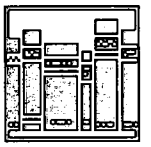
Journal of Research in Rural Education, Fall, 1995, Vol. 11, No. 2

Book Review



The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Farewell Little Kanawha. A. DeYoung. New York: Garland, 1995, 342 pp. ISBN: 0-8153-0744-6.

Review by
Larry Cuban
Stanford University

In *The Life and Death of a Rural High School: Farewell Little Kanawha,* Alan DeYoung records the three quarters of a century history of Burnsville High and Middle Schools in Braxton County, West Virginia. "Little K", as he and others have called the school (after the nearby Little Kanawha River), was built in 1915 as a first- through twelfth-grade school divided into two units of grades 1-8 and 9-12. The two-unit school served as the town elementary school and the district high school until the early 1950s when the decline in population accelerated and the county school board began consolidating smaller outlying one- and two-room rural schools. The students bused into "Little K" and nearby high schools found the facilities limited.

From almost 150 schools in the years following World War II, the Braxton County school board closed over 125 schools by the mid-1970s, leaving only 8 by the early 1990s. The current superintendent, a Braxton County native, went for 8 years to Cedar Creek School as a boy in the 1950s and then on to Gassaway High School. Both schools no longer exist.

As part of this sustained school reform—for that is what consolidation is—the County merged the high school portion of the school with two other districts in 1969 creating a county-funded new facility, Braxton County High outside of Burnsville, leaving "Little K" as a reconstituted middle school including a portion of the building for grades 1-4. Then two decades later, the abovementioned superintendent (exploiting a state-funded effort to build new schools) drafted a plan to merge the three middle schools into one Braxton County Middle School. The plan was approved by local and state authorities and "Little K" finally closed its doors in 1992.

DeYoung argues that this three-quarter century journey from high school to middle school to extinction was virtually inevitable as the dominant political, economic, social, and cultural forces at work within the nation seeped through central West Virginia, an isolated portion of Appalachia that never fully recovered from the Great Depression of the 1930s. The social imperatives for modernity, for turning rural folk into educated citizens, and the professional agents of that transformation—teachers and administrators—worked slowly and inexorably in central West Virginia, an area with a declining local economy of subsistence farming dependent upon mining industries and out-of-state investments.

To reformers who assumed that improved schooling was the prime instrument of social and economic progress, consolidation of tiny one- and two-room schools into larger units was an efficient solution to the problem of rural isolation, inadequate and unequal education, and adult poverty. To most state policymakers and professional educators, bigger schools meant better schools. Larger schools would prepare youth to get jobs and live responsibly in communities either in the state or elsewhere. Larger schools raised academic standards, retained students in school until they graduated, and insured that school staffs were held accountable. Even though some scholars and federally-funded projects had raised serious questions about the merits of larger rural schools and the supposed cost savings that would accrue to taxpayers in the late 1970s, the axiom that bigger naturally meant better still remained dominant among West Virginia educators and policymakers (Nachtigal, 1983; Sher, 1977).

DeYoung questions the axiom by distinguishing between rural schools and their important social functions within a community and the process of schooling itself. Rural schools, DeYoung argues, served as a moral and cultural glue for Appalachian communities as they endured the whiplash of shifting economic and social changes. The dominant professional view that school consolidation would improve schooling for individual youngsters paid less attention to the contrary opinion that mergers hastened the death of those very fragile places.

Here, then, is both an historical narrative and analysis of one school in the midst of a half-century of unrelenting rural school consolidation in an impoverished central West Virginia county. At first glance, then, DeYoung has written another one of those sad tales (sad, from the perspective of the author and most of his informants) of vanished small communities where schools served broader func-

tions than teaching the young. But a whole book about a small West Virginia school of which few readers have heard?

The author takes up that very question in the final pages when a prospective publisher rejected the prospectus for this book. "Why," the publisher asked, "would anyone want to read about a school that was closed? Why would anybody want to read about a school that failed?" (DeYoung, 1995, p. 329). DeYoung's answer is that the 75-year history of "Little K" captures the larger social and economic transformation of a nation and the inexorable imperatives those massive changes have visited upon this central West Virginia school. It is, in short, an American tale.

DeYoung, using the concepts of sociologists, brings an anthropologist's manner of inquiry to the task joined smoothly with the methods of historians. He sees the story of "Little K" as one where biography, social structures, the political economy and history intersect; where national and regional economic, political, and social forces interact with individual actions shaping what ultimately occurs.

DeYoung's view of personal agency in shaping outcomes focused upon the substantial influence of the politically astute and savvy superintendent of 16 years who engineered the merger of the three middle schools leading to the disappearance of "Little K" in the early 1990s. Here was a man, according to DeYoung, who viewed consolidation as a means of reducing high numbers of dropouts from the county high school and better preparing these West Virginia youth for the twenty-first century workforce and duties as a citizen.

