

Young Voices from the Rural Midwest

Joseph J. D'Amico

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

William Matthes Anita Sankar
University of Iowa

Betty Merchant Martha Zurita
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

To find out how youngsters growing up in rural communities across the Midwest see themselves, their families, friends, communities, and futures, a team of researchers from the Rural Young Voices Project spoke with teenagers from three of these rural places. What they found was that despite an ambivalence about their rural experiences and a desire to move elsewhere, these "young voices" make the best of, value, and take joy from living in rural places.

It is a given that isolated communities cannot hold on to most of the best and brightest who grow up there. After college they move on to better job opportunities elsewhere.

(Norris, 1993, p. 50)

Introduction

The axiom that young people are the life blood and future of America is perhaps more true for rural communities than any other places in our nation. Ask most anyone in a small town what their biggest concerns are and usually "kids leaving" will be among the top ten. Increasingly, over the last few decades our rural communities have been shrinking as the youngsters who grow up in them move on to college, or to work, away from home and rarely return. With this pattern of outmigration comes a growing sense that each of these small communities—thus rural America, itself—is threatened.

"How do we keep our best and brightest children from leaving and never coming back?" This simple question/plea from a school teacher and mother in Clearview, Iowa, led to the Rural Young Voices Project, a joint venture which included researchers from the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), the University of Iowa, and the University of Illinois. The project took its guiding objective from our friend, colleague, and coauthor Bill Matthes

who advised us to look for the answer by first "talking to the kids."

The Study

In the Rural Young Voices Project we visited three rural Midwestern communities and interviewed young adults, most of whom had spent their lives growing up in these communities. We wanted to know how they saw life, what were their hopes and dreams for the future, and how they thought growing up in a rural community had given shape and meaning to their lives. We interviewed 33 students from three small high schools. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Conducted with individual youngsters, they lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each.

To the degree possible in the rural Midwest, we wanted to include as diverse a cross-section of adolescents as possible and succeeded in this goal by visiting a rural community where about 80% of the residents are Hispanic and talking with 10 Hispanic students there.

Using two different structured interview protocols, in part because interviews with the Hispanic students were conducted in Spanish, the site researchers sought to uncover what these students saw as the forces shaping their lives and futures. In particular, we wanted to know what they saw as the role of the following in their view of the world and their place in it:

school and the peer group relationships that are part of school life,
home and their family relationships, and
place and their relationship to it.

The Communities and Schools

Although in different states, the communities where the interviews were conducted have a lot in common. All

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under contract number RJ96006301. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department of Education, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1900 Spring Road, Suite 300, Oak Brook, IL 60521. (damico@ncrel.org)

three loosely fit a common Midwestern agricultural image. The schools also seem to fit the image of small town, rural: single-building or grandfathered facilities; small class sizes; highly personalized student-teacher interactions; and so forth.

El Rincon

El Rincon is a community of about 3,000 in the corn and soy belt of central Illinois. It is a fairly multicultural community with Hispanic, Asian, and East Indian, as well as white residents. Despite being surrounded by farms, many El Rincon residents work in two large factories in the town. Others are employed in agriculture or in businesses that are associated with farming.

There are no farm owners among the families of the children we interviewed and the majority of the Hispanics live in ethnic enclaves behind the factories or in a nearby trailer park. They do not seem to be highly integrated into the community's social life; most usually speak Spanish and frequently they travel to two neighboring towns, also with small Hispanic populations, for entertainment, shopping, and the like.

El Rincon High School. El Rincon High is a comprehensive high school with an enrollment of 201 students. Approximately 9% of them are Hispanic. Although a separate building, the high school is connected to the El Rincon Elementary School. There is no separate junior high school, but youngsters of junior high age take classes in both the high school and elementary school. As a result, there is a considerable amount of cross-age mingling and interaction among students. Also, because they spend their entire school career in one grandfathered building, relationships among students and among students and teachers develop over time.

