

# On Resisting “Awayness” and Being a Good Insider: Early Career Scholars Revisit Coladarci’s Swan Song a Decade Later

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*This theoretical essay critically examines the impact of Coladarci’s 2007 article, “Improving the Yield of Rural Education Research: An Editor’s Swan Song,” which he composed at the conclusion of his tenure as editor of the Journal of Research in Rural Education. Using boundary theory and “awayness” as a metaphor for understanding community in social science research, we use citation analysis to review the ways in which Coladarci’s work has been taken up by the field, illustrating the ways in which this piece serves to socialize new researchers to rural education research. We then take up Coladarci’s invitation to further discuss what might define a contribution to the field of rural education scholarship and propose several additional considerations, including analyses of how power manifests across space and the criticality of a topic to rural schools and communities.*

In 1983, Massey and Crosby argued that rural communities are “invisible,” stating, “Rural residents are far more likely to suffer in silence than demand attention from the agencies and institutions ostensibly designed to serve them” (p. 266). However, in the wake of the 2016 U.S. election, rural America has been thrust into the spotlight, with the critical importance of better understanding the circumstances of rural communities recognized by both national media and the broader field of social science research (Black, 2017; Bottemiller Evich 2016; Cramer, 2016; Kurtzleben, 2016; Monnat & Brown, 2017). As rural education research scholars, we are as affected by this sudden attention as other rural social scientists are. It is our “boomtown” moment in which some out-of-field scholars are rushing in to study this “under-researched field,” while the lifetime residents seek to hold on to our boundaries and make clear our core assumptions. Now is the time to

reevaluate the constructs of our field: What constitutes rural education research? What ought it be?

In this theoretical essay, we critically reexamine a piece of rural education scholarship that has become an important standard for judging rural salience, Coladarci’s (2007) “Improving the Yield of Rural Education Research: An Editor’s Swan Song.” Written at the end of his tenure as editor of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* over a decade ago, Coladarci laid out a handful of carefully explained standards for how to evaluate and enhance the unique quality of rural education research. These standards included, among other recommendations, the request that authors of rural education scholarship “make the rural argument,” or justify why rurality is theoretically relevant to their study with the goal of more carefully understanding what happens at the intersection of rurality and schooling. It is a piece that has been used to introduce newcomers to the field of rural education research, and it is cited as a reference in the submission guidelines for the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. As such, it has significantly shaped the rural education research community over the last 10 years.

We position Coladarci’s (2007) article as a powerful recent example of boundary work in our field. As scientific research is a social endeavor, research communities must coalesce around a series of norms that help to define the

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important questions to be studied, the acceptable methods to be used, and, by contrast, those that are not (Kuhn, 1970). Attempts to delineate a field are as much the work of demonstrating what it is not as what it is; this process creates necessary boundaries so that such work can facilitate systematic connections between observations and studies to constitute knowledge systems (Gieryn, 1983; Kuhn, 1970). As new researchers are socialized into a field, these boundaries need to be explicitly taught and referenced if their work is to be accepted—through peer review or otherwise—by those who have helped to shape these boundaries. It is for this reason that doctoral education places such an emphasis on helping students to understand the core exemplars in their field of study and using texts that make explicit how to work within these boundaries (Kuhn, 1970). However, we construe the concept of “new” broadly here, to refer to both novice researchers and experienced researchers coming to rural education research for the first time.

We are three early career rural education researchers. As such, we find ourselves positioned differently than Coladarci (2007) was in writing his *Swan Song*. Having begun our careers in the post-*Swan Song* era, we have already had to confront challenging and thought-provoking questions related to this piece of boundary work in rural education research as guest or managing editors of this journal, as program chairs for rural research convenings, or as dissertators in search of a rural education research topic. Looking ahead to the length of our careers, this question of demarcation is not, as Gieryn (1983) once argued regarding the demarcation of science from other activities, a purely “analytical” (p. 781) problem. The ramifications of the social construction of the rural school problem over the course of the past century demonstrate the real effects of the durability of research categories and boundary work over time (Biddle & Azano, 2016). In this essay, we review Coladarci’s standards. First, we make an argument about how they have influenced the field through a citation analysis and two illustrative cases. Second, we return to the question of what makes a valuable contribution to rural education research.

### **Boundary Work in Social Science and “People From Away”**

Rural people are often accused of parochialism and suspicion of outsiders. The close social ties which may characterize rural communities and small towns create an in-group/out-group status that can be hard for those outside the community to penetrate (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017). Furthermore, the historical legacy of powerful corporate or wealthy individual interests using their political or economic capital to influence or even

disenfranchise local rural residents’ self-determination is often the background against which suspicion or resistance to such outside influence occurs (Gaventa, 1980; Massey & Crosby, 1983; Stoll, 2017). In Maine, there is a regionalism which deftly sums up these relationships between locals and outsiders, naming these individuals as “people from away.” The concept of “awayness” can mean many things in the Maine context, from summertime residents and occasional tourists to those from the next town over where they have a different way of doing things. “Where are you from?” a Mainer may casually ask early on after an initial meeting, in an attempt to better position a stranger socially and culturally. Most often, however, awayness is a colloquial term demarcating someone as an “outsider.” Furthermore, awayness can be imposed on community “insiders” in times of conflict (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; McHenry-Sorber, 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). Such politicization of community identity can create spaces of social exclusion for individuals or groups whose interests and values misalign with dominant or hegemonic values espoused by those in power (McHenry-Sorber, 2014). While awayness can be a permanent marker for those who come from away, the boundary label may be used fluidly for community members within the context of shifting interests and power structures.

Awayness is both an example of and a powerful metaphor for boundary work that signifies the social importance of in-group and out-group status (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Boundary theory illuminates how we, as social beings, delineate categories, define classifications, and create boundaries between them (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wray, 2006). A critical focus on boundaries allows us to see the pressures that contribute to creating boundaries, explore the social function of boundaries, and to understand the inclusions and exclusions created by these boundaries (DiMaggio, 1997; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Boundary theory also includes critical examination of the collective identities that derive from the creation of boundaries and the ease of transitioning between them, or crossing boundaries (Jenkins, 2000; Melucci, 1996). When boundaries are more flexible and permeable, these transitions are easier. The more rigid boundaries become, the more challenging they are to cross and the easier it is for newcomers to transgress (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

The placement of boundaries is a critical part of their creation, and in the social sciences, these boundaries are often placed and then contested and refined through scholarly discussion of the standards of the field (Gieryn, 1983; Nippert-Eng, 1996). The boundaries established through these debates are then taken up and maintained by the members of a research community as they use these standards to evaluate others’ work. Because peer review is a critical part of scientific knowledge production,

clear understanding of these questions within a scientific community is what creates cohesion and produces durable knowledge, rather than disjointed information. We argue that, in the case of rural education, Coladarci’s (2007) *Swan Song* is a rare attempt to define an important articulation of what makes research valuable to the field. To do rural research without adhering to these standards, therefore, is to risk being perceived as “from away,” regardless of whether one was earlier considered a rural research community insider.

