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Innovation and Implementation in Rural Places

*School–University–Community
Collaboration in Education*

edited by
R. Martin Reardon
Jack Leonard

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R. Martin Reardon and Jack Leonard, *Series Editors*

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Innovation and Implementation in Rural Places

**School–University–Community
Collaboration in Education**

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INTRODUCTION

In their compelling juxtaposition of rural and urban America, Lichter and Brown (2011) argued that rural and urban places have developed multiple interdependencies, and, consequently, that they have become much less clearly delineated than the popular understanding of the terms suggests. They referred to the blurring and shifting of the boundaries between rural and urban places as an “interstitial zone that is dense in social, political, and economic relationships” (p. 584).

This evocative analogy to tidal movement highlights the imperative to endow the concept of place with dynamic connotations. Indeed, based on their reading of the literature, Lichter and Brown (2011) labeled as problematic the conventional asymmetrical view that changes in rural America were largely unidirectional and resulted in rural becoming more like urban America. Lichter and Brown pointed out the more symmetrical nature of the cultural interaction especially in the ways in which individuals in urban America “play at being rural” (p. 570) by, for example, creating urban gardens, initiating sewing and quilting clubs, hosting folk festivals, sponsoring state and county fairs, horse riding, canoeing, hunting, fishing, and embracing country music. Arguably, there is a fondness among urban dwellers for a romanticized version of rural life which is sustained by their lack of first-hand experience—a sense that, in the words of Lichter and Brown, “rural people live simple and uncomplicated lives that somehow insulate them from the economic assaults and stresses of modern society” (p. 569).

Because the researcher authors are writing from their own immersed perspectives, even a cursory overview of the chapters in this volume will be

enough to disabuse any idyllic perspectives regarding rural areas. The researcher authors are all writing of the optimal learning environment that emerges when the interests of schools and universities and communities in rural places coalesce to build upon the strengths and advantages inherent in such places. The chapter authors eschew glamorous half-truths and—unsurprisingly—reveal a complex panorama that defies reduction to platitudes.

While they wrote compellingly of the blurring of boundaries between urban and rural America, Lichter and Brown (2011) hastened to warn against over-generalization. Indeed, they asserted that “America today contains many rural Americas, all of which are linked in fundamental but different ways with urban America and big cities” (p. 568). Part of this dependency is the reality that big cities rely on food production in rural places. As cities have grown, this reliance has prompted fundamental changes in rural places in order to achieve greater efficiency. In the era of rural agribusiness, the small family farm is a curiosity in many rural places. The multi-faceted affordances of GPS and cell phone technology, the Internet, and cable and satellite television have generated strong demand for digital technology availability in wide swaths of rural America. Digital technology has radically altered how farmers do business, ranging from how crops are sown, to the application of fertilizer, to the regulation of water usage, and to how crops are harvested and marketed.

The dynamic interaction among the many rural Americas and what we can characterize analogously as the many urban Americas invokes the richly nuanced conception of “place” as something that is much more than a frozen scene for human activity (Pred, 1984). Pred’s (1984) dynamic conception of place prompted the inclusion of the word in the title of this volume (and its companion volume). Pred highlighted the dynamism of place by pointing out that a place “cannot emerge fully formed out of nothingness and stop, grow rigid, indelibly etched in the once-natural landscape” (p. 279). Upon reading Pred’s assertion, one is struck by how unassailable it is, and yet there is a countervailing sense of nostalgia here too: there is a sense that a place should be something to which one can return and find one’s deep-seated roots—that, for example, rural America as a place should be “a kind of safety deposit box that stores America’s fundamental values” (Lichter & Brown, 2011, p. 568).

In fact, the dynamic interaction between urban and rural places modulates values (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). For example, in some peri-urban rural places, servicing the demand for electricity spurred by digital data storage intertwined with what started as the disruption of the retail industry is again changing the very complexion of the once-natural landscape. Renewable energy (from wind and solar farms) is transmitted many miles to an urban place, leaving inhabitants of the rural place in which the energy is generated—who have already integrated the affordances of digital technology into

their everyday lives—to ponder what they value as they face the question of whether to turn yet more productive farm land over to yet another wind farm, thereby reaping an expected return far in excess exceed the potential profit from farming that same land.

The dynamism of place is paramount and sometimes problematic in schooling in rural places. Very much in keeping with Pred's (1984) concept, Schafft and Jackson (2010) conceived of place in the context of rural schooling as “an articulation of social relations and cultural and political practices that are paradoxical, provisional, and constantly in the process of becoming” (p. 11). This somewhat Heraclitean perspective is the antithesis of “safety deposit box” thinking, and is not limited to rural schooling. It extends to other aspects of life that are pertinent to the educational prospect. For example, place is also implicated in discussions of rural poverty, as was made clear in the context of the invited conference—sponsored by the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI, 2004)—oriented to creating a national rural poverty research agenda. Issues related to schooling and poverty rank high among the multiple intersections of the components of rural places, but, to hearken back to the point made by Lichter and Brown (2011), it is crucial to remember that “when you've seen one rural area, you've seen one rural area” (RUPRI, p. 3).

