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Community Social Interactive Processes and Rural Adolescents' Educational Outcomes: What We Know and What We Need to Know

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Abstract

The low educational outcomes of rural adolescents have long been a subject of research among educational and social researchers. In particular, extant studies have explained the high rates of high school dropout and low rates of college completion among rural adolescents mainly in terms of the structural and economic disadvantages associated with rural life. However, more recent research have employed social capital theory to show that rural adolescents' educational outcomes are shaped not only by the structural elements of their communities, but, also importantly by the dynamics of the social interactive processes taking place within this social environment. The present article provides a synthesis and review of literature on the relationship between community social interactive processes and rural adolescents' educational outcomes. The article is divided into four sections; the first section is an introduction to the study. The second section is a review of literature on what is known about the relationship between community social capital and educational outcomes in general. The third section is a discussion on the dynamics of the relationship between community social capital and adolescents' educational outcomes within the context of rural communities, while the fourth section discusses some identified research gaps and the need for further studies on the influence of community social interactive forces on rural adolescents' educational outcomes.

Introduction

The educational outcomes of rural adolescents have been studied by researchers who have reported that compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural youth have lower educational aspirations and lower educational attainment (Haller and Virkler, 1993¹; Blackwell and McLaughlin, 1999²; Bajema et al., 2002³; Howley, 2006⁴), are more likely to drop out of high school and more likely to drop out of college (Burnell, 2003)⁵. Empirical evidences of a rural-urban gap in educational attainment and outcomes abound in literature. For example, a report of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) on the urban-rural gap in educational achievement indicated that in the year 2000, the proportion of rural adults (i.e., 25 years and older) with no high school education was 23.2% compared to 18.7% among urban adults, and, for the same period of time, the college completion rate was 15.5% for rural populations compared to 26.6% among urban populations (USDA, 2003)⁶. Corroborating this trend, Hardre and Reeve (2003)⁷, in their study of rural students' intention to persist in high school, stated that high school dropout rate in rural America was higher than in the national population, while the national high school dropout rate was about 12%, dropout rates was about 20% among rural students. According to the most recent data released by the USDA, about 17% of rural adults held at least a 4-year college degree in the year 2005 compared to over 29% among urban adults, also, high school dropout rate was higher for rural populations at 19% than urban populations at 15% (USDA, 2007)⁸.

In much of the older studies, (e.g., Haller and Virkler, 1993⁹; Blackwell and McLaughlin, 1999¹⁰), explanations for the urban-rural gap in educational attainment were offered only in terms of the structural elements of rural families (e.g., parents' socioeconomic status, family size, and parental expectations of college attendance), and, the economic disadvantages associated with rural life (e.g., low paying jobs and poor school resources). For example, rural education systems are often viewed as inferior and characterized by resource disadvantages, and, thought of as lacking the capacity to provide rural adolescents with information about different career options, career diversities, and, opportunities for specialized and advanced course work (Singh and Dika, 2003¹¹; Bajema et al., 2002¹²; Castle, 2002¹³).

Although the structural explanations provided by Haller and Virkler (1993)¹⁴ and other researchers are useful, and, indeed offer some important insights into certain factors that affect rural adolescents' educational outcomes, they provide "little direction for educators and policymakers for how to affect changes in educational processes and outcomes" (Singh and Dika, 2003, p. 114¹⁵). A review of recent research (e.g., Beaulieu et al., 2003¹⁶; Burnell, 2003¹⁷; Singh and Dika, 2003¹⁸; Israel and Beaulieu, 2004¹⁹) reveals that researchers are becoming increasingly aware that rural adolescents' educational outcomes are shaped not only by the structural elements of their rural communities, but, also importantly by the dynamics of the social interactive processes taking place within the community. For example, Howley (2006)²⁰ argued that rural adolescents, because of their strong emotional attachments to their communities often develop educational aspirations that match the low skill jobs available in their local

communities. Most of these recent studies have found social capital theory (Coleman, 1988²¹; 1990²²) a useful framework. Although Coleman's study did not focus on rural adolescents in particular, but children in general, his concept of social capital is a useful framework for exploring and understanding the role of community social networks, and interactive processes in shaping the educational outcomes of rural adolescents.

