

Book Review

Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World

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When early last year a high-ranking official from the federal Department of Education visited us in New Mexico, I was invited to act as one of his guides, to set up a tour for him at two schools. With the dramatic infusion of Race to the Top funds into education, and in particular into states like New Mexico where achievement data have consistently indicated that our students rank near the bottom nationally, his stated goal was to understand better the challenges we face. With the collaboration of an urban principal, we hosts were soon able to arrange for our guest to tour an ethnically diverse, low SES elementary school in Albuquerque. But we also wanted our guest to get a sense of rural education in the state. Arranging for that, however, required more planning, for I wanted the official to get an overview, not just of a particular rural school, but a sense of New Mexico's ethnic, linguistic, and geographic complexity.

In the end, we were welcomed into a small high school located in the high desert, west of Albuquerque where the population is predominately Native and Hispanic. Our guest immediately noticed that the school's central plaza bore little resemblance to the architecture of the public schools he had visited thus far. Each of the four sides of the plaza had been built to echo the façades of the ancient churches in the four villages from which the school's students came. As we toured the facility, observing classes, speaking to students and teachers and a couple of school board members, I could see that his disorientation was growing. Finally, as we were standing in the doorway of a classroom where the lesson was being taught in the language of the local indigenous people, he whispered, "Tell me what I am looking at."

Only later that day, on the drive back to his hotel, were we able to address his concerns in any kind of depth. As we discussed his seemingly simple question and what it

revealed about much of officialdom's lack of understanding about rural and local education in America, I realized that an authentic response would require not just an explanation of rural schools, but also one of place and identity, and of the economics of a fast-globalizing world.

Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World (2010), edited by Kai A. Schafft and Alecia Youngblood Jackson, lays out an extremely helpful overview of these deeper educational and cultural issues in a volume of 13 articles. Divided into three parts, the scholars in this book address "Spaces of Identity," "Placing Education," and "Teaching Communities." Had I had this book in hand at the time of our guest's visit, its panoramic scholarship would have gone a long way toward addressing many of his questions.

Rather than take as their unit of analysis the classroom or the school building (as so often has been the case in rural education research), Schafft and Jackson in their Introduction put the reader on notice that the work in this volume "foregrounds the *interrelationship* between school and community, and how that interrelationship is shaped by the global-local context in which it is embedded" (p. 3). Relying largely on qualitative designs "such as ethnography, case studies, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and mixed methods" (p.3), the chapters in *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century*, set out quite purposively to emphasize the views and voices of rural people, "as they are situated within their local spaces, while keeping an eye toward the global context in which rurality is constructed, experienced, and critiqued" (p. 4).

Spaces of Identity

Theobald and Wood in the first chapter of this volume, situate much of what follows in this first section

by reminding the reader that “from our first days as a nation, urban and rural interests differed, the differences created struggle, and the struggle a culture marked by mutual suspicion” (p. 22). As the balance of economic power in the late nineteenth century tipped toward urban America, so too did the political and cultural power to define just what it meant to be rural. As a result, rural culture too often became caricatured as marginal, ignorant, and in many ways, pathological. Today, the authors tell us, “rural youth see themselves as nonparticipants in the American experience, at least until they leave their home and move to the city. If there is a rural version of progress at all, it is defined as a quick transition from family farms to large, corporate-controlled ‘agricultural complexes’” (p. 27).

Expanding on these themes in chapter 2, Howley and Howley explore the ways in which rurality intersects with social class. Schools in particular “tend to reproduce long-standing community power relations by categorizing, stereotyping, and ultimately disabling ‘poor’ students” (p. 42). Indeed, “schools,” they maintain, “facilitate out-migration, in part, by shaping *identities* that willingly embrace departure. Entire realms of knowledge, experience, and affection are abandoned by the once-rural individual as part of the loss” (p. 46). As a result, rural values of community, hard work, stewardship and frugality “come increasingly to be viewed as unsavory—backward, conservative, and irrelevant—a native anathema to be eradicated” (p. 47).

