

# Country Kids, City Kids: Community Context and Geopolitical Identity

**Jan Armstrong Gamradt<sup>1</sup>**

*University of New Mexico*

**Patricia G. Avery<sup>2</sup>**

*University of Minnesota*

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines whether community context shapes geopolitical identity. An open-ended survey was administered to 187 rural and urban tenth grade students by their social studies teachers. Students were asked to describe their community, state, nation, and world. Participants' responses were analyzed using content analytic techniques. Comparison of rural and urban students' responses revealed both continuities and discontinuities. Implications for rural education and rural education research are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

The country is a spread of localities, while the nation is something that exists in Washington and other seats of government. . . . The wider, the more formal, the legal entity, the more intense becomes the local life (Dewey, cited in Steiner & Mondale, 1988, p. x).

. . . the rootless, homogenizing nature of American experience engenders a counter-desire for stability and more intimate places of identity. . . . The sheer immensity of the United States seems to require a search for subnational places of belonging. It may be that the larger and more expansive a nation, the more urgent is the need of its citizens for distinctive regional identities (Steiner & Mondale, 1988, p. ix).

United States schools embody the cultural and economic diversity of the population as a whole. As a consequence, urban and rural students spend their time in strikingly different sociocultural environments. "City kids" encounter the pressures and pleasures of post-industrial urban life: alienation, social fragmentation, economic stratification, cultural diversity, myriad recreational opportunities, and—too often—overcrowded classrooms staffed by overburdened and de-

moralized teachers (Grant, 1989; Maeroff, 1988; Parish, Eubanks, Aquila, & Walker, 1989). "Country kids" experience the comforts and the hardships of contemporary rural life: social cohesion and continuity, cultural homogeneity, comparatively limited economic and recreational opportunities, and—too often—half-empty classrooms staffed by teachers coping with constant threats of school consolidation and retrenchment (DeYoung, 1987; Green & Stevens, 1988; Lomotey & Swanson, 1989; Sher, 1977).

A number of scholars have documented the way in which public schooling has been used to overcome, or at least attenuate, local and regional loyalties and cultural predispositions in order to build a unified, national constituency and to transmit psychological capacities required for participation in industrial society. Historically, the school has helped moderate tensions arising from cultural and economic diversity through the inculcation of nationalistic and patriotic sentiments (Spring, 1986; Tyack, 1976). The structure of mass public schooling transmits values and norms that *presumably* "enable people to participate in and cope with the demands of modern occupational and political institutions, and to engage in the public life of society outside the household" (Dreeben, 1968, p. 94). Thus, schools provide students with experiences that lead to the acceptance of norms linked to the national sphere - achievement, independence, universalism, and so on

<sup>1</sup>Jan Armstrong Gamradt is a Professor in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106.

<sup>2</sup>Patricia G. Avery is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455-0208.

(Parsons, 1959). The widespread acceptance of these norms, combined with the school's selective distribution of knowledge among students, tends to reproduce patterns of economic and social inequality. Schooling provides a mechanism for both social control and social regulation. "As an institution for establishing direction, purpose, and will in society, schooling ties polity, culture, economy, and the modern state to the cognitive and motivating patterns of the individual" (Popkewitz, 1991, p. 13).

Three decades ago, Kimball and McClellan (1962) made the following observation of American society:

Democracy, freedom, and justice [have] become the symbols of common consent; since they do not discriminate in any way, they serve to harmonize the association of people who have little in common other than these symbols themselves. They facilitate the surface cooperation of persons who lack a deeply sensed historical and structural unity in life experience (pp. 250-251).

Recent evidence suggests that fostering social cohesion through "nation-building" remains a part of the contemporary school curriculum. For example, Norris Johnson's (1980, 1985) research on the material culture of rural United States classrooms has shown that public school classroom decorations and other artifacts embody national images and symbols, while rarely representing ethnic, local or regional events, traditions, or cultures. Clearly, the contention that one of the primary functions of schooling is the inculcation of national (as opposed to local and regional) values and symbolic understandings is well supported in the educational literature. What is unclear is whether any meaningful regional differences in students' geopolitical perspectives remain after prolonged exposure to the "one best system" (Tyack, 1976).

In recent years, social scientists have shown an increasingly sophisticated appreciation for both the complexity and importance of *place* as an intervening variable, an aspect of the individual's phenomenological experience, and a theoretical construct (Harper, 1989; Steiner & Mondale, 1988). For example, the notion that cultural transmission is simultaneously a "radically local" and a macrocultural phenomenon, is nearly axiomatic within educational anthropology (Dobbert & Pitman, 1989; Erickson, 1986). For decades, anthropologists have carefully documented the impact of community context on human learning both in and out of school. Representative works include Kimball and McClellan's (1962) *Education and the New*

*America*, John Ogbu's (1978) *Minority Education and Caste*, the Spindlers' (1987, 1989) work on "instrumental linkages" with students in Germany and the United States, and Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) *Ways with Words*. Nonetheless, educational researchers and reformers have tended to assume, rather than to systematically examine, relationships between geographic locales and socialization processes. For instance, comparative, qualitative analyses of the impact of urban versus rural school environments on students remain in short supply (see, however, Barker & Gump, 1964 and Lomotey & Swanson 1989).

