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A case study of senior students' perceptions of factors that shape aspirations in one low-income rural Iowa high school

Louise Elizabeth Esveld
University of Northern Iowa

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A CASE STUDY OF SENIOR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

OF FACTORS THAT SHAPE ASPIRATIONS

IN ONE LOW-INCOME RURAL IOWA HIGH SCHOOL
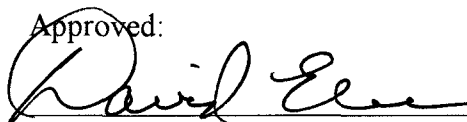
A Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree
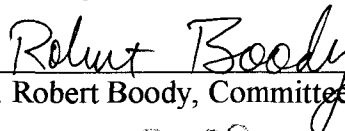
Doctor of Education

Approved:

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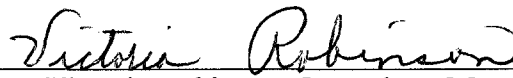
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May 2004

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the seniors at "Bonteville" who were so welcoming, honest, and insightful in their contributions to this study. It is also dedicated to the many Iowa students, both rural and urban, from whom I have learned so much over the course of my work in education. Every day, I have been delighted and informed by their words and actions and found good cause to hold great hope for the future that will be theirs to shape.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has long been a companion, even during the years when I was mostly otherwise occupied with career, family, changing jobs, and all the other things that life requires. Like most intense relationships, there have been moments of exhilaration and periods of plain hard work. Without the love, encouragement, support, and assistance of my family, friends, colleagues, and professors I could not have seen it through to completion.

First, and above all, I want to thank my husband, Ken, who is my best friend and the best educator I know. It was Ken who taught me how to look beyond the youthful awkwardness of students to see and trust in their potential. Ken and our children, Peter and Ruth, have steadfastly supported me in this work. They have made do at home, excelled in their own endeavors, and loved me anyway--in spite of my frequent absences and preoccupations.

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This work has been entirely dependent upon the permission, willing support, and patience of the superintendent, high school principal, educators, and support staff of the Bonteville school district. While, in the interest of protecting the confidentiality of

participants, I cannot name the individuals there who helped me so much in the course of this project, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude for their assistance.

My thanks go to Lisa Rock, my research assistant, who went into the field with me, transcribed the interviews with much detail and precision, and whose insights I value. I owe a great deal more than I can say to Gina Linn, Cheri Doane, and Tom Jackson, who cheerfully spent long hours proofreading chapter drafts for me.

I am deeply grateful to the Central College Vice President for Student Life, Tim Phillips, for his unwavering support. I am appreciative of my Pre-College Programs team members--Nancy Wright and her ETS and GEAR UP staff, Kelly Kowzan, Billy Kirby, and Judy Roorda—who have "taken up the slack" while I have been away from the office to work on my research and writing. My research for this dissertation was made vastly less complicated through the services made available at the Central College Geisler Library. I owe many thanks to the library staff for their excellent service and assistance. I also thank my colleague, Eddie Moore, Jr., who, traveling on a parallel journey, has often inspired me through the energy and commitment he invests in his own work and the many words of encouragement he expressed for mine.

Finally, I offer a heartfelt thank you to my sisters, Judy Jackson and Margaret Roetman, and to my good friends--Cheri Doane, Lisa Hetzel, Kate Holt, Gina Linn, Linda McCartney, Sue Schmuck, Carolyn Schnell, and Popcorn Throssel--who, on walks and over lunches and coffee, shared in the challenges, frustrations, and joys of this work.

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Dr. David Else, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

Rural Iowa high school graduates from districts enrolling fewer than 600 students are more likely than their more urban peers to be economically disadvantaged as measured by eligibility for free and reduced cost meals. They are also less likely to aspire to high levels of educational attainment. Over the last decade, the percentage of graduates from small, rural schools intending to pursue any postsecondary education or training has approached or exceeded the percentage in more urban districts. However, among rural graduates with postsecondary intentions, the ranks of those students planning to pursue a four-year degree or higher remain disproportionately thin.

This case study of seniors in one predominantly low-income rural Iowa district employed focus groups to gather seniors' perceptions regarding factors that influence their aspirations. Group and individual interviews conducted with parents and school personnel provided additional insights. The results illuminate the important role of rural culture and context in shaping students' sense of possibility and their plans for the future as well as ways in which rural values of place and connectedness collide with the national agenda of developing a competitive workforce ready for a global marketplace.

The findings suggest that participants: (a) value hard work, independence, responsibility, and relationships; (b) view education primarily as a means to becoming credentialed; (c) feel little pressure to pursue four year college degrees but believe their parents are supportive of at least some postsecondary education; (d) are not knowledgeable about choosing, gaining entrance to, and paying for a postsecondary option suited to their needs and interests; (e) rely heavily on college admissions

counselors as the most important source for information about college selection and financial aid; (f) find their parents to be the most important source of support in considering their postsecondary options; and (g) have been offered few planned experiences at school designed to help them explore postsecondary options and understand the processes related to college selection, admissions, and financial aid.

Recommendations for additional research include comparative case studies of seniors in urban and rural settings and studies that would follow rural students throughout their senior year exploring how their perceptions change over time.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

How do high school seniors, attending school in a small, predominantly low-income, rural Iowa school district, describe the norms, attitudes, values, experiences, and conditions that shape the decisions they make about education beyond high school?

Decades of research into the development of educational aspirations (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Paulsen, 1990), college choice (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), and rural education (Harmon, Howley, & Sanders, 1996; Hodgkinson & Obarakpor, 1994; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001; Odell, 1989) identify and isolate variables and processes that go far in explaining how individual youths make choices about their lives after high school.

However, too narrow a focus on such variables may cause us to look at students and their families as removed from the context of their schools, communities, and our larger society (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Doing so may obscure real and important differences that affect both opportunity and outcomes for students and communities. Some experts writing about the development of aspiration among rural youth have called for additional studies that will add to our understanding of the ways in which context (i.e., location or attributes associated with location, societal conditions, values, attitudes, etc.) interacts with identified variables to shape the vision students construct for the future (Baugh, 2001; Harmon et al., 1996; Khattri et al., 1997).

Conceptual Framework

In Figure 1, I draw together major themes that I identified from the literature on rural education, development of aspiration or predisposition, and college choice to form a conceptual framework. This framework provides a useful background for the study, illustrating my understanding of the ways in which major themes from the literature intersect. Included are variables widely found to directly and powerfully influence the development of aspiration. The model also suggests one way in which we might begin to understand the role of context in the formation of aspiration. Here, important societal values compete to determine the shape of students' aspirations through filtering layers of community context, students' personal characteristics, and family background.

Studies have persistently reaffirmed the centrality of ability/achievement, parental influence and support, socio-economic status, and race/ethnicity as key predictors of educational outcomes for students (Hossler & Maple, 1993; Paulsen, 1990). There has been less agreement among researchers regarding the meaning of context for rural youths making decisions about whether or not to pursue college after high school (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khattri et al., 1997).

Some studies have found that, once personal characteristics and family background are taken into account, school and community have negligible, if any, impact on aspiration (for example, Jackson, 1981). Others did find that place of residence has some effect on postsecondary plans. Downey (1980), for example, found that rural youth differed from urban youth in their attitudes, skills, views of the opportunities available to them, and preparedness for college. Lawrence (1998) found that the norms, values, and

traditions embedded in the culture of a rural Maine community helped explain why so

few students from that community went on to achieve postsecondary degrees in spite of

excellent performance during their elementary and secondary school years.
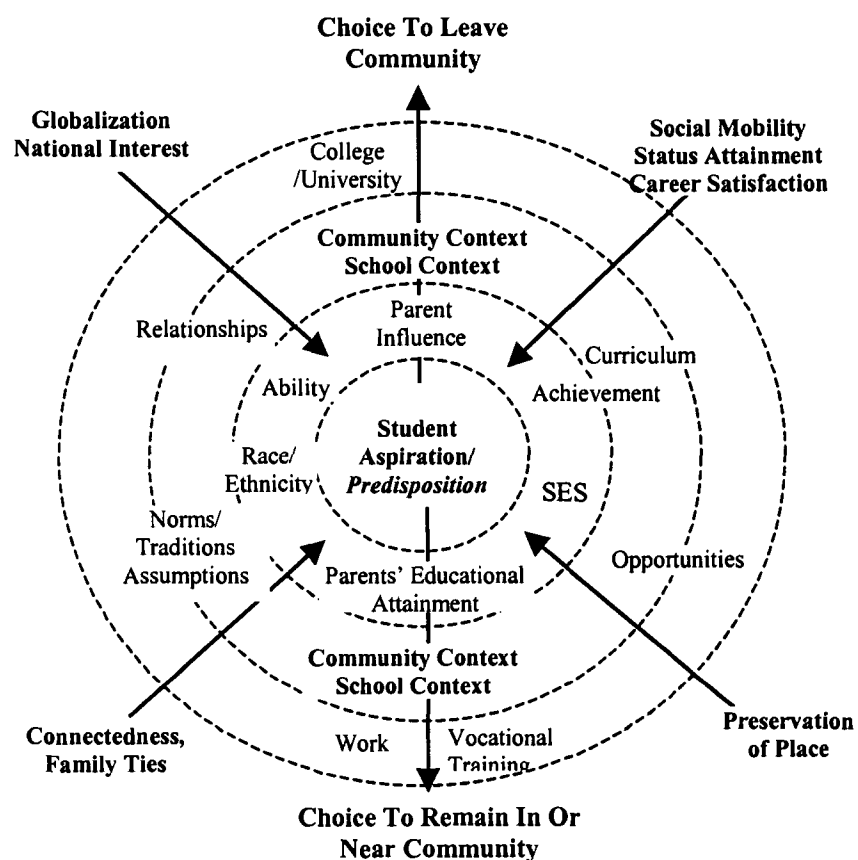
Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the development of rural students' aspirations.

Current research in rural education also debates the meaning of competing

societal values to the development of aspiration. Some experts have argued that, for rural

youth, values of maintaining close family relationships and ties to their community may

be incongruent with larger societal values of social mobility status attainment through

career and financial success (Hektner, 1995). Furthermore, rural schools and

communities may wish to emphasize agendas and curricula grounded in values of preservation of "place" (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996, p. 151) and connections to family and community. However, when they do so, they define different educational priorities than those identified as important to developing a sophisticated workforce prepared to lead an increasing global economy and society (Howley et al., 1996; Howley, 1997).

Khattri et al. (1997) are among those who have called for new research to expand our understanding regarding "whether poverty is the primary factor jeopardizing student educational achievement, or whether rural location and attendant community characteristics also play a significant role" (p. 93). Harmon et al. (1996) as a result of their review and analysis of doctoral research in rural education, called for additional research assessing student expectations and their vision for the future. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) recommended more serious attention to learning how to reconcile rural and national agendas so that rural young people are empowered to make informed choices about their futures.

The conceptual model provides a framework for examining, from the perspective of high school seniors, the assumptions, norms, policies, and practices that are emergent from the confluence of powerful forces that shape the context in which rural youth make their life decisions. The model serves as the organizing element of this study. I use it to illuminate, as heard in the voices of students, the meaning of this context to the decisions they make for their futures.

<u>Defining Rural</u>

That no consistent definition of *rural* has emerged from the literature complicates the task of making sense of available data and findings from studies of rural places (Beeson & Strange, 2000; Fasko & Fasko, 1998; Khattri et al., 1997; Rios, 1988). Further complicating the problem of defining what is rural, the circumstances and characteristics of rural communities and their inhabitants vary dramatically from region to region and even within regions across the nation (Beeson & Strange, 2000). For example, Iowa is frequently described as a rural state. Yet, to say so masks the diversity within its borders. For example, among the 23 Iowa counties where the U. S. Census Bureau classified 100% of residents as rural in 2000, the range of per capita income in 1999 was $16,436 in Decatur County to $28,121 in Iowa County (Goudy, Burke, & Hanson, 2001).

The National Center for Education Statistics noted three classification systems used by Federal agencies to determine "urbanicity" (National Center For Education Statistics [NCES], Retrieved March 9, 2003, Beale Codes section, ¶1) of locales. The most commonly used of these, United States Department of Agriculture's ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, is popularly referred to as the Beale Codes. It comprises four metropolitan categories, and six non-metropolitan categories. Two of the non-metropolitan categories, codes 8 and 9 are designated as "completely rural" with "no places with a population of 2,500 or more" and either "adjacent to" or "not adjacent to a metropolitan county" (NCES, Retrieved March 9, 2003, Beale Codes section, ¶3).

However, this system is not only cumbersome, it characterizes as urban many places that Iowans think of as rural in character.

Iowa State University's Department of Ecnomics (2002) offered a rural/urban classification system that is a useful adaptation of the 1993 United States Department of Agriculture's Beale Code Definition. The Midwest PROfiles classification system reduced the number of categories in the system to four types of counties, two of which are designated as rural. According to this typography, rural counties are those non-metro counties with urban populations of less than 20,000. These are further divided into counties that are adjacent to metropolitan counties and those that are not.

In this study, I use the most conservative definition of rural within the Midwest PROfiles classification system. Therefore, rural refers to places that exist in a county with an urban population of less than 20,000 and are not adjacent to a metropolitan county. Forty-five counties with 72 school districts in Iowa are identified as belonging in this category.

<u>Characteristics Of Rural Places</u>

The U.S. Census Bureau classifies 48.7% of Iowa public elementary and secondary schools as rural (Rural Schools and Community Trust, 2003). This includes many of the 42.1% of small Iowa school districts that enroll fewer than 600 or 12.4% of Iowa school age children (Iowa Department of Education, 2003). Districts enrolling fewer than 600 students are more likely to enroll higher percentages of low-income students as measured by the number students eligible for free and reduced meals. They

also report slightly lower numbers of graduates who intend to pursue postsecondary education or training (Iowa Department of Education, 2003).

In addition, those who do go on to postsecondary education are more likely to permanently leave their rural community for more urban places (Besser, 1995). Besser noted that the net loss of college-educated 20-34 year olds from non-metro to metro areas is 11% while there is a net gain of young people who did not finish high school.

These data are consistent with national studies indicating that suburban and urban students are more likely to enter and complete postsecondary education (Gibbs, 2000). The NCES (1996) showed a lower college application rate for rural 12th graders (54.3%) compared to their suburban (61.6%) and urban (56.5%) peers. Likewise, among residents age 25 and older, rural residents appear less likely to have attained a bachelor's degree. For example, in Des Moines, Iowa's most metropolitan area, 29% of all residents earned a bachelors degree according to 2000 U.S. Census data. Meanwhile, in four non-metro counties in south central Iowa the percentages of the population holding a bachelor's degree ranged from 11% to 17%.

Important early indicators of postsecondary continuation include academic performance and whether a student takes advanced math and science courses in high school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). While not necessarily intended for this purpose, ACT scores are frequently cited as measures of academic preparation and achievement for individuals and groups of students. Recent statistics from the Iowa Department of Education (Stillwell, 2003) for rural schools enrolling fewer than 250 students indicated that rural students earned lower ACT scores (average of 21.1 compared to the state

average of 22). Additionally, according to Stillwell's report, fewer rural students enrolled in advanced math courses (11.8% of rural students compared to 19.1% statewide) and fewer enrolled advanced science courses (23.9% of rural students enrolled in physics compared to 34.7% statewide).

Districts in all enrollment categories report a steady trend toward higher percentages of graduates who plan to pursue education or training beyond high school. However, in six of the last eight years (1995- 2002), districts with total enrollments between 250 and 599 students reported a smaller percentage than the state as a whole. Districts in the smallest enrollment category (<250 students) reported a lower percentage than the state in five of the last eight years.

Table 1

Percentage Iowa Public High School Graduates/Seniors Pursuing or Intending to Pursue Postsecondary Education/Training by Year of Graduation and Enrollment Category

| Year of Graduation | Enrollment Category | | | | | | | |
	<250	250-399	400-599	600-999	1,000-2,499	2,500-7,499	7,500+	State
1995	65.9	68.3	72.2	73.2	71.1	70.8	73.4	71.9
1996	59.5	69.2	71.5	73.3	73.4	68.4	72.6	71.9
1997	76.6	72.4	68.4	73.4	74.9	68.4	74.0	72.5
1998	69.7	70.2	70.8	73.2	74.6	72.5	75.8	73.7
1999	69.9	74.7	73.4	76.4	76.9	76.6	74.5	75.8
2000	80.5	82.5	80.1	78.9	79	76	79.1	78.7
2001	73.9	81.3	81.0	82.5	83.1	81.9	84.3	82.7
2002	84.1	84.9	82.1	82.7	83.5	80	82.6	82.4

Note. Adapted by researcher from "Percent Iowa Public High School Graduates/Seniors Pursuing or Intending to Pursue Postsecondary Education/Training Graduating Classes of 1985, and 1995 Through 2002," Iowa Department of Education. (2002). *Condition of Education Report 2002* (p. 211). Des Moines, IA: Author.

In two of the three most recent years (Table 1), schools in the smallest enrollment categories reported higher percentages than the state average of students planning to pursue postsecondary education or training. It is unknown if this is a response to short

term changes in employment opportunities resulting from the flagging national economy or if this represents a longer-term trend for high school graduates of small, predominantly rural Iowa communities. However, Pogue and Maxey (1996) noted that, among youths pursuing any postsecondary education, a lower percentage of rural students, as compared to urban students, pursue four-year degrees. Pogue and Maxey report that trend continues through graduate education.

Districts in the three lowest enrollment categories also have, on the average, high percentages of students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch (Iowa Department of Education, 2002) based on family income. All districts in the smallest enrollment category qualify as at least mid poverty districts (21% to 40% eligible for free and reduced price meals) according to the definitions used by the 1993-1994 Schools and Staffing Survey (Khattri et al., 1997). More than 25% of these schools qualify as high poverty districts (over 40% eligible for free and reduced price meals).

Table 2

Free and Reduced Lunch Rate by Enrollment Category

Enrollment Category	<250	250-399	400-599	600-999	1,000 to 2,499	2,500 to 7,499	7500+	State
Free or Reduced %	37.1	29.8	24.5	23.2	24.7	21.5	34.3	26.7
Free or Reduced % Range	22.7:70.8	14.1:49.4	6.2: 42.5	5.1:48.2	5.3:51.5	3.24:40.29	9.3:51.7	

Note. From Iowa Department of Education, *2001-2002 BEDS PK-12 free and reduced eligible meal student counts by school district.*

Statement of Purpose

This study adds to our understanding of the meaning of competing societal values and community context in the development of educational aspirations of young people in one low-income, rural Iowa community. This was accomplished through an analysis of what a sample of high school seniors had to say regarding what is important to them, what perceptions and experiences they say have shaped their hopes, and what fears they confront when considering the likelihood of achieving their dreams.

Statement of Problem

The problem considered in this study is how high school seniors attending school in a small, predominantly low-income, rural Iowa district describe and assign meaning to the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shaped their choices about whether or not to pursue education beyond high school.

Research Questions

Four broad research questions guided my study:

1. What do rural students say they want most out of life? To what extent do they see education as the pathway to achieve their goals?

2. How do rural students make decisions about what they will do following high school graduation?

3. What do rural students see as the supports that will help them in achieving what they want? What do they understand as the potential barriers?

4. How strongly do they feel connected to their roots? Do they think their decisions about life after high school have any relationship to the future of the community?

The following topics in the literature will be explored for their contribution to shaping the study and understanding the results: (a) the role of culture in defining the purpose of education for a society and in determining what is valued by its members (b) the role of community context in shaping aspiration, and (c) the development of aspiration and college choice.

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

Terms requiring definition for the purposes of this study may be separated into two categories. These are terms referring to (a) site and personal characteristics, and terms referring to (b) aspiration.

Site and Personal Characteristics

Terms referring to the site and personal characteristics of participants will be operationalized using the following definitions:

Rural. In this study, rural refers to places that exist in counties with an urban population of less than 20,000 that are not adjacent to a metropolitan county.

Small district. A small district is a school district enrolling fewer than 600 students K-12. This includes districts in the two smallest enrollment categories identified by the Iowa Department of Education (2002).

Low-income. Low-income school districts are those for which the Iowa Department of Education reports a 2002-2003 free and reduced lunch rate that exceeds

the state average of 28.5%. Percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced cost meals provide a useful measure of the socio-economic status of rural Iowa communities. Because free and reduced lunch eligibility is dependent upon family income, the percentage of students reported as eligible for free and reduced cost meals has become a nationally recognized measure of socio-economic status (Khattri et al., 1997).

Educational attainment. The highest level of education for which a degree, license, or certification was awarded.

Academic achievement. For the purposes of this study, academic achievement means Grade Point Average (GPA) and/or performance on standardized tests such as the ACT or Iowa Tests of Educational Development.

High school graduation rate. The district's self-reported percentage of students who enrolled in the ninth grade, did not transfer to another high school, and graduated after four years.

Postsecondary continuation rate. The district's self-reported percentage of high school graduates who entered postsecondary education.

Aspiration

In this study, I will operationalize aspiration according to Haas' (1992, Understanding Aspirations, ¶1) definition that, "Aspirations reflect individuals' ideas of their 'possible selves,' what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become."

The operational definition of terms related to the educational aspirations of participating students will include the following:

Postsecondary education. Two or four-year college or university degree program for qualifying high school graduates.

Postsecondary training. Vocational training program for qualifying high school graduates leading to a certificate or license.

Expectation for postsecondary education or training. The self-reported level of commitment or certainty a student, his or her parents, or others express toward that student's pursuit of education or training after high school graduation.

Support for postsecondary education or training. Encouragement, assistance, advice, and information provided to students for the purpose of facilitating their postsecondary plans.

Plan for postsecondary education. The self-reported type and geographic location of educational program or institution a student plans to attend following high school graduation and the time period during which students expect to begin and complete their program of advanced study.

Connectedness. The self-reported degree to which students link their educational and career goals to staying in or near the community where they attended high school.

Assumptions

This study is founded on two important and common assumptions. First, I assume that it really is important to Americans in the 21st century that the national educational agenda includes developing every student's potential as fully as possible. Second, I assume general consensus among educational researchers, leaders and policy makers (Hurn, 1993; McGranahan, 1994) that some form of education beyond high

school for most, if not all students, has or should become an integral part of the developmental process. While both of these assumptions may be subject to serious debate, they appear to be substantially reflected in the language of education reform initiatives in recent decades (see, for example, Hurn, 1993).

Delimitations of the Study

This proposed study is observational, descriptive, interpretive in nature, and grounded in data collected at a given point in time. The study will have the following delimitations:

1. This study is site specific. While the site was selected for characteristics that may be representative of other rural Iowa districts, it should be recognized that each community and school district is unique. Therefore, while the findings in this study may have implications for policymakers and educational leaders with regard to similar settings, generalizability should not be automatically assumed.

2. This study does not intend to show cause and effect. Rather, it is designed as a naturalistic approach to inquiry, the purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experiences to unique individuals in a specified context.

3. This is a study of reality as perceived and communicated by 17 and 18 year-old participants. Their perceptions of reality may be constrained by their, as yet, limited life experience and their developmental stage. However, it is this limited perception of reality that is the focal point of my study as it forms the foundation upon which these young people will make some of their most important life decisions including whether or not to pursue education beyond high school.

Importance

There are persistent demands to develop the potential of more American youth through high levels of educational attainment in order to increase our nation's capacity to compete in a global economy. At the same time, many scholars have called attention to the dilemma this mandate creates for rural youth, their families, and their communities as values of nation building collide with rural values of place, family, and community.

The results of this study contribute to our ability to respond to these challenges by expanding our understanding of the meaning students in low-income, rural Iowa communities ascribe to the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shape their choices about whether or not to pursue education beyond high school. Such knowledge will help parents, educators, and policy makers better shape the quality, content, and timing of experiences available to youth as they make their postsecondary choices. Educators will be able to develop more relevant learning experiences that empower youth to envision a future of positive choices regarding family, career, and geographic location. Policy makers will have a better foundation for deciding how to allocate scarce public resources. Institutions of higher education will be able to shape recruitment and retention policies to meet the needs of rural students.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Teaching and learning happen within the social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic contexts of a particular "place." These contexts influence the opportunities students have to learn and what we expect of them. (Carter, 1999, ¶1)

The problem under consideration in this study is how high school seniors, in a

small, predominantly low-income, rural Iowa district describe and assign meaning to the

norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shaped their choices about

whether or not to pursue education beyond high school.

To develop a foundation for understanding the perceptions of high school seniors

in a depressed rural community with respect to their aspirations for the future, this review

explores the following topics in the literature: (a) the role of culture in defining the

purpose of education for a society and in determining what is valued by its members, (b)

the role of community context in shaping aspiration, and (c) the development of

aspiration and college choice.

What's Really Important: Culture, Context, and the Aspirations of Rural People

A lower percentage of rural students than urban students plan to enroll in

postsecondary education (Barcinas, 1989; Gibbs, 1997). Barcinas found that 47.2% of

rural students compared to 65.1% of urban students aspire to postsecondary education.

Still, not all researchers agree that the character of a community is important to

development of youths' educational aspirations. Surveying research results on the

development of aspiration, Paulsen (1990) argued that community characteristics were

not a significant factor once other variables were taken into account. He found students'

academic ability, parents' educational attainment, and the socioeconomic status of the

families to be particularly important.

However, others (Brown, 1985; Hektner, 1995; Lawrence, 1998) found the

culture and context of the community of origin do impact what students grow to envision

as possible and desirable and, ultimately, what careers they choose to pursue. Fasko and

Fasko (1998) suggested that rural youth are more affected by their social relationships

and the norms and values of their communities than are urban youth. Lawrence (1998),

drawing on, among others, the work of Mead in the field of cultural anthropology and

Bandura, Erikson, and Hamechek in developmental psychology, noted the power of

culture and culturally determined expectations to shape the knowledge young people

acquire and the way they develop identity and understand their place in the world. Thus,

young people learn to think about their futures, in ways that fall into identifiable patterns

of behavior.

> Within the culture of origin we find factors that define the aspirations an
> individual learns to consider worth attaining. An individual may grow away from
> those definitions, may change goals and redefine appropriate means to attain
> them, but not without effort, since they are deeply imbedded with the concept of
> self. (Lawrence, 1998, p. 36)

In addition to differences in plans for college, there are clear differences in

patterns of preparing for attending college between rural and urban youth (Barcinas,

1989; Khattri et al., 1997; Iowa Department of Education, 2002; Lawrence, 1998). A

smaller percentage of rural than urban students take advanced math and science (Pogue &

Maxey, 1996). Similarly, a smaller percentage of rural youth take the ACT Assessment

and rural youth are less likely than urban youth to attend four-year colleges and

universities. They are more likely than urban students to attend two-year colleges and

universities (Khattri et al.; Pogue & Maxey). Finally, 2000 U.S. Census Bureau data

indicate that, overall, educational attainment is lower for rural Americans than for urban

Americans.

<u>Culture</u>

Increasingly, rural sociologists are examining issues related to rural culture and

competing values that encroach from national, even global agendas, for their ability to

help explain the differences in outcomes between rural and urban people (Theobald &

Nachtigal, 1995). The concept of culture, as used in this study, draws heavily upon

anthropological definitions of culture. Raymond Williams (Miraglia, Law, & Collins,

1999) pioneered the concept of culture as a way of thinking about the symbolic

dimensions of our everyday lives. Culture has subsequently been understood as a

description of the patterns of meaning people assign to life as they experience it. Such

patterns include what is known, believed, valued, encouraged, and produced by an

identifiable group of people (Bodley, 1994).

Cultural meaning outlives individuals and is transmitted from one generation to

the next (Bodley, 1994). As such, culture involves widely shared meanings and norms

that deeply affect the development of its members; yet, as Williams suggested, the

meanings must still be reconstructed anew by each member of the culture in the progress

of developing his or her own abilities, interests, and experience (Miraglia et al., 1999).

So, out of a common experience and widely shared meanings, the aspirations of youth

evolve in a way that has both identifiable patterns and anomalies.

