

Abstract

Moving Away: Resisting the Dominant Culture of High School

by David G. Winter, Abigail J. Stewart, Eaaron I. Henderson-King and Donna Henderson-King

Schools play a key role in integrating divergent social, economic, and cultural groups into a single (albeit still heterogeneous) civil society. Yet many students, on account of their personal characteristics or their social status, either seek marginality or are forced into it. Others reject the proffered values and life patterns by moving away or “getting out” after high school. This project studied 250 students who grew up in the American Middle West during the 1950s. Through survey questionnaires and interviews, we compared those students from “Midwest High School” (a pseudonym) who moved away (typically to either coast) with the two-thirds who stayed on and settled in their hometown region.

The results of our analysis suggest that those who left Oak Valley and those who stayed shared not only some core values, and a generally equivalent experience of high school activities, but some recognition of the relational advantages of the extended family network available in Oak Valley. Those who left were, though, drawn both by career and economic opportunities, and attracted to the diversity, novelty, and—most important—the self-expression that were enabled by leaving Oak Valley. Leavers “resistance” took the form not so much of rebellion or even disidentification (“voice,” in Hirschman’s, 1970, terms), but rather of the development of a tenacious commitment to “get the hell out of here” (“exit,” in Hirschman’s terms).