The purpose of this article is to provide a synthesis and review of literature on the relationship between community social interactive processes and rural adolescents' educational outcomes. The next section provides a description of the influences of community social capital on the educational outcomes of adolescents in general followed by a discussion on the dynamics of the influences of community social capital on educational outcomes within the context of rural communities. The paper concludes by identifying gaps in the research, and, the need for further studies.

Community Social Capital and Educational Outcomes

Social capital has been defined as the "quantity and quality of relationships among parents, their children, and other adults in the community" (Carbonaro, 1998, p. 295)²³, a public good produced by positive social networks and civic engagements within communities (Putnam, 2000)²⁴, and metaphorically, as "the glue that holds the society together" and the "oil that lubricates social life" (Edwards, 2004 p. 5)²⁵. Falk and Kilpatrick (2000)²⁶ defined social capital as "the product of social interactions with the potential to contribute to the social, civic or economic well-being of a community of common purpose" (p. 103).

Social capital is also viewed as a social resource that exists in the relations or networks among persons, and, the instrumental utility of such resources in facilitating productive activities (Coleman, 1988²⁷; Lin, 1999²⁸). Social capital encompasses the shared feelings of belonging (Giorgas, 2000)²⁹, and, the consequent effects of social networks, ties and interaction on human action, behavior and choices (Oorschot, Arts and Glissen, 2006)³⁰. According to Woolcock (1998), social capital encompasses "the norms and networks that facilitate collective action for mutual benefits" (p. 155). With respect to adolescents' educational aspirations and achievement, social capital represents the "communal resources that promote children's cognitive and social development" (Carbonaro, 1998, p. 296)³¹. That is, the set of supportive interpersonal interactions or social relations existing in the communities that promote, motivate or facilitate the formation of high levels of educational achievement and aspirations, and the attainment of such aspirations (Coleman, 1988³²; Israel et al., 2001³³). Social capital inheres in the social networks, interactions and bonds that exist between adolescents, their parents and the other members of their community. For example, adolescents' and their families' integration into the community, monitoring of students' activities by non-family adult members of the community, participation in religious organizations and attendance at religious activities (Coleman, 1988³⁴; Smith et al., 1995³⁵).

Community social capital is characterized by social networks, social interaction or ties and social integration (Oorschot et al., 2006)³⁶. Social networks refer to the links or connections an individual and his family has with other members of the local community. Social networks consist of two elements; participation in voluntary organizations, and, socializing with families and friends (Oorschot et al., 2006)³⁷. Social interactions refer to social relationships that exist among members of the community and in their relations with the institutions of the community (Coleman, 1988)³⁸. Social integration refers to the extent to which adolescents and their families are socially embedded into their communities, or, the “structure of opportunities for social interaction (Smith et al., 1995, p. 368)³⁹.

The indicators of community social capital include participation in community and religious groups, intergenerational closure, stability of residency in local community, adolescents' networks within the communities, etc. For example, when rural adolescents are involved in religious and other youth organizations (e.g. FFA, 4-H and youth bible study groups), they form relationships with peers and non-family adults from whom they can access useful information and other social resources that can positively influence their educational achievement (Coleman, 1988⁴⁰; Newman, 2004⁴¹). In particular, the church often provides rural adolescents with opportunities to develop interactions with, and receive social support from adults outside of the family. For example, a Sunday school teacher may be able to provide basic moral teachings and other information that may shape adolescents' norms, values and educational aspirations, motivate them to shun delinquency, thereby increasing their chances of staying in school (Coleman, 1988⁴²; Israel et al., 2001⁴³; Israel and Beaulieu, 2004⁴⁴).

Adolescents' interaction with the members of the community is not limited to their participation in religious and youth activities, but also includes their interactions with people in other social spheres such as on the streets, in the mall, schools etc. As indicated by Morrow (2003)⁴⁵ adolescents are “active social agents who, at least in the micro-level, shape the structures and processes around them” (p. 4). Hence, the way adolescents relate to wider social networks and communities have important influences on their educational outcomes.

