

Rural Education and Out-Migration: The Case of a Coastal Community

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In this article, I report on findings from a case study examining the relationship between formal education and out-migration in a Canadian coastal community from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. Although high rates of village-level out-migration were chronic, most migration trajectories were short-range. Contrary to large-scale quantitative analyses of rural depopulation, I found a geographically stable population and persistently low high-school graduation rates among those who stayed in the proximal area. In the analysis of educational attainment and migration, schools served their traditional role of sorting and selecting youth for out-migration.

Keywords: rural education, educational attainment, geographic mobility, school to work transition, coastal communities

Dans cet article, l'auteur présente les conclusions d'une étude de cas portant sur la relation entre l'éducation formelle et l'exode au sein d'une communauté côtière canadienne du début des années 60 à la fin des années 70. Si les taux élevés de migration hors des villages ont été chroniquement élevés, la plupart des migrants ne sont pas allés très loin. Contrairement aux résultats des analyses quantitatives de l'exode rural sur une grande échelle, l'auteur a constaté ici que la population était demeurée relativement stable et que les taux d'obtention du diplôme de secondaire étaient d'ordinaire peu élevés chez les personnes qui sont restées dans la région. Dans son analyse du rendement scolaire et de l'exode, l'auteur a noté que les écoles ont assuré leur fonction traditionnelle de sélection scolaire ainsi que de filtrage de celles et ceux qui iraient étudier à l'extérieur.

Mots clés: éducation rurale, rendement scolaire, mobilité géographique, transition de l'école au travail, communautés côtières

LEARNING AND LEAVING

It is common to think of universal access to secondary schooling as a feature of modernity, well established by the 1920s and 1930s (Sutherland, 1995). Yet, as spatially sensitive historical analysis has shown, time does not transform all spaces and places equally. In many of Canada's rural communities, the routines of secondary schooling were not effectively established until at least the postwar period (McCann, 1994; Perry, 2003).

In rural Canada, such factors as diverse uneven development, local labour markets, patterns of informal education, and direct socialization to adult roles offered an educational alternative to the school and the often-questionable training it offered (Davey, 1978; Gaffield, 1987; McCann, 1982; Wilson and Stortz, 1993). Rural communities have also offered active and sustained resistance to early efforts to impose schooling on children, with little regard for the social, economic, or cultural composition of communities (Corbett, 2001b; Curtis, 1988; Popkewitz, 1998; Scott, 1985). Indeed, the normalization process of making protracted schooling and higher education automatic and habitual is not yet well established in some Canadian rural and coastal communities (Corbett, 2001a; McCann, 1994). As a southwest Nova Scotia fisherman pointed out to me, it is easy to say that young people “need” an extended formal education, “but the argument has never been proven.” As a result, schooling in coastal communities, and in rural and northern places, remains a significant challenge for youth, for those who educate them, and for the Canadian state (Government of Canada, 1999; Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2003). One core problem is that by implicitly defining educational success in terms of a mobile population of youth exported to urban areas, rural schools may tacitly promote the erosion of their own human capital (DeYoung, 1995; Theobald, 1997). On the other hand, many urban-centric policy analysts like Richard Florida (2002) see contemporary migrations of educated, uprooted people into vibrant cities as a principal motor of economic and social development. The relationship between modernization of economies, rural to urban migration, and formal education has long been the subject of policy discourse, often in the absence of clear evidence about how learning and leaving are related in specific locations in time and space. In this article, I have presented the results from a case study in which I investigated the link between formal education and out-migration in a coastal community in southwest Nova Scotia. The central questions driving this study are: who leaves, who stays, and what level of formal education credentials does each of these groups have?

