

Toward a Research Agenda for Rural Education: Discovering the Essence

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Three realities (mindscapes) used in constructing knowledge and their traditional research methodologies are discussed as a basis for proposing a research agenda and strategy for rural education. In order to study rural education, the authors propose the use of conceptual empiricism and contextual appraisal consisting of four domains; personal (self), instruction (class), institutional (school), and societal (schooling). Data are collected in each of these domains in order to discover the essence, to 'paint a portrait,' of the rural school. Within each of these domains, three research tools (currere, hegemony, and connoisseurship) are suggested as means of viewing the rural school from a holistic perspective and placing the research emphasis upon emergent patterns rather than manipulated variables. Once the portrait of the rural school is unveiled, then suggestions for improvement (if needed) can be discussed.

The portrait of rural America perceived through the nostalgic mindscapes of many educators is synonymous with viewing a Normal Rockwell or Grandma Moses painting or listening to the words of "I Wanna Go Home" sung by Joe South. Rural schools comprise 67% of all schools in America and one-third of all students live in rural America [13].

That rural education is a distinct phenomenon with characteristics allowing it to stand apart from other educational realities has been documented [13; 18; 19; 21]. McCannon [18] suggests that "rural" and "farm" can no longer be equated. There are 16,000 towns of 15,000 population or less where more than 70 million people live. These small towns form what he calls agropolitan centers. Although rural school districts commonly have been defined as those having fewer than 1,000 students, Helge [13] views population-based definitions of rural as problematic.

Concomitant with a rise in interest in rural education, the educational community has been inundated with reports condemning the nation's schools and calling for reform [20]. Growing out of these reports has come legislation mandating reform measures which are to be applied to all school sites, rural and urban, in a given state [4]. Helge [13] contends that, historically, urban service delivery models have been recommended and unsuccessfully applied to rural schools.

If Helge [13] is correct relative to urban models being unsuccessful delivery models for rural schools, if states are mandating common reform measures for both rural and urban settings, and if rural education is a unique phenomenon, then there appears to be a need for descriptive research accurately portraying rural education. To continue efforts to transport a knowledge base that has been largely generated in an urban area to a rural setting is to deny that knowledge is contextual.

The basic problem in research and reform efforts in general and rural education in particular, is epistemological; the treatment of knowledge as a static and stable condition. Knowledge is viewed as something out there to be known rather than as a dynamic process having an historical, cultural, economic, political, and philosophical context. In order to adequately critique knowledge, its construction as well as its substance must be scrutinized and interpreted. To continue to deal with particulars (rural education) out of context (rural America) is to use a reductionist perspective which often results in conventional wisdom.

In the remainder of this paper we discuss knowledge construction including multiple realities (three differing epistemologies) and their companion research traditions. We also suggest a tentative agenda and strategy for conducting rural education research.

REALITIES/DIFFERING EPISTEMOLOGIES

Research perspectives, due to the uniqueness of individual perceptual filters, are often contaminated with conventional wisdom, perspective without validity. Perceptions, either individually or collectively, are at best approximations of reality.

For educators to deal with what they think they know, especially where the nurturing of the young is concerned, until they deal with why and how they think what they know, is disastrous. The historical, cultural, economic, political conditions that give birth to research questions must be considered. What is real is too often obscured by the obvious.

To recapitulate, the crucial element in developing a research agenda for rural education is epistemological in character; questions about the nature and validity of knowledge. Ideas, unformed conceptions, are inventions

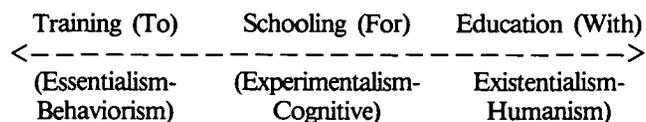
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TABLE 1
The Language of Schooling

