

# State-Mandated Testing and Cultural Resistance in Appalachian Schools: Competing Values and Expectations

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*Set in two Southeastern Ohio school districts, this study explores how the culturally inspired values of working class Appalachian families, as well as those of non-Appalachian families and school staff, influence understandings of the role of schooling in the lives of children. More specifically, it explores the ways these three groups understand the rationale and utility of state-mandated group testing for fourth- and ninth-grade students. Finally, the study seeks to characterize the ways parents, both Appalachian and non-Appalachian, make their voices heard in their schools. This analysis reveals sharp differences in the views of working-class and middle-class Appalachians.*

## Introduction

Despite its abundant natural resources and prime geographic location, much of Appalachia has existed for generations as a region apart, isolated both physically and culturally. Appalachian language, history, and traditions—what anthropologists such as Clyde Kluckhohn (1949, p. 26) would characterize as “the social legacy the individual acquires from his group”—continue to separate this region and its people from mainstream America. In many areas of Appalachia, generations of physical isolation have resulted in an ethic of self-reliance and independence, an ethic that is often manifested in resistance to mandates from governmental and social services agencies (Duncan, 1999; Gaventa, 1980; Pudup, Billings, & Waller, 1995). For these reasons, and because poor rural areas have historically received little attention from the federal government, many Appalachians continue to have limited access to, and participation in, education, health care, and employment opportunities.

Much of Appalachia’s economic and political history reads like that of an internal colony. As the building of railroads in the mid-19th century connected many of the region’s geographically remote areas with factories in the East, industrialists rushed in to buy up large tracts of land

in order to exploit the rich coal and timber resources (Eller, 1982; Gaventa, 1980; Hennen, 1998). Soon dispossessed by what became a massive economic reorganization, the displaced local population, who until then had depended largely on subsistence farming, grew instead to depend on the jobs these new industries created. The number and size of family-owned farms declined precipitously (Gaventa, 1980). Rather than property owners, large numbers of the region’s residents soon became renters in the company towns created to house industry workers. If economic control of the region quickly passed to these new industrial landowners, political control soon followed.

While industrialists in New York and Philadelphia became the new landlords of Appalachia, for the most part they remained personally absent. To ensure that their industries and requisite infrastructure would continue to run smoothly, however, the absent industrialists cultivated groups of local residents who would act in their stead. In time, these local people would evolve into the region’s small professional class: The descendants of coal mine operators and sawmill overseers would eventually become today’s lawyers and businessmen (Hennen, 1998). Thus were sown the seeds of an economic caste system; resources were owned by distant industrialists while economic and political control was exercised by a small indigenous elite who acted in their name. At the same time, the vast majority of workers remained bound economically to the system thus constituted (Gaventa, 1980; Salstrom, 1994).

Even though the new professional class might have identified with much of the culture of their fellow Appalachians, their own economic and political interests were tied to those of the eastern centers of power. To maintain their

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positions, the small professional class, over time, would produce sheriffs, judges, congressmen, and governors of their states. And even in many areas where, in more recent times, the dominant role of the original industries has become less pronounced, economic and political control has remained largely in the hands of the indigenous elites.

Formal schooling has not remained immune to this economic and political evolution. Beginning after the Civil War, as small local schools began to consolidate into larger institutions of economic and political importance, the professional class would also assert its control over them, becoming school board members and, often, superintendents and principals. Thus, schools, public institutions created to educate local children, were often controlled by the same elites whose economic and political allegiance lay elsewhere (Duncan, 1999).

### The Consolidation of American Schools

Until the Civil War, the common school was the venue of formal instruction for most Americans. Changed little from those first schools in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 17th century, the common school was the responsibility of its community. Procuring a serviceable building, hiring and housing a teacher—even the decision as to what to teach—all fell within the purview of the community (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Is it any wonder then that the values endorsed at home and in church were the same values that students found promulgated at school?

