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PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY AND PLACE AND THE MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF AT-RISK YOUTH IN RURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Population decline in rural areas is often attributed to the outmigration of young people, particularly those with high educational and occupational aspirations. This study investigates the perceptions of community and place and the migration intentions of rural at-risk youth, an often-overlooked population in community development efforts. Thematic analysis of more than 60 photoliteracy projects and 23 interviews with young people identified as low-income and at-risk resulted in the identification of two major themes: the rural context and migration intentions. Findings support that limited educational and occupational opportunities contribute to participants' intentions to migrate away from their home communities after high-school graduation. However, strong community attachments were key influences for participants who indicated a desire to remain in or return to their hometowns. Recommendations for community leaders and teachers to build upon youths' community attachments to stem rural out-migration and motivate at-risk students are discussed.

For rural students, decisions to stay in their home communities or migrate to other areas upon graduation hold great economic, social, and emotional consequences. The effect of these decisions on rural communities is also tremendous, as the outmigration of youth may result in negative outcomes for their home communities due to the loss of potential workforce, community leaders, volunteers, and parents of future generations (Demi, McLaughlin, and Snyder 2009). As such, a growing literature focused on understanding the complex relationships among student aspirations, community attachment, and intention to migrate has recently accrued (Burnell 2003; Carr and Kefalas 2009; Corbett 2007; Demi et al. 2009; Elder and Conger 2000; Howley 2006; Johnson, Elder, and Stern 2005; Petrin et al. 2011). Moreover, the scholarly interest in youth outmigration—often called in the vernacular *brain drain*—is paired with an escalating demand for information by rural residents and practitioners: a simple internet search for “brain drain” will reveal dozens of links to local, regional, and state-level workshops addressing youth outmigration and providing community leaders, school officials, rural economic development councils, and small-business owners with tools to help stem what is viewed as an immediate hazard to their towns' well-being.

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Rural students considering leaving their home communities for economic or educational reasons often grapple with the emotional and social consequences, which may include a loss of rural identity, the stress of leaving an established social network, and feelings of anger and emptiness (Donaldson 1986; Hektner 1995). This choice to “move up” and “move out” (Hektner 1995:3) creates a dilemma in which students who desire to stay in their rural communities may have to lower their occupational and educational aspirations (Donaldson 1986; Hektner 1995). As such, much research on the aspirations and migratory trends of rural students is based on a deficit model of rural communities, with researchers blaming lower aspirations on deficient schools, traditional rural values, lack of opportunities, inadequate family support, and inaccessibility to information (Bajema, Miller, and Williams 2002; Cobb, McIntyre, and Pratt 1989; Singh and Dika 2003). However, other research cites community and place attachment or strong social ties in students’ home communities as additional reasons why students may decide to forego a college education and remain in (or return to) their rural areas (Burnell 2003; Elder and Conger 2000; Haller and Vickler 1993; Hektner 1995; Howley 2006; Johnson et al. 2005; Petrin et al. 2011).

This study is part of a larger, ongoing research and outreach initiative featuring a rural community-youth development program that aims to understand how community attachment and community ties may influence students’ post-secondary aspirations and residential preferences. Building upon research that suggests low-competency youth may have increased desire to move away yet lack the resources to do so (Petrin et al. 2011), the larger project focuses on youth identified as at-risk by their school districts.¹ For purposes of this paper, the primary research objective

¹This research relied on the Texas Educational Code criteria for identifying students who are at-risk. To be identified as at-risk in Texas school districts, a student must meet at least one of 13 criteria used by the Texas Education Agency (TEA 2012) that signifies a student is in danger of dropping out of school (Texas Education Code, § 29.081, 2011). According to the Texas Education Code, students who are at-risk of dropping out of school are students under 21 years of age who:

1. Are in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;
2. Are in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;
3. Were not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more years;
4. Did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under Texas Education Code, subchapter B, Chapter 39 (Texas Education Code, 2011) and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or

