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ADOLESCENTS LIVING IN RURAL POVERTY:
SUCCESS, RESILIENCE, AND BARRIERS TO SOCIAL MOBILITY

Dissertation
by
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Abstract

Adolescents Living in Rural Poverty:
Success, Resilience, and Barriers to Social Mobility

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This study asked low-income adolescents from rural communities directly how they define success, resilience, and progress. More specifically, it assessed the ways in which rural youth and their families are resilient and identifies the main obstacles they face. This study used the participatory method of Interpretive Focus Groups (IFGs). Together with the researcher, participants examined photographs taken in a previous study (Pratt-Ronco & Coley, 2006), along with transcripts of previous interviews. The data analysis was directed at gaining a better understanding of what resilience and social mobility mean to the adolescents in the sample and identifying the barriers that beset adolescents living in rural poverty. This methodology is a good fit for these questions because the answers lie in the adolescents’ perspectives of their worlds. All too often, adults (academics, teachers, families, and the government) decide what it means to be successful, socially mobile, or resilient. This study asked adolescents to define these terms and thereby gives insight to the complexity of working with these youth.

In addition to the Interpretive Focus Groups, thirteen educators were interviewed. The purpose of the educator interviews was to gain a better understanding of how school
personnel perceived the problem of rural poverty. This information allowed for triangulation of the data, as well as a way to look for dis-connects between teachers and students.

The findings of this study shed light on an understudied population. There are two overarching themes which categorize the data collected: pervasive poverty and hope and resilience. The adolescents at the center of this research were surrounded by want and deprivation. They were isolated from resources, opportunities, and wealth. The reality of just how much adversity rural poor youth face on a daily basis is disconcerting. However, they showed great resilience, hope, and a “grittiness” that came from their rural poor existence.
Chapter 1- Introduction

Individuals living in rural poverty are isolated from the general research community. Their existence is known only to a select few: the 500 people in their township, the 40 students in their school, the 10 students in their graduating class, or the 5 people in their household at the end of a 25-mile dirt road. The rural poor work on farms and in mills, they live in the woods, and they have few neighbors, thus, their lives are marginalized and quieted. The research community knows very little of these people because their voices are too far away to be heard. They live a paradox where “everybody knows everybody,” yet no one really knows them at all.

Thirty-nine percent of children in the United States live in low-income households; 17% of children in the United States live in poverty (Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2007). Although the face of poverty in research samples is most often urban and of minority racial or ethnic status, poverty is as common in rural as in urban areas, and one third of the children living in low income families are white (National Center for Children Living in Poverty, 2008). Forty-seven percent of children living in rural areas are low income compared with 49% in urban areas and 30% in suburban areas. Twenty-two percent of children living in rural areas are poor (Jensen, McLaughlin & Slack, 2003). Despite the preponderance of poverty in rural America, poverty is predominantly studied in urban settings. Thus, there is a need for further insight attending to the similarities and differences between rural and urban poverty. This study seeks to explore these differences by looking at the understudied rural context.
Youth, in particular, may face specific constraints and challenges in rural poverty. Extant research and theory have argued that poverty can significantly influence adolescents through the lack of resources and supports available to them through both their family systems (e.g. Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997), and their community contexts such as peer networks, educational systems and neighborhoods (e.g. Leventhal, Fauth & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Wilson, 1987). Despite the hardships faced by poor children, and the negative outcomes they experience as a result, many show resilience.

“Resilient” is used to describe those individuals who overcome adversity to reach “normal” levels of functioning (Luthar et al., 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilience theory and empirical evidence also come from a predominantly urban poor population (e.g. Jarrett, 1995) and therefore are more easily generalized to a comparable urban poor population. However, with the prominence of poverty in rural areas, one must hypothesize whether or not this body of literature maps on to a population from a different context, or onto individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Little research has explored these questions.

Further, it is usually the dominant society (middle to upper class) that defines success, and it is quite possible that an adolescent growing up in rural poverty has a different definition of what it means to be successful and resilient within this context. As a group, adolescents are often not seen as valuable or reliable sources of information for research. Few people have taken the time to truly understand their perceptions of their lives: their experience of being poor and living in a rural area, how they perceive their social status, their identity, and their aspirations.
Therefore, this study asked low-income adolescents from rural communities directly how they define success, resilience, and progress. More specifically, it assessed the ways in which rural youth and their families are resilient and identifies the main obstacles they face. Does being successful by the dominant culture’s definition have any consequences within their culture? The study explored these questions not only on an individual level, but also on a social level in terms of family and community.

To answer these questions, this study used the participatory method of Interpretive Focus Groups (IFGs). Together with the researcher, participants analyzed and interpreted data collected from a previous study (Pratt-Ronco & Coley, 2006) on rural adolescents. The Rural Poverty Study found a wealth of rich information revealing two critical points. First, the sample of rural poor adolescents, like their other poor counterparts, experienced a number of stressful life events. There were constant barriers and challenges that were faced and navigated in an unpredictable world. Second, despite all of the possible negative events in their lives, these respondents had something that kept them going, something that made them get up in the morning and persist through another day. They were not in fact antisocial, underachieving, or in possession of low aspirations as previous research suggests they would be. They had aspirations for a life different from their parents and wanted desperately to overcome the barriers related to money and social class. In short, they displayed resilience, hope, and the potential for success. However, informal follow ups with the participants and discussions with practitioners working with this population, combined with informal observations over several years indicate that despite the resilience that these rural poor youth exhibit, they
are not always “successful” by society’s standards (i.e. attainment of higher education, moving out of their small towns, etc.). This phenomenon leads to the hypothesis that there may be a disconnect between expectations placed by society on adolescents who are living in rural poverty and the expectations they have for themselves.

In this study, the researcher and participants examined photographs taken in the previous study, along with transcripts of previous interviews. The data analysis was directed at gaining a better understanding of what resilience and social mobility mean to the adolescents in the sample and identifying the barriers that beset adolescents living in rural poverty. This methodology is a good fit for these questions because the answers lie in the adolescents’ perspectives of their worlds. All too often, adults (academics, teachers, families, and the government) decide what it means to be successful, socially mobile, or resilient. This study asked adolescents to define these terms and thereby give insight to the complexity of working with these youth.

In addition to the Interpretive Focus Groups, thirteen educators were interviewed. The purpose of the educator interviews was to gain a better understanding of how school personnel perceived the problem of rural poverty. This information allowed for triangulation of the data, as well as a way to look for disconnects between teachers and students.

This study has the potential to make substantive contributions to the fields of education and psychology in terms of theory, method, and practice. The direct impacts of these results on practice are perhaps the most important. The implications of better understanding the vulnerable population of adolescents living in rural poverty are great
for educators and families. Identifying the disconnect between how adolescents view success and how the systems they operate in view success will help those working within the systems to offer better services and help youth achieve their goals.

In sum, the study sought to look at an underprivileged and understudied population to better understand their possible multiple definitions of success, resilience, and barriers to social mobility. A participatory approach is necessary to understand these constructs and the meanings they have to a population of rural poor adolescents. This study sought to uncover a disparity between the services and supports provided to this population and their explicit needs of this group. With this knowledge, suggestions for future services and supports can be made.
Chapter 2- Literature Review

Poverty Theoretical Models

Research on poverty and developmental outcomes clearly indicates that the context of poverty has an impact on human development. Three global models propose to account for these outcomes. The first model is the family stress model (Conger, 1994, 1999, 2000) which suggests that socioeconomic hardship creates stress, which affects parenting and family, thereby affecting child outcomes. This model carefully delineates how financial strain can affect a family system, but fails to consider other systems in which the child participates. The investment model (Becker, 1991) is an economic perspective, suggesting that children’s development is a product of investments in the form of time and money made by caregivers and others in positions of influence. Investments are made in the form of materials, services, and home environments that are conducive to children’s cognitive and emotional well-being (Yeung, Linver & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Positive adaptation is a return on a sound investment. The investment model views the family as a factory, producing child outcomes (Foster, 2002). Unfortunately, the investment model also views the child as a passive participant in his or her development and puts the responsibility on the caregivers to ensure healthy development. This model neglects the very active role youth play in affecting their life courses. Finally, perhaps the most tenuous of the three primary models of poverty’s effects on human development is the culture of poverty model (Lewis, 1961, 1968). The culture of poverty model proposes that cultural values emerge in response to specific circumstances. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1968) argues that the culture of poverty
is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in class-
stratified, highly individualized, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope
with feelings of hopelessness and despair that develop from the realization of the
improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger
society (p. 188).

According to Lewis, there are many traits associated with the culture of poverty. People
with a culture of poverty have a low level of education and live in poor housing
conditions. Childhood is not viewed as its own sheltered period of development in
families with a culture of poverty. There is likely to be early exposure to sex, and families
are often led by single females. Individuals with a culture of poverty also tend to lack
impulse control and an inability to delay gratification. They tend to be oriented toward
the present, lacking planfulness and feel helpless and inferior. Finally, there is an
intergenerational aspect to the culture of poverty that is passed on through these cultural
norms and values. In fact, Lewis (1998) argues that there are groups of poor people (for
example those who are in the middle class and then lose their money and experience
poverty) who do not have a culture of poverty. Wilson (1996) attributes the
deindustrialization of urban areas to the creation of a ghettoized culture that undermines
subscription to the norms and values of the dominant culture (the non poor) and also
prohibits the attainment of skills that are integral for social mobility.

Several researchers have explored the culture created by poverty. Annette Lareau
(2003) calls it a “cultural logic” which refers to the way parents respond to advice given
from experts about child rearing. Middle and upper class parents tend to adapt more
quickly to recommendations made about family management strategies, whereas lower income parents tend to focus on the natural development of their children with little intervention. The development middle and upper class parents cultivate in their children leads to the provision of significant advantages because their child rearing practices are more in line with the dominant culture.

This culture of poverty model is controversial because some interpret it as a deficit model, which highlights what poor individuals lack, rather than their strengths in the face of adversity. It has been adopted by some educational consultants (Payne, 1998, 2005) and turned into a professional development curriculum for teachers who work with low-income students. This curriculum pathologizes poverty and calls for remediation of the poor to fix their deficits. A latent effect of such miseducation of teachers is that students internalize the views of their educators and schools, creating more negative outcomes. However, Lewis (1968) clearly states, “there is nothing in the concept that puts the onus of poverty on the character of the poor” (p. 199). It is arguable that individuals living in disadvantaged settings may in fact hold mainstream values, but lack the resources to be able to enact these values in their daily lives. It may be necessary to accommodate the environment in order to ensure survival, thus acquiescing to the culture of poverty.

Edin and Kefalas’s (2005) work explores the concept of motherhood for low-income women and explains how “single moms” are often a stereotype of poverty. Women who are low income and choose to have children out of wedlock are often regarded as lacking the moral standards of other mothers who have children within the
context of a relationship. Edin & Kefala reveal that low-income women actually value the
institution of marriage so much, that they will not marry the fathers of their children just
to do what is socially acceptable. The issue of adolescent childbearing also carries weight
in the public eye. In fact, young women who become pregnant do not necessarily see
pregnancy as a barrier to their success. For many low-income youth, pregnancy in the
teenage years may occur only a few years earlier than they had anticipated. For their
higher income counterparts, childbearing is predicted to occur up to ten years after
adolescence. The culture of poverty model encompasses more psychological factors than
the family stress model or the investment model. It also may be the most comprehensive
of the three models in explaining how poverty exerts pronounced effects on youth
development. Practitioners must tread lightly because this theory can be divisive.

The review of the literature that follows will detail the negative effects poverty
has on child development. It will then look at the contexts in which poverty exacts these
outcomes and the proposed theories accounting for the pathways between poverty and
outcomes. Finally, the specific context of rural poverty will be discussed in detail,
including how it is contrastive to urban poverty. Together, these literatures will serve to
illuminate various aspects of poverty that contribute to a distinct culture of influence and
thereby generate questions about how development occurs within these conditions.

Negative Effects of Poverty

Research on poverty and its impact on developmental trajectories shows that the
negative outcomes of living in poverty are numerous. The “culture of poverty”
perspective elucidates the psychological aspects of poverty and how it affects human
development, thus it complements developmental models such as the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977). The constraints poverty places on youth have several outcomes in terms of their biopsychosocial development. According to this model, children develop in three realms simultaneously: biological (physical), psychological (cognitive), and social (and emotional). By looking at an individual from these three perspectives, one can see a more holistic view of how the individual is impacted by one factor such as poverty. Further, in some cases it is difficult to identify a specific outcome as being strictly biological or social. For example, depression has a biological component, but also has a social dimension. Thus, it is less important that the outcomes be categorized into developmental realms, and more important that they be identified and recognized as part of a complicated system of potential problems that a child living in poverty may face.

The biopsychosocial model has a clearly applied aspect as well because practitioners, to determine points of intervention and programs targeted at mitigating negative outcomes, use this approach.

The biological or physical outcomes related to living in poverty are predominantly observed in early childhood development, including low birth weight (Bradley et al., 1994; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) and lead poisoning (Cecil et al., 2008; Needleman et al., 1990) which precipitate issues with brain development and overall healthy functioning. However, in adolescents there are other negative outcomes including late onset of puberty, developmental delays of secondary sex characteristics (Eveleth & Tanner, 1990), and obesity (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).
Cognitively, there are numerous outcomes related to developing within an impoverished environment. Children growing up in poverty tend to have more verbal skill impairment (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997) and lower IQ scores (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994) than their non-poor counterparts. Poverty also has a great impact on achievement. This includes lower high school graduation rates and completed schooling (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Yeung & Smith, 1998), higher participation in special education, lower test scores (Lohman et al., 2004; Smith et al., 1997), and greater grade retention (Smith et al., 1997). Recent research (Evans & Schamberg, 2009) has found that the chronic stress poverty produces explains the link between poverty and cognitive deficits. Essentially, poverty creates wear and tear on the brain as it is required to constantly maintain equilibrium. The longer an individual lives in poverty, the more taxed the brain becomes, and the less it is able to allocate resources to short-term memory needs such as problem solving. Stress suppresses new nerve cells from being generated and shrinks the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, which are associated with working memory.

The social and emotional impacts of poverty for adolescents tends to fall in the areas of lowered self esteem (Bolger et al., 1995; Conger et al., 2000), impaired interpersonal skills (Bolger et al., 1995; Brody et al., 2001; Conger et al., 2000; Jarrett, 1995; McLeod & Shanahan, 1996), increased aggression (Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991), greater antisocial behavior (Brody et al., 2001; Conger et al., 2000; McLeod & Shanahan, 1996), increased stress and anxiety (Conger et al., 2000), higher rates of depression (Conger et al., 2000; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; McLeod &
Shanahan, 1996), and other general behavior problems (McLeod, & Shanahan, 1993; Smith et al., 1997).

Together, these three arenas of developmental difficulties and delays in physical, cognitive, and socioemotional realms, lay out a dismal course for youth growing up in poverty. The total number of negative outcomes any individual may be prone to is unknown. However, the longer one remains in poverty, the more likely he or she is to experience negative outcomes and at more detrimental levels (Bolger et al., 1995; Duncan et al., 1994). To truly understand how at-risk low-income youth are, one must examine the contexts and processes through which poverty operates.

*Developmental Contexts and Mediating Processes*

Although the correlation between living in poverty and negative biopsychosocial outcomes is evident, the precise mechanisms by which poverty leads to these negative outcomes is somewhat less apparent. To understand these mechanisms, one must examine the primary contexts that have an influence on child development. The context is critical in appreciating human development. Furstenberg and his colleagues (1999) have defined development itself as “the iterative and ongoing process between children and the settings in which they grow up” (p.10). Families, neighborhoods, and educational settings all have the potential to have a great impact on a developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

*Families*

One pathway through which poverty influences development is through the family. As previously mentioned, Conger and his colleagues (1994, 1999, 2000) put forth
the Family Stress Model for understanding how children are affected by economic disadvantage. The model traces a pathway between family economic hardship and the aforementioned negative outcomes; this pathway is mediated by parental discord and disrupted parenting. Parental discord refers to the fact that the strain placed on a family during financial hardship causes caregivers to argue more with each other, as well as be more distraught due to the stress of not having money. Disrupted parenting refers to lack of parental monitoring due to the need to work more hours, or potential resentment toward children during times of financial crisis. Bradley et al. (2001) found that poor mothers were less likely to use effective communication toward their children and less likely to show physical affection than their wealthier counterparts. Further, poor children were more likely to be spanked and unmonitored. Evans and his colleagues (2005) support the Family Stress Model in their study of the role of chaos in low-income homes. They assert that the “immediate surroundings of low-income adolescents are more chaotic, consisting of noisier, more crowded more frenetic, and less structured and predictable routines of daily living, than are households of wealthier adolescents” (p. 564).

There is also an emerging literature exploring the conceptual model of childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families (Burton, 2007). Adultification involves a child’s assumption of adult responsibilities at a young age. Adultified children are prematurely exposed to adult perspectives and knowledge and often take on the burden of this knowledge and suffer consequences. Adultification has several derivatives including parentification and peerification. Parentification may involve taking on
childcare responsibilities for other family members or providing a caregiver role to the parent (Jurkovic, 1997). Peerification refers to children being treated as peers by their caregivers. The child may be privy to family financial information as well as other knowledge commonly shared with other adults (Burton, 2007; Weiss, 1979).

In economically disadvantaged households, adultification, and its derivatives, is prevalent as a function of living in poverty. Children may assume financial responsibilities (earning money, paying bills, worrying about finances). Children of immigrant families also often take on such adultified roles, where they are needed to be cultural brokers, negotiating with the dominant culture (e.g., Felugini, 2007). As with immigrant families, economically disadvantaged families may face circumstantial factors that promote their children into adult roles, unintentionally. If childcare is not affordable, this responsibility may fall on the oldest child in the family (East, Weisner, & Reyes, 2006). Similarly, crowded homes limit privacy, thus increasing children’s exposure to adult conversations (Burton & Lawson Clark, 2005).

The outcomes of adultification include both “assets and liabilities” (Burton, 2007, p. 339). In terms of assets, adultified, parentified, or peerified youth may develop leadership skills and express competence in handling stressful situations. The liabilities accrued are associated with the simple fact that children execute all of these adult-like behaviors. Developmentally, they are not equipped to approach the world from an adult perspective, which can engender anxiety and depression as well as attendance and performance issues in school (Burton, 2007).
The household is clearly a rich developmental context for both positive and negative outcomes to occur. However, one must also explore the environment beyond the household, where another level of influence can occur: the neighborhood.

**Neighborhoods**

Generally, poor families are situated in neighborhoods with limited access to the resources necessary for healthy child development such as good schools, municipal buildings, and safe neighborhoods. The neighborhood setting itself has the potential to exert effects on children either in conjunction with individual and familial factors, or in addition to them. Research looking at urban neighborhoods (Furstenberg, 2003; Kohen, Brooks-Gunn, Leventhal & Hertzman, 2002; Leventhal et al., 2005; Varitan & Buck, 2005) and social mobility (Jarrett, 1995) supports and confirms several theories of how these factors influence the development of children. Currently, there are four central theoretical models used for discussing neighborhoods. These include theories of a) collective socialization, b) social contagion, c) competition, and d) relative deprivation. There is a divide in the field concerning the level of social isolation experienced by poor youth and how this affects their development. Both collective socialization and social contagion theories view the presence of more affluent neighbors (less social isolation) to be a positive influence on child development (Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Wilson, 1997). The latter two theories view the presence of more affluent neighbors in the community to be harmful to development (Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Some research shows that neighborhoods with more affluent neighbors have a positive effect on development, whereas other research suggests that the out-migration of middle class workers creates
residential segregation, whereby poor neighborhoods are ghettoized by race which serves to limit opportunities for racial minorities (specifically, African Americans) and creates higher concentrations of poverty in urban areas (Gephart, 1997).

Collective socialization (Wilson, 1997) emphasizes the mediating role adults in a neighborhood play in human development. Adults in the community serve as both role models and monitors of social behaviors. This perspective highlights the importance of more affluent neighbors in a community who have a positive influence on development. Furstenberg (2003) has shown that neighbors actively participate in monitoring and passing on social norms to youth. Conversely, the out-migration of the middleclass from urban neighborhoods to suburban areas leaves behind a group of poor people who are isolated. Some (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993) argue that the presence of more single parent (a proxy for low-income) families in a community greatly reduces the number of adults present in the community who are able to participate in collective socialization.

Social contagion theory (Jencks & Mayer, 1990) purports that peers play an integral role in creating an epidemic of negative behaviors. Through both peer pressure and imitation, negative behaviors spread throughout a neighborhood. This model assumes that peers who are more affluent are therefore less likely to perpetuate negative behaviors in communities. Crane (1991) shows that dropping out of high school is highly likely among adolescents living in neighborhoods where fewer than five percent of the workers have managerial or professional jobs. Children who grow up in less disadvantaged neighborhoods also have also been shown to complete more years of schooling (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993).
Competition theory (Jencks & Mayer, 1990) refers to the competition for limited resources prevalent in low-income neighborhoods. This theory suggests that the presence of more-affluent peers (or competition) creates conflict, resistance, and lower success because of the scarcity of resources. Similarly, relative deprivation theory (Jencks & Mayer, 1990) postulates that individuals assess their social worth based on a comparison made against those around them. Youth may respond to their lack of success (as compared to their more affluent peers) by simply giving up. Supporting research (Leventhal et al., 2005) has shown that when youth are deliberately moved from neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty to those with a low concentration of poverty, they do not necessarily do better in the long term. Leventhal and colleagues (2005) found that youth had lower grades and reported less school engagement than their high poverty counterparts.

In sum, the neighborhood literature suggests that the setting of the neighborhood provides a complex system where development occurs. However, the overarching criticism of this body of literature is that it predominantly investigates the context of urban neighborhoods and fails to look at rural life and how that milieu might be a similarly complex system. The theoretical models of neighborhood contexts were developed after studying inner-city urban neighborhoods, predominantly in the Chicago area. It is unclear whether these theories translate to a rural setting. It is possible that rural contexts are too isolated and geographically spread for the processes delineated through neighborhood theories to function. Alternately, similar processes may function in rural contexts. A continued discussion of this discrepancy will follow in this review of the
literature. Beyond the immediate surroundings of the neighborhood is yet another context mediating the relationship between living in poverty and developmental outcomes: the educational setting.

Education

Socioeconomic status influences both achievement in and attainment of education (Aronowitz, 2008; Dubois, Felner, Meares, & Krier, 1994; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Felner et al., 1995; Fine et al., 2008; Lareau, 2003; Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker, 2004; Smith et al., 1997). One pathway through which this happens starts before children even enter elementary school, but has lasting effects until school completion. This education happens in the home. Children growing up in poverty often live in homes that are impoverished in numerous ways such as lacking books and developmentally appropriate toys, and therefore are more likely to start elementary school scoring lower on achievement tests than their middle and upper class counterparts (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Schoon, et al., 2004). Specifically, impoverished home environments account for as much as one-half of the gap in test scores between poor and non-poor children (Smith et al., 1997). These contextual factors support the investment model of poverty in that they demonstrate how children fair when an investment is not made in their early cognitive development by furnishing a rich learning environment in the home.

Less talking also occurs in low-income homes, which leads to smaller vocabularies, less verbal ability, and less comfort with adults and authority figures (Lareau, 2003). Further, adolescents living in families where their parents only have a high school education (a proxy for socioeconomic status), report less of an emphasis on
intellectual issues in their families (Felner et al., 1995). These findings lend further support to the family stress model because it is possible that economic strain in the home accounts for caregivers’ talking less to their children and interacting with them in ways to develop social skills necessary for interacting with authority figures.

Working class parents also tend to focus on the “natural growth” of their children, which emphasizes a child’s autonomous development with less direct involvement from the caregiver. In contrast, middle and upper class parents focus on “concentrated cultivation” which is a deliberate approach to parenting and the developing person (Lareau, 2003). As previously mentioned, Lareau refers to this as “cultural logic,” suggesting that caregivers in low-income households have a different set of values around child development than their middle and upper class equivalents. This value system upheld by working class families may stem from the fact that they simply have less time and resources to devote to the intentional procurement of development. Consistent with the culture of poverty model, such values around child development will also be transmitted intergenerationally.

All of these processes may have long lasting effects on children. Research has found that underachievement in as early as first grade is correlated with high school dropout (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Research on the importance of early home learning environments has been the impetus for numerous early intervention programs. The success of these programs supports the theory that poor children’s early learning environments greatly influence their later development (Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004; Reynolds & Temple, 1998). The implementation of early interventions
seeks to disrupt the culture of poverty, by augmenting the early learning environment and redirecting the emphasis of development from a natural occurring phenomenon to purposeful advancement.

In addition to home educational contexts, the formal educational settings of poor youth also suffer deficits. Education systems are another mechanism through which poverty can yield outcomes. Low-income adolescents often face more daily stress and their school climates tend to be more negative (Dubois, Felner, Meares, and Krier, 1994; Felner et al., 1995). The learning environment itself may also be physically falling apart around them (Fine, Burns, Torre, & Payne, 2008). Low-income adolescents report feeling less sense of belonging to their schools than their middle and high-income counterparts (Felner et al., 1995).

There is often less parental involvement in school related matters for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; parental involvement has been found to be positively correlated with school achievement (Bolger et al., 1995; Kelly, 2008; Lee & Croninger, 1994). In addition, the quality of parental involvement differs among social classes (Kelly, 2008). Parents from low-income backgrounds may not feel comfortable talking with teachers who have a higher educational status than they do, they may feel intimidated by the school environment, and may not know that they can advocate for their children. Further, “the organization of schools takes for granted the norms of middle-class family life, knowledge, time, and resources, making it appear as if the problem of social inequality and school failure is the result of ineffective, inadequate, “bad” mothers [and fathers]” (Luttrell, 1997, p.10).
Schools themselves also may not be preparing economically disadvantaged students for the rigorous academic work of post secondary education (Aronowitz, 2008; Fine et al., 2008). For example, in a case study of five public schools representing four levels of advantage and disadvantage, Anyon (2008) found that the type of knowledge (“school knowledge”) emphasized at each of the four levels differed. The four stratifications of schools were chosen based on parents’ employment, which is often used as a proxy for social class. At the “Executive Elite” school, there was an emphasis on excellence and being the best to be able to get into the best colleges. At the “Affluent Professional” school, the emphasis was on narcissism, or individualism. Here students were encouraged to find their own meaning in learning and were focused on going to a “good college.” In the “Middle Class” school, possibility was the way that knowledge was translated. Students were taught about ideology as it related to content and this translated to learning as a means to go to college and get a good job. Finally, resistance represented the “Working Class” schools. There was a great deal of tension between teachers and students and the focus was on learning individual facts and disjointed bits of knowledge that were not interconnected. There was much more focus on behavior and the teacher spent a great deal of time attending to distractions in the classroom that were prohibitive to learning. The school knowledge present in the working class schools was skill related, and none of the participants interviewed used the word “thinking” in their interviews, suggesting that this was not a process they learned in school.

