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Educating Out and Giving Back: Adults' Conceptions of Successful Outcomes of African American High School Students from Impoverished Rural Communities

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This study examined community adults' conceptions of successful early adult outcomes for rural African American adolescents from 2 low-resource communities in the Deep South. Focus groups were conducted with parents, teachers, and community leaders. Parents also completed semistructured phone interviews. The focus groups identified 2 general types of successful outcomes. One type involved youth leaving their hometowns to attain their educations and establish careers and then reconnecting with the community (i.e., "giving back"). The 2nd type involved youth establishing themselves in the community as employed adults to support themselves and their families. Parents also described a variety of successful outcomes related to education, employment, living arrangements, and family and community involvement. Barriers to success included involvement with drugs and alcohol, peer pressure, and a lack of community-level supports (e.g., jobs, youth programs, extracurricular activities, educational opportunities).

Introduction

Many rural schools, particularly in the south and the west, serve low-income minority youth who experience impoverished developmental contexts that are linked to poor educational and occupational outcomes (Kim, Brody, & Murry, 2003; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2005; Save the Children, 2002). Compared to urban settings, the rates of school dropout and career difficulties are higher for youth from high-poverty rural areas (Lichter, Cornwell, & Eggebeen, 1993; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Further, ethnic-minority youth from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have sustained patterns of school engagement in adolescence and to experience social support for planning and exploring careers beyond high school (Kao & Tienda, 1998; McLoyd, 1990). One factor that may contribute to the educational and career attainment of rural youth is the viewpoints of community adults (i.e., parent, teachers, community leaders) (Rojewski, Wicklein, & Schell, 1995). Recent work suggests that rural adolescents' aspirations for their adult lives are often linked to the conceptions

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of their parents and other influential adults (Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996). With the current emphasis on high school reform and the establishment of programs to support the attainment of low-achieving youth, more knowledge is needed about community adults' conceptions of successful early adult outcomes for ethnic-minority youth, particularly those living in impoverished rural areas.

While it is known that low-income rural youth may be more likely to experience inauspicious educational careers, there is little information on community adults' views of successful outcomes for ethnic-minority adolescents from impoverished rural areas or their perceptions of possible supports and barriers for achieving such outcomes. Compared to parents and leaders in metropolitan communities, adults in rural areas may have different views of the purposes and aims of education and may link student success more directly to community and family needs than to educational and economic attainment (Haller & Virkler, 1993; Howley, 1997; Lapan, Tucker, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003). Therefore, it is possible that parents and community leaders in impoverished rural areas may view successful youth outcomes in terms of family and community goals. The aim of this study was to explore this issue by examining community adults' conceptions of successful outcomes of rural African American high school students from two high-poverty communities in the Deep South.

Background

Child poverty rates are strongly influenced by local industrial composition and labor opportunities. Since the 1960s, work patterns in rural areas have shifted such that increasingly high rates of young adults and women have fewer employment opportunities and are more likely to be impoverished (Lichter, Johnston, & McLaughlin, 1994). Reflecting this shift, the highest concentrations of child poverty in the United States are in rural areas, particularly in southern and western states (Friedman & Lichter, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Save the Children, 2002). Poverty impacts the developmental ecology of youth through a variety of family and community factors including family and household structure, adult role demands on youth, parenting practices, inadequate nutritional and health resources, and limited educational and community supports for poor families and youth (Conger, Wallace, Sun, Simons, McLoyd, & Brody, 2002; Lee, Murry, Brody, & Parker, 2002; Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992; McLoyd, 1990; Murry & Brody, 1999; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).

Low-income rural communities often compensate for economic disparities with higher levels of social capital (Elder & Conger, 2000). Social capital refers to social relationships that serve as resources for individuals to draw upon in implementing their goals (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995). With regard to investment in youth, social capital consists of the social relationships within the family and the community that generate attention and time spent by parents and community members in the development of children and youth (Coleman, 1994).

