

In the book, "Rocket Boys" by Homer Hickam, Jr. there are many examples of how the social context interacts with the curriculum to which the students are exposed. The roles of sports and the coal town mentality play a big part in the education of the students in Coalwood, West Virginia.

Athletic prowess in Coalwood was a highly valued commodity. Being a good athlete was something that parents could be proud of and provided boys with an opportunity to possibly leave Coalwood on an athletic scholarship. In fact, if a boy were not a good athlete, he would be ridiculed. Sonny's dad often makes comments about how great Sonny's brother, the football star, is while Sonny is made fun of because of his lack of athletic ability. At one point in the story, Sonny's dad is bragging about Jim's football abilities to his peers. Sonny's mom confronts him and says that maybe he should brag about Sonny occasionally. Homer Hickam, Sr. responds, "What about?" The lesson that this attitude taught the boys of Coalwood was that the only way to leave their town was through athletic ability. If a boy did not have natural athletic talent, he was destined to remain in the town and work in the mine.

The coal town mentality played a big role in the education of the children in Coalwood. On the one hand, there were people in the town, like Sonny's father, who believed that the natural progression for a boy was to grow up and go to work in the mine. That the mine would be there forever and that mining was all the people of the town were capable of. On one occasion, Sonny's dad takes him into the mine and explains to his co-workers that, "Sonny's thinking of becoming a mining engineer," even though Sonny had never specifically expressed an interest in mining. In fact, Sonny's father discouraged him from pursuing other interests that might draw him away from the town.

On the other hand, there were other people in Coalwood, like Sonny's mom and Mr. Dubonnet, who realized that mining wasn't necessarily the destiny of the children of Coalwood. They recognized that the mining industry might not always flourish in Coalwood. Early in the story, Sonny's mom asks him if he wants to go to college because, "You can't count on the mine being here when you graduate from college, Sonny. You can't even count on the town being here." Likewise, Mr. Dubonnet says, "In just a few years all this will be gone, almost like it never existed." Because of their understanding of the life cycle of a mining town, both Mr. Dubonnet and Sonny's mom encourage the rocket boys to continue to learn as much as they could about rockets. Both of these characters knew that pursuing their interest in rockets would give the boys an opportunity to leave Coalwood.

Many aspects of life in Coalwood influenced the education that students' there received. Some of these influences were the result of people who wanted to preserve the Coalwood way of life, while others came from people who realized that the Coalwood way of life could not continue forever.