This study investigates whether (and in what ways) community context shapes students' conceptualizations of the geopolitical sphere. Broadly stated, our goal has been to explore the interrelationship between *place* and one aspect of the culture acquisition process: the development of geopolitical identity. Specifically, this work examines whether young people growing up in contrasting social and institutional environments (rural versus urban settings) construct distinct images of the geopolitical universe.

Our research strategy reflects a constructivist theoretical orientation (Harre, 1986; Ingleby, 1986). Thus, we define "geopolitical identity" as the individual's sense of place within the wider geopolitical universe—a culturally transmitted, evolving, interrelated set of cognitive and affective maps. These maps are unique to the individual, yet patterned by the contexts in which they are acquired. They reflect the actor's sense of connection to, or isolation from, the social and political world. In our view, geopolitical identity is best understood as a kind of "imaginary social world"—a world that each of us constructs, modifies, and reconstructs throughout our lives (Caughey, 1984). The Mind's Eye Project Survey (MEPS) was designed to capture students' geopolitical perceptions in as much detail and with as few constraints as possible.<sup>1</sup> This report compares the responses of 187 tenth grade rural and urban students who completed the MEPS in May of 1989.

## METHOD

### *Instrument*

The Mind's Eye Project Survey is a four-page booklet consisting of 11 open-ended statements. It invites students to reflect upon and share their conceptual and affective "maps" of the geopolitical universe. The survey asks participants to articulate their concerns, attitudes and beliefs about specific aspects of the geopolitical environment (e.g., "What people from other

countries should know about the United States is that . . ."; "If I were to tell someone from another country about my community, I would tell them . . ."; "I would like President Bush to know that people my age are very concerned about . . ."). The survey was developed as part of an evaluation effort aimed at assessing the effectiveness of a national, community-based educational reform project; the goal of the project was to "internationalize" and "restructure" the public school curriculum of participating rural schools (Gamradt, Avery, Sedro & Trygestad, 1990).<sup>2</sup> Students' responses to five MEPS items are described below.

### Sample

The survey was given to 187 tenth grade students enrolled in one rural and one urban school district in Minnesota. The urban school, one of seven high schools in the district, has an enrollment of 1891 students in grades 9-12. In contrast, the rural high school serves all 524 of its district's students in grades 9-12.

The students ranged in age from 14 to 18 years; the mean age was 15.4 years. The majority of respondents were white (90%) United States citizens (98%); 57% were female, 43% male. The mean number of years of residence within the community was 9.7; there was little variation between the school districts. The participants required approximately one-half hour to complete the survey.

### Analytical Procedures

Standard content analysis and descriptive statistical procedures were used to describe and categorize the students' geopolitical attitudes, interests, beliefs, and concerns (Weber, 1985). Our analysis focused on the words, phrases, and sentences students used in completing the survey's 11 open-ended sentence completion items. A coding taxonomy was developed through inductive, content analytic procedures. Descriptive categories were defined, expanded, and modified until our research team was satisfied that our codebook did a reasonably good job of capturing the full range, if not the rich detail of the students' comments. All 187 surveys were then formally coded. Inter-rater agreement ranged between 75 and 100%.

Each written response was classified in terms of its thematic content by counting the number of different themes or basic ideas contained in the participant's response to each item. Some of the students' responses focused on only one theme. A rural female's description of her community as "pretty dull and boring"

contains one theme. Our coding taxonomy places this response in the **Lack of Activities** category. Another student's response to the same item contained multiple themes: "It is very small. There are a few restaurants and department stores. People are very friendly" [rural male]. This response would be assigned three thematic categories: **Environmental Features; Institutions; and People, Positive**. Responses that did not fit our established categories, and illegible responses, were placed in the **Other** category.

The tables included in this paper report the percentages of participating students whose responses were judged to contain various themes. These percentages do not sum to 100 because students' responses often contained multiple themes. The Yates-corrected Chi-Square test was used to identify statistically significant thematic differences between the two comparison groups (rural versus urban). This test provides a more stringent test of statistical significance than the Pearson Chi-square test.

## RESULTS

### *Students' Perceptions of Peers' Concerns*

One MEPS item was designed to elicit students' thoughts about the issues that are of greatest concern to members of their generation. "I would like President Bush to know that people my age are very concerned about . . ." Inductive analysis of the students' responses to this item produced a coding taxonomy containing six thematic categories. Table 1 summarizes the students' responses to this item by residence (rural versus urban) and in combination.

The students' responses to this item most often focus on **social problems**—drugs, racism, AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, crime, hunger, poverty, and so on. Forty-four percent of the combined group mention social problems in response to this item. A rural male's comment is typical: "drugs, they're getting out of control and becoming very threatening to everyone." An urban female's response indicates the way in which these problems are integrated into her life. She writes: "wars and drugs, gangs, the everyday things."