BASIC ELEMENTS	Movement Toward External Control		Movement Toward Internal Control
	REALITY A	REALITY B	REALITY C
PHILOSOPHY			
Nature of Humans	Humans are potentially evil.	Humans are potentially both good and bad or blank slate.	Human potential is basically good.
Nature of Learning	Truth exists separate from the individual. There are basic facts that are necessary for all. Learning occurs by reaction.	Truth is relative and subject to the condition of the learner and the environment. Learning occurs by action.	Truth is an individual matter. Learning occurs when the information encountered takes on personal meaning for the learner. Learning occurs by transaction and interaction.
Nature of Knowledge	Logical structure. Information. Subject matter. Vertical relationship. Universal	Psychological structure. Vertical and horizontal. Relationships and interrelationships.	Perceptual structure. Relationships and Interrelationships. Personal. Gestalt.
Nature of Study	Closed. Ordered. Institutionalized. Static. Grouping. Controlling.	In flux. Democratic. Relative values. Experimentation.	Open. Self reviewing. Individual. Liberating. Distribution. Egalitarian.
Purpose of Education	To understand and apply knowledge. To control the environment. To learn absolute truth.	To learn prerequisite skills for survival. To learn conditional truths.	To live a full life. To experience the environment. To continue learning personal truth.
PSYCHOLOGY			
Human Growth and Development	Growth is environmentally determined.	Growth is the realization of one's potential.	Growth is the experiencing of one's potential.
Concept of Self	Determined by what others think. Focuses on personality deficiencies.	Determined by how the individual perceives the social environment (becoming-future orientation).	Determined and created by each individual (being-now orientation).
Human Emotions	Controlled. Closed. Unaware. Masked.	Circumstantial. Objective. Based on position. Well-adjusted.	Free. Openness. Spontaneity. Aware. Transparency. Experienced.
Interpersonal Interactions	Role playing. Manipulative games. Defensive. Detached. Distrusting. Dependent.	Minimum risk. Selective. Objective. Exclusive. Encountering. Independent.	Sharing. Risking. Trusting.
DAILY PRACTICES			
Curriculum	Predetermined. Structured series. Logical sequence. Content centered. Outcomes established.	Sequenced experiences. Problem-centered. Future utility. Universalism.	Hidden. Unfolding. Created. Process centered. Unlimited. Emerging. Dynamic.
Instructional Behavior	Transmission of facts and content. Purposeful. Management. Teacher directed.	Grouping for instructional convenience. Inquiring. Discovering. Open questions with multiple answers. Teacher invitation.	Learner directed. Learner invitation. Teacher functions as source of safety and support.
Organization	Established. Emphasis on management. Focus on homogenous grouping.	Orchestration. Focus on skill grouping.	Changing. Circumstantial. Adaptive. Focus on heterogenous grouping.
Evaluation Techniques	Measurement of facts and content. Determined by authority. Imposed. Product oriented.	Critical thinking. Problem solving. Tests higher cognitive skills. Focuses on what is learned.	Feedback by invitation. Cooperative pupil and teacher evaluation. Non-damaging comparison. Focuses on how one feels about what is learned.
DEFINITION			
Definitions of Curriculum	A structured series of intended learning outcomes [14].	A sequence of potential experiences set up in school for the purpose of disciplining children and youth in group way of thinking and acting [26].	An attempted definition of humans translated into educational specifications [7].
Representative Language	Structure. Management. Reinforcement. Shaping. Labeling. Performance. Accountability. Objectives. Behavior. Matching. Environment. Cause-effect. Measurement. Observation. Transmission of roles. Function. Control. Intelligence. Reality. Order. Standards. Tests. Grades. Cover. Direct	Sequence. Stages. Growth and Development. Becoming. Correlated. Interest. Programs. Diagnostic. Readiness. Techniques. Skills. Activity. Individual differences. Rational. Well-adjusted. Motivation. Progress. Expectations. Understanding. Discipline. Knowledge. Evaluation. Enable. Support. Facilitate. Guide. Help. Interests. Meaningful.	Being. Desires. Process. Democratic. Freedom. Feedback. Fulfillment. Experience. Diversity. Perception. Potential. Harmony. Personal order. Self-direction. Accepting. Unique. Consequences. Awareness. Sharing. Trusting. Allow. Experiment. Involve. Issues. Options. Natural. Spontaneous. Personal meaning.

