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**The Picture of School Life in the Novels by Laura
Ingalls Wilder**

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Declaration

Hereby I declare that I have written the bachelor's thesis entirely on my own and all sources that I used are listed in the list of references.

Brno, March 2018

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Markéta Čížková

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Anotace

Bakalářská práce s názvem “The Picture of School Life in the Novels by Laura Ingalls Wilder” se zabývá obrazem školství v období 19.století na americkém Středozápadě. Cílem práce je analyzovat do jaké míry školní život popsany ve vybraných románech od Laury Ingalls Wilderové odpovídá skutečnému způsobu výuky a vzdělávání ve druhé polovině 19.století. První část práce se zabývá sérií románů inspirovaných spisovatelčíným životem a také vysvětlením vybraných klíčových pojmů použitých v analytické části práce. Hlavní část práce se věnuje samotné analýze vybraných aspektů školního života a to školní budově a třídě, kurikulu, výukovým metodám, učiteli a jeho vzdělání a disciplíně.

Klíčová slova

škola, vzdělávání, autobiografické paměti, příběh školství, Laura Ingalls Wilder, třída, učitel

Abstract

The bachelor thesis “The Picture of School Life in the Novels by Laura Ingalls Wilder” deals with the picture of school life in the 19th century in the Midwest of the United States. The aim of the thesis is to analyse to which extent the school life described in the novels *Little House in the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* by Laura Ingalls Wilder corresponds to the actual way how the education was conducted in the late 19th century. The first part of the thesis focuses on the series *Little House* inspired by the writer’s life and the explanation of the selected key terms used in the analytic part. The main part of the thesis analyses the selected aspects of school life, namely a schoolhouse and class, a curriculum, teaching methods, a teacher and their education and the discipline in a classroom.

Key words

school, education, autobiographic memoirs, school story, Laura Ingalls Wilder, class, teacher

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Introduction

1.1 Laura Ingalls Wilder

Laura Elizabeth Ingalls Wilder was an American author of children's literature praised for her well-known for the *Little House* series of novels for children. She was born on February 7 1867 in Pepin, Wisconsin (Watson 755) which became the default point of her writing. She was the second child of Charles Philip Ingalls and Caroline Quiner (756) and had three sister: Mary, the older one, Carrie and the youngest Gracie. The *Little House* series consists of eight books, namely *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932), *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937), *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939), *The Long Winter* (1940), *Little Town on the Prairie* (1941), *Farmer Boy* (1933), *These Happy Golden Years* (1943) and *The First Four Years* (1971) (Humphrey and Prichard 570, 571).

In the *Little House* books, Wilder describes her childhood, adolescence, family life and marriage with Almanzo Wilder. The series begins with the first published novel *Little House in the Big Woods*. The novel reveals the story of the Ingalls family living in the Big Woods of Wisconsin in their "little grey house made of logs" (Humphrey and Prichard 570). Furthermore, it gives the description of their daily life in a simple narrative "with attention to such details as the butchering of the family hog" (ibid).

The novel published as the second in the series is *Little Town on the Prairie*, which follows the Ingalls family after their decision to leave the Big Woods because it was overcrowded with new settlers. During the journey towards the West, "they experience dramatic river-crossing and other hardship before building themselves a new log house in Indian territory" (Humphrey and Prichard 570). Unfortunately, according to the law ordered by the government, they have to leave the territory and move again (570). The next two novels *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and *By the Shore of Silver Lake* follows the Ingalls family first back East to Minnesota and then back West to Dakota Territory (ibid).

As the best book of the series is generally considered the novel *The Long Winter*. The snowstorm that stands at the beginning of the "long winter" is dated to 1880 and De Smet, South Dakota, where the family lives is isolated and suffers from the shortage of supplies because of the tons of snow which blockade the railroad (Watson 756). The

following novels *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* will be more focused on in the subchapters below.

The last two novels which are worth mentioning are *Farmer Boy* and *The First Four Years*. The novel *Farmer Boy* is the only book from the Little house series that does not follow the Ingalls family, though. Wilder describes the childhood of her husband Almanzo Wilder. Moreover, *The First Four Years* is “the story of the start of Wilders’ married life and their experiences of the same kind of crisis that punctuated their parents’ life before them” (Humphrey and Prichard 571). This novel is regarded as the unfinished sequel since it was found after Wilder’s death and it was first published in 1971 (ibid).

1.2 Fiction or autobiography?

The Little house series is based on Laura Ingalls Wilder’s memories and this fact may give rise to the assumption that the series is autobiographic. In fact, the series is defined as fiction because “it is shaped and distanced by the third-person narration and is told in the manner of story rather than autobiography” (Townsend 143). The events Wilder describes are mostly based on what actually happened, yet she modifies the truth in order to make the story more appealing for her readers (Smith Hill 3). Wilder herself once told her audience:

I began to think what a wonderful childhood I had had. How I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession. ... Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history (Wilder qtd. in Smith Hill 5).

Wilder considered the “greater truth of fiction” and “the satisfying arc of good story” more important than the accurate interpretation of her past (5). Watson claims that the story is based on autobiographical memoirs and confirms and adds that some events are fictionalised (e.g. in *The Long Winter*) or that the memories which Wilder used in *The Little House in the Big Woods* in fact come from the period the Ingalls family returned to Pepin in 1871 (756). What is more, Wilder succeeded in transforming the real Laura

Elizabeth Ingalls into the fictional Laura Ingalls (Smith Hill 5), an indispensable part of American literature for children. The authors like Townsend, Smith Hill and Watson agree that as the main source of the series Wilder used her childhood and adolescence memories which she changed for the purpose of creating a good story. Therefore, the *Little House* series may be listed as the autobiographical fiction. The interesting is the fact that the novels are unusual in that “they ‘grow up’ as Laura does”; the style of Wilder’s writing becomes slowly less childlike and the novels are “successively suited to the progress of a child reader” (Humphrey and Prichard, 571).

Moreover, the huge impact of the novels written by Laura Ingalls Wilder is significant even nowadays. De Smet, South Dakota, is frequently visited by tourists seeking for discovering of the Ingalls’ life. For this purpose, Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society acquired more than 2000 artefacts which used to belong to Laura and her family including the schoolhouse Laura and her sister Carrie visited (“Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society”). In addition, between 1974-1983 the NBC shot popular TV series called *Little House on the Prairie* based on the *Little House* series. The TV series has total of 205 episodes and it gained popularity around the world (IMDb, “*Little House on the Prairie* (TV series 1974-1983)”).

1.3 Closer look at the selected novels

The novels *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* are both set in De Smet, town in the South Dakota, which was established in 1880 and the Ingalls family “built a house there in addition to their claim shanty” (Watson 756). De Smet of the 1880s can be characterized as “a railroad town” (Miller 356). During the town’s development necessary buildings were built including a courthouse, a depot standing next to the railroad, a mill, a jail and hotels which symbolized the sense of excitement and change in the frontier towns (Miller 360-363).

1.3.1 Little Town on the Prairie

The story begins one evening when the Ingalls family is having dinner and Pa offers Laura to start helping to sew shirts in town. Laura agrees and starts working, but

she does hate the job and continues only because it will help to send her blind sister Mary to college for Blind in Iowa. The celebration of the Fourth of July is held in town and Laura, Carrie and Pa decide to attend it. Within the celebration, the horse races are organized where Laura meets her future husband Almanzo Wilder.

During the summer, the Ingalls family has to deal with the blackbirds which destroy the crops of corn and oat intended for sale on market. It seems that Mary would have to delay the college, but Pa solve the unpleasant situation by selling one of their cows. Mary can be sent to the college, so Ma and Pa accompanied her on her way to Iowa.

In autumn, Pa makes a decision that the family should move to town for winter since the shanty on the claim is not weatherproofed and it would be safer to stay in town. There Carrie and Laura return to school where Laura meet her old school friends Minnie Johnson and Mary Power. Further to this, a new girl adopted by Rev. Brown Ida Brown becomes a member of their group of friends. Furthermore, the family of Nellie Oleson, Laura's nemesis, lives in De Smet now and Laura has to face Nellie in school. The school teacher Miss Wilder is an older sister of Almanzo Wilder and during the autumn term, she is turned against Laura by Nellie Oleson.