### A Review of the Use of “Swan Song,” A Decade On

Ten years ago in his final essay as editor of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, Coladarci (2007) proposed six considerations for strengthening the rural education research literature, imploring rural education researchers to (a) describe the rural context of their study in more detail to better differentiate between diverse ruralities; (b) draw more explicitly on the theory and empirical contributions of other disciplines (including history, sociology and anthropology, among others); (c) frame their research question as explicitly rural; (d) better synthesize the extant research on rural education for the benefit of policymakers and new rural education researchers; (e) better distinguish between advocacy and science; and most importantly, (f) make the rural argument by discussing the theoretical relevance of rurality to the phenomenon of interest in their study. He acknowledges, in the opening of his essay, some of the unique developments in the field that influenced his writing the piece, including the recent award by the Institute of Education Sciences of its first multimillion dollar grant for a National Center on Rural Education Research. Additionally, rural researchers were—like others in the field of education—grappling with the implications of the still new high-stakes accountability measures introduced in the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind). In his essay, Coladarci frames his recommendations in light of these developments not as “a general repudiation of rural education research” (p. 1), but as a way of curbing the exceptions to these principles that “limit the potential of rural education research and ... the accumulation of knowledge that is desired in any discipline for its viability and import” (p. 2). To assess the influence of the piece over the last ten years, we reviewed the ways in which Coladarci’s *Swan Song* has been explicitly used within the field, using Google Scholar to identify works that have cited the piece. The purpose of this citation analysis in the context of a theoretical essay is to establish some initial parameters for a discussion of the nature of the piece’s impact on the field. Certainly, it is likely that this piece has also had a substantive implicit influence on the field—which we will address later in two illustrative vignettes—however, given that this is far harder to discern, we have focused on

citations as a rough approximation of influence, and to point us toward whom or what is being influenced.

Since it was published in 2007, the piece has been cited 175 times,<sup>1</sup> ranging from 7 to 28 citations per year since its publication (see Figure 1). While 175 citations may not seem like significant use over the course of a decade, one can compare this level of citation to other works that have taken up similar topics, such as Howley’s (1997) piece “What Makes Rural Education Research Rural?” which has only been cited 90 times in twice the amount of time, or the Howley and colleagues (2005) piece entitled “What Rural Education Research Is of Most Worth?” which has been cited 83 times over the course of the same decade. We reviewed each instance of *Swan Song*’s citation, examining the way in which the authors were using the work and created an emergent coding structure based on these usages (see summary of codes and sample text in Table 1). We excluded 20 instances of grey literature and reports, choosing instead to focus on instances of citation subject to some level of engagement in the social aspects of scientific knowledge production, including edited volumes, books, peer-reviewed articles, and dissertations. This criterion was important because of our interest in understanding the ways in which *Swan Song* may represent a piece of boundary making and reinforcement. Based on these 155 instances, we arrived at a dataset that provided summary information on how *Swan Song*’s argument had been picked up and used (or not used) by the education research literature.

One of the interesting summary-level aspects of these data was that only 19% of citations (n=30) were from articles published in rural-focused journals, such as the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* and the *Rural Special Education Quarterly*. The majority of citations, 37% (n=57), were from students completing their dissertations on rural-focused topics. Sub-field integration, such as educational leadership, teacher education, or subject area focused educational research, accounted for less than 10% of all citations. It seems clear that while the piece has played some role in the shaping of research within rural education, it has played a far greater role as a tool of socialization for novice researchers for the field. This observation is important because it points to the article’s role as a method of making implicit knowledge explicit as new researchers seek to define valuable contributions to the field, an important component of teaching of boundaries (Kuhn, 1970).

<sup>1</sup>At the time of our review of its use, Google Scholar formally indicated that the piece had been cited 179 times. However, in reviewing that number, we discovered the weakness of Google Scholar’s count as four of those instances were repeat entries. Despite this issue, we found Google Scholar to be a useful tool for understanding the piece’s influence on in the field over time, as evidenced by the 175 authentic citations.

