

Youth Realities and Aspirations

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The preceding papers provide a splendid set of findings and insights, a basis of important implications for education policies and practices, and a store of ideas for further research. The purpose of this commentary is to characterize the severe problems faced by American youth, and to comment on papers individually and as a set.

Status of Contemporary Youth

In understanding the problems of rural youth, it would seem important to know how American youth in general are faring. If they are subject to difficult social conditions, we can imagine that rural youth's problems are still more difficult in relatively isolated areas.

In a comprehensive synthesis, *The State of Americans*, Bronfenbrenner, McClelland, Wethington, Moen, and Ceci (1996) compiled statistical trends on American citizens that should cause alarm in a variety of academic disciplines and professional fields. Some of the disturbing and substantial changes concern youth and conditions that affect them (pp. 1-27). They are as follows:

During the 1960s and 1970s:

- high school seniors trust in others declined;
- their religious participation declined and is especially low among those in one-parent families;
- teenagers' tolerance of out-of-wedlock births increased;
- increasing percentages of teenagers believed that planning makes people unhappy since plans hardly ever work out;
- cheating and tolerance of cheating among high school and college students increased; and
- voting in presidential elections declined and is about 20% lower among those less than age 24 than other adults.

Youth performance and character are strongly affected by changes in families; those in the increasing numbers of single-parent families are much:

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- less likely to attain an "A" average as high school seniors,
- less likely to trust others,
- more likely to skip school, and
- more likely to use illegal drugs.

Youth, especially minority youth, are more likely than adults to be victims of violent crimes. Between about 30% and half of America's teens reported:

- not feeling "very safe" in school,
- not trusting others because of violence,
- taking part in a physical fight,
- carrying a weapon to school, and
- believing gangs and peer pressure cause violence in school.

Similarly, local surveys yield evidence worrisome behavior. About half of Rochester, New York, teenagers, for example, reported engaging in drugs or alcohol, delinquency, and sex; 29% reported engaging in all three.

Much can also be said of adult character and behavior, which obviously affect children and youth. As only two examples, consider the views in two formerly revered professions. Only 41% of California lawyers reported believing that ethical standards of most lawyers are high, and 67% said that attorneys compromise professionalism because of economic pressure. Twenty-two percent of medical students had personal knowledge of others cheating on examinations; 19% would allow other students to copy their examinations, and 12% disagreed that failing to report an on-duty intoxicated physician is unethical. To whom can adults and youth turn?

Significant Contributions of Preceding Papers

Rural youth face similar problems, which can be amplified by economic decline, lack of traditional work opportunities, and increasing isolation from other people. These, of course, affect their aspirations. The problems they share with other youth, as well as those that are uniquely theirs, are pressing matters for research and educational interventions. The papers in this issue suggest experience shapes aspirations. As the ancients knew, early opportunity and experience foster adult aspirations, character, and behavior. They set forth clearly the nature and scope of the

problem, identify the general principles that can serve as guidelines for action, and describe a variety of programs that address specific problems and populations.

Toward a Theory of Student Aspirations

Russell Quaglia and Casey Cobb offer an historical perspective on aspiration theory. They define aspirations as a student's ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals. Social groups, however, pressure youth toward uniformity and discourage diversity, excellence, and risk-taking. In these ways, social groups can reduce students' aspirations for educational attainments and vocational goals. They conclude that educators and researchers need to examine and measure key school conditions that affect student aspirations. This paper sets the stage for the remaining issue. It reveals the crucial role of aspirations in determining the life course of students and clearly identifies crucial variables that affect aspirations and that are affected by them.

Construct Validity Evidence for the Student Aspirations Survey

Jonathan Plucker administered the *Student Aspirations Survey* to students in rural middle and high schools. Though factor analysis suggests that the survey's construct validity can be improved, it proved reliable. The 12 scales measure such intriguing factors as inspiration, ambition, achievement motivation, curiosity, risk taking, self-confidence, and mentoring. The research suggests that we will attain a better understanding of aspirations if we see their influential connections to other traits and conditions. Plucker's research suggest that a modified instrument should be valuable in diagnosing the aspirations character of students and conditions in their schools so that educators can improve schools' climate for fostering aspirations.

Rural Partnerships in New England: Learning from Kids

Eva Kampits reports that rural students are less likely to pursue college degrees than nonrural students despite higher secondary education graduation rates. High expectations of students and greater access to postsecondary education are key factors influencing motivation and aspiration. Using the *Student Aspiration Survey*, the Rural Partnership Project helps high schools analyze the necessary conditions for fostering student aspirations. These conditions affect the climate of the entire school. In one participating high school, the identification of necessary conditions led to improved standardized test performance, a decrease in absenteeism, gains in student achievement, and an increase

in student interest and enrollment in post secondary education. This study is exciting in suggesting that not only can the conditions be measured, but that interventions can yield actual benefits.

Congruence of Aspirations of Rural Youth

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) team developed a survey of parents, teachers, and students of 11th and 12th grades about rural youth aspirations in 21 high schools in as many different states. Contrary to common assumptions, students seldom desired to leave their communities. Teachers, though, believed that students would prefer to live elsewhere. Parents, teachers, and students felt that future success would be related to personal qualities such as dependability, decision-making, following directions, and learning new skills rather than academic performance. The belief that achievement is unimportant, whether it is or not, is a rational reason for poor academic motivation. Such a belief may hardly be restricted to rural youth, and is undoubtedly one reason that American students compare unfavorably with those in other countries. Careful surveys such as NWREL's can reveal such widespread beliefs and serve as the basis for educational and counseling interventions.

Young Voices from the Rural Midwest

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) team, in collaboration with University of Illinois and University of Iowa, interviewed students in three midwestern rural communities. The students knew about the youth culture in urban and suburban communities and often felt they were missing out. Their range of social activities is limited, and many leave their communities for this reason. As such, school and family play highly significant interactive roles in these students lives. The NCREL team found that these students saw their communities as safe but isolated and boring places. For this reason, many leave for college jobs, and better opportunities. Thus, qualitative methods complement and enrich surveys reported in this issue.

Conclusion

The papers as a set show that surveys and interview techniques can be employed to give us a richer understanding of the problems and opportunities of rural youth. Educators and researchers should feel indebted and grateful to editor Quaglia and the group of paper authors who report important new research on the aspirations of rural children and youth in this issue. They lay a foundation for educators and their allies to help solve the nation's rural youth

problems. Their writings should be of interest not only to educators but to those in the several related professional fields with whom they are collaborating.

Reference

Bronfenbrenner, U., McClelland, P., Wethington, E., Moen, P., & Ceci, S. J. (1996). *The state of Americans*. New York: Free Press.