Miss Wilder is replaced by Mr. Clewett next term who begins to organize literary societies at school. Mr. Clewett is later replaced by Mr. Owen who decides to hold the School Exhibition. The Exhibition is important for Laura as it leads to her gaining the teaching certificate. One day near Christmas, two men Mr. Brewster and Mr. Boast come to Laura's house offering her teaching the school at Brewster's settlement. She is surprised, but she passes the examination conducted by the county superintendent Mr. Williams and gets third-grade teaching certificate¹.

1.3.1 These Happy Golden Years

The novel starts with Pa taking Laura to the Brewster's settlement where she is going to teach her first school. She has a hard time dealing with Mrs. Brewster who acts hostile towards her and simultaneously she is dreadfully afraid of her first teaching experience. At school, she has a difficulty with controlling some of her pupils as they are

¹ The plot refers to the book Wilder, Laura Ingalls, and Garth William. *Little Town on the Prairie*. HarperCollins US, 1953.

older than her. With advice from Ma, who is a former teacher, she manages to handle the class.

Meanwhile, her relationship with Almanzo begins to blossom. After Laura's returning home, she continues studying for her own education and attends the school in De Smet as a student. She is offered to teach in new school at Perry's claim which she accepts. The salary she gets is enough extra money for Mary to finish the college.

Her romance with Almanzo culminates when he offers her an engagement ring and she agrees to marry him. She announces her teacher in De Smet Mr. Clewett that she is not coming back to school anymore because she is going to get marry. The story of the novel ceases with the small wedding of Laura and Almanzo and Laura's saying goodbye to her family².

² The plot refers to the book Wilder, Laura Ingalls, and Garth William. *These Happy Golden Years*. Scholastic. 1943.

2 Explanation of selected key terms related to the education

This chapter is aimed to provide an explanation of the selected key words occurring in this thesis connected with the education. With the help of the online dictionaries Oxford Dictionary and Cambridge Dictionary and the encyclopaedias *Encyclopaedia of American Education Vol. I-III* and online Encyclopaedia Britannica, I explain the key terms ‘curriculum’, ‘normal school’, ‘one-room schoolhouse’, ‘school district’, ‘school board’ and ‘superintendent of school’ so as to help the reader with understanding the context of the analysis in which the key words are used the most.

2.1 Key terms

The first word to explain is the noun ‘curriculum’. The *Encyclopaedia of American Education* defines the word as “a broad term usually referring to the totality of formal courses taught in a school or college” (Unger, 1: 265). Cambridge online dictionary provides a simpler definition and describe the word as “the subjects studied in a school, college, etc. and what each subject includes”.

The term ‘normal school’ is in the online Encyclopaedia Britannica explained as an “institution for the training of teachers”. This definition describes the essence of the institute of normal school. Apart from the definition, *Encyclopaedia of American Education* provides a brief outlook into the history of normal schools. Although the state institutions were established from the initiative of Horace Mann, first small normal schools were opened in 1820s (Unger, 2: 755). The schools serving for the teachers’ training offered “a two-year course of study” during the 19th century (ibid).

According to the *Encyclopaedia of American Education*, the term ‘one-room schoolhouse’ is “the traditional frame building that housed most rural 18th and 19th century schools in the American colonies and states” (Unger, 2: 736). The schoolhouse was usually unheated building with open windows “that allowed snow and rain to storm through the room” and a teacher was usually responsible for 40 to 60 children (ibid).

Next word to define is the noun phrase ‘school board’ or ‘board of education’. Oxford online dictionary expounds it as “a local board or authority responsible for the provision and maintenance of schools”. The *Encyclopaedia of American Education* further explains that the school board is elected and in control of “establishing policies [...] and supervising schools within its jurisdictional area” (Unger, 1: 187).

Oxford online dictionary provides a simple definition of the term ‘school district’ and describes it as “a unit for the local administration of schools”. This definition nearly coincides with the definition provided in the *Encyclopaedia of American Education* which says that a school district is the most basic unit “with all schools governed by a single school board and under the ultimate administrative jurisdiction of a single school superintendent” (Unger, 3: 993).

The last key term which needs to be explained is the term ‘superintendent of school’. Cambridge online dictionary describes the word ‘superintendent’ in a broader sense as “a person who is in charge of work done in particular department, office, etc., [...]”, while the *Encyclopaedia of American Education* defines it in terms of education as “the chief administrative officer of a public school district”. The *Encyclopaedia* also adds that “usually hired by the district school board, the superintendent [...] and coordinates all school programs within the district” (Unger, 3: 1031).³

The main purpose of this analysis was to provide the reader the explanations of the terms related to education, yet after the closer examination of the words it can be also considered as the help for the readers with shaping the idea of the schooling in the 19th century. The definitions of terms ‘curriculum’, ‘school board’, ‘school district’ and ‘superintendent of school’ include the general information, while the terms ‘normal school’ and ‘one-room schoolhouse’ are defined from the historical point of view and all definitions will be helpful later in the thesis.

³ Online dictionaries used are <https://dictionary.cambridge.org> and <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com> and the Encyclopaedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/>. Accessed 8 March 2018.

3 School

School, in general, appears in the both novels chosen for analysis *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

3.1 Schoolhouse

Throughout the novels, several schoolhouses are described. In the late 19th century, most American schools were not large buildings and the size of classroom served as for “two to four families” (Sisson 834). The first schoolhouse appearing in *These Happy Golden Years* seems to match Sisson’s description. When Laura, the main protagonist of both novels, approaches her first school the only description the reader receives is the black smoke rising “from the old claim-shanty’s stovepipe” (Wilder, “These Happy Golden Years” 13). Even though that single mention does not say much about the school building and its condition, it indicates that the school building is an old shanty built in the middle of the claim with nothing in the close proximity. Nevertheless, the more detailed description can be determined from the omnipresent narrator:

The board walls were not battened. Streaks of sunshine streamed through the cracks upon a row of six homemade seats and desks that marched down the middle of the room. Beyond them on the studding of the opposite wall, a square of boards had been nailed and painted black, to make a blackboard. (Wilder, “These Happy Golden Years” 13)

The schoolhouse was a one-room school made of wood without proper foundations; the gaps between the pieces of wood causes that in winter the cold air flowed through them and makes the room cooler even though “in front of the seats stood a big heating stove” (Wilder, “These Happy Golder Years” 13). Thus those pupils who sit at the farthest desk from the stove could suffer from cold and even frostbites. Moreover, both seats and desks are presumably made of hard wood which makes it uncomfortable for the pupils to sit on them. The other equipment, such as a blackboard, is made provisionally in order to be used in the lessons. It is obvious that the class equipment is poor and it might have been made by the community members.

Similarly, when a new school is about to be built later in the story, it is expected that it will be built with the help of people living in the neighbourhood, which is proved by Laura's Pa saying: "All the neighbors will help build it [...]" (Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" 147). The togetherness of the community and their great care about education is confirmed by Sisson who points out that communities and families, apart from investing money into schools in general, "helped to paint schoolhouse, build outhouses, clean and tend the school and the yard and arrange for firewood for fuel" (834). What is more, the financial support for the school construction is provided by the school district, as it can be deduced from Pa's announcement: "The school district's going to put up a schoolhouse on Perry's claim [...]" (Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" 147). Hence it can be presumed that town De Smet, where the story takes place, is one of the bigger settlements, for they are able to build the schoolhouse from the district's funds. Surprisingly, it is not only the adult neighbours who take care about the school construction and maintenance; after the school is built, the sons of Mr Perry, the owner of the claim, painted the schoolhouse white (Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" 150). The facts that the children participate in the school building's preparation and that one of Mr Perry's son is only seven years old suggest that regardless the age, everyone could help in some way.