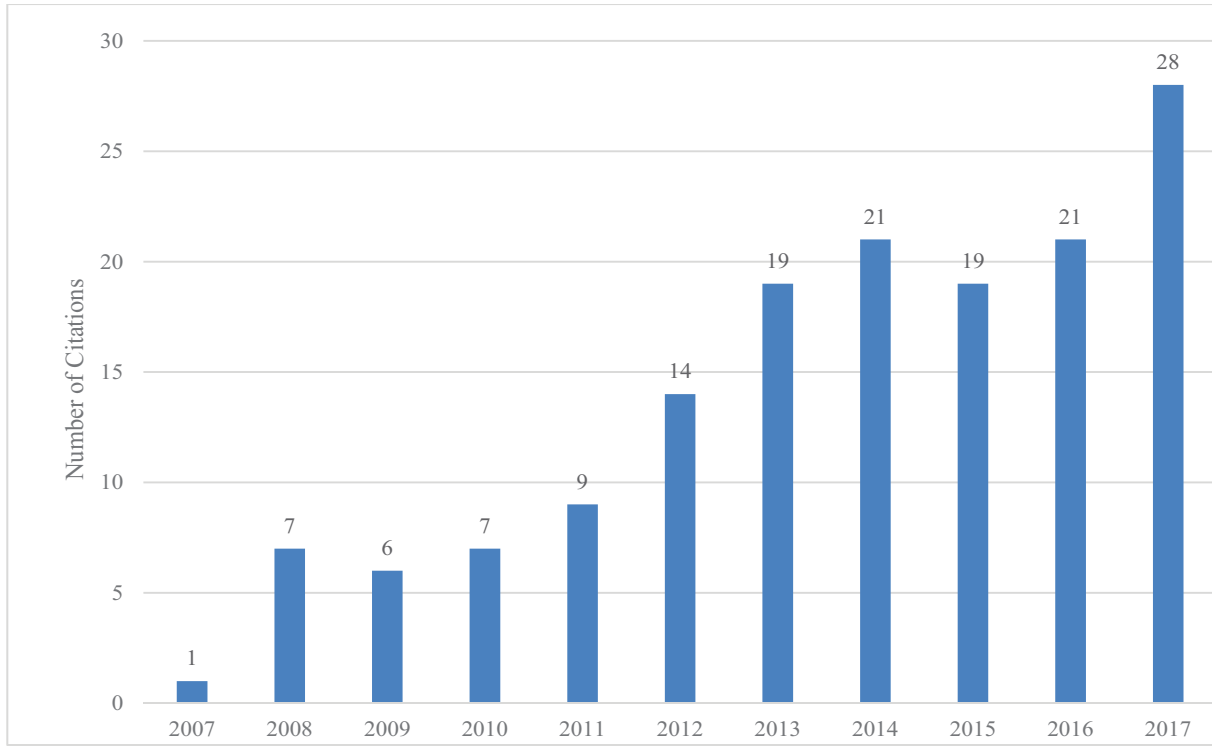


Figure 1. Number of citations of Coladarci's (2007) Swan Song in the past decade.

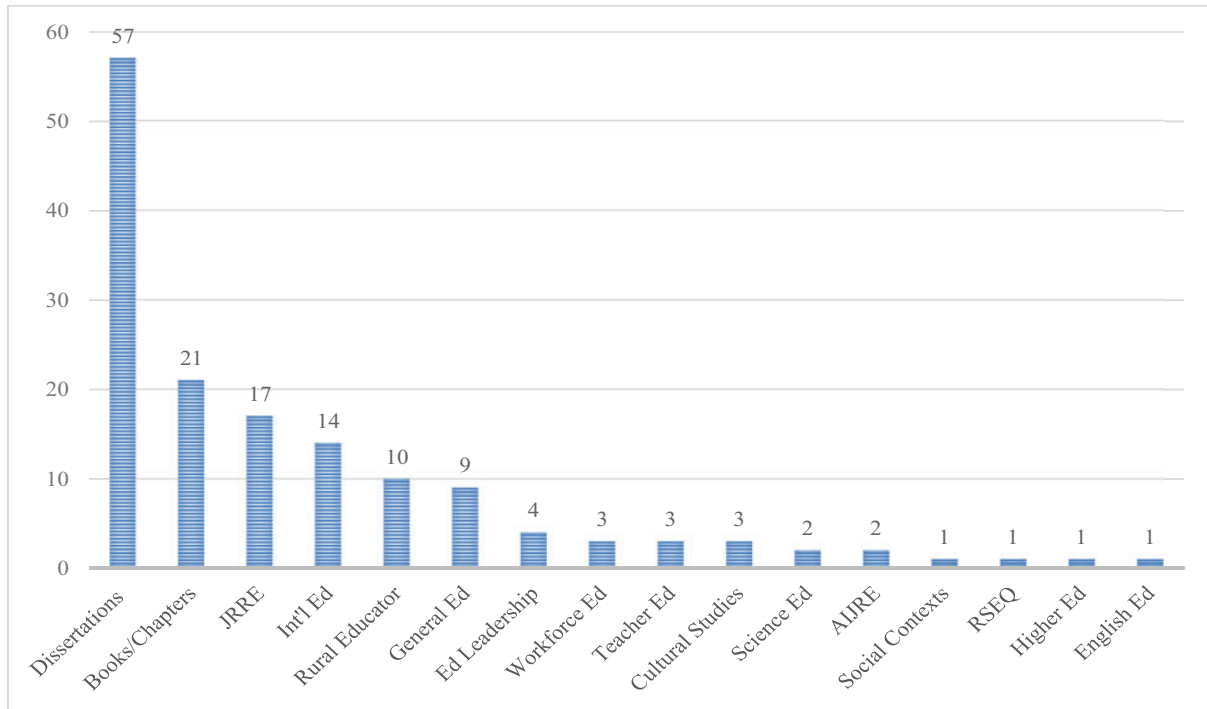


Figure 2. Instances of Swan Song (Coladarci, 2007) reference by publication type.

To understand how the piece has been used, we looked at the context for each citation in all 155 articles, coding these instances according to the main reason for the citation (see Table 1 for examples). In some instances, *Swan Song* was cited more than one time, or for more than one reason. Each of these instances was examined and coded separately, or multiple codes were assigned to the same instance when applicable. Ultimately, using an emergent approach, we produced 11 unique codes, which can be seen in Figure 2 along with percentages of how often they occurred. As one might expect, there were parallels between Coladarci’s (2007) six suggestions for enhancing the yield of rural research and the reasons the piece was cited; however, these were not the only reasons the piece was cited, as can be seen in Figure 3.

Discussion of the challenges of defining rurality was the most common reason for citing *Swan Song* ( $n=38$ ), followed by the need for rich context description ( $n=26$ ). Both of these usages relate to the first component of Coladarci’s (2007) argument, “describing the rural context of research” (p. 2). These citations typically included summary statements referencing the fact that rural, as a concept, resists singular definition, often quoting Coladarci’s statement that, “there is no singular definition of rural” (p. 2). The majority of texts demonstrated clear engagement with Coladarci’s argument about resisting a singular definition while also providing a

clear, expanded definition of how rural was operationalized within their own study. Other texts merely referenced the controversy around the definition of rural, while failing to meet the standard advocated by Coladarci. In some cases, authors failed to acknowledge Coladarci’s argument at all, instead using his description of the many ways in which rural has been defined in the literature to justify their own specific definitions. These latter two usages were almost exclusively in dissertation studies, rather than in articles which had undergone rigorous peer review.

