

Revisiting and Extending the Argument: A Rejoinder to Wiles and Lipsitz

Alan J. DeYoung

University of Kentucky

Craig Howley

Appalachia Educational Laboratory

Paul Theobald

South Dakota State University

We'd like to thank Jon Wiles for inadvertently confirming many of the points we earlier raised about the unexamined assumptions underlying the rhetoric behind the middle school concept (DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald, 1995), points that he appears not to have fully understood. We offer a different sort of thanks to Joan Lipsitz. She reluctantly appears to agree with portions of our analysis, but also gives us room to elaborate several critical issues rather than merely reiterate our earlier discussion. Were our rejoinder a court case, we would metaphorically implicate Wiles as a defendant, while calling upon Lipsitz as a hostile witness for the prosecution. We treat their objections in turn, first making our case against the defendant.

Discerning readers no doubt recognize that the Wiles response constitutes a kind of intellectual "second" to the issues we raised in our essay: that unexamined assumptions and historical misunderstandings run rampant in much discourse on contemporary school reform and restructuring. For the benefit of Wiles, we will make one final attempt to retrace and refresh our argument. First, Wiles takes us to task (as we do him) for misinterpreting history. Second, in deflecting our charge that middle schools can be a threat to the well-being of rural communities, he highlights the importance of curriculum to the "middle school concept." And, finally, he closes with a plea that we all turn out for the inarguable but vacuous project of "becoming excellent" in the 21st century.

The propensity to romanticize future possibilities appears often in those who misunderstand the past. Consider his assertion that since he was there with Alexander, Lounsbury, and Hines in 1965, Wiles is well placed to provide the authoritative view of the middle school concept. Even a novice student of history can see the flaw in such a claim. Alexander the Great, for instance, did not take pos-

session of the definitive historical interpretation of the rise of the Macedonian empire, nor, for that matter, did George Washington of the American empire. Schools, institutions, and nations *are* what they become and how they are defined after the fact, not what they were in the minds of "founding fathers."

Wiles suggests that the middle school concept has become an important way to reorganize the school curriculum because several developmental psychologists came up with some novel way of understanding the "needs of children" three decades ago around some office desk. We suggest that anyone who accepts such a view of the historical process can make no claim to understand any educational movement, including the middle school movement. We argue that curriculum is never just the things that proponents want children to learn and do. Rather, the *implementation* of curriculum occurs within an ideological and political arena in which social and economic forces supersede and redefine much of the psychological. This is the historical sense that concerns us and, we believe, appears to elude Wiles.

Actual features of the contest over any curriculum get worked out in real places where people look into and (in this case) establish middle schools. Contests over whose curriculum will get implemented depend upon the economic, political, and ideological circumstances of any given situation and who has the ability to define what the situation calls for. In our experience and interpretation, inherent psychological or developmental "needs" of children are rarely the catalyst for substantive school reform or restructuring. This perspective is not surprising or radical, but Wiles doesn't seem to grasp its significance.

Wiles also accuses us of misusing statistics, a charge that confuses us. While we believe that it is a factor, we never attempted to "prove" that the middle school concept has single handedly caused all rural school consolidation. We don't even report a correlation coefficient, for that matter. Our main empirical finding is that some administrative decisions—those made about school buildings in recent

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alan J. DeYoung, College of Education, 131 Taylor Education Building, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506-0001. (cpd159@ukcc.uky.edu)

years in rural areas—increasingly sort kids by age into larger schools. Neither the data nor the analysis are complex, and perhaps there are other reasons for these facts. But the facts remain that middle schools in rural places are still being created, while elementary schools are disappearing. This is no statistical slight of hand. Rather, we use the occasion of these facts to critique the developmental arguments we have personally witnessed in elementary school-closing hearings during the past decade. We are obviously skeptical of the 20th century tendency to sort the things and relationships of the human world into separate categories and practices in the name of efficiency. Sorting children in this way is probably a very bad idea. We are hardly alone in making this assessment.

New social forms like middle schooling are almost always foisted upon the world with the assistance of interests that distort the intentions of the originators. But people give the originators too much credit, in our view, when they bemoan this circumstance. Actions aren't *conclusive*. People *don't* actually "get something done" when they act. Instead, if they are innovative, they originate a chain of events with an unknown end. Action generates many possibilities, which are predictable only in part. The corruption of the middle school concept, like all such original conceptions, was, indeed, predictable.