Twenty-four percent of the respondents cite **institutional inadequacies** (weaknesses in governmental, economic, legal, or educational policies, structures or officials). Many of the **institutional inadequacies** cited focus on the educational system. One urban student expresses her frustration this way:

Table 1  
Students' Perceptions of Peers' Concerns (In percentages)

Response Themes	Rural	Urban	Combined
Social Problems	44	44	44
Environmental Issues	8	34	22***
War/Peace Issues	24	22	23
Institutional Inadequacies	18	28	24
Personal Concerns	27	14	20
Other	4	7	5
No Data	5	5	5

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 84. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 103. <sup>c</sup>*N* = 187.

<sup>\*</sup>*p* < .05. <sup>\*\*</sup>*p* < .01. <sup>\*\*\*</sup>*p* < .001.

the need for a good public education: I think its disgraceful that there are more hockey pucks or soccer balls than history books or math books or even paper. Someone needs to do some serious rebudgeting or whatever to see that schools get needed supplies.

Global issues such as **war/peace** and **environmental issues** are each mentioned by over one-fifth of the students (23% and 22%, respectively). One urban student ponders the impact of nuclear arms on his future.

People my age are very concerned about life. At the age of 30 yrs., what will life bring me. Will I die from a nuclear war or will I live in a paradise of advanced technology.

A rural female expresses similar concerns:

having peace in the world, the pollution of our world, the destruction of the rainforests—our future.

Not all of the students chose to express concern for global or social issues. One-fifth (20%) want President Bush to know that persons their age are worried about more immediate problems or **personal concerns**, such as "the curfew at night" [rural male], "getting our drivers license and not failing our permit test" [rural female], and "appearance" [urban female]. Only 5% of the responses to this item were placed in the **other** category.

This item may indirectly provide students with an opportunity to indicate whether they feel President Bush *would* be responsive to their concerns. Only a small percentage of students (5%) did not respond to

the item. However, one urban female writes: "keeping abortion legal. Although [Bush] sees marches in D.C. and doesn't do anything." Another urban student expresses frustration with his perception of young people's limited power to effect change:

all the issues that people think only adults can handle. Though we believe in all this, we can't take action because of all the restriction put upon us. I mean, we have opinions too!!

These students' comments reflect a sense of dissatisfaction with the political system and the way in which change does or does not occur.

Did rural and urban students show differences in the kinds of issues they would like to share with President Bush? Our analysis indicates that urban participants are more likely to mention **environmental issues** (ozone, pollution, acid rain) than are rural students (*p* < .001). Although not statistically significant, urban students are somewhat more likely to refer to **institutional inadequacies** than are rural students (28% and 18%, respectively; *p* = .139). Rural students more often mention **personal concerns** in their responses (*p* = .030). Rural and urban students are about equally likely to mention **social problems** and **war/peace issues**.

### Students' Perceptions of Geopolitical Spheres

Four MEPS items ask students to describe their community, state, nation and world to an "outsider."

\* If I were to tell someone from another country about my community, I would tell them . . .

- \* If I were going to tell someone from another country about Minnesota, I would tell them . . .
- \* What people from other countries should know about the United States is that . . .
- \* Suppose that an extraterrestrial being came to visit you and asked, "What is this world you live in?" List three things you would tell the E.T. about the world.

These items provide participants with an opportunity to share their perceptions of four geopolitical units or "spheres." They also invite students to think about what an individual from another country (or galaxy) might *want* to know, as well as what such individuals *should be told* about these places. Our analysis focused on both the similarities and differences between rural and urban students in the thematic content of their responses to each item.

**Perceptions of Community**

Table 2 shows the kinds of themes present in the students' descriptions of their communities for all respondents, as well as for each subsample.

When writing about their communities, students from both rural and urban areas are most likely to

mention the positive attributes of local residents (**people, positive**) and of local **environmental features** (31% and 21%, respectively). Although participants often include positive evaluative comments about their communities (**evaluation, positive**), a few students write about the problematic aspects of life in their communities—most notably, a lack of things to do (**lack of activities**) and the presence of **social problems** (16% and 13%, respectively).

Comparison of the responses of rural and urban students reveals both continuities and some striking differences. Both groups are about equally likely to mention **environmental problems**, the existence of interesting **activities**, and both positive and negative attributes of **people** and local **institutions**. In general, for both groups the valence of the students' responses is more positive than negative.

There are three notable differences in the thematic content of the comments made by rural and urban students. First, rural students are more likely than urban students to describe the **environmental features** of the settings in which they live ( $p < .001$ ). Second, rural respondents are more likely to complain about a lack of things for young people to do (**lack of activities**) in their community ( $p < .001$ ). For example, one rural student offers the following description of his community: "it is pretty much boring. Nothing really happens we have live music a few bars around thats all." Finally, urban participants are more likely to men-

*Table 2*  
**Students' Perceptions of their Community by Residence (In percentages)**

Response Themes	Rural <sup>a</sup>	Urban <sup>b</sup>	Combined <sup>c</sup>
Environmental Features	37	9	21 <sup>***</sup>
Activities	12	14	13
Lack of Activities	29	5	16 <sup>***</sup>
People, Positive	30	32	31
People, Negative	6	10	8
Institutions	13	13	13
Social Problems	4	20	13 <sup>**</sup>
Environmental Problems	1	3	2
Welcome, Positive	5	9	7
Welcome, Negative	5	9	6
Evaluation, Positive	20	18	19
Evaluation, Negative	6	3	4
Other	6	6	6
No Data	1	9	5

<sup>a</sup> $n = 84$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 103$ . <sup>c</sup> $N = 187$ .  
<sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ . <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .

tion the presence of **social problems** when describing their community ( $p = .001$ ). An urban student describes his community this way: "it sucks, dirty, criminals. No room in prisons. Police not working hard enough." Another urban female student offers this advice: "Make sure you got a gun before you come out of your house or car."

