



Reardon, R. M., & Leonard, J. (Eds.) (2018). *Innovation and implementation in rural places: School—university—community collaboration in education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

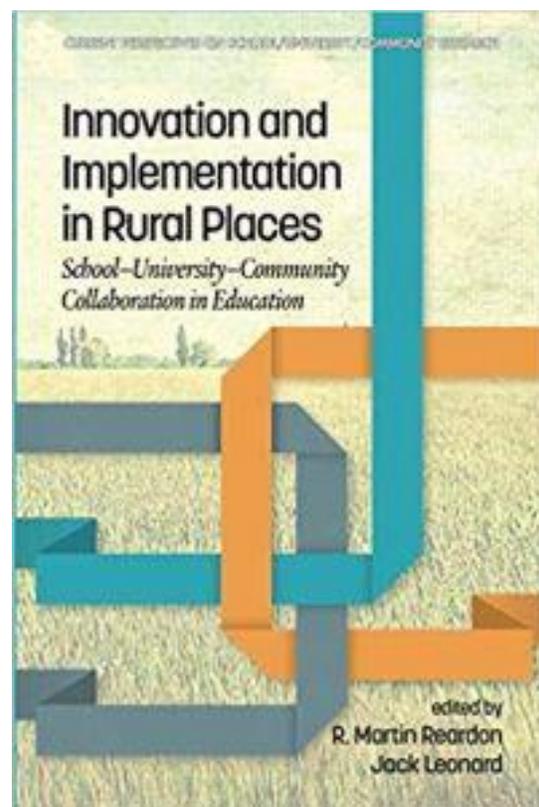
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In early April of 2019, a Midwestern governor offered a state of the state speech, including descriptions of challenges facing a rural school district. Those challenges, he argued, might accelerate the drain of young people and professionals from an area of sparse population and dwindling economic resources. His plea for rural investment was met with a quick response from his partisan opponent, who argued that if progressives and rural citizens would assent to the capital projects of Big Energy, everyone would flourish. Interestingly, within days, U.S. President Donald Trump was in the same state, arguing that *only* he represents the best interests of Midwestern states, and *only* pro-business development could benefit rural Americans.

Of course, the American Midwest is not uniformly rural, and the president spoke at a suburban trucking company; but what is at stake politically in rural America is increasingly a matter of discussion, conjecture, and prognostication. In 2015, prior to an electoral



college series of rural victories for Donald Trump, Victor David Hanson argued in the *Los Angeles Times* that understanding rural American identity is critical. Again, in May of 2019, the *Washington Post* offered a front-page piece “The Real (Surprisingly Comforting) Reason Rural America is Doomed to Decline” where business writer Andrew Van Dam argued, “The nation has long fretted about the fate of its rural margins, but after the 2016 election the discussion took on a different tenor.” And, in recent academic semesters, Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), an ambivalent *homage* to the narratives of rural America generally, and Appalachia in particular, was perched atop national bestseller lists, and became a new staple on at least some university first-year reading lists. More recently in the March 2019 edition of *The New York Times*, we heard from highly educated Americans who have returned to their home communities in rural states. Contrary to stories of divide and dissolution, they argue for the trend of younger Americans who are “home-comers,” creating new businesses, immersing themselves in civic projects, and building families where they grew up, rather than moving on to large urban centers (Anderson, 2018). Clearly, something is afoot when rural identity and policy achieve front-page prominence, and something called “rural America” is on the tip of political leaders’ tongues.

Reardon and Leonard’s ambitious collection highlights 13 different collaborations between higher education institutions and rural schools. It is a timely collection, given an intensifying discussion about the future of American rural communities and given the shifting status of U.S. education research in the generally. As Snow (2015) argued, the next generation of education researchers will be wise to focus on partnerships that leverage the identities of higher education researchers *and* practicing teachers. Snow (2015) wrote:

Transcending the low status of educational research will require demonstrating its relevance to improvements in practice. Educational progress is most likely to emerge from approaches to research that create an equal footing for practitioners and researchers, recognizing that though these groups accumulate and curate knowledge in different ways, they both have a role in creating tools (curricula, practices, professional development approaches) that can be used to forge lasting improvements. (pp. 460-465)

Indeed, much of the value of this collection stems from this exemplar of practice-embedded education research. The researchers featured in this collection offer other iterations of Snow’s call for better education research, but somewhat surprisingly, do not reference her explicitly. Nonetheless, her message and call for savvy university and school partnerships as a model of effective research might be said to speak loud and clear in these pages. All the same, the editors offer readers a valuable synthesizing perspective. In their well-crafted introduction, they use Pred (1984) to advance an important premise for any consideration of the dynamic of “place” in rural education:

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.

Reardon and Leonard understand that rural America is not a mere instrument for inquiry, or an identity to be taken on by urban people who think the rural might be a “cool lifestyle.” Instead, rural America is many things, and the array of projects here – too many to all be

treated in this review – are testimony to the many rural Americas that Pred describes.