During the industrialization of America, educators, enamored with the application of “scientific management” to business, began to agitate for its use to guide efforts to restructure American schooling (Callahan, 1962). One of the most serious impediments to scientific progress in education, according to many critics, was the small community-based, community-governed common school, especially those schools located in rural areas where the need for reform was perceived to be the greatest. Addressing the lack of cohesion in Massachusetts rural schools in an 1837 lecture, Horace Mann (1855) declared:

These schools, at the present time, are so many distinct, independent communities; each being governed by its own habits, traditions, and local customs. There is no common superintending power over them. (p. 19)

In order to bring coherence to so disparate a system, social reformers and many professional educators believed that broad reforms were necessary in which schools would be consolidated into efficient, cost-effective institutions, organized along industrial lines. In little more than a century, a majority of the nation’s common schools was consolidated

into much larger graded schools. In American cities, schools were built to resemble factories with architecture often following such a conception of educational function (Cremin, 1961). Able now to realize economies of scale, schools grew very large indeed. In rural America, scattered, community-based schools were increasingly consolidated into district-wide or county-wide systems, usually over the vehement objection of local communities (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

The restructuring of education brought about by consolidation achieved much of the geographic and curricular centralization that critics such as Mann desired, but it also brought about, especially in rural areas such as Appalachia, a grievous loss of connection between communities and their local schools. Because large, consolidated schools required specialization of work, the day-to-day power and control of education passed largely from lay community members to professional administrators and to the state. In the two decades between 1960 and 1980, for example, the number of public school districts in America was reduced from 36,402 to 15,601 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1981).

If the promise of consolidation was to produce specialized, cost-effective buildings and broader curricula with greater opportunities for students to participate in sports and other leisure activities, then much of that has been achieved. If, however, the goal of consolidation was to improve the level of education that students receive, particularly in rural areas, then the results are far less clear (Howley, 2002). What is clear is that consolidated schools have largely lost their significance for local communities and their connections to people’s daily lives. Many rural communities, in losing their small local school, have also lost one of the few practical venues for training citizens in democratic participation (Orr, 1995; Theobald, 1997).

The impact of consolidation has not been uniform across rural America. In many areas of Appalachia, for example, the advent of consolidation (especially because large consolidated schools soon became economically and politically important entities) often meant that local participation in the public governance of schools became far more limited (Salstrom, 1994). Increasingly, the old political and economic elites asserted control over district and county school boards, often creating systems of patronage through the allocation of jobs to principals, teachers, and custodial staff (Gaventa, 1980). The working poor, in order to participate in their local schools, were thus forced to cooperate with the hegemonic system. Those who did not, seldom found a welcome at their children’s schools.

### Context of this Study

Appalachian Ohio is generally considered to be the 29 counties in the southeastern part of the state. A predominately rural region in an urbanized state, Appalachian Ohio differs

from the other areas in its geography, history, and political economy (Spohn & Crowther, 1992). Indeed, this comparatively poor region of Ohio has arguably more in common culturally with the rest of Appalachia than with other (Midwestern) parts of the state. As in much of Appalachia, eastern (and foreign) industrial concerns took possession of natural resources starting in mid-1900s. Safeguarding this possession usually led, if indirectly, to securing control of public institutions like schools (DeYoung, 1995; Hennen, 1998). And while the economy of Appalachian Ohio has generally remained more diverse than that of single-industry regions such as southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, large sections of the population still identify culturally with their social and economic struggles.

#### Research Framework

Community means many things to many people; or, more complicated still, the concept may mean different things to the same person, depending on the circumstances of its use. Tonnies (1887/1957), writing at the end of the 19th century, advanced the terms *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* for categorizing the then-recent phenomenon of workers in industrial societies moving from agrarian to industrial societies, and as a result, creating communities with different cultural values. Tonnies explains:

Gesellschaft is transitory and superficial. Accordingly Gemeinschaft should be understood as a living organism, Gesellschaft as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. (p. 35)

In other words,

Gesellschaft is to be understood as a multitude of natural and artificial individuals, the wills, the spheres of whom are in many relations with and to one another, and remain never-the-less independent of one another and devoid of mutual relationships. (p. 76)

Both terms describe sets of social and cultural relationships. In *gemeinschaft* communities, people are bound one to another, roles bound with other roles, and lives with other lives. In these societies, nothing stands on its own. By contrast, *gesellschaft* communities are ones in which not only are people separated from other people, but any one role an individual may play is separate from other roles played by the same person. One group is independent of the next group, and values held by one group are often different from, and even in conflict with, values held by the other group.

Differing concepts of community often lie at the heart of the policy debate regarding the role of schools in rural

communities (Theobald, 1997). Many rural educators argue that the proper role of schools is to serve the needs of the local community; that is, the school should both reflect and shape a sense of community. In a *gemeinschaft* community, beliefs and mores are well understood by all, and each community has an identity independent of its neighboring community. In these local villages, individuals find a sense of personal identity in interrelationships and membership in the local community. The role of the school is to educate students for membership in their communities and, thus, the school itself becomes one of its fundamental institutions (Becker, 1968).

