

Michael Corbett  
Dianne Gereluk *Editors*

# Rural Teacher Education

Connecting Land and People

 Springer

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# Prologue and Acknowledgements

This project began with a conversation, or more accurately, a series of conversations. The conversations span both time and space, and weave between the scholars involved and their relationship to the land and its peoples. We feel as though this book, which we think is the first text to bring together Canadian education scholars to create a rural education collection, requires a particular opening acknowledgment that problematizes the very idea of rurality as a construct. For Indigenous scholars, it is a reclaiming of the rural space as part of its identity and ancestry. The idea of reconciliation is very much on the minds of Canadian educators today. We see reconciliation at one level as a proactive response to a profound silencing and violence that the colonial education has represented. In historical context, education has been part of a complex of institutional systems and processes that have systematically impeded Indigenous flourishing in the bounded territory that came to be known as Canada.

The very idea of the rural has been freighted with racialized meaning. It is often constructed as the gendered quintessence of the national consciousness: the space of the farmers, loggers, fishers, railway workers, road-builders, surveyors, and miners around whom the mythology of exploration, settlement, and nation building have been formed. The field of rural education has functioned as a space for settlers to tell of their places, sometimes acknowledging its colonized past often recognizing their own immigrant roots. It is arguable that historically, these stories and conversations between Indigenous peoples and settlers largely did not overlap or converge. In fact, they were more often very different accounts of both national history and present sociopolitical circumstances. This ideological separateness, and stark contrasts in the telling of the stories about our educational past, have often obscured the unacknowledged polyvocality, complexity, and complicity in a long, more troubling history.

In some respects, this book is a telling and retelling of past conversations, a repositioning of conversations that have related particular narratives, some nostalgic, some that silenced the Other, and yet other narratives that have more or less actively harmed people. Particularly in educational history, many of those harmed have been children. In part, for the sake of present and future children who live in non-metropolitan communities, the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission (2015) calls for an honest discussion about what it means to recast how we conceptualize and cultivate rural education in a way that allows individuals and communities to flourish.

Indigenous thinkers and activists (e.g. Battiste 2018; Cajete 2003) have long pointed not only to the brutality of the colonial experience, but also to the related human-centric unnatural ecological disaster that has followed in the wake. America's preeminent rural philosopher poet, Wendell Berry (1977) has argued for more than half a century for the importance of stewardship, land care, reverence for life, and a re-embedding of all people in natural places. He has also argued that the history of the Americas is a history of the displacement of any individuals or groups who established themselves in a healthy symbiotic relationship with the land. Beginning with the Indigenous peoples, anyone embedded in territory, and who cared about and for that territory, was ruthlessly pushed aside<sup>1</sup> by the unrelenting tide of the next wave of development. In 1974, poet Gary Snyder published a collection of ecologically attuned poems entitled *Turtle Island* drawing his title from the name many Indigenous people give to what most of us now call North America. From this early work, more recently there has been a considerable volume of ecological critique published in a wide variety of academic and non-academic/activist fields. Much, but by no means all of this work, recognizes the impact of the colonial experiment, European ontologies, and epistemologies, and that way these have contributed to (if not created) the catastrophic conditions we now face as a species. Seldom though has the rather obvious connection between how ecologies are understood and experienced as rurality and how they are understood and experienced in Indigenous thought been taken up (Lowan-Trudeau 2017). We think it is this largely missing interface that needs to be developed and many of the pieces in this collection address this profound and timely issue.

Contemporary conceptions of "development," it must be said, are largely propelled by urban requirements and what Andreas Malm (2015) calls "fossil capitalism." Such arguments converge with contemporary thinking of Indigenous scholars and elders who have shaken the foundations of how Canadian educators think about our work and the role this work has played in the creation of social and spatial inequality and the normalization of colonial capitalist power relations. This book is a challenge to the larger, more dominant positioning of spaces beyond city limits in urban-centric educational debates. As rural education scholars, we deal fundamentally with spatial questions and the relations both mythic and real geographies (Corbett 2016; Lefebvre 1992). We also strive to be keenly aware of what is now called intersectionality, which relates to the way that our critical conceptual lenses such as social class, gender, sex, race, colonialism and disability need to productively read together as well as with and against spatial concepts such as rural and urban.

When we have come together, the authors of this volume have recognized and acknowledged the work of Indigenous peoples who cared for and who were

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<sup>1</sup>This displacement imperative is powerfully instantiated by the KAIROS blanket exercise (<https://www.kairosblanketexercise.org/>).

guardians of the land long before the settlers colonized, and uprooted their cultures, traditions, and the embedded relational ontologies and epistemologies that gave life and meaning to the vast geography of Turtle Island. And so, we invite educators who are committed to rural education and schooling, to name our historical past for what it was—over a century of intergenerational trauma and genocide against Indigenous peoples. There is much work to do, but an initial step is to recognize our settler past in relation to Indigenous peoples on their traditional lands. Our first conversation is to understand and be attentive to this historical and present conversation.

The conversation among contributing scholars in rural education and the teaching profession was one that arose from a number of Canadian researchers who had received SSHRC funding to research how to create more robust rural educational experiences in schools and their rural communities. Our initial gathering brought together individuals researching various aspects of rurality in their local and regional contexts, and we took this opportunity to look across our projects to begin to see where our ideas converge and diverge. In this sense, we were attempting to initiate a national conversation on rurality and education, and one that went beyond rural education's established focus on settler communities and the struggles they encounter in a relentlessly urbanizing society. Obviously, this conversation is only beginning. The continued support from federal SSHRC funding ensures the sustainability of our work in the academy and in our communities.

Pragmatically, while our own research was located in various locales across Canada, the financial support from the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, brought key educational scholars from across the nation together for a two-day intensive think tank session. The hope was that we could listen and learn from each other, and consider how we might elevate our individual research toward a more collective integrated whole. These two days provided the foundation to build the collaborative space. Two years later, a second meeting was hosted by the University of British Columbia, in a one-day symposium to refine our ideas and provide substantive feedback to our work. From there, we saw an opportunity to bring our work together more broadly toward this edited book. We feel that we have created an embryonic rural education scholarly community, which is, we believe, Canada's first, and which we hope will encourage broader conversations and collaborations on a national level.

This edited book gathers under a symbolic roof as an overarching and overlapping conversation between settler and Indigenous peoples. The conversations intersect our identities as teacher educators, educational and rural sociologists, curriculum scholars, and educational researchers, and this confluence has challenged us to look at the nuance and wonder of the vast geography of Turtle Island, diverse non-metropolitan communities, and the equally diverse opportunities and challenges providing a quality education beyond the city limits. While it is about rural education, this book is not simply about children, or the teachers, or the parents. The analyses in this book are situated in a particular time and place, knowing that the weight of previous conversations has been told before our arrival.

Like most settler societies today, the physical fact of the space beyond the city limits is massive. While this book is about Canada, we believe that there are lessons that may be gleaned beyond our extensive physical geography, the vast majority of which is non-metropolitan, yet which ironically is one of the most heavily urbanized nations in the world. The World Bank estimates that 98.6% of the Canadian land mass is classified as rural.<sup>2</sup> Rural is rather obviously invoked here as a catch-all category that encapsulates pretty much any non-metropolitan territory. At the same time though, rural is also a symbolically freighted colonial term that is crying out to be reconceptualized. These dialogues are beginning, and we hope that this book contributes something useful to this crucial discussion. Similar reconceptual conversations are occurring in Australia and New Zealand between Indigenous and settlers on rural lands. The USA has similar challenges in the vast rural and remote areas that face changing economic patterns with increasing rates of poverty, and a more polarized civil society between urban and rural. These challenges, it is now well understood, take on important sociopolitical dimensions and have real consequences. While we do not contend that one can simply apply and adopt some of the ideas into different locales, we hope that these contributions provide an opening for more nuanced discussions for how we might think more purposefully about rurality and rural education. Indeed, the shared focus on place and land in rural and Indigenous education can contribute productively and critically to the often placeless policy dialogues, curricula, pedagogy, and assessment schemes that mark metrocentric educational discourse.

Finally, we wish to thank Springer International Publishers, who saw the potential of this project as contributing to a larger global debate, looking both within and beyond Canada. With that, we invite you into this conversation, to see where the themes and ideas resonate, and where a sharper focus might be required moving forward. We welcome consideration of how our presence and language will create particular conditions for how we think about and support the individuals who live in those spaces constituted as rural areas.

November 2019

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Dianne Gereluk

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# Editors and Contributors

## About the Editors

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**Dianne Gereluk** is Dean and Professor at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. Dianne Gereluk's research examines normative aspects of educational policy and practice. Her areas of expertise include philosophy of education, policy analysis, and political philosophy. Her present research examines issues of equity and access for rural and remote students who wish to pursue a career in teaching.

## Contributors

**Sandra Becker** research examines the nature of makerspaces and considers how designing in a variety of formal environments promotes learning for both students and teachers. Sandra is a post-doctoral associate in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary.

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**Patricia J. Danyluk** grew up in northern Manitoba, where she spent the early part of her career working with remote First Nations and Métis communities. Dr. Danyluk joined the Werklund School of Education in 2014 after working at the Laurentian School of Education for ten years. She is currently the Director of Field Experience for the Community-based pathway in the Bachelor of Education program. Patricia completed her Ph.D. at Laurentian University, her Master’s in Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University, and her B.Ed. at Nipissing University. Prior to this, she worked as a teacher, college professor, human resources consultant, and as a manager for the Manitoba Government. Dr. Danyluk’s research focuses on student teacher development specifically as it relates to the practicum. She has traveled throughout northern Canada to gather the stories of new teachers in remote, rural, and Indigenous schools.

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**Roswita Dressler** research focuses on teaching and learning in a variety of contexts. Her K-12 research looks at Canada’s bilingual programs in international languages. Her higher education work examines the informal learning of students on study abroad and the formal learning of rural and remote students through online instruction. Roswita teaches in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary.

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**Dustin Louie** is First Nations scholar from Nee Tahi Buhn and Nadleh Whut'en of central British Columbia. He is a member of the Beaver Clan. Dustin's education background includes a degree in Canadian history, a Master's in International Relations, and a Ph.D. in Educational Research. He has worked as an historian in a land claims law firm, studied Indigenous homelessness in Western Canada, worked internationally for non-governmental organizations in Uganda and Australia, and is now at the Werklund School of Education in the University of Calgary. Dr. Louie is conducting research, educational design, and training with First Nations, schools, and organizations across Western Canada.

**Christopher Martin** is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and Associate Member of the Department of Economics, Philosophy and Political Science at The University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Education in a Post-Metaphysical World* (Bloomsbury Press, 2012), *R.S. Peters* (Bloomsbury Press, 2014; with Stefaan Cuypers), and *Questioning the Classroom* (Oxford University Press, 2016; with Dianne Gereluk, Bruce Maxwell, and Trevor Norris). His research areas include political philosophy and the philosophy of education. He is currently working on a project on the values and aims of higher education in liberal societies.

**Kevin O'Connor** is Associate Professor and Chair for the Department of Education, Mount Royal University, Canada. He has taught in elementary and secondary schools and was educational administrator for 15 years. Much of his current research and publications are based on the synthesis of multi-sensory pedagogy and interdisciplinary curriculum through the integration of experiential and place-based learning, science field studies, and Indigenous education. Dr. O'Connor is the National Chair of the Canadian Association of Teacher Education (CATE)—Self-Study in Teacher Education Practices (SSTEP) group, NASA-GLOBE Canada Country Coordinator, serves as an editor and reviewer for numerous education research journals worldwide, and sits as Advisory Board member on the *Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy CRISP*, *NASA-GLOBE International Science Education Group*, *European Scientific Institute (ESI)*, and *The Paulo and Nita Freire International Center for Critical Pedagogy*.

**Sherry Peden** The late Sherry Peden was a member of the Tootinaowaziibeeng First Nation. She worked as a teacher and professor at Brandon University. Dr. Peden's last academic position was that of Academic Vice-President at the University College of the North in The Pas, a position that she held until her retirement in 2015.

**Peter Peller** has been Librarian and Director at the University of Calgary's Spatial and Numeric Data Services since 2001. Peter has supported dozens of academic projects across numerous disciplines. Peter's main research interests are in the areas of the census, geocoding, and map vectorization.

**Susan Rodger** is Psychologist and Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Counselling Psychology at the Faculty of Education at Western University and Research Associate at both the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children and the Centre for School-Based Mental Health, Western University. Her research interests include mental health literacy for teachers, teacher candidates, and foster care providers, the influence of exposure to violence on learning, inclusive education, and outcome measurement. She is currently collaborating with colleagues in the mental health and education fields developing resources for teacher wellness and supporting child and youth mental health in schools.

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communities' funds of knowledge to build participatory, place-conscious, and culturally responsive practices. His books, films, and research articles are widely referenced in local, national, and international contexts.

**David Scott** is Assistant Professor and Director of Student Experiences for the Community-based pathway in the Werklund School of Education. David's research explores how educators, as well as the public, make sense of officially mandated curriculum shifts. As part of this work, David has examined how teachers in Alberta have responded to recent initiatives to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and historical perspectives.

**Alexa Scully** is a PhD candidate at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, ON, in Anishinaabe territory. Her research explores the central importance of land in critical place-based education and Indigenous education courses in teacher education. Alexa currently lives in Inukjuak, Nunavik, where she coordinates projects for the Inuit Land Survival and Culture department of Kativik Ilisarniliriniq. In the summers, you will find her in a canoe in Algonquin Park, back in Anishinaabe territory.

**M. Shaun Murphy** is Professor and Department Head of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan. He was born and raised on Treaty 6 territory, where he still works. He was an elementary school teacher in rural and urban settings for 20 years. Shaun's research interests are based on relational narrative inquiry and focus on familial and school curriculum making; identity; rural education; the interwoven lives of children, families, and teachers; and teacher education.

**Cameron W. Smith** is a recent graduate of the Master's program and current Project Specialist at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. Cameron has experience in teaching and supporting rural schools as a technology coach for classroom teachers. His research interests include the access and provision of teacher and second-language education, particularly in rural and remote communities.

**Bonnie Stelmach** is a professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Her primary research focus is on parents' participation at the secondary level in rural contexts. Before taking up an academic position, she taught secondary school in rural and northern Alberta, and at an international school in Thailand. She also served as a school improvement project manager for a school district in northern Alberta that focused on engaging parents in schools.

**Dawn Wallin** serves as Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs at the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. Her research interests focus on rural education, leadership and administration, and equity in education.



# **Why Rural Matters in Education**

# Introduction: Why Rural Matters in Canadian Education



Michael Corbett and Dianne Gereluk

**Abstract** In this chapter, we introduce the book and its genesis. We highlight some of the features of the Canadian rural education context and address the particularity of Canada's highly decentralized system of educational governance and delivery and how this influences the provision of education across a vast geography. We also elaborate how we understand the rural suggesting that contemporary spatial theory can productively support complex, relational understandings of rural education and rural teacher education. We conclude with a brief "road map" of the territory the book traverses.

**Keywords** Rural education · Policy · Canada

## 1 Introduction

The field of rural education is one that is shrouded in mystique that relates to the larger mystique associated with the rural today. What indeed is rural and why does it matter in education? The title of this book refers to both an ongoing conversation about the nature and value of rural Canada and what this implies for education as well as to the idea of land which is central to the very idea of the rural. As Halfacree (2006) pointed out, rural is a fundamentally spatial concept. Conversations concerning land in a settler society like Canada relate to the relations of people to place, the fundamentals of sustenance, the massive changed wrought by capitalism and colonization and pressing questions of environment and Indigeneity. The central challenge posed by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission positions land as a key feature of what reconciliation might mean and how decolonization is not a metaphorical notion but rather a question of rethinking what land itself means (Alfred, 2009; Tuck

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and Yang 2012). Climate scientists, activists, Indigenous people and rural producers have also raised the alarm reporting experience and analysis of what is happening to land in the face of a changing climate. As Martin Nakata (2007) argues, the path forward is a critical examination of what he calls the “cultural interface” which has emerged beyond the colonization of Oceania, the Americas and other settler societies.