Context of Rural Places

Community conditions interact with students' imaginations as they realize their aspirations. (Haas, cited in Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996, p. 133)

Culture develops within a context, a complex milieu of contributing factors that is

the unique set of economic, ecological, social, historical, or other phenomena, both

internal and external, as they relate to a given place (Lawrence, 1998). From the

intersection of these phenomena in the life of a people, patterns of behavior and shared

meanings emerge over time and come to characterize that people and their place.

McDonough (1997) referred to this as creating the "web of opportunities," "structural

arrangements," and "contingencies" in which young people make their postsecondary

plans.

The economic context of rural communities. Following a national trend, rural

communities are becoming more internally homogeneous. Rural communities are also

differentiated from each other by the nature of the local economy and the socioeconomic

status of the people who live there (Huang, 1999).

Nachtigal, cited in Kannapel and DeYoung (1999), has suggested three types of

rural places that are grounded in the economic and cultural life of communities: (a) poor

rural communities, places with lower median income, lower education level, high

mortality rate, and lower self-determination; (b) traditional communities of Middle

America, characterized by strong family life, well-kept homes, a strong work ethic, and

high levels of achievement in school and work; and (c) communities in transition, places

where recreation, energy and proximity to urban areas result in an influx of outsiders. Following the economic turmoil in rural America of the 1980s and the subsequent changes in many rural communities, these categories seem too simplistic.

Gjelten (1982) developed a more elaborate typology that offers additional power for understanding the differences that evolved among rural communities in the last two decades of the 20th century. Gjelten identified five types of communities:

1. Stable rural communities are prosperous, homogeneous, and strongly support education.

2. Depressed rural communities offer little promise of economic growth, few employment options, and high out migration of more educated young.

3. High growth rural communities have rapidly increasing populations related to a new economic base such as energy production or industrial development.

4. Reborn rural communities are places where comfortable climates or attractive natural features draw upscale, urbanites seeking refuge from the frenzied life of cities.

5. Isolated rural communities are separated from the rest of the world by natural barriers, such as water, mountains, or woods.

The last half of the 20th century witnessed a dramatic shift in the economy of rural places so that, by the mid 1990s, the new economic character of many traditionally stable rural communities more closely matched Gjelten's (1982) description of depressed rural communities. Economically, these communities became very similar to many urban areas (McGranahan, 1994). DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) noted that less than 3% of the American labor force is employed in farming or other employment directly related to

natural resources. According to McGranahan, 60% of employment in both urban and rural areas is in distributive or consumer services with 20% in manufacturing.

However, many companies reserve their rural locations for production creating employment opportunities that include a relatively large percent of low-wage, low-skill jobs. Meanwhile, most professional, managerial positions are located in more urban areas (Hodgkinson & Obarakpor, 1994; McGranahan, 1994). Levine and Nidiffer (1996) noted that, as a result of an increasing isolation of communities by socioeconomic status, youth have few role models to draw upon in the development of their aspirations. Rural youth and their parents may see little reason to pursue high levels of educational attainment if young people plan to eventually seek employment opportunities close to home (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001).

Socioeconomic status and the development of aspiration. Persistently, research has found socioeconomic status of families to be a significant predictor of postsecondary education (Paulsen, 1990). The literature on the development of aspiration generally looks at socioeconomic status as a characteristic of individuals and families and not communities (Paulsen). However, rural places tend to be homogeneous with respect to socioeconomic status. As such, the socioeconomic status of families, considered collectively, becomes part of the milieu of the community.

As has been shown, the economic base of many traditional rural farming communities has been altered in important ways and the changes significantly affect rural families. Accompanying the shift to a manufacturing base, McGranahan (1994) documented a decline in income for less well-educated males. Additionally, more

women entered the work force but earn less than similarly educated rural men. For example, rural women with college degrees earn about the same wages as men with high school degrees. As a result, there are more poor families with both parents working outside the home. In addition, single working mothers head an increasing number of households (Hodgkinson & Obarakpor, 1994; McGranahan).

Khattri et al. (1997) found that, while the percentage of rural people who are poor increased in the last decades of the 20th century, rural poor were more likely than urban poor to be employed. For example, they noted by 20%, fewer rural than urban families received Aid to Dependent Children. Still, overall, Hodkinson and Obarakpor (1994), McGranahan (1994) and others described increasing *child* poverty in rural areas during the 1980s and 1990s. While the situation improved somewhat in the late 1990s, a significant percentage of students growing up and attending school in depressed rural communities are members of families with income levels below or hovering near the poverty line.

The relationship of socioeconomic status to educational attainment and other measures of well-being has been thoroughly documented (Manski, 1992; Manski & Wise, 1983; Sewell & Shah, 1968; Stage & Hossler, 2000). Oesterreich (2000) and Mortensen (2001a) argue that socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of college enrollment and persistence.

> At every level of disaggregation of population data, the same powerful relationship between educational performance and success with family income holds. More family income produces greater levels of educational attainment. (Mortenson, 2001b, p. 3)

Statistical analyses of national data have shown that the college participation rate nationally among 18-to 24-year-old students from low-income families (income less than $33,902) in 2000 was 35.5% % compared to 75.2% for students with family incomes above $ 86,200 (Mortenson, 2001a). In Iowa, according to Mortenson, low-income students fared slightly better with a college participation rate of 37.7% in 1999.

Ottinger (1991) found that, after accounting for ability, socioeconomic status is also an important factor in college persistence. Ottinger found a 14% gap in retention rates between high and low socioeconomic status students. Manski (1992), reviewing data from the Current Population Survey, the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, and High School and Beyond Survey, found that only 50% of all students enrolling in college earn their bachelor's degrees and that the rate of college completion is significantly lower than 50% for low-income students.

Family type in rural places and the development of aspiration: Of course, while many families in depressed rural communities are poor, some families are not. Within rural communities, stratification of families by socioeconomic status clearly results in related patterns of college-going behaviors. The Iowa Youth and Families Project (McGrath et al., 2001) grouped rural youth into three distinct categories: (a) professional-managerial families (middle and upper income families), (b) farm families (varying family income levels), and (c) lower status (low-income) families. Youth in each category follow a distinct path to college.

Professional-managerial parents socialize their children to go to college based on their own education, resources, and connections (McGrath et al., 2001). Youth in this

category generally have at least one parent who completed a college education. They are likely to report growing up with high academic expectations for achievement and the assumption they would also attend college. McGrath et al. found that 91% of youth from professional-managerial families attend college.

Farm families similarly have high expectations for children although McGrath et al. (2001) noted a slightly different focus in their expectations. They found that farm families create strong supportive networks for their children through their community ties and their expectation for leadership roles in the community. Furthermore, youths growing up in farm families are more likely to be expected to assume responsibilities vital to the life of the family and its business, thus building self-confidence and the expectation among youth for leadership roles. Among the children of farm families, 87% attend a two-year or four-year college.

In both professional-managerial families and farm families, parents are actively involved in their children's education and extra-curricular activities. Their children, then, develop important relationships that support and reinforce the development of aspiration for high levels of educational attainment (McGrath et al., 2001). Thus, though the paths are different, the children of professional-managerial families and the children of farm families appear similar in their college going expectations and behaviors.

McGrath et al. (2001) identified a more difficult pathway to high educational attainment for lower status rural students. Over 60% of their parents had no college experience at all, had net assets of less than $40,000, and were not active in the life of the community. Still, these youth must rely on relationships developed with adults in the

school and community (often through church related activities) to help them develop early aspirations for high levels of educational attainment. This presents a significant challenge since, according to McGrath et al., lower status youth tend to be less well integrated into the life of the community and, thus, have limited opportunities to develop such relationships. Further, according to McGrath et al., even when lower status students develop college aspirations, they are less likely to enroll and/or persist. Of lower socioeconomic status youth, 69% enroll in college.

Historical context of education in rural communities. The culture of rural America, including the meaning it assigns to education, is deeply rooted in its agrarian past and the populist views of Thomas Jefferson (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lutz, Lutz, & Tweeddale, 1992). The traditional structure of family and community life was shaped around a diversified economy supported by an agrarian base and its deep connections to the land. Formal education was a function of communities, locally controlled and expected to complement the values of the family and to socialize students into the life of the community (Lutz et al.).

A push for professionalism of school staff and state-mandated accountability accompanied the rise of industrialism and the corresponding push for a professional bureaucracy in the 20th century and persists today (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Some researchers studying rural education argue that, as rural schools and educators have adapted to the demands of the national agenda to provide specialized workers for a global marketplace, it has redefined what success for students means in alignment with the national agenda (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Lutz et al., 1992). In doing so, schools

have lost sight of the need to also prepare students to live well in their rural places, if they so choose, and to sustain local communities (Kannapel & DeYoung; Lutz et al.). As a result, students may wish to stay, even choose to stay, but believe that staying behind marks them as inherently less successful (Lawrence, 1998).

The context of education in depressed rural communities. Coleman (1988), argued that socioeconomic status accounts for about half of the difference in college attendance and that much of the rest can be accounted for by what occurs in the context of the school. McDonough (1997) found that schools do affect whether or not students attend college. She noted resources schools make (or, fail to make) available that are important to the development of aspiration: (a) the curriculum, (b) the academic standards, (c) the value climate of the school, (d) the formal and informal communication networks, (e) the orientation of school staff, and (f) the resources devoted to guidance and counseling.

Depressed rural schools face many challenges in trying to provide these resources for students. Generally, Gjelten (1982) found depressed rural communities are less able to support schools financially. However, Pogue and Maxey (1996) point out that the relative support available to districts is a function of individual states' funding practices. They found that per pupil expenditures were about equal in urban and rural school districts in Iowa. However, the small and often declining enrollments in depressed rural districts and the generally tight fiscal resources during the last decades of the 20th century have resulted in school facilities that are often old, in need of repair, and/or inadequate to meet the needs of students. In particular, according to Pogue and Maxey rural students

are less satisfied than urban students with the libraries and laboratory facilities that are available to them.

The nature of the curriculum and the quality of instruction in depressed rural communities is also an issue and may be related to the development of aspiration for postsecondary education. Gjelten (1982) and Stillwell (2003) reported that rural schools tend to have high staff turnover resulting in lower quality instruction. Some studies indicate that many rural teachers are teaching in more than one content area and frequently outside their content area (Khattri et al., 1997; Pogue & Maxey, 1996). Additionally, according to Pogue and Maxey, rural schools offer inadequate guidance services.

Rural students are also dissatisfied with curricula that lack depth and breadth (Downey, 1980). The curricula in rural places generally offer fewer opportunities for students to take advanced levels of math and science (Barcinas, 1989; Khattri et al., 1997). Limited options may help, but do not fully explain why rural students are more likely than urban students to enroll in vocational courses instead of taking college preparatory courses as documented by Pogue and Maxey (1996).

In addition to fewer curricular offerings, rural schools offer a more limited range of extracurricular activities. Barcinas (1989) found that rural schools offered a mean of 22.9 extra-curricular activities compared to 41.4 in urban schools. However, Barcinas also found that the percentage of participation among rural students appears nearly equivalent to that of urban students.

In spite of the challenges, Khattri et al. (1997) and Howley, Strange, and Bickel (2000) identified important advantages related to small school size that is characteristic of many rural places. Lee (2001, ¶ 1) argued that the popular perception that rural schools operate as a "deficit" model of education is not substantiated by available data.

Some researchers cite higher standardized test scores as indicators that rural schools support academic performance as well or better than their urban counterparts (for example, Gibbs, 2000; Gibbs , Swaim, & Teixeira, 1998; Khattri et al., 1997). Through about grade 10, rural students achieve at levels higher than their urban peers and with about equal performance in grades 11 and 12 (Khattri et al.). In addition, Khattri et al. report higher high school graduation rates for low-income rural students (94%) when compared to urban students (90%).

Rural and small schools are able to compensate for at least some of the disadvantage through the strength of personal relationships that develop among students, their teachers, and parents (Howley et al., 2000; Lee, 2001). Khattri et al. (1997) concluded that a generally positive school climate, an orderly learning environment, and strong student involvement in extra-curricular activities support student achievement in spite of the economic challenges facing families and the community. Low student-to-teacher ratios, cooperative learning, individualized instruction, and staff commitment are qualities that have also been identified as strengths of small schools (Lee).

It appears, from findings in the literature, that depressed rural schools have both strengths and weaknesses with respect to their capacity to help students achieve

academically. Discussions in the literature are less clear regarding how well depressed rural schools support the development of aspiration among the youth they serve.

Culture of rural places. In spite of the lack of economic promise in depressed rural places, researchers studying values of rural Americans (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Howley, 1997; Lawrence, 1998) identify some common themes that represent the shared meanings of experiences for many rural people and reflect their affection for and attachment to rural places. Herzog and Pittman reported a list of 88 positive descriptors students attending Western Carolina University used to describe their rural communities and schools. Participating students offered only 17 negative descriptors.

Positive descriptors are reflective of the rural social and economic structure. They included such qualities as " peaceful," "safe," "friendly," "home," "comfortable," "close-knit," "common good people," and "people who care more about each other than money" (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 117). Dukes Lee (2001) noted that some rural people return to their rural communities of origin, after years living away, in search of comfort and security.

Haas and Lambert (1995) confirmed the importance of family and relationships to other people. Herzog and Pittman (1995) further noted rural youth valued the character of the land around them, the informality of rural life, the strong work ethic of their people, the sense of discipline, and lack of racial/ethnic conflict and socioeconomic stratification. Similarly, Lawrence (1998) found that the rural people of Tremont, Maine, valued family and neighbors, the honesty of manual labor, and their relationship to the

land. D'Amico, Matthes, Sankar, Merchant, and Zurita (1996) added that rural people also value the rituals, traditions, and predictability of rural life.

Howley et al. (1996) found that, while rural youth value jobs that provide reasonable compensation, they also desire a clean and healthy living environment, help for the unemployed to find jobs, activities and places for teenagers to interact safely, and high quality medical care. In a similar vein, Haas (1992) believes that many rural parents place little value on goals that focus on achieving high status and wealth. Instead, they care more about stable employment and solid incomes that permit continuity of relationships with family and friends.

Researchers identified relatively few negative descriptors. Among those included are "no culture" (evidently referring to the refinements of high or popular culture) and "isolated" (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 117). D'Amico et al. noted that some rural youth describe their communities as places where there is hostility and racism, boredom, and lack of opportunity.

Herzog and Pittman (1995) found that the attitudes of teachers and the textbooks still used in rural classrooms project negative stereotypes of rural places. They made the case that negative stereotypes of rural people are generated from the urban values and agenda of the larger American culture. Herzog and Pittman found that rural students internalize these externally imposed images in ways that negatively affect their perception of self and their possibilities.

> Even though our times are characterized by a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences, it is still considered socially and politically correct to poke fun at "rednecks," "hillbillies," and "hicks." (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 114)

Rural Values: Competition From the Dominant Culture

Lawrence (1998), Herzog and Pittman (1995), Shaffer, Seyfrit, and Conference

Participants (1999) and others have concluded that values embedded in the culture of

rural places are often incompatible with those of the dominant culture of the United

States in important ways. It has been suggested that these incompatibilities result in less

than satisfactory outcomes for some rural youth (Hektner, 1995; Howley, 1997; Khattri et

al., 1997; Lawrence).

> We develop not only an individual personality, we also take on a cultural
> personality. To the extent that the norms and values of the native culture are at
> odds with the norms and values of the encroaching dominant culture, people
> living between the two will suffer cognitive dissonance as they cross back and
> forth between the two. It is as if the two cultures are playing tug of war. The
> challenge then is to enable students to define their aspirations by integrating what
> they value in each. (Lawrence, 1998, p. 107)

The dominant culture assumes that the primary goal of all schools, rural as well as

urban and suburban, should be to produce graduates consistently prepared with the skills,

knowledge and attitudes needed to serve national interests in our economic, military and

social institutions (Harmon, 1998; Israel et al., 2001; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

Thereby, a citizenry capable of managing complex information technologies will ensure

our nation's successful competition in an increasingly global marketplace.

The role of education in supporting progress. The perspective of the dominant

culture is grounded in the functionalist constructs of scientific inquiry, scientific

management, and rational bureaucracies (Hurn, 1993). It assumes that the primary

purpose of education is to support *progress*. During the period of rapid industrialization

following the Civil War in the United States, progress came to be defined as rapidly

expanding technology developed to support increased production. The design for progress called for increasing levels of specialization for workers (Lutz et al., 1992). The curriculum is understood as (a) the means to develop the human capital or the skills, attitudes and knowledge needed for increased specialization, productivity and economic growth; and (b) an efficient way of identifying and channeling talented individuals to the most important positions (Hurn).

The logic of progress, as elaborated by Lutz et al. (1992) and used here, is embedded in the concept of cultural evolution. Cultural evolution dictates that all cultures and organizations exist on a continuum of increasing sophistication. In this schema, the measure of sophistication is the level of scientific knowledge possessed by the culture and the degree to which related technology has been developed and used to apply that knowledge. An emphasis on numbers and scores is an associated value that is expressed in terms like "efficiency" and "achievement" (p. 52). Cultures (in this case urban or national culture) where one finds the most advanced technologies are defined as the most progressive and progress becomes a dominant value. As places where high degrees of specialization are not present or necessary, rural places may be understood as getting in the way of progress (Howley, 1997).

Pittman, McGinty, and Gerstl-Pepin (1999) examined the related assumption that increasing the number of highly educated people will drive new economic progress. They found that, instead, at the societal level economic growth and higher incomes support increased pursuit of high levels of educational attainment. However, it is not true that increasing the percent of the population that is highly educated necessarily leads to

economic growth. Pittman et al. argued that, while the number of jobs available is not a function of the number of individuals qualified to perform those jobs, over time, earnings are negatively associated with the ratio of qualified individuals to the number of jobs available.

This means that, while individuals may command higher wages for a skill that is temporarily in short supply, training many individuals to perform equally well in the same skill area will not necessarily support continued high incomes or drive progress. Particularly for rural places, Pittman et al. (1999) recommended skepticism of claims that increasing levels of educational attainment will result in improved local economies.

Credentialism, consumerism and how we define success. DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) link the definition of progress as a societal value to the notions of careerism, or credentialism, and consumerism (Lutz et al., 1992). At the heart of credentialism and consumerism is the belief that, in order to be successful workers in an increasingly sophisticated and productive technological economy, individuals will have completed high levels of education (DeYoung & Lawrence. An individual's success in the present global economy is defined as the accumulation of wealth to support consumerism that, in turn, drives the demand for increased production. DeYoung and Lawrence and others find that these assumptions contradict and devalue the rural experience and the values of community and place.

Hurn (1993) and Howley (1997) drawing on the work of Collins and Bowles and Gintis, argued that there is a "myth of technocracy" (Hurn, p. 62). They point out that, in fact, only very modest changes in skills will be needed to work effectively in most new

jobs. Harmon (1998) noted that investments in higher education would be of benefit only to those willing to commute long distances or willing to migrate toward urban and metropolitan areas. According to Harmon, most rural labor markets will provide opportunities that require vocational training or associate degrees at most. Several studies point out that degrees or certificates are likely to be less important than highly developed workplace skills such as good communication skills, a strong work ethic, and ability to work as a member of a team (Harmon; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

Given this reality, some argue that setting educational goals and developing curricula that focus on high levels of educational attainment may, in effect mean setting an expectation that the most academically accomplished students will leave rural communities for more urban places (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). This urban focus in the educational agenda sends a clear message to students, parents, and community members that bigger is better, urban is preferable to rural, that the rural experience is inherently less valuable (Theobald & Nachticgal, 1995).

Finally, there are those who perceive the push for credentials (degrees) as a powerful mechanism for reinforcing existing social inequalities (Howley, 1997; Hurn, 1993). They contend that education has become a kind of cultural investment that allows individuals to maintain and pass on from generation to generation a certain kind of status with all the accompanying advantages.

Specialization, standardization, centralization, efficiency, and reliance on experts are among the enduring legacies of cultural evolution and industrialism. Standards for graduation are now set with access to four year degree programs and work in a global

marketplace in mind. Meanwhile, in many rural communities, students and their families

have lost a sense of ownership for and engagement with learning (Lutz et al., 1992).

Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) note that, in the end, many rural youth are less likely to

link education to local economic opportunities. This, they suggested, may contribute to

the reality that aspiration and educational attainment are lower in rural places and out-

migration of the most highly educated young people remains high.

<u>The Development of Aspiration: How Rural Youth</u>
<u>Make Decisions about Life After High School</u>

Aspirations reflect individuals' ideas of their "possible selves," what they would
like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become.
(Haas, 1992, Understanding Aspirations, ¶1)

The development of educational aspiration, sometimes referred to as

"predisposition," for college is an important first stage in the long process of college

choice, enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Stage,

1992). The importance of the predisposition stage is reflected in the theoretical work

related to this topic. Paulsen (1990), in his review of relevant literature, suggests that this

stage is the most important and longest phase leading to postsecondary outcomes.

<u>Models Explaining the Development of Aspiration for College</u>

The development of models explaining college choice and persistence is emergent

from econometric and sociological studies with recent models combining elements from

both traditions (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper., 1999). Econometric

models are based on the assumption that students making decisions about their lives after

high school will weigh the costs and benefits of alternatives and make a rational decision

(Jackson, 1981). Econometric models offer a valuable tool for understanding ways in

which youth and their parents weigh alternatives. However, they fall short in their assumption that good information is available and that students and their parents will choose rationally (Hossler et al., 1999).

Sociologically based models of status attainment form the other root for studies of college choice and offer a more complex view of human factors that impact students' decisions. (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990; Sewell & Shah, 1968). These studies identify ways in which variables interact to shape, and thereby constrain, students' options beginning at birth (Hossler et al., 1989.) They examine how socialization processes, family conditions, peer interactions, and school environments shape students' choices. These, however, tend to ignore the role of economic factors and rational decision making in this process.

Most recent discussions in the literature pertaining to college choice and persistence in postsecondary education agree that models combining the econometric approach and the sociological approach offered more power to explain students' decisions (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990; Stage & Hossler, 2000). Combined models identified in the literature typically describe three to seven sequential stages, most beginning with student background as the foundation for the development of student aspirations and concluding with college choice or persistence in/dropout from postsecondary education, depending on whether it is model for choice or persistence. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) present a model for predisposition as a subset of three major stages in college choice (p. 37).
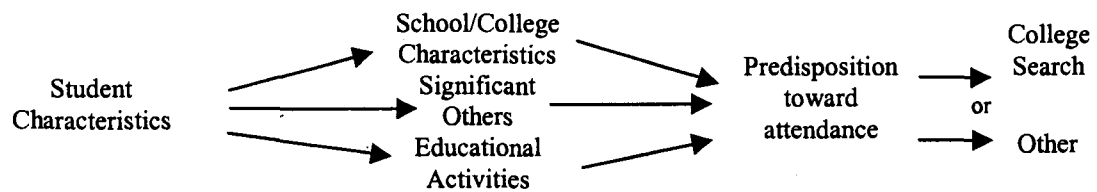
Figure 2. Development of predisposition.
Adapted by Researcher from Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

On the Early Development of Educational Aspirations

Research suggests that the earlier a student develops an expectation that he/she

will attend college the more probable it is that the student will actually attend (Hossler et

al., 1989). McGrath et al. (2001) found that seventh graders who expected to earn a four-

year degree were more than twice as likely to attend college as their peers who were

undecided or who indicated they definitely would not attend college. According to

Hossler and Maple (1993), students who will actually enroll in college may differentiate

from their undecided peers as early as ninth grade based upon the amount of time they

spend thinking about and planning for their postsecondary options.

McDonough (1997) also found that it was important to have college plans by at

least the 10th grade. She confirmed previous findings that students with long-standing

goals for postsecondary education increased the likelihood of actually enrolling in college

by 21% compared to that for students who developed aspirations in their senior year.

Hossler et al. (1999) suggested that most students solidify their educational plans

between 8th and 10th grade. They found that data from the National Educational

Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1992 indicated that 73% of all 8th graders surveyed

reported they expected to earn a bachelor degree. That percentage was consistent through the 12th grade.

<u>Social Capital Theory: Relationships and the Development of Aspiration</u>

Levine and Nidffer (1996), studying low-income students who went to college, found that the process for overcoming disadvantage was not an accident and started early in a student's career. Each found a mentor or mentors and used their relationships at home, school and in the community in support of his or her goals.

James Coleman's 1988 article introducing the theory of social capital further aids in understanding how the important interactions among the student, his or her family, and other adults at school or in the community shape the aspirations and future actions of students. Coleman revisited the concept of human capital as created through the acquisition of new skills and capabilities. He then presented social capital as the product of the interlocking networks of relationships that develop around each young person. Social capital, according to Coleman, is what empowers individuals to use their human capital, their skills and abilities, to complete otherwise impossible actions. The construct of social capital aids in understanding the way important cultural values and expectations are communicated through the networks of relationships surrounding each young person.

Chapman (1981), reviewing the literature on college choice, describes three ways in which students' performance interacts over time with their important relationships with parents, teachers and community mentors, and peers (Figure 3). First, a student's performance sets in motion a set of general comments and advice from parents, teachers, and friends that helps shape the student's vision of possibilities for his/her future.

Second, student performance affects direct advice regarding college choice from

counselors and colleges. Third, the student compares his/her own performance with that

of friends and school peers. He or she then uses that information in the decision making

process along with information peers provide about their own postsecondary plans. The

student uses this information to determine which postsecondary choices are of interest to

him or her.

Student effort   Middle/Early High School

Good grades
          Encouragement/General Advice

          College aspirations
             Continued good performance
             Encouragement Directed advice
                                        High School Graduation

                    Student compares own performance
                    to peers/with college information
                              Narrows choices

                                   College entrance
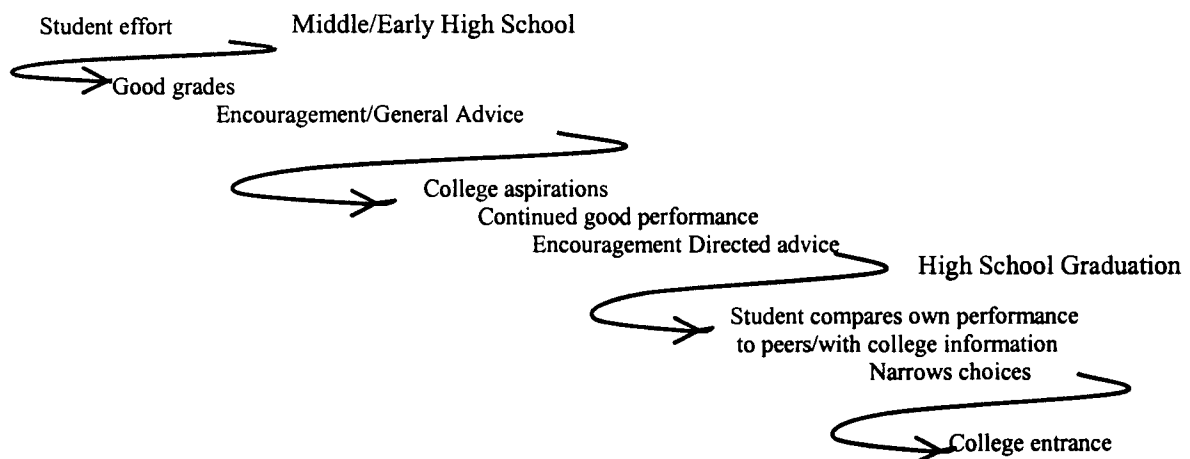
Figure 3. How performance interacts with parent and teacher
support to influence predisposition.
Researcher developed model based on Chapman (1981).

Coleman (1988), McGrath et al. (2001), McDonough (1997) all noted the critical

importance, especially to low-income youth, of developing social capital in the form of

networks that include adults and peers outside their family circle. For example, McGrath

et al. noted that the likelihood of attending college increased threefold for lower status

ninth graders attending church at least once a week.