Raferty and Hout (1993) propose a theory that attempts to explain the persistence of the achievement gap between differing levels of advantage and disadvantage. Their
theory, known as “Maximally Maintained Inequality” refers to the opportunities that
more-privileged individuals have and are able to perpetuate to future generations.
Further, it is not until an entire social class of people has essentially achieved a prescribed
level of attainment (e.g. high school completion) that the less privileged can begin to
reach the same levels of attainment. Gamoran (2008) argues that quantitatively,
Americans are beginning to see this theory play out, as high school graduation rates have
become nearly perfect for middle and upper class students, and they are increasing for
lower class students. College matriculation shows a similar pattern. However, the
achievement gap is still present despite the obvious increases in some areas of education.
Lucas (2001) refers to this phenomenon as “effectively maintained inequality” and
suggests that what is happening is a differentiation in individual levels of attainment that
is still preventing underprivileged students from higher achievement. For example,
tracking (ability grouping) in high schools now means that students are graduating, but
with varying degrees of knowledge and skill levels. The rise of the community college
system is creating access for more students, but still channeling the lower class students
into a stratified system. The lower level of stratification (lower academic standards for
admission, lower prestige) does now allow for the same achievements as the more
privileged levels of stratification. Similarly, programs like financial aid on college
campuses are shifting from need based aid (an economic leveler) to merit based aid
which goes to students who are more privileged for all of the aforementioned reasons
(Gamoran, 2008). In short “qualitative distinctions are preserving inequalities even as
quantitative differences fade” (p. 172).
As previously mentioned, tracking is yet another mechanism through which social class exacts outcomes on achievement and educational attainment. Tracking is the process whereby students are placed in homogeneous groupings based on specific performance indicators (e.g. testing). The courses these groups take are sorted into clusters, or tracks. The tracks often include the “college preparatory” track, the “general” track, the “vocational” track, or the “special education” track. Tracking affects students’ likelihood of going to college (Lucas, 2001). Research (Kelly, 2004, 2008) has shown that students who are from low income backgrounds are more likely to be in lower track courses in high school. In fact, students whose parents obtained college degrees (a proxy for socioeconomic status) were four times more likely to be in top course tracks, than students whose parents obtained high school degrees. Other striking findings show that despite the fact that two students may have the same test scores and grades, a lower-income student is more likely to be in lower track courses than a more privileged student.

Academic achievement, parent involvement, preparedness for higher education, tracking, and the achievement gap are all issues salient in the culture of poverty model. As previously discussed, these aspects of educational systems perpetuate disparities between social classes. It is evident that there is a culture surrounding education and poverty that begins in the home and continues within the walls of the education system (both secondary and postsecondary). It is clear that the educational milieu has the potential to have a great impact on low-income students. How much social class is part of the collective consciousness of educators is still unknown. It is unclear how these inequalities within the education system develop: deliberately or unintentionally. Further,
how these inequalities are addressed within the landscape of education in terms of intervention is yet to be seen. This area of educational research and practice must be examined for change to be made.

_Psychosocial Processes_

In addition to the contextual mechanisms through which poverty influences development, poverty can also impact individuals through psychosocial processes such as identity development (Phillips & Pittman, 2003). Social stigma from living in poverty can lead one to create a negative identity (Erikson, 1980) or negative views of the self. Lowered levels of identity development have been found to be associated with negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, substance use, delinquency, and poor academic achievement (DeHaan & MacDermid, 1996). The central task of adolescent development is identity formation (Erikson, 1964) and the stress poverty places on adolescents can unquestionably interfere with optimum development. Once again, in the culture of poverty adolescents’ identities may be inextricably linked to their status in society. When social class becomes embedded in individuals’ perceptions of themselves, they may become impossible to separate. The internalization of social class is then a part of the culture.

_Resilience_

Despite these negative outcomes, some youth living in poverty experience success and show resilience. The construct of resilience is typically defined as the dynamic process of adaptation in the context of adversity (Luthar et al., 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992). Two factors must be present in order for resilience to occur. First, there must be
adversity or hardship. This is often referred to as chronic or severe in nature (Werner, 1994). Second, the person who is resilient must positively adapt in the face of this adversity (Luthar, 2000). It is important to note that resilience is characterized by an individual’s ability to reach just an average level of achievement (as determined by what middle class children can achieve), and does not refer to poor children’s abilities to over-achieve, or exceed what their middle class counterparts are capable of. Resilience is promoted by protective factors and constrained by risk factors.

Models of resilience argue that protective factors may inhibit a negative outcome when risk is present; in other words, buffering against negative outcomes (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976; Werner & Smith, 1992). Risk factors may be detrimental to an individual’s development. Similar to the primary contexts significant in the poverty literature, protective and risk factors occur on three broad levels: personal, familial, and community wide. Because individuals develop in multiple contexts simultaneously (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), they are also exposed to risk and protective factors at multiple levels simultaneously.

A host of protective factors for youth are defined in the literature. Personal and familial protective factors include intelligence (Masten, et al., 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998); adult role models (Werner & Smith, 1992); a high internal locus of control (Luthar, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1992); empathy (Werner, 1986); high self-esteem (Werner & Smith, 1992); and problem solving skills (Murphy & Moriarty, 1976).

Community related protective factors which are likely to increase social mobility for African American youth are outlined by Jarrett (1995) These contextual factors
include (1) a supportive adult network structure, (2) restricted family-community relations, (3) stringent parental monitoring strategies, (4) strategic alliances with mobility enhancing institutions and organizations, and (5) adult sponsored development. A supportive adult network structure refers to parents’ ability to furnish their children opportunities through their links to social networks. These networks offer additional adults who can provide time and resources. If the networks include adults who are more affluent, than access to resources is enhanced. Restricted family-community relations refers to a family’s attempts to identify community members who do not support their familial values and who may not be a positive influence on their family. Restricting access to these identified community members will help to preserve the family’s own values. Parental monitoring strategies refer to the techniques caregivers use to supervise their children. These include imposing curfews and constraints on time spent out of the house, knowing friends and acquaintances of their children, as well as parents of their children’s friends, and being present to witness activities involving friends and acquaintances (acting as a chaperone). Strategic alliances with mobility enhancing groups refers to the way caregivers go about accessing resources within their communities, specifically within the school and church. Finally, adult sponsored development refers to involvement with adult-led activities that will enhance a child’s development along with parental involvement in a child’s developmental processes in general. These community level factors parallel collective socialization theory. They emphasize aspects of the neighborhood that increase youth’s chances of social mobility: those that rely on others within the community to partake in the positive development of youth.
Resilience theories such as those discussed above tend to be empirically informed, resulting in a list of factors that must be present in order to protect children from negative outcomes. However, they fail to talk about how these factors are translated into human behavior. Typically studies of resilience focus on individuals after they have become resilient. Little is known about the psychological mechanisms that serve as bridges between the protective factors and the outcomes. It is unclear how those who have a culture of poverty are able to rise up out of it and resist the negative outcomes that are so salient.

One theory that offers some insight into these processes is hope theory (Snyder, 1997, 2002). Hope is a deliberate, cognitive process. For a disadvantaged population, hope helps individuals to first foresee barriers and challenges that could stand in their way and prevent them from achieving their goals, and second to act on them in productive ways. Snyder’s Hope Theory details three necessary cognitive components of hope. First, hopeful people must have goals, or plans for the future. Goals can be immediate (short term) or they can be long term. They are wishes for what they will achieve and can encompass a variety of areas of one’s life. Second, hopeful people must employ pathway thinking. Pathway thinking is the ability to see a route to achieving a goal. This is a plan for accomplishing what one sets out to do. Another critical piece of pathway thinking for hopeful people is that they are able to generate multiple pathways to reaching a desired goal and they are not limited by just one. Third, there must be agency to achieve goals. This requires the motivation to set out on a delineated pathway and to
persevere until a goal is met. Agency is critical to achieving goals, for without it the actual achievement will not occur.

Empirical data suggest that college students with high hope (as measured by the Hope Scale) as entering freshmen have better overall grade point averages than lower hope students. They are also more likely to have graduated and not been dismissed from college within a six year period (Snyder et al., 2002). In a sample of adolescents, similar findings are apparent: youth with high hope scores also report high scores on measures of psychological adjustment such as satisfaction with life, positive mental health, grade point average, and participation in structured activities (Gilman, Dooley, & Florell, 2006). Further, in a sample of youth who were part of an educational opportunity program, and thus identified as having some of the cognitive characteristics of hope theory, adolescents’ voices also highlighted that hope may not be merely a set of cognitive and behavioral paths (Pratt-Ronco, 2007). What these data suggest is that hope, for this sample of rural poor youth, seems to be both cognitive and emotional. Perhaps what is happening is that individuals must have the cognitive structures that hope theory suggests initially. It is with these cognitive structures that youth are able to see opportunity and take advantage of it. As resilience theory suggests, however, it is not until one is faced with adversity that hope becomes a socioemotional construct.

The High Valley Resilience Study (Hauser, Allen, & Golden, 2006), a qualitative study of adolescents with mental illnesses, lends some insight into these processes of resilience. Interviews were conducted over time. When 9 out of 67 youth were determined to be “resilient” by quantitative measures years in adulthood, researchers
went back to their narratives to look for emerging signs of resilience. Researchers
determined distinct characteristics were present in the nine resilient individuals that were
not present in the other participants in the study. First, resilient participants believed they
had control over their lives and could influence their environments. They showed agency
and tenacity as they moved through life. They were described as “taking action and
watching the world respond” (p. 268). The actions do not necessarily always produce
positive results, yet they continue to experiment with agency. The less resilient
participants did not show the same kind of purposeful actions. Second, they were
reflective and able to process their emotions. They were capable of metacognition and
able to identify and regulate their thoughts and feelings. This awareness creates strong
positive outcomes. “Along with refuge, reflective people have access to a source of
intense emotional vitality” (p. 276) which also supports the development of resilience.
The nonresilient group lacked this awareness and self-reflection. Third, resilient youth
established strong relationships and observed the relationships of others. They were able
to solicit relationships from others by way of their reflection, thus being able to “tell the
kind of story that will engage a responsive adult.” (p. 279). Less resilient children had
complicated relationships that were often constructed on anger. They were unable to
create the kinds of relationships that were sustainable and viable for resilience.

The bidirectional relationship resilient individuals have with their environment
provides more opportunities for them. Resilience is not just a list of outcomes, but also a
process that requires agency. Providence is not responsible for individuals’ resilience;
they select situations that foster the process. Resilient individuals are active participants
in their development and their abilities in the areas of agency, reflection, and relationships serve them in this. The process of resilience echoes Furstenberg’s (1999) definition of development as an iterative process.

Hauser and his colleagues (2006) also assert that the underlying processes of resilience are not always visible. Adolescent resilience can be masked by conduct that seems counterproductive. “A resilience process may be operating powerfully underneath exactly the kind of behavior that would most seem to controvert it” (p. 268). What is regarded as difficult behavior may indeed be an important signal that resilience is present. For youth, it takes time to experiment with relationships and reflection in order to master it. This experimentation can be destructive at times, but is arguably better than complacency. The results of this study show that the characteristics making individuals resilient are present at an early age and can emerge over time as internal working models are developed. The data were collected, however, from a predominantly privileged group (one-third were from “lower-middle and working class” families). They also all had diagnosed illnesses and were undergoing treatment. It is unclear whether the findings of this study generalize to a more mainstream population of adolescents.

The literature on resilience offers a plethora of information on the qualities and characteristics that furnish resilience. However, the processes by which these characteristics exact resilient outcomes are not as decisive. Hope theory provides one possible explanation, but more research is needed to support its efficacy. Currently, hope is seen as a purely cognitive construct, which has no socioemotional dimension. Hauser et al.’s (2006) research suggests that there is an emotional component to the resilience
process. Perhaps a facet of it is socioemotional and perhaps it is another product of the culture of poverty, but one that few researchers have examined. What is perhaps more critical to the resilience literature is the ways in which resilience is defined and who has the authority to label others. The voices of the resilient are scarce in the literature and perhaps they could explain the missing link between characteristics and outcomes.

The Rural Context

Arguably, children growing up in rural, versus urban, poverty have a different life experience. The environment itself is unlike that of a densely populated, urban hub. The remainder of this review of the literature will aim to do three things: first to define “rural” and describe in detail the rural context; second, to identify some of the similarities between urban and rural contexts of poverty; and third to discuss rural poverty as it specifically relates to adolescent outcomes.

Defining rural

The definition of rural is often debated and rarely agreed upon. Currently, there is no clear definition of rural that all researchers use. According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ (2006) definition, there are three categorizations of rural: fringe, distant, and remote that are determined based on proximity to an urban area. Moreover, rural is often labeled by what it is not, rather than what it is. Rural is globally defined as an area not inside an urban area. The determination of “rural” for an area is achieved based by a town’s latitude and longitude, and thus distance from an urban center. Despite this ambiguous definition of rural, Coladarci (2007) argues that a precise definition of rural is not what the research community is lacking, as much as clear contextual
description detailing the specific rural context under study. This allows other researchers and practitioners to determine for themselves whether or not two rural contexts are similar enough to generalize the results for quantitative studies. Unfortunately, such rich descriptions are not present in all studies focusing on “rural populations.” However, this study seeks to pay careful attention to the rural context when pursuing answers to the research questions in order to establish the rurality of the investigation.

Obviously, rural life in general is comprised of more than just distance from an urban center. Many who live in rural areas are envied for what some believe is an easy, slow-paced lifestyle. The rural, however, face many stressors contrary to these myths of the idyllic rural existence (Hansen, 1987; MacTavish & Salamon, 2003). Poverty rates in rural areas are quite similar to urban areas. Individuals living in rural areas face great isolation and are likely to have lived in the same remote areas for generations (Bushnell, 1999). Rural families are growing to look more like their non-rural counterparts with higher divorce rates and single parent headed households in the past twenty years. Rural families feel more pressure to care for more dependents (children and elderly) than urban and suburban families. With the decrease in agricultural jobs, more workers that are rural are forced to face long daily commutes to and from work, which takes a toll on family cohesiveness and routine (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003).

Similarly, there are many misconceptions about who the rural poor are in America. They are most likely working poor (Lichter, Roscigno, & Condron, 2003), with the majority being parents who are employed full time, year round (Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2007). Children living in rural poverty tend to come from two parent households
(Lichter et al., 2003) and are more likely to be “latch-key” children (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003) than their non-rural counterparts. They also have fewer ties to extended family (because extended family is further away, and more often working); they rely heavily on their immediate family and friends as their social networks (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003).

Many of these descriptors of rural life could be considered risk factors for healthy youth development. Caregivers are working, thus their availability for monitoring and chaperonage is limited. Because of their physical isolation, they may not have the kinds of social networks that are stressed in collective socialization theory. Taken together, this leads to the hypothesis that perhaps the rural context and the urban context have similarities in terms of their impacts on youth trajectories, but they may also be incomparable.

_Urban vs. rural_

On the surface, the rural context is very different from the urban context. However, there are some striking similarities. These similarities might be overlooked easily because researchers must adjust their frames of reference slightly. In urban terms, the unit of analysis is often the neighborhood, the people living in close proximity on a few streets or blocks within a city. In rural terms, where neighborhoods are less common, the unit of analysis is the town. By using these terms interchangeably for urban and rural, the similarities begin to unfold. For the rural poor, these similarities come in the form of paradoxes. For example, crowding is a problem for the urban poor, where families are often living in densely packed neighborhoods, literally on top of each other in high-rise
apartment buildings (or “projects”). The paradox for rural families, many of whom live in houses (rather than apartment buildings) is that they are still crowded under one roof. Previous research conducted by this author (Pratt-Ronco & Coley, 2007) found that often several children were sharing one bedroom, or a family member was sleeping on the couch because he or she had no bed.

Outside of their homes, rural life is associated with isolation, allowing children to see little of the world beyond poverty (Duncan, 1999). However, the urban poor face a similar isolation (despite living in densely populated neighborhoods). This isolation comes from the fact that their neighborhoods are often ghettoized, meaning that they are surrounded by people like them, with few opportunities to see a world beyond their poverty (Lichter et al., 2003). Social stigma associated with poverty may be greater in rural areas, because being poor brings shame in rural communities (Amato & Zho, 1992). The poor are often blamed for their poverty (Duncan, 1999). The isolation experienced in rural towns often prevents the rural poor from utilizing the support networks they would need when they are feeling shamed. Particularly for white rural poor, who have poorer psychological well being than their white urban poor counterparts, there may be a dynamic in rural areas where judgments are made about poverty and welfare for white people that are not made about ethnic minorities (Amato & Zho, 1992).

Similarities are illustrated in the work of Furstenberg and his colleagues (1993) in a study of dangerous neighborhoods in Philadelphia. This research profiled one type of community that parallels rural life. Poor families predominantly characterized this neighborhood. The community members had strong ties to each other and to their
neighborhood. They felt a sense of obligation to stay in the community. They also felt that everyone was involved in each other’s lives and they could not escape the collectivistic aspect of the community. Small town America often has a similar feel. Everyone knows everyone. No one leaves. People are protected by the things that hold them back.

Research on rural versus urban poverty might suggest that the urban poor have a more stressful life than the rural poor; however if one looks at white urban poor who tend to be more spread out within a city, they do not necessarily experience any more stress than their white rural poor counterparts. African American urban poor do experience more stress than the rural poor (Wilson, 1987).

It should be noted that it is difficult to untangle race from social class. Sometimes race is used as a proxy for class, and thus it is hard to determine which outcomes are a product of one’s socioeconomic status and which are a product of one’s race or ethnicity (Gamoran, 2008). There is a large body of literature on poverty; however, it is more specifically about urban poverty, and even more specifically about urban poverty among minority ethnic and racial groups (e.g. Wilson, 1987). It is possible that other groups including the rural poor, who are also white, could experience many of the issues attached to race (isolation, segregation, and discrimination). There are explicit models of development for racial and ethnic minority children (e.g. Garcia-Coll, 1996) which could also be relevant to people in other groups.

What these studies suggest is that people living in poverty, regardless of the location, experience great hardships. It is difficult to say who suffers more, because the
differences between the two are based on the location. For example, some would argue that single mothers struggle more in urban areas because of the fact that they are raising their children in violent neighborhoods. Single mothers living in rural areas may not have to worry about violent neighborhoods, but they do have access to fewer resources, namely opportunities to work while raising a child, thus they are more likely to stay in poverty for longer (McLaughlin & Sachs, 1988). The extant research on poverty has neglected the rural population, particularly adolescents. However, some researchers have explored the marginalized lives of rural poor youth in terms of the outcomes they experience.

Youth Outcomes

Research on negative outcomes among rural youth has identified that educational outcomes are particularly problematic. Research (Burnell, 2003; Rojewski, 1999) suggests that rural youth as a whole have low aspirations for higher education and are much more concerned with the “real world” which is the world of work. Compared to urban youth, rural adolescents’ parents may be more supportive of them attending trade schools, enrolling in the military, or seeking careers that do not require higher education (Cobb et al., 1989). Further, rural youth may not equate educational and occupational attainment with life satisfaction (Wilson & Peterson, 1988). Quaglia & Perry (1995) posit four factors that may contribute to lowered aspirations for rural youth. These include limited access to seeing a variety of careers that may inspire them, the high poverty rate in rural areas, parents’ educational levels, and the impact socioeconomic status has on academic achievement. Lack of school resources in rural areas can also contribute to
fewer course and extra curricular offerings and fewer teachers to teach classes, precipitating lowered school engagement (Singh & Dika, 2003).

For rural individuals, attainment of higher education, a measure of success, has been found to be equated with leaving one’s community (Corbett, 2007). For some rural communities, particularly in coastal areas, youth outward migration is a threat to the prosperity of the community as a whole. In subtle ways, youth come to learn that the pursuit of higher education means leaving the community, rejecting a way of life, and in essence, discounting one’s family. This collective consciousness around the meaning of education prohibits some adolescents from moving away from their rural communities where there are no resources or options for them. This presents an interesting question about the rural context; does it prohibit intellectual promise? Would youth living in a rural coastal community be considered resilient if they were unable to pursue post secondary education due to a culture that does not promote it?

Whereas a great deal is known about the effects of poverty on the urban poor, there is little comparable literature detailing the effects on rural poor youth. Rural poor youth face constraints from multiple sources. First, constraints of poverty such as parental education and limited financial resources; second, constraints of rural isolation, such as lack of school resources, and limited exposure to careers and higher education. Together these constraints confer negative outcomes. A small base of quantitative research suggests that rural poor youth show high rates of antisocial behavior, drug use, alcohol abuse, psychosocial distress and teen childbearing, as well as low academic functioning and aspirations (e.g., Conger et al., 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Evans &
English, 2002; Lichter et al., 2003; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002). Many of these same characteristics have been found in urban populations. However, studies (Evans & English, 2002) have shown that rural youth show higher rates of psychological distress and maladjustment (Felner et al., 1995) than their urban counterparts do. They also show difficulty with self-regulation. In the school setting, low-income rural adolescents show a lower sense of belonging to their school than their more advantaged peers, and well as greater exposure to stressful life events (Felner et al., 1995).

In addition to negative patterns of psychological functioning, research on rural poverty (Elder, 1974; Elder & Conger, 2000; MacTavish, & Salmon, 2006) has found that children exhibit a great deal of resilience and hope despite their circumstances. Rural students may thrive in an environment that supports their autonomy (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). In contrast to urban students, teacher supported autonomy is shown to have a considerable impact on the motivation of rural students. In some instances, the success of the rural poor may be due to a strong work ethic tied to farming (Elder & Conger, 2000). Success has also been attributed to living in a working class town where everyone is considered working poor (Duncan, 1999). Duncan’s ethnographic study of three rural poor communities suggested that the most socially prosperous community was the town where everyone was the same: poor. There were no “have’s and have not’s.” This is contrastive to Wilson’s (1987) work on neighborhoods and the out migration of middle class workers, leaving behind a socially segregated group of people. This leads one to surmise that there may be something unique about the rural context impacting success and setting it apart from an urban context. One final hypothesis for the resilience of the
rural poor is that adolescents somehow associate themselves with people or communities outside of their own in order to support their social mobility as MacTavish & Salmon (2006) found in their study of rural trailer parks.

MacTavish & Salamon (2006) distinguish between flourishing (upwardly mobile), static (unchanging), and floundering (downwardly mobile) pathways of adolescent development exhibited by youth living in a rural trailer park. They found that those youth who were flourishing distinguished themselves from their static and floundering peers by making connections with middle class people in the town and avoiding any contact with others in the trailer park. The work of MacTavish & Salmon (2006) parallels Jarrett’s (1995) social mobility model. Both include the importance of connections with adults who are positive role models and can increase social capital. Both also emphasize restricted interactions with people who are close in proximity to the youth, but distal in terms of aspirations. In essence, the trailer park in rural America is comparable to the neighborhood in urban America. The strategies that aide adolescents living in trailer parks in gaining social mobility are the same that work for urban poor youth.

The literature on rural communities indicates both positive and negative outcomes for youth. It is unclear if the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and if there are aspects of rural life that could be enhanced in order to support rural youth development in the face of poverty. This research seeks to address this conflict by looking more specifically at youth and their families and asking them how they characterize various
aspects of their communities and how such characteristics affect them in both positive and negative ways.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, there is a gap in the literature at the heart of this discussion that lies in how the research community and practitioners define resilience, success, and achievement. The literature on resilience lacks the perspective of the group being studied. It is researchers who define what resilience and success are. It is unclear how rural poor youth themselves operationalize these constructs and consequently evaluate how they would use them to label their own lives and those of their families. If, in fact, there is a disconnect between how rural poor youth define the jargon used in the field to label them, then the implications for practice are vast. A better understanding of this population is needed in order to determine appropriate policy and educational approaches for working with disadvantaged rural youth. In response, this study seeks to address this gap in the literature by asking participants to name their own risk and protective factors and to decide for themselves what it means to be successful, resilient, and socially mobile.

Some research has sought the adolescent perspective on various topics and employed participatory methods to explore research questions around issues such as inner city violence (McIntyre, 2000), HIV/AIDS in South Africa (Preston-Whyte & Dalrymple, 1996), sexual and reproductive health in Zambia (Kambou, Shah & Nkham, 1998), immigration issues for Latino populations (Streng, 2004) and teen pregnancy (Luttrell, 2003). The participatory research seeking an adolescent voice has been predominantly done in other countries and focused on health issues. These important
studies have laid the groundwork for future researchers to explore other social issues with similar marginalized groups of adolescents. These studies reinforce the fact that adolescents are a reliable source of data and that they are capable of providing great insight into unexplored topics. Taken together, the literature suggests that the context of poverty in general is influential for a child’s development and can lead to a host of negative outcomes for those growing up in it. Further, the geographical location of the poverty (a rural community) can also shape the development of an individual. Rural youth are isolated, have limited access to resources, and may not be exposed to examples of traditional definitions of success and achievement. Yet, many of these same youth show resilience and success (by a middle class definition). The goals of this research are to gain a deeper understanding of how rural poor youth define their success, resilience, and social mobility and what they see as potential barriers to this success.
Chapter 3- Research Design

Context

This study was conducted in rural Western Maine. It is necessary to provide as much information about the specific rural context as possible so other researchers and practitioners can determine for themselves if the findings could be extrapolated to a similar population (Coladarci, 2007). A clear contextual description sets the stage for what will follow.