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is to explore the perceptions of community and place and the migration intentions of rural at-risk youth, an often-overlooked population in rural community development efforts. In doing so, this paper adds to the current literature on migration intentions and residential preferences among rural youth. Before describing the methodology and data and elaborating on the analyses and findings, we summarize the contemporary literature on youth migration intentions and residential preferences.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Roughly a decade ago, Johnson and colleagues (2005) investigated the links between rural students' residential preferences and their aspirations, perceptions of local opportunities, and ties to family and community. Primarily examining migratory trends, Johnson et al. analyzed data drawn from the Iowa Youth and Families Project, a longitudinal study beginning in 1989 with a sample of 451 families with a child in seventh grade. Drawing on data from 1994, when the students in the original sample were in 12th grade, and 1999, when the students were four years post-high school, Johnson et al. uncovered that although students who respected their parents and wanted to emulate them placed greater importance on living near family, most students were willing to leave their communities to pursue educational and occupational goals if necessary. Moreover, students with

-
- another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110% of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;
5. Are pregnant or have children of their own;
 6. Have been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with TEC 37.006 (2011) during the preceding or current school year;
 7. Have been expelled in accordance with TEC 37.007 (2011) during the preceding or current school year;
 8. Are currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;
 9. Were previously reported through the PEIMS to have dropped out of school;
 10. Are students of limited English proficiency, as defined by TEC 29.052 (2011);
 11. Are in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;
 12. Are homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11302, and its subsequent amendments;
 13. Resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway houses, or foster group home.
- Additionally, all participants in this study qualified for programming based on low-income status as determined by the Texas Workforce Commission.

high levels of community and family attachments were not held back by these attachments. Somewhat surprisingly, students with strong attachments to community (as indicated by participation in community activities) placed less importance on living in their home community after high school.

Other studies investigating the influence of place and community attachment upon youths' desire to stay in or near their home communities have similar results. Demi et al. (2009) used data from the Rural Youth Education survey to examine the effects of community-level variables (e.g., community socioeconomic status, community attachment) and individual and family characteristic variables (e.g., gender, grades in school, parents' education) upon students' educational, occupational, and residential aspirations. Based upon their results, Demi and colleagues concluded that students who have positive views of their community are more likely to *want* to remain in their rural home area, but students from advantaged communities (low poverty, high education) are also most likely to leave to pursue occupational and educational aspirations. In one of very few studies including youth who might be considered at-risk, Petrin et al. (2011), in a large-scale study exploring differences in place attachment and community satisfaction between high-competence and high-risk rural youth, revealed that high-competence youth have stronger connections to their rural communities and often value rural lifestyles, but high-risk youth often view their communities more negatively and desire to move away. Similarly, Howley, Harmon, and Leopold (1996), in a study of aspirations among youth from rural Appalachia, discovered that although high-achieving (in this case, honors program) students were not more eager to leave their home communities than were rural-students-at-large, the high-achieving students exhibited stronger modern dispositions, which may increase the likelihood of outmigration. Thus, when considering the influences on migration, it seems that high-competence youth with strong community ties are often pulled away from their rural communities for occupational and educational advancement. Concomitantly, rural youth with high-risk configurations are pushed from their rural communities due to lack of community/place attachment and satisfaction.

Pretty et al. (2006) discovered similar connections between community/place attachment and migration intentions among Australian youth. Based upon a survey of 3,023 adolescents living in rural Queensland, Pretty et al. used hierarchical regression to determine that sense of belonging, sense of community, community support, and quality of life all had a positive relationship with youths' intention to stay in their home communities. However, the researchers also concluded that community sentiment is not enough to keep youth from leaving; communities

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interested in stemming youth migration must also invest in economic development to give youth local occupational opportunities. In another Australian study, Eacott and Sonn (2006:199) sought to explore “the reasons surrounding rural youth migration as well as youth experiences of place and rural culture” among a sample of ten college students who migrated to Melbourne, Australia, from rural Victoria. Specifically, the researchers focused their interview-based study on reasons for migration decisions that went beyond educational or occupational opportunities. However, although the interviews provided some new insights into students’ feelings about their home communities and their desire to return (or not) to those communities, their findings also supported the conclusion that young people indeed migrate because of occupational and/or educational opportunities. Like Pretty et al. (2006), Eacott and Sonn concluded that rural communities facing population decline and youth outmigration must focus their efforts on community development, economic development, and local educational opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative data presented in this paper were collected as part of a rural community-youth development project conducted in three rural counties in central Texas. Study participants included 31 high school students age 15-18 who attended a pre-internship camp and then engaged in community-based internships at local businesses and organizations. All participants in this study attended schools identified by the National Center for Education statistics as Rural: Fringe, Rural: Remote, or Town: Remote, and all participants met at least one criteria of the Texas Education Code for identifying at-risk students and qualified for programming based on low-income status as determined by the Texas Workforce Commission. Although this study used a convenience sample of students labeled at-risk and qualifying for the community-youth development project, the decision to research students labeled at-risk is purposive, as previous studies suggested that low-competency/at-risk youth may be more likely to want to leave their rural communities but less likely to have the resources to do so (Petrin et al. 2011; Pretty et al. 2006).

