Transforming Rural Young Higher Education Aspirations through Community Engagement in a Migration Culture

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Abstract: Previous studies show that low aspirations for higher education in rural areas stem from economic constraints and limited information access, yet research remains largely diagnostic, with few studies testing community-based interventions. A culture of migration, where youth leave home regions for work, reinforces the perception that employment yields income faster than further education. This study aims to reconstruct rural youth's higher education aspirations through education rooted in community engagement. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, it involves rural youth, parents, community leaders, and university students as educational partners. Data were collected through observation, interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation. Results show the approach deepens adolescents' understanding of higher education's importance, broadens knowledge of scholarships and career opportunities, and shifts their orientation from immediate post-school employment toward higher education. Community involvement also strengthens social support for their educational choices. The originality of this study lies in developing a perspective on reconstructing educational aspirations that positions community engagement as a mechanism for negotiating the cultural norm of migration towards the potential for social mobility through higher education. Theoretically, it expands the discourse on educational aspirations by framing the community as an agent of change shaping future orientations. Practically, it offers a community-based educational model adoptable by village governments, schools, and higher education institutions to broaden educational access and foster social mobility in rural communities.

Keywords: Higher Education Aspirations, Culture of Migration, Community Engagement, Social Mobility, Community-Based Education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a strategic role in developing human capital, expanding individual capabilities, and promoting social mobility. Access to higher education provides young people with opportunities to develop knowledge and competencies, improve their competitiveness, and participate more actively in social and economic development. Ideally, therefore, young people in rural communities should have equitable opportunities to pursue higher education regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographical location. Higher education should not be perceived merely as an individual pathway to employment but also as an important investment in improving family welfare and strengthening the long-term development of rural communities (Arifin, 2017; Abdillah, 2023).

Participation in higher education remains uneven between urban and rural populations. Indonesia's higher education participation rate has remained relatively limited, with a substantial urban–rural disparity (Corbett, 2016). This condition indicates that access to higher education is shaped not only by academic ability but also by socioeconomic conditions, access to information, family expectations, and the social environment in which young people make decisions about their futures (Yeboah, 2021). For rural youth, the transition from secondary education to higher education may therefore involve competing choices between continuing education and entering the labor market.

One important social context influencing these choices is the culture of migration, locally known as *merantau*. In many rural communities, migration is regarded as a practical pathway to obtain income, support the family economy, and achieve social mobility (Gore et al., 2022). Consequently, some young people perceive working or migrating after completing secondary education as more immediate and economically meaningful than continuing to university. Previous research has indicated that economic orientation and employment expectations may contribute to school discontinuation and reduced educational aspirations among rural adolescents (Baiq Yunia Rahma Dewi Syafruddin & Nursaptini, 2025; Corbett & Forsey, 2017). In this context, migration culture should not be understood merely as geographical mobility but as a social value system that may shape how young people define success and construct their educational futures.

The problem is further complicated by limited access to information about higher education, insufficient knowledge of scholarship opportunities, financial concerns, and the scarcity of educational role models from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Some parents may also perceive university

education as financially burdensome or less immediately beneficial than employment. These conditions can generate uncertainty among adolescents who may have sufficient academic potential but lack the social and informational resources necessary to translate that potential into higher education aspirations (Hassen et al., 2025; Naidoo, 2015; Mussa, 2019). Thus, rural youth educational aspirations emerge from the interaction between individual motivation and the broader family, social, economic, and cultural environment.

From a theoretical perspective, educational aspirations refer to expectations, goals, and desired educational achievements shaped by individual experiences, motivation, and social environments. Aspirations are not constructed independently; rather, they are influenced by family, peers, schools, community networks, and culturally embedded expectations. Social conditions can therefore shape what young people consider possible, desirable, or realistic in relation to their educational futures (Dhany Puspita & Ngatmin Abbas, 2024; Zago, 2016). This perspective suggests that efforts to strengthen higher education aspirations should move beyond individual motivation and address the social environment in which educational decisions are negotiated.

Community engagement offers a potentially relevant framework for addressing this multidimensional problem. Rather than positioning adolescents as passive recipients of educational information, community engagement emphasizes active participation and collaboration among young people, families, community leaders, village authorities, higher education students, and alumni. Such engagement can create spaces for dialogue, information exchange, collective reflection, and social support. In the context of rural education, collaboration among these actors may help adolescents reconsider established assumptions about higher education while simultaneously strengthening the community's capacity to support educational continuation.

