

Listening to Rural Adolescents: Views on the Rural Community and the Importance of Adult Interactions

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The problems facing rural areas are many faceted, but a key component to their solution is the human resource of rural adolescents. In this study, an interpretive analysis of interviews focusing on perceptions of the community, family, school social dynamics, and aspects of self identity with 20 adolescents from a rural high school, is discussed within the framework of two organizing dimensions: living in a rural community and the importance of adult-adolescent interactions. Participants both liked and disliked growing up in a small rural community. The interpersonal intimacy of a rural community was seen as providing a sense of safety and belonging while taking away personal privacy and fostering prejudices. Perceptions of community isolation include lack of social activities, difficulty with transportation, and, positively, an identification with nature. Adult interactions that were perceived as important range from global perceptions of community support for school and adolescent activities to interpersonal contacts with teachers, family members, and other adults. Participants seemed to be simply asking to be heard and responded to as individuals. The importance of listening and understanding the unique concerns of adolescents in each rural community is emphasized. Schools and communities need to work together locally to support the plans that most rural young people would seem to naturally make: to live in a rural area to work and raise their own families.

The deteriorating economic and social conditions in rural areas have received national attention for some time. Romantic nostalgia aside, rural America is in trouble and the political battle for the survival of rural communities has been joined. Rural schools are only one focus of this struggle, but, I think, a critical one. The school is the link between young people and the future of the community. The youth of rural communities are a key component in the equation for a healthy future. Yet there has been comparatively little research on rural adolescents, and almost none that has provided an opportunity for rural adolescents themselves to say what is important to them—to express their own thoughts, feelings, needs, or values. In this study, I begin to give voice to a group of rural adolescents, focusing on their perceptions of (a) what it is like to live in a small rural community and (b) the importance of adult interactions.

Background

Economic instability and increasing poverty have characterized rural American populations in

recent history. The deteriorating rural economic climate is particularly critical in New York. Of New York's 62 counties, 44 are legislatively defined as rural. In the 1980s, the most rural counties in New York lost population, unemployment rates of the rural counties were about double the rates of metropolitan areas, the rate of employment growth in all rural areas declined, and the per capita income of all rural counties was about 60% of metropolitan areas (Eberts & Khawaja, 1988).

In recent years, there has been an out migration from rural areas to urban areas among young adults beginning their productive work years (Brown, 1989; Fuguitt, Brown, & Beale, 1989). Fewer farm children are choosing to stay on the family farm, leading to a new source of stress for farm families (Hedlund & Berkowitz, 1979). Murray, Keller, McMorran, and Edwards (1983) found that high school students who expect to leave rural communities have higher educational and career expectations, and are more motivated, competent, and socially involved than those students who plan to stay. There is evidence that rural youth who remain in the community gener-

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ally have a diminished orientation toward success in the future (Mazer, 1976).

Currently, there is active legislative debate in New York and elsewhere concerning the value of small schools versus the economic benefits of further school consolidation in rural areas (Monk, 1990). This is an issue that is likely to be resolved primarily on financial grounds and national educational goals rather than by focusing on the well-being of rural communities or the needs of rural young people (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). There are few sources of information available to policy makers concerning community values or some of the more intangible, but important, educational outcomes, such as student satisfaction, self-esteem, or how life planning decisions are made. There are almost no sources of information about the views of students who have attended small rural schools. Youths, and the schools that connect them with the community and its heritage, are the most valuable resources available to rural areas. Only by better understanding the internal world of the rural young person—their hopes, disappointments, needs, and aspirations—can communities, schools, and families take reasoned steps to increase the probability that adolescents will develop into young adults with a strong self-identity who have the capability and commitment to contribute to and improve the viability of rural America.

Below, I report research in progress. First, I present a brief overview of the larger research project and its development over four years. An interpretation follows of adolescent perceptions of (a) living in a rural community and (b) the importance of adults in the lives of rural adolescents. The first dimension of student perceptions reported here, that of living in a rural community, represents a conceptually driven variable since this was one content area in the interview protocol. The second dimension, the importance of adult relationships, is a variable that emerged from the interviews through the content analysis. It subsumes all of the content areas of the interview.