of human agents. Educational researchers conceive as well as collect ideas from established disciplines and arrange them in various structures in order to create concepts unique to schooling. These concepts exist in the human mind and are used not only to affirm reality, but as tools to create educational thought. In addition, researchers select and cluster certain concepts to represent a particular perspective of human life or culture, resulting in ideology. Thus, educational thought is ideologically based. Research efforts are not value neutral. "The questions we ask determine the answers we get" [24]. If concepts are syntheses of selected ideas and ideas are inventions of human agents, then the potential for epistemological error exists. In order to adequately interpret educational knowledge, educators must examine not only the knowledge itself but also the way the knowledge was created. This can only be done by examining the conceptual bases used in knowledge formulation.

There are probably many, but certainly three identifiable realities, (mindscapes) resulting from scholarly tradition, used in formulating educational research agendas. Table 1 is an attempt to identify and contrast these three philosophical and psychological realities (mindscapes) which tend to separate into three world views; Reality A, Reality B, and Reality C. This separation is a reflection of whether educators are primarily concerned with doing *to*, *for*, and *with* young people. The three realities can be dispersed on a continuum ranging from training to education [6; 7].



According to MacDonald [16]

... training is the process of preparing a person to perform defined functions in predictable situations and education is the process of equipping an individual to perform undefined functions in unpredictable situations. (p. 39)

An educational context committed to training is based on the belief that humans are the sum total of their experiences, passive victims of their environments. The education end of the continuum depicts the belief that humans are active and goal-seeking, eager to act upon their environment.

Despite certain limitations, the model presented in Table 1 enables those interested in rural education to make useful distinctions among education directions reflecting different realities. These realities are seldom, if ever, found in pure form; most schools, however, are patterned after one of three.

The basic elements of the model, as they apply to the three mindscapes, are categorized into four parts; (a) philosophy, (b) psychology, (c) daily practices, and (d) definitions. The model is analytical and does not provide answers to questions about what rural schools should teach or how curriculum should be organized.

THREE RESEARCH TRADITIONS

The three educational realities or mindscapes presented in Table 1 are aligned with three research traditions available to rural educators; logical positivism, hermeneutics, and critical theory [5]. Stephenson [28] establishes that:

Research is based on differing assumptions about what exists to be studied, the nature of that reality, the relationship between the observed and the observer and the goal of the research endeavor. (p. 31)

Logical Positivism

Logical positivism has had an impact on the theory, research, and practice of curriculum within the past two decades (e.g., management by objectives, competency-based testing, the accountability movement, competency-based teacher education and diagnostic-prescriptive teaching). Basically, logical positivism is a blending of symbolic logic and the scientific method (validation through experience).

Auguste Comte and other forerunners of the movement believed that symbolic logic could be used to construct systems and that general laws could be reduced to propositions which could be established through scientific verification. Reality is established through this process, commonly referred to as a reductionist perspective. Advocates are accused of dealing with particulars out-of-context. Logical positivists, for the most part, ignore epistemological questions dealing with the metaphysical, theological and ethical. A result of this positivistic activity has been the encouragement of a technical rationale [12]. The goal of the logical positivism is to create knowledge that can be used to predict and control both natural and human phenomena.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutical theorists do not assume, as do logical positivists, that natural and human phenomena are the same. While logical positivism calls for taking a rational grid and procedure from one context and placing it over another (research findings from an urban school to a rural school), the hermeneutic methodology reflects a constant creative search for conceptual frameworks which, through new interpretations, reveal different perspectives. In essence this means looking at people through the lenses of human culture in relation to the humanities (e.g., philosophy, history, literature, ethics, religion, moral theory, etc.) [17].

Hermeneutic researchers deal not only with the object studied and its context, but also the forestructure of understanding (historical and philosophical roots), and the prejudices they bring to the task [5]. This requires reflection, continuous circling back and forth between the whole and the part.