The third most prevalent reason for citing *Swan Song* was as evidence that there was a paucity of rural literature in general, or pointing to the thin nature of rural research ( $n=19$ ). This usage seems to stem from the first sentence of the article, which states, “Rural education research is a considerably smaller enterprise than other branches of educational research” (p. 1). These texts were divided in their finger-pointing for these shortcomings. Some pointed to the literature itself, suggesting that Coladarci (2007) argued that it had significant “methodological and substantive shortcomings” (p. 1; see also Hellwege, O’Connor, Nugent, Kunz, & Sheridan, 2013; Hussar, 2015), while others pointed to the broader educational research literature, suggesting, as Coladarci did, that the lack of attention to rural schools and communities was surprising in light of the large number of students attending these schools in the

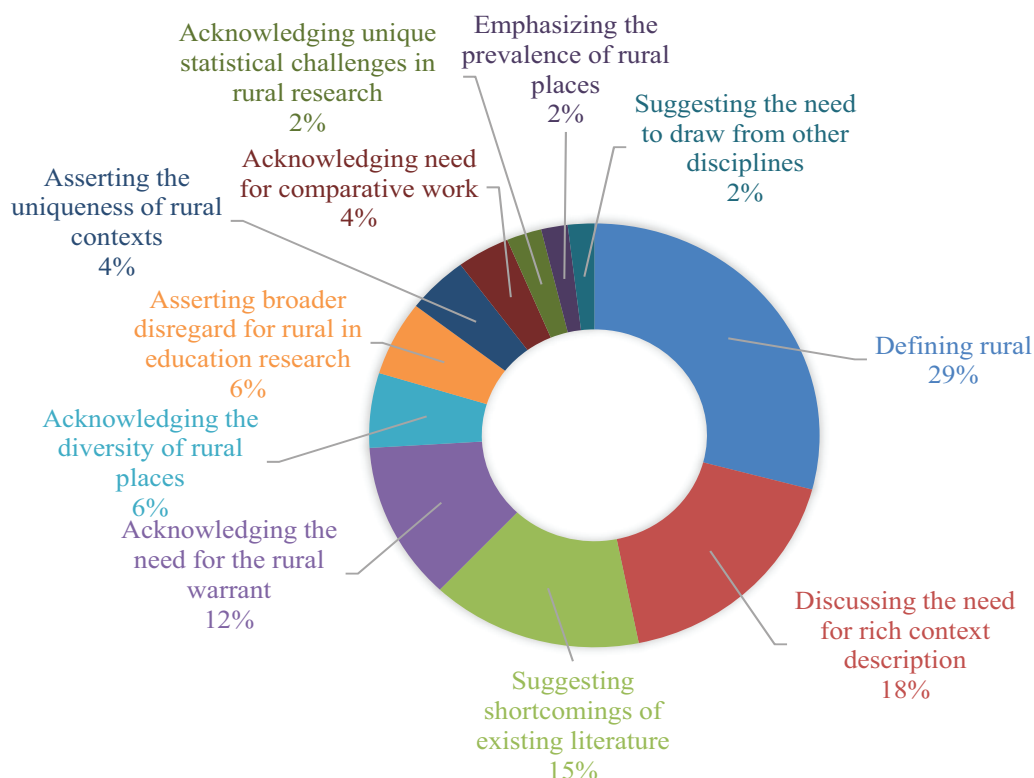


Figure 3. Prevalence of reasons *Swan Song* (Coladarci, 2007) was cited by research literature.



Table 1

*Samples of Articles and Codes from Coladarci (2007) Citation Analysis*

<u>Article Title</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Reference text</u>	<u>Code</u>	<u>Type of Article</u>
Rural Teachers' Best Motivating Strategies: A Blending of Teachers' and Students' Perspectives.	2008	Hardre et al	Due to the diversity of rural places and definitions of them (Adams, 2003), it is prudent to provide descriptive details of places in rural studies (Coladarci, 2007; Holloway, 2002)	Need for rich context description	JRRE
Quality of worklife for rural and remote teachers: Perspectives of novice, interstate and overseas-qualified teachers	2008	Sharplin	Ambiguity also exists about the term rural education, which can be interpreted as education occurring in rural locations, or education specifically addressing curriculum relevant to rural living, regardless of place of instruction (Coladarci, 2007). This study focused on education provision only in remote and rural locations.	Rural warrant	Dissertation
Teachers' experiences with student bullying in five rural middle schools	2010	Ramsey	Coladarci (2007) discussed the need to compare a phenomenon in different cultural contexts such as rural, urban, and suburban settings. It is outside the scope of this study to compare results to bullying research conducted in an urban setting.	Comparison	Dissertation
The possibility of place: one teacher's use of place-based instruction for English students in a rural high school.	2011	Azano	Rural education advocates stress the importance of research in rural schools (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Coladarci, 2007) to address factors that potentially compromise the quality of education for rural students, such as funding inequities (Jimerson, 2005; Mathis, 2003), limited access to educational resources (Gibbs, 1998), and rural poverty (Johnson & Strange, 2005).	Advocating for rural schools	JRRE
Creating and sustaining an "effective" rural school: The critical triad—leadership, curriculum, and community	2012	Wright	There are contested views about what constitutes a small school and what constitutes rurality (Coladarci, 2007; Starr & White, 2008). Part of the problem for rural education and rural research has been a lack of a definitive understanding of rural.	Defining rural	Dissertation
Rural adolescents' participation in extracurricular activities and nontraditional gender-typed occupational aspirations: A study of achievement motivation	2013	Askew	However, similar research needs to be pursued in other populations to understand if the patterns of findings are uniquely rural in nature (Coladarci, 2007)	Uniqueness of rural	Dissertation
Perspectives of Educators Engaged in Continuous Improvement Efforts Within a Rural Appalachian School Setting	2014	Cox	There is no single definition of "rural" (Budge, 2006; Coladarci, 2007; DeYoung, 1992; Hargreaves, 2009).... Coladarci (2007), Dobson and Dobson (1987), and DeYoung (1992) describe a variety of types of "rural" communities including "high growth," "depressed," "stable," and "isolated."	Defining rural; diversity of rural	Dissertation
Introduction: The Rural Superintendency	2014	Ylimaki et al	More importantly, millions of children across the United States are educated in rural school districts (Coladarci, 2007)	Prevalence of rural	Ed Leadership
Why some school districts outperform others: A mixed-methods study on poverty, student performance on the New York state school assessments, and school ...	2014	Lonneville	However, Coladarci (2007) states that rural education is "a considerable smaller enterprise than many other branches of educational research" which becomes more significant when the research shows that "one in five public school students attends a rural school, and almost one third of all public schools are located in rural areas" (p. 1).	Shortcomings of existing literature	Dissertation
Cultural Competence and the Mississippi Educator: An Investigative Study into the Cultural Competence Levels of Mississippi Educators	2015	Stewart	The practices of not including rural school districts in quality education research and not providing funding for rural education research are scrutinized by many practitioners in the field of education, including the United States Department of Education (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Coladarci, 2007; Sherwood, 2001)	Disregard of rural	Dissertation
The coalition of essential schools and rural educational reform	2015	La Prad	Heeding Coladarci's (2007) advice, this article makes no attempt to generalize rural educational context or critique current reform movements in rural schools. Rather, the aim is to share possibilities for reform.	Diversity of rural	Rural Educator
Defining rural in gifted education research: Methodological challenges and paths forward	2016	Kettler et al	No single, agreed upon definition of rural nor unitary rural variable exists in the field of education research (Coladarci, 2007; Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005). Coladarci (2007) asserts that a single definition of rural may be unrealistic and recommends, "We should not seek consensus on a single definition of rural but we should ask that rural education researchers carefully describe the contexts of their (putatively) rural investigations" (p. 2).	Defining rural	General Ed
Voices of Female, Rural Superintendents as They Implement California's Local Control Funding Formula Policy	2016	Coughran	However, the reports and publications generated to fulfill this mandate fail to attend to the rural context of their research (Coladarci, 2007) resulting in "rural education research that fails to make a rural case" (Stapel & DeYoung, 2011, p. 28).	Rural warrant	Dissertation