McGrath et al. (2001) found that low-income, rural students must rely more than

their higher socioeconomic status peers on school and community networks, including

teachers and guidance counselors, in order to bolster their social capital. McDonough (1997) noted the importance of such mentoring relationships to all students but agreed that it is an essential factor in developing aspirations among low-income students.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) identified four outcomes of effective mentorship that affect development of the aspirations of rural youth. These are (a) imparted hope which helps young people develop a vision for who they might become and the belief that their dreams are attainable; (b) enhanced confidence that allows youth to perceive themselves as capable of making their dreams a reality; (c) belief in the importance of education to goal fulfillment; and (d) actual assistance with obtaining college information, completing forms, arranging visits, etc.

Horn and Chen (1998) and McGrath et al. (2001) noted significant potential benefits for lower status students who develop networks through participation in school and community activities that provide such mentorship. Lower status youth used these avenues available to them to, in part, compensate for the disadvantages that accumulate due to family background and community context.

> Rather than converting parents' cultural or social capital into educational attainment, they actually created educational capital through early ambition and through community involvements available to them. (McGrath et al., 2001, p. 253)

Hossler et al. (1999) identified gender differences in the way students develop and use their social capital to support aspiration. It appears that female students are likely to talk with parents, teachers, and friends more persistently and more often and to use this network to form their postsecondary plans. Males appear more likely to ground their

aspirations in academic achievement and the resulting parental encouragement and support.

According to Israel et al. (2001), some rural communities are better prepared than others to support high educational aspirations, help youth envision a future within or outside their community, and engage youth as learners and community members. Israel et al. determined that the capacity of communities depends on the quality of their structural and process attributes. Structural attributes are the opportunities for and frequency and duration of interpersonal interactions between youth and significant adults. Process attributes are the qualities associated with these interactions, including the nature of nurturing and control. Israel et al. suggested that education policy should develop programs and initiatives for rural communities that focus on developing youths' skills, self-competence, positive relationships, and that convey the expectation for high academic achievement.

> Localities will differ in their ability to enhance community social capital. Inequality, isolation, dependency, and gaps in the organizational and institutional structure can inhibit community action (Wilkinson, 1991). Communities that are fragmented, manipulated by outside organizations, or limited by smallness or distance are less likely to increase their social capital or (on the basis of our results so far) to be able to address local youths' educational achievement. Until these structural deficiencies are confronted, many communities will be less able to muster the social capital needed to make a real difference in local youths' lives. (Israel et al., 2001, p. 63)

Onyx and Bullen (2000) expanded the concept of social capital to include two types of social capital that develop within the context of communities. The first, bonding social capital, supports the development of trust, participation, and connectedness while the second, bridging social capital, develops social agency, the capacity to act proactively

in a social context. Onyx and Bullen found that rural communities tend to develop high

levels of bonding social capital while urban areas develop more bridging social capital.

The Expectations and Support of Rural Parents

Coleman (1988) identified parents' expectations, particularly a mother's

expectations, as one indicator of the presence of social capital within families.

Researchers consistently find that parents' expectations for college are critically

important to the development of aspiration for college and to college entrance and

completion (for example, Hossler & Maple, 1993; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990;

Sewell & Shah, 1968). Hossler and Stage (1992) found that parents' expectations are the

strongest influence in shaping aspiration for college.

Given the critical importance of parents' expectations for college, it is relevant to

note the pattern of lower expectations among rural parents that was identified by Barcinas

(1989). He found that fewer rural than urban parents (60.8% compared to 74.3%)

expected their children to go to college.

Part of the reason for the difference might be seen in Coleman's (1988)

identification of a set of resources that families make available in varying degrees and

that are related to parents' expectations. The degree to which these resources are

available to young people has important implications for their educational outcomes.

Coleman's list of resources included: (a) financial capital, referring to the fiscal resources

available to support education; (b) human capital, referring to parents' educational

attainment and the resulting cognitive environment of the home that defines the help

available to children for advancing their academic and critical thinking skills; and (c)

social capital, referring specifically here to the strength of relationship between parents

and children. This last, social capital, as it relates to the relationship between parents and

children, is particularly important according to Coleman. He argued that if social capital

of this type is in short supply, children cannot profit fully from parents' human capital.

McGrath et al. (2001) revisited Coleman's (1988) work. They suggested a

slightly modified description of resources that families make available to children. These

included: (a) the ability to buy academic and developmental advantages, (b) parents'

highest level of education and subsequent ability to produce more academically able

children through early socialization, (c) knowledge about how to negotiate the system,

and (d) parents' social networks.

Parents' educational attainment and the development of aspiration. The preceding

discussion detailed the limited fiscal resources available to many rural families for the

purchase of educational advantages for their children. Rural parents are similarly

challenged with respect to their ability to support the academic development of their

children through their own educational attainment. Barcinas (1989) reported that 37.3%

of urban fathers held four-year degrees compared to 13.5% of rural fathers with a similar

gap between urban and rural mothers.

The level of parents' education continues to emerge as a powerful indicator of

postsecondary enrollment and completion (Hossler & Maple, 1993; Stage & Hossler,

2000). Manski and Wise (1983) found that children whose parents had college degrees

were twice as likely to apply to college. Choy (2001) found the level of parents'

education impacts the rate of college access, enrollment, and persistence among first

generation students. She argued that this makes a difference even after controlling for educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools in planning for college, and socioeconomic status.

Choy's (2001) analysis of data provided by the NELS indicated: (a) 82% of high school graduates with a parent who had earned a bachelor's degree enrolled immediately in college compared to 54% of graduates whose parents completed high school and 36% of students whose parents did not complete high school; and (b) 23% dropout rate by the second year of college for first generation students compared to 10% for students with a parent who has earned a bachelor's degree.

DiMaggio (1982) found that cultural capital, here referring to the educational attainment of parents, has a significant impact on student achievement and the development of aspirations. DiMaggio further noted that college-educated parents pass this advantage to their children through their fiscal, human, and social capital. Still, both rural parents and their children expect that children will attain higher levels of education than their parents (Odell, 1989). Odell found that 50% of parents expected their children to pursue postsecondary education even though only 12% of parents had degrees.

Parents' knowledge about how to negotiate the system. In spite of considerable research pointing to the necessity of helping young people solidify their plans for college early, as early as the eighth grade, parents may actually do very little to get their children started early on plans for college (Mitchell Institute, 2002). Smithier (1994) suggested that parents in depressed rural communities are distanced from their children's educational experiences because they work long hours outside the community and are

naively confident that their schools' professionals are taking care of their children's

educational plans.

<u>The Expectations and Support of School Personnel</u>

> The story, put simply, was of an individual who touched or changed the students'
> lives. What mattered most was not carefully constructed educational policy but
> rather the intervention by one person at a critical point in the life of each student.
> (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996, p. 65)

McGrath et al. (2001) found that low-income, rural students must rely more on

school and community networks, including teachers and guidance counselors, in order to

bolster their social capital. McDonough (1997) noted the importance of such

relationships to all students but agreed that it is an essential factor in developing

aspirations among low-income students. According to Tierney and Jun (2001), effective

educational programs aimed at helping students prepare for postsecondary education

employ adults who consistently communicate high expectations for academic

performance. Tierney and Jun suggested that effective programs should promote the

development of supportive networks and teach parents how to facilitate their children's

development.

However, Ley et al. (1996), in their study of the relationship between the

expectations of parents and teachers and students' aspirations in 21 rural high schools in

21 states, found that rural school personnel appeared to expect less from low-income

students than did parents or the students themselves. They noted teachers believed that

lack of motivation and a poor work ethic were more significant than other factors in the

environment. Ley et al. reported that educators were twice as likely as students and their

parents to predict students would remain in the community without seeking additional

education. McDonough (1997) noted that guidance counselors working in predominantly low-income communities are likely to provide little beyond information regarding nearby community colleges, vocational schools, or non-selective state universities.

DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) found that teachers and counselors, even those who are from the area, are more interested in developing the skills and aspirations of middle and upper class students, particularly those moving into the community from more metropolitan areas. They noted that rural educators are more likely to counsel low socioeconomic status youth into vocational courses and tracks.

The role of the school itself may be problematic with respect to the development of aspiration for high levels of educational attainment. For many rural Americans, the school is at the center of life in the community (Maynard & Howley, 1997). But, that does not necessarily translate into support for high levels of educational attainment (Lutz et al., 1992).

Lutz et al. (1992) described the findings of their 1987 study of Dairyland, Texas and liken it to the findings of Peshkin's 1978 study of a rural midwestern community. In Dairyland, academic achievement was secondary to participation in activities (sports) and important rituals and traditions including homecoming, prom, etc. Participation in school activities was not limited to students; parents, siblings, and other community members had roles, if only as observers, in most activities connected with the school.

> To participate was the important community goal. [The] school is the centerpiece of the community. Without the school there may be no community. If DISD disappears, if it is consolidated, if it has no basketball team, no homecoming, no prom, no graduation, it may not survive as a community. Certainly, the single gas station/convenience store cannot take the place of the school--nor can the churches. (Lutz et al., 1992, p. 51)

Similarly, DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) concluded the symbolic value of schools to rural communities should be thought of as equal in importance to their instructional value. They argued that schools are the most important source of meaning and the remaining nucleus of traditional culture for many rural communities. In such places, the most important function of schools may have more to do with the continuity of the community and less to do with developing aspirations for educational outcomes that support individualistic goals of career and social mobility.

The Expectations and Support of Peers

Researchers disagree about the impact of peers on the development of college aspirations. According to Hossler et al. (1989), most studies do not find that peer expectations and support are significant to the development of aspiration for college once researchers have accounted for student ability and family background characteristics. However, McDonough (1997) argued that notions regarding what constitutes acceptable postsecondary options within a school culture are important and influence students' choices, particularly with respect to which programs or institutions they ultimately choose to attend.

Carpenter and Fleishman (1987) also found that students are more likely to go to college when their peers have plans for postsecondary education (see also McDonough, 1997). Horn and Chen (1998), studying at-risk students who go to college, agreed that peer interactions were important in determining the postsecondary outcomes for each student. They suggested that the values peers placed on educational activities influenced

postsecondary plans in general and the specific enrollment plans of friends influence the decision whether to attend four-year college.

Smithier (1994) agreed that the support and encouragement of peers is important in small rural schools. She found that rural youth in a depressed community were able to create "culture that set a standard for success and they assisted each other in reaching that standard" (p. 90). Smithier found that the rural youth in her study valued participation and fostered a climate of cooperation and mutual support for both academic and extracurricular pursuits.

The Disconnect Among Expectation, Aspiration, and Getting Ready

Even if youth have parents who encourage them to develop aspiration for postsecondary education or develop aspiration through connections with supportive networks of other adults and peers, the process of effectively getting ready to go to college does not automatically follow. McDonough (1997), the Mitchell Institute (2002), and others studying the low postsecondary continuation rates of dis-advantaged youth, reported that parents and educators often do too little too late to provide the needed information and preparatory activities to support college entrance and persistence.

Hossler and Maple (1993) found that students who ultimately go to college may be identified as early as ninth grade by their interest in receiving and processing information about college. Stage and Hossler (2000) noted students with greater access to information were more likely to persist in college. McDonough (1997) documented the experiences of individual students for whom information arrived only in their junior or senior years, too late to allow them to adequately prepare for college in spite of

generally strong school performance. She noted that disadvantaged students are often not aware until too late that courses required for college entrance may differ from those needed for graduation from their high schools.

Related findings noted that fewer rural than urban students take advanced math and science (Pogue & Maxey, 1996). In addition, fewer rural youth take the ACT Assessment and rural youth are less likely than urban youth to attend four-year colleges and universities. Additionally, most students and their parents lack realistic understanding of college costs and admissions practices. Most families, but especially low-income and first generation students and their parents, tend to greatly overestimate the cost of tuition and fees at public institutions and are largely unaware of the financial aid processes that take into consideration a family's ability to pay for their children's education (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

A Summary of Supports for and Barriers to the of Aspiration among Rural Youth

Researchers studying the development of aspiration among rural youth have identified a number of important supports for and barriers to the development of aspiration among youth living in depressed rural communities. A number of these have been discussed in preceding sections of this review of the literature on culture, context, and factors related to the development of aspiration. A brief summary of challenges facing rural students is useful here for the purpose developing a sense of the scope of the issues.

<u>Supports</u>

1. Small rural schools support low teacher to student ratios (Howley et al., 2000; Lee, 2001).

2. Small rural schools are characterized by safe and orderly learning environments (Khattri et al., 1997; Lee, 2001).

3. Small rural schools report low absenteeism, fewer discipline problems, and fewer dropouts (Lee, 2001).

4. Rural communities foster high levels of bonding social capital (Onyx & Bullen, 2000).

5. Rural parents are more involved in the life of school than urban parents. (Baugh, 2001; Khattri et al., 1997).

6. Rural families, even in depressed rural communities, expect their children to attain higher levels of education than parents (Odell, 1989).

7. Small rural school environments tend to support relatively strong academic achievement through the 10th grade with performance leveling off in the 11th and 12th grades (Gibbs et al., 1998; Howley et al., 2000; Khattri et al., 1997).

8. Small schools provide more individualized instruction (Lee, 2001).

9. Rural schools generally have lower drop-out rates than urban schools. (Howley et al., 2000).

<u>Barriers</u>

1. Low socioeconomic status of families and community is characteristic of depressed rural communities (Gjelten, 1982).

2. Rural families in depressed rural communities are unable to identify a connection between education beyond high school and employment opportunities in the area (Israel et al., 2001).

3. Rural students and their parents do not value high status careers with high salaries as much as they value solid incomes and remaining close to family and friends (Haas, 1992; Haas & Lambert 1995).

4. Depressed rural communities offer few role models for high educational attainment (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

5. In depressed rural communities, there appears to be a high community value for participation at school but low community value for high levels of educational attainment (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Lutz et al., 1992).

6. Curricular and extra-curricular offerings in rural schools are limited (Barcinas, 1989; Downey, 1980; Khattri et al., 1997).

7. In depressed rural schools, students lack access to or fail to enroll in advanced math and science courses at rates similar to urban students (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Pogue & Maxey, 1996).

8. Rural students in depressed rural communities are less satisfied than urban students with school facilities, especially libraries and laboratories (Gjelten, 1982; Pogue & Maxey, 1996).

9. Rural school personnel are less qualified, are underpaid, and tend to turn over frequently. Teachers are frequently asked to teach outside their area of expertise (Khattri et al., 1997; Pogue & Maxey, 1996).

10. Rural school students are generally less satisfied with their guidance services (Pogue & Maxey, 1996).

11. In depressed rural communities there is low parental expectation for high educational attainment (Barcinas, 1989).

12. In depressed rural communities, there is low educator expectation for high educational attainment (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Ley et al., 1996; McDonough 1997).

13. Fewer parents in depressed rural communities have attained college degrees (Barcinas, 1989; Odell, 1989).

14. Rural students and their parents lack realistic information about college costs and processes related to college choice, admissions, and financial aid (McDonough 1997; Mitchell Institute, 2002).

15. Students, especially lower socioeconomic status students, start thinking about college too late in their high school years (McDonough 1997; Mitchell Institute, 2002).

16. Students, especially low socioeconomic status students, get little help from school personnel in applying to college (McDonough 1997; Mitchell Institute, 2002).

Connections and Crossroads: Family, Community, and the Decisions Young Rural People Must Make

Knowledge of place--where you are and where you come from--is intertwined with knowledge of self. (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, p. 134)

Some researchers have found that when a rural youth determines his or her educational aspirations, that youth is also very likely making a decision about the nature of the future relationship she will have with her family and her place of origin (Hektner,

1995; Khattri et al., 1997). Crosby and Picou (1979) suggested that nearly all American youth, including rural youth, dream of high educational attainment and career preference. Besser (1995), Howley et al. (1996), Lawrence (1998) and Ley et al. (1996) found that many higher achieving rural students and their parents, irrespective of attachments, feel compelled to focus on personal career and economic success.

However, it appears that the process of making decisions is not always an easy one. Hektner (1995) reported that rural Midwest youth indicated feeling more internal conflict surrounding the necessity to choose between remaining close to home and leaving to pursue education, careers, and higher incomes. He concluded that, as a result, rural youth are more likely to have lower aspirations for college or to postpone their entry into college.

DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) and Howley et al. (1996) are among those who found that local educators and others might falsely assume, based on the progressive values of the dominant culture, that young people who choose to remain in their rural communities of origin are less bright or less motivated. They further noted that the youths themselves sometimes buy into the negative stereotypes imposed on them from outside.

> Rural youth can choose to stay, but they are likely to believe--with most of the world--that the choice is a mark of their failure. They can choose to move, but long--with most of their mobile rural friends--for home. Like all humans, rural youth try to be savvy about choosing between two evils. For only a few is it likely to be a very happy choice. (Howley et al., 1996, p. 159)

However, De Young and Lawrence (1995) concluded that many rural youth who choose to stay have simply identified and acted upon the most important priorities in their lives despite pressures from the larger society.

In the end, many young rural people and their parents do believe they must move to larger towns or metropolitan areas in order to achieve their career and financial goals (Howley et al., 1996; Ley et al., 1996). Ley et al. point out that demographic trends show that rural youth in the Midwest are more likely to move out of their communities of origin than rural youth in the South and East. Besser (1995) notes data confirming this trend in Iowa, adding that college-educated young people leave their rural communities at higher rates than non-college-educated youth (Besser, 1995; Shaffer et al., 1999). Some have found that the decisions of those youth who leave and those who stay have important consequences for their own lives but also for the future of rural places and the shape of our society as a whole (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

Themes explored in this review of the literature illustrate how the choices young people make regarding their plans after high school are deeply rooted in the norms, values, beliefs, experiences, and circumstances that are the product of the culture and context of their rural place. Still, the ways youths internalize, make meaning from, and choose to act as a result of what they learn through the rural culture and context of their lives remains unclear. Among those researching issues in rural education, there is interest in additional research that will help clarify the role of culture and context in the development of aspiration among rural youth.

For example, Khattri et al. (1997) call for more study exploring:

> Whether poverty alone is the implicating factor [in low educational attainment among rural youth], or whether type of location (rural or urban) also makes a difference. In addition to poverty, other community characteristics may be important in determining a student's opportunity to learn, and therefore, attain high levels of academic achievement. (p. 80)

Shaffer et al. (1999) called for additional research into the relationship between the development of aspiration and qualities of rural life including the meaning of community, local culture, and the nature of connections between rural places and the larger society. Harmon et al. (1996) in their analysis of doctoral research in rural education, recommended additional research on the following topics related to this study: (a) assessment of the federal role in rural education, (b) assessment of the degree to which rural schools are educating students for participation in a national versus a local economy, (c) assessment of student expectations including their view of the future, (d) an examination of factors of rural community economies that influence rural students' decisions regarding education, and (e) identifying social and cultural issues in rural communities that impact rural education.

This study responds to calls for additional research focusing attention on how seniors in an economically depressed rural community express their view of the future. The research questions connect the students' views of the future to the meanings they assign to their important experiences growing up and attending school in the context of their community. The study also seeks to identify ways in which the values of rural youth and their community intersect with those of the larger society.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology used in the study. Because the contents of this chapter are grounded in my own reflections, choices, and actions as the researcher, I use my voice herein to facilitate readability.

A description of the study's design and a discussion of my personal perspectives follow an explanation of the choice of a qualitative versus quantitative methodology. I elaborate on the appropriateness of the proposed methodology in addressing the problem. The major portion of the chapter is devoted to discussion of site and participant selection, processes for conducting interviews and focus groups, preparing and analyzing the data, and presenting the results.

Choosing a Qualitative Approach to a Case Study

In much educational research we overlook the fact that events that appear the same may have distinctly different local meanings. Qualitative methods are probably the best means we have for discovering these local meanings. (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 407)

This is a qualitative case study of seniors enrolled in one low-income, rural high school in Iowa. In educational research, case studies are usually qualitative in nature but are not necessarily so. And, of course, qualitative research can take many forms of which the case study is one (Stake, 2000). In this section, I elaborate on the characteristics of my study that make it both qualitative and a case study.

The Qualitative Nature of the Study

The problem considered in this study is how high school seniors, attending school in a small, predominantly low-income, rural Iowa district describe, and assign meaning to

the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shaped their choices

about whether or not to pursue education beyond high school. It is, at its core, a problem

of meaning and the ways people construct meaning. In it, I seek to discover the ways in

which the meaning of a very particular kind of experience, living and attending school in

a depressed rural community, intersects with the development of students' postsecondary

aspirations. Qualitative studies are particularly suited to such problems of meaning as the

one addressed in this study (Bogden & Biklen, 1998).

Merriam (1998) cites five characteristics shared by all qualitative studies

including this study. Her descriptors relate to both the ultimate goal of qualitative

research, the discovery of meaning, and to the nature of the qualitative research

processes. Merriam's characteristics include: (a) an interest in gaining the "insider"

perspective of the meaning of events and phenomena, (b) the researcher as the primary

instrument for data collection, (c) data collection that is naturalistic or done in the field,

(d) a research strategy that is inductive, and (e) a product that is descriptive instead of

numeric.

The characteristics Merriam (1998) described can easily be identified in my study.

For example, in this study, I sought the insiders' perspectives, the ways that Bonteville

seniors perceived the factors that shape their aspirations. My methods included going

into the field myself to interview groups of students, parents, and individual teachers in

order to gather, with as much richness as possible, their accounts of their experiences

related to the development of aspiration and the meaning they ascribed to them. I

analyzed the data using constant comparative strategy to extract patterns of meaning

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Lastly, the product of this study is a descriptive narrative of what I heard, observed, and learned.

Bodgan and Biklen (1998) describe the qualitative researcher's interest in the "process" of developing meaning in addition to an interest in "outcome" or the meaning itself as derived from the process (p. 6). Process--referring specifically, in this study, to how aspiration develops in the context of the events and circumstances of rural Bonteville--is a central point of interest in this research.

Merriam (1998) adds that many qualitative studies use purposeful, not random, sampling. Purposeful sampling refers to the selection of sites, participants, and data sources based on criteria established to ensure the greatest insight will be gained with respect to the questions to which the researcher is seeking answers. In my study, the site was selected purposefully based on characteristics that make Bonteville and its student population, in many ways, typical of other small, depressed, rural communities. Since the case under study was all seniors enrolled in regular education classes at Bonteville High School, the purposeful selection of the site was equivalent to the purposeful selection of the case.

Finally, it is important to note that the choice of a qualitative orientation for my study, ultimately, has much to do with my own way of understanding the world. My accumulated experience and resulting perspective have been constant companions in making decisions about the study, interacting with participants, interpreting the data, and presenting results. While I have an appreciation for numbers and their power to explain many phenomena, my personal preference for finding meaning in experience and

circumstance is always through words and images instead. I find enormous power in words for their potential to not only reveal but also to explicate patterns and congruity, both bold and subtle, in human thought and understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

A Case Study

Qualitative in approach, this study is a case study by design. Using a case design helps narrow the focus, putting "boundaries around a particular experience" so that one may seek to understand what happens within that experience in as much complexity as possible (Stake, 1988, p. 257). The seniors, in this study, constitute the case. They are bounded by their enrollment as seniors in regular education classes at a particular low-income rural Iowa high school--Bonteville High School. The school district, the community and the countryside that surrounds it, the rural economy that sustains it, seniors' teachers, parents, friends, and the national cultural that presses inward upon them form the context for this study.

Stake (2000) describes a case as "one among others" and "an integrated system" (p. 436). The seniors of Bonteville, while certainly individuals with many differences among them, share in common a particular set of experiences of growing and going to school in one rural community. Similarly, as a group, they are at the same time, unique unto themselves and like seniors in other similar rural school districts. On one hand, as a unique class of students, this group of seniors has its own internal dynamics based on personalities and unique experiences. On the other hand, in important ways (socio-economic status, range of opportunities available, etc.), they are like other classes of

seniors who have and will graduate from Bonteville[1] and other small districts similar to

Bonteville.

In this type of case study, as in all case studies, the primary goal is particularistic

in that it concentrates on the way a particular group of seniors think about options for the

future (Merriam, 1998). According to Stake (2000), it is also instrumental, providing

"insight into an issue" that is larger than the case itself (p. 437). The case is examined in

as much complex and rich detail as possible in order to pursue insights into the

researcher's overarching interest; in this study the larger interest is in learning how rural

students in predominantly low-income communities think about the relationship between

education and their goals for the future.

I chose a case study design because I am interested in knowing, as richly as

possible and from their perspective, how seniors in rural, predominantly low-income

communities think about their options for the future and why they think that way. This is

a process question as much, or more than, it is a product question. When the questions in

a study are predominantly "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 1994) and when the

researcher seeks answers that include thoughts, feelings or desires (Merriam, 1998) the

case study offers the considerable power to yield significant results.

<u>The Appropriateness of Focus Groups as Method</u>

The choice to use focus groups as the primary means of data collection relates to

the purpose of my study and my statement of the problem. These require results that are

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[1] The name "Bonteville" is a pseudonym as are the names of all participants quoted or otherwise cited in this study. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

descriptively rich and exploratory in nature (Merriam, 1998). In the course of this study, I have sought to open the door of a particular human context to discover its complexity and nuances. Rather than prediction (the outcome, lower rates of postsecondary continuation and completion, were already known), I hoped to illuminate, through the words of the participants, meanings students ascribe to the factors and interaction of factors that have shaped their dreams and plans. To do so required the opportunity to ask open-ended questions and to seek clarification and elaboration from participants. The case study approach provided the necessary framework for this opportunity.

The use of focus groups served several valuable purposes. A focus group approach allowed me to effectively and efficiently collect a relatively large amount of valuable data from multiple individuals in targeted populations (Gibbs, 1997; Yin, 1994). This method is well suited when researchers wish to draw out a range of participants' attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions, experiences, and reactions in a way that allows expression (i.e., choice of words, tone of voice, etc.) to further illuminate participants' responses.

Moreover, conversations that occur among students as participants in the focus groups may be more revealing than those that might occur between an adult interviewer and a single student. It has been pointed out that, in this latter case, a power differential exists that may cause the student to deliver responses he or she believes may please the interviewer instead of what he or she really thinks about an issue. According to Gibbs (1997), group interviews provide opportunities for participants to affirm or challenge each other, to ask questions and to add to each other's responses, and, as such, are likely

to draw out more honest responses and reveal multiple perspectives. Gibbs argued that focus groups allow researchers not only to identify significant issues but also to understand why an issue is significant and how it relates to other ideas, circumstances, or events.

Finally, the use of focus groups was an appropriate choice for this study because of my experience conducting and participating in focus groups. First, as a graduate student participating in University of Northern Iowa Institute for Educational Leadership conferences and program evaluations, I participated in developing interview protocols, conducting interviews, and analyzing and reporting results. As an educational program leader, I have organized and participated in many focus groups for the purpose of program development and evaluation.

In developing this research project, I have drawn on the work of others who successfully used case study methodologies employing focus groups and individual interviews to give dimension and meaning to the experiences of young people as they develop their aspirations. In an ethnographic study of the influence of culture on the development of aspirations among the youth of a small town in Maine, Lawrence (1998) met with focus groups and conducted individual interviews to collect life histories. Similarly, D'Amico et al. (1996) and McDonough (1997) both used individual and group interviews to study concerns related to the development of aspiration.

<u>A Personal Perspective</u>

My interest in the experiences and meaning of rural education is long standing. It is both personal and professional. Although I spent my earliest school years in a

suburban community, my family moved to a rural community before I started the 6th grade. I think of this community and school as formative in my life. The child of a professional manager, I grew up assuming I would go away to college and did. After marrying, however, I returned to my rural hometown to start my family. My own children lived and went to school all of their elementary and half of their secondary school years in that same community.

I have also taught and held administrative positions in rural high schools. For four years, I administered a school-based youth services project, the primary purpose of which was to coordinate support services for low-income and high-risk youth and their families in a predominantly rural county in north central Iowa. At the time of this study, I am responsible for two college preparation programs for low-income and first-generation college students who attend 23 high schools in Iowa high schools that represent some of Iowa's most urban and rural districts.

My concern for the quality and outcomes of the rural experience is, therefore, very personal as well as professional and interacts with this investigation in at least two important ways. First, my personal and professional experiences with rural life have contributed to the nature of the research questions and, ultimately, have given character to the structure of each interview. Second, my experience has informed my analysis of the data. As I sifted through transcripts and records, my own perspective, shaped through experience and study, became integrated into the nature and expression of the meaning I ascribed to the themes and patterns I discovered.

