

Book Review



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Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community. M. Corbett. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2007, 297 pp., ISBN 10:1-55266-229-2.

Reviewed by

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I hadn't spent much time reading Michael Corbett's *Learning to Leave* before deciding that this was clearly a major research contribution—one that will join a relatively short list of first-rate books aimed at helping the education research community, as well as the general public, understand the convoluted phenomenon known as rural education. Corbett took a geographically bounded context—Nova Scotia's Digby Neck region, a long narrow strip of land jutting into the Bay of Fundy at the far southwest point of the province, forming, as a result, St. Mary's Bay to the east and a stretch of territory that came to be dominated by fishing for centuries—and asked who among local youth stays on "the Neck," who leaves, and what role did formal schooling play in the staying or the leaving?

To answer these straightforward questions, Corbett set up an extensive qualitative research framework, interviewing high school graduates and drop-outs from three cohorts: those who attended Digby Neck Consolidated High School between 1963 and 1974, between 1975 and 1986, and between 1987 and 1998. Additionally, Corbett interviewed a wide array of parents, teachers, and local community residents. The result is an in-depth look at the role of formal schooling in a rural community, one that has undergone profound economic transformations as the fish industry moved from a local, to a national, and ultimately to a global endeavor. In fact, one of the great strengths of *Learning to Leave* is the extent to which Corbett was able to connect economic transitions in and around the Neck to the perceived relevance of formal education.

As I became increasingly immersed in *Learning to Leave*, I couldn't help but begin to lament the fact that many Americans, and probably Canadians too, who profess an interest in rural education will see little value in something that doesn't point the way toward more learning standards met and higher test scores achieved. On top of

that, Corbett's work is not "scientifically-based." In fact, he didn't even bother to ask these former Digby Neck students for the Canadian equivalent of their SAT scores. In a poignant way, though, Corbett's analysis sheds revealing light on the intellectual poverty of regnant educational policy and practice in both the United States and Canada. The policy-making community is doing its best to focus the efforts of educational researchers on how to best connect curriculum and instruction to a symbol of success—that is, how curricular and instructional decisions square with the acquisition of a desirable test score.

In contrast, Corbett examines the impact of schooling on the extent to which individuals from Digby Neck feel their own lives to be successful. The difference is a little like analyzing an individual's ability to drive in a simulator versus analyzing an individual's ability to drive an actual car. It's a sad commentary on American (and likely Canadian) society that those with an interest in the topic actually prefer scientifically-based analyses of how youth do in the simulator we call school, over authentic in-roads into the lives of youth via the reality we call life.

Looking at success through the eyes of individuals rather than numerical data is particularly pertinent for those interested in rural education, given the array of cultural messages that bombard us in modern, or postmodern, society. Rural places have been pronounced backwaters by the dominant urban/suburban culture.¹ It is the place where hicks reside, or country bumpkins, or dumb farmers and fisherman. One result of these cultural pronouncements is that rural youth are forced to make a difficult decision through the very act of staying or leaving, a decision that doesn't trouble urban or suburban youth in anything near

¹ There is very little sophisticated analysis related to this dynamic in western society. My research suggests that it may well be tied to the urban/commercial/industrial attack on the Old Order, the conscious attempt of the emerging bourgeoisie to unseat rural power that defined the feudal world. There was a certain obvious utility to chastising rural dwellers as backward, unwilling to change with the times, etc. The fiery English social critic William Cobbett claimed that he witnessed this cultural development within his own lifetime (roughly 1750-1835), claiming that it was not only England's industrial captains that began to look down their noses at rural dwellers, but all manner of clerks, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and the like.

the same degree. Consider this passage from a relatively recent Digby Neck graduate:

Education does make us migrants if we choose to pursue it. I think it's unfortunate that some people say when they move from here to Toronto and they say that well, Toronto's my home and Digby Neck, well, that's a place I'd rather forget. I think that's the dark side of education. (p. 241)

Corbett adeptly exposes the modernist project that current public schooling represents. Rural places are the last remnants of a world where economic activity was practically synonymous with physical activity—with hard manual labor. In all but rural locales, that world was replaced by the world of machines, technology, computers, and robots. The new sophisticated world requires intellectual rather than physical wherewithal, or so the story goes. Resource extraction—be it agriculture, mining, logging, or fishing—it was all hard work. It was all rural work. Schools could contribute little to such a world. But the new world, that was a different matter altogether. Schools were integral to that world, as nearly every reform proposal of the last 25 years has loudly claimed. We have to have better schools to compete with the Japanese and Germans, we were told in the 1980s; and today, with India and China.

In the interest of fulfilling this modernist project, schools have sought to pull rural youth out of their culturally deficient environment and expose them to this new world. The Future Farmers of America organization is probably as good an example as any. Originally conceived as an entity intended to help rural youth become farmers, it gradually transformed into an instrument for moving rural youth into “agri-business careers” in large urban centers. Canada likely had no analogous Future Fisherman organization; but if it had, it arguably would have made the same transition. Indeed, Canada's government, as Corbett reports, has tried hard to help schools make this kind of contribution to “saving” rural youth. Witness the “learn to earn” initiative of the 1990s.

Rural youth are forced to deal with messages that contend that their friends, neighbors, parents, and they themselves are living in a backward environment. They must decide if they want to be “successful” as the school and the larger culture define it. It is not an easy decision. Simply accepting the larger culture's definition of success, let alone actively aspiring to it, is a subtle condemnation of everything around you and of everyone you have ever known. On top of this, rural youth must then wonder whether they are adequately prepared to compete for urban success, since their rural experiences, including their school experiences, are by cultural definition sub-par.