As an elementary and secondary teacher in coastal and northern communities through the 1980s and 1990s, I strongly sensed that a great many youth, and the majority of young men, remained close to home. Many of those people who remained in rural areas seemed to exhibit significant entrepreneurial resilience to survive and prosper using family economic, social, and cultural capital, with or without credentials, to maintain a lifestyle and make a living in a familiar place. A persistent conundrum for state educational policy is that many rural people stay in their communities and find ways to survive without very much formal education (Corbett, 2001a; House, 1989; Matthews, 1976; Jensen, 2002; Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Pocius,

1991; Smyth and Hattam, 2004). Yet rural people often find themselves cast as redundant rustics who resist modernization by staying in the “wrong places,” blocking what is considered progress (Berry, 1977; Ching & Creed, 1997). Implicit here is the notion that formal schooling provides a mobile form of capital and that education is an institution of what Anthony Giddens (1990, pp. 21–29) calls “disembedding,” severing attachments to traditions and particular locales.

The quantitative literature on both internal migration in Canada and international migration shows a strong link between education and the propensity to migrate. For instance, using Canadian census, labour force survey, and T-1 taxation data, Dupuis, Meyer, and Morissette (2000) found a consistent correlation between educational credentials and the propensity for out-migration from rural communities. Tremblay (2001) found essentially the same pattern in his analysis of Statistics Canada data. In a related study, Bollman (1999) also found that, in rural Canada, the economic “returns” on education were significantly less than in urban communities. The general picture is that people who possess higher levels of formal education are more prone or more able to leave rural communities; similarly those who stay, without higher education credentials, do not reap significant economic benefits from their schooling.

Several recent studies of migration and mobility have suggested that the traditional structural adjustment and push-pull models of migration decision making are less than adequate for understanding why, when, and how people move from one place to another (Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Papastergiadis, 2000; Settles, 2001). These researchers make the case that an analysis of the complex nuances of culture, human agency, and subjectivity must be incorporated into migration studies to gain a clearer picture of the character of geographic mobility. Although structural push and pull mechanisms are clearly important, they are experienced in the context of culture, community, and family, influencing some people to move and others to stay. Such analysis foregrounds the need for research that takes a closer look at the cultural dimensions of the way formal education and out-migration are linked in places outside the urban mainstream.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation was situated in ten coastal villages in southwestern Nova Scotia, along a 30-kilometre peninsula known as Digby Neck. These villages ranged in population from 29 to 206 residents, totalling 1055 for the entire “Neck” (Statistics Canada, 1993). Several larger villages have working wharves as their economic focal points, and evidence of fisheries-

related work (work trucks and fishing gear) is visible around most houses. Most of Digby Neck's inhabitants are in some way connected to the economy of the fishery.

I chose Digby Neck for this study because the area has experienced relatively little in-migration in the past 40 years, and because with the consolidation of elementary schools in 1957, I could identify through school records every person who grew up in the villages that comprise Digby Neck. Because families are tight economic and social units (Davis, 1991; Kearney, 1993), I could, with the support of local informants, trace individuals to their present locations and answer the central questions: who stays and who leaves? My own position in this research is important because as a public school teacher in the community for ten years I was able to use my network of community contacts to accomplish this work.

To establish actual patterns of migration I conducted a Basic Information Survey (between November 1999 and March 2000) of individuals who left the consolidated elementary school to attend secondary school 20 to 35 kilometres away in the town of Digby between 1957 and 1992. I obtained school records from former administrators and teachers as well as from the Nova Scotia Provincial Archives to establish this target population (756 people). This population corresponds with the potential high-school graduating classes of 1963–1998, a 36-year period. The individuals in this population ranged in age from 19 to 56 as of 1999; this population represented virtually all native-born inhabitants. With local informants (typically extended family matriarchs), I developed the Basic Information Survey with which I tracked each student in the population to his or her present location, either on Digby Neck or elsewhere. I was able to locate all but 3 of the 756 students (99%) for whom I could find grade-6 attendance records. This survey showed that a majority (70.9%) of people born on Digby Neck through the study period left the community (see Table 1).

I then conducted a second survey that investigated work and educational histories for this population. I was able to find basic educational attainment data for approximately 70 per cent (511 individuals) of the total population (the Community, Education and Migration Survey carried out between November 1999 and April 2000). From these data, I established out-migration rates and correlated these rates with two key variables: educational attainment and gender.

