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Disrupting Dichotomous Traps and Rethinking Problem Formation for Rural Education

**Amy Price Azano
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This article highlights various paradoxes and false dichotomies in rural education research. Using Paulo Freire's theories of oppression and critical awareness, the article delineates a theoretical framework designed to explore a reframing of rural education. We propose that this reframing would serve as rural praxis for school leaders and teachers, and we make use of these theories to discuss school leader and teacher preparation programs. This reframing for the field of rural education research proposes a way through contradictions and dispels deficit narratives underlying conceptions of rurality and theoretical constructs in rural education research.

Introduction

Last August, at the International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE), we presented to colleagues from around the world about *deficit ideology* and the role it plays in perceptions of rurality. It was a full room of maybe 50 people – researchers from Australia, Canada, and the United States of America (USA); rural superintendents – a few from remote districts with one-room schools; teachers in rural communities; education policy experts; advocates from non-profit organizations; and a robust and earnest group of doctoral students in rural education. This assembly needed no prodding to engage in dialogue about the deficit narratives ubiquitous in the literature on rural education. Moreover, they were eager and willing to discuss how these narratives play a role in their lived experiences as rural community members. For the duration of the conference, we heard numerous attendees circling back to this idea of avoiding or resisting deficit ideologies. Many asked us directly *how* in fact to do that. *How* do you disrupt a foregone tradition?

Here, we offer more dialogue in that regard. National media and social scientists alike have begun to examine with renewed interest the ways in which rural communities are uniquely affected by broader global and national trends, such as regional job loss, the outmigration of young people, the aging of the population, and rising incidences of substance use disorders (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Monnat & Brown, 2017; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). Why are these challenges viewed tangentially as *rural* ones as opposed to issues of national or global importance? While these issues affect other communities around the country, the unique needs of rural communities in confronting these challenges have gone unaddressed

as social services have remained fractured, under-resourced, and in the case of treatment for substance use disorders, geographically distant (Monnat & Brown, 2017). Rural spaces are socially constructed as a geographic periphery, even though the vast majority of rural landmass in the United States – and the world – would indicate otherwise. Likewise, rural education research has been relegated to a sociocultural periphery, thus permitting the deficit narrative to function as the de facto theoretical lens reinforcing that boundary.

For this special call, we look to Paulo Freire's theories of oppression and critical awareness to frame and reframe rural challenges and opportunities. First, we delineate a theoretical framework designed to explore a reframing of rural education. Then we demonstrate how a reframing would serve as rural praxis for educational leaders and teachers. Finally, we make use of these theories to discuss educational leader and teacher preparation programs, along with a continued reframing for the field of rural education research. In each of these sections, we highlight various paradoxes and false dichotomies and propose a *way through* these contradictions in an effort to counter loss with hope, fear with freedom, distrust with love.

Freire's Conscientização as a Theoretical (Re)Framing for Rural

In the introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—originally published in 1970 and considered a definitive text on critical pedagogy—Paulo Freire (2009) mentions the “fear of freedom” and the “danger of conscientização” (p. 35). Conscientização represents the idea of becoming aware of social, political, and economic inequities and taking action against these oppressive systems of

reality—in essence the act of becoming critical. Freire (2009) argues that it is our fear of being truly free that limits our critical awareness: “Fear of freedom, of which its possessor is not necessarily aware, makes him see ghosts” (p. 36). Drawing from examples relevant to where we live and work, we question this fear in the context of rural schools and communities. For example, in Appalachia, is it a fear of freedom that makes the ghost of coal so powerful? In other words, does the fear of losing coal (and thus an identity) in the region (a real, substantiated economic fear) constrain pathways to “freedom”? In Maine, is it the loss of the tradition of soft pulp processing that constitutes a threat? And does this threat in and of itself oppress these communities? What are the working constructs of fear in other rural regions of the USA and the world?

We use Freire’s radicalized concepts of *conscientização*, fear, freedom, oppression, and authenticity as a theoretical lens for understanding troubled dichotomies. This relates to what Freire (2009) coined as the banking model of education—a term he used as metaphor to describe a traditional (and oppressive) model of education, one in which the teacher “deposits” information into a passive receptacle (the student). He explained there is an “assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not a re-creator” (p. 75). We question if and how this dichotomy serves as a conceit for education in rural communities—that rural members (leaders, teachers, students) internalize their role as spectators not as powerful re-creators who “perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (p. 83). We question if and how various dichotomies create traps for rural educators, scholars, and advocates.