Compared to the first schoolhouse described, the financial support of the district reflects the state of the schoolhouse built on Perry's claim. Desks, seats and teacher desk are made from the same "honey-coloured" wood, so they match. A blackboard is new and on the contrary with the first schoolhouse each piece of equipment is bought rather than homemade. In addition, Laura can use a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary while teaching and check time on a small clock lying on her desk (Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" 150, 151). The description of the classroom gives an impression of a bright, new room to which a lot of money had been invested, for the desire for education was growing after the Civil War. Nevertheless, with the arrival of the newcomers to the Midwest whose children need to be educated, the need of building a larger schoolhouse appears, since there were not enough seats for all the children coming to the school (Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" 140). Mondale adds that on the frontier and the Midwest, schoolhouses were predominantly built "as ornaments to success" and it was more common to convene classes in "sod dugouts, defunct saloons" and wherever it was possible (49), or, according to the story, in old shanties.

3.2 Class

The structure of a class can be seen from three different points of view in the novels. Firstly, gender divergence is not significant since boys and girls are mixed up in a one-room school. The main reason was that in rural areas the number of children attending school was not high enough to allow to separate classes for boys and girls (Urban 178). Nevertheless, there are several moments in both novels when the class is consisted only of girls, yet it is not caused by the gender separation. Classes are composed of girls in spring terms, for boys “were still working on the claims now” (Wilder, “Little Town on the Prairie” 128). Similarly, in *These Happy Golden Years* when Laura returns to school as a student “only a few back seats were empty, and these would be filled when the weather grew too cold for farm work and the big boys came to school” (201). Hence it can be presumed that boys helping their parents on the fields since their childhood take care about the family claim later. Nevertheless, the school environment introduced in the novels resembles more the common school system⁴ in terms of class composition.

Secondly, age and associated skills and knowledge can be regarded as the most important factor by which children are sorted in classes. Thus it is very important for teacher to discover each child’s abilities. It is not unexpected that, as Pulliam and Patten mention, theoretically, each child had a possibility to start attending school at the lowest level and proceed according to their skills and knowledge (179). Urban adds that a one-room setting of schooling includes students of all ages studying at their own level (175). Take, for example, Miss Wilder, a new teacher arriving to De Smet in *Little Town on the Prairie*, writing down pupils’ names into a record book in order to get to know them (128). Further to this, she proceeds with sorting the pupils into their classes: “Laura and Ida, Mary Power and Minnie, and Nellie Oleson, were the only big girls. They were the most advanced class [...]” (132). Comparably, when Laura starts teaching her first school, there are only five children: one of second reader, one of third reader and three of fourth reader (Wilder, “These Happy Golden Years” 16). Consequently, since there is only one classroom for several pupils with different knowledge, the oldest have to sit in

⁴ The school system introduced in the 1830s in Massachusetts by Horace Mann. Common schools were supposed to provide elementary education to boys and girls regardless age, gender or religion. Common schools were mostly financed by “local property taxes” (Urban 97, 115).

the back of the classroom and the youngest in the front of the classroom. The classes are called after the abilities of pupils; it means they are sorted according to a reader they use, namely: first reader class, second reader class, third reader class, fourth reader class and fifth reader class. Even though not every reader class is mentioned in the novels, it is almost sure that the series of *McGuffey Reader*⁵ is used, because, as Mondale claims, “a series of textbooks were written expressly for the children of the West” (55) and its use was widespread. The fact that one class is consisted of children of wide range of readers indicates a heterogeneous class.

Finally, later in the story, when a new schoolhouse is built, pupils are divided into two classrooms by age. Moreover, it is the two-story house allowing the young children to be taught downstairs and the older ones upstairs; each class has their own teacher (Wilder, “These Happy Golden Years” 201).

It is important to allude to a form of recess. In *Little Town on the Prairie*, the narrator mentions that “at recess and noon they were always together” (145), which indicates that pupils usually spend their recesses talking and playing together. Girls are not as much active as boys, for it is not appropriate for their age to be “tomboyish”:

In the crisp, sunny weather the boys played ante over and catch, and sometimes they just threw the ball against the schoolhouse and ran jostling and bumping together to catch it in the wild prairie grasses. Often they coaxed Laura, “Come, play with us, Laura. Aw, come on!” (Wilder, “Little Town on the Prairie” 145)

It is a general assumption that girls of the age of fifteen should not be as playful as boys and should be more ladylike. However, everyone can decide how they want to spend their free time at school. As winter is coming, “the big girls did not play outside anymore” (Wilder, “Little Town on the Prairie” 186). Laura, studying for her becoming a teacher, fills her recess with reading a book because she is worried that she may fail her

⁵ A series of five readers, a primer and a speller written by William McGuffey. *McGuffey readers* were written to be used in public schools and their purpose was not only to educate children, but also to teach moral lesson (Jeynes 163). The length and difficulty of the stories used in the series of *McGuffey Readers* differs from short stories to writings by various authors (Spring 158).

exams, while her friends are watching boys playing outside: “Sometimes Laura stood with them, but usually she stayed at her desk and studied” (ibid).

The school year is conducted in two terms; the spring term and the winter term in the novels. When Laura is about to start teaching on the Perry’s claim, Pa informs her about her salary which will cover a three-month school lasting from April to June (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 149), which means the spring semester. After the spring term ends, children have holidays similar to nowadays summer holidays, yet they are expected to assist their parents on the farms, the claims or in the households. The length of the winter semester is not directly mentioned in any of the novels, yet the clue that it may end in February is discernible when Laura teaches her last day in Brewster school and gives her pupils her name-cards with the inscription on the back: “Presented to Ruby Brewster, by her teacher, with kind regards. Brewster School, February, 1883” (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 86). Then Laura returns to De Smet and visits school as a student again. However, it seems that the dates are flexible and may be changed as testifies the passage in which Laura ends the school in March (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 236). In addition, Pulliam and Van Patten state that in the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century public school education in the United States of America comprehended 8-year elementary school and also 4-year high school (174). Therefore, considering that only two novels of the *Little House* series are being analysed, the total length of Laura’s or her sisters’ education is not revealed.

The similarity with common schools implied earlier in the chapter is noticeable several times in both novels selected for the analysis in terms of school building condition, school equipment, and last but not least the structure of the class. The condition of the first school building introduced in the previous subchapter *Schoolhouse* resembles what Pulliam and Van Patten say about the schoolhouses built in the first half of the 19th century. It is not unexpected that school buildings and equipment were in a very poor condition which was not better even in the private schools and academies (147). Another aspect typical for the common schools, which put the foundations of the modern American schooling, is not dividing children by sex, age or religion (Urban 97), along with the one-room schooling. As mentioned above, the classes in the novels consist of children of different age and gender, which again indicates that schools in the rural Midwest cities were backward compared to the urban educational system developed in

the East. Therefore, it is evident that the educational system in the United States did not developed equally and its development reflects the economic and social level of the states and territories.

To conclude, the school buildings presented in the novels *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* reflect the amount of funds invested in the construction of schools. Comparing three schoolhouses proves that school is summoned basically whenever it is possible as it is in the case of the old shanty, and that the school equipment is made by the male members of the community or, in case of bigger financial support, bought. Therefore, it is evident that not only the school district, but also families and the community provide financial aid and contribute to the development of education by helping with maintaining the good condition of schools. One-room schools which are the prevailing type of schools in both novels consisting of boys and girls of different age, skills and abilities make a proof that teacher has to pay attention to each class separately. In addition, free time at recess is usually spent by talking or playing outside the schoolhouse, but there is a hint that girls should be devoted to girls and boys to boys. Moreover, the school year is organized in two semesters of not precisely specified length and the semesters are referred to as 'winter' and 'spring'. The difference in development of the education between the East and the West of the United States is evident as well as the difference between the rural and urban schools.

4 Curriculum and teaching methods

4.1 Curriculum

Although a curriculum had changed several times during the 19th century, a base of it remained unchanged. In the first half of the 19th century, before the Civil War, the rudiments of the curriculum had been based on memorizing, reciting and reading (Urban 98). Later on, along with the expansion of the educational standards and the rise of the number of suitable teachers, arithmetic, spelling and grammar became the basics of the curriculum in the late 19th century (Urban 175). Further to this, in the western frontier towns, spelling was sometimes stressed more than reading and writing even before the Civil War (Pulliam, Van Patten 147).

