Book Review

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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 triologue, 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.
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 trialogue 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.