Thinking through the meaning of dichotomy—a division of two contrasting representations, it is reasonable to understand why Freire theorized that dichotomies (e.g., banking model versus problem-posing education) create the inability to transform reality. Meaning, if rural communities are vulnerable (or perceived as such; Gutierrez, 2016) to larger, economical and societal forces—then that oppression or vulnerability, when imposed on the existence of rural itself, creates a rigid truth. These dichotomies create the “unauthentic word” (Freire, 2009)—a word “deprived of its dimension of action” (p. 87). These unauthentic words, which Freire calls “idle chatter” and the “alienating blah,” lack action and reflection, creating “an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action” (p. 87).

Here, Freire’s educational philosophy on collective action serves as a framework for examining oppressive and emancipatory forces at play in rural communities. It calls for us to challenge oppressive elements in ways that might elicit change. In a previous work (Biddle & Azano, 2016), we analyzed a hundred years of literature addressing challenges within the rural teacher workforce. One might argue, given the theoretical construct offered here, that the efforts to prepare, recruit, and retain rural teachers (though not without progress and success) have, in effect, created “idle chatter”—white noise devoid of a reckoning of the oppressive elements limiting opportunities for rural schools: inequitable funding, less pay for rural teachers, ensconced stereotypes about rural people, and so on. The challenges related to the rural teacher workforce do not exist in a vacuum but when a “problem” is seen as a rural one—then its solutions are limited by that same context.

How might we explore challenges in rural education without creating this inauthentic, alienating chatter? How can we explore the dichotomies imposed on rural elements we have come to take for granted? Coal, rural poverty, and the opioid epidemic are palpable issues in Appalachia. In rural Maine, the long-term forecast for the forest industry and mill closures are economic and policy concerns in local communities. Outside of our regional examples, we recognize other rural communities confront threats to global warming and farming, exploitative tourism and land ownership, hospital closures, economic fallout of limited internet (when remote areas are unable to attract digital jobs), and so on. As with these examples, how do we discuss change or development in authentic ways that resist or question these known economic and cultural structures that seemingly oppress rural communities?

Seeing Rural Through Educators’ *Conscientização*

In an attempt to make these theories less abstract, we offer examples for the educational leader, rural teacher, and for preparation programs. We focus specifically on Freire’s (2009) concept of praxis—“reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126)—in order to put rural first, focusing on hope in our discussion of spaces often viewed through a lens of loss. We draw from the American context, using these examples to point to the “social, political, and economic contradictions” (Freire, 2009, p. 35) currently at play in rural communities, although we argue they are relevant globally. These examples are drawn from our work as teacher educators and preparers of educational

leaders, as well as our on-going production and engagement with the scholarship on rural education. We, as rural-facing scholars, focus our work on the nature of core-periphery relationships and their effect on education. However, in our own work, we seek not to position core-periphery relationships as deterministic, but rather find counternarratives of hope that challenge the master modernist narratives of education presented by American policymakers (Giroux, Lankshear, & McClaren, 1996).

Educational Leadership as Rural Praxis

It is impossible to think about the nature of rural educational leadership without thinking about the social, economic, and geopolitical positioning of rurality in contemporary society. Rural is not an identity that usually has master status for educational leaders – although someone might identify themselves as a “country boy,” it would be the rare person that saw this descriptor as their most defining social membership. However, for educational leaders working within a national system in which the role of state education agencies is continuing to increase (McGuinn, 2016), the rural identifier begins to take on greater importance as it governs the conditions that interact with their role as school leaders: small, and often declining student populations, staff playing varied and multiple roles, weak teacher and staff labor markets, eroding tax bases (which in the American context affect school funding), and the ever-present threat of closure and consolidation. However, as educational leaders in such contexts know, rural also often means unique strengths that are rarely leveraged by state-level policy, including the visibility of school programs and life in the community, the institutional and economic importance of the school itself to the community, and the involvement of multiple generations in school activities. These strengths create unique opportunities for rural leaders to innovate to meet the needs of their students and families.

Educational leaders in these communities, tasked with creating a college and career ready workforce, must confront the fundamental paradox of rural schooling: namely, that if they are very good at their job as it is institutionally defined, then students will graduate with the knowledges and skills to either pursue post-secondary education or training, or enter the globalized labor market (Budge, 2010). Corbett (2007) skillfully argues the ways in which the economic system has positioned rural youth as mobile reserve labor for more densely populated urban areas. Rural youth, like all youth, are prepared for a system in which they should go where the jobs are – but the difference is that for rural youth, the

jobs are not likely to be in the places they grew up. As Carr and Kefalas (2009) put it to the school board of the town in which they completed their year-long ethnographic study of rural youth aspirations in Ellis, “You do realize, don’t you, that because you do your job so well here, that you are basically making sure the best students leave Ellis and the odds are they won’t come back?” (p. 139).

