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Saving the Children of the Poor in Rural Schools

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ACCLAIM's mission is the cultivation of *indigenous leadership capacity* for the improvement of school mathematics in rural places. The project aims to (1) understand the rural context as it pertains to learning and teaching mathematics; (2) articulate in scholarly works, including empirical research, the meaning and utility of that learning and teaching among, for, and by rural people; and (3) improve the professional development of mathematics teachers and leaders in and for rural communities..



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Abstract

This study closely examined interview transcripts collected in six rural schools to describe how educators and community members viewed issues of social class. Data came from an SEA-funded project investigating high-poverty schools honored for serving all students well. This study is one of several drawing on data gathered for this project.

Findings demonstrate three distinct approaches to engaging the poor. The major tendency is “saving the poor,” a benign middle-class attempt to support impoverished families and intending to help children from such families enter the local middle class. Four of the six schools embrace this approach. The other two schools were different. In one, the poor were repudiated and even demonized. In the other, the poor were not even identified as a group; instead, interviewees described all residents as “common people,” and the school exhibited a strong community purpose and a strong concern for the common good. Such close connection permitted educators to convince skeptical rural parents of the value of a prominent reform mathematics curriculum, which this school adopted.

The discussion considers several theories potentially useful in explaining the findings: educational leadership, cultural values, community type, economic structure, and historical views of schooling. Examination of issues of economic structure, however, offers unique causal insights. The discussion concludes with an interpretation of the relevance of a deeper understanding of social class issues to the future of rural schooling.

Saving the Children of the Poor in Rural Schools¹

Introduction

In *Worlds Apart*, Cynthia Duncan (1999) argues that democracy and sustainability are promoted in rural communities in which there is a strong middle class. Her case studies paint a sharp contrast between communities in which elites dominate local institutions and communities in which a sizeable middle class promotes wider participation. Other rural sociologists also provide evidence supporting what might be called “middle-class theory” (e.g., Chan & Elder, 2001).

This theoretical perspective seems to suggest that the middle class is the repository of democratic values in rural places. The dynamics that lead researchers to this conclusion are, however, not well understood. Two conjectures have been advanced, with some evidence to support them: (1) that elites are threatened by the participation of the poor and (2) that the poor are too downtrodden to press for access to democratic institutions (e.g., Duncan, 1999; Gaventa, 1980). In either case, some researchers—Duncan perhaps most vocal among them—suggest that a strong middle class can speak on behalf of the poor and thus give them opportunities to have their needs met by community institutions.

These dynamics, if they do indeed exist widely, represent a “double-edged sword,” because when the middle class speaks *for* the poor it cannot (because of its own class interests) speak *in the best interests of* the poor. Little research, however has explicitly examined what happens when the middle class in a rural community assumes

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the responsibility of saving the poor from itself. Yet this project is rampant among educators in rural schools, as the popularity of Ruby Payne events and products attests (e.g., Payne, 1998). Our study takes up the question of middle class patronage in rural places, with particular attention given to the ways such dynamics play out in the context of community.

Related Literature

Although it is hardly plentiful, some literature does shed light on the ways middle class educators treat impoverished students and their families. Studies conducted by Crozier (1999), Lareau (1989), and Lewis and Forman (2002), for instance, suggest that teachers in schools serving poor students are less likely to view parents of such children as competent participants in the project of schooling than are those in schools serving primarily middle class students.

Other studies show how working-class students tend to receive custodial educations that prepare them for working-class jobs, whereas middle class pupils receive academic preparation that readies them for management positions (Anyon, 1980). Still other work illustrates the ways in which middle-class teachers' deficit views of their impoverished students' abilities structure their instructional interactions and depress students' intellectual growth (Eder, 1981; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan & Shuan, 1990; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), particularly when race and class intersect (Delpit, 1996; Feagin, 2000; McLeod, 1987; Wells & Serna, 1997).

In addition, a few studies of educational reforms illustrate how middle-class biases sometimes undermine initiatives ostensibly undertaken to benefit impoverished

children. For example, Hubbard and Mehan (1999) and Lipman (1997) analyze the superficial implementation of two reform efforts intended to increase the academic achievement of low-income and African American students. Teachers and middle-class community members in these contexts used the logic of American meritocracy, among other tactics, to limit important reform strategies such as de-tracking, academic support, and teaming. As a result, in both studies, poor and African American students tended to remain where they had been before the reforms were instituted. They were excluded from highly valued Advanced Placement courses, and their academic achievement did not improve.

Although, for the most part, this literature does not consider class dynamics in rural places, some studies begin to clarify ways in which the middle class in other locales seeks to rescue the poor. Teaching middle-class values and norms is one primary means by which middle-class teachers attempt to refashion their poor students. In her study of an urban school serving poor African American youth, Anyon (1995) provides numerous examples of teachers modeling, and even demanding, student behavior that conforms to middle-class values. Telling children to bathe more often, to talk quietly, to avoid laziness (“the lazier we are today, the more we have to do tomorrow” reads a sign posted throughout the school [p. 78]) are examples of such efforts.

Prescriptive literature from the fields of social work and education, moreover, often recommends that practitioners inculcate impoverished children with middle-class values, dispositions, and norms as an ameliorative to poverty (e.g., Splittgerber & Allen, 1996). Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Allen-Mearns (2002), for instance, provide suggestions for intervention through school-based services to offer poor students access to instruction

in courtesy, “ethical” behavior, and achievement orientation. Schools in this literature are viewed as critical sites for such training in the cultural capital of the middle class (e.g., Maeroff, 1998; Payne, 1996; Vail, 2003).

Some empirical studies also show how school personnel enact the role that the prescriptive literature advocates. Acting in loco parentis to compensate for the alleged incapacity of poor students’ families, educators connect pupils to counseling and social work services, punish and reward students in ways usually reserved for parents, or even take students into their homes until they complete school (Anyon, 1995; C.W. Howley & Kusimo, 2004; Parese, 2002).

Another way educators attempt to save poor students from themselves is by commending the acquisition of higher education. This social class dynamic is one that does appear in the literature on rural education. Much attention, for example, has been focused on the allegedly lower educational aspirations of rural students as compared to their suburban counterparts (e.g., Breen, 1989; Cobb, McIntire & Pratt, 1989; Haller & Virkler, 1993; McCracken & Barnicus, 1991; McGranahan, 1994; Reid, 1989; Rojewski, 1999). And a number of these studies conclude with the explicit recommendation that educators extol the value of a college degree, particularly to the poor and rural.

Some literature also provides evidence that educators ascribe unflattering motives and dispositions to their impoverished students and families in an attempt to better understand the alleged personal determinants of poverty. The college students from impoverished backgrounds interviewed by Beegle (2003) described their elementary and secondary education experiences as humiliating. Anyon (1995) notes the demeaning stereotypes held by teachers about their poor pupils. Others describe how teachers’

negative views of impoverished students influence academic outcomes (Eder, 1981; Fine, 1986; McLeod, 1987; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Overall, the related literature includes almost no analyses of social class relations in rural schools. Findings from studies of other locales, however, suggest that schooling embeds a middle-class bias that often works to the detriment of impoverished students. With the possible exception of Duncan's case studies, little empirical work thus far has presented a nuanced view of such dynamics in rural places.

Origin of the Study

The study was funded by the SEA, which sought to discover "road maps" for improvement and derive "lessons learned" applicable to practice. Our purview was considerably broader: to describe school cultures and community interactions underlying current practices. The desire of funders for "lessons" has always struck us as unusually problematic, assuming as it does in this case, the existence of a sort of praxis capable of generating nostrums to improve practice elsewhere. In short, we think that SEAs give far too much credence to the validity and reliability of their own accountability regimens.

Our major short-term practical "lesson learned," incidentally, was that schools can seem to perform quite well by concertedly tweaking test performance of student groups at the margin, but that such results have dubious utility beyond a short-lived public relations value for the SEA. For all but one school (the positive outlier discussed in our report of findings), the honors bestowed by the state lasted just one year.² We offer this observation because much of what we saw *with relation to improving test performance*

² Most of the schools given this award by the SEA enjoy it for a single year. Only a handful of such schools have received state accolades for more than two years; and only a handful for two years only.

seemed to center on tweaking test scores in now familiar ways.³ Educators' real concerns, of course, went well beyond that unfortunate game, and that's where much of the story recounted in this paper lies.

