

Memories of a 23-to-1 ratio covering six grades

By MARY ZIEGENHAGEN
Of the Opinion Page Staff

Teachers in the Minnesota Education Association are asking the Legislature to mandate a 15-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio in kindergarten through third grade. And they're gonna hate me for this.

But I can't help it. Everytime I think of grade school, I think of my own. Unlike our children's brightly carpeted, skylighted and brilliantly equipped "learning center," mine was a one-room country school. The kind you see boarded up in fields overgrown with weeds in rural areas. Single story, white clapboard, large windows on the north side, two outhouses in the back

and a bell over the entry.

When I entered first grade my teacher was barely 18 years old. She had had a summer's training at the "normal school." And she was responsible for 23 of us in six grades of what was, in fact, an eight-grade school. Most years there simply weren't any children in two of the grades.

We called her not Miss Gould, but Mary Katherine—a familiarity which shocked my lace-curtain cousins who attended a similar school several miles to the west conducted by a more formal instructor. And like 16 of the 22 other pupils, Mary Katherine was my cousin—a second cousin, whose sister Helen and I together made up an entire grade.

Nothing strange about that, inasmuch as some grades had only one student while others had as many as four. I still remember the awe with which I later entered sixth grade in town, where 30 students all the same age filled the room—and the desks were, incredibly, all the same size.

In most country schools, desks near the windows were small, for first and second graders, and gradually became larger across the room until near the opposite wall they were positively adult-size for the strapping and prestigious 8th graders.

Mary Katherine used to arrive at school around 7 a.m., to sweep the floor, prepare lessons, wash the blackboard and clap the

erasers if it hadn't been done the previous afternoon.

In winter, she stoked the coal furnace in the back of the room so that by 9 o'clock it was warm for the rest of us. At about 10:30 on those winter days, Mary Katherine strode down the three desk aisles, collecting from each child potatoes we brought from home, to be placed on the hot ledge just inside the furnace door to bake for lunch.

Sometimes the potatoes were charred black and steaming hot when she returned them, but positively delicious, slathered with homemade butter brought in wax paper from home. One kid in each family kept a salt and pepper shaker in the desks

just under the inkwell. When the furnace wasn't burning, lunches consisted of peanut-butter and homemade grape jelly sandwiches.

The only "visual aids" in that school were one map of the world and others of the state and county. Palmer-method alphabet cards were tacked along the top of the blackboard, and two six-foot shelves of books were the library. A small globe sat atop the piano.

While many of the classes were taught according to grade — first-grade reading, third-grade arithmetic — others were what today might be called "open school." Science, for example, was a subject all grades worked on together. Science meant an understanding of soil conservation, names of rocks, birds, types of weather, flowers, grains, etc. The few chapters we studied on health and the human body, rather than enlightening us only confused us the more.

World War II was raging, and everyone seemed involved in what was called "the war effort." We seemed mostly to be helping the Navy in our county, whether by design or accident I cannot say. But in any case, Mom and the other women in our church knitted navy blue socks and sweaters while Dad, a farmer at the time, responded to his government's request to grow 80 acres of "Manila hemp" — for ropes for ships we believed. (To



this day, he swears it was marijuana he grew, and that when the field was burned over in preparation for fall plowing, people were high for miles around. He's Irish, of course, but even so maybe it's true.)

And so it was the duty of children to spend a couple of days in the fall walking along railroad tracks shoving dried milkweed pods into gunny sacks, "to fill life-preservers," for sailors, we were told. All sorts of things were rationed, meat, shoes, sheets, nylon stockings, sugar. Never again will we feel that painlessly noble.

Physical education was whatever we could do outdoors. Playground equipment was two swings, a teeter-totter and a rubber ball with which we played "Annie-aye-over," throwing it over the schoolhouse, then rushing around to the other side before one of the opposing team caught it and tagged us.

There were no programs for the gifted in our school, except that the same kids always won the speldown, and Mary Katherine tried to find harder words to stump them with next time. And Patty Jane, who was very pretty, had a lovely singing voice and sang a solo every time there was a program. And children who were fond of reading got books for their birthdays.

No psychologist or speech therapist darkened the door, and yet practically everyone in the world entered first grade pronouncing their "r's" like "w's." By the time they reached third grade, usually they had got it right.

There were no special education classes, but I remember John, who spoke in a high vague voice and couldn't hear very well, even with a hearing aid. He seemed to read a lot, and we knew he understood the lessons. But I think he stopped coming to school sometime around fifth grade.

Even in a school so small, we had a minority population. Three of them. Their distinguishing characteristic was, to begin



with, that they were not cousins. They also were neither Irish nor Catholic. And even more exotic was the fact that they came from Kentucky. Their fathers worked as "hired men" on our fathers' farms, and we hardly ever saw their mothers. We never visited their homes, and they never came to ours. One measure of our isolation was the fact that we thought their name was strange. It was Smith.

Along with the church, 4H meetings and family reunions, the school was a social center for the community where we met for bonfires and wiener roasts in the fall, Christmas programs and Memorial Day celebrations followed by a parade to the cemetery, where we placed flags on graves of veterans. Taken together such occasions provided dozens of opportunities, and obligations, for children to perform, to sing or recite "a piece." And, as important, to be praised for it.

I have no idea what Mary Katherine's salary was, and I don't know what she thinks today of teachers' strikes. In truth, she didn't need much money then, since she lived at home until she married. And in that self-sufficient family-farm land, money indeed seems to have been a less compelling aspect of life than it is today. But frankly, I doubt she could even imagine teaching just one grade, or having only 15 students. I just don't think she could.

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Things just aren't the same in education any more

To the Editor: I noted with considerable interest Mary Ziegenhagen's article Jan. 5, "Memories of a 23-1 ratio covering six grades." The article merits response.

Mary states as her credentials for writing the article her experience as one of "23 of us in six grades" when she was in country school, and then uses her experience to infer that class size doesn't make much difference, if any.

I beg to differ with Mary. My credentials: nine years as a public school teacher, seven years as a full-time teacher advocate, a parent of school-age children, a son of parents who taught over 40 and 30 years each in mostly tiny schools in North Dakota, and one of nine graduating seniors with my high school class (which was one of the larger classes I was in during 12 years of schooling).

I too wax nostalgic about those years, but "those years" are no more. "Those years" for most of us were part of a simpler time. For example, the Space Age was just barely beginning when I graduated from high school. These days, Mary, I would guess that your teacher, cousin Mary Katherine, would not last very long as a teacher at any level in any school system.

If you don't really believe conditions in education today are different, simply take some time to interview classroom teachers who have been teaching children for many years. You will be surprised, I'm willing to bet, at what you learn.

I'm sure, Mary, that you wouldn't find many classrooms that would consist of 23 children or fewer (let alone a class where

the teacher and "16 of the 22 pupils" were cousins). I can imagine that the family pressure on the 16 cousins was very helpful to Mary Katherine then. Today, teachers sometimes have great difficulty in getting assistance from parents of children in their classes for a number of reasons.

Teachers in my district, just for one example, have become accustomed over the years to high class sizes, and we've had to fight the system every step of the way even to achieve a maximum class sizes of 30 in elementary grades. Contrast that with almost any volunteer teaching activity — scouts, religion classes in churches, etc., where it is the rare exception to find over 15 students assigned to a single adult leader. Those volunteer parents know when they've reached their limit; if the limit is exceeded, they no longer volunteer.

Perhaps the old days were OK then. But like everything else, times have changed in education, and I believe you do an injustice by even suggesting that memories of what must have been pleasant country school

days accurately reflect the reality of today.

—Dick Bernard.

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