

Book Review

Gristy, C., Hargreaves, L., & Kučerová, S. R. (Eds.). (2020). *Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space and Place*. Information Age.

Hernan Cuervo
University of Melbourne

Citation: Cuervo, H. (2021). Book review of “Educational research and schooling in rural Europe: An engagement with changing patterns of education, space and place.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 37(5), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3705>

In his wonderful account of rural life in Italy in the 1930s, during his exile imposed due to his antifascist activities against Mussolini’s regime, the Italian writer Carlo Levi noted in his book, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, “Gagliano like all Italy, was in the hands of schoolmasters” (1947/2000, p. 62). Levi, originally from Turin, offered in his experience of exile in southern rural Italy the confrontation of two cultures, his modern urban and the rural peasant way of life. Amid a rural landscape of economic hardship and poverty, and alien to the process of modernization and fascism engulfing Italy and much of Europe, Levi could not help but notice the centrality of *comparaggio* in the inhabitants’ everyday lives—that is, an acquired and symbolic kinship, a unifying web beyond family ties, a sense of communality that brought together the people of Gagliano. Underpinning this fraternal tie was, obviously, a social history but also the centrality of the institutions of church, schooling, and agricultural work in comparison to the absence of the state. Closer in time, Mara Tieken (2014), in her important book *Why Rural Schools Matter* in the United States, also reminds urban and rural readers alike of the centrality of schools in the everyday lives of individuals and the community at large. Her book, however, alerts us of the “imperfect and important relationship” between schools and communities, and most importantly of the threats of school consolidation and the “whispered fears that would ripple through staff” that their school “would finally be deemed just too small and too rural to remain open” (p. 3). Indeed, times are changing, and within the space and time from modernity to late modernity the role and survival of small schools in rural

communities has been questioned by many national states and supranational agencies.

A new edited book by leading rural education scholars Cath Gristy, Linda Hargreaves, and Silvie Kučerová illustrates these changes from modernity to late modernity in rural schooling and the status of schools in rural communities in a dozen European countries. From the outset, the editors state that one of the main focuses of this new volume is to understand and examine the “survival of small and rural schools” (p. 3). The contributors to this volume provide detailed analysis of sociohistorical changes and challenges to rural schooling in the last few decades in Europe by highlighting how global and local processes have affected the delivery of education in small rural schools and its effect in the sustainability of rural communities. From contributors’ chapters, we receive accounts that highlight that bygone are the days when schoolmasters ruled communities and teachers were autonomous and respected central actors on the national stage of each country, as per Carlo Levi’s assertion of 1930s Italy.

Indeed, a central thread connecting the 19 chapters (including a substantial Foreword and Appendix) in this volume is the analysis of the impact of global, national, and local social, political, and economic processes on rural school closure and consolidation. For instance, Rune Kvalsund (Foreword) and Karl Solstad and Gunilla Karlberg-Granuland (Chapter 3) bring to the fore rural trends happening in Europe that will resonate with researchers in other parts of the world: the impact of neoliberal policies, with their shift toward a market-oriented approach to the provision of education based on efficiency, productivity, and choice; the centralization of schooling and its detrimental impact on rural schools’ autonomy; the rise of testing regimes as a way of determining what knowledge counts; and the effects of globalization on the process of cultural homogenization of rural life. The last point is also a constant in this book: how the urbanization of societies renders rural

All correspondence should be directed to Herman Cuervo, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia (hicuervo@unimelb.edu.au).

JRRE is associated with the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Penn State, and is a publication of Penn State Libraries Open Publishing.

life less attractive for rural youth. Even when opportunities are present (as Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund affirm in their Norwegian and Finnish contexts), young people still find cities more appealing to forge new lives.

