways. This isolation is the foundation of one of the most potent ideologies in Canada – regionalism. Regionalism is also a major theme in any discussion of the 20th-century trend toward an inclusive Canadian multiculturalism.

How does the history of one-room schools relate to the ideal of embracing differences in society? In these hinterland settlements, families and people of similar ethnicities, cultures, religion and nationalities were more often than not rooted in the same geographical space. Anglo-Saxon communities were separated from predominantly Catholic villages, or Mennonite settlements from Métis homes, and travelling labour camps from all others. A micro-analysis of these rural collectivities reveals an over-riding sense of uniformity, with a smattering of people – often transient – who differed in outlook or spoke another language. These interlopers sometimes felt ostracized from the rural community; similarly families who did not share the dominant ideologies and ethnicities of the community had to adapt socially and politically in order to participate as full members of the community. In some ways, the social make-up of the communities in which one-room schools were located was a reflection of urban societies, but in the end they were clearly historical remnants to later 20th-century developments of the modern multicultural urban community.

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Into these rural, largely homogeneous, and self-sufficient communities came the one-room schools, often agents of a startling culture shock, bringing with them “urban” educational standards and values and the inequity of an entrenched gender imbalance. Until the Second World War, the vast majority of teachers in one-room schools were women who had recently graduated from the schools or faculties of education in urban centres and been sent to far-flung regions to meet the challenges of sequestered living, capricious local politics and conditions, and decrepit school conditions. The schoolmistress was sometimes younger than her eldest male charges. The job, undoubtedly exhausting, challenged her emotional and professional legerdemain: she was the leader of the schoolhouse, a parachuted-in member of the community, and she had to anticipate the most unpredictable of situations, from rain that caved in the school roof, to wild animals prowling the schoolyard. Using primitive equipment, the young woman had to persevere to ensure that her pupils gained the skills necessary to meet the imposed province-wide standards of literacy and knowledge. Canadian society in the first half of the 20th century was sexist by today’s standards, and the one-room schoolteacher experienced this first-hand. Although she carried the burden of delivering education in conditions that could be primitive, she was subject to the imperious behaviour of both male community leaders and school inspectors.

With a community alien in values and surroundings, people of unique dispositions, motivations, politics, and economy, services and amenities sometimes bare-to-none, and local conditions that would challenge the most rugged pioneer, the high rate of vacancy and teacher transience throughout rural western Canada is not surprising. In British Columbia’s northern interior, in the first three decades of the 20th century, for example, teachers stayed in



their schools for not much longer than nine months on average; many only stayed until Christmas, leaving the community and school inspectors scrambling for replacements. Indeed, a few teachers even died as a result of their duties; cases of physical assault, illness, and fatal accidents are documented in rural newspapers of the time. The schoolteacher had to hone her wits, intelligence, and judgement, sharply and quickly. The young, inexperienced, one-room schoolteacher was the unsung historical agent in rural society.

As urban-based representatives of the provincial educational system, school inspectors would visit the school annually, if it were not too remote, assessing its conditions and pedagogy, and its leader, the teacher. Although visits often went smoothly, the inspectorial scrutiny could be nerve-wracking, at times forcing the teacher to put the best, most brave face on a disadvantageous situation. Over time, the educational policy-makers in the provincial capitals became increasingly doctrinaire and vigilant in their demands and standards for academic performance in schools throughout the province, regardless of the fact that access to some schools took weeks to gain over terrain best fit for horses and through rapids navigated by only the best boatmen. When inspectors managed to reach the schools, they were surprised by the harsh conditions. They were also chagrined by the schools' educational quality, which, although by no means wholly inadequate thanks to the ingenuity of the teachers and their pupils, was considered by officials as sub-standard. (In the vernacular of the early 20th-century inspectors and urban educational authori-

**EN BREF** Même si dans l'esprit des Canadiens et des Canadiennes les écoles à classe unique sont le symbole d'une autre époque plus simple, selon les historiens de l'éducation, la réalité est beaucoup plus complexe. Dans un certain sens, l'école à classe unique était un concept déplacé : elle a été créée pour offrir une instruction anglo-saxonne et urbaine à des collectivités isolées, sans égard pour leur composition ou leurs dynamiques politique, économique et sociale. Une étude de l'impact des écoles à classe unique expose divers déséquilibres fondés sur le sexe et la culture, et aussi une détermination à imposer des valeurs urbaines à des collectivités rurales.

ties, the one-room schoolchildren were “retarded,” or a full year behind urban counterparts in terms of academic achievement).

In a sense, the one-room school was a misplaced entity: it was there to provide an urban and Anglo-Saxon education to each isolated community despite the community's unique and volatile social, economical, and political composition and dynamic. Applying urban-based “solutions” to rural-based “problems,” or misdirected urban perspectives on rural vicissitudes, is an all-too-common practice in 21st-century Canada and was no less a force in rural cultures in the last century. The one-room school was intended as an institution of educational provision, but it was directed by bureaucrats, politicians, and policy-makers woefully lacking in knowledge about living in remote regions in their province.

The inspectors argued that the conditions of the rural community hindered educational attainment, and as a result the schools must be uprooted to a more urban setting. The one-room schools stood as a monument to intrepidity, to be sure, but also to rural cultures and conditions that were out of step with “progressive” and industrializing

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We are confronted with the fact that many people criticize the education of the present day because it is not practical. They say we have continued unchanged for many, many years, and that all the work of the schools has in view is the fact that the child will become a "scholar". Now, it is quite clear that for many years to come few of the children who pass through our schools can ever hope to become scholars in the narrow acceptance of that term. Most of them must leave school at too early an age; many of them lack the natural abilities, and there is indeed a great army of children to be provided for who can in no sense be scholars. Dr. J. W. White, Principal, Ottawa Normal School, 1913

Canadian urban society. This was the reasoning behind the movement in the 1930s and 1940s, in British Columbia and Alberta, to consolidate rural schools into larger multi-level institutions, sometimes several hundred kilometers away. Amalgamation, consolidation, and the closing of one-room schools took a while to realize, however, and many one-room schools, still diligently (and largely successfully) struggling to provide an effective education for sequestered children, continued to largely fend for themselves for several decades.

While we look back at the one-room schoolhouse with rose-coloured glasses, it is also a symbol that allows us to explore more diffusive and penetrating themes in Canadian identity and education. It exposes gender and cultural imbalances at their most personal level; the ineffectiveness of applying urban (and arrogant?) band-aids to perceived rural shortcomings; and the vibrancy of regionalism and ruralness as intellectual themes in the study of the growth of Canadian society. As the Second World War

approached, lost in the momentum for school consolidations was the richness of frontier cultures, various and fluid – a backbone of Canadian mythology and nationalism. As part of the "wild" in Canadian identity, rural society in theory and practice was a rudimentary and intimate form of social organization. As a result, the one-room school remains an integral vestige of our heritage. ★

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