Critical Theory

The research tradition of critical theories is based on dialectical thinking (discussion and reasoning through

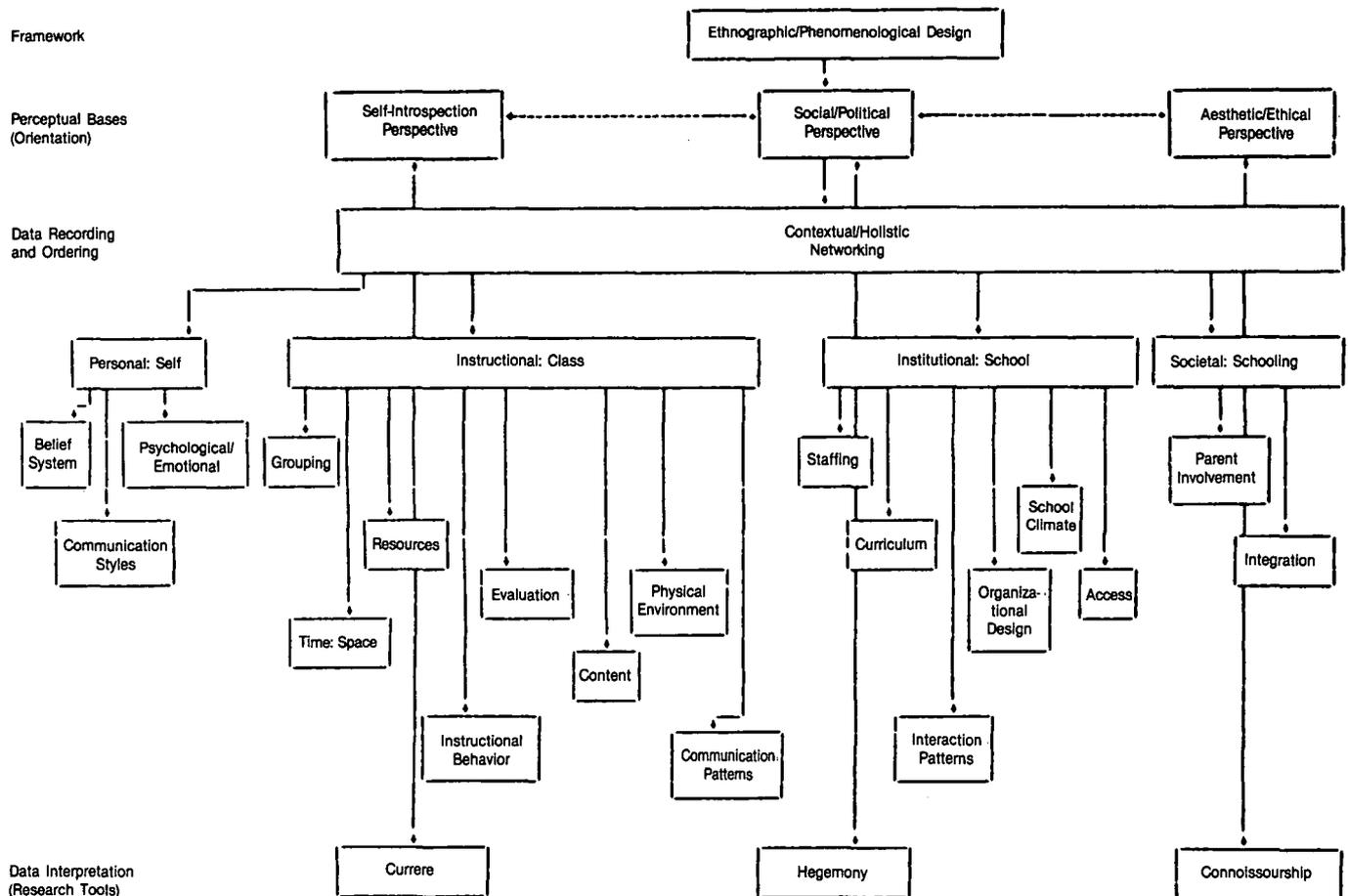


FIGURE 1. A contextual appraisal system for describing the concrete reality of a rural school.

dialogue) and is directed at contradictions between society's and schools' claims and realities [5]. Research efforts based in the critical tradition address matters concerned with control and understanding.