An Overview of the Case Study using Focus Group Method

This study was undertaken to identify patterns in ways seniors in Bonteville think about the relevance and value of postsecondary education to their future plans. In doing so, I hoped to discover the related meaning they have constructed from their rural experience and to understand how that experience relates to the larger social context. In my study, I employed focus groups as a method (Krueger & Casey, 2000) to search for patterns in the ways students talked about their choices and decisions regarding their lives after high school and for clues to reveal how students' choices are related to growing up in a low-income rural community.

Based on self-reported postsecondary plans, intentions to remain in or leave the community following high school graduation, and self-reported family income, I assigned each participant to one of three focus groups so that each group was similarly balanced with respect to these criteria (A table detailing characteristics of participants in each focus group is included in Appendix A). This aspect of the design allowed me to check patterns and themes in students' responses across the groups and provided one means to triangulate the data. As outlined in Table 3, I interviewed each group two times, 10 days apart, using the second set of interviews to follow up on questions that emerged from the first. District administrators determined the dates and times during which group interviews could be conducted. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Table 3

Focus Group Design: Senior Participants by Postsecondary Plans

Postsecondary Plans	No. of Interviews
Mixed	
Group A1	2
Group A2	2
Group A3	2
Plans to Leave	
Group B1	1
Plans to Stay	
Group B2	1

After completing the interviews with Groups A1, A2, and A3, I conducted two additional student focus group interviews with a limited number of participants drawn from Groups A1, A2, and A3. Group B1 included only seniors who indicated that they plan to attend two or four-year colleges or universities and they expect to leave the community permanently. Group B2 included only seniors who indicated (a) they do not plan to pursue any postsecondary education or who plan to attend locally available postsecondary education programs and, (b) who plan to remain in or near the community of Bonteville permanently. The purpose of the interviews with groups B1 and B2 was to provide an opportunity to ask these students with more specificity about their plans and attitudes.

Other data collection was used to further enrich and triangulate the results as follows:

1. A brief researcher-designed participant survey, the Survey of Intentions, was used to gather basic data about the seniors in order to sort them into focus groups (Appendix A).

2. Four 45-minute individual interviews with the guidance counselor and three educators and one 90-minute interview with a small group of parents provided the opportunity to summarize and seek reaction to a preliminary analysis of the data from transcripts of student data. These interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded using the coding scheme as used for the student interviews.

3. District performance data, as reported to the Iowa Department of Education, provided a source of important background information for the development of the interview protocols and the analysis and reporting of the interview data.

4. The log notes of the researcher served as a memory bank for my observations in the community, the high school, and participants in the study.

Procedure

This section provides a more detailed account of the process used to carry out the study.

Preparing for the Study

In preparation for the study, an interview protocol was prepared and piloted with seniors from one area high school who are enrolled in Central College Upward Bound or Educational Talent Search[2]. The pilot interview was conducted in September 2003.

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[2] Upward Bound and Educational Talent Search are federally funded outreach programs for low-income and first generation secondary school students. These programs are, for the most part, hosted by colleges or universities and are mandated to develop the skills and motivation necessary for successful enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education.

While this group was not precisely congruent with the target population for the study (i.e. the group was not necessarily representative of the senior class at the school where the pilot was conducted), there were enough similarities in age, socioeconomic status, and educational experience to expect useful feedback about the protocol and the structure of the session.

The pilot interview was videotaped and subsequently reviewed by the researcher and three college professors experienced in focus group methods for the purpose of reviewing and honing the protocol and interview techniques. One other researcher skilled in using focus groups for data gathering was asked to provide feedback. Additionally, participants in the pilot were asked to offer their suggestions for changes or improvements to the process. The data from the pilot focus group interview was not transcribed or included in the reported results.

Site Selection

The site for this case study was selected using the following criteria:

1. The district in which the site (the high school) is located qualified as low-income, for the purpose of this study, because the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (34%) is in excess of the 2002-2003 average for Iowa districts (28.5%) of the total district enrollment.

2. The district qualified as rural because it exists in county with an urban population of fewer than 20,000 and is not adjacent to a metropolitan county, matching the Midwest PROfiles' (Iowa State University, 2002) most conservative definition of rural.

3. The district qualified as small because it enrolled 367 students in 2002-2003.

4. The district granted approval for the researcher to conduct the study.

Several weeks before data collection was scheduled to begin, I initiated contacts with the superintendents of three school districts meeting the above criteria that were within a 75 mile radius of my home. (Although I was willing to travel further if needed to identify an appropriate site, practical issues suggested sites within that radius would facilitate scheduling interviews and other district contacts.) While all superintendents contacted were interested in and supportive of the study, two were unable to commit to participation in the study, one due to district construction schedules and the other because he was beginning his first year in the district and preferred not to add the study to his list of projects to facilitate.

The superintendent at Bonteville, however, was able to commit district energy and time to the study and welcomed the opportunity to support research in rural education issues. After an initial meeting with the district administrators to explain the purpose of the study and the interview process, the superintendent sought and gained the approval of the Bonteville Board of Education.

Data Collection, Preparation, and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in the planned sequence previously described with some additional contacts added as the need emerged in the preliminary analysis of the data.

There were five stages of data collection:

1. <u>Preliminary interviews and descriptive data.</u> Once the district granted permission to conduct the study and guidelines governing the study were agreed upon, preliminary interviews with the school superintendent and principal were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was threefold. The first purpose was to explore their perceptions with regard to the protocol for the first focus group session and the research topic. Their insights, while helpful in gaining a sense of the school culture, did not result in significant changes to the protocol. Second, the superintendent and principal were asked to identify any existing data sources that could shed light on the focus of the study.

Data sources provided included the district's Annual Progress Report 2002-2003. The Progress Report contained demographic information for the student population, student achievement information, data regarding student performance on the ACT, Iowa Youth Survey results, and indicators of students' postsecondary plans. The superintendent and principal provided class schedules, staff rosters, and contact information. They agreed to assist with the identification of potential focus group participants and with arranging for focus group interviews.

2. <u>Identifying participants.</u> All seniors in the district were invited to participate in the study. To engage participants, the high school principal invited me to provide a general overview of the purpose of the study and research methods for the entire class of 35 high school seniors during a seminar period. A few days later, the district mailed letters to the homes of all seniors again introducing the study, assuring parents and participants that all responses would be confidential, and enclosing my request for parental consent to participate for students under age 18 and student consent for students

18 years of age and older (Appendix A). Consent forms were returned to the high school

offices. Of the 35 members of the senior class, 22 chose to participate in the interviews

for this study.

After consent forms were returned and one week prior to the start of interviews,

21 seniors completed a Survey of Intentions (see Appendix A). One of the 22 was absent

on that day and, despite several reminders, never "found time" to complete the survey.

One of the 13 who did not choose to participate in the study attends an alternative high

school in a neighboring community and one spends a significant portion of the day

attending classes at an area community college and was generally not available to

participate.

All respondents who indicated a willingness to participate were assigned to one of

three student focus groups of approximately equal size. Two groups were students

enrolled in a 5th hour government class and one group was in a smaller 8th hour

government class. Each group was similar in composition with respect to the range of

socioeconomic status, postsecondary intentions, and plans to stay in the area or leave the

area following high school graduation. District administrators scheduled interviews at

times they determined least disruptive to instruction and at intervals I requested in order

to allow time for preliminary analysis of the data between the first and the second group

interviews.

 3. <u>Primary data collection: First interview with Groups 1A, 2A, and 3A</u>. Each

interview with participants, both students and adult participants, included an overview of

the purpose of the study along with assurances of confidentiality and the voluntary nature

of participation in the study (see the Interview Protocol, Appendix A). All focus group

sessions were conducted using a semi-structured format (Merriam, 1998). I prepared a

protocol that included a mix of structured and open-ended questions (see Appendix A).

This format was selected to allow the perspectives of the participants to emerge as well as

to gather responses to findings and issues that emerge from the literature. Once

beginning each session, we used the protocol to direct and redirect discussion as required

to maintain the focus of the group. Each focus group session was approximately forty-

five minutes in length and was tape-recorded to allow for subsequent verbatim

transcription.

4. Initial preparation of the data. Once all primary data were collected and

transcribed, a first review of the data was conducted using a constant comparative

strategy. In this inductive process, recurrent patterns or themes relating to the research

questions were identified and coded and any incongruence or confusion noted for further

investigation. These became the foundation for the preparation of the protocol for the

second meeting of Groups 1A, 2A, and 3A (Appendix A).

5. Follow-up interviews and additional clarifying data. The purpose of the

follow-up sessions was to seek clarification or elaboration on important points not

sufficiently illuminated in the first session.

6. Final interviews and data collection. Following this second set of interviews,

I determined that a third set of interviews would be helpful to ensure that new data would

not yield significant new details or themes relevant to the concerns of this study. For the

third set of student interviews, I met with Groups 1B and 2B.

Also, I asked the high school principal and secretary to help arrange individual interviews with the guidance counselor, three teachers whose names were consistently mentioned by students and a small group of parents[3]. The purpose of these interviews was to check some of the students' perceptions against the experiences and perspectives of adults with more years of experience in the community.

Inductive Analysis and Interpretation of the Data

I used a constant comparative method of data analysis. As Bodgan and Biklen noted (1998), although often associated with studies that develop grounded theory, this method is appropriate in other types of qualitative research. The advantage of the constant comparative method to this study is that analytic and interpretive processes proceed simultaneously with the collection of the data.

As soon as the first documents were collected and the first descriptive field notes for this study were made, the process of searching for and coding patterns, themes, and notable anomalies in the data began. I started with a framework of major codes drawn from my research questions. All subcategories emerged from the data itself and from comparisons between themes in the data and themes represented in the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

All field notes, interviews, and collected documents that could be scanned or transcribed were saved as Microsoft Word files for the purpose of numbering all lines of text so that data could be easily located in its original context as the analysis proceeded.

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[3] The school secretary invited as many parents of focus group participants as she could reach by phone. Five agreed to participate initially. Two parents who agreed to participate initially withdrew due to last minute conflicts and one parent did not show up for the meeting.

Proceeding line by line, I coded one printed copy of each interview transcript and document in the right margin and then cut each document apart in order to compile groups of related data. In some cases, I coded lines of data with more than one code. In such cases, segments were duplicated for inclusion in all relevant categories.

The process of analysis was non-linear as information and insights emerging from later data collection suggested new ways of organizing data or a rethinking of codes for data assigned in the earlier stages. Once the data were coded and grouped, major themes, patterns and notable anomalies were identified and articulated.

Reporting the Results

The results of the study are recorded in Chapter IV of this report. Chapter IV includes a detailed description of the site, the participants, their perceptions, and my analysis of their perceptions as it relates to the review of the literature presented in Chapter II. This discussion systematically reflects upon existing findings as reported in the literature, draws upon the themes from the data, and illustrates them using the actual words of participants. In this way, Chapter IV helps clarify what part of the gap, if any, has been filled with respect to knowledge of the ways in which youth in a depressed rural community think about their education and their future. In Chapter V, I consider the implications of the knowledge gained as a result of my efforts. Finally, I offer suggestions for future research including some new questions that have emerged from my analysis and interpretation of the data.

<u>Trustworthiness</u>

Merriam (1998) points out that the trustworthiness of any study, qualitative or quantitative, is dependent upon (a) adequate attention to issues of ethics, (b) the appropriateness of the methods used, and (c) whether or not the data recorded reflect an accurate accounting of reality.

In this study, the primary ethical concerns emerged from the power differential between study participants and myself. This difference is based on (a) my status as an adult in relationship to students and their status as a younger person, (b) my status as a highly educated person in comparison to most of the student, parent, and educator participants, (c) my status as a college employee and an outsider from a more affluent place.

To address these concerns, I carefully adhered to guidelines governing human subjects participation (consent forms and related information provided to participants may be viewed in Appendix A). I also gave ongoing attention to the quality of the interactions I had with students and other participants. For me, as researcher, this meant being aware of and setting aside my own assumptions and sense of myself as relative expert regarding the issues under investigation. It also meant communicating openness to and respect for the perspectives and stories shared by participants

A related concern is the possibility, in this study, that participants altered their responses or withheld information based on my presence or status as an outsider and researcher. As Bogden and Biklen (1998) suggest, it is very likely impossible to eliminate an "observer effect" (p. 35), and, in choosing to use focus groups, I imposed an

additional level of artificiality into the process. The rationale for doing this, as elaborated previously, was to minimize the observer effect by creating a sense of safety within the group and an opportunity for less restrained dialogue. To a remarkable degree, I think this was successful. Seniors and adults interviewed appeared comfortable and the notable differences in their responses indicate they felt relatively free to respond with candor.

The appropriateness of the methods used in this study was discussed in detail earlier in this chapter and evidence of the study's trustworthiness. I argued that this is a problem of meaning and of the ways in which people construct meaning with respect to a particular kind of experience. As such, it is qualitative in nature. Because, the research questions required responses that included thoughts, feelings, and desires the case study method is appropriate. The use of focus groups served to draw out a range of participants' responses and to minimize the observer effect mention earlier. The inductive approach to data analysis using a constant comparative technique allowed themes to emerge from the words of participants that, I believe, as accurately as possible the reality of their lives.

I used several key strategies as suggested by Merriam (1998) to increase the reliability of the study. First, I triangulated the data among the groups and individuals interviewed. Second, I regularly used member checks to test the plausibility of the data. For example, I prepared and presented a brief summary of initial findings and sought reaction to that summary from student focus Groups B1 and B2 and from the parents and educators interviewed. Finally, I compared the results of the study against local, state, and national data.

CHAPTER IV

OBSERVATIONS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The saying is, "You sneeze and someone on the other side of the town says, 'bless you.'" (Darren from Bonteville High School, 2003)

A Rural Place

Driving to Bonteville from the north means leaving four lane highways behind to follow winding, two lane highways. They make their way through countryside that is sometimes hilly and sometimes flat, a mix of timber and open fields of corn and soybeans. Beside the road, a few new homes of considerable size sit, a surprise on the entirely rural landscape, catching the eye of those passing by and strutting the accumulated resources of the owners. But mostly, newer homes are much more modest and there are many older dwellings in varying states of repair and occupation.

The road passes through a neighboring town nine miles to the north of Bonteville that some Bonteville residents describe as a *big* town; the big town boasts a population of 3,706 along with a number of goods, services and employment options that Bonteville district residents regularly utilize. Similarly, another community 11 miles to the south and slightly west has a little larger population of 5,924 and a community college campus that attracts Bonteville graduates. To the west, a reservoir forms a barrier and provides a popular recreation area. South and east of Bonteville are some of the poorest rural communities and school districts in the state (Iowa State University, 2002).

Bonteville School District is three times as wide as it is tall when overlaid on a map of southern Iowa. The district occupies most of the top third of the county in which it is located. Some small areas of the district spill over little into neighboring counties to

the north and east. According to the district profile prepared by the NCES (retrieved November 26, 2003), 2,119 people live in the district; 713 of this number (328 families) reside within the city of Bonteville. Ninety-nine percent of the population is of northern European decent. While many residents claim mainline protestant or Catholic religious affiliation (American Religion Data Archive, 2000), there does not appear to be a strong ethnic or religious tradition to bind the community together.

In spite of the rural nature of the county and the large expanses of fields evidently in a cycle of production, only 1% of the declining population base (13,721 in 2000 compared to 15,511 in 1980) is employed in occupations related to farming, fishing, or forestry (Hanson, Artz, & Imerman, 2002). A larger percentage of county residents than for Iowa as whole (36% compared to 27%) are employed in manufacturing, the transportation of goods and materials, construction, maintenance, or extraction operations.

According to 2000 U.S. Census Bureau data, median household income in the county is $28,612 with 13.7% of all children under age 18 living in poverty. Inside the city of Bonteville, the median household income is lower, $26,042. However, the percentage of children living below poverty line inside the city limits is slightly lower than for the county as a whole. Both city and county measures of median household income are well below the state household median of $39,469. According to Hanson et al. (2002), unemployment is higher in the county than in Iowa as a whole (4.3% compared to 2.6%).

The picture of educational attainment in the county parallels the economic picture

in significant ways. The county lags behind the state in the percentage of the population

over age 25 who have earned a high school diploma but is similar in that regard to the

nation as a whole. A slightly higher percentage of county residents (compared to state

residents) seek two-year degrees. However, with respect to the percentage of the

population holding a bachelor's degree or higher, the county falls far behind state and

national comparisons.

Table 4

Highest Level of Educational Attainment for Adults 25 and Older

Educational Level	Bonteville (City)	County	IA	U.S.
% Less than H.S	13.7	18.6	13.9	19.6
% H.S	55.1	41.2	36.1	28.6
% Some College/no degree	13.9	19.6	21.4	21
% Two-Year Degree	8	8.5	7.4	6.3
% Bachelor's Degree	8.2	9.1	14.7	15.5
% Advanced Degree	1	3.1	6.5	8.9
% H.S or higher	86.3	81.4	86.1	80.3
% BA or higher	9.3	12.2	21.2	24.4

The state highway that connects Bonteville to neighboring communities and,

eventually to the larger world passes by not through the town. One turns from the

highway onto North Street, one of 20 or so named streets that make up the town of

Bonteville. A few blocks to the east, a left turn leads past a handful of homes to the

Bonteville district campus. On a November morning, in front of an older Victorian home

with a neatly trimmed lawn, a display of cornstalks and pumpkins welcomes passers by

with a celebration of the season. Across the street and a door or two down the block,

black broken glass and dried weeds grown tall against the side of a house offer a lonely contrast. At the entrance to the school parking lot, a few dilapidated, but lived-in, trailer homes occupy a narrow strip of land that forms one border of the school campus.

Bonteville High School

Bonteville elementary, junior, and senior high schools are housed together in a rambling building, perhaps 30 to 40 years old, on the northwest edge of the community, just a few blocks from the quiet grassy square at the center of the community. On a school day, cars and pickups pack the gravel parking lot in front of the school masking the reality of declining enrollments. District enrollment is down 23% from 413 students in 1997-1998 to 320 total enrollment in 2003-2004 (data provided by the Bonteville School District).

Two wings of an open V, each sporting the appropriate sign, welcome visitors to the Bonteville Elementary or Bonteville Junior/Senior High School. The far right of the complex is dominated by a half barrel roofline, behind which can be seen the football field, the home of the Bonteville Braves. Just inside the entrance to the high school, the school secretary, Jann, regularly offers greetings to visitors and assists students from across a counter that separates the secondary school office from the foyer. Four additional doors opening from her office area provide her access to the secondary principal, a storage/work room, a time out space for miscreant children, and the superintendent's secretary. Next to the main office door, in the foyer, visitors can page through a rack of poster size reprints of senior class photos that go back many years. Across the large foyer, doors open onto the gymnasium where, late in the day, sports

teams spill out to utilize the hallways as well as the gym floor for sprints and extra workout space.

Most classrooms are found along a hallway that stretches out around the corner to the left of the school office. The district employs 34 professional educators, 15 elementary, 16 secondary, and 3 who are both elementary and secondary. With only one exception, most secondary educators appear to be teaching within their content area or, at least, teaching within one content area. Eleven of the 34 teachers have Bonteville addresses. Others live in neighboring towns in or nearby in the countryside (information provided by the Bonteville School District). Many of the teachers have lived most of their lives in the area although the principal and the superintendent have not.

<u>Student Achievement</u>

At least some evidence suggests that Bonteville graduates will not be quite as prepared academically to compete with their peers statewide at more demanding colleges and universities. However, a number of indicators suggest that the district may be doing a better job than in the past. A look at the courses offered, district test scores, and ACT participation and results tell part of the story.

The district graduation requirements include three years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of social studies, two years of science, two semesters of computer applications, and physical education each semester. In addition to its graduation requirements, the district has implemented a recommended college preparatory curriculum called the *core curriculum* that encourages students to complete an additional year of English and an additional year of science.

Students completing the core have few courses to select from at the advanced levels. Traditional advanced mathematics and science offerings such as physics, trigonometry, and calculus are noticeably absent from the schedule. However, students may elect to take anatomy and advanced biology/zoology in addition to chemistry, introductory biology, and physical science. In mathematics, four levels of algebra plus a pre-algebra are offered along with geometry, technical algebra, and a college algebra/statistics course offered via the Iowa Communications Network. Language arts offerings include English I-III, American literature, English literature, and an individualized reading course.

In spite of limited offerings, the district reported 2002-2003 district composite scores for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in Grades 4, 8, and 11 above state goals with one exception. At 63.9%, the 11th grade reading score fell 5 percentage points below the state goal of 69% (Appendix B). Bonteville reported that 11th graders exceeded the state goal score in mathematics concepts and problem solving. Goals aside, the district composite scores in reading for older students, 11th graders in particular, were considerably below the composites for the State (63.9% compared to 77.1% for the biennium period 2000-2002). No comparison data were available for science.

The district reports that 13 Bonteville students took the ACT Assessment during the 2001-2002 school year and their composite score (23.1) exceeded the composite for the state (22) and for the nation (20.8). This represents a significant improvement from five years earlier when the composite score for Bonteville seniors was 19.7, well below both state and national comparisons (see Appendix B).

In August 2003, the district reported 86% of graduating seniors had postsecondary intentions, a percentage that exactly mirrored statewide projections. However, there is a sharp distinction within that number between Bonteville seniors and the statewide cohort in the type of postsecondary institution seniors indicated they planned to attend. Bonteville officials reported that 9 or 21% of 43 graduating seniors in 2003 planned to enroll in four-year colleges and universities. Twenty-seven or 63% planned to enroll at a community college. Seven were undecided. Statewide, more than 40% of seniors indicated they plan to enroll in four-year colleges and universities while only 38% planned to attend community colleges or private two-year colleges (Iowa Department of Education, 2003).

The Class of 2004

One hundred and seventeen students are enrolled in grades 9 through 12. The senior class has 35 members and is the largest class presently enrolled K-12. Of the 35 members of the senior class, 22 chose to participate in the interviews for this study and 21 completed the Survey of Intentions (see Appendix A).

Like the residents of the county, the students attending Bonteville school district are predominantly white. Many students (12 of 21 seniors responding to the Survey of Intentions) have lived their entire lives in the district and know each other very well. They know each other so well by the time they are seniors that they have no difficulty finishing each other's sentences. And, in fact, they sometimes did this during the group interviews for this study.

Nearly half of the seniors (11 of 21) responding to the Survey of Intentions (see Appendix A) reported that their fathers had earned a high school diploma or dropped out before high school graduation. Eight students reported similar information for their mothers. Seven seniors reported their fathers had some college or a two-year degree and a similar number reported the same information for their mothers. Only three fathers and three mothers had earned four-year degrees.

Six of the participating seniors estimated their family income to be below $25,000 annually. Most (9) estimated family income between $25,000 and $50,000 and 5 estimated their parents earned $50,000 or more. In another measure of family income, among school age children attending Bonteville schools during the 2002-2003 school year, 34% were eligible for free and reduced-price meals compared to the state average of 28.5% (Iowa Department of Education, 2003).

In late October of their senior year, nearly half of the senior participants (10 of 21 seniors) indicated on the Survey of Intentions (Appendix A) that they would be somewhat likely to or would definitely stay in the area following graduation from high school. Eleven indicated they are likely to or definitely will leave the area following high school graduation.

With respect to plans for postsecondary education, seniors indicated more interest in two-year degree programs than in four-year programs. Seven indicated they definitely plan to enroll in a two-year degree program or vocational training program. Four seniors indicated they would definitely attend a four-year college although one of these also chose "definitely yes" for a two year college program. Seven said they were either

unlikely to or definitely would not attend a four year college. Few seniors were interested in pursuing the military as a postsecondary option. It seems likely that this class, like its predecessor, will see relatively few students enroll in four-year colleges and universities while a relatively high number will pursue two year or vocational options.

There is a clear difference in aspiration between Bonteville high school seniors and their statewide cohort. This study explores the norms, attitudes, values, experiences, and conditions that shape the ways young people in this depressed rural community think about their future and the role education will play in it. My analysis of the data is presented in the following sections under headings that correspond to seven major themes identified in the research questions. Section subheadings represent major themes drawn from the data itself.

What's Really Important:
Imagining the Good Life and the Hopes of Rural Seniors

In the voices of the 21 seniors participating in this study, as they talked about whom they want to become and their hopes for the future, the power of their rural experience in shaping those dreams is inescapable. It is not that they are unaffected by the larger culture. Clearly, like rural youth elsewhere (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Lawrence, 1998), Bonteville High School seniors have heard and internalized some of the messages from the larger culture that communicate the importance of progress, the related values of credentialism, and some negative stereotypes regarding rural places. However, as they envisioned "the good life," the accomplishments and situations the seniors perceived as possible and desirable have deep roots in their rural culture and circumstances.

The conclusions drawn in this study also confirm the usefulness of the conceptual framework presented in Figure 3. The way individual students translate the meanings of their rural experiences into aspirations for life after high school varies and appears to be filtered through a number of lenses (see Figure 1). These lenses include their collective and individual understandings of: (a) competing societal pressures of globalization and social mobility versus values of place and family ties; (b) opportunities for college, training, or work after high school; (c) community and school context; and (d) family and student characteristics. In the end, with respect to education beyond high school, while the hopefulness of youth is present in their expression of aspiration, there is profound skepticism regarding the real value and meaning of education as it has been offered to them.

Who I Want to Become: Role Models and Mentors.

Asked to describe people they knew personally whom they admired and whom they might like to emulate, seniors' responses included values that reflect the rural working class that surrounds them. The values they express closely echo those that emerged from the work of Herzog and Pittman (1995) in Western Carolina and Lawrence (1998) in Maine. The examples in this section illustrate values as expressed by many of the seniors participating in the study. In general, they admire people who know how to work hard, act responsibly, get things done, are independent, are able to work in difficult conditions, have a capacity to acquire knowledge informally, and demonstrate a willingness to be involved in the lives of others.

A willingness to work hard, as typified by going to work "every day" or performing manual labor, were frequently mentioned as qualities that are admired by the seniors. They sometimes folded additional characteristics into their comments about working hard that may be labeled as "acting responsibly." These were expressed by describing the presence or absence of certain behaviors, such as not drinking or smoking.

> Matt: Well my dad. ...He goes to work every day at five o'clock in the morning--he doesn't drink or anything, he doesn't smoke--I just admire that, I guess.

> Kaitlin: . . . and my dad works every day, I mean he doesn't take a day off.

The ability to persevere and overcome major challenges through intelligence, physical strength, or commitment to achieving goals emerged as qualities some students admired in the role models they described.

> Tiffany: . . .my aunt . . . she's really smart . . . she's always working with a bunch of guys that always think that they're better than her . . .but she still holds out and works there. And, like, if you ask her a question, she's probably gonna know it.

> John: My uncle is in the army. He's an army ranger. That's a lot of physical work. It takes a lot of time and effort. His training was--three to six months and he was completely sealed off from everything.

> Kaitlin: And, hmm--my cousin--he took a year off school and he's workin' hard and so he's getting a lot of money to go to school. So, I kind of admire that, a lot.

Several students identified persons who, for them, modeled an ability to acquire knowledge informally and to use that knowledge to "get things done." These are people Bonteville seniors perceived as successful in spite of their lack of formal education leading to degrees beyond a high school diploma. Through their relationships and experiences with these role models Bonteville seniors have defined what it means to be smart and successful and have developed a sense of the value of education in their lives.

> Ryan: One would be my mom, 'cuz, even if she hasn't gone to college, she's actually gotten a job with the social worker business--with DHS--and she's petty cool.

> Kristin: Mine is a no-brainer--my daddy--he taught himself, he didn't go to college, and he can do a lot better than some people who have been to college and graduated...he makes sure that everything's done, he's a perfectionist....

The quality of independence emerged from the data that some seniors aspire to.

James describes, as a role model, a man who is able to manage his own time and activities while earning a good personal income.