THE CONTOURS OF THE RURAL PLACE

In order to delineate places, in 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.) revised its definitions of school locale types to the “urban-centric” classification system (not to be confused with the earlier “metro-centric” classification system) in accord with the Office of Management and Budget's 2000 *Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas*. The new system embraced four major locale categories—city, suburban, town, and rural—each of which was, in turn, divided into three subcategories. The three subcategories within rural were defined as:

- Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
- Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster
- Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster¹

According to the 2013-2014 NCES Common Core of Data (CCD), just over 9 million students of the just under 50 million students in elementary and secondary schools in the United States (approx. 18%) resided in rural areas. Of these 9 million, just over 5 million resided in fringe territories, just under 3 million in distant territories, and just over 1 million in remote territories. These students attended 27,264 of the 98,271 U.S. public schools (approx. 28%; 10,333 in fringe territories, 10,442 in distant, and 6,489 in remote),² which were contained within 7,156 of the 13,491 U.S. school districts (approx. 53%; 1,582 in fringe territories, 3,145 in distant, and 2429 in remote).³

The researcher authors of the chapters in this volume cite their own preferred educational statistics, but the indisputable reality is that rural America constitutes a major sector of the educational prospect of the United States as millions of children hitch their stars to an “educated hope” (Edmondson & Butler, 2010, p. 150).

SCHOOLING IN RURAL PLACES

Schooling in rural places was acerbically referred to by Corbett (2007) as the “quintessential institution of disembedding” (p. 251). According to Corbett’s narrative, children in rural places are immersed throughout their formative years in hearing “a story about somewhere else” (p. 117), studying a curriculum designed somewhere else, and striving to meet standards of academic achievement focused on fitting them to perform on a stage set somewhere else. Little wonder, then, that some children graduate from schools in rural places and leave for somewhere else.

The drift of youth away from rural places and away from the “vision of the common good, locally lived” (Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 47) may be inextricably enmeshed with the factors implicated in the above discussion: the quest for economic efficiency in agricultural production, the impact of evolving policies regarding resource extraction and utilization, and the spread of urbanization. However, at the same time that there is outmigration from among the youth of the long-time inhabitants of numerous rural places, in some such places there is immigration of ethnically diverse newcomers. These newcomers may be open to low-status employment opportunities, even as they anticipate that their uniqueness will be more readily embraced—or at least less hatefully construed—than it was in the places from which they came. While the enhancement of economic prospects through immigration is welcome—and not just in rural places (e.g., the influx of immigrants has staunched the decades-long decrease of the population of Utica, NY)—the respectful integration of such immigrants and the effective

education of their children places a strain on the schooling resources as a new vision of the locally lived common good is born.

Nevertheless, as Petrin, Schafft, and Meece (2014) discussed compellingly, to cast education's role as inevitably contributing to the hollowing out (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) of America's rural places would be to over-simplify the reality. Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, and Swanson (2012) advocated for higher education to embrace a "framework focused on a stronger level of societal relevance that improves both society and the overarching goals of higher education" (p. 7). They depicted such a framework as a culmination of a transition from an "an expert model of knowledge delivery" to a model in which "community and university partners co-create solutions" (p. 7). The chapters in this second volume of the *Current Perspectives on School/University/Community Research* series collectively exemplify just such a model: university personnel working with school and community collaborators in rural places to co-create innovative approaches to educationally and socially relevant problems of practice and then to collaborate in the implementation of those approaches.

DESIGN FEATURES

The first of the three sections of this volume features five chapters. In Chapter 1, Fusarelli, Fusarelli, and Wirt discuss what they describe as a "home-grown model" to recruit high-quality candidates for school leadership in rural places in northeastern North Carolina and collaboratively equip them with an understanding of the theoretical perspectives on leadership specifically as those perspectives apply in their own localities. The model they describe provides the funding to support the candidates throughout their immersion in the program and beyond their graduation. In a provocative conclusion that attests to the bi-directional dynamism of collaboration, they reflect on the disruptive impact of this model approach on the conventional leadership preparation program at their institution.

Attesting to the coherence of the collaborative approach to preparing rural school leaders, in Chapter 2, Hewitt, Schmidt-Davis, and Davis discuss their distinct "grow your own" program for the central region of North Carolina. Their collaboration involves a supply-side partnership between a university and an organization that constitutes a 16-state compact offering core services to its member states. This innovative approach involves a collaboration among 11 high-needs, rural school districts oriented to "germinating/initiating, growing/developing, and sustaining/renewing" the preparation of leaders for those districts.

In Chapter 3, Buskey, Klar, Huggins, & Desmangles describe a research-practitioner partnership that encompasses a 12-district consortium of

rural, high-needs schools in South Carolina, again oriented to developing educational leaders. One of the characteristics of a research-practitioner partnership is its long-term focus, and, in this regard, they focus on the positive impact of the diversity of perspectives brought to the table by the wide range of representatives who remain intentionally engaged in leading this endeavor.