Methods

Our research team selected six rural schools serving low-income students. The schools had been honored by the SDE for their high achievement in mathematics during the 2003-04 school year. The schools included one 9-12 high school, two 7-12 high schools, one 5-8 middle school, one K-8 elementary school, and one K-4 elementary school. Our interest was broad, but we were concerned to understand how mathematics was conceived and taught in these places; the interview protocol included some questions to this end. One school studied exhibited a mathematics story related to the theme of this paper.

Spending approximately five days in each of the six schools, team members conducted semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews included one-on-one conversations with adult informants (administrators, teachers, parents, and community members) and focus-group discussions with students. Approximately 24 interviews (lasting from 30–90 minutes) were conducted at each site. All interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were prepared for analysis with Atlas-Ti software.

Initial analysis made use of four *a priori* codes relating to community: “community engaged,” “community disengaged,” “community elitist,” and “community

³ For instance, coaching students near but slightly below the “passing” threshold; or devoting a month of instruction school-wide to test preparation; or adopting test formats into instructional routines all year; or paying educators a bonus for high test scores. We saw all these tactics in use. It was discouraging to observe.

egalitarian.” Quotes classified using these codes were recoded in a more fine-grained way using an inductive, constant-comparative method. The recoding process yielded a total of 54 codes, 21 of which related explicitly to social class. Quotes relating to these codes were then reviewed in an effort to identify salient themes explaining the character of social class relations in the six schools.

Findings

Our four salient themes are: (1) *in loco parentis*, (2) teaching middle-class behavior, (3) extolling the value of a college degree, and (4) “othering” the poor. Each theme in each school exhibits more complexity than can be captured adequately in this paper, but the detail is of less concern to us than the overall story of social class here, which we characterize as “saving the poor.” Each theme contributes to the overall story, but we report on the themes separately as if they were not really intertwined in nuancing the overall story.

The findings appear here in four sections. A brief introduction gives very general background on the six schools. Next follows a discussion of findings that we think characterize the approach of four of the schools. The following two sections each considers separately the two other schools, whose approaches differ from that of the four, as well as from each other.

The Six Schools: Introduction

This is a story of how people framed the issue of “social class” in six rural schools enrolling student populations characterized by the State Education Agency (SEA) as

substantially “economically disadvantaged.” All six schools had been selected and publicly honored in the 2003-2004 academic year as doing an admirable job with poor children. The criteria were ostensibly objective: being in the top two categories of the accountability system (i.e., “substantially improved” and “wonderful”), meeting the requirements then prevailing for “adequate yearly progress” under the provisions of the federal “No Child” Act, and enrolling a substantial proportion of students from impoverished families.

We found substantial differences, arrayed along a familiar continuum, and with a familiar distribution (a bell-shaped curve, though stochastic random distribution may be a coincidence, of course). Four schools seemed to us, on analysis, to have engaged a project of “saving the poor.” This project represented, we found, genuine engagement, with respect and community purpose in mind. Two schools were outliers, one a negative outlier and one a positive outlier.

The six schools are situated in four districts. Lumberville High School [LHS] is the only high school in a district of the same name (all names are fictitious); Willemsburg Elementary School [WES] is one of three elementary schools in its small district; and Basque High School [BHS] is one of four small high schools in a county-wide district (consolidated county districts are rare in this state with many hundreds of school districts and fewer than 100 counties). The remaining three schools comprise all the schools in Utopia-Concord district. The Utopia-Concord (UC) schools are housed in a single building complex, like those in Lumberville.⁴

⁴ This pattern (single-building complex in small districts) is the form that consolidation has assumed in this state, where localities have resisted district consolidation more successfully than in some states. The UC schools serve all of Concord Township, with the complex located in the township’s central town, Utopia. Young children therefore take bus rides that are as long as those taken by high school students.

Each of the six schools differs from the others in many additional ways, but the main concern in this paper—or perhaps its theoretical framework—is the similar approach to the poor manifested, particularly in the remarks of those we interviewed, and most similarly in four of the schools: Basque High School (BHS) and all of the UC schools. The approach of the four schools in these two districts is quite different from the approaches taken in the two other schools in this study, Willemsburg and Lumberville, each of which is a kind of outlier to the central tendency seemingly represented by BHS and the UC schools. Willemsburg and Lumberville are discussed separately for this reason (see the subsequent sections for the relevant discussion). Table 1 provides descriptive data for all six schools. We begin with a report of findings for the four schools.

Four Schools Saving the Poor

The four rural schools that we have characterized as “saving the poor” are located in two districts. The three Utopia-Concord schools comprise all the schools in that district. The other school is one of four small high schools in another, geographically very large, rural district.

Table 1

Descriptive Data on the Six Schools

	UCHS	BHS	UCMS	UCES	LHS	WES
grade span ^a	9-12	7-12	K-4	5-8	7-12	K-8
enrollment ^a	394	561	367	452	420	200
% disadvantaged ^b	28%	40%	46%	45%	50%	40%
% teachers w/masters ^b	53%	82%	48%	62%	40%	25%
average teacher salary ^b	\$47,000	\$44,000	\$40,000	\$50,000	\$40,500	\$41,000
Mdn household income ^c	\$35,000	\$29,000	\$35,000	\$35,000	\$22,000	\$39,000
hshld inc. < \$30,000 ^c	36%	42%	36%	36%	60%	30%
hshld inc. \$30,000 to \$60,000 ^c	41%	38%	41%	41%	20%	45%

^aSource: State Education Agency accountability system.

^bSource: 2003-04 *Common Core of Data*, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

^cSource: Census 2000 *School District Demographics Project*, accessible through NCES.

These four schools enroll, roughly speaking, about 100 students per grade, making for small high schools (about $\frac{3}{4}$ a standard deviation below the average size for a 9-12 school in this state, and about the modal size) and about an average-size elementary school (the school is about half a standard deviation larger than the state mean for K-4 schools, and about twice the modal size for this configuration).⁵ As a group, the UCES teachers are the best paid of those in the 6 schools in this study—they are an old staff; the UCMS teachers, with the lowest aggregate salary, by contrast, are very young.⁶ Table 1

⁵ Calculated from 2003-2004 data from the Common Core of Data, retrieved March 2, 2006. Although a subjective impression, the elementary school *felt* larger than either the UC middle or high school.

⁶ The 2004-2005 statewide average annual salary for regular teachers was about \$48,000 (source: SEA). Compared to SEA-defined “similar districts,” UC paid about \$6,000 more and the BHS district paid about

also includes data on income distribution in three broad bands: district-aggregated household income less than \$30,000; household income from \$30,000 up to \$60,000; and (by implication) household income \$60,000 and above. These data are reported as well for the other two districts and will figure in our discussion section. Here it is sufficient to note that a similar income distribution characterizes these communities (see Duncan, 1999, for a similar consideration; see Figure 1, in the discussion section, for the graphic display of income distributions).

These four schools exhibit a similarly benign approach to engaging impoverished students and families. The phrase “saving the poor” characterizes this approach, which rises to the level of a professional ideology in the Utopia-Concord district. This ideology is notably connected to the community’s struggle to fashion a positive image, both as a self-reflection and as a projection to the outside world. Basque High School and the town of Basque are also struggling with their identity, centering in their case on seceding (“deconsolidating”) from the Big River Valley and County District to which they were consolidated in the early 1970s. We did *not* ask questions about this effort in our interviews, but the struggle was spontaneously cited by many interviewees.

In loco parentis. Although the need to act in the stead of parents is constructed somewhat differently across the levels of schooling, the overall view seems to be that the capabilities of impoverished parents to attend to their children’s needs are inherently limited by the struggle for mere survival. The following remarks, one from a parent and two from teachers were typical:

\$5,000 less. Willemsburg’s district’s salaries averaged about \$4,000 more than “similar districts” and the Lumberville district averaged about the same as for “similar districts.”