Rural Canada is at a kind of crossroads in terms of social and economic development, cultural practices and pressing questions of social justice and equity and the state of the environment in the face of potentially catastrophic patterns of production and consumption. Just as urban populations require a different kind of education that provides the human capital required in what is called the knowledge or even post-carbon economy, so too is the quality and character of education in rural Canada a crucial foundational problematic. Politically and socially as well, the tensions that run through most advanced democracies have given rise to new forms of authoritarian leaders and populist politics of resentment that draw on rural mythologies concerning who belongs on the land and who does not (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Kerrigan 2018). While some argue that these forces are less likely to take strong root in Canada (Adams 2017), emerging literatures on the nature, character and sources of rural racism point to the potential dangers of ignoring the concerns or rural citizens who remain a significant electoral constituency.

The rise of comparative educational metrics and the globalization of educational policy and governance have also created the conditions for increasing standardization of educational policy practice, policy borrowing and system centralization. The process of centralization has a long history in rural education as village schools have given way to amalgamations and consolidation, school closing and ubiquitous bussing. Globalization and related changes in monetary and fiscal policy, supply chains and mechanization/automation have created new labour force demands that place additional pressure on education systems to produce different kinds of workers with different skill sets (Corbett & Beack, 2016; Corbett & Forsey, 2017). These comparative metrics tell stories about rural educational (under)performance at different scales, and these stories meet those of people living, working and educating in rural places.

Global measurement and comparison schemes like the (OECD’s) Organization for International Cooperation and Development Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) appear to demonstrate that Canada is a high-equity, high-performing system similar to those found in Scandinavia, Finland and select elite European and Asian systems of education. There is a certain truth in this story, but it is also one that obscures critical differences and inequities in Canadian education, a situation which is also the case in other national systems identified in international testing as “high performing”. Given the radical decentralization of Canadian education with its thirteen different systems, curricula and governance structures, it is problematic to identify “Canadian” education as a unified entity as the PISA and other similar national comparative assessments tend to do.

Canadian education is riven with equity and inclusion challenges found in all advanced capitalist societies, which are well known and too numerous to catalogue

here. For instance, the share of Indigenous students in rural schools needs our attention as Canadian society continues along the path of truth and reconciliation and this is a central theme in this collection. For example, Bollman and Looker (2020) note, one result of the long (and unfortunate) history of Indigenous peoples in Canada is marked differences in educational outcomes. In each type of community along the gradient from urban to rural to remote, Indigenous students are less likely to complete their secondary schooling, compared to non-Indigenous students, and while there is a large Indigenous presence in most urban centres, many of these students live in places defined as rural and remote.

This book seeks to focus on one particular challenge that is common yet unique in each Canadian province and territory, and this is the struggle to provide quality education across a vast geography. This is arguably *the* problem of rural education, and in this book, we are concerned with the related problem of preparing teachers for work in rural communities.

## 2 The Genesis of the Book

Driven by success on international testing and skills assessments over the past decade or so, there is a narrative that has played out that positions Canadian public education systems across the country as responsive to the needs of all citizens. Through its ranking system and publications, the OECD portrays Canadian public education as an idealized global exemplar. Canada has provided an egalitarian, high-performing, education system that the OECD positions as a model of global policy. Yet, within Canadian education, there is considerable geographic, social, cultural, and economic diversity along with substantial unevenness of educational outcomes. Canada has a radically decentralized education system that is exclusively governed at the provincial level. In addition, most Canadian provinces have governing school boards that regulate educational provision in subregions of each province. While the OECD's indicators in the global PISA results suggest high student achievement, retention and equity, a more nuanced look suggests geographically inequitable outcomes are important to understand within high-performing national educational systems. One important aspect of this inequity concerns education in rural regions, where other forms of disadvantage intersect with rurality.

Problems relating to rural education are, of course, not lost on the OECD. Rural places are identified in their analysis as educational underperformers in terms of comparative evidence produced by multiple international assessment schemes. Although there are notable exceptions, the general picture is high-performing cities and rural areas that lag behind. As Andreas Schleicher puts it summarizing analysis of the PISA,

(T)hese differences in performance between students living in rural areas and those in big cities can sometimes be linked to socio-economic disparities between their populations. But PISA results show that differences in social background explain only part of the story; much

of the performance gap remains even after accounting for socio-economic status. So there does seem to be something distinct about education in large cities. (2018, p. 185)

We wish to complicate this all-too-common framing of what the Canadian Council on Learning (2008) described as the rural/urban gap. Rural communities, or communities defined as rural by one or another demographic classification are not uniform, and indeed, some are highly advantaged. The definitional problems associated with determining which places are and which are not rural are matter given a considerable amount of attention throughout this text. Given the economic, social and cultural challenges faced in many rural communities, it may well be that rural schools “punch above their weight” in terms of educational performance (Corbett 2014; Roberts 2016). These findings echo and reinforce the well-established research into the importance of the teachers, principals and other school leaders to improving student achievement, which in turn supports the need for high-quality preservice and inservice professional learning. The chapters in this volume provide a set of nuanced and contextualized accounts of teacher education practices in Canada that suggest considerable activity outside the metropolis that is addressing pressing contemporary issues in the field. The qualitative focus of much of the work in this collection also complicates and troubles the simplicity of linear comparison, quantification and classification of educational quality accomplished by broad scope quantitative instruments like the PISA and other forms of standardized testing.

None of this is to suggest that rural education and/or rural teacher education receives the resourcing and support required to provide a uniformly high quality of education across the country. Increasingly, local and national governing bodies call upon teacher education programmes to address the multiple challenges of spatial educational inequality. In particular, there are calls for systemic and programmatic changes to address the gap between urban and rural learning environments. Typically, rural education is viewed from a “metrocentric” perspective as a deficit educational space that needs to be somehow “fixed”. This metrocentric view coupled with the very pragmatic reality of the increasing closure of rural schools due to decreased demand for workers in mechanizing primary production industries, resultant depopulation and declining enrolment in rural schools is not to be underestimated for the real consequences it may have on a community’s ability to flourish and regenerate (Oncescu and Giles 2014).

In the light of these current discussions, the genesis of this book is a desire amongst a group of education scholars to shift the debate towards reimagining a relational vision of what it means to teach well in rural areas rather than focus on (Martino and Rezaei-Rashti 2013). Indeed, schools and schooling are and have always been a crucial part of the lifeblood of these rural areas. The initial call to scholars across Canada began when Dianne Gereluk invited educators from teacher education programmes who were trying to reconceptualize how to provide more robust learning experiences for future teachers in rural regions. The challenge of addressing rural teaching and learning is in part located in the nuances and complexities of the particular places, yet this challenge has overlapping threads that weave across the communities and sit within rural, regional and remote educational, cultural, economic, and social

geographies. If individually we were all grappling with the question of how to better support rural students, teachers, and parents in their schools and communities, how might we find ways to share and build upon each other's knowledge despite the reality of decentralized provincial educational jurisdictions that facilitate the development of programmes at a local level through school boards or regional education authorities?

In 2017, a group of educational researchers came together at a think tank at the University of Calgary that provided a space to reflect and begin a dialogue on a larger scale beyond what we were doing within our own post-secondary programmes in the regions that we typically serve. Some of us are quantitative researchers operating in a sociological frame. Others do qualitative work and narrative inquiry that seeks to understand the experience of rural citizens and rural education more fully. A number of us were also working with and in Indigenous communities, which have provided for several authors in this collection, an important element of how they think about rurality. Quickly, we realized that our focus on intersectionality in education compels us to consider broader scale work that explores Canadian trends in sociology, geography, economics, the analysis of poverty and Indigeneity, and to consider broader national questions that inform and influence rural schooling. While we all recognized that these themes are inextricably tied, ironically, most literature and research comfortably bracketed out such notions as distinct and separate issues other than demonstrating a fairly superficial acknowledgement that intersectionality does indeed exist. In this book, we see rurality as one dimension of intersectionality that inflects, for instance, standard structural categories such as race, social class, sex and gender that are now central to educational research.

Our circle of scholars thus expanded as we looked to see how others were considering the question of rurality beyond our teacher education programmes, and to start providing more nuanced and entangled stories that weave between such issues. Researchers from across Canada were invited to this conversation to provide a more nuanced examination of lived rural experiences on a micro and macro level for sustainable and vibrant rural communities. The invitation to broaden our circle was a reminder to each of us of our collective responsibility to elevate the conversation about why rural matters in education and society, and our concomitant responsibility to work together *in* and *with* these communities to think deeply about how we can support and cultivate the conditions for people to live well across our Canadian lands.

This book offers a new perspective concerning how Canadian educators and sociologists are shifting the conversation from a deficit model to a more hopeful discourse that relates to how together we can foster meaningful rural learning environments that will contribute to building stronger rural communities. Many of the chapters include and draw upon the voices, stories and expertise of rural people who believe and share in cultivating the conditions for people to flourish in rural areas. In so doing, there is a recognition of their rightful place and identity in this larger story, and a repositioning of historical tendencies that have silenced or furthered both-inward looking rural exceptionalism and the deficit stereotypes of the rural experience.

### 3 Rural Education in Modernity

In late August of 2019, just as we were finalizing this manuscript, the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) published a document entitled *Farmer 4.0*. This document outlines what is presented as a crucial gap between the kinds of agricultural practices, skill sets, education and technologies necessary for Canadian farming to keep pace with the remarkable growth in productivity that is possible in today's economic conditions. While agriculture only represents a small portion of Canada's rural population, the RBC report illustrates the sort of pressure facing established industries across rural geography. The general picture is that Canadian farm productivity growth is being outpaced by that of rising economies such as China, Brazil, Indonesia and India. These emerging economies have been steadily increasing market share in the global economy. Meanwhile, Canada's global market share has fallen from 6.3% in 2000 to 3.9% in 2017 despite increased raw output. Like much analysis of rural issues, productivity and modernization problems are constituted simultaneously in terms of economic growth, technological advancement and efficiency in tandem with a proposed need for a differently educated worker. In *Farmer 4.0*, RBC writes:

We concluded that with the right mix of skills, capital and technology, agriculture could add \$11 billion to Canada's GDP by 2030. To get there, we need to rethink our approach to education, both for agriculture and the growing range of sectors that affect it; do more to attract young people to farming; and invest in the skills needed to attract a growing immigrant population to the sector. (Royal Bank of Canada 2019, p. 1)

This narrative is one of many that invokes a human capital-focused neoliberal analysis of rurality as a problem space within the national economy (Corbett and Baeck 2016; Corbett and Forsey 2017). In this analysis, rural Canada is insufficiently developed, and the problem can be traced back to educational deficits primarily. In this analysis, rural matters in education because it represents a system failure in the sense that education has not kept up with the demands of a radically and rapidly changing labour market. The combination of increasing mechanization and the development of new production and distribution technologies, an ageing farmer population and labour shortages due to more retirees leaving the workforce than new workers entering it (Bollman 2014), insufficient education and recruitment, increased global competition from countries that are innovating and using technology, and the resulting differentiation of agricultural work itself into different types of managerial, engineering/technical, scientific/research and manual work create a complex picture of future needs. For the RBC, this all adds up not necessarily to a crisis (although it could be read this way), but certainly a massive loss of potential productivity for the nation.

The field of rural education has seen a protracted naming and shaming of people and systems that have failed to modernize dating back at least to the work of Cubberley (1922) who identified what he called the "rural school problem" as a subset of a larger "rural-life problem". Work that has followed from this analysis has been principally focused on "modernizing" rural schools, subjecting them to more centralized governance and control, professionalizing teaching, and amalgamating

and consolidating small rural schools into larger more “efficient” and specialized units. Another key feature of this analysis has been a focus on what is now called “raising aspirations” of rural people who are essentially blamed for their educational and subsequent economic marginalization (Byun et al. 2012; Corbett 2016; Robbins 2012). Indeed, rural education is very often situated as a classic problem of raising aspirations given that:

(R)ural-urban gaps in academic performance generally disappear after accounting for socio-economic status and rural students are less likely to expect completing a university degree than city students, but this gap in expectations persists even when rural students have a similar socio-economic status, on average across OECD countries. (Echazarra and Radinger 2019, p. 4)

Unlike the twentieth century modernization literatures on rural education and the low aspirations deficit discourse, more nuanced contemporary analyses like that of the OECD (Echazarra and Radinger 2019) and the RBC situate rural educational underperformance as a more complex phenomenon of global social change forces, community and social development, limited access, as well as low aspirations. While the RBC still recognizes the demand for what they call “doers”, or those workers who do the kinds of labour requiring relatively rudimentary levels of education by contemporary standards, they highlight the stronger demand for a range of technically skilled knowledge workers, entrepreneurs and managers to build, maintain and sustain a globally competitive agricultural industry. This contemporary work tends to be situated between international development literature, some of which take a more critical view of the development of contemporary globalization drawing on a Marxist-inspired analysis of the uneven development of capitalist societies (Pain and Hansen 2019; Stephens 2018). But more prevalent is the influence of human capital literatures that claim to be more politically neutral and even celebratory of technological and political developments and neoliberal globalization of the last 30 years (Becker 2009; Beck and Cronin 2006; Giddens 1999). Similar human capital-oriented calls for improved education have resonated through the myriad private sector and government reports from around the world up to and including *Farmer 4.0*.

In this analysis, rural matters in education because it is part of a larger phenomenon of underdeveloped human capital and shrinking rural labour forces Bollman (2014). This phenomenon is highlighted and reinforced in our analysis here. People living in rural areas (however they are defined) are, as Cubberley (1922) pointed out a century ago, a problem for education. The physical reality of their distribution across the expanse of Canadian physical geography, the vast western farmland, the Indigenous communities established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries around strategically (from the point of view of the colonial powers), yet remotely positioned trading posts, the Atlantic and Pacific coastal villages, and the logging and mining communities of the Canadian interior, have created a vast network of educational infrastructure that most Canadian provinces struggle to operate and staff. How this situation is problematized and understood is the subject of considerable debate.

Fundamentally, rural educational underperformance in terms of generally lower standardized testing and international assessment scores, graduation and continuation rates and post-secondary participation has been incorrectly understood either



as a problem of access, of aspirations, or both (Corbett 2016; Fleming and Grace 2017; Robbins 2012; Watson et al. 2016; Zipin et al. 2015). To reiterate, Canadian rural students outperformed urban students in reading tests when adjustments for socio-economic status are made (Cartwright and Allen 2002). Roberts has found that adjusting for socio-economic circumstances produces similar results for Australian rural students (2016). Furthermore, in some national contexts, rural students (e.g. the USA, Belgium, Great Britain) have higher raw PISA scores than urban students (Echazarra and Radinger 2019). What this analysis reveals is that the measured performance of rural students and their schools cannot be explained in psychological terms.

The question concerning why rural matters also raises broader questions of how to define rurality, which is a persistent problem that has been noted and explored by demographers, geographers, rural studies experts and sociologists since at least the 1960s (Pahl 1966). Any definition of rural will inevitably include some inappropriate people and places within the category and exclude some who should probably be included. This is a chronic problem in and for rural studies, and it is one that Looker and Bollman (2020) and Smith and Peller (2020) address in this book by taking great care to articulate exactly what definitions and parameters they use to demarcate rural space. However, relying entirely on demographic categorization is crucial to classify people rather than countryside. Rural geographers have more or less concluded that when we invoke the term rural and there are infinite complexities and diversities that generate different results depending on the employment of classification schemes.

Yet, for those of us who have lived and worked in rural communities, this seems ridiculous. Rural people know who they are, and they know that they face particular kinds of challenges and opportunities in the modern world. If there is one consistent story in qualitative rural education research, it is the myth that rural people do not aspire or want formal education. The challenges associated with educational access, performance and success are both individual and collective and they are as complex in rural areas as in other places.

Despite myths of rural homogeneity, social class, race, culture, language, ethnicity, disability, gender and sex all intersect in rural social space. The global techno-industrial changes illustrated in the OECD and RBC documents are, of course, familiar to many people who work and live in rural Canada, and while they are embraced by many rural entrepreneurs in both traditional rural industries and emerging spaces like ecotourism, high amenity development, alternative energy production and niche agriculture. These transformations can appear as threats to existing lifeways rather than as opportunities. This can be particularly poignant when governments and corporations call for change. The resulting policies and directives often focus on education and innovation which often ironically appear in tandem with the withdrawal of services from rural communities. These reductions in service also very often accompany the increasing centralization and capitalization of industries such as agriculture, forestry and fishing where more and more of the hands-on work is being done by temporary or immigrant labour.

