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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 Publishing.

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Rethinking “the rural” in Rural Europe

This review focuses on a book about educational research and schooling in rural areas of Europe. Edited by Cath Gristy, Linda Hargreaves and Silvie R. Kučerová, *Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space, and Place* foregrounds “the rural” in a world where the rural is so often marginalised. In mapping out this important focus, the book brings together authors with a wide range of perspectives from 11 European countries: Austria, Czechia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In all, the book contains contributions from 25 authors. This breadth, along with the depth that comes with it, is one of the book’s strengths.

The book was spawned in the productive environment of the annual European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), organised by the European Educational Research Association (EERA), which fosters dialogue and collaborations amongst researchers from many countries. The three editors are stalwarts in EERA’s Network 14, which brings together researchers interested in communities, families and schooling. Research about place, including the rural, fits under the network’s umbrella, and that is clear in the book’s content and how it is organised.

Indeed, the book is clearly structured. The context of “*far-reaching political, economic, and societal changes*” in Europe over the last half century (p. ix) is clearly established in the Preface, which states the book’s purpose as a sharing of information across borders as well as across multiple social science disciplines. This is followed by Rune Kvalsund’s Foreword, which lays down what I think is an imperative and critical goal: to debunk and refute “*the hegemonic and lasting perspective of rural schools as deficient schools—deficient versions of larger urban schools in formal as well as informal learning*” (p. xiii).

The chapters are book-ended by the editors. Linda Hargreaves authored Chapter 1, which provides insights into the guiding questions given to the contributing authors and reinforces the deliberate move to avoid deficit constructions and focus instead on “*rural advantage*” (p. 7). This is followed by a two-chapter section (Part I) that conceptualises and maps rural spaces of Europe. In the first of those two chapters, editor Silvie R. Kučerová teamed with Petr Meyer and Petr Trahorsch to consider some of the factors, including historical, geographical, physical and sociocultural influences, that have shaped the spatial organisation of schooling in rural Europe.

All three editors contributed to the book's final two chapters, Chapters 15 and 16, which consider "*change, innovation, and hope*" (p. 321). These two chapters, respectively, identify emergent themes, along with issues, challenges and complexities of European rural places, and consider what rural education research moving forward might look like.

In the middle of the book are two sections. The first (Part II) contains nine chapters and explores "*changing patterns of education, space, and place*" (p. 77). These chapters consider rural education and research in particular European countries, with each author, or team of authors, providing contextual information—the lay of the land, if you like—of a country: a historical overview of education, significant educational and policy changes that have occurred, insights into policy documents and political factors, and relevant rural research.

This part of the book was informative and I learnt a lot. I was introduced, for example, to the complex contextual factors relating to ethnicity in Hungary, the post-socialist decentralisation of Poland and the impact on education in rural areas, changes that occurred in the post-socialist countries of Serbia and Czechia, the manifesto for small schools developed in Italy, to name just a few of the ideas and issues that were new to me. In fact, while reading the nine chapters, I experienced many "*I didn't know that*" moments. These included the following: there were 65,000 small schools in Spain in the 1960s; primary/elementary schooling in Austria comprises only four year levels, compared to six in most other countries; and, because of religious diversity in The Netherlands, two-thirds of schools are privately governed. These were just a few of the ideas that piqued my interest.

Indeed, every chapter presented me with information that demonstrated the diversity of the European countries represented in the book. Yet, at the same time, there were themes that seemed to weave in and out of many, if not all, chapters. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it indicates some of the emergent themes raised by authors, in their own words: "*the neglect of rural education in strategic and other relevant ... documents*" (Pešikan, Antić, & Ivić, Chapter 7, p. 148); the "*evident gap between the wishes (the legal level, i.e., the constitution, laws, etc.) and the reality*" (Pešikan, Antić, & Ivić, Chapter 7, p. 149); small schools help to build stability and operate "*as a defence against social vulnerability*" (Canella, Chapter 10, p. 221); "*one-size-fits-all*" approaches to schooling do not work across different contexts; the importance of understanding "*the significance of the multiplicative effects of school changes and closures to local communities and contexts*" (Tantarimäki & Törhönen, Chapter 12, p. 277), the negative effects of "*capitalist, neoliberal, market-oriented economic systems*" on schooling (Gristy, Hargreaves, & Kučerová, Chapter 15, p. 325), and the need for "*new thinking, new smart and place-based solutions, and new co-working futures inside individual municipalities, from rural to urban environments, from local to national levels*" (Tantarimäki & Törhönen, Chapter 12, p. 278).

Across these chapters, there is definitely a call for action: for reconsiderations of rural schooling with accompanying research, across the European context. Part III takes up this call explicitly, beginning the process of "*developing and deepening theoretical engagement*" (p. 77). This is based on the advocacy of Kvalsund and Hargreaves (2009, 2014) and Corbett (2015) for theorised rural research, and recognition of the inherent tensions in research footprints: "*the disturbance created by researchers and their instruments*" and "*the lasting ripples and repercussions*" (Gristy, Chapter 14, p. 305).

In talking about theory, this section of the book comprises two chapters: one by Carl Begley and Sam Hillyard (Chapter 13), examining primary school leadership through the use of Bourdieu's work, and the other by Cath Gristy (Chapter 14), one of the editors, advocating the usefulness of Lefebvre's "*spatial triad*" to consider conceived, perceived and lived spaces (p. 308). I found both of these chapters inspiring, in part because their arguments for theory resonated with my

reading of the nine chapters in Part II and, in addition, because they provided ways of revisiting and rethinking those chapters.

Part IV, the book's final section, draws together all the previous chapters by considering emergent themes (Chapter 15) and the "where to from here" (Chapter 16). After reading these final chapters, I was left wanting more. Indeed, to me, that is a sign of a good book. The editors have paved the way for ongoing, interesting and relevant discussions. They have argued strongly for considerations of theory and have highlighted the complexities, plurality and diversity of rural Europe. In raising awareness of "the diversity, the resource, and potential of rural school contexts in Europe" (p. 352), the discussions need to continue.

Interestingly, the book includes an appendix, written by Libor Jelen, that considers "the migration crisis and the status of immigrant children in educational systems" in Europe (p. 357), a topic that receives only a few mentions in the book's chapters, much to the editors' surprise. In light of ongoing humanitarian crises, including the recent and current Russian invasion of Ukraine and the associated movement of people including children across borders, the appendix has also paved the way for future discussions about how rural schooling and educational research in Europe might respond.

References

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