Reagan, Coppens, Couse, Hambacher, Lord, McCurdy, and Pimentel shift the focus of this section to teacher education in Chapter 4. The collaboration they describe is oriented to alleviating the teacher recruitment, preparation, support, and retention issues that beset rural places in New Hampshire. Their innovative approach sets out to purposefully engage the schools and communities within the very same rural places that confront the difficulties that the Teacher Residency for Rural Education is designed to address.

To bring this initial section to a fitting close, in Chapter 5, Myran evokes cooks and kitchens in reflecting on his decade-long involvement with the building of authentic partnerships in the kitchen (at the grass-roots level) in Virginia against the ever-evolving policy milieu continually reconstituted by a hierarchy of multiple cooks. He cautions that the intensity of policy and personnel churn at the hierarchical level has the potential to obscure the place-based needs of the community.

NOVEL APPROACHES

Kopish opens the second section of this volume (in which authors highlight novel approaches to collaboration) with Chapter 6 by offering his inquiry as stance perspective on a “third space” collaboration in a rural Appalachian Ohio context. As Kopish explains, the third space concept is operationalized in this rural place by promoting “civic engagement among teacher candidates through service-learning projects with community partners” that build on both community members’ knowledge and lived experience.

Continuing the service-learning theme while broadening the horizon beyond teacher education, in Chapter 7, Iddings and Sigler discuss their personal collaboration in developing several service-learning projects for the undergraduate students in their neighboring but very different respective institutions that collectively serve a rural community. They highlight the imperative for careful planning to enable the full involvement of their students while avoiding over-taxing the limited place-based resources.

In Chapter 8, Scherr and Fox discuss their novel collaboration that casts their own university in Wisconsin in the role of a place-based resource. By involving university faculty and both undergraduate and graduate students with the opportunity to actively engage with children in a local rural school

district on a regular basis, this collaboration provides time for teachers to engage in productive professional development. The university, for its part, benefits from the demystification of the university as a place.

Rich and Stein bring this section to a close with Chapter 9, in which they discuss how, in the context of an innovative federal grant, their 12-district collaboration in Oklahoma has facilitated the introduction of a multi-tiered system of support approach across 17 schools. The effectiveness of this collaborative endeavor is evidenced by student behavioral and academic indicators. The dynamic impact of place is elegantly highlighted by the contrast between how their grant proposal envisaged the collaboration would play out and its eventual configuration.

PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The final section of four chapters opens with Chapter 10. Lasater discusses a research-practitioner partnership in a Midwestern rural high school the focus of which is to do nothing less than transform family-school relationships. Continuing the theme of reciprocal benefits highlighted by Scherr and Fox, Lasater's personal investment in this partnership stems from her commitment to the place in which she lives and raises her own children.

In Chapter 11, Berryhill and Morgan build on the theme of family-school relationships by recounting how a collaboration with which they are involved in Alabama works to counter the isolation induced by the physical separation between parents and their children's school that is sometimes a characteristic of rural places. This isolation is only increased by well-meaning rural school district consolidation. The Parent-Teacher Leadership Academy represents an innovative ecological systems approach to this issue at the elementary school level.

Sabina, Neupauer, and Sabina move the discussion to the other end of the formal education continuum in Chapter 12 with a discussion of community college expansion in Pennsylvania. They make the point that expanding the opportunity for higher education is, in itself, an exercise in long-term collaboration that, to be effective, must take into account the perspectives and agendas of a wide range of stakeholders. When done well, such expansion expands opportunities for students while lessening the potential for them to "fall through the cracks."

The concluding Chapter 13 of this section and volume brings us back to a comment that Lichter and Brown (2011) made to the effect that "cities (and their elites) have always been viewed as the incubators of new ideas, technology, and mass opinion that spread outward to people living in small places and the countryside" (p. 567). By contrast, Koennecke, Watkins, and Rismiller re-brand rural school districts as rural incubators and implement

a novel format for their chapter by adopting a social media-like approach to discussing school and community collaboration in a small, rural school district in Ohio.

“GET IT DONE”

Although not directed specifically to rural places, Harkavy’s (1984) clarion call to work “intensively, systematically, and effectively to ‘get it done’” (p. 33) is fitting way to raise the curtain on this volume. The “it” is the formation of school-university-community collaborations. The following chapters chronicle the innovative work of those who know first-hand that, when it comes to school-university-community collaborations, “the hard thing is to figure out how to do it. The hardest thing of all, or course, is to actually get it done” (Harkavy, 1984, p. 33).

NOTES

1. Office of Management and Budget (2000). Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas; Notice. Federal Register (65) No. 249.
2. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2013–14, (version 1a).
3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Local Education Agency Universe Survey,” 2013–14 (version 1a).

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