DATA COLLECTION

The authors used a qualitative research design employing semi-structured interviews and photovoice-based literacy activities conducted during the pre-internship camp. Interviews were conducted with 23 youth participants during July 2013 and were video-recorded and transcribed before analysis. During the

interviews, participants were asked about their perceptions of their communities, what they valued about their hometowns, what they would like to see changed, and whether or not they would like to live in the same town in the future.

The photovoice-based activities encouraged participants to take photos and create posters or slideshows on the themes of “identity,” “my community,” and “struggles and supports.” Participants then annotated their photos and/or presented their posters in group sessions. Data drawn from these photoliteracy projects include the participants’ photos and writings, videotaped presentations of the students discussing their projects, and field notes taken by the researcher at the time of the presentations. To support accurate understanding of participants’ meanings and to clarify any ambiguities, informal member-checking interviews were conducted after the student presentations. In sum, the complete data set for this research included 23 interviews, twelve student presentations, researcher-generated field notes, and more than 60 student-created photoliteracy collages.

ANALYSES

The volume, variety, and complexity of data emerging from the interviews, photoliteracy projects, and participant presentations were considered in the selection of an analysis process, ultimately informing the decision to apply a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis, according to Boyatzis (1998:4), is “not another qualitative method but a process that can be used with most, if not all, qualitative methods.” Thematic analysis is appropriate when searching “for certain themes of patterns across a data set, rather than within a data item such as a single interview” (Braun and Clark 2006:8). A deductive approach was applied to examine the data using preconceived research categories to provide thematic structure. According to Braun and Clark (2013), there are six steps or phases to conducting a thematic analysis: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generalizing initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

Immersion in the data involved transcribing the video-recorded interviews and student presentations; reading and re-reading the transcripts; and sorting, photographing, and collating the student photoliteracy projects. During the readings of the transcripts, the researchers used colored highlighters to indicate key words, phrases, and ideas that addressed the main answers to the interview questions along with statements that the researchers believed to be important. The researchers used self-stick notes to annotate the student photoliteracy projects, first

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labeling the subjects in the photos and subsequently drawing statements from the student writings that appear alongside the photographs.

The second phase involved coding the interview and presentation transcripts and photoliteracy projects based upon the earlier highlighted portions of the transcripts and the annotations of the photographs. As this study relied upon deductive analysis, codes initially fell into the predetermined categories of “likes,” “dislikes,” “plan to leave,” and “plan to stay.” Initial analysis revealed 48 codes and prompted the addition of another category, that of “plan to return.” Subcategories were also created during this phase, and the researchers drew a thematic map to assist in the organization, combination, and separation of subcategories. Once the codes had been categorized, the third, fourth, and fifth phases involved generating themes, reviewing themes, and naming themes. During these phases, the themes of “rural context” and “migration intentions” emerged.

FINDINGS

The overarching themes that emerged from the data, as well as the categories, subcategories, and exemplary quotations, are presented in Table 1. All names of participants have been changed to protect identities. In-depth presentations of findings follow.

Perceptions of Rural Context

The theme of rural context emerged from participants’ views on what it means to live in a rural area, the attachments to people and places, the values and traditions of the area, and the resources available. The notion of a rural way of life is explored in this theme, as it encompasses both the tangible and intangible aspects of rurality.

Rural community. Youth residing in rural areas expressed firm opinions about the benefits and disadvantages of their surroundings. The strongest sentiments, expressing both positive and negative aspects, fell into the distinct but related categories of *community* and *place*. The category of rural *community* refers to the extensive social interactions and personal relationships reflected in the participants’ responses, their strong attachments to people and organizations, and the way of life. The strongest and most frequent sentiment voiced by the participants involved the perception that “everybody knows everybody,” which was declared by over half the interviewees and largely viewed as a positive aspect. Jonathan remarked: “...everybody knows everybody here. I’ve lived here my whole life, so I know

everybody. We have a small town environment, small-town feel. We know our neighbors, and we can trust people.”

