Rooted in Appalachia: Supporting Rural Students in Postsecondary Education through

Enactments of Possible Selves

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Introduction

In this contribution, we explore the pedagogical approaches embodied in possible selves as a theory that builds on rural and small community assets and successes as related to the social resources and capital that rural students represent. Specifically, we look at the connections that possible selves as a theory makes to rural students' socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts and how this theory can accentuate concepts like social capital with respect to postsecondary student success. By centering our focus on rural students' experiences in Appalachia, we make connections to how this pedagogical effort, in relationship to community-based networks and systems, helps to address self-limiting beliefs toward postsecondary achievements (Rosecrance et al., 2019). Further, we emphasize how this pedagogical approach can become a comprehensive effort to shed light on the inconsistencies of rural disadvantage narratives and the role that deficit thinking has on the persistence of rural students in academia.

Sociohistorical Context of Appalachia (Ada)

In the story of postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and success, the narrative has emphasized a rural disadvantage wherein challenges including low socioeconomic status (SES), lower parental expectations, and fewer opportunities for college preparation in high school has made it challenging for rural students to compete with their nonrural peers (Byun et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 2019). This has been exacerbated by the consistent trend of teacher attrition in rural K-12 schools, lower quality resources in rural schools, and the lack of access to comprehensive postsecondary counseling in rural high schools (Chambers et al., 2019; Means, 2017). This is certainly the case in rural Appalachia where there still exists a significant gap in terms of key economic factors including low high school graduation rates, low per capita income, and high poverty which varies across the vast region that encompasses the area (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2022). In particular, graduation with a bachelor's degree from rural

Appalachian areas is almost half that of the national average (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2017; Rosecrance et al., 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Students in rural Appalachia also disproportionately have first-generation status with particular barriers to access related to social resources and capital (Rosecrance et al., 2019).

For any discussion of education in Appalachia it is important to begin with the historical and sociological context. Appalachia is a vast, diverse region consisting of 423 counties across thirteen states from New York to Mississippi (ARC, 2022b). Appalachia is a land rich in natural resources, high poverty rates, and a low investment in education of its people (Caretta,et al., 2022; Haynes, 1997; Partridge, et al., 2013). Outside corporate interests, particularly that of extractive industries, have taken precedence over that of its citizens throughout its history whether it be traditional mining, mountaintop removal, or oil and gas extraction (Caretta,et al., 2022; Haynes, 1997). This prioritization has led to a lower level of education funding for Appalachia throughout the years. Overall, research has found that high levels of natural resource extraction leads to lower per capita income, higher poverty, and more social inequality (Mueller, 2020). Even though the region has seen a stark decline in mining in recent years, the history of dependency on extractive industries continues to take its toll on the region (Schwartzman, 2021). In addition, the decline of mining has led to a decrease of funding for schools and subsequently a decline in k-12 enrollment in an already impoverished area with an underfunded education system (Murray and Schaeffer, 2018). Similar to its dependence on mining, the region has been disproportionately impacted by a decline in manufacturing (Mueller, 2020) with the region being heavily dependent on lower wage manufacturing (Haynes, 1997) which has experienced a more rapid decline.

The lack of funding for education makes it difficult to recruit teachers and once recruited the low pay and There is often a disconnect between teachers and students in Appalachia. While

most students in the region come from low income, rural backgrounds, their teachers tend to come from middle class, urban or suburban backgrounds (Hendrickson, 2012). This socioeconomic gap between teachers and students leads to less effective relationships between students and teachers and a reduced sense of belonging for Appalachian students which in turn can reduce engagement with school for Appalachian students (Hendrickson, 2012). Teacher training programs rarely prepare teachers to use culturally responsive education approaches for Appalachian students and thus there is an emphasis on deficit thinking which is often even employed by native Appalachian teachers (Collins, 2020). This can also lead teachers to a lack of understanding of the local culture, perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and undervaluing of the contributions of Appalachian students (Hendrickson, 2012). "Teachers sometimes make assumptions about the students in rural schools, mistakenly attributing poverty to habits associated with poor people and blaming parents and families for living in poverty; some school employees in rural areas trivialize students knowledge and culture with a "saving the poor" attitude toward education" (Hendrickson, 2012, p. 38).