Project Summary

The Program in Rural Youth Development (Project PRYDe) is interpretive and descriptive, attempting to come to a better understanding of the rural adolescent, the manner in which she or he organizes experience and develops phenomenological meaning (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956;

Sarbin, 1990), develops a sense of self-identity (Waterman, 1985), and makes life decisions (Cochran, 1990; Raskin, 1985). The project was initiated during the 1989/1990 academic year. A group of rural high school students, beginning in grades 9 through 12, have been interviewed each year over a period of 4 years. Participants who graduated or left school were contacted yearly.

Four schools were chosen to represent the four basic types of rural localities described by Eberts (1984). Eberts classifies rural counties according to two variables: size of the largest community and percentage of the work force that commutes outside the county.

Principals assisted in choosing students from each grade, balanced by gender and farm/non-farm residence, and varying on achievement level and family income. About 400 consent letters and family demographic questions were mailed to those students and their parents at the home address. Approximately 20 consent forms were returned to each of the four high schools, for a total of 87 participants beginning the study in 1989/90. With geographic moves and other reasons for loss of participants, approximately 60 interviews were conducted in 1992/93.

Procedure

We were interested in having students share their perceptions of four aspects of the context of their lives: community, school, social interactions, and family. The semistructured interview concluded with an inquiry about self-identity, including hopes, fears, spirituality, and future plans (see Hedlund, 1992, for a copy of the interview protocol). The interview took approximately 1 hour to complete. The same interview protocol was followed for the first 2 years of the project (1989/1990, 1990/1991). In the second year, we also asked about changes during the past year, and students who graduated or left school were asked to reflect on the original high school experience from the perspective of the present. Field interviewers were graduate and undergraduate students with standardized training, earning course credit for research experience. All interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription.

Contextual information concerning issues facing students, recent events in the school and community that may have affected students, and general school climate was gathered from school principals, counselors, and selected teachers. Demo-

graphic data on the family background of each student were furnished by parents. Academic performance and notes on disciplinary actions were copied from student records at each school.

In the last 2 years of the study, interviews became both more participative and focused. In the third year (1991/1992), we began by presenting a summary of the first two interviews, inquiring about the accuracy of the summary and about any apparent points of disagreement between the content of the first and second interview. This interview was unstructured. Participants were encouraged to discuss topics of interest to them and to tell stories about events in their lives. This procedure provided a check on the accuracy of the interpretation of the first interviews and led to clarification and amplification of points important to the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In 1992/1993, the original ninth grade participants were seniors; all other participants were out of school. Interviews in 1992/1993 focused on the decision-making processes involved in leaving high school and planning for the future, from the reflective perspective of graduates and from the more immediate view of seniors. We inquired about both short- and long-term planning in career and personal life areas. The emotional and rational processes in decision making, sources of help, perceived social pressures, and critical incidents relating to choices were among the dimensions participants were asked to explore.

The Present Study

In this paper, I discuss a preliminary analysis based on the first 2 years of interviews. These data derive from a partial content analysis of interviews with 20 students in the most rural of four secondary schools included in the larger project. This school was chosen because it is small—about 150 students—and the surrounding area represents the economic and social characteristics of rural areas in upstate New York and many other areas of the country (cf. Fitchen, 1991).

Interview Coding. The first level of coding was conceptually defined by the interview structure, which focused on the perceptions of community, family, school, social life, or self. We developed a second and third level of codes inductively by reading interviews and iteratively comparing notes among three raters (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Reliability of the coding procedure was increased by defining the lower level codes so they fit under different first level codes. A segment could be

coded @FMY (1st level) %SXX (2nd level) %VLU (3rd level). In this instance, the coder judged that the segment described family values about sexuality and dating behavior. Another segment may be coded @SLF%SXX%VLU. This indicates that the segment describes personal values of the participant about sexuality and dating. For example, a researcher interested in dating behavior could easily use the computer to sort for SXX (the second level code for sexual and dating) under any of the first level codes (social, school, community, family, or self). With this coding system it is unlikely that interview segments of interest to a particular researcher will be lost, even if they are coded differently by different analysts. I am using the macro facility of WordPerfect for the Macintosh to enter codes and interview identifier information, then to find and move similarly coded segments to separate summary documents for ease of analysis. (Reid, 1992, presents a useful discussion of using a computer to manage text data.)