TABLE 1. EMERGENT THEMES, SUBTHEMES AND CATEGORIES, AND EXAMPLES DRAWN FROM DATA.

THEME	SUBTHEMES	CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES
Rural context	Community	Positives	“Everybody knows everybody.”
		Negatives	“Everybody knows your business.”
	Place	Positives	“I like wide open spaces.” “There’s no traffic. It’s peaceful.”
		Negatives	“We are so far away from big towns.”
Migration intentions	Plan to leave	Education/ employment	“I need to leave to have a career in medicine.”
		Personal growth	“I want to travel and see the world.”
	Plan to stay	Community attachment	“My family and friends are here.” “This is my home.”
		Family commitments	“I have a job in my father’s business.” “My family owns land here.”
	Plan to return	Community attachment	“I’ll come back here to settle down and raise a family.”
	Undecided	Conflict between attachment and aspirations	“I want to stay, but I don’t know if there’s anything for me to do here job-wise.”

The recognition of “everybody knows everybody” was the foundation for other positive perceptions of community interactions. Participants noted that they found

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people in their towns to be friendly, helpful, and supportive of young people overall. Photoliteracy collages showed photos of a man helping someone whose car had broken down on the side of the road, people working at a bake-sale, and townsfolk talking on a sidewalk. Support for schools and school athletic teams was also noted by many the participants. Latricia commented: “There’s just so much support for the schools, people really care about our teams, and you can see that support everywhere... there’s always signs that show support. People really appreciate what goes on here and are proud to live here.”

The topic of pride was decidedly prevalent, as participants noted a general sense of pride in the schools, the athletic teams, their town, their state, and their country. Pride, patriotism, and a respect for history were displayed repeatedly in the photoliteracy collages through images of school mascots, the Texas state flag, and local landmarks such as historic courthouses, city buildings, and museums. Participants also photographed artifacts such as a flag from the Battleship Texas and an antique handgun used in the Civil War. In one town, many participants indicated the importance of the “Muster Tree,” an oak tree where soldiers would meet before leaving for war.



FIGURE 1. STUDENT PHOTOLITERACY PROJECT USING HISTORICAL BUILDINGS AND OTHER STRUCTURES TO DEMONSTRATE PRIDE AND TRADITION.

Pride was one traditional value cited by participants as a positive aspect of living in a rural community, along with a slow-paced lifestyle, the safety of knowing one's neighbors, and the proximity to extended family and lifelong friends. As Brad claimed: "...this is a small town, so it's peaceful. There's not too much going on, which I actually see as a good thing. Not a lot of change comes along, so it's always the same warm feel." Joseph added: "You can do pretty much whatever you want. It's not a big city, and everybody knows everybody, so you can let your kids run around and know they're safe."

Participants were also quick to point out that certain aspects of living in a rural community that are often perceived to be positive can also be problematic. Whereas participants valued the condition that "everyone knows everyone," they also admitted that they felt a lack of privacy and sometimes resented being labeled because of what others thought or expected of them. Stephanie remarked, "It's such a small community that you know everyone, but everyone also knows everything about you...it can be both a blessing and a curse, mostly a blessing, I guess." Several participants reported "too much drama" at the schools among different groups of students, often the result of stereotypes. According to Suzy, "when everybody knows everybody, then everybody thinks they know you even if they really don't." George demonstrated a similar idea by drawing a handgun on his photoliteracy project; in his presentation, he pointed to photographs of himself smiling with friends and playing sports, stating, "This is me. I'm a good kid." Then he pointed to the drawing of the handgun. "But sometimes people look at me and think I'm trouble because they know my family and they think I'll turn out the same way." The close-knit, slow-to-change lifestyle was also perceived negatively, as participants commented on the lack of exposure to new ideas and new people.

Rural place. Participants also held strong opinions about the rural *place* in which they live. Whereas community involves social interaction and interpersonal relationships, place involves geographic location, material form, and the investment of these locations and forms with meaning and value (Gieryn 2000; Theodori and Kyle 2013).

