

Pie Suppers and Cake Walks: A Historical Perspective of a Closed Rural Community School

Ruby Robinson and A. G. Rud Ph.D. Purdue University

Paper Presentation 2010 AERA Annual Meeting, April 30-May 4, 2010

Denver, CO

Abstract

Rural community schools and their educational mission have always provided a sort of connectivity for the rural community. This research takes a closer look at the closing of a small rural community school located in a southern Appalachian region and determines its effects upon the teachers, students, and community culture. Although these students have the social capital to succeed and the environment to grow, the school was still closed. It was determined that there were both gains and losses incurred with the closing of this rural Appalachian community school. However, in this qualitative study, the participants all used the same term to describe the effects of the school's closing upon the community as "devastating."

Send all inquiries to Ruby Robinson Purdue University Beering Hall 100 N. University Street,
West Lafayette, IN 47907

Introduction

From the 130,000 school districts in 1930 there are fewer than 15,000 in the United States today (Lyson, 2002). Unfortunately, a victim of school consolidation has been the rural community schools, but more importantly the rural Appalachian schools. Their loss in particular weakens the community as the school is their center, their place to go for their social and athletic activities. This loss of community connectivity weakens the link between democracy and education as advocated by John Dewey (Dewey, 1916). Their loss also weakens the social capital gain by the rural Appalachian community. The purpose of this research is to take a look at the closing of a small rural southern Appalachian school and determine its effects upon the teachers, students, and community culture. What did it mean to this rural Appalachian community to close its school? What is lost or gained in the closing their school?

At the rural community school this link between democracy and education can be seen in both their social and academic activities. Though once the center of most social activities in many rural communities, public schools (and the ideas, values, and skills they convey to children) have become of great concern (DeYoung, and Howley, 1990). According to DeYoung (1990), schools that would sooner use blackboards than computers, teachers who would concern themselves with ideas more than employment, and parents who prefer the happiness of their children over a good return upon "human capital" investments are increasingly made to appear as willful primitives in our current era. For Dewey, (1916) this investment in human capital as noted by DeYoung, is an important step in education because education is a "fostering, nurturing, and cultivating process" (pg. 10).

The small rural Appalachian community school is the hub of the community with its various social and athletic events such as basketball games, plays, musicals, fairs, carnivals. It

serves as the gathering spot for the community in times of need whether for fundraising activities for local residents or for a natural catastrophe. The school also provides for inquiry, dialogue, communication, cooperation, and participation by everyone (Cam, 2000). Parents are involved with many volunteer activities such as parent teacher organization (PTO), scouts, and various clubs. These bonds of community friendship are created and continue generation after generation in rural Appalachian areas. Students are known by not only their teachers but by the other parents as well and no one gets lost in the crowd. The small rural Appalachian school can react quickly to students and parents needs. These schools generally have smaller class sizes, more interaction among the teachers, students, parents, and more community involvement. For Dewey,(1916) personal interaction, parental involvement, and student participation are all very important in linking democracy and education. This research will take a closer look at what is lost and gained with the closing of a small rural Appalachian community school.

Theoretical Framework

Schools serve many social and academic functions within the community. Small rural schools in particular were often targeted for reform throughout the early 20th century, not necessarily because they were shown to be deficient pedagogically, but because they were assumed to be less intellectually stimulating environments and certainly were less desirable administratively and financially (DeYoung, 1987). Carter, (1998) also found that the families do not want to leave their rural Appalachian area despite the economic conditions or the lack of things that others might value. Some believe that students are at an educational disadvantage being in a rural environment but the same can be said of inner city students as well. One can say that if a student has the personal and social resources then they have the social capital to succeed, including in a rural Appalachian school.

Along with the importance of social capital, there is the importance of a loving and nurturing environment for the students. As noted above, Dewey believed that education was a “fostering, nurturing, and cultivating process” (Dewey, 1916, pg. 10). In other words, a student needs time to grow just like a plant needs time to grow. Just as a child grows physically, so does he grow mentally and for Dewey, “education is growth” (Dewey, 1916, pg. 51). In a democratic and educative environment, students are allowed to communicate, inquire, and construct common values and knowledge (Noddings, pp. 36, 2007). Dewey thought that society is a function of education, not vice versa as some people might think. If we are educating indirectly by means of the environment as Dewey believes (1916, pg19), then by closing the rural community schools, the mental and moral dispositions of the students are also changed. Schools are to provide an environment that eliminates any “unworthy” features and to allow each student the opportunity to come in contact with a broader environment than their home life (Dewey, pg. 20, 1916). For these students in a rural Appalachian area, they also need time to grow and use their social capital toward their success.

