

RURAL POVERTY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE VALUE

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Facts About Michigan Rural Schools and Rural Poverty

There are more than 2.5 million people residing in rural poor residing in Michigan
Rural schools make up 29.7 percent of Michigan Public Schools
Michigan's rural schools tend to be big and a relatively low percentage of rural school
expenditures get to the classroom.
In Michigan, 8.7 percent of *children* live in rural poverty.
The pay-gap between Michigan's rural and non-rural teachers is very large.
Michigan's rural teachers are among the most likely in the nation to feel support from parents.
* From *Why Rural Matters*

Rural areas realize significant poverty levels. In Michigan 2.5 million residence live in rural poverty. Among them, almost nine percent of Michigan's children live in rural poverty. These numbers do not surprise rural teachers. They are familiar with issues related to educating rural poor students, and the importance of place value in rural education. Haas and Natchigal (1998) stress the important connection students must make on how they fit into the community. On (1992) wrote about the importance of "a detailed knowledge of place...and a sense of care and rootedness" (On, 1992, p. 5). He argued that we are inextricably interconnected and urged educational researchers to develop a more active understanding of place.

The Bucks Stopped Here

I looked out the window of my office at the parking lot dotted with rusted, snow-covered trucks and late model four-wheel vehicles. The pine trees surrounding the parking lot were heavy with snow. A rusted van pulled up and parked in the "No Parking" section. I watched a large middle aged woman shake her head expectantly, the van sputtering as she exited. Obviously, she planned to let the dying machine idle while completing her business. The woman removed a battery from the trunk and hooked the cables up to the appropriate plugs to restart the old thing. She climbed back in and gunned the engine, the van shuddering and smoking as the battery charged. Ignoring the angry glares of the parents waiting to pick up their children, she left it unlocked and running. She herded the young children through the slush and wind towards the elementary school.

On that January day, I greeted them at the door and met the Buck family. As elementary principal of a small rural northern Michigan school, I was quickly becoming acquainted with the unique issues involved in educating the children of poor rural families such as the Buck's. The district has many of the typical characteristics of rural education in beautiful northern Michigan. Seasonal jobs make unemployment rates higher in rural areas than in urban, and local employment often requires less education and pays lower salaries (Yeo, 1998). Lower population density coupled with a weak economic base result in lower tax revenue to support school programs. Like many rural schools, the district was poorly funded with the states lowest per pupil funding. Support services and area agencies to help the disadvantaged are sparse and remote. The ISD provides diagnostic, consultative and professional development services. I quickly learned that, unlike our urban counterparts, getting services to needy children and families to support educational initiatives was a

real challenge.

The Buck children were on welfare, Medicaid and were being homeschooled by their illiterate but well-intentioned mother. The homeschooling was unsuccessful, as pre-enrollment testing to enter school placed the children one or two grades behind their age levels. It was clear to me at first meeting that Mrs. Buck was a loving and kind mother who struggled everyday to meet the needs of her children.

Some of the children had greater needs than others. Mrs. Buck suspected that her youngest child had ADHD. He had a long list of bus referrals and discipline referrals, which included multiple violent episodes. His mother, his teacher and I tried many times without success to have him assessed by area agencies. Local doctors would not take Medicaid payments and ultimately the child posed such a risk that his bus privileges were suspended indefinitely.

The Bucks lived in a distant hollow, about as far out into the remote wilderness as one could get and still be in district. Their trailer was old and broken-down and the lawn was strewn with washing machines, rusted appliances, children's toys and free-range chickens. Mrs. Buck talked openly about how difficult it was to make ends meet, get medical services and keep her children in school. "My kids have a hard time with the school work and I have a hard time with everything else. No one will take my insurance so I can't get my kids the medicine they need to stay in school. My car keeps breaking down and I can't afford the gas anyway." In March she wrote a letter that was nearly illegible and withdrew all five to home school them once more, using textbooks we donated to her.

What does the research say about rural poverty?

The facts are that life is extremely hard for children growing up in poverty in the United States, no matter where they live. Poverty rates for children are actually higher in rural America than in urban America. Researchers are divided about the actual numbers, but they range from 2.5 to 9 million impoverished rural children. These children often live in remote areas, and the results can be devastating. In Michigan, almost 9 percent of the state's impoverished children reside in rural areas. Healthcare services may be limited and agency and support services are sparse compared to their suburban or urban counterparts. Tapping into limited existing resources may require hours of transportation. As a result, some families have difficulty meeting the child's most basic needs.

Opportunities to grow and thrive are limited or expanded through education and thus the role of educators becomes increasingly important. Research tells us that the way out of poverty is through education. For these children and families, the teacher may become the most important link to empowerment. The teachers' knowledge and training about educating rural populations is critical.

When I began working in rural areas I quickly learned what most rural teachers already knew: teaching in rural areas is contextually different than teaching in urban areas. Our students may not only live several miles from their country school but also at a greater distance from larger population hubs. Access to technology, social services and outside resources which support the educational process are often limited and complicate schooling. The importance of the school and teacher become greater because rural at-risk students living in poverty often lack local resources to access.

Some rural poor students and families display ambivalent attitudes toward traditional school cultures. This may reflect generational social patterns identified in educational research focusing on educational levels, work and poverty (Hill and Duncan, 1987, Concoran et al, 1987). This research gives rise to questions about how rural poor experience education. Could it be interpreted that rural poor value schooling differently than others?

Rural Values

When I began working in a rural school district, my burning question became *what matters to rural people? How do rural poor define the value of education?* My experience in working in both urban and

rural settings told me that the way schooling was valued and experienced was different between the two groups. I wanted to understand what the research said about rural education and local values, specifically for the children and families. It was an area with little scholarly inquiry. Most of what I found focused on the importance of place value in rural schooling for all students.