Research suggests that social capital may play a pivotal role in promoting the adaptation of youth who experience environments that have been linked to developmental compromise. For example, community support is related to positive parenting behaviors in single, low-income African American mothers in dangerous neighborhoods (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002); collective socialization has been shown to protect against deviant peer affiliations in African American youth from disadvantaged communities (Brody et al., 2001); and religious involvement has been linked to academic success in youth from low-income areas (Regnerus & Elder, 2003). Likewise, social capital has been linked to completing high school (Lichter et al., 1993) and young adult attainment (Dyk & Wilson, 1999) for youth from rural high-poverty areas. In addition, rural youth from low-income families with no previous higher education backgrounds have been found to be more likely to attend college when they and their parents are involved in community and school activities (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001).

Although social capital is an important source of support for rural youth, the ties and responsibilities to the family and community may also serve as barriers to adult attainment (Hektner, 1995). Even high-achieving students may experience economic and social pressures that curtail professional career aspirations (Haller & Virkler, 1993; Lapan et al., 2003). Further, limited employment opportunities coupled with geographic isolation impact the adult outcomes of youth who do not have postsecondary educational aspirations (Lichter et al., 1993). In fact, rural youth are often faced with conflicting goals (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000). On one hand, they want to maintain their rural way of life and remain in the area where they grew up. On the other hand, they want to pursue higher education or career opportunities that cannot be realized in their home community (Hektner, 1995; Rojewski, 1999). How adolescents experience and work through these conflicting ambitions may be influenced by the views and supports offered by parents, teachers, and community leaders (Dyk & Wilson, 1999; Rojewski et al., 1995; Wilson, Peterson, & Wilson, 1993).

In addition, research in impoverished communities in the Deep South and the Appalachian Mountains suggests that stratification between the "haves" and the "have-nots" can result in the unequal distribution of community resources such that poor youth are not afforded the types of formal and informal support that promote their educational growth (Duncan, 2001). From this perspective, poor youth are excluded from the types of community social capital (i.e., attendance in higher performing schools, involvement in community programs) that advance the attainment of their

more affluent counterparts. In addition, because of the limited resources that are available to the poor, families are often left to fend for their own. Therefore, rather than being able to rely on community social capital, impoverished rural youth who complete their education and escape the bonds of poverty are most likely to do so with the support of family members and other significant adults in the community. In turn, as these individuals experience success, they are likely to return to their communities and invest in creating community social capital to help build support for other children (Stack, 1996).

Research Aims

The goal of the current study was to examine community adults' views of pathways to successful outcomes for poor, rural African American youth in the Deep South. Building from and extending other studies that have focused on African American families in impoverished rural areas that are highly racial stratified (i.e., Duncan, 2001; Stack, 1996), we were particularly interested in adults' views of educational and career attainment and their perspectives on how community characteristics and resources contribute to students' early adulthood outcomes.

Accordingly, this study was guided by three related research aims. The first aim was to identify community adults' conceptions of successful outcomes for rural African American adolescents from two impoverished communities in the Deep South. The focus here was to identify the outcomes that parents, teachers, and community leaders viewed as possible and desirable for ethnic-minority youth growing up in these communities. This included outcomes related to educational attainment, occupational and career choices, family relationships, and community engagement. The second aim was to identify the factors that community adults perceived as currently being in place to help youth achieve these outcomes. The third aim was to identify existing factors that community adults viewed as hindering or preventing the achievement of successful outcomes.

Method

This study involved a multimethod design that included both focus groups and semistructured phone interviews with multiple informants. As part of a longitudinal study that has tracked the developmental pathways of two cohorts of African American youth from fifth grade through the final years of high school, the methods of the current investigation were employed within a broader data collection effort that included measures focusing on students' academic, behavioral, and social adjustment. This program of research focused on clarifying factors that are related to academic and behavioral adjustment in African American youth from impoverished rural communities. Previous findings from this research program have reported on risk and resilience factors related to aggressive and injurious behavior (i.e., Estell, Farmer, & Cairns, in press; Estell, Farmer, Cairns, & Clemmer, 2003; Farmer et al., 2005; Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003; Farmer, Goforth, Leung, Clemmer, & Thompson, 2004; Farmer, Price, et al., 2004) and school adjustment (Cadwallader et al., 2002; Farmer, Irvin, Thompson, Hutchins, & Leung, 2006; Gut et al., 2004).