**Perceptions of the State of Minnesota**

When asked what they would tell someone from another nation about Minnesota, a large majority of the participants (70%) mention the state's **environmental features**. Students frequently mention the state's cold but varied climate, and its many lakes. An urban female writes: "It's great because we have such a variety of seasons. And we have many lakes." Similarly, a rural male student describes Minnesota as "warm in the summer and cold in the winter and a good state to live in it has fresh water lakes it has alot of animals." Table 3 shows the distribution of themes present in the participants' descriptions.

For the most part, the students are more likely to focus on positive than negative features. They are more likely to mention the strengths of state **Institutions** and **people** than to focus on their weaknesses. An urban male describes the state this way: "Minnesota is a good state with good people. In Minnesota there are many jobs and opportunities." Several respondents seem

concerned about various "myths" and misconceptions about their state. The following comments are illustrative:

it's not always cold & the people aren't as simple as they're made out to be. [urban female]

Yes we *do* have summers that reach 100's. Also, this is *not* a barren tundra with few people. [urban female]

Other students seem happy to perpetuate the state's special mythology:

Very much different from other places. Water is the best fun thing to do and have. Also the land of two seasons. Winter is coming, winter is here. [rural female]

We also noted that a number of students think of Minnesota as a "clean" place. Very few students in the combined group (5%) write about **social problems** in association with the state geopolitical sphere.

Analysis of the two comparison groups' responses to this item reveals more similarities than differences. However, rural students are considerably more likely than urban students to write about Minnesota's **environmental features** ( $p < .001$ ). Urban students, on the other hand, are more likely to include **positive evalu-**

Table 3  
Students' Perceptions of State by Residence (in percentages)

Response Themes	Rural <sup>a</sup>	Urban <sup>b</sup>	Combined <sup>c</sup>
Environmental Features	86	57	70 <sup>***</sup>
Activities	25	16	20
Lack of Activities	6	9	7
People, Positive	12	17	15
People, Negative	0	3	2
Institutions	8	17	13
Social Problems	5	5	5
Environmental Problems	0	3	2
Welcome, Positive	10	15	12
Welcome, Negative	1	7	4
Evaluation, Positive	4	18	12 <sup>**</sup>
Evaluation, Negative	1	3	2
Other	4	7	5
No Data	0	3	2

<sup>a</sup> $n = 84$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 103$ . <sup>c</sup> $N = 187$ .  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

ations of the state in their responses ( $p = .004$ ). These included comments with positive sentiments but no specific reference point (e.g., "nice place"; "we live in the U.S."). Although not statistically significant, rural students are also somewhat more likely than urban students to mention the availability of things to do (activities) in connection with the state geopolitical sphere (25% and 16%;  $p = .152$ ). As previously noted, a number of rural students express concerns about the lack of activities for young people within their own community. Thus, the rural respondents are more inclined to view Minnesota as a locus for interesting activities and entertainment than their own community.

**Perceptions of the United States**

Table 4 provides an overview of the kinds of themes present in the students' descriptions of the United States.

Thirty-two percent of respondents in the combined group use words and phrases that describe national values and political ideals. Students often emphasize the idea that the United States is a "free" country, that United States citizens are "equal," and "free to choose" the way they live. Comments such as "You are very free to do what you want and nobody is constantly telling you how to live your life" [urban female] and "You have a lot of freedom in the US of A

and it's a good place to live" [urban male] are representative of the responses in this category.

As in describing their communities and the state, the respondents tend to emphasize positive rather than negative attributes of people and institutions. Eighteen percent of the participants offer general, positive evaluations of their country ("It's nice here."; "It is a good place to be"). However, 12% of the respondents include non-specific, negative comments about the United States in their descriptions (evaluation, negative), such as "it is not all it is cracked up to be" [rural male], or "it's not as great as a lot of people say/think" [urban female]. Further, 22% of the participants mention social problems when describing the United States. For example, an urban female writes: "Black afro americans all around the contry in place still have to fight for equale oportinitice." A rural male observes that "there is a lot of crime, it is not the safest country in the world." An urban male offers this description: "Although we are hungry for money and leave homeless in the streets, we are a good people as a whole. Our government just makes frequent blunders."

Only 6% of the participants describe the physical features of the United States environment (climate, geographic features, beauty, wildlife, scenery, etc.). This is in contrast to the students' descriptions of their state. As previously noted, 70% of the students refer to environmental features when describing the state of Minnesota.

