

Honoring the Rural Narrative in Educational Research

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Scholars have argued that rurality is not valued by the dominant culture and stereotyping is socially sanctioned (Budge, 2006; Corbett, 2014 a/b; Theobald, 2005). In addition, rural educators and schools are underrepresented within general educational research (e.g., Burton et al., 2013). This paper will examine rural stereotypes and the state of rural education research, and advocate that researchers take the lead in considering the ways in which their work contributes to the dominant cultural narrative about rural communities, schools, and teachers.

Despite “a climate of public correctness” (Azano, 2014, p. 61), rural stereotypes abound, with rural people being portrayed as either “barbarians or paragons of the pioneer spirit” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007, p. 39). These derogatory depictions of rural life are not only reflected by the media (e.g., Azano, 2014; Deggans, 2011), they are also found within scholarly research literature. For example, Burton, Brown & Johnson (2013) reviewed four decades of peer-reviewed research on rural teachers in the United States and discovered a rural-problem storyline that is often deficient-oriented; that is, rurality was portrayed as a ‘problem’ to overcome, with rural citizens being viewed as “deficient and out of touch with the world beyond their community” (p. 8). Because the stigma attached to rural people can be strong — “rural equals backwards” (Theobald, 2005, p. 122) — there is a risk that messages of inferiority from the dominant culture may be internalized (Budge, 2006). Azano (2015) cautions that rural students are in danger of internalizing these negative stereotypes given that

they are repeatedly “told by popular culture, canonized literature, media, music, comedians, and so forth that they are lazy and stupid” (p. 268).

Importantly, not all stereotypes of rurality are negative, as the notion of the romantic rural idyll is arguably as prominent (Roberts, 2013). Rurality has been represented as “a soothing space of relaxation and respite” (Corbett, 2014a, p. 3) and “a peaceful, tranquil, close knit community... based on a nostalgia for a past way of life which is ‘remembered’ as purer, simpler and closer to nature” (Valentine, 1997, p. 137). Azano (2014) again advises against the acceptance of a perspective that is overly optimistic and simplistic. In education, the idealization of rurality “is no more helpful than negative portrayals, for neither captures the complexities of rural teachers and their practice” (Burton et al., 2013, p. 8), and more multifaceted and nuanced understandings of this world may be prevented (Nairn et al., 2003). Indeed, “[r]ose-colored glasses only give permission to further ignore challenges” (Azano, 2015, p. 269).

In the field of educational research, we are not privileging rural places. In the 1970’s Sher (1977) observed that rural teachers and schools were underrepresented in education research. The 1980’s showed a similar scarcity of research, with Guenther and Weible (1983) suggesting that rural teachers were “all but forgotten” (p. 59). In examining the last four decades of research on rural teachers in the United States, Burton et al. (2013) maintain that although attention to rural

schools has increased “it remains a relatively marginal focus within the corpus of education scholarship” (p. 2). Currently within Canada, the “field of rural education has not been significantly developed” (Corbett, 2014b, p. 1).

Of significance to the growth of rural education research is the creation of several specialized journals for the subfield of rural education. U.S. based journals include the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, and *The Rural Educator*, founded in 1982, 2002, and 2004 respectively. The Australian equivalent, founded in 1991, is the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (previously *Education in Rural Australia*). These journals have contributed to educational discourse on issues pertinent to rural education. However, Burton et al. (2013) found that in general education journals, the “rural voice is lacking” (p. 9), as only 18.8% of research articles focusing on rural issues were published. Without publications beyond the rural education scholarly community, many education researchers remain unaware of issues within rural education (Azano, 2015; Burton et al., 2013). This absence reveals “a story about research priorities and publication in the United States; it is a story where the rural largely is marginalized, and perhaps ignored” (Burton et al., 2013, p. 10). Even less is known, or considered, of the rural context in Canada (Corbet, 2014b).

To broaden the rural voice researchers in the field must look to ways in which rural research can be included within the wider field of education literature. In addition, more qualitative research is needed. For example, examining the lived experiences of rural teachers may provide a way to contextualize rural education beyond deficient-oriented or romantically simple perspectives (Goodpastor et al., 2012; Vaughn & Saul, 2013). Although the ultimate aim is to develop positive perceptions of teaching in rural contexts, research should not simply present romanticized versions of rural teaching. Milner (2008) notes that, counter-narrative, offering a different point of view to widely accepted beliefs, “provides space for researchers to share teachers’ experiences in ways that have not necessarily been told” (p. 1576) and thus offer details into the intricacies of

rural issues. In disrupting stereotypes and viewing rurality not as a ‘problem’ but as a “setting to understand” (Burton et al., 2013, p. 8), students, teachers, and researchers may “construct rural narratives that honor the complexities of rural people and places” (Azano, 2014, p. 62).

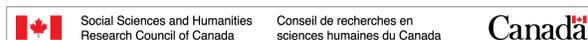
Rural is: “more than a backdrop or a cliché. It is more than a cartoon or a punch line. It is worthy of attention because rural matters” (Azano, 2015, p. 269). It is important to focus attention and research on rural communities, educators, and students in order to deconstruct stereotypes and advance the rural voice beyond rural-specific journals, thereby creating awareness of rural issues within the general education scholarly community. To promote quality teaching and learning, and thus deliver more equity for rural students, new and creative ways are needed to promote cooperative relationships between universities, educators, and rural schools (Green & Reid, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2011). In creating a space for this work and by honouring the rural narrative, researchers can “make more visible the neglected rural” (Azano, 2014, p. 63) so we can move from viewing a ‘rural problem’ to envisioning ‘rural possibility’.

Author Biography

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Acknowledgements

The *Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play* (NOW Play) Project is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.



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