In Northern New England (the region comprised of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont), rural families struggle more than their non-rural counterparts. Whereas 23% of rural families make less than $25,000 per year, 15.5% of non-rural families make that same amount (Census, 2000). In Maine alone, 26.2% of rural families make less than $25,000 per year, compared to Vermont (20.7%) and New Hampshire (17%). The population density of Maine is 43 people per square mile; this is exactly one half of the United States’ population density (Census, 2008). Ninety percent of Maine’s land base grows trees, which translates to 17.8 million acres of forest. Ninety-four percent of the forest area in Maine is privately owned (Maine Forestry Service, 2006). The Maine economy depends on several natural resources for its survival. In recent years, the economy has become increasingly fragile. Agriculture, logging, and manufacturing have been the primary industries in Maine.

In the past three decades, jobs in farming and forestry have declined steadily in rural areas of Maine. There are now fewer farms and farm related jobs due to the globalization of farming (Northern New England Kids Count Collaborative, 2004). The
pulp and paper industry has also seen an incredible downturn of late. In fact, during the
collection of data for this study a mill closed in a neighboring town, resulting in over one
hundred workers losing their jobs. Some paper mills have evaded closing by just stopping
production on one paper machine, still leaving a large number of laborers unemployed.
Regardless, these losses greatly affect the local economies of the towns they are located
in. Entire communities built their identities around being “mill towns” and without the
mill, the consequences ripple to other business and workers. In one generation,
approximately half of the farming and manufacturing jobs have been lost. In response to
the loss of industry in the state of Maine, 3% of the total jobs are now in farming, 13% in
manufacturing, and 84% in other industries such as retail and service. Thirty years ago, it
was 7% farming, 24% manufacturing, and 69% other industries (Bureau of Labor
Statistics, 2000). With the rapid changes in the local economies that have occurred and
continue to plague rural Maine, families are now more desperate than ever.

In Maine 35% (98,417) of children live in low-income families defined as income
below 200% of the federal poverty level. The comparable national average is 39%
(National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). Fourteen percent (39,778) of children in
Maine live in poor families, defined as income below 100% of the federal poverty level.
In the United States, 18% of children live in poverty (National Center for Children in
Poverty, 2007). Sixteen percent of the children living in rural Maine are living in poverty,
whereas 20% of the children in rural America are living in poverty (18% National rate)
(Census, 2000).
The poverty guidelines issued by the Department of Agriculture in 1969 involved multiplying a food budget by three. These guidelines are still used today and do not take into account other expenses that fluctuate based on factors such as: geographic region, cost of living, cost of childcare, transportation, and other basic needs. In fact, food costs now make up about one-seventh of a family’s expenses (Cauthen & Fass, 2008). A Basic Needs Budget, or Livable Wage, has been derived to estimate the amount of money a household needs to be able to meet all its basic needs. Typically, families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level to meet their basic needs (National Center for
Children in Poverty, 2007). Table 1 shows the livable wage estimates for the counties sampled for this study. It also shows the median income for each of the counties for comparison purposes.

As Table 1 indicates, all youth participants in this study were living in high poverty areas, with the percentage living in poverty notably above the state average.

**Table 1. Economic Demographics for Counties in Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
<th>Livable Wage</th>
<th>Poverty Rate %</th>
<th>Age 0-17 in Poverty %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Androscoggin</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>$38,054</td>
<td>$46,377</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennebec</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$38,458</td>
<td>$44,034</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>$35,205</td>
<td>$45,182</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerset</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>$32,079</td>
<td>$44,340</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td></td>
<td>$39,212</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
<td>$43,318</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Data taken from Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, 2004
Livable wage based on four-person household (2 earners, 2 children).
2004 poverty level (100%) $18,850
2004 poverty level (150%) $28,275
2004 poverty level (200%) $37,700

The economic condition of the state of Maine undoubtedly affects education systems. Economic deprivation creates distress, which motivates youth to seek employment earlier (Burton, 2007). It also inhibits educational success (e.g. Lohman et al, 2004; Smith et al, 1997) and lowers attainment (e.g. Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Brooks-Gunn et al, 1998). Educational attainment, however, also has the potential to generate an educated labor force with more earning potential and the abilities to change local economies. Although Maine has a somewhat higher percentage of high school graduates than the national average, it does not compare in higher education aspirations and enrollment. Whereas 85% of Maine students graduate from high school, only 30%
are expected to get a college degree (Maine Department of Education, 2001). Almost 70% of Maine’s population reports lacking a college degree and in several counties, this statistic rises close to 80% (Census, 2000).

Respondents for this study were drawn from eight high schools serving rural area in western Maine.

**Table 2. Demographics of Schools in Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2*</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>ME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of students</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% low income families</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% students receiving free and reduced lunch High School</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>53-60</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% people 25 and older without a Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>77.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop out rate (%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College attendance rates (%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
*Grades 7-12/ Jr. and Sr. High School
Income data derived from U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, Table P26
Free and reduced lunch data derived from State of Maine Department of Education, 2008
Education level data derived from U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, Table DP-2
Drop out and College going rates derived from survey done of schools by Upward Bound, 2006
Table 2 shows demographics of the schools on several factors. All schools had small student populations and higher rates of poverty for children under 17 than the Maine state average. The free and reduced lunch rates are of special interest because of the discrepancies between the number of students in the elementary schools and the high schools who are participating. Many high school students simply do not complete the paperwork necessary to receive free and reduced lunch. This statistic is often used by schools as a proxy for determining the number of low-income students in their schools. In high schools, the number may be under-representing the actual population.

What cannot be measured by statistics and figures is the lived experience of rural life. The daily struggles of this population are not easily quantified, but certainly accrue in one’s lived experience. People “from away” as they are affectionately called, may find it difficult to grasp the lifestyle of those living in rural Maine. For many, there is a perception that Maine is “Vacationland” as its license plates say, or “the way life should be” as its motto boasts. Images of Maine are filled with quaint costal communities, dotted with moored lobster boats. The people who walk the streets of these novel seaside villages all wear khaki pants, deck shoes, and L.L. Bean sweaters draped over their shoulders. Indeed, these people do comb the streets and beaches; however, they are tourists who come to select havens in Maine to fulfill their desire to experience the country. What few of these tourists realize is that Washington County, comprised of a string of small costal towns, has the highest poverty rate in the state and the fishermen who own those quintessential white lobster boats are terrified that the next spring they will not be able to put them back into the water.
Every season in Maine brings new tourists to see all of its charm. The “leaf peepers” spend the month of October taking lazy drives to apple orchards and hiking trails. What they may not see is that on the other side of those trees are loggers, making their living doing backbreaking work that called them into the forest when they were still just children. In the winter, SUV’s with roof racks caravan up the mountains to experience “the best skiing in the east” and to spend weeks in condominiums, cleaned by local high school students. But they do not drive those treacherous, sometimes unploughed roads every day to work and try to avoid all of the frost heaves and bumps the cold weather has created. They do not have to get up at four in the morning to start shoveling out their cars so they can make it to work by eight. The lives of rural individuals and more specifically, rural poor individuals are often hidden from the dominant culture. This study sought to bring attention to not only issues facing the rural poor, but a greater understanding of their lived experiences.

Epistemology

This study employed qualitative methods operating within a phenomenological framework. Epistemically, phenomenology stands apart from other forms of qualitative inquiry for several reasons. The main purpose of phenomenology is to understand the “lived experience” of a specific population. This understanding involves employing a method grounded in existential philosophy, which emphasizes intentionality, experience, and perception. Intentionality is deliberateness of the mind and attention on the topic of exploration. Experience is considered to be “an individual’s perception of his or her presence in the world at the moment when things, truths, or values are constituted”
According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), “to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body; all the while the thing keeps its place within the horizon of the world” (p.42). Together these elements allow the researcher to see the lived experience of the population in a way that is true to the individuals being studied.

The early (1913) work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl focused on consciousness as being intentional and directed at some phenomenon. A phenomenon is the object of a conscious subject’s experience as it presents itself (Moustakas, 1994). Understanding how consciousness functions helps one to know how individuals understand their social world. Phenomenology is situated in the constructivist paradigm. Contrastive to a positivist epistemology, this view claims that there is no one reality; merely each individual creates his or her own reality and that reality is an interpretation of the world (van Manen, 1990). Ultimately, “the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (Kvale, 1996, p.52).

There are two assumptions of phenomenology. First, “perceptions present us with evidence of the world...as it is lived” and second, “human existence is meaningful and of interest in the sense that we are always conscious of something” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 45). These assumptions force the researcher to see each participant as an individual with a unique experience of living in this world. Therefore, the researcher does not try to homogenize experience into the generation of a theory, or seek to generalize to the population under study. Phenomenology really is a philosophy; a way the researcher must view the world that appreciates individual experience, voice, and multiple truths.
For this study of adolescents living in rural poverty, the phenomenological lens was most appropriate for truly getting at this human experience. As previously stated, extant research has paid little attention to the constructs explored in this study. The rural poor are an isolated population, who are silenced by the isolation they experience. For this reason, qualitative methodology in general serves to give them voice. However, phenomenology can go further by probing into the lived experience of this population to gain understanding where none has yet been achieved. Also, because few people have taken the time to truly understand rural poor youth’s perceptions of their lives, qualitative methods serve as a way to listen.

In essence, this dissertation is a study within a study. The initial research started four years ago, and primarily focused on using the phenomenological framework to gain understanding about the lived experiences of adolescents living in rural poverty. The more recent continuation of this work employed a broader qualitative methodology, but remained grounded in the overarching principles of phenomenology. Whereas the goal in the initial phase of this research was to produce descriptions of the lived experiences for readers to explore and gain understanding from, the more recent work sought to achieve deeper meaning, while simultaneously expanding the perspectives of the phenomenon of rural poverty.

**Methods**

*Interpretive Focus Groups*

Specifically, this study used the methodological practice of Interpretive Focus Groups (IFGs) (Dodson, Piatelli & Schmalzbauer, 2007; Dodson & Schmalzbauer;
Interpretive focus groups present existing data to new participants who are similar to the original sample based on selected characteristics. These new participants then analyze and interpret those data collaboratively with the investigator. In this study, the participants were shown photographs, and given excerpts from transcripts to analyze. Participants were not asked any direct questions about themselves, as they were only asked to respond to the data they were looking at. This technique was very effective with this population, in that rural adolescents may be hesitant to share the intimate details of their own lives in poverty, yet by talking about the lived experience of someone else’s situation they are able to infuse their own stories and shared reality.

One of the greatest strengths of IFGs is that they give participants the power to tell the researcher what is most important. People living in poverty develop mechanisms for protecting themselves and their lives. Dodson & Schmalzbauer (2005) refer to these mechanisms as “habits of hiding” and claim that there are certain topics people living in poverty may not feel comfortable discussing with an outsider. This can be extrapolated to a sample of youth living in poverty who may find it challenging to divulge personal information to someone who is on the outside for multiple reasons (socioeconomic status, age, gender, etc.). This method allows participants to talk about people who are like them, but who are not them specifically. The distance may be enough to create trust and safety for the participants.

The Rural Poverty Study

The data used for the Interpretive Focus Groups came from a previous qualitative study conducted about this population three years ago by the author (Pratt-Ronco &
Coley, 2007). From here, the study will be referred to as “The Rural Poverty Study.” The Study employed a photo-elicitation interview (PEI) data collection technique. Participants were given disposable cameras with the instructions to photograph an object that represented each of six realms of their lives: family, friends, school, community, future, and identity. Participants also photographed their houses and backyards. After the films were developed, photo-elicitation interviews were conducted. In the interviews, participants were asked to explain how each photo they took represented a specific realm of their lives. Each photo was discussed and although the interview was autodriven (Heisley & Levy, 1991) or led by the participants, the interviewer asked follow-up questions about the photographs and the realms they represented.

The PEI method has several benefits. In this study, the photographs served as a medium to facilitate dialogue. Discussing an object can be much easier for some adolescents than participating in a face-to-face interview. It also puts the participants at ease, knowing they decided what would be discussed in the interviews (what they chose to take pictures of). Photo-elicitation interviewing is “concerned with the subjective meaning of those images for the interviewee that can disrupt some of the power dynamics involved with regular interviews” (Clark-Ibanez, 2004, p.1512). Perhaps the most important feature of PEI is that it allows the participants to teach the researcher about their lives. PEI gives the participants an opportunity to show the researchers what they should be paying attention to. It goes beyond what might have been generated in a semi-structured interview process.
The Rural Poverty Study’s sample consisted of high school students \( (n=32) \) between the ages of 14 and 18. The mean age was 16.5. They represented 25 towns and townships within 5 counties in rural western Maine. There were 22 female participants and 10 males. They were all Caucasian. All participants were in high school: 3 were entering their sophomore year, 11 were going to be juniors, 9 were going to be seniors, and 8 had graduated from high school just before they were interviewed. They had a mean grade level of 11\(^{th}\) grade. All participants were also part of an Upward Bound program in rural western Maine.

Upward Bound is a federally funded TRiO program serving low income, first generation college students nationwide. These are high school students who fall below 150\% of the national poverty threshold and whose parents did not receive a four-year postsecondary degree. (Up to one third of participants need only meet one of the criteria to be eligible.) Started in 1965 as part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” Upward Bound’s mission is to help disadvantaged youth gain access to higher education as a way to better themselves and eventually rise up out of poverty. Study participants’ years of participation in the program varied: 10 were in their first year, 11 were in their second year, 8 were in their third year, and 3 were in the fourth year of the program.

**IFG Sample**

The IFG sample for this study consisted of a purposive sample of adolescents \( (n=26) \), between the ages of 14 and 18, with an average age of 16. They were enrolled in one of six public high schools in four counties in Maine. The participants came from 15 surrounding towns. There were 5 seniors, 8 juniors, 12 sophomores, and 1 freshman who
participated. There were 18 female participants and 8 male participants. Twenty-five participants were white; one was multiracial.

All students whose income was below 200% of the National Poverty Level and who participate in the Upward Bound program at the University of Maine at Farmington were invited to participate in the study. Due to the fact that one-third of the participants in Upward Bound could potentially be over the 150% income guideline for the program, four students were excluded because their parents’ income was over 200%. They were invited to participate via an email sent to their UMF Upward Bound e-mail account. The recruitment e-mail was at a seventh grade Flesch-Kincaid reading level. It explained to the youth that their parents would be receiving a letter in the mail to request their consent for participation. It was made very clear to the participants that the research was not related to their participation in Upward Bound, and that their choice to participate in the research would not impact their status in the program. Further, students were assured that no school personnel would know who was participating in the study, and therefore their grades, or status at their high schools would not be impacted by participating.

The eligible participants for this study were selected by the Upward Bound program because they were identified as being more educationally attached than their rural poor peers. Their participation in the Upward Bound program socializes them into a college trajectory. They are good candidates for this research because they were identified by educators as having a high potential for success (as defined by the dominant culture’s standards). This study sought to understand how they view their potential for success and how they define it.
Parental consent took place after the participants were identified, but before data collection began. Parents received a letter in the mail, explaining the study and asking for their consent for their child to participate. Parents returned the consent form in the self-addressed stamped envelope. The consent form was at a ninth grade Flesch-Kincaid reading level. I was available via phone or email to answer any questions that parents had. The original mailing did not elicit as many responses as intended, thus a second mailing was required a few weeks later to increase participation. Out of 47 adolescents invited, 70.2% received parental permission to participate. Ultimately, of this group 78.8% participated, leading to a total response rate of 55.3%. There were several reasons why some youth who had parental permission did not participate. Several were absent from school the day the group was scheduled to meet. Others had transportation issues or extenuating circumstances that prohibited them from being available.

Adolescent assent took place after parental consent was granted, but before the interpretive focus groups began. The assent form was at a ninth grade Flesch-Kincaid reading level and youth were invited to clarify questions or concerns with the investigator prior to assenting. For any participants who were 18 or older, consent also took place before any data were collected.

The focus groups were held at the high schools the participants attended. These locations were chosen to diminish transportation concerns of the largely geographically dispersed sample. To remunerate participants, there was a drawing for $20 at each IFG session. This is the same amount the students are paid for monthly afterschool group meetings as part of Upward Bound, thus it was no more of an
incentive than they usually received. Participants were paid in cash because a gift certificate would not be practical, considering their geographic location; the distance to the nearest mall or movie theater varies among the schools, but for some it is over 50 miles.

During each IFG meeting, participants were shown excerpts from interviews and photographs from the original Rural Poverty Study using power point slides. The researcher wrote down the “big ideas” the participants talked about as a way to remind them what they said and to check to be sure the information was correct. When each slide was shown, I read the text aloud, and then gave the participants an opportunity to re-read it silently and look at the photograph if there was one. I then asked, “What do you think this person means?” The participants discussed their interpretations of the photograph and text. The researcher also took field notes during and after the IFGs to record important data. Interviews were audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. Both my research assistant and I transcribed the tapes.

Educator Interviews

A second part of the study consisted of interviewing educators (n=13) at 7 schools (5 of which overlapped with the IFG data collection). It was important to gain the perspective of school personnel and incorporate the voice of the institution in the findings, because the topic is success and barriers to achievement. To gain more insight on topics that are most important, purposive sampling was employed. Participants were chosen based on their willingness to reflect on the phenomenon of interest and would have the time to do so (Morse & Richards, 2002). I started by inviting teachers,
administrators, and guidance counselors to participate by contacts already made through
my job with administrators and guidance counselors. In two cases, one of the participants
recommended that I also talk with someone else in the school. Participants were
recruited through email (written at a ninth grade reading level) as well as word of mouth.
The response rate was 100%.

The educators held various positions in their schools. There were five guidance
staff, three principals, two Jobs for Maine Graduates teachers, one school nurse, one art
teacher/class advisor, and one technology coordinator. Eight male educators and five
female educators participated. Collectively, the educators interviewed had over 200 years
of experience working with rural youth. The range was 7 to 40 years, with a mean of 15.5
years.

Interview participants were assured that their participation would in no way
influence their job or status as an educator in their school. Further, no one at their schools
knew who participated. The researcher recruited participants through email (recruiting
email at a ninth grade reading level) and word of mouth. Consent took place after the
participants were identified, but before data collection began. The consent form was at a
ninth grade Flesch-Kincaid reading level. The investigator was available to answer any
questions the participants had. The interview questions were open ended, exploratory
questions about educators’ experiences working with this population, and what they see
as challenges, constraints, and factors that help poor students. To compensate the schools,
I offered a teacher workshop on the topic of rural poverty and adolescent development,
conducted after the completion of data collection. Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim.

One final aspect of this study’s methodology was the use of participant observation. Although this was not an ethnographic approach, it is important to note that I did move to the area where the data were collected, and lived and worked there for over a year while developing and conducting the research. I spent time in each of the schools twice a month for over a year as part of my job at Upward Bound, and came to look at the schools and students through a participant observer’s lens. These informal observations and field notes were collected throughout the course of the project and assisted greatly in retelling the account of the findings.

Researcher Stance

Because the nature of the research is qualitative, my involvement in the Upward Bound program and prior knowledge of some of the participants enhanced the depth of the study and the quality of the interpretive focus groups and educator interviews. In fact, leading authorities in qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003) argue that such a relationship is necessary for the collection of rich qualitative data. Whereas quantitative experts discourage personal involvement and claim it might impact the research negatively, qualitative experts see this as an advantage. Dodson’s (1999) discussion of the idea of “crossing over” into the world of one’s participants is seen as necessary. Crossing over required me to see the other side, acknowledge the differences between my participants and myself (socioeconomically and experientially), and not presume to know
how my low-income participants viewed me. This applied to the educators as well, a
group I also did not have membership to.

Crossing over goes against positivist views of the researcher being neutral and
distanced from the participants. Crossing over requires “spending considerable time with
people; being observed, being tested, revealing before you collect revelations” (Dodson,
1999, p. 246). Crossing over also involves soliciting the “authoritative participation”
(Dodson, 1999, p. 246) of the population in various stages of the research process.

Research Assistant

Research assistants are not typically mentioned at great length, but in the case of
this research, my research assistant was invaluable. I advertised for an RA in late August,
just before the school year started. On Labor Day weekend, I received an email from
Clementine, a sophomore at UMF who was also a participant in the initial Rural Poverty
Study. After serious consideration, I decided that hiring her could be one of the best
things I could do.

Another layer was then added to the data analysis. The original data were
analyzed in this study by new participants, and these new data were in turn analyzed by
an original participant. The bulk of Clementine’s work primarily involved transcribing,
but we also spent time after each interview, talking about what we both heard. I worked
silently to the click and whir of the transcribing machine day after day, waiting for
Clementine to take off her headphones and turn in her chair to share her thoughts about
the dialogue she heard. She was quick to tell me her first reaction to what was said, and
then she stepped back as a researcher and interpreted the data through a more critical
lens. Actually, that is false; her initial reactions were usually more critical. Her participation was an unplanned addition that fit perfectly with the constructivist paradigm.

Clementine pushed me to pay attention to some topics that I might not have otherwise concluded to be important. She often suggested where I should go next. In the end, she added another level to the work that made it fuller and more valid. What she added was a perspective that I did not have. She was sensitive to language in a different way than I was, because she lived a similar experiences as the participants.

Data Analysis

Data from both the educator interviews and the interpretive focus groups (IFGs) were analyzed using Colazzi’s Phenomenological Method (1978). All interviews were transcribed verbatim by one researcher and then checked by the other researcher for accuracy. After the interviews were transcribed, the first step in this method involved an initial reading of the interviews in order to gain an overall feeling for them. I recorded interesting ideas and thoughts on a large piece of newsprint. The second step of Colazzi’s method required extracting significant statements. This was done in two parts. First in vivo, or line-by-line, coding involved reading the hard copies of the transcripts and rewriting the participants’ words in the margins. The point of in vivo coding is not to "look" for anything, but to just see what the data tell. These codes stayed very close to the data, using no interpretation but only the participants’ exact words. This prevented me from seeing what I wanted to see in the data and moving away from the participants thoughts and words too quickly to higher levels of abstraction.
Together, my research assistant and I created a list of codes that represented the most salient themes across all the interviews (educator interviews and IFG data were analyzed separately). This list was also started on newsprint. Initially, we generated a list of approximately 15 codes for the educator interviews and approximately 22 for the IFGs. Then to increase validity, we both coded an interview together. We read through the text and decided which codes to assign to with which pieces of text. Each line of the interview was discussed in detail and debated to create a meaning for each code. We also had to add more codes in order to capture all of the data. In the end, there were 26 Educator Interview codes and 31 IFG codes. Two interviews were coded collaboratively to ensure agreement and inter-rater reliability concerning the meaning of each code.

The third step of the process was metacoding, which was completed using HyperResearch. In this software program, an electronic copy of the transcript was highlighted and the codes were applied to selected chunks of text. The codes were based on the in vivo codes, but were a bit broader to capture all of the elements of the interviews. Some text was coded multiple ways as a check to be sure no data were lost during the coding process. Codes were also memoed about and defined and these annotations were linked to the codes in the software program for future reference. A master codebook was then created which included a print out of all of the data organized by code. It had a table of contents with the codes and their definitions for easy reference.

The final step in Colazzi’s method involved arranging the codes into clusters of themes. The clustering started while the coding in HyperResearch was still going on. Again, I recorded possible “big ideas” on newsprint and hung them up around my
workspace. Most of the “big ideas” revolved around contexts: rural, school, family, and self. These were insufficient in the end. The original codes were collapsed into 26 clusters and these clusters were again collapsed into super-ordinate themes or “tensions.” Table 3 illustrates how the super-ordinate themes or “tensions” can be broken down.

**Table 3. Coding Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tensions</th>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Codes*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insulation vs. Isolation</td>
<td>Rural Life</td>
<td>Rural Life (IFG)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural Factors (ED)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Insulation vs. Isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Opportunities (IFG/ED)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Transportation (IFG/ED)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cycles (IFG/ED)</td>
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<td>Pervasive Poverty vs. Social Distinctions</td>
<td>Economic Disadvantage</td>
<td>Poverty (IFG)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Barriers- financial (IFG)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Financial Factors (ED)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social Distinctions</td>
<td>Academics/Tracking (IFG)</td>
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<td>Everyday things (IFG)</td>
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<td>Poor vs. Rich (IFG)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social distinctions (IFG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
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<td>Cycles (IFG/ED)</td>
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<td>Homelessness</td>
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<td>Risky Behaviors</td>
<td>Risky behaviors (IFG/ED)</td>
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<td>Family influence (IFG)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cycles (IFG/ED)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immediate Gratification</td>
<td>Immediate gratification</td>
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<td>(IFG/ED)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Activities/Entertainment (IFG)</td>
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<td>Grittiness</td>
<td>Grittiness (IFG/ED)</td>
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<td>Hope (IFG)</td>
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<td>Positive Outlook</td>
<td>Personal qualities (IFG)</td>
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<td>Social capital (ED)</td>
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<td>Aspirations vs.</td>
<td>Poverty (IFG)</td>
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<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Personal qualities (IFG)</td>
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*IFG are youth codes.  
*ED are educator codes.
Rigor

Sound qualitative research can point to examples of rigor within the process. Several techniques were used to make this research more rigorous, thus more valid. These include bracketing; prolonged engagement; triangulation; thick description; peer debriefings, double coding, and consensus; reflexivity; and memoing.