Space

My initial problem for this research was to establish the boundaries of the community and what counted as leaving. In the fieldwork that preceded

TABLE 1

Historic Graduates of DNCS Remaining on Digby Neck by Percentage

	N	Deceased or unknown	N Revised	Digby Neck 1999	Per- centage
Cohort 1 (1963–74)	306	25	281	73	26.0%
Cohort 2 (1975–86)	236	12	224	66	29.6%
Cohort 3 (1987–98)	214	5	209	69	33.0%
Total (1963–98)	756	42*	714	208	29.1%

* 39 were deceased, 3 unknown.

Source: Basic Information Survey (99 per cent data).

the surveys, I classified or located informant's proximity to "home" (Digby Neck) in three spatial circles. The first group were "stayers" who had remained throughout their lives on Digby Neck or who had returned to live after a period of absence. However, most informants identified people living within 50 kilometres as still being "around here," given that the economic and cultural characteristics of surrounding communities were generally considered to be similar to those of Digby Neck.

With the establishment of improved transportation and communication grids as well as the consolidation of many essential services (including secondary school to which all children have been bused daily since the early 1950s) in the local magnet community of Digby, most Digby Neck village dwellers travelled regularly and extensively within the "around here" circle for shopping, children's schooling and activities, and a variety of services. People who stayed within the 50-kilometre circle were also able to maintain regular contact for family-based employment, mutual aid, and social gatherings. They drew on many of the same networks of community and family resources as people who had actually remained in their home villages. Thus, the "around here" group were considered to have stayed.

Those who had moved within Nova Scotia, into the Annapolis Valley, southwestern Nova Scotia (the "South Shore" in local terms), or to Halifax (within 250 km) were considered to have migrated, but to have remained "not far." It was more difficult for these people to maintain regular social and economic contact with home. Those living beyond Halifax were generally considered true migrants who have "gone away." From this preliminary work, I constructed the four spatial categories used in this analysis (see Figure 1).

Non-migrants	
1. <i>Stayers</i>	– living on Digby Neck in 2000
2. <i>Around here</i>	– living within 50 km of Digby Neck in 2000
Migrants	
3. <i>Not far</i>	– living more than 50 km but not more than 250 km from Digby Neck in 2000
4. <i>Away</i>	– living more than 250 km from Digby Neck in 2000

Figure 1. Categories used to describe spatial status

Time

Informants who helped me develop this analysis of space identified the importance of differentiating the population by the “generation” or time period in which individuals “came of age.”¹ People growing up on Digby Neck in the 1960s faced a very different set of life choices and institutional expectations compared to 1990s youth. I established three 12-year age cohort groups representing what key informants defined as significant stages in the development of the social and economic history of the community (see Figure 2).

The first cohort came of age between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s (1963–1974). Through this period, the community experienced a transition from an almost exclusive economic reliance on the small-boat fishery and multi-occupational practices (Hughes, Tremblay, Rapoport & Leighton, 1960) to an emerging state-regulated industrial fishery (Davis, 1991). The period was described as one in which plentiful manual work was available in the fishery for most men, and stable opportunities for women as homemakers and in fisheries support work. Few youth were thought to have “gone on” beyond high school.

The second cohort came of age between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s (1975–1986). This period is described as the boom period when the fishery industrialized, shifting significantly from a strong reliance on small-boat,

Cohort 1 (1963–1974)	Transition Period
Cohort 2 (1974–1986)	Industrialization “Boom” Period
Cohort 3 (1987–1998)	Period of Decline and Uncertainty

Figure 2. Age cohorts

inshore, fixed-gear fishing to a mixture of inshore and offshore fishing with mobile gear and using larger and more powerful boats (Davis, 1991). This period was also marked by enhanced general living standards on Digby Neck and multiple lucrative employment opportunities for able young fishers, plus educational opportunities for young women in the expanding post-secondary system, particularly for those in well-positioned, licence-holding fishing families. Both my informants and Davis (1991) contend that this period is also marked by an increasingly differentiated social class structure on Digby Neck as wealth concentrated disproportionately in the hands of particular families.