Results

My interpretation of some of the data follows, illustrated by excerpts from individual interviews. I first consider the reactions of adolescents to the rural community in which they live, after which I discuss the perceived importance of adult involvement in the lives of rural adolescents. Finally, I relate this analysis to other research on adolescents, drawing possible implications for rural schools and communities. As we work further with the data, interpretation will become richer and, undoubtedly, new dimensions for understanding how these rural adolescents make meaning of their lives will emerge.

Perceptions of the Rural Community

Most students like living in a rural setting, but the characteristics of a small community create tensions that are not easily resolved. Knowing everyone, and even being related to many others in the community, is satisfying because of the personal connection one feels with other people and the sense of belonging and identity that results. There is generally a feeling of safety (low crime) and security (it is easy to get help with anything), but privacy is limited and social biases flourish.

Connectedness. Almost all participants commented on the friendliness of the small community. From a 10th grade female student:

It is real nice to live here. Everybody is really friendly and stuff, so it is not like living in the city where you don't know who is walking down the street. I like it here. I like being around people who know you.

A large majority of students mentioned the sense of safety in a small town. A comment from a 12th grade female illustrates this attitude and the widespread realization among both males and females that a small rural community is a good place to raise a family:

You feel more safe. Like even with my little sister. I can't picture us living in the city and having her try and go out like I did, because I know she wouldn't handle it the same. Everybody is always in a rush. You don't know anybody else really. I think that's the advantage here with young kids.

Said a 10th grade male student: "You know that if you are ever in trouble, you can go to any house around here and you would be safe."

After a year away at college, a female graduate reflected on her high school experience:

I think going away to a bigger school helped me grow more, but it also made me realize how lucky I was to go to a smaller school. A lot of people come and I tell them there were only 33 in my graduating class—and they think I'm lying. They just can't comprehend only 33 people graduating. But yet, if you ask, they'll tell you stories about three or four friends—that's all that they can tell you about. You know, I could tell them stories about every person in my class.

These same community characteristics—of connectedness and intimacy—place constraints on behavior through a loss of privacy. For example, one student complained, "I can't do anything wrong because someone who knows me is bound to see!" An 11th grade female reflected:

I think that just because everyone's so close, there's always going to be the rumors. But I just think—because it's so close—you [also] feel like you have your own family here. Like people you can depend on.

The negative aspect of this social interconnectedness, which our participants took seriously, is the perception that biases or prejudices persist because one is forced to keep interacting with the same people.

Prejudice. Though the adolescents in our study felt secure living in the small community, they were acutely aware of social divisions and prejudices. The type of prejudice in a rural community differs from the urban setting. A principal from another rural school in the study commented that her students really had no conception of racial prejudice since they had no exposure to people of differing racial or ethnic backgrounds. Fitchen (1991) notes that rural social structures may be changing with the recent influx of urban dwellers, particularly the urban poor (also see Schram, this issue). But our participants perceived deep-seated biases based on socioeconomic status and family history. Rural prejudices seem to persist over time because extended family enclaves tend to persist over generations. Social cliques in the high school generally reflect the social structure of the community.

A 10th grade male, who had moved to a different community, summed up many students' feelings:¹

P: If you didn't have a last name or if you weren't in the "in crowd," they just threw you away. That was like one of the biggest problems.

I: They judged you by your name?

P: Yeah, because my Dad moved down into this area, and my Ma did in a way. Their name wasn't too big.

