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Logic Gone Wrong: A Reply to DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald (1995)

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When I initially read this manuscript as a reviewer, I was struck by the probability that the authors had wedded three different manuscripts to construct one. In manuscript one, a "straw man" is constructed by a misinterpretation of the history of the American middle school. In manuscript two, the middle school is blamed for the consolidation of rural schools in America. In manuscript three, this consolidation is credited with the demise of rural communities and some imaginary quality of life that previously existed. While there are many interesting ideas contained in the final article by DeYoung, Howley, and Theobald (1995), I find it to be poorly constructed and poorly reasoned.

History is a great teacher, and when I first read the comments by DeYoung et al. suggesting that the American middle school emerged because of demography or economy, I laughed out loud. I'm sorry gentlemen, but I was there in 1965 when Bill Alexander, John Lounsbury, and Vince Hines conceptualized the new middle school, and it had nothing to do with money or desegregation or a strategy for rural school consolidation. There was, by contrast, considerable excitement in the findings of the UC-Berkeley Growth Studies that documented preadolescence. It was a curriculum thing all the way. Later, in the mid-1970s, all of the "wrong reasons" that DeYoung et al. cite did provide a political opportunity for middle school growth.

Third, it is unbelievable that the authors could conclude that the middle school is a threat to the Western culture that resides in the small towns of America. Neither the junior high school nor the American middle school was created to serve "handicapped or socially disenfranchised students" who couldn't otherwise realize the American dream. In fact, both were reactions to a rather mindless sort of secondary education in this century that is generally disfunctional outside of the college campus. If anything is responsible for the death of schools in rural communities, it is the unrealistic demands for breadth and depth in the classic liberal arts curriculum imposed by accreditation standards.

While reviewing the initial manuscript, I had the opportunity to work with a faculty from a rural school (7-12) in Minnesota. I came away from the experience horrified at what they couldn't do for the 236 students in attendance. Because the teachers were largely graduates of the same school, and because the staff was too small to cover even a basic four-subject curriculum, students were penalized in many ways. Not only was the Western culture not being perpetuated by this community school, but the students were actually being prepared to stay in a dying community. I can't believe that DeYoung et al. are advocating such cultural suicide under any banner, including rural community survival.

I think a much more positive spin might be put on what is actually an economic and demographic problem, rather than an educational development. Since 1990, the capacity of personal computers has taken away much of the deprivation of any person living in a rural area. For the first time, it is possible to be "small" and live "large" in terms of educational opportunity. Why not develop this idea and provide some healthy options for small schools in America? I say, don't beat up the middle school or manipulate statistics to show nonexistent cause-and-effect relationships. Likewise, please don't suggest that towns that no longer have a movie theatre or a newspaper will be culturally emasculated by the establishment of middle schools. Instead, let's show small school districts how to become excellent in the 21st century. After all, shouldn't this be the mission for educators and a journal dedicated to research in rural education?

References

DeYoung, A. J., Howley, C., & Theobald, P. (1995). The cultural contradictions of middle schooling for rural community survival. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 11,* 24-35.

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