The importance of spelling is evident and stressed in the novels, even though the differences between reciting and spelling are often hard to distinguish, e.g. when Carrie, Laura's sister, is examined orally in front of the class Laura thinks: "Carrie would know every word in the morning; then when she was called upon to recite, she would make a mistake" (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 154). Yet few days later Laura refers to the similar situation as mentioned above as to the spelling lesson: "That afternoon, again, Carrie missed three words on her spelling lesson" (ibid). Making a mistake is seen as a thing which needs to be punished, but not every time the punishment equals the size of a mistake nor is fair. When Carrie makes three spelling mistakes, her classmate Mamie makes some mistakes too, but only Carrie is punished (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 155):

Then Miss Wilder closed her speller, and said sadly that she was disappointed and grieved. "Go to your seat, Mamie, and study this same lesson again," she said. "Carrie, you may go to the blackboard. I want to see you write, 'cataract,' 'separate,' and 'exasperate,' on the board, correctly, fifty times each." (ibid).

Since the development of education differed in the various areas of the United States in 19th century, the focus in the Midwest was placed, as Sisson mentions, on the three R's and some more: grammar, penmanship, spelling, geography and history (834). Moreover, Pulliam and Van Patten add that American history was taught children who

stayed at school more than three years, while geography was taught already before 1825 (148). The grammar lesson in the novel *These Happy Golden Years* is conducted for the first time for the pupils over 15 years of age, Laura's classmates, after her returning from her first teaching experience; the topic of the lesson was writing a composition on "Ambition" (97). In *Little Town on the Prairie*, there is a passage proving that also geography was learnt by pupils: "Laura was intent on her geography lesson. Glancing up, while she memorized and thought about the exports of Brazil [...]" (159). This quote not only proves that geography was taught, but also that memorizing was still prevailing teaching method and students were supposed to memorize the text without any interpretation from a teacher. Identically, in Laura's first class where she begins her teaching career, she examines knowledge of geography of the New England states and because the pupils succeed, Laura sets "them to learn the Middle Atlantic states" (Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" 16). In contrast, in none of the novels the teaching of penmanship is even mentioned.

As it was pointed out in the previous chapter, the lessons are held in the morning and afternoon as well. Therefore, when Laura starts her teaching experience in *These Happy Golden Years* she has to plan the schedule for her pupils. Taking into consideration three classes in spelling, she decides to teach "reading, arithmetic, and grammar recitations in the forenoon, and, in the afternoon, reading again, history, writing, and spelling" (17). This could imply that the basic R's, namely: arithmetic, reading and writing are taught in the morning when the pupils are more concentrated, but since writing is taught in the afternoon and it is replaced by grammar in the forenoon, reading is taught both morning and afternoon and also memorizing and recitation are the most used teaching methods in most subjects, the schedule planed by Laura reflects the needs of pupils, i.e. in which subject they need to improve their skills and knowledge.

Along with the development of the schooling, social values and American individualism began to spread among the people. Consequently, Pulliam and Van Patten emphasize the importance of "education for citizenship, morality and self-improvement" (179) and it is confirmed that education is considered as means having shaped the American personality (Bailyn 48). Therefore, the celebration of 4th of July suggests that the inhabitants of De Smet realize their patriotism and they are proud to be Americans. When the celebration starts and the man start his speech about America being liberated

from European influence, the crowd shout loudly: “Hurray! Hurray!” (Wilder, “*Little Town on the Prairie*” 73). The recitation of the Declaration of Independence follows and it is no wonder that “Laura and Carrie knew the Declaration by heart, of course, but it gave them, a solemn, glorious feeling to hear the words” (73). After reading the Declaration of Independence, Laura is thinking about American nation:

Americans won't obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn't anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good. (Wilder, “*Little Town on the Prairie*” 76).

She realizes that being a free individual means to have own rights to make decisions and be responsible for one's behaviour and future; she realizes that a self-reliance is an important aspect of American social values.

4.2 Teaching methods

The list of teaching methods which can be considered usual in both novels is rather short. It is not surprising that the teaching methods used in the late 19th century, when the story takes place, and in the novels are memorization and recitation. Pupils had to be tested orally or questions had to be written on a blackboard (Pulliam and Van Patten, 173) and examinations were supposed to be conducted regularly (Urban 175). The school in which Laura teaches is a small school as mentioned above, but Laura follows the routine of a town school in terms of her teaching approach to pupils. In the spelling lesson, “each class have to come forward to recite”. Ruby, the youngest participant in the class, is alone in her spelling class, so it is expected that she knows her answers perfectly, yet when she makes a mistake, Laura gives her another try (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 18). On the other hand, when two of the older pupils misspell a few words, Laura has to punish them and says: “Charles and Clarence, go to the blackboard, and write the words you missed, three times each” (ibid).

It is interesting that very similar attitude is used as a reward when Tommy, a young pupil of Laura's, improves his reading skills: "Your reading is improving, Tommy. You deserve a reward. Would you like to copy your spelling lesson on the blackboard?" (Wilder, "*These Happy Golden Years*" 56). Then he copied his lesson on the blackboard, smiling, praised by Laura. The main purpose of using exactly the same approach in punishing and rewarding may be an effort to motivate further progress in pupils. However, pupils' work in school is also graded by points. Grades are not in the form as they are known nowadays, but pupils are given a certain number of points reflecting their knowledge and preparation. Laura, trying to get a teacher certificate in order to have permission to teach in school, knows that her grades must be perfect and she is disappointed by her score: "She stayed at the head of all her classes, but her grades were no longer 100" (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 253). She says that she made a mistake in arithmetic and her grade was once 93 points. Individual tasks were assessed and graded separately according to pupil's mastering of a task, e.g. after writing a composition, Laura gets the highest grade 100 points: "It couldn't be marked higher. Laura still was at the head of her class" (Wilder, "*These Happy Golden Years*" 98).

Laura sees herself also as a student and not as a professional teacher, therefore she tries to keep up with her class in De Smet while teaching her first school. She decides to make use of this fact when one of her pupil, sixteen years old Martha, has trouble studying her grammar lesson about complex and compounds sentences. Laura says to her that she must revise the lesson, but then an idea to revise it together comes to her mind: "I would like to go over it again myself. I am trying to keep up with my class in town, and grammar is hard. If you would like to, we can go through this lesson together at the noon hour. [...]" (Wilder, "*These Happy Golden Years*" 57). Studying together with Laura, Martha comprehends the lesson and Laura feels sorry that she is a teacher: "Laura wished that she need not be the teacher; she and Martha were the same age, and might have been friends" (ibid). She knows that being a friend with her pupils, even though they are the same age, would not help her authority. In fact, studying with Martha results in the exact opposite. The pupils start to respect Laura more.

Once a year an annual school exhibition was held in the late 19th century. Annual school exhibition served as a proof of teachers' good work and parents and community members gathered in the school to see their children present their knowledge gained in

the school (Mondale 58). In *Little Town on the Prairie* an exhibition, from a teacher's point of view, is held in order to demonstrate the needs of school to the community. Mr Owen, a teacher, shares his thoughts with Laura and Ida: "This school needs a larger building [...], I am counting on a great deal upon the showing we make at the School Exhibition, to acquaint the people with the school and its needs" (274). At the School Exhibition, Laura and Ida are given a task of presenting "the whole of American history, from memory" (Wilder, "Little Town on the Prairie" 274), but they also participate in grammar and arithmetic classes. Further to this, the particular exhibits look like oral examinations in lessons and each part of the exhibition is ended by Mr Owen dismissing class (Wilder, "Little Town on the Prairie" 289). Furthermore, Mondale notes that "the spelling bee" was a favourite form of performance on such events as exhibition and students took it as a competition in spelling of exotic words (58). Despite of the fact that such competition does not occur at the School Exhibition, events of literary society are organized where the teams compete in the similar game; each team has its own leader picking other members who match in pairs in spelling words whose difficulty rises (216).