> James: ... [There is] a guy. I look up to him a little bit. He's a heck of a nice guy. He's got plenty of money. He does do a little bit of farming . . . raises show cattle--I kinda like that . . .. He does a lot of traveling, too. He goes to different shows and sales all over the U.S. So he's seen plenty of the country. He's not really on a time clock or anything like that--he can just kinda do as he pleases and makes money at it.

Descriptors like highly educated and rich are notably absent from most of the participants' responses regarding role models. Parents, especially fathers, were prominent among the people the seniors most admired. Both male and female participants mentioned male role models including cousins, boyfriends, employers, or friends. A few, like Tiffany and Ryan mentioned female role models. Some students mentioned people whom they admired because they were working hard to pay for college education. However, being educated is a quality to be admired by at least some students. One young woman defined a role model based on that individual's pursuit of a college degree. One other student eliminated her parents as possible role models because of their lack of education.

> Kaitlin: Probably the most [important] role model that I've had would be my parents, my mom and my dad. Well, my mom is now going to college; she's going to be a lawyer.

Angela: I don't want to be like either one of my parents. Yeah--neither one of them have anything above a high school education and it shows.

Finally, several seniors, as they talked about the people they admired, whom they might like to be like, and who helped them with their plans for life after high school, included a description of the willingness of their role model to be involved in the lives of these seniors and others.

James: He's always there to help me out doing stuff.

Tiffany: Like right now she's trying to help me budget my money--ha, ha, it's not working, but--she's trying.

Mike: These people I met this summer--they just kinda got interested in the camp and everybody. They're just easy to talk to and they've [had some training] and they helped me go through things about [my]self. They have a lot of knowledge in them.

Work as a Means to a Quality of Life.

At first glance, the seniors interviewed appeared to corroborate the conclusions of Crosby and Picou (1979) that most rural youth dream of high educational attainment and career preference. When asked to imagine what it would be like for life to be *as good as it gets* 10 years after high school graduation, many of the seniors thought first about the jobs they will eventually hold. While not all (probably not most) have decided firmly on a direction, they quickly provided a list of varied career interests. These included musician or educator, nurse or obstetrician, Certified Public Accountant, sports medicine, probation officer, dispatcher, factory worker, industrial designer, and "something with God."

However, a deeper look reveals a more complex set of attitudes about work and the good life. Nearly all the students, male and female, assumed their future, even when

life is as good as it can get, will include work. For some, part of their hope is to build a career that will allow them to engage in work that is meaningful and that they will enjoy.

For others, however, the importance of work in their vision of the future appears more related to its ability to support a certain quality of life outside the workplace. For these youth, work is a *job* valued for its ability to produce income without as much concern for whether or not it is fulfilling.

In either case, the hope of one day finding work is not necessarily linked to making lots of money. Like rural Appalachian youth (Howley et al., 1996), the Bonteville students interviewed appeared clear in their minds about the "difference between the aspiration for decent work and greed" (p. 158). Only one among the students interviewed talked about making large amounts of money as part of his dream for a good life.

> Darren: Filthy rich! (laughter from the group). What I'll be doing--I have no idea [about].

Instead, persistent themes in the seniors' responses included (a) *not* wanting to be wealthy, (b) avoiding debt, and (c) having enough to pay one's bills and still afford some extras.

> Eric: I really don't care if I'm rich or anything--just as long as I'm happy with what I do, and happy with where I am--that's about it.

> Kristin: I want to be able to, like, you know, pay all my bills, have money to go take the kids on vacations--buy lots of clothing and, like, have a good life--do you know what I'm saying, like--I don't want to be rich...

> Andrew: ...just financially set--making 100,000 dollars a year is not what I'm planning on making--I'll be set if I just make 30,000 dollars a year.

John: I won't be in debt, I'll have a small, but nice house, a girlfriend, no children, hopefully (general laughter from the group), uh--a job--not real high paying job, just maybe a little above the poverty level.

Researcher: Why do you say that? If life is as good as it can be for you?

John: .... Just depends on how you're --what type of person you are--a lot of rich, rich people are snobs, and some of 'em are very nice--I don't know, I'm fine with being average.

When teachers were asked to comment on these reactions, they interpreted the students' viewpoints as coming from the perspective that, in Bonteville, success is not defined by the nature of the work one does or the amount of money one makes. Again, working hard and being able to meet one's financial obligations emerge as highly valued attributes, counting for more in the eyes of Bonteville students, parents, and educators than a college degree. It is interesting to note that Mr. Jones identified, as the additional criterion of being an "upstanding citizen," someone who obeys the law, takes care of self and family, and contributes to the life of the community in positive ways.

Mr. Jones: I think they judge more by what the person makes of himself. If, if someone's going to, going to go work at a factory and they, they can support themselves and, and are worthy and a honest hard-working person, I think they would probably have just as much respect in the community as, as a doctor or someone else.

Researcher: So--what kinds of attributes make a person worthy in a community like Bonteville?

Mr. Jones: They would have to be able to hold a job that's going to support their life. But the other thing is, you know, be an upstanding citizen as well, not just a person who works.

Family as Important and Assumed

The importance of family in the lives of rural youth is a persistent theme in the literature on the developing aspirations of rural youth (D'Amico et al., 1996; Hektner,

1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Kannapel & DeJong, 1999). Whether talking about education, work, or where they would like to eventually settle, many of the young people interviewed appeared to think of family, including their own offspring, as a foundational piece of the good life as they imagine it. The desire to stay close to family may be key to understanding why such a high percentage of Bonteville youth attend the local community college.

> Stephanie: I always thought I wanted to go far, far away from home--but now, I just, I wanna stay close to home, so . . . hmm--I'm a mommy and daddy's little girl.

Teachers agreed that students are family oriented. Asked why he thought so many Bonteville youth chose to attend the local community college, Mr. Barnes talked about his perceptions of the importance of family in the lives of these seniors.

> Mr. Barnes: I think that has to do with how they were brought up, I mean, a lot of kids, I think, here are very home oriented. They like their parents and they want to stay close--stay close to their parents.

In describing her hopes related to work--"[I want to] have money to go take the kids on vacations"--Kristin made the assumption that her future will include a family with children of her own. She does so almost without awareness, indicating, perhaps, how deeply rooted this assumption is. In a similar fashion, many of the seniors took into account what they perceive to be of importance to their future family.

> Cheri: I wanna work for, like, so long, and then have kids and I want to be a stay-at-home mom until my kids are in school. I don't want somebody else raising my kids.

> James: As good as it gets means I have everything I want--no debt, bills-- everything under control, a hot wife, some kids. ...I don't mind goin' to school here.

Family also played an important role in imaging the ideal place to live after their

formal education is complete. For some seniors, the idea of living away from family

members and friends was unimaginable. For others a little distance might be desirable.

> Tiffany: I wanna live in the area because my family's here. If I didn't, like, have my sister and my niece and nephew, then that would just be horrible. So, I have to live here.

> Kristin: I don't, you know, want to live I *with* my family, but somewhere close-- somewhat bigger.

Imagining the Ideal Place to Live

Hektner (1995) concluded that rural youth struggle more than non-rural youth

with the decision to stay in their community of origin or to leave. Certainly, the push and

pull between exciting new adventures and the attachment to family and home can be

heard in the indecision of Bonteville seniors like Michelle who thought about her rural

connections as she reconsidered her college choice in her senior year.

> Michelle: I thought I had everything decided, and then, a lot of things changed . . . things affecting where I want to go to college at, like--whether I want to stay around Iowa, or leave, or, yeah.

With respect to the setting they imagine when dreaming about a future further

down the road, Bonteville seniors, like rural Appalachian youth (Howley et al., 1996),

were almost evenly divided between a desire to settle in or near Bonteville or a similar

town and preferring a somewhat larger city or major metropolitan area. Even though

nearly all identified qualities of their rural experience that they value highly, there was

also general agreement that rural life has limitations as well. However, the opportunities

students said they were looking for in places away from Bonteville were different

depending on the student.

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Some seniors, like Mike and Kaitlin, indicated they feel drawn away by the attraction and excitement of new places, new experiences, and even the opportunity to be anonymous.

> Mike: I wanna see everything I can, experience everything I can. And, I've done pretty much, most everything in Bonteville you can do. [It would be] just nice to be anonymous--but, here you can't. Everybody knows who you are. It's kind of restricting.

> Kaitlin: I don't know [where, exactly, I want to be]--just away from here, that's all I know--I just want to be out of Iowa. I'm so bored here; it's *so* boring--so as long as I'm out an' away.

Other seniors are attracted by the lure of expanded career opportunities they believe will be available in larger cities. While their responses sometimes reflected only minimal understanding of the demands and responsibilities of work they think they might like to one day do (a problem in small rural places where students have little exposure to professional role models), their sense about where the most interesting and well-paying jobs will be in the future is undoubtedly accurate.

> Kristin: I'm moving somewhere big. Because probation officers, if I want to get a good paying job [as a probation officer], I have to go somewhere where there's a high crime rate.

> Mike: I'd probably be traveling or something, like getting myself known around places, big places. I kind of planned on music or education, but I can see myself, like, out acting in something or [doing something] with music. You're just traveling for awhile, and, you know, payin' your dues. If [I] find a ...community sometime [it will be] big. Um--just a lot of people around, and a lot of opportunities and things to do.

Others did not imagine cities or far away places. Instead, they dream of familiar places that support the qualities of rural life they included in their vision for a good life. They seek the sense of safety and the family they imagine they will have. Several of

these seniors indicated that they value life in the country for its relationship to the land

and all that means for activities, privacy, quiet, and independence.

> Gina: ......if I ever have kids and I'm all happy and everything, I probably won't work in Bonteville, but I'm gonna live here, definitely, probably somewhere in the country, and I'm gonna make my kids go to this school if it's still open.

> Jennifer: I'd like to live in a small community like this, because it just suits me-- but I'd also kinda like to be a little outset from the community, not like right in the town, living-wise--just 'cuz it's better not in town.

> James: Country--right here. I can't think of any place better for kids to grow up than a small town.

For some, especially some of the young men, there is a powerful connection to the

land through farming. They acknowledged they would have to find employment off the

farm, but talked about their hope of maintaining a life that includes farming in some

form.

> Tim: I'd have a house. I'd have a good truck. I'd have a good huntin' dog. I'd have some ground. I'd have some cows. I'd probably be married--probably have a couple of kids. Hopefully have a good job. That's about it for me.

> Andrew: [I want] a farming life ...I've lived in the country my whole life, so I wouldn't wanna live in the town [Bonteville], but at least outside of it, because when you live in a country like that, you--just the people you know around--like, I like to hunt a lot, so I can hunt almost all the property around me. There's not one place I can probably not hunt--so I prefer just having my own rights around people and buildin' respect--have respect for them and them havin' respect for me.

A few acknowledged the limitations of life in Bonteville and indicated they will

seek a practical compromise as they imagine living in a little larger place but not too far

away.

> Cheri: I don't want to live in Bonteville, cuz like all my family lives here and I don't wanna, you know, live with my family. But somewhere close--I don't know--and I want my kids to be in a little bigger school than this--like

Bonteville's a nice school and everything, but you don't get, like, the opportunity to do things that you would in a somewhat bigger school.

Education as a Pathway to the Good Life

Whether or not they planned to leave the community following high school graduation, many of the seniors indicated they plan to enroll in some form of postsecondary education. Some said they would prefer not to continue their education after high school graduation, but thought they should in order to improve their opportunities in the job market. Only a few appeared to believe that a college education has value in their lives beyond the importance of a degree for employment purposes:

Darren: [A college education] is important--I don't want to be stupid...

Cheri: I think education's important even if you're not going to go on and do something--I don't know--if I were just gonna like, stay at home and raise a family, whatever, I'd still want to go to school and learn stuff. But, I like school, I like to do homework and stuff. I couldn't just not do anything--I think it's important.

Stephanie: ... like my mom, now, she didn't go to college. She just went to high school--so, she can't help on my homework that I have trouble with. If I ever have children, they need the education, so I want to help them with that, I guess--so education is pretty important to me.

Education as a Means to Higher Paying, More Satisfying Jobs

However, most Bonteville seniors, even those who thought education would be valuable in their lives for other reasons, indicated they think the purpose of postsecondary education is, first and foremost, to prepare students for the world of work. Several appear to subscribe to the belief that jobs in the future will demand increasing skills in technology and other kinds of expertise (Kannapel & DeJong, 1999; Ley et al., 1996).

Tim: Definitely, I think I'd have to go to college--the way the world is, you kind of need a better education to stay up on technology and everything. High school's not enough, I don't think.

Kristin: Yeah--because whenever we get older, we're gonna have to have college--even for the simplest of jobs. Probably, even if you work at McDonalds, you're probably still gonna need college--you know, one of these days--cuz everything's gonna be so high tech.

While a few talk about gaining valuable skills in postsecondary education that will allow them to perform with excellence in the career of their choice, others describe the process as a means "to get a piece of paper." Among students in this group, getting a college degree means one of several things.

Even though it does not appear that James aspires to a higher socioeconomic class, he thought that a college education could provide a key to social mobility, allowing a lower socioeconomic-status youth access to life in the middle or upper classes. Some, like Angela, believed postsecondary education amounts to a process of credentialing with little else meaningful about it (Howley, 1997; Hurn, 1993).

Angela: I think education out of high school is important, but that's only because they're saying that it is now, because for some odd reason they think you have to have a nice little piece of paper saying that you can do something that you probably could've done before you spent all the money on it.

College is Not the Pathway to Realizing Dreams for Everyone.

Some seniors expressed significant reservations about the necessity and advisability of pursuing a college education. These youth perceived the push for a college education as simply "overrated." For others, their hopes for the future included staying in the area. It appeared that one aspect of the decision-making process for these young people included an assessment of the types of jobs that will be locally available.

These youth measure the value of a postsecondary degree in the local marketplace against

what they believe is the potential for return on their educational investment in the form of

future earnings.

> John: So--it's really overrated, in ways, because there are a lot of people that go
> to college and spend four years, or however many years they want to spend in
> college, and then don't even use their degree. And, then, I know people that, I
> don't even think they have a high school diploma, have brought in over $150,000
> a year. I don't know--it's good if you're gonna use your degree, but if you're not,
> it's a pretty good waste of time--unless you like the experience, which-- I thought
> high school for me was a pretty good waste of my time, except, I like the
> experience.

> Andrew: I think more people succeed not going to college, working in factories,
> than they do goin' to college, wastin' money . . . . I don't know, I probably won't
> go too much further if I even go anywhere--just depends if I can get along--I just
> plan on working at [a factory in a neighboring community] for the rest of my life
> if I can get on there . . . if you've worked there for awhile you're gonna get your
> money built up anyway, you're gonna keep getting' raises, before long, before too
> long you'll be making a lot of money.

It is interesting to note that John completes his assessment by stating that, in his

view, there is an additional consideration. He indicated that the enjoyment he gained

from the experience of being in school might be enough to justify the investment in a

college education even if the potential for future earnings cannot.

Overall, John and Andrew spoke to the value of higher education in terms of the

usefulness of a college degree in the context of their rural setting. They concluded that a

college degree might be a waste of money if one values it only for the purpose of finding

a job in the local economy. Their comments provide an illustration in real time of some

conclusions reported in the literature. According to Khattri et al. (1997) the reality is that

the rural labor market, for the foreseeable future, is likely to include mostly employment

opportunities that require little in the way of formal education beyond high school.

Parents and educators agreed that employment opportunities in the area may not

require advanced levels of education and further noted the power of a rural childhood to

shape some youths' visions of the ideal place to live.

> Mr. Jones: They associate what they will do in the future with what's available to our near area. Maybe mom or dad worked at a factory for the last, you know, twenty-five, thirty years and that's perfectly suitable for them [too]. There's a lot of jobs around that you could get, a factory type job, hourly wage, right out of high school, eighteen years old or whatever. We had a couple kids go to work for John Deere as welders, not last year, but the year before that, and I think they probably make more money in a year than I do [as a teacher].

> Jennifer's Mother: It's a farming community, and the farming is changing, big-time. You just don't make a living off your farm anymore like you used to. But, these boys are still raised country—a big [percentage], probably 50% or better wouldn't it be?—at this school are farm kids. I mean, you know, there's several (she laughs), like the boy that got the job, job at John Deere. Like he said, he took a lot of ag, shop, that sort of classes. That's what's gonna work for him; you're not gonna stick him over in Iowa City, you know, in a four-year university. It just isn't gonna work, that's my opinion. There's a lot of them-there's no reason for them to go on because it's not what they're going to do.

Making Decisions: Life After High School

Although Bonteville seniors share many common experiences and values, they

have developed differing aspirations for life after high school. In particular, the findings

of the following researchers are useful in helping make sense of the differences in

aspiration among Bonteville seniors: (a) Chapman (1981) for his model demonstrating

the role of important relationships in development of aspiration (see Figure 3), (b)

Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital describing how a student's network of

relationships and associated values and expectations that shape one's sense of possibility,

(c) Onyx and Bullen (2000) for differentiating between bonding and bridging social

capital, and (d) Lawrence (1998) for exploring the meaning of local culture in the development of aspiration.

According to Chapman (1981), each young person receives many messages over time from the people in his/her unique network of relationships. The messages are responses and feedback to the young person's qualities, abilities, and performance. Messages may be communicated in the form of expectations, information, and/or support and, as a student grows and develops, they become more specific with respect to what a young person might do or become.

> Kate: As far as I can always remember, like if I did something good, my parents would tell me, and that's what I knew they expected from me, and I knew I could do that. [Now]--anytime I talk about doing something that I want to do in, like college, they'll just say, "I think that would be a good job for you." And, "I think you'd do well."

> Tim: My dad thinks I'll go to college and play baseball. He wants me to go to a big school.

Coleman (1988) calls the product of the interactions between a young person and the members of his/her network social capital. Differences among youth in the amount and quality of social capital each has accumulated may go far to explain why there may be some differing outcomes among rural seniors. For Kaitlin, whose parents have better developed human capital in the form of college degrees, a steady accumulation of social capital resulted in the solid assumption that she will attend college. Angela's parents, however, had less human capital to contribute to the development of their daughter's social capital and her aspirations for the future.

> Kaitlin: I guess they expect me to go to college and do better than they did. You know, that's what they've always told me.

> Angela: My parents don't expect anything from me. I mean, whatever I do--it's how I'm gonna do. If mom says anything to me, it's like, "I know how you did in school mom, so don't tell me anything."

So, as one might expect, given the varying experiences and resources available to students at home, some Bonteville seniors develop higher educational aspirations than others. However, beyond parents and family, the values, conditions, and experiences associated with the culture and context and context of a place exert a mediating influence. These work to shape the messages that are communicated to youth through the networks that link students, their families, and educators to the rest of the community (Lawrence, 1998). As a result, when considered collectively, there are identifiable and unique patterns in the development of aspirations among the young people of a given place. For example, among students who develop aspirations for higher education, the context of the local economy and the stories people share with one another regarding relative value of higher education in that economy mediate the types of postsecondary options youth consider useful and desirable.

Relationships: How Students Decide About Postsecondary Education

Consistent with findings in the literature on aspiration, Bonteville seniors' perceptions[1] of the expectations of their parents, teachers, and friends are powerful influences in the way they shape their plans. Expectation, as used here, implies an outcome that is anticipated with some certainty. Support, which will be discussed

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[1] It is important for the purposes of this study to note the distinction identified by Sewell & Shah (1968) between seniors' perceptions of the expectations of significant adults in their lives and what those adults, might themselves report as their expectations. It is, in the end, what the student perceives to be important, possible, and true that ultimately shapes the plans he or she makes.

separately, encompasses such actions as encouragement, assistance, advice, and information.

Predictably, the expectations communicated by parents emerge as the most profound influence on students' thinking (Hossler & Stage, 1992). More surprising, in light of the small school size and small class size, is the level of uncertainty seniors express regarding the expectations of their teachers and counselors. However, this result is consistent with the findings of at least some studies (D'Amico et al., 1996; McDonough, 1997). Also consistent with the literature, the friends of Bonteville seniors play a much smaller role than do parents. It is an important supportive role nonetheless. Seniors turned to friends to talk through the range of options they and their parents have determined are within acceptable limits. Also, consistent with the literature, it appeared students who had less social capital originating from home relied more on the advice of friends.

Parents' expectations. While only four seniors indicated they are certain they will attend a four-year college or university, most seniors responding to the survey and participating in the interviews at Bonteville High School said they are "likely to" or "definitely will" attend some form of postsecondary education (Survey of Intentions, Appendix A). Similarly, among those interviewed, most indicated their parents either expected them to attend postsecondary education or training or would be pleased if they chose to do so.

Eric: My parents expect me to go to college.

Matt: [They] expect me to go to college.

Kate: They don't, like, pressure me all the time, "saying, you're going to college," but if I (she laughs) if I like, joke around and say, "no I'm not going, then they might say something like, "Oh yeah, you are." But--it's not like they're gonna make me, I mean--it's pretty much my decision. . .

A few seniors felt considerable pressure from their parents to enroll in postsecondary education or postsecondary education of a certain description. Of students in this category, some parents' expectations were connected to their confidence in their child's potential to successfully compete at high levels in collegiate athletics--a confidence their child does not always share.

Tim: My dad thinks I'll go to college and play baseball--he wants me to go to a big school. . . . I think if I went to a big school I don't, I don't know if I'd get to play.

Other students felt their parents were pressuring them to make college choices with which the student may not agree in order to save money, remain close to home, or to enter a particular type of institution.

Cheri: I think that my mom expects me to go to a cheap college right here and live at home for the rest of my life and marry some guy and still live in Bonteville. I think my mom has this bad idea of the world, like being this cruel, awful place and doesn't want me to leave ...She wants me to go to [area community college], and I don't wanna go there, I want to go to...our church college in [neighboring state]. She doesn't want me to go anywhere far from home and a place that's expensive, even though I'm--can get scholarships and stuff, so--I don't know, it's hard, wanting to do one thing and she wants me to do another.

Ryan: . . .they'd rather prefer me go to a Christian school than a public school, yeah which I agree with them on that .

However, most indicated they felt their parents would accept whatever decision they ultimately make regarding education beyond high school. No senior reported his/her parent was opposed to their plans to enroll in postsecondary education.

Jennifer: My parent doesn't care what I do--she's not gonna make me go to college, but I think she'd be happy if I would. And, she doesn't point me in any direction saying, "You should do this, it'd be good for you."

Michelle: Well, they expect me to go to college. I just, I don't know, I've just always talked about it and that's just what I want to do. So, it's not really, like their expectation--they just go along with whatever I want then--they're fine with it. It's not really like they [have to] expect a whole lot from me because I'm pretty motivated myself to do it anyway, so . . .

Expectations of teachers and other school personnel. Bonteville seniors, like the

midwestern students who participated in the study conducted by D'Amico et al. (1996),

were ambivalent about the role of teachers in helping them develop their postsecondary

plans. They generally believed their teachers and other school personnel to be generally

caring and concerned about their performance in the classroom as the students are in high

school. Several students, like Darren, described specific incidents that indicated teachers

pay attention to and respond to the events in students' lives.

Michelle: They--expect us all to graduate and make it. But, it's not like, it's not like they push you and tell you how to do it and what you should be doing, but, just by the way they act, you know that they care, and that they're there for you if you need something.

Darren: I don't know what they expect, but I do know what they--are concerned about. I joined the military and decided to blow off classes--and within a week before grades came out I had about five people trying to strangle me--asking me what was wrong with me and why I decided not to do my homework--so they apparently care--cuz they find that stuff out pretty quick.

While most seniors indicated they believe some or most of their teachers care

about them as people, there was far less agreement about whether teachers, with notable

exceptions, are invested in helping students decide whether to continue their education

after high school. Some, like Mike, thought that most teachers expect students will

pursue some form of postsecondary education after high school. However, he seemed to

suggest that teachers vary both in their expectations and in the ways they communicate
their expectations.

> Mike: I think it's really just different with each teacher, like, as Kate said, Ms.
> Smithson makes us, expects everybody to go to college. And it's the same for
> Mr. Jones and probably most of the teachers here--an' then like, Mr. Phillips just
> kinda spazzes out and' expects everybody just to do everything an' them to do it
> perfectly. . . an it's cool, because, you know, we learn more with him. But, like,
> Mr. Cave, I doubt if he really cares about anything, you know, . . . it's just one
> more year behind his belt so he can brag and complain.

Others said they had heard only one or two among their teachers communicate
active expectations that students should explore their postsecondary options, including
college, while still in high school. These students seemed to believe, overall, that
teachers, were primarily concerned with managing their classes and teaching the content
but were not particularly invested in encouraging students to pursue higher education.

> Stephanie: I honestly think none of the teachers in this school really care what
> you do--after high school.
>
> Researcher: They never talk to you about your plans?
>
> Stephanie: No.
>
> Tiffany: Ms. Smithson does. Other than that, it's like once we leave here it's not
> like they had to put us in college, so it doesn't matter to them. It's like their
> goal's to get us outta here, and once they do, then--that's it.
>
> Kristin: . . . I really don't think our teachers really care--well, I mean, they care,
> but, I mean, we're just another class graduating, it doesn't feel like we have a
> tight bond with any of 'em--I don't think--I probably won't come back and be
> like, "Hey I'm this now!"--doesn't really matter.
>
> James: Um, they expect us all to graduate. I'm sure they want us all to go to--
> college somewhere. Heck, I don't know--they've done their job--got you through
> high school and it's your decision to--go on to college, I guess. If I was a teacher,
> that's what I'd do. I mean, it's not their job--to, uh, make sure you go to college
> or whatever.

Ley et al. (1996) reported that rural schoolteachers expected less from students, particularly low-income students, than did the students themselves or their parents. Some responses provided by Bonteville educators seemed to confirm this finding. Understandably, they expressed expectations for students that appear to be as, or more, anchored in their own experience with previous graduates than connected to the expectations expressed by the individual students they currently serve.

> Ms. Field: I think most of them will either be finishing a two-year program, or have a good shot at the middle part of a four-year program--our kids are more than capable of doing either one--this class in particular seems not quite as sure of where they're gonna be as, you know, last year's class maybe--it kinda runs in cycles up and down.

Teachers maintained Bonteville students are academically prepared for four-year colleges and universities but may not be socially or emotionally prepared.

> Ms. Smithson: And leaving home--some of them just don't feel ready to leave home yet. Now, last year, we had two girls that stick out. One's at UNI and one's at Truman, and they're both doing exceptionally well. They were to that maturity point where they were ready to leave--they love to come back-- but they knew they had to grow some more. I think kids are all different, some here are a little more, maybe naïve and not quite ready to leave.

Mr. Barnes seemed to think that many Bonteville students would be satisfied with a life similar to that of their parents. He appeared to question whether encouraging some students to think about developing higher educational aspirations would be either appropriate or successful. On the other hand, Mr. Barnes would like to see the educators at Bonteville High School do more to help students feel confident about entering four-year programs at larger colleges and universities.

> Mr. Barnes: I think a lot of our kids that stay here, their parents were from here and their grandparents were here. They're brought up--they know everything about Bonteville. I think they just like what they hear and they're happy with

where they're going to be. Why, I guess my philosophy [is]-- I try to tell kids, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Well, they think it's pretty good the way it's happening now. So why not just, just stay and, maybe, part of it's just they don't want to take that big step of going out on their own and challenging themselves.

A lot of our kids will go to [the local community college] and that's fine, but, and I feel, I think that is like a step, but the kids who want to go to Iowa, Iowa State, Drake, UNI--that's a leap, and--I think we need to maybe try to get more of our kids wanting to try to do the leap instead of the step.

Expectations of peers. The responses of Bonteville seniors generally confirm that

parents' expectations have more impact on the development of aspiration than do the

expectations of peers (Davis & Kandel, 1981). Still, classmates and friends appear to

play a role in developing aspiration similar to that outlined in Chapman's (1981) model.

Like most teens, Bonteville seniors generally select close friends who mirror and affirm

their own interests and goals.

> Kate: Well, they're my friends. I expect them to do probably about the same as me--lots of people hang around people that are like them.