Bracketing

The first technique was the aforementioned *epoche* or “bracketing” technique. In essence, the researcher brackets or sets all a priori knowledge about the topic aside, to the extent possible; this includes: theory, research, and experience. Bracketing allows the researcher to enter the data collection process without presuppositions and to attend to the data collection from a stance of “unknowing” or a condition of openness. It requires the researcher to abandon assumptions about the phenomenon. Bracketing is essential because “our relation to the world is so profound and so intimate that the only way for us to notice it is to suspend its movements, to refuse it our complicity” (Merleau-Ponty, 1956, p. 64). This process is also referred to as “decentering” (Munhall, 2001). As Merleau-Ponty said, a researcher must “be astonished before the world.” It is from this place of astonishment that I came to know the phenomenon of interest. It is also critical during data analysis that “interpretations be rendered in terms used by participants rather than in the more abstract language common to a discipline” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 49). Every effort has been made to use the participants’ own words to describe the phenomenon.
Initially, it may seem as if the concept of bracketing conflicts with the notion of “crossing over” as a researcher. To clarify, bracketing does not assume nor require neutrality, for that is unobtainable (Pollio, et al, 1997). Bracketing simply helps the researcher to stay open to multiple truths without allowing prior knowledge to direct the meaning making. One cannot be neutral, for as Dodson (1999) reminds us, “neutrality is known only as collusive silence” (p. 246).

_Prolonged Engagement_

Another way to increase the validity of the findings from this study was my immersion in the community. Through prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Munhall, 2001; Padgett, 1998) with the phenomenon, one can come to a deeper understanding of it. Living in the community allowed me many of the same experiences as my participants, among them being: harsh weather, rural isolation, and small town life. Further, my involvement in the schools where I collected data gave me the opportunity to be treated not as an outsider, but as one of the community. I was able to establish a rapport with the educators I interviewed and was regarded as someone who was on their side (crossed over), rather than an outsider coming in to “study” them. Munhall (2001) describes that the experience of one’s research will “take up residence” (p. 138) with the researcher as well if immersion take place properly.

_Triangulation_

Triangulation is a technique involving using two different methods, theoretical perspectives, or data sources to get at the same research question with the goal of looking for “convergence” in research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). “By combining several
lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantial picture of reality; a richer more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these documents” (Berg, 1995, p.4-5).

In the case of this study, there were several methods used for collecting data: Interpretive Focus Groups, individual interviews, and observations. The data sources were also two different groups: adolescents and educators. The topics where there was corroboration shows that those data are more reliable because they were captured in multiple ways.

Thick description

The technique of thick description (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) is very important in qualitative research. This involves providing as much detail as possible to set the stage for the reader. Thick description is used in multiple places in this study. First, I needed to describe the rural context, particularly in Maine. As previously mentioned, this description is necessary to give readers enough information to determine for themselves if the findings are generalizable to another similar population. Second, thick description is used in portraying the details of the IFG’s, as this is a research method that is still fairly new. It is important for readers to understand what was going on during the collaborative analytical process. Finally, thick description was used in the methods section as a whole in an effort to create transparency in the process (Padgett, 1998). Again, this allows readers to see for themselves how decisions were made.

Peer Debriefing
Discussing emerging themes and ideas during the process can be extremely beneficial to the researcher. My research assistant was invaluable in listening to me talk about ideas I felt were starting to be important. The debriefing (Padgett, 1998) I did after interviews, after transcriptions, and after analysis helped me to justify each step of the process and to get input from another person who had read the interviews. This was also useful during data analysis because we were able to work together to achieve consensus on emergent themes.

Reflexivity and Memoing

Memoing, or writing reflectively about the process, is one way to achieve bracketing, but also a way to be reflexive during the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Reflexivity involves reflecting on one’s role as researcher while simultaneously coming to know oneself within the research context. Reinharz (1997) says, “we not only bring the self to the field...[we also] create the self in the field” (p. 3). I journaled and took field notes throughout the entire research process: during the initial design and proposal stages, after each interview, during data analysis, and after discussing findings with practitioners. Researchers begin phenomenological studies “with self reflection” (Munhall, 2001, p. 154). This process helped me to keep in check and to be aware of what was going on as my research assistant and I interacted with the data. Memoing provides a means for establishing the difficult balance between “analytic distance and emotional participation (Luttrell, 2003, p.163), both of which are important for the qualitative researcher.

Organization of Findings
The adolescent participants took their roles as researchers, data analysts, and experts very seriously. They were thoughtful about the photographs and text that others before them had provided. They tried to refer to each other by pseudonym and fully claimed the job that they were asked to do.

I have made an effort to use both the educators’ and adolescent participants’ words as much as possible. It is imperative that their voices be heard, using their own words to convey their lived experiences from their points of view. “Each individual participant needs our reverence for their individuality and their way of expressing meaning” (Munhall, 2001, p. 151). Very little editing occurred, and only in places without which would make the essence difficult to understand. The authenticity of the dialect has been preserved as much as possible in an effort to capture the individual personalities of the participants and give them individual voices. The result is a polyphonic representation of the reality of rural poverty.

Names

A 281-mile stretch of the Appalachian Trail winds through western and northern Maine. Most of the Appalachian Trail in Maine is not recommended for novice hikers. The weather is especially extreme and the terrain is rocky and steep. The wild country of the “Hundred Miles” is an isolated area, skirting the region of Western Maine where the data were collected. As part of their pilgrimage, most thru-hikers assume a new identity—a trail name. Historically, hikers have given themselves trail names to represent who they want to be during their journeys. These names carry great significance for their bearers.
As I began writing the results in narrative form, I was troubled by the fact that I could not attribute the words of the participants directly to them to give them the credit they deserve. Dodson (1999) reminded me of how “powerful is the issue of naming” (p, 248), that I took very seriously myself. All of the names used here were self-selected by the participants. It is clear that the adolescents used their creative freedom to characterize themselves and give them a new identity for the duration of this pilgrimage we were on to co-construct meaning.

The educators, on the other hand, gave me names and explanations for them. Several used another family name, or a variation of their own given names. One teacher even asked his students what his pseudonym should be and they created it from the acronym for his job title. In the few instances where I was unable to obtain a pseudonym from the participant, I named him or her after one of the most influential educators in my life. I felt it important to still give them names with meanings that could bring out their identities as we set out on this adventure together. My identity also changed as a result of this project. My “trail name” will not be awarded until I complete my journey, but what it will represent has felt much like the “Hundred Miles” of the Appalachian Trail.
Chapter 4- Results

The findings of this study shed light on a topic researchers know very little about. What follows is a presentation of the most salient themes and ideas described to me by both the adolescent participants and the educators I interviewed. During data collection the two groups never mingled; here they work together to tell the story of rural poor adolescents.

There are two overarching themes which categorize the data collected: pervasive poverty and hope and resilience. The adolescents at the center of this research are surrounded by want and deprivation. They are isolated from resources, opportunities, and wealth. Even their perception of “rich” is skewed by the fact that they live in towns where mill workers make the most money. The reality of just how much adversity rural poor youth face on a daily basis is disconcerting. However, there is hope shining through the barriers and challenges poverty creates.

This hope can be found in the individual resilience of rural poor youth and the characteristics they possess that help them overcome arduous circumstances. It can also be found in the educators who know and understand their plight and work every day to support their struggling students. The presence of educated role models and some underground practices serve to show poor adolescents what they can become and how they can “rise up” out of poverty and potentially “change the history of their families, forever.”

The findings from this study are organized in five thematic “tensions.” The tensions are comprised of opposing forces acting on adolescents and affecting their
abilities to be socially mobile. The tensions occur within several contexts: rural communities, schools, families, and the inner lives of adolescents. Underlying these tensions are also hardened cycles; ongoing series of actions that perpetuate poverty. They are difficult to interrupt, thus making poverty virtually inescapable. Even with supports in place, the cycles of poverty may have the power to overwhelm the positives of hope and resilience and generate negative outcomes. Conversely, the cycles also provide potential points of intervention that, if effective, could affect an individual at multiple levels.

The rural context can be difficult to imagine for someone who has not lived there. People who visit or vacation in Maine may have one perception, while those who actually live there have another. In my interactions with the participants in this study, they collectively painted a clear picture of what rural life is like. The most prevalent issues educators cited related to the rural context were insulation and isolation. On either side of this tension are the positives and negatives pulling in both directions

**Insulation vs. Isolation**

“Who can take their BMW mudding?”

I walked into the classroom where I was meeting with seven IFG participants. They had already thrown their heavy backpacks on top of desks and were milling around, awaiting my arrival. Before I set up my computer, I dumped a bag of snacks on a desktop. Teenagers swarmed around, selecting their favorite flavor of gummy snacks or Kudos. The classroom was not ideal for what we were doing. All of the desks had chairs attached and were difficult to move. I suggested we try to make a circle out of them as best we could. They willingly obliged, but in the end, we had a mismatched pile of desks
and people. Blaine sat sideways in his chair; Daisy dangled her legs over the top of the desk where she was perched. It was not important to them that the arrangement of chairs be perfect; they were just eager to get to work.

The adolescents talked candidly about their experiences living in a rural area. Often they started joking about the novelty of being rural. Much discussion revolved around pridefully identifying themselves by where they come from. A lively conversation at one of the larger high schools in the sample revolved around trailer parks. Participants were laughing about owning “double wides. . . double wides with trailers. . .double wides with add-ons,” and “let’s refer to it lovingly as a triple wide.” Another focus group of all girls at a smaller school, twelve miles away, described “mud season” as an unofficial fifth season in Maine. Mud season is especially fun because they can “go mudding” which involves driving a car into a field that has become “a mud pit. . . .And then you just get your car stuck and then you gotta hike up them jeans. . .and get unstuck.”

It seems as though the adolescents interviewed have created their identities around their circumstances. They do not appear to have developed a stigma related to poverty or ruralness. Erikson (1980) suggests that their identities might be impacted by the social stigma of living in poverty. However, they seemed to find humor in stereotypes that can stigmatize individuals, thus dissociating them from others. These adolescents did not seem to feel individually isolated.

“We’re everywhere, that’s us,” said one boy, laughingly. Another student, named Kent, acknowledging the present-day economic situation, commented on the sense of community they share in their small towns.
Even in a small town like this one...there are people who struggle, but...other families help out. You’re kind of on your own, but if you are in a town like this...you have other people who are willing to help you out.

The spaces between where they live, where they work, where they shop, and where they go to school made defining their setting difficult. Distances between homes and distances to town centers blur the definition of a community or neighborhood. Some towns are mere extensions of other rural areas. Describing rural existence is also difficult for professionals who serve this population. Even a Jobs for Maine Graduates teacher, Mr. Grover, struggled to simply describe the rural context.

If you drove here you noticed that we don’t have a town. You know, I mean where’s the Main Street with all the stores?...That doesn’t exist. I mean, just the sense of community which is very strong ‘cause if someone’s got a flat tire on the side of the road they’re bound to stop and help. But at the same time where does the community meet if were gonna hold a parade? I’ve been here for years and I would have no idea.

In a supply closet with no windows, a technology coordinator, Ms. Scott, told me about how rural adolescents at her school lack “experiences outside of their town.” This was echoed by a guidance counselor who stated that students do not have exposure to “just being in a city where they can walk around and see where other people live.” The struggles of being poor are compounded by living in a rural area. Propping his feet up on the desk, Mr. Grover shared his thoughts.
The distance from stuff is brutal. . .because you have no money. ‘Cause we’re talking about a poor population. Are they going to choose to spend gas money and valuable resources, you know that could be a meal or whatever, to go see a play or to even drive to the coast which is free but just to drive and get there? I’m not sure if they would.

“Success is local.”

Other educators emphasized the lack of perspective that comes with living in a rural area. Students lack information and resources because they simply do not exist. A passionate school nurse, Ms. Walker, expressed her frustration about the lack of perspective of her students.

How would you know? You wouldn’t know. . . .These kids don’t. Their worlds are very narrow. Many of them have never left Maine. I mean anything they know of the outside world they only know from TV, which you know how realistic is that? It’s from some idealized, crazy TV show that’s creating other illusions about what the real world is all about.

Similarly, Ms. Brown, a guidance counselor expressed her concern especially about the boys in her school who have a limited perspective about learning and its importance in their lives.

It’s almost like a cultural thing that these boys who wear the skidder boots and are looked down upon if they like to read, and they don’t get out enough to know that’s not the facts. They don’t meet new people who like to read and are awesome they just stay in their little pods and think reading is stupid. And it holds
them back. They need “experience.” I think that’s the biggest problem. I think they have the ability. . .but they hold themselves back.

Why is the rural context so influential for students? How does it actually affect them? A guidance counselor said succinctly, “success is local” in his small school, where over sixty percent of students take advantage of free and reduced lunch (it is in fact more likely that about eighty-four percent qualify, but do not complete the paperwork in high school). The principal at this same school was able to explain the meaning of local success with a vivid example.

They know what has existed in the community for years, and they sometimes set goals around that, so in other words if their parents. . .did not graduate from high school, but they seem to be doing okay, that’s good enough for them as well. . .sometimes, it creates what we refer to as educators as low aspirations, for them it’s not. . .but just the exposure is a big thing.

“Opportunities, opportunities to interact positively. Um, opportunities.”

One of the first ideas mentioned by educators as a rural barrier was lack of opportunities. Educators noted students had limited access to employment opportunities, broad curricula, and diversity in general. Being far away from metropolitan areas limits students’ opportunities to visit museums and access diversity in the form of other cultures and people who are different from them. Primarily educators cited employment opportunities as being very limited by the rural context.

Because, rather than living in a highly populated space where it’s filled up with jobs and stores and. . .opportunities to work and help earn a wage, we don’t have
that here. The jobs that are available for students are few and far between and they’re all fighting for the same ones. . . .So, by living in this kind of an area the lack of opportunity is what really prevents a lot of that other stuff from happening. ‘Cause if they lived in Portland. . . there’s more opportunity for them than if they’re living up way up in Albion, or you know, Clinton Variety’s really the only place in Clinton [to work].

Educators also talked about how the rural context impacted the school. In a school of approximately 300 students, they are offered two different foreign languages. They [students] have a lot fewer opportunities then they would at a big school where they might be able to offer three or four languages and certainly a lot of the bigger schools that are able to offer five years of foreign language as opposed to two. . . .Whether they’re rich or they’re poor they still have a lot fewer opportunities by living in a rural area.

At a school 60 miles north, there is only one foreign language offered and it is through a distance learning program where the teacher is not physically present in the classroom.

Another guidance counselor related to the issue of curricula in rural areas. “There may only be one physics class not three different physics classes to meet your needs, or they may not have a physics class at all.”

Students felt their opportunities were limited by living in a rural area as well, but their lack of experiences outside of their community made it more difficult for them to articulate. It is almost as if they do not know what they are missing, but educators with more life experience are more aware of what students are missing out on. There was one
pervasive theme that became obvious almost immediately and resounded in every IFG I conducted: transportation.

“I need a vehicle.”

Transportation is the most obvious challenge for rural poor youth to cope with. In Western Maine there is no public transportation, which leaves youth spending a great deal of time securing rides to and from activities. “Transportation is a burden,” a teacher told me. Cars were also on the minds of the adolescents in this study. Conversations unrelated to cars often drifted back to them. A photograph of a truck (Figure 2) elicited immediate reactions from participants. The photo was taken by a participant in the Rural Poverty Study to represent his identity. About it, he said, “I don’t come from a rich fancy background. I come from driving around clunkers like this and I’m alright with that, I’m fine with that, for me it’s been quite character building.”

Figure 2. Photograph of truck.

“That’s cool” said a girl. Chuck, a boy with duct tape wrapped around the corner of his glasses to hold in the lens reacted with, “Sweet.” I prodded, “Why do you say sweet?”
Chuck smiled. “Just ‘cause it’s a good truck.” He was not making it easy. “How do you know it’s a good truck?” I asked. “‘Cause it looks like the engine’s being held together by duct tape.” Participants used cars as analogies to illustrate class differences. One girl explained, “like some people have really really fancy expensive cars. . .those people with the fancier cars would seem the cooler people—“ She was interrupted by another girl who eagerly chimed in “they’re not really as cool as they think they are. It’s just the car that’s cool.” The car talk always digressed requiring me to pull them back together.

It’s funny because I was thinkin’ about this the other day. I need a vehicle [laughs]. I just got my license and I don’t have one, and I was looking through the Uncle Henry’s [Magazine] and I’m sayin’, like, “hmm two thousand dollars or under. A ’92 Ford Explorer with a broken clutch? Nope!” However, at times it was important to let these conversations go on because it was obvious transportation was an important issue. Occasionally, it was clear the topic was weighing on their minds when it would surface as a barrier or a challenge. “Maybe if their family doesn’t have a car” was the definition one shy young man gave for the phrase from the previous study: “not having everything together.” Participants also cited transportation as a barrier that might prevent a person from going to college.

Lack of transportation also prohibits students from participating in extra curricular activities, and from being able to work in a rural area. A guidance counselor said,

I think they may be less apt to be involved in school because of their transportation and for kids who are low socioeconomic status and rural. . .they’re gonna maybe be a little more apt to fall into that category because the family
doesn’t have the gas money to come back and forth, or . . . one vehicle, or . . . work second shift. . . . Whenever the bus runs, that’s when and how you get home.

Mr. Moody, a principal with 26 years of experience working with rural youth provided a description of the end of the school day and the distinctions he sees related to transportation. “If you stand out here at this door at this intersection of this hallway, when the bell rings the poor kids go out that door to the bus; the kids who are more well-to-do go forward to the car area.”

I myself ironically felt the strain of the issue of transportation just moments after I left the aforementioned interview. I wrote a memo about the frustrating experience that I later looked back on as great insight into the lives of my participants.

I decided to stop at the gas station in town that is famous for selling gas for about five cents cheaper than anywhere else in central or western Maine. And because I am on a budget, I need to get cheap gas. I filled up my tank and then my car wouldn't start. Being in rural Maine and knowing no one (no social capital for me), I had to have it towed 30 miles back to Farmington (at $3 a mile after the first 5 miles). Then, I took it to the guy who has his own garage because he has the best rates (and I can't afford to have VIP figure out what is wrong with it). And he isn't open on Fridays (this was a Thursday), so he couldn't look at it until Monday. I had to reschedule my next data collection appointment because I had no way to get to the school. In the midst of all of my stress and mental breakdowns, I just tried to use it as research. My experience echoed what I have been hearing in my interviews about transportation being a barrier to so many
things. I understood what it was like to be stranded, to have to bail on something at the last minute because I had no other choice, and to not get my work done because of something beyond my control. So, $500 later I understand what "researcher as participant" means!

Clearly, lack of transportation creates both physical and social barriers. Opportunities are already limited and then the lack of means to access the few opportunities that are available makes life a challenge. Lack of transportation may be the most debilitating barrier for rural people. Rural individuals may feel that their only way out is by having a vehicle. Unfortunately, owning one often comes with a host of other challenges that can make life harder rather than easier.

“A cycle you can’t really break.”

In the Rural community the most prevalent negative cycle is the car → job cycle. Essentially, rural poor adolescents need jobs, but in order to get those jobs they need transportation, then the jobs become necessary to afford the vehicles, and no financial progress is made because all the money earned goes directly into the cars. Repeatedly educators gave descriptions of the car → job cycle and the impact it has on rural adolescents’ futures.

Not living in the city they’re dependent on vehicles to get anywhere. . . . They’re failing their classes and they’ll say, “Well, I don’t have time ‘cause I’m working” and I’ll say. “Well. . .why do you have to work?” “Well, I have to work because I need a car.” “Well, why do you need a car?” “Well, because I need to go to work.” But I think they feel they need cars to get to school, and just to be able to
do anything. There’s no public transportation around here so kids really don’t have opportunities to get anywhere unless they have a car. So the fact that they feel they really are in a position to need a car then often requires them to get a job because low income parents can’t afford to pay for a car for them, so then the kid has to get a job. . . .Once they get a job and they start working it’s even harder for them to quit that job and go to school because they’ve gotten used to having money, even if it’s not a lot of money at least it’s some money. And so they don’t wanna quit their job and go to college.

There are also cycles revolving around transportation to health care. Ms. Walker, a school nurse who characterized her job as much more than that, described her frustration with the cycle of health care access for rural youth.

I think when you limit access to transportation it goes beyond that because then kids can’t get to programs. They can’t get to appointments with a counselor. They can’t get to Augusta to get their Maine Care. They can’t go to their appointment easily in Augusta for getting their KVCAP [Kennebec Valley Community Action Program] or their food stamps. So although you can set up KVCAP transportation, you can’t do the KVCAP transportation until you’ve been certified, and if you’re not certified you can’t get transportation. So there are always these barriers where you need A to get B but you can’t get one without the other so you’re caught in this, you know, it’s just like a cycle you can’t really break.
She described a similar cycle related to making and keeping appointments. Health care providers who accept Maine Care may not be local, requiring transportation to access them. In a middle class world, individuals receive phone call reminders of their upcoming appointments (low-income individuals often have phone numbers that change frequently or cell phones that get shut off). In addition, middle class individuals likely already have the appointments recorded in their electronic organizers or planners (low-income individuals may not have these organizational means at their disposal). Finally, health care providers are intolerant of missed appointments. Too many missed appointments results in termination of care. If a low-income individual is relying on others for transportation to appointments and the transportation arrangement falls through, the individual will miss the appointment and may not be able to return to that provider. Ms. Walker continued to lay out how these same individuals may then be denture-less and have foul smelling breath, which affects their ability to get a job. They may also have chronic health issues like asthma, resulting in missed school that turns into academic problems. As one of my educator participants said, "The system doesn't acknowledge the barriers and try to develop the infrastructure to minimize the barriers." So the negative outcomes of living in poverty are perpetuated.

Although rural adolescents face many barriers related to their geographical distance from opportunities, there may be protective factors in the insulation from negative influences that may not be present in more urban areas. Mr. LeClair, a principal told me,
that insulation is sometimes helpful. . . . There’s a distance, an insulation that
keeps ‘em a little bit safer. Some of the trends and things that that you see happen
it takes longer before they reach here and that’s that insulation.

These arguments beg the question, does the insulation of the rural context outweigh the
isolation of it? A nurse surmised that the students she works with are

not used to seeing the larger social institutions that can support them, because
they’re not immediately accessible to them by virtue of them living more out in
isolation. And I think although there are some benefits to rural life, it is more self
limiting.

Unfortunately, the comfort that insulation creates also often results in a myopic
view of the world around them. This view is then reinforced everyday as they look out
their windows and walk down the streets of their towns, past the rundown homes of their
peers, the solitary market struggling to survive on the main street and the devastating
closure of the mill down by the river, the beat up trucks parked on the front lawns. They
see that everyone looks just like them. There is resignation to an idea that this is the way
life is always going to be.

Pervasive Poverty vs. Social Distinctions

Rural life alone creates limitations, but when the challenge of poverty is added,
the outcomes are compounded. Poverty creates a barrier to adolescent success, resilience,
and social mobility. In terms of its interaction with the rural context, participants
primarily saw poverty as another factor yielding negative outcomes.

“He just doesn’t wanna think about it and just be able to do it.”
At a school where I had rescheduled our IFG meeting twice because of snow days and bad weather, I read the words of a boy their age. In the Rural Poverty Study I asked him, “In ten years, do you think you will be like the people you go to school with now?” The Rural Poverty Study participant replied with, “Probably we’ll just be average people, still livin’ in Maine, just getting by.” One girl, living in the county with the second highest poverty rate in the state remarked,

that’s how life is here, in most of Maine just gettin’ by. . . .Because probably most of their parents . . . didn’t go to college or anything. And he knows that college is expensive so he’s just gonna skip college and settle for a minimum wage job and that’s just gonna get by.

Some participants also felt that the interaction between the rural context and socioeconomic status could yield a positive outcome. “As a community and as a people, not having much money can sometimes draw you together” said Kent. “You think of close knit communities, you think of people having respect for one another,” he later added.

One major commonality among adolescents living in poverty is the primacy of locating and providing for basic needs, the lack of which often influences their health, limits their ability to put time and effort into their studies and class work, and strains family bonds. Students are often forced to either relegate their education to a secondary activity, or find creative ways to stay afloat.

“I need a space heater.”
At the first IFG meeting I conducted, I brought six scarves I knitted with me. It had been a particularly cold week. Elementary schools were having inside recess, people were leaving the cabinet doors under their sinks open at night to prevent their pipes from freezing, and I was accumulating “projects” and needed to be rid of them. When I arrived at the room where we were meeting, I sheepishly told the group of five girls that I had some scarves I made and if they saw one they wanted, they could have it. I then laid them out on the table and proceeded to set up my computer and materials. They looked over the scarves, handled them, and by the time I turned around, each one had chosen a scarf. As we talked for the next hour, they wore their new scarves that suited them perfectly. It was evident that one of the biggest challenges educators see their students facing is that their basic needs are not getting met. Mr. Massey, a guidance counselor explained,

School is almost secondary to their lives and their focus is on. . . day to day stuff. . . . “Am I gonna get fed when I get home? Are my parents gonna be there? Am I gonna be on my own? Am I safer not going home? Is it a better environment somewhere else?” It’s not, “What do I have for homework?” and, “Did I bring all the books I need home? And “Who do I call for help if I don’t?” Those aren’t the issues that are pertinent. I generally think if they can’t get it done within the six hours at school, it’s gonna wait until the next opportunity.

Educators felt that at times, for poor students, “just getting to school every day is a success.” Some educators have been around long enough to see that this concern for
basic needs is a shift in the focus of the education system. Ms. Brown, a guidance
counselor of 18 years explained the contrast.

I think our biggest barrier used to be that students didn’t seem prepared
academically for college because their families don’t really respect education as
much as they should . . . Now the challenges have become more, “Is the student
cold? Is the student hungry? Does the student have a home?” I used to talk to
students, “What can we do to help you succeed in class? What can we do to help
you get a better grade?” It used to be, “I need more help in math. I need
somebody to help me in my study hall. I need to have less homework.” Now it’s,
“I need a space heater.”

With pain on their faces, educator after educator unraveled stories of hardship
they heard or witnessed. Teachers heard stirrings in the hallways of students whose
bedrooms were not heated, who ran out of oil, or who kept the furnace below 60 degrees,
even when it was 20 degrees below zero outside. These interviews took place during a
time in Maine when the snow was deep and the state of the economy was part of every
conversation. More families were struggling and more families were reaching out to the
schools for assistance. Some schools were receiving desperate phone calls from parents
who were purposefully living in freezing cold homes in order to have enough money for
food. Still others relied on the school’s free and reduced lunch (and breakfast) programs
to feed their children, because those were the only meals they were getting. The historical
context of this study must be acknowledged because it is an important factor. The topic of
poverty was on the minds of educators and they too were desperate. Desperate for the
answers to how they could possibly help their students; to how they could give them hope when they themselves were in doubt.

