

## Book Review

White, S., & Corbett, M. (Eds.) (2014). *Doing educational research in rural settings: Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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*Doing Educational Research in Rural Settings: Methodological Issues, International Perspectives and Practical Solutions*, edited by Simone White and Michael Corbett, provides an introduction to rural education research and represents one of the first books to address the many methodological issues that emerge in this research. Collectively, the authors argue that rural education research must honor and reveal that which is distinctive about rural schools and communities and the interrelationship between them. To do otherwise inevitably marginalizes rural places as deficient, thus undermining their vitality and uniqueness. As the authors in this collection make clear, conducting research "for," rather than simply "on" rural places is of critical importance. Therefore, the research process should be shaped accordingly. Like many anthologies, this collection covers a range of diverse issues and themes that are not always consistently presented in a way that best serves the reader. In this book review, I highlight the palpable themes that emerged from the text, although the book itself does not follow this structure.

### How Rural Places and Schools Are Understood

In the first chapter, Craig and Aimee Howley provide a useful critique of dominant social thought, methodologies, and research practices that are often applied to rural schools and communities: Hegemonic educational and social discourses frequently marginalize rural ways of life and conceptualize rural education as problematic. Metrocentricity, common in modern discourse, effectively pushes rural places and practices to the margins of contemporary thinking. Other contributors to this volume

discuss how this marginalization occurs over space and scale (Green & Reid), in theory application (Gristy; Kvalsund & Hargreaves), in teaching (Roberts), through the metaphorical misrepresentation of "rural" (Donehower), and in public policy (Bartholomaeus, Halsey, & Corbett). For example, Rune Kvalsund and Linda Hargreaves show how a mass-society perspective derived from Giddens' contemporary social theory ultimately devalues rural life and thus places the researcher in opposition to the rural people and practices under study. How rural places and schools are conceptualized and constructed within these research paradigms can narrow and skew how rural schools and communities are understood, thereby unknowingly continuing to marginalize and disempower rural places, practices, and voices. Collectively, these researchers call for more critical evaluations, discussions, and reflections on the dominant theories and perspectives in the field in relation to their application to research on rural communities and education.

### The Researcher and the Participant

Both the positionality of the rural researcher and the relationship between researcher and participant are shaped by the need for rural education research to be "for," rather than only "on," rural places. In their dialogue, Pamela Bartholomaeus, John Halsey, and Michael Corbett highlight the challenges of objectivity in rural research. They emphasize the need for reflection, awareness, and disclosure of the positionality of the researcher *before* conducting research. Through this critical inventory, the researcher is able to understand his or her impact on the research process and specifically on his or her relationships with participants. Michelle Anderson and Michele Lonsdale argue how awareness of positionality becomes a critical steppingstone for respecting those studied while at the same time eliciting their viewpoints and understandings. As they state, "Being attuned to our own assumptions and ideas means valuing difference, recognizing that ideas are unlikely to be shared if researchers aren't open to hearing them, and reflecting

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on the nature of the research enterprise itself” (p. 202). As this assertion suggests, rural education researchers must be ever attuned to the diverse perspectives that are held within the settings that they study. Consequently, a researcher’s methodologies and research designs should also be crafted to reveal rather than obscure these varied points of view. Tanya Brann-Barrett, for example, demonstrates how she was able to gain the diverse perspectives of her research subjects through the use of audio, visual, and photographic research methods. These differing research strategies allowed her to elicit genuine and unique perspectives of community members, thereby respecting the pluralistic viewpoints and experiences found in rural settings. These multiple methods make for more valid research findings while also respecting the different views and backgrounds found within rural settings. Such an approach, as Roberts suggests, allows the rural researcher to “imagin[e] the world as another” (p. 142).

### **From Outside and Within**

The rural researcher faces many challenges when navigating between insider and outsider statuses, or emic and etic perspectives. This continuum also creates opportunities for researchers, however. Zane Hamm, as well as Robyn Henderson and Sherilyn Lennon, reveal how their outsider status presented unique challenges for their research efforts. Hamm’s transition to an insider was a slow process that he accomplished only because of his persistence, rural background, and alignment with many of the values held by those in the community he studied. While this insider position has advantages, it can also produce its own problems, something Henderson and Lennon highlight. They describe how, as insiders, they normalized and took for granted many of the practices and values of the community where they lived and researched. As these researchers ultimately realized, they had to find ways to look at these normalized practices differently. To do so often meant consciously changing and challenging their research positioning to gain a different angle of vision on the community they studied. Taken together, these chapters point to both the opportunities and limitations associated with outsider and insider perspectives. Being an insider may inadvertently blind the researcher to potentially important issues such as power dynamics, which may be taken for granted by community insiders. On the other hand, outsider perspectives can marginalize the voices of the people under study, thus limiting what researchers can discover. This dilemma is not easily reconciled for researchers in the field.

### **Within and Across Place and Space**

A number of authors highlight the importance of place and space when conducting and conceptualizing rural education research. Howley and Howley discuss the value of *terroir*, that which comes from and is shaped by place, when analyzing and understanding rural values and practices. Corbett, in his triologue with Bartholemaeus and Halsey, argues that researchers need to pay attention to emotional geographies, or the ways in which both researchers and participants form attachments to place, when researching rural education. By so doing, the researcher is able to gain an understanding of how place shapes, impacts, and is constructed in rural daily life. “Place” is often socially constructed and thus shaped by the confluence of many local and global forces. Therefore, it is not simply a context in which rural education occurs, but a critical element of how education in rural communities takes place. Bill Green and Jo-Ann Reid also discuss how rural education is shaped by space and how educational and social practices and processes can be measured and understood spatially. By focusing on how space and place are constructed and impact rural education, the researcher is also able to understand and critique the forces that intentionally or unintentionally minimize, marginalize, and condense rural areas and our understanding of them.

### **Conclusion**

This text is an important addition to the rural education research literature. It should be read by rural education researchers and those interested in rural studies more generally. The editors suggest that the book has been written for the “most part with the beginning researcher in mind” (p.1). As a beginning rural education researcher myself, I learned a great deal from this text. It provides a basis for the beginning rural education researcher to learn about, to question, and to critique theory and methods in the field. It also highlights many of the methodological considerations to which the rural education researcher must attend while conducting research. I therefore recommend it highly for all rural education researchers entering the field.