Previous studies have demonstrated that community-based educational activities can strengthen learning motivation, social support, leadership development, and collective awareness of educational opportunities (Lusiana, Ramaditya, & Parastry, 2025; Bhattarai, 2025). Educational assistance involving university students and alumni may also provide adolescents with concrete role models and more accessible information about higher education pathways, scholarships, and future careers (Jadid, 2021). Nevertheless, existing studies tend to examine community engagement in relation to general educational participation, literacy, leadership, or learning motivation.

Limited attention has been given to how community engagement can transform higher education aspirations among rural youth whose educational decisions are embedded in a strong culture of migration.

This limitation reveals an important research gap. Existing discussions often treat rural educational aspiration primarily as a consequence of economic disadvantage, limited access, or individual motivation, while the interaction between aspiration formation and migration culture remains insufficiently explored. Moreover, there is a need for empirical research that examines not only the initial condition of rural youth aspirations but also how those aspirations may change following a participatory educational intervention involving multiple community actors. The present study addresses this gap by examining higher education aspirations as a socially constructed phenomenon and by positioning community engagement as a mechanism through which educational perspectives can be collectively negotiated and transformed.

The novelty of this study lies in connecting three dimensions that are rarely examined together: rural youth higher education aspirations, migration culture, and community engagement. Rather than framing migration culture solely as an obstacle to educational continuation, this study examines the social meanings surrounding migration and explores how community-based educational engagement can open alternative interpretations of success and future mobility. The involvement of parents, community leaders, village officials, university students, and higher education alumni further distinguishes the approach by creating a collaborative educational environment in which information, motivation, role modeling, and social support are integrated.

This study is urgent because decisions made during the transition from secondary education may influence young people's long-term educational trajectories, employment opportunities, and social mobility. If migration and immediate employment remain the dominant pathways perceived by rural youth, inequalities in access to higher education may continue across generations. Understanding whether and how community engagement can broaden educational aspirations is therefore important for developing context-sensitive strategies for rural educational development. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the transformation of rural youth higher education aspirations through community engagement within a migration culture, with particular attention to their initial aspirations, the implementation of community-based educational engagement, and changes in their educational orientations following the intervention. The study is expected to contribute

both theoretically to the understanding of socially constructed educational aspirations and practically to the development of community-based strategies for expanding rural youth participation in higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a community engagement design to examine the transformation of rural youths' higher education aspirations within a migration culture. The qualitative approach was selected to capture participants' perspectives, experiences, expectations, and interpretations of higher education through direct engagement with the community. The study was conducted over three months, from January to March 2026, in a village in Tegal Regency, Indonesia, characterized by a strong culture of migration among its residents. The community engagement process positioned educational aspiration as a socially embedded phenomenon and involved community members as active participants in the educational process rather than merely as research subjects.

The participants comprised 25 rural youths aged 15–19 years who were enrolled in secondary education or had recently graduated, 10 parents, 3 community leaders, 2 village officials, and 5 university students who served as educational facilitators. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus and their experiences with educational decision-making and the local migration culture. The researcher served as the primary research instrument and was directly involved in observation, interviews, educational activities, and data interpretation. The involvement of different participant groups enabled the study to examine educational aspirations from individual, family, and community perspectives.

Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted to identify the social context, prevailing perceptions of higher education, and initial educational aspirations before the intervention. In-depth interviews with youths, parents, and community leaders explored the factors influencing educational choices, perceptions of migration, financial concerns, and expectations regarding higher education. FGDs were used to facilitate collective discussion concerning higher education opportunities, career prospects, scholarship access, and perceived barriers to continuing education. Documentation included field notes, interview records, photographs of activities, and participants' reflection sheets. The community engagement intervention consisted of higher education

information sessions, scholarship information, educational motivation discussions, and experience-sharing sessions involving university students and alumni.

The intervention was implemented collaboratively with youths, parents, community leaders, village officials, university students, and higher education alumni. The activities were designed to strengthen participants' educational literacy while creating social support for continued education. Particular attention was given to providing accessible information about higher education pathways, scholarship opportunities, career prospects, and experiences of individuals who had successfully pursued higher education. The process also created opportunities for participants to discuss and reflect on the relationship between migration, employment, and educational aspirations. This participatory process enabled the researchers to compare participants' orientations before and after the community engagement activities.