Groenke and Nesor in chapter 3, examine the ways racist language is used to establish boundaries of local identity in a case where a school district attempts to enfold rural students. They find that “racist speech served multiple uses, from symbolically excluding outsiders and newcomers to the area, to subverting [school] administrators’ attempts to integrate the school discursively into the larger cosmopolitan school district by instituting a speech code, to policing intra-group identity among peers” (p. 54).

Jackson, in chapter 4, employing a Foucauldian lens of analysis, examines a school system in a “tight-knit” southern community called Garner, where the Hispanic population has doubled over the last ten years. Far from the idealized community control over education that is so often put forth as the solution to globalization, Jackson finds that the actual practices “can be exclusionary and oppressive” (p. 73) and indeed, “that community resistance to globalization can... limit the lives of the people whom that very resistance attempts to ‘protect’” (p. 73).

Placing Education

Section 2 of this volume begins with chapter 5 by Schafft, Killeen, and Morrissey, examining the issue of student transiency in rural schools and communities in the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Because NCLB

derives from the neoliberal principles that “privilege growth, international economic competitiveness, and the assumption that market principles will lead to better schools and improved economic achievement” (p. 99.), and because rural communities, often dependent on single-industry economies are particularly vulnerable to globalization, in Upstate New York where this study takes place, the “chronic residential movement of poor families—and the student transiency that results—is both a symptom of and a contributing factor to community distress” (p. 100). As a result, the authors argue that student transiency “and its associated academic outcomes are largely beyond the control of local schools and school districts” (p. 110).

Even though educational policy in the form of standardized assessment has not served well the needs of rural students and their communities in recent years, it has adopted detailed “risk profile[s] that... establish educability, employability, security risk, credit limits, mental stability, targeting for marketing and increasingly personalized advertising, and a variety of other contemporary identity parameters” (p. 120), Michael Corbett, looking at education in Nova Scotia, asserts in chapter 6. But he views this as perhaps an inevitable outcome of the economic changes in rural life, and that “[t]he truth is that [rural life] is indeed transforming in ways that place [the local economy] in jeopardy and that probably means that most... children will dream of leaving for a more stable and arguably better life” (p. 129). Faced with this reality, what does responsible education look like? “It seems to me,” he concludes, “that desirable rural teaching practice ought to build bridges between the local and the global by helping young people investigate systematically the ways that globalization transforms, complicates, and infuses necessarily local lives” (p. 130).

Chapter 7 by Giroux, Jah, and Eloundou-Enyegue examines the phenomenon of a “flattening” world and its attendant assumption of an equalized world economy. They find that while the flow of capital, ideas, technology, and labor have indeed compressed to some degree the inequality among countries, “inequality within regions and within countries may be rising” (p. 132). In sub-Saharan Africa, the context of their study, they discover that the divide between rural and urban areas has in fact increased. Their findings further indicate that while in Cameroon the differences between education levels of individuals has decreased, ironically their human capital attributes may have less effect on outcomes than in previous times.

Edmonson and Butler in chapter 8, exploring the role of education in postindustrial rural communities in Pennsylvania, explore what it means to be an educator in this context. They conclude that teachers will need “to mobilize and bring changes to the meanings and policies that work to direct their lives...” and have “...democratic public spaces to engage their efforts” (p. 168). In addition,

they advise that rural teacher preparation programs “could foster opportunities for preservice teachers to participate in the public sphere,” and “deepen [their] understandings of the various political, social, and economic pressures that influence the discourses of people participating in these spaces in particular communities” (p. 168). In short, the authors maintain that rural educators must “find ways to support one another through [their] dissent to imposed definitions and policies as well as [their] efforts to bring change” (p. 169).

Teaching Communities

In chapter 9, Faircloth and Tippeconnic remind us that for Native people, the effects of globalization have been a reality of their lives for more than five hundred years. “Throughout history, Native people have continued to fight against the hegemonic forces that have both knowingly and unknowingly worked to acculturate, assimilate, and decimate their lifeways” (p. 175). In the fight to determine the direction of their education, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge, the tribal college movement in the 1960s has “resulted in the establishment of more than 40 tribally controlled colleges in the United States and Canada” (p. 176). These colleges, the authors assert, “enable many Native people to know who they are, where they come from, and where they are going, by serving as both repositories and incubators for the intellectual, cultural, and linguistic capital that Native people and their communities possess” (p. 183).