Youth participants displayed deep connections to place: the landscape, structures, and physical environment surrounding their rural homes. The perceived importance of local businesses and services was evident; participants frequently referred to the necessity—and at times the luxury—of having local main-street businesses such as banks, real estate offices, restaurants, insurance agencies, and small retail shops. Participants also recognized the essential functions of city/county government agencies and other institutions such as libraries, health

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services, schools, Head Start programs, women and children advocacy centers, and food banks. The influence of agriculture was pervasive: participants pointed out the significance of grain elevators, feed and supply stores, sale barns, and the local livestock commission, and photographs of horses and cattle appeared frequently in collages aiming to describe the local area. Hardware stores, dollar-stores, and convenience stores also figured prominently when participants sought to explain what was important to them about their towns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the youth participants expressed gratitude for local coffee shops that offered free wi-fi, commenting that these spaces were gathering places for young and old alike.



FIGURE 2. PHOTOLITERACY PROJECT OF IMPORTANT PLACES AND ASPECTS OF RURAL TOWN.

Natural amenities were also deemed valuable, as participants claimed strong attachments to local parks, rivers, farm and ranchland, and the overall landscape, both for the perceived beauty of the features and for the activities those features make possible.

The theme of place also encompassed the dissatisfaction participants expressed regarding the limited resources in their rural towns. The echo of “not enough” resonated throughout the interviews and photoliteracy projects. “There’s just nothing for teenagers to do here,” Larry said. “Lots of the programs for young people sort of stop at age thirteen or fourteen, and if you can’t drive or don’t have a car, then there’s not much.” Several participants also declared that not having many stores or businesses meant limited opportunities for employment, although the participants were eager to work and earn a wage. Some participants cited the isolation of their towns from other towns as detrimental, stating that young people had to leave town to find entertainment sources such as movie theaters, but they also recognized the need to leave their hometowns simply to shop for clothing or see doctors.

Moreover, even with the expressed desire for new businesses, more stores, and more entertainment options, participants were highly critical of establishments they felt were bad for the community. Bars and liquor stores, in particular, were viewed as negative influences. “More bars than churches,” claimed Allison. Next to a photograph of a local bar, Tyra wrote, “The downfall of our community.” One town had recently opened a large liquor store, and the reaction from the youth participants was dismay and disappointment. Most of the participants claimed first-hand knowledge of the destructive nature of alcohol, fighting, and addiction—which is what bars and liquor stores represented to them.

Migration Intentions

The theme of migration intentions illuminates the decision-making process that young people employ in their determination of whether or not to migrate away from their home community and the multiple influences on the decision to stay or leave. Of the 23 interview respondents, eight young people expressed the desire to remain in their hometown or return after getting an education, seven indicated that they did not want to stay in or return to their hometown, and eight indicated uncertainty about the decision.

For the young people who want to stay in or return to their hometown, the pull of family and friends was the dominant factor influencing their decision. “I do want to live here,” exclaimed Thomas. “I want a stable job and to settle down here because all my family is here. This is my home.” Other reasons for wanting to stay closely followed the aforementioned theme of rural community, with participants believing that their town is “a good place to raise a family” and “where I want my kids to grow up,” often because of the peaceful lifestyle, the perceived safety, and the