*Table 4*  
Students' Perceptions of the United States by Residence (In percentages)

Response Themes	Rural <sup>a</sup>	Urban <sup>b</sup>	Combined <sup>c</sup>
Environmental Features	10	4	6
Activities	10	4	6
Lack of Activities	0	0	0
People, Positive	10	27	19**
People, Negative	0	7	4
Institutions	20	17	19
Social Problems	19	24	22
Environmental Problems	0	3	2
Welcome, Positive	0	5	3
Welcome, Negative	0	2	1
Evaluation, Positive	20	16	18
Evaluation, Negative	11	14	12
National Values	39	26	32
Other	8	13	11
No Data	5	11	8

<sup>a</sup> $n = 84$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 103$ . <sup>c</sup> $N = 187$ .  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Similar to their descriptions of Minnesota, however, students frequently want to correct misconceptions they feel non-United States citizens hold about the United States:

We're not *all* fascist, capitalist pigs. (Just kidding). People from other countries generalize too much about the U.S. [urban female]

There aren't just snotty rich people who take money from the really poor people. There are caring middle classians who help the poor. [urban female]

What is said about this place being the land of opportunity is wrong. Most of the stuff we say about the United States we wish were the United States. [rural female]

Such comments reflect students' awareness of and concern for the stereotypes of the nation and its citizenry.

A comparison of rural and urban students' responses to this item shows a good deal of uniformity. Urban students are more likely than rural students to mention the positive attributes of United States residents ( $p = .004$ ). Rural students also refer to **national values** somewhat more frequently than urban participants (39% and 26%, respectively;  $p = .081$ ). For the

most part, however, the themes represented in rural and urban students' responses are strikingly similar.

**Perceptions of the world**

Table 5 summarizes the thematic content of the participants' responses to the "world" MEPS item. When asked what three things they would tell an extraterrestrial being about their world, 36% of the participants mention **social problems**:

People don't really get along. People like to cover it with trash. People don't like to work together. [rural female]

It has many wars going on. Watch out for missiles. They will kill you. [urban male]

It's a place of war, pollution and homelessness. [urban female]

Approximately one-fourth of the students (27%) mention the positive attributes of the world's inhabitants (**people, positive**). Twenty-three percent of the respondents describe the earth's **environmental features**. Some of these comments focus on factual information: "It's big. It has a lot of water. It has lots of people" [urban male]. Others emphasize the physical

Table 5  
Students' Perceptions of the World by Residence (In percentages)

Response Themes	Rural <sup>a</sup>	Urban <sup>b</sup>	Combined <sup>c</sup>
Environmental Features	31	17	23 <sup>**</sup>
Activities	14	9	11
Lack of Activities	0	0	0
People, Positive	32	22	27
People, Negative	12	11	11
Institutions	13	1	6 <sup>**</sup>
Social Problems	33	39	36
Environmental Problems	17	17	17
Welcome, Positive	17	16	16
Welcome, Negative	0	6	3
Evaluation, Positive	20	17	18
Evaluation, Negative	4	7	5
National Values	14	8	11
Other	5	16	11 <sup>*</sup>
No Data	5	19	13 <sup>**</sup>

<sup>a</sup> $n = 84$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 103$ . <sup>c</sup> $N = 187$ .  
<sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ . <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .

beauty of the planet: "Many places are very beautiful" [urban female]. A somewhat smaller percentage of respondents (16%) explicitly welcome the E.T. to earth, offering touristic advice about what to see, do, and be wary of. For example, one rural male warns, "Its not all good, you have to watch your back." Eighteen percent offer non-specific, **positive evaluations** of the world ("its good invironmnet" [rural male]). A few students (11%) write that they would tell the extraterrestrial about "things to do" (**activities**), and an equal percentage mention **national values** in their responses. Less than 10% of the participants refer to social **Institutions** when describing their world.

Although both urban and rural students express concerns about **environmental problems**, the rural participants are more likely to include descriptions of the earth's **environmental features** in their responses (31% versus 17%;  $p = .031$ ). Rural students tend to refer to institutions more than their urban counterparts (13% versus 1%;  $p = .002$ ). The urban students are more likely than rural students to produce divergent responses—comments that did not fit our established categories, and which therefore were coded **Other** ( $p = .033$ ). Urban students were also more likely not to answer the item than were rural participants ( $p = .006$ ). Once again, however, the two groups appear to be more similar than different in the kinds of themes they decided to include in their responses to this item.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest both similarities and differences between the two groups of participants. We first summarize these patterns of continuity and discontinuity, then offer some interpretations of our findings.

### ***Patterns of continuity between rural and urban students***

When asked what their peers would like President Bush to know, both rural and urban students are equally likely to mention social problems and war/peace issues. In describing their communities, both groups are about equally likely to refer to the positive attributes of residents, and of the community in general. Both rural and urban students emphasize environmental features when describing the state, although rural students are more inclined to do so. Very few students in either group mention social or institutional problems in connection with the state geopolitical level. Instead, participants

generally emphasize the positive attributes of the state's residents and institutions.

Both groups appear to associate abstract political ideals and values with the national sphere. Similarly, both groups are most likely to talk about social problems when describing more "distant" geopolitical spheres (the world and the nation) and are least likely to refer to social problems when writing about their state.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Discontinuities between rural and urban students' responses***

On the "presidential concerns" item, urban students are more likely than rural students to mention environmental problems and somewhat more likely to refer to the failure of specific institutions (government, education, etc.). Rural students more often "personalize" their hypothetical communication with the president by writing about personal problems and concerns.