Among their larger peer group—their classmates--comparing one's own abilities

and talents to those of one's peers appears to help each young person determine and

reinforce his or her sense of self and sense of possibility. However, as Smithier (1994)

found in the rural youth culture he studied, comparing oneself to peers does not

necessarily imply competitiveness. Instead, there appears to be a spirit of general

cooperation and support in which youth appreciate, recognize, and accommodate

individual strengths and weaknesses.

> Andrew: I think people with, when you see people with better grades than you, you expect them to do a lot better than what you do--like Mike, I expect him to succeed and he does a lot better in school than I do.

Mike: [Andrew's] probably got a lot better work ethic than [others in our class] do.

Processes: How Students Decide About Postsecondary Education

Most models of the development of aspiration and college choice recognize that aspiration develops over time and takes into account student and family characteristics, as well as significant relationships that develop within and outside the family (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). They also generally acknowledge a sequence of information gathering and processing with respect to options that becomes increasingly focused and specific over time.

For example, Hossler and Maple (1993) found that young people who ultimately enroll in colleges and universities may be identified as early as the 9th grade by their interest in receiving and processing information about college. Horn and Chen (1988) concluded that participating in college preparatory activities positively and significantly affects the development of aspiration among high-risk youth.

McDonough (1997) documented the differences in preparatory activities offered to students in schools with high percentages of lower socioeconomic-status students compared to those offered in public and private schools with high percentages of higher socioeconomic-status students. She found that schools serving lower socioeconomic students tended to have fewer counselors available, and that academic advising was limited and often did not help students understand the difference between graduation requirements and college entrance requirements. She also noted that counselors tended to direct lower socioeconomic-status students to community college or less prestigious public institutions regardless of their academic performance or standardized test scores.

On the other hand, McDonough (1997) found that schools enrolling high socioeconomic-status students provided more counselors, sometimes assigning each student a college preparatory advisor as soon as the student entered school as a freshman. In these schools, students and their parents were consistently provided information throughout their school years to maximize the postsecondary options that would be prepared to consider.

Seen through the eyes of seniors, the experience of getting ready for college at Bonteville High School has much in common with the experience of students in the schools serving lower socioeconomic students described in McDonough's 1997 study. For some seniors at Bonteville High School, their experience has included enough timely feedback and information from parents and friends to facilitate developing and reaching goals of going to college. However, for many others, there appear to be troublesome gaps in the communication of expectations and the provision of information that unnecessarily limit students' perceptions of their options and their sense of possibility for the future.

The beginning of awareness: Postsecondary education as an expectation of parents and teachers. Researchers studying the development of college aspiration assert that early development of college plans is critical to college success, at least as early as the 10th grade (McDonough, 1997) but perhaps as early as grade 8 (Hossler et al., 1999). When asked to remember at what age they began thinking about their plans for life after high school or became aware of parental expectations for what they would do following

graduation, seniors interviewed at Bonteville High School offered widely varying responses.

Some were understandably vague, seeming to indicate that parents' expectations came into focus gradually as they grew up. Some noted with great clarity an event that marked the beginning of awareness. In either case, for a significant number of the students interviewed, by the time they reached high school they had a sense from parents that they were expected to, or would be supported if they chose to, continue their education beyond high school. For some, as long as they could remember, they believed their parents had expectations for them with respect to academic performance in elementary, then secondary school, and, finally, for a future of work or college.

Researcher: So they expect you to be in [postsecondary] school?

Tiffany: Yeah

Researcher: And when did you first become aware that they expected that?

Tiffany: A long time ago.

Mike: Even in elementary my mom wanted me to get good grades, and then even in junior high and high school--all the way through.

Darren: [whose father hopes he will join the family business after, or instead of, college] When I was about eight, my dad said, "Hey, you're getting' up next mornin' and come help me work."– hmm–huh, that's about what happened.

For others, parents began talking about their expectations when their child reached high school age:

Tim: When I started high school. [My mom] said I had to get good grades, cuz I was goin' to college--and she couldn't afford to pay for it all, so I need to get a scholarship, so I had to get good grades.

Andrew: I agree--probably freshman year.

Several students noted important events in their families that marked the beginning of their awareness that their parents had expectations for their education after high school:

> Michelle: Basically, around like freshman year, but, more like, when my brother graduated, and uh, he took a year off, before he started going to college and he's going now, so they talk about it more now than they did before.

> Kaitlin: Um--when my cousin got pregnant at the age of 16--they told me that if I ever ended up like her they were gonna kill me (some laughter from her and others). And so, that's when it all started. They told me that I had to go to college, and I, because they made me watch, like, her, like see what she did and everything that she's going through now, and I guess they just want better for me, so.

With respect to life at school, seniors interviewed had more difficulty identifying a time when school personnel began talking with them about their postsecondary plans. Other than some early opportunities to develop career interests and skills, most students could not remember any planned presentations or lessons by school personnel on college choice, college entrance requirements, or financial aid, during their high school years. When asked if they could describe the first time they heard from anyone at school about choosing or planning for colleges or other postsecondary options, Kristin's response was typical of Bonteville seniors:

> Kristin: When the college people came this year, maybe?

> Researcher: Have you ever had, in any of your classes, anybody talk to you about financial aid or how [college admissions] processes work?

> James: No.

> Mike: No.

> Stephanie: No.

Darren: Our guidance counselor, uh, has people from colleges come in to talk to us about it.

Brandon: But you have to take time out of classes, and –

Cheri: But they're not usually the colleges we want.

These responses echo conclusions reached by McDonough (1997) that guidance counselors working in predominantly low income communities tend to provide limited, if any, information about college selection and admissions early in students' high school years and, ultimately, tend to direct most students toward community colleges and vocational programs. Bonteville high school teachers' responses tended to confirm this assessment. Ms. Smithson commented that she believes the experience of Bonteville students might be typical of students in most depressed Iowa school districts.

Ms. Smithson: We do nothing young [eight and ninth grades] that I know of--the only think I know, really, they don't--we don't sit down enough with them--I start reminding kids when they're sophomores, you need to get an ACT score under your belt... but we really don't do any of that counseling.

Mr. Barnes: We take them to [the local two-year college], for senior day. So they know a lot about what [that school] does, but the, but the upper level fours, uh, we could do a little better maybe

Researcher: Do you think it's different here than most other small districts?

Ms. Smithson: Nope.

Learning how the system works. In spite of some reminders in their classrooms, participating seniors expressed minimal awareness of the importance of college entrance exams, such as the ACT exam, and very limited understanding of how financial aid processes work. When asked, in November of their senior year, if they had completed the ACT exam, the following responses were typical of Bonteville seniors:

Researcher: Did anyone talk to you about registering for [the ACT]?

Stephanie: Ms. Field does.

Kaitlin: She really pushed it last year, but this year she's really not pushing it--I don't know, I think she can do a better job of doing that than she does now.

Mike: I'm going to [to take the ACT] in December, but I haven't [yet].

Tiffany: I haven't--I'm sure I will, but it's not like, mandatory? Like, if you don't, it's not on the top of my list.

Matt: Took it twice.

John: Hell, no.

Similarly, seniors were not yet knowledgeable about processes for obtaining student financial aid. Asked what they knew about the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), one student responded he knew a little but would need to learn more. Another had worked a little on completing his online. Most were unaware that it is very important to complete the FAFSA, when the FAFSA is due, or that the FAFSA is the foundation for determining financial aid packages at nearly all-postsecondary institutions:

Researcher: You know that you've got to complete [the FAFSA]? Right?

John: We do?

Kristin: Unless if you're gonna pay out of your pocket.

Mike: Yeah, some of the, like I'm going to a private college, and uh, a lot of them won't take federal aid, so depends on what college I go to, to get that.

Brandon: And it seems like it's the only financial aid they'll give you is if you join the military.

However, it is important to keep in mind that this interview took place in early November of the participants' senior year. The school does provide some planned

informational meetings during the senior year that some students were aware would happen soon.

> Cheri: There's a financial aid meeting in like--I don't know when it is--they always have a set meeting for it, so, that's when you usually go learn about all that.

The school counselor also reports she meets with most or all seniors individually over the winter months to provide information and advice about college admissions. She indicated she tries to encourage all students complete at least two applications.

> Ms. Field: I try to have [seniors] have one application out at least by Christmas. So, even if it's just to the two-year school, and then I usually try to get 'em to do two before the end of the semester, the first semester. [I] try to have 'em do two-- one that they really think they're gonna go to, and then one to fall back on. . . . I try to meet with them all [individually]. Some are a little bit more interested than others, so--those would come in on their own and, a few of 'em, I would just go into the study hall and say, "Well, this is what we've got. Are you interested in any of these things?"

Supports

Support includes the encouragement, assistance, advice, and information provided to students for the purpose of facilitating their postsecondary plans. As we have heard, Bonteville seniors identify a limited number of adults, including a few teachers, beyond parents who are important resources for them as they develop their dreams and plans for the future. Certainly, seniors also consult with their friends. However, parents, and, sometimes, siblings or other family members provide the most significant support in the form of expectations that are translated through active encouragement, guidance, and assistance.

Parents as Supporters

Yang (1981) found that parents' expectations, but especially mothers'

expectations for their children, provided the most powerful influence in rural youths'

decisions about college. Clearly, for many Bonteville seniors, mothers play an active role

in their decision-making. Most seniors welcomed their mothers' assistance. A few

indicated they thought their mothers were over-involved.

> Michelle: [My best friend] and my mom, and probably my little sister--they're
> like the three main people that I actually do talk to, all the time.

> Jeanne: I think that –my mom and my aunt and my grandma, because, uh, they
> think that I should [go to college] because they encourage me to do that, and if I
> need help I always have them to, um, help me through it.

> Stephanie: . . . like my mom, I mean she'll sit there and be like, we have to fill
> this out--she opens my mail and if she doesn't like it she'll throw it away.

> Tim: . . . so I had to get a job and I kinda support myself anyway so I just, I
> mean, I don't know, she kinda, she tries to treat me like a little kid, but--what she
> says really doesn't mean that much to me because I kinda know what's gonna
> happen and I got my life pretty much planned out I think.

Seniors mention, specifically, fathers less often than mothers with respect to

developing their plans for college. When they do, fathers tend to remain in the role of

communicating expectations, while mothers provide the most active support.

> Gina: --My dad's always preaching about how we need to be positive and all this
> stuff and if you put your mind to it you can do it.

> Stephanie: --My dad just sits there and says I'm gonna go to college

> Andrew: But my dad, I don't know –he gets to pushin' too hard, and it's just--it
> just gets to where I just ignore him, cuz I don't know, he just--like college--I
> really don't wanna go, but he keeps pushin' so hard.

Overall, seniors interviewed valued the support of their parents and family members but, as with Andrew, many are not afraid to develop their own opinions regarding future plans. Seniors responses indicated they listen carefully to what their parents say about their capabilities, circumstances, and options. However, most seniors appeared to also believe that, ultimately, decisions regarding their postsecondary options are theirs to make. Asked to comment on how valuable they found their parents helpfulness, the following provide examples of what seniors had to say:

> Kate: I think it was helpful--everybody needs to be helped set on their way--it's always good to know somebody else's opinion.

> Jeanne: On a scale of 1-10, I'd give it an 8. Um, I take some of their advice and then some of their advice I don't. And I just make up my own advice, and take my own advice.

<u>Teachers as Supporters</u>

McGrath et al. (2001) found that low-income rural students must rely more than upper income students on the support and guidance of teachers, counselors, and other community adults to bolster the critically important social capital they need to be able to take advantage of the opportunities available. Smithier (1994) concluded that, in depressed rural communities such as Bonteville, parents often assume that the professionals employed at the school will take care of the educational needs of their children. This would include helping youth consider and choose among available postsecondary options. However, as previously noted, some experts are finding (McDonough, 1997) that rural educators may provide information to students based on lower expectations than those held by students and their parents.

In many ways, this gap between the expectations of students and parents and the expectations of educators seems apparent in the quality and extent of support that teachers and counselors provide to students at Bonteville High School. In addition to a paucity of events and processes offered to students by the guidance office, seniors identified only a few teachers who talk with their classes on a regular basis about skills needed for success in college.

Still, while some teachers appear to be just doing what is required to secure a paycheck, students say others consistently push them to develop skills or knowledge that will be important for college success and to think about pursuing higher education. According to the seniors interviewed, the teachers who provide this critically important support integrate information into the context of their regular lessons and at least one takes time outside of class to help students complete forms and find information.

Researcher: Have any of your teachers helped [you get ready for college]?

Darren: --they don't give us like college information *on* colleges, but they do tell you what you need to know for college--they'll be like, when they're tellin' you something in class, they're like, "Oh, you need to know this for college." . . . So, that's where they help us with the college stuff.

Cheri: Ms. Smithson always does.

Michelle: I'd have to go along with Kaitlin on that one--Ms. Smithson's definitely the person you can talk to about, like any college stuff, and like, anything you wanna do in the future--she'll sit there and talk about it to you, she'll help you fill stuff out, too, so ...

Mike: Smithson does like, at least once a week. Mr. Jones--not as bad as Ms. Smithson, but maybe, probably last month and a half or so he's been hitting it a lot--and it's just getting annoying from everybody.

However, some students feel that support from teachers is more readily available for some students than it is for others and that this distinction is made based on the ability and socioeconomic status of students and their families:

> Stephanie: I think [our teachers] help other people more than they help some people. I think they help the smarter ones more than the lower class ones. I mean, like Ms. Smithson can talk to these guys all--like, all the time (indicates some other participants), but Ms. Smithson never really talks to me about college, so I mean . . .(A male student says "Yeah" in agreement)

> James: They didn't--nobody, none of my teachers ever--never really asked me, about college or whatever. Mr. Jones would probably be the closest and he's, he like talked about some vocational programs or somethin', but he never said really much either, so--I mean, nobody's ever like, got any forms for me to fill out or anything like that.

Kaitlin, one of the students who Stephanie indicated received more attention from school personnel, pointed out a fundamental difference between students who feel empowered and are highly motivated and students who are not:

> Kaitlin: Well, it's not that they talk to us. We actually go to them--we actually go and we ask for information. I mean some kids, they might be too scared to go ask, or they might not even care--we go and we ask, that's why they talk to us.

Clearly, some students arrive at school better equipped than others, presumably as a result of the social capital they bring from home, church, or friends. They then use this capital to further develop the resources available to them at school. Meanwhile, students like Stephanie and James, who have less capital at the start, are frustrated as they try to negotiate a system that provides little help for those with fewer skills and less confidence.

Peers as Supporters

As we heard Michelle say earlier, peers, especially close friends, provide valuable support for young people making a number of important decisions about their lives--

decisions that include whether to go to college, which college to choose, and which

relationships are good for them. Students turn to their friends for care, information, and

advice. Some seniors, responding to the question that asked who has been most

influential helping them develop their hopes for the future, included peers in their

responses.

> Brandon: I'd have to say, probably my close friends--helped me, you know, at least decide that I probably should do something with my life –probably my girlfriend would help me.

> Kristin: Our friends are really supportive; I think if one of us is sad and down, someone's going to be like, "What's wrong?" And, we're gonna be there for each other . . . Yeah--I think our friends want the best for us, and what they see is the best.

> Michelle: . . . just having conversation with your friends, you learn a whole lot more [than they teach you in schools]

Among the seniors I interviewed, only a few did not agree that they are tightly

bonded as a class. They noted the differences among them that one might expect in any

class of seniors--differences in interests, abilities, and inclinations.

> Kristin: (eliciting laughter from the group) Our class isn't normal! We have too many personalities in our class to judge it as one big whole, cuz like--We have four or five guys that are just so different than me, like, they're all punked out, um, reading books, and I don't ever [read books]. I can, when I associate with 'em--I just think, gosh these people are so cool, cuz they're so different than me. But I don't ever really talk to them much cuz we just have different interests. They don't ever go to sporting events and I do. They'd rather play in a, like, punk rock band. And it, like, makes me happy that they're so different and they're not afraid [sometimes]– to be, like, the normal, "Oh, let's go to sporting events, and then hang out after that or whatever."

So, in spite of their differences, these seniors appeared bound together by their

common experience in Bonteville. Several noted that their peers, even beyond their

group of closest friends, are valued for their advice and encouragement. They also

recognized the significant bond that developed among the students who have known each other nearly all their lives.

> John: I think the group that's been here since, like kindergarten and second are pretty close.

> Cheri: Cuz we know everything that's happened in each other's lives.

What Might Get in the Way

When seniors were asked to consider potential barriers that might interfere with their plans for the future, it soon became apparent that, like two sides of the same coin, qualities or experiences that function as assets for some students or some ways for all students can also serve to limit students' capacity to achieve their goals.

Academic Ability and Performance: Preparedness for the Rigors of College

Consistent with findings in the literature, the predominantly low-income students who attend Bonteville High School appeared to benefit in many ways from small class sizes and teachers who know them personally and often know their parents. (Howley et al., 2000, found that small school size minimizes the impact of poverty on school performance.) However, it is true that course offerings are limited. It may also be the case, that some Bonteville teachers are teaching courses outside their true field of expertise, that performance expectations are too low, and class sizes are too small to provide healthy competition among students (Beeson & Strange, 2000).

Seniors persistently questioned whether their school experience had adequately prepared them for college. For some, the curriculum lacks relevance.

> Brandon: School has introduced nothing to me. I've learned more through independent reading and study than I could ever hoped to learn anywhere otherwise--I mean through conversation with friends as well--that's taught me.

School teaches you formal stuff that everybody wants you to know. But the good stuff is what you probably shouldn't know [according to adults].

Darren: It's a good point. Because there's a lot of stuff that school leaves out that you can learn by reading other stuff. They just teach you what you, what they think you need to know--more than half of it you probably won't ever need to know.

Others are concerned about the rigor of performance expectations. These students believe they have not been challenged to perform at levels that will help them in the transition to postsecondary education. Seniors believe they are not being held accountable for the timeliness and quality of their work. They also question whether the courses at Bonteville High School are adequately challenging

Angela: I think our, our school expects us to do well, which all schools should expect you to do well. But, they do kinda hand feed you. Well, I mean they give you way too many chances to do something when, and you're not gonna get it at college. . . . Yeah. They're just teaching you that you can get by, by not doin' stuff. But I mean, when you go to college, you're not gonna get by with it-- you're gonna get zeros and then you're gonna fail . . .

Kaitlin: I don't know, because, like--like, some of us don't have very hard classes, and so, like, when we go to college we're not prepared--to have to take on the tougher classes . . . but when we go to college, you know, we're gonna have hard classes.

Self-Efficacy

Still, for at least a few Bonteville seniors, their confidence was such that they could not identify any potential barrier great enough to prevent them from reaching their goals. These fortunate students have a well-developed sense of self-efficacy that has grown as their social capital increased over the years. As a result, each feels empowered to do whatever is required to generate his/her success (Stage & Hossler, 2000).

In addition to being successful students at school, both Kaitlin and Michelle have parents who actively help them with their college plans. It is interesting to note that Kaitlin is also the young woman who described initiating contacts with the guidance counselor regarding college selection and admission. She might be said to have developed "planful competence" or the ability to take responsibility for her actions and create a plan for the future (McGrath et al., 2001, p. 251). Of those who have not taken the same kind of initiative, Kaitlin speculates, "I mean some kids, they might be too scared to go ask, or they might not even care."

Researcher: Is there anything that could be in the way of your going to college?

Kaitlin: No, I won't let it. Because I know what I'm going to do, and I mean, If feel like nothing can really stop me if I have my mind set on it, so –

Michelle: I honestly don't see anything getting in my way of going to college. I'm pretty much motivated enough to know that nothing's getting in my way, and that I'm going anyway, no matter what. And whether there's gonna be friends [from high school] there or not is something that I'm gonna have to get through if I wanna achieve my goals, so I'm motivated enough to know that I'm going.

Others, like Stephanie and Angela, expressed less confidence in their ability to meet the expectations they or others have set for them.

Stephanie: Um, my parents expect a lot from me--they want me to like, go to college and be a big time, like athlete . . . but I just, like two weeks ago I told 'em I just wanted to start at [the local community college] and they didn't like that, so, it's like they don't understand what I wanna do, it's like, they want me to do what they wanna do, they don't really care what I wanna do . . . I don't know, I guess I'm scared I'm gonna let 'em down.

Angela: [I worry about] not making the grades--if you don't pass your classes you don't, don't graduate with your degree.

Mike thought that the lack of confidence that seems to characterize some Bonteville seniors is an important reason why graduates may fail in their attempts to

make the transition from life in a small school and community to life on a college campus in a more urban setting.

> Mike: Oh yeah--I think it is--it's like, some people wanna go from a small school to a big school and they go and then, you know [they say to themselves] "this isn't for me" and they'll get scared, and they'll make up things where they don't want to get into it and then they won't do it.

Uncertainty regarding their ability to act in ways that will ensure their success can also be heard in the stories seniors tell about young people who graduated in previous years. They could remember many students who had enrolled, then dropped out of college. However, they could think of very few who were still attending college or who had graduated.

> Stephanie: I know a lot of, like, fellow teammates. They'd go to college to do [sports], but yet, the pressure is just too hard for them. So, they don't want to do it . . . I knew a couple of girls that went to college to play basketball and they dropped out of the basketball cuz it was too hard. They were afraid to, like, go on cuz we're a small school and they thought college [ball] was, would just be like high school ball. But it's totally different, so they just dropped out.

> Researcher: Dropped out of college--altogether?

> Stephanie: Well, the girls I know did.

> Darren: I can't think of anyone, like from around *here,* who graduated, you know.

> Michelle: There's some that actually go on to college, and there's some that'll actually, like, stick out --there's a couple from my brother's class, like Matt's sister--she's gonna make it in college--she tried really hard in high school and she's gonna make it through college--and then there's some that aren't gonna make it at all because they just don't even care. They go there for all the wrong reasons and they're gonna drop out just like a lot of the others did. And, there's a couple more like Matt's sister, but there's not very many.

It is useful to revisit Onyx and Bullen's (2000) theory distinguishing bonding social capital from bridging social capital. It provides an excellent framework for

understanding the degree to which at least some Bonteville seniors appear to rely on the sense of safety, trust and belonging that operated so powerfully for them during their elementary and high school years. The contrast is striking between those who do build bridging social capital that facilitates their actions on their own behalf (as have Michelle and Kaitlin, p. 108) and those who have not.

Stephanie provided an example of the latter as she talked about her struggle to find some congruency between the high expectations of her parents, her longing to stay connected to family and friends, and her fear that she will fail to measure up to her parents' hopes for her. She seemingly finds confirmation for her fear of failure in the story she shared about former teammates who dropped out of college.

The Plans and Values of Friends

While there is some disagreement about how much power youth have to influence the postsecondary plans of their friends, some researchers find that students are more likely to go to college if their peers have similar plans (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987). Horn and Chen (1998) concluded that the values peers place on educational activities make a difference in the way at-risk youth think about their postsecondary plans in general, and the specific enrollment plans of friends influence the decision whether to attend a four-year or a two-year program. Certainly, this is so for some of the seniors at Bonteville High School.

> Stephanie: Certain friends, you know, you don't want to lose them. So, going to college, you might just find new friends and cause you to, you know, forget about your old friends back here at home. And, then, maybe you just come back here after college and [find] you have no friends. So--and I don't want to go to college not knowing anybody. So I kind of, like, want to go to college where everybody

else [in my friends group] is going. [Then,] you're probably actually not scared to go to college.

The Cost of Getting There

The cost of college appears to pose significant challenges for low and middle-income rural families and appears related, ultimately, to the educational attainment of rural people (Haas, 1992). Almost one-third of the seniors interviewed at Bonteville High School would be considered lower income by any definition. Of the 20 who completed the initial survey, six estimated their total family income is less than $25,000 annually, nine estimated family income between $25,000 and $50,000 annually, and five estimated family income above $50,000. As one might expect, a number of Bonteville seniors are concerned about paying for college or just having enough to get started in life.

> Jeanne: Money--yeah, because, um I have one older sibling and one younger sibling, so I'm, like, the middle child and my mom and dad have basically financed everything that my brother is, couldn't finance, so yeah, I think I'd need some help.

> Mike: --money--cuz like I plan on going to a Christian college and they're all private and they're like--the one I really want to go to is like 26,000 thousand a year, which won't happen--and, they're really expensive, so--it's, that's a big setback for me--it'll probably take me back--just money.

> Brandon: Money--writers don't make a whole lot of money--well, if they are really good--which I am not.

With respect to managing college costs, perhaps the most limiting factor for Bonteville seniors thinking about postsecondary education is that they appear confused and largely uninformed regarding important processes and deadlines related to college access and financial aid. In this respect, they may be similar to many seniors nationwide, especially those from lower income families and families without a parent who has

completed a college degree (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003). Horn et al. reported that

nearly half of 11th and 12th grade students who planned to enroll in college could not

estimate the cost of one year of attendance at the school where they expected to enroll

and more overestimated the cost than underestimated it. Furthermore, they noted that,

while the gap in awareness of college costs exists at every socioeconomic level, they

found the gap significantly greater among low-income students and their parents who are

the least able to assume additional financial responsibilities.

> Mr. Jones: I think maybe our economic status, as an average, is probably lower
> than most of the rest of the state, and a lot of the rest of the United States. The
> idea of sinking twenty thousand or forty thousand dollars into an education is
> pretty scary for an eighteen-year-old kid.
>
> I don't know, I'd say between twenty-five and forty different colleges come to
> present to students who are at the high school every year. They bring their whole
> spiel with them--scholarships and grants and what the tuition costs are. Then our
> guidance counselor gives [all the students] the Pell grants and the forms. But, I
> don't know if--[I don't know] how much they believe [that it is really possible to
> get financial assistance with college costs].

Parents' Expectations

Some studies of rural places describe cultures in which parents do not value

education beyond high school (Lawrence, 1998; McDonough 1997). In contrast, it seems

parents of Bonteville seniors do value additional education for their children. However,

like their children and, as Ley et al. (1996) suggest they might, they appear to value some

additional education for their children because of its potential to provide a decent income

and a comfortable lifestyle close to home.

None of the seniors interviewed indicated in their responses that their parents

would prefer they not seek postsecondary education or training of some sort. For a few

students, however, their parents' expectations appear to them as potential barriers. This occurs when parents' expectations do not match the goals and dreams the students have formed for themselves.

> Cheri: . . . my parents like to tell me what to do and how I'm gonna do it, and that, and that would be a big setback. Yeah.

> Ryan: For me, it'd be my family--even now, I can tell that my family's trying to push me and lead to a different way, to where I might not like . . . in my own mind, the things that my parents want me to do, I cannot see myself doing . . .

The Difficult Transition from Life in a Small Town and a Small School

Bonteville seniors are well aware that rural students may face a period of significant adjustment when leaving home to attend college and universities in more urban areas. Some studies attribute lower college persistence rates among rural youth nationally with the difficulty rural students experience with being away from home (Downey, 1980).

Coping with living among strangers, less immediate access to support and encouragement, high levels of competition, noise, and other distractions are on the list of worries on the minds of Bonteville seniors. They are aware of their inexperience in the world and worry about coping with the differences between life as they have known it in Bonteville, and the way they believe life will be away from home. Certainly, the stories Bonteville students shared about friends, relatives, and schoolmates would tend to confirm that adjustment could be a challenge for students from very rural places.

> Matt: I'd say the majority of people got to college, but they, the majority of the, those people drop out--it's a jump from a small town life to going to a bigger city. I think the courses, classes might be a little bit tougher.

Jennifer: I'm mostly scared of a big town. There's two colleges that I'd like to go to. One is, like, ten miles out of Chicago and the other one is in Kansas City. And I go to Des Moines and I freak out cuz there's so many people around me. It's like I need to breathe, I gotta go outside.

Kate: I'd have to say that maybe living in a small town all my life, it's going to be harder for me to get out and go to college cuz I'm going to be more scared, being around more people and not knowing anybody.