There's many families in the community here that face several obstacles: transportation, lack of support, lack of parent knowledge, lack of parenting skills, lack of resources. (UCES parent)

The hardest battle we have with the kids is what their parents put into them. Some of the kids are made to feel that they are worthless, some of the kids are trying to rear themselves (BHS teacher)

But the kids, you know, a lot of them come from broken homes and they don't have structure. It seems like when I run into a problem most of the time I find out that this is how the kid has learned to deal with this problem. (UCMS teacher)

As the last two remarks indicate, parental incapacity is seen to sponsor incapacity for schooling among children of the poor. What is notable, however, about this construction of incapacity is the recognition, in interviews, of numerous exceptions to what seems to interviewees the general tendency. One UCMS teacher spoke warmly of the capabilities of a family with six children living in a "trailer" (a trailer park is located in downtown Utopia and is the residence of a substantial number of impoverished families). Further, and more poignantly, a number of interviewees reported coming themselves from impoverished backgrounds, and two of these spoke to us of their alcoholic fathers.

The UCHS principal identified himself as coming from an impoverished family, but noted critically that such a background did not necessarily make teachers more empathetic. It could give them, he claimed, great empathy for resilient impoverished students and little to none for those succumbing to the threats that beset them.

The engagement with poverty in these schools is complex. Stereotypes are evident, and so is resistance to them. This appreciation of complexity characterized these schools' engagement with their poor in ways that suggested they took a large measure of responsibility for local poverty. A parent observed, for instance:

A lot of the teachers kind of play counselor, someone for the kids to talk to. Not necessarily give advice to the kids, but the teachers listen and they genuinely care.

Which a lot of the kids don't have that at home. (BHS parent)

There are perhaps a score or more of remarks in the transcripts for these schools that exhibit this acceptance of local civic responsibility in varied ways. Many are poignant, and some exhibit faculty experiencing epiphanies that might occur less often elsewhere.

Noted one UCES interviewee:

I've made lots of home visits over the years because I feel like, if I didn't know what was happening at home I couldn't really be effective with the kid. And once you do know, and see things, you think, "Ok, I understand now why he's sleeping." (UCES teacher)

At the high school level concern for students' immediate futures as legal adults is substantial. Teachers and administrators in these communities do not want to see students accept impoverishment as a natural fate. (In Lumberville, by contrast, such a fate is accepted as a foregone conclusion.) This professional hope sometimes manifests itself as desire for distance between impoverished parents and their children—but often the interviewees in these schools exhibited, once more, an appreciation of complexity, mingled sometimes with probable personal conflict over the issue. One confessed,

That's my biggest struggle, the economics and the uneducated parents—not that they're bad people, but they don't have an idea of what it's all about and why.

And some of them are happy living the way they are, and that's fine. But I think a lot of them have the access [*sic* in the transcript] to know what life could be like.

(UCHS teacher)

Teaching middle-class behavior. This theme is arguably the richest and most nuanced of the four in these schools. Educators and community members in these rural places consistently expressed the desire—the intention backed by practice—that students behave well. They were well behaved, as our classroom observations and navigation of hallways and offices attested. The social norms in all these schools centered on cordiality, respect, and deference to adults. Indeed, as rogue academics, we sometimes felt the emphasis on law and order to be oppressive in these schools (and, indeed, the school climate in these four schools differed substantially from that observed in the more communal Willemsburg school). The educators and community members with whom we spoke—to a person—appreciated the schools' emphasis on this sort of discipline. They were proud of it, as one high school teacher noted:

They come in, they do what they're supposed to do, and they're quiet and respectful when we take them places, out on field trips. I'm always impressed with the way our students behave as compared to what I see other schools' kids doing. (UCHS teacher)

A parent told us of her relevant expectations:

I think a lot of our community holds the schools accountable for the kids and how the kids behave and what the kids are taught. I as a parent expect my kids to learn

what they need to learn in order to graduate and make it in the real world once they get out of here. (BHS parent)

Traditional “comportment” is important to these communities, and its standards apply to all students, not just to children from the middle class. Parents who do not train these behaviors at home are regarded as letting the community down. This attitude clearly expresses itself among educators as a willingness to help, according to the testimony of parents; for instance:

It seems like the ones, the kids who don’t have parents who care, there is another adult who steps up and takes the kid under their wing and tries to take care of them. I think the community overall is a very caring and loving community and tries to help out when they see a need. (BHS parent)

Underneath concern for comportment lies a more powerful concern—for the future character of the community. For these two rural places, the future identity of the community is not to be left to chance, but is understood as an active work in the present, with the school widely viewed as a center of action. In Utopia, the desired future differs from the present and is connected to a remembrance of things past:

It seems...years ago it was so wonderful. I mean, I remember as a child we had a drugstore with a, you know, the ice-cream parlor thing, and we had several businesses on Main Street—as a child. And then I’m not sure what happened.... But like I’ve said, the last couple of years it seems like it’s getting better. (UCMS parent)

The vocational-agricultural teacher struck us as the interviewee with perhaps the strongest grasp of the town and township’s *rural* dilemma. This teacher echoed a theme

common in rural education literature—of departure and return, or of a need for bi-cultural experience in rural communities:

One of my main points is I try to get kids out of town... and I push that for a couple of reasons. Number one is it gets them away to see different things, but also I do that because they get out and see things that could be better. To experience that and to realize maybe it's not so bad in their own community. If they experience it now, then later on in life they won't have that "Well, I wish I would have done that," and I push them to come back to the community because they can be leaders and that's a problem here just like a lot of rural communities, is that all the young people leave for better things—they think [so] at that time.

(UCHS teacher)

One parent told us, Utopia "needs more businesses brought in; it's ugly; I mean, you saw it coming in, right?" In fact our own fieldnotes observed what a pleasant and healthy little burg Utopia seemed, with a pharmacy, a bank, a post office, a veterinarian, and a small supermarket—and a school in the center of town (a school had occupied that property since the early decades of the 19th century). It seemed to us much healthier than many rural towns we have personally known. In fact, many of those with whom we spoke, like a parent previously quoted, see substantial improvements.

The situation confronting Basque High School and the town of Basque was different. The pressing concern was more direct and more short-term: withdrawal of the school from Big Valley and County School District and creation of an autonomous Basque School District. Though deconsolidation was not an interest of the study formally conceived, the prospect of deconsolidation was in the minds of all interviewees, and

many (9 of 25 adults interviewed) spoke of it unbidden. Informants generally agreed with the parent who said, "I think we would be much better if we were out." Asked what would improve the school, one parent offered this opinion:

If we got our own school district then they [we] could kind of monitor your [our] teachers yourself [ourselves]. And like where the central office worries about the whole district, if you [we] had your [our] own school [district] you would just be focused on your [our] elementary and your [our] high school only. (BHS parent)

Another BHS parent described the town of Basque as proud of its identity, "Basque has always been a school that the parents took a lot of interest in. Pride in community. I think that is what it is. Close knit community, sometimes even clannish." The town and many school patrons believed they received insufficient care and attention from the distant Big Valley and County District office.