All of these large-scale social and economic change forces pressure rural communities and rural citizens, and rural education cannot be understood adequately apart

from this context. Around the world, rural communities have been moved to action which can appear as futile resistance to inevitable change, but which also tends to signal both the disjuncture between worldviews and unease with the sorts of change modernity brings to rural communities. The defence of a school is generally understood as the defence of the community itself by rural citizen activists. Woods (2006) describes what he calls the “politics of the rural” to describe the way that rural space is increasingly politicised and the site of struggle. Indeed, several of the chapters in this volume relate to the educational face of these political struggles over governance and service provision outside the metropolis.

Here, we encounter the limits of demographic analysis, which is important, yet it is only one dimension of what Reid et al. (2010) and White et al. (2011) call rural social space (see Fig. 1). Rural social space as it has been developed by Bill Green, Jo Reid, Simone White and colleagues is a multifaceted way of understanding rurality that combines economy, geography and demography. This framework integrates the material, distribution of human population, culture and industry to suggest a complex perspective that draws on trialectical understandings of space (Green and Letts 2007) developed by Lefebvre (1992) and extended by a range of cultural geographers, most notably perhaps Soja (1996) and Massey (2005). Rather than understanding space as a container within which human activity takes place, space is

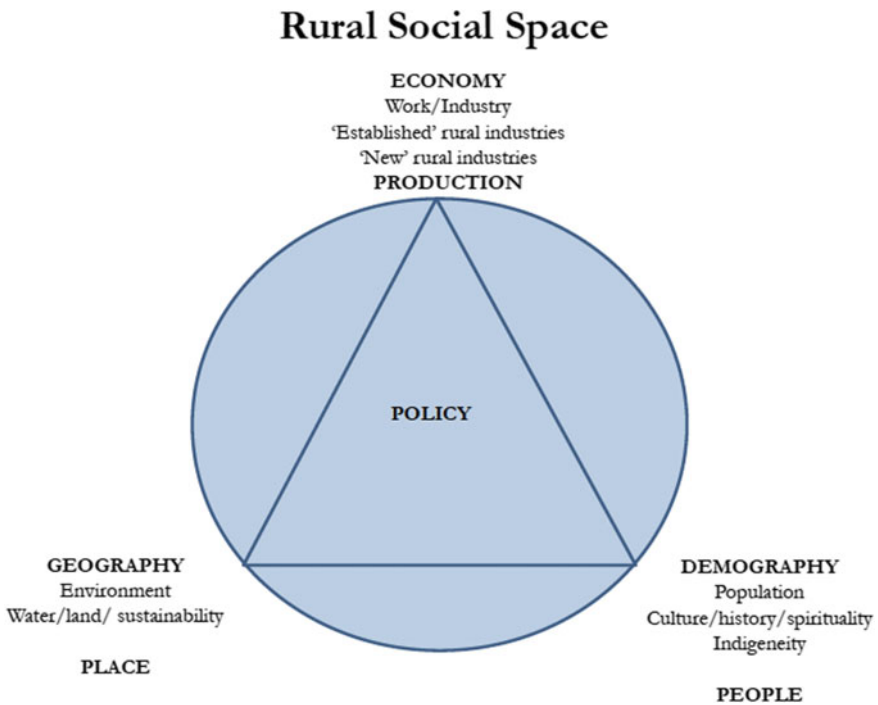


Fig. 1 Rural social space (Reid et al. 2010)

complex, multi-dimensional, overlapping, emergent and what Massey calls “thrown together”. This complex characterization allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between the realist quantitative parsing of space into place, and corollary, relational understandings of the qualitative socially and culturally mediated experience of place and space as a symbolic and lived phenomenon.

Much of the inquiry in this book presents analysis of life and education in communities populated by people who live outside metropolitan areas, i.e. cities and larger towns. They are people who have lived in rural areas for varying lengths of time and whose experience of place and culture puts rich substance into the raw demographics that define a locale in relation to population density or distance from a dense population (Looker and Bollman 2020). Here, we encounter questions beyond the realm of either critical theory or human capital discourses, questions of labour and technology and the psychology of aspirations that typically frame discussions of rural education, including those of RBC and the OECD cited above. These are ultimately stories of people in/and place.

We do not disagree with the analyses presented in high-level policy framing; the development of rural communities does demand the same high-quality education required in those spaces defined as urban or suburban. We agree that relatively low levels of university participation of rural youth (Frenette 2006) are a pressing problem, and more proximate community colleges have become more attractive to rural youth who see this form of post-secondary education as a recognizable path to a stable, well-paying rural job (Corbett 2009). However, at the same time we recognize, and the contributions to this volume demonstrate, how rural matters for cultural reasons as well. To live rurally is to live in relation with a particular physical and human geography and to participate at some level in cultural practices that have their roots in established ways of living and working outside the metropolis.

These diverse non-metropolitan cultural practices have been, it must be recognized, seen as marginal to what was considered the core business of formal education and by extension to what is seen as the core business of development itself which is urbanization. Rural people, their language and cultural practices and the everyday “rustic” things that many of us do and say (Ching and Creed 1996; Corbett 2014), have been, for the most part, placed either entirely outside the purview of formal education, situated as the object of change and reform, or at best, relegated to remedial and vocational programming (Corbett and Ackerson 2019; Ching and Creed 1996; Theobald 1996, 1997). In other words, rurality has been understood educationally from a deficit perspective and what this collection seeks to do is assert that rural is different and distinct, but not lesser than urban.

Finally, this book takes up a complex of issues that are rarely addressed in rural education scholarship, the relationship between Indigenous and settler populations. Canada is a classic settler society, violently colonized by European interests whose descendants have come to dominate the state and its culture. This domination includes the ideological and symbolic domination and exclusion built into a system of education that has worked in tandem with the interests of established capital to ensure the preservation and growth of systematic economic and cultural exclusion. While this has been well understood as injustice for generations, we have only recently begun

to seriously address what “truth and reconciliation” might look like. Rural places are often the most charged sites of interaction, exclusion and violence following from colonization and its aftermath (Scott and Louie 2020; Scully 2020), and much of the work in this volume begins to address the complexity of the Indigenous-rural interface and the politics it engenders. Many of the chapters in this volume emphasize the importance and power of place, but we hope in a more nuanced and complex relational way than the kinds of place-sensitive analysis found in much rural education scholarship. While rural education scholarship has attended to the power of place, it has been less ready to interrogate the place of power in its educational analysis (Corbett 2015).

While we address rural teacher education specifically in this book, we situate our analysis in broader teacher education, place and spatial analysis, rural studies and rural education discussions. What this book seeks to achieve is productive engagement between and across: (1) the human capital analysis of the kind of rural education that makes sense (and to whom) in a contemporary economy; (2) the ubiquitous rural aspirations discourse which, while important, is always partial and often psychologized; (3) the problems of culture that go beyond simple demography and illustrate how rurality matters to those who live and identify as rural people; (4) the questions of geographic distance and access that are never far from discussions of rural education; (5) the ubiquitous resistances, social justice struggles (often to grow the community in order to keep schools open) and political mobilization of rural people for recognition and survival in the face of bureaucracies and business interests that often fail to understand why services should be provided beyond the city limits and finally; (6) the often troubled, yet potentially productive space of the Indigenous-rural interface.

## 4 A Road Map

The book is divided into five sections. In the introductory section, we set the stage for the text attempting to situate the Canadian experience within the rural education literature following the Calgary workshop in 2017 that provided the foundation for our work. We begin by challenging the deficit perspective which has been the normal framing for work in rural education both nationally and globally. Canada is often presented in contemporary international education discourse as something of a success story, and in many ways we believe it is. One of the core secrets of this success, we suspect may have something to do with Canada’s decentralized educational governance that tends to draw attention to smaller scale and scope educational problems in the provinces, many of which remain largely rural in demography and in cultural character.

The chapter by Looker and Bollman offers original analysis of national and regional population trends, teacher demand and supply in rural Canada (including a focus on Indigenous communities), the nature of teachers’ contractual conditions, length of service, and teacher mobility. They also examine how school completion rates differ in rural areas for those who do and do not identify as Aboriginal. Smith

and Peller use spatial analytic tools to examine the accessibility of teacher education programming to Canadians living outside metropolitan areas. Martin then moves the discussion of the landscape of rural education towards a consideration of neoliberal individualism as a central framing motif in contemporary educational policy and practice. Scott and Louie conclude this section reporting on a study of programming aimed at incorporating Indigenous cultures and traditions into a rural school district.

The third section focuses on identity and relationality, reporting on how identity and conceptions of community and belonging are being addressed and incorporated in rural education and teacher education. While Looker and Bollman's work in this volume complexifies and nuances the problems associated with common assumptions about teacher demand and supply in rural Canada, they specifically highlight that teacher turnover is higher in remote and northern schools. The recruitment and retention of teachers to the most isolated of Canada's rural communities is a central problem in/for rural education. Two of these chapters, by Gereluk, Dressler, Sarah Eaton and Becker as well as the chapter co-authored by Danyluk, Scott and Burns report on rural teacher education initiatives that focus on preparing candidates who are already established in remote rural communities. These programmes focus on what Gereluk et al. call "home grown" teachers, particularly candidates who are already employed in rural schools in quasi-professional roles. The other three chapters in this section highlight the experience of different actors in the rural education landscape. Stelmach's chapter examines rural parents' sense of community in a western Canadian rural locale incorporating an analysis of the discursive constructions of insiders and outsiders. Murphy, Driedger-Enns and Huber then construct a closely drawn narrative analysis of a beginning teacher and principal who explore the meaning of rural place and deep relational roots. Finally, in a piece that focuses on a common rural education theme, but in a small city locale Cristall, Roger and Hibbert take up the power of grassroots resistance which will resonate with rural education activists.

The fourth section of the book is composed of four diverse analyses of place and land-based education. Place-based education is a movement that has had considerable influence in the field of rural education dating back to the advent of the influence of Deweyan ideas in the middle decades of the twentieth century. This emphasis has remained prominent in the field, particularly in the USA as a recent meta-analysis demonstrates (Reagan et al. 2019). In Canada, interest in place has been powerfully inflected in recent years by Indigenous education scholars who focus on land and the deep relationality implicated in dwelling in a place. The release of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 has foregrounded historic deficits in Canadian education as well as the pressing need for educators to develop pedagogies that support a more positive, educational future for all Canadians. A sample of this emerging rural scholarship is developed throughout the book, but the first three chapters in this section focus specifically on land-based education in teacher education. Scully's chapter examines how land-based education integrated with critical place-based education can challenge and disrupt teacher education candidates' ordinary understandings of what it is to teach on land and how to take on different ways of understanding. Dawn Wallin begins with a narrative analysis of her own position as

a rural settler-educator to set up an analysis of a land-based educational leadership programme conducted with Sherry Pedan that valorizes northern, Indigenous and rural space. Kevin O'Connor then takes land and place-oriented pedagogies into the particular domain of science and environmental education developing an analysis of the infusion of Indigenous knowledge into the place-based study of science. Corbett concludes this section with a critical interrogation of conceptual challenges facing place-based education in a globalized and deeply interconnected world.

In the final section, we offer some provocations and suggest some directions for Canadian rural education and rural teacher education arising from the experience of developing this book out of our initial meetings in Calgary in 2017. Leyton Schellert, the Eleanor Rix Chair of Rural Teacher Education at the University of British Columbia, offers an afterword to conclude the book. We hope this book will offer readers some answers to the question concerning why rural matters in education and indeed, why it is important to consider space, place and the multiple, complex and often messy relations that a forthright and complex analysis of rural education requires. Rural education is not a phenomenon that has been bypassed or left behind by some homogenizing juggernaut of modernity where place becomes as Giddens (1990) famously put it, “phantasmagorical”. Nor is it a monolithic and monochrome facet of close-knit, allegedly pre-modern communities of people who toil on land and sea. Rather it is part of what Lefebvre (1992) called the “production of space”, the emerging relational world we inhabit where diversity and difference compose a rich and sometimes frightening tapestry that includes different blends of the country and the city.

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# **The Rural Education Landscape in Canada**

# Setting the Stage: Overview of Data on Teachers and Students in Rural and Urban Canada



E. Dianne Looker and Ray D. Bollman

**Abstract** With new analyses of Statistics Canada data from the census and the annual Labour Force Survey and other sources, we examine the trends and current situation of teachers and students in rural (versus urban) Canada. The research literature documents concern about the ability of rural communities to attract and keep experienced teachers and closures of small rural schools. After considering trends in the number of school-aged children, the number of graduates from Bachelor of Education programmes in Canada, and the number of teachers hired in Canadian schools, we present details of the employment situation of rural and urban teachers. We find few overall rural–urban differences in teacher employment experience, including various measures of “teacher turnover”, which perhaps reflects the strength of teacher unions. However, there are important differences among rural areas, with those areas farthest from urban centres showing more teacher mobility. Looking at the important intersection of Aboriginal Identity and rural location, we discover that much of the well-documented overall rural–urban difference in high school dropout rates reflects the differential distribution and the complex situation facing those with an Aboriginal Identity. Implications for research and policy are briefly explored. (Detailed charts by province are available in Bollman, 2020.)

**Keywords** Rural · Teachers · Teacher supply · Teacher demand · Teacher working conditions · Aboriginal students · Drop-out rates · Demographic change · Time trends

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# 1 Introduction

Schools are key public institutions. Not only is attendance in some form of schooling compulsory, but most children attend schools funded by tax dollars and staffed by teachers paid by tax dollars. These facts make it important to understand the provision of this schooling, including the supply and demand for teachers, and the constraints and challenges facing teachers and students in rural and urban areas.

To set the stage for the chapters that follow, this chapter will present some key data from Statistics Canada<sup>1</sup> that highlight some factors of teacher supply and demand, as well as looking at a range of issues relating to both students and teachers, including school attendance rates, high school graduation rates, teacher employment, and turnover in rural as compared to urban areas. Section 2 explains how we measure the concepts of rural and urban in this chapter.

We will also look at the important impact of trends in the portion of the Canadian population who identify as having Aboriginal Identity.<sup>2</sup> As we will see, the age projections for those with an Aboriginal Identity indicate that this will be a fast-growing segment of the Canadian population. Further, rural areas have much higher concentrations of those with an Aboriginal Identity (10% in rural/non-metro areas compared to 5% in Canada as a whole) (Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016). So, it is critical, in any discussion of rural issues in Canada, to see how Aboriginal Identity intersects with rurality.<sup>3</sup> Some issues which have been thought

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the data presented are available on Statistics Canada website, but most of the reported data come from special requests submitted to Statistics Canada, and are not elsewhere published. The authors would like to acknowledge the funding provided by the Norwegian Research Council for the generation of these special tabulations. These data are now in the public domain and are available from the authors upon request. Selected charts by province are provided in Bollman (2020).

<sup>2</sup>We acknowledge that the term “Indigenous” has replaced the term “Aboriginal” in some recent discourse. We have chosen to use the designation of “Aboriginal” Identity because that is the term still being used in the Labour Force Survey and was used in the 2016 Census of Population, when respondents were asked whether they identified as an Aboriginal. Aboriginal Identity was derived from data collected in three questions: (1) Aboriginal group (respondents could respond “Yes, First Nations (North American Indian)”, “Yes, Métis”, “Yes, Inuk (Inuit)” or “No, not an Aboriginal person”); (2) Registered or Treaty Indian status (“No” or “Yes, Status Indian (Registered or Treaty)”); and (3) Membership in a First Nation or Indian band (“No” or “Yes, member of a First Nation/Indian band”). Aboriginal Identity is a derived variable. For more information on the input variables for the Aboriginal Identity variable in the 2016 Census of Population, refer to the definitions for Aboriginal group, Registered or Treaty Indian Status and Membership in a First Nation or Indian Band (Statistics Canada 2018). Statistics Canada notes that users should be aware that *the estimates associated with this variable are more affected than most by the incomplete enumeration of certain Indian reserves and Indian settlements in the Census of Population*. For additional information on the collection and dissemination of Aboriginal data, including incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements, refer to the Aboriginal Peoples Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016 and the Aboriginal Peoples Technical Report, Census of Population, 2016.

<sup>3</sup>In this volume, see Scott and Louie (2020), Scully (2020), Wallin and Peden (2020) and O’Connor (2020).

of as essentially rural (such as lower rates of high school completion) may well relate more to the complex status of Aboriginal peoples.

This chapter is not designed to explore particular theoretical issues. Rather, the focus is on providing a broad stroke picture of students and teachers in rural as compared to urban parts of the country.