We have kids who couch surf who live in multiple homes and I always wonder, what’s their access to food? What’s their access to expendable income to buy just personal care items? You know, shaving cream, deodorant, new socks, new underwear? I mean, they’re living from one place to the next and I always ask them that. “What do you do when you need something for yourself who gives you the money?” And a lot a times it’s another impoverished family who’s sharing their limited resources for the benefit of another.

“You give homework? They don’t have a home!”

The issue of homelessness was salient throughout the interviews, but in very different ways. The definition alone was on a spectrum. At one larger high school, school personnel determined that “at least fourteen kids” were homeless. They defined homeless as not living with a legal guardian. On the other end of the spectrum, Mr. Massey, at a smaller school did not think of any of his students as homeless because they all had a “home to go home to” (it just might not be their own). He called them “stay-overs.” Falling somewhere in the middle on the homeless scale was Ms. Brown’s perspective that just because a student is living at home, does not mean it is a good place for him to be. “One girl lives with her mother but her mother is remarried and she lives in a basement corner. So she’s not really homeless, she still lives with her parents but, I consider it homeless.”
As Dodson (2005) says, the poor use “habits of hiding” to protect themselves from authorities. Homelessness seems to be disguised by students in several ways. One way they hide it is by “couch surfing” which involves staying at a different person’s house each night. This could include extended family or friends. This results in an inconsistent living environment and could also create safety issues. The other way adolescents hide their homelessness is by stretching the definition of “family.” Some educators talked about the definition of “family” being somewhat loose for their low-income students. This is another example of the fact that youth can say they “live with their grandparents. . .and then we find out they’re not really even grandparents, [but] people who say they’re grandparents.” Protective mechanisms such as these make it difficult to fully grasp the scope of the homeless population in any given school. Most educators do not know how many of their students are not living in their own homes. Unfortunately, some also feel they “can’t come right out and ask someone ‘Are you homeless?’ I mean, you can, but it’s generally not tactful.”

Why are students homeless? Educators attributed it to dysfunction within the home. Sometimes the family is “abusive,” other times there are people in the house whom the adolescent does not get along with. Ms. Geiera, a guidance counselor, seemed very frustrated by the choices some of the parents of her students make. She described scenarios where mothers were choosing a new boyfriend or a new husband over their child. I can’t believe how many kids have basically had to leave their home because they couldn’t get along with the stepfather. . . and the real [biological] parent doesn’t seem to have the
wherewithal to intervene, and say “this is my child and I’m gonna support that child.”

She further went on to explain why some mothers were choosing relationships over their children.

I think part of it is financial. . . .A lot of the women, they don’t know how else to live, don’t know how they’re gonna afford to support themselves so they just hang in there in abusive relationships. Again, I see a lot of kids that kind of are living on their own, or they’re staying at friends’ houses.

A school nurse added that it was “amazing that some of them [students] are able to rise above and be as successful as they are. Even get to school,” considering the constant necessity, in many cases, to find their own shelter and to plumb their depths of resilience.

Adolescents did not talk about homelessness in their groups, but they did talk about teenagers they knew being kicked out of their homes. The adolescents noted that when children are kicked out, their parents regularly rely on the local police to find them and bring them back, claiming their child ran away. These teens often earn a reputation as being runaways when the reality is otherwise.

Parents will kick kids out six, seven, eight times a year and so the kids won’t be able to go back, and they don’t even know that their parents want’ em to go back until they [the teens] get picked up by the cops.

This creates a level of confusion about where they belong and to whom they are responsible. Conger’s (1994, 1999, 2000) Family Stress Model helps to explain how the strain of poverty experienced in the household can impact parenting practices,
consequently impacting adolescent outcomes. These examples make it clear that poverty is extremely stressful for families. Educators commented on this concept in reference to parental role models and how their poor students do not have other role models from other socioeconomic statuses to encourage them to see beyond their communities.

“When you come from being poor or when you come from being rich.”

Despite the fact that rural poor youth are surrounded by poverty and deprivation, they still see social distinctions. These distinctions, however, are relative because no one in their vicinity is particularly well off. One participant stated it honestly when he said, “we live in rural Maine so we’re not gonna know that many rich people.” Henrietta, from another focus group also talked about this idea when she said,

In our town there is really no rich. . . .There’s poor and there’s less poor and then maybe a little bit lower middle class but nobody really has an overabundance of money everybody has to worry about if they’re gonna be able to pay their bills that month, and everybody’s kinda poor . . . .We’re all on the same level around here.

A teacher echoed the students’ sentiments when he described the hallways of his school.

We certainly talk a lot about diversity and what that means here, because you walk through the halls and if you were blind you might realize that we were diverse, but we don’t look any different than anybody else. Most of the people are wearing their Carhart pants and their work boots and a plaid shirt and, if you were rich or if you were poor, maybe the only difference would be is that they weren’t Carharts, they were just a different type of pants. . . .You don’t see diversity as
much, but it exists. It exists in the parking lot a lot more. You can tell who has money and who doesn’t. I don’t think the kids would recognize that as diversity, that some people have and some people don’t and that that makes you different. Interestingly, adolescent participants did not see many socioeconomic distinctions within their communities, but they were aware of social class distinctions in their schools.

Adolescents’ perceptions of how they stood apart from their more affluent peers gave insight into the reality of their school experience. The consensus for these participants was that in the end, being poor is better than being rich because people who are rich “have everything handed to them” and do not “actually work for that.” The assumptions that the rich have a different life were based somewhat on concrete evidence or experience. “If you’re poor you’re on the wrong side of the tracks and there’s not a lot a people like you.” One girl said, “rich people have more opportunity to participate in some of the things the poorer people just aren’t able to. . .[like] stuff within the community.”

The understanding of differences between rich and poor also affects students’ academic success and their choices for the future. A senior girl, valedictorian of her class of 15, planning to attend college in the fall said,

there’s a completely different way to act when you come from being poor or when you come from being rich, and if you go to a Yale or a Harvard everybody there, or most everybody there, is gonna have a substantial amount of money to be able to go. And once you get there it’s gonna make it a lot harder for you, ‘cause that’s a completely different social climate, and it’s just thinking about that. . .is scary
enough on its own not how you’re gonna pay for it. . . .It’s complete different standards all the way around that we don’t have here.

She continued to articulate how she came to the realization that these differences exist and how they shaped her thinking.

One of the most important teachers I had would always say, “they can tell who comes from money and who doesn’t, and it’s gonna be hard for you. Are you sure that’s what you wanna do?” Nobody thinks that coming from small town Maine you’re gonna go anywhere and nobody is willing to push for it ‘cause they settle for the community colleges. . . . It’s what they can afford, and it’s what comes natural, and they don’t want to push any further. It doesn’t register at a young age that if you try hard you can get good grades and you can get a full boat scholarship. That’s not the way that we think. It’s, “we’re poor now, we’re always gonna be poor,” so just do what we can do.

Adolescent participants in this study spoke about how they understood social distinctions between themselves and others. On occasion, the discussion revolved around social groups or cliques at their schools; at other times, it was directly related to money. On occasion, the separation was a manifestation of their perceptions of differences, at other times differences were imposed on them by others. Whereas the perceptions of social differences have the potential to be a reflection of the individual realities of students, the concrete examples participants offered to describe those differences show a more collective aspect of the issue.
Participants described the social divides in their schools based on two characteristics: similar interests and similar backgrounds. Conversations around social groups with similar interests tended to use the word, “cliques.” Participants identified the cliques in their schools as “bullies, athletes, hick, preps. . . . Anime. . . and social outcasts.” These groups are identified by who is “sitting together at the lunch table.” One of the IFG conversations was reminiscent of a theme that emerged in the Rural Poverty Study. After describing all of the social groups his school, a young man, Blaine, labeled himself as a “blend.” I had heard this before, just not in such a succinct and perfectly chosen word. In the Rural Poverty Study, my participants said they “moved from group to group.” Blaine defined blends as “regular middle people who are just kind of stationary; they’re just all around.” The other members of the group caught on to this new phrase and used it for the rest of the conversation. All seven participants in the group labeled themselves as “blends.”

One question still left unanswered by this study is whether participants (in both studies) used their lack of identification with a social group as a protective mechanism. In other words, does calling themselves “blends” or saying their friends are from “mixed groups,” prevent them from having to say they are not in a group considered “popular” by their peers? Perhaps rural poor youth do not feel a strong sense of belonging to any particular social group because they do not feel a sense of belonging in their schools in general (Felmer et al., 1995). They did, however, see other social distinctions within their schools.
The other characteristic that created social separation was money. Typically, this manifested in clothing differences. “How much money you have. . you can have different clothes so they [rich students] dress almost the same, and they have certain brand name shoes instead of the cheap stuff, so they kind of identify you for that.” Jane, who told me when I was setting up the equipment for the meeting that she bought her jeans at the on-line clearance section at American Eagle, noted “Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle, not everybody can afford that, and your school’s sectioned off.” Her thoughts were followed by Henrietta who said,

if your school’s sectioned off into different categories by what you wear and how much money you have and all that stuff, then the amount of money you have is gonna be how much you spend on clothing. So. . . if you have to shop at Wal-Mart you’re not gonna feel as good as shopping at American Eagle.

Social distinctions potentially lead to other forms of segregation that are rooted in material differences. Sally, sitting sideways on her chair, described a potential scenario where there is “somebody bullying another one that has more money, and possibly they’re like, “Well ha, ha you don’t have this.” And “You’re not cool because you don’t wear Abercrombie sweatshirts everyday.” At another small school where over 50% of the students received free and reduced lunch, a young man said matter-of-factly, “people will judge you on how much money you have, how nice are they?” He seemed frustrated when he came to the conclusion that people do this because “they won’t see past that to see who you really are. They judge you on what you look like. On what you have.”
I would be remiss if I did not point out that these adolescents who spoke so poignantly about being judged by people with more money than them also cast judgment themselves. They often assumed that people with money “have everything they want from the start,” or that they have things “handed to them.” Participants concluded that they would “rather come from a poor family. . . than be spoiled” their entire lives.

“They feel they’re better I guess.”

Another social distinction conversation at one school illuminated just how aware of class differences students are. Studies (e.g. Kelly, 2004; 2008; Lucas, 2001) show tracking is an issue for low-income student success. Low-income students tend to be placed in lower tracks even if they match their middle and upper class peers in all other ways. Tracking has lasting effects on students. Educators talked about tracking in their schools minimally, but I was surprised to hear it addressed by the adolescents. They were very aware of social class differences in upper level honors and AP courses. For some students, being in an AP course can be a social struggle because the majority of the other students are from a higher socioeconomic background.

A lot of my AP classes [students] seem to be, they have more money they’re like, “Oh my God I woke up and it was cold.” And I’m like, “Yeah I wake up and it’s cold everyday. “Oh wow, I have so much bills, hmm oh sixteen dollars for a t-shirt sure.” It’s like. I guess it just depends.

A group of participants at a high school an hour away also struggled socially in Honors English Three. “The people who make more money will take over [in class] because they feel that they’re better I guess? They might just think they’re smarter.” Participants
described a division in the classroom between the “rich people” and the “low-income people” where the rich students do not ask for the poor students’ opinions in class or include them in conversations. One girl who talked in questions referred to her honors level classmates as “cliquey?”

Back at the school with a student population one-third the size, Blaine caught my eye and raised his hand to let me know he had something to say. He waited patiently until another participant finished talking and then with an angry tone in his voice explained his thoughts on such distinctions in upper level classes. “I believe the majority of kids in AP classes have been premedicated [sic] and bred for success. Like their parents have trained them and shown them everything to do.” Moments later, he caught my eye again and made another gesture to let me know he had something more to add. “I don’t have the same heritage as they do. I was not bred from the moment I was born to do that kinda thing.”

Two quick girls bantered back and forth during an entire group session. They played off each other and finished each other’s sentences. The girl on the right rationalized the tracking dilemma with something she learned in her Sociology class; her friend on the left finished her sentences:

Herald: In Sociology we talked about parents who went to college, and they are pushing their kids. Most of the time parents who went to college have more money than parents who didn’t, so there’s the richer and then the not as rich. That prob’ly creates some of the division too, but the students who are in honors classes and their parents didn’t go to college are in there because of their own
behalf and their own willpower and the other people are just in there because their parents want them to be.

Hildagarde: Yeah last year was pretty bad—

Herald: In History yeah.

Hildagarde: Maybe that’s the reason, ‘cause I know a lot of people in those classes like their parents are teachers and everything, so prob’ly their parents are pushing them more than they want to push themselves.

Herlad: Maybe that’s their reason for not really, you know, acting like they care, or acting like they care about other people in that class.

The underlying theme is that students perceived to be from middle class backgrounds already have a positive future planned, one that will not involve hard work or hardship, and where a college education is taken for granted. Low-income students, driven by the need to provide support for their families, trapped in the car→job cycle, academically impacted by tracking and attendance issues, may resentfully find themselves working to meet all these needs, and transfer that resentment onto those in higher economic classes. Once enmeshed into the daily responsibilities of work and family, these adolescents may find it difficult to leave and pursue other goals. This may in turn lead them to become involved in alternative forms of escapism.

Consequences vs. Adaptations

“Willing to take the chance.”

Both adolescents and educators alike talked about what is referred to in the field as “risky behaviors.” This refers to actions that put a person at risk for negative
outcomes. Typically risky behaviors are characterized by actions like drug and alcohol abuse. Despite the fact that both groups talked about risky behaviors, their perspectives differed. *Educators* discussed the topic in relation to their students and how they were engaging in these activities. *Adolescents* discussed the topic in relation to their families and how they were witnessing risky behaviors in their homes.

The educators who talked with me expressed regret about what they saw from their students in terms of negative behaviors. Ms. Brown raised her voice, gaining momentum as she described a situation in her school.

I’ve seen an increase in violence, so I think that we as a society aren’t really aware of the challenges that do exist right now. . .we don’t even know how bad it is. We haven’t faced it. . .Our kids, all of them, are in a total crisis.

Ms. Geier described similar behavior problems in her school and recalled a conversation she had with a health teacher about this very issue. The teacher told her, ‘I have more problem kids in my classrooms here then I did when I worked in inner city Boston.’ Ms. Geier was struck by the health teacher’s observation and tried to understand why this situation was occurring in her school.

I thought, wow that’s really weird. I said [to her], “Why would that be?” ‘Cause I’m thinking, you know, big city you’ve got the gangs and stuff, and she said she really thought it was because they [the students] didn’t have anything else to do so they come to school. So the problem kids in Boston are finding a lot of other places to hang out, but in rural areas there’s no place else to go, so they come to school for their social life.
Later in the interview, she went back to the topic of students with behavior problems in school and why they are present.

They might be here to sell drugs. I felt in the past that some kids were just coming to make drug contacts. . .Again, if they were in a city like Boston they’d be getting those drug contacts in a lot of other places; they wouldn’t have to come to school to do it. And if they don’t have a car then they can’t drive anywhere to sell their drugs so they have to come to school to sell their drugs.

Ms. Walker, a school nurse, also shared her fears about the potential for future risky behaviors that could be a product of the lifestyle rural poor children are living. “I think about the kids I know who live in a more rural part of our student population, they seem to have high availability of firearms. . .I see that as a risk as well.” Listening to her concerns, I questioned if the access to firearms was related to hunting and if, in fact, the students with guns in their houses were also trained to use them. She responded saying,

I think it might be perhaps food. I think it’s largely sport and culture. In terms of training, I don’t know if they’ve all taken hunter safety (laughs), or if they’re really as safety conscious as they should be. I know they’re not. I know there have been situations where I’ve had conversations with kids who go out in the fall and they’re not properly clothed and, you know, that’s a really dangerous situation. . .

The access to the firearms even though it might not pose a safety threat on a daily basis, the nature of kids. . .can be explosive, and if they’re already working with limited resources, and they’re frustrated, and heaven forbid there should be a mental health issue, you know you don’t know if that availability could. . .cause a
problem in terms of, you know, somebody using a weapon in a way that’s not appropriate. If it’s ever appropriate.

Several educators also commented on the adolescent girls in their schools who were pregnant. One guidance counselor with twelve years of experience working with rural adolescents, felt that “recently [there are] more teenage pregnancy issues.” Mr. Martin recalled several students he worked with who did not reach their goals due to pregnancy. He described another cycle, the occurrence of which has the power to keep individuals in poverty. He told me,

in my opinion, [they were] not choosing the best of partners, and then becoming pregnant, and then dealing with the child, and still trying to go to school and work at McDonald’s and everything else, so it’s just always a struggle. . .the same old pattern over and over.

Poor young women may not see early childbearing as something that will drastically alter their life courses or prevent them from reaching their goals (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). This attitude may be in part because for low-income young women, pregnancy in adolescence may only happen a few years earlier than they had expected it in the first place. Conversely, their middle and upper income counterparts view early childbearing as an event that would come about ten years before they planned.

Adolescents’ participation in risky behaviors does not necessarily indicate that they are not thinking about their futures or lacking perspective about how the present affects the future. Even poor choices may show agency (Hauser et al., 2006); a sense that
they can in fact exert control over their worlds. The opposite of agency, complacency, would be far worse. These may be signs of the process of resilience at work.

Whereas the educators implicated the adolescents in the risky behaviors, the adolescents connected the behaviors to the adults in their lives. Even when the conversation was not directed at discussing issues such as drugs and alcohol it often went there. Many times drugs and alcohol were referenced as offhand comments, giving some insight into the lives of these adolescents.

Sitting beside me at the conference table, Jane mentioned several times that she had plans to leave Maine and go west as soon as she graduates; she described what happens to people who do not leave.

You’d be surprised by how many people after they stay around. A lot of ‘em are like junkies and things and everybody’s like, “Oh we’re in Maine, that doesn’t happen..” Really? . . . We got a lot a pill heads . . . Like they do a lot a pills.

On several occasions, participants cited drugs and alcohol as reasons for family conflict or dysfunction. I presented the groups with a quote from a participant in the Rural Poverty Study. The text said, “I’m hoping I don’t have to worry about living pay check to pay check and hoping I can put food on the table for my kids.” In each group, I asked the adolescents sitting with me to talk about what they thought this teenager could mean by that. Sometimes there was laughter and a series of affirmative responses:

Fredrick: That sounds like me yeah (laughs).

Telissa: Me too.

Mary: I think that everybody thinks that.
After the initial nods of affirmation, Kent, playing with his baseball cap on the table in front of him offered, “Like maybe like smoking cigarettes? Like people that smoke cigarettes spend so much money on cigarettes, and like that could be part of what they could buy for food in their house.” Telissa, sitting next to him added, “Also the way, like, her parents spend their money. They could, like, be throwing parties all the time, going out drinking, and stuff. It’s gonna affect the kids no matter what.” Other participants offered hypotheses for why the original participant felt worried about the future. “Maybe she lives in a really dysfunctional family and she doesn’t wanna be that way.” A girl who offered very little in her group said, with her hand over her mouth, “I think that’s everybody’s problem.”

The tenth slide in the series of data presented to the IFGs displayed an excerpt from an interview with a girl named Kelly. In her interview I asked, “Do you think you’ll be the same or different from your parents when you are their age?” Kelly told me, “I hope to be much different. I don’t know, just have everything together.” This phrase “have everything together” made me curious during my original data analysis. What does that mean? What does it look like? The IFGs were my opportunity to better understand this phrase and gain more insight into their vision of the future.

The initial reactions to the presentation of this quote were responses to my original question about being the same or different from one’s parents. “Oh God I hope not.” “Definitely I do not want to be a drunk who lost his license or someone on disability.” A girl quickly identified with Kelly, “They don’t feel like they have good role models at home, that person.” Another student also related,
I think this person is tryin’ to say they don’t wanna . . . end up like their parents or other big figures in their lives. I feel the same way I don’t want my future to be like that of my parents. I don’t want my future to be that like a lot of different people’s parents that I know. I want to have my own life set up the way that I enjoy it and I wanna be able to take care of my kids as well.

And another said, “I think they. . . don’t wanna be like their parents. My mom dropped out in eighth grade and my dad dropped out in ninth grade, so I wanna get my life together.”

Participants offered their ideas about Kelly’s life: “Could be a divorce situation.” “She can see one parent drinking all the time. . . or down and depressing and not having everything together.” “The family’s goin’ all crazy and things aren’t goin’ right.” Perhaps Kelly wanted to “not be drunk all the time and, you know, doin’ drugs.” A young man explained, “How you grow up is who you become. . . like what kind of influence. . . if you’re in an abusive home then you’ll probably grow up to have the same kind a feelings towards others.”

“A cycle you can’t really break.”

In the family, the cycle that seemed to present itself was one of negative influences leading to negative behaviors. For some of my participants and many of the educators, it seemed like the family is very influential. From a young age people begin developing their scripts (Hudson, Sosa & Shapiro, 1997; Lucariello, 1998), which are the cognitive structures that influence how they think the world operates. The scripts one creates for how “typical life” should be will influences a person’s development, and in
some cases turn into internal working models (Main & Goldwyn, 1998) which impact
future relationships. So, if there are negative influences in the home (or low
expectations), scripts are developed around these negative influences and/or low
expectations. Children begin to believe that what they experienced is the way the world
works. This can be detrimental to their progress in some cases.

A young woman, who was very good at talking in levels of abstraction when
analyzing the data, stated it very clearly when she said,

where you come from and, like, how you grew up has a lot to do with, like, the
person you turn into, and what’s important to you, and your values and your
morals, and what’s been instilled in you when you were growing up. . . .Unless
you know what that is that you came from, you can’t actually know who you are.

Educators also feel the family has a huge influence on student outcomes. A guidance
counselor stayed afterschool for nearly two hours to talk with me. She kept returning to
the topic of family and how she saw it playing a role in development and how she wanted
to

help these parents understand that some of the decisions they make are so harmful
to their kids that and even if they don’t do the harmful things, that their lack of
encouragement. . . just doesn’t get their kids where they want ‘em to go.

Clearly, the behaviors educators see in the school setting are a product of the
modeling students receive from their families. Perhaps this points to a place of
intervention for schools. Perhaps a step back to insert themselves at the family level
might help educators to interrupt some of the negative impact the family is having on
children, and thus stop it from entering the school. Engaging in risky behaviors may be an extreme form of escapism, but there are also smaller, daily distractions that seem to occupy the rural poor. Participating in risky behaviors may set a tone for living in the present, and not thinking about the future.

“Immediate gratification.”

The home environment shapes the personal expectations of students. According to one guidance counselor, a noticeable attribute of the home environment is the need for immediate gratification. Once when delivering supplies to a home because the family was in financial distress, Ms. Geier noticed they owned a large, flat screen television. “I see... .kids who say, ‘I can’t afford to go to college’ but I know they’ve got snowmobiles, and they’ve got boats, and they’ve got big screen TVs.” Her frustration was apparent. “There’s no savings, there’s no college fund, so again I think their values are different regarding...how money is spent.” This was perceived by the students in the study as an inability to make hard decisions now in order for better things later.

“Everybody just likes to go with the flow; they don’t like hard things or challenges. They like simple. Instead of drawing a masterpiece, they’d rather draw stick people.”

Some students did acknowledge that college is just one path to choose. “Could mean that you’re just choosing your different path and instead of going to college you may decide to go on a road trip for a year. You never know,” Mary offered. “You have a whole world of opportunities to do all kinds of different things, but it depends on what you do.” Not planning for the future could be adventurous, and choosing one path could be limiting. But a guidance counselor was a bit more concerned about these short-term
decisions, particularly “when. . . all they had to do was get a job and get a vehicle. . .that short sightedness. And that’s where they’re happy. Sometimes. . .they see success as the immediate gratification of the money in the hand.” A female student named Destiny saw how having a job impacted decisions about post-secondary education at her school that has less than 75 students in her graduating class. After a boy named Joshua stated that most of his senior class had no plans for after high school, she added that most of them seemed fine with just getting a job.

In tandem with short-term rewards seemed to be an accompanying need for the escapism provided by entertainment, a relief from the quiet and isolation of rural life. “I would wager that if you went in to almost any of my students’ homes there would be background entertainment. . . the TV would be on, a movie would be on, someone would be on the Internet,” claimed Mr. Grover, who has worked with this population for 14 years. Specifically he cited the need for noise and distraction.

I think that in places of poverty, that silence. . .they hate it. There’s always some entertainment, people over standing on the tailgate of a pick up truck talking, socializing, and. . .not much time spent doing crossword puzzles, or with your feet kicked up on the couch reading a book.

As a result, the chaotic home environment (Evans et al., 2005) then affects what happens in the classroom. When students are asked to work quietly, to take tests, or to read, there is a restlessness that is palpable; a need to fill the quiet spaces with something other than silence. “Silence at home just doesn’t exist. . . .It almost feels like something’s wrong, if it’s quiet.”
Despite what seems like perpetual negative outcomes associated with living in rural poverty, there may be good that comes from adversity. Adaptive mechanisms develop which serve to protect youth against some of the risks poverty presents. Participants in this study faced constraints from their environments in the form of unmet physical and emotional needs. It is also important to point out that their experiences can bring out incredible individual strengths.

“There’s a kind of grittiness that comes from poverty.”

A protective factor that one educator described as an “anti barrier” is what he referred to as “grittiness.” Grittiness came to be defined by this research as a strength both physical and psychological. Examples of grittiness were salient throughout both the educator interviews and the IFGs. The teacher who coined the phrase defined it and then discussed its etiology. “People in the world recognize the toughness that it takes to live in rural Maine. . . . A lotta these kids are physically tough because they split wood, and they hay, and they shovel snow.” Somehow, this physical strength and predilection to hard work translates into an attitude or frame of mind. He described what his students might hear in their homes.