With regard to the "geopolitical spheres" items, rural students are more likely to describe the environmental characteristics of their community, state, and the world. They express greater concerns about the lack of things to do in their community than the urban students. The rural students are also more likely to describe their state and nation as places providing visitors with interesting things to do. Urban participants' descriptions of the state of Minnesota are positive, but less specific. The urban students describe Minnesota as a "good place" and "a nice place to live" rather than a setting in which to fish, hunt, ski, camp out, go sightseeing, and so on. Not surprisingly, when describing their community, urban students are more likely than rural students to write about social problems. However, urban and rural students are similar in the extent to which they incorporate references to social problems into their descriptions of the wider geopolitical universe. In other words, the urban students' concerns about social problems does not seem to "generalize" beyond the community level.

In describing the world to our mythical extraterrestrial, rural students more frequently mention the positive qualities of earth's inhabitants; urban students more often write uninterpretable or "divergent" (uncategorizable) responses to this item. Also worth noting is the fact that on the "nation" item, urban students more often refer to both the positive *and* negative qualities of United States citizens; rural students are *slightly* (though non-significantly) more likely to mention national ideals and values in connection with the national sphere.

### Interpretive comments

As noted, there are striking contrasts between the school and home environments experienced by urban and rural students. Why, then, do our findings reveal more continuities than discontinuities in the way the two groups responded to the survey? One possibility is that our coding taxonomy was not detailed enough to capture existing differences between the two groups of students. For example, students in both groups express concerns about "social problems" in almost exactly the same proportions. Unfortunately, our formal analysis didn't identify *which* social problems the participants described. A more detailed analysis might well reveal important differences in the types of problems referred to by the students.

Another possibility is that there is less contrast between the two communities than we have assumed to be the case. Although there are clear demographic differences between the rural and urban students, members of both groups may come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Further, some of the parents of our "rural" students may be long-distance commuters who work in larger towns and metropolitan centers. Thus, the relative impact of community context may have been attenuated by other factors, such as socio-economic status and parental employment.

Lomotey and Swanson's (1989) comparative analysis of the research on rural, urban, and effective urban schools suggests an even more intriguing possibility. Their work suggests that rural and *effective* urban schools share a number of important characteristics. Our limited field observations suggest that the urban school attended by our respondents possesses many of the attributes of an effective school. Rural schools tend to be small, have very strong ties to the community, serve a homogeneous group of low-income students, and focus on basic skills (because enrichment opportunities are limited). Rural school teachers are able to closely monitor student achievement and create a nurturing sense of community within the school. In rural schools, discipline is orderly and often self-monitored. Effective urban schools create small, "schools within schools," enjoy "somewhat better" community relations than typical urban schools, serve a homogeneous group of low SES and minority students, and emphasize basic skills. Teachers and administrators evaluate student achievement systematically, create a "nurturing, challenging, and compassionate" sense of community within the school, and consistently employ pre-planned disciplinary strategies in order to maintain school discipline (Dunne, 1977;

Hutto, 1990; Lomotey & Swanson, 1989; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1990). Thus, another interpretation of our findings is that some of the similarities (or lack of dissimilarity) observed between the two groups' responses might be attributed, at least in part, to structural similarities in their school environments.

A related explanation is that the continuities between the two groups accurately reflect substantive, culturally-shared assumptions and beliefs about the geopolitical universe. As noted above, a number of scholars have observed that mass public schooling has helped foster harmonious social relations by transmitting certain basic cultural values and assumptions to the young. These cultural beliefs are represented symbolically and abstractly. As they become more abstract, they may actually become *more* powerful as instruments of unification:

By losing connection with a unique historical experience, the symbolic system of America becomes broader and more inclusive in intention as well as extension. The rights and obligations, the duties and privileges it expresses can now literally apply to all men, regardless of race, creed, or national origin (Kimball and McClellan, 1962, p. 261).

From this perspective, the similarities between the two groups of participants may indicate that the public schools (and other socializing institutions) are fulfilling their implicit mandate to transmit certain core cultural ideas to all students, *regardless of local context*.

### IMPLICATIONS

The quotations with which this article began suggest a reciprocal relationship between the growth of national culture and the formation of enduring attachments to "subnational places of belonging." Our findings do not tell us whether young people growing up in rural and urban settings differ in the degree to which they long for such attachments. Nor do they shed much light on whether the expansion of national culture has led to an intensification of local life, as Dewey once predicted. However, our results do raise some issues that we believe deserve further analysis and debate within the educational community. Three of these issues are discussed below.

First, our findings indicate that both rural and urban students have internalized certain abstract, political ideals. The fact that our MEPS respondents asso-

ciated both national ideals *and* social problems with more “distant” spheres lends support to the argument that the school curriculum must help students make connections between national values and their real world correlates. The effective transmission of abstract, societal values should be viewed as a necessary, but not sufficient educational outcome. The rhetoric of freedom has mixed consequences. On the one hand, national ideals help unite the disparate constituencies that comprise the whole of American society. On the other hand, the successful inculcation of these abstract ideals may tend to inhibit critical analysis and appraisal of social issues. Effective participation in a democratic society requires the ability to distinguish between the language of democracy and its substance.

