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THE INTERPLAY OF SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL CAPITAL AS RESOURCES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between social and physical capital resources in shaping students' perceptions, motivation, and academic performance across two rural community contexts—L County (high-performing) and F County (low-performing), Kentucky. The primary objective is to explore how community-level resources influence students' educational orientations and how these dynamics vary between high- and low-achieving groups. Grounded in motivation theory and cultural models theory (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Gee, 1996), the study conceptualizes social and physical capital as motivational structures that mediate students' agency, aspiration, and achievement. Employing a pragmatic mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative analysis ($n = 42$) with qualitative interviews ($n = 40$). Quantitative findings indicate that in L County, students' motivation was primarily shaped by teacher influence ($r =$

0.596, $p < .01$), whereas in F County, motivational drivers were dispersed across teachers, peers, and parents, reflecting weaker coherence. Qualitative evidence further reveals that deficits in physical capital—such as inadequate infrastructure, limited facilities, and restricted local opportunities—indirectly constrained long-term aspirations, while social capital, particularly through teacher and family relationships, exerted a more immediate influence on motivation and performance. Overall, the findings suggest that the quality and coherence of social relationships, rather than the quantity of available resources, are decisive factors in educational success. The study contributes to the sociology of education by integrating spatial and relational dimensions of capital into motivational analysis and by illuminating how students in resource-constrained settings mobilize social and physical capital to navigate structural inequalities and pursue academic advancement.

Keywords:

Social–Physical Capital Interplay, Student Motivation and Performance, Cultural Models and Motivation Theory, Mixed-Methods Community Study, Contextual Capital Alignment, Rural Educational Inequality

1. Introduction, Research Objectives, and Conceptual Framework

This study examines how students' perceptions and educational behaviours are shaped by the social and physical capital resources of their communities, and how these dynamics vary across groups with differing academic performance. A secondary objective is to understand how community structures produce patterned perceptions that influence educational outcomes. Building on recent interdisciplinary work emphasizing the integration of social and spatial dimensions of education (Chiu, 2024; Desha et al., 2021), this research investigates the interdependence between social and physical capital in shaping students' motivational orientations within distinct community contexts.

The framework draws from Gee (1996), Strauss (1992), Losey (1997), and Harklau (2000), who propose that social and physical capital possess motivational force—structuring goals, desires, and actions within educational systems. This concept serves as the study's central mechanism linking community resources to academic motivation and performance. Grounded in theories of human motives (D'Andrade, 1992; Strauss, 1992; Martin, 1987; Willis, 1977), the analysis conceptualizes motivation as an outcome of internalized values and culturally mediated interpretations of one's environment. The study addresses three research questions:

- How do physical capital resources (infrastructure, built environment, and their associated social and economic values) influence students' perceptions and educational performance?
- How do social capital resources (parents, peers, teachers, and schools) shape these perceptions and performance outcomes?
- What are the relational patterns between social and physical capital that explain differences in educational motivation across performance groups?

1.1 Research Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Foundations: Two complementary perspectives—motivation theory and cultural models theory—inform this study. Motivation theory explains the internal drives guiding student behaviour, while cultural models theory examines how community norms, networks, and structures condition access to social and physical capital (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Gee, 1999).

1.1.1 Motivation Theory

Educational motivation reflects students' willingness to engage and persist in learning (Wolters, 1998), shaped by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Bandura, 1997; Ames & Ames, 1984; Wentzel, 1994). Human motives produce satisfaction when fulfilled and frustration when unmet, filtered through cultural constructs that guide meaning and action (D'Andrade, 1992; Strauss, 1992).

1.1.2 Cultural Models Theory

This framework highlights how community infrastructures and relational networks influence motivation and achievement (Carspecken, 1996; Curry, 2002). Physical capital encompasses material infrastructure, economic value, and embedded social meaning (Leithwood et al., 2003), while social capital refers to trust-based networks and shared norms enabling collective educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The study focuses on four key social capital dimensions—parents, peers, teachers, and schools—as central agents of student motivation.

Together, these frameworks reveal how motivational processes are shaped by the interaction between individual drives and community-level capital structures, offering insight into the mechanisms linking inequality, culture, and educational performance.

