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**AUTHOR:** Russell J. Quaglia and Constance M. Perry

**TITLE:** A STUDY OF UNDERLYING VARIABLES AFFECTING ASPIRATIONS OF RURAL ADOLESCENTS

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### **AUTHOR ABSTRACT**

Aspirations are comprised of two major components--inspiration and ambition. Ambitions represents the ability to look ahead and invest in the future. Inspiration can be described as the ability to invest the time, energy, and effort to reach those ambitions. Variables such as how and why students spend their time illustrate the dynamics of these two components. The data in this report are based on the responses to the *Aspirations Survey* of 2,677 eighth-to twelfth-grade students from seven rural schools in Maine. The data suggest that many students have no understanding of why they engage in certain activities. If students are to be responsible for their education and more importantly for themselves, they must see purpose in their pursuits.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Student aspirations cannot be simply defined as individual dreams or ambitions (Quaglia, 1989). They are derived from a combination of personal and familial educational goals, vocational endeavors, and self-concept as it relates to what they believe are important elements to success in their choice of lifestyle. Aspirations require the investment of time, energy, and resources (Sherwood, 1989).

Research concerning the educational, vocational, and quality of life aspirations of rural youth has received increased attention in the last several years. Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt (1989) in an analysis of data gathered in the longitudinal survey, *High School and Beyond*, reported that in comparison to urban young people, the rural young felt that their parents were much more supportive of their taking full-time jobs, attending trade schools, or entering the military rather than attending college. Lower aspirations for making a lot of money, and higher aspirations for making an adequate income, having a secure job, and maintaining friendships were more typical of rural than urban youth. At least three factors have been consistently associated with the "lower" aspirations of rural youth. They are: the relationship of socioeconomic status and educational outcomes (Marion, Mirochnick, McCaul, & McIntire, 1991); the high poverty rate in rural America; and the education level of parents, which is likely to be lower in rural areas (Pollard & O'Hare, 1990). A fourth factor, less acquaintance with occupations and therefore lower occupational aspirations, has also been identified (Haller & Virkler, 1992). None of these factors is easily changed by interventions in schools or with families.

This paper examines aspirations in a different light by analyzing variables which can be directly influenced by the student, family, and/or school personnel. Aspirations are comprised of two major components--inspiration and ambitions. Ambitions represent an individual's ability to look ahead and invest in the future. Inspiration can be described as the individual's ability to invest the required time, energy, and effort. Variables such as how and why students spend their time illustrate the dynamics of these two components. This research specifically studied rural students in order to better understand aspirations.

## **RATIONALE, SAMPLE, AND METHOD**

Our work (Quaglia, Townsend, and McIntire, 1991) and the Aspirations Survey (1992) were greatly influenced by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1984) seminal study, *Being Adolescent*. They discuss how patterns of thought and choices that help students know who they are develop during adolescence.

"Where adolescents spend their time, what they do with it, and whom they spend it with demarks a system of options, constraints, and potentialities that bear on adolescent life, shaping both the immediate reality and the future growth" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1984 p. 44). The major contexts of most adolescents' lives are family, school, and friends. Their time is apportioned among different activities which may be thought of as personal and social, and potentially productive or nonproductive.

In a recent study of talented teenagers, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (in progress) remind us that every teenager has to make choices between immediate gratification and long-term development, about being alone, and being with others. Each person's potential must be cultivated--which takes time and the investment of psychic energy. Thus, "patterns of time use are important because time is limited, and the choices we make determine what our lives will consist of. These choices are especially crucial in adolescence, when the pattern for the future course of one's life is being set" (1993, p. 85).

This report uses the survey which allows for systematic analysis of relationships between variables that affect student aspirations. The survey is based on students' perceptions of self and their environments. It asks questions in four areas: students' perceptions of themselves; how they choose to use their time; and why; and how they perceive the support they receive in home and school environments. All of these components are essential to the process of developing aspirations. The present study reports on two of the areas: (1) time allocation for specific activities; (2) reasons for allocating.