Like many rural Midwesterners, El Rincon's students and its citizens see the school as a community focal point. They take great pride in the accomplishments and successes of its students and especially in the successful high school sports teams. Many of the high school football players are heavily recruited by regional colleges.

Westview

Westview is a small rural community in east central Iowa much like the ones described by Osha Gray Davidson (1991). Westview itself could not be considered a prosperous community, yet there are many prosperous families around it. A visitor might see it as an agricultural community, but most of the town's residents commute to manufacturing and service jobs in the larger towns that surround Westview. These towns are where many Westview residents go for entertainment and shopping. Both the farmers' children and those from the town attend the Westview public schools.

Westview High School. Like El Rincon, Westview High is a 9-12 comprehensive school with about 170 students enrolled. Also like El Rincon, it is a community focal point and source of pride with its strong athletic and music programs. Westview High's academic program, however, is basic—some call it limited. Westview has a very strong Future Farmers of America chapter with a high level of participation.

Southfield

Southfield is a predominantly Catholic, traditional community in Iowa where the church plays a prominent role in both family and community life. It also is an important part of the lives of Southfield's children. The community economy is driven largely by agriculture and agriculture-related businesses and industries.

Southfield is more remote than Westview and El Rincon. This, plus the central place religion and church occupy in community life, tends to keep Southfield's residents close to home for entertainment.

Southfield High School. The Southfield schools are the source of great pride to the community and much of community life revolves around them. The Southfield parents are very involved in their children's education at all levels. The high school has received recognition for excellence in fine arts and academics.

Southfield High is the largest of the high schools we visited with approximately 300 students and 27 teachers some of whom also teach in the elementary and middle schools. Nearly all of the Southfield students graduate and over 85% go on to postsecondary experiences.

The Young Voices

The young people we interviewed attend these local high schools although a few from El Rincon are junior high school students. Most act and dress much like other young people from urban or suburban communities, but they do not have the same range and variety of social acquaintances, activities, and entertainment that their city and suburban counterparts have. For them the county fair or driving to neighboring towns to shop are big events. Often this makes them feel they are missing something.

Lisa: It's hard because there's not a lot to do out here ... I suppose that's why I'm so involved in school so much, because there's not anything to do if you're not in sports or anything.

Yet just as often they do not mind missing it.

Barb: I don't want to live in the city. I want to live in a rural area. I like small towns. I think I'd

probably be too scared to live in a city... There's just so many more people, and more things ... cause. in a town you know everybody and in the city, if you don't know everybody, you might be wary of people and you're scared. and you're living your whole life scared of everybody.

To an outsider, their lives do not seem to be very complex; they mostly revolve around their schools, their families and friends, and the little things in their town like the Dairy Queen, a football game, or a church social.

Jan: It's not like the big city, in a lot that it offers but you can find fun in your own way with your friends. You can go to the movies, or go hiking, or camping on weekends.

This perception is not 100% accurate, especially from these youngsters' point of view. Growing up in a rural community can be a combination of boredom and turmoil.

Victor: ... once we ditched our afternoon classes ... it was me, this other Mexican guy and this white guy. We went to a neighboring town once we left school. Well, our principal caught us the next day and said that me and the other Mexican guy were seen inside of this liquor store in town. He didn't even say anything about the white guy! He didn't even get called down to the office. He (the principal) kept trying to make us admit that we were in the liquor store ... kept saying he had witnesses ... we weren't even in town that afternoon!

School

In many rural communities schools have the potential to be the major social/cultural and educational focal points for young people, and this certainly is the case in all three of these communities. Not all see this potential nor take advantage of it though.

When we asked the El Rincon, Westview, and Southfield students about school, we heard a variety of reactions from high enthusiasm to tolerance to total dislike. Among the Anglo students, whether they liked them or hated them, school experiences typically represented an important dimension of their lives. For some, school was a way to give definition to themselves.