This hollowing out of rural communities, which has been well documented in rural research (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), and the subsequent threats of closure of rural schools are discussed at length in the central body (Part II) of this volume, mostly through a meta-analysis of nine national education systems. In Part II, the editors put together a very good distribution of countries by region with chapters from central and northern Europe (Austria, Netherlands and Finland), the Mediterranean region (Spain and Italy), and post-socialist societies (Hungary, Serbia, Czechia, and Poland). I found it particularly interesting to learn about the education systems of post-socialist countries, many of which went through rapid processes of decentralization, only to return to a more centralized system when the panacea of marketization of education and local “autonomy” (i.e., without appropriate resources) did not work. This experience is reminiscent of Peck and Tickell’s (2002) theorization of the neoliberal reforms of the (welfare) state as a process, first of “roll-back” (decentralization and deregulation, pulling back states’ resources, social disinvestment), and later as “roll-out” (aimed to amend some of the detrimental impacts of dismantling welfarism, such as marginalization, growing spatial inequality, and declining rural communities). This situation describes the case of Hungary, as eloquently explained by Kovács (Chapter 4), in which this process is also complicated by migration flows into rural areas that trigger ethnic segregation and patterns of “White flight” due to the increase of Roma children in rural schools. A similar case of “roll-back” policies is reported by Bajerski (Chapter 6), about the history of Poland’s rural schools, which experienced a fast-paced decentralization, underpinned by the aim to “disassemble the communist state” (p. 126), and the introduction of marketization of education. While each chapter describes a different national education system, Bajerski’s chapter illustrates the rationale behind radical reforms in post-socialist countries (as well as in liberal societies): demographic changes, including rural out-migration; a reduction in funding to support essential school building construction, recruitment of teachers, school bus programs and the updating essential classroom resources such as computers; combined with a reform process based on school consolidation and underpinned by financial efficiency where small schools were forced to close and establish a network “to be as cheap to run as possible” (p. 131).

These processes of school closure and consolidation, and the struggles for distribution of resources, are also

present in chapters that focus on traditional liberal societies (e.g., Italy, Austria, The Netherlands) and have been documented in research around the globe (see Biddle & Azano, 2016; Tiekens & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). One of the important contributions to rural education research emanating from these chapters in Part II is the analysis of what is at stake with school closure and/or consolidation in different national contexts. First, the authors highlight that at stake is the loss of local culture, the memory and identity of the community, or as dramatically put by Deunk and Maslowski (Chapter 11), who focus on The Netherlands, school closure “will mean” the community’s “death” (p. 251). Kučerová and Trnková (Chapter 5), in their analysis of school closure in rural Czechia, show that the loss of the local school signifies the gradual disappearance of other key institutions in the town (p. 115). Second, sustaining economic rationalism that promotes school closure and/or consolidation across Europe in the last three decades is based on what Carlos Alberto Torres (2013), through a Gramscian lens, identified not just as an all-encompassing project based on a powerful ideological agenda but the construction of a “new civilization design” underpinned by a new common sense to promote the idea of “students as consumers not citizens” and promoting the “concept of possessive individualism and by implication (the demise of) any and all forms of collectivism” (p. 97). That is, the closure of small schools sweeping rural Europe in the last few decades seems also based on national education policy driven by the connection between education and the economy, with its goal being to increase human capital to intensify labor productivity to compete in the global economy (e.g., Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Several chapters in this book show how this reconfiguration of education in market terms is based on principles of efficiency, accountability, competition, performativity, and privatization, and on a rearticulation of social justice education from a historical view based on the individual rights of any person as a member of society to what Fazal Rizvi (2013) argues is education as “property rights” (p. 275). In the latter sense, social justice education is constructed as “the process of acquisition and production of capital” rather than “the need to build social communities based on notions of trust and human dignity” (Rizvi, 2013, p. 275). The problem with this homogenization and commodification of education, as Kvalsund argues in the Foreword of this book, is that it constructs a normativity with a supposedly linear connection between education and employment opportunities which are often imagined in urban spaces, while positioning rural life, and for that matter rural schooling, as deficient—as a space from which youth need to migrate. As Kvalsund affirms, school

consolidation is nothing less than “ideological,” sustained by “the hegemonic and lasting perspective of rural schools as *deficient schools*” (italics in original, pp. xiii–xiv).