To sum up, the basics of the curriculum typical for the 19th century are fulfilled and reciting and spelling are considered since the most important since the story discusses them the most. For older students, the curriculum comprises also grammar, geography and history. Furthermore, the testing of the pupils is conducted orally and it is repeated every day serving as a proof of pupils' preparation. On the one hand, pupils are punished for making a mistake, but on the other hand they are also rewarded for accomplishing their lesson. The School Exhibition proves to be equally important because it serves for the school purposes as well as for the public entertainment. The importance of the awareness of being an individual responsible for one's own life is stressed as an important part of developing American nation whose integral part was education. The picture of school life depicted in the novels, in terms of curriculum and teaching methods, predominantly corresponds with the actual trends in education in the late 19th century.

5 Teacher

5.1 Teachers' qualification

The professional education of teachers was rather exceptional. Van Patten and Pulliam claim that during the 19th century it was usual to hire teachers with only elementary education (147). After 1870, “county teacher institutes, annual seminars lasting from a few days up to six weeks were popular in the Midwest” (Sisson 834). In *Little Town on the Prairie*, the first teacher introduced is Miss Wilder who moves to the town De Smet in order to teach the local school. Miss Wilder possesses a certificate which one enables to be a schoolteacher and this fact raises a presumption that owning the certificate means to be a good teacher who knows how to teach. When Laura and Carrie go to school on the first day of school they talk about Miss Wilder. Carrie says that she hopes she will be a good teacher and wants to know what Laura thinks. Laura reacts: “Pa must think so, he’s on the school board”. The girls talk about it for a while and then Laura ends the conversation by saying: “Anyway, she knows how to teach. She has a certificate,” (125). Since Laura tries to get her own certificate authorizing her to be a teacher, she is thinking how hard Miss Wilder must have studied to get it (ibid). Nevertheless, the actual education of Miss Wilder is never mentioned or spoken about.

On the other hand, both novels provide the description of Laura’s getting her certificate and passing the exams necessary for becoming a teacher. In the late 19th century, the examinations were much more formal than they used to be in 1850 when the examinations were conducted by non-professionals who were not able to recognize a good prospective teacher among the aspiring ones. Later they were organized by the supervisors; after passing the exams, new teacher was awarded with a certificate of different classes “according to their performance on the test” (Katz 64). Laura wants to become a teacher in order to help her parents with paying school supplies and a school fee for her blind sister Mary who manages to get to the college for blind in Iowa. Moreover, the desire to help Mary serves as Laura’s motivation. The hiring of teachers in schools was influenced by a good moral character of the applicant, “the board’s acquaintance with or relationship to the teacher, and consideration of the grade of teaching certificate held by the aspiring teacher” (Sisson 834). There can be no doubt

that Laura is of good moral character since the main reason she keens on becoming a teacher is to help financially to her sister. At the end of *Little Town on the Prairie* Laura says to Ma who worries about paying all Mary's expenses that she is going to be sixteen in two months and she may get her certificate next summer (299) because she can apply for the certificate once she turns sixteen. In a few moments Lew Brewster visits the Ingalls and says that he saw Laura at the School Exhibition last night and that Laura is the teacher they are looking for to teach in a new school opened in their district. Although Laura is surprised: "I am not old enough yet," she answers, he is willing not to care about those two months remaining to her sixteenth birthday (301). Hence the county superintendent Mr Williams who happens to be in town starts examining her at home. She is tested from arithmetic, geography, spelling, writing:

They sat together at the table. Laura worked examples in arithmetic, she spelled, she answered questions in geography. She read Marc Antony's oration in the death of Caesar. She felt quite at home with Mr. Williams while she diagrammed sentences on her slate and rapidly parsed them (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 303).

The examination proceeds with the grammatical analysis of the sentence: "*Scaling yonder peak, I saw an eagle Wheeling near its brow*" (304):

‘I’ is the personal pronoun, first person singular, here used as the subject of the verb ‘saw’, past tense of the transitive verb ‘to see’. ‘Saw’ takes as its object the common generic noun, ‘eagle,’ modified by the singular article, ‘an’. ‘Scaling yonder peak’ is a participial phrase, adjunct of the pronoun ‘I’, hence adjectival. ‘Wheeling’ is the present participle of the intransitive verb ‘to wheel,’ here used as adjunct to the noun ‘eagle,’ hence adjectival. ‘Near its brow’ is a prepositional phrase, adjunct of the present participle of the verb ‘to wheel,’ hence adverbial (ibid).

The examination in history is not necessary, for the superintendent saw Laura recite the history of the U.S. a night before at the School Exhibition (305). As can be seen in the examples above, the examination is conducted from the important subjects and it

is carried out very profoundly. Laura has to prove herself to be a clever young lady managing the curriculum on the level to be able to share her knowledge with her future pupils. Laura's certificate provides all necessary information, namely: her name, the subjects and branches she is competent to teach and the period during which the certification is valid and also that she is seen as morally good person:

This is to certify that *Miss Laura Ingalls* has been examined by me and found competent to give instruction in *Reading, Orthography, Writing, Arithmetic, Geography, English Grammar, and History* and having exhibited satisfactory testimonials of Good Moral Character, is authorized by this *Third Grade Certificate* to teach those branches in any common school in the country for the term of twelve months (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 306).

Moreover, the results of examination are written at the bottom of the certificate. Despite the fact that Laura has passed the examination once when she wants to teach a new school she has to pass new exams (Wilder, "*These Happy Golden Years*" 148). Sisson confirms that the owners of the certificates had to renew them annually (834). The exams are conducted by the superintendent; this time they are held in school with the questions written on the blackboard (Wilder, "*These Happy Golden Years*" 148) and Laura obtains the competency to teach again (149).

Nevertheless, getting the certificate was not the only option to teach at school. After the Civil War, institution on academically low-level called normal schools became more popular serving for educating teachers. Many students studying at normal schools already held teaching certificates and had some teaching experience (Pulliam, Van Patten 191). Sisson adds that many Midwestern states offered teacher education in state or private normal schools, yet not many rural teachers had a possibility to attend such institution (834). However, Laura never attends a normal school nor an institution of this nature as annual seminars or county institutes. Before her first day at school, she realizes: "Only yesterday she was a schoolgirl; now she was a schoolteacher," (Wilder, "*These Happy Golden Years*" 2) and her becoming a teacher happened so suddenly. She lacks a methodological training which she realizes may cause problems and her worries are obvious from her thoughts: "She did not really know how to do it. She never had taught school, and she was not sixteen years old yet. Even for fifteen, she was small; and now

she felt very small” (ibid). It is possible that if she received the proper teacher’s training, she would be able to handle her beginnings in the teacher’s position better.

In conclusion, aspiring teacher becomes authorized teacher once he or she passes the examination organized and supervised by the county superintendent. The assumption that a teacher is of good morals is a matter of course and the testing is held from the subjects to be taught by the teacher. What is more, the institution of normal schools growing in the second half of the 19th century does not occur in the novels in spite of its popularity.

5.2 Teachers’ status in the community

In the novels *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years*, there are several teachers and it can be said that each of them is perceived differently by the community in which they function. Yet they have at least one thing in common: respect by parents and community members. In the second half of the 19th century, young women travelled across the United States and headed West in order to train children of parents who might have been uneducated, ignorant and some even could not distinguish letters yet very kind (Mondale 54). It was usual that incoming teachers boarded with families who offered them to provide an accommodation (ibid).

Therefore, when Laura starts her first teaching experience, she lives with the Brewster family since there is no possibility commuting there daily because of the twelve-miles distance. In contrast with Mondale’s claim, Laura does not have to deal with the uneducated family or neighbours, but from the first meeting with Mrs Brewster she feels that Mrs Brewster is contemptuous towards Laura: ““Good afternoon, Mrs Brewster,’ Laura said as cheerfully as she possibly could. ‘Just go in the other room and take off your wraps,’ Mrs Brewster said.” (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 5). Laura tries to make the best first impression she can and she asks Mrs Brewster if she could help her with preparing the diner, but the answer was complete silence. Laura attempts to make a conversation at diner, yet unsuccessfully (8). On the one hand, Laura is thankful the Brewster family provides accommodation, but on the other hand she feels she is not welcomed. Trying to fall asleep, Laura overhears a quarrel between Mr and Mrs Brewster making Laura understand that it is not her personally who bothers Mrs Brewster, but the fact that she has to “keep a boarder” and she might have “been a teacher herself, if she

hadn't married a ...'' (10). Thanks to this evidence in the novels, it can be stated that the situation of moving teachers across the country according to the needs of districts is not easy to handle neither for a teacher nor for a family or a hostess.