1.2 Analytical and Methodological Framework

An integrated approach combining human motives (D'Andrade, 1992; Strauss, 1992) with social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Carspecken, 1996) informs the analysis. Social and physical capital are conceptualized as motivational structures influencing students' agency, aspirations, and achievement (Gee, 1996; Losey, 1997).

A pragmatic mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Brannen, 2005) was employed to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Quantitative analysis identified correlations between perceptions of capital resources and academic outcomes, while qualitative interviews explored the cognitive and motivational processes underpinning these relationships. Spatial econometric modeling further accounted for community-level variation, enhancing the contextual validity of the findings (Xiao Li, 2024).

1.3 Data Collection

Both phases were approved by IRB and school district superintendents.

1.3.1 Quantitative Phase

130 sectional survey questions captured perceptions of three physical capital dimensions (P1: infrastructure; P2: economic values; P3: functional/material aspects) and four social capital dimensions (S1: parents; S2: peers; S3: teachers; S4: schools). Educational motivation derived from physical (Mp) and social (Ms) capital served as dependent variables, while academic performance was measured using Kentucky's CATS data (L County as higher-performing and F County as lower-performing provided contrasting contexts – Appendixes figure 1).

1.3.2 Qualitative Phase

Semi-structured interviews explored students' perceptions of the seven resource dimensions and their influence on motivation and behavior. Participants (n = 20 per county, stratified by performance group) provided in-depth reflections on attitudes, perceptions, and relational experiences. 76 sectional interview questions followed culturally informed motivational frameworks (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Bandura, 2002; Bourdieu, 1990) and included seven domains: community infrastructure, economic and physical values, community social norms, parental involvement, peer influence, teacher support, and school resources.

1.4 Data Analysis

1.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Likert-scale responses were analysed using Spearman's rho to assess correlations among physical and social capital dimensions and motivational constructs ($\alpha = .744-.768$).

1.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were analysed using the constant comparative method, with dual inductive and theory-driven coding. L County analysis yielded 27 major thematic categories; F County, 23 categories. Enumeration ensured representativeness, while triangulation with quantitative data validated findings.

1.5 Reliability and Validity

Survey instruments drew on validated measures, including the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990) and the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction

(Wubbels & Levy, 1993). Internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .744$). Qualitative rigor was ensured through audio-recorded transcription, dual coding, and triangulation with quantitative results. Pilot testing with education experts established face and construct validity.

2 Research Findings and Analysis

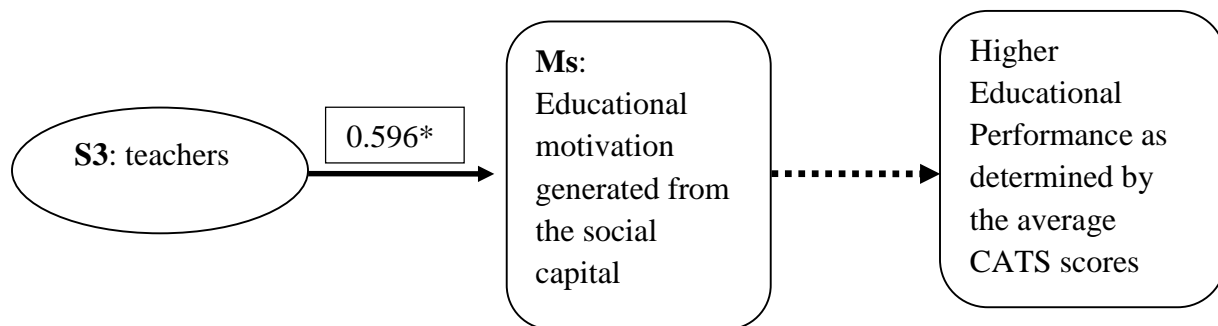
2.1 Quantitative Results

This section reports results from a survey of 42 senior students at L County and F County High Schools (2007–2008). The analysis examined relationships between students' perceptions of physical and social capital resources and their educational motivation and outcomes.

2.1.1 L County High School

Twenty-six students participated (65% response rate; 9 males, 17 females; M age = 17.8). Most respondents lived outside city limits (58%) and with both parents (61%). Spearman's rho analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.744$) revealed a single statistically significant positive correlation between students' perceptions of teachers (S3) and motivation derived from social capital (Ms) ($r = 0.596$, $p < .01$).