Therefore, the rural educational leader seems obligated to find a third way through this paradox – serving both the master of educational policies to whom she is beholden, but also not ignoring the well-being and long-term sustainability of the community. To “name” the world, as Freire suggests, in authentic words, rural educational leaders must flip the conventional narrative of loss, deficit, and anti-modernity on its head through both their action and reflection on that action, their praxis. The first challenge is to transform a global discourse of human mobility, liquid modernity, and disposability within their sphere of agency (Baumann, 2001; Corbett, 2016). For example, personal relationships, opportunities for contact and dialogue with community members across a variety of contexts (the grocery store, religious settings, school events, community suppers, the gas station) become sites of action and “naming” as rural educational leaders work to establish the trust necessary for mobilization on issues of importance to the community. There are many pressures to make these sites of action focused on individual progress of individual students toward the goals of the placeless institution, for example a discussion of student behavior advanced for the goal of increased standardized achievement. The leveraging of these relationships in those directions are symptomatic of the fear of freedom that Freire argues; the fear of defining well-being in collective terms, of seeing students as part of something greater than reserve labor in a global economy (Corbett, 2007).

Rural educational leaders, positioned as they are already on the literal margins of a system that privileges the well-being of the core over the well-being of the periphery, have a unique opportunity to resist in ways that leverage their positioning within boundary-space (Wray, 2006). There are examples of this type of resistance: superintendents in the Eagle Ford shale play (a geologic formation under much of Texas) leveraging rapid boom-bust cycles associated with shale gas development for long-term school and community well-being (Hemmer, Aguilar, & Fleming, 2017); schools hosting community dialogues to make sense of their collective history in the borderlands of Texas (Guajardo, Guajardo & Casaperalta, 2008); or the founding of the Eastern Maine Skippers program by a rural principal seeking

to re-engage high-school fishermen in academic work (Paperny, 2016). In each of these cases, a vision of community well-being that leveraged dialogue and connection was used to catalyze these sites of action. Such leadership mobilizes communities in ways that resist the dichotomies of school success or failure within this narrowly designed sphere of educational policy.

Classroom Teaching as Rural Praxis

Much like the rural educational leader, the rural schoolteacher plays a varied, important, and socially constructed role in rural communities. Historically, the rural schoolteacher was the community teacher. The legacy of the one-room schoolhouse is a pervasive narrative and, even still in rural communities that have long consolidated smaller schools, there are rural teachers who have taught multiple generations of families (a child, her parent, and even grandparent). They embody the histories and meanings of place, understand implicit culture and politics, and play a role in the very construction of schooling and influence the value of education. In many ways, rural teachers serve as a strong metaphor – one leaning into the aforementioned narrative of loss, that is knowledge intermediaries lost to time and modernity—and also symbolic of the current challenge in rural communities struggling to recruit and retain their rural teacher workforce. How then does rural teacher praxis counter or deconstruct the myth of the rural teacher pioneer while at the same time use its lesson to engineer hope in the community, school, and curriculum?

In the case of the rural schoolteacher, there is an opportunity to upend the core-periphery model, assuming the core to be the rural place itself and the periphery the world beyond. The best example is perhaps place-based education, as it is often written about and used by rural scholars and advocates. Common standards and assessments contend that context is unimportant – that only a global and common understanding of the world is needed for one to engage as a prepared citizen. This maintains the neoliberal purpose of education itself – to prepare students for a global workforce. However, these efforts call on both the rural teacher and student to devalue the context for learning. In this scenario, place is merely a geographic container where one learns. In this “banking model,” the image of the student’s brain metaphorically serving as a receptacle for dumping knowledge is replaced by the community itself—passively collecting “global” knowledge as if (like the student) it is separate rather than of the world, having no known knowledge or value, or role in the construction of knowledge itself.

In contrast, the use of place allows teachers to move learning and the meaning of that learning to the core.

Whereas place may be seen in contrast to a decontextualized curriculum, a problem-posing (Freire, 2009), critical pedagogy of place (Greenwood, 2003) is an opportunity to see through this dichotomy. Utilizing and teaching from a stance of critical place literacies can be one that allows a teacher to use the local as a way of valuing community knowledge and mediating global understandings. This involves the “naming” of place and allowing students to explore their own positioning within that place. Teachers, too, may interpret and mediate these understandings in very different ways.