Other educators, often urban, advocate for a *gesellschaft* America in which individual membership is founded on belonging to civil units, not through kinship ties. These are usually specialized communities with a division of labor and a relatively large number of organizations and social service institutions, each with special interests and responsibilities. Rather than control being maintained through traditions and mores, in these communities formal social controls are set by law and enforced by civil agencies. The role of the school in these societies is to educate students for a future distant from and distinctly different from the lives their parents currently lead (Becker, 1968).

In this study, I employed Tonnies' (1887/1957) framework to explore the ways families from different geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds understand the role of schools in the education of their children, and thus the way they value state-mandated testing for academic proficiency.

#### Methodology

This study was carried out in two neighboring, rural school districts in southeastern Ohio. The communities were chosen because of their similar histories and demographics: culturally mixed populations (each composed of approximately 50% Appalachian and 50% non-Appalachian families), diversified economies, and consolidated schools. In the first community, a small town of some 20,000 residents with a major university located nearby, I interviewed the families of ninth-grade students whose children had recently taken the state-mandated Ohio Proficiency Test. In the second community, situated 10 miles distant from the first, I interviewed the parents of students who had just taken the fourth-grade Ohio Proficiency Test.

With the consent and participation of each district's superintendent, I first sent out a mailing to the parents of fourth- and ninth-grade students in the respective communities, asking for their participation in the study. In this same mailing I asked parents to identify where they had been born and raised as well as their average family income over the last 5 years. From the 133 requests sent out to fourth-grade parents, I received 75 responses. Separating the Appalachian

respondents into one group and the non-Appalachians into another, I randomly selected 10 parents from each group to interview. With the consent and aid of the middle school principal, I also interviewed all nine of the fourth-grade students' teachers. As with parents, I asked these teachers to identify where they had been born and raised.

Similarly, of the 216 requests I sent out to ninth-grade parents, I received 123 responses. Again, I asked these parents to identify where they had been born and raised, as well as their average family income over the last 5 years. Separating the Appalachian and non-Appalachian respondents, I randomly selected 10 families to interview from each group. Because arranging interview times in common made randomizing a sample of ninth-grade teachers extraordinary difficult, I interviewed the 10 teachers who had volunteered for the study. As with fourth-grade teachers, I also asked these teachers to identify where they had been born and raised. Employing open-ended questions, I interviewed all informants for 45 minutes. All of the interviews were audio taped and the data later transcribed.

Because the parents of younger students (fourth graders in this case) typically express greater concern for their children's safety, welfare, and social development in school, they more often visit their children's classrooms as well as volunteer at school functions (Lareau, 2000). However, as these children mature and advance in grade level (ninth graders in this study), the involvement rate of parents in their schools typically diminishes, even as their relationships with the schools change (Swap, 1987). Even though interviewing the families of two different grade levels has implications for the interpretation of findings, I chose to interview the families of both fourth and ninth graders because I wanted to understand how the age and maturity of the child might influence the parents' perspective on issues such as the differential roles that the family and school play in the child's education, as well as the way they assessed the value of standardized testing.

In analyzing individual responses to the questions, I looked first for evidence of the way cultural-based values (*gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*) informed the perspectives of the three groups. Within this general framework, I additionally sought to understand the ways informants viewed the family's and the school's roles in children's education, as well as the history of their interactions with schools and teachers. Finally, I explored the value that each group assigned to standardized testing. I organized my analysis of interview transcripts under three related themes: (a) the value of the tests; (b) the role of schools in children's lives; and (c) how culture informs the way parents view the role of schools and the value of standardized testing. I will first describe the associated meanings, followed by my interpretation of the disparate meanings subsumed by the themes.