Research methodology based on critical theory relies upon reasoned reflection as the basis for its validation. The theory-practice dilemma is replaced by praxis (action with reflection) causing this research mode to be radical in nature when compared with the logical positivism and hermeneutical traditions.

Historically, research agendas relative to rural education have followed a logical positivistic tradition. Researchers have tended to see reality as independent of their knowing, to believe the whole can be studied by dividing it into separate parts/variables, to be removed or separated from the research, and to use statistical techniques, generating quantitative data [2; 3; 8; 10; 11; 13; 26].

A PROPOSED RESEARCH AGENDA

In an attempt to move away from conventional wisdom and habits of thought relative to rural education, researchers must take steps to become oriented toward a concrete reality as an alternative to abstract reality. Researchers must accept and deal with their presence in the research effort.

Chances are that well-intended proponents of differing reality frameworks and the companion research traditions are more concerned with political rhetoric and funding opportunities than with what is best for children and society. Contemporary debate tends to focus on what rural education ought to be while almost totally ignoring what rural education is. There is a need for rural educators to have a portrait (description) of the rural school to use as a tool for future research efforts and as a guide for recommendations for daily practice.

There are three major assumptions underlying the proposed research agenda for rural education. For the most part, functions and practices of rural education have been studied in isolation by researchers using quantitative methodology. Dealing with particulars (variables) out of context for purposes of research efficiency, confounds the problem and intensifies the prospect of errors. It is possible to perceive and describe the "gestalt" or "ethos" of a rural school in a systematic fashion.

Research Questions

The following questions constitute the suggested research agenda.

1. Is it possible to identify a set of practices and conditions that constitute a reality called rural education?

If so, what are these practices and conditions?

2. Do the practices in a rural school act or interact in such a way as to allow the researcher to classify the process of a rural school as systematic in nature?

3. Does the portrait of a rural school resemble what educators currently believe relative to rural schools?

In order to pursue these questions, it becomes necessary to depart from quantitative research and shift, for the most part, to techniques derived from qualitative research. This shift is motivated by the premise that schools do not always function in a rational, goal-based fashion. Figure 1 presents the reader with a schematic view of the proposed strategy.

A PROPOSED RESEARCH STRATEGY

The perceptual base for this research strategy includes three perspectives; (a) self-introspection, interpreted through autobiography or *currere* [22], (b) socio-political, construed through hegemony [1], and (c) aesthetic-ethical, illuminated through connoisseurship [9].

Self-Introspective Perspective

The self-introspective perspective aids researchers in analyzing their situations in life and ultimately responding positively to understanding their reasons for being and their social status. Among the research tools evolving from the self-introspective perspective are autobiography and journal keeping.

Socio-Political Perspective

The socio-political perspective is chiefly concerned with emancipation rather than dominance. Education is plagued by conformity to the ideas, values, and dictates of tradition. Mazza [15] contends it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve a major goal of education, ". . . the transition from critical consciousness to social action." She continues that it is difficult to arouse critical consciousness because of educational limitations imposed by the present system, the lack of teachers who make an effort to rise above customary procedures, and the emphasis on content rather than the significance of subject matter.

Two significant questions must be answered in analyzing the socio-political perspective of the rural school. Is the power held by the school board, central office personnel, the principal, or the teachers? Does the community, to a large extent, determine which practices will be continued, eliminated, and introduced in the school?

Aesthetic-Ethical Perspective

The aesthetic-ethical perspective, concerned with humankind and experiences, is pertinent to rural education research for it emphasizes the values, emotions, and experiences of life which influence feelings of self-worth, self-identity, and self-realization. This perspective involves both private and public moral issues, from which

personal determinations of conflicting values may be made. By approaching society from a holistic point of view, that is, seeing the whole as well as the parts of any situation, educators may be better qualified to make decisions which will enrich their lives and the lives of those they teach.