The third cohort came of age between the late 1980s and the late 1990s (1987–1998). By the late 1980s the boom period in the industrial fishery came to an end, ushering in a period of declining catches in the offshore scallop and ground fishery as well as a general pessimism about the future of the industry and of the community.² Through this period, the inshore lobster fishery grew and prospered but the small-boat, hook-and-line fishery suffered significant decline. I decided to cut off the final age cohort in 1998 to allow the youngest single age group (the “class” of 1998) to have nearly two years post high school to set educational and career direction.

FINDINGS

Although most people who grew up on Digby Neck between the 1950s and 1990s left their home villages (see Table 1), the majority remained within the 50-kilometre “around here” circle (see Table 2). This percentage remaining within the space of “around here” actually grew from 55% in Cohort 1, to nearly 66 per cent in Cohort 3, at least tentatively

TABLE 2

Out-migration from Digby Neck by Cohort and Destination, Potential Graduating Classes of 1963–1998

Cohorts	N	N Revised	Stayers & Around here	Not far	Away
Cohort 1	306	281	155 (55.2%)	62 (22.1%)	64 (22.8%)
Cohort 2	236	224	144 (64.3%)	53 (23.7%)	27 (12.0%)
Cohort 3	214	209	137 (65.6%)	39 (18.7%)	33 (15.8%)
Total	756	714	436 (61.1%)	154 (21.6%)	124 (17.4%)

Source: Basic Information Survey (99% data)

demonstrating that the population as a whole appeared to be becoming less geographically mobile through time. This observation appears to complicate the common perception that rural communities are experiencing massive depopulation. A limitation of this finding is the relative age of Cohort 3, particularly some of the younger members who were out of school fewer than two years when surveyed.

The Basic Information Survey also revealed that women were more mobile than men in terms of leaving Digby Neck, but that their migration tended to be relatively short range into the “around here” and “not far” spatial regions. Among the group that remained in the villages of Digby Neck, men outnumbered women by more than 2:1 (see Table 3). However, a higher percentage of women moved into nearby villages within the 50-kilometre circle, and the women who migrated into the intermediate “not far” region outnumbered men by more than 2:1. Men were slightly more likely than women to migrate beyond 250 km, into the “away” region.

Data from this study give support to the general notion that migration is positively associated with formal educational attainment. Those individuals who remained within 50 km of Digby Neck had levels of educational attainment similar to stayers (see Table 4). Similarly, those individuals who migrated into the median “not far” region had educational profiles similar to those living “away.” In terms of educational attainment, the key division was the 50-km circle. Those who moved beyond its boundaries were four to eight times more likely to have post-secondary credentials.

Education was powerfully associated with out-migration only when that migration took the individual outside the 50-kilometre circle. Inside this circle, these data suggest that formal credentials were much less common,

TABLE 3

Out-migration Rates from Digby Neck by Gender and Present Location, Potential Graduating Classes of 1963–1998

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Stayers	145 (40.5)	60 (16.9)
Around here	101 (28.2)	130 (36.5)
Not far	46 (12.8)	108 (30.3)
Away	66 (18.4)	58 (16.2)
Total	358 (99.9)	356 (99.9)

Source: Basic Information Survey (99% data)

TABLE 4

Highest Level of Education Achieved by Migration Status and Gender

	———Stayers———		———Around here———	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Less than grade 10	36 (30.2)	4 (08.2)	22 (32.3)	10 (10.3)
Some high school	44 (37.0)	15 (30.6)	23 (33.8)	17 (17.5)
High school grad.	34 (28.6)	28 (57.1)	19 (27.9)	62 (63.9)
Post-secondary	5 (04.2)	2 (04.2)	4 (05.9)	8 (08.2)
Total	119 (99.9)	49(100.1)	68 (99.9)	97 (99.9)
	———Not far———		———Away———	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Less than grade 10	1 (04.3)	4 (05.9)	5 (12.2)	0
Some high school	5 (21.7)	10 (14.7)	13 (31.7)	7 (15.2)
High school grad.	9 (39.1)	33 (48.5)	9 (22.0)	24 (52.2)
Post-secondary	8 (34.8)	21 (30.9)	14 (34.1)	15 (32.6)
Total	23 (99.9)	68(100.1)	41 (100)	46 (100)

Source: Community, Migration and Education Survey (70% data)

and presumably much less necessary, for men to possess. As informants put it, "You didn't need much education if you wanted to stay around here."