Data were analyzed interactively through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, following the Miles and Huberman analytical framework (Sugiyono, 2020). Analysis involved organizing interview, observation, FGD, and documentation data into relevant themes concerning educational aspirations, migration culture, perceived barriers, community support, and changes following the intervention. Data credibility was strengthened through source and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from youths, parents, community leaders, village officials, and facilitators across different data-collection techniques. Member checking was also conducted by reconfirming interpretations with selected key participants. These procedures were used to establish a comprehensive and credible account of the transformation of rural youths' higher education aspirations following community engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Rural Youth Higher Education Aspirations within a Migration Culture

The findings indicate that migration culture constitutes a significant social reference in how rural youth imagine their educational and occupational futures. Among the 25 participating adolescents, most initially expressed a stronger preference for working or migrating after completing secondary education than for entering higher education. This orientation was associated with three interconnected considerations: the economic circumstances of their families, the desire to obtain income quickly, and the

normalization of migration as a long-established practice within the community. Migration was therefore not perceived merely as an economic option but as a familiar and socially legitimate pathway to adulthood.

A distinctive finding was that several adolescents evaluated higher education through an immediate economic lens. University education was frequently associated with substantial costs, while its benefits were perceived as uncertain and long-term. In contrast, migration was viewed as offering a more tangible and immediate economic return. This difference in temporal orientation shaped how participants evaluated the two pathways: higher education was associated with delayed benefits, whereas migration and employment were associated with immediate contribution to family welfare.

The interviews further revealed that successful community members who had migrated without completing higher education functioned as visible reference points for adolescents' decision-making. Their experiences provided concrete evidence, from the participants' perspective, that economic success could be achieved without a university degree. This finding suggests that educational aspirations were influenced not only by what adolescents knew about higher education but also by the examples of success that were most visible within their immediate social environment.

Another important finding concerned the information gap surrounding higher education. Some adolescents had limited knowledge about university admission pathways, available scholarships, and potential career opportunities. Consequently, financial concerns were sometimes intensified by incomplete information. The perception that university education was unaffordable was not always accompanied by adequate knowledge about scholarship schemes or alternative pathways for financing higher education. This indicates that economic barriers and information barriers were interconnected rather than functioning independently.

The findings also show that educational aspirations were relational. Adolescents' choices were influenced by conversations with parents, observations of community members, and expectations regarding their future contribution to the family. Parents and community leaders were therefore not merely external actors but part of the social environment through which educational decisions were interpreted. The initial condition demonstrated that strengthening adolescents' aspirations required engagement with the wider community rather than focusing exclusively on the adolescents themselves.

Implementation of Community Engagement

The community engagement program brought together adolescents, parents, community leaders, village officials, university students, and higher education alumni. The intervention consisted of information sessions on higher education, explanations of university admission pathways, scholarship information, career discussions, educational motivation sessions, and experience-sharing activities. The program was designed not simply to transfer information but to create opportunities for participants to discuss and reconsider assumptions about higher education collectively.

The focus group discussions generated a different form of engagement from conventional educational socialization. Adolescents were given opportunities to articulate their concerns about tuition fees, employment prospects, family expectations, and the perceived risks of continuing education. Rather than receiving information passively, participants could compare their existing assumptions with the experiences of university students and alumni. This dialogical process became an important component of the intervention because it connected abstract information about higher education with experiences that participants considered socially and economically relevant.

The presence of university students and alumni emerged as a particularly distinctive component of the program. Their experiences provided participants with concrete examples of educational trajectories that were previously less visible in the community. The role models also demonstrated that financial limitations did not necessarily eliminate the possibility of attending university because scholarships and other educational support mechanisms could be explored. Thus, role modeling complemented the informational component of the intervention.

The involvement of parents and community leaders produced another important shift. Discussions concerning higher education were no longer restricted to adolescents but became part of a broader community conversation. Parents gained additional information about educational costs, scholarship opportunities, and the longer-term benefits of higher education. Community leaders and village representatives also became aware of the importance of creating an environment supportive of educational continuation. This finding suggests that community engagement expanded the intervention from individual motivation to collective educational support.

Transformation of Higher Education Aspirations

Table 1. Changes in Adolescents' Educational Aspirations Before and After the Program

Options After Graduation	Pre-Program	Post-Program
Continue study	6 Persons (24%)	14 Persons (56%)
Working/Migrating for Work	15 Persons (60%)	8 Persons (32%)
Undecided	4 Persons (16%)	3 Persons (12%)

Data in Table 1 indicates that the number of adolescents aspiring to pursue higher education increased significantly after participating in the program. Conversely, there was a decline in the number of participants opting to enter the workforce immediately or migrate for work. These findings demonstrate that the provision of information, motivation, and social support can positively influence adolescents' educational aspirations.