I have worked with countless future teachers and many, many veterans of the profession. The toughest lesson I try to impart is to have them at least consider the possibility that by encouraging rural students to leave their homes, we may be doing a disservice. I am not opposed to teaching in ways that help rural students acquire the intellectual wherewithal required to leave—in fact, I openly encourage that. But I am opposed to sending the subtle, and

often not-so-subtle, message about where success is located. Preservice teachers and veterans alike, in huge numbers, cling to the culturally-embedded wisdom that tells them to save the ones they can. Put them on the road to the city. Make them, as Corbett's astute subject noted, migrants to somewhere else.

In the face of this “dark side to education,” many rural education advocates, myself included, promote place-based pedagogy, critical theory, project-based learning, or some kind of approach to curriculum and instruction that yields far greater insight into the human condition than that which students typically garner from teaching intended to produce success on tests. That is, success in the simulator. While Corbett counts himself among such advocates—“rural schools,” he says, “need to adopt a more place-sensitive focus” (p. 269)—he also contends that the problems surrounding rural education are too complex to be resolved by embracing a particular approach to curriculum and instruction.

One of the fascinating data-driven themes that emerged in *Learning to Leave* is the heavy patriarchal dimensions to rural life on the Neck. In all three of Corbett's cohorts, women left the Neck in the greatest numbers, which is one and the same as saying that women pursued postsecondary education options at significantly higher rates than their male counterparts. Males stayed on the Neck to fish because it was initially very lucrative to do so. As the government got involved in regulation of the industry, selling licenses for commercial fishing, etc, neighborhood dynamics began to change and fishing opportunities began to diminish. Yet still, males stayed in greater numbers.

In reading *Learning to Leave*, I was struck by the incredibly similar circumstances that unfolded in rural farming communities of the Midwest. During the 1970s, \$5 corn and \$12 beans engendered a land-buying frenzy that resulted in an extraordinary collapse, or “weeding out,” of small independent farmers throughout the region. This dynamic created a kind of *petit bourgeoisie*. By the end of the 1980s in Digby Neck, “rich fisherman” was as common as the reference to “rich farmer” anywhere in Iowa. The policy arena in both locales made it easier for those with the most to begin with to acquire even more, more boats and more tractors.

Learning to Leave does not delve far into the problems created by modernist policy, at least not far beyond how such policy shapes the ends sought by the formal educational endeavor and how those ends mesh with the life goals of rural students on the Neck. In this regard, probably one of Corbett's most intriguing findings is that the students from the third cohort—those students who inherited a far less open fishery—actually stayed in the greatest numbers of any of the cohorts. Every economic consideration suggests that the opposite ought to have been true. With fewer fishing opportunities, more students should have left. But this was not the case. More stayed. According to Corbett, they saw staying “as their birthright,” a birthright that had been “usurped by corporate concentration, engineered by the ‘big players,’ with the support of the ‘educated people’ in the bureaucracy” (p. 268).

There is much to praise in their decision to stay. But as Corbett ably demonstrates, staying was not entirely a choice to reject the injustice afforded the local community, nor was it entirely about rejecting the pejorative labels that one garners merely from living in a rural locale. It was also about choosing to remain embedded in a system of neighborhood support—emotional and, when necessary, financial. Most students who wish to stay on the Neck remain ambivalent about school since it adds so little to enrich local lives. As Corbett contends, that’s not what school has offered rural places. “What it has offered is an allegedly enriched life elsewhere” (p. 268).

American and Canadian scholars have been aware of rural outmigration since 1895, when Hamlin Garland published his collection of stories about rural youth leaving the countryside to move to the city. In the United States, the initial reaction to this trend was to try to stop it. President Theodore Roosevelt created the Country Life Commission and launched the Country Life movement with just that goal in mind. But the rationale behind this effort was overtly racist. In the heavily social Darwinist milieu of the Progressive era, the prospect of talented white men and women from the nation’s farms moving to the city meant inevitable interaction with the southern and eastern European immigrants who were flooding into American cities in unprecedented numbers. The result would be a decline in America’s mean IQ. To combat this, we needed to keep “a standard people on our farms,” as one prominent Country Life advocate put it.

With such a dubious rationale undergirding it, the Country Life movement waned quickly. For all intents and purposes, it was over by the time the United States entered World War I. And, in any event, the tremendous economic

growth that followed WWI meant that still more workers were needed in the nation’s cities—and former rural dwellers were more than welcomed. After all, we were headed for an urban future, or so regnant cultural wisdom claimed.

The story of American, and likely Canadian, rural education since the 1920s has not changed significantly to this day. School consolidation is the central character in that story—an educational version of the enclosure movement that removed the use of the commons from rural dwellers throughout Europe. No educational policy anywhere, ever, has been so widely implemented with so little to recommend it. The ubiquity of school consolidation created its own legitimation, and the resulting diminishment of rural communities, like those on the Neck, became the price of progress. Lamentable perhaps, but inevitable. There should be no surprise, therefore, that rural schools continue to be staffed by teachers who believe that they have failed any student who chooses not to leave their rural community. Until the publication of *Learning to Leave*, there has been too little sophisticated scholarship that problematizes this dynamic. That void is now at least partially filled. Everyone who professes an interest in rural education should read this book.

That said, I do have a few minor quibbles. A map of the Neck, and photographs, would have been very useful. And too often the index failed to take me to the correct page. But these frustrations were overshadowed by the depth and breadth of this wonderful account delineating the role of formal schooling in the decisions made by rural youth to stay or leave their coastal community. I highly recommend *Learning to Leave*.