A key finding is that many rural–urban differences documented in the research literature really reflect differences between *remote* rural areas and all other rural areas. That is, there are important differences *among* rural areas. Further, much of the “rural” population of Canada lives in “rural” areas within commuting distance of larger metropolitan centres. These urban-adjacent rural areas are often more like the near-by metropolitan areas than they are like the rural remote areas, in terms of many of the characteristics which we examine. Thus, despite there being some important attributes in smaller, remote rural areas that are often causes for concern in educational circles, there are fewer “rural–urban” differences among students and teachers than one might expect, when “all” rural areas are compared to urban areas.

## 2 What Is “Rural”?

We focus on rurality as a spatial concept. Others suggest rural is a social construct (Halfacree 1993) or a “state of mind” (Allen 1973). As a spatial concept, rural may be considered to have two key dimensions: density of population (or population size of the settlement) and distance-to-density (Bollman and Reimer 2018; Reimer and Bollman 2010; World Bank 2009). Various thresholds of density and distance-to-density have been used to classify population as rural and urban. In this chapter, for most of the discussion, we have chosen to use *metro* to represent “urban” and to use *non-metro* to represent “rural”.

In our analyses, “metro” refers to census metropolitan areas (CMAs) which have a population of 100,000 or more (with 50,000 or more in the built-up core) and includes the residents of all neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50% or more of the employed residents commute to the built-up core. Thus, “non-metro” refers to individuals residing outside metro areas.<sup>4</sup>

This way of classifying the population as urban and rural is based on a couple of considerations:

- A scan of the “Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletins” published by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada 1999–2012) indicates that towns and cities with a population less than 100,000 have socio-economic characteristics that more

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<sup>4</sup>See Bollman (2020) for details.

closely align with the characteristics of the population in rural and small town areas and align less with the population of metro areas.<sup>5</sup>

- Important data on the trend over time regarding the demand for teachers and the supply of teachers were more easily available for the metro and non-metro delineation. Specifically:
  - Statistics Canada’s programme for annual demographic statistics publishes annual estimates of the population for each single year of age for each CMA in Canada. By summing the CMAs within each province and subtracting these figures from the province-total population by single year of age, we calculate the level and trend of the school-aged population in non-metro areas for each province.
  - Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) publishes monthly data on the number and characteristics of those employed in each occupation. We selected the occupation of elementary school and kindergarten teachers and the occupation of secondary school teacher. The sample size of the LFS for metro areas and non-metro areas was large enough for each of these occupations to generate a time series of the level and trend of the supply of teachers in non-metro areas.

There are important differences *within* the non-metro population which, for some measures, we are able to document with data from the 2016 Census of Population by dis-aggregating the non-metro population into the following groups:

- *Census agglomerations (CAs)* have at least 10,000 in the urban core and include the population of neighbouring census subdivisions<sup>6</sup> (CSDs) where 50% or more of the employed residents commute to the CA. For the population living outside CMA/CA areas, the population is classified according to their *Metropolitan Influenced Zone (MIZ)* (Statistics Canada 2018):
  - Strong MIZ includes the population of all CSDs where 30% or more of the employed residents commute to a CMA or CA;
  - Moderate MIZ includes CSDs where 5% to 29% of the employed residents commute to a CMA or CA;
  - Weak MIZ includes CSDs with some commuters, but less than 5% of the employed residents commute to a CMA or CA;
  - No MIZ refers to CSDs with no commuters to a CMA or CA. (However, there are still many workers who commute to smaller centres [Harris et al. 2008]); and finally
  - Residents of the Territories who live outside the CAs of Whitehorse and Yellowknife are classified as “Non-CA Territories”.

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<sup>5</sup>The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) is one of the few organizations which regularly publishes systematic statistical data on rural areas. The ROI has chosen the “metro vs. non-metro” delineation to portray the urban and rural population in Ontario in their series of “Focus on Rural Ontario” Factsheets (Rural Ontario Institute 2013–Present).

<sup>6</sup>A census subdivision (CSD) is the general term for municipalities (as determined by provincial/territorial legislation) or areas treated as municipal equivalents for statistical purposes (e.g. Indian reserves, Indian settlements, and unorganized territories) (Statistics Canada 2018).

The analysis of the results by the MIZ classification shows the nature of differences within rural areas.

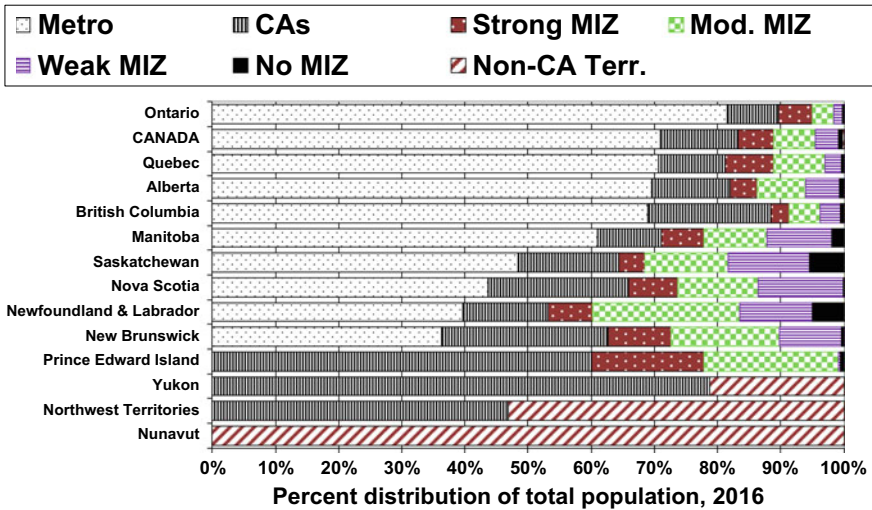
### 3 Data Sources

With a few exceptions, the information presented is from either the LFS or from Canadian census data. An advantage of the LFS is that it provides information on more points over time, giving us some important information about shifts in teacher employment over the last couple of decades. Further, it asks a lot of detail about *type* and terms of employment that are not covered in the census. However, the LFS is restricted to those over 15 years of age, and it *excludes* those living on First Nations' reserves. It is important to note that the LFS is based on a sample, and the limited sample size precludes some detailed analyses at the subprovincial level. The census, while more comprehensive in its geographic coverage, is taken only once every five years, and it covers a more limited number of topics.

As a result of the types of data available, for many of the analyses we do not have details on the non-metro areas broken down into those rural areas which are distant from urban centres versus those which are closer (i.e. "Metropolitan Influenced Zones" or "MIZ"). If there are key differences among rural areas, as there no doubt are, these may not be evident in the graphs we present based on LFS data.

Nevertheless, it is important to take into consideration the relative size of the populations being discussed. Overall, in Canada, in 2016, the census tells us that 71% of the population lived in metro areas of 100,000 or more. The 29% in non-metro areas include: 12% in census agglomerations of 10,000–99,999; 6% in strong MIZ; 7% in moderate MIZ; 4% in weak MIZ; 1% in no MIZ and less than 1% in the rural and small town areas of the territories (summarized in Fig. 1).

We will see in some of the graphs later in this chapter that for many of issues for which there is a large difference by rural location, the differences arise in the weak MIZ and the no MIZ areas and in the rural and small town areas of the Territories versus other areas. When interpreting these patterns, it is important to keep in mind that these three areas together represent about 5% of the total Canadian population. This fact does not make them unimportant, but it may be relevant to discussions of priorities in policy discussions. Further, the experiences of teachers in these more rural remote areas will likely differ from the experiences of those who live and work in more urban-adjacent "rural" areas.



Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) which have a population of 100,000 or more (with 50,000 or more in the built-up core) and includes all neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50% or more of the workforce commutes to the built-up core. Census Agglomerations (CAs) have 10,000 or more in the built-up core and includes all neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50% or more of the workforce commutes to the built-up core. Metropolitan Influenced Zones (MIZ) are assigned on the basis of the share of the workforce that commutes to any CMA or CA (Strong MIZ: 30% or more; Moderate MIZ: 5 to 29%; Weak MIZ: 1 to 5%; No MIZ (no commuters).  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016. Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 1** Per cent distribution of the total population by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, Canada, provinces, and territories, 2016

## 4 The Issues

### 4.1 Decline in School-Aged Children

A key issue in many rural communities is a general decline in the population (but see Bollman 2017<sup>7</sup>), and a specific decrease in the number of children and youth. A serious decline in school-aged children often leads to pressure to close or amalgamate schools, pressure that is often resisted by rural communities.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Bollman (2017) presents the interesting finding that many rural communities are growing. However, since a key part of being a “rural” community is population size, when a community grows past a certain size, it is reclassified as “urban”. So, rural “success stories” are often lost as communities become reclassified. See Fig. 4 in Bollman and Clemenson (2008) and their appendix “The rural quandary: Analyzing geographic data over time” that describes the quandary between reporting data over time for the “rural concept” or for a specific geographic delineation.

<sup>8</sup>The decision about whether to close or amalgamate a rural school typically falls to the local school board or the provincial Department of Education. However, one could argue that the underlying population dynamic is more the purview of the local social and economic development agencies, working with the community to attract and keep young families with school-aged children. The school administration is typically blamed for the decision to close a school where, arguably, it is the mandate of community stakeholders to maintain and to build the school-age population in order to justify keeping the school open. That said, see Corbett and Mulcahy (2006). This debate is the context within which we provide selected statistical indicators related to rural schools. For a map of

Galway (2015) talks about the enrolment declines in rural areas of Atlantic Canada, echoing Dibbon's (2002) analysis which is specific to Newfoundland and Labrador. The concern is that the "...school-aged population is declining at a precipitous rate..." (Dibbon 2002, p. 6). The provincial government department of Saskatchewan Learning notes a similar pattern in Saskatchewan where "significant decreases in both student enrolments and the number of educators required are projected" (Saskatchewan Learning 2007, p. 11). Corbett and Beck (2016) also reference the concern about a population implosion in rural areas as feeding part of the discourse about rural schooling.

This population decline may be attributed to (a) an ageing population, reflecting an out-migration of young adults in their childbearing years and/or an in-migration of older individuals, and/or (b) a decline in fertility among young adults (Galway 2015). The out-migration of youth and young adults is well documented in many regions of Canada (Bollman 2018; Dupuy et al. 2000; Galway 2015; Looker 2013; Looker and Naylor 2010a). The issue is not only that youth leave to pursue post-secondary education (see Corbett 2007), but that many fail to return. Since few young adults move from urban to rural areas (Dupuy et al. 2000; Looker 2013; Swanson and McGranahan 1989), this out-migration of rural youth means there are fewer young adults of childbearing age to increase the local population.

#### 4.2 *Rural–Urban Patterns in the Demand for Teachers*

Of course, there is concern, especially among rural communities themselves, about declining populations and declining numbers of school-aged children because of the impact these declines have on schools in rural areas. In addition to the threat of closing and amalgamating schools, there are the frequently reported issues of (a) the supply of teachers to replenish those who are retiring, and (b) the challenge of recruiting (and retaining) teachers in rural and remote communities. See the related chapters in this volume (Gereluk et al. 2020; Murphy et al. 2020; Danyluk et al. 2020; Stelmach 2020).

Kitchenham and Chasteneuf (2010) highlight the impact of teacher retirements. They note that, in Northern Canada, "There is an overall anticipated shortage of teachers because the retirement rate has accelerated in the last ten years and the number of teachers graduating has declined in relation to this retirement trend" (p. 870).

There has certainly been ample media coverage of issues relating to the supply of teachers. Some warn that there are "Way too many teachers" (2011), while others claim there are teacher *shortages* in many areas of Canada (Montgomery 2018; Pfeifer 2018).

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the pattern of community growth and decline in Canada, see Beshiri and Bollman (2001), Mwansa and Bollman (2005) and Slide 21 in Bollman (2018).



Galway (2015) presents a more balanced analysis. He notes that “the range of demographic factors and political and economic drivers required to predict fluctuations in teacher demand are complex and unstable, and many are out of the control of governments and universities” (p. 2). He and others (Brandon 2015; Dibbon 2002; Jack and Ryan 2015) emphasize that while “enrolment is the fundamental driver of teacher demand, there is little evidence to suggest that teacher demand is tightly coupled to enrolment” (Galway 2015, p. 8). In other words, the number of school-aged children is important but not the *only* factor when considering demand for teachers.

Dibbon agrees with these authors that “...there is no overall shortage ... and there is not likely to be one in the near future...” (Dibbon 2002, p. 13). However, there *are* regional variations in teacher demand and supply, variations that are central to the focus of the current book. “It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract teachers to rural and remote regions...” (Dibbon 2002, p. 12). “...it is difficult for small rural schools to attract and retain qualified teaching staff” (Canadian Council on Learning 2006, p. 4). This pattern is echoed by others (Alberta Teachers’ Association 2002; Eaton et al. 2015; French 2019; Hamm 2015; Lamb et al. 2014; Saskatchewan Learning 2007; Saskatchewan School Boards Association 2010).

Some of the research, cited above, notes not only the issue with attracting teachers to rural and remote areas, but also with retaining them. The Canadian Council on Learning comments that “rural schools often have to fill their vacancies with younger, less experienced teachers” (CCL 2006, p. 4) and that this, in turn, leads to high teacher turnover. Kitchenham and Chasteneuf (2010) note the same concern in filling teaching positions in the Territories. On the other hand, some researchers find higher turnover in *urban* schools—see Schaefer et al. (2012) and Guarineo et al. (2006).

Further, there is the issue of particular specializations. Even when rural schools are able to attract qualified teachers, they may not be able to fill specialty positions. This issue is raised by Dibbon (2002), Saskatchewan Learning (2007), Lamb et al. (2014), Kirchenham and Chasteneuf (2010), Montgomery (2018), and the Canadian Council on Learning (2006). And, given the important role played by supply or “substitute” teachers, the lack of such teachers in many rural and remote areas can add to the challenges facing schools in rural and remote areas (Galway 2015; Nova Scotia Teacher Supply and Demand Report 2012).

### 4.3 Rural–Urban “Performance” Gap

Separate from the issue of the availability of teachers is what has been referred to as the rural–urban “performance” gap. There are two components to this “performance gap” that are referenced in the literature. One is the differential high school graduation rate in rural and urban areas, with high school completion being higher in urban than rural areas. The other is the gap in results from standardized testing, such as the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) reading scores. We will

focus solely on high school graduation rates, since the data we have do not have PISA scores or any other measure of standardized testing.<sup>9</sup>

It has been documented for some time that in Canada, as elsewhere (Bowlby 2005; Swanson and McGranahan 1989; Uppal 2017; USDA 2017), rural areas tend to have lower rates of high school completion (or, as is often referenced, corresponding high rates of “dropping out” before receiving a high school diploma). Overall, dropout rates tend to be declining over time as more youth complete high school (Gilmore 2010). And, while the rural–urban difference is declining in many areas (USDA 2017), it still persists in many others (Canadian Council on Learning 2006; Richards 2011). High school completion is seen as important partly because of the human capital skills developed during the process, but also because of its “signalling” effect to employers (Frenette 2013).

One issue that researchers have explored is *why* rural youth have higher dropout rates. Wenk and Hardesty (1995) suggest it has to do with family resources: “...rural teenagers are just as likely to translate family resources into increased education as are teenagers living in other regions” (p. 327). However, the key point is that “family resources” are *not* the same in all areas. Others emphasize differences in the occupational skills needed in rural areas, and thus the opportunity structure<sup>10</sup> facing rural as compared to urban youth. The “... occupational structure of urban and rural regions appear polarized, even when differences in industry structure are taken into account” (Alasia and Magnusson 2005; see also Beshiri 2001; Canadian Council on Learning 2006; Gibbs et al. 1998; Looker 2002, 2010a; Magnusson and Alasia 2004). Corbett and Beck note that “Local labour markets constitute an important structure for young people in the sense that the possibilities they see at their places of residence will affect the choices they make for the future” (2016, p. 546). As they note, often decisions about the jobs that constitute these “opportunity structures” are made by global corporations based outside the rural community. See also Martin (2020) in this volume.

There are also important regional variations in the dropout rates, especially when looking at remote and northern areas. Gilmore documents that it tends to be “those in smaller towns who contributed more to the dropout rate than young people in more sparsely populated areas” (2010, p. 3). And the Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report (2010) claims that rural areas outside the north have *lower* dropout rates than urban areas. So, certainly further investigation into these rates is warranted.

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<sup>9</sup>For discussions of rural–urban differences in reading scores see Cartwright (2003), Cartwright and Allen (2002), the Canadian Council on Learning (2006), and Lamb et al. (2014).