Sue: I got presented. I was on the Honor Roll for the school. And we just finished a vocal concert and I got a one on my solo, and I was really happy about it."

Alice: Yes, I'm a lot more involved in everything. too ... I am class treasurer. German Club Secretary. I am in volleyball, basketball manager and the Spring play, and band and everything ...

Lila: I didn't feel too good about myself until I was a new student going up against this senior for Spanish Club Secretary, and I was picked over her in all the Spanish classes, and that made me feel good.

For others it was a chore that took up too much of their lives.

Pat: Sometimes I just hate getting up to go to school when I'm really tired ... I just want to stay home. I feel worn out from sports and staying up late studying.

Nick: A kid shouldn't dedicate his whole life to school!!!

The Hispanic youngsters, on the other hand, kept their comments about school at a superficial level. Clearly most we interviewed had school on the "back burner," and only spoke with passion about it when they spoke of peer relationships or racism.

Nilda: School? It's "more or less" (a Spanish expression translated literally) ... more because it's distracting and it passes the time; less because it's boring.

Alicia: Something bad that happened to me? ... um ... I had a fight with a white girl earlier this month ... I was walking to class, talking to my friend, Monica, in Spanish (because Monica does not speak English) and the white girl turned and said, "I don't know what you're saying, but speak English, you stupid Mexican." So I pulled her hair ... that's it, nothing else came of it, but I do feel badly about it because I don't like to fight.

Victor: I think school is fun ... it's something to do. Also, I get to look at the girls while I'm here.

For some, negative feelings about school were related to feelings they had about their homeland and the problems they encountered because of their poor language skills.

Mariposa: ... it's boring ... I haven't learned English within these 7 months here, so I don't under-

stand anything the teachers say . . . I get bored easily. Before, in Mexico, I *never* used to like missing school . . . I loved school. If I missed a day, I would cry. Now, I love missing school; it's just that I get so bored with it . . . the same thing everyday.

As with any youngsters, those who were good students and participated in many school-related activities liked, even enjoyed school. Those who struggled with their studies and were uninvolved tended to dislike school or be bored with it.

Luna: . . . school is nice, but I think that it's because I've been here longer. . . . I know more English and have more white friends than do the other Mexicans. If I was just here from Mexico, I think that it would not be as nice. I would probably hate it like Mariposa and Nilda . . .

Barb: Pretty fun. I enjoy coming to school actually. But I'm a straight A student so I enjoy it.

Peers

For most of the adolescents we interviewed, friendships and peer interactions that originate in school are very important. In these rural, small communities, however, school-based peer interactions often took on added significance as there typically are no alternatives. Moreover, because many of these young people feel isolated living in El Rincon, Southfield, and Westview, their peer interactions and relationships became critical defense mechanisms. Most saw their friends as vital resources for comfort, confidences, and holding off feelings of isolation.

Sonia: When I had this particular problem, my friend, Mariposa, gave me good advice. She told me not to worry about what anybody else thinks; that I have to do what is right for me because it is my life.

Andres: I thought I was going to lose a friend and that really made me feel badly . . . I really value my friends. They are very important.

Deb: When I have a problem. I turn to my friends, my closest friends. I usually, when I have a problem, get on the phone and talk to others about this one problem. and they are there to listen . . . They give me advice. They're just there to listen, and it helps me know that they are listening and I can talk it out. They really

don't make judgments before I say anything. They'll listen, and then they judge what I should do. Sometimes I take their advice, and sometimes I don't.

Despite their central role for these students, peer interactions were not always positive. Sometimes they even increased feelings of isolation.

Joaquin . . . there were two Mexican kids that did something bad to me . . . they kept taunting me and saying that they could beat me up, that I was no big deal . . . they were in about fifth grade . . . and everyone at my lunch table laughed at me. They made me feel foolish.

