

Book Review

Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community

Corbett, M. (2007). Halifax, CAN: Fernwood Publishing. 297 pp.

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Policy makers, educators and parents have attempted to understand and explain the decisions that young people make about education, life choices, and their future in rural communities. Michael Corbett takes this inquiry further and offers rich illustrative examples for the real and perceived gains and losses that are considered by rural youth, as he describes the complexity of their attitudes towards formal schooling and these transitions. The inherent tensions between educating for future mobility and with/in a rural community struggling to survive are reflected in the title, *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community*.

Corbett begins with the principal thesis that rural schools play multiple roles, including the “reproduction of labour in traditional local industries,” and rural-urban migration (p. 8). He asks why some youth learn to leave rural communities, while others “learn to stay,” and questions the role and influence of formal education and competing discourses of what is valued in rural communities (p. 8). It is through this exploration and a comprehensive literature review that Corbett’s clarity and sensitivity is demonstrated as he tackles the difficult themes of loss, competing ideas of success (p. 31), ambivalence, and disconnection. These ideas are developed in seven chapters, but it is clear that this is not a deliberation with a conclusive response.

While he centers his discussion around the case study of Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, from 1963-1998; the second chapter, “reconceptualizing resistance, habitus, discourse, and place” (p. 42-69), and the concluding chapter that emphasizes Corbett’s emerging theory of “mobility capital,” as well as migration, ambiguity, and resistance in rural schooling and communities (p. 243-273), serve as ‘book ends’ that frame central themes and demonstrate the relevance of this seminal work to emerging debates.

Through interviews and data analysis, the author skillfully portrays the lived experiences of rural community members, and the friction between education, local resource-based economies, and out-migration. In their own words, Corbett demonstrates the ways in which youth measure the decisions to leave rural coastal communities for an uncertain future against the promise of opportunity. They weigh the risks and possibilities of life outside their home community with the decision to stay based on kinship ties, family support, and a known resource or way of life. Males are more likely than females to resist formal schooling, he finds, at least during times of economic prosperity in the fishing industry. However, as Corbett demonstrates, these decisions are further complicated by a discourse of decline around rural education; the interplay and tensions between the known resource (fishing, in this case) and schooling creates resistance (p. 50). He

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maintains that “[t]his discourse of decline is mediated by a questionable ‘community development’ discourse about entrepreneurial high-tech information industries, or tourism,” but “[y]outh are not convinced, and in the absence of better alternatives many remain ‘around here,’ not because they see exciting new opportunities, but because it is a known space and one in which they can negotiate a livelihood and survive” (p. 50). Corbett draws on Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and “logic of practice” to demonstrate how youth might perceive their options, and how agency is enacted “locally in the context of particular social spaces,” but he expands these notions with Foucault’s work to illustrate that youth are agents in multiple positions responding to multiple discourses (p. 51). As Corbett maintains, “[c]ommunities contain within them multiple power relations and divisions, as well as tangible and virtual connections to other communities” (p. 51). Although the local resource referenced in Corbett’s work is the fishing industry, he draws on education, sociology, social capital and cultural capital theory that demonstrate broader application and connections between forms of capital, community networks and resource-based economies.

Corbett’s unique contribution is his emphasis on the sense of pride, place, and belonging that is reflected in the voices heard in the interviews, juxtaposed with a deep undercurrent of longing for opportunity, a sense of ambivalence about the role of formal education, and inevitable loss that comes with choices to leave and decisions to stay. Gruenewald and Smith’s (2008) edited text on contemporary place-based education, including Bartsch’s literature on the roles of youth as resources in revitalizing communities, provides an extension to this discussion that situates youth as agents facing complex decisions in the context of their rural community or chosen destination. Other scholars indicate that responses to rural youth out-migration, such as local training, employment, and education opportunities, are critical in small communities if youth are to have a sense of purpose and connection with the social and economic sectors of the rural community (Dupuy, Mayer, & Morissette, 2000). Corbett succeeds in demonstrating that while the importance of a sense of place and tangible options are central to the investigative questions that underpin analysis of rural youth migration, the education policy implications and range of possible community development approaches are complex.

Social, political, and economic forces shape the identity of rural communities, and Corbett challenges his readers to recognize that an understanding of these *pushes* and *pulls* is essential in developing education practices and policy that respond to the realities for rural young people and the local community context. The author’s claim that guidance for young people during times of transition is necessary to support young peoples’ choices to stay or leave rural communities is relevant to educators in rural or remote communities in Canada and in international contexts. It is here that readers are provoked to think of rural youth mobility as a phenomenon on a global scale. For example, Corbett’s exploration of gender, class, familial roles and expectations (p. 50, 175, 215), and his assertion that women are often more mobile and successful than men in formal education systems (p. 243), reflect structures that extend beyond rural coastal contexts.

If his intention is to convince his readers that there is value in sustaining rural local community economies *and* in pursuing education and options beyond the rural community, Corbett is successful in conveying that these rural connections are vital, and there is both risk and opportunity that comes with mobility. The question that emerges is in the application to a relevant education system that addresses this gap, and the best policy response or a range of solutions that begins to respond to this dilemma. Researchers recognize possibility and hope in a shared history and memory, as well as a collective response to loss of land, community identity, and power in a rural community context (Epp & Whitson, 2001). Corbett's strength lies in his emphasis on hope, while providing an extensive review of literature that reflects a range of possible challenges and responses.

Readers are encouraged to continue the exploration, to confront the tensions, and to respond to the call for educators and policy makers to expand their range of approaches to address the realities of schooling and rural youth mobility. Through Corbett's command of accessible language and his attention to rural community dynamics, he creates an engaging text that is relevant and applicable to a diverse audience. For educators, concerned citizens, students, and scholars seeking insight into the complexity of education in and for a rural community, this book offers critical analysis and theoretical underpinnings through which readers may begin to understand and frame the issues. Corbett draws on Bourdieu, Foucault and others to provide theoretical lenses through which to engage with this work. A vast selection of authors, additional sources, and an index provide the reader with comprehensive resources for further analysis.

In conclusion, Corbett highlights implications for rural schooling and community resistance, including an emphasis on the "contemporary transformations" of rural spaces and the necessity to "confront racism, sexism, and constructions of masculinity and femininity that lead to oppressive and systematic inequality" (p. 269). His emphasis on social justice is clear as he asks if we might "imagine rural schools as sites of resistance to the forces that threaten families and communities" (p. 272). Educators interested in sustainability education and global citizenship will have to deal with the challenge of engaging in their own critical analysis, and applying this significant work and theory to other local and global contexts.

An area for further exploration that emerges through Corbett's analysis is the question about the choices that some young people make to return to a rural community after a period of time away. Although Corbett suggests that leaving opens spaces for "possibility and perspectives," and there is an option to return, he does not directly expand on the dimension of "return" in this work (p. 269). The notion and the likelihood of "returning" provides another critical variable as we continue to ask the questions "why" and "how" and consider the implications for future policy and practice. Ultimately Corbett's challenge to his readers is to hope, to resist the ways in which rural communities have been constructed, and to dare to think differently.

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