Because of concerns that parents' responses might be impacted if questions were yoked specifically to respondents' own children, questions about early adult outcomes were designed to focus on adolescents from the community in general and not specific youth. Consequently, it was not possible or appropriate to link parents' interview responses to other data about their own children. Also, the purpose of the parent data was not to generate inferences but to confirm, extend, and qualify the viewpoints expressed in the focus groups. Therefore, parental data from the surveys are presented as generalities and not as statistically confirmed probabilities.

Participants

Participants were parents, teachers, and community leaders from two rural communities in the Deep South. The ethnic composition of both communities was approximately 70% African American and 30% Caucasian. Local government and school officials in both communities were primarily African American. However, economic resources and employment opportunities in each community have historically been controlled by White business and land owners. Each community is more than 60 miles from a major population center, the population of each community is less than 3,000, and the density of the two counties that the communities are embedded in is less than 17 persons per square mile. For both communities, the leading types of industry are manufacturing, educational and social services, and retail/service trades. Also, for both communities only 60% or less of adults has a high school degree or higher, and 50% or less of the adult population is in the labor force. Each of the communities is routinely identified as among the poorest in the state. More than 50% of the public school students in these communities live in households that fall below the national poverty level, and over 95% of public school students receive free or reduced-price lunch (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Further, although there is a substantial White population in these communities, over 99% of the children who attend public schools are African American.

All parents and community adults who participated in the focus groups and the phone interviews were African American. This reflects the fact that Caucasian children and parents are not involved in the public schools and not integrated into the activities of the African American community. The focus group participants were recruited by the

local project staff members and members of the community advisory board that was established at the beginning of this research program. (At the time of this study this board had actively worked with the principal investigator and the project staff for 10 years and was very familiar with project activities). The recruitment involved the advisory board members identifying community members whom they felt were in a position to best speak about the outcomes of local youth and the resources to support them. Consistent with the high level of participation in previous work with this community and reflecting a strong commitment of the community members to support local youth, individuals who were invited did attend the meeting and participated.

Focus groups. The individuals who participated in the focus groups included local leaders in business, local government, law enforcement, social services, religious leaders, school administrators, and teachers. One focus group was conducted in each community. The first focus group consisted of 16 participants and 3 research staff. Participants were teachers (n = 3), school administrators (n = 3), parents (n = 5), and community members (n = 5). In the second community, the focus group consisted of 3 research staff, 7 teachers, 2 school administrators, 5 parents, and 5 community leaders.

Semistructured phone interview. Participants for the semistructured interviews included 100 randomly selected parents. These parents were selected from a core of over 360 parents who were participating in a more intensive and structured phone survey on student and family adjustment factors. This broader sample reflected 80% of parents of all youth in these two communities who were in the 10th and 11th grades at the time of this study.

Procedures

All data collection was conducted by Caucasian research staff who were not from the communities involved in this study. However, the organization of the focus groups and the initial parent contacts were made by African American project staff that were members of the participating communities. This division of labor was necessary because it was important that the research efforts were sensitive to the local community needs and relationships, and yet it was also important that the parents and participants felt comfortable to express their views. Therefore, the initial direct contact with community members gave parents a sense that it was okay to decline or to participate according to their own desires and volitions. By using outsiders to collect the data, parents had another opportunity to decline participation, and they also had the freedom of anonymity to express their views to outsiders rather than to members of their small close-knit community.

Focus groups. One focus group meeting was conducted for each community. Both meetings were conducted in the local high schools. The principal investigator for the study played the role of facilitator and began the discussion by stating that the purpose of the meeting was to learn more about what parents and community leaders viewed as successful outcomes for their youth, what factors in the community that they viewed as effective supports for such outcomes, and what were the barriers to these outcomes. In addition, they were told that the aim was to identify what they viewed as important considerations in preparing their children for adulthood and what were the areas that they felt required additional attention, resources, and effort. As the discussion opened up, participants developed an active dialogue and organized their own framework for responding to the initial questions. Consequently, for each group, there was relatively little need for additional questions and guidance by the facilitator once the groups began to address the issues. With the knowledge of participants, two members of the research team recorded the responses by hand as the discussions proceeded.

