

## Book Review

Cuervo, H. (2016). *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education*.  
New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

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A number of books on the subject of rural education have appeared recently. Several are excellent and serve to move the field in a positive direction by taking up questions which have been present in the rural education literature for some time, but which have not had the kind of in-depth treatment afforded by a book-length study. Notable here are several titles. In *Why Rural Schools Matter* (2014), Mara Tieken deals principally with racial diversity in rural schooling, but simultaneously with the more traditional rural education preoccupation with understanding the importance of schools in rural locations. Jinting Wu's *Fabricating an Educational Miracle* (2016) is a broadly theorized study of the complex interface of education, mobility, development, and audit culture in rural China. Wendy Geller's (2015) *Rural Young Women, Education, and Socio-Spatial Mobility* is an analysis of the educational decision making of young women in rural areas in which she engages with contemporary literatures concerning mobilities, gender, and identity formation.

Some years ago now, Ted Coladarci (2007) issued a call for rural education scholarship that is distinctly rural in character and not just gesturally so. What I think he meant by this mandate was that much rural education scholarship was blending into mainstream educational analysis by treating the rural as a variable rather than as a central organizing focus. This call echoes a similar analysis by Craig Howley, Paul Theobald, and Aimee Howley (2005) that raised questions about research that pays little attention to place and rural lifeways, in favor of an "infatuation" with decontextualized quantitative analysis that effectively erases places.

The three books mentioned above have, I think, achieved the kind of analysis that Coladarci recommended,

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and each of them takes up established problems in rural education by situating rurality at the center of the analysis. It is my sense, though, that rural education scholarship also suffers from a contrasting problem: A considerable amount of scholarship is insufficiently engaged with the larger questions, theoretical currents, and methodological advances that have emerged in recent years in educational thought. I think that each of these books also situates rural education firmly in the mainstream of educational and social thought rather than portraying rural education as a kind of side-show occurring in places that are in some way set apart from modernity.

A recent book by Hernán Cuervo, who works in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, adds to this more sophisticated rural education literature. His *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education* (2016) asks the reader to think about education as a spatial problematic drawing on work from geography, political theory, sociology, and youth studies. Cuervo's basic argument, at least as I read it, is that neoliberal governance and policy practices put everyone and everything in schools under the microscope of audit culture. The three-legged stool of competition, choice, and equity wobbles along supporting the belief that all three of these elements can coherently coordinate educational work.

Drawing primarily, but by no means exclusively, on theories of justice, Cuervo offers a sophisticated, and I think convincing, argument that rural education is caught up in a particularly problematic way in an analysis of social justice that relies too heavily, and too exclusively, on notions of distributive justice. This idea was developed most extensively in political theory by John Rawls, whose analysis is predicated on an understanding of social justice that "assigns rights and duties, and distributes benefits and burdens through social cooperation" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 3).

Cuervo does not deny that redistribution is an essential justice problematic that requires careful attention, but he makes the claim that what develops from the relatively exclusive focus on simple redistribution of resources, is that the equally important problems of recognitional (domination, disrespect, and marginalization of groups)

and associational (the extent to which individuals and groups are involved in decisions that affect their lives) other equally important aspects of what constitutes justice tend to be sidelined. This outcome effectively shunts many problems of distinctiveness, culture, and identity to the side, supporting instead an individualized focus on self-reliance and choice, which are assessed through contractualized relationships designed to generate a greater portion of measured justice. What this framework allows Cuervo to do, drawing principally on the work of political theorist Marion Young, is to think about rural education outside a metrocentric lens that tends only to look at the problems in the field in relation to metropolitan advantage and through a quantitative lens.

While it may be true that rural places are under-resourced relative to wealthier metropolitan locations, simple redistribution will not, and has not (despite several decades of effort in this direction in Australia), created a more just, equitable, or spatially-equal educational landscape. This book is set in Australia, but it tackles the standard and substantive rural education questions such as teacher shortages; preparing rural teachers; mobilities and the brain drain; the opportunity costs of higher education; problems of distance; place-based education; funding for rural schools. Cuervo's analysis also explores questions of identity and the ways that neoliberal discourse formats and pervades the ideas of teachers and students alike, causing them to think of educational processes as fundamentally a matter of compliance and choice.

A narrow focus on redistribution of resources does accomplish, in Cuervo's analysis, is a way of thinking about just schooling as a relatively straightforward problem that essentially boils down to choice and strong accountability systems that focus on standardized data collection that can generate an accurate representation of how well educational reform efforts are working. Thus, they are constructed as fundamentally fair, meeting the test of redistributive justice by paying attention to redistribution (compensatory funding for geographically isolated schools, incentives for rural/remote teachers, etc.) and by meticulously measuring performance against standard criteria.

What emerges from this view is an input-output model that imagines education like any other form of production that can be accurately audited, and whose outcomes can, and should, be compared at different scales. This model is top-down and administratively driven, and rather obviously, has little commerce with questions of domination, marginalization, culture, or participatory governance other than to impute that all these things will improve in a system that measures predefined outcomes using standardized instruments and seeks to provide sticks and carrots to improve performance. Indeed, the elevation and improvement of rural "culture," which is today often nested in terms of "low educational aspirations" in rural

areas, has long been a key feature of critiques of rural education (Corbett, 2016). What is missed in this analysis are the complex spatial and cultural politics that sit behind rural and regional educational inequality.