Brandon described why he believes students from more urban areas might adjust more easily to college life:

Brandon: Probably cuz [kids from more urban places] don't have to adjust--I mean, if you live in urban Des Moines, you can go to college . . .live in urban Ames, you know, there're colleges right there, so, your whole life you're intermingling with college people--you don't really know it--but I mean, you are, and then when you go to college nothing really changes, except for like, your address--and really that doesn't even have to change, because it's right the-- everything's just always there.

The Realities of Life: Temptations and the Unexpected

Even though somewhat isolated from the world, Bonteville seniors are well in tune with a litany of additional worries that keep many American parents of young adults from sound sleep on at least some nights of their parenting years. They described a number of possibilities that could result from shortsighted, spur-of-the-moment decisions they might make that would ultimately interfere or alter their plans for a lifetime. Driving drunk, partying instead of studying, having children too soon were common themes in their responses about potential roadblocks to success.

Kristin: Right--but we all have so many temptations, though, in life, that it's just so hard to like, when somethin' comes up and you want to do it, you know what I'm saying? And you're like . . . you don't think about what's gonna happen tomorrow . . .you might be like, "Let's party!"--and you don't think about, ok, what if the cops come, ok, what if my parents ground me for being home late, you know, whether, what if you wreck and die on the way home--I wasn't gonna go that far.

Tiffany: So, like if you have kids and you're obviously not gonna be able to go to school unless you hire a babysitter and want somebody else to raise your kids.

Finally, the seniors interviewed recognized that unexpected events may occur in their lives that may change their plans. Serious illness, competition for scarce jobs, and simply growing older and changing priorities might interfere with their ability to access "the good life" as they imagine it today. For at least some, there is a sense of fatalism about what will happen in the future.

> Gina: There's all sorts of stuff –you can't really put a name to any of it--all sorts of things could happen between now and--what your plans are in the future. Like, I'm pretty sure that God already has us all figured out, and what we're gonna do and everything. So I just think that basically, it is like fate, I mean, you're gonna end up doin' what you're supposed to be doin'--eventually--you just have to choose the right things.

Connections: Powerful Ties to Family and Place

Clearly, many of the seniors interviewed are deeply rooted in their rural place where they have lasting ties to family and friends. As they talked together about what is important and valuable in their lives, it became apparent that, as found in studies of other rural youth (Hektner, 1995; Ley et al., 1996), they do feel torn between a desire to remain connected to their roots and the attraction of new experiences, interesting careers, and high incomes.

Two themes are woven through the comments of Bonteville high school seniors regarding the decision between staying close to home following graduation or seeking out new places to establish their lives. The first is about the value they associate with the place itself and the quality of life found there. The second speaks to the strength of the relationships youth have established with family and friends.

<u>The Value of a Place: Community Characteristics that Matter</u>

Like the youth in the study conducted by Herzog and Pittman (1995), Bonteville

seniors identify other important qualities unique to rural community life including the

level of respect people develop for each other, a sense of safety, the lack of drugs and

violence in the school, the opportunity for privacy, and space, and the quiet of the

countryside.

> James: Most of 'em are pretty good people — not too much really goes on here as far as any crimes or anything like that. Oh yeah. [Our community is] as safe as it gets.

> Tim: I like it here because you don't have to worry about all the violence that all the bigger schools go through, all the drugs or anything like that.

> Kate: Well--I can imagine I'll be living here on a farm . . . I'd like to live in a small community like this, because it just suits me--but I'd also kinda like to be a little outset from the community, not like right in town, living-wise--just cuz it's better not in town.

> Andrew: Yeah, you get a heck of a lot better privacy.

> Jeanne. Oh yeah!

> Andrew: Something I've noticed, it's always--whenever I'd stay the night at a friend's house--it doesn't matter, even if it's just in Bonteville-- I just think it's so noisy--there's just always so much noise going on. And, in the country, it's just, all you hear is just the animals . . . you're in town and it's just, there's either a car driving by, or there's just--you can hear the lights--I always hear the lights and they annoy me...

<u>The Power of Relationships</u>.

In spite of the less than shining prospects for finding rewarding work in the area

and other disadvantages identified by the participating seniors, the strong relationships

with family and friends form powerful ties that evidently shape the ways some seniors

think about the choices they will make for their lives (D'Amico et al., 1996).

On one hand, some seniors find that everyone knowing everyone else can be "restricting," as Mike and Darren suggested, or contribute to the rapid spread of rumors, being overly judgmental or hypocritical, as experienced by Gina. Here are some responses that describe such experiences.

> Darren: I think Bonteville's kind of boring. There's not that many people here. You know everybody, which sometimes is bad.

> Male student: Always bad!

> Darren: You can't do anything here without someone saying, "Oh, I hear you did that..."

> Gail: I think the one disadvantage—I've done something bad, and after that, this one teacher, just like, totally hated me. You (addressing her peers) probably didn't know about it because I didn't tell anybody. But all I can say is that, it's like, after you mess up once or they hear something that maybe you had done but it's just a rumor—then, it's like, "well that is a bad student, obviously."

But others so value the quality and strength of relationships that develop in their rural community that they hope to make a life in the area.

> Cheri: Everybody's pretty close, like friendly-wise—you might have an older couple living next door to you and they always know, [they will say] "Hey, good job on the ball game last night!" or "Hi!" Everybody's pretty friendly and they care about everybody else most generally.

> Stephanie: .. They might, like, butt into your business but at least they care . . . If you come from like a big city, no one would really care who you are. So that's probably the best thing about Bonteville.

Choosing to Leave or to Stay

The stories seniors remembered and shared about previous graduates also reflect, as Howley et al. (1996) suggested, that there may be established value judgments associated with young people's decisions to stay in or leave the area.

A few indicated they are looking forward to graduation and moving away to larger cities and new adventures:

> Jeanne: Hmm--(with a laugh) I think I'm gonna get outta here because--I'll put spice in my life and go meet other people, I wanna see what's outside of Bonteville.

> Mike: I don' think I'll live here. I will wanna go to, not a huge city, but a bigger city--see if I like it--I, you know, from what I've seen--bigger cities, I like it--the anonymity and such. But, I'm glad I grew up in a small town, I guess. I probably would have liked to have gone to a high school in a bigger school.

But others are making plans to stay. In their responses on the Survey of Intentions (Appendix A), most seniors who wish to stay in the area indicated they are likely to attend at least a two-year institution in their area or a vocational program near their home. Some have already taken some beginning steps to establish themselves as independent adults in the community:

> Angela: I'll be here. It's a guaranteed proven fact. I, well, not me myself, but I pretty much already have property bought here, not me, but I'll pay for some of it myself.

> James:--right here--I've got a, another house, I've got a house, a farmhouse I'm gonna move into.

> Kate: I think I'll be around here, just because I like the small towns--I hate going to bigger places, it just doesn't suit me well--this is what I'm used to.

Angela and Kate appear to be firmly committed to community college or vocational training in the next year. James seems less certain. However, their choice to stay seems grounded in an attachment to family and community and a way of life and does not appear to justify the negative stereotypes cited in the literature as associated with young people who "stay behind" (Lawrence, 1998).

At the same time, when asked about graduates who stayed in or returned to the area, seniors interviewed readily described a group of graduates whose activities have earned them the descriptor of "lowlifes."

> Stephanie: I know they all stick around here, and, I mean, I know a couple, kids from my brother's class, or other classes, just lowlifes--don't do anything with their lives.
>
> Researcher: Do most students go on to do something?
>
> Male respondent: They have a lot of parties.
>
> Researcher: What about jobs?
>
> Angela: If they do, it's just the lower paying factory type of job.
>
> Andrew: You can work at [local factory] and make good money.
>
> Angela: No one really does. They come out, I mean, they come out every year, and they go to [local manufacturing company] or [local manufacturing company] or somewhere and probably make eight bucks an hour . . .

But graduates do go away to complete their education and return to build a life in the area. The guidance counselor described how it happened for her stepson:

> Ms Field: It's a whole different attitude I think, of the kids who are choosing to be here.
>
> My stepson, for example, graduated a couple years ago. He always swore he'd be, you know, on either coast or something, and he was going be some big sports broadcaster or something like that. He ended up going to [local community college] and doing the bioprocess deal, and has just been working full-time for a year. And [he] has realized that, "I don't really like this job, I'm bored watching this paint dry, and so I need to go back to school." But he still--he just told my husband this last weekend, "Hey, I want you to save that south farm for me cuz I want to buy that and build my house here." And I would've--I never would've imagined him being here. And there's several in his class that are like that, too. They want to have this as home, but they have been out to other places.

Seniors' Decisions and the Future of the Community

Students had little to say when asked to consider whether the choices they make

for their own futures will impact the future of Bonteville. Whether or not they recognize

the collective impact of their individual decisions, seniors appear to assume the future of

Bonteville is predetermined and that whether they stay or go will make little difference.

In any case, they consider their choices to be individual ones and, as such, disengaged

from the future of the community:

> Mike: Not really--I mean, I'm not really someone like that, that is special--I'm
> just another person.

> Andrew: So the school's gonna be done, or, I mean, they say this every year.
> But, you always hear, "Oh, in two years Bonteville's shuttin' down." Two years--
> well, this year [the rumor] actually went all the way through [neighboring district]
> schools sayin' "Here, in two years we're gonna be teamed up with Bonteville
> students and maybe even [another district]." So it seems to be closing down.
> After this school goes, this town's probably just gonna be like a ghost town and
> nobody's--it's not gonna matter. Cuz the school's the only thing that's holding it
> up. These parents want see their students in a safe community. So, that's why
> they stay here, that's why they never really move away.

The counselor and other staff describe what Andrew reports as rumor but agree

with his assessment of what will happen to the community if the school closes:

> Ms. Field: Yeah. Yeah, I think if this school were not here—(sigh) a lot of
> Bonteville would, (whistles) ya know, blow away--because there wouldn't be
> anything to keep 'em here. They'd go, one way or the other, it'd start bein' a little
> suitcase town like, ya know, some of the suburbs around Des Moines. All they
> do is go there to sleep. And people would still do that I think, because Bonteville
> would have cheap housing and they'd come here to sleep, but they wouldn't do
> anything here.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem considered in this study is the question of how high school seniors, attending school in a small, predominantly low-income, rural Iowa district describe and assign meaning to the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions which shaped their choices about the pursuit of education beyond high school.

Four broad research questions guided the study:

1. What do rural students say they want most out of life and to what extent do they see education as the pathway to achieve their goals?

2. How do rural students make decisions about what they will do following high school graduation?

3. What do rural students see as the supports that will help them in achieving what they want and, conversely, what do they understand as the potential barriers?

4. How strongly do rural students feel connected to their roots and do they feel their decision about life after high school has any relationship to the future of the community?

The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the ways in which community context shapes the values and aspirations of rural youth. The findings of the study provide significant insight into the meaning people in a depressed rural community assign to role of education in their lives. The knowledge gained has the potential to inform the work of education policy makers, school leaders and educators, and institutions of higher education.

The Conceptual Framework for the Development of Rural Students' Aspirations (Figure 1) provided a useful tool for understanding the ways in which students' experiences and the meanings they construct from those experiences fit together to shape their aspirations. Bonteville seniors, describing their values and aspirations, reveal the pressure they feel from the competing societal values of place and family versus globalization and social mobility.

Their responses also give clues to the ways in which those competing values are filtered through the lenses that are the context of their depressed rural community. In this rural context, with its unique set of relationships and opportunities, rural values and culture persist and moderate influences from the larger society. Each family adds its lens to filter these competing values based on parents' educational levels and family income. Ultimately, youth translate values into aspirations as they develop and test their abilities and react to the support and advice offered by significant adults and peers in response to their performance.

What Was Learned

In some ways, Bonteville school district retains characteristics of the stable rural communities Gjelten (1982) claimed were characteristic of the Farm Belt. Bonteville has little diversity and little conflict within the school or community. Students, parents, and teachers describe strong community involvement in and support for school activities. While it would be difficult to describe Bonteville as truly prosperous since high free and reduced lunch rates suggest that many families are needy, desperate poverty--poverty that

is associated with hunger or homelessness, for example--is not apparent. Students and parents interviewed seemed generally satisfied with life and their traditional values.

In many ways, however, descriptors of the context of life in Bonteville school district match Gjelten's (1982) description of a depressed rural community. The local economy offers little in the way of future employment options, there appears to be little economic growth, and a large percentage of families qualify as low income compared to the rest of the state of Iowa. While limited in the range of academic and extracurricular opportunities it offers to students, the school is perceived to be the center of life in the community. Students, educators and parents fear that the loss of the high school might mean the end of any sense of community.

What Do Rural Students Say They Want Most Out of Life?

In spite of changing economic conditions and employment opportunities in their rural community, Bonteville high school seniors still embrace values similar to those espoused by rural youth elsewhere in America (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Lawrence, 1998) The young people participating in the study admire people who work hard, act responsibly, get things done, are independent, work in difficult conditions, have a capacity to acquire knowledge informally, and demonstrate a willingness to be involved in the lives of others.

For many Bonteville seniors, work is valued for its ability to produce income and support a comfortable lifestyle without much concern for whether it might be fulfilling in and of itself. While not universal, many seniors' responses included the following related

values (a) wealth is to be avoided, not sought after, (b) debt, also is to be avoided; and (c) it is important to have enough income to pay one's bills and still afford some extras.

Nearly all seniors interviewed identified qualities of their rural experience that they value highly. Even so, they were almost evenly divided between a desire to settle in or near Bonteville or a similar town and a preference for a larger city or major metropolitan area. About half of the seniors indicated they are drawn by desires for new experiences and employment opportunities, new connections, new places, or even the opportunity just to be anonymous.

Among the group who plan to leave the area, several talked about looking for new opportunities in bigger places but where some of the qualities they have valued in their rural experience can still be found. One student talked about finding someplace where he would find a sense of relative safety, where he would like "the general feel of the city." Another described the ideal place as, "not a really big city—not exactly everyone knowing everyone, but pretty close." Some students who imagined *a good life* in a bigger city described "big" as cities like Des Moines or Iowa City. They revealed an awareness that they think about their options in relationship to their experiences. As one young woman commented, "living [in Bonteville], anything's big." She went on to name a nearby community of 6000 as "big," then said, "just kidding--Des Moines' big."

Other seniors are anchored in the community by their appreciation for country life and its relationship to the land with the accompanying opportunities for recreation, privacy, quiet, and independence. These seniors said the values of close, long-term relationships with friends and neighbors and the sense of safety they feel in the

community are part of their vision for *a good life* for themselves and the children they imagine as part of their own family in the future.

To What Extent Do They See Education as the Pathway to Achieve Their Goals?

Many of the rural seniors interviewed for this study indicated they would seek some postsecondary education, most at a nearby community college or in area vocational training programs. Nearly all indicated their parents would be pleased if they completed some postsecondary education but would also be supportive if they chose not to go to college.

Students expressed a range of perspectives regarding the purpose of education in their lives. A few indicated that being an educated person is, itself, an important value in their lives. However, most thought that (a) postsecondary education will provide them with the specialized knowledge and skills they will need to be competitive in a global marketplace requiring advanced technology and complex information systems, or (b) postsecondary education is primarily a means of credentialing individuals and may or may not provide those individuals with useful skills or knowledge.

Students, their parents, and educators alike expressed significant lack of confidence that a four-year degree would result in better employment opportunities or higher incomes. Many questioned the wisdom of an investment in a four-year education, particularly if a young person decides to stay in or near the community.

How Do Rural Students Make Decisions about What They Will Do Following High School Graduation?

Findings in the literature consistently point out that early development of aspiration for and commitment to college attendance is critically important to ultimate enrollment in college (Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997; McGrath et al., 2001). Social capital, developed through each student's interactions with his/her parents, teachers, and peers, is essential to the student's perceptions of his or her postsecondary options (Coleman, 1988).

Consistent with the findings in the literature, Bonteville seniors provided responses to interview questions that reflect the particularly important role of parents in shaping the ways in which young people think about the future. For some this meant that, as long as they could remember, parents communicated high expectations and praise for strong academic performance. For others, at some clearly defined moment, often upon entering high school, parents began to communicate the importance of performance in school for the purpose of obtaining college scholarships, implying an expectation for college itself. For a third group, parent expectations for college were less clear. These students did not think their parents *expected* them to go to college, but indicated their parents regularly communicated, whether directly or indirectly, that they (the parents) would be pleased if their child chose to go to college. No Bonteville seniors reported, if they chose to pursue postsecondary education, that their parents would be dissatisfied with that choice.

Students participating in the study were less clear about the expectations of educators. They indicated that some teachers consistently integrate messages about the importance of postsecondary education into the curriculum. They consistently identified the same two or three teachers as communicating an expectation that all students should plan to continue their education beyond high school. Students thought other teachers either cared little about their future plans or, perhaps, believed that it is not the role of the secondary school personnel to involve themselves in students' plans for the future unless the student expressly asked for advice.

However, when interviewed in late October and through November of their senior year, the participants were not knowledgeable about the process of selecting or financing a college education. They were generally unaware of the importance of college entrance exam scores in securing admission to most two-year and four-year degree programs. Similarly, they appeared to have minimal understanding of opportunities for and processes leading to financial assistance for postsecondary students.

There is, apparently, no systematic or intentional process for (a) giving all students access to timely information about postsecondary options, (b) teaching students strategies for choosing and applying to appropriate postsecondary programs, and (c) identifying suitable options for financial assistance to pay for postsecondary education. Students and parents most frequently mentioned college admissions counselors as the primary source of information on these topics. Some, with encouragement from parents or others, had discovered Fastweb and other Internet sites where information and guidance are available to those who seek them out.

Meeting an admissions counselor is contingent upon a student being willing to (a) take the initiative to sign up to meet the counselor, and (b) miss a class at the time when the admissions counselor is at the school, or (c) taking a day from school or a vacation day to visit a college or university. Most students do not meet with admissions counselors before the latter part of their junior year in high school, far too late for students to think for the first time about the possibility of going to college.

What Do Rural Students See as the Supports That Will Help Them in Achieving What They Want?

Support is defined, for the purposes of this study, as encouragement, assistance, advice, and/or information provided to students for the purpose of facilitating their postsecondary plans. Relatively few adults in Bonteville have earned college degrees and it appears likely that most parents have little experience with college admissions and financial aid and lack broad knowledge about the relative benefits of various postsecondary options. However, parents--especially mothers--remain, far and away, the most significant source of support, encouragement, and advice for students.

Students report that the level of support, in the form of obtaining information, helping complete forms, and choosing colleges, varies considerably from family to family, with mothers more active than fathers in providing assistance with information processing and forms. Students with siblings or cousins in college appeared more confident about application and financial aid processes than did students with little family experience with college education.

Students were not generally enthusiastic in describing the support provided by school personnel, including the guidance counselor and teachers. The seniors frequently identified one classroom teacher in particular as someone who is willing to take the time to work with students, to help them obtain information, to assist them with forms, and to help them make necessary arrangements for college visits. While the school does employ a guidance counselor who provides some college information for students, she did not emerge as the most significant source of support for postsecondary education within the school. Students, educators, and parents reported that the school offers students and parents very limited planned support designed to facilitate students' access to postsecondary options.

What Do They Understand as the Potential Barriers to Postsecondary Education?

The seniors interviewed identified the following as potential barriers to accessing and completing postsecondary education:

1. <u>Academic preparedness.</u> Several seniors were concerned that they might not be prepared to compete successfully in college classrooms. Several indicated they felt they were not held sufficiently accountable for the quality and timeliness of their work. Seniors noted the limited course offerings in some areas and believed that might put them at a disadvantage.

2. <u>Self-efficacy.</u> Some students are very confident of their future success at college. Others worry that they may not be able to match the expectations they and others have for their performance. Fear of failure was a regular theme in students'

responses, in part, gaining potency from the stories they knew and shared about previous graduates who had dropped out of college.

3. <u>Fear of loss of relationships</u>. A number of students noted the value of maintaining important relationships as a complicating factor in making decisions regarding postsecondary education. Relationships with parents, friends, boyfriends or girlfriends constrained postsecondary options some seniors considered.

4. <u>Cost.</u> Like lower income students everywhere, Bonteville high school seniors are concerned about the cost of college. However, seniors in this study appear to weigh the cost of investing in a college education against what they believe about the potential for earnings in the immediate area. Students, parents, and educators relate stories of some area young people earning high wages with only a high school diploma and other stories of young people accumulating high debt but earning a degree that was never used or stories of students dropping out of school altogether. These stories are powerful in shaping the perceptions of young people who are trying to weigh the cost of college against the potential benefits.

5. <u>Conflicts with the expectations of parents.</u> While apparently an issue for relatively few Bonteville seniors, some students struggle to balance their dreams for the future with those their parents hold for them. While it is not unusual anywhere to find young people at odds with their parents regarding their plans for the future, some pressures may be uniquely reflective of small rural communities like Bonteville. For example, in a rural place where the school is the life of the community, and the athletic teams are the life of the school, successful high school student athletes are sometimes

pressured by confident--perhaps over confident--and proud parents to test their skills as college athletes.

6. <u>Difficulty of transitioning from life in a rural community and small school to larger setting.</u>

Many of the concerns seniors shared about attending college were grounded in the stories they knew about prior year graduates who had dropped out of college. Several described the challenges associated with leaving a rural place and its safety net of relationships, supportiveness, quiet, and lack of competition. Some commented that the fear of failure might be as much of a challenge as the reality of the transition itself.

How Strongly Do They Feel Connected to Their Roots?

The seniors interviewed were generally appreciative of the quality of their rural experience, have deep connections to family and friends in the community, and place little value on high status careers and earning lots of money. Still, some feel the attraction of more urban places that offer new experiences, more career options with higher salaries, and more opportunities for the families they anticipate starting in the future. In the end, the seniors seem evenly divided in their intentions with about half hoping to stay and about half planning to leave.

Do They Feel Their Decision About Life after High School has any Relationship to the Future of the Community?

In spite of the obvious feelings of attachment and affection the seniors participating in this study have for their community, their families, and neighbors, they expressed little sensibility that their individual decisions with respect to the future could

have any corresponding impact on the future of the community. They were well aware of fears expressed in the community that, as enrollment continues to decline and the state imposes more rigorous student performance standards, the school will be forced to close. However, the idea that obligations or attachments to community might be a consideration for students in considering their future seemed alien. Students, parents, and educator were fatalistic in their views of the future.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have important implications for both policy and practice. The findings warrant the attention of: (a) advocates and leaders responsible for setting educational agendas at local, state, and national levels; (b) experts and educational leaders engaged in developing standards, programs, and innovations for elementary and secondary schools; and (c) leaders in higher education working in postsecondary admissions, marketing, and outreach.

The results of this study affirm and build on the foundation work of previous studies (for example, Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Khattri et al., 1997; Lawrence, 1998; Ley et al., 1996; McDonough, 1997; McGrath et al., 2001) in several important ways. First, it is clear that there is a pressing need to consider rural values, rural culture, and the economic realities of rural places when developing educational agendas. Doing so helps ensure that the standards, curricula and practices flowing from such agendas are more meaningful to rural students and their parents. Second, if it really is important that most, if not all, students complete some form of postsecondary education, then, it is urgent that policy makers and educational leaders do more to ensure a developmentally appropriate,

well-articulated sequence of preparatory activities. These must be designed so that all youth and their parents are adequately prepared to successfully navigate a path through the educational system that is well-suited to each student's interests and level of preparedness.

Finally, leaders in education policy and practice should attend to the skepticism Bonteville high school seniors express regarding the real value and meaning of higher education. National statistics suggest that more education is likely to produce higher incomes for individuals. However, students, parents, and educators in Bonteville do not necessarily place a priority on high incomes. Nor do they necessarily believe that national statistics reflect the real experience of individuals, especially for young people who wish to eventually return to the area to work, live, and raise a family. It would seem prudent to develop a more substantial message regarding the potential of higher education to enrich the lives of individuals and communities, both in and beyond the workplace.

For Policy Makers

Two important messages for policy makers can be heard through the voices of the rural youth participating in this study and their major supporters (their parents and educators). First, there is a pressing need to revisit the values reflected in the education agenda at the national, state, and local levels in order to ensure that rural youth, their families, and the educators who serve them can relate the curriculum and the expected outcomes to students' visions for their futures. Second, policy makers should consider the best ways to deliver necessary, developmentally appropriate, and timely support to all youth and their parents so that they will be able to choose wisely among a multiplicity of

postsecondary programs, types of institutions, cost and financing options, and geographic locations.

Many researchers writing on the topic of rural education have called upon policy makers to recognize and revisit the urban/national value assumptions that presently dominate the national education agenda. These assumptions result in the devaluation of the rural experience and a standardized curriculum that prepares students to leave rural places (Howley et al., 1996; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lee, 2001; Ley et al., 1996; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Instead, it has been argued that rural schools should develop curricula that are grounded in local needs, prepare students for local job markets (Howley et al., 1996), and connect students to local history, culture, and values (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Theobald & Nachtigal).

However, there is a third possibility for an education policy focus beyond a polarized choice between revitalization of rural communities and competition in a global economy. As suggested by Kannapel and DeYoung (1999), rural and national goals may be able to coexist, even enrich each other. To do this, educational programs will be more effective in helping all rural youth develop strong academic skills if they: (a) connect content and process to the issues, environment, history and culture of their rural communities; (b) help youth develop a sense of economic and social contributions of rural places; and (c) facilitate youths' sense of self and possibility for self in the community and/or in the larger society.

This will require a relaxing of the present push toward standardized outcomes for all students in order to allow communities to develop and prioritize some local standards

(Howley & Howely, 1995). To the degree that standardized tests force educators and schools of all sizes and descriptions to conform to an urbanized national agenda, a "one best system" (Howely & Howley, p. 129), educators must turn away from developing curricular goals that reflect the unique contexts of individual communities and places. Without context and relevance to the experience of people known to them and to the possibilities most students and their parents imagine, the curriculum and the educational process lose meaning and value.

There is also a need for policy makers to concern themselves with the issue of ways in which youth learn about the process of identifying, choosing among, and financing appropriate postsecondary options. Several studies documented that students receive too little information about this process too late in their high school years to be ready to take advantage of postsecondary options for which they might easily have qualified (McDonough, 1997; Mitchell Institute, 2002). McDonough found that timely access to information about postsecondary options is often a function of socioeconomic status, both of the student and of the school and community.

In other words, poor rural students have less access to quality information, fewer role models, and less support than do more advantaged students, a problem that may be compounded by the relative isolation that characterizes many depressed rural communities. In an era when many business, political, and educational leaders are calling for every student to complete some form of postsecondary education, policy makers should consider ways to create and fiscally support more equity of access to timely information and assistance with planning for postsecondary education.

For Schools and Communities

The results of this study have several significant implications for school leaders in depressed rural communities that, if effectively pursued, could: (a) empower youth and their parents to make better decisions for the future; (b) respond to demands for a more rigorous, meaningful curriculum; and (c) contribute to the vitality of the community. A first, and critically important, step for depressed rural schools to take is to plan and implement an early awareness program designed to prepare youth, over time, to make informed postsecondary choices. A developmental curriculum beginning as early as the sixth grade would combine the exploration of personal interests, matching personal characteristics with career possibilities, and matching interests with postsecondary options.

Part of this curriculum must include information and instruction for parents who are so critically important to the development of their children's aspirations. During the middle school years, schools should provide parents with instruction and information regarding the range of postsecondary options, their long-term benefits, and financial aid processes and options for managing college costs.

In designing early awareness programs, educational planners should give careful attention to creating opportunities for students to develop caring, informed, and supportive networks including relationships with teachers, coaches, and mentors (Chapman, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Tierney & Jun, 2001). The social capital resulting from such relationships is critical to students' success in postsecondary education.

This means school leaders should consistently provide information to teachers, parents, and community members regarding the importance of postsecondary education in students' lives. Such information should outline related processes and opportunities and the ways in which supporting such aspirations might ultimately benefit both the student and the life of the community. In this manner, students will receive consistent messages regarding the expectation for and value of education in their lives (Mitchell Institute, 2002).