<sup>10</sup>See Corbett (2009) and Corbett and Beck (2016) for a nuanced discussion of the issues creating these opportunity structures.

#### 4.4 *Aboriginal Issues*

It is important when we talk about rural issues in Canada to recognize that a higher share of the rural population has an Aboriginal Identity, compared to urban. This is particularly important given the history of schooling in Canada for Aboriginal peoples.

We have some limited data that relate to those with an Aboriginal Identity. While any kind of comprehensive review of the research relating to Aboriginal schooling is beyond the scope of this chapter, identifying some of the relevant research will help to put those results in a wider context.

In their discussion of the challenges in teacher recruitment facing rural and remote areas, Eaton et al. (2015) note that Aboriginal communities are especially vulnerable to these challenges.

Others note the lower retention rates/higher dropout rates among Aboriginal peoples (Frenette 2013; Gilmore 2010; Saskatchewan Learning 2007). Uppal (2017) reports that the dropout rates, Canada wide, are: 20% for Aboriginal males; 16% for Aboriginal females, 9% for non-Aboriginal males, and 5% for non-Aboriginal females (2017, p. 3). Richards echoes this finding, stating that “Canada’s most serious education gap is that between [those] who identified as Aboriginal... and other Canadians” (2011, p. 8). The issue is especially critical on First Nations’ reserves. Sharpe and Lapointe (2011) add to that discussion by noting that educational attainment tends to be higher in reserves near urban centres. So, the issue is a complex one. Nonetheless, it warrants attention, and it is important to try to untangle the effect of rural location from that of Aboriginal Identity, given the uneven residence of Aboriginal peoples across the rural–urban landscape. See the related chapters in this volume (Scott and Louie 2020; Scully 2020; Wallin and Peden 2020; O’Connor 2020).

## 5 Results

We start by setting the context for a discussion of schooling in rural versus urban areas. First, it is important to note the distribution of the population by urban and rural for Canada and for each province/territory.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the total population in metro areas and in Metropolitan Influenced Zones (MIZ) within Canada and the provinces and territories (see also Table 2 in Bollman 2018). No province has more than 5% of its population in the no MIZ areas (Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan have 5%). (And rural areas in the territories outside the census agglomerations of Yellowknife and Whitehorse are in a separate category, labelled as “Non-CA Territories”.) Only three provinces have more than 10% of their population in the weak MIZ zone: Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia have 13% of their populations in weak MIZ areas; Newfoundland and Labrador have 12%.

As noted earlier, the distribution for Canada as a whole is: 71% in “metro”; 12% in census agglomerations (1000 and over but less than 100,000); 6% in strong MIZ; 7% in moderate MIZ; 4% in weak MIZ; 1% in no MIZ and less than 1% in the areas of the territories outside Yellowknife and Whitehorse.

Thus, the share of the population residing in non-metro areas varies widely across the provinces and territories, and the share residing in “more” remote non-metro areas (i.e. weak MIZ and no MIZ) areas varies as well.

## 6 The “Demand” Side: Changes in the School-Aged Population

The literature review, above, noted that the size of the student population is not the only driver of the demand for teachers. However, it is a key part of this demand and cannot be ignored, especially in rural and remote areas that face population decline and/or ageing.

In order to set the stage for a more detailed discussion of patterns in rural as compared to urban areas, it is useful to see what the patterns have been in Canada, overall, overtime, and what the projected size of the school population will be. Such an overview allows us to have some context to understand any historic trends in rural versus urban areas.

How has the “target” population of 6–14-year-olds and of 15–18-year-olds<sup>11</sup> changed in Canada over the last several decades? How is it likely to change in the next few decades? We will start by considering 6–14-year-olds (the primary target age group for elementary school) and then 15–18-year-olds (the target age group for secondary school).

Looking first at the historical trends (the data up to 2017 in Figs. 2 and 3), we see the demographic pattern of a slight increase in children aged 6–14 years of age, from 1997 to 2002, at which point the numbers decrease, with an upturn in 2013.

The same pattern unfolds for youth 15–18 years of age, with about a 7-year lag (as the elementary school-aged individuals move into the group 15–18 years of age) (Fig. 3). For this age group, there was an increase to 2008, then a decrease to 2017. There is no rise in the historical data as the recent bump in youth aged 6–14 has not yet shifted to this older age group.

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<sup>11</sup>Since education is a provincial jurisdiction in Canada, the relevant age groups for elementary and secondary schooling differ. Differences exist in: the compulsory ages to start schooling, the age to which compulsory attendance continues; and the breakdown in “levels” of schooling. Some provinces have “junior high” years, others do not, and those that do have a “junior high” level, do not always include the same grades of schooling. Quebec has “CEGEP” (Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel), a publicly funded pre-university, post-high school system, which most students attend after grade 11, while most other provinces have a grade 12 in high school. Given this variation, there is no one cut-off in ages that “best” captures “elementary” and “secondary” students in Canada as a whole. Our choice of ages for the cut-off reflects the best match to various provincial schooling systems.

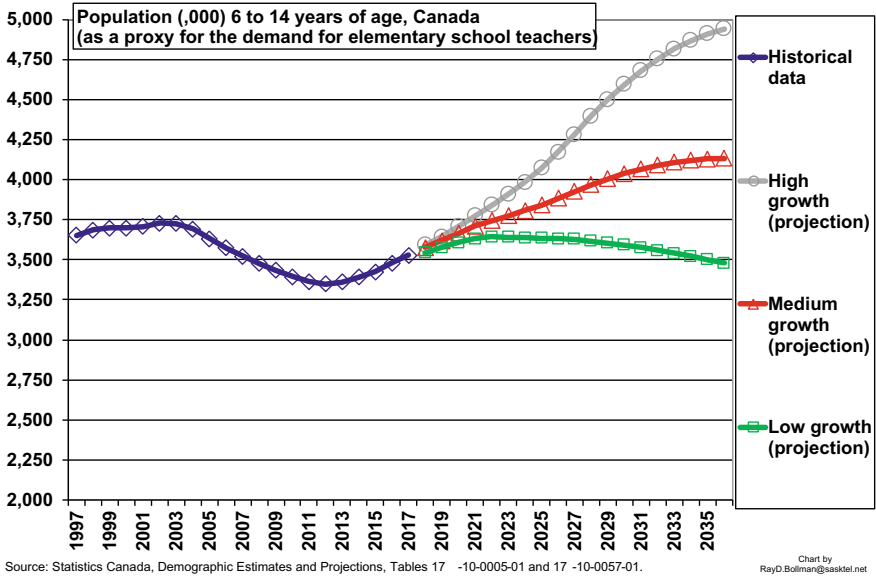


Fig. 2 Population 6–14 years of age, Canada; historical data from 1997 to 2017 and projections to 2036

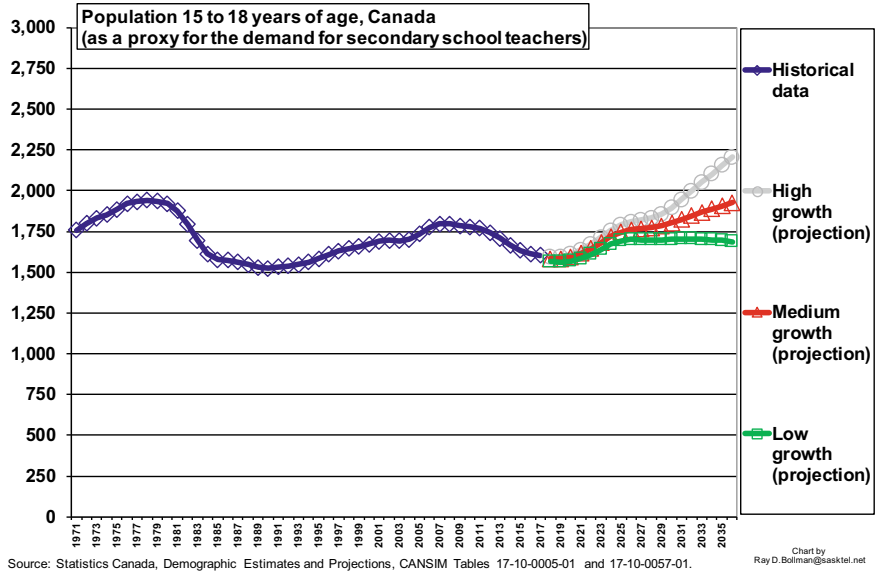


Fig. 3 Population 15–18 years of age, Canada; historical data from 1997 to 2017 and projections to 2036

More interesting, perhaps, especially for those planning for future hiring of teachers in Canada is the other information in these figures. Figures 2 and 3 also give *projections* for these demographic age groups from 2018 to 2036, based on a number of assumptions. Statistics Canada has prepared projections of the population by age group, given the assumption of high growth, of medium growth, and of low growth.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2 shows that the number of elementary school-aged children in Canada is expected to increase at least until 2025. What happens after 2025 depends on which set of assumptions is the more accurate. A low growth scenario would see a decline in this age group after 2025; a high growth scenario would see it mushroom to well above historic levels. The more moderate, and perhaps more likely, medium growth scenario would see a consistent increase in this age group to 2036, to the point where the numbers match those in the 1970s (data not shown, see Bollman 2020) and are higher than in the mid-1990s, where we start the focus for this chapter.

Again, for secondary school enrolment (Fig. 3), we see an expected increase until about 2025, then either a levelling off (under the low growth scenario), a slight increase (under the medium growth scenario) to the peak evident in the late 1970s (Bollman 2020).

The conclusion we can draw appears to be that the number of school-aged children, in Canada as a whole, is likely to increase in the next two decades. These projections are not available at the subprovincial level, so we cannot, at this point, do a rural–urban comparison.

There is, however, also information available on the historic trends and projections at the *provincial* level<sup>13</sup> to get a feel for how these trends vary across the country. What these provincial analyses show is that

- (a) the historic trends have differed from the Canada-level trends in some provinces; and
- (b) the projected increase is not likely to occur in all provinces.

Considering the population of *all* school-aged children (6–18 years of age), there was a decline at the Canada level in the recent historical period (from 2002 to 2015) but the numbers have started to increase in 2016 and 2017. Most provinces show a similar pattern wherein the decline of the population 6–18 years of age has reversed in recent years. Three Atlantic Provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia) are showing a continuous decline in school-aged children up to 2017. Only two jurisdictions (Alberta and Nunavut) reported a continuous increase over the 1997–2017 period in their population 6–18 years of age (see Bollman 2020 for details).

The *projections* for most provinces and territories show a projected *increase* in the population 6–18. However, a *decline* is projected for Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and for New Brunswick.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>See Bollman (2020) for the assumptions for the different growth scenarios.

<sup>13</sup>Charts for each province and territory for those 6–14 years of age and those 15–18 years of age are presented in Bollman (2020).

<sup>14</sup>Recall the caveat that we are using the assumptions in a “medium growth” projection and these projections were published in 2014 (Statistics Canada 2014).

## 7 Rural Urban Demographic Trends

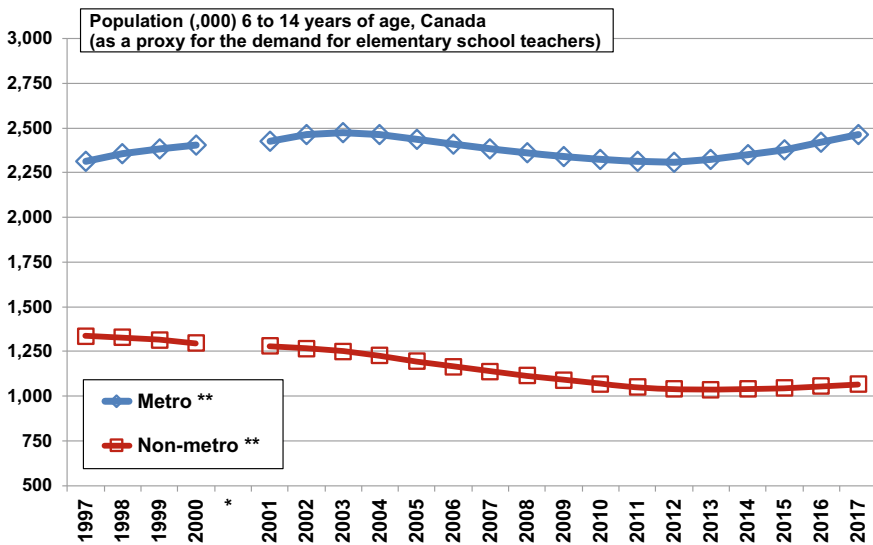
These overall demographic trends set the stage for a consideration of urban–rural differences in these patterns. Unfortunately, there are no projections available for rural versus urban areas, but we can learn from the historic trends.

As of 2017, 29% of the population of Canada resided in rural areas (“non-metro” in these graphs) (Fig. 1). Similarly, 30% of those aged 6–14 and those aged 15–18 were living in rural areas (data not shown).

There is, of course, important provincial variation in these proportions. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan, the non-metro population outnumbers the metro. In PEI and the three territories, there is no “metro” area at all; the whole province or territory is “non-metro” (Fig. 1).

So, what are the relevant demographic trends in rural as compared to urban areas for Canada as a whole? Figures 4 and 5<sup>15</sup> show the patterns for Canada, from 1997 to 2017.

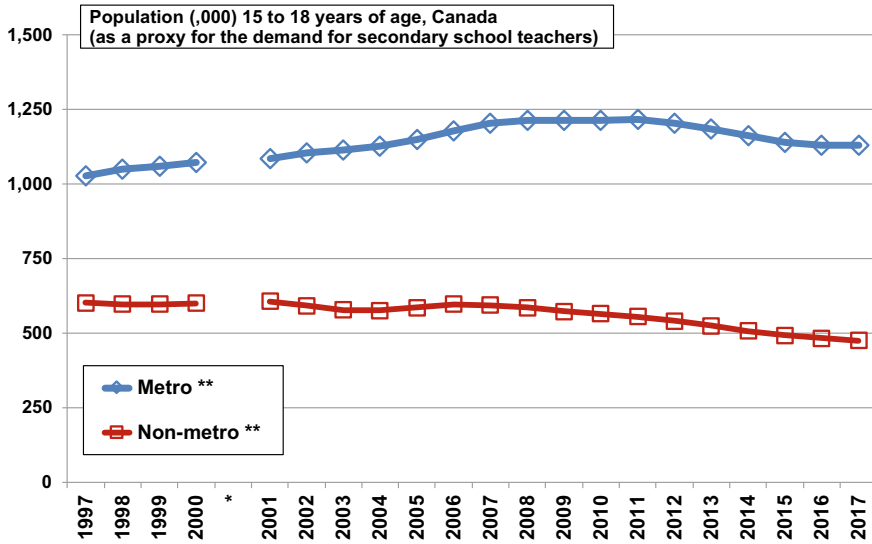
As Fig. 4 shows, the recent upturn in the number of children 6–14 years of age, evident in Fig. 2, occurs almost entirely in the urban/metro areas. The number



\* Data for 1997 to 2000 are classified according to the 2006 grid for CMA boundaries and data since 2001 are classified according to the 2011 grid for CMA boundaries.  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) which have a total population 100,000 or more (with at least 50,000 in the urban core) and includes all neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed residents commute to the CMA. Non-metro refers to individuals who live outside a CMA.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Annual Demographic Statistics. CANSIM Table 051-0001 and 051-0056. Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

Fig. 4 Population 6–14 years of age, by rural–urban location, historical data from 1997 to 2017, Canada

<sup>15</sup>Data for 1996–2000 are classified according to the 2006 grid for CMA boundaries and data since 2001 are classified according to the 2011 grid for CMA boundaries. The break in the graphs in Figs. 3 and 4 reflect this change in classification.



\* Data for 1997 to 2000 are classified according to the 2006 grid for CMA boundaries and data since 2001 are classified according to the 2011 grid for CMA boundaries.  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) which have a total population 100,000 or more (with at least 50,000 in the urban core) and includes all neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed residents commute to the CMA. Non-metro refers to individuals who live outside a CMA.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. **Annual Demographic Statistics**. CANSIM Table 051-0001 and 051-0056. Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 5** Population 15–18 years of age, by rural–urban location, historical data from 1997 to 2017, Canada

of children in this age group in non-metro areas has been fairly level since 2010. However, the overall message is that there has been an increase in number of children in this age group since 1997 in metro areas, and a decrease in these numbers in non-metro areas, over time.