Diagram 1: *Significant correlation of variables of L County High School*



*Significance level of 0.01

No other variables reached significance. This pattern indicates that L County students' educational motivation was strongly and exclusively associated with perceptions of teachers, suggesting that positive teacher–student relationships were the key motivational driver supporting the county's higher academic performance.

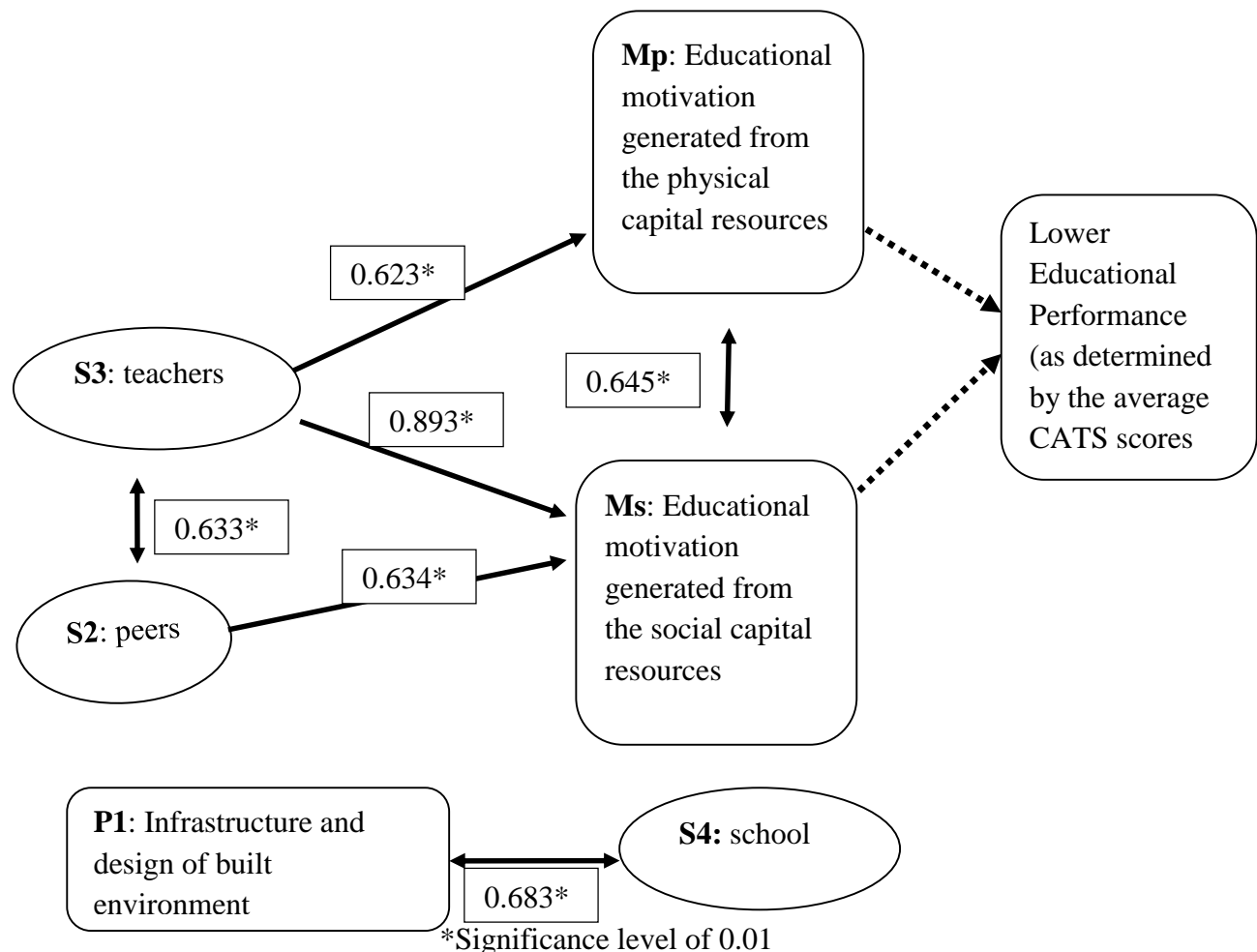
2.1.2 F County High School

At F County High School, 16 students participated (46% response rate; 10 males, 6 females; M age = 17.9). Most lived outside city limits (69%), and half resided with both parents. Reliability was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.768$). Several significant positive correlations emerged ($p < .01$):