A second, closely related issue has to do with the consequences of a school curriculum that has traditionally focused on the national and international spheres while ignoring particularistic (i.e., local, community-based) attributes and concerns. Rural and urban students who completed the MEPS were equally inclined to mention the positive attributes of local residents, but rarely acknowledged cultural and ethnic diversity as a feature of contemporary American life. Those few students who did so were urban students. This pattern may have especially important implications for rural school professionals, who may tend to overestimate the homogeneity of the populations they serve. As Norris Johnson (1980) has observed, the residents of rural midwestern communities are characterized by a good deal of religious, ethnic, and cultural heterogeneity. Even in what appear to be monolithic communities, local residents continue to uphold traditions and customs that can be traced to the nations from which their predecessors emigrated: Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and so on. The public school’s traditional focus on assimilation and nation-building (Spring, 1986; Tyack, 1974) has resulted in a curriculum that deprives students of opportunities to learn about multiculturalism as a natural and inevitable feature of everyday life. The changing demographic composition of the United States population has led to heated debate over the relative merits of multicultural education. While the war over multiculturalism in the schools rages on, practitioners may want to explore the pedagogical implications of the diversity that exists within their own communities.

A third issue concerns what appears to be a tendency for educators and educational researchers to underestimate the complexity of the relationship between community/school contexts and political socialization.

This inclination may lead us to *assume* that rural schools transmit democratic values, rather than examine whether (and how) they achieve this end. For example, the literature suggests that rural residents often share positive attitudes toward their schools. Lomotey and Swanson (1989) observe that:

Rural schools are characterized not only by a strong sense of community within the school itself, but also by a sense of being a part of the larger community and an extension of the family...The fear of losing that sense of community is largely responsible for rural opposition to schemes for school consolidation (p. 441).

Hutto (1990) attributes some of the positive features of rural school life to the fact that students “often come from homes that ascribe to the puritan work ethic” (p. 7). She concludes:

This puritan outlook gives the student an identity. They are identified as being from that school and take pride in this fact—*esprit de corps*. The students want the school to be proud of them and they want to be proud of the school. From this may develop the elements or ingredients for good citizenship—being active in community or civic affairs (p. 7).

Hutto’s argument posits a direct link between the rural school’s “sense of community” and the production of good citizens. However, this proposition is contradicted by a recent national study of democratic participation in small-town school districts which found that:

Although schools in most places were successfully operating as the safe vortexes for their communities in their extracurricular activities, they were not being particularly effective internally in fostering democratic participation. We rarely found administrators sharing influence with teachers, colleagues exchanging ideas about instruction, classroom teachers employing cooperative learning, or students having a voice in how the schools were being run. School was not typically a very supportive and cooperative climate for administrators, teacher, or students (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1989, p. 18).

Although the Schmucks' findings are noteworthy, it is important to note that their approach rests on the assumption of a relationship between the community/school environment and the transmission of democratic values and skills. We believe it is time for educational researchers to investigate this relationship, rather than simply assume its existence. In this article we have used the term "community" to refer to specific, bounded geographic locations. However, as illustrated by the quotes above, "community" can also refer to (1) the individual's actual and perceived connections to other individuals, institutions, and geopolitical spheres (Nelson 1991; Raywid, 1988); and (2) schools (and people) characterized by "school spirit," "high morale," "pride-of-place," and caring about others. As we have argued, the assumption that schools possessing a strong "sense of community" also produce effective citizens is precisely that—an assumption. To our knowledge, there is no empirical research illustrating an association between these two constructs. Until such evidence is available, educators should distinguish carefully between them. Our experience with the Mind's Eye Project Survey suggests that the open-ended questionnaire can be an effective tool for examining this kind of question.

We think this study illustrates the value of comparative, qualitative research strategies aimed at capturing students' developing conceptualizations of the social and political world. We have been impressed and encouraged by the interest students and teachers have shown in the MEPS approach. Their efforts have helped shed light on the complex relationship between community context and geopolitical socialization. As always, further clarification of this relationship will require additional empirical work.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In viewing students as legitimate, active participants in the shared process of constructing an image of "trans-global reality" rather than as passive repositories of knowledge, the MEP approach represents a departure from earlier efforts to understand the way young people think about the world. The conviction that social scientists and educational policy makers must develop better ways to understand and draw upon the special capacities of young people represents a significant departure from historical precedent. For insightful discussions of this problem, see Cook (1989), Katz (1988), and Kurth-Schai (1988). Recent attempts to operationalize this new attitude toward the young include the work of Robert Coles (1986); Farrell, Peguero,

Lindsey, and White (1988); Fordham (1988); Kutz (1990), Ogbu and Fordham (1987), and Spindler and Spindler (1987, 1989). For a useful overview of methodological issues, see Fine and Sandstrom (1988).

<sup>2</sup> Although the instrument has been administered to over 600 primary, middle grade, and secondary students from three contrasting types of communities (rural, suburban, and urban), the present analysis is limited to a description of findings from rural and urban secondary schools.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, students' responses have been transcribed verbatim.