The next example demonstrates that the teacher must be obeyed and their opinion must be respected even though they might be wrong in their judgement. When Laura and Carrie return home being punished by sending them home from school, Laura is not happy about it and she strongly disapproves with their punishment, but she does not regret it. Carrie explains to their parents that it is her fault, while Laura says it is actually on her. Pa reacts: "You girls will go back to school tomorrow morning, and go on as though none of this happened. Miss Wilder may have been wrong, but she is the teacher. [...]" (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 165). What Pa says indicates that the opinion of the teacher cannot be questioned and that even parents have to respect their point of view.

Another situation showing community's attitude towards the teacher is the chapter in the novel *Little Town on the Prairie* in which Mr Clewett, a new teacher in town, begins to organize literary societies for the inhabitants of De Smet. He wants to bring in an order and says that it would be good to appoint a temporary chairman who would be in charge of nominations and "ballot for permanent officers". Everyone is little surprised by his proposal, but his proposal raises their interest even though it sounds a little formal. Then another interesting idea is suggested by Pa:

'Mr Clewett and townfolks, what we've come here for is some fun [...]. So I suggest, let's just go straight ahead and do what we want to do, without any officers. We've got the schoolteacher, Mr Clewett, to act as leader. Let him give out a program, every meeting, for the next meeting. Anybody gets a good idea can speak up for it, and anybody that's called on will pitch in and do his share in the programs the best he can, to give everybody a good time' (214).

The approach given by Pa proves that he respects the position of a teacher and that being a teacher means being a recognized authority. His speech is followed by the voting and "a loud chorus of 'Ayes' voted that it should be so" (216). This fact indicates that not only Pa, but also the whole community present on the literary society appreciate and respect Mr Clewett to that extent he can be their leader. Furthermore, the singing

school is organized in church by Mr Clewett who “taught them the names and values of the notes, the holds, the slurs, and the rests, and the bass, tenor, and treble clefs”. (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 203). According to these pieces of information, the teacher, in a way, brings a cultural life into the community. What is more, the fact that the singing school is held in the church denotes the connection between the teacher and the clergy which is not directly confirmed in the novels.

On the whole, the teachers in the novels are treated with respect and esteem and their position in the society can be viewed as the link between the community members. Bringing the cultural events into the community proves the former statement and the teacher holds a respectable position. Nevertheless, the issue of dispersed school districts results in teacher’s boarding with a host family who might not be friendly towards their boarder.

5.3 Supervising the teachers’ work

The Midwest schools were small institutions divided between hundreds of school districts, each of the district had its own education board taking care of school matters elected from the local citizens (Sisson 834). The school board was in charge of overseeing “instruction, discipline, and attendance and to supervise the teacher, although rural school board members often neglected this job.” Furthermore, the most important and influential job of school boards was hiring of teachers (ibid).

Similarly, in *Little Town on the Prairie* the school board visits Miss Wilder’s school in order to check obedience and help to establish order in the classroom (179). The school board consists of three members one of whose is Laura’s father Charles Ingalls. They introduce themselves and Charles says that it was decided to visit the school because they heard Miss Wilder “have been having a little trouble” (180). Hence the school board, after being notified that discipline causes troubles to Miss Wilder, determines to intervene and pays a visit to school. Of course, they stand with Mrs Wilder “to keep order in this school,” and Charles speaks to everyone in the class: “All you scholars must obey Miss Wilder, behave yourselves, and learn your lessons. We want a good school, and we are going to have it” (182). In this case, the members of the school board fulfil their duties towards school and are not lax about the job.

The school board disposes of the power to cancel the school e.g. in case of the bad weather as it is demonstrated in *These Happy Golden Years*. The weather is so cold that “Laura found that the quilt had frozen stiff around her nose while she slept” (62). Mr Brewster returns from outside determined that the school must be cancelled today:

When they had saved his half-frozen feet, Mr Brewster told Laura not to go to school that day. “You would freeze,” he said. She protested, “But the children will come, and I must be there.” “I don’t think they’ll come,” he said. “I built a fire, and if they do come, they can get warm and go home again. There will be no school today,” he said flatly. That settled it, for a teacher must obey the head of the school board (63).

Laura, even though she knows that the weather does not allow school to run, is concerned about her pupils waiting for her. She proves that she is aware of the responsibility that she has over her class, but she cannot change the decision made by her supervisor Mr Brewster.

Nonetheless, the school board was not the only institution of the late 19th century supposed to oversee school. The position of superintendent is formed in order to moderate the development of curricula and buy supplies for schools (Urban 176). Sisson adds that a superintendent was responsible for one county and these country superintendents “examined and licensed teachers, distributed school moneys to local districts, visited schools and kept records of school population, children in attendance and condition of school building” (834). Even though it may seem that the powers of the school board and the superintendent were similar or even the same, the bureaucratic system developing in the late 19th century appointed the institution of the superintendent as the head of the system (Urban 176).

As it was mentioned in the previous subchapter, the first appearance of the superintendent in the novels happens in order to examine Laura and make her a certificated teacher. In *These Happy Golden Years*, the county superintendent Mr Williams visits one of Laura’s lessons to inspect her teaching. Laura is aware that this is the test of her teaching and she is grateful that pupils are in their seats, studying. However, she senses they are alert and tense, but she is comforted by the fact that each pupil

attempts to show their best for her. Mr Williams listens to “recitation after recitation” and he stays to noon when he must go. Before he leaves, Laura asks him “if he wished to speak to the school”. His answer ““Yes, I do,” he answers grimly,” makes Laura wonder what she did wrong (80). Although it is not clear what “the school” Mr Williams wants to speak with refers to, it is probable that “the school” is represented by Mr Brewster, the head of the school board, and the school board itself which remains unmentioned in this case.

Overall, the teacher’s work is controlled by two institutions; the school board which is subordinate to the second institution supervising teachers’ work: the superintendent. The powers of both may seem similar; while the visit of the school board demonstrated above is initiated by receiving a notification, the superintendent visits school in order to check the work of starting teacher and is about to report his observations to the school board responsible for running the school.

6 Teacher's status in classroom and dealing with discipline

6.1 Teacher's status in classroom

It was believed that school was supposed to act not only as means of education, but also the social role of school seemed important. Many believed, as Jeynes mentions, that after the Civil War “the school would provide the educational means necessary to help the children in penurious families rise out of their poverty and live up to their fullest potential in American society” (192). In other words, teachers would have the obligation to teach their pupils to read and write, but also hygiene habits such as bathing, cleaning the teeth, combing their hair or tying their shoes (ibid). However, none of the novels refer to the fact that teachers are obligated to take care of duties mentioned above and the teachers in novels put focus on the base of their curricula. Besides, the author of the novels never discloses an evidence that any children come to school in dirty clothes, with their hair uncombed or their teeth uncleaned, which is not surprising considering the novels as depicting idyllic countryside.

On the contrary, in *These Happy Golden Years* the issue of gaining authority of teacher occurs. Laura starts her teaching experience at similar age as some of her students are. Further to this, she has hard time in interesting the pupils in learning: “Though she did her best, she could not interest them in learning even geography and history” (48). Laura has the feeling of failure and desperation supported by refusing learning by Clarence, one of her pupils, who is also rude to her when she wonders why he did not study all parts assigned to study: “‘The lesson was too long,’ Clarence replied with a look from narrow, laughing eyes that said, ‘What are you going to do about that?’” (48). Since Clarence is bigger than her she is afraid to punish him and tries to calm herself down. It is not easy to keep her emotions in moderate level and she says to Clarence that he is the loser because he does not want to study. This is, in a way, a turning point for Laura, for she realizes how difficult it had to be for her former teacher Miss Wilder to handle a class full of disobedient students. It is evident that the similar age of Laura and her students is one of the probable reasons making it harder for Laura's getting full respect from her students. The age of teacher, along with the lack of experience in teaching and insufficient

training, might have resulted in small authority and inability to calm the pupils. It is noticeable that the issue of authority and discipline was recognized also in the late 19th century and it was important for teacher to find a way to handle the pupils.