## Findings

### *Value of the Tests*

Each of the three groups interviewed (Appalachian parents, non-Appalachian parents, and teachers) had distinct interpretations of the value of the fourth- and ninth-grade tests of student proficiency. Teachers, while all acknowledged the need for performance-based assessment, objected strongly to the use of a single instrument to assess the achievement of students. "The student might not be feeling well that day, or might be hungry—that's not uncommon here," one fourth-grade teacher said, "but that's not taken into account." Another teacher argued that "education means a lot more than just showing skills in a few areas; education means, or should mean, citizenship, taking responsibility, and individual growth. None of that is measured on the tests." Additionally, several teachers indicated that their "poor students" did not have the life experiences that enabled their middle-class students to perform well on the tests. One teacher gave an example:

There's a question on the test that asked something about a wharf. These kids don't know what a wharf is; if [the question] said dock then they would have probably known that. Many of these kids haven't been out of the county; there are no books in their homes. Questions like that are just unfair.

Because of what teachers perceived to be too great an emphasis placed on the proficiency tests by their schools, students, not just teachers and administrators, had begun to feel the stress as well. "I had a little girl ask me the week before the test," a fourth-grade teacher recalled, "whether she would have to leave school if she didn't pass; that kid was crying! A fourth grader! It's gotten completely out of hand." Generally speaking, however, a majority of the teachers (6 of 8 fourth-grade teachers, and 8 of 10 ninth-grade teachers) agreed that the organizational and curricular reforms that had come about in response to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation had been beneficial. A ninth-grade teacher of long tenure in her school remarked on the positive changes: "Before, when I first started teaching, a ninth grader in this school might be doing one thing and the same kid in Cincinnati something entirely different. This way at least, you know they're all doing something similar. It better prepares our kids to compete when they graduate."

Non-Appalachian parents agreed with several of the points made by teachers. Most (8 of 10 fourth-grade families) expressed concern at the stress their children experienced in connection with the tests. "My little girl got so upset she was actually throwing up," a fourth-grade parent recalled,

“Now that’s just too young to be worried about a test.” Even so, 9 of 10 families of ninth graders, like their children’s teachers, felt that the higher academic standard required by NCLB would better prepare their children to compete with those in urban and suburban schools. Such reform measures prepared their children “for the real world.”

Non-Appalachian parents also saw the state “report cards” on schools as ways to address their concern about the local school’s performance (7 of 10 ninth-grade families voiced this concern). One ninth-grade student’s father said, “You drop your kid off at the door and you trust he’s getting a reasonable education. But when the school only gets a 12 out of 27 let’s say, then you know something’s not right. The problem might not be with your child—it might be his teachers.”

Working-class Appalachian families,<sup>1</sup> however, had a markedly different interpretation of the value of proficiency testing. Unlike teachers and non-Appalachian families, poor Appalachian families found little or no value in state-mandated testing of their children (this was true of all 7 of fourth-grade, working-class families, and 7 of 8 ninth-grade families). Speaking of her daughter, the mother of a fourth grader summed up the sentiments of many in saying, “I just tell her: Don’t worry about that test; it don’t have anything to do with you or your family.” Another fourth-grade parent, complaining of the stress his child felt about the tests, said simply, “I just keep him home on that day.”

When asked to expound on their understanding of the reason for proficiency testing, a majority of working-class Appalachian parents (6 of 7 fourth-grade parents, and 7 of 8 ninth-grade parents) located the rationale for such testing in a wider socioeconomic context. “[Testing]’s just one more way of deviling the working man,” one father of a ninth grader opined. Another, a mother of a ninth grader, connected what goes on in schools, and proficiency testing in particular, with the “lack of jobs, no decent place to live” that working people experience. “The day’ll come I believe when these schools will just take your kids away; they’re already trying it,” a fourth-grade father maintained.

Middle-class Appalachian families expressed many of the same sentiments as did non-Appalachian parents and teachers. While they too were concerned with the stress experienced by their younger children, they felt, in general, that standardized testing was a way of knowing whether their children were, as one parent expressed it, “making the grade.” Many of these parents (2 of 3 fourth-grade parents, and both ninth-grade parents) referred to reports they had seen in the media about “failing schools,” saying that standardized testing was an effective way of knowing

whether their children, and the schools, were performing adequately.

### *Role of Schools in Children’s Lives*

All of the non-Appalachian families were unambiguous in their view that formal schooling played a central role in the future success of children. All of the teachers interviewed (8 of 9 were themselves Appalachian) drew a direct connection between schooling and success, particularly for poor children. A ninth-grade teacher remarked: “Most of these kids are caught up in a cycle of poverty, and if they don’t get a good education, they are going to wind up in the same situation their parents are in: teenage pregnancies, McDonalds kind of jobs—you know what I mean.”