United States. The majority of these texts (n=14) only cited *Swan Song* for this reason, without engaging with any other aspects of Coladarci’s broader argument for improving the yield of the research, or acknowledging the ways in which he assessed the many assets of the rural education research literature in the introduction to his article.

Perhaps the most interesting and diverse uses of *Swan Song* were among the texts that engaged directly with Coladarci’s (2007) argument regarding the “rural warrant” (p. 3; n=20). In his discussion of making the rural argument, Coladarci laments, “Far too often, it remains unclear whether the researcher has uncovered a rural phenomenon or, instead, a phenomenon that is observed incidentally in a rural setting” (p. 3). Beyond “rich description,” Coladarci wants researchers to “speak unequivocally to the rural circumstance” (p. 3). He suggests that those aspiring to contribute to rural education research must use one of several strategies to demonstrate this contribution. These strategies include the establishment of a phenomenon as being inherently rural or—if the inherent rurality of a phenomenon cannot be easily established—to demonstrate the rural warrant through study design or literature review. Inherent rurality can be established through the study of a uniquely rural phenomenon, according to Coladarci, through research that “resembles the stuff of anthropology” (p. 3) and is arguably, given his examples, place-centric. When the researcher finds it necessary to establish warrant through design or literature, the charge is that of comparison of the phenomenon under investigation to non-rural contexts. The aim of such comparison is to offer “vivid comparison between rural and non-rural contexts” (p. 3) with the purpose of demonstrating the rural nature of a phenomenon through the lens of difference and contrast.

Authors’ citations of *Swan Song* in service of the rural warrant fell into three categories. The first of these were a handful of published articles and dissertation studies which used Coladarci’s (2007) argument about the rural warrant to engage with the extent to which their studies met this standard. Interestingly, arguments for meeting the standard typically centered around rural location as a starting point, rather than identifying “inherently” rural educational phenomena as the focus of the study (Klar & Brewer, 2014; Seelig, 2017; Sharplin, 2008; Showalter, 2013; Yahn, 2017). The second of these were literature reviews which used the “rural warrant” as an inclusion criterion in rural-focused syntheses of the literature on a variety of education-related topics or as a criticism levied at rural literature and reports that did not adhere to these standards (Burton, Brown, & Johnson, 2013; Coughran, 2016; Pazos, DePalma, & Membiela, 2012; Semke et al., 2012). The third and last category was comprised of theoretical pieces calling for greater attention and careful consideration of the rural warrant (Corbett, 2015, 2017; Howley, Howley,

& Yahn, 2014) within the context of a broader, largely institutionally-focused field in which place plays little if any role in defining educational practice. These citations from *Swan Song* therefore largely demonstrate scholars’ interpretation of the rural warrant as a defining boundary for the field to which they must respond, rather than a guide to demonstrate the inherent rurality in a manuscript.

These four reasons for citing *Swan Song*—defining rural, providing rich description of the study context, acknowledging shortcomings of the literature and acknowledging the rural warrant—account for 75% of all its citations. While there was a handful of other reasons for citing the piece, it is clear that the majority of Coladarci’s (2007) recommendations for improving the yield of rural education research serve as implicit guides for the field, rather than as an explicit research framework.

### **Wrestling with Uneven Integration of Coladarci’s Recommendations**

To better understand how *Swan Song* may function as an implicit guide for the boundaries of rural education research, in this section we provide two illustrative vignettes. First, given the influence of the piece on early career scholars, we examine how a rural education doctoral student interpreted and applied *Swan Song* as a socialization guide and research boundary in her dissertation research on local control. We then consider the subfield of rural educational leadership, examining how the use of the rural warrant and relational definitions of rurality have narrowed the field from the insights from the full spectrum of sociospatial literature. Through both of these vignettes, we seek to highlight the nature and positioning of our current boundaries and to demonstrate how *Swan Song* has implicitly shaped the scholarship in the field.

### **Socialization and Implicit Boundaries of the Rural Warrant: A New Scholar’s Study of Local Control**

We offer an example from one of the authors, who encountered the rural warrant paradox of local control in her dissertation study. Local control is an issue that is not uniquely rural—broadly, the design of the U.S. school system implicates local control as a critical issue for schools in every locality. As a form of organizational governance, it exists across diverse state systems, including Texas, Michigan, Maine, and Montana (Railey, 2017; Shelly, 2012). However, local control is a significant issue in rural contexts. Rural education theorists focus extensively on the effects of a neoliberal, globalized society in “dis-embedding” (Corbett, 2007) schools from their communities (Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010, 2016; Theobald, 1997). These scholars claim the tight, interrelated relationship between rural

communities and schools requires place-specific leadership (Budge, 2006; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010, 2016). Yet here the line stops: rural scholarship has not pursued empirical research on the enactment and production of educational local control necessary to maintain place-based leadership (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Instead, empirical research on local control is located in mainstream educational policy work primarily conducted in suburban and urban communities (Cohen, 1990; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Spillane, 1996; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Despite the significance of local control in rural schools and communities, employing Coladarci's (2007) rural warrant is not feasible, as the issue is not inherently rural, and lacks the rural-specific scholarship from which researchers can frame their work.