In the process, the very idea of social justice itself is abstracted out of particular locations, and the audit procedures themselves come to represent in the public imagination, and often by educators and specialist analysts, fundamental tools to both measure and redress social inequality. For instance, the argument that high-stakes standardized tests are instruments that reproduce and reflect social inequality, which has been pretty much standard in educational sociology for a generation, is replaced by the idea that these tools motivate educators as well as those who suffer disadvantage. It is rather like imagining a speedometer as a tool way to make vehicles go faster. Cuervo writes:

High stakes testing regimes are a central component of the reconfiguration of social justice in education as equity by numbers, where inequalities and disadvantages can be ameliorated through the production of comparable information to track those that are performing and those that are not. (p. 52)

Whether or not you happen to agree with this analysis, Cuervo focuses on in the way this neoliberal process deflects attention away from systems, cultures, societies, economies, and other collective ways of representing people in place and instead onto atomized and autonomous individuals. This neoliberal analysis also ignores questions of justice beyond simple redistribution that addresses measured "gaps" (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2015). In the process, space and place are essentially ignored, other than to conjure them as tools for ferreting out locations of disadvantage that need to be elevated through, you guessed it, self-reliance and governmentality, more monitoring, compliance, choice, and competition. Rurality then is either ignored and/or held up as a geography of deficit and disadvantage to be treated pretty much like any other education problem space that needs to be brought up to the metrocentric standard.

The idea that an education might reflect and respond to the particular character of people and place or consider the wider assemblages of power represented by curriculum, socioeconomic structures, and culture is written off as left-wing whining or what former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper called "committing sociology," which is to say, letting people off the hook for solving their problems. This reconceptualization of the idea of social justice and its corollary, production of educational geographies, makes it easy, and even necessary, to blame teachers and families in rural (and inner-city) locations for consistently failing to choose well enough to make the grade and compete with their metropolitan peers.

This neoliberal preoccupation with the individual tends to position racialized minorities, the unemployed and underemployed, rural citizens living far from growth poles and services, and working-class people as authors of their own misfortune, often through their alleged unwillingness to take appropriate educational opportunity. Here, education becomes both a disciplinary technology and a way of justifying the social order that seems to say to those who struggle that, “you did not stay in school/college/university, so you got what you deserved”. All of this blaming contributes to the vigorous backlash against the established liberal elites represented by mainstream political parties that has discovered newfound voice and organization in recent times (Frank, 2016). The stakes in Cuervo’s argument are high when this analysis is read against the rise of increasingly divisive and frightening right-wing politics, often simplistically and reductionistically associated with rural resentment and that play on essentialized national identities and imaginaries.

Cuervo explores how this hegemonic neoliberal framing marginalizes rural communities and shapes educational processes within them, both by providing a theoretical critique that productively uses a range of scholarly sources and through a study of two rural schools that draws on extensive interview data and a wide range of documentary evidence. This evidence provides a composite picture of students and educators who feel that their work is increasingly organized in ways that ignore who they are and where they are, effectively confirming established findings in rural education research dating back generations around the world.

In Cuervo’s analysis, the neoliberal educational machinery fails to meet the needs, or address the particular challenges, of rural youth and/or their communities. What teachers and students confront instead, is a system that normalizes and universalizes “youth lives based on processes that create ‘experiences and capacities’ of urban youth as standards against which *all* [emphasis in original] young people are measured” (Cuervo, 2016, p. 120). What is required, according to Cuervo, is a more considered theory of justice that melds crucial redistributive initiatives with corollary work that focuses on the particularity of the challenges faced by rural citizens and a respect for their right to participate in change processes and governance.

This is a timely and scholarly book that moves between theoretical considerations of justice, space and place, globalization, critical policy studies, youth research, sociological analysis of education, and the intimate stories of rural youth and educators working in rural Australia. Cuervo’s focus on political theory and questions of justice largely avoids the “capitalization” of educational thought in the wake of both human capital theory and the powerful and generative work of Pierre Bourdieu. Just as Cuervo has

caused me to think about the relationship between rural community life, democratic participation, and the politics of redistribution, he has also caused me to consider how contemporary frameworks instantiate so many educational phenomena in terms of capital.

How does an emphasis on various forms of capital, for instance, directly support the need for a better and more just society (Rancière, 2004)? The question remains, and Cuervo’s analysis draws on different, and perhaps older, language focused on qualitative questions of recognition and democratic participation as much more than those of quantified gaps, capital, and redistribution. Reading this book, I have begun to think about ontologies and epistemologies and how a fixation on capital accumulation (including cultural and social capital) may contribute to the very neoliberal hegemony so many of us in rural education bemoan. It is, perhaps, a short hop from the critical analysis of capital(s) inspired by Marxist theory, or by a contemporary thinker like Bourdieu, to the neoliberal imaginaries that equate the success of social justice initiatives with efforts to increase standardized test scores.

Finally, what I think this book demonstrates, meeting Coladarci’s test as well as my own, is that the ordinary processes and tensions in small rural schools in one particular national context are both unique educational and geographic situations, but at the same time they are also part of larger incessantly shifting and mobile change forces (Gulson et al, 2017) and theoretical flows that can be used to link the particular to the general, the micro to the macro, and that which we call rural to the urban. Each of these binaries can teach us something and serve as tools for thinking rather than as precise conceptual razors.

What rural means is more than a matter of population density or distance from a metroopolis and redistributive efforts that reduce problems and questions in rural education to quantitative demographic determinism inevitably leads to ineffective and insensitive policy. This perspective shows how rural remains a vibrant conceptual category by demonstrating, against the grain of standardization and homogenization, precisely how it matters in diverse spaces and places from the perspective of those who teach and learn there. I heartily recommend *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education* as a book that advances the field of rural education in important ways, raising some of our most persistent questions in the light of considered scholarly reflection and bringing them into dialogue with broader questions concerning the nature of justice.

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