The slight decrease in the last decade in the number of youth *aged 15–18*, shown in Fig. 3, is reflected in both the metro and non-metro patterns (Fig. 5). Note that the rural–urban gap widens over time (i.e. rural declined more), from 1997 to 2017.

There are significant differences in these demographic trends for these age groups in the different provinces (Bollman 2020). How do these differences play out in the rural–urban breakdown?

The breakdown of these trends by non-metro versus metro shows that, for those provinces with a decline in recent decades among school-aged children (Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick<sup>16</sup>), that decline is mostly attributable to declines in the numbers in non-metro areas. Further, the decline is steeper for the younger age group, those 6–14 years of age. There is, in fact, little variation in the 1997–2017 period in the number of school-aged children in *metro* areas in these provinces.

<sup>16</sup> All of Prince Edward Island is classified as “non-metro” so there is no comparison possible in that province.



In Alberta, where there is an increase in recent years, especially among those 6–14 years of age, most of the increase is in the *metro* areas of Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge.

Looking at things another way, there is an increase among those 6–14 years of age in *non-metro areas* in recent years—basically since 2012 or 2013—only in Quebec, in the four western provinces and in the territories. There is an increase in those aged 6–14 in *metro areas* in *all* provinces (noting that PEI and the territories have no “metro” areas) during the same time period. Further, the increase in these numbers in metro areas is more pronounced in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec.

The picture is rather different for those aged 15–18, as one can see from the Canada totals charted in Fig. 5. There is no *increase* in recent years among this age group in either metro or non-metro areas, at the Canada level, as the recent increase in the population 6–14 years of age has not yet reached the older age group. Indeed, there is no increase in the numbers in this older age group in metro or non-metro areas in any of the provinces or territories in the last few years. The only rural–urban difference of note is that the *decline* has been more pronounced in recent years in non-metro as compared to metro areas in: Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia (see Bollman 2020 for details).

So, the bottom line is that, where there is a decline in the school-aged population, it tends to be more pronounced in non-metro areas. The long-term projections at the level of provinces/territories, at least in some cases, show that there will be an increase the school-aged population. It remains to be seen if the increase will have the same *effect* in rural as in urban parts of the country.

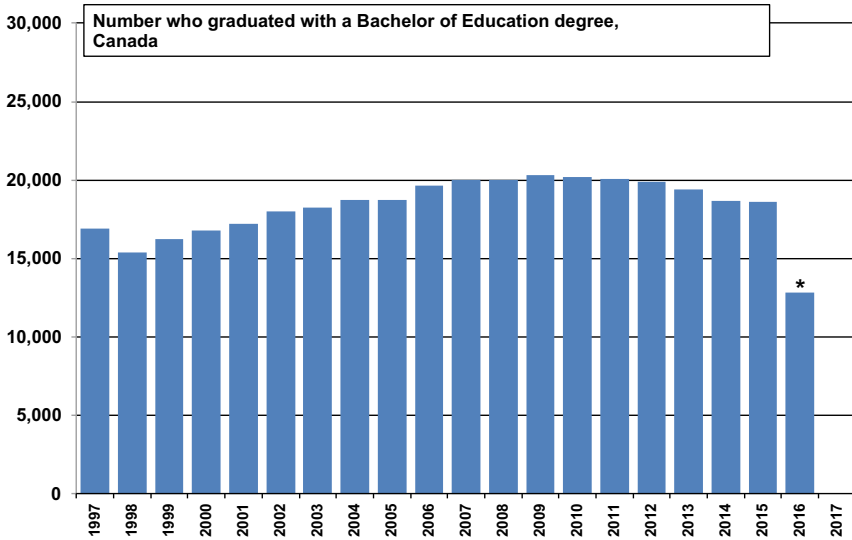
## 8 Supply of New Teachers: Number of Bachelor of Education Graduates

Having looked at the trends in the number of school-aged children, we next look at the supply of teachers. Universities and colleges in Canada graduate several thousand new teachers every year. According to Statistics Canada, 12,846 individuals graduated with a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree in Canada in 2016.<sup>17</sup> That number comprised more than 7% of *all* bachelor degree graduates in Canada that year.

As Fig. 6 shows, the number of B.Ed. graduates declined from 1997 to 1998, then steadily increased, reaching a high of 20,304 in 2009. Overall, the number of B.Ed. graduates has been between 18,000 and 20,000 per year from 2002 to 2015, but has recently decreased.

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<sup>17</sup>Note that, in 2015, Ontario halved the number of admissions to Bachelor of Education programs and extended the program from a 1-year program to a 2-year program. Thus, we show a drop from 2015 to 2016 in Ontario and, therefore, in the totals for Canada. The data for 2017 and 2018 on the number of Bachelor of Education graduates were not available when this chapter was drafted.



\* In 2015, Ontario halved the number of admissions to Bachelor of Education programs and extended the program from a 1 year program to a 2 year program.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Graduates of degree programs in education (undergraduate plus non-graduate post-baccalaureate) (data for 2005 to 2008 includes imputed values for the University of Regina) Table 37-10-0012-01.  
 Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 6** Number of Bachelor of Education graduates, 1997–2016, Canada (The University of Regina did not submit any reports from 2005 to 2008. This gap affects not only provincial totals but also totals for the country as a whole. To adjust for this omission, data were imputed for these missing years so that the numbers in Saskatchewan and at the Canada-level parallel the numbers of graduates in the preceding and following years)

In more detailed provincial data (Bollman 2020), the overall increases over the past twenty years in B.Ed. graduates primarily reflect an increase in the number of such graduates from Ontario to 2015. That pattern changed somewhat in recent years, with the number of graduates being somewhat lower in Ontario since 2012, and dramatically so since 2015. Up until 2015, Ontario graduates made up over 40% of all B.Ed. graduates in Canada. Given the admission cuts in Ontario in 2015, they now account for only 26% of Canadian B.Ed. graduates. Quebec graduates accounted for about twenty per cent of all graduates in most years since 2000; as of 2016, they make up 30% of all B.Ed. graduates. Numbers of graduates from other provinces have remained quite consistent since 1997.

Since students interested in B.Ed. programs go where the programs are offered, we do not have any details on the access of B.Ed. programs by aspiring teachers *from* rural as compared to urban areas. However, see Frenette (2002) and Looker (2010b).

## 9 Number of Teachers Employed in Canada

So, how many teachers are there, employed as elementary and secondary teachers,<sup>18</sup> in Canada?

The number of teachers employed, of course, varies from month to month as teachers are hired, and others leave, temporarily or permanently. To get a clearer picture, we look at the number employed in the average month during the school year (September–June).

The data for each school year presented in Bollman (2020) show that the number of teachers employed in Canada ranged from a high of 342,000 in 1997/1998 to a low of 256,700 in 2004/2005. In the school year 2017–2018, about 303,900 individuals were employed as elementary or secondary school teachers, according to the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

However, the LFS data for each school year show considerable year-to-year variability due to the small sample size of the LFS. Administrative data on the annual number of teachers employed by each province show remarkable year-to-year consistency (Bollman 2020). Thus, in order to remove some of the year-to-year sampling variability when presenting data from the LFS, we show, for each year, the median (or middle value) of the number employed for the previous year, for the given year and for the following year (following Tukey 1977). This technique removes much of the year-to-year variability in the data and allows one to see the underlying structure and the general trend in the data.

Overall, the average number employed (elementary plus secondary) teachers is quite consistent over time. There was a slight decrease at the turn of the century, and then the level was essentially flat from 2000/2001 to 2006/2007 followed by a higher level in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 (due to higher reported levels in Ontario and Manitoba) before reverting to slightly lower level in the most recent 7 years (Fig. 7).

Figure 8 provides some detail of this employment by rural versus urban location.<sup>19</sup> The higher levels in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 occurred only in metro centres. The overall trend is:

- (a) The number of metro teachers is higher in recent years (2011/2012 to 2016/2017) compared to the period 2001/2002 to 2006/2007; but
- (b) The number of non-metro teachers has been flat, with a very slight decline in recent years.

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<sup>18</sup>This section focuses on data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), with details available from 1997–1998 to 2017–2018. The LFS gathers data each month from a sample of Canadians, 15 years of age and over. The employment questions tend to focus on employment in the week preceding the survey. “Teachers” include elementary and kindergarten teachers (National Occupational Code (NOC) code 4032), plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031). Where relevant, we focus on employment during the school months, September to June.

<sup>19</sup>For the remainder of this chapter, where appropriate, we will focus on the rural–urban trends rather than showing both the totals and the rural–urban breakdown. Also note that respondents to the LFS are assigned to the location of their residence and not to the location of their job.

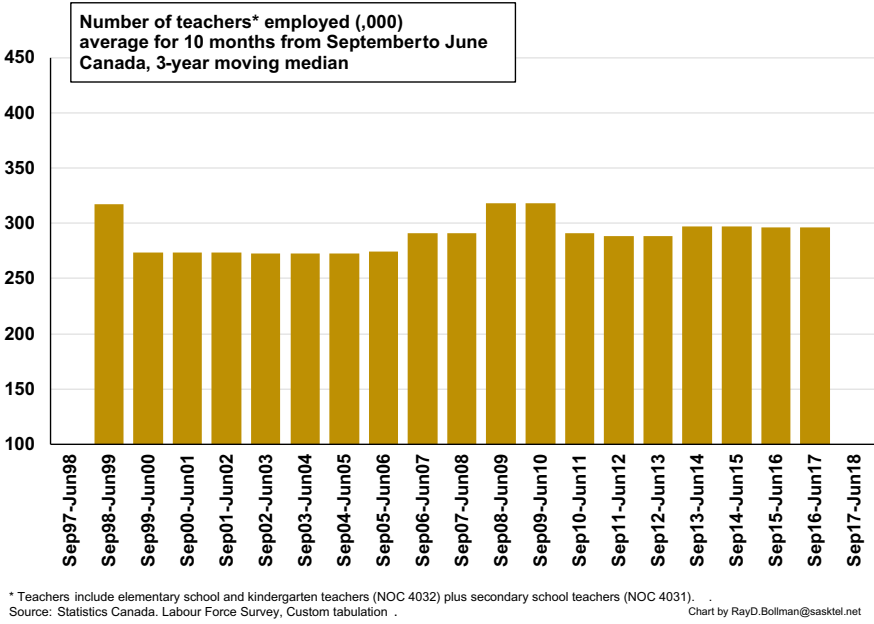


Fig. 7 Number of teachers employed, 1997–2017, Canada

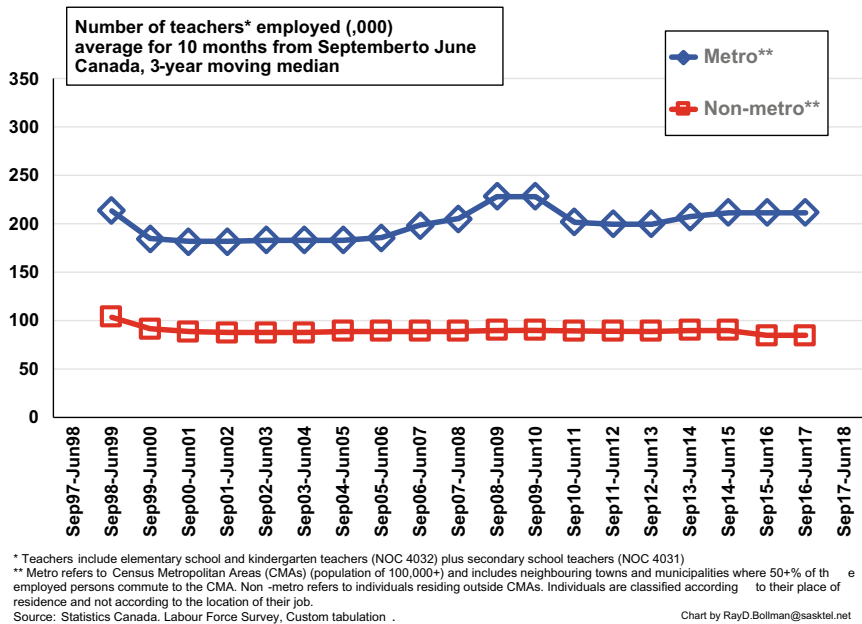
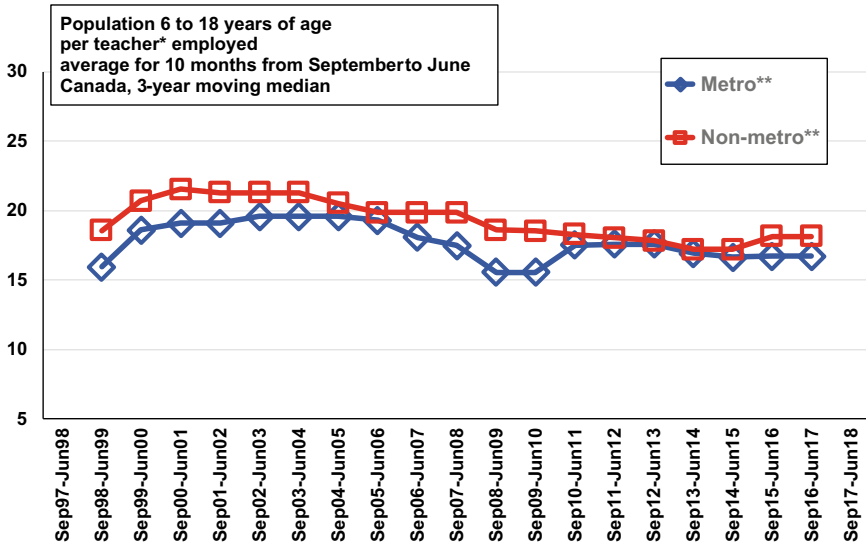


Fig. 8 Number of teachers employed, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non -metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 9** Ratio of the population 6–18 years of age per teacher employed, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

Given that fewer children live in rural areas, it is not surprising that fewer teachers are employed there (i.e. the rural line is below the urban one).

Since we know the number of school-aged children, and we know the number of employed teachers, we can compare the two.<sup>20</sup> Figure 9 shows the result, allowing us to see if rural or urban areas have a “disproportionate” number of teachers, given the school-aged population in their area.

Three points might be noted from the results in Fig. 9:

- Non-metro areas have a (slightly) higher ratio of the population 6–18 years of age per teacher;
- Within both metro and non-metro areas, this ratio has declined since 2000/2001; and
- In recent years (since 2011/2012), the ratio for both areas has been fairly consistent, hovering around 17.

The key point in Fig. 9, however, is that, despite the smaller *number* of teachers in rural areas that we saw in Fig. 8, the number of teachers tends to parallel the number of students. There is no obvious “large” disproportionate *level* of employment, relative to the population 6–18 years of age, in either rural or urban areas. Keep in mind

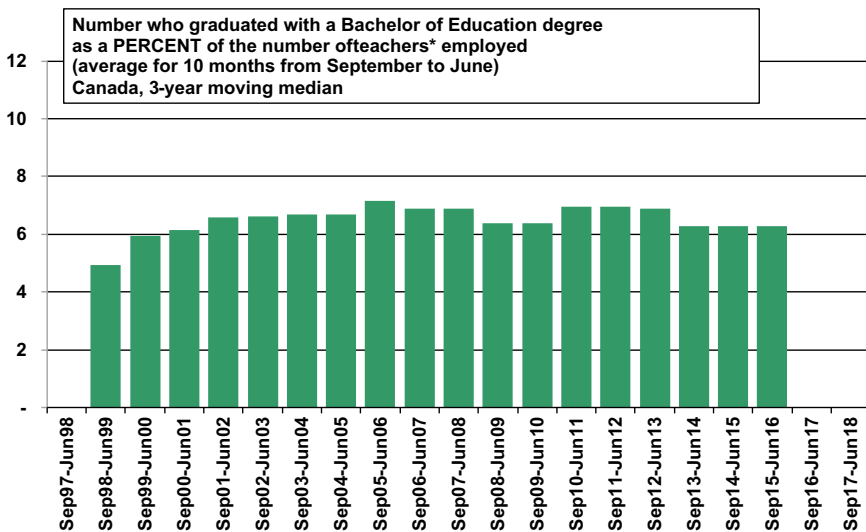
<sup>20</sup>Note that the ratio we compute is not a simple “student/teacher” ratio, in classroom terms, since not all individuals employed as teachers in these two occupations are necessarily in the classroom. And clearly some classrooms would have higher and some lower ratios.

that “rural” (non-metro) schools can be small or they can be large, as consolidated schools serve a large geographic area.