Reardon and Leonard have organized this book around three major topics: design features, novel approaches, and parent and community involvement. While reading Part I, 'Design Features,' this reviewer observed two primary themes. First, the researchers in this section almost uniformly organized their work around the notion of building capacity. Three, or arguably four, of the five studies examined development of leaders for under-served rural schools; and one study by Reagan et al. focused on teacher education. In these designs, the university is often a delivery method for some kind of capacity augmentation. While acknowledging the potential imbalance this model presents, the researchers were all careful to discuss how design might increase capacity without compromising relationships. Hewitt, Schmidt-Davis, and Davis highlighted another major theme in this section: the importance of trust in these rural contexts. They wrote,

Such partnerships must intentionally and continuously attend to germination, development, and sustainment of the partnership through a variety of strategies and structures that are responsive to rural contexts.... *Trusting relationships* are critical to the development of the partnership. (p. 52)

As this reviewer has found, smaller communities defined by rural identities are often subject to a kind of fragility of trust. These authors in this section have also hit on an important notion. Indeed, the studies in this section are at their weakest when they overuse acronyms and specialized administrative terminology, privileging the university expert. They are at their best when they adopt more widely used language or theory. and when their stance is one of outright humility, which nearly all authors here acknowledged to be critical in the rural school

and university interface. Myran made an interesting case along these lines: "...the epistemology of scientific management may play a significant role in undermining rural schools' sense of place and the credibility of their voice both within the school-university collaborative partnerships and beyond (p. 127). This orientation in several studies suggests the importance of epistemic agency: rural schools establishing what they think is important knowledge-building, and Moll's *funds of knowledge*, the sense of epistemic vitality indigenous to the community, and not being located solely within the university. To this end, all of these studies urge caution about roles, noting that loci of control relative to community, state and federal mandates, funding, and local politics, must be factored into effective designs for collaboration.

Part II, Novel Approaches, incorporated four studies with a greater focus on teacher preparation. The section more openly addressed versions of critical pedagogy, with an emphasis on injecting additional teaching capacity for rural schools as well as developing teacher effectiveness for rural communities. Kopish devoted his study to third space collaboration, noting that teacher education candidates are offered many affordances by becoming acquainted with community practices and knowledge away from the school itself. Needs-based collaboration is a theme in Iddings and Sigler, and Scherr and Fox, whose essays discussed ways to support local schools through an injection of developing teachers into classrooms, including, in the case of Scherr and Fox, an innovative way to fund and support professional development release. Rich and Stein described multi-tiered supports as currently mandated by a host state, and show how university assets can be leveraged to help a district build required capacity. All of these studies show something of the trust issues described in Part I, with an emphasis on the sensitivity of the relationship between classroom teachers and outside agents (teacher

candidates, university personnel) as critical to project success.

Part III presented examples of parental and community involvement, including four models of the community school. Lasater continued in the vein of trust and transparency in her study of a high school family school partnership. Trust and sensitivity to community roles are critical. Berryhill and Morgan cited Epstein (1987, 1995) in a way that might be said to characterize all of the studies in this section of the volume. They wrote that it is critical "...to understand how the interrelationship between educators, families, and community partners can enhance community involvement" (p. 259). Berryhill and Morgan developed this overlapping interaction metaphor as a kind of ecological systems phenomenon in rural communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986). Studies of community college change (Sabina, Neupauer, and Sabina) and rural incubators (Koennecke, Watkins, & Rismiller) kept with this central theme of the school and community as ecosystem, where change, growth, and development are sensitive dynamics, and need to be treated as such.

The diversity of projects that Reardon and Leonard have gathered suggests the array of challenges facing U.S. rural education. Even with this variety, several themes make clear how deep, and even intransigent, some educational challenges can be for rural communities. Sustainable leadership models and development are one such challenge. Ameliorating divides of culture and bureaucracy between PK-12 schools and higher education are another. Finally, a deep sense of community knowledge, as epitomized in Moll's paradigm of *funds of knowledge*, is clearly a need in any research partnership that seeks to help rural learning. For all of these themes, trust, transparency, and communication are critical, and university researchers are counseled frequently and energetically to maintain a posture of humility

while navigating the rural community as "higher education expert."

It is also clear that rural education affords many opportunities to address interesting and timely questions of leadership, of varieties of literacy, of the role of higher education in communities, and of identity in communities in rural America. These affordances should have a higher profile in American education research conferences, where, in this reviewer's experience, there is a distinct turn away from rural America.

I imagine three audiences, with some overlap between them, for this volume. Foremost is the graduate student in master's or doctoral programs, along with supporting faculty, who envisions a research project where collaboration occurs in rural education settings. A second group of likely readers is those practicing researchers who desire to initiate a new collaborative research project across a university and community juncture. The volume offers helpful guidance for revising current projects, or avoiding potential pitfalls in new partnerships. Finally, policy makers and teacher educators whose work includes rural stakeholders would do well to review this volume, offering as it does many examples of smart initiatives to develop capacity both in PK-12 learners and future educators, whether teachers or building leaders. Of particular use to these readers will be the extensive literature reviews completed by all of the researchers represented in this volume, literature reviews that can offer readers both foundational and contemporary literature on rural education practices and challenges.

As Americans encounter the challenges of a 21st century that is increasingly digital and urban, rural places are subjected to the markets and discourse of an information economy very different from agricultural and extractive economies that long defined rural economic vitality. Rural schools are no

different. As Tieken (2014) argued recently, and as Tocqueville argued long ago, rural America is critical to American identity in so many ways, but it is also challenged by perennial characterizations of being “other” than perceived mainstream America. Rural America is often caught between remaining rural, or rural American becoming some other place belonging to urban America.

In their introduction, Reardon and Leonard wrote, citing Harkavy (1998, p. 33): “The ... 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 is actually get it done.’” We all need this reminder, particularly as it pertains to a significant slice of American education, that which affects our millions of rural learners and their educators. These children, teachers, school leaders, and community leaders also belong to our experiment in democratic education. They are still very much with us in the 21st century, and there *is* much work being done, despite all reports of rural demise.

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