Also, parent-neighbor interactions are interactive processes that may influence rural adolescents' educational outcomes. An example of parent-neighbor interactions is parent-neighbor oversight (Bankston and Zhou, 2002)⁴⁶, or, watchful care which refers to the genuine care and interest of non-parent adults or neighbors in the academic progress and behavioral outcome of adolescents. This includes the willingness of neighbors to tell if they see another neighbor's child get into trouble, or do something wrong. Parent-neighbor oversight could also refer to the willingness of neighbors to respond to other neighbor's children in times of emergency (e.g., an accident), especially when the parents are absent. Coleman (1988)⁴⁷ views practices such as parent-neighbor oversight as sources of social control that can serve to inhibit non-normative behavior in adolescents, hence exerting a positive influence on behavioral and educational outcomes.

Related to the concept of parent-neighbor oversight is intergenerational closure which exists when the people or adults in a community are in close interaction with one another (Coleman, 1990)⁴⁸, and, measures breadth of ties existing among these adults (Israel et al., 2001)⁴⁹. Portes (1998)⁵⁰ described intergenerational closure as “the existence of sufficient ties between a certain number of people to guarantee the observance of norms” (p.6). For Coleman (1988⁵¹;1990⁵²), intergenerational closure refers to the extent to which parents know and interact with the parents of their child’s friends, that is, a situation in which “a child’s friends and associates in school are sons and daughters of friends and associates of the child’s parents” (Coleman, 1990, p. 318)⁵³.

Intergenerational closure facilitates information gathering among community members, it also reinforces community norms and values that facilitate the formation of high levels of educational achievement and educational aspirations among adolescents. Moreover, communities and social networks that are characterized by closure are effective in generating and facilitating social capital (Coleman, 1990⁵⁴; Giorgas, 2000⁵⁵). For example, the connection among parents strengthens the levels of social capital that exists between them and from which their children can tap (Carbonaro, 1998)⁵⁶. As stated by Coleman (Coleman, 1990⁵⁷; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987⁵⁸), when parents are in close contact with the parents of their child’s friends, they (parents) come together to discuss their children’s activities, set norms and standards for the children, and are able to provide support for another parents’ child when necessary. By being friends with the parents of their child’s friends, parents are able to ensure that their child’s friend or peers come from a similar background with similar values, mutually understood norms and compatible aspirations and goals (Israel et al., 2001)⁵⁹.

Another indicator of community social capital is stability of residency which refers to a family’s length of stay in any community. It is often measured by the number of times a family has moved within a given period of time, and represents the degree of social integrations of the family into the community (Coleman, 1988⁶⁰; Smith et al., 1992⁶¹; Israel and Beaulieu, 2004⁶²). Residential instability hinders adolescents’ development and sustainability of relationships with other members of their local communities, thereby affecting social interaction and social integration, both of which are important elements of community social capital. When families move or relocate, their social ties and relations and access to community social capital become weakened or completely broken at each move, and are therefore unable to maintain relationships. The result is that adolescents in such families do not stay in a community long enough to develop a sense of integration into the social structure of the community, therefore they are unable to forge long-term relationships with members of the community (Smith et al., 1995⁶³; Coleman, 1988⁶⁴; Hofferth and Iceland, 1998⁶⁵; Newman, 2004⁶⁶). Researchers (e.g., Coleman, 1988⁶⁷; Smith et al., 1995⁶⁸; Israel et al., 2001⁶⁹; Israel and Beaulieu, 2004⁷⁰) have reported that adolescents in mobile families are more likely to drop out of school than those in residentially stable families.

Community Social Capital and Educational Outcomes within the Context of Rural Communities