## 10 Teacher Employment Compared to the Number of Bachelor of Education Graduates

How does the number of employed teachers match the number of individuals graduating with a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree? Figure 10 shows the pattern.

Figure 10 shows that the number of B. Ed. graduates as a per cent of the number of employed teachers<sup>21</sup> went up fairly consistently from 1999/2000 to 2004/2005. There has been some variation since then, but the per cent has returned to the 6% level reported in the early 2000s.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the number of new graduates has been



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation.

Source: Statistics Canada. Graduates of degree programs in education (undergraduate plus nongraduate post-baccalaureate) (data for 2005 to 2008 includes imputed values for the University of Regina) Table 37-10-0012-01.

Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 10** Number of Bachelor of Education graduates as a per cent of the number of teachers employed, 1997–2017, Canada

<sup>21</sup>The number of B.Ed. graduates is based on the spring graduation and the employment level is based on the average level of employment from September in the same year to June of the following year.

<sup>22</sup>Note that our use of a 3-year moving median means that the observation for 2015/2016 presents the median value for the three years of 2014/2015, 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 and thus the lower number of B.Ed. graduates in Ontario in 2016 is not reflected in this chart. When the 2017 data

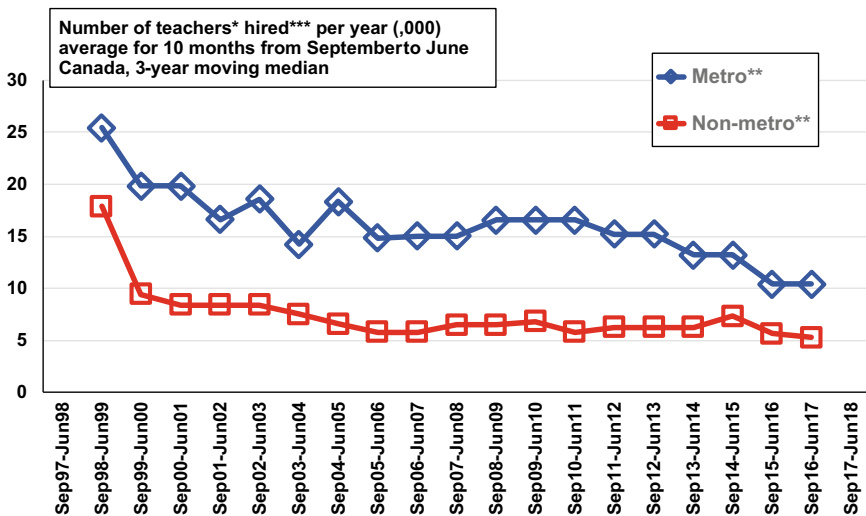
equivalent to about 6–7% of the total number of teachers employed in Canada for over a decade.<sup>23</sup>

## 11 Number of Teachers Hired

How many teachers are *hired* per year in rural and urban areas in Canada? Figure 11 gives the details.

The number of individuals hired as teachers each year in Canada has gradually declined over time. However, we can see that most of the variation in hiring, including the decrease since 2001, has been in metro areas (those with over 100,000 residents).

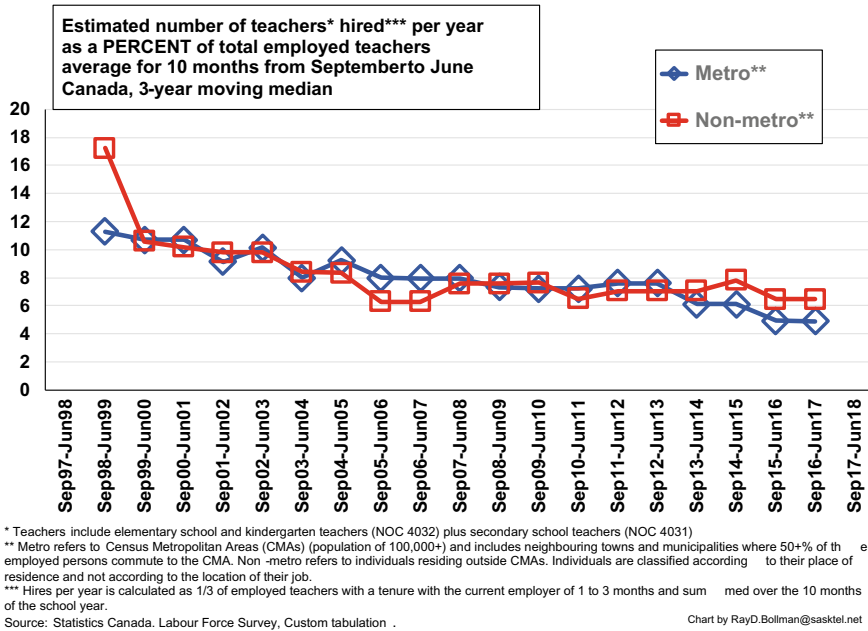
If rural areas were having a hard time attracting and keeping teachers, you would expect an increase over time in *hiring* in those areas. However, that is not the case for rural areas as a whole (but Figs. 21, 22, 23, and 24 show more turnover in rural areas that are more remote).



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 \*\*\* Hires per year is calculated as 1/3 of employed teachers with a tenure with the current employer of 1 to 3 months and summed over the 10 months of the school year.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 11** Number of teachers hired per year, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

becomes available, then the lower number of B.Ed. graduates in 2016 and 2017 will determine the 3-year moving median for 2016/2017. A chart with the annual data is presented in Bollman (2020).<sup>23</sup>The Ontario decision to enrol one-half the number of students in B.Ed. programs will impact the Canada-level patterns going forward from 2016 (See Fig. 6).



**Fig. 12** Number of teachers hired per year as a per cent of the number of employed teachers, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

Keep in mind that these are *not* all new hires. Indeed, the calculation is based on those who report, in the LFS, that they have been with their current employer 1–3 months and thus employed teachers who change employers would be tabulated as a “hire”.<sup>24</sup>

When we calculate a rate of hires per year (i.e. the estimated number of hires as a per cent of employed teachers), we see:

- The same hiring rate in metro and non-metro areas in most years (Fig. 12); and
- The hiring rate has been declining at essentially the same pace in both metro and non-metro areas.

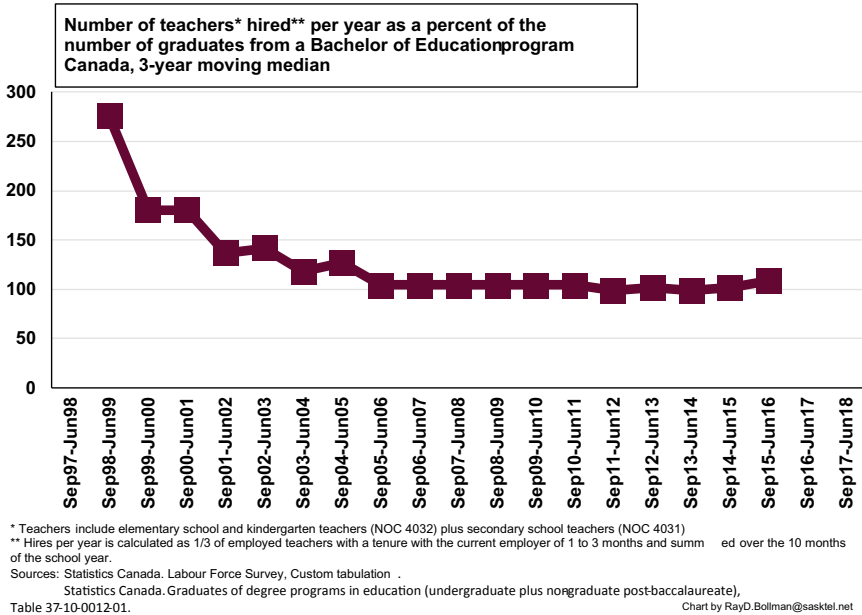
Thus, this indicator of teacher “turnover” does not show a greater level of turnover in non-metro areas, compared to metro areas, and turnover is not increasing in non-metro areas.

Next, Fig. 13 shows the numbers of teachers hired per year as a per cent of the number of Bachelor of Education graduates.

There was a high point in this ratio in the late 1990s, reflecting the spike in hiring in 1997/1998 and 1998/1999. Then, things level off. Up to about 2005, more teachers

<sup>24</sup>It is not clear from the wording of the LFS whether contract employees who are rehired by the same employer in September for several years would say they are recently hired or say that they had worked for the same employer for several years.





**Fig. 13** Number of teachers hired per year as a per cent of the number of Bachelor of Education graduates, 1997–2016, Canada

are hired than graduate that year (that is, the ratio shown in Fig. 13 is greater than 100).

Since 2005, the ratio of hires to B.Ed. graduates has hovered around 100%.<sup>25</sup> This ratio has remained unchanged since 2005–2006, which implies a more stable relationship between annual hires and the annual number of graduates. Given that we do not know the share of annual hires that is due to teachers moving from one employer to another, we do not know the share of annual graduates who are hired. However, the situation appears to have been unchanged during the period from 2006–2007 to 2015–2016.

<sup>25</sup>As noted above, our use of a 3-year moving median means that the observation for 2015/2016 presents the median value for the three years of 2014/2015, 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 and thus the lower number of B.Ed. graduates in Ontario in 2016 is not reflected in this chart. When the 2017 data becomes available, then the lower number of B.Ed. graduates in 2016 and 2017 will determine the 3-year moving median for 2016/2017. A chart with the annual data is presented in Bollman (2020).

## 12 Summary of Bachelor of Education Results

We have presented a number of charts looking at the number of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) graduates per year in Canada, as an indication of the “supply” of teachers.

In Fig. 6, we saw that there has been an increase in the number of these graduates, Canada wide, since about 1998, although this increase has recently disappeared. The pattern of increase and levelling in the number of B.Ed. graduates roughly matches the pattern for the number of teachers employed in Canada in the same years (Fig. 10). So, the number of B.Ed. graduates has been about 6–7% of the number of teachers since the recent turn of the century.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps more telling is that the number of teachers hired per year is about equal to the number B.Ed graduates that year (Fig. 13). In other words, it seems that the “supply” of teachers graduating from B.Ed. programmes in Canada has been keeping pace with the rate of hires (acknowledging that our estimate of hires includes teachers moving from one school to another and thus “new hires” is lower than our estimated number of hires).

## 13 Type of Contract

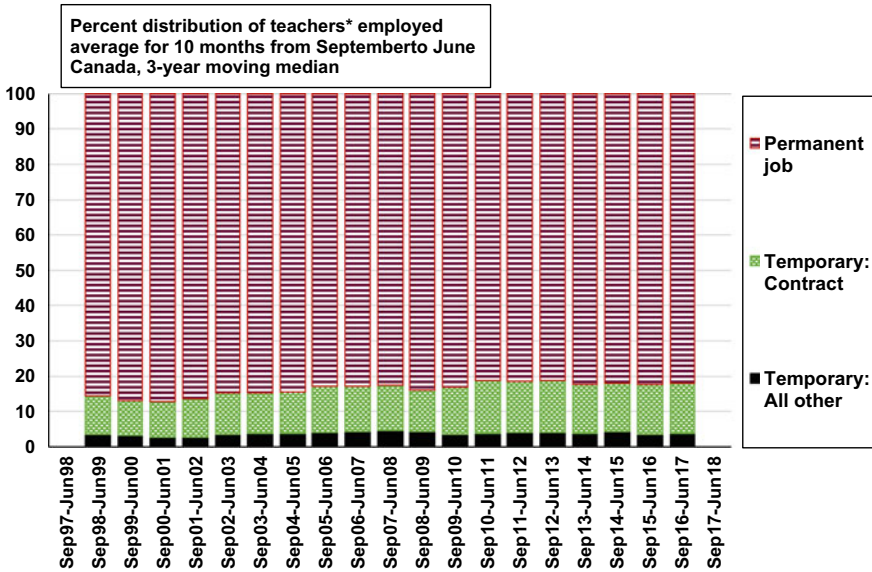
Are more teachers being employed on temporary rather than permanent contracts? Having a temporary position may be a first step to garnering a more secure, full-time teaching post, or it can be a reflection of the number in the important pool of “substitute” teachers, who fill in for those on leave for various reasons. Unfortunately, we do not have information on transitions in and out of temporary employment. Figure 14 gives the trend, over time, in the distribution of permanent versus temporary positions among Canadian teachers.

We see that there is a slight *increase* in the per cent of positions filed with temporary employees over time. This per cent edges up from about 14% in the period before 2002/2003 to about 18% in the period since 2010/2011. That said, what is perhaps surprising is how little change there has been over the last twenty years. There is little evidence in these reports from the LFS of a major shift from permanent to temporary positions.

Further, as we see in Fig. 15, non-metro areas have had slightly more temporary jobs in some years, but not all years. Specifically, the share of non-metro jobs that were temporary was slightly higher than in metro up to 2005/2006 and again slightly higher since 2011/2012. However, for most years in the period we examined, the share of non-metro jobs that were temporary was approximately equal to the share in

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<sup>26</sup>The Ontario decision to enrol one-half the number of students in B.Ed. programs will impact the Canada-level patterns going forward.



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)

Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .

Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 14** Per cent distribution of teachers employed, by permanent versus temporary contracts, 1997–2017, Canada

metro areas. Thus, there is no clear pattern of rural locations having more temporary positions than urban.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 16 provides details on a different type of employment issue: the per cent with a part-time (less than 30 h a week) position. Rather than the slight increase we saw with temporary positions in Fig. 15, we see a slight decline in the per cent of employed teachers who report working part-time.<sup>28</sup>

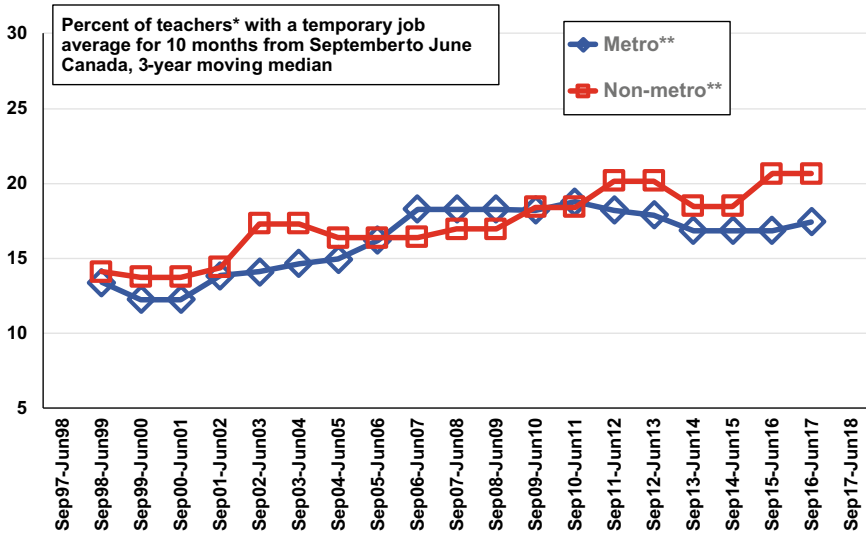
More relevant for this book, however, is that fact that, yet again, there is virtually no rural–urban difference in these per cents and no rural–urban difference in the trend over time.

## 14 Average Tenure of Teachers

We have seen that there is little rural–urban difference in the *type* of contract held by employed teachers in Canada. Do those who live in rural areas leave their jobs more often—is there higher teacher turnover? If so, the average tenure would differ by location.

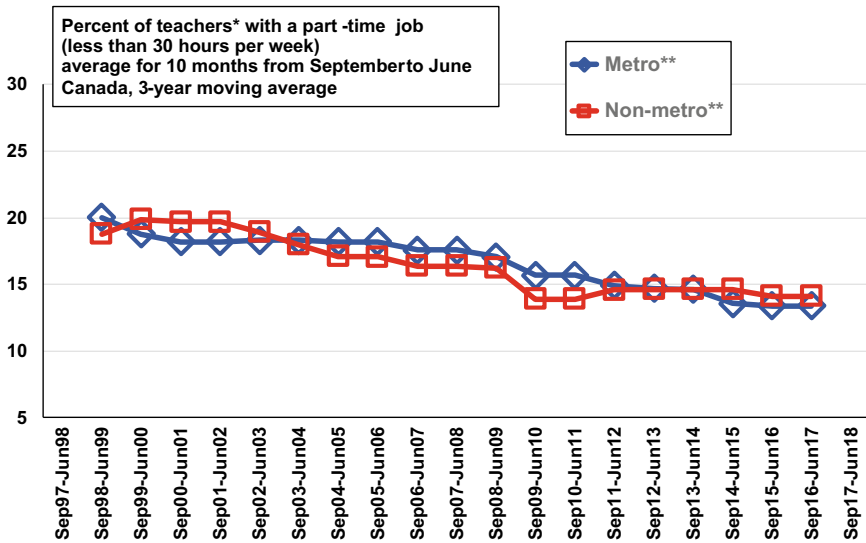
<sup>27</sup>There are some interesting and important differences in the rates of temporary contracts over time, by province/region of the country. See Bollman (2020).