We argue that the logic supporting the American middle school movement has heretofore been opposed to the maintenance and health of "community" in rural places. Our critique is based upon communitarian precepts, and we incorporated descriptive statistics to illustrate the seriousness of the concern. Furthermore, when we talk about "community," we recognize that we beg the question of what a community is as well as what it ought to be. For us, though, "community" and its healthy relationships with "school" ought to be the focus of rural education improvement. We believe that strengthening, rather than ignoring or minimizing, this connection is critical.

We agree with Wiles that the Carnegie Unit and high school curricular differentiation has been one bane of rural education, and that subsequent action has made a hash of applied middle schooling. However, when he makes such statements as "the American middle school has always used grades 5-8," he misspeaks. What he may mean is that the middle school *concept* specifies those grades. Actual middle level grade configurations in America are in reality determined more by the configurations of available buildings (i.e., the "situation") and by local battles to occupy or abandon them than by the purity of the original curricular and developmental conception. We have the data.

We are also troubled with Wile's glib concluding anecdote about an "inadequate" Minnesota 7-12 high school he visited. He claimed it was too small (236 students) and poorly located (in a "dying" rural place). Maybe the school is inadequate in important ways, but to assume that it is the

size of the school that causes this inadequacy reinforces our concern about those school improvers who routinely "blow in, blow off, and blow out" of rural places without ever attempting to understand the contexts in which they advise. The sin of being small and rural is similar to the sin of being poor and African American. With such a slur, more is being communicated than is being stated.

We're not surprised in these circumstances to see Wiles blame the victim for its situation. The solution for this dying community, according to Wiles, is to create a school with computers that will overcome the "deprivation," as he calls it, "of any person living in a rural area." We are disturbed that people continue to rely on technology to deal with essential human dilemmas (dilemmas such as accomplishing a decent upbringing of our children). What Wiles apparently missed was that a community was ostensibly dying and all he could offer in the way of hope was to give kids more technical skills with which they might flee the community.

Perhaps wider reading would help Wiles see that indifference to the deterioration of communities (which he exhibits in his response) is a major source of America's contemporary social problems. For at least a century, American formal educational institutions, largely in the name of individualism and nation building, have been busy trying to ignore community or insulate the enterprise of schooling from it.

Recognizing this connection, the dilemma for citizens (including educators) is to undertake action that will help nurture community, outside as well as inside the schoolhouse. What can be done in schools to rebuild citizenship for community? How can we show children that their responsibilities to communities must balance their rights as individuals? How can we prepare them to engage urban knowledge but at the same time (and more critically) help them to see and enact decent possibilities for rural life? What can be done in schools to reverse destructive cultural messages about rural places of the sort advanced and illustrated in Wiles' response? And most importantly, how can we teach people the importance of being devoted to particular places as a root of meaning and virtue? The foot-loose, narcissistic tendencies of American culture constitute our undoing not only in rural but in urban places. Our disregard of particular places and communities is both the end and the means of this undoing.

In the future, and for the preservation of a decent future, we need to help students understand how and why rural places are being destroyed. And we need to help them claim the measure of human dignity required to live well in any place—rural or urban. In light of this dilemma, the defense and implementation of the original middle school concept is an insignificant mission. We hope readers recognize that ours is not a wholesale attack on middle-level education, or even on the psychology of human develop-

ment. Good middle-level schools could, of course, accomplish much of what we imagine to be necessary, though middle-level schooling is not at all a necessary feature of a true education. Our critique concerns the way economics and ideology intersect as history, and in contradictory ways to undermine community in rural places. The salience of our warning is supported by some evidence, which we presented in our article.

Deborah Meier, writing about a small school serving mostly poor, mostly African American children in New York City, has, we think, got the business of size and curriculum about right: "Smallness makes democracy feasible, and without democracy we won't be able to create the kind of profound rethinking the times demand" (Meier, 1995, p. 110). The last time we looked, elected officials were still calling this country a democracy. If a rural community is dying, then part of the education it affords its youth has got to be an exploration of the forces delivering the death blows. Not to compel the kids to live there forever, but to help them shoulder the burden they inevitably will bear as participants in a nation that still aspires to be a democracy.