Asked about the role of parents in their students’ education, 7 of 9 fourth-grade teachers maintained that the poor parents of Appalachian children did not participate in the life of the school and therefore did not value education for their children. “It’s just not a priority,” one said. When asked why they believed this to be so, many speculated that perhaps it was because the parents had had little education themselves: “They’ve never had the experience, or anyone in the family, of improving their lives through education. They just don’t see it as a possibility.”

All of the ninth-grade teachers equated parental “caring about education” with supporting teachers in requiring students to complete homework assignments and responding quickly and supportively to discipline measures by the school. Referring to the parents of fourth graders, teachers defined support for education as visiting the school and their children’s classroom and reading to their children. Teachers also expressed the belief that parents who “cared about education” would ensure that their children’s homework was done and handed in, in a timely manner.

When asked to respond to the often-voiced Appalachian critique of schools that they “only educate kids to leave [their families],” most teachers (7 of 9 fourth-grade, and 8 of 10 ninth-grade teachers) did not disagree. One teacher asked directly, “Isn’t teaching them to get out of this area what we’re here for, really?” Many teachers then went on to express the belief that so long as poor students remained in the area, they were fated to lives of poverty. A major role of education, they maintained, and hence that of schools and teachers, was to help students develop skills that would enable them to secure employment outside the area, and thus create economically stable lives for themselves.

Non-Appalachian parents agreed in the main with the views of the teachers, but with reservations. Non-Appalachian parents (8 of 10 fourth-grade parents, and 7 of 10 ninth-grade parents) maintained that the primary role of education, and hence that of the teacher, was to prepare students to compete successfully with other students across the country. These parents, while expressing a desire to have

<sup>1</sup>Of the 10 Appalachian families of fourth graders interviewed, 7 were working class, and 3 were middle class. Of the 10 Appalachian families of ninth graders interviewed, 8 were working class, and 2 were middle class.

their grown children settle near them, accepted as inevitable that many would leave the area after finishing high school. Referring to students leaving the area after graduation, one ninth-grade parent lamented, "I hate to see it happen; it's draining away some of our best people. But I don't see what else can be done." But many spoke of this move as a rite of passage, one that they themselves had gone through years before, and one that would accustom them to "what it's like in the real world."

When asked to react to the critique of schools voiced by poor Appalachian families that schools educated children to leave their families, middle-class Appalachians (2 of 3 fourth-grade families and all ninth-grade families) generally agreed that this could be a concern, even if they felt this didn't particularly apply to them. Schools, they said, often educated children for a life beyond southeast Ohio; the skills their children acquired in schools were not in great demand in the immediate area. Thus, a public school education seldom led to employment in local industries. In the case of their own children, however, they expressed confidence that, after acquiring a Bachelors degree, their children could return home as teachers and businesspeople, often working in the businesses their families now owned. "In the case of my own son," a ninth-grade father declared, "he'll come into our car dealership when he finishes [school]. Our family has lived here for generations. This is our home."

#### *How Culture Informs Parents' View of School*

One can better understand the divergent opinions offered by the three groups in this study (Appalachian families, non-Appalachian families, and teachers) by applying the sociological "concepts" of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* to the data (Tonnie, 1887/1957). As the individuals in the three groups discuss education, they implicitly endorse either the *gemeinschaft* view of community as a place of respect, family unity, and allegiance to place or the *gesellschaft* view characterized by social mobility, competition, and mass participation.

Teachers in this study, even though a large majority grew up in Appalachia (8 of 9 fourth-grade teachers, and 7 of 10 ninth-grade teachers) maintain that one of the central roles of the school is to educate students for a life outside their local communities. Fundamental to achieving this goal, teachers believe, is helping students develop a set of skills that will make them competitive with other students across the country. One ninth-grade teacher maintained, "The bright ones are going to leave, they just are. Unless their parents have money. I feel that my job is to help them learn what they will need in order to be successful out there." Here schools, expressing their values through teachers, are clearly endorsing competition and social mobility (*gesellschaft*) over community and allegiance to place (*gemeinschaft*).