I contacted a noted rural educational researcher, Craig Howley of the Annenburg Rural Challenge who recommended that I begin my investigation with Paul Theobald's work on place conscious education (1997). Theobald stresses the importance of *intradependance* of the rural human experience and how local folks exist within their environment. Place-conscious education focuses on the connections and relationships between that necessary relationships- natural, agricultural, social that makes up its communities. He stresses the importance of immersing learners in relevant, local communities to create meaning. Educational relevance begins locally and moves to a wider engagement and understanding of issues. The key concept is the students individual experience and intradependence and their understanding of place, of how they connect locally and to the "world out there."

Rural researchers Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal, (also of the Annenburg Rural Challenge), supported Paul Theobald's work on place value and authored, *Place Value: an Educator c Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education* (1999) as a way to frame and define components of place-conscious education. The authors stress the importance of understanding place, of living well within the community and of incorporating the impact of education to local issues. Living well is very much a part of rural life, largely experienced through hard work and production. Nachtigal and Haas pose the argument that rural life is rapidly vanishing and being replaced by the pervasive influence of capitalism which prescribes limitless growth and affluence through education and migration. If you want the good life you must look elsewhere to the cities and suburbs for higher wages, better jobs, nicer homes, and abundant living with "**lots more stuff.**" The author's tell us that education has fed into this by schooling children with information outside of the community, forcing children to find educational relevance *anywhere else but here*. By focusing on local contexts, rural education becomes relevant and valuable and children are better able to see how they connect to it. The authors suggest that teachers use the five components to place value in education: living well ecologically, politically, economically, spiritually and within the community. It is this last component that may provide a critical bridge to connecting with rural disadvantaged youth.

An outstanding book published through the National Writing Project focused on the application of place conscious education. Edited by Robert Brooke, *Rural Voices: Place-conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing* (2003) is written by teachers who believed that the current trend of placeless education, teacher and student proof national curricula and national standardization was for the birds (my interpretation). These teachers believed that real accountability and learning occurred when students learned how to live well, actively and fully in their communities. As Haas and Nachtigal put it "It is the narrative of who we are, how we get along together, how we make a living, and how we are connected to it" (p. 21).

It is important for children to understand how communities work together and how each individual has value and is connected. I have a hunch that this concept may be especially important for rural poor students; however the research base on this is thin. What research does tell us is that children who come from poverty are less likely to be successful academically, feel comfortable at their school and experience success in the workplace (Hill & Duncan, 1988).

So, if this is true, how do we teachers reach these rural impoverished and disconnected children? How does the practitioner help these students become more connected to the community and find a meaningful place for themselves? Dan Fletcher, a seasoned high school English teacher at Inland Lakes Schools and a National Writing Project fellow uses his best practice approach to teaching writing. Dan considers essential components of teaching writing: a topic sentence, a pre-write containing brainstorming, organization based on chronology, order of importance or formal outline, two supports of the topic statement and a clincher statement. Dan Fletcher also stresses the importance of the writer's place or voice. He explains that it is the student's personal voice, the child's soul on paper that makes the district's MEAP tests so well received by the state. His students and community are

aware that it is authentic rural voices that make this project award winning, but also serves to help elevate individual students to recognize that what and who they are matter to the district and the community.

Tonya Perry, also a National Writing Project Fellow is an alternative education teacher and the GED examiner for Houghton Lake Public Schools. Like Dan Fletcher, she uses writing to connect with her at-risk students. Tonya works with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. One common need among all her students is the need to be recognized, respected, and to feel connected. Many of her students are migratory. Some consider themselves outcasts from other towns who come to alternative education scarred and with baggage. Finding a sense of place and connection can be difficult. Tonya explains that she connects with many of her students through journal writing. These students begin to write at first to fulfill a course requirement, and then to find themselves and eventually learn how they connect to the greater community. Hence, those communal stories must be shared as community memories. These students need to learn how they fit and matter to those around them.

Teachers can positively impact the student's success by helping the student find their place in the community. Duncan (2000) provides examples of successful professionals who were encouraged by a teacher to get a college education and break out of rural poverty. Becky, a successful and respected special education teacher in a northern rural school was just such an unlikely student. From a farming family, she was an apt student who never considered college. To her family, it was a waste of time. It was not until she was mentored by a teacher and guided towards higher education. "If it were not for that teacher I would have never even considered going to college. I come from this area. I have rural roots here. All of my family worked on the farm and they did not need a college degree to make a living."

Mrs. Buck's Return

It was early May when I greeted Mrs. Buck in my office to discuss the re-enrollment of her children. I was so pleased to see her that I startled her with a bear hug. It was clear that she did not expect this kind of welcome so I closed the door to discuss the issue in private. I pulled up a chair next to hers, patted her hand and asked her how she had been. She told me with a tired smile that she had been working hard but had difficulty teaching her children. She wanted to bring her kids back to school but feared they wouldn't fit in. I recognized the stress and her need to feel welcomed, useful, and an important part of the educational process. I nodded my head and said, "I know. I felt the same way when I first got here." Mrs. Buck blinked and the wide O of her mouth slowly turned into an understanding grin.

"Let's say you and I work together to help your children feel comfortable. I will work with the transportation department to try and set up a meeting with you before the children start riding the bus. We can place the children back with their original classroom. We already have your free lunch forms on file. Is there something else that you need from me to make you feel comfortable here? I want you to be a part of our school. We need you".

Mrs. Buck stood up and looked at me sternly. "No, that's It." she said. She turned quickly and opened the door, pausing to look over her shoulder. She held my gaze for a moment, looking deeply without expression. I waited for her to say something, but with a turn of her heels she was gone.

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