Another 10th grade student, in relation to the small size of her school, commented on how teachers see her as smart and she can get away with anything. She continued:

The teachers know everybody so well. Everybody knows our styles. If you are different, like my friend: she wears her hair differently from everybody else. She likes heavy metal. [My teacher] doesn't like that. He thinks that's wrong. He calls her a punk. "You are a punk. I don't care how hard you work. You were wild in eighth grade, so you

¹Interview segments which follow are labeled "I:" for interviewer statements and "P:" for participant statements.

are going to fail now," which makes no sense. In a bigger school, everybody wouldn't know everything about everybody else.

The situation of a young female participant illustrates the overlapping roles found in the small rural town. Everyone seems interconnected in some way.

I mean especially because my dad's a teacher. You can't do anything around here because everybody knows about it. He knows about half the stuff before I know about it. So I guess that kept me out of more trouble than anything.

Isolation. Isolation is a key term in most perceptions of the rural community. For adolescents, it is a term with several dimensions: difficulty with transportation, few social activities or cultural events, and lack of exposure to differing cultural or ethnic viewpoints.

A 12th grade female is typical in expressing the difficulty of organizing social activities with friends for any adolescent who cannot drive an automobile:

You can't drive, you can't go anywhere. Everybody else is going out and you're still home, unless somebody comes to get you—[but] you don't really know anybody else that can drive. Plus where I live nobody is really into travelling 10 miles to pick you up and bring you back.

As a result, adolescents become more dependent on parents' involvement in their social lives, even for romantic relationships. In addition, the lack of activities available in a small town requires travel somewhere to do things together. One 10th grader spoke about her dating activities with her last boyfriend:

Once in a while we went out. But if you went out—since he couldn't drive—we would have to have his mom take us. Therefore you need an objective: We are going to the movies, we are going to the rollerskating rink. Therefore you have got to spend—it is \$5 to go to the movies. I don't know how much it costs, but it is steep.

A female 12th grade student summarized the frustration expressed by many students over lack of cultural and social activities:

I: What do you dislike about living here?

P: Being secluded, and having less opportunity to go to concerts or go to lectures—just having nothing to do. You know, no social things.

I: What social things would you imagine there being, if you lived somewhere else?

P: Places to go and dance, places to go and eat—we have one choice.

I: The pizza place?

P: Yeah. Or you can hang out in the ice cream store. Having a movie theater, having things to do with a college. Just having places to hang out.

Isolation strains family relationships also. Many parents do not seem so involved with their children that they will take time to support their social lives. Others try and are unable for many reasons (cf. Westland, 1993). From comments of our participants, the effects of isolation are evidently a topic of conversation in many families. An 11th grader's discussion of this aspect of his childhood expresses some of his sadness and sense of burden on his family:

We don't live in town and a lot of the times when I was growing up—I was an only child you know—I'd ask my dad to go out and play ball with me. But a lot of times he wouldn't because he was so tired—he had been hunting or something—and he just didn't want to. And I had to go out and throw the ball against the . . . (pause). We have a cabin and I used to do that a lot. I've done that so many times. We live out in the country and there's no other kids around and I just, I guess I got lonely or something. [If] I had another brother or something for me to play with . . . Right now if I get the car, I just feel that, if I get the car I can just go wherever I want.

Many students, both female and male, expressed the perception that living in a bigger city would lead to temptations that would get them in trouble. Moreover, most participants saw a small rural town, similar to the one they live in, as a good, safe place to raise their own children.

The remote rural setting does have strong positive qualities for many young people. A 10th grader, for example, felt good about both the social and the geographic setting of his rural home. His comments also point to the prevalence of extended families in rural New York settings. "I

have grandparents in back and then all the neighbors are around us." The interview continues:

I: You're not really isolated at all.

P: No.

I: Is there anything that you like about living there?

P: Well, I can walk out my back door and I can go hunting.

I: You live right on a forest?

P: Yeah, all I got to do is cross a little stream.