Semistructured interviews. At the end of an annual structured phone survey for the broader longitudinal study, parents who were randomly selected to participate in the interview were told, "Now we would like to ask you a few questions about the adult outcomes of adolescents growing up in your community. Thinking about all children and not just your child, what do would you consider to be a successful outcome for youth growing up in this community?" For parents who were unsure how to respond, a follow-up probe was given in which they were told that they could answer about any aspects of adulthood such as, education, employment, family life, community life, and living arrangements. Next they were asked, "What are the things in this community that help youth to be successful? What are the barriers in this community that make it difficult for youth to be successful?" They were also told that they could give their opinions on anything else that they thought was important to adult life.

The purpose of including the parent surveys was not to make statistical inferences regarding parents" views but rather it was to extend and enhance information about the themes generated by the focus groups. Asking more structured questions with parents helped to ensure that important issues and concerns were not overlooked in the focus group meetings. Also, it provided the opportunity for a broader range of perspectives and voices. Consistent with this intent and due to the structure of the data and the sampling procedures, it is not appropriate to conduct quantitative analyses and to make statistical inferences regarding the parent reports.

Results

The results of this study involved identifying major themes that were generated by participants and the reasons

why they were considered to be important issues or concerns. The results are presented in two sections. The first section summarizes the responses of the focus groups. The second section outlines the viewpoints expressed by parents in the semistructured interview.

Focus Groups

As indicated above, the focus groups consisted of parents, teachers, and community leaders. There was strong concordance in the themes and issues discussed in the two focus group meetings. Therefore, responses reported here are aggregated across the two communities.

Successful Outcomes

The focus groups distinguished among two general types of successful outcomes. One type of successful outcome involved youth leaving the community to attain more education and to establish to a career path that could not be supported in the home community. The second type of successful outcome involved youth staying in the community and establishing a steady job to support themselves and their families. Around these general outcomes, more specific themes involved settings goals and working to get the things that one needs, gaining postsecondary education, and developing a career or trade.

In both communities the focus groups stressed the importance of "educating out and giving back." The view was that because of the highly limited economic resources, educational opportunities, and employment options, it is necessary for most youth to leave the community to establish successful careers and economic independence.

> [Our town] don't have opportunities, children have to leave for school, for work.

But leaving does not mean becoming disconnected with the hometown community. On the contrary, both groups strongly expressed the view that successful youth give back either by returning to the hometown to live after they have developed a career or vocation that could be sustained in the community (e.g., teachers, healthcare professionals, building trades) or by returning on weekends and for special occasions and by serving as a mentor and role model for other youth in the community.

> They need to go away to set up opportunities and make the community better than what their parents did.

Many focus group participants related their own life stories to provide examples of "educating out and giving back." Most participants in the focus groups had grown up in their respective communities and had left the area for postsecondary education and training.

> [I] left [this] county after high school, but felt the need to return . . . wish kids graduating today felt the same need to return . . . and do something better than their parents.

Some had returned shortly after they completed college while others had been away for several years before returning when there was an opportunity to do so. They also stressed that many others that they grew up with still did not live in the community but that they would return periodically to attend church or a community activity and to be involved in fundraising efforts for various community programs. Participants pointed out that such individuals naturally served as examples to youth, demonstrating that it is possible to go beyond the hometown to establish successful lives and yet fulfill their responsibilities to their families and the community they grew up in.

While most participants strongly endorsed the view of giving back, some parents and teachers indicated that there was a need to be careful not to saddle youth with responsibilities for the family and community in ways that curtailed their aspirations and opportunities. As several people stressed, there are not enough opportunities within 1 or 2 hours of the communities for everyone to be able to successfully meet their own needs and the needs of their family. The groups acknowledged that some youths' interests, skills, and talents may best be accommodated in areas far away from their hometowns and that they should be encouraged to pursue opportunities that enhance their professional and personal growth. In fact, some parents stated that not only were there no opportunities in the communities for their children, but there were also no opportunities for themselves or other members of their families.