Like Utopia-Concord, they looked to a different future in which the school served as a central point of attention. According to the BHS principal, speaking about what made Basque a decent place to live and work,

I think the pride. If you go down the streets at Basque, you will see new trees up, brand new trees now. You'll see new buildings. You will see the old buildings being painted. When kids see that pride, then they will have a little bit more pride [in themselves] and it kind of goes back and forth. With this new [school] building being built, and right on the edge of town, you can look and see the growth all the way around it and [see] some of the new. I think that is the most important thing, is the pride. (BHS principal)

Many Basque informants spoke of helping students realize that they weren't just "Big Valley County hicks," but were the equal of students anywhere. According to one teacher, for instance:

If our school is looked at as [being] dumb Big Valley and County hicks in this community, then are kids are going to act like that, and think that's all they are. But they are more and it is helpful that I have lived all over the place because I can tell them that I have been in places where people make lots of money where parents are doctors and lawyers and there is nobody with better minds than you guys right here. (BHS teacher)

Note the hint of differential treatment from the Big Valley and County center—from the county seat, in fact. Basque is located about 30 miles north of the county seat and may well suffer the invidious reputation (in Big Valley center) of being a "hick community." Its teachers and residents don't appreciate the treatment and believe they can do better for themselves.⁷

Extolling the virtue of a college degree. One of the most frequently cited incapacities of parents was an alleged failure to support—or to appreciate the value of—education. Occasionally this remark referred to a perceived lack of support for the *school* from a few (undescribed) parents. In both communities, however, the general sense of community and parental support for the schools was that it was strong. More often, the

⁷ Post study footnote: a state court denied the deconsolidation ("on a technicality" according to the local press) and Basque activists are currently still pursuing the issue. Recently, also, the state legislature arrogated to itself the right to approve the creation of any new school districts (also according to Big Valley County local press reports). In countywide districts, in our long experience of one state entirely organized that way, a county-seat mentality dominates local construction of outlying communities as backward. This observation is fairly common in rural education and sociology (see, e.g., DeYoung, 1995; Duncan, 1999; Gaventa, 1982).

alleged failure to support education concerned parental inexperience of the putative benefits of higher levels of schooling. The UCHS principal observed,

I think a lot of students in the district have not had the model set for them that education is something that can benefit them, that it's something that's important, that it's something they should look at. Sometimes, even, that they should look at anything more than just as an inconvenience on their lives or something. (UCHS principal)

Considering the disreputable ways impoverished families were typically treated in the 20th century by schools—with their middle-class allegiances—the legacy of skepticism among impoverished families has a solid justification in the history and culture of schooling.

Educators in these districts, by contrast, needed no convincing as to the value of “an education”; many believed they had avoided unhappy lives by becoming teachers and thereby escaping poverty. A BHS teacher noted,

Many of the students' parents—most of them—didn't go to college at all. Which occasionally, it is a concern. Not really, directly from the parents, but the student will say, “My mom or dad didn't go to college, so why should I focus on this or that?” That does sometimes pose a difficulty to teaching, especially the [family] history.... We have been working on getting more and more students to get extra credit training outside the high school. (BHS teacher)

Instilling middle-class aspirations for college is a long-term project for educators in these schools. The principal at UCHS was insistent that students take high school courses expected by colleges. As he told us, he did not want students to be able to say,

“Well, I never took that, I can’t go to college.” UCHS arranged its mathematics curriculum, for instance, so that all students could experience elementary algebra at any time during their high school years. These educators seemed well aware of the allegations that “ninth-grade” algebra serves to mark those to be considered fit material for college (e.g., Moses & Cobb, 2001).

Community health, on the view in play at these schools, apparently entails the capacity of the middle class to recruit more members into its ranks, and part of this recruitment effort is internal recruitment via the local schools. This is what these schools seem to be doing. It is in a sense their locally given mission. Teachers, moreover, are themselves locals. They are not interlopers imposing an alien vision; they live in these places themselves, and they too grew up there.⁸ One UC elementary teacher seemed appropriately (on this reading) to confound her own issues of community pride with those of students:

A lot of times the kids are like, “We’re just from Utopia,” but we’re trying to get them out of that. We’re trying to get them out of that mindset. Hey, [the teacher is now speaking of herself] I’m from here. I’m proud of my community and I’m proud of my school, you know, and I didn’t do too bad, I’ve got a four-year degree plus a Master’s degree. (UCES teacher)

The work undertaken by teachers is, or also represents, work undertaken on themselves. Part of this work, as in this teacher’s remarks, lies in the past. But the future influence of current students also harbors the potential to influence these teachers personally, as local people with a stake in the local community.

⁸ Many teachers in the UC district were not native to the township, but nearly all grew up in similar places within the radius of an hour’s drive or so, as they told us. In Basque, most of the teachers had been raised locally.

Going to college, however, means going away, at least temporarily, but too often in rural America the absence becomes permanent (see Heuer, 2004, for the recent trends). This is a touchy issue in many rural communities, because so many rural students come to realize that entering the middle class *big time* entails a metropolitan existence. Salaries are better, and the desiderata of the upper reaches of the middle class come to seem better as well. Almost echoing the words of Wendell Berry⁹, a UCHS teacher mused,

We all think that to be successful we need to move to the city and make a lot of money. And there's opportunities here, but we have to make those opportunities also. (UCHS vo-ag teacher)

“Othering” the children of the poor. In only one of the six schools (Lumberville) did we hear truly *hateful* language describe the poor, and in only one other did we record no speech disparaging the poor (Willemsburg). In that school, in fact, the poor were simply not characterized in any way. Therefore, in five of these six schools, we did hear the poor described in disparaging ways. Our formal description of the code most closely related to this theme (“demonizing the poor”) follows:

Evidence from community or school (faculty or administration) of blaming the poor for challenges in community or school and/or of stereotyping that leads to assumptions therein.

To identify the poor is to ascribe qualities to them, and the qualities thus ascribed are predictably not flattering ones. In these four communities, however, the seeming intent of the characterization concerned plans to *reform* or *redeem* the children of the poor, not to

⁹ “The general aim was to go where the money was to be made; the resources of nativeness and of established community were abandoned without a thought.” (*The Hidden Wound*, p. 65)

exclude, deny, disrespect, or dismiss them. (In Lumberville, we did hear of a mass dismissal of impoverished students.)

In both districts, teachers told us they were using materials developed by Ruby Payne to help them “understand” poverty. The following excerpts demonstrate Payne’s influence on teachers’ conceptions of poverty:

Kids in poverty don’t plan for anything. It’s right here, right now. Satisfy what we need to get down right here. I always have a calendar up so they can see.

We’re here this month. In three months we need to be here; because they’re not equipped with those kinds of skills (UCMS teacher)

We meet every Monday and Wednesday and it is basically on the teachings of Ruby Payne and it has been very insightful. Sometimes it is kind of challenging because there are the rules of poverty. We are learning about the rules of poverty. (BHS teacher)

The Payne method apparently strikes educators in these places as practical. For the authors’ interpretation of its limits, see the discussion section.

What sorts of vices did these interviewees attribute to the poor? The list includes: ignorance, lack of ambition, freeloading, indolence, domestic violence, substance abuse, dirtiness, sexual promiscuity, and neglect. Again, we heard no such attributions from anyone interviewed in Willemsburg, and such attributes can as easily be made to fit middle-class people as poor people (Ehrenreich, 2001).

These troubling attributes were the very same we heard repeated in Lumberville. The telling difference, however, between the educators in the two “saving-the-poor communities” and Lumberville was an abundance of qualifying statements, second

thoughts, and occasional on-the-fly revision of statements offered: in the end, a generous (or perhaps charitable) outlook strongly moderated the effect of the disparaging attributions. For instance, we personally saw no instances of children mistreating or mocking one another in these schools. One teacher, talking about her school's insistence that students respect one another, claimed,

They don't make fun of each other if somebody comes in dirty or this and that.

They just...they're just fortunate that they have what they have. We start our year off that way. We're a classroom, we're a family, and we're not going to make fun of each other, we're going to help each other all year. (UCES teacher)

One parent, who seemed particularly sensitive to the circumstances of working-class families, offered the following counsel for consideration in future school improvement efforts:

Give some different options where maybe some of the more—the lower economic background—give them some more choices to where they won't feel overwhelmed or feel like they're not good enough to come in and help. (UCES parent)

Overall, in our reading of the transcripts, these four schools were, in Alan DeYoung's phrase (DeYoung, 1991), "struggling with their histories" and basing their struggle in a common perspective that led them to engage the children of the poor for the benefit of their communities' futures.

Lumberville High School

Lumberville High School enrolls about 420 students in its six grade levels. Enrollment is 98% white and about 50% of students are considered economically disadvantaged by the SEA. The median household income in the district is about \$22,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006)—by far the lowest across all four districts. Average teacher salary is about \$40,500; 40% of the faculty hold at least a masters' degrees (SEA data). About 60% of households in the Lumberville district have annual incomes less than \$30,000, and a little more than 20% have incomes from \$30,000-\$60,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Lumberville clearly encompassed the proportionally largest impoverished population among the schools studied.