This sense of identification with the "country" or "nature" was corroborated many times. A 10th grader spoke of how she was renewed by solitude and nature. She went on to say: "I like the outdoors. It is nice to have the green, be able to take a walk and be away from everybody."

Adult Interactions

Adult involvement in the lives of adolescents was one theme that was expressed in varying contexts throughout the interviews. The types of involvement varied, from a global perception of adult attitudes toward the school or school activities to support of adolescent activities and social groups, and include individual interactions with teachers or family members. At a global level, participants were sensitive to the attitude of the community toward the school and toward school activities. Many students discussed financial support, or lack thereof, for the school and for school activities.

Attitudes of the Community. The importance of perceived community support was illustrated by the comments of a ninth grade male who enjoys being in band:

I: If you could change anything about the community, what would you change?

P: The way it feels about our band program. They don't really accept us. Like, we go down to — Street and we have gotten calls and letters to editors that they don't like it. We got permission by the county and stuff, but they just don't let us go down there.

He continued a little later:

P: But if we were up on a field or something, we wouldn't have anyone watching us. Just

a lot of the old people come around and sit there watching our band.

I: So, it is important to have the community sitting there watching?

P: Yeah, they give us a little life.

"They give us a little life" seems to capture the sentiment of many students about the attitudes of the community. Much of the community involvement with the school comes through sports. An 11th grader summarized this point, "a lot of the community centers around high school sports because a lot of people come to the games and they support the kids." That emphasis builds community/school spirit and, at the same time, places pressure on students and coaches to perform well. It probably should be noted that football and basketball, both male sports, were the ones most often mentioned by participants and best supported by the community.

Students are well aware of community politics concerning the financing of education, another aspect of adult involvement in the life of the adolescent. One 11th grade male was rather bitter about the support received from his town:

I: What do you dislike about this community?

P: It seems like a lot of times when I get to school, or the community gets a lot of money, they always find ways to throw it on something else other than what they really need.

I: Like?

P: I guess school always has all these fund raisers and they seem to get money. But if they want to put it into a new softball field or something, it always goes somewhere else, and they never carry out their plans to do what they want to do.

Many students had similar comments. This participant continued discussing a local funding controversy:

Nothing runs the way it's supposed to be. Like the sports. If something like the money—if it's supposed to go to one thing it never goes there and, oh, they had a lot of controversy over the budget. I guess it was last year. And they didn't know whether the sports were going to pass or anything. When it gets to be that far, when the kids can't even play sports, it's stupid.

A 12th grade female went on to explain why the local sports program is important to the health of the community:

P: They're wondering if we're going to have our budget pass next year so we can have a sports team, because this year it had to be voted four times before it passed the board.

I: So you see that as another problem for passing again.

P: Yeah, because if they don't have sports they're going to be out on the streets hanging out.

I: So then, are sports a major activity here in [town]?

P: Yeah, very. More than half the school is involved in sports or band, or something like that, or FFA or FHA. And if we don't have the budget passed, we don't have any of that.

I: So then you see that everyone would just be sort of roaming the streets?

P: Yeah. There's nothing really to do in [town] except hang out in the pizzeria.

So rural high school students appear quite aware of community political dynamics in relation to the school and its programs. It is interesting to note that the language students use to speak of these issues indicates that they feel little ownership of, or ability to influence, community dynamics. Consequently, frustration and bitterness is evident in their discussions of community support. One wonders what would happen if students were provided the opportunity to have an effective voice in community issues relevant to them.

Family. Personal involvement with family members, as well as with teachers and other adults, is important to adolescents. It might be surmised that being taken seriously, listened to carefully, and supported by an adult means that one is also an adult, therefore important and, significantly, responsible. Participants who mentioned positive interactions with family members seemed to be more insightful and to express clearer values for guiding behavior.

A ninth grade male, who was having social and academic problems and had little sense of control over his life, provides a negative example:

I: Do you get a lot of support from your folks for playing in the band?

P: Not really, just that I do what I want. I go by myself for band. They don't really say much, and I don't really talk that much about it.