Swan Song's rural warrant creates an implicit boundary to establish scholars who are part of the field, or are "from away." New scholars socialized into the field seem to be, judging by the number of dissertations represented in the citation analysis, most influenced by the socialization guides set by Swan Song. As a graduate student seeking to enter and contribute to the field of rural research, Sutherland used Coladarci's (2007) work as a standard to establish the rural dimensions of her study design. Her site selections drew from U.S. Census population data and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric locale classification codes for school districts and their encompassing communities. Her study initially focused on the leadership in rural schools, a topic that neatly fits into the rural warrant of an inherently rural phenomenon. However, over the course of the study, Sutherland changed her focus to local educational politics that shape the leadership work in rural schools. This small shift to a study on local control in rural schools created a quandary as to whether she was still conducting a truly rural study.

For the new scholar, she was unable to meet the rural warrant as established by Coladarci (2007) because existing scholarship on rural education politics is thin, out of date, and in some cases, methodologically problematic (e.g., Lyson, 2002), undermining her ability to build an empirically sound conceptual framework from within the field of rural education. Second, Sutherland was unable to claim her study was "inherently rural" because the underlying political phenomenon of the small, rural school boards she studied—local control—is not an inherently rural phenomenon; suburban, exurban, and urban communities in the United States have fought to retain democratically elected school boards as a means to leverage local control over all facets of public education (Scribner, 2016). From her perspective as a new scholar interpreting the boundaries of the field, Sutherland ultimately concluded her dissertation could not meet Swan Song's parameters for rural research. Following conversations with committee members about

the "ruralness" of her study, and whether it truly met the definition of a rural dissertation, she added an appendix to her dissertation (Hall, 2016) to explain that her scholarship was situated outside the boundary of rural research:

Some theorize that local control is more common in rural towns, as they tend to be smaller and geographically remote, thereby necessitating a local form of governance (Boyd, 1978; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008; Shelly, 2008, 2012). Nonetheless, my research on the work of locally controlled school boards does not solely speak to rural communities. In fact, I suspect what I observed in Vermont would also be evident in neighborhood-specific school boards in urban areas, because my study examines democratic, community-based educational governance. Therefore, this is a study situated in a rural area, but is not inherently rural research.

As a novice scholar seeking to develop a conversation within the field, her example demonstrates how Swan Song's rural warrant can be interpreted and used in practice as a boundary creating a scholarship sense of "awayness." Further, as a new scholar in the field, Sutherland interpreted that the study's inability to meet the rural warrant would also limit its relevance to rural education research. She therefore perceived it would not be appropriate to submit manuscripts from her dissertation research to rural-specific conferences or journals such as the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, or *The Rural Educator*.

In this vignette, Swan Song served as a socialization tool defining the "awayness" of the new scholar's work. This illustrative example is similar to the broader analysis of the use of the rural warrant, whereby scholars are using it in practice as a rationale for the definition of their studies. While advanced scholars in the field may feel comfortable transgressing and redefining the boundaries of the rural warrant (as evidenced by the scholarship of established rural education researchers), new scholars or outside scholars may be using it as the author did: as a delineating boundary that evaluates insider or awayness status in the field.

### **Relational Boundaries in Rural Educational Leadership**

Rural research, like the rural places central to its work, has been marginalized in the broader academe (see Tice, Billings, & Banks, 1993). While we most often think about the personal effects of academic marginalization when our rural-focused scholarship is rejected from broader journals because of its "unrepresentativeness" or "sample," we might also consider the implications of



such marginalization in terms of an imposed nonporous disciplinary boundary through which the lessons of our rural-specific scholarship fail to inform the broader field. These boundaries are arguably established by those outside rural fields of scholarship. However, if (newer) rural scholars feel obligated to demonstrate the uniquely rural nature of the phenomenon under study for a sense of legitimacy among rural education peers—even if that legitimacy is self-imposed through interpretation of works like *Swan Song*—these bounds between rural and non-rural educational scholarship become even more impermeable, and thus inhibit the flow of ideas from the subfield of rural education scholarship to the broader education field.

One key example is research on rural education leadership. In the larger educational leadership field, concepts like contextually responsive leadership (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008), leadership for social justice (Muijs et al., 2010; Ryan, 2006), and culturally responsive leadership (Leithwood, Jacobson, & Ylimaki, 2011; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013) are used to explain and interrogate the work of school and district leaders. Common across these constructions of leadership is a notion that leaders are responsible for understanding and responding to their specific contexts, which may include place, social and demographic inequities, and the reciprocal relationship those contexts have on leadership practice. In the subfield of rural educational leadership, scholars have engaged in their own debates about place-conscious and critical place-conscious leadership (Budge, 2006, 2010; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b; Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2004; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2019; Theobald, 1997)—leadership responsive to place as an important context, resistance to the degradation of place by external policies and practices, a rejection of externally imposed mandates, and a call for critique of within-community spaces of inequality. Though the broader and rural-specific leadership constructs are derived from analogous preoccupations—attention to place and spaces of marginalization and oppression—the boundaries between the specialized and broader fields of educational leadership, and the subsequent language barrier used for theorizing leadership, constrain the ability of researchers to talk to one another through scholarship.

Because the concept of critical place-conscious leadership does not appear in the broader field of educational leadership, rural education researchers attempting to speak to larger audiences are first burdened with the task of building bridges between the more tightly constrained rural leadership literature, which has demonstrated inherent rurality, and the more expansive field of educational leadership, which seems unencumbered by parallel constraints. Further, by

focusing on the uniqueness of rural educational leadership as practice, our ability to apply rural leadership constructs to other contexts is inhibited. That is, if rural educational leadership is uniquely rural, it is therefore nontransferable to urban schools and school systems. This has three effects: (a) it constrains theories of educational leadership to the rural subfield; (b) the uniqueness of theory of practice makes it difficult to engage in comparative work across contexts; and (c) it further affirms the marginalization of rural scholarship from broader disciplines. For example, it seems implausible that urban leaders are unconcerned with local environmental degradation or social and economic injustices that marginalize their communities—the very tenets that form the basis for place-consciousness and critical place-consciousness (see Berry, 1997; Bowers, 2006; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004)—yet we see no centrality given to critical place-conscious leadership in educational leadership literature outside rural contexts. While there may be multiple roots of this lack of transference, we would be remiss if we failed to consider the imposition of our subfield’s bounds as contributors to the siloing of our research.