Furthermore, it is important to set the rules and arrange order from the beginning. Miss Wilder is aware of that and she starts her first day with a speech which may be considered as the motivational speech for pupils. She gets pupils' attention by rapping the desk with a ruler, which is the method later used also by Laura. Thus it is apparent that Laura finds inspiration in Miss Wilder's teaching and experience she observed as a pupil are beneficial when she starts teaching. Miss Wilder begins with her speech:

'Now we are all ready to begin the school term, and we're all going to do our best to make it a success, aren't we? You know you are all here to learn as much as you possibly can, and I am here to help you. You must not look upon me as a taskmistress, but as a friend. We are all going to be the very best of friends, I'm sure,' (Wilder, "*Little Town on the Prairie*" 132).

The fact that Miss Wilder address the class and herself as 'we' betray that she attempts to set the ground rules adjusting the relationship among the teacher and the pupils. She would like to conduct herself as a friendly person, but on the other hand she expects her students to behave politely and prepare for their lessons. She proceeds with her speech:

'None of us will ever be unkind or selfish, will we? I am sure that not one of you will ever be unruly, so there need be no thought of punishment here in our happy school. We shall all be friends together and love and help each other' (ibid).

In this part she implies the expectation of keeping rules and in case of breaking it, the punishment will be necessary and inevitable. The speech reveals that she is prepared to be friendly towards her students, but she keeps certain distance in order to create and maintain authority. Moreover, throughout the 19th century it was believed that the moral virtues are one of the essence of education (Spring 137). The teacher was seen as that they should function as a model of morality and they were expected not only educate children in the subjects. The main goal was "to link methods of instructions, classroom management, and the character of teachers to the development of students' moral

character’’ (Spring 138). Therefore, Miss Wilder’s speech not only sets the rules of behaviour in the class, but also should serve as moral rudiments by which the pupils should be motivated and influenced. Teachers were supposed to live faultless lives and be always under public oversight (ibid).

As mentioned, Laura finds the inspiration in Miss Wilder’s way of teaching. Nevertheless, at the beginning of her teacher’s career she experiences hard time with her students. In contrast with Miss Wilder’s motivational speech, Laura feels pleased that the pupils ask her to play a snow fight with them on recess and does not hesitate to join the activity (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 26). After a while, she realizes that the decision to play games with her pupils is not right, because if she kept playing, she would not be able to tackle them later. Accordingly, while Miss Wilder thinks from the start of her teaching that she must build the authority and keep the professional distance from pupils, Laura acts like their friend. The similar age, again, may be the cause why Laura joins game, since she misses her friends from De Smet as well as her feeling homesick.

Compared to teaching experience of Laura and Miss Wilder, it is interesting that when a male teacher occurs in *Little Town on the Prairie*, he is respected from his first moment in the school. Mr Clewett is described as “‘quiet, but firm, a good disciplinarian’’ (185). During the lessons, “‘there was not a sound in school now, except the low voices of classes reciting, and in the rows of seats every pupil diligently studied’’ (185). Therefore, the male teacher, apparently, makes less effort in order to keep order in class. Yet teaching school was considered rather as female’s work whereas men mostly held the supervising offices (Urban 178), which novels in most cases confirm, e.g. Mr Williams as the county superintendent or Mr Brewster as the head of the school board.

The duties of the teacher in their classroom is not only to teach children, but also to maintain the school tidy and clean since there is no other staff to do it. After school ends in the afternoon, Laura has to prepare the classroom for the next day: “‘She cleaned the blackboard, and with the broom she swept the floor’’ (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 20). However, not only teacher, but also children help maintaining school during day; boys put coal in a stove (19) and when the snow blizzard comes they help to their younger classmates with breaking a path in snow (25).

6.2 Dealing with discipline

The issue of authority is tightly connected with discipline and punishment. With the birth of urban schools “punctuality, regularity, obedience and silence were expected and rewarded,” otherwise pupils were punished (Urban 175). Even though schools appearing in the novel *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* are rather rural, obedience is required and its violations are punished. The forms of punishments are different, some of them are mild, but some of them are considered as the worst possible punishment.

Firstly, because the punctuality is required, the late arrival has to be punished. Although Martha and Clarence are late because of the snow through which they have to break the path to school and Laura would like to excuse them for once, she feels that it would not be honest and says: “I am sorry I must mark you tardy, [...] Breaking a path is hard work, I know” (Wilder, “*Little Town on the Prairie*” 26). Laura has to be fair and she has to keep the rules herself in order to be an example for her students, so there can be no exceptions in punishment even though she knows that the late arrival is not completely mistake of Martha and Clarence. Marking tardy once does not mean anything significant, but regular late arrivals may result in harder punishment.

Secondly, the most common form punishment is copying misspelled words on the blackboard for making a mistake during a recitation as it was mentioned earlier. In one of those cases in the novel, Clarence, the student of Laura, while writing his misspelled words makes a joke of the punishment he is given. He says to Laura that the board is too small and laughs at her. She makes him to erase the words written on the blackboard and start over (Wilder, “*These Happy Golden Years*” 19). He knows that if he does not obey her the punishment will get worse. Similarly, when Laura has to punish Ruby and Tommy for quarrelling, she sets the lesson they should learn and they have to stay in at recess in order to recite it to her (47). The pupils are penalized for the errors and mistakes made when they are examined, which reflects that day-to-day preparation is required.

Thirdly, the pupils can be punished for being rude to the teacher, disturbing during the class or harming the classmates. In *Little Town on the Prairie*, the punishment of standing in the corner occurs when Charley disturbs class. Miss Wilder has troubles to keep order in class and when she cannot be patient anymore, she declares: “Go stand in

that corner. Face to the wall!’’ (168). Prior to this, her first decision is to punish Charley by smacking the ruler over his fingers. This is the first hint that intimate using of physical punishments. Sisson confirms that in the Midwest teachers also disciplined students by corporal punishments (834), it usually includes whipping by a pointer or by a ruler. One of such punishments can be seen in the novel performed by Mr Owen punishing Willie Oleson who stares from the window all day instead of studying his lesson:

“‘Come with me, Willie.’ He had pointer in his hand. With the other hand firm on Willie’s shoulder, he took Willie into the entry and shut the door. He did not say anything. From their seat nearest the door, Ida and Laura heard the swish and thud of pointer. Everyone heard Willie’s howls. Mr Owen came quietly in with Willie. ‘Stop blubbing,’ he said. ‘Go to your seat and study. I expect you to know and recite your lessons,’”. (Wilder, *“Little Town on the Prairie”* 270).

The use of corporal punishment should prevent Willie from the repetition of not paying attention to his lesson and motivate him to fix his behaviour because it is probable that punished person does not want to be whipped again.

Eventually, the worst of punishments of all is being sent home from school. It is Laura and her sister Carrie who are excused from school for their misbehaviour. This form of punishment is seen as the worst by all pupils, but no one has experienced it before:

Everyone had heard of being sent home from school. No one there had seen it done before. It was a punishment worse than whipping with a whip. Only one punishment was more dreadful; that was to be expelled from school (Wilder, *“Little Town on the Prairie”* 163).

This form of punishment should make a pupil feel ashamed for behaving inappropriately and keep the rules again. As it can be seen from Laura’s and Carrie’s experience, they learnt their lesson and “‘when the whole school was roaring, only Laura and Carrie were able to keep their faces perfectly straight” (168). Thus the punishment works perfectly.