- P1 (Physical infrastructure) – S4 (School): $r = 0.683$
- S2 (Peers) – Ms (Motivation from social capital): $r = 0.634$
- S3 (Teachers) – Ms: $r = 0.893$
- S3 – Mp (Motivation from physical capital): $r = 0.623$
- S3 – S2: $r = 0.633$
- Mp – Ms: $r = 0.645$

Additionally, S1 (Parents) – Ms showed a moderate correlation ($r = 0.599$, $p < .05$).

Diagram 2: Significant correlation of variables of F County High School



These findings indicate that teacher (S3) and peer (S2) relationships were central to students' motivation. The strong correlation between Mp and Ms further suggests an interdependence between social and physical motivational factors. Although perceptions of school infrastructure (P1–S4) were positively related, they did not directly influence motivation or achievement.

Overall, the F County pattern reveals multiple positive but diffuse motivational relationships, primarily teacher- and peer-driven, that did not translate into higher performance outcomes.

2.1.3 Quantitative Cross-comparison Analysis: L County vs. F County

Cross-case comparison reveals contrasting motivational structures between high- and low-performing contexts.

- L County (high-performing) exhibited a streamlined, teacher-centered model, where motivation derived almost exclusively from teacher influence (S3 → Ms), corresponding with strong academic results.
- F County (low-performing) demonstrated a fragmented, interdependent model, characterized by multiple overlapping motivational relationships among teachers, peers, and environmental factors (S3, S2, Mp, Ms). Despite the number of positive associations, academic outcomes remained weak.

These results suggest that the coherence and quality of social capital relationships—rather than their quantity—determine motivational effectiveness and educational success. In L County, teacher-centered motivation provided clear direction and consistency. In contrast, F County's dispersed motivational network may reflect competing social influences that diluted focus and hindered performance.

Together, the findings reinforce the study's theoretical proposition that educational motivation arises not merely from the presence of social and physical capital resources but from their alignment and integration within the cultural and relational fabric of the community.

Table 1: *Summary of Significant Correlation Patterns: L County vs. F County High Schools*

Variable Relationship	L County	F County	Significance Level (p)	Interpretation
S3 – Ms (Teachers → Motivation from Social Capital)	r = 0.596	r = 0.893	0.01**	Strong teacher influence in both contexts; substantially stronger in F County.
S2 – Ms (Peers → Motivation from Social Capital)	n.s.	r = 0.634	0.01**	Peer influence significant only in F County.
S1 – Ms (Parents → Motivation from Social Capital)	n.s.	r = 0.599	0.05*	Parental influence moderately significant in F County.
S3 – Mp (Teachers → Motivation from Physical Capital)	n.s.	r = 0.623	0.01**	Teachers influenced both motivational domains in F County.
S3 – S2 (Teachers ↔ Peers)	n.s.	r = 0.633	0.01**	Teacher–peer relationship significant only in F County.
Mp – Ms (Physical ↔ Social Motivation)	n.s.	r = 0.645	0.01**	Interdependence between motivation types in F County.
P1 – S4 (Physical Infrastructure ↔ School)	n.s.	r = 0.683	0.01**	School environment associated with physical infrastructure only in F County.

Note. n.s. = not significant. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.744$ (L); 0.768 (F)

2.2 Qualitative Survey Result: L County Individual In-Depth Interview Analysis

The 27 broad categories identified in the L County interviews served as the basis for thematic analysis. Thematic context analysis was applied to identify patterns of relationships between categories and to streamline potential relational structures. The transcripts were interpreted through theoretical constructs, resulting in the identification of seven emergent themes.

The categories contributing to each theme were consolidated based on observed linkages and patterns within the transcripts. Table 2 summarizes the emergent themes and their associated categories (derived from full list in Appendixes - tables 4 and 5).