Data Analysis

School

This study looked at one southern rural Appalachian community school founded in 1951 and closed in 1986-87 academic year. This school was originally a consolidated school as well from five other schools dating back to 1914. At the time of this school’s closing, there were 170 students in attendance in this K-8th grade rural Appalachian community school. Of all the county elementary and middle schools, it had the best reputation for academics and athletics. The students excelled in English and Math and the high school teachers noted that they were the better prepared students of all the county school children. The school always had the best boys

and girls basketball teams in the county as they won many championships over the years. Several of these students have went on to become doctors, lawyers, and other working professionals.

Physical features of the school

This building is still standing in basically the same condition as when it was closed in 1987. One could say that it is a museum to the community's efforts to keep its memory alive. This school is an elongated, brick building with classrooms up and down the hallway. As you first enter the building you notice the original class pictures still hanging on the walls and the basketball trophy case still filled with their golden championships. In the center of the building is the airy gym with its wooden floor and two rows of bleachers on each side which were always filled to capacity on game nights. The classrooms still have the chalkboards on the walls and the window air conditioning units. Outside, the baseball field still has its backstop fence and the school mail box is still standing. One thing the author found unusually was that the windows of the school were all still intact; not one broken window.

School Location

The school is located in a county with low to low middle income area with the primary income being industrial (machine operators, assemblers, production). From the census data, one finds, the following: a slightly increasing population from 17,600 in 1990 to 20,500 today. Eighty-four percent of the population lived in a rural area with ninety-eight percent of the county population Caucasian with a median household income of \$21,500. For those 25 years of age and over, 44 percent had at least a high school education while about 7 percent had a bachelor's degree. According to the Economic Research Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the unemployment statistics in 1990 showed the county with an unemployment rate of 9.2 percent. However, now 2010, this rate has climbed to 12.5 percent.

Participants

The author interviewed several participants for this qualitative study. The following people were interviewed: Mr. Wills the former principal at the time of the school closing and current county school board chairman. He is a life long resident of the community school area. Ms. Jones, the current town elementary school principal who is also from the county and was student teaching at the town elementary school at the time of the school closing. She is a life long resident of the town. Mr. Mills, the town middle school principal and at the time of the school closing was the principal at the other small county high school which the county was also closing at this same time. He is a life long resident of the county. Ms. Clark, the former second grade teacher and life long resident of this community and who is currently a second grade teacher at the town elementary school. Lastly, Mr. Wright, a life long resident and founding principal of the closed rural school. He was the principal from 1951 to 1968 and also a former school administrator. Finally, several former parents were also interviewed.

The Closing

The school closed in 1986-87 academic year and the school board listed the stated reasons for the school's closing: 1.) lack of needed funding, 2.) need maximize resources, and 3.) better opportunities for the students academically. With the closing of the rural Appalachian school the school board funded the building of a new middle school in town for grades 5th-8th. The previous K-8th grade school was changed to the elementary school with grades K-4th.

This closing did not go quietly as there were many county residents upset about this school's closing. Per Mr. Wills, the former principal at the time, "there were death threats and school board members with state and local police escorts". People packed the school board meetings, but all that was noted in the school board minutes was the vote for closure (School

board minutes, 1985). The building however, was turned over to the local residents for use as a community center.

Affects upon the Community

The affects upon the community concerning the school's closure has been both positive and negative. The participants all used the same term to describe the effects of the school's closing upon the community and that was "devastating." It was amazing that after all these years, those interviewed still felt that the school's closing was a mistake. From the interviews, the author determined that there were both gains and losses incurred with the closing of the rural community school. The rural school was the center of the community as the nearest town was located 30-45 minutes away over hilly and mountainous country roads. They did not have any other gathering place except for the two local country stores and their country churches. Now we will look more closely at the gains and losses of the closing of this school.