Schools in depressed rural communities can do more to help youth develop (a) the skills and knowledge they will need if they choose to leave the community to pursue a future elsewhere, and (b) a sense of possibility for a future in the area that includes high levels of educational attainment. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) and others have suggested that better articulated district objectives and rigorous coursework could link youth into meaningful community problem solving and community development efforts while effectively preparing them to be successful in postsecondary education. Curricula should include goals designed to help youth (a) develop strong academic and intellectual skills; (b) connect formal education to preparation for real life problem-solving; (c) develop a positive sense of identity with community through awareness of local conditions, values and culture; (d) explore the relationship of the community to the larger world; and (e) help develop young people as potential future leaders.

<u>For Institutions of Higher Education</u>

At least two important implications for colleges and universities can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, the pool of potential students may be smaller than it

need be, the number of applicants constrained by the lack of realistic information students and their parents have about the postsecondary options available to them, including options for managing the costs of college. To begin addressing the lack of realistic information available to students, postsecondary institutions could do at least two things: (a) advocate with those who govern secondary education at the state and local level for the inclusion of an early college awareness curriculum that all students would participate in, and (b) develop more college/university based pre-college programs for disadvantaged students such as Educational Talent Search, GEAR UP, and Upward Bound.

Second, many of the students participating in this study indicated that college admissions representatives and college faculty or coaches who students met with as part of their college visits were the primary source of their information with respect to choosing, applying to, and paying for college. As long as this remains the case, college personnel meeting with prospective students will need to balance the goal of marketing the institution with the need to ensure that the prospective student can realistically compare the institution with other options available to him or her. If a prospective student lacks the ability to realistically compare options then that students' retention, if he or she eventually enrolls, may be at risk.

<u>Summary of Implications and Recommendations</u>

For policy makers:

1. Reassess the values reflected in national, state, and local education agendas in order to ensure that rural youth, their families, and educators are able to relate the curriculum and the expected outcomes to students' vision for their future.

2. Determine responsibility for, and fund programs to provide developmentally appropriate and timely support to all youth and their parents so that they will be prepared to choose wisely among the multiplicity of postsecondary programs, types of institutions, cost and financing options and geographic locations.

For depressed rural schools:

3. Plan and implement an early awareness program, to begin no later than the sixth grade, designed to prepare youth and their parents, over time, to make appropriate postsecondary choices.

4. District curricula and activities programs should (a) help youth develop a positive sense of self as a member of a rural community through awareness of local conditions, values and culture and involvement in community problem solving and (b) effectively prepare youth to be successful in postsecondary education.

For institutions of higher education:

5. Higher education leaders should advocate with those who govern secondary education at the state and local level for the inclusion of an early college awareness curriculum in which all students should participate.

6. Higher education leaders should develop and implement more college/university based pre-college programs for disadvantaged students and target some of these programs specifically to serve depressed rural communities. Examples of such programs include the federally funded Educational Talent Search, GEAR UP, and Upward Bound programs. These programs have demonstrated success in helping young people complete secondary school and enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

However, at the present time, limited funding means only a small percentage of eligible students are served in these programs.

7. College personnel meetings with prospective students will need to balance the goal of marketing institutions with the need to ensure that prospective students can realistically compare an institution with other available options.

Recommendations for Further Research

Several recommendations for additional research emerge from the results of this study:

1. As the economic and political context of rural communities changes, typologies of rural places may need to be revisited and updated to better reflect the nature and diversity of rural places in the early decades of the 21st century.

2. Several studies and reviews of the literature cited in this study provided a historical context that helps illuminate the ways in which issues and values related to globalization, nation building, and technocracy came to dominate the educational agenda today. Additional studies might focus on identifying the ways these values are expressed in the political and regulatory milieu of American education and put pressure on the community context in which youth make their decisions.

3. Rural to rural and rural to urban comparisons would be useful for the purpose of assessing whether the perceptions of the rural seniors in Bonteville are also shared by their peers in other types of rural communities or by their peers in more urban settings. It may be particularly valuable to assess the perceived importance and purpose of education in the minds of students and their parents in a variety of contexts.

4. The perceptions of the seniors interviewed in this study were captured at a given time of the year--October and November--within a crucial year of their lives. Additional studies might add to the knowledge base by tracking changes in student perceptions over time. Perhaps a study that began early in the second semester of participants' junior year and concluded in the fall following high school graduation would be useful in developing an understanding of the ways in which (a) students' values and plans change over time and (b) events and circumstances precipitate those changes.

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APPENDIX A

Data Collection and Analysis

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
PARENT'S CONSENT to PARTICIPATE

Project Title: **A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School**

Dear Parent/Legal Guardian:

Your son/daughter has been invited to participate in a research project, conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to allow your child to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you made an informed decision whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this study is to learn how high school seniors enrolled in one rural Iowa district describe and think about the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shaped their choices about whether or not to pursue education beyond high school. The Moravia district administration has granted permission to the researcher to conduct this study because it feels this study will contribute to a better understanding of the value and conditions of rural education in Iowa.

If you and your child consent to participation, he or she will be asked to complete a brief survey and to participate in two 30-45 minute audio-taped group interview sessions that will be held at Moravia High School during two regularly scheduled U.S. Government class periods in the month of October. Your student will be assigned to a group with five to seven other seniors who indicate similar plans for their future after high school. During the interview students will be asked to respond to a number of questions about their plans for education, work, and life after high school.

Participants in this study are subject to little, if any, risk of discomfort or inconvenience beyond the time required to participate. A participant may discover new questions or feel some additional anxiety as a result of participation in the study with respect to the choices they, and all other seniors, must make as they leave the years of mandatory school behind. In this case, participants will be encouraged to talk with their parents and guidance counselors.

The researcher will provide pizza coupons to students who participate in study as a way of saying "thank you" for sharing their time and energy. However, the most valuable benefit of participation may be the structured opportunity for participants to talk with their peers about their plans, and concerns for the future. It is expected that, as a result of the conversation, participants will clearer about what they hope to accomplish in the years following high school and better able to ask questions that will help move them on the path toward achieving their dreams.

Information obtained during this study that could identify your child will be kept strictly confidential. The results of the study, without identifying information, will be made available in my doctoral dissertation and may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

Your child's participation is completely voluntary. He or she is free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, your child will not be penalized or lose benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled.

If you have questions about the study you may contact or desire information in the future regarding your child's participation or the study generally, you can contact me at 641-628-5246 or my faculty advisor, Dr. David Else, at the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, University of Northern Iowa 319/273-3358 you can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-2748, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

Sincerely,

Louise Esveld, Researcher

PARENT'S CONSENT to PARTICIPATE

Project Title: A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that
Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my child's participation in and the possible risks associated with the survey and the two focus group sessions as described letter I received. I hereby agree to allow my son/daughter to participate in this project.

_____   _____

(Signature of parent/legal guardian)   (Date)

_____

(Printed name of parent/legal guardian)

_____

(Printed name of child participant)

University of Northern Iowa
Informed Assent to Participate

For Student Under Age 18

Project Title: A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that
Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School

Name of Principal Investigator(s): Louise Esveld

■■■

I, _____, have been told that one of my parent/guardian has given his/her permission for me to participate in a project about the development of students' plans for their lives after high school. I understand that, in agreeing to participate, I will be asked to complete a brief survey and join a small discussion group of high school seniors. We will meet for two class periods and will respond to questions about our plans for the future.
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I have been told that I can stop participating in this project at any time. If I choose to stop or decide that I don't want to participate in this project at all, nothing bad will happen to me. My grade/treatment/care (as appropriate) will not be affected in any way.

_____   _____
Name   Date

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
INFORMED CONSENT
Student (Age 18 and older)

Project Title: A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School

Dear Student:

You have been invited to participate in a research project, conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you made an informed decision whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this study is to learn how high school seniors enrolled in one rural Iowa district describe and think about the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shaped their choices about whether or not to pursue education beyond high school. The Moravia district administration has granted permission to the researcher to conduct this study because it feels this study will contribute to a better understanding of the value and conditions of rural education in Iowa.

If you consent to participation, you are asked to complete a brief survey and to participate in two 30-45 minute audio-taped group interview sessions that will be held at Moravia High School during two regularly scheduled U.S. Government class periods in the month of October. You will be assigned to a group with five to seven other seniors who indicate similar plans for their future after high school. During the interview you will be asked to respond to a number of questions about you plans for education, work, and life after high school.

Participants in this study are subject to little, if any, risk of discomfort or inconvenience beyond the time required to participate. As a participant, you may discover new questions or feel some additional anxiety with respect to the choices you, and all other seniors, must make as you prepare to leave your high school years behind. In this case, you will be encouraged to talk with your parents, teachers and/or guidance counselors.

The researcher will provide pizza coupons to students who participate in study as a way of saying "thank you" for sharing their time and energy. However, the most valuable benefit of participation may be the structured opportunity for you to talk with you peers about your plans and concerns for the future.

Information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The results of the study, without identifying information, will be made available in my doctoral dissertation and may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized or lose benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have questions about the study you may contact or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, you can contact me at 641-628-5246 or my faculty advisor, Dr. David Else, at the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, University of Northern Iowa 319/273-3358 you can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-2748, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

Sincerely,

Louise Esveld, Researcher

University of Northern Iowa
INFORMED ASSENT

For students 18 years and older

Project Title: A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that
Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School

Name of Principal Investigator(s): Louise Esveld

■ ■

(Full Name, Please Print)
I, _____, am fully aware of the possible nature and extent of my participation in
interviews conducted in the course of this study as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I
understand that, in agreeing to participate, I will be asked to complete brief survey and join a small
discussion group of high school seniors. We will meet for two class periods and will respond to questions
about our plans for the future.

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I have been told that I can stop participating in this project
at any time. If I choose to stop or decide that I don't want to participate in this project at all, nothing bad
will happen to me. My grade/treatment/care (as appropriate) will not be affected in any way.

I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent
statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

_____   _____
Name   Date

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
INFORMED ASSENT
(Adult Participants)

Project Title: A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School

Name of Investigator(s): Louise Esveld

You have been invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you made an informed decision whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this study is to learn how high school seniors enrolled in one rural Iowa district describe and think about the norms, attitudes, values, experiences and conditions they say shaped their choices about whether or not to pursue education beyond high school. The Moravia district administration has granted permission to the researcher to conduct this study because it feels this study will contribute to a better understanding of the value and conditions of rural education in Iowa.

If you consent to participate, you may be asked questions regarding your perceptions of factors affecting the development of senior students' plans for their lives after high school graduation. Interviews will be held be held in an available space at the Moravia High School at a mutually agreed upon time. Interviews will last approximately 30 minutes. Conversations may be tape recorded or recorded in the log notes of the researcher as part of the collected data for the study. However, information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential.

The results of the study, without identifying information, will be made available in my doctoral dissertation and may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

Participants in this study are subject to little, if any, risk of discomfort or inconvenience beyond the time required to participate. There are no direct benefits for adult participants in this study. However, student participants in this study may benefit from the opportunity for focused dialogue about their plans for the future.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized or lose benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have questions about the study you may contact or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, you can contact me at 641-628-5246 or my faculty advisor, Dr. David Else, at the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, University of Northern Iowa 319/273-3358 you can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-2748, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process."

Sincerely,

Louise Esveld, Researcher

University of Northern Iowa
INFORMED ASSENT
(Adult Participants)

Project Title: A Case Study of Senior Students' Perceptions of Factors that Shape Aspirations in One Low Income Rural Iowa High School

I am fully aware of the possible nature and extent of my participation in interviews conducted in the course of this study as stated in the letter I received and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

_____   _____

(Signature of participant)   (Date)

_____

(Printed name of participant)

_____   _____

(Signature of investigator)   (Date)

_____   _____

(Signature of instructor/advisor)   (Date)

Results: Survey of Intentions

Please put a ✔ before the description the best describes how likely you are to be doing each of the following options one year after you graduate or leave high school:

1. Employed full time or nearly full time in or near the community where I reside now.

   2 Definitely not   **9** Not likely   **8** Somewhat likely   **2** Definitely Yes

2. Employed full time or nearly full time in a city (like Des Moines, Kansas City, or Chicago).

   1 Definitely not   **8** Not likely   **7** Somewhat likely   **5** Definitely Yes

3. Living outside Iowa.

   2 Definitely not   **8** Not likely   **8** Somewhat likely   **3** Definitely Yes

4. Enrolled in a vocational training program or trade school.

   4 Definitely not   **12.** Not likely   **4** Somewhat likely   **1** Definitely Yes

5. Enrolled full time in a two-year degree program.

   1 Definitely not   **3** Not likely   **11** Somewhat likely   **6** Definitely Yes

6. Enrolled full time in four college or university.

   2 Definitely not   **5** Not likely   **10** Somewhat likely   **4** Definitely Yes

7. Enlisted in a branch of the military.

   12 Definitely not   **7** Not likely   **1** Somewhat likely   **1** Definitely Yes

8. Married, living in or near the community where I reside now.

   7 Definitely not   **6** Not likely   **7** Somewhat likely   **1** Definitely Yes

9. Married, living away from the community where I reside now.

   5 Definitely not   **6** Not likely   **8** Somewhat likely   **2** Definitely Yes

How long have you lived in the community where you now reside?

   0 less than 1 year   **5** 1-5 years   **4** 5 –15 years   **12** all my life

Please put a ☐ before the range that describes your family's income.

   6 0 –$25,000   **9** $25,000 –$50,000   **5** $50,000 +

Please indicate the highest level of education completed by each parent/guardian with whom you live:

___Father/Guardian	___Mother/Guardian
2 Less than High School Diploma	**1** Less than High School Diploma
9 High School Diploma	**7** High School Diploma
4 Some College	**5** Some College
3 Two Year Degree	**2** Two Year Degree
3 Four Year Degree	**3** Four Year Degree

Table A1

Focus Group Participants: Characteristics of Group Members

Group	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2
	$n = 8$	$n = 6$	$n = 7$	$n = 4$	$n = 3$
Socio Economic Status					
Family income $0-$25,000	4	3	0	1	0
Family income $25,00-$50,000	3	1	4	2	3
Family income $50,000+	1	2	2	1	0
Parents' Educational Attainment					
	F/M[1]	F/M[2]	F/M	F/M	F/M
Less than high school diploma	1/1	0/0	1/0	0/0	1/1
High school diploma	4/2	2/2	3/3	3/1	0/1
Some college	2/2	2/1	1/1	1/0	2/1
Two-year degree	0/1	0/2	2/1	0/2	0/0
Four-year degree or higher	0/1	2/0	0/2	0/1	0/0
Postsecondary Plans[3]					
No postsecondary plans	0	0	0	0	0
Military	1	0	1	0	1
Vocational or trade school	1	0	1	0	1
Two-year degree program	1	3	2	1	0
Two or four-year (wavering between[4])	3	1	2	2	1
Four-year degree program	1	2	1	1	0
Intentions to Stay or Leave					
Likely /somewhat likely to stay	3	2	2	0	2
Likely /somewhat likely to leave	3	4	2	3	0
Wavering between stay and leave	1	0	3	1[5]	1

[1] F = Father or male guardian. M = Mother or female guardian.

[2] One student reported living in a home with no mother or female guardian present.

[3] Responses were counted in a category when: (a) there was a clear indication that one postsecondary option was more likely than another. For example, if a student indicated "Definitely Yes" for "enrolled full time in a two-year degree program and "Somewhat Likely" for "enrolled full time in a four-year college or university," I counted the response as "two-year degree program"; or when (b) the postsecondary option represented the higher of two levels of educational attainment a student indicated as equally likely.

[4] A student was counted as wavering when his/her responses to survey questions 1, 2, 8, and 9 were contradictory or indicated that staying or leaving were equally likely.

Introduction to the Interview

My name is Louise Esveld. I am a graduate student from the University of Northern Iowa. My assistant's name is Lisa Rock. I want to talk with you today in order to learn more about how you, as high school seniors in rural Iowa, think about what you will do once you finish high school.

In order to make sure we capture what you say, I would like your permission to audio tape our conversation today. I also ask your permission to use your responses, along with those from other high school seniors, to develop a report that will help educational leaders and others make better decisions about educational and community programs in the future. No real names will be used in the report nor will readers be provided any information that would allow them to trace any of your responses back to you. Your responses will not be shared with district employees, parents, or community in any form that would allow you to be identified with that response.

I ask that you keep anything said today in confidence. If anyone feels at any time he/she cannot do that, please excuse yourself quietly.

Also, please keep in mind that this is a group interview. It is not the purpose of this interview to share personal or private information that may make you or your family uncomfortable if others in your community were to know it.

Finally, if you do feel uncomfortable at any time during this interview for, please feel free to excuse yourself and report to your regular classroom or activity. Nothing negative will happen if you choose to end your participation early.

Process and ground rules:

I have a few questions to get the conversation started. After that, I will act as a moderator to keep the conversation moving and to redirect if we move too far off topic. You do not need to raise your hand to respond to a question, to ask a question of your own, or to ask one of your peers for clarification. However, I do ask that you observe a couple of guidelines.

Please be respectful of each other:

- Wait until a speaker finishes his/her statement before speaking yourself.
- Please affirm others' right to have an opinion that differs from your own.
- Avoid "put downs"
- Draw everyone into the discussion

What do you think about this process and do you have any questions about the study in general?

Protocol: Groups A1, A2, A3, First Interview

Introductory Questions:

1. Tell everyone who you are (first names are fine) and one thing you will always remember about living and going to school in Bonteville.

Transition Questions:

2. Imagine you have traveled to a far away place and are asked to describe what life is like in Bonteville. What words would you use?

Key Questions:

3. Now imagine yourself 10 years from now. Imagine your life is as good as it could possibly be. What does that look like for you?

4. What will it take for you to turn your hopes and dreams into reality? What role will education beyond high school play in achieving your goals?

5. What special people or experiences have helped you shape your dreams and plans? Has anything or anyone caused you to change the way you think about education after high school?

6. Can you imagine anything that could "sidetrack" you or potentially get in the way of reaching your goal? What would it be?

7. Going back to your life "as good as it could possibly be," do you imagine that you will be living that life here—in or near Bonteville—or somewhere else? Why do you think that?

8. What impact, if any, will your decision to live your life in here, in Bonteville, or somewhere else will have on the community of Bonteville and/or the school?

Ending Questions:

9. If you were asked to advise new freshmen at Bonteville High School with respect to their future, what advice would you give?

10. One hope in doing this study is that school and community leaders will learn how to do a better job of helping students like you find their dreams the future and become better equipped to make their dreams come true. With that in mind, is there anything I missed?

11. Is there anything else you wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

Protocol: Groups A1, A2, A3, Second Interview

Welcome back. Again, my name is Louise. You will remember the last time we were together we talked about growing up and going to school in and near Bonteville. We also talked about your hopes for the future –what you think you might be doing a few years down the road.

1. Did anyone think of something later that you wish you had said or would like to say now about any of those topics?

Today, I want to talk with you a little more about the things that help you form your plans for the future. However, first I want to share with you some of the results of the survey you did for us a few weeks ago. (Show graph and use the summary to highlight a few results)

2. What about the results surprises you?

3. Look how many of you seem pretty undecided about what you will do. Graduation is seven months from now. What do you think about that?

4. What else do you think about this data?

Last time we may have talked briefly about the role of your parents or guardians in helping you make decisions about your future. Let's talk about that a little more

5. Think about people older than yourself who you know personally. Who would you most want to be like and why?

6. What are the things you think your families <u>expect</u>, not just hope, but really expect that you will do or become over the next few years? Think about education but also work, family, community etc.

   - How and when did you first know what they expect from you?

   - Overall, how helpful are your parents or guardians in helping you decide make plans for your future?

7. Similarly, what do you think the adults – teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, administrators, secretaries, etc - at Bonteville High School expect from you? What do they believe about your future? – How is that the same or different from what your parents expect?

   - Overall- how helpful is the school, or people at the school, in helping you understand your options for life after high school and making your choices? What should the school or people at the school do differently?

8. Finally, think of some students you know who have graduated from Bonteville in the past few years. What did they do what they set out to do? What are their stories?

Protocol: Groups B1, B2

Students Planning to Stay:

1. What employment options do you expect to have in the area?

2. How do you think your friends influence your plans for work or college after high school? Do they most affect whether you go to college at all or do they most affect which college or vocational training program you choose?

3. Some students said last time that teachers provide more support for some students in making plans for the future than for others. What do you think about that?

4. How do you imagine you will be part of the community in the future? Have you ever participated in school or community projects that helped you understand your community better or appreciate it's history or culture?

5. Generally, what are people's attitudes around here toward students who graduate from high school and stay in the area?

6. Generally, what are people's attitudes around here toward students who finish college and go off to pursue careers elsewhere?

7. Seniors seem about evenly divided with about half hoping to stay in the area following high school graduation, perhaps attending Area Community College or a local vocational training program, and about half planning to leave the area to go to college or follow other pursuits. How would you describe the difference between these two groups?

Students Planning to Leave:

1. For you, what are the most important considerations in choosing a college or university? How will you decide?

2. What steps have you taken/ are you taking now to get ready for college?

3. How do you think your friends influence your plans for work or college after high school? Do they most affect whether you go to college at all or do they most affect which college or vocational training program you choose?

4. Some students said last time that teachers provide more support for some students in making plans for the future than for others. What do you think about that?

5. Generally, what are people's attitudes around here toward students who finish college and go off to pursue careers elsewhere?

6. Last time, some people characterized students who stay as "lowlifes." Why was that?

7. Seniors seem about evenly divided with about half hoping to stay in the area following high school graduation, perhaps attending [local community college] or a local vocational training program, and about half planning to leave the area to go to four-year colleges or to follow other pursuits. How would you describe the difference between these two groups?

Protocol For Teachers

1. Seniors seem about evenly divided with about half hoping to stay in the area following high school graduation, perhaps attending Area Community College or a local vocational training program, and about half planning to leave the area to go to college or follow other pursuits. How would you describe the difference between these two groups?

2. Only a handful – four out of 22 interviewed indicated with certainty they would attend a four-year college. Most selected two year or vocational programs as their most likely pursuit. Why do you think that is so?

3. How well prepared do you think Bonteville graduates are for four year colleges and universities - academically and socially?

4. What opportunities does Bonteville offer to students and their parents to learn about postsecondary options and how to plan for them?

5. What is role for school personnel in helping students make and follow through on their plans for the future – whether for college or work.

6. The seniors interviewed remember more stories about students who went away to college and dropped out than who persisted through college graduation. How does that fit with your perception of what happens to Bonteville graduates?

7. If graduates choose to stay in the area, what are their options for employment?

8. What opportunities do students have to learn about and/or develop positive attitudes about the history, environment, economy, or culture of the Bonteville area?

9. When I asked about recent graduates who stayed close to home, some seniors used the term "lowlifes". How does that fit with your perception of young people who choose to stay in the area?

10. What values/expectations associated with living in a rural place like Bonteville do you believe most affect the future plans of local youth?

11. How do you think their decisions impact the future of the community? Do you think students should consider the future of the community when making their plans?

Protocol For Parents

1. What are the things in life that Bonteville parents most value when they think about what they want for their children as they move into adulthood? How important is education beyond high school? How much is needed?

2. Only a handful – four out of 22 interviewed indicated with certainty they would attend a four-year college. Most selected two-year colleges or vocational programs as their most likely pursuit. Why do you think that is so?

3. How well prepared do you think Bonteville graduates are for two and four-year colleges and universities - academically and socially?

4. What is the most appropriate role for school personnel in helping students make and follow through on their plans for the future – whether for college or work?

5. How do parents learn how to help their student with college entrance and financial aid?

6. What are the biggest challenges for Bonteville parents in helping their children realize their dreams for the future?

7. What values/expectations associated with living in a rural place like Bonteville do you believe most affect the future plans of local youth?

8. What opportunities do students have to learn about and/or develop positive attitudes about the history, environment, economy, or culture of the Bonteville area?

9. The seniors interviewed remember more stories about students who went away to college and dropped out than who persisted through college graduation. How does that fit with your perception of what happens to Bonteville graduates?

10. If graduates choose to stay in the area, what are their options for employment?

11. What do people think about students who choose to stay in the area and who, perhaps, choose not to pursue any postsecondary education? Conversely, what do people think about students who go away to pursue degrees and careers?

12. How do you think their decisions impact the future of your community? Do you think students should consider the future of the community when making their plans?

APPENDIX B

Bonteville District Achievement Data

Table B1

District, State, National Comparisons: Percent Students Proficient in Reading, Mathematics, and Science[1]

APR Checklist due August 15, 2003 (APR Checklist, item 22r-27s)

District Student Achievement Data Compared with State and Nation Percent of Students Proficient ITBS and ITED				
Grade Level	Biennium Period[5]	District[6]	State[7]	Nation[8]
Reading Comprehension				
4	2000-02	76.3%	69.0%	60.0%
	2001-03	87.3%	NA*[9]	60.0%
8	2000-02	51.8%	69.4%	60.0%
	2001-03	61.4%	NA*	60.0%
11	2000-02	63.9%	77.1%	60.0%
	2001-03	64.1%	NA*	60.0%
Mathematics Total				
4	2000-02	76.4%	72.4%	60.0%
	2001-03	76.6%	NA*	60.0%
8	2000-02	58.9%	73.1%	60.0%
	2001-03	70.2%	NA*	60.0%
Mathematics: Concepts and Problem Solving				
11	2000-02	88.8%	81.3%	60.0%
	2001-03	82.9%	NA*	60.0%
Science				
8	2000-02	56.3%	NA**[10]	60.0%
	2001-03	73.7%	NA**	60.0%
11	2000-02	79.8%	NA**	60.0%
	2001-03	81.9%	NA**	60.0%

[5] A biennium period is identified as the combination of a two-year period such as the 2000-02 biennium period is composed of the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years. The biennium value (average) is determined by averaging the annual student achievement data for the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years. For the biennium period 2000-2002, 1992 Norms were used for the 2000-01 school year and 2000 Norms were used for the 2001-02 school year.

The percent proficient is determined according to the sources identified as follows:
[6] The District Data is determined by adding together the percentages of the intermediate and high achievement levels as identified on the System Achievement Level Reports provided to the District by the Iowa Testing Programs, identified University of Iowa.
[7] The State of Iowa Reading Comprehension Data is obtained from the Department of Education's The Annual Condition of Education Report for 2002, Grade 4 – page 136, Grade 8 – page 139, and Grade 11 – page 143. The State of Iowa Mathematics Data is obtained from the Department of Education's The Annual Condition of Education Report for 2002, Grade 4 – page 146, Grade 8 – page 150, and Grade 11 – page 153.
[8] The National Percent is derived from the achievement levels definitions – intermediate plus high equals 60%.

[9] NA* – Biennium Reading and Mathematics State of Iowa Data will not be available until the Department of Education's The Annual Condition of Education Report for 2003 is released in November 2003.
[10] NA** – State of Iowa Science Data is not available.

[1] Source: Bonteville Community School District Annual Progress Report (APR) 2002-2003.

Table B2

District, State, National Comparisons: Summary ACT Composite Results²

	Number	English	Mathematics	Reading	Sci. Reason	Composite
Test Year			Local (Bonteville)			
1997-1998	11	18.6	18.9	20.2	21.1	19.7
1998-1999	16	18.1	17.9	21.3	19.8	19.4
1999-2000	15	17.6	19.3	18.8	19.9	19.0
2000-2001	18	19.0	19.3	21.6	21.3	20.4
2001-2002	14	21.9	21.6	25.0	22.8	23.1
			State			
1997-1998	24233	21.5	21.9	22.3	22.4	22.1
1998-1999	24829	21.5	21.6	22.2	22.1	22.0
1999-2000	25182	21.3	21.6	22.3	22.1	22.0
2000-2001	24730	21.3	21.6	22.3	22.2	22.0
2001-2002	23805	21.2	21.7	22.4	22.1	22.0
			National			
1997-1998	995039	20.4	20.8	21.4	21.1	21.0
1998-1999	1019053	20.5	20.7	21.4	21.0	21.0
1999-2000	1065138	20.5	20.7	21.4	21.0	21.0
2000-2001	1069772	20.5	20.7	21.3	21.0	21.0
2001-2002	1116082	20.2	20.6	21.1	20.8	20.8

² Source: Bonteville School District website.