The curriculum does not necessarily need to serve as a dichotomous pawn. While some have appropriately cautioned against an overly insular view of place in the curriculum (Corbett, 2016), learning about place does not have to come at the expense of developing global takeaways. Place can be local without being provincial. However, teachers may feel a certain tension in using place – wanting to affirm a student’s sense of it while providing an opportunity to critique it. Another tension would be using place without creating a bystander stance in the learner. Without a critical frame, place-based lessons may unintentionally send a message that place shapes us for better or for worse or that the absence of the local is intentional erasure and doesn’t matter at all (Eppley, 2011). This inactive model is no different than the banking model and place is reduced only to an instructional trick to gauge interest. In contrast, a critical and socially forward interpretation allows students to understand how place influences the construction of knowledge. For example, as described in Brooke’s *Rural Voices* (2003), teachers can use place-conscious writing to engage active learners, enhance local knowledge with community projects, and foster regional citizenship, connecting writing education to issues that shape a community and using those experiences to scaffold more global understandings.

Rural teachers can and should simultaneously reinforce the importance and *persistence* of place while acknowledging that many students will face the economic decision to leave their place to search for work—and not necessarily in deterministic terms. A socially conscious place-based critical pedagogy can originate from a place of hope, even in communities burdened by loss. Place allows rural teachers and students to name the world around them and to honor the contexts in which people live and learn. Without it, students will learn geography and economy without exploring local implications to mills and mining and pipelines and coal and fracking. They

will have a *core* (and a common one at that) “understanding” of standardized definitions of abstract concepts without learning how these ideas take on very real and concrete meaning in local communities. Rural students must have the opportunity to consider the intersection of global and local knowledge. Corbett (2016) asked if educators should “be in the business of supporting rural places through their work or, conversely, helping individual youth realize their potential by transcending the bonds of the locale?” (p. 271) and, while the question is a timely one, we wonder if these might not occur simultaneously. Advocating for *place* does not need be in conflict with rural “aspirations.” Rather, place-based education can provide opportunities for students to “understand the persuasive public ‘rhetorical spaces’ that surround them” (Brooke, 2012, p. 161).

Educator Preparation as Rural Praxis

Historically, there have been many attempts to “ruralize” teacher and leader preparation programs at the university level, although in the USA fewer such programs exist today. Between 1910 and 1950, there were several departments of rural education within the United States’ normal schools (i.e., schools and colleges for training teachers) and universities, devoted to considering how to supply a prepared workforce of teachers and administrators schooled in the modern science of management to newly consolidated multi-grade rural schools and rural districts (see Bunting & McGuffey, 1928; Meredith, 1929). In the tradition of the land-grant university model, many preparation programs specifically considered the needs of the rural school within their coursework and fieldwork experiences. In the context of the modernizing 20th century school, the work for teachers and leaders within this context, the work of teaching was framed itself as a kind of community development focused on modernization. As the Roosevelt Commission on Country Life wrote in 1909,

The schools are largely held responsible for ineffective farming, lack of ideals and a drift to town. This is not because rural schools on the whole are declining, but because they are in a state of arrested development and have not yet put themselves in consonance with the recently changed conditions of life.

Other reformers pointed specifically to the training of supervisors and teachers as the key to transforming rural schools as the “chief agency in this social-economic reconstruction” (Foght, 1912, p. 151).

Contemporary educational leader preparation programs, typically, have focused on preparing school and district leaders for interchangeable school contexts through organization of coursework around instructional leadership, organizational theory, ethics, and data analysis. This focus has typically precluded much instruction in social theory or dealt with topics that break down the rather arbitrary barrier between classrooms and the community (Green, 2017). In doing so, they practice the same pedagogy of erasure (Eppley, 2011) that many schools practice by focusing on their organizational coherence and community at the expense of their own contexts. Research on leader preparation and leadership, too, has reinforced the arbitrary distinction between the school and the community in which it is situated, focusing largely on enhancing the ability of educational leaders to perform a narrowly defined school mission to educate students for a placeless society. This trend is not solely the doing of researchers in educational leadership or teacher education; rather, we argue that such a focus reflects the broader limitations of educational research overall (Biddle & Azano, 2016). In education, when context has been acknowledged at all, the widely accepted manner of discussing it has been confined to marked distinctions between rural, urban, and suburban (Coladarci, 2007). Early on in the coalescing of the discipline, this was driven by the unique developmental trajectories towards administrative and social modernity defined for urban and rural communities by progressives and educational reformers (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Educational leadership programs in the United States, in particular, with their early focus on scientific management practices and emphasis on administrative efficiencies, have been slow to shake off this legacy (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa & Allen, 1998). Some in educational leadership programs, for example, have recognized this and are integrating these insights into their calls for greater integration of social justice theories and concepts into the preparation of educational leaders. To date, these developments have been mostly to the benefit of urban educational leaders as these programs have typically had explicit urban foci and integrate insights from a growing number of programs dedicated specifically to the needs of urban education. Few educational leadership programs have enacted a specific focus on social justice enacted in rural spaces. This may be in part because of the intellectual heritage of social justice as a concept, which has not historically been spatialized (Roberts & Green, 2013).

