

Book Review

Tieken, M. C. (2014). *Why rural schools matter*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-4696-1848-7

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Despite the fact that nearly 51 million students in the United States receive their education in rural communities, rural educational research has suffered from a dearth of publications when compared to research on urban education (Tieken, p. 6). However, Mara Casey Tieken's (2014) contribution, *Why Rural Schools Matter*, provides an excellent example of scholarship that will lead to greater interest in and understanding of the field of rural education. Specifically, this work focuses on the role that rural schools have in determining the relationship between education and race. In the post-integration South, the histories of many communities are tainted by slow and agonizing adherence to the *Brown v. Board* decision (Tieken, 2014). Furthermore, the African American struggle has had significant effects on the delicate relationship that Whites and Blacks have shared in the post-segregation South. Such rural stories need to be told.

A graduate of Harvard University and former rural school teacher, Tieken explains the value of rural schools to their communities. She also describes the influence that these schools wield in shaping racial dynamics in their communities and how each respective community in her study is sustained by the rural school experience. In this process, she reveals that many rural schools are fraught with complex problems that require creative answers and a significant understanding of the issues that shape the discourses of politicians, economists, teachers, and citizens within rural communities.

Drawing on qualitative data collected in two Arkansas towns, Delight and Earle, Tieken illustrates the forces that are shaping the debates on education: the governmental

standardized approach to solving educational problems and the local forces that determine local school policies. Tieken locates her study within the paradigm of portraiture. Portraiture is a qualitative research method that requires researchers to reflect on conversations, observations, and interactions with the subject or topic that they are studying. More specifically, Tieken used portraiture to explicitly examine the relationships of schools and their communities by focusing attention to the context of interviews and observations to interpret meaning. As such, Tieken is fulfilling what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) called for when they urged researchers to co-create narratives with participants and to examine phenomena in a social context. By immersing herself in the communities that she studied, Tieken was able to describe in detail the relationships that she created with community and school members as well as "investigate the meaning community members give to their schools and explore how these understandings correspond and differ" (p. 30). Further, Tieken used portraiture to clarify meaning through the shared experiences of individuals and the creation of communal value attached to their respective schools.

The first community that Tieken investigated, Delight, appears to be a town in which White interests dominate the ebb and flow of the community. The school is a crucial element of Delight's identity, as most residents are either directly involved in the affairs of the school board or have children that attend the school. Tieken notes that "the schools is more than a job or an institution, it's an identity" (p. 65). To Delight's citizens, the rural school defines the town's identity by "providing shared symbols and traditions, perpetuating a set of common values, and establishing clear boundaries" (p. 65).

While the Delight community and school maintain a shared culture, Tieken frames the community within a larger discussion among scholars regarding the importance of rural communities in a transitioning society. Over the last 60 years, Southern communities have faced myriad challenges. From the transition from family farms to the

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impact of globalization on the local economy and culture, Delight has remained a community where discussions of race are overlooked in favor of focusing on the community as a whole. Tieken asks an important question: “Have they [rural communities] really changed” from the days of segregated schools and facilities to the universal acceptance of integration? (p. 82). In response, Tieken argues that the school fosters community cohesiveness, despite the presence of different ethnicities. For example, all residents, both White and Black, converge to support the school from the threat of consolidation. She concludes the chapter by stating, “the school forces a certain amount of cross-race interaction and integration” because its members share a common purpose (p. 83). However, she wonders if the community’s unity is distinctive because its members have overcome the racial barriers, or if the cooperation is a matter of convenience to avoid consolidation. To explore this question further, Tieken juxtaposes Delight with another rural Arkansas community.

Situated within the history of integration, the story of the community of Earle is similar to that of other Southern towns. Tieken examines the role that race plays in the decline of Earle and points to several key factors that have contributed to its school’s decline. For the White population of Earle, the decline of the school and community was initiated by desegregation. The frustration that many members of Earle’s White population expressed is similar to what other historians have documented (Rury, 2005). Its White citizens perceive the decline in student test scores to be directly related to the integration of Earle’s schools. Consequently, many White families moved to other towns or sent their children to other school districts, thus contributing to Earle’s decline (Tieken, 2014).