On a similar note, McDonough, Gildersleeve and Jarsky in chapter 10, arguing that rural life is “qualitatively different than urban and suburban cultures” (p. 191), find that “[s]ystems, institutions, and individual organizations are not congruent with rural students’ specific concerns about money, lifestyle, or academic preparation” (p. 191) and therefore “higher education needs to take responsibility for serving rural communities without expecting them to conform or assimilate to dominate cultural practices” (p. 192). This chapter explores the issue of the underrepresentation of rural students in higher education and posits the metaphor of the “golden cage” in order to understand how higher education opportunity is often at odds with rural life. Rural life, “as fulfilling and sustaining as it is to [rural college students], is also trapping them into a low-mobility, low-flexibility, low-socioeconomic status that might well limit their capacity to obtain and sustain a comfortable rural life experience” (p. 204). College and universities, however, are only preparing them for the dilemma of the “golden cage,” wherein they acquire skills and knowledge that will require them to leave their rural homes in order to prosper. To address this quandary, the authors maintain that higher education needs to move “toward a more responsive relationship with rural

areas by increased involvement in the rural life” (p. 206).

Crump and Twyford, in chapter 11, summarize research into the theory and practice undergirding the interactive distance e-learning project (IDeL) in the Australian states of New South Wales and the Northern Territory, where satellite-supported, two-way broadband Internet services were instituted for school children and adults, with “the aim [of] expand[ing] and reform[ing] educational services to these rural and remote communities to provide greater equity of access and better educational outcomes” (p. 211). The authors conclude that the IDeL project provides “a tool for achieving [equal opportunities for education and training] in a way that recognizes that equality is not ‘sameness’... but that it also can be celebrated and addressed so as to minimize disadvantage” (p. 228). At the same time, Crump and Twyford maintain that “[a]lso achievable are new and more equitable outcomes in other areas of education and community life” (p. 228).

In chapter 12, Bustamante, Brown, and Irby note that the cultural makeup of many rural communities has begun to change because U.S. companies are relocating to rural areas to take advantage of lower labor and land costs, and because “enhanced technology and infrastructure have decreased rural isolation” (p. 232). This chapter examines the perceptions of teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in a selected group of Texas communities in terms of how they may have influenced change locally. Importantly, these teachers when they join local communities “have been found to be naturally interested in maintaining the identity and local traditions of the areas in which they live” (p. 233). The authors find that these teacher leaders felt that they were in a unique position to be catalysts for change within their local communities, particularly as they worked “to increase awareness of other cultures and languages, educate others about world geography and history, and facilitate the eventual acceptance of others into the local communities” (p. 251).

Butera and Costello, in chapter 13, explore how special educators’ biography and geographic background influence the creation of family – school partnerships in their work in several rural Indiana communities. Many teacher preparation programs have been found to favor professional expertise over the social, economic and political issues of the local communities in which they work. In this study examining the effects of a professional development program where these community issues were specifically structured into the curriculum, students found that their personal experiences had a profound influence on the way they understood and addressed these problems. Students in the program found that their own values as rural children resonated with those of the communities in which they carried out their preparation. Even though these students often reported a lack of experience with students of color, they had more

familiarity with social class differences. As a result of their work in rural communities, these special education, preservice teachers developed a “feeling [of being] better prepared to advocate for the families of the students they taught” (p.263) and thus were able to bridge the gap between schools and families.

Throughout this volume of research studies the reader hears at the local level, whether in the American Southwest, Canadian Nova Scotia, or sub-Saharan Africa, the voices of rural people and the changing realities of their lives and communities. In addition, we see how on-going themes in rural research, such as identity construction, place-based education, and teaching (not just students but entire communities), are evolving in response to the globalization of rural economies and industries. Because of the high quality of the research and its clear organization around three themes, the reader is able to understand and connect rural education issues, both their similarities and differences, with those of urban and suburban communities across the globe. This work and its organization will serve students well, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, who may not be familiar with the theory and practices of rural education. Finally, this collection will also serve to inform policy makers of the needs and realities of rural communities and their schools as distinct from those of urban and suburban America.