I: How come?

P: My dad is big into wrestling and stuff. He doesn't really [see much] sense in band, but it is just different than that.

This same student had one adult relationship that seemed to provide a grounding point for his life, and points to the importance of the extended family as it often exists among lower socioeconomic status families in rural New York. The theme of his interview was trust in other people and how difficult it was for him to trust anyone.

P: So, my grandmother—instead of having her only as a grandmother—on certain days she is just my friend. I can go to her with any trouble. I told her a lot of stuff. And she doesn't say anything. She has told me, and I don't say anything.

I: What kinds of things could you tell her without her telling other people?

P: I just tell her what it is like at home that I can't talk to my parents about, and any other real trouble that I don't want my parents finding out about. It is just—like, at home, my mom takes my younger sister. [It's] not really favoritism, but . . . And my dad likes my older sister. And that really just leaves me out. So now I tell her . . .

I: So, now it is to have someone there to . . .

P: Yeah, I can always go down to her.

I: And what kind of thing does she tell you?

P: She tells me about anything. She will tell me something that she wouldn't tell to anybody else, like when my uncle died. That really hurt her. And she really didn't have anyone to open up to. So, she came to me. And it is like every week she takes me out after school and stuff. And we go and we talk. We just ride around, talk about our problems that no one else knows.

An 11th grade male spoke well of the relationship with his father:

I'd call my dad no matter how much trouble I got in because he's always told me: "You get in a lot more trouble if I see you driving it when you're drunk than if you just called

and I pick you up." My dad kind of understands more than my mom.

He went on to relate a story about his father's high school experience that indicated a good deal of father-son intimacy.

P: My dad went in the service when he was 17. He got kicked out of school. Well not kicked out of school. I guess he quit school. He got in some kind of trouble. Not bad trouble, [he] just had a temper. He wasn't bad. The incident he always tells me about [is how] he was sitting in a study hall doing his homework, and some teacher came up behind him and slapped him right across the face with a ruler. I guess he went berserk.

I: What did he say he did?

P: He chased her. But I guess you could say my dad has calmed down now. I guess I would be that way too, because I know he said he wasn't doing anything wrong. I knew that he wasn't because I just know when he's telling the truth. He said it was a big mistake and he knows that it was a big mistake. [Mr. _____] was the principal here and he tried to calm him down but he went so crazy that he just didn't want to have no part of it. He just didn't like school. Then he went in the service because he had two brothers and a sister and I guess family life wasn't working out for him because I guess his mom and dad got in fights and stuff. He just found the service a good way to get away from [town].

He continues with a statement illustrating the importance of family stories in defining oneself:

A lot of the people around here regard [my father] as one of the better hunters around. Because the [family name]—I have my Uncle _____ and my Uncle _____—they always tell all the people around every deer season. It's always, "Well, how many deer did the [family name] get?" And people always drive by and can see a deer or two hanging in our tree, and a deer or two hanging in their tree. I've grown up hunting and I guess that's just what we like.

The parents of this young man evidently provide clear boundaries for his behavior and enforce family rules:

I: In what ways is your family different from other families?

P: A lot of families don't care what their sons or daughters do. My family does and I'm glad they do. A lot of times [I ask]—Why couldn't you just let me go to this place, or why couldn't you just let me go with [my friends]? They've been through it before so I know that they're just doing the best for me. And a lot of times I get mad because they won't let me do this or they won't let me do that. But when I think back on it, it's just they're doing it for my own good and I'm glad they do.

This family intimacy, sharing of stories, and rules of behavior can be contrasted with a statement by another tenth grade male who was academically at risk:

Dad leaves [at] six in the morning, don't get home till six thirty at night. And then he usually goes in his room and reads and stuff. I mean, the only time we ever talk to each other is when we go hunting, and that's just brief. Ask if you seen anything. So Mom mostly makes the decisions and me and Dad don't get along.