Among all the schools we studied, as well, Lumberville informants were most certain of the deficiencies of the poor and least appreciative of their strengths. The poor were represented by interviewees as needing help but likely to be beyond its reach. Only a few interviewees made no such remarks; some made a great number of such remarks.

In loco parentis. A large majority of Lumberville High School teachers spoke generally in ways that suggested they doubted that most parents had the best interests of their children in view; more specifically, they voiced the view that impoverished parents were unconcerned with their children's education and that "generational poverty" (a phrase used by several interviewees) would persist. Very few passages expressed empathy for the poor and for the challenges of parenting in impoverished circumstances. None expressed respect.

Remarkably one teacher even claimed that “parents sit at home and making more than we make here as teachers, and do nothing other than simply receiving their checks in the mail.” This remark might pass as legitimate personal opinion among co-workers on a blue-collar job-site, but it would be widely regarded as an inappropriate perspective for a high school teacher. The view is also *dead wrong* (as U.S. Census data for Lumberville so clearly demonstrate).

As might be expected, however, Lumberville teachers are reluctant to offer themselves as providing substitute or supplemental parenting. We heard almost none of what we heard so commonly elsewhere: the perspective that teachers and school (and community) ought *concertedly* to offer opportunities for which parents, due to unfortunate circumstances, lack capacity. The role of *in loco parentis* did not, then, appear to be an active one among the Lumberville High School faculty, so far as could be judged from transcript data.

Teaching middle-class behavior. In Lumberville, there was little evidence that interviewees believed that middle-class values could be successfully taught to very many students outside the middle-class itself. Many, perhaps most, students were apparently not considered likely candidates for middle-class learning. According to one teacher, echoing many such remarks, “Their parents just stay in welfare and they are going to be—nine times out of ten, which is sad, but [true]—the same thing is going to happen to them.”

On the logic of this view, if anyone were to “teach middle-class values” to the poor, it would have to be the poor themselves. Consider the following remarks:

We have a number of parents who are non-readers. Some cannot write. I have several [students] in each class—or in some cases, great-grandparents, they’re my

age, are raising their children—and we have a number of pregnant mothers right now, and the parents are supporting the [pregnant] child but [also] helping with the birth. They're not just saying, "Okay, we're going to dump them on the side of road somewhere." But they also have to encourage them not to get in that state.

Elsewhere, this remark might be interpreted as educators' ownership of a problem. In the Lumberville context, we interpret this remark as evidence of the way this faculty deflects responsibility for middle-class norms to the poor themselves. It's not simply an oxymoron, it appears, in this context, a convenient way to construct, blame, and condemn a victim. One teacher, working under the Lumberville script, aptly mused, "We feel like we're fighting a losing battle where we are dealing with parents and generational welfare."

Extolling the virtue of a college degree. Given the foregoing portrait of class relations in Lumberville, the virtue of a college degree is predictably understood to be the special, though not totally exclusive, province of "important families" [a phrase used by one interviewee, see below]. One teacher articulated what seemed a prevalent view:

For a lot of people education is not that important. You know we have, in some cases fourth generation welfare. They are not ambitious and these students have grown up seeing that people do not work—you know: you do not have to go out and get a job, necessarily, to get by, so they do not have any real ambition in life to try to go to college and whatever.

The remarks of one parent suggested an elitism sufficiently entrenched in Lumberville that many students are not be viewed *as college material* (a sobriquet frequently used two generations ago). According this interviewee,

To improve the school, I think they need to pay more attention to students in the middle, not just the kids from important families. They [i.e., students in the middle plus students from important families] all need pushed toward college.

College attendance was valued in Lumberville, as it is everywhere, but it seemed a fate *intended* for children from the comparatively advantaged segment of the community. It was a fate not widely “extolled,” but instead “reserved.”

“Othering” the children of the poor. Readers should, at this point in the narrative, have little difficulty with the conclusion that the children of the poor are widely regarded as “other” by Lumberville faculty and by important community members. This generalization is not a universal, of course (as the remarks of a reputationally excellent teacher, who praised parents as widely caring, show). To drive home this point, we offer a few more troublesome passages from the transcripts:

[If I ask,] “Well why you don’t get your homework done?” [I hear,] “I went home and no one was there to take care of my brothers.” Mom and dad are around partying or whatever. (a teacher)

There’s a lot of poverty and that affects what they can teach in the school. Lots of the kids just don’t have the background others have. (a parent)

Obviously, we are poverty stricken and most of the time the cycle is going to continue. (a teacher)

The ideological purpose of such “othering,” of course, is to erect barriers between the work of the school and the work of community building. Building community is not in the school’s mission in Lumberville. The superintendent exhibited this spirit in dealing with “difficult” new students:

We've got such an influx of people coming from City A and City B, and the urban type kids that will have gangs. And this past fall, we really worked hard, and I expelled eight outside kids that were starting a gang.

It would seem that a different sort of hard work were required, but if this approach represents the organizational culture of the district, the pay-off might be predictable: "The only time, generally speaking, the only parents that show up for anything is someone that wants to complain about something. They just won't come," as the superintendent reported.

Willemsburg Elementary School

Willemsburg Elementary School enrolls about 200 students in its nine grade levels (i.e., K-8). In contrast to the K-4 Utopia-Concord Elementary School, this school enrolls about half as many students per grade, and is one standard deviation below the state mean for K-8 school enrollment (about the modal size for K-8 schools in this state).

Local district Omega operates four elementary schools (enrolling from about 140 to about 430 students each), plus a middle school and a high school. District enrollment is about 1,700. Among households in the district, about 30% have annual incomes less than \$30,000 and about 45% have incomes from \$30,000 up to \$60,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Approximately 40% of students are considered economically disadvantaged by the SEA. Although all students at Willemsburg Elementary are white, the school is arguably the most culturally diverse of all schools in the study because approximately 40% of its students¹⁰ are Amish.

¹⁰ As reported by the principal. The Amish have the constitutional right, affirmed by the United States Supreme Court, to educate their children outside the public system. They are exempt as well from state

The median household income in the Local District Omega is approximately \$39,000. Average teacher salary is about \$41,000 and about 25% of the faculty hold at least a master's degrees (see Table 1 for data on all schools).

Willemsburg was unique in our interview transcripts for exhibiting no directly—and very few indirectly—disparaging remarks about the poor. Like Lumberville, the Willemsburg transcripts present substantial variances on the themes identified in this study. One parent captured the communitarian spirit that seemed to characterize this school, in league with its community:

There's not a difference between the rich and the poor¹¹. I mean, you can have a club and you've got poor, you've got all kinds of incomes in there and it's not—it doesn't make a difference. You've got, especially with the Amish, you need help with something, they're right there to help. And they're a big factor in this community. I mean, it's, and it's not just the Amish. I mean, anybody in the community would do almost anything for you. (parent)

In loco parentis. Instead of taking the place of parents, the institution of Willemsburg schooling seems to include not merely parents as active participants, but the Willemsburg community as a whole. The superintendent claimed, for instance, “We want

laws that mandate school attendance beyond the 8th grade, and most parents terminate their children's formal schooling at the end of the 8th grade. Given a contentious legal and a divergent cultural history, the presence of such numbers of Amish children at Willemsburg Elementary is *remarkable*. A new principal altered the school culture and seems to have effectively invited Amish patrons to entrust their children to the school. This principal has most recently established a special 7th and 8th grade for children of Amish patrons. The curriculum in these classes focuses on activities (“place-based” and “authentic”) relevant to Amish intentions for their children. We observed that all students in the 7th and 8th grade were Amish males. (English children attend the district's consolidated middle school: as yet no English parents have asked that their children attend the Willemsburg 7th and 8th grades.) It is of interest that this rural school, with grades 7 and 8 previously removed to the district's consolidated middle school has, with the implementation of an “Amish” program, restored the purloined grades to this community.

¹¹ This passage is notable for being the *only* one in the entire Willemsburg transcripts in which the word *poor* appears. The word *poverty* does not appear at all.

to create an atmosphere or a climate where parents and even beyond parents, community members in general, feel welcome at our schools.” The superintendent went further than this in characterizing the culture of Willemsburg Elementary School.