Victor: I broke up with my girlfriend this month . . . I guess that was kind of bad.

Family

As important as peer relationships are to the students of El Rincon, Westview, and Southfield, it is family relationships and interactions that most significantly affect these youngsters.

Mat: The most important person in my life? Right now I have to say . . . it would probably be my mother. I have other people, but my mother helps a lot. I mean I can talk to her about stuff . . . She can understand things that nobody else can.

Mariposa: My parents are the most important people in my life because they are good to me. They give me advice. They don't yell at me or hit me. They tell me what's the right thing to do and steer me away from the wrong thing.

And these relationships ran the gamut from friend to advisor to disciplinarian.

Joe: Dad is the easiest person to talk to . . . he gives me advice but leaves it to me to make my own choices . . . and he'll support my decision if he thought it was right.

Luna: . . . my mom gives me advice and works to get me things . . . like my quinceañera (equivalent to a coming out party). Also I think she could give me advice more than my Dad because she's a woman and understands what I say . . .

Mariposa: I ask my parents for permission to go out. For things that pertain to inside of the house, I do what I want; but like to go to the park or go to eat, they have control over whether or not I do it . . . I feel good about that . . . they're my parents and I respect what they say.

Relationships with mothers were seen as extremely influential, particularly by the young women we spoke to.

Lila: Well, I guess whenever I have problems, I usually go to my mom. Cause, she always has these anecdotes and stuff like that to make you feel better.

Reta: Probably my parents, my mom. We don't get along very well, but she's still important . . . She's really a good friend, too. She's not just a mom. She's always there if I need to talk to her.

Joaquin: My mother is the most important person in my life . . .

Interestingly though, relationships with fathers were often viewed as more important than those with mothers.

Deb: . . . His (father) opinions matter more to me cause he usually lets me do what I want, and then when he doesn't want me to do something, it seems like it's more important, cause he has a better reason.

Mary: Dad's very funny. I love him a lot . . . We get along well. He always tells me jokes every morning . . . She's (mother) immaculate. She keeps the home spic and span . . . that's one thing that drives me nuts. She always tells me to pick up my room, so I just close my door and say let me deal with it . . . We have our differences, and it just gets so tense.

Place

The Midwestern states that form America's heartland offer such a huge diversity of rural communities that it is impossible to characterize a single rural context. There are common threads, however. In this region most rural communities are isolated geographically, culturally, or in terms of their access to goods and services. Many are small and more than a handful are poor. Lots of them are closed socially and fiercely conservative.

On the other hand, these communities are often seen as safe havens by the folks who live in them. For many

who have grown up in them, they are a comfortable fit and feel like an extended family. Moreover, these small communities display the important rural values of resilience, self-sufficiency, and cooperation that sometimes are difficult to find in cities and suburbs.

The young voices we listened to seem to appreciate the positive aspects of small town culture, but also they are well aware of the minuses of living in the rural Midwest.

Jan: Living in small town, everybody pretty much knows each other, and it's pretty easy to get along with people who live here.

Joe: People here are really . . . I mean you know everybody. It's just a big family.

Barb: I just want to listen to people's problems, and I always want to give them the right advice.

Mary: It's landlocked. It's just pushed away from all problems; there's no worry about drugs or anything around here, and when kids graduate from here and they go on to college, it's quite a change, and so that's one bad thing about this secluded area . . .

Victor: Not too long ago, this guy came up to me and said, "Damn Mexican pigs." I turned to him and said, "But there are many more white pigs." He looked like he was going to start a fight, but then just turned and walked away. He never said anything to me again.

Andres: . . . I do not like it here as much as where I used to live in Michigan . . . over there, everyone talked to each other, no matter if you were black, white, or Mexican. Here the whites talk to the whites and the Mexicans to the Mexicans.

Their assessments of these pluses and minuses have an effect on their reactions to growing up in a rural community and what they do to cope.