“I never did that why do you think you need to do that? We’re just fine”

. . . I think that’s kind of a grittiness that comes with poverty. I mean, you don’t wanna raise your kids ashamed of the situation that your’re in. . . . You don’t have as much money as other people around maybe, so they kind of get this gritty, you know, toughness about them and they just tell. . . their kids, “we’re not gonna have Christmas this year,” or “we’re not
gonna have--” whatever it might be. “You can’t apply to college ‘cause
we’re never gonna be able to afford it.” I just think the kids feel limited. .
or maybe I feel limited for them because they may not even know what’s
out there, because they’ve never been presented with some things.

Primarily, the concept of “grittiness” became a positive attribute that could
potentially be capitalized upon when working with rural students to help them see how
much strength they actually have. However, there may be another side to this idea that
can have a detrimental effect.

You’re in rural areas, it’s always been a do-it-yourself world. . . .They’re
farm owners, they’re live-off-the-land people, or hunter-gatherers. They
just aren’t used to having outside help come in. They’re used to taking care
of it themselves, and they’re hard workers. But that’s work, it’s focused on
day to day. Not. . . “five years down the road where do you think you’re
gonna be?” They’re hoping they still own their house probably [and] have
enough food to feed their kids. It’s day-to-day battle.

Planning for college requires a longer view, not something that comes easily to
this mindset. This do-it-yourself philosophy further impacts students’ willingness to ask
for help, whether it is in the classroom setting answering questions, or when exploring the
process of applying to college. Mr. Masssey, a guidance counselor of fourteen years
stated, “I think there’s some level of embarrassment. . . .Some level of fear. . . .I don’t
think it’s something that comes naturally.” This grittiness creates a fear of weakness,
especially when educators and guidance counselors put students in a position where they may have to admit they simply do not have the answers. “It goes against every grain.”

The adolescent participants did not use the word “grittiness,” but they applied the concept when discussing their futures and the challenges that lay ahead of them. Blaine demonstrated an underlying hopefulness when describing his situation. “We’re down there,” he said, actually pointing to the floor. “Down low but looking up.” Others saw the paths ahead challenging but not unexpectedly so. “The road looks rougher. . .but it looks like it’s going to better places,” explained one girl. “It might be a bit harder, but in the end it’s worth it,” added another. Finally, Joshua seemed to encapsulate the impact of grittiness on their goals. “Their dreams are their strength and they don’t wanna give up, ‘cause they don’t wanna show that they’re weak they just wanna keep going and prove they can be something.”

Mr. Grover aptly summarized the character of these communities. It is about “getting by on beans and rice and if you really wanna shake it up for dinner you eat rice and beans. . . .That type of attitude just seems to live here.” Having grittiness and being willing to take on challenges does not mean one can overcome every barrier. Poverty places constraints on individuals that compound the challenges of being rural.

“You hope that whatever you get lasts.”

At the end of each IFG, I took out a twenty-dollar bill and drew a name out of a manila envelope to give one winner the money. Hemuro, a boy fascinated with Japanese anime, won at one particular school He was very excited about having cash. “What are you going to do with it?” I asked. “Buy Vault [soda] because you can’t buy it with food
stamps.” I always gave him a ride home when I was at the school, because his mother did not have a car. On this day I told him I needed to stop at the grocery store and asked if he would mind going with me before I took him home. He was fine with it and when I mentioned that he could spend his winnings while we were there, he thought it was better than fine.

The adolescent participants discussed the limitations that poverty creates for them very openly. Whereas they have hopes for their futures and like the idea of looking ahead, they also acknowledged that their families do not look so far forward; they have present day realities and present day needs that have to be addressed first. “I wouldn’t ask my mom for sixteen dollars for a t-shirt,” stated Destiny. “She wouldn’t be able to afford it. There’s no way.” “I pay for it my own way,” added a boy. This recognition of their daily realities was a common theme as they considered poverty and how it impacts their futures.

When asked about barriers that could stand in one’s way, the first response was always “money.” Lana, a senior said, it’s hard because you can’t go to like these super big colleges because you don’t have the money for it. And so they’re [others] saying “oh big college big money you can’t make it you’re not, you don’t have that kind of money there’s no way you’ll get accepted.”

These adolescents had a rationale for how the cost of postsecondary education would prevent them from going to college.
College. . .they can cost a lot. And, well, it’s hard to make a lot without going to college. . . .If you get a student loan you need to get it co-signed and [if] your parents have bad credit it’s not gonna happen.

It does not mean, however, that they did not seek to find positives in their deprivation. In one case, a student found motivation from the absence of resources. Listening to the quotes from the original study, one boy surmised, “They want to have more than what their parents did maybe ‘cause. . . .their parents live paycheck to paycheck and they struggle a lot.” He then came to the conclusion that this could be the catalyst for pursuing a college education, so that they would not “have to worry about all this stuff.”

A female participant offered that “coming from families that don’t have much I think our dreams are more realistic then the people who have a lot of money.” An outcome of this conversation is an interesting insight into what students coming from poverty perceive as the goals and capacities of those in higher economic classes. Perhaps fed by pop culture images created by TV and movies, one girl stated that, “for people who have a lot of money their dreams and goals are obviously going to be different and it’s a lot easier to attain them. They have enough money to get everything that they dream for.”

This theme emerged again when I met with five students in an IFG. It was immediately apparent that I was meeting with a highly intelligent group of adolescents. The group itself repeatedly gained momentum until they were all talking at once, and someone would interrupt the chaos and bring them back to the specific task at hand. I never minded their digressions because they always seemed to lead to something profound. At the halfway point of their data analysis, I read the quote, "I can't do things
people who are better off can do. I don't know, just everyday things." The ensuing conversation was a list of "things" like sports, driver's education, and extracurricular activities. Then one young woman, Hildegarde, stopped the rapid firing of ideas with her take on the text. "'Everyday'... is I think the word that needs to be really emphasized. I guess it kind of means in a way they’re suggesting society has accepted the things that the better off people do as 'everyday things.'"

The participants were very aware of the limitations they face. They see the destructive behaviors around them, and even recognize that role modeling may be influencing them regardless of how much they wish to be different. Still, they also see the strength their families possess in the face of hardship and acknowledge the hard lessons their parents have learned. A subtler impact on these participants that may not be so readily apparent to them is the difficulty in seeing the long-term outcomes of their present-day decisions. The immediacy of cash in hand outweighs the benefits of delaying these rewards for the sake of a college education, especially when, to many of these youth, the barriers to college appear oppressively large. Ironically, the hopes that their families have for them and the dreams they have for their own futures are pitted against familial expectations, both real and imagined, that they will be there when the family needs them.

Aspirations vs. Expectations

“Pulling your weight.”

Family obligations seem to be non-negotiable, and often require sacrifice. According to one student, Fredrick, rural poor adolescents “might not be able to play
basketball or soccer or anything because they need to. . .help out at home.” Helping out at home might include “babysitting for siblings while parents work,” cooking meals, paying bills, doing chores around the house, or taking care of a sick parent. Rural families are often forced to rely more heavily on immediate family because extended family is too far away (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003). Not only do family obligations limit one’s participation in extracurricular activities, but might also create barriers to the pursuit of higher education. One participant responded to the data presented by telling a story of a male friend who,

tried to go to school and their parents. . .were divorced and they lived with their mother and they pretty much like begged him to stay. . .he obviously couldn’t leave because he couldn’t see his mom just not be able to pay the bills and have her lifestyle change and all, so he stayed home and he worked two jobs while she worked like one part time.

At times, the responsibility that falls on adolescents in rural poor families seems to be much more than they should have to manage. Often, adolescents share in not only the physical responsibilities, but also the psychological as well. There is pressure that comes from being committed to one’s family. “You have to. . .help out your parents as much as you can because you’re worried about it yourself,” said one participant. Other participants talked of times when they took on more responsibility than some of their peers might have to.

Kids have to worry. . .some of ‘em. . .have to take care of their brothers and sisters because maybe the activities their parents participate in would be more
like what you would think of a high school kid, but then they just never grow out of it and they [adolescents] wanna be put together.

Many rural low-income families really need their children to be contributing to the sustainability of the family, economically as well as practically. Their children are adultified (Burton, 2007) through the responsibilities they are given. The responsibility to the family, and the necessity to help when financial distress occurs, also looms over their college considerations. A guidance counselor noticed a common pattern. As the students get older, they are asked to pull more of the financial weight for the household. This becomes particularly acute if one of the caregivers becomes incapacitated.

I’ve seen it before and I’ll always see it, it’s that piece of a puzzle. I’m gonna work, it’s more important, therefore their education goals go out the door.

Sometimes if it’s a parent that gets hurt, you know they don’t have insurance, or very limited insurance…now they [children] are the extra income to provide food…on the table.

Choosing familial responsibilities over continuing education more often than not wins out. The ever present possibility of assuming a portion of the parental burden, of protecting their families from financial difficulties, and missing out on opportunities that their peers participate in can create a huge psychological weight for a lot of these youth.

“Building bridges or . . . jumping off bridges.”

A recurring idea for the adolescent participants in this study was pressure and stress. Repeatedly, participants used the words like “overwhelmed” or “goin’ nuts” to describe the way the pressure put on them made them feel psychologically. The pressure
seemed to come from two sources. First, the adolescents put pressure on themselves in response to the hardships being faced by their families. This self-imposed strain within the family context then has the potential to influence choices made by the adolescents that impact future success. “They’ve seen their parents. . .struggle to get things done, and being worried and seeing how that puts stress on everybody else and they’re afraid that they’re gonna live the same way.” The participants in this study said that their other rural poor peers have many worries and concerns for the future based on how they have been raised. In some cases they even acknowledged that these worries and fears may be greater for them, than more affluent youth. Joshua, who had recently turned eighteen (he proudly signed his own consent form without needing parental permission), explained, saying,

I just wanna know I can provide for the people that I live with, my family, without any troubles at all. To be able to know that I will always have food in the fridge for them [and] always have a bed for them to sleep in. If I have that then I have everything.

Blaine, another boy in this same group, but three years younger, echoed this sentiment when he said, “I want to be able to just go through my day and. . .not have any trouble on my mind while I’m trying to go to sleep.”

The second source of stress and pressure comes directly from family members. Once again, the pressure placed on adolescents is a response to past mistakes and missed opportunities. The participants in this study who talked about this particular kind of stress did not see it as motivational for them and did not necessarily think it would make them more successful in the future. One young man described his point of view.
I think there’s a lot more pressure on those who don’t have an income, because not only do they want...to make a lot of money and be able to do things in their life, but they hear from other people how they should be doing it. And the parents who are really pushing for their kids to do that, they push and push and push but they don’t realize how hard it is because usually they took the easy way out.

When this type of pressure turns into an expectation, adolescents feel overwhelmed. Destiny shook her head saying, “My mom wants too much for me.” Another boy summarized the feeling as “All those people, all the pressure.” Conversely, at a school about 25 miles away, a group talked about how adolescents hear from their communities that they will not “make it.” “There’s only so much doubting a person can take before they just give up,” stated one participant. I challenged them by asking them to reflect on a dissimilar situation:

Interviewer: What if you tried to reverse it in your head? What if everyone was telling her, “You’re going to Harvard. You’re going to Yale. You can be it. You can do it. You can be the first one?”

Fredrick: That’s a lot of pressure. Yeah that is a lot of pressure.

Telissa: Yeah.

Mary: Yeah that’s a lot.

When Fredrick first saw the photograph in Figure 3 he did not hesitate to say that the reason the bridge represented the future is because the photographer is “either thinking about building bridges or he’s thinkin’ about jumping off bridges.” When I asked him to
tell me why “jumping off bridges?” He shrugged and replied, “’cause there’s a lotta stress.”

Because the parents and caregivers of these youth have more urgent day-to-day issues that need to be addressed, many youth perceive unrealistically high expectations being placed on them to provide support for their families in the here and now, and to forgo the pursuit of a college education that will take them away from home.

“We’ve come to the conclusion that they are all at risk.”

Whereas the adolescents in this study talked about their parents putting a great deal of pressure on them to achieve in school, sometimes with a lack of understanding of the barriers that might be standing in their children’s way; educators cited low parental expectations as an issue. One guidance counselor had a lot of experience with parents who lacked expectations for their children and had strong views on how such parents influence youth’s future success.
They haven’t had the parental role models to encourage them along the lines of going to college. Their parents never went. The parents are, I think, often times intimidated by the school setting, so...a lot of parents won’t even walk into the high school, much less encourage their kids to go to college. And, so I think a lot of it is lack of expectation maybe, you know, that the parents don’t have the expectation that their kids are going to be able to go on to college so they don’t...encourage their kids to go on to college.

Mr. Grover, a Jobs for Maine Grads teacher at a similarly small school, attributed the lack of expectations more to poverty than to a fear of the school setting or of the future. He said,

the expectation for them to go on and do something with themselves is very low because they’re, this might not be necessarily true, but it’s just my opinion...they live in poverty because they’re generational poverty, where it’s just been going on and on and on forever and they don’t know that there are other options and opportunities out there.

Educators felt strongly that setting high expectations for students was important in order to assume a role that parents in the dominant culture more typically fill. Another JMG teacher, Mr. Martin, explained how he accomplishes this in his classroom on a daily basis.

My feeling on dealing with these students is to set the expectations extremely high, because for so long nobody expected them to do anything, so they just assume that there’s no expectations, and I think when someone finally starts
putting higher expectations [on them], they realize “well this person really thinks that I have some ability, or, you know, there’s some options.

The larger issue may be that parents of high school students may not have the confidence to address academic issues with their children. Research ((Kelly, 2008) suggests that low-income parents may not feel comfortable talking to their children’s teachers, or even know the educational jargon to advocate for them effectively. The structure of the school may prevent them from feeling like an equal part of their children’s educations. In the Rural Poverty Study one young man told me that he never told his mother when there were events going on at school because of the way “they treated” his mother. He protected her from the feeling of inferiority the only way he could.

One teacher contemplated that it is also possible parents are so focused on “keeping food on the table and staying one step ahead of the landlord, they’re not spending a lot of time worrying about [their] kids’…access to quality classes.” This sentiment once again echoes the Family Stress Model. For many parents, the best thing they can hope for their children is to graduate from high school. Expectations are typically on the more fundamental tasks requiring attention.

The parents expect them to do stuff around the house you know help out that way too. First, before school too, you know “Have ya fed the animals? Have ya taken out the trash? That’s gotta get done first before they start focusing on the other.” For the parents, the reality of day to day existence may set expectations for the students that are high enough. As Lareau (2003) reminds us, low-income parents tend to prefer “natural growth” to a more deliberate approach. Their unreasonable requests may stem
from the fact that they really do not know the parameters of high expectations created by the dominant culture. They know they are “supposed to” expect a lot, but actually believe that their children will develop naturally, without intervention.

The principals who participated in this study also emphasized low aspirations as being a barrier for student success. Mr. Moody was exasperated by how being rural and poor affected students’ aspirations. When asked to articulate the barriers he saw his students facing, the first thing he said was, “aspirations based on modeling or lack of modeling. They have no basis to think outside their own world. ‘How could I possibly be different than what I’m aware of? What I’ve grown up with?’”

What is the etiology of low aspirations? Have aspirations actually gotten lower over the years for low-income rural students? Mr. Karter, a principal of 40 years and alumnus of the school he now leads, reflected on the change he witnessed in student aspirations.

I think the job market back years ago was much more . . . appealing to kids who just wanted to graduate from high school . . . back in the eighties or late seventies they were gonna work in the paper mill when they got outta high school. They knew that’s what they were gonna do and many of ‘em are down there now. Jobs are not that available here anymore. So we say that they have low aspirations but I think we’re targeting a larger group of kids. We expect a large percentage of our students to go to a two-year [or] four-year college. So I don’t know as aspirations have changed. . . . I think some of it is perceived and some of it’s real, it just depends on how you look at it I guess.
For these adolescents, the pressure from family to stay and help, and the expectations
from teachers and administrators to pursue other goals that may pull them away from
their communities, often collides with their own aspirations as well as their fears of the
unknown. For these students the question is which direction should they go?

“A feeling of leaving”

Sitting with a group of eager adolescents, pouring over a laptop with photographs
and words from other rural poor youth like them, the energy was palpable. They squinted
to see the details in the photos and reread the words, silently mouthing them. They were
looking at a picture of the bridge in Figure 3, with its accompanying text: “Some days
I’m thinkin’ about going to college some days I’m thinkin’ about just getting in my car
with my friends and taking off.”

No sooner had the text been read then nods of affirmation and giggles of relief
started to sound. Shyly they looked down when I tried to make eye contact. “No it’s
okay, what are you thinking?” I asked. “I like that one,” said Tea, a senior. “I understand
that,” said a freshman. The fact that they “liked” the quote was a response to the stress
and pressure they described in their lives. Leaving might be a way to escape the
challenges that sometimes felt insurmountable. Lana, a senior, whose initial reaction was
a laugh, explicated.

Coming from a small town and such a low economical status everything is a
bigger struggle. There’s not as many things given to you so college is one of the
biggest that we all have to face. And I feel the exact same way some days; I
would love to just give up. It would be easier to give up and be miserable about it
than it would be to keep pushing for it and have what I want, you know. It’s easier
to make excuses than it is to actually do something and it would be a lot easier to
just get in a car and take off and not worry about anything but what happens when
you run out of gas?

These responses echo Corbett’s (2007) work that suggests that for rural youth, success is
equated with leaving one’s town. Often it is inevitable because there are no post-
secondary institutions near then. According to Crockett, the geographic facts create a
dichotomous dilemma for adolescents: the only way to be successful is to leave
everything behind.

Many participants felt the words resonated with them. When they were asked to
put themselves in the person’s shoes and describe what he or she might be experiencing,
they were quick to fire their hypotheses. “Kinda sounds like that person’s thinking about
anywhere but where they are right then.” And when asked to describe the significance of
the bridge to the person’s future, they knew exactly what it represented: “Getting away. .
. .Sometimes when you cross a bridge you’re going into a new town. So he could be
going someplace new he’s never been before.”

After the visceral response to the text, participants began talking more about the
prospect of leaving their towns as well as the state of Maine. Several said they would
need to leave in order to pursue the career or studies they want. Many said they would
eventually return to Maine, but probably not to the town they grew up in. Why would
they want to leave their hometowns? “Maybe they’re just tired of the little po’ dunk little
town they live in, you know, they just wanna leave.” Still others attributed the feeling of wanting to leave to something more.

Maybe it’s that they wanna make themselves proud. But at the same time they wanna make their friends and family proud? And sometimes when they just don’t really care, on those days and they figure out that they’re disappointing their family and friends, that it makes it hard just to stay here and do the usual same routine. And sometimes they just wanna leave and runaway. Maybe that’s it. There is a pull to the unfamiliar, “goin’ somewhere new experiencing different things,” as one student put it, but at the same time there is also fear. “‘Cause sometimes goin’ to college seems like the option but then they get thinkin’ about it, and there’s downsides to college like money…’cause you’ll be in debt.” The question of leaving or staying is a pivotal one.

“Into the woods.”

The family has a powerful influence on how rural poor adolescents make decisions for the future. In some cases, home life situations can motivate individuals to reject their kin and leave home.

They might not have the best home life. They could be abused and might not have money. Just things that you don’t wanna return home to. When you get the first option to flee from your home then you’re going to.
Yet, the need to fulfill a role, to be some place familiar, and to have adult responsibilities has its own allure. In one rural community, a group of girls described the fate of many of their classmates.

Sharon: A lotta kids actually leave their. . .high school and don’t go to college just ‘cause they’re afraid of leaving their parents unable to pay bills.

Sally: I know people who have actually left school to work in the woods, and help support the family.

Interviewer: What are they doing? Do you know?

Liz: Logging.


Sally: I kinda think like they’re happy that everybody around them is happy with who they are.

Furthermore, in low-income situations, the family’s economic condition is susceptible to even the slightest loss. Educators surmise that when students who were once active in school or socially become less involved it is most likely because something at home has also changed.

Parents losing a car or they don’t have a vehicle anymore. . .having to get a job to help support their family, or they have to hurry right home because they’re the oldest siblings and they’ve got two younger sisters and they have to watch them…They’ve been turned into mini moms or mini dads to help keep things running.
Again, rural poor adolescents experience tension created by opposing forces, pulling them in divergent directions. Ultimately, they face a point where they must make hard decisions.

“A fork in the road.”

Nearing the end of the meeting, a group of participants scrutinized a photo of a road (Figure 4). The quote at the bottom of the screen was: “This picture represents my future.” There was silence. They looked carefully at the whole picture to make meaning from both the curved road and the dirt road jutting off it.

![Figure 4. Photograph of road to represent future.](image)

“The paved road could be college and the other one could be, like, graduate from high school and work at Mickey D’s or Wal-Mart for the rest of your life.” Lana, who spoke earlier of being proud of the fact that she was going to the University of Maine, because “90%” of the college bound students in her school were settling for community college, talked about how the roads relate to higher education as well.
The bigger road is the main road. It’s what everybody around him has chosen . . .
and there’s that little side road there that’s really, like, it’s not that far off the main road, but it takes you in a completely different place. And it’s trying to choose between what you want and what everybody else wants and making the decision for yourself. . . . It could be somebody who just feels like they want to be separated from the rest of the school or something. [He] just like wants to go his own way.

Henrietta, a dominant voice in the first focus group I conducted, broke the silence first in her group. “You’re the first to go to college in your family, and that road would be either like unpaved or nobody before you has traveled down it before so you wanna be the first one to do it.” For some, higher education is the way out, but it also means traveling down an unpaved road that no one in their social radius has gone down before. This can also be motivating for adolescents. As one participant said, “They wanna go to college and get a good job so they don’t have to live like their parents did.” Clearly, the potential for success is great, but the potential for failure might be greater.

“An unpaved road.”

By the time slide 13 (Figure 5) was shown, the topic of roads representing the future had usually been discussed thoroughly. I did not anticipate that happening when I selected the data the groups would analyze. Thus, the participants humored me again and set out to look at another road as a symbol for the future. The text that accompanied the photograph of dirt road said, “For future I took a picture of an unpaved road.”
The allusion to New England poet, Robert Frost may have been obvious to them, but no one said “the road less traveled.” Rather, they made meaning of the photograph in their own poetic ways. My by-then predictable question of “what do you think this person means by this?” was answered with another question in the first IFG: “You wanna make a path for yourself or you wanna follow someone else’s path?” Another young woman at the table put herself in the shoes of the photographer.

They wanna be the first one to succeed in their household. Or even their family because their grandparents prob’ly didn’t go to college, and their parents didn’t go to college and they wanna be the first to succeed and prove to somebody that they can do it. It just takes motivation and [a] positive outlook.

The discussion continued with another girl more deeply analyzing the photograph and relating it to the life of the photographer. “They have a bend and curve so it’s like you
never know where your the future’s gonna take you.” Billie ventured a guess about the metaphor of the unpaved road.

I think he means that an unpaved road’s not like tar, it’s not just a flat surface that’s the same every step. An unpaved road has obstacles, bumps, potholes, ditches, ruts. And all you can do is find a way around all that.

The unpaved road analogy was made in reference to participants’ families over and over again, pointing out the struggle that poor youth face when they want to do something that no one before them has done. “Neither of my parents went to college. I wanna go to college. I want a career. . .I wanna be great. . .Have a good family. Have no troubles with money hardly.”

In both discussions of the road to success, participants emphasized that a paved road might imply taking the easy way. “The easy way’s paved and the hard way is dirt.” One eager young man said, “sounds like fun to me. For future I’d like an unpaved road ‘cause I don’t really like paved roads that much. I’d rather drive unpaved roads.” A girl interjected, “I’ve only driven on one paved road and it’s the same one every time.” These statements of tenacity reminded me of the mindset of the young women Edin & Kefalas (2005) interviewed in their research. Upon becoming pregnant in their own childhoods, the idea of adoption or abortion was never entertained. The reasoning these young women gave: they needed to take responsibility and not take the easy way of dealing with their situation by “getting rid of it.”
At times, despite high hopes and a tenacious spirit, rural poor youth still feel defeated and held back. There are bumps and barriers on their roads that rattle them and force them to question their aspirations.

“They.”

The barriers rural students face to achieving future goals are sometimes difficult to untangle from socioeconomic status. A non-financial barrier within the rural context is community members themselves. Participants were asked to analyze the following quote from the Rural Poverty Study, “I take pride in my goal ‘cause not a lot a people from this town are like, ‘Yeah, I’m going to Harvard or Yale.’ They’re always like, ‘You’re not gonna make it there.’ And I’m always like, ‘Yeah I am.”’ When probed to identify who “they” are that this girl was referring to, the participants began listing people who might stand in her way. The community was usually first on the list. When pushed to explain further what they meant, the adolescents said things like, “Nobody else in the town has made it so why would she be the one?” The implication here is that community members might be jealous or skeptical of the ambition of one of their youth. Some participants thought community members might actually be realists, trying to prepare her for the failure she might face. Undoubtedly the “they” referred to “people making her change her mind” about her goals for her future. This echoes the educators’ perspectives about the lack of role models who show youth they can leave their towns and do something different from their families.

Whereas adolescents commented on the symbolism of the paved and unpaved roads and the journeys they would take them on, they did not forget that other forces
were at play that would influence which path they would chose, even if it was against
their will or counter to their dreams. Invariably, the conversation about roads, barriers,
and decisions would return to the two powerful forces initially discussed in this section:
familial obligations and financial worries. When it came to making the hard choices
about college these two forces are often intertwined. One student posited that the decision
not to attend college was because “prob’y those kids’ parents didn’t go to college or
anything. And he knows that college is expensive so he’s just gonna skip college and
settle for a minimum wage job.” Because the participants in this study have the potential
to be the first in their families to attend college, their families’ unfamiliarity with post-
secondary education, and the means to pay for it, can lead to a heavy emotional burden
placed on the students. “They don’t have that experience base in the family,” a guidance
counselor noted, “and that. . .can be a major. . .deficit.” Mr. Ferrell, a 15-year veteran of
working with rural students explicated on the possibility that for some parents, the
college experience may create an imbalance in their relationship, implying feelings of
inferiority for the parent and a demand that their children should experience the hard road
they traveled as well.

Their families may be like, ‘I can’t pay the rent, how am I gonna pay for you to
go to college? You know, you gotta quit this crazy talk. When you’re eighteen,
you know, you’re on your own…I had to make it on my own.’