Yet, as a scholar of Appalachian rural schools and cultures, drawing from the social sciences, he does not hide his views in recounting the 75-year history of this West Virginia school:

> This story was not about a school that failed its community or its children. For the most part, this was a story about a school which both helped to fuel the human resource needs of modern America, yet fell victim to the uneven and exploitive nature of a national economy. It was also a place that helped to define and redefine a local community in the days when local communities were important places for daily social life. . . . Its passing is symbolic of a larger social transformation that may or may not be positive. And its passing was not just a West Virginia or Appalachian or rural American story. It was a story about the transformation of America and American culture. Farewell, Little Kanawha. You will be missed by those that knew you well; and by those of us who barely came to know you. (DeYoung, 1995, pp. 329-330)

Is it, indeed, a national story captured in the details of one school's history? If it is, then, is the argument and evidence set forth compelling? Before answering these questions, I need to disclose my experiences to alert readers to a possible tilt in the reviewer's perspective.

I served as a school superintendent in an urban district (Arlington County Public Schools, across the Potomac River from Washington, DC) between 1974-1981. Like the Braxton County Superintendent, I (and the school board that hired me) faced a situation where declining school enrollments (from 23,000 students to 18,000 and still falling) and an aging population reluctant to increase taxes raised immediate threats of school closures to those scattered elementary schools of fewer than 200 students around the small county. What complicated my situation was that county enrollments were shrinking, but also getting more culturally diverse at the same time that standardized test scores were falling. So the sense of decline in the district was pronounced at the time of my appointment.

For 5 years, after much planning and analysis of birthrates and shifts in the county population, I brought recommendation after recommendation to my school board to close elementary and, then, secondary schools. After public hearings, protests by parents at the targeted schools, and much recrimination, the board accepted each and every recommendation that I made. Out of 32 schools in the county, the school board closed five elementary and two junior highs, converted junior highs into middle schools and moved the ninth grade into the high school. Not a pleasant time to be a superintendent or school board member.

During those years when consolidation as a means of school reform was highly contested, I, like my colleague a decade later in the state west of me, accepted the assumptions of my profession about economies of scale and equity: larger schools (defined as above 300 for elementary schools and 600 for middle schools) meant options for student choice in the curriculum, among teachers, and after-school activities. In short, better schools. Opponents of the mergers that I recommended to the school board argued that the loss of community in a small school and the meaning of that loss to a neighborhood, even if Arlington were essentially an urban county adjacent to the nation's capital, could not be captured in my projected savings or reconfigured schools. The objections were heard and noted by the school board but ultimately were swept aside because both the school board and I prized efficiency, equity, and the importance of schooling as a social instrument for both individual and social progress in an increasingly diverse community.

Today, well over a decade removed from the superintendency and with far more time as a professor to examine those assumptions, I am more willing to question the values that I prized and sought to achieve as superintendent. I

offer this brief personal aside to readers as a background for assessing my comments on Alan DeYoung's study.

Is this study a national story captured in the details of one school's history? Yes and no. The yes part of the answer is well elaborated in the distinction between schools and schooling children, between places that serve more than one function in a community and the process of turning individual children into citizens and workers. This distinction has been made elsewhere in the country when rural school consolidation (and urban, as I mentioned above) became an issue. Moreover, DeYoung's argument that the livelihood of central West Virginia—subsistence farming and extractive industries dependent upon out-of-state capital—was acutely sensitive to national shifts in the economy link the region to larger society. Further, the impact of mass popular culture through media increasingly available to a rural, mountainous people slowly leached opportunities to come together as small communities, save at times of crisis. Finally, the professional wisdom of West Virginia administrators drew from a national culture that valued highly economies of scale, providing equal opportunities for poor children, and accountability for school professionals. For example, the veteran Braxton County superintendent who presided over the recent consolidation of the middle schools was an advocate of "effective schools" philosophy of high expectations for children, constant monitoring of academic progress, the role of the principal as an instructional leader, and holding educators responsible for what their students achieve. This rational and bureaucratic view of schooling derived from urban elementary schools in the late-1970s had spread across the country to encompass one of four districts nationally by 1990 (General Accounting Office, 1989). To this degree, then, DeYoung has assembled a strong case for "Little K" being an American tale.

The "no" part of the answer rests upon a flaw in the logic of the argument that DeYoung makes. In reviewing the literature of rural schools, he distinguishes well between the bulk of the writing on rural schools being situated in the midwest and that West Virginia poverty and isolation makes it a separate case—that is, generalizing about rural schools from a largely midwestern literature would be misleading. Moreover, DeYoung nicely elaborates how much diversity marked Braxton County schools and across the state. The points that he raised persuaded me that the County is a special case of rural schooling closer, perhaps, to schooling for "at-risk" populations elsewhere in the south (especially in largely black communities) and even in cities. The slippage in the logic of his argument is this well-documented uniqueness of Braxton County schools. Had the author made a case for rural and urban similarities when schools try to address poverty in communities, there might have been more of a national story to tell.