While readers will have in one volume access to a plethora of data and information about rural schooling in Europe, the amount of meta-analysis presented by many contributors in this volume, and particularly in the case studies of national education systems, can be overwhelming. Further, as the complex relationship between community and schools remains in some parts of the book at a meta-level of analysis, it deprives readers of the nuanced everyday dynamics that happen in rural places. However, some chapters, such as Vigo-Arazola and Soriano-Bozalongo’s on Spain (Chapter 8) and Kučerová and Trnková’s on the Czech Republic depart from the meta-analysis of education systems and reforms to refreshingly present the voices of rural teachers and principals. The latter, for example, offers a case study of two rural schools that faced closure and includes the voices of community and school members. Here we learn about the anxieties of rural people in the voice of former local authority that states that the school was a symbol of “independence, prestige, and cultural heritage,” and that all they wanted was “our school preserved because the church, the parsonage and the school, they used to be three basic ... simply buildings and personalities, you know ... [of] what was happening around the village” (p. 114). In Part III, Bagley and Hillyard (Chapter 13) draw on ethnographic research conducted in one English rural primary school to share the views of the school’s head teacher. Using Bourdieu’s thinking tools (*habitus*, *capital*, and *field*), the authors take account of changes in education due to the contamination of the field by neoliberal economics, and more precisely new public management, and how this influence threatens and affects the head teachers everyday thinking and practices of leading a school. I found powerful the head teacher’s comment, against the backdrop of closure of local shops and subsequent labor and leisure opportunities, that “the school is one of the few constants ... and it was important for me to help make sure we keep it for the sake of the village” (p. 295). With the inclusion of these voices, the contributors to this volume help humanize the plight of small rural schools against the strong force of economic rationalism that threatens their survival and the sustainability of their communities.

Other gems in the book includes narratives of resistance against education reforms which are identified by Kovács in her chapter on Hungary. In this case, a teachers’ movement called *Tanítanék* (Would Like to Teach) opposed the centralization and managerialism that was imposed to schools and teachers due to national financial constraints. Looking at the Norwegian and Finnish experiences of the risk that global forces and national policies posed to sustainability of rural communities and schools, I found

interesting Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund’s idea that the threat of closure for rural schools displayed a strengthening of “belonging and commitment to a local community” (p. 55). In Norway, for example, communities rich in “social capital” and “rural literacy” organized strong mobilizations against school closure, and where they could not stop the school from being closed, they effectively succeeded in replacing that school with the creation of another school, albeit private, to cater for the community (p. 60). However, in both chapters by Kovács and by Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund I felt that the stories of resistance and belonging merited a deeper description and analysis so readers could better understand the role of school staff and communities in this process of education reform.

Another interesting contribution to the rural education literature in this book is offered by Cannella, in his chapter on Italian rural schools (Chapter 10), with a “manifesto for small schools.” In this manifesto, originally developed by the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research (INDIRE), small schools are viewed as “communities of memory and quality of learning;” “pluri-classes” are understood “as a resource, not a limitation;” and where technology offers opportunities to “overcome the limits of isolation” (pp. 230–231). At the heart of this manifesto, as I read it, is a cry by small rural schools’ advocates to be recognized by the powers that be (generally the state, but lately also think tanks, and might I say academics, that dominate education research and policy formation—see Ball, 2012). Returning to Carlo Levi’s (1947/2000) autobiography of exile, toward the end of his stay in Gagliano, he also formulated what could be seen as a manifesto for rural people based on a political, economic, and social basis. In this case, almost 100 years ago in rural Europe, Carlo Levi believed that the problem for Italian peasants was not just poverty and lack of opportunities but, firstly, a state alien to them and one in which they did not have a share, and secondly, the tyranny of the middle-class villager who under fascism had identified with the state and took control of local affairs.

My aim is not to digress with Levi’s account of rural life in Italy but to point out that issues of rural misrecognition by the state and elites is not something new or just part of late modernity. Thus, to conclude this review, I want to briefly sketch the other strong thread in this new volume, which is the issue of recognition—that is, the poor cultural status of rural schooling in European education systems and the misrecognition of rural research in the field of education research. For example, Kučerová and Trnková, in their chapter on the Czech Republic, share that a scarcity of research focuses on rural education in their national context. Further, they argue that the most frequent focus on rural education is through comparisons with urban education, which as Kvalsund and other scholars have mentioned

(see Howley & Howley, 2014; Roberts & Cuervo, 2016), often serves to position rural schools as deficient. This poor cultural status of rural schooling is also picked up by Bajerski, who states that the “discourse concerning rural education in pedagogical sciences in Poland is focused around stereotypes” and is underpinned by a “prevailing conviction that rural education is an education of inferior quality” (p. 132). Similar instances of misrecognition are found by Pesikan and colleagues in the Serbian context (Chapter 7), both in terms of policy and research, and by Kvalsund in the Norwegian and European context, in relation to the deficit view of rural schooling. Finally, Vigo-Arrazola and Soriano-Bozalongo argue that the urbanization of Spanish society—accelerated by the economic recession of 2008 and the subsequent closure and consolidation of rural schools—comes with a stigmatization of rural areas and a representation of rurality as “troubled” and “poor,” filled with people “in need of special help” (pp. 183–184).