When asked why they themselves did not leave the area after graduation, these same Appalachian teachers (7 of 8 fourth-grade teachers, and all 7 ninth-grade teachers) couched their reason in *gemeinschaft* terms. "I went away for awhile," said one fourth-grade teacher, "but I missed my home and friends. I taught in a school in Columbus but, I don't know, it just wasn't the same. I didn't know the other teachers, my neighbors. So I came home and got a job teaching here." Ironically, middle-class teachers tend to endorse the *gesellschaft* values of competition and social mobility for their poor Appalachian students, even as they exhort the *gemeinschaft* values of community and connection for themselves and their middle-class students.

Non-Appalachian families (8 of 10 fourth-grade parents, and all 10 ninth-grade parents) also believe that the proper role of schools is to prepare students for a competitive life beyond their communities, thus adhering to the same *gesellschaft* view. Inherent in their beliefs was the expectation that children will leave their families and communities; that the identity for children is actually formed, at least in part, through learning to break with their communal ties. "To a certain extent," said the father of a ninth grader, "I think breaking away from the family is healthy; I did it. I couldn't wait to get away." Rather than view the individual child's identity as formed, at least in part through his interrelations with his group and community, the non-Appalachian families, voicing *gesellschaft* values, instead view the individual child as the fundamental social unit, independent of his context. "Right now she talks about wanting to be a doctor," explained the mother of a fourth grader, referring to her daughter. "Of course that will likely change. But I told her: 'what if that means leaving mommy and daddy?' She said she wants to live in California."

Only in the case of the Appalachian families, and in particular working-class families, does one see a sharply divergent point of view. These families, when they speak of the role of schools and education in the lives of their children, wish to see a direct connection between the values taught in school and those endorsed at home. A ninth-grade mother explained:

The kids there talk back to teachers [referring to her son's school]; they don't respect their teachers or their parents. It's all this talk about sex and drugs. And they teach them to go off and live in far away places. That's not the way my son was raised. That's not what I want for him.

Poor Appalachian families (all of both fourth- and ninth-grade families) voice the concern that because schools socialize their children to *gesellschaft* values, the education they offer children often results in their children leaving the local area and their families. Local schools, they believe, are educating children to be citizens of a socially mobile

culture, one that is disconnected from place and local values. Far from reinforcing local family and community-based values, these working-class families interpret the education offered in most schools as a challenge to, and often rejection of, their local values. A fourth-grade father explained: “They’re trying to teach our daughter to talk different, eat different, listen to different music—and to make fun of people who don’t!”

### *Community and Consolidation*

In place of the small, community-based schools that educated Americans through much of the 19th century, today one increasingly finds large, centralized schools, often separated geographically and philosophically from their local communities. This *gesellschaft* model of education, greatly advanced by consolidation efforts, is becoming increasingly common in rural areas. Promulgating this evolution (according to Appalachian participants in this study), state and federal efforts over the last 20 years to increase academic outcomes through mandated curricular and accountability measures have further shifted the locus of power in rural school from the local community and toward state and federal capitols, thus implicitly endorsing the *gesellschaft* over the *gemeinschaft* concept of community.

Both school districts in this study have experienced consolidation. The town high school was consolidated with two smaller, outlying rural schools in 1968. At the time of this study, the middle school, as well as four outlying elementary schools, are in the process of being consolidated internally. Next academic year, the middle school and a single, merged elementary school will be relocated to the campus of the high school. The secondary, middle, and elementary schools will all have new buildings, but far from their present village locations and far from any center of population. The experience of consolidation in both districts, though one took place more than 30 years ago, has been, and continues to be, divisive. In both cases, parents speak of “losing” their local schools, but the way they understand this loss and its subsequent outcomes varies along the cultural and economic lines already discussed.

Non-Appalachian parents value the personal contact and rapport they have established with teachers and are concerned that it will be lost in a larger, less “friendly” environment. At the same time, they express concern that their children, who have grown up in this personalized educational environment, will be “lost” in the larger facility. These reservations notwithstanding, most non-Appalachian parents (8 of 10 fourth-grade parents, and 9 of 10 ninth-grade parents) readily admit that the new facilities will be a vast improvement over the older ones: more resources, greater physical safety, and facilities for sports and activities. A middle-school parent explains:

They’re crammed in that building like sardines. They don’t have room to turn around. And any sports or other activities they want, they have to go somewhere else to play. The new buildings will certainly help in that way.