Susan [the Willemsburg principal] uses the phrase “learning community,” and I think we really have that here—a learning community, where it’s not just about teachers and it’s not just about the school personnel, but it’s really about the community at large. (superintendent)

On this view the Willemsburg school centers itself on community. This is an unusual testament from any American educator in the 21st century, and especially from a superintendent because, as Paul Theobald (1997) asserts, the ideology, rhetoric, and practice of American schooling centers itself on benefits accumulating to individuals. Instead of *taking the place* of parents, the Willemsburg school would seem to *take the part* of community. Instead of supplanting an allegedly troubled role (parent), the school appears to augment an acknowledged legitimate role (i.e., sustaining community).

Teaching middle-class behavior. Because the school is not setting out to rescue the poor, teaching middle class behavior—accumulation, “high” aspirations, planning, orderliness—is not an explicit agenda. There is no reference in the transcript material to a middle class, for instance. Nonetheless, the middle-income (\$30-60,000) bracket here, as in the Utopia-Concord schools, contained the plurality of households. It may be that “middle-class values” simply prevailed as the informing ethos at Willemsburg. Given the influence of the Amish culture, however, there is reason to doubt this possibility.

Another interpretation is possible, however, based on a communitarian reading of both transcript data and classroom observation. First, we observed few instances of

discipline being imposed, and neither parents nor teachers spoke of it in interviews (in sharp contrast to the other schools). Second, classrooms at Willemsburg notably used more cooperative learning tactics than other schools in the study. Cooperation was such a theme, in fact, that the principal led the entire school in reciting the related school mission over the intercom: “*United Effort, United Responsibility, United Success.*” If, as Theobald has it, schooling along conventional (arguably middle-class) American lines centers on individualism, then something else—more communitarian and less individual, more cooperative and less competitive—is going on at this school, and seems deeply entrenched there. (The new principal seems to have tapped into an ethos previously available to the school, but unused.)

Extolling the virtue of a college degree. With 40% of its students coming from homes of Amish patrons, readers will not be surprised to hear that Willemsburg Elementary does not “extol” college-going. In part, silence on this point¹² may be a function of school level; we did, however, hear mention of the importance of college attendance among elementary teachers elsewhere. The school and the district are nonetheless aware that most Amish children will not choose to attend college—a decision they appear to respect and which they may quite likely understand. Such an appreciation would give Willemsburg educators a different outlook on college attendance from that held by educators elsewhere.

Academic engagement, however, is much in evidence at Willemsburg. In our research protocols, the place of and conduct of mathematics education was an issue specifically addressed in interviews. We wanted to know what educators were doing with mathematics and why. Willemsburg Elementary was the only school in the study to have

¹² The only use of the word *college* is in the recollection of teachers’ own undergraduate experiences.

adopted a “reform” curriculum. The impetus for the adoption reportedly came from teachers, who wanted a more “authentic” or “hands-on” format. The faculty investigated alternatives and the school recently adopted *Everyday Math* (University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, 2006). Parents reportedly had difficulty accepting the program, but teachers worked (“united effort, united responsibility”) to help them understand. There are many comments to this effect in the transcript data, but one parent’s remarks seem summative:

The new math program? Ah, there’s been a lot of talk about it. I don’t know. I suppose it would be the community, it would just be me talking to other parents and all of us, especially in the beginning of the year, you know, freaking out, you know, about what they were doing....So, there was a lot of concern, but as the year’s progressed and I’ve seen what they’ve been introduced to and actually understand, you know, fractions. It’s amazing what, and even my first grader, and then I’ve talked quite a bit to the teachers about, you know, if I have a concern, you know, where it’s going, so, you know, that helps....I think it’s so important to know what’s going on and they always, you know, are very responsive to that, so, in our individual case, that really helps our experience in school. (parent)

Teachers appear to be succeeding in “selling” the program to a skeptical (and arguably “conservative”) community. It may be that taking the part of the community, being united and responsible about the adoption decision, and making themselves open to concerns is the basis for this apparent success. Mathematics reform adoptions often founder, even in affluent districts, for lack of parental understanding (e.g., Lubienski, 2002).

“Othering” the children of the poor. At Willemsburg, the children of the “others” are Amish. The Amish are clearly different from the “English” (i.e., those who speak just English and not the Amish dialect of German). The Amish live among the English as a linguistically and culturally distinct rural minority group. The distinction between Amish and English is dramatically reinforced by the divergent ways the two groups engage the world. Amish are as unmistakable as Hasidic Jews. The Amish are easy, and perhaps frequent, targets of “othering.”

There was a time at Willemsburg, not long past, when the Amish were seemingly “othered,” or at least not invited to benefit from the local public school (which their taxes support). An “English” parent¹³ told the story from her standpoint as someone who elected to rejoin the community after a time away. We quote at some length because of this interviewee’s sense of the cultural dynamics involved, and of the community’s responsibility to care for this “other”:

Previous principals—or a particular principal, really—damaged the relationship between the school and the community and that was before ... we moved back here. So I know that coming in, I had discussions with her [the new principal]... and... I think there’s a real sense of our community, and involving the community....Also, you know, the Amish-versus-the-English, you know, where they have their own schools ... you know, so those parents are choosing to send their kids here, which is probably a little bit of a descent within their church and stuff. So, they’re making the commitment to come here and the Amish community is very supportive. So, it’s a good feeling and when I drive down into our little town and into our school, I mean, everybody waves and it’s very much

¹³ We were able to interview some Amish parents, though none is quoted in this paper.

what we wanted and why we moved back here. (parent)

A school board member found a benefit to the school from welcoming and caring for the children of Amish patrons:

I think that because so many of our students are Amish, there's somewhat of an [academic] urgency, because they often don't go to school, or very many don't, ... past the eighth grade. There's a seriousness about getting what we can in the years that we have. And I think that that seriousness, or that commitment, follows through into the English community. (non-parent community member)

Of the board, this member observed, "We're everyday people...people from the community. We interact ... very well with the community and that's the overall function. We're common folks."

Discussion

Findings from this study are consistent with contentions evident in the research literature, although the way the themes are manifest differs sharply, even in so small a number of cases as these six.¹⁴ The norm in these schools is "saving the poor" in comparatively benign fashion. That is, in our view, these schools are serving impoverished children well and responsibly—even if the approach that stirs our admiration is that of Willemsburg. Only Lumberville seemed to be doing badly by its poor—and, we'd argue, thereby failing to address or even recognize its potential. The disposition of cases curiously, perhaps coincidentally, resembles a bell-shaped curve, with one negative and one positive outlier.

¹⁴Our data set includes two other schools, findings from which will be incorporated into subsequent revisions of this paper. These additional cases exhibit discourse similar to that of Utopia-Concord, in one case, and somewhat similar to Lumberville in the other case.

Unlike the hostility exhibited by teachers in Anyon's studies (1980, 1995), the speech and behavior of teachers in five of these six schools tended to be far more sympathetic. (Like Anyon, we spent many hours observing in classrooms, although the analytic focus in this study is on interview transcripts.) In all schools, we found teachers who did not disparage the poor and in all but one school we found some who did. Only in Lumberville did there seem to be many teachers and community members willing to abandon the poor to a meager fate.

Causal Theories

The findings of every descriptive study, and this one too, raise issues of causality—why are these things happening this way in these places? A number of theories suggest themselves related to educational leadership, community culture, local economic structure, and local and regional history.

Educational leadership. We have written elsewhere (Howley, Woodrum, Burgess, & Rhodes, 2006) about the attendant leadership issues, and readers are referred to that paper. The thesis there, however, turns on the degree of congruence (resonance or dissonance) between leadership practices and community culture. That paper concludes rural school leadership practices are often congruent with community values, but that in communities where the demography is changing, or beginning to change leadership struggles may be likely (e.g., prospectively in Utopia-Concord and in Lumberville according to interview data about in-migrants in those two communities). Leadership theory is probably too narrow a frame of reference for the issue of social class as treated in the present paper.