Table 2: *L County Emergent Themes and Related Categories*

Theme	Related Categories
Community Settings	Age Group; Community Size; Environmental Conditions; Available Community Resources; Conditions of Facilities; Boredom
Career Prospect Challenges	Employment Opportunity; Economic Conditions; Career Satisfaction; Job Market Settings
Social Integration	Social Acceptance; Personal and Community Relationships; Group Ties and Support; Community Involvement
Isolation	Sense of Belonging; Social Norms and Characteristics; Group Ties and Support
Developmental Constraints	Drug Problems; Available Community Resources; Available School Programs; Quality of School
Developmental Approach	College Education; Planning; Commitment; Assertiveness
Influences	Parental Involvement in College Planning; Parental Support and Encouragement; Teacher Support; Peer Reference

2.3 Qualitative Survey Result: F County Individual In-Depth Interview Analysis

The 23 main categories from F County interviews informed the thematic analysis. Using theoretical constructs, five emergent themes were identified. Table 3 presents the emergent themes and their associated categories (derived from full list in Appendixes - tables 6 and 7).

Table 3: *F County Emergent Themes and Related Categories*

Theme	Related Categories
Community Settings	Community Size; Environmental Conditions; Available Community Resources; Safe, Comfortable Community; Family Ties
Social Integration	Family Ties; Social Acceptance; Personal and Community Relationships; Group Ties and Support; Community Involvement
Developmental Challenges	Available Community Resources; Employment Opportunity; Economic Conditions; Job Market Settings; Social Norms and Characteristics
Developmental Approach	College Education; Planning; Commitment; Personal Will and Ambition
Influences	Parental Support and Encouragement; Teacher Support; Peer Reference; Autonomy in Education Decisions; School Offers Variety of Classes

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Physical Capital Resources and Educational Performance

3.1.1 Community Infrastructure and Built Environment

Quantitative analyses revealed no direct, statistically significant relationship between students' perceptions of physical capital and academic performance in either county. However, qualitative evidence indicated indirect influences on motivation and personal development. Students across both L and F counties described limited community infrastructure—such as libraries, museums, youth centers, and recreational spaces—which restricted opportunities for self-development and engagement. Several students (seven in L County, six in F County) expressed intentions to leave their communities in pursuit of broader career and personal growth opportunities, suggesting that physical capital deficiencies shape long-term educational aspirations rather than immediate academic outcomes. These findings support prior research emphasizing the developmental and motivational functions of community infrastructure (Brown et al., 2001; City of Toronto, 2001, 2006).

3.1.2 Economic Conditions and Employment Opportunities

Students perceived limited economic opportunities and weak local labor markets, viewing postsecondary education as essential for future stability. Notably, F County students with lower CATS scores (Group B) appeared less influenced by economic constraints, opting for vocational programs offering immediate employment, consistent with the “warehouse concept” of schooling (Bozick, 2009; Grubb & Lazerson, 1982). Overall, local economic weakness indirectly encouraged aspirations for higher education without producing measurable gains in current academic performance.

3.2. Social Capital Resources and Educational Performance

3.2.1 Perceptions and Utilization of Social Capital

Social capital—encompassing family, peers, teachers, and schools—differentially shaped student outcomes across community contexts. F County students relied on close family and community ties for social and economic security, often prioritizing work over academic advancement. In contrast, L County students perceived social cohesion as restrictive and were more motivated by independence and educational mobility. These distinctions align with Nahapiet and Ghoshal’s (1998) relational, cognitive, and structural dimensions of social capital.

3.2.2 Family Ties and Community Attachment

In F County, strong family bonds reinforced community belonging but sometimes constrained educational mobility. Conversely, weaker family ties in L County provided greater autonomy, enabling broader academic aspirations. These dynamics align with prior research identifying family as a central form of social capital influencing educational outcomes (Coleman, 1998; Hsiao, 1992).

3.2.3 Teachers as Social Capital Resources

Teacher influence emerged as a key motivational factor in both contexts, though in different forms. L County students emphasized relational trust and emotional support, correlating with higher CATS scores. F County students valued teachers for functional guidance and vocational preparation. These findings echo prior evidence linking supportive teacher-student relationships to motivation and achievement (Brekelmans et al., 2000, 2002; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 1998).