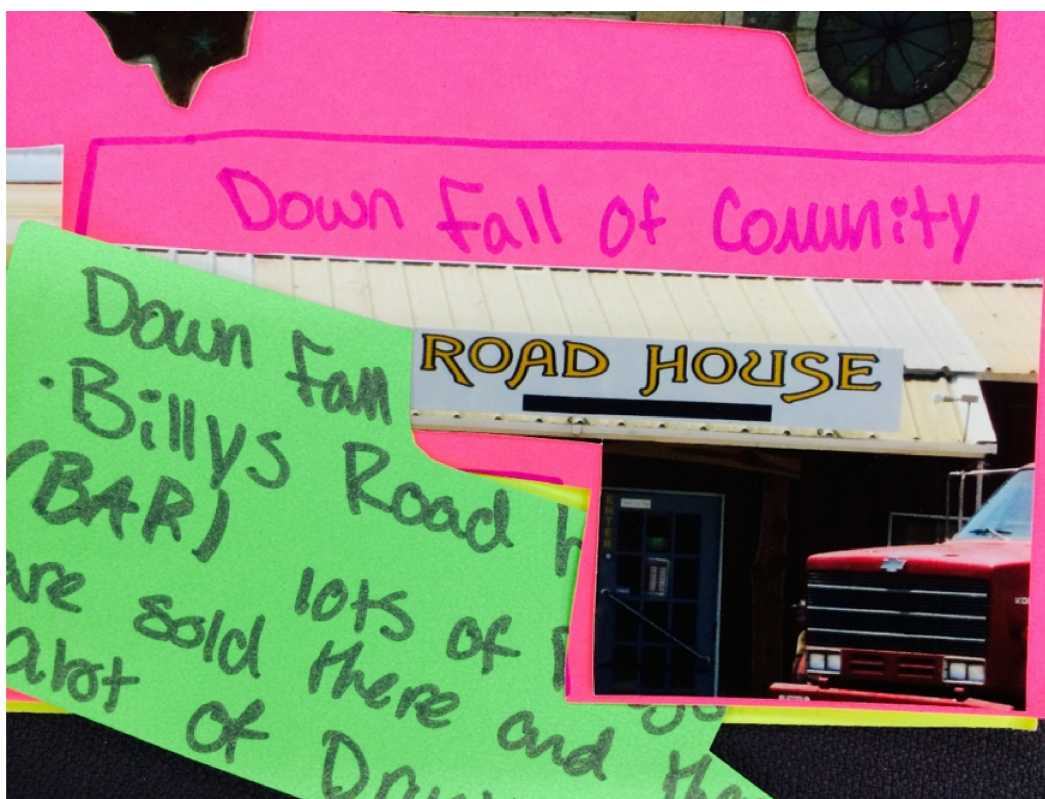


FIGURE 3. STUDENT PHOTOLITERACY PROJECT SHOWING A LOCAL BAR.

connections with other members in the community. As Brad said, “This is my home, that’s it.” Among the young people who see themselves living in the same town as adults, several indicated they intended to leave to get an education and then return. The oft-mentioned boredom and lack of activities that participants experienced as adolescents did not figure prominently into their concerns for the future; instead, the young people seemed to believe that their future adult selves would be satisfied with family and work activities.

The possibility of new places, new faces, and new opportunities were instrumental factors for young people who intend to leave their home communities. By far, the most often expressed reason for wanting to leave was to find educational or occupational opportunities not available in the rural locale. “I can’t see myself living here when I’m older,” stated George. “There’s not too much opportunity for work here. I need more opportunities to succeed.” Other reasons for wanting to leave included the desire to travel, to experience a new lifestyle in an urban area, and to meet different people. Jonathan stated, “I want to see new things, I want to

see the world, see new people, new environments...Miami, Las Vegas, Los Angeles...living here is just seeing the same thing over and over again.”

Many participants declared uncertainty about their future residence, demonstrating conflicting desires to stay in their hometown but also to “go out and make something of myself,” as Jeremy reported. “If I stay, it will be because of family,” stated Suzy, “but I don’t know if I can find work here.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Declining rural populations are of great concern for current scholars of rural America (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Corbett 2007), who have reported negative cumulative effects on the individuals and communities “left behind” (Carr and Kefalas 2009:3) by youth outmigration. Carr and Kefalas explained that, whereas the rural-to-urban migratory trends of young adults may be a natural occurrence, these “individual choices accumulate into devastating consequences for the communities” (p. 3) they leave. The outmigration of youth may result in negative outcomes for their home communities due to the loss of potential workforce, community leaders, volunteers, and parents of future generations (Demi et al. 2009). Furthermore, unmitigated youth outmigration may threaten community sustainability because the loss of this important human resource makes economic and community development efforts more difficult, creating a cycle of diminishing social and economic resources (Demi et al. 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore at-risk students’ perceptions of their rural communities/places and their residential preferences for the future. We also sought to provide “biographical flesh” (Jones 2004:209) to some numbers indicating an exodus of young people from rural communities in search of greater occupational and education opportunities. Moreover, by focusing on low-income students labeled as at-risk by their school districts, we hoped to move beyond the well-documented correlations among outmigration, educational aspirations, and family resources, and investigate perceptions of rural life and reasons for outmigration in a group of students traditionally overlooked in the “brain drain” literature. The categories and themes that emerged from our analysis show participants’ strong attachments, feelings, and opinions—both positive and negative—regarding their rural hometowns and illuminate various reasons for wanting to leave or remain after high school graduation.