Beth: It's just so small . . . there's nothing to do here. You get bored and can't find anything to do and all I ever get to do is go out with some of my friends, or just go out and run. But there's nothing in this town actually to do. Like they don't have movies, they don't have any place to shop, they don't have food places. Mostly they've got three to four bars here. They've got more bars here than they've

got places to eat. You've got to have a car to do anything mostly.

Kate: There isn't very much to tell about this town . . . If I were in Spencer, then it would be different because there's more places to go, to see.

What many do is leave: for entertainment and excitement while they are in high school, for college, jobs, and better opportunities when they graduate.

Joe: If you go down to Dubuque, there are more things to do there . . . Go to the movies. Go bowling or something. Pizza.

Pete: . . . there's not very much stuff to do here so it's like going to Davenport.

Barb: . . . we usually go to Mason City out to eat and cruise around, or go bowling or something. Saturday nights is our regular for skating. We go to the rink and skate from 7:00 till about 2:00 in the morning.

Luna: My whole family is returning to Mexico . . . I'm going next year and my parents are going to wait until my brother learns more English. I like it here, but I like it there a lot more. (Her hometown in Mexico) is bigger than here . . . a lot bigger and the people are nicer.

Sonia: In 10 years, I'll be a housewife and in Mexico . . . I won't be in El Rincon . . . I just don't like it here anymore.

Luna: . . . work as a teacher . . . but in Mexico, not here.

Self and Others

Adolescents generally spend a considerable amount of time and energy thinking about themselves, their relationships with significant others, and their place in the world. Growing up in the somewhat isolated, somewhat sheltered, and somewhat intimate context of a rural community often gives young people an even greater tendency toward this kind of introspection. This certainly seemed true for the youngsters from El Rincon, Westview, and Southfield.

Many showed they had thought a lot about themselves and had a pretty solid sense of who they are.

Sue: At the beginning I was out to impress people you know, and then you want to go to all the

parties and try to fit in with everyone, and it's harder when you try and do that . . . cause, it doesn't work out . . . cause, I kind of mellowed out and do just what I want.

Sam: I've most definitely got to know more people. I'm not so shy as I used to be. I never used to talk at all. And now I got this girlfriend, I talk all the time.

Beth: My things always seems so important to me when I was a kid. I got along with nobody when I was a little kid cause . . . nobody liked me. It was just that I was a little unpopular child, and nobody talked to me. So things became important in my life because that was all I ever used. And my parents, they always yelled . . . they just spanked if we did things wrong, and I didn't really have any friends, and friends we did have weren't really good friends . . . I think I was so dependent on things that's why I'm selfish with people . . . When I'm with people, I'll get selfish with them if they're hanging around somebody else more often than me. Cause, I think they wouldn't like me as much, and I wouldn't like the person they were hanging around with.

Luna: They would say that I always have to be moving around, can never stay still, am a music lover, am always talking on the phone, and sometimes lie to them, although I never get away with it. I am a terrible liar.

Victor: I would tell him not to hang out with me . . . I'm a bad influence.

Some had an equally solid sense of who others are and how important others are to them.

Lisa: I don't know . . . Maybe that I understand him more than my sister does . . . My sister, she is very dependent still so she thinks this has to be done, and this has to be done. Dad knows he doesn't have money or time to do this . . . And I understand his limits more than she does, as far as I'm like, "Don't push him or he's going to hit you." . . . I mean he's not abusive."

Beth: He's really a caring person but he's got this macho act . . . he uses it all the time . . . like nothing can hurt him but you know it can . . .

He's just got to open up . . . never really has opened up yet . . .

Sue: After he left, my life . . . I don't know . . . I just don't talk to anybody really . . . I think I more or less hold all my feelings in . . . cause I don't know who to turn to anymore . . .

Plans and Dreams

Our interviews with these youngsters left us with a very vivid impression of their overall maturity and focus when it comes to their future. Most had clearly articulated aspirations for college, marriage, jobs, careers, and a good life. Often these aspirations focused on helping others.