In short, a focus on inherent rurality can create problematic barriers that preclude rural research from both making meaningful contributions to the broader discipline and benefiting from its insights through dialogic engagement in its argument building. Yet the field’s focus on relational boundaries, which are reinforced in *Swan Song* as scholarly boundaries, limits our ability to build coalitions and consensus that will ultimately best serve research, policy, and practice.

The question of the theoretical relevance of rurality to one’s scholarship is a useful one in the course of study design intended to contribute to rural research and to benefit rural and small schools, and Coladarci’s (2007) aim—to increase the yield of rural education research—has in some ways been realized through adherence to these standards. However, our cases demonstrate that its utility in evaluating the suitability of an article for inclusion in a rural research program or journal is too limiting to be the primary consideration in addition to the obvious standards of methodological and intellectual rigor. While this may not have been the intent of *Swan Song*, in practice, particularly among young scholars, the work has served as a major marker of what counts/does not count as legitimate rural education research.

In his conclusion, Coladarci (2007) writes, “I harbor no presumption that that readers will find this discussion complete or inarguable; like anyone, I have my biases and blind spots” (p. 7). Here, he invites the rural education research community into a reexamination of the ideas that will best serve to advance the field. And yet, until now, this invitation has gone unanswered. Therefore, we propose

some considerations that may expand the interpretation of Coladarci's work for a new generation of rural education scholars.

### **New Possibilities for Interpretation: Expanding the Bounds of Rural Education Research**

Like place and social identities, we argue that the negotiated identities and norms of the rural education research community are fluid and dynamic, ever-changing in response to renegotiations of ideas and norms within the community and to ideas and constructions outside its porous bounds, as researchers move between multiple scholarly and practice communities (see Massey, 2013; Miewald & McCann, 2004). For the creation of more robust rural education scholarship, we need shared norms that promote intersection, rather than boundary construction delineating awayness. Therefore, we propose that, over a decade after *Swan Song's* publication, it is time to expand Coladarci's (2007) work to construct new, more permeable guides that can support emerging and collaborative scholarship in our field reflective of changing norms and contexts. To that end, we propose the following two revisions to *Swan Song's* suggestions for improving the yield of rural education research. First, we propose researchers articulate the ways in which their topics are *critical* to rural communities (rather than inherently rural); and secondly, we propose that these studies must speak back to *how power manifests across space*.

### **Creating Research That Is Critical to Rural Communities, Rather Than Uniquely Rural**

Rather than having to make the case that rurality shapes an educational phenomenon in a unique manner, we think that researchers should be able to demonstrate the importance of their research for education in rural contexts. This importance, we posit, need not be unique to rural contexts, but the power dynamics governing that phenomenon should be unpacked with regard to how they may or may not differ with regard to rural space. Rather than creating a research community that polices its boundaries to exclude rural convenience studies, this consideration instead invites all education researchers to further consider the ways in which their phenomena of interest may be adequately contextualized, theorized, and studied using innovative methodologies. Under these standards, urban and suburban education researchers, for example, would be invited to consider the ways in which issues of settlement density affect the key constructs of their study, while rural education researchers might be encouraged to consider the ways in which the micropolitics of school consolidation threat are similar or different across the rural-urban continuum. This does not, however, mean that we argue for a

new standard of comparative scholarship. Rather, we invite scholars to attend to place as dynamic, porous, political, and relational, as well as geographic (Massey, 2013; Miewald & McCann, 2004; Pulido, 1997; Reid et al., 2010). Properly contextualizing both of these issues is critical to creating policy that functions equitably across place and space; however, in the current paradigm these invitations remain unextended, and comparison is encouraged for the sake of discerning rural's unique essence.

We see our first consideration, that of criticality, as similar to Roberts' (2014) discussion of the development of his own rural standpoint. We would argue that many in our community adopt a rural standpoint, but that such a standpoint is centered around a care and attention to the realities of rural, rather than a unique concern for rurality. Of this, Roberts writes, "If the research is not advancing an understanding of the rural, for the rural, it may just be enacting symbolic violence against the places it purports to represent by inadvertently constructing them as a curiosity or as deviant" (p. 135).

The humanity of this difference is an issue of research practice as much as it is of theory. Azano (2014) invokes this difference in her reply to Howley and colleagues (2014) in their critique of rural dissertation studies. In her response to their assertion of the poor quality of these dissertations, she points to the importance of their attention to rurality and the desire to understand rural schooling that is embodied in that attention, mediated by the very real challenges that doctoral students face in constructing high quality dissertation studies with limited resources. By reframing the objective of rural research from creating uniquely rural claims to instead providing knowledge relevant to rural communities, we as a field enable greater participation while ensuring critically needed reciprocity with the communities we study.

*Swan Song* played an important role in directing needed attention to rurality as a unique theoretical construct. Since the publication of *Swan Song*, countless pieces have successfully furthered our understanding of the centrality of place to investigations of rural education phenomena, provided opportunities for the application of existing or the establishment of new theoretical frameworks to studies of rural issues, and promoted a field that generated the interest of a new generation of critical scholars (e.g. Budge, 2010; Corbett, 2010; Nesper, 2008; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). This firm theoretical foundation now allows us to consider a revision of boundaries that allows for greater permeability. However, as with the fluidity or expansion of any boundary, such a move warrants careful consideration. Our suggestion is not to open the floodgates of what constitutes rural research. Indeed, such a move might harken us back to problematic education shifts like the What Works Clearinghouse at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which arguably removed context or place almost entirely from considerations of educational practice. Instead, we

recognize the tensions in maintaining the specialness of the rural education research field while providing boundaries permeable enough to allow for important scholarly dialogue to occur across places and fields. This is what we mean by a focus on research critical to rural communities: a scholarly focus on issues and phenomena important to rural schools and communities with opportunity for conversation across rural-non-rural research bounds.

### **Moving Beyond the Rural Warrant Toward Spatial Justice**

We are living in an era where social science cannot afford to ignore the nature of power. Human and critical geography have much to offer education research broadly by way of understanding power and space, including a critique of our very reification of rural space and place (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Sheller, 2017; Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson & Smith, 2011). The concepts of the core and the periphery, themselves, for example, suggest a fundamental reframing of urban, rural, and suburban and the work of the education scholar working on issues relevant to these places (Corbett, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Thomas et al., 2011). Comparison between them for the sake of finding difference reinforces the uniqueness of rural as a spatial category at the expense of understanding the dynamic relationship between places, as well as diversity across rural places. Nesper (2008) makes a similar critique of confined conceptions of place-based education. By seeing space relationally, rather than categorically, we argue that it becomes easier to make meaningful connections across existing research, to better integrate the findings from our field into a broader conversation about education, and to inform the ways in which educational policy and practice ought or ought not to differ between communities.