Some young people in this study indicated a firm intention to remain in or return to their hometowns, but most expressed either an explicit desire and intention to leave or a doubtful uncertainty about the feasibility of staying. The

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findings in this study are consistent with past research: young people leave rural areas for educational and employment opportunities elsewhere. Based upon the findings in this study, the ambition for educational and occupational advancement is not limited to young people with high-levels of academic achievement and personal resources; indeed, young people identified as at-risk may be even more determined to, as Jeremy said, leave and “make something of” themselves. At-risk students who desire to migrate away from home communities may also want to shed the reputations and stereotypes they believe have been assigned to them. According to Jonathan, “Someday, these will just be people I used to know.”

Beyond our findings confirming past research, the emergent themes of place and community may hold important implications for rural leaders, community members, and others who are actively seeking ways to stem outmigration or encourage young people to consider returning to their hometowns. The features falling under the theme of *place*, while considered important to young people, were not cited as reasons for wanting to stay in or return to their hometown. In and of themselves, businesses, organizations, natural amenities, historical buildings, and treasured landmarks were negligible in participants’ stated reasons for wanting to stay or return. However, *community* features were most often offered as reasons for wanting to remain or return. Community, which can be characterized as “a place-oriented process of interrelated actions through which residents of a local population express a shared sense of identity while engaging in the common concerns of life” (Theodori 2005:662-663), is at the heart of what young people value most about their hometowns and what may influence students to become adult residents of their hometowns. Among young people who intended or simply hoped to stay, close family and friends and the perceived sense of belonging, of being known and understood, and of being part of a community that shares common values and traditions superseded the limited resources and opportunities available in a rural area. Therefore, although local leaders often—and perhaps necessarily—seek to retain or attract people to their rural areas through economic development (i.e., development *in* community), equal attention should be paid to community development (i.e., development *of* community), thereby fostering the relationships and social networks so valued by young residents (cf. Theodori 2005).

Teachers of rural youth who may or may not be identified as at-risk can also benefit from these findings. As studies show student motivation to be directly tied to students’ interactions with their teachers, their schools and communities, and their personal backgrounds and experiences (Harde and Sullivan 2009; Harde, Sullivan, and Roberts 2008; Pintrich 2003), teachers of rural students may

successfully tap into the strong attachments to community and place demonstrated in this study to motivate students. As Harde and colleagues (2008:24) posited, “If students understand the usefulness of the content and see it as relevant and connected to their own lives, then they are more likely to develop interest and see learning as positive.” Advocates of place-based and place-conscious education (Gruenewald 2003; Theobald 1997; Theobald and Nachtigal 1995; see also Brooke 2003; Smith and Sobel 2010; Sobel 2004) recommend similar approaches to validate students’ rural experiences and to ground learning in a relevant context. The photoliteracy project used in the data collection for this study can serve as one example of a place-based approach.

Considering these findings, we also contend that community leaders should reframe their understanding of “brain drain,” a term that denotes the export of the brightest and most ambitious youth in their community, and focus instead on fostering positive adult-youth relationships with all young people, including those labeled at at-risk, to abate youth outmigration. Schools, community organizations, churches, and other groups/organizations should work together to encourage youth engagement in community activities and support the sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Leaving a home community to pursue an education and work or simply to break the ties of childhood seems like a natural path for young adults, rural or urban. The results of this study illustrate that many low-income, at-risk rural youth also intend to leave their hometown for these reasons, even as they resolutely express strong attachments and appreciations for their rural communities and places. A thorough understanding of youth perceptions regarding their hometowns and rural upbringings—and how these perceptions may be influential in their decisions to stay in or migrate away from their home communities—can only support rural communities trying to maintain populace. Creating local opportunities for employment and education in rural areas may assist in providing youth who want to stay with options to do so. Moreover, focusing on programs and activities that build community relationships may also encourage young people to stay in or return to their hometowns.

Because all participants in this study were low-income and at-risk, future research comparing at-risk youth and high-competency youth could investigate any differences in perceptions of rural areas and migration intentions between the two groups. Clearly, the opinions young people hold about their rural communities and their decisions to stay or leave are personal, varied, and often private. Further

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research into the influences of youths' decisions to migrate—including the sources of information about educational and occupational plans—could provide necessary insight to individuals who help young people decide.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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