3.2.4 Parents as Social Capital Resources

Parental involvement also varied by community. L County parents provided active guidance in postsecondary planning, whereas F County parents offered emotional support with limited academic direction. This distinction supports Bourdieu's (1986) concept of mobilizable social capital and aligns with studies linking parental engagement to academic success (Ames & Archer, 1987; Entwisle et al., 1987; Grolnick et al., 1997).

3.2.5 Peers and Schools

Peer networks influenced motivation and perceptions of success. In L County, strong peer norms favored collective academic engagement and higher expectations, whereas F County peers often expressed limited educational ambition. Schools functioned as mobilizable institutional resources: F County students used vocational programs for immediate career pathways, while L County students sought academic enrichment for college preparation. These differences illustrate context-dependent mobilization of school-based social capital, consistent with the "warehouse concept" framework (Bozick, 2009; Grubb & Lazerson, 1982).

3.3 Cross-County Comparisons and Implications

Despite similar regional characteristics, students in L and F counties leveraged social and physical capital differently. Physical capital primarily shaped aspirations indirectly through economic and infrastructural constraints, while social capital—particularly relationships with family and teachers—directly influenced academic motivation and performance. These findings underscore the contextual interdependence of community resources, supporting conceptualizations of social and physical capital as interconnected yet distinct (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Croll, 2004).

4. Conclusion and Limitations

This study demonstrates that students' perceptions and mobilization of social and physical capital are central to understanding educational motivation and performance. Physical capital shapes developmental environments and long-term aspirations, whereas social capital exerts a more immediate influence through relational trust, guidance, and support. Family, teachers, peers, and schools serve as mobilizable social capital, with effects contingent on community context and individual agency. Limitations include the focus on two counties, limited quantitative participation due to consent constraints, and reliance on CATS scores as the sole

performance indicator. Broader socioeconomic variables and school climate factors were not fully incorporated. Future research should integrate multi-dimensional performance metrics and examine how students strategically mobilize capital across different community and institutional contexts. Practically, fostering strong teacher-student relationships, promoting active parental engagement, and aligning school programs with students' aspirations represent effective pathways to enhance motivation and educational attainment. Overall, these findings contribute to the sociology of education by illuminating how structural and relational community resources jointly shape students' educational orientations, aspirations, and opportunities.

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Appendixes

Figure 1: CATS scores of F and L counties, and average KY State

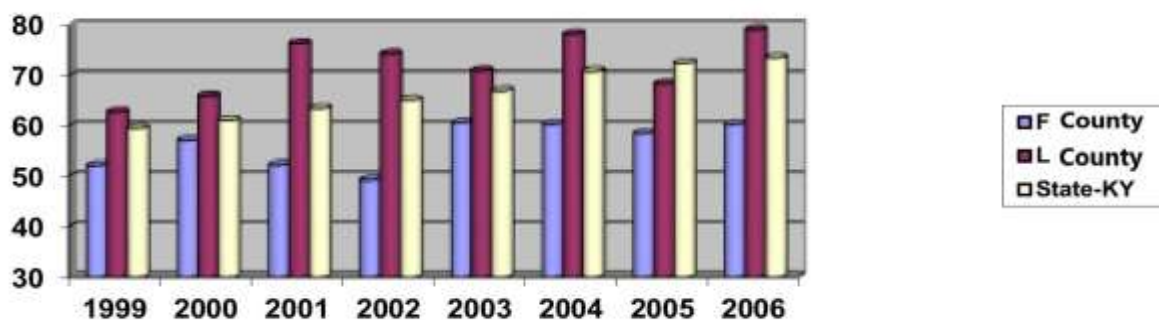


Table 4: Broad categories for L County

Age group	Employment opportunity	Social acceptance
College Education	Drugs problems	Parental involvement in college planning
Community size	Economic conditions	Personal and community relationship
Environment conditions	Career satisfaction	Group ties and support
Available community recourses	Job market settings	Community involvement
Conditions of facilities	Quality of school	Peer relationship
Boredom	Available school programs	Teacher support
Personal commitment	Planning	Parental support and encouragement
School Assertiveness	Sense of belonging	Social norms, characteristics