Although researchers may not agree on how 'rural' should be defined, there tends to be a general agreement that social capital is higher in rural communities. Rural places are characterized by unique social environments and social interactive processes that foster the formation and sustainability of effective social capital. For example, compared to urban communities, rural communities are more cohesive, closely knitted, and have stronger family ties and connection to their family networks (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998)⁷¹. Rural families are more attached to place, have a greater sense of collectivity, and are less mobile, more likely to reject a job offer because it is located elsewhere, and more likely to report that they would be sad to leave their community (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974⁷²; Hofferth and Iceland, 1998⁷³; Howley, 2006⁷⁴). Rural dwellers value the role of cooperative efforts in achieving individual aspirations (Castle, 2002)⁷⁵. Rural families are more likely to have traditional family arrangements in which both mother and father are present (Israel et al., 2001)⁷⁶. Rural areas have higher proportion of persons belonging to a church (Durham and Smith, 2006)⁷⁷. Rural youth are more likely to be involved and committed to youth associations such as the National FFA Organization (Chan and Elder, 2001)⁷⁸. Because of the strong social ties among rural dwellers and informal social controls, the genuine concerns of adults for other people's children are strong in rural communities (Litcher et al., 1993⁷⁹; Smith et al., 1995⁸⁰).

Given that social capital is a function of dense or close relationships among members of a family or community (Crockett et al., 2000)⁸¹, the above descriptions of rural life suggest that rural communities are high in social capital resources. This is due to the presence of strong social interactions, social ties in rural places. Likewise, cultures and communities that emphasize the family and the collective are viewed to be more effective in accessing and utilizing social capital than individualistic cultures (Giorgas, 2000⁸²; Smith et al., 1992⁸³).

However, rural communities face some structural disadvantages that may translate into lower access to community social capital resources for rural adolescents (Crockett et al., 2000)⁸⁴. For example, the strong ties in rural areas may hinder economic development, social mobility, innovation, and inhibit access to new knowledge and resources (Burt, 1992⁸⁵; Florida, Cushing and Gates, 2002⁸⁶; Oorschot et al., 2006⁸⁷). Coleman (1988)⁸⁸ noted that social capital "not only facilitates certain actions; it constrains others" and "effective norms in an area can reduce innovativeness in another area" (p.105). Although most researchers have focused on the good and productive side of social capital while putting aside the less attractive features (Portes, 1998)⁸⁹, it is evident that rural communities provide an example of how social capital may produce negative influences on individuals. For example, research has indicated that rural youth's aspirations are shaped by attachment to place (Jamieson, 2000⁹⁰; Howley, 2006⁹¹). Indeed, Hektner (1995)⁹² reported that rural adolescents' low aspiration is often a reflection of their commitment and attachment to their families and rural communities.

Hektner (1995)⁹³ reasoned further that because rural adolescents have strong feelings of attachment to their local communities, they often develop aspirations that fit the poor career opportunities available in their local communities. That is, the strong social bonds and interactions often prevent rural youth from setting educational and career goals that might require them to move out of their rural environments, thus hindering social mobility. This trend has been reported not only in America, but also in Europe. For example, Schuller (2001)⁹⁴ wrote; “in Northern Ireland the values of tight-knit communities can serve to inhibit the learning aspirations of adults, binding them into a low-skill local economy and reinforcing the divide between those who achieve high qualifications in the initial educational phase and those who do not” (p. 99).

Although much of the literature ignores gender relations in social capital (Molyneux, 2002)⁹⁵, there are several theoretical bases for the expectation of gender differences in the relationship between social interactive processes, or social capital and adolescents’ educational aspirations and academic achievement. Researchers have shown that gender differences occur in socialization processes (Molyneux, 2002)⁹⁶. Adolescents are often socialized in the schools, families and communities to conform to cultural and traditional gendered roles (Crouter, Manke and McHale, 1995)⁹⁷. Similarly, gendered behaviors and outcomes are created by the daily lived experiences of people, the complex interactions between people and by the discourse of a culture (DeLamater and Hyde, 1998)⁹⁸. That is, boys and girls may express different aspirations or have differential educational outcomes because they “face different societal constraints and expectations” (Howard and Hollander, 1997, p.38)⁹⁹. Morrow (2003)¹⁰⁰ reported that informal social networks appear to work differently for boys and girls, while the girls in her study saw friendship as a source of emotional support; the boys placed more value on the shared activities (sport) they have with friends. It is possible that these extracurricular associations and the information acquired through them might have different effects on the educational outcomes of boys and girls.