Yet Tieken contrasts decline with progress. Earle’s African American residents found their political voice through participating in and through the schools. As the Civil Rights movement spread from the cities, such as Selma and Montgomery, to the rural areas, African American leaders in Earle rallied supporters to express their frustrations and hopes at the ballot box. The shift in local politics, as well as in Earle’s school board, gave voice to those disenfranchised citizens, many of whom were former students in Earle’s schools.

However, race relations in Earle have not progressed, according to Tieken, as Delight’s have. Where Delight’s Black and White parents and athletics fans fill the stands and cheer for every child, Earle’s residents debate tax rates and share little more than the common understanding that the school’s test scores are subpar. Tieken suggests that Delight’s progress serves as an example of what other rural communities, such as Earle, could become.

Tieken concludes that rural schools can serve different ends: They can either bridge a community’s racial gaps to

overcome the segregated history that citizens often share, or they can serve as the catalyst for further divides between residents. She explains,

this narrative is about potential, the potential for rural institutions, to pull a diversity of people together for shared purposes. In these school spaces, there is a possibility, the possibility for relationships and support, for a collective identity that bridges social divides (p. 138).

The two concluding chapters synthesize Tieken’s previous observations of both communities. Her main argument is that rural schools can unite different ethnicities rather than separate them. Using the portraiture approach, Tieken illustrates that communities share unique characteristics that most members possess. It is these similarities that allow citizens to overcome the legacy of segregation that has plagued rural communities in the South. She persuasively calls for better educational policies that place more emphasis on addressing the threat of school closures due to low enrollment or low test scores. She asserts that if politicians would simply consider schools as more than a standardized test report and instead support schools’ attempts to educate more engaged and racially sensitive citizens, the Southern tradition of racial division would soon end.

Tieken ends her study by contemplating the future of schools in Arkansas in light of *No Child Left Behind* and state law Act 60, which mandated the consolidation of school districts with enrollments of fewer than 350 students (Tieken, 2014). Facing these legal mandates, Tieken argues, the Delight and Earle schools are illustrative of rural schools across the country that face the tasks of remaining relevant to their communities, preparing students for college, and providing opportunities to unite people of different skin colors, races, and ethnicities.

Tieken is at her strongest in her narrative of the effects of a long history of racial divisions in both Earle and Delight. She possesses a thorough understanding of the history of schooling in Arkansas and across the South and demonstrates deep knowledge that some researchers in the field of rural education lack. Broadly incorporating the historiography of the South, Tieken complements her research findings within the larger framework of Southern rural schooling.

Despite the strengths of Tieken’s book, the inclusion of other influences on change in Delight and Earle would have added to her study. Specifically, I would have liked to have learned more about the factors that drove White families to leave these communities and about the economic consequences that desegregation mandates had on both communities. While she is correct that Arkansas’ rural

economies suffered as a result of integrated schools and the subsequent White flight from many communities, Tieken's analysis does not consider the influence that technology has played on the agricultural labor force. Tieken argues that school integration drove many rural White families to move to other towns or enroll their children in other districts, but integration is only one part of the narrative. The adoption of more advanced agricultural technologies reduced the need for unskilled laborers, which also contributed to the decline of rural populations. Despite this omission, Tieken correctly emphasizes the role that integration played in the decline of many rural towns in Arkansas.

Students seeking to understand the relationship between race and rural schools would be wise to read this book, especially in light of recent mandates for standardized testing. While undergraduate students may find many of the concepts challenging, graduate students interested in rural education should consider reading this book before they begin their teaching careers. Tieken's efforts to reveal the complex relationship between rural schools and their communities are commendable and mark an important contribution to rural educational research. This text will be useful for any scholar interested in rural economic, social, or political issues.

References

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