Parents and other family members who listen to adolescents and share personal information are valued. Likewise, parents who set and enforce clear boundaries are respected and are generally seen as caring and supportive. It is my impression that adolescents in our study who feel intimate with their parents are more self directed and insightful.

Teachers. Individual teachers who make the effort to treat a student as an important person have considerable impact on students. The special attention of individual teachers is related to satisfaction with school and academic motivation. The interesting point is that students who reported positive episodes of interactions with teachers were generally high achievers. Is it their high motivation that teachers respond to, or does their involvement result from teacher attention? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that most of these same students mentioned poor teachers: ones who were role bound and personally distant. An example was provided by a 10th grade female:

I: What do you like about school?

P: The opportunities to do things—becoming connected with other people. My science teacher is incredible. He channels you to different places. He gets stuff in the mail, he'll give me the stuff, and I am interested in it. I might have never found it before. We do a lot of creative things in some classes.

This same student, who went on to a university, discussed the special effort made by two teachers to meet the individual needs of students:

[In] some classes like my English class, we do get to influence what we do in a bigger manner. It is a Shakespeare class. We decided that we wanted to have a presentation. We were encouraged to decide what we wanted to do, how we were going to do it. There is another teacher, who I never had. He is great too. We have an astronomy club. And, the other day, a couple of us got together and asked him if he would drive us to a lecture on artificial reality. And he said sure. He gave up a golfing game and drove us all over, which was great. So, we do have some say, but, once again, you have to be smart.

"Once again, you have to be smart." This participant realized that behavior is reciprocal, and that students have responsibility for influencing their teachers' behavior.

Closing Thoughts

The picture of rural adolescents that begins to emerge from this study is tentative. It is derived from a content analysis representing two dimensions of the concerns of participants from one school. As we proceed with the analysis of the first two years of interviews from all four schools, the complexity of our understanding will increase and the trustworthiness of our interpretation doubtless will improve. For example, comparisons between groups of participants will be possible by gender, ruralness of the school, and grade level. The project will then proceed to look at the last two years of interviews, focusing on development of self identity, life planning, and how life experience is organized to make meaning when one grows up in a rural area.

With those qualifications in mind, I would like to posit two general propositions for consider-

ation. First, rural adolescents perceive both advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a rural community. For them, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages. They appreciate being personally connected with other people. At the same time, they wish for more privacy and dislike community prejudices. A deep identification with nature and the outdoors often develops. While many of our participants might want to live elsewhere for awhile, given the opportunity most would return to a rural area to raise their own families.

Second, adult relationships are important to rural adolescents. When family members, teachers, or other adults responded to participants as individuals of worth, with a sense of equality—but not necessarily of equal authority—it was an important event reported with enthusiasm and pride. Participants often felt disenfranchised from community affairs and the management of the school. Perhaps they felt generally disenfranchised by adults.

If adolescence is a period of developing identity (Waterman, 1985), then being recognized as a person of worth by adults is critical in overcoming the marginal status felt by our participants. Churchill (1993) confirmed the importance of non-parental adult interactions in the lives of rural youth, a topic on which there is little research. The influence of family on career identity and aspiration was explored by Young, Friesen, and Borycki (in press). But, as Haller and Virkler (1993) argue, the important aspect of adolescent self identity from a rural community development perspective is occupational aspiration rather than educational aspiration. Aspirations toward occupational pursuits appropriate to the rural area will encourage young people to stay and become productive rural adults.

The question becomes, then, how can the school and the community work together locally to alleviate the kinds of social issues that our participants identify, minimize economic barriers, and complement and support the life plans these young people would seem to naturally want to make? It is not likely that national educational goals or state level educational planning will capture the uniqueness of a rural adolescent's situation or the conflicts one experiences when growing up in a small rural community. I think it is vitally important to listen and try to understand the perceptions and concerns of the young people in each community.

I wonder what effect it would have if ways could be found to really improve opportunities for the rural adolescent to have a voice in family, school, and community affairs? I do not think our participants were asking for control or for even an equal vote. They just want to be heard and acknowledged.

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