When asked what impact the consolidation move will have, or has had, on their own interactions with the school, most non-Appalachian parents express frustrations with the inconveniences their children (and they) have in traveling some distance in order to participate in the life of the school. They also feel that the size of the new schools makes personal contact with individual teachers or administrators somewhat more difficult. All in all, however, they do not feel that the consolidation has left them less connected to their children’s schools. Thus, most non-Appalachian parents view the consolidation from a *gesellschaft* perspective, that is, from a concern for the impact the move will have on them as individuals, not on the community and its values.

However, middle-class Appalachian families (all fourth- and ninth-grade middle-class parents), while agreeing with some of what the non-Appalachian families voice, also express concern at what the loss of the local schools means to their communities. “The little mom-and-pop stores depend on the kids’ trade at lunch or after school to keep going; once the school’s gone, they’ll be forced to fold,” one father of a middle-school student reflects. Speaking of the village in which one of the elementary schools is presently located, a middle school mother says:

There used to be a couple of stores there when I was a kid, but they’re both gone now. There’s still a filling station but he doesn’t do much business these days. Seems like the only thing left here is the school and now that’s going. I enjoy all the stuff the school does: the plays and the like. They have Halloween parties every year and the whole town turns out to see the kids parade by in their costumes. I guess all of that will be gone because no one’s going to go all the way over to the new school to see it.

The theme of loss runs throughout the musings of the Appalachian families, both poor and middle class. The notable difference for middle-class families, however, is that they often connect the loss of the school with what they term “progress.” “Things change,” one Appalachian parent, a professional in his field, reckoned, “and I guess the schools have to change with them. But it hits these little towns hard. Once the school goes the town just kind of folds up.”

One mother has a story of loss she wished to share with me:

My son had forgot his lunch one day and I went over to the school to give it to him so he would have to do without. When I got there, the class was doing a lesson on multiplication of fractions. I was kind of interested because I remembered when I was a kid I had had terrible problems multiplying fractions, and I could see right away these kids were having the same problem. So I offered to help: I told the teacher I would like to help. I must have spent an hour there, going round, helping the kids figure out how to do their problems. I guess I won't be able to do that in the new school.

These same middle-class Appalachian families (all fourth- and ninth-grade, middle-class parents), although regretting the loss of the village schools, remain confident that the consolidation will not affect their own relationships with the schools. One mother of a ninth-grader remarked, "Sometimes it's a pain going all the way over [to the high school], but my son's teachers are all nice to me. I see them out when I'm shopping and we speak. If he has a problem, I just go right over there to talk to them. You've got to make an effort." Thus, culturally, middle-class Appalachian families often express their values in *gemeinschaft* terms, valuing personal interrelationships and allegiance to place. Economically, however, they adhere to the *gesellschaft* paradigm of competition and social mobility.

Poor Appalachian families (6 of 7 fourth-grade parents, and 7 of 8 ninth-grade parents), however, frequently see in the loss of their local schools further evidence of their own social and economic dispossession. As a father of a fourth grader insists:

It seems like they're moving everything away; things like grocery stores and such. We have to travel all the way into [town] to shop. And some of us have to travel to Chillicothe or even Columbus to find work. Here, we're just forgotten. So it don't surprise me they're taking the school away; they've took everything else.

They're always talking about what bad shape the school's in. Well, once a few years back they were complaining about the school needing painting and such. So I told them, if you supply the paint, I'll get the people to do the painting. And I did. Some of us here in town got together and we painted classrooms and the hallways.

When asked how he expected the new schools would get painted, this same father shrugged: "They'll hire people I guess. It won't be me doing it though. Way I feel about it is: They've already took our school from us. It's their school now."

### *Culture and Social Class*

While the sociological concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* are useful in categorizing the different community values uncovered in this study, they do not fully explain the way social class and group identification (themes that also surfaced in the study) affect individual and group participation in schools and school communities. As noted earlier, non-Appalachian families tend to focus on their individual children and the children's success when they reflect on the role of schools in society. A majority of parents (8 of 10 fourth-grade parents and 9 of 10 ninth-grade parents) in this study, in reflecting on the role of schools in their children's education, emphasized the acquisition of "sets of skills" so as to be able to compete more effectively with other students. Appalachian families, however, both middle and working class, tend to place greater emphasis on the value of interrelationships, their sense of community and their attachment to "our home." When these families (8 of 10 fourth-grade parents, 9 of 10 ninth-grade parents) reflect on their children's education and their futures, it is almost always within the context of the local community. Consequently, they feel that the school should be an institution rooted in the local community, and thus a purveyor of the community's values.