This shift was evident not only in educational choices but also in the participants' perspectives on the future. Most participants began to recognize that higher education could serve as a pathway to better employment, skill enhancement, and expanded opportunities for social mobility (Thoriq Amrullah & Luluk Humaedah, 2025). Furthermore, increased awareness of scholarship programs helped alleviate participants' concerns regarding the financial costs of education.

The most visible change occurred in participants stated educational orientations after the program. Before the intervention, only 6 of the 25 adolescents (24%) expressed an intention to continue to higher education, while 15 (60%) preferred to work or migrate and 4 (16%) had not yet determined their post-secondary pathway. After the program, the number expressing an intention to pursue higher education increased to 14 (56%), while those choosing work or migration declined to 8 (32%), and those without a definite choice declined to 3 (12%). These changes indicate a substantial shift in stated aspirations following the community engagement activities.

The transformation was not limited to the numerical distribution of educational preferences. Participants also demonstrated changes in how they interpreted the relationship between higher education and future employment. Higher education increasingly came to be understood as a possible pathway toward better employment, skills development, and broader social mobility rather than simply as an expensive continuation of schooling. This change in interpretation is important because aspiration involves not only choosing an educational pathway but also redefining what individuals believe to be possible and worthwhile.

In addition, scholarship information appeared to reduce some participants' perceptions of financial barriers. Before the intervention, the cost of higher education was often discussed as a reason for preferring immediate employment or migration. Following the program, participants became more aware that financial assistance could provide alternative pathways to university. The finding suggests that information may function as a form of social and educational capital, particularly when it is delivered through trusted community interactions and supported by concrete examples from students and alumni.

Overall, the findings reveal that community engagement created a shift from individually imagined futures toward more socially supported educational possibilities. The transformation did not eliminate the cultural significance of migration, nor did it demonstrate that all adolescents had permanently abandoned the intention to migrate. Rather, the intervention broadened the range of futures that participants considered possible. Migration and higher education increasingly appeared as choices that could be evaluated alongside one another rather than as mutually exclusive definitions of success.

Discussion

The first major finding demonstrates that rural youth educational aspirations are socially constructed within the cultural environment in which young people make decisions (Wolfe et al., 2020; Anlimachie et al., 2022). The strong orientation toward migration reflects more than a simple preference for employment; it represents a socially recognized pathway associated with adulthood, economic contribution, and family welfare. This finding supports the perspective of social capital theory that individual expectations and decisions are shaped by relationships, social networks, and community-based resources. In this context, migration culture provides adolescents with a particular form of social reference that influences what they perceive as realistic and desirable.

The finding that migrant community members function as reference points can also be interpreted through social learning theory. Adolescents observe the experiences of people around them and use those experiences to evaluate possible future pathways. When economically successful migrants are more visible than university graduates, migration may become a stronger model of success. The presence of university students and alumni during the intervention introduced alternative models of achievement into the adolescents' social environment. This suggests that transforming aspirations may require not only providing information but also expanding the range of socially visible role models (Quintana-Murci et al., 2026).

The participants' concern about the cost of higher education is consistent

with research emphasizing socioeconomic factors in educational participation. However, the findings indicate that financial barriers cannot be separated from informational barriers. A perceived lack of affordability may partly emerge because adolescents and families are unaware of available scholarships, admission pathways, or other forms of support. Community engagement therefore becomes relevant because information can be exchanged within trusted social relationships (Kilpatrick et al., 2019). Rather than treating families as passive recipients of policy information, community-based engagement allows educational opportunities to be discussed in relation to their concrete circumstances.

The role of parents and community leaders further confirms that educational aspirations are embedded within collective decision-making processes. From the perspective of educational aspiration theory, adolescents formulate future goals through interaction with significant others. When parents primarily emphasize immediate economic contribution, employment or migration may become more attractive (Murphy, 2024; Webb, 2015). Conversely, when parents and community leaders understand the long-term value and feasibility of higher education, adolescents may receive stronger social support for continuing their studies. The findings therefore extend the individual-centered understanding of aspiration by demonstrating the importance of relational support.

The implementation of community engagement also supports the view that educational interventions are more meaningful when they involve the community in dialogue rather than simply disseminating information. The focus group discussions provided adolescents with opportunities to express concerns and challenge assumptions about higher education (Theodori & Theodori, 2015). This dialogical process is consistent with community-based education perspectives, in which learning is connected to lived experiences and collective problem-solving. The intervention consequently functioned not only as an information program but also as a space for negotiating the meaning of education within the community.