Lisa: I think probably go into music and major in music. I think I like to perform . . . like musically, like be in a band. I really enjoy the stuff.

Tina: It's not probably right away . . . after college, after I have a good job and everything . . . I want to make sure that I had a really nice job so that I can care for them (children) really well and everything.

Manuel: . . . I don't know . . . I want to be a teacher and help students like myself, who do not speak English. I want to help them learn English because I know what it's like not to know the language. I want to help them through school as much as I could.

Jaoquin: In 10 years? I'll be working in stores . . . I'll be in college too . . . What will I be studying? I will be studying to be a mechanic of some sort and I'll be studying that language . . . you know . . . Japanese . . . How do I know about that language? I saw it on the television and it looked interesting to me.

Alicia: I want to be a kindergarten teacher.

Some have a pretty realistic grasp on what these aspirations involved and some did not.

Sonia: " I'll be in college . . . but I'm not sure . . . I will be if I'm not married by that time.

Nick: Guess I won't mind welding class. Lot of money in that . . . cause, I really don't want to farm . . . they have no money in it . . . If I stick with welding, maybe have my own shop . . .

All knew they were on their way to adulthood, and they would have to grow up soon.

Mary: I think I have become better at making my own decisions rather than having somebody tell me what to do . . . Most of my decisions are okay. They are right, I feel anyway. I truly can make my own decisions and deal with the consequences. Some of them might not be good, but I guess that's what I want to do.

Reta: I want to get a job this summer and start saving up for college and for a car. I want to work as much as I can plus I'll be working to help around the house . . . I buy my own school clothes and school supplies to help out my morn by babysitting or detasseling-taking the tassels out of the corn. You make about \$4.25 an hour, and then each check is over \$200 . . . Usually use it up for things I need or to help morn, you know like some bill or something. . .

Themes

If we look for common themes among this diversity of young voices, we find family and the importance of family is a strong one. Family relationships are central to these youngsters' daily lives. And they seem to rely heavily on family members-especially parents-to play important roles in their growth and development.

Another theme is ambivalence. These young voices express ambivalence when talking about school, the major institution in their lives. They appreciate it for the social-in some cases the academic-focus it brings to their existence; but they simultaneously resent the fact that it is such a focal point. Many also are ambivalent about their rural community itself. They see and appreciated that it has advantages such as safety, predictability, and a supportive environment. Yet, many find it boring, isolating, and for some a place full of racism and hostility. To most the rural community is a place to leave, for excitement and entertainment, and for opportunity.

This, then, is another theme: that the future for these young voices is somewhere else. They feel rural isolation acutely. They long for excitement and wish for ways to broaden their opportunities. Bored by the lack of "action" that for them comes with small town life and hemmed in by the conservatism and narrowness of the rural culture, most wait it out until they can leave for work, college, or another place where life is "a lot bigger and the people are nicer."

Summary

What do these young voices have to say to the teacher from Clearview, Iowa, when she asks how to keep children from leaving rural communities? What do they tell us all? We think they tell us to listen. Listen and you will hear that like most anyone else who lives in the thousands of rural communities across the Midwest, these young people are resilient, self-sufficient, energetic, and optimistic. They recognize that living in a small place has its advantages and disadvantages, and they make the best of it by taking joy in the institutions and rituals that frame their rural place. Above all, they value the relationships that always seem to run so strong and deep in rural places: the ones they share with family, friends, and community.

We should cherish our rural young people while they stay and do what we can to give them good memories of their rural community. And perhaps someday they will come back.

References

- Davidson, O. G. (1991). *Broken heartland: The rise of America's rural ghetto*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Least Heat-Moon, W. (1991). *Prairie Earth (a deep map)*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Norris, K. (1993). *Dakota: A spiritual geography*. New York: Ticknor and Fields.