Table 5: Emergent Secondary Issues of L County

Code #	Issues
1	Age group
2	Limited places to go and things to do
3	Lack of resources and opportunity for personal development, growth
4	Boring environment
5	Meet basic needs
6	Want to leave the community
7	Low employment opportunity
8	Return to community later

9	Peaceful and quiet environment
10	Nature and outdoor activities
11	Cleaned, well maintained environment
12	Weak, unattractive business and economic conditions of community
13	Low advancement, getting-by jobs available conditions
14	Self-confidence
15	Personal will, choice
16	Specific type of business is going well
17	Small size community affects business growth
18	Job market that does not require education/degree
19	College degree is required for good, successful jobs
20	Don't feel belong, don't fit well with friends, and community
21	Accept and is satisfied with the conditions
22	Work hard, motivated, and stay focused to achieve
23	Personal relationship with community people
24	Group ties, support, connection
25	Community's involvement/ expectation
26	Societal norms
27	People get together, festivals
28	Drug/alcohol problems
29	Family relationship/ties
30	Community/town is small
31	Like the community
32	Safe, easy, comfortable, homely community
33	Steady-going business, no growth community
34	Personal career perspective, career choice, and career-related college plan
35	Talk with parents about school/school matters
36	Discuss with parents for college options, major, financial
37	Parent's expectation
38	Parent's attention to school performance, grades
39	Support/encouragement from parents
40	Parents support sports activities
41	Not in trouble at school
42	Personal goals/plans to achieve
43	Spend a lot of time with friends
44	Don't study, don't study hard environment
45	Close relationship with friends
46	Friends' college going rate is high
47	Teachers help and support to do well in school
48	Close relationship with teachers
49	Teachers care about personal development, progress
50	Some teachers don't care
51	School has the same quality as other schools
52	Small size school
53	Old, outdated school facilities

54	School lacks developmental courses and activities
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Table 6: *Broad categories for F County*

Available community resources	Personal and community relationship	Community involvement	Community size	Economic conditions
Social acceptance	Employment opportunity	Job market settings	College education	Commitment
Autonomy in education decision	Group ties and support	Family ties	Parental support and encouragement	Teacher's expectation
Teacher support	School offers variety of classes	Environmental conditions	Ambition and personal will	Social norms and characteristics
Planning	Peer reference	Safe, easy, and comfortable community		

Table 7: *Emergent Secondary Issues of F County*

Code #	Issues
1	Limited places to go and things to do
2	Lack of resources and opportunity for personal development, growth
3	Boring environment
4	Meet basic needs
5	Want to leave the community
6	Low employment opportunity
7	Peaceful and quiet environment
8	Nature and outdoor activities
9	Cleaned, well maintained environment
10	Farming and farmlands
11	Weak, unattractive business and economic conditions of community
12	Low advancement, getting-by jobs available conditions
13	Want to live in the community
14	Personal will
15	Small size community affects business growth
16	Job market that does not require education/degree
17	College degree is required for good, successful jobs
18	Social issue of laziness
19	People resist to change
20	No knowledge of economic conditions
21	Don't feel belong, don't fit well with friends, and community
22	Accept and is satisfied with the conditions

23	Work hard, motivated, and stay focused to achieve
24	Personal relationship with community people
25	Group ties, support, connection
26	Community's involvement/ expectation
27	Societal norms
28	People get together, festivals
29	Family relationship/ties
30	Community/town is small
31	Like the community
32	Safe, easy, comfortable, homely community
33	Steady-going business, no growth community
34	Personal career perspective, career choice, and career-related college plan
35	Make own decision for college option
36	Talk with parents about school/school matters
37	Discuss with parents for college options, major, financial
38	Parent's attention to school performance, grades
39	Support/encouragement from parents
40	Personal goals/plans to achieve
41	Spend a lot of time with friends
42	Don't study, don't study hard environment
43	Close relationship with friends
44	Friends' college going rate is high
45	No discussion/no involvement from parents for college/education
46	Teachers help and support to do well in school
47	Close relationship with teachers
48	Teacher's expectation
49	Teachers are active in community
50	Teachers help in future career and education
51	Community pays attention and support school, school activities
52	School has the same quality as other schools
53	Safe, comfortable, and nice school
54	Small size school
55	School offers variety of classes
56	School helps to be successful in education