The idea that a child could succeed at something that a parent had failed at, or had never
experienced at all, creates its own challenges. A male participant drew a colloquial
analogy, based on an experience many Maine adolescents can relate to.
My dad’s never gone out and actually gotten a deer when he’s gone hunting. He’s been going hunting for probably fifteen years. He would be extremely ticked off if I went out in my first season ever and shot a deer.

Another girl put it in very direct terms: “Or they don’t want their children being better than they are. Succeeding more and having more money, and having a better lifestyle than what they were able to bring to their kids.”

Even if the aspirations are high, and the adolescent has the support of his or her family, the reality of cost, and the impact it will have on a low-income family, cannot be ignored. One participant, commenting on the rising cost of post-secondary education, discussed the conflicts that can arise when deciding on a college.

If you come from a low income family your parents are gonna discourage you. . because they don’t wanna be the ones that more debt gets put on. . .so they’re gonna try to stop you from going. Or try to let you choose a different school.”

Often the institutions themselves are seen as placing an undue financial burden on low-income students’ future goals, which then brings family back into the discussion. “When you look at. . .financial aid. . .and they talk two thousand dollars, even though to a university that might not be much,” stated Mr. Clark from a high school with a 52% college going rate, and where 60% of students get free or reduced lunch. “To a family, it’s a month’s wages, two months wages.”

While families and finances can influence which paths these youth take, the professionals interviewed also noted that some pathways that low-income students embark on, should they decide to get their college education, exploit their socio-
economic position. Because few people in their lives have an understanding about the college application process or the financial aid process, and there is fear about the cost and questions about the benefits of something so expensive, another route is regularly considered – the military. Mr. Ferrell, who professed support for the armed services, also noted that the military most certainly recognizes the barriers that poor students face when deciding what to do after high school. “They [the military] do well sometimes in the low socioeconomic groups because those folks believe that that may be the only, or the primary, way for them to be able to continue their education is get the GI benefits.”

Desires to change, to avoid destructive patterns, to pursue dreams and goals, and yet live up to perceived responsibilities to those they love or feel obligated to, place pressures on youth. Aspirations and expectations create competing and stressful emotions. The youth may feel that they are alone as they ponder what to do. What is apparent is that the burden of poverty on adolescents and their families does not go unnoticed by the people they interact with at school.

*Educational Limitations vs. Collective Socialization*

Public education is the mediating institution for adolescents living in rural poverty, a public institution that often can provide services to low income families more efficiently than other governmental agencies, which may be too far away. Yet in some very significant ways, the schools can also be seen as a barrier. Some participants stated that because their schools were rural, they are already at a disadvantage no matter how hard they worked. This is then reflected in their attitudes towards getting into college. “Maybe the schools in the town are just not good enough so you can’t get in,” stated a
frustrated boy. “Just because your high school sucks.” At a small high school in the
mountains of Maine, a girl described the curriculum

Well here we have enough classes to do basically three classes a semester and not
repeat classes, if you don’t take study halls, and we have four that we’re supposed
to take. That makes it really hard to have an impressive course list and compete
with students who have the money to go to a private school and it gives them an
edge, ‘cause you don’t have a chance to show yourself. Nobody thinks of us as
being able to take online courses ‘cause they’re not offered here all that often and
every time you think you might have a chance something happens and our little
public school has got their funding cut again and they can’t offer the program so
we have to live with what we have and try to do our best.

“A cycle you can’t really break.”

In addition to the limited course offerings both the educators and the students
talked about tracking in the schools, the result of which can lead to a frustrating cycle.
Essentially, low-income students are more likely to be in lower tracks for academic
classes (even when they match their peers academically) (Kelly, 2004, 2008). If low-
income students are placed in lower academic tracks, this affects their academic
preparedness, which in turn impacts success in higher education, which impacts
persistence and attrition rates, which means they are not completing their educations and
getting out of poverty. Tracking, as mentioned before, creates awareness in the
participants that there are class differences within the school environment. Mr. Massey, a
guidance counselor affirmed that it is “easy for low socio-economic kids to end up in the
wrong track. . . When you’re in a tracked environment and that track is not an identified college preparatory track, culturally that track takes on a whole mindset of its own.” At a larger school with a fairly involved tracking system, Mr. Farrell was hesitant to disclose his personal opinion, but in the end said that he would like his school to reduce a couple of the tracks. . . I’d like us to change the flow in where a kid can not come into high school with a special math [or] science and be on a path that is destining them to not be ready for a Bachelor’s Degree period. . . I wish we’d just get rid of the tracks.

Unfortunately, low-income parents may be unaware of the social distinctions at play within the schools their children attend. Furthermore, they may not feel comfortable advocating for their children to be placed in more rigorous classes (Kelly, 2008). Similarly, students who are poor face attendance issues resulting in yet another unfortunate cycle. This could be related to homelessness, which means that adolescents are not sure where they are living, thus they may face challenges around physically getting to school. Some schools have attendance policies that do not award credit to students if they miss a certain number of days of school.

Ms. Brown “quit” her attendance committee the day before I talked with her because she just did not agree with the ethos behind it. She described her frustration to me.

We have an attendance policy that says if you miss eleven days you’ve lost credit. . . How can we take away credit from the students that miss eleven days? [They] don’t have parents that care. They don’t have parents that can afford doctors. If
you have a doctor’s excuse, then you get out of it. If you go on a vacation, you get out of it. But if you’re absent, you actually lose credit for classes that you’re passing, that’s drop out waiting to happen. . . .We have teachers that still say “nope they missed the eleven days we have a policy, eleven days” they don’t look back at the student to see that three of her brothers have dropped out in the past, her mother and father never received a high school diploma, she’s been very sick. We don’t look at those, we look at the eleven days. That’s one of my gripes right now, it kills me. I quit the attendance committee three times this week just to let you know [laughs].

Cycles such as these in the school context mean that poor students are not graduating, are not going on to higher education, and are remaining in poverty. Because this is often generational, there is little evidence in their lives, or their parents’ lives, to indicate that it will ever be different.

“We can only do so much.”

Sitting on a metal stool at a high table, I talked with Ms. White, an art teacher and class advisor about her poor students.

I’d rather not know about this, because then I can put on the cheery face and life is good wherever I am, and all my students have a great home life. . . .and it breaks your heart because we can only do so much.

This was my final interview, but the first time I heard this honest a response. The issue of poverty is one that brings up emotions and strong feelings for those who actually do face it. Repeatedly educators said, “it’s frustrating.” They “feel bad” that they cannot help all
their students and see to it that they have what they need. In my first interview, Ms. Geier said, “I just feel like crying when I think about so many of these kids.” Mr. Martin described his struggle to relate when he said, “I can’t imagine what it would be like to try to get ready for school if there’s not hot water and electricity.” These emotional reactions could prevent educators from inserting themselves into the lives of their students. Self-preservation from burnout or professional boundaries may drive them to keep their distance.

“We can be the same because of how different we are.”

Some participants felt that there was a disconnect between teachers and low-income students in the school setting. Surprisingly, the adolescents discussed it sparingly while the educators were quite aware of it among their colleagues. Adolescent participants from one school had a lively discussion about the division between teachers and students.

Kent: It’s extremely unfortunate, but yes, within this school I’d say a quarter to a half of our teachers are pretty condescending.

Blaine: Couldn’t you just say “teachers—“

Destiny: Yeah they are. You’re right.

Kent: One hundred percent.

Destiny: Yeah like Miss [teacher’s name] is always like, “Oh it’s gonna be really tough you guys aren’t gonna be able to make it because you can’t even make it in this class.”
In this same group, participants cited teachers as a possible barrier to a students’ success. When I asked them to explain why that might be, one thoughtful student replied, because they don’t have pride in their communities. . .Maybe they’re jealous. . .or maybe they live in higher society communities, because a lot of our teachers don’t live in this town. Some of ‘em live two hours away and they come in. 

Educators spoke more acutely about the dynamic in their schools between teachers and students. All of the educators praised their colleagues for their overall sensitivity to the important issues. As mentioned before, educators in these eight schools are doing good work, targeted at improving the academic experience of disadvantaged youth.

I think most of the staff here are extremely supportive of students. But I think they need a little help. Because first of all, most of them are dealing with kids in groups. They have a curriculum to teach, they have a content area that they value highly, and they’re motivated to impart a knowledge base to a group of kids because they value that knowledge base. . . .I think there always needs to be [someone]. . .that can say to them, “let me tell you about so and so’s life because I did a home visit there today.” Because I don’t think people are maliciously minimizing the lives that these kids come from, but I think it’s sometimes easy to forget. There are kids who come to school here who don’t have a hat, who don’t have a coat, who don’t have mittens, and they did that when it was 20 below zero. And, unless you spend time paying attention to the fact that they don’t have those things and find a way to give it to them. . .you’re not ignoring it by seeing and
saying “I’m not gonna pay attention,” but sometimes you get so wrapped up in what it is you’re. . .noticing or not knowing. . .there are people who live very differently than many of us live.

Mr. Clark echoed this idea when he said,

I think they’re understanding, but they don’t know who [is poor]. If you don’t know the family, if you don’t monitor the lunchroom where basically you can tell who. We’re sixty percent free reduced lunch, so six out of every ten kids in your classroom are probably gonna be [poor], but they dress well. They aren’t dirty so they’re not pulling it on that way. It’s just something that they make the decision as to what they’re gonna have, you know, when you see the same kid wearing the same pair of pants for the fourth or fifth day in a row. But then again, they don’t see him everyday, so therefore they don’t see that they might not pick up on the little things. It’s just sometimes they need to be refreshed with it you know be aware that this is going on.

Some educators like Ms. Brown are seeing changes in their schools.

I think in this school. . . everyone feels it. I don’t think within the community though they do. I think in the school the teachers are realizing it. They see, I mean you give homework? They don’t have a home. We’re still, like, basing our grades on homework. . .we have teachers who don’t give homework now, or allow time in class. Or if they come with their homework undone will then allow them to go finish . . .so we need to make those changes and I think our school is trying.
Perhaps a disconnect between educators and low-income students is inevitable. First, teachers are already preoccupied with teaching the content of their classes and assessing learning, so they may not know the details of a student’s life. Second, it is difficult to identify the population because they do not “look poor.” Third, educators are in a different social class from their low-income students, which means that their lives are different. A JMG teacher who knows the personal lives of his students well expressed his fears.

I kind of fear as teachers, as educators, that we live in an NPR, public TV, read magazines and books as educators but we live in a spot where we’re . . . a huge majority of the people that are doing those types of things. And then we come to school. And the kids don’t get us because we don’t get them. We don’t understand what it’s like to go home and take care of three of my screaming siblings in a freezing cold trailer, where the pipes are frozen, and we’re melting snow on a wood stove to drink. Most educators don’t live that life, but most of our students do. Or a huge chunk live below the level at which we do and it’s very hard to relate. . . . so it’s this weird world where we’re tryin’ to get you to understand the world, but we don’t understand your world so it’s very hard to not sound like I’m condescending. You know to understand it from your point of view and not talk down to you or talk like you don’t know something.

“Maybe that’s your success.”

One of the major pursuits of this study was to uncover how both adolescents and educators viewed success, and to determine whether or not there is a disconnect between
their points of view. The answers to this question were very interesting. When I asked the 
educators to predict what they thought the adolescents might say in response to the 
question, they were intrigued. Several looked up at the ceiling, searching for an answer; 
listening back through snippets of hallway conversations they overheard, recalling after 
school conversations with students about their futures. Then, usually a look of 
disappointment came over their faces. “Get a job, make a lot a money, buy a big truck,” 
said a guidance counselor confidently. “It’s too bad really.” In interview after interview, 
the professionals expressed regret as they told me what they thought their students would 
say success is. There was a heaviness in the room that was not present even when we 
were talking about all of the challenges related to rural poverty. Some put themselves in 
their students’ shoes. “I wanna make a lot a money,” or “being able to have snowmobiles 
and TV’s. . .material success. . . .I want to get out of Maine.” Others made it very simple. 

Then, they explained their disappointed looks by telling me what they knew their 
students would not say. “Happiness.” “It’s not, you know, I’m happy with what I’m 
doing.” “I would hope. . .they would say success equals the exact same thing as 
happiness.” As I progressed in my data collection, I was able to nod my head, knowing 
the truth about what the adolescent participants were really saying about how they 
defined success.

It was always the last question I asked the youth after an hour of talking about 
their lives and their challenges. “How do you define success? How will you know when 
you are successful?” Their responses did not require a great deal of thought or
contemplation, and if only their teachers could have heard. “Healthy and happy.” “My
definition of success would be looking back on my life and knowing that I was happy and
not regretting anything.” Each participant responded to the question, as the attention
circulated around the group. Individuals had their own time to define success for
themselves. None of them said “cars” or “a lot of money.” Several referred to their basic
needs being met.

I just wanna know I can provide for the people I live with, my family. . .to always
have food in the fridge for them [and] always have a bed for them to sleep in. If I
have that, then I have everything.

Destiny said, “My definition of success is that you set a goal for yourself and you either
meet the goal or go further than you intended.” Sitting on top of a desk with her legs
swinging back and forth, Daisy-Marie nervously shared her definition. “To me success is.
. .being able to make what your dreams were, like what you wanted, where you wanted to
go, and being who you wanted to be. That’s to me what success is.”

After listening to hours of tapes and reading hundreds of pages of text, I conclude
that there is not an actual disconnect between how educators and students view success,
or further how the middle and lower classes view success. Merely, it is a misperception.
Perhaps educators are basing their assumptions on what they overhear in the hallways,
which are usually conversations revolving around money and transportation (immediate
needs of poor adolescents). Perhaps they have not had the opportunity to sit with a group
of adolescents for over an hour, delving deeply into their very private thoughts and
perspectives on life.
I do not doubt the fact that it is also entirely possible that the adolescent participants in my study use their said definitions of success as a protective mechanism. A vagueness about one’s future goals (“being happy”) protects one against failure. As long as one can look back on life and feel some happiness, then he has not failed. Operationalizing happiness and success makes it much easier to fail; much easier to let others down and not live up to their expectations for themselves.

The disconnects between teachers and students are puzzling and yet also understandable. Unfortunately, when there is a divide, it makes the development of relationships outside of one’s socioeconomic status difficult. These relationships have been shown (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003; Jarrett, 1995) to protect youth and foster resilience. Whereas it is important to acknowledge the strong emotions, they cannot prevent educators from addressing the problems in their schools. Every educator whom I interviewed saw poverty as a huge barrier to student success, and yet educators faced it every day, even if it was “really hard.”

“We’re in it together.”

Clearly, the challenges rural poor students face precipitate strong emotions for school personnel. At times, there is a feeling of helplessness, at others it is frustration. Perhaps it is a product of teaching in a small school; perhaps it is in the nature of the kind of teachers who seek employment at a rural school. There seems to be a pervasive feeling of a shared existence. Ms. Brown shared that she works in the second lowest paying district in the state, so “we’re in it together,” she said. Other educators interviewed were not as overt about this theme; however, they shared strong examples of things they do to
level the playing field. These behind-the-scenes actions, which most students are unaware of, help low-income students have the same opportunities their more affluent peers have.

I talked with a senior class advisor who makes “class dues disappear,” because typically students who do not pay those dues are in threat of not graduating. The stress of this financial burden (usually around fifty dollars), can be enough to academically derail a low-income student. At the least rural of the schools in the sample, there is greater economic stratification in the school. At their winter carnival activities, administrators walked around handing out money to students who needed it so they could participate fully in the activities that cost money and patronize the vendors selling food.

These stories continued. Ms. White keeps a box of granola bars in her supply closet and will pop a bag of popcorn after school for kids who are in her classroom so they can refuel and keep working. Mr. Grover brings graduates who “made it” back to talk with current students to show them examples of people who may have come from similar backgrounds to show them role models who are not from the dominant culture. Ms. Walker, the school nurse believes that “somatization is a legitimate way to get attention from someone” and assumes every complaint is “a reflection of something amiss.” She takes the time to see each student, even if some are just seeking attention. Numerous guidance staff take extra time to work with seniors who will be the first in their families to go to college, making parent contacts, explaining the process, and helping them make good choices. Often no one knows about these acts of kindness that make a big difference in the lives of disadvantaged students.

“They know who they can trust.”
Not all educators participate in these underground practices, aimed at leveling the playing field. A challenge for building the social networks that seem so essential (Jarrett, 1995; MacTavish & Salamon, 2003; Werner, 1986) may be difficult for teachers who are not aware of low-income adolescents’ needs for social capital. As Furstenberg and colleagues (1999) posit, social capital is important for low-income individuals’ survival because they do not have financial capital. Within the community, it seems that adolescents “know who they can trust.” Mr. LeClair, a principal who has worked with rural students in one capacity or another for 17 years, gave me an example,

if they have a difficult[y]. . .at the home or something. . .they know somebody they have. . .access to somebody with a truck, or a vehicle, or a welding, or a this or that. Often times that same group. . .will work with each other to help each other out. But there also are. . .long understanding[s] [with the] family, or relationships that they also [have]. “I can call this circle of people, but. . .I’m not gonna involve myself with that group over there.”

For low-income youth who place a premium on social capital and see it as a necessary aspect of managing relationships, social class differences may be difficult to navigate. If these youth are accustomed to understandings they have about non-monetary remuneration in the form of services, and they need help from someone in the dominant culture (a teacher or professor), they may be unable to manage the exchange. How can they reciprocate in a world where the dominant culture uses money to barter, and they use services? They may feel that they do not have the currency to use in relationships with
middle class individuals. Lack of social capital and its potential to influence help seeking behaviors may be the result of yet another cycle, created by poverty.

“A cycle that you can’t really break.”

Ms. Walker said it best when she described the problem of help seeking behaviors as,

a cycle that you can’t really break unless you’re resourceful or you find someone who can advocate for you, and sort of think outside the box a little bit. I think the other thing that I see for a lot of these kids is . . . when somebody tells them “no you can’t do that” I think that one of their barriers to success is that they believe that, and so rather than seeing that as “how dare you tell me I can’t do this? I’m gonna find a way to do it,” I think that their problem solving skills, perhaps because they’ve not had that modeled to them, are somewhat limited. So they are less able many of them to think outside the box and try to find a different road to get between A and B.

This is a situation where a more affluent adolescent might feel entitled to help from others, rather than feeling that it would put undo burden on someone, thus giving up. The lack of helping seeking behaviors and the initiative to ask for help from teachers may be attributable to another issue as well, it is a two way street that requires both the teacher and student to come to know each other.

“I can’t help you if I don’t know you.”

While spending time in a small school of just over 300 students, I noticed a very overwhelmed-looking teacher, trying to move tables in the lobby and lay out books for a
book sale. I had some time between interviews, so I volunteered to help. As I began pricing books, I started learning from her about what was going on. She said she had little success with Scholastic Book Fairs at the school, but wanted to be able to expose students to books and make them affordable. She talked about limited access to bookstores and how her students do not use the public library because they cannot physically get there. The nearest Barnes & Noble is 45 miles away from the school, and she was fairly certain that the majority of the students had never been to a book store, ever.

This awareness of students’ needs prompted Ms. Scott (as I later came to know her) to buy books with her own money and clean off her shelves at home, bring them to school to sell for $2.00 each, and use the profits to buy more books for the next sale. She hoped to make it a monthly event. This particular night, there was an open house so she was going to leave it open for that as well, so parents could buy books too. I later asked her if I could interview her because it was evident that she “got it” and was trying to do something to improve the lives of low-income rural students.

Despite the feelings of frustration educators experience when trying to help their low-income students, it was evident there were practices already in place to support both low income and rural students to overcome their barriers and be successful. The practices can be grouped into three broad categories: relationships, meeting basic needs, and offering opportunities. These categories parallel some of the biggest challenges educators cited when talking about barriers to success.

*Relationships.* The resilience literature (e.g., Werner, 1992) suggests relationships are important in fostering resilience, and more specifically, that the presence of at least
one caring adult in the life of a child will promote this resilience. Some educators articulated that relationships with school personnel were important to students’ success. “I think the research supports that one of the biggest factors in a student’s success is making a connection with an adult, someone who’s gonna, you know, be your cheerleader and, you know, keep you moving forward.” Others demonstrated the importance of relationships by giving anecdotes about their interactions with students. Some schools created advisory programs, formally structuring relationship building between teachers and students by giving them time to work together each day or each week.

One school in particular, which the guidance counselor referred to as a “feeling school,” seemed to stand out in its emphasis on relationship building with students. One of the first things I learned in my interview with the guidance counselor was that the guidance office (with a staff of one counselor and one administrative assistant for approximately 300 students) was not just a school guidance office, but also a community service provider. “We have a lot of people who come in who have graduated. So we’re not just a high school office, we’re an open office. . . .We work with parents that go to college and all that.”

A second aspect of the school is their Attendance Committee (which several other schools had as well). The purpose of the committee is to use attendance as a proxy for school success and as a way to identify students who are at-risk because they are missing school. These committees are usually comprised of counseling and administrative staff
and they serve as a forum to discuss specific students’ needs in order to gain a clear understanding of what is really going on in the students’ lives.

A third characteristic of this school that makes it a model for relationship building is the individual attention teachers afford students. Having a small student body lends itself well to creating these relationships, but having caring teachers is also important. A beloved Jobs for Maine Graduates teacher at the school described his classroom as a place where students can “express themselves and feel safe at school.” His philosophy revolves around listening to students and “giving them a voice,” supporting them and trying “to give them confidence. . .and let them know that everybody has a barrier.” The emphasis on individualized attention and getting to know students is an asset in building relationships with them.

Basic needs. As previously mentioned, meeting basic needs is a concern weighing on the minds of educators. Although it would be impossible to address all of the basic needs of students, it is possible to address some of them and do a little at a time. One school offers a meal for parents if they attend a financial aid presentation. The administration realized that parents need to feed their children and that priority takes precedence over a school meeting. This way the school can meet both needs at the same time. To address transportation issues in the rural communities, many schools provide a late bus for students, which allows them to stay afterschool and participate in activities and still have a ride home. The only drawback with the late bus is that often times the bus cannot take everyone directly to their doorsteps and students may possibly be dropped off
at a location eight miles from their actual house. Without transportation for that remaining eight miles, they may still be unable to stay afterschool at all.

*Providing Opportunities.* The largest emphasis for addressing the challenges faced by rural poor students was on offering them opportunities that they would not otherwise have. Several schools utilize their MELMAC Educational Foundation money to provide these opportunities. MELMAC is a grant program that gives money to several of the schools involved in this study. The purpose of the program is to encourage every student to go on to a post secondary program, other than work. Schools use some of the money to provide college visits for students. Ms. Brown faced some resistance from her faculty when she told them that MELMAC wanted 100% of students to visit a college campus. Some teachers felt that college is not necessarily the right choice for every student. Ms. Brown’s response was, “Okay, who do you want me to cross off the list then? If we aren’t going to get 100%, then somebody’s name needs to be crossed off the list.” No one wanted to give her specific names. Ms. Brown said that “100%” has driven her ever since.

Several schools highlighted their curricula as places where they are offering opportunities to students. With technology growing, small rural high schools are now able to offer on-line courses through local colleges and Virtual High School (VHS). Another opportunity offered by some schools is that they have carved out a time during the school day for students to receive extra help from teachers, and ask questions without having to stay afterschool. In essence, the entire school has a study hall at the same time, allowing students to move about from room to room to talk with teachers. This specific
time serves to level the playing field a bit for students who are constrained by lack of transportation or familial obligations, prohibiting them from staying after school. At one school this results in three hours of additional instruction time a week for students to gain access to teachers and get the support they need.

All of the best practices that were mentioned by educators can be summed up by one Jobs for Maine Graduates teacher. His motto in his classroom is, “I can’t help you if I don’t know you.” For any progress to be made with students, it is essential educators know their students. This means knowing them through relationships built with them, knowing what basic needs are not being met at home and where they are struggling, and knowing what opportunities might change the course of their lives. One professional said it bluntly when he said, “There’s no other additional support network” for low income students. This means that the school must therefore play a larger role in meeting this need as well.

“In an ideal world.”

When asked what they thought might help to support low-income rural students, educators offered humble answers that spoke to their commitment to students. Some suggested that educators might be missing the mark if they start trying to change attitudes and behaviors in adolescence. “I just feel like by the time they’re in high school it’s too late. They’re paths have been socially set,” said Mr. Massey in a school with a college going rate of 39%. A principal of a school with three times the students, but still a 41% college-going rate, talked about how there seemed to be more of a “culture shift” happening at the middle school and they were hoping to emulate that at the high school
level, but were not sure how to go about doing it. Mr. Ferrel, a guidance counselor at another large school talked about the need to change the school culture as well. His focus was on wanting to create a culture that supported all students in their future goals, without creating a hierarchy of value for one pathway over another. He wanted all students to be praised for their decisions whether they involve going to “Swarthmore or into the Army.” He would like to see his colleagues view all post-secondary options as parallel, so that students could feel good about their decisions and believe in themselves.

Several educators saw beyond the school setting and immediately perceived a need for supporting families with more education around parenting practices and educational expectations. Mr. Martin did not hesitate when I asked him what he would like to see in an ideal world to help support his students.

The hardest key is just the warm nurturing stable home environment that’s very positive and encouraging. You can’t change that. I mean obviously we can’t take kids out of their house they wouldn’t wanna be separated from their family, but [for] so many of our students their main obstacles is what they face at home. You know the perceptions and often times the parents don’t necessarily wanna see their kid succeed.

In the course of this research I met several educators who thoughtfully address the issue of rural poverty in their schools. Many feel helpless because of the limitations placed on them by the educational contexts they work in. Whereas they may not represent the collective consciousness of educational institutions, they are examples of individuals who
can be leaders in their schools and communities to bring attention to these issues and make changes in their schools.