With many of the students in Appalachia being first generation college students they are less likely to be mentored by their family for college success (Hendrickson, 2012). Similarly, because of the depressed economies in their communities, they are less likely to envision as many possible employment options. Between the disconnect with teachers and being first generation college students in communities with few employment opportunities for college educated populations, Appalachian students face additional challenges and barriers. Many may not envision college as even a possibility. In West Virginia (the only state totally within Appalachia) research found that only 26 percent of first generation college students were considering college in elementary school compared to 53 percent of non-first generation college students (Noland, 2011).

An additional challenge for Appalachian college students are the stereotypes that they face within college. As marginalized individuals in higher education, they face the dilemma of acknowledging that they are Appalachian and risk being stereotyped or deny their Appalachian heritage and not confront the stereotypes (Tennant, 2022). Thus, a challenge for many is how to embrace their cultural identity without being viewed as having cultural deficits because of others' stereotypes of people from the region. The question becomes how to shift from an oppressive educational model that leads to cultural loss (Collins, 2020) and simultaneously inhibits Appalachians from envisioning all possible selves.

Traditionally, the Appalachian people have been viewed by educators from a deficit approach although some theorists are transitioning to see the value in Appalachian culture and using this alternative lens are approaching the culture with a more culturally responsive pedagogy such as funds of knowledge (Collins, 2020). These culturally responsive approaches see value in the region's culture and scaffolds a positive learning environment on the culture of the region and allows students to expand their views of possible selves.

Challenges and Barriers (Andrea)

Due to the barriers associated with rural Appalachian students' college-going self-efficacy, there is a need for their learning environment to help them develop other possible selves through effective pedagogies. Scholarship indicates that students from rural Appalachia often experience stereotype threats which derive from negative perceptions of the region and, in turn, influences their postsecondary success (Smith, 2019). These stereotype threats often arise in tandem with deficit thinking that emphasizes the limitations of rural Appalachian students based on perceptions of being lazy, unmotivated, and backwards (Gibbins et al., 2019; Gorski, 2010). Valencia (1997) suggests that deficit thinking is the perspective that students from marginalized

and minoritized communities perform poorly in schools based on internal deficits related to their families and communities instead of structural inequalities.

Pedagogical Approaches (Jacob)

Scholarship has consistently challenged these disadvantaged notions related to rural areas, showing that most educational and academic differences between rural and nonrural students can be attributed to SES rather than elements of stereotypes associated with rural disadvantaged narratives (Means, 2017). Further, rural students often represent the values of their tight-knit families, schools, and communities which often translate to strong social resources aligned with positive youth development and persistence (Byun et al., 2012; Means, 2017). Gibbins and colleagues (2019) argue that,

> One group in the U.S. that would benefit from a culturally sensitive adaptation is people living in rural Appalachia. (...) We assert that when working with cultural groups such as rural Appalachians, career counselors and educators must filter career needs through an understanding of community strengths and values before considering how to address individual needs. (par 2-3)

Theories, like possible selves, emphasize the importance of the social capital embodied by students and build on rural and small community assets in order to counter deficit thinking (Markus, & Nurius, 1986). The social resources linked to rural youth are lauded by scholars as necessary instruments to navigate new educational frontiers and the unfamiliarity of academic social norms in postsecondary life (Byun et al., 2012). Possible selves is a theory anchored in facilitating a student to envision the person(s) they could become instead of simply reproducing the stereotype threats associated with their socioeconomic, sociocultural, or sociohistorical characteristics (Kelley et al., under review). This approach recognizes all the forms of social

capital associated with rural Appalachian students, incorporating the strengths of their community as part of the success of their postsecondary education.

Conclusion

According to a report for the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, over half of the school districts in the United States are categorized as rural, with over 8.9 millions students in attendance (Means, 2017). Appalachia encompasses over thirteen states that comprises several rural regions, including 26 million residents across the majority of the Southeastern United States (ARC, 2022). The presence of rural Appalachian students that are making their way on postsecondary education journeys is therefore not minimal and should not be overlooked when considering national objectives related to student retention, persistence, and attainment. In this contribution, we present possible selves as a way to counter the deficit thinking influencing the disadvantaged narrative of rural Appalachia by elevating the importance of the social capital and resources students from this region bring to postsecondary education. By building on rural and small community assets and successes, possible selves theory produces a narrative supportive of rural students' growth in and beyond Appalachia. By supporting the social capital and resources of Appalachian students through supporting their possible selves we simultaneously open the door for various possible Appalachian futures (Schwartzman, 2021).

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