DATA RECORDING AND ORDERING (CONTEXTUAL APPRAISAL)

According to the contextual appraisal system [25], there are four contextual domains; personal (self), instructional (class), institutional (school), and societal (schooling) within which are recorded the contextual variables. Contextual variables are defined as elements contributing to the environment of the classroom, the school, and the community within which school-based learning takes place.

The category of personal domain (self) focuses on the beliefs held by the principal, secretary, teachers, students, parents, and other school personnel; their communication styles; and the psychological/emotional feelings of those involved in the school. The instructional domain (class) is concerned with grouping, time, space, resources, instructional behavior, methods of evaluation, the content presented, as well as the physical environment and the communication patterns that are used in the classroom.

The institutional domain (school) allows observation of the school with respect to classroom practices, type of curriculum, interaction patterns, the organizational design, school climate and the availability of personnel. The societal domain (schooling) is associated with two significant variables, parental involvement and integration of school and community. The societal domain addresses the roles which parents play, other than the familial one, and aids in determining the extent to which the school and community unite in providing a learning environment.

THREE RESEARCH TOOLS FOR DATA INTERPRETATION

Perhaps the most specific, and indeed the most significant, of the research tools should be those associated with the three perspectives (self-introspection, socio-political, aesthetic-ethical).

Currere

Currere, a technique of self-introspection, allows researchers to review lived experiences and thereby to question personal insights into the rural school. *Currere* serves an added function as well, for it can be a constant reminder that researchers' perceptions and interpretations are not value free. Pinar [23] uses this method for his studies on the analysis of one's lived experience of curricula. He finds it useful in the recollection of one's personal life and in anticipation of planning for and foreseeing a significant future. The integration of these two

facets enables one to discover a new perspective based upon reflection of traditional values and correlation with new values associated with these experiences. Pinar [22] states, "Currere aspires to cut through to preconceptual experience, which is the basis for distinctly personal meaning" (p. 316). Thus, currere facilitates a perspective of present situations that depend upon the continuum of one's educational experience, the extent to which past events provide enlightenment and enrichment for the future.

Hegemony

The second research tool, hegemony, is a technique of the socio-political perspective. Hegemony can assist researchers in determining various forms of authority present in rural schools. Claiming that ". . . hegemony is a whole body of practices and expectations," Apple [1] states that hegemony is geared toward oppressive authority. Although at times the oppression is recognized consciously, at other times it is unconscious so that many of one's thoughts about people, things, attitudes, and institutions are taken for granted. Rather than accepting things as they are, researchers investigate the concepts, language, cultural background, and power structure of the school with the expectation of making recommendations for the future.

Hegemony is functional in a hidden curriculum as a primary way of teaching students norms and traditional values, even to the extent of exhibiting personalities that are developed by living and coping with institutional expectations and routines of school days. Hegemony can be a useful tool, in characterizing the norms and values, personalities and attitudes which dominate the rural school.

Connoisseurship

The third research tool is connoisseurship, a form of the aesthetic/ethical perspective. Eisner [9] claims ". . . to be a connoisseur is to know how to look, to see, and to appreciate" (p. 219). Researchers can use discrimination in observing and appreciating the school in its natural setting, as well as in viewing the school in a sensitive and conscious way. Researchers' accumulations of countless experiences with classroom practices enable them to discriminate between acceptable practices for learning and those relatively unacceptable.

SUMMARY

Three realities (mindscapes) used in constructing knowledge and their concomitant traditional research methodologies are discussed as a basis for proposing a research agenda and methodology for rural education. In order to study rural education, the authors propose the use of conceptual empiricism and contextual appraisal consisting of four domains, personal (self), instructional (class), institutional (school), and societal (schooling). Data are collected in each of these domains in order to

discover the essence, to 'paint a portrait' of the rural school. Within each of these domains, three research tools (currere, hegemony, and connoisseurship) are suggested as a means of viewing the rural school from a holistic perspective and placing the research emphasis upon emergent patterns rather than upon manipulated variables. Once the portrait of the rural school is unveiled, then suggestions for improvement (if needed) can be discussed.

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