Although researchers and policy makers often assume that rural communities are “classless” and socio-economically homogeneous societies where there are no differences between the haves and have-nots (Duncan, 2001)¹⁰¹, the role of family SES in shaping rural adolescents’ access to community social capital resources cannot be ignored. Some researchers (Edwards, 2004¹⁰²; Lin, 1999¹⁰³; Lin, 2000¹⁰⁴) have argued that inequalities in SES translate into inequalities in access to community social capital. For example, Duncan (2001)¹⁰⁵ argued that while both the haves and have-nots in rural communities can each enjoy the benefits of encouragement and emotional support from family members; the haves are more able to access and harness community social capital resources. Although rural communities have strong institutions, close ties, participation and sense of cooperation that are conduits for effective social capital, equal access to community social capital is often hampered by “rigid stratification along lines of class and race” (Duncan, 2001, p.60)¹⁰⁶. That is, rural poor are often isolated from “mainstream opportunities” that constitute community social capital resources. This is because rural life is “family-based, and

resources tend to be distributed through family ties and connections, reinforcing the privileges of the haves and the disadvantages of the have-nots” (Duncan, 2001, p. 61)¹⁰⁷. Hence, the “potential benefit” of community social capital resources to rural adolescents’ educational outcomes may vary and contingent upon their position in the “social hierarchy” (McNeal, 1999, p. 120)¹⁰⁸.

Observed Gaps in Literature and the need for Further Studies

Although researchers are increasingly becoming aware of the important role of the social interactive processes that take place within rural communities in shaping rural adolescents’ educational outcomes, the relationship between rural adolescents’ social interactions and their educational achievement and aspirations remains understudied. There is limited research that has examined the influence of the social interactive processes within rural communities on the educational achievements and aspirations of rural adolescents. Most of the studies utilizing the concept of social capital have focused mainly on adolescents in general and, urban and minority adolescents in particular.

Newman (2004)¹⁰⁹ argues that “while social capital resources are available for all adolescents, the theory has frequently been applied to understanding low income, inner city adolescents, and why, although they face more difficulties, many of them actually have good outcomes” (Newman, 2004, p.3)¹¹⁰. Little is known about the link between interpersonal relationships and the educational achievement and aspirations of rural adolescents. Singh and Dika (2003)¹¹¹ noted that researchers are yet to explore for rural adolescents, the same connection reported in excellent empirical studies between diverse social environments of urban, minority youth and their educational and psychological outcomes. There are only a few studies (e.g., Israel et al., 2001¹¹²; Beaulieu et al., 2003¹¹³; Israel and Beaulieu, 2004¹¹⁴; Singh and Dika, 2003¹¹⁵) using social capital theory as a framework for understanding the factors affecting rural adolescents’ educational outcomes.

This paucity of research is not a total surprise given that rural adolescents are a group that is understudied in the literature on adolescent development in general, and in the educational and occupational aspirations literature in particular (Scheidegger, 1998¹¹⁶; Crockett et al., 2000¹¹⁷). In their study of the condition of rural education research, Arnold and colleagues (2005)¹¹⁸ conducted a search of ERIC and PsycINFO databases for K-12 rural education research studies conducted in the United States and published in journal articles between 1991 and summer 2003. They found only twenty-one abstracts dealing with the factors affecting the academic achievement of young people in rural communities.

Rural adolescents are unique and deserve more attention than being accorded them in sociological and educational research. These young people grow up and are exposed to family and community structures and processes that are uniquely different than their urban and inner city counterparts (Haller and Virkler, 1993)¹¹⁹. For example, rural areas are generally characterized by a sense of family and community, the importance of connectedness and

personal relationships, a tendency towards uniformity and community culture, and, an aversion to individual recognition and competition (Bajema et al, 2002¹²⁰, Burnell, 2003¹²¹.) Given the uniqueness and dynamics of rural lives, the examination and understanding of the influences of social interactive processes or social capital resources on rural adolescents' academic success is both necessary and important.

Stemming from the limited number of studies on rural adolescents is the paucity of empirical research exploring gender differentials in the relationship between community social interactive processes and rural adolescents' educational outcomes. The effects of gender on the dynamics of social interactive processes must not be overlooked or ignored. Also, there is the possibility that gender differences in societal expectations and roles translate to gender differences in rural adolescents' educational achievement and aspirations, and in the effects of social interactive processes on rural adolescents' educational aspirations and academic success. To assume that there are no gender differences in the social interactive processes of generating and accessing social capital (Warr 2006)¹²², or, that these differences will not translate into gender differences in the relationship between social capital and educational aspirations is misleading and unfortunate.