> [I] can't get to work because don't have a car, but can't get a car because don't have a job to get money. I want my daughters to go to college and get out. When they go, I'm going with them.

Thus, they viewed supporting their children's educational and professional success as a way to move the family out of the community and into areas that offer greater economic opportunity.

Supports for Successful Outcomes (What is Needed)

The second aim of this study was to identify the supports currently in place to help youth achieve successful outcomes. The focus groups had difficulty identifying existing supports

for successful outcomes for youth. They indicated that there is a general sense of caring for youth in the communities but they also stressed a need for the establishment of more concrete supports and programs to foster strong relations between community adults and adolescents.

> As a whole, school could be more productive if all parents, community, and businesses were all connected in commitment.

Churches and involvement in religious activities were viewed as strengths as well as ongoing efforts to establish mentoring programs in the communities. They also suggested that the community was full of success stories and individuals that could serve as role models and examples for youth, but they felt that there was a need to more clearly document such successes and to utilize successful individuals in career exploration activities.

> There is no way for them [local students] to see what is being done or to have those role models from [county].

Finally, despite the many challenges and limited resources in the area, the focus groups indicated that there continues to be a strong sense of community and collective responsibility that helps foster youths' feelings of being connected and to "come back to the community and give back."

Barriers to Successful Outcomes

In both focus groups, the participants outlined several barriers to successful outcomes for African American youth in the two communities. The barriers and key related concerns are summarized in Table 1. The general themes described by both the focus groups included lack of knowledge of career pathways and post-high school opportunities, limited community infrastructure to support families and businesses, historical context and social climate that constrains educational attainment, societal pressures, and school-related constraints.

Parent Interviews

Parent responses to the question of what can be considered as successful outcomes for impoverished rural African American youth center around five areas: education, employment, living arrangements, family involvement, and community involvement. Parents were also able to identify several barriers but few existing supports for achieving successful adult outcomes. The most frequently named outcomes and barriers are described below.

Successful Outcomes

Education. The majority of parents indicated that they viewed educational success as completing high school and attaining a college degree or some level of postsecondary education and training. "Education is the key." Over three quarters of all parents viewed postsecondary education as an essential component and marker of adult success. Parents viewed the limited employment opportunities in the community as an indicator that their children need to attain an education that gives them the flexibility to gain work in a broad range of jobs and in areas beyond their home community. However, not all parents felt college was the only educational option.

> I don't believe they need to go no further than high school 'cause many children are not college material. They should go to training school or trade school to get experience to get a job.

Employment. Nearly all parents indicated that they viewed success in early adulthood as attaining a professional career or vocational trade. The most frequent careers named included teaching, healthcare, computer technology, business and administrative work, engineering and science, and the military. Further, some parents indicated that there were few if any job opportunities in the home community, and most indicated that success involved the development of a career that would prepare youth to be employable in communities beyond their hometown.

> One parent described telling his 17-year-old son, "no one will give you anything, but I'll help you with anything you ever need. Anything I ever got, I worked for it."

Living arrangements. A clear majority of parents indicated that successful youth would live on their own and some indicated that this would include home ownership. A few parents indicated that success would include living at home or in close proximity of the family.

Family involvement. Parents indicated that successful youth would establish their own families while maintaining close ties with their extended families. Several parents endorsed a variety of factors that would strengthen families including communication, supportive relationships, religious involvement, and spending time together as a family.

> [It's] easier to succeed when the whole family is there to help.

