

Argument Misguided and Divisive: A Reply to DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald (1995)

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In their article, "The Cultural Contradictions of Middle Schooling for Rural Community Survival," DeYoung, Howley, and Theobald (1995) argue that "middle schooling puts the presumed prerogative of child development ahead of social, cultural, and historical priorities" (p. 25). In so doing, middle schools typically overlook existing linkages between schools and their social and cultural contexts" (p. 25), thereby threatening the integrity of rural communities. By making this argument, the authors pit the needs of children against the common good:

It makes no ethical sense—none—to so misconstrue the needs of children (e.g., to a "developmentally appropriate" curriculum) that such "needs" come before the common good. (p. 34)

This is an unnecessarily divisive argument, similar to those that set up dichotomies between developmental responsiveness and intellectual rigor, or between humane and caring environments and disciplined schools.

We should be wary of an argument that pits the needs of children against the needs of communities, as this article does. Surely we must insist that we can have both—indeed, that we cannot have one without the other. In Indiana, for example, we have many rural schools with a 7-12 configuration, where the 7th and 8th graders are oppressed, even lost, in what is an unrelentingly *senior* high school that is clearly dysfunctional for young adolescents. It is not essential, nor is it politically feasible, to break up this grade configuration. The need is to change the climate, curriculum, and pedagogy for the young adolescents within that grade structure. This is exactly what some of these schools are doing, in collaboration with Indiana State University. They have learned important lessons from their middle-school colleagues in the state, and they are applying them, appropriately, to their rural contexts. They are making their way to a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young adolescents in a school configuration that serves their communities well.

In doing so, they are following the path of the most thoughtful of the middle-school reformers, who argue primarily for excellent and equitable schooling for all young adolescents much more vociferously than for a particular grade configuration.

They also argue that, all things being equal, people face fewer impediments in establishing promising educational practices for young adolescents in middle schools (i.e., schools with grades 6-8 or 5-8). In the circumstances the authors describe, however, all things are *not* equal. The authors are on target about many middle-school proponents' lack of attention to rural communities' survival issues. The authors are misguided, however, in arguing that the middle-school movement has an urban bias: School observers concerned about urban schools have long held that the middle-school movement has been unrelentingly suburban and ex-urban. While this failure is now being redressed to a certain extent, it has for too long alienated urban educators. Again, the authors create an ill-advised dichotomy—in this case between urban and rural schools—instead of joining forces with fellow educators, albeit urban, who have begun to interpret and translate the considerable insights of the middle-school movement for their own contexts.

DeYoung et al. are absolutely correct that too many early middle-school proponents have decontextualized schools. The movement has from the outset needed more sociology to complement its powerful psychology. This is not to argue that we don't need to pay attention to what is a very compelling time in the life span, just as we do for toddlers or would for the elderly, if we were more humane; but paying careful attention to developmental imperatives should not compete for time with just as careful a look at the contexts of children's lives. This point is true for the inner city, for the suburbs, and for the very diverse rural communities across this country.

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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