Is the argument and evidence set forth compelling? Even with the above-mentioned flaw, I found the study persuasive. The historical data are fragmented and incomplete (as are most such data drawn from diverse and scattered sources). The whiff of nostalgia does trail a number of the sources the author uses even as he acknowledges the dangers of romanticizing a past where rural charm masks the damages of poverty and isolation. The author's affection for rural schools and the important social role that they have played in community life and his disappointment over the closing of this school is evident throughout the book. Yet as obvious as his feelings are for "Little K," DeYoung meticulously analyzed an advocate's public appeal to the County school board to keep "Little K" open. The appeal included all of the familiar arguments against mergers including the advantages of smallness, the importance of the school to the community, and so on. In each instance, DeYoung points out how little evidence there was to sustain the argument of even the few anti-consolidationists willing to contest the closure.

In using school board minutes, yearbooks of "Little K" and newspaper articles, DeYoung compiled a diverse array of sources that could be cross-checked for corroborating key points. The strengths of evidence are most evident in the interviews and further reflections upon and analyses of those sources. Overall, I felt that the story DeYoung tells is internally consistent and largely supported by the evidence he offers.

That story, however, would be clearer to the reader had a tougher editor required the author to more sharply define the main pillars to the overall argument and stuck with them. I found myself immersed in a leisurely explication of the author's methods to secure information or an intricate argument over issues of modernity in West Virginia or oppositional cultures (each section engaging me), yet to be swept along to another point that was related but nonetheless taking me elsewhere. The multiplicity of themes in the analysis of the closing of "Little K" were not well-braided giving the reader a clear sense of where the author finally ended up. Hence, a tighter analysis focused upon fewer themes would have helped a reader see the story in clearer outlines, while retaining the passion and elegiac echo of what happened in one West Virginia county.

These caveats should not deter readers from Alan DeYoung's story of the demise of one school. His rendition of the literature on rural schools and how writers have approached Appalachian poverty offers a well-balanced overview to a large body of work well worth the price of the book. Moreover, his combining the methodology of an ethnographer and historian with the conceptual apparatus of particular sociologists enriches the narrative (even as it sometimes overwhelms the story), provoking at least one reader to stop and reflect on his experience as a superinten-

dent who also saw consolidation as a school reform. For that alone, I thank Alan DeYoung.

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Integrating Education, Health, and Social Services in Rural Communities: Service Integration Through the Rural Prism. R. D. Bhaerman. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Better Schools, Inc., 1994, 137 pp. ISBN: 1-56602-058-1.

Review by
Carol E. Mertens
University of Iowa

The integration of education, health, and social service to enhance efficiency and effectiveness is once again being embraced by policy makers and those involved in the delivery of human services. The fragmentation of the human service system has created a lack of coordination of services and artificial, but real, barriers for the individuals the system is designed to serve.

The concept of service integration requires collaboration among human service providers. The concept assumes that the needs of individuals are frequently interrelated. For example, crisis assistance may lead to family assistance, health service, or even protective services. The proponents of integrated human services assert that coordination and collaboration is necessary among educational programs, social services, crisis assistance, recreation, employment assistance, protection services, and health services.

While integrated human service initiatives have intuitive appeal, conceptualization and implementation of the concept is complex and formidable. In this monograph, *Integrating Education, Health, and Social Services in Rural Communities: Service Integration Through the Rural Prism,* Bhaerman (1994) aspired to "provide information and insights for rural schools and communities interested in integrating services in order to maximize positive impact on children, youth, and their families" (p. 1).

Bhaerman focused primarily on educators in rural schools as well as social service and health personnel who "need to address unresolved problems and unanswered questions regarding service integration" (p. 1). This review will focus on the stated intent of this monograph.

To accomplish this ambitious task, Bhaerman examined selected dimensions of the concept and suggested guidelines for the implementation of integrated human service programs. Throughout the monograph, Bhaerman engaged the reader in a structured dialogue by using a question and answer format. Part I provided an overview of service integration. This section included a brief discussion of the resurgence of interest in the concept, a consideration of the various definitions of the concept, and an examination of the needs of rural communities. In addition, this section examined the rationale for integration of human services, barriers to integration, recommended legislation, models for implementation, and the implications for educators. The section concluded with a plea for action.

The implications of integrated human services for rural communities was addressed in Part II. Bhaerman structured this section of the monograph around two questions: (a) What are some educators saying about the rural context? and (b) What are reactions of educators in a rural context to the implementation of the integrated human service concept? The response to the first question is based on vignettes, whereas in responding to the second question, Bhaerman appeared to solicit responses of educators in a somewhat more structured manner. He "identified and contacted a random sample of twenty rural service integration practitioners" (p. 40). The methods and procedures used to gather information from these individuals are unclear; it is inferred that a mailed survey was employed. While the monograph is directed towards the practitioner, who may or may not be interested in methodology and procedures, some explanation seems to be in order. After all, the results of this "study" provide the basis for a major portion of the monograph. It seems that a more detailed description of the methodology would allow for a more adequate evaluation of the discussion of this "study."

Bhaerman concluded Part II with a foreseeable conclusion that "certain aspects of life in rural schools and communities need to be considered in order to make service integration work" (p. 59). Finally, the reader is offered the rural prism that reflects the need for financial, technical, knowledge, and human resources for integration of human services in a rural context. Although Bhaerman