Perhaps it is Hargreaves, in the Introduction, who exquisitely illustrate the status of rural education in Europe: “Education in rural areas has for decades been almost invisible: unseen, underfunded, under-researched, underestimated, and overgeneralized: an irritant for governments—‘the stone in Europe’s shoe’” (p. 5). Ultimately, and following Nancy Fraser’s (1997) theory of recognition, what I think is implicit throughout this volume is the need for a resignification of rural knowledges and experiences that counteracts the apparently low institutional cultural value that rural schooling has in European education policy and research. To the issues of distributive justice, as proper allocation of material goods, raised throughout the chapters in this book, the contributors argue for a politics of recognition which entails that equal respect for rural education cannot continue to be an “assimilation to majority or dominant (urban) cultural norms” (Cuervo, 2020, p. 133). It seems to me that what the contributors in this volume posit is not a “misrecognition” of rural schooling (its mission, knowledges, and people) but what Axel Honneth (2007) sees as the contrast of recognition: disrespect. This phenomenon is also what Carlo Levi, writing during modern times, saw from the Italian state and elites toward rural southern peasants: disrespect of their way of life, their needs, and their interests. Unfortunately, as this interesting collection shows, in late modernity Europe’s disrespect for rural schooling, its mission, knowledges, and people continues to be the state of affairs.

Near the end of the book (Chapter 14) Gristy eloquently analyzes Lefebvre’s trialectic theory of the social construction of space challenges, metro-centric hegemonic discourses, and practices, while in Part IV the editors offer two robust chapters (Chapters 15 and 16) that summarize the complex analyses in the book and question the “silence” (p. 324) of their contributors about the impact of migration

in these rural contexts. For that matter, they offer an extensive appendix by Libor Jelen to discuss research that addresses this issue, including rural schools’ resilience and adaptability to absorb, include, and settle young migrants (p. 329). I believe this contribution is an important new addition to the rural education literature which, at least for me, provides fresh and rich analyses and voices that confirm that rural school research has become a vibrant space, albeit often misrecognized by the broader field of education. Ultimately, I feel that with this new volume readers have a great deal to learn about the state of small rural schools in Europe.

References

- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global education inc.: New policy networks and the neoliberal imaginary*. Routledge.
- Biddle, C., & Azano, A. P. (2016). Constructing and reconstructing the “rural school problem” a century of rural education research. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 298–325. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16667700>
- Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. (2009). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Beacon Press.
- Corbett, M., & Forsey, M. (2017). Rural youth out-migration and education: Challenges to aspirations discourse in mobile modernity. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38(3), 429–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2017.1308456>
- Cuervo, H. (2016). *Understanding social justice in rural education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cuervo, H. (2020). A social justice approach to rural school staffing: The need for a politics of distribution and recognition to solve a perennial problem. *Journal of Pedagogy*, 11(1), 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jped-2020-0007>
- Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the “postsocialist” condition*. Routledge.
- Honneth, A. (2007). *Disrespect: The normative foundations of critical theory*. Polity.
- Howley, C., & Howley, A. (2014). Preface. In C. Howley, A. Howley, & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Dynamics of social class: Race, and place in rural education* (pp. vii–x). Information Age.
- Levi, C. (2000). *Christ stopped at Eboli* (F. Frenaye, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1947)
- Peck, J., & Tickell, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode*, 34(3), 380–404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00247>
- Rizvi, F. (2013). Equity and marketization: A brief commentary. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(2), 274–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.770252>

- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*. Routledge.
- Roberts, P. & Cuervo, H. (2015). What next for rural education research? *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 25(3), 1–8. <https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/99>
- Tieken, M. C. (2014). *Why rural schools matter*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Tieken, M. C., & Auldridge-Reveles, T. R. (2019). Rethinking the school closure research: School closure as spatial injustice. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(6), 917–953. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319877151>
- Torres, C. A. (2013). Neoliberalism as a new historic bloc: A Gramscian analysis of neoliberalism's common sense in education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 23(2), 80–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2013.790658>