Neither is the *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* destination particularly useful in explaining the differential values working- and middle-class Appalachian families express in regard to their sense of connection to public schools. While middle-class families express regret at the loss of their local schools, for example, they tend not to interpret this as a loss of access and influence, even if it does represent a loss of community. They remain confident that, with a little effort, they will be able to maintain their connection to their children's schools and teachers. On the other hand, poor Appalachian families tend to identify the loss of their local schools within a broader historical, social, and economic disenfranchisement. Of the 15 working-class Appalachian families interviewed in this study (6 of 7 fourth-grade families, and 6 of 8 ninth-grade families), the vast majority made a direct connection between the consolidation of their local schools and the loss of jobs, property, and civic voice.

Results from this study indicate that there is a marked cultural difference in the way Appalachians (both working and middle class, as well as middle-class Appalachian teachers) understand the role of schools and communities in children's education when compared to that of non-Appalachians. However, social class is the most efficacious lens through which to view the differential views of all Appalachians interviewed. Middle-class Appalachians (families and teachers alike) adhere to the cultural values of the local community (*gemeinschaft*), even as they endorse "economically" the values of social mobility and competition (*gesellschaft*). This reflects the privilege they have

historically enjoyed: being culturally of the local area, even as they benefit economically from the power conferred upon them by outside interests. Similarly for teachers, this means that because they benefit from a middle-class upbringing and education, they can confidently expect to find employment in the local communities whose *gemeinschaft* values they endorse. For their poor students, however, these same teachers endorse the *gesellschaft* necessity of competition and social mobility, even if the families of these students place greater value on community, allegiance to place, and interrelationships.

### Implications

The school reform literature has tended to explain poor student performance on standardized tests as a function of failing schools: poor teaching, unfocused curricula, and tight resources. The findings from this study suggest that cultural and economic dissonance between poor Appalachian families and public schools may also play a role in student performance.

The advent of mandated proficiency testing in Ohio's schools, as in schools across the country, grows out of an older national reform movement, one that is designed to address what is perceived to be low academic standards, unfocused curricula, and failing schools. By requiring schools at the local level to align their curricula with those of others across the state and nation, as well as implement a series of organizational measures, one assumes the state can improve academic performance by standardizing the educational experience of all children (Eisner, 1991).

The language of school improvement and accountability stresses equity and access for all: "no child left behind." The assumptions behind such measures are that the policies are value neutral—that all children (and by implication, all communities) will have an equal opportunity to participate and benefit from the reforms. In this study, however, one sees that the values undergirding accountability reforms often reflect a *gesellschaft* view where the working class Appalachian values of interdependence, family unity, and allegiance to place are largely rejected. In their place, the accountability reforms would have schools prepare students (by advancing a curriculum that disconnects the student from the local community and its values) for technologically advanced and vastly different lives from the ones they presently lead, often at great distances from their communities and families. The Appalachian families in this study, and in particular poor Appalachian families, believe that embracing the values promulgated by schools too often requires a rejection of their own family and community values. And therefore many Appalachian families are caught squarely between the two competing ideologies.

For over a century, the promise of rural school consolidation has been to produce specialized, cost-effective

buildings, a broader curriculum, and greater opportunities for students to participate in sports and other leisure activities. Findings from this study suggest that the way members of these two rural communities interpret and understand the benefits of consolidation is strongly mediated by their culture and social class. Non-Appalachian families, while regretting the loss of intimacy and convenience that losing their local school implies, largely believe that the benefits outweigh the loss. They remain confident that their children will receive better academic preparation as a result and become more competitive in the job market. Their focus is on the benefits to the individual child. For middle-class Appalachian families, however, the loss of the local school means a loss of community and local values: The villages will lose businesses, and the identity of the village will be threatened. Middle-class Appalachians, while regretting these losses to community, nevertheless feel that it is an inevitable result of "progress" and that their children will benefit from the changes.

For poor Appalachian families, however, the loss of their local school to consolidation tends to be interpreted as part of their larger, on-going history of social and economic dispossession. Because they feel that they have been dispossessed of their land, their jobs, their communities, and their historic homes by the greater *gesellschaft* society, poor Appalachian families view consolidation of the local school as yet one more loss. The disappearance of the local school means that one of the last public institutions with which they maintain a connection is disappearing. And thus one of the few remaining venues for participation in the life of their communities is also disappearing.

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