<sup>4</sup> The participants' tendency to associate social problems with more distant (and therefore more abstract) geopolitical spheres has important implications for the social studies curriculum. These are discussed in Avery, Gamradt, Trygestad, and Sedro (1991).

## REFERENCES

- Avery, P., Gamradt, J., Trygestad, J., & Sedro, S. (1991). Students' geopolitical perspectives. *Social Education, 55*, 319-325.
- Barker, R., & Gump, P. (1964). *Big school, small school*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.
- Caughey, J. (1984). *Imaginary social worlds*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska.
- Coles, R. (1986). *The political life of children*. Boston, MA: Atlantic Monthly.
- Cook, T. E. (1989). The psychological theory of political socialization and the political theory of child development: The dangers of normal science. *Human Development, 32*, 24-34.
- DeYoung, A. (1987). The status of American rural education research: An integrated review and commentary. *Review of Educational Research, 57*, 123-148.
- Dobbert, M., & Pitman, M. (1989). Cultural transmission: A review of existing theory and method. In M. Pitman, R. Eisikovits, & M. Dobbert (Eds.), *Culture acquisition: A holistic approach* (pp. 46-58). New York: Praeger.

- Dreeben, R. (1968). *On what is learned in school*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Dunne, F. (1977). Choosing smallness: An examination of the small school experience in rural America. In J. Sher (Ed.), *Education in rural America: A reassessment of conventional wisdom* (pp. 81-124). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M.C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 119-161). New York: Macmillan.
- Farrell, E., Peguero, G., Lindsey, R., & White, R. (1988). Giving voice to high school students: Pressure and boredom, ya know what I'm sayin? *American Educational Research Journal*, 25, 489-502.
- Fine, G., & Sandstrom, K. (1988). *Knowing children: Participant observation with minors*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black students' school success: Pragmatic strategy of pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 54-84.
- Gamradt, J., Avery, P., Sedro, S., & Trygestad, J. (1990, April). *Capturing the student's voice in educational research*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA.
- Grant, C. (1989). Urban teachers: Their new colleagues and curriculum. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70, 764-770.
- Green, G., & Stevens, W. (1988). What research says about small schools. *The Rural Educator*, 10, 9-14.
- Harper, S. (1989). The British rural community: An overview of perspectives. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 5, 161-184.
- Harre, R. (1986). The step to social constructionism. In M. Richards and P. Light (Eds.), *Children of social worlds: Development in a social context* (pp. 287-296). Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Hutto, N. (1990). Rural schools can be effective schools, too! *Rural Educator*, 11, 6-9.
- Ingleby, D. (1986). Development in social context. In M. Richards and P. Light, (Eds.), *Children of social worlds: Development in a social context* (pp. 297-317). Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Johnson, N. (1980). The material culture of public school classrooms: The symbolic integration of local schools and national culture. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 11, 173-190.
- Johnson, N. (1985). *West Haven: classroom culture and society in a rural elementary school*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina.
- Katz, P. (1988). Children and social issues. *Journal of Social Issues*, 44, 193-209.
- Kimball, S., & McClellan, J. (1962). *Education and the new America*. New York: Random House.
- Kurth-Schai, R. (1988). The roles of youth in society: A reconceptualization. *The Educational Forum*, 52, 113-132.
- Kutz, E. (1990). Authority and voice in student ethnographic writing. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 21, 340-357.
- Lomotey, K., & Swanson, A. (1989). Urban and rural schools research: Implications for school governance. *Education and Urban Society*, 21, 436-453.
- Maeroff, G. (1988). Withered hopes, stillborn dreams: The dismal panorama of urban schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 69, 633-638.
- Nelson, J. (1991). Communities, local to national, as influences on social studies education. In J. P. Shaver (Ed.), *Handbook of research on social studies teaching and learning* (pp. 332-341). New York: Macmillan.

- Ogbu, J. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-culture perspective*. New York: Academic.
- Ogbu, J., & Fordham, S. (1987). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting white.'" *Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.
- Parish, R., Eubanks, E., Aquila, F., & Walker, S. (1989). Knock at any school. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70, 386-394.
- Parsons, T. (1959). The school class as a social system: Some of its functions in American society. *Harvard Educational Review*, 29, 297-318.
- Popkewitz, T. (1991). *A political sociology of educational reform: Power/knowledge in teaching, teacher education, and research*. New York: Teachers College.
- Raywid, M. (1988). Community and schools: A prolegomenon. *Teachers College Record*, 90, 197-210.
- Schmuck, P., & Schmuck, R. (1990). Democratic participation in small-town schools. *Educational Researcher*, 19, 14-19.
- Sher, J. (Ed.). (1977). *Education in rural America: A reassessment of conventional wisdom*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (1987). Cultural dialogue and schooling in Schoenhausen and Roseville: A comparative analysis. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18, 3-15.
- Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (1989). Instrumental competence, linguistic minorities, and cultural therapy: A preliminary attempt at integration. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 20, 36-50.
- Spring, J. (1986). *The American school 1642-1985*. White Plains, New York: Longman.
- Steiner, M., & Mondale, C. (1988). *Region and regionalism in the United States*. New York: Garland.
- Tyack, D. (1976). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University.
- Weber, R. (1985). *Basic content analysis*. New York: Sage.