Community involvement. Parents indicated that they viewed community involvement (not necessarily in their hometown community) as an important part of a successful

Table 1
Barriers to Successful Outcomes

Themes	Related concerns
Students' lack of knowledge of post-high school opportunities "Those who don't finish high school: just trouble. Having babies, have no jobs, hanging out on the corner, have their names in the paper"	• Students have limited access to online resources • Students don't have enough exposure to college/trade programs in school • Students don't know about financial forms and when they are due • No career testing available • Career prep classes have been replaced with standardized test prep • When students do get information, it is often inaccurate (e.g., students were told they could not receive financial aid if applying to 2-year as opposed to 4-year colleges) • Counselors do not have the opportunity to advise students. This used to take place in homeroom. That time has been eliminated from students' schedules
Lack of community infrastructure "A challenge for our small, rural area is that public education has not been supported by business establishments" "Not too many father figures living at home. Boys need their fathers to talk to."	• The community does not have the infrastructure needed to promote and sustain success • Businesses will not come to areas where there is no strong educational system • Few students will stay or return due to lack of job opportunities and community resources and activities • No opportunities for those practicing trades • No institutions of higher learning in the community
Historical context/social climate "[A] spirit of hopelessness envelopes our children. They have lost a dream." "racial atmosphere and economics. If a community is that divided [public vs. private school], it carries over into other areas. There are only a few Whites in the public school"	• Limited funding for public education—all White students attend private schools in the community • Education has not always been the primary focus of the Black community, sometimes playing second to other needs • Many of the local jobs are reserved for Whites in the community (e.g., schools, banks, industry)
Societal pressures "There is something missing with our children in this new generation"	• Sociocultural emphasis on material possessions • The influence of television and the entertainment industry

Continued

Table 1 continued

Themes	Related concerns
School-related constraints "Parents need motivation. Parents do not know and they do not want teachers to see they are afraid and don't understand."	• Strained school-parent relationships (some parents don't know the names of their children's teachers) • Lack of the types of school, parent, and community partnerships that are necessary to establish strong supportive programs for youth • Available student resources are not connected with the target population (e.g., many children attending tutoring programs, etc. are those already doing well in school) • Lack of focus on successful and high-achieving students (few programs or supports to help them build from and maintain their accomplishments) • Little acknowledgment of prior success stories of youth who have grown up in the community (youth need to see that others have made it and have returned to share their success) • Lack of financial resources to buy the educational materials that would facilitate training and preparation of youth for the types of jobs that are in close proximity to the community

adulthood. They expressed this in a variety of ways including getting involved and helping others in the community, volunteering to help youth and the elderly, involvement in the church, and serving as a good role model to others.

> Be involved with church, encourage young people, be decent and honest human beings.

Barriers to Successful Outcomes

Parents from both communities identified three primary barriers to successful adult outcomes.

(1) The most frequent concern was drug and alcohol involvement.

> A lot of people sell drugs. There is fussing and fighting, stabbing, not a nice place.

Parents expressed that youth have few opportunities for positive recreational and leisure activities and are susceptible to the lure of drugs and alcohol.

> Other kids that don't go to school don't want to be successful. Smoke pot and drink beer.

> No community center, no where they can hang out, no summer jobs.

> No centers or activities for kids, no programs for kids to get involved in, no parks. Schools are too far away, must go too far for tutoring and activities.

(2) The second most frequent concern involved a variety of negative social influences including peer pressure to engage in unproductive activities, limited positive role models, and involvement in gangs and youth violence.

> Peer pressure. Parents, especially young parents, are not acting in authority, too busy to spend time with children, leave child rearing to grandmothers. Kids are looking to gangs for love and respect and to feel important. "An idle mind is the devil's workshop."

(3) The third most frequent barrier involved the lack of positive factors and supports including promising jobs, a lack of programs and activities to support youth, and limited educational opportunities.

> Our kids know that they can't get the good jobs. They can work at the catfish factories or on somebody's farm for day wages, but they know where the good jobs go. The White kids know when they finish school that there will be a good

fulltime job waiting for them at the bank or one of the factories in town.

No programs to help them learn a trade. The schools don't have what they need to train them.

Children stay here in the comfort zone even if there is nothing here.