An analysis of high school dropout rates³ makes the point another way. Even in Cohort 3, the male dropout rates continued to exceed 50 per cent. The female dropout rate in this cohort was slightly less than 12 per cent (see Table 5). Women's higher rates of out-migration from Digby Neck mirror higher levels of formal educational credentials, reflecting among other

TABLE 5

Dropout Rates by Age Cohort, Present Location and Gender

	Inside 50 km		Beyond 50 km		Totals	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Cohort 1	70.9%	42%	51.6%	18.8%	64.5%	30.6%
Cohort 2	77.8%	35.2%	31.6%	0%	51.9%	29.9%
Cohort 3	58.3%	16.7%	8.3%	0%	51.4%	11.9%

Source: Community, Migration and Education survey (70% data)

things, a lack of access to local fisheries employment related resources and paid employment. These data show that education serves as a form of mobile capital that has a very different value beyond the 50-km circle both for men and for women. However, women who stayed in the local area also stayed in school longer, acquiring more educational credentials than men.⁴

By the 1990s the vast majority of those individuals who left “around here” had acquired at least a high-school diploma. At the same time most men (51.8%) and a minority (16.7%) of women who remained within the “around here” circle had not graduated from high school at the time of the interviews. These data show that most people who left Digby Neck required at least minimal formal educational credentials. This is apparently not the case for men who remain “around here” and whose dropout rates remain high and for whom educational capital is apparently still not necessary to make a local life.

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Digby Neck may not be growing in terms of population, but its boundaries appear to be opening up to include a wider geographical space. Residents describe a sense of community that has broadened from relatively isolated village life in the 1950s through to the expanded community “around here” of the late 1990s. Almost universal access to short-range car travel allows residents to remain in their “community” while at the same time leaving it. Although Digby Neck remains distinct (“a special place” in the words of informants), residents’ lived sense of community has expanded to encompass a surrounding area where an expanding variety of goods and services are available.

Although the community expanded spatially and in terms of its transportation and communication linkages through the 1980s and 1990s, the industrial economies of western and central Canada were contracting apace. Out-migration is always fuelled by opportunity elsewhere and it has become increasingly difficult for many Atlantic Canadian youth to make the transition to western and central Canadian cities because of uncertain employment conditions and high urban living expenses (Corbett, 2001a; O’Grady, 1995). My data show that more than 40 per cent of men in Cohort 1 migrated outside the 50-km circle, while in Cohort 3 fewer than 24 per cent did so. In other words, Digby Neck men were much less likely to pull up stakes and settle outside the “around here” region in the 1980s and 1990s than they were in the 1960s or 1970s. This observation suggests that the local economy continues to provide some

form of survival opportunities to a significant and apparently growing population of young men.

Young men can “stay home,” access vehicles, and get meals and lodging, but staying “around home” means being limited to work “around here.” These young workers have relatively low levels of formal education, forming an easily exploitable pool for low-wage, often temporary and part-time work in the tourist and local service industries. They also fulfil more traditional on-call occupational roles by being available when needed in the fishery. A good example of this is in the recent revival of the Bay of Fundy scallop fishery, where record catch values were recorded in 2001 and 2002 (Nova Scotia Department of Fisheries and Agriculture, 2004). Another example is in the still-prosperous lobster fishery that also registered record catch values in 2001 and 2002.

The costs and risks of leaving also increased in the 1980s and 1990s. University and college tuition and living costs skyrocketed, pushing the chance of attendance beyond the means of many families. Even when this was not the case, the returns on educational investment were dubious compared to projected returns from more “down to earth,” small business ventures or in other endeavours in known local fields. As Bourdieu (1990) argues so well, families whose traditions have been rooted in labour and pragmatics make a virtue of necessity and find new ways to do “what they have to” in order to survive. For more successful fishing families, tourism, emerging fisheries in “underutilized” species (e.g. crab, shrimp, or sea urchin), or aquaculture allowed young people to use family financial resources in ways that are at least partly familiar and which typically focus on familiar place-based knowledge of markets and resources. For instance, whale watching requires similar knowledge sets to those required in small-boat fishing. For the children of successful fishing families, the entrepreneurial path is familiar and supported by parental experience and knowledge.