Now let us interrogate the hostile witness for the prosecution. Before we interrogate her, however, let us characterize her standing on our analysis. Lipsitz, in essence, chides us for our tone and for our critical intent—which she characterizes as "unnecessarily divisive." She might have gone further, and accused us of knocking down a "straw man." She did not, we suspect, because at least part of her acknowledges that what we argue is accurate. She also suggests, as do others, that there are indeed *some* thoughtful practitioners who have proven resilient to the middle school concept and, for some reason, have not embraced some idealized grade level configuration. And finally, she concurs that the foundations of our perspective—sociology—ought to be borrowed from more extensively in the preparation of middle level school teachers. Lipsitz suggests that numerous Indiana educators are already imbued with such an understanding.

Our reply to this is twofold. On the one hand, as writers we believe that intellectual arguments are a primary undertaking, and they are not necessarily—and certainly not inevitably—subservient to the needs of practice. We feel no need to always conclude a critique with some mutually satisfying but often simplistic solution to a problem. We suggest that the social aims of education are the most important part of the issue at hand here. That is, we openly ask "What is the nature of the human community and how ought the public school relate to its needs and concerns?" Our rhetorical reply is that many rural schools continue to be reformed in directions that have little to do with local communities, and they are being shaped by arguments that do not consider the basic school and community relationship at all. We hope this will change.

We specifically contend that arguments used to proselytize the "middle school concept" provide for us one interesting place to look at how the issue of community is framed or ignored by a particular nexus of academics and practitioners. In previous eras, "administrative progressives" like Ellwood Cubberley and champions for national academic excellence like James Conant have provided grist for those of us concerned to understand the logic and rhetoric behind rural school consolidation. Nevertheless, while we are less sanguine than Lipsitz about the possibility of peacefully resolving contradictions that we regard as inherent in the social, economic, and political fabric of society, we end our discussion with references to several folks who *do* propose resolutions to rural school and community health. We urge interested readers to find out about such works.

We are tempted by Lipsitz's remarks to beg forgiveness if we have forgotten the good manners that must underlie reasoned discourse. But we doubt that even our tone really has offended anyone, especially readers of *JRRE*. We are more chagrined and offended when academic arguments are misdirected in support of particular—usually unconsidered—courses of action. We have each personally witnessed, many times, advocates of middle level schooling who have cited developmentalist theory as one strategy to help consolidate rural elementary schools. And this is perhaps a sense in which "the middle school concept causes consolidation"—that is, at the level of disingenuous and inconsiderate rhetoric. And, since we believe that enhancing and defending rural communities is more important than convincing children that they are unimportant (i.e., that their destiny as national jobholders supersedes their devotion to any particular rural place), we confess to some hard feelings on our part.

All in all, we feel our critique is rather more measured than divisive. We purposely dichotomized familiar theoretical arguments used by developmentalists in their call for different sorts of educational practices. The point was to simplify, not to demonize. We did not invent the quotes or practices that we cited, nor did we invent the typology used in our critique. All these things are to be found in the literature on school reform, a literature we are each at this moment contributing to.

Furthermore, as implied above, we are much less convinced than Lipsitz that the aims of developmentalists and communitarians are easily reconciled, for these aims come from quite different commitments, intellectual persuasions, and, yes, academic disciplines. We argue, further, that a sociological (or historical, or anthropological, or other context-sensitive perspectives) would underscore our views on this matter, rather than those of either Lipsitz or Wiles. But of course, all this is the purpose of "argument" in the first place! We are attempting to articulate a web of meaning,

as well as to convince readers of the validity of our points. Disagreement and division of viewpoints is to be expected.

As to the charge that middle school advocates or practices have actually alienated urban educators because middle schools are really creatures of suburban environments, there is some merit to the point. Yes, in fact, middle schools are perfectly suited for suburbs, because suburbs aren't communities in as meaningful a sense. So yes, if pushed, we could expand our critique to include the proposition that the logic of middle schooling is a threat not only to rural places, but to urban ones as well. Perhaps such an analysis (without specific solutions) will be the focus of our next collaborative effort. The argument there, however, will bake a different bread with the same yeast.

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