Core-periphery relationships have never been fully unpacked broadly in education research; as a consequence, our research has been done in context-specific communities under the umbrella of the larger coalescing discipline of education (Lagemann, 2002). Rural, urban, and suburban continue to exist cleanly within their NCES classifications, as if some types of space could exist as completely disconnected and disentangled from other types of space (Schafft, 2017). Furthermore, within rural education research specifically, we have not yet been able to escape the legacy of the rural school problem (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Cubberly, 1922). Rural education, within the broader discipline, remains a problem defined by urban education reformers over a century ago: a problem of early modernity that has more or less been solved by electrification, transportation improvements, administrative science, and efficiencies of scale.

However, rather than seeing this legacy as a limitation, we would argue that unpacking core-periphery relationships

for the benefit of the discipline is a task to which the scholars in our community are uniquely suited and, indeed, have already begun (see Corbett, 2016; Moon Longhurst, Thier, Craig, Grant, & Jakubowski, 2019; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015; Roberts & Green, 2013; Schafft, 2010). We are very familiar with the ways in which power manifests across space and the ways in which it affects place-making, the meaning of schooling, and the capacity for places to deliver on results as they are defined by our modern project of schooling. Understanding the literal marginality of rural space within a globalized system makes the spatial lens through which rural researchers are accustomed to seeing the world invaluable for better theorizing education as a whole. But in order to do so, we must complicate rurality by acknowledging the ways in which it defies “inherent” definition rather than attempting to somehow discern its unique essence through our work.

### **Operationalizing Additional Research Considerations**

Several types of questions might be asked throughout the design and peer review process to ensure rigorous contributions to rural education scholarship for these considerations. Central questions for this community to ask in evaluating its work might include: How will this research matter to rural schools and people? Will it support their struggles? Does it expand, strengthen, or complicate our understanding of how power manifests across space through, with, or for education? And, conversely: Does this research essentialize rural people and communities? These questions can be applied to common issues in our field, including outmigration; the effects of globalization on rural communities; place-based education; and rural teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention, and consolidation. However, they would also broaden the scope of our work to include intergovernmental education policy, local control, democratic education, social justice and rural schooling, childhood adversity, and other opportunities for intersectional work.

Operationalizing the ways in which power manifests across space may actually better reinforce the importance of several recommendations that Coladarci (2007) makes in his original piece. By using comparative data or urban education literature, for example, to compare and contrast how educational and social challenges manifest within these settings, we can enhance our understanding of the relatedness of social phenomena across space, and in doing so concentrate on locating common sources of rural and urban peripheralization. By engaging in thick description of the contexts in which our studies are situated, we can seek to situate participant agency, institutions, policies, and culture within broader dynamics of power across place.

By positioning ourselves in this way, we make the case for the relevance of rural not only for its own sake,

but for the sake of disciplinary coherence when it comes to understanding spatial phenomena. Scholars of urban and suburban education are also well positioned to work on these issues, and in many cases already are (see Buras, 2011; Green, 2015; 2017; Hoglebe & Tate, 2012; Miller, 2012; Morris & Monroe, 2009). If we can frame our work in this way, new bonds might be forged across our discipline in ways that benefit both fields. This framing allows us to ask questions that explore how the lessons from rural communities can support the work of non-rural sites and vice versa, eliminating the need to see attention to rural, suburban, or urban education as a zero-sum endeavor (in which, until recently, rural areas almost always lost). Ultimately, we believe the inclusion of greater scholarly diversity in rural education research will strengthen the quality of work in the field while also inviting critical opportunities for collaboration with non-rural scholars.

### Conclusion

Every spring, the islands off the coast of Maine hum with activity of construction and preparation for summer people to arrive. Summer people are unequivocally “people from away,” those who lack the heritage and tenacity to winter over on a small, isolated community. There is an uneven distribution of power in that people from away can never truly understand or be fully included in the year-round island community. Yet islanders value summer people because they bring their patronage to businesses, and they bring new perspectives to engage with to residents tired of having the same arguments with their neighbors for the long winter months.

As we call for a renegotiation of the boundaries of our work, we have several caveats. First, more than a decade after the publication of *Swan Song*, we agree with Coladarci’s (2007) original intent: to strengthen rural education scholarship published in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and elsewhere. Rural education research has an important role to play in providing insights into implications of rurality for education and schooling. It is our responsibility to clearly unpack the insights of our work for practitioners, policymakers, and other social science researchers in order to contribute more clearly understandings of how rural schools and communities are affected by contemporary educational practice, policy, and positioning. However, it is not the only role that rural education research ought to play in our discipline.

It is also important to recognize the urbanormativity of the broader field of education (Thomas et al., 2011): that the study of urban education is understood to be both responsive to the unique needs of urban areas, and yet at the same time also infinitely generalizable. Studies of rural education research face strong challenges from the field when similar

claims are made in peer review, at conferences, and by journal editors. This imbalance of power is, in many ways, similar to the dynamics that created the idea of awayness in Maine in the first place. Living in “Vacationland” (the state slogan of Maine), locals desire boundaries to demarcate the cultural elements they wish to retain control over vs. those introduced by people from away. Yet that protectionism can also be a disservice when political and economic capital that can benefit communities comes with it.

Certainly, Coladarci’s (2007) *Swan Song* has contributed to increasing the rigor and cohesiveness of rural education research since its publication. The suggested guidelines of *Swan Song* have encouraged important, nuanced conversations about the nature of rurality, the indicators that will help us to better understand its essence and also its diversity, as well as to benefit from the insights of other rural social sciences. However, just as Mainers question the value of the concept of awayness in their current economic and social context, it is now appropriate to question what we lose when we focus on the rural warrant to advance our field. Revisiting how we define what is most important to our field will help to advance and encourage retheorized notions of space and context in the broader field of education—a revisioning which can only help to enhance attention to rural schools as they are better represented in a more relational conversation that crosses boundaries in the discipline (Corbett, 2018). This moment in the national spotlight for rural communities is certainly a time to highlight the good work that has been done, but it is also a time to embrace our opportunity as boundary spanners—to build the case for the relevance of our work, not for its idiosyncrasies, but for its contribution to the broader understanding of education and social context.



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