Gender has played and continues to play a central role in the relationship between education and migration. Young women have limited opportunities in family-based fishing operations. Consequently, young women face relatively more pressure to leave Digby Neck simply because the main sources of well-paid local employment are not open to them. Women also face greater pressure to succeed and conform in school because of the migration imperative most of them face. The need for at least a high-school diploma appears to extend into most aspects of work in locally based service industry work, which is predominantly done by women, typically for minimum or low wages. Some women live on Digby Neck and commute to work in the 50-km circle, but for the great majority of young women

growing up on Digby Neck, few opportunities for work exist outside the home. Furthermore, traditional marriage, educational, and mobility patterns have meant that women grow up in an established tradition of leaving the community for higher education or to marry men from other nearby communities (Hughes et al., 1960; Kearney, 1993).

As such, women's relative success in institutions of formal education is both a result of their economic marginality in the local space, as well as a passport out of the space and the limited opportunity structure it offers them. Women "around here" are also able to secure service industry employment with their relatively better educational credentials in the expanding service sector economy in and around the rural magnet community of Digby. The economic transformation of the town of Digby into a rural service centre and the development of a small but expanding tourist industry have created employment in low-waged, seasonal, and part-time work within commuting distance of Digby Neck. The expansion of consumer options in the "around here" circle increases short-range consumer mobility and diminishes pressure for longer-range, long-term relocation. For instance, with the establishment in Digby of a large hardware/automotive chain, two large mega-grocery stores, movie rental outlets, along with more than a half-dozen multinational fast food outlets, the town with a population of less than 2200 is now said to have "just about everything you can get in a city." At the same time, new people seek to consume the space as tourists, summer residents, and as industrial developers. These phenomena generate some form of employment, much of it temporary and part-time, and virtually all of it poorly paid.

Educational capital remains crucial to women on Digby Neck whether they stay or leave. High-school graduation is now a minimum requirement for most "around here" cashier and clerical work which is dominated by women. With limited professional opportunities available locally, it is generally understood that post-secondary education leads one out of the community and significantly more women than men have used educational credentials to move beyond the around here circle (see Table 4).

In his analysis of the relationship between education and income in rural communities, Bollman (1999) found a negative relationship between education and income in rural communities, supporting the idea that there is a lower "payoff" for formal education among those who remain in rural communities. For those who wish to remain in rural communities, the decision to forego higher education may contain elements of economic rationality. Using 1940–1990 United States census data, Pittman, McGinty, and Gersti-Pepin (1999) found similar results. Although they reported a positive correlation between education and 1998 income, it was much

weaker in rural than urban areas, leading them to conclude that “rural educators and citizens should treat as doubtful, claims that educational improvement will lead to improvement in rural economies” (p. 29). The residents of Digby Neck appear to understand this imperfect rural learning-earning equation, particularly for young men, expressing scepticism about the uncertain economic payoff for formal education, supporting instead the known importance of hard manual work, entrepreneurial acumen, and multiple occupational skills (Corbett, 2004).⁵

Table 6 shows that both the quantitative analysis of Bollman and Pittman et al. and the common perception that education is not directly related to income “around here” is supported by Census Canada data for 1996. Western Digby Neck, the area with the highest average family incomes “around here” (including the census enumeration area of the municipality of Digby which closely matches the “around here” circle), also has the highest percentage of high-school dropouts. When this sentiment and the economic reality it reflects are repeatedly presented to young people in coastal communities (not only in rhetoric, but in the living example of virtually all male role models), it undoubtedly has consequences for school performance. This understanding, no doubt, explains something of the continuing phenomenon of high male dropout rates, particularly among that cadre of young men most well connected to the local economy and culture.

