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Seth Marineau, Candidate

Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin, Ph.D., Advisor

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

March 21, 2008

1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Grace Coolidge Room 501
Waterman Building

Title: SUBSTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASPIRATIONS OF RURAL HIGH
SCHOOL STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

In the era of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) the nation's attention in education is undeniably focused on raising student academic achievement (Sirotnik, 2004). Improving the academic achievement (standardized test scores) of disadvantaged students is the central goal of NCLB. This, however, assumes that improved test scores will lead to success in college or the workforce (White House, 2006). Implicit in this assumption is the notion that higher test scores will prepare disadvantaged students for successful lives after high school. This thinking ignores the way in which schools influence student capacity for success beyond academic achievement. This dissertation examined aspirations as one source of such influence.

This dissertation investigated the substance and development of the aspirations of rural working class students. Researchers have studied aspirations from a variety of angles, but few studies have engaged in understanding the influence of schooling on aspirations. Studies of rural students' aspirations exist in the literature, but the majority of these studies are quantitative in nature, pointing to a need for rich qualitative analysis into rural student's aspirations.

Using ethnography and qualitative methods as a research design, this study gathered data from interviews with students from two rural Vermont high schools. Field-based observations were conducted over a four-month period and a review of documents and cultural artifacts were used to triangulate the data. Data was analyzed for emerging themes and patterns related a theoretical framework drawing upon social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977) and cultural production (Willis, 1981). Findings suggest a majority of these working class students hold aspirations that could lead to social mobility. However, they also expressed a strong desire to redefine success in terms other than educational and occupational attainment. The influence of school varied across the two sites. One school's community-based learning program was seen by students as wielding a significant positive influence on their aspirations, while students at the other school did not perceive the school as influential. Similar to students in other studies, these students faced decisions about leaving their communities in order to pursue opportunities unavailable in their rural towns. The study findings differed from previous studies, however, in that the participants did not express tension or anxiety over leaving their communities but rather saw leaving as an opportunity for their own growth. Of particular note, is that a number of students defined their goals as being happy rather than attaining a particular job or admission to post-secondary education.