It is incumbent on leader and teacher preparation programs to help students break down the complex social narratives they receive about the meaning of rurality and urbanity and how it will inform their work, to find a third way through placelessness and modernity, or a retreat to a hyperfocus on the local. For example, the emphasis placed on rural youth returning home to work is based on the idea that others cannot or will not yearn to live in rural places. Rural community asset mapping, for example, could provide a counternarrative to this assumption. How might that be an effective tool for teachers, students, and leaders in both rural and urban places to break down the complex meanings that are put on those settings together? When urban and rural are reified without recognizing the historic relationships between them, the interdependence of rural, urban and suburban spaces, teachers and leaders continue to reproduce unhelpful dichotomies that thwart freedom.

Problem Formation for Rural Education in a New Century

In writing this article, we found ourselves wrestling with the competing frame of *conscientização* and the attempt to move away from deficit thinking about rural education. The act of perceiving contradictions and naming oppressions seems in and of itself operating from a place of loss. How do we as rural advocates and scholars serve to acknowledge the inherent value of rural places while simultaneously striving to “improve” them? In so doing, we look to these three entry points—educational leadership, place-based teaching, and preparation programs—as opportunities to resist dichotomies imposed on rural places. Rural educational leaders can resist the odds of framing schooling either as kneeling to a global demand for reserve labor or creating a falsehood about opportunities in rural spaces. Rather, the rural educational leader has a unique opportunity to mobilize learning around issues of importance and sustainability for rural communities but within a broader, global context. Likewise, the rural teacher does not have to teach common standards at the expense of local knowledge, or vice versa. A critical pedagogy of place should stand in tandem with more global ideas. In fact, place provides an opportunity to disrupt the core-periphery dichotomy altogether. It is not rural separate from the world; it is of the world. Issues in rural communities are issues for a global

existence. “Problems” often catalogued as rural ones did not spontaneously occur. To think of the current challenges without acknowledging the historic, economic, and political structures at play is to deny learners an opportunity to develop complete and complex understandings of place. And while educators may note a tension in bringing place into the classroom, it is one worth detangling. Place does not sit waiting outside the school doors. It is brought into the classroom with every learner. As Corbett (2016) suggests – and we agree – place is not a “backdrop” (p. 280).

In the Afterword of *Reclaiming the Rural* (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012), Paul Theobald argues that “What Americans don’t fully understand is that an urban locus of power has not always been the way of the world” (p. 240). Theobald also says that while identity formation is “directly related to place” (p. 242), those place identities and behaviors are portable and have the potential to create economic, political, and sociocultural dissonance. Programs preparing educational leaders and teachers are sites of action to negotiate these various loci of power and to consider what it means to foster a sense of civic involvement. Haas and Nachtigal (1998) argue that “rural schools can play several roles in helping people live well politically” and that the future and quality of all lives “depends on raising a generation of young people to take their places as participants in a moral, communal, and democratic society” (p. 12).

As rural scholars, we might consider our own form of resistance—resisting the frame of pitting rural challenges in opposition to places elsewhere but, rather, to consider the relationship between rural and “other” in the context of challenge. We can nuance this tension into action and engender *conscientização* in our scholarly practices. Rather than falling into the trap of determinism for rural spaces, we can use this new focus on rurality as a jumping off point for more critical discussions of the intertwined nature of education, political economy, and freedom. As Freire (1982) warns, “If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along in the wake of change” (p. 7). That wake of change is upon us and we mean here to explore how new ideologies can yield new outcomes—“action that transforms the world and critical reflection regarding the meaning of that action” (Freire, 1983, p. 60).

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