Seven specific activities are examined by the survey--homework, hanging out with friends, participating in sports or hobbies, reading for pleasure, working part time, watching television or videos, and spending time with family.

Homework is work assigned by teachers or other assignments of an instructional nature. While time spent in class is known, time allocated to study by individual choice is an important indicator of aspirations.

Hanging out with friends represents nonproductive time spent with those of the same or opposite sex, singly or in groups. Considerable time is spent conversing, exchanging ideas and feelings, norms, and values. This represents considerable psychic energy which can be invested in personal goals.

Participation in sports or hobbies are activities pursued outside of instructional time in school. They may or may not be related to school. Structured leisure activities such as sports, hobbies, and social groups represent culturally defined pursuits. They may be either adult organized or spontaneous. Some of these activities are competitive under a system of rules; others are self-defined and noncompetitive.

Reading for pleasure is engaged in apart from school assignments. Magazines and newspapers comprise much of the leisure reading for adolescents.

Working part-time is gainful employment. In moderation, part-time work is often considered educational since it may lead to future life work. It often reflects a cultural value placed on acquiring possessions.

Watching TV or videos alone or with others except for instructional television represents a significant nonproductive leisure activity. The impact of a "media-prepared version of the world" may be significant.

Spending time with family members is done with either the entire family or individuals. It is believed that, in general, adults invest little time with young people. Since we learn about being grown up from observing, imitating or interacting with adults, it is obviously important. If families provide supportive environments, the amount of time spent is important.

Specific questions are asked about each activity to determine why adolescents do what they do in order to gain insight into their perceptions in three areas: Inspiration, Ambitions, and Separation. Inspiration is an indication that the activity is enjoyable and that there is an awareness of being fully and richly involved in life. Ambitions measure responses which reflect the perception that an activity is important as a means toward future goals. Separation assesses the extent to which students consider themselves alienated from an activity.

To study the relationships among these items on the Aspirations Survey, intercorrelations were computed and the average interitem correlations within and across dimensions were examined for each of the seven activities. Results of this analysis indicated a clear distinction between the Separation items and the remaining items on the survey. Across the seven activities, the average interitem correlation among the Separation items and the remaining items was -.11. Conversely, the median interitem correlation between the Separation items within each activity was .34.

The average interitem correlates among the Inspiration items ranged from .43 on "hanging out with friends" to .62 on "spending time with their families." Using the Spearman-Brown formula to estimate the reliability of the sections, this translates to reliability estimates between .75 to .85 for the two- to four-item Inspiration sections.

On the Ambitions dimension, there are never more than two items within an activity. The average interitem correlations ranged from .61 on "participate in sports and hobbies" to .68 on "do homework" and "read for pleasure." This translates to reliability estimates of approximately .80 for the Ambitions sections.

The interitem correlations also provide evidence for the existence of distinct (but related) Inspiration and Ambitions dimensions. The interitem correlations across Inspiration and Ambitions items were consistently lower than the interitem correlations within the dimensions. The Inspiration/Ambitions interitem correlations ranged from .30 on "watching television or videos" to .53 on "spending time with family members."

Some students' perceptions may reflect considerations along one dimension only. Others may, for example, perceive an activity as enjoyable, but completely irrelevant to their future lives. Some may reflect both immediate and long-term motivations. Such insights are important if we are to understand where schools and parents can best respond.

Figure 1 illustrates how an individual may behave along the dimensions of Separation, Inspiration, and Ambitions. It also describes the degree of individual involvement at each stage.