Gains

There were some gains of the school's closing to the community, students and teachers. Currently, the town middle school has around 450 students and the town elementary school has 600 students. With the new town middle school, there are now computers in every classroom and keyboarding in the 5th grade. Also they have added two athletic teams, soccer and dance. With the increased number of students, some of which are African American and Hispanic, the students now have some diversity in their student body. They also have more staff and programs such as a guidance counselor, gifted education and a larger library.

Dewey and his democracy and education are not always supported by the small rural school. Being from a small rural Appalachian school does have its' disadvantages as well. With everyone knowing everyone, this can be a hindrance to the students. It does not always allow for

growth as Dewey discussed. Some students would rather be behind the scenes, so to speak, rather than out in front of everyone. For example, if a student fails a test, the parent knows about it before the student gets home. A student may not want to play on the basketball team, but has to play in order for the school to have enough players for a team. Teachers as well may become complacent with the student's abilities because they from an uneducated family. A rural environment does not always support Dewey's idea of democracy and education.

Losses

Although there were some gains to the closing of the rural Appalachian community school, the losses to the community, students and teachers far outweighed the gains. There has been a loss of the community social and athletic events as the school was the center of the community. Ms. Clark, (personal communicate) the second grade teacher, stated that "all the older people, entire families, grand parents, aunts, uncles, cousins came to the basketball games." She said that everyone in the community attended the pie suppers, cake walks, plays, basketball games, PTA meetings and any fund raising event.

Another affect upon the community is the distance from the closed rural community school to the town school. Students are now bused as much as ninety minutes one way to school. They get on the bus at 6:00 in the morning to be at the elementary school by 7:30 a.m.

Ms. Clark, said, "We have lost the closeness and for the student; there is no individual help that the small school offered in the school now." She said, that on "Monday mornings, the teachers were in a hurry to get to school, they could not wait to get to school to see what happened over the weekend." She also stated that as a teacher today "I do not know the children before they come to my class and I do not know the family." She also talked about the teacher collaboration at the small rural school. She stated, "If a teacher had an idea, they went with it

whereas now there is no collaboration among the teachers.” The former principal and current school board chairman, Mr. Wills stated that “now the teachers do not live in the community or even in the county; they do not know the parents.” He talked about the gymnasium being so small that when they played basketball, the women would watch the girls’ game and the men would stand in the hall or outside talking and when the boys played they would switch places and the men watched the game and the women talked in the hallway.

Mr. Wills talked about discipline at the closed school, “all a teacher had to do was pick up the phone and call the parent and that took care of the problem.” He said, “The teachers at the town school do not even pick up the phone to call a parent.” He said “the interest is not there like it used to be.”

When asked about the gains of closing the school, Mr. Wills stated, “No gains, it was all political.” He stated, “Our budget is up (higher), we built a new building, added additions onto the elementary school; we did not save any money.” He talked about the students of the closed school as being the best prepared for high school especially in English and Math. He stated, “It is not like it used to be, there is less attendance (at the games) and the parents leave after they see their child play, they do not stay for the rest.” Most likely because of the driving distance, times of the games and fuel costs, parents and other extended family members are not attending the social and athletic events like they did at the closed rural school.

At the closed rural school, because of having a low enrollment (170 students) in the K-8th grade, the students all could participate in the social and athletic activities. Now at the larger town school, the students have limited opportunities for athletics and extra-curricular activities. Mr. Wright, a life long resident and founding principal of the closed rural school, talked about the loss to the community. He called it a “sad thing, close community, not any better now.” He

stated that, “the students did well in high school, better than any other county school.” He thought the reason for the closing of the school was its low enrollment numbers, low population; however, according to Mr. Wills that was not the case.

School system today

Today the county school system consists of six K-8th schools and one high school in the county. The students are bused into town to attend the elementary, middle school and high school. So if a parent has multiple children, they may have to go to three different schools to pick them up. Academically, the county is still striving to meet all the state mandates.