TABLE 6

Average Family Income and Percentage of the Population Whose Highest Educational Attainment is Less than a High School Diploma, 1996

	Average family income	Percentage of population less than high school diploma
Canada	\$54,583	36.8
Nova Scotia	\$46,110	41.0
Digby Town	\$38,195	46.8
Digby Municipality	\$35,311	51.3
East Digby Neck	\$28,805	58.7
Central Digby Neck	\$30,735	50.8
West Digby Neck*	\$40,118	70.4

Source: 1996 Canadian Census Micro data.

* This census enumeration area includes the communities on Digby Neck west of Little River and Tiverton and Central Grove on Long Island.

The question perhaps is not so much whether education is beneficial to people in coastal communities, but rather, what are its benefits for differently placed individuals? It may be true that secondary education is very important for a mobile, elite group, and for many women, but not necessarily for those men who remain. In places like Digby Neck, pro-educational discourse may paradoxically be read as an attempt to subvert the economic prospects of a young man and lure him into an uncertain future where his own cultural capital has limited value.

DISCUSSION

To understand ironic findings such as declining out-migration, continuing high dropout rates for males, and the apparently irrational ambivalence that continues to mark secondary and post-secondary education, the context of the contemporary coastal community needs examination. Contrary to romantic notions of isolation from modernity (McKay, 1994), Digby Neck is an example of a Nova Scotia coastal community intimately caught up in contemporary transformations that do not necessarily support stronger commitment to schooling or provide youth better options and economic prospects.

My data suggest that, rather than becoming more geographically mobile than were previous generations, youth in contemporary coastal communities (and possibly, in many rural and northern communities) may actually be facing a more restricted set of options and opportunities. In addition to the mismatch between rural/working class homes and school, which has been well established by educational sociologists, additional factors such as rising tuition costs, the centralization of educational and other services in rural areas, the high cost of leaving, and the expansion of low-wage, low-skilled work in the expanding rural service economy may help to explain continuing high dropout rates and low post-secondary participation rates in rural communities. A rough life in a known community among family and friends may look better to many youth than taking a very expensive shot at an educational journey that represents an expensive, unproven, and uncertain path.

It could be that rural youth, like their elders, need to see a connection between higher education and the cultural and geographic spaces they inhabit. My data support common local perceptions about how education functions as preparation for out-migration. Many youth may not possess the necessary cultural (e.g. family living near post-secondary institutions or traditions of leaving home for higher education) and economic resources and linkages to make what one educator I interviewed called a

“leap of faith.”

Diminishing opportunity in western Canada and in Ontario for work requiring little formal education since the 1970s has also made it difficult for rural Atlantic Canadians to work in the classic “reserve army” fashion, moving in and out of coastal communities to serve the needs of capital (Veltmeyer, 1979). This compression of opportunity has been accompanied by increased living costs in western and central Canada. My data suggest that the new reserve army moving out of the rural hinterlands is comprised of formally educated, flexible workers required in a post-Fordist economy as opposed to the traditional multi-skilled, manual, “hard-working” migrant labourers who have been replaced by an urban-based, “bloated irregular workforce comprised primarily of minorities and the poorest segments of the population — a geographically concentrated and subservient reserve army of labour” (Soja, 1989, 181). The traditional Atlantic Canadian reserve army labourer is now considered to be “stuck” close to home, mixing service industry work with primary resource harvesting and state transfers, never having to leave home. If there is a rationalization these days for formal education, it is to provide a labour force for the symbolic factory work of call centres, on-line support, and other forms of poorly paid, post-industrial work that cannot easily be shipped offshore because they required an inexpensive, fluent Anglophone workforce. It appears as though Nova Scotian rural women fill this bill nicely. As I write this article, a call centre has recently (2004) opened in Cornwallis, a small, around-here community with a decommissioned military base.

One part of the ambivalence that formal education generates is rooted in questions about ability of both formal education, and the state more generally, to improve life on Digby Neck. Few adults currently living on Digby Neck have used formal education to achieve what is defined as a quality of life comparable to that of people educated in what one fisherman called “the University of the Bay of Fundy.” Another marker of ambivalence is the sense that the need for education is part of the juggernaut of forces that impinging on rural life. Families in coastal communities understand that their children need education, but the source of this need is ironically nested in the very forces that are conspiring to destabilize the life they know. Formal education sits uneasily with corporate concentration in resource industries, unwanted development, the denigration of landscape, pollution, rural depopulation/disembedding, and other unsavoury features of late modernity. In other words, young people’s need for formal education has been created by the same global change forces that are seen to be jeopardizing the traditional way of life in coastal and rural villages. Thus, education, along with other forms of state intervention, has come to be

viewed with scepticism and ambivalence.