On October 5, 2005, I wrote a memo that started with a quote from James Agee’s (1939) seminal work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Using pictures and words it told the story of rural poor farmers. He challenged me by saying, “Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it” (p.9). I had just finished the Rural Poverty Study. I had hundreds of photographs and transcripts. I knew that I had a “cause” and a “purpose,” but no ”right” or “qualifications” to properly analyze and draw conclusions. Less than one month later, I learned of the IFG method (Dodson, 1999) that would allow me to do justice to the data I collected. Five years later, their voices can now be heard.
Chapter 5-Discussion

When I completed the initial Rural Poverty Study I was struck by how much adversity rural poor adolescents face. It was clear they were at risk for many of the negative outcomes found in the literature (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bolger et al., 1995; Conger et al., 2000; Duncan et al., 1998; Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Jarrett, 1995; Lohman et al., 2004; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; McLeod & Shanahan, 1996; Smith et al., 1997). Despite the bleak picture that seemed to be forming, something else amazed me more. I sat with the data for a long time trying to determine what was keeping the youth from being broken, traumatized, or complacent. Finally, after months of thinking and talking about it, I literally “saw” it. The final quote of a slide presentation I created from my data said, “Hopefully my dreams will keep me going.” Was it hope? Was it resilience? The discourse on hope and resilience did not satisfy me. The majority of it was about outcomes and I am a practitioner, I want to know the process.

I also noticed a pattern emerging for some of the students I worked with in Upward Bound. Despite having high hopes and goals for the future, there were barriers that could stand in their way. Sometimes they were not buoyant even though they wanted to be. There were times of frustration with students and their choices when I wondered if we were speaking the same language. The lingering questions from the Rural Poverty Study, coupled with my experience working with the population, propelled me forward in this study of success, resilience, and barriers to social mobility. Perhaps we were not even speaking the same language at all. Perhaps the dominant culture’s definition of success
and social mobility are different from low-income individuals’. Potentially, the conversation could change.

These compelling accounts of the lived experiences of youth living in rural poverty illuminate the many obstacles that beset them. Through the voices of both adolescents and educators, this study sought to explore the constructs of success, resilience, and social mobility. It was evident that multiple arenas of development are influenced by poverty, which in turn influence success. The story that emerged from these data is one of adversity and challenge. It is also a story of hope, resilience, and “grittiness.” Clearly, there are opportunities for intervention, as well as ways to capitalize on the strengths that rural adolescents and educators already have to overcome the aspects of poverty that are counter to development.

Summary

This study shows that growing up in rural poverty requires youth to find a balance between tensions that are pulling in opposite directions. The rural context presents a tension between insulation and isolation. The constructive aspects of the rural setting are that it protects youth from some of the potentially negative influences that urban youth are affected by. Despite the protection the rural milieu provides, it also prevents youth from accessing resources, opportunities, and positive influences that promote positive development. When the problem of poverty is layered on top of the ruralness, another tension is added.

Socioeconomically homogenous communities predominantly surround rural youth. The people in these communities are in large part poor and working class
individuals. This can serve as a protective factor (Duncan, 1999). Relative deprivation theory suggests that it is detrimental for economically disadvantaged children to live in neighborhoods with more affluent youth because individuals start to compare themselves to others and the less advantaged are blocked access to resources that the more advantaged dominate. (Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Poverty is pervasive in rural areas (Census, 2000), however rural poor youth experience social stratifications in their school contexts. Material differences separate students: name brands and vehicles divide the “haves” from the “have-nots” (relatively speaking) in the eyes of adolescents and their teachers. The participants in this research who were taking honors level classes were aware of the social distinctions that permeate school politics (Kelly, 2004, 2008). Participants in both the Rural Poverty Study and this study did not see themselves as really fitting in to any of the typical social groups most adolescents subscribe to. In the Rural Poverty Study they talked about “mixing” with people from several groups, or “not having a set group” to identify with. In this study, a participant coined the term “blend” to describe his social status in the school. Perhaps these youth see the social stratification and are trying to straddle it. They do not want to be held back by their disadvantage, but they also do not want to dissociate themselves from their home base.

The presence of poverty interacting with the rural context produces outcomes that are negative as well as adaptive. Externalizing risky behaviors are problems for adolescents as well as their families. Consistent with the literature (e.g. Conger et al, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Evans & English, 2002; Lichter et al, 2003; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002) educators talked about substance use, risky sexual
behavior, and antisocial behavior from their students. Adolescents talked about drug use, substance abuse, and other psychosocial behaviors in relation to the adults in their lives. The youth who participated in this study were keenly aware of their limitations and were able to recognize that the role models in their lives were not always positive. They also had the ability to see beyond the negative aspects of their disadvantage. This positive outlook fuels their dreams for the future and what they aspire to.

Psychological problems are also a product of living in rural poverty. The need for immediate gratification may be heightened by the fact that there is so little to do in rural areas to productively occupy time. These youth face constraints from their environments but it must be recognized that they have developed strengths in the face of adversity. Their attitude about poverty is that it is “character building” and one would not want to “take the easy way out.” Perhaps this is a defense mechanism for youth to rationalize the poverty they experience. However, even if this positive outlook is just a façade, it demonstrates that they are able to see the other side and not become a victim to it. This attitude has not been specifically discussed in the resilience literature. It may parallel Hauser et al.’s (2006) characteristic of reflection and metacognition; being able to identify one’s feelings and understand their etiology.

For some adolescents the expectations their families have for them conflict with their own aspirations. Some youth are obligated to contribute to their families practically, emotionally, and financially. The requests made of them are non-negotiable and the adolescents know no other way. For some this is a product of financial hardship: parenting is disrupted because of demands outside of the home, thus children suffer
The experiences they have at a young age give them a perspective that their non-poor peers may not have (Burton, 2007). They may gain a sense of independence because of the responsibilities they have. Many adolescents are parentified (Jurkovic, 2007) at an early age by taking on childcare responsibilities in their immediate and extended families. Again, these early experiences build maturity and competence; however, they may also produce a false sense of competence, thus making early childbearing a viable option (Edin & Kafala, 2005).

The expectations placed on poor youth also have the potential to physically deter them from their goals because they may be spending so much time working to contribute to the family that they do not have time to apply for college. Expectations are also a psychological deterrent because their personal goals revolve around doing things that perhaps no one in their families has done before. They have to make hard choices about their futures that could create barriers between them and those they love. For the rural poor, achieving their goals often requires them to leave their home communities (Corbett, 2007) and leave behind their family and friends. Whereas breaking away from family is part of normative adolescent development, it can be incredibly stressful for poor adolescents to think about their “unpaved roads” and setting out on them completely alone. For rural youth, institutions of higher education are typically not nearby. The geographical distance to the nearest post-secondary opportunity usually requires traveling a significant distance (as opposed to urban youth who have more options closer to home). On a psychological level, it may require rural poor youth to, in a sense, reject their upbringing. Will leaving require an emotional (as well as physical) severing of kinships?
And how do those being left behind cope with the loss of one of their own? Is it possible they will sabotage the aspiring adolescent due to jealousy or fear of the unknown, or simple lack of understanding?

It may be impossible for rural poor adolescents to overcome the tensions they face without help and guidance. Educators are in an important position to offer this support. Some teachers work behind the scenes to level the playing field for low-income students giving them food, making sure they can participate in activities that require money, or by giving them extra support where it may be lacking. It can sometimes be a challenge because the teachers and these students come from different places socioeconomically. Socially, they lack mutual understanding. This research sought to expose those differences and commonalities.

Collective socialization theory (Wilson, 1997) purports that poor youth benefit from others taking a shared responsibility for their well-being. In urban settings, neighborhoods provide the context for collective socialization to take place. While some parents work, others look out for their children; many contribute to the development of youth. In rural areas where neighborhoods are uncommon, the school provides the place, particularly in small schools that have a strong sense of community.

It is clear that in the small schools in this study, there are dedicated educators who understand the hardships their students face. Students and teachers are alike in many ways, sharing a rural existence that can be difficult. However, they also have differences that may be irreconcilable and can stand in the way of forming the relationships needed
for social mobility (Jarrett, 1995; MacTavish & Salmon, 2006) and resilience (Hauser et al, 2006; Werner, 1986).

An example of a barrier that may stand in the way of making the relationships possible is beliefs that the educators hold that are different from their students. One of the specific aims of this study was to better understand the construct of success as rural poor adolescents define it. Typically, the dominant culture defines what success is, but rarely does that culture acknowledge that there may be a disconnect between the majority in power and those they may impose their standards on. This study found that there is in fact a disconnect, but not in the definition of what it means to be successful. The divide between educators interviewed and the adolescent participants was created by assumptions and misperceptions. The educators regretted that their poor students would not want happiness, but rather money and material wealth. However, when adolescents were asked to define success, they did in fact indicate happiness as their definition of success. They defined happiness as being satisfied with their lives and content with how it has turned out.

It is possible educators base their assumptions on conversations overheard in hallways, one side of a cell phone exchange, or limited information they have about their students. These hallway conversations do indeed revolve around cars and money, as they are immediate needs the youth are trying to meet. These needs, however, do not completely define nor determine their broader goals and definition of success.

The downside of having an abstract definition of success is that it makes concrete goal setting critical because it may be hard for adolescents to work toward an abstract
ideal like “happiness.” Defining success in terms of something as general as happiness may also make it harder to fail. In the end, if they do not achieve their specific goals, but they can say they are happy, then it does not matter what they did or did not do.

Applications and Implications

Phenomenological studies are grounded in practice. Research questions come from practice and results seek to inform practice. These findings can first inform the consciousness of practitioners. It is important to know how experience and context shape behavior. It is critical to hear individuals’ voices. In practice, it is not helpful to apply aggregates to individuals to truly understand them. It is also not effective to make assumptions about what someone needs; rather the person can help you understand. Munhall (2001) warns practitioners “understanding meaning is the best way of designing interventions. . .better they be from the patient’s perspective of the experience than from the caregiver’s” (p.162).

The voices of rural poor youth are virtually absent from the literature. Some question whether they are reliable sources of data. In both studies, I found rural youth capable of introspection, reflection, and reflexivity. The eloquence with which they articulated their stories was incredible. It is through their words (as well as those of their teachers) that I am able to describe the profound challenges set before them. It is also through their words that I am able to show their incredible strength and resilience. Several themes emerged from these data that are particularly relevant for policy makers, educational leaders, and families. These important themes will be further discussed here.
“A huge culture shift.”

The theoretical model the findings of this study best supports is the culture of poverty model. This study reveals values, beliefs, and characteristics of rural poor youth. I am wary, however, of using these words because of the implications they have. One of the leading teacher in-service professional development programs on poverty (Payne, 1998, 2005) is based on a self-published book called, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. A recent qualitative study of this program (Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson, 2008) shows that the majority of the “data” in the book are not empirically supported. Educators are essentially being trained to perpetuate the oppressive systems that make it difficult for low-income youth to be socially mobile.

Many of the educators I interviewed made statements that echoed the unverified assertions of Payne’s work. Several referenced her specifically as the authority on poverty and education. One principal told me he recently purchased dozens of copies for his teachers to start a reading group. In April of 2009, the Maine Principal’s Association brought Payne to their annual conference for a three-day training on poverty and education (Maine Principal’s Association, 2009). The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) has driven the need for schools to find a way to improve the test scores of the “economically disadvantaged” (a special category of students who need to demonstrate progress). Payne’s work serves that purpose.

Bomer and his colleagues (2008) call for a more informed response to the culture of poverty model, which is currently guiding teachers to create more inequalities, then combat them. Specifically they posit that
Attempts to describe reality, especially the reality of the lives of a vulnerable population such as poor children, should be based on careful study and accurate evidence, and they should take into account the perspectives of the people of whom they speak (p.2498).

This study has sought to be this response. I do not refute that there is a culture of poverty, but I think it is very clear that it is not a deficit model. As previously mentioned, this study illuminates values, beliefs, and characteristics of a population of rural poor youth. However, it also situates them within a context and a system that can both help and hurt them. This study shows the strengths rural poor youth develop in the face of adversity. To view them as deficient would be simplifying a very complex issue.

“A cycle you really can’t break.”

There are several contextual factors affecting the success of low-income rural adolescents in both positive and negative ways. These include the rural context (or community), the school, the family, and the self. These influential factors go from a proximal (self) to distal (community) level for the adolescent. Each level (rural, school, family, individual) affects a person’s success, resilience, and social mobility. Underlying the whole structure are the hardened cycles that are difficult to break. The car → job cycle requires the rural poor to have a car in order to work, but the cost of having a car prohibits them from using their earned income for other purposes. Social service cycles make it extremely difficult to access the resources and supports most needed, which increases the need for more services. The education system often perpetuates class differences in both secondary and post-secondary settings, meaning fewer low-income
students are matriculating, persisting, graduating, and moving up the economic ladder. The cycles serve only to perpetuate poverty and keep youth entrenched in unending struggles.

The cycles also present possible points of intervention. Policy makers can start by interrogating these cycles to look for opportunities to intervene. For example, health care is an area where slight adjustments in the system could precipitate larger positive outcomes. Educators can also look at how levels of advantage stratify their schools. A large part of interrupting the cycles is simply naming them. It may be difficult for educators to take responsibility for their roles in the processes around poverty. Hard conversations may need to take place in schools to address the needs of students and create ways to eliminate the barriers that stand between educators and their students. Involving low-income families in these conversations is an important place to start. Perhaps inviting parents to discuss the issues they see standing in their way within the education system would allow them to be heard. In addition, this study shows the importance of youth development programs like Upward Bound which strive to help children use education as a tool to rise up out of poverty. As Mr. Grover reminds us, it could “change the history of their families forever.” If rural poor youth take advantage of opportunities that will allow them to chart a course out of poverty, they clearly have the skills and necessary attributes to be able to be successful. Rural poor adolescents have a unique tenacity, which serves them in times of adversity.

“There’s a grittiness that comes from poverty.”
It is evident that many rural poor adolescents are resilient (or at least show characteristics of the process of resilience). In this study, I used a teacher’s words and referred to it as “grittiness.” Many rural youth have a strong sense of independence and believe they have a great deal of control over their lives. Hauser et al. (2006) calls this agency. Participants in this study used powerful words to describe the choices they were going to have to make about their futures. Of the two roads before them, they did not want to “take the easy way.”

Unfortunately, this attitude seems to be so strong that it sometimes prevents youth from developing important relationships and seeing or taking advantage of important opportunities for support. In this way, a characteristic that has an adaptive purpose (grittiness) may not be used in a productive way (trying to survive alone). Poor adolescents do not readily ask for help when they need it. They may also, as Ms. Walker told me, believe people who tell them they cannot do something. This may be perceived by some as a helplessness that rural poor youth have, preventing them from taking action in their lives. Low-income students may lack the social capital they feel is necessary to solicit help from their teachers. In their culture, reciprocity is socially, not financially, remunerative. In the dominant culture, the currency is money. Poor students may feel that they do not have the financial capital to exchange for help given to them. Compounding the situation is the rural context. Social capital relies on social networks (family and friends who are close by to call on for help). In the rural setting geographic distance is prohibitive to forming social networks, which makes building social capital more challenging.
If teachers can find a way to acknowledge the assets that grittiness gives the student, while also calling attention to the barriers it creates, they may be able to cultivate resilience. In order to accomplish this, it is vital that teachers learn from their students just as much as they teach them.

“I can’t help you if I don’t know you.”

One of the most impactful messages taken from this research is in Mr. Grover’s nine words of wisdom: “I can’t help you if I don’t know you.” The statement resonates because it has multiple meanings. First, this theme brings meaning to the research as a whole. This study sought to bring attention to an understudied population in order to improve practice. Much research has been done on urban poverty and its effects on adolescent development, but it is unknown whether these findings can be applied to a rural population. Research must continue in the area of rural poverty to better inform practice. Knowing the population allows practitioners to help them.

The statement also puts the onus of education equally in the hands of both the teacher and the student. Development is iterative and it is bidirectional (Furtenburg, 1999), as is the ethos of Mr. Grover’s statement. It is important for practitioners to know their students well in order to do what is best for them. Teachers must ask the questions, even if they might not be “tactful,” as one guidance counselor told me. Low-income students practice habits of hiding and they may not divulge the critical information without supportive prompts.

The task of coming to know their students personally may be daunting for overworked teachers. Much emphasis is placed on the academic demands of education.
However, this study shows that there may be more pressing needs to address first. There is always more to the story. Children do not develop in one isolated context at a time; they are influenced by multiple contexts simultaneously (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is the teacher’s job to recognize this and know that relationships are integral to educational success. All of the educators in the schools where data were collected have the advantage of working in small schools. Small schools afford teachers more opportunities to get to know students personally.

“I can’t help you if I don’t know you” also informs students that they need to advocate for themselves. Teachers are not mind readers. They have many responsibilities and they cannot always be aware of things they cannot see. Youth need to be taught help seeking behaviors and how to approach people who will help them. Rural poor youth in particular may have an attitude of independence and grittiness that can stand in their way. They may need encouragement and reminding to assure them that it is okay to share themselves and develop relationships for support. Teachers will not know about their students’ subjective worlds unless they are told about them.

The resilience literature (e.g. Werner, 1992) shows relationships are vital for the promotion of resilience. Hauser and his colleagues (2006) remind us that while the presence of one adult role model may be a characteristic of resilient individuals, in the process of resilience, resilient individuals may be able to solicit these relationships more readily. It is important for educators to help at-risk children develop resilience at a young age by helping them form and maintain relationships.

“Reality”
In addition to the data collected during this study, the epistemological perspective has particular implications for practice, as well. The phenomenological lens is significant to this study for reasons beyond just the research methodology. As researchers, it is easy to listen and analyze, and then apply theory to people’s behaviors. As practitioners, there is a tendency to fix the problems that experts identify. As human beings, it is natural to categorize and generalize to make sense of the world. As a phenomenologist, one must always defer first to the reality of the participant. Prior theory and research always inform the work, but “the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (Kvale, 1996, p.52). What does this mean for practitioners? It requires that they truly listen to their students and clients; that they suspend what they already know to be able to listen and remain open to what they are told. If educators honor the realities of their students, they can make a deeper connection. Research (e.g. Alexander, et al., 1997; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1998; Fine et al., 2008) shows that low-income students face numerous barriers. It is important to not presume those are also the most pressing issues for an individual at any given moment. Practitioners must first attend to the students’ perspectives and then their own.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the field of qualitative inquiry. Interpretive Focus Groups is a young qualitative method that more research will serve to support and strengthen. Until this study, interpretive focus groups had not been conducted with adolescent participants. Adolescents are egocentric thinkers, but are also worried about what others might think of them. It is possible that they could be easily swayed by their peers in the groups and refrain from offering a differing opinion. Are they even
cognitively capable of doing what is asked of them? In the case of this study, the answer is yes. I told them that they were welcome to disagree as long as they were respectful, and they took this as a challenge to explore multiple viewpoints and bring their own perspectives into the process.

The IFG methodology works by asking participants to talk about someone else rather than themselves. Undoubtedly, the participants do end up inserting themselves into their analysis anyway. This is something that the adolescents were almost too good at. Sometimes it was a challenge to get them to stop talking about what they would do and analyze what someone else would do. In order to ensure that they were in fact able to put themselves “in someone else’s shoes” I created a code called “sense of other.” During data coding, I looked for passages that exemplified participants’ ability to think outside of themselves and see from someone else’s perspective. I found data in every IFG that supported a strong sense of other. This in turn supports the use of the IFG method with adolescent groups.

**Limitations**

**Sampling**

The samples for both the adolescents IFGs and the educator interviews pose a limitation for this study. Both were self-selected groups who agreed to be part of the study perhaps because they had an interest in the topic, or thought they had something to say about it. Particularly for the educators, not having a random sample makes it incredibly difficult to generalize their perspectives to other educators working with rural populations. A random sample would have yielded a cross section of perspectives that
would have more accurately represented the voice of the institution. However, what this study is able to show is that there are educators in every school who understand the challenges rural poor students are facing. These educators have the potential to be leaders in their schools to educate other practitioners, and work toward change.

In regards to the adolescent IFG sample, not only were they a self-selected group of participants, but they came from a self-selected pool of potential participants. Students who are part of the Upward Bound program have been identified as having the potential to be resilient in the face of their circumstances. As a qualification for the Upward Bound program, they must demonstrate the potential to continue on to post-secondary education and indicate that as a goal. Therefore, the findings of this study are not easily generalizable to a population of rural poor youth who are not in Upward Bound.

*Rural Research*

The rural context itself presents many limitations for researchers. Several factors should be taken into consideration when conducting research in a rural context because there are challenges that can greatly affect the research findings. Not surprisingly, these are the same challenges that face the participants in the research. First, distance and transportation are issues that influence research on many levels. The distance one must travel to reach participants requires more time and effort to collect data. I traveled over 750 miles in total during my data collection. The distance can be prohibitive when, for example, the researcher drives 30 miles to collect data and then all of the participants are absent from school. Returning to the school on another day may be impossible because of time constraints, thus data are not collected there. Rural research also requires that one
have reliable transportation because there is no public transportation in place. The distance can make it impossible for the researcher to ask participants to travel to a central location for data collection as well.

Another aspect of rural life, particularly in Maine, is the weather. Winter weather is severe at times and school is often canceled. This can disrupt data collection and make rescheduling difficult. Beyond that, even on days when school is still in session, the 50-mile drive to the site may be treacherous with un-ploughed roads, frost heaves, etc. The researcher may have to make a hard decision about personal safety versus the project.

*Historical Context*

The historical context of this study could also be a threat to its validity. The data were collected during a tenuous time economically in the United States. There was a recession and the economic downturn was constantly discussed in the news. Particularly in the communities where these data were collected, a mill closed, laying off hundreds of workers; and schools were consolidating in order to stay open. Halfway through an educator interview, Ms. White told me how timely my research was because they had just been discussing poverty at their last staff meeting. If I interviewed her a week earlier, would she have had a different perspective? Economic hardship was acutely on the minds of the participants in this study due to its placement in the landscape of history.

*Other Limitations*

Two other limitations should be mentioned. First, despite my honest efforts to immerse myself in the context and become part of it, I still held a position of power in the lives of the adolescent participants. I cannot ignore my role as a middle class, educated
adult who is an administrator in a program they participate in. These factors may have
influenced my connection with the participants. Second, because of time constraints I was
unable to conduct member checking. This involves taking the data back to the
participants for them to read their words and comment on. This step would have helped to
verify the data and make a stronger study.

Future Directions

The fields of sociology, psychology, and education informed this study on
adolescents living in rural poverty. There are also three major areas where research is
needed to continue to understand the phenomenon of rural poverty and its impacts on
human development. First, more research is needed on rural poverty to continue to
explore the convergences with and divergences from urban poverty literature. Theories
based on urban poor populations need to be applied to rural settings and strong urban
studies need to be replicated in the rural context. Second, the topic of poverty needs to be
explored more from a strength-based, positive development, perspective. The deficit
models are useful in some ways, but the way to enact change may be through
encouraging strengths rather than trying to fix weaknesses. Finally, more qualitative
research needs to be conducted. The kinds of questions that need to be asked of the rural
poor context can be best answered using qualitative methods. This allows for in-depth
exploration and deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

In my own research trajectory, the next steps for research in this area are in two
logical directions. First, I would like to explore these same questions with a sample of
rural poor youth who are not part of the Upward Bound program, as they may be more
representative of the larger population. This would provide comparison groups of adolescents who have not been identified as being notably academically engaged.

Second, I plan to conduct a follow-up study of the original 32 participants in the Rural Poverty Study to see how their goals and aspirations have changed over the past four years, and to delineate factors which supported their success (by their definitions). This will help to better understand how the realities of rural poor adolescents, and their perceptions of their lives, affect their futures. It will also be an opportunity to discuss what supports made a difference in their lives. This would expand Hauser et al.’s (2006) work on the process of resilience and how it relates to a more mainstream population. It would be interesting to revisit the original interviews and recode them for agency, reflection, and relationships (Hauser, et al., 2006). I would then do the same for the second round of interview data collected to look for signs of the process. One final thing I would like to do in future research is to continue to employ alumni of the Upward Bound program (or who have a similar background) in the research process in order to maintain their valuable perspectives. This will add to my process as well as my outcomes.

Final Thoughts

As I was writing this final chapter, a colleague called me to tell me about a book I should read when I am “finally finished.” She read the back flap to me as a teaser. “...a memoir of poverty...” Then she read a statement that I wrote on my desk blotter. “...children who accept poverty as a fact but refuse to accept it as a verdict” (Queenan, 2009). While writing this chapter, I kept looking at this quote on my desk and thinking about how aptly it captures this study. This attitude is the reality of the youth I worked
with, who also exist in a society that indicts them for their socioeconomic status through inequalities, stereotypes, and misunderstanding. There may in fact be a culture of poverty, but this study shows that it produces adaptive behaviors. At times, there are strong contextual factors that create barriers that even individual psychological strengths cannot combat. To blame these problems on the individuals in the situation is irresponsible. To make decisions about their best interest without consulting them would be unethical. It is imperative that practitioners and policy makers address the influence of the situated context on the meaning and experience of an individual. For educators, it is not about rural poor youth needing remediation, but encouragement; to recognize what they bring to the classroom rather than what they are lacking and seek to capitalize on their strengths.

Finally, for rural poor adolescents and their families there are three important developmental contextual tenets to take away from this study. First, on a personal level it is important for youth to recognize the strengths they already possess and seek ways to use them as bridges between obstacles. There are adaptive behaviors that come from living in rural poverty and these can be applied to many situations. Even lessons learned from a dysfunctional home life can serve to strengthen individuals. It is possible to rise up out of poverty and change the history of a family. Second, on an interpersonal level, building relationships and support networks are imperative for success. Individual grittiness is an asset, but it is not enough. Self-advocacy, help-seeking behaviors, and communication are the ways that these positive relationships are established. Asking for help is not a weakness and it is okay to look for it outside of one’s socioeconomic status.
Youth must find people who will listen to their stories, and who they trust to share their worries. Finally, on a sociocultural level, it is important to develop a social consciousness around the context of rural poverty. There are currently systems in place that do not support poor youth and serve to perpetuate inequalities. Both the Rural Poverty Study and this study have exemplified how reflective and articulate adolescents can be, and that they deserve to be part of the dialogue about what is best for them. They are capable of making change in academic and political arenas, but they need to know that if they speak, they will be heard.
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