Discussion

Consistent with other research on the educational and career attainment of rural youth (e.g., Haller & Virkler, 1993; Lapan et al., 2003), adults in these two impoverished rural communities viewed successful early adulthood outcomes as being strongly linked to supporting the needs of the family and the community. However, they also acknowledged significant limits in the resources and opportunities in the community, and they indicated that it was not realistic to expect many youth to stay in their hometowns or to return immediately following the completion of their postsecondary education. Instead, they suggested that the concept of "educating out and giving back" was a more viable alternative. That is, they expected youth to take the steps necessary to establish successful careers and independent lives but they also expected them to maintain a sense of "connectedness" to the community and to make efforts to support their hometowns. They suggested that in some instances there would be opportunities for individuals to return to the area to live and to become part of the community leadership. In other cases, they felt that efforts to come home periodically, to meet with community youth, and to become involved in community support programs and fundraising activities were meaningful ways for individuals to "give back" to the community. In fact, because of limited resources and constraints in the community, they suggested that it is important to have successful people living outside the area to serve as resources and supports for community members when they have the need to access services and activities that are only available in metropolitan areas.

Parents, teachers, and community leaders all agreed that postsecondary education or vocational training is particularly critical for helping community youth to establish productive and independent lives. They indicated that because of the severely limited employment and economic opportunities in the area, it is not feasible to expect that adolescents can find stable and meaningful work in their hometowns. Further, without additional training, African American youth from these two communities do not have skills that would make them marketable in metropolitan areas. Therefore, a college education or some other form of career training (e.g., vocational education, military training) was viewed as essential for youth to be successful adults, and it was also considered to be important in terms of cultivating youths' capacity to "give back" to the community. Further, they also suggested that the promise or dream of a career and a future was important in helping youth to stay productively engaged in high school and in preventing them from becoming involved in activities or circumstances that constrained their early adulthood opportunities and outcomes.

Parents and community leaders were consistent in their views of barriers to successful outcomes for youth. Community adults identified drug and alcohol use, sexual activity and early parenthood, and gang involvement as adolescent outcomes that have a strong potential of getting even the most productive and talented youth off-track and jeopardizing their futures. Teachers and other community leaders suggested that the risk for such outcomes rested not in the youth themselves, but rather in the lack of community resources and opportunities and the absence of school-based career development activities.

Accordingly, participants strongly endorsed the view that the communities must develop programs that foster the promise of a productive future and the motivation to avoid activities and situations that could imperil adolescents' goals and dreams for successful careers and lives. Community adults described two distinct but related types of programs. First, they indicated the need to establish a highly visible and active career development program for youth as they begin high school. Such programs should help community youth to explore their career interests and to identify possible career goals and corresponding educational pathways. They should also help parents and youth learn about resources (financial, informational) that are available to help them to prepare for and apply to college and other postsecondary training opportunities. Second, as part of the concept of "giving back" community adults articulated the need for programs (e.g., career night, summer mentoring, weekend career institutes, job shadowing, a community "success" register documenting successful alumni) that linked youth with past community youth who had established successful careers and lives. In addition to becoming important resources for information and support, they suggested that such individuals would serve as examples to community youth that it can be done and that they have a responsibility to help support the youth of their home communities.

As Duncan (2001) found in the Mississippi Delta and the Appalachian Mountains, the current findings suggest that stratification along economic and racial lines can significantly limit the degree to which impoverished rural youth have access to the types of community social capital that promote educational and career attainment. Similar to Duncan's descriptions in the Mississippi Delta, several of the parents in the current study indicated that community services and supports for children are inadequate and that it is necessary for youth to rely on the support of family members rather than local institutions (i.e., schools, vocational services, community programs) to help them develop the

skills to become productive adults. Yet, similar to Stack's (1996) descriptions of rural African Americans feeling the need to return home and help their communities in South Carolina, parents and community leaders in the current study indicated that they needed to take it upon themselves to develop community programs and supports for youth by fostering this sense of "giving back" and creating formal community mechanisms by which this could happen.

This is highly consistent with Duncan's (2001) stories of individual successes and the development of social capital for the "have-nots" in impoverished rural communities in the Delta and Appalachia.