In conclusion, the teacher's authority is not easy to obtain. The age of pupils, as one of the factors, can influence the acceptance of a new teacher by pupils as well as the teacher's approach to the class. However, the novels do not demonstrate that teacher functions as a "nanny" which teaches not only the given curriculum, but also hygiene habits. It is implied that the male teacher has less issue with handling the pupils than Laura and Miss Ingalls who both struggle with the issue of respecting the status of teacher in the classroom. Moreover, compliance of the rules and obedience are required, otherwise the pupils are punished. Several forms of punishments exist and occur in novels *Little House on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* and corporal punishments are not exceptional.

7 Little House on the Prairie: TV series

As it was mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, the *Little House* series served as the base for the popular TV series *Little House on the Prairie*. Two episodes of the TV series are important for the analysis since the issues dealt in the previous chapters are dealt there and therefore, they can be compared with the novels. For this purpose, episodes “Back to School Part 1” and “Back to School Part 2” were chosen.

The first appearance of a schoolhouse in “Back to School Part 1” reveals the outside of the building, its appearance and surroundings (00:05:21). The schoolhouse is a white painted building made of wood, which corresponds with most of schoolhouses presented in the novels. The neighbouring buildings indicates that the school is built in the town. Moreover, the first look on the building proves that it is a one-room school, which proves the next scene set in school (00:06:02). The equipment in a classroom more or less corresponds with the equipment described by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her novels. A blackboard in front of the classroom, several desks in a row and a stove standing behind them are similar to what is depicted by Wilder. Nevertheless, another blackboard hanging on the side between the windows may seem slightly strange (00:09:00). At the end of the episode the homework assignment is written on the board so that pupils copy it to their notebooks (00:36:52). Even though both outside and inside of the school building in the TV series compared to those in the novels look quite similar, it is evident that the TV series portrays the schoolhouse more idyllically than it is depicted in Wilder’s novels in order to make the series more appealing to TV audience.

Another purpose of the second blackboard in the classroom is for pupils’ writing their punishments as it is shown in “Back to School Part 2”. As Laura is leaving the classroom, there is Willie Oleson writing his punishment on the side board (00:14:38), which is common punishment for missing a word in spelling lesson. Willie is punished by being kept after school (BTSP1, 00:16:18) and he has to write his punishment five hundred times (00:16:41). However, it is not the only form of punishment that can be seen in the episodes. It seems that Willie Oleson is a disobedient boy and he is punished a lot because in “Back to School Part 1” he is punished as well. This time he is standing in the corner back to his classmates (BTSP1, 00:36:56) and he has to stay after the class is dismissed. Further to the punishments, the discipline is important aspect in education.

Miss Wilder, as a new teacher, is aware of that fact and she sets the rules in her speech on the first day of school: “My job is teaching and your job is learning. If we all do our jobs, we should get along splendidly” (BTSP1, 00:06:50 to 00:06:59). The forms of punishment which can be seen in the TV series are also used in the novels. This fact proves that in order to keep the order in a class each violation of the rules leads to an appropriate punishment. Furthermore, Miss Wilder also gives a speech as she does in the novels which should motivate her pupils.

Since Laura wishes to be a teacher, she decides to ask Miss Wilder how she can get a teaching certificate. Miss Wilder explains to Laura that the examiner has to come to town, which Laura sees as an easy option. It is surprising that there is no age restriction for taking the test and the only requirement is getting a school certificate first. School certificate test can be given by the teacher at school and it is comprised of vocabulary, mathematics and history (BTSP1, 00:13:30 to 14:30).

The main difference between the TV series and the novels is the necessity of having the school certificate. In the books Laura has to be at least sixteen years old and examined by the superintendent, while in the TV series the age is not considered as a crucial factor. Overall, the picture of school life in both novels and the TV series is, in its description, more or less realistic. Nevertheless, the TV series contains romanticized elements such as the popular actors, always sunny weather and Pa who looks much better in the TV series than he is described in the novels.

Conclusion

The thesis dealt with the depiction of education in the novels *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* by Laura Ingalls Wilder and focused on the American Midwest in the late 19th century. Its aim was to analyse the school life described by Wilder and assess how it coincides with the actual educational practices in the late 19th century in the United States.

The first part of the thesis introduced Laura Ingalls Wilder as a remarkable American author of children literature. As the inspiration for her writing had served her own experience from her childhood. From the studied literature, the book series *Little House* is considered fiction rather than autobiography as the author changes slightly some events used in the novels in order to create a good story, but the story line follows the actual life of the Ingalls family. Another significant feature of Wilder's novels is the style of her writing. The beginning of the story is written in a simple narrative in a perspective of a child and as Laura grows up the narrative changes its structure and is more complex.

The first part of the thesis also focused on the explanation of the meaning the key terms related to education. Its purpose was to create an idea of schooling in the late 19th century. The second part of the thesis was focused on the analysis itself. The analysis began with the examination of the school buildings occurring in the novels followed by the examination of the structure of the class. The most common type of school is a one-room school which was the prevailing type of school in the late 19th century. Moreover, the fact that the members of the community are involved in the school constructions is obvious in the novels, i.e. building the Perry's school with the help of all the neighbours, and it proves their realizing of the importance of education. Additionally, the similarity of certain aspects with common schools is mirrored in the schoolhouses' conditions. The schoolhouses pictured in the novels are of wooden construction with the gaps between the logs and equipment in most classrooms is also poor. This proves the evident difference in development of education and schools in general between the East and the West of the United States and urban and rural schools in the late 19th century.

The thesis continued with the analysis of the curriculum and teaching methods used and described in the novels and their comparison with the lessons typical for the examined period. The curricula presented in both novels corresponds with those which

prevailed in the late 19th century, namely reciting and spelling complemented by grammar, geography and history. The importance of spelling cannot be denied, yet it is often hard to distinguish spelling from reciting as it happens when Laura refers to her sister's spelling lesson. Furthermore, pupils are examined orally and making a mistake is punished as well as answering correctly is rewarded.

The analysis then focused on a teacher in different contexts. In the novels, one becomes a teacher after passing the examination conducted by the county superintendent whether it is Laura, Miss Wilder or Mr Clewett. Despite the fact that normal schools as the institutions for teachers' training developed in the end of the 19th century, they are not mentioned by Wilder. Nevertheless, as the examination of the aspiring teachers by the superintendent were one of the ways how to become a teacher in the late 19th century, the teachers' qualification depicted in the books matches the description in the studied literature. The institute of superintendent is also superior to the school board which plays important role in the education. Both institution control and supervise the work of teachers. The intervention of the school board is necessary in case of Miss Wilder' not handling the discipline in her class and the visit of the superintendent in one of Laura's classes is meant to be a supervision of her in role of a new teacher.

What is more, the teacher functions as the link between the community members since he or she organizes social events in town, i.e. the literary societies and singing school organized by Mr Clewett and therefore, they are treated with respect and esteem. However, in the 19th century was not uncommon that young teachers had to stay with their host family in town where they taught. A similar situation occurs when Laura has to deal with Mrs Brewster and her unfriendly attitude. The teacher must win authority in his or her class which is not always easy. This is proven by the fact that Laura has to deal with gaining respect issues because of her young age and insufficient teacher's training and by Miss Wilder's troubles with the discipline in her class. In contrast with women, the male teacher and his authority is more respected. Further to this, disobedience and breaking the rules set by the teacher are punished by several forms including corporal punishment.

At the end of the analysis, I focused on the TV series based on the novels by Wilder *Little House on the Prairie* and the comparison of the issues discussed in the main part of the thesis. The most surprising is the fact that in the TV series there is no age

restriction for getting a teaching certificate, while in the novels an aspiring teacher has to be at least sixteen years old. From the small analysis it is evident that the educational practices and the picture of school life betrayed in the TV series is more or less similar to the description provided by Wilder although the TV series is romanticized in order to be more appealing for TV audience.

In conclusion, most aspects of the education depicted in the selected novels by Wilder and assessed on the basis of a comparison of primary and secondary literature are authentic features of the school life in the late 19th century in the American Midwest. Wilder's description of the education provides realistic and reliable evidence as the analysis confirmed.

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