Culture. The cultural lens that interests us, and which seems to hold promise for education studies, is that of Geert Hofstede (2001). Hofstede characterizes cultures along five dimensions: (1) power distance, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism and collectivism, (4) masculinity and femininity, and (5) long- versus short-term orientation. Hofstede's work exhibits interesting possibilities here for understanding many of the differences observed in this study. Clearly, one can argue for minimal power distance and, given the agrarian character of the community, strong risk avoidance and a long-term sense of stewardship (see, e.g., Theobald, 1997, on risk avoidance in agrarian communities). It remains a distinct likelihood that the rhetoric one hears from people reflects the varied commitments and values of the culture in which they are embedded. Hofstede would accept this proposition himself. Howley and colleagues (2006) use Hofstede, in fact, to characterize the differences among communities related to leadership behavior. Hofstede's cultural analysis is sufficiently robust to address issues of the construction of social class among varied communities (although the theory was developed to address national, not local, differences).

Community type. Another view of community that has possible explanatory power turns more loosely, but more specifically, on *rural* community type. Several typologies are available, but the one that offers hermeneutic possibilities (as opposed to empirical ones) is Tom Gjelten's. Gjelten (1982) suggested five basic types: (1) depressed rural, (2) stable, and (3) high-growth, (4) reborn, and (5) isolated. In a sense, all the communities in our study could be considered "depressed rural" since all are classified by the SEA as having high proportions of impoverished students. Perhaps, however, a better characterization is that none of them is "high-growth."

Actual familiarity with the communities in which the schools are located, moreover, suggests that the communities are *very* different within that broad commonality (not high-growth). Lumberville might be regarded as the “depressed” community among the four (see the next discussion for economic detail). Depression is perhaps a mark not just of economic decline, or bad material straits, but also of the decline of the concept of community—eroded devotion to a common good. By contrast, Utopia-Concord is, or is becoming, a “reborn” rural community, as many interviewees suggested in contrasting previous decline with more recent improvements. It may be more accurate to interpret Utopia-Concord as a declined community “in recovery” (in the sense of perpetual threat recognized by Alcoholics Anonymous); the recent plant closing is indeed a current threat to recovery. Utopia-Concord is, however, also sufficiently close to the city and its nearer suburbs that the first inklings of suburbanization have begun: large, expensive houses nearest the commuting arteries. That sort of development is nonetheless of concern to a number of informants troubled that Utopia-Concord will relinquish its rural character—a different sort of threat to recovery.

Willemsburg is perhaps an iconic stable rural community, with its agrarian base. Community—a working theory of the common good—seems solidly intact there, to the surprising extent (surprising, that is, in contemporary America) that poverty is not even identified as an issue. The community certainly includes families locally recognized as existing on low incomes, but such a circumstance does not appear to render them less worthy members of the community, at least in the eyes of those to whom we spoke (*everyone* to whom we spoke).

What about Basque? It is about 30 minutes further from the big city to which commuters in Utopia-Concord (60 minutes' distant) are connected: A few Basque residents may make the drive, but not many. Basque is arguably an "isolated" community, or perhaps it is a mixed type, stable-isolated. Rebirth, also, may be an issue lurking in the community's desire to operate its own school district.

Lumberville, too, might be read as a mixed type: rural depressed-isolated, as it too is located 90 minutes from a different big city, and 2 hours from the city to which Utopia-Concord orients some of its commuting. Depression, as a psychological as well as a political and economic condition, may also help to explain the evident community self-loathing apparent in Lumberville interviews. Community type is helpful, but the types combine—or confound—a variety of assessments in a synthetic whole. This is its utility and its shortcoming. The validity of the types is *prima facie*, rather than empirical.

Economic structure. The primary dimension in the Gjelten typology seems to be economic status. In fact, one can display the economic structure of these communities, in terms of income distribution, rather easily and also with considerable validity and reliability.

One example of such a display appears in Figure 1. The Figure reports income distribution relevant to these four communities (Willemsburg, Utopia-Concord, Basque, and Lumberville). The income reported is *district-level* income and embeds a certain amount of error as a representation of income within the attendance areas of three of the six schools in the study. Despite this limitation, the data appear to us to be remarkably interpretable. The interpretation is not so different from that given by Duncan (1999).

Figure 1

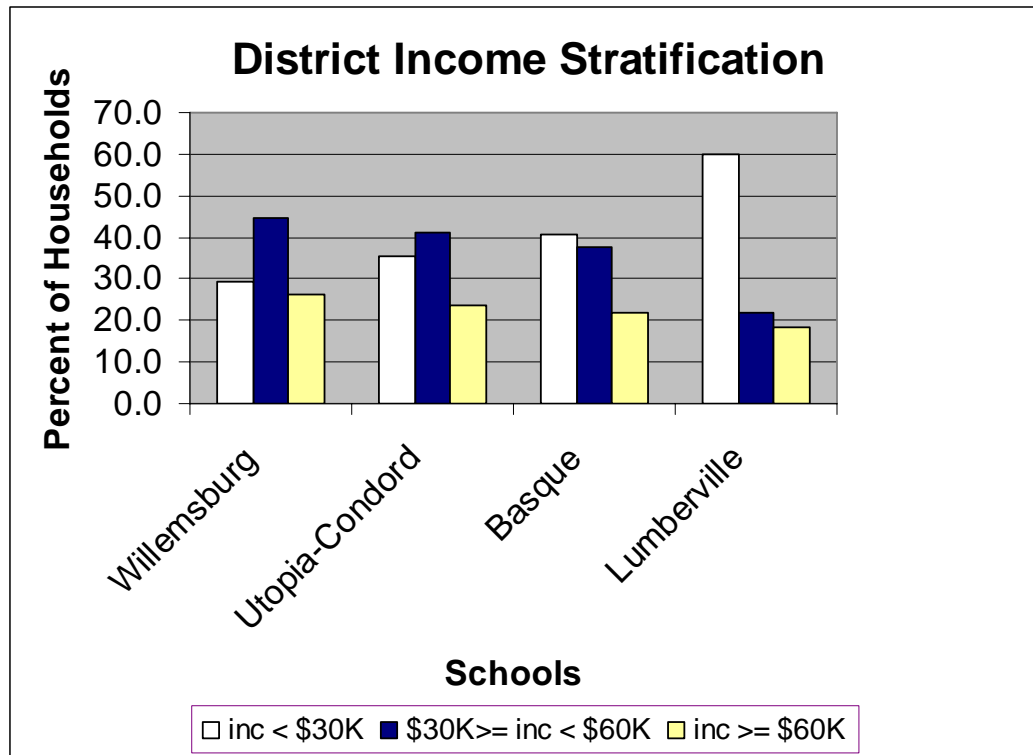
Income Stratification in the Schools' Districts

Figure 1 reports household income by the percentage of households in bands of \$30,000 increments: (1) below \$30,000, (2) from \$30,000 up to \$60,000, and (3) \$60,000 and above. Affluent communities frequently exhibit median incomes in the upper bracket, so these communities—or the school districts in which they are located—are clearly not affluent communities (median household income in the four districts is about \$30,000). With one exception—Lumberville—they are communities of modest means. Lumberville, with a median household income of \$22,000 (see Table 1), is quite arguably a depressed rural community according to the Gjelten typology.

As compared to income level, *income distribution* can be read as a measure of

economic equity, or, if one will, *economic justice*. The less equal the distribution, the greater the level of economic injustice. On this view, Lumberville is not merely depressed, but very arguably economically *unjust*. Perhaps the source of the lopsided income distribution there is not the result of local machinations—we don't know enough (unlike Duncan) to make that claim—but the injustice does arise from some arguable *cause*: for instance, globalization, macro-structures of capitalist markets, narrow economic base (timber), local exploitation (or more likely from some combination of such causes). The isolation of the community is not, however, to be blamed because not logically causal. The situation in the Basque community suggests this insight about isolation as a cause of poverty (also isolated, Basque does not disparage the poor so hatefully, and Basque has a more equal income distribution).