> Those who escaped poverty in these poor places are the ones who complete their education rather than drop out or coast through school, and they learn enough in school to take the next step toward further education and a steady job. Invariably it was someone in their family—mother, father, aunt, grandfather—or a favorite teacher or coach who pushed them to finish school. Often they also had the opportunity to see a world outside their poor home community that broadened their perspective and gave them a sense of another kind of life and another kind of community. (p. 80)

> . . . If they return to work in their home communities, often in health or education, they dedicate themselves to building a community both for their own children and for others. They become the "good" middle class, not selfish and exclusive, but generous and inclusive . . .

> Each of these success stories come about through family-level social capital. Young men and women were pushed and encouraged by a combination of support, high expectations, and discipline to achieve more. But what they also have in common is a commitment to stay home or return home and build community-level social capital. (p. 81).

While the current findings and the reports of Duncan (2001) and Stack (1996) do not provide direct implications for intervention, this collective work suggests that education and career development opportunities must be viewed as a bridge for poor youth to reach beyond the constraints of poverty and to return to or give back to the community as they experience success. Central to this theme, there is an implicit understanding that the growth and development of rural communities is inextricably intertwined with the education of the children. The well-being of the children, in turn, rests in large part on the resources and supports offered by the community. From this vantage, the importance of placed-based education for rural communities comes to the forefront and it suggests that education researchers and policymakers should include community capital (social and human) and students' career aspirations as important outcome measures when considering the impact of educational programs on student achievement. The critical issue here is that while standard levels of achievement may be important for youth to transcend the limits of impoverished communities, there is a strong sentiment among community adults that this should not be achieved at the cost of youth losing a sense of connection and responsibility to those who come after them. Educational programs that include a community focus and the involvement of past graduates can help give poor rural youth a sense that they can succeed while simultaneously providing them with a sense of connection to the community. This may help to subsequently anchor their educational growth and to promote their own desire to "give back" by helping to build a strong foundation of community social capital.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that may impact the findings. First, the work reported here is conducted in two highly impoverished communities in the Deep South that are racially stratified and may not be generalizable to a broader range of rural districts. Nonetheless, this is a fairly sizable but understudied population that is found in many rural areas in the south (Farmer et al., 2006), and the findings reported here are consistent with other research with rural, African American communities in the south (see Duncan, 2001; Stack, 1996).

Second, the methods and analyses presented in this study are descriptive, and inferential statistics are not used. Although this also limits the ability to generalize this work to a broader population, the findings reported here do provide an account of what community leaders and parents view as important in the development of their adolescents as they transition into adulthood. In turn, such information may provide a foundation for future empirical studies.

Third, the focus groups and interviews were conducted by Caucasian research staff which may have impacted participants' responses. This is an issue that this research team has struggled with during a decade of work in this community. On one hand, we have found that participants are sometimes unsure of what they can disclose. For example, in the current study one of the participating communities was reluctant to talk about race relations. On the other hand, participants have also indicated that they prefer the anonymity of talking to strangers who do not know them or their world. In the first years of this study, several students and parents told us that they had never talked to White people before who wanted to listen to them or who cared about what they had to say, and they seemed to welcome the opportunity to voice their views. Over the years, members of this community appear

to have developed a cautious but comfortable relationship with this research team which they seem to view as outsiders who are willing to help tell their story. We have also taken African American research staff with us to this community but have found that it sometimes seemed to create, rather than reduce, discomfort. This was due in part because differences between local community members and the African American research staff were striking. Also, the African American research staff was exposed to very intense levels of racism by White community members, and there were concerns about their personal safety. Therefore, having local community staff organize the research activities and turn the interviews over to the Caucasian staff has been an effective compromise that the local advisory boards and the university internal review board have endorsed.

In conclusion, adults in the two impoverished rural communities that participated in this study were quite hopeful about the potential for successful outcomes for their children. "Be a positive force for [State] so other people can live by your example." However, they were also realistic in expressing that their communities offered few opportunities and many constraints for their adolescents as they transitioned into adulthood. Consequently, they viewed educating their youth out and developing programs that provided opportunities for them to give back as the way to meet the continuing needs of the community while simultaneously fostering the development of productive and independent lives.

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