Students completed the Aspirations Survey during the winter and spring of the 1991-1992 school year. Schools were selected as part of a study to identify variables that may affect aspirational levels of rural youth. Distribution of students by grade and gender are presented in Table 1.[cont. on p.238]

## **RESULTS**

Adolescents spend more of their discretionary time hanging out with friends than in any other activity, with 45% reporting spending eleven or more hours a week (Table 2). Thirty-four percent report spending eleven or more hours a week with their family, and 32% say they spend eleven or more hours engaging in sports and hobbies. In contrast, 7% report spending eleven or more hours reading for pleasure, 19% report working part time eleven or more hours a week, and the majority (58%) report spending 0-5 hours a week on homework.

Table 3 suggests that a number of students do not know why they do things or feel pressured by others to do them. For example, one out of four who does homework is not sure why. Half the students report watching television or videos without understanding why.

The Inspiration variable is high for all activities except homework. Only 40% find homework enjoyable and interesting. The data regarding Ambitions variables suggests that most students who engage in activities see a future purpose in doing them, even watching TV. Although the percentages are higher here than in the Separation or Inspiration categories, over a quarter of those who engage in the activity see little future relevance in doing homework, participating in sports and hobbies, or reading for pleasure.

## **DISCUSSION**

Adolescence is known as a time of emotional, cognitive, and social transformation. Patterns of thoughts and choices that help students know who they are, develop during this period. Though it is difficult to achieve a stable perception of self in today's volatile climate, some cohesive sense of self is essential if life and school are to have purpose.

Since adolescents must learn to allocate their time for useful and productive activities, schools need to provide an environment that will help students make these important decisions.

To have high aspirations is to do more than dream. One must look toward the future and work toward it while still an adolescent. Schools and families which foster such aspirations help students succeed. Knowing how and why

adolescents spend their time provide a partial picture of the school's and family's success in fostering an environment which provides students an opportunity to achieve their aspirations. The Inspiration factor shows that students are enjoying what they are doing, while the Ambitions factor shows the connection between what they are presently doing and their future goals. Separation can be seen as a counterbalance to the other two factors--that students do not connect what they are doing to either present enjoyment or future[cont. on p.241] goals and therefore see no link between their activities, beyond school requirements, and their future. High percentages of the Separation factor choices denote a lack of aspirations.

Three potentially productive activities--homework, working part-time, and reading for pleasure--are engaged in very little, yet of those who do participate, approximately 3 out of 4 see them as important. Two other potentially productive activities--sports and hobbies and spending time with family--are engaged in more often, and again 3 out of 4 participating students see them as important. Activities labeled as nonproductive--hanging out with friends and watching television and videos--show differences in time spent and reasons for doing so. Hanging out with friends, the activity most chosen is rated high (94% and 84%) on the Inspiration variable and the Ambitions variable (83%). Of the 70% who report watching television and videos from 1-10 hours a week, almost all (98%) report it to be interesting, an Inspiration variable, yet 48% report that they do not know why (Separation) they do it.

Examining each activity separately, homework is done more for its importance to future goals, and hanging out with friends, participating in sports and hobbies, reading for pleasure, watching television and videos, spending time with family, and working part-time are engaged in for the present enjoyment they provide.

In examining the total sample, Separation factors are agreed with by a markedly larger percentage in regard to watching television and videos than any other activity, and is engaged in by a higher percentage than homework, reading for pleasure or working part-time. More adolescents engage in the activity and do not know why. The lowest percentage of agreement on the Separation factor choices falls under sports and hobbies, reading for pleasure, and working part-time. Those who choose such activities largely do so for Inspiration and Ambitions reasons. Other potentially productive activities, homework and spending time with family, show agreement with Separation items less than for television and video watching, but more than for sports and hobbies, reading for pleasure, and working part-time.

It is interesting to note how rural adolescents spend or do not spend time; 58% of the entire high school sample report doing only 0-5 hours of homework a week; 35% report not reading for pleasure, yet 96% report watching television or videos; 97% report hanging out with friends with 45% spending at least eleven hours a week doing so. Although 94% report spending time with their family, 66% report that it occurs ten hours or less each week. Working part-time, which can be productive if not done for so many hours that it detracts from other productive activities, was engaged in by 45%. The good news is that of the 45%, only 11% worked more than fifteen hours a week.