The income distribution data are not inconsistent with Cynthia Duncan's insights and the vague body of "middle-class theory." We remain skeptical, however, principally because the sociological tradition of class analysis as the *stratification of social status* confounds matters of income distribution with matters of convention—the behaviors, preferences, and peculiar moral commitments of those in a middle-income stratum. The analysis tends, in the end, to overlook macro-economic issues, the nature and significance of conflict between classes, and what Robert Heilbroner (1985) refers to as the "nature and logic of capitalism." In our view, the American "middle-class" is not a class at all, but a peculiar historical artifact. The nature and logic of capitalism strikes us as far more relevant an analytic frame.

History. The so-called middle class, in fact, has occupied, or "colonized," the institution of schooling as neither the lower class nor the upper class ("classes" so called,

but actually status groups) can do. Schools are middle-class institutions by virtue of several circumstances: moderate adequacy of teacher salaries, the status associated with knowledge work generally (teachers, one must note, were well-regarded in these communities); the construction of “school knowledge” as a conventional rather than a critical sensibility (lack of talk in these communities of the value of liberal learning); and, of course, the varied ways that schools work to reproduce a class society (an arguably *classist society*). On this view, it is hardly surprising that successful schools should convey middle-class behavior, though in somewhat different ways, from school to school.

History evolves continuously. The middle class (so-called) occupies tenuous ground within the national income distribution. Some analysts worry that the “middle-class” is shrinking; indeed, the number of officially designated “poor” is rising as a proportion of the population, just as is the proportion of those in the upper-income brackets.

The same political cabal whose policies create that shrinkage, however, are those remaking education and education research to serve its bidding. The cabal represents national and global business interests, bi-partisan political concord at the national level, and the image of schooling thus promoted cannot by any means be interpreted as rural-friendly. The agenda seeks, as astute educators well know (e.g., Berliner & Biddle, 1995) to shift the blame for economic injustice from corporate to educational shoulders.

From an historical perspective, what is going on in these varied communities, then, reflects struggles that are largely invisible to local actors, and they are unaware of the varied commitments of the combatants—and even of the fact that their rural communities are among the combatants. The recent, globally-driven closing of a major

industrial plant within comfortable commuting distance of Utopia-Concord residents, however, brings the issue very much up-close and personal to these people.¹⁵

Only a schooling that does not take middle-class conventions so seriously, however, has much hope of disclosing the workings of history to local people. Needless to say, that is not the sort of history that the corporate cabal seeks to have taught in the schools of middle America.

Social Class and the Future of Rural Schooling

Might the poor be described in rural communities other than in disparaging terms? Certainly. The Christian Bible, for instance, does not typically confound vice and poverty. Indeed, Jesus of Nazareth apparently thought the rich more characteristically evil, since he gave them almost no chance of gaining entry to heaven in the afterlife. Yet, in five of these six very Christian rural communities—arguably impoverished rural communities—the poor were frequently characterized in accord with our code note: “blaming the poor for challenges in community or school” (see findings section).

In these rural schools Ruby Payne’s view of poverty finds fertile ground. It is particularly suited to places that aim to save the poor on a middle-class model because that is precisely the project that Payne articulates. Embracing Payne, however, comes at a cost. Of several unfortunate upshots, the worst is that the cause of poverty is attributed to

¹⁵ A discouraging post-study footnote concerns the closing of a large automotive transmission plant nearby, which undoubtedly provided many well-paid jobs to residents of the Utopia-Concord district. Part of the massive layoffs by a major automaker, this event is a local catastrophe, but globally is merely business as usual. Schools and communities with a middle-class, middle-American ethos are hard pressed to connect the former decline with the looming one, perhaps because the middle-class outlook doesn’t comprehend an adequate critique for such events.

the bad habits of the poor.¹⁶ Slovenliness, indolence, promiscuity, substance abuse, dirtiness, and neglect cause poverty. Poverty is the result of how bad people (the poor) behave. It's one theory, but so many educators remain unaware of other theories of poverty that objective observers might wonder if the appeal of Payne's presentation is not part of an intentional myopia—a middle-class myopia. Such ignorance is educationally, intellectually, and politically hazardous according to many writers of quite varied commitments (e.g., DeYoung, 1995; Duncan, 1999; Ehrenreich, 2001; Katz, 1989; Lareau, 1989; Moses & Cobb, 2001).

In particular, too many educators remain ignorant of working-class theories of poverty, that is, those that entail conflict among classes. The poor themselves are in the habit of blaming the rich. But theories of class conflict run a gamut from Jesus to Proudhon to Marx to Dahrendorf—all with a somewhat different tenor, but *none* of which conclude that the cause of poverty is the personal bad habits of the poor. In some of these theories (as in those of Jesus), poverty is more commonly attributed to the bad habits of the rich.

To others, however, poverty is not merely a local phenomenon nor caused by a bad personal morality. Local and personal manifestations surely must occupy the attentions of local actors—but local actions are arguably, in these other theories, improved by interpretations of poverty with greater breadth and depth than Ms. Payne's. One might imagine that education, and even schooling, would open the necessary breadth and depth. Surely, this remains a possibility, even in the rural United States?

¹⁶ In Payne's formulation, poverty doesn't cause vice (the principle Jesus of Nazareth rejected), vice causes poverty. Although Jesus might not have thought this way, the illusion that lack of worldly success is a symptom of vice is a Calvinist mainstay (e.g., Weber, 1905/1958).

Remarkably, not a single educator referred in these interviews to reasons for pursuing higher education other than escaping poverty. Only one educator in our interviews (the vo-ag teacher in Utopia-Concord) vocally doubted the American pursuit of middle-class success (see the findings section). In fact, the value of the wider world was never in these interviews framed in the context of higher education, never, for instance in terms of the value of learning as *liberation*. A failure to acknowledge the utility of a wider world of ideas is consistent with a readiness to embrace a jejune theory of poverty like Payne's. The relentless omission¹⁷ of a high-minded outlook on education may indicate a middle-class failure to value processes of critique and resistance to injustice.

In a sense, a local form of class struggle was underway in five of these six schools (three of these four districts)—a struggle between the middle- and lower-income strata, with healthy communities struggling to keep pathways to decent incomes *open*. Struggle against the rich, however, was not ever referenced. Of course, in these communities the upper reaches of the American income strata are almost entirely absent: distant economic overlords indeed. A “middle-class” schooling is perhaps quite unable to organize the more appropriate struggle against the greed sponsored by American and trans-national corporatism. Some observers have noted the importance of grounding rural schooling on the relevant understandings (e.g., DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald, 1995; Theobald, 1997, 2005). According to DeYoung and colleagues,

When rural people are skeptical of schooling, their skepticism can, we think make a lot of sense. Schooling is a national enterprise carried on with little respect for

¹⁷ Many spoke of college but without any evident regard for liberal learning.

communities. It can perpetrate formal instruction that undermines more broadly conceived kinds of education. (DeYoung et al., 1995, p. 32)

What sort of schooling might serve rural communities better? Theobald (2005, pp. 20-21) offers the following counsel for future action:

For those rural dwellers who would like to see rural schools take corrective action... the task is to direct a school's curricular attention to the provision of political wherewithal. This was the largest part of the rationale for free schools when they were established in the nineteenth century. A democracy requires a citizenry that knows how to make democracy work. Somewhere along the way, we dropped the idea that students might use literature, art, science, music, history or mathematics to explore substantive definitions for such concepts as beauty, truth, and justice; lost, too, was the idea that school is an excellent place to practice the application of these concepts to matters of public policy.

In this light, the case of Lumberville suggests the limit of middle-class good intentions. But can schools, after all, alter local income distributions? It may seem preposterous, but Utopia-Concord, in particular, seems to be trying. Despite such attempts, however, global forces (i.e., as expressed in the nearby major plant closing) are predictably heedless of the community's and educators' decent middle-class intentions. "Not our business!" might be the complaint of global manufacturing concerns, a complaint that the dominant political and economic cabal would surely approve. An alternative is rural schooling that connected to local conditions and that simultaneously had in view the intellectual substance of which Theobald writes. Such schooling cultivates thinkers and actors with a clearer view of the common good—and a clearer

view of the predictable enemies of the common good (enemies that do not include the poor themselves).

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