A particularly important finding concerns the contribution of university students and alumni as role models. Social learning theory suggests that individuals can acquire expectations and behavioral orientations by observing others whose experiences appear relevant to their own circumstances. The role models in this study were particularly meaningful because they could demonstrate pathways from similar social environments toward higher education (Smith & Gergan, 2015). Their experiences made scholarships, university admission, and educational mobility more concrete. Thus, role

modeling complemented formal information by transforming abstract possibilities into socially imaginable futures.

The increase in the number of adolescents expressing an intention to pursue higher education provides evidence of a transformation in educational orientation following the intervention. However, the finding should be interpreted as a change in stated aspiration rather than definitive evidence of actual university enrollment. Within a qualitative design, the importance of this finding lies in demonstrating how participants' interpretations of their future changed during the intervention. The shift from 24% to 56% in stated intention to pursue higher education indicates that the intervention was associated with a broader educational horizon among participants, while longer-term behavioral outcomes require further investigation.

The study also contributes a more nuanced understanding of migration culture. Migration should not necessarily be positioned as the opposite of education or as a cultural problem that must be eliminated. For rural families, migration may represent a legitimate strategy for economic survival and social mobility. The more productive educational approach is therefore to broaden the available pathways and enable young people to make informed choices. Community engagement can facilitate this process by presenting higher education as an additional pathway rather than demanding the rejection of migration as part of local identity.

Theoretically, the findings suggest that higher education aspirations can be understood as the outcome of interactions among social capital, social learning, access to educational information, and community expectations. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Social networks determine which opportunities become visible; role models influence perceptions of what is attainable; information reduces uncertainty; and community support affects whether aspirations can be sustained. The study therefore proposes that interventions targeting rural educational aspirations should address these dimensions simultaneously rather than relying exclusively on motivational messages directed at individual adolescents.

The findings have practical implications for educational institutions, village governments, community organizations, and policymakers. Programs aimed at increasing rural participation in higher education should move beyond one-time socialization and develop sustained community engagement involving adolescents, parents, local leaders, university students, alumni, and educational institutions. Universities can strengthen their social responsibility programs by providing structured scholarship literacy, admission guidance, career information, and alumni role-model networks for rural

communities. At the community level, village governments can facilitate information access and develop local educational support mechanisms. Theoretically, the study reinforces the importance of understanding educational aspiration as a socially embedded process rather than solely as an individual motivational outcome.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in one village in Tegal Regency with a relatively small purposively selected group of participants, limiting the transferability of the findings to other rural communities with different migration traditions or socioeconomic conditions. Second, the study examined changes in stated aspirations immediately following the intervention and did not track whether those aspirations resulted in actual university enrollment. Third, the qualitative design does not permit statistical attribution of the observed changes exclusively to the intervention. Future research should therefore involve multiple rural communities, longitudinal follow-up, and mixed-method or comparative designs to examine whether changes in aspiration are sustained and translated into educational participation. Further studies could also investigate how gender, household economic status, parental education, migration networks, and specific forms of community support interact in shaping rural youths' higher education trajectories.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that rural youths' higher education aspirations are deeply embedded in a migration culture in which immediate employment, economic contribution, and successful migration constitute highly visible models of future achievement. The distinctive finding is that community engagement broadened adolescents' perceptions of possible futures by combining higher education information, scholarship literacy, dialogical discussion, family involvement, and direct encounters with university students and alumni. The proportion of participants expressing an intention to pursue higher education increased from 24% before the intervention to 56% afterward, while the proportion preferring work or migration declined from 60% to 32%. These findings indicate a transformation in stated educational orientation, although they should not be interpreted as evidence of permanent behavioral change or direct causal effects.

The study implies that strengthening rural participation in higher education requires a shift from individual-centered motivation toward socially supported educational transformation. Educational institutions, village governments, community leaders, parents, students, and alumni should

collaboratively create sustained mechanisms for educational information, scholarship access, mentoring, and role modeling. Rather than treating migration culture as an obstacle that must be eliminated, future interventions should recognize migration as part of rural social life while expanding higher education as an equally legitimate pathway for social mobility. Longitudinal and multi-site research is recommended to determine whether the transformation of aspirations identified in this study is sustained and ultimately contributes to increased higher education participation among rural youth.

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