Town elementary school

The town elementary school consists of 31 classroom teachers with two resource teachers, one preschool language development program teacher, one CDC teacher, one guidance counselor, one librarian, two physical education teachers, one P-K teacher, one reading coach, one reading intervention teacher, and one computer/ technology instructor. The current enrollment at the town elementary school has been increasing and is currently at 600 students. As of 2007-08 academic years, 67 percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. The attendance rate for the 2006-2007 attendance rates was 94.7 percent. The mission statement of the town elementary school now lists the importance of their policies and objectives as being data driven. At the closed rural school, the student was most important.

Conclusion

Even after all these years, the loss of the rural community school was termed “devastating” according to all those interviewed. It forever changed the culture of the community. From this study one can see a sense of loss to the community, students and teachers. There were some gains to the community; however, the losses appear to outweigh momentary

and academic gains as portrayed by the school board. Even though these students had the social capital and the ability to grow as Dewey discussed, the school was still closed. After all these years, the people of the community are still feeling the loss from the school's closure. Pie suppers and cake walks are no more for this rural community.

Dewey thought that democracy and education are linked and that is how society makes intellectual opportunities accessible to all. Through the social and academic connectivity of the rural community schools, one can see Dewey's important democracy and education link. Bigger is not always better when it comes to closing the rural Appalachian schools. These schools exemplify Dewey's linking of democracy and education. These schools do develop the students' capacities to the fullest and unless the benefits of community are extended to everyone, the prospects of continuing growth will continue to be diminished. In order for us to achieve democracy in education, we must educate our youth to the fullest growth potential and support our rural community schools in this endeavor. According to Dewey, we educate indirectly through the environment. Therefore, the rural community schools, with its smaller class size, student teacher interaction, parental involvement, etc., students have a better environment to learn and to influence their moral and ethical education. Dewey would be very supportive of the rural Appalachian community schools for its efforts in linking democracy and education. Along with the student's social capital, their success was all but assured.

Implications for further study

This research was conducted upon one small rural Appalachian school and has limited generalizations for other types of schools. More research needs to be done in the area of this school's closing. What are some more of the long term effects of this school's closing? What are the people doing to stay in touch with each other now? How the community continues when their

“center” is closed is important and needs further study. Also, how do the students and parents balance their lives with their school being so far away? Thinking of Dewey, how have these students done academically and socially at the town school? How does having social capital of the rural environment affect the students in the “town” school?

References

- Cam, P. (2000). Philosophy, Democracy and Education; Reconstructing Dewey. In-Suk cha (ed.), teaching Philosophy for Democracy (Seoul: Seoul University Press, pp. 158-181.
- Carter, C. S. (1998). *Lovebugs and Scientists: Coming to Grips With Contradictions in the Education of Adolescent Appalachian Girls*, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, California, April 13-17. Print.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Print.
- DeYoung, A. and Howley, C. (1990). The Political Economy of Rural School Consolidation Peabody Journal of Education, Vol. 67, No. 4, A Look at Rural Education in the United States. Summer, pp. 63-89 Published by: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Taylor & Francis Group. Web.
- DeYoung, A. J. (1987). The Status of American Rural Education Research: An Integrated Review and Commentary. Review of Educational Research, Vol. 57, No. 2, Summer, pp. 123-148, American Educational Research Association. Web.
- Lyson, T. (2002). What does a school mean to a community? Assessing the social and economic benefits of schools to rural villages in New York. Journal of Research in Rural Education, 17:131-137. Web.
- Noddings, N. (2007). Philosophy of Education. Westview Press, 2nd Ed.
- Personal communication, Mr. Wills, former principal, 4:30 p.m. December 1, 2008.
- Personal communication, Mr. Mills, current middle school principal, 4:30 p.m. December 2, 2008.
- Personal communication, Mr. Wright, community member and founding principal, 10:00 a.m. December 5, 2008.
- Personal communication, Ms. Jones, elementary principal, 4:30 p.m. December 5, 2008.
- Personal communication, Ms. Clark, second grade teacher, 10:30 a.m. December 8, 2008.
- Personal communication, Former teacher's Aide , 10:30 a.m. March 7, 2010.
- Personal communication, Former Parent 1, 10:30 a.m. March 8, 2010.
- Personal communication, Former Parent 2, 11:30 a.m. March 8, 2010.

Personal communication, Former Parent 3, 11:30 a.m. March 9, 2010.

School board minutes, (1984-85). School board administration. Southern Appalachian area Print.