The sense of a loss of control generates multiple forms of resistance in rural places. Resistance to some forms of industrial development like an American corporate rock quarry planned for Digby Neck is, I think, not entirely separate from resistance to many of the implications of formal education. Resistance takes many forms, ranging from continuing high dropout rates, to school violence and adolescent hopelessness and frustration, to the strong unfocused desire to “get out of here” that many rural, northern, and coastal youth exhibit, to a variety of attempts to organize coalitions to control the rural space. I would further argue that staying in what is a known, if not entirely safe coastal place (Kelly, 1993) is also a response to ambivalence and ontological insecurity of mobile modernity described by social theorists like Zygmunt Bauman (1991), John Urry (2000), and Anthony Giddens (1990). Elsewhere appears to be no less secure than here.

I suggest that rural educational institutions continue to serve their traditional role of sorting and selection for out-migration (Lotz & Welton, 1997). In Atlantic Canada, educational policy makers have not yet begun to give serious consideration to the broader role of schooling in non-urban spaces. The role formal education could play in helping rural places resist large social forces of community disintegration is a question for the future, one that challenges the role of the state educational machinery in the whole process of generic normalization, standardization, and accountability initiatives that continue to haunt efforts to develop educational programming concerned with more than displacement of redundant people living in redundant places. My data show that the educational displacement process has worked very well and the formally educated do indeed leave, yet Foucault’s (1986) modernizing “pious descendents of time” have not yet completely mobilized “determined inhabitants of space” (p. 22). As Wotherspoon (1998) has pointed out, rural residents’ support for community schools may have more to do with supporting community survival than with supporting the kind of schooling contemporary educational policy imagines.

What role does formal schooling play in rural and coastal communities, and is it possible to imagine an education that is about something other than leaving? If the answer to the latter question is yes, this will undoubtedly mean reassessing the mobile liberal individualism that Paul Theobald (1997) finds at the heart of the way the purposes of education are typically constructed. It will also involve a similar reassessment of what contemporary global capitalism is doing in and to that vast space outside the city that historical development should have depopulated ages ago. It is my

contention here that in rural, northern, and coastal communities, formal education and out-migration are intimately linked and if policy makers and educators want to come to grips with the contemporary challenges facing education in rural communities, the ambivalence generated by this learning-leaving link must be taken seriously. I sense that the ideas of place-based education (Gruenwald, 2002; Smith, 2002; Theobald, 1997) and a contextually sensitive curriculum (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Kincheloe, Steinberg & Slattery, 2000) might provide a place to start.

NOTES

- 1 I define "came of age" as the year in which an individual would have graduated high school given a normal, uninterrupted school career. This was determined by simply adding six years to the year in which school records showed that individuals left grade 6 in the consolidated elementary school. For instance, if an individual left the elementary school in 1959, the "coming of age" or potential high-school graduation year would be 1965.
- 2 By the end of the 1990s, however, many fish stocks had begun to rebound and by 2000 and 2001 record catch values were recorded in the core fisheries of Digby (scallop) and Digby Neck (lobster).
- 3 I defined a "dropout" as a person whose highest level of educational achievement was less than high-school graduation at the time s/he was surveyed in the Community, Migration and Education Survey.
- 4 This finding is consistent with the analysis of the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women (2002, p. 4) who demonstrate that women rely more on formal educational credentials for economic security than do men. In 1999, for example, nearly two-thirds of Nova Scotian women (64.6%) between the ages of 18 and 21 were enrolled in university compared to a national rate of 35.3 per cent (2002, p. 18).
- 5 Other international studies confirm the tenuous link between education and income in rural areas (Banerjee, 1996; Demerath, 1999; Jolliffe, 1998; Hare, 2002).

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