Another gap in previous studies is the paucity of research on how the relationship between community social interactive processes and educational outcomes might vary across different socioeconomic groups in rural communities. Although researchers "have some clues that social capital may operate quite differently across social strata", less is known about how social class (or SES) influences access to social capital (Furstenberg, 2005)¹²³. Much less is known about how the relationship between social class and social capital may result in differential effects on the educational aspirations of rural adolescents from differing socioeconomic status. This problem may not be unconnected with the temptation on the part of some researchers to view rural communities as "classless" and socio-economically homogeneous societies where there are no differences between the haves and have-nots (Duncan, 2001)¹²⁴. An example of such assumptions is Fan and Chen's (1999)¹²⁵ statement that "the role SES plays in students' academic achievement may be less important in rural than in urban schools" (p.32). The fact however, is that while most rural families may be of low SES, all rural families are not of low SES. Indeed, rural communities, like urban and suburban communities are socio-economically diverse with significant differences between the rich and the poor (Duncan, 2001)¹²⁶. It is very possible that the differences in SES of rural families contribute significantly to differences in the educational outcomes of rural adolescents. Hence, it is of utmost importance to examine how the relationship between social interactive processes, and educational aspirations might vary across different socioeconomic groups in rural communities.

Another limitation in extant studies is the paucity of research on the extent to which community social interactive processes and social capital resources differentially affect educational outcomes across different racial groups within rural communities. Although researchers (e.g., Beaulieu et al., 2003)¹²⁷ recognize a racial gap in rural achievement, little has been done to

explore if the gap is a matter of differences in the amount of community social capital resources available to adolescents in these racial groups. According to McNeal (1999)¹²⁸, it is possible that “the same forms of social capital will be less effective for minority students because of the differential availability of resources both within and outside their social networks” (p. 123). That is, a form of social capital or social capital resource may have different usefulness and outcomes for different racial groups (McNeal, 1999)¹²⁹. Increased diversity in rural populations suggests the need to explore racial differences in the relationship between social capital and rural adolescents' aspirations. Given that race and SES are always in interaction, (i.e., minorities are often in the lower SES hierarchy), an examination of the interaction between race and SES, and their combined effects on rural adolescents' educational aspirations is of great importance.

Conclusion

In summary, Coleman's concept of social capital provides a framework for the understanding of the influences of community social interactive processes on rural adolescents' educational circumstances and outcomes (Warr, 2006)¹³⁰. Given the earlier discussions about the paucity data and research on the influences of social interactive processes and rural adolescents' educational outcomes, it is obvious that further studies are needed to fill the observed gaps in literature. By addressing these gaps, these studies would contribute to literature and increase the understanding of the concept of social capital and its effect on the educational outcomes of rural adolescents.

Moreover, these studies will guide rural educational policy makers and youth development personnel in several regards. First, the studies would provide an understanding and insight into those social resources that constitute sources of resilience for rural adolescents. Second, further studies would help rural youth development personnel and educators in pinpointing the particular social interactive processes that influence the educational outcomes of rural youth, and, which of these may need policy interventions. Third, studies exploring possible gender differences would guide rural youth development workers and educators in deciding whether to have gender-differentiated programs or policy initiatives for rural adolescents. Lastly, an understanding of the processes through which social capital resources influence educational achievement will guide rural youth counselors and youth development personnel in channeling counseling resources.

End Notes: Omolola A. Adedokun and Mark A. Balschweid, "Community Social Interactive Processes and Rural Adolescents' Educational Outcomes: What We Know and What We Need to Know," [Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy](#) (2008.2).

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Notes

- *1. This article is based on a doctoral dissertation (*Social Capital and Rural Adolescents' Educational Achievement and Aspirations*, Purdue University, West Lafayette, 2007) conducted by the first author (Omolola A. Adedokun) under the supervision of the second author (Mark A. Balschweid) [\[back\]](#)

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