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) 1990 survey had similar findings for homework, television viewing, and reading for pleasure by 17-year-olds. Only one-third spent as much as one hour or more per night on homework, 50% reported watching three or more hours of television a day, and 20% reported reading for pleasure only once a year or never. The difference between the NAEP findings and those of the present study is that this study attempts to explain the reasons for engagement in certain activities--and these explanations have implications for schools and families. Why do some students, admittedly few, engage in the potentially productive activities of homework, reading for pleasure, and spending time with family? And why do they see these activities as enjoyable in the present and important for their future goals? How can schools and families increase the number of students who engage in such activities? Perhaps the answer lies in helping students see valid reasons for engaging in these activities, both in the present and future. Engaging in sports and hobbies, which is potentially productive, is seen as enjoyable and important. Teachers could make homework more relevant and tie it to future goals. Families could stress the importance of homework for success in the future. Teachers and families could model reading for pleasure and express their enjoyment and the importance of doing so. If the potentially productive activities such as homework, reading for pleasure, and spending time with family were seen as enjoyable now and valuable for the future, students not only might engage in them more, but would more closely connect their present activities to their future goals.

One could hypothesize that rural students spend a great deal of time with friends and watching television because they claim "there is nothing else to do." What we have found is that there are a number of things for them to do, but they see little or no value in doing them. It is obvious that we must create an environment that gives purpose, enjoyment, and meaning to potentially productive activities in students' lives.

Added material

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Figure 1. Illustration of Student Involvement Levels on the Three Dimensions

	SEPARATION	INSPIRATION	AMBITIONS
The individual may be described as:	Someone involved in an activity but not sure why or by who's choice	Someone who enjoys being busy and involved	Someone who has goals and expectations and is willing to invest time and energy to fulfill them
Involvement level	Limited involvement	Involved in various	Involved in various

may be described as: in activities with little or no inherent sense of purpose or value activities for their inherent value and enjoyment activities with the intent of attaining future goals

Table 1 Description of Sample

	GRADE					GENDER		No		
	8	9	10	11	12	MALE	FEMALE			
n	187	701	599	621	555	14	n	1318	1345	14
%	7%	26%	22%	23%	21%	1%	%	49%	59%	1%

Table 2 Time Allocated to Specific Activities

HOURS PER WEEK	HOMEWORK	FRIENDS	SPORTS & HOBBIES	PLEASURE READING	WORKING	TV & VIDEOS	FAMILY TIME
	n=2663	n=2640	n=2638	n=2645	n=2620	n=2618	n=2656
0	6%	3%	11%	35%	55%	4%	6%
1-5	52%	24%	31%	49%	14%	42%	35%
6-10	26%	28%	25%	9%	11%	28%	25%
11-15	9%	17%	18%	3%	8%	14%	16%
16-20	4%	13%	8%	2%	6%	6%	8%
21+	2%	15%	6%	2%	5%	7%	10%

Table 3 Reasoning for Time Allocation (Percent who strongly agree or agree)

	HOMEWORK	FRIENDS	SPORTS & HOBBIES	PLEASURE READING	WORKING	TV & VIDEOS	FAMILY TIME
Separation Variables							
it is something I do but can't think of a reason why	26%	32%	18%	22%	17%	48%	26%
I feel pressured by others to do it	26%	8%	11%	9%	15%	9%	12%
Inspiration Variables							
it can be enjoyable and interesting	40%	94%	99%	90%	79%	98%	87%
it makes me feel good about myself	NA	84%	NA	62%	83%	42%	75%
I can get into it and it's not too difficult	54%	NA	89%	85%	81%	92%	NA
Ambition Variables							
I learn about things that are important to me	72%	83%	73%	71%	72%	58%	69%
challenges me to think about important things	66%	NA	75%	76%	NA	58%	72%

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