<sup>28</sup>About three-quarters of teachers employed on a part-time basis are females who are “voluntarily” working part-time (data not shown).



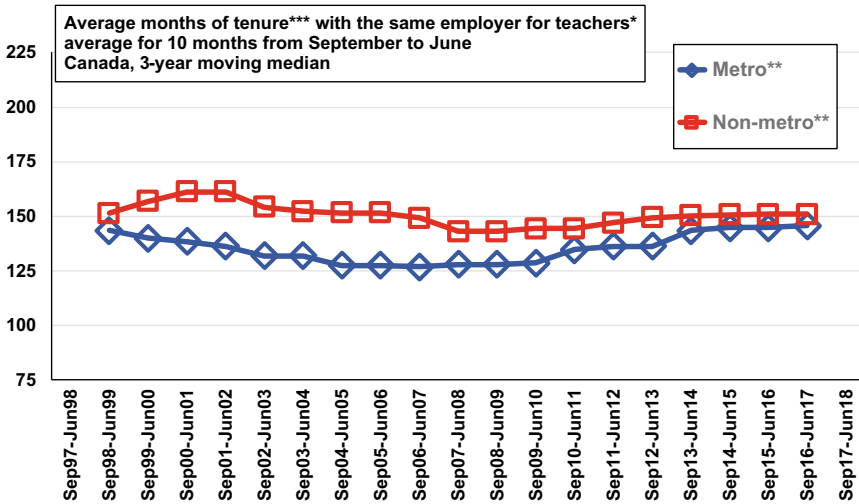
\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non -metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

Fig. 15 Per cent of teachers with a temporary (In this chart, “Temporary: contract” and “Temporary: all other” are combined in one category) job, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non -metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

Fig. 16 Per cent of teachers with a part-time job, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non -metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 \*\*\* Job tenure is the number of consecutive months that a person has worked for the current employer.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .

Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

Fig. 17 Months of tenure with the same employer, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

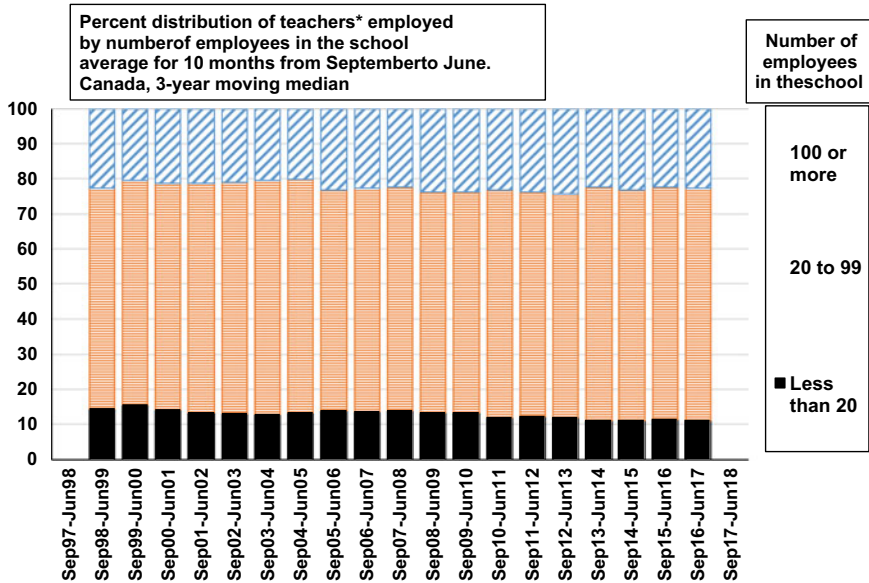
Figure 17 shows this is the case, but not as one might expect. In fact, using “months of tenure” with the current employer as an indicator of “turnover”, we see, on average, those in rural areas stay longer, on average, compared to teachers in metro centres. This finding suggests that, contrary to the research literature, there is *less* turnover in rural areas. Further, there has been virtually no shift in these numbers over time.

## 15 Size of School

One issue in the research literature is the size of schools in rural areas. The concern is that small schools are often faced with closure or amalgamation. Are rural small schools on the decline in Canada overall? Are they more prevalent in rural areas?

Figure 18 shows the trend in school size, over time. There is a slight trend to fewer teachers being employed in smaller (those with fewer than 20 employees) schools. About 14% of Canadian teachers were employed in smaller schools up to about 2008/2009 and, since 2014/2015, about 11% of teachers are employed in smaller schools. Interestingly, there is little change in the number in larger schools (those with over 500 employees)—about 23% of Canadian teachers have been employed in larger schools (over 100 employees) since 2006/2007.

Given the interest in the research literature on small schools in rural areas, we show the rural–urban comparison of the share of elementary teachers employed



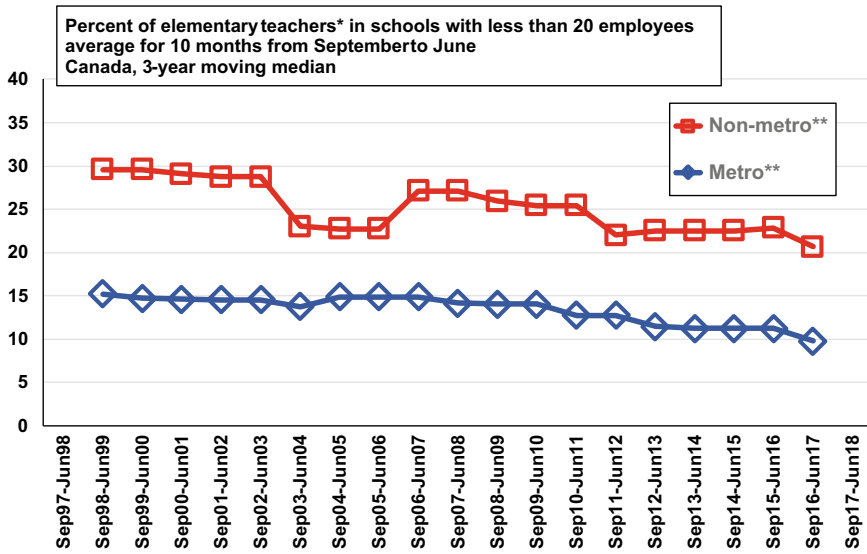
\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation. Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 18** Per cent distribution of teachers by size of school (number of employees), 1997–2017, Canada

in smaller schools (less than 20 employees) in Fig. 19 and for secondary school teachers in Fig. 20. We differentiate the two levels of schooling here, recognizing that secondary schools are often larger than elementary schools.

First, not surprisingly, a higher share of teachers in non-metro areas are employed in smaller schools (less than 20 employees). For *elementary* school teachers, the share has declined from about 30% in the early 2000s to about 20% in recent years. The share of metro elementary teachers in smaller schools has also declined over time from about 15% in the early 2000s to about 10% in recent years. Over this time period, it has stayed at about half the per cent of non-metro teachers in smaller schools.

Overall, a lower share of *secondary* school teachers compared to elementary school teachers are employed in smaller schools in both metro and non-metro areas—under 10% of non-metro secondary teachers and about 5% of metro secondary teachers.



\* Elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032).  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non -metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

Fig. 19 Share of elementary school teachers in schools with less than 20 employees, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

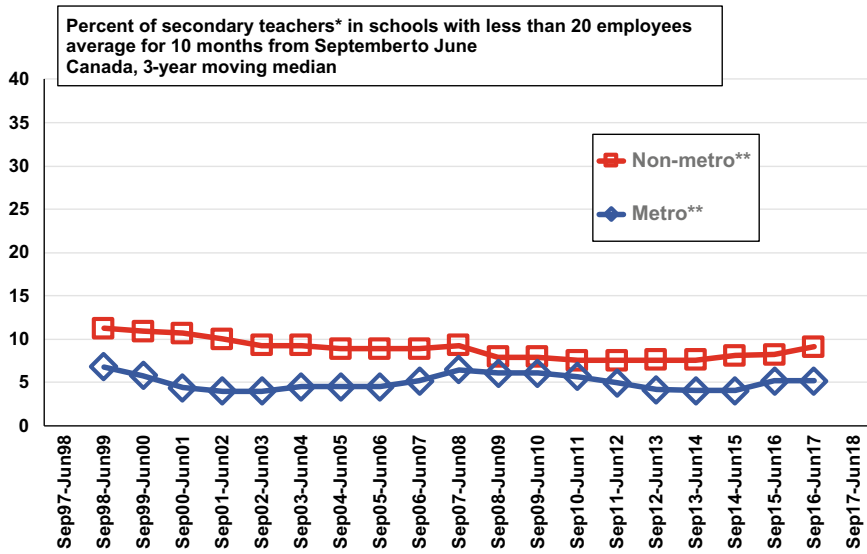
## 16 Summary of Employment Issues<sup>29</sup>

The data on employment issues among Canadian teachers (Figs. 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20) have focused on two types of information. One is the trends in employment patterns *over time*. The other is *urban/rural* (metro/non-metro) differences and similarities.

Looking first at time trends, we see that:

- There has been minimal increase in temporary contracts from 1997 to 2017.
- The per cent of teachers reporting a part-time (less than 30 h a week) job during that time frame has shown a slight decline.
- There has been little or no change in the average number of months teachers report working for the same employer.
- There has been a slight decline in the number of teachers employed in smaller schools (with less than 20 employees).

<sup>29</sup>We also looked at reports of unpaid overtime, thinking that there might be more pressure on rural teachers, especially those in smaller schools, to “volunteer” for coaching or other volunteer/unpaid activities. We found no rural–urban differences in unpaid overtime (Bollman 2020).



\* Secondary school teachers (NOC 4031)  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non -metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 20** Share of *secondary* school teachers in schools with less than 20 employees, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

In other words, while there have been some changes in working conditions (as indicated by these limited measures) for teachers in Canada, these changes have been minimal.

What about rural–urban differences? The consistent message these results tell us there are not many rural–urban differences in these employment issues between metro and non-metro areas. Teachers in rural areas report no more and no fewer temporary contracts and no difference in the percentage with part-time positions. Interestingly, teachers in rural areas report slightly more time, on average, with their current employer. The overall fairly consistent pattern (of a lack of a large rural–urban difference) speaks, perhaps, to the power of teachers’ unions in ensuring some parity across the different geographic regions.

The one rural–urban difference of note concerns the last employment issue examined above: school size. It is clear that there is a higher share of teachers in smaller schools in rural areas than is the case in urban communities. This finding is consistent with the research literature that documents concerns around school size in rural areas, particularly threats of school closures, and difficulties covering a wide range of specialty areas with a limited number of teachers in a given school.



## 17 Geographic Mobility as an Indicator of Teacher “Turnover”

In the discussion above, the “rate of new hires” and the “average months of tenure” were presented as indicators of teacher “turnover”. The LFS data showed, for the average rural teacher, the indicators of turnover showed little difference between metro and non-metro areas and, if anything, longer tenure among rural teachers.

Here, we investigate differences in “turnover” for 2016 across degrees of rurality using Census of Population data. To indicate the degree of turnover, we use a measure of *geographic* mobility—specifically, did the individual reside in a different city/town/municipality<sup>30</sup> one year ago and five years ago. What is the “turnover” (or “stability”) of teachers in rural schools? What is the likelihood that students in that area will be dealing with a new teacher on a frequent basis?

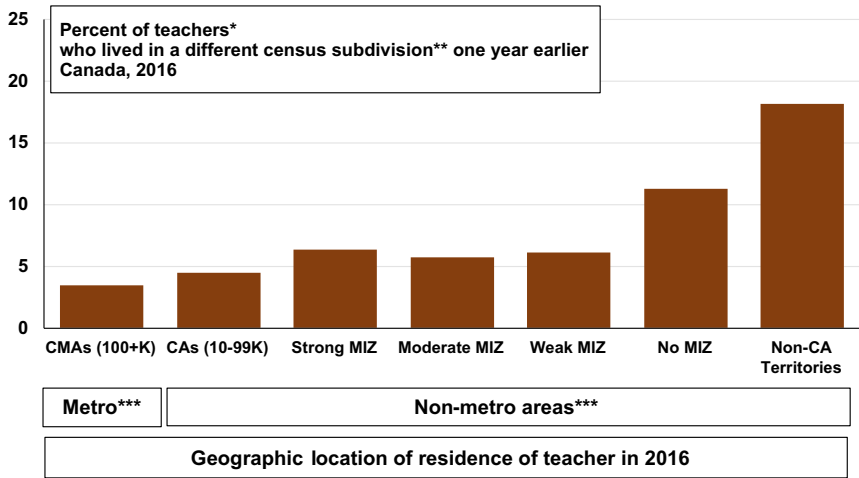
Given that “turnover” (as indicated by this measure of geographic mobility) is not very sensitive to mobility within cities, it is not surprising Fig. 21 shows that this geographic mobility is lower in metro areas. Geographic mobility<sup>31</sup> was higher for those far from urban centres (the no MIZ zones) and for those in the Territories. Specifically, compared to situation in the “core” rural areas (i.e. strong/moderate/weak MIZ areas), the turnover rates are 5 percentage points higher in no MIZ areas (for both one-year turnover [Fig. 21] and for 5-year turnover [Fig. 22]). Furthermore, the turnover rate in the territories (outside the CAs of Whitehorse and Yellowknife) is an additional 5 percentage points higher (for both one-year and five-year rates of turnover).

Thus, schools in “more remote” rural areas have a higher turnover of teachers. Keep in mind that, together, no MIZ plus the rural areas of the territories (i.e. all areas in the territories except Whitehorse and Yellowknife) comprise about 1% of

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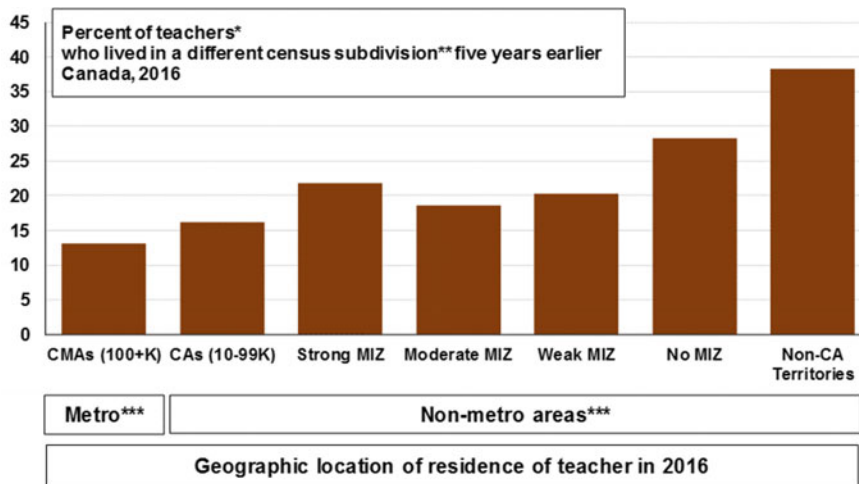
<sup>30</sup>By city/town/municipality, we are specifically referring to the Statistics Canada concept of a census subdivision. Census subdivision (CSD) is the general term for municipalities (as determined by provincial/territorial legislation) or areas treated as municipal equivalents for statistical purposes (e.g. Indian reserves, Indian settlements and unorganized territories) (Statistics Canada 2018). Generally, a CSD is a unit of local government to whom one pays property taxes and is the jurisdiction that maintains roads, collects garbage, etc. Many CSDs are small—both small in population size and small in geographic area. For example, Plenty, Saskatchewan is a CSD because it is an incorporated place. Its land area is 0.65 square kilometres and the 2016 population was 164 residents. However, the CSD of the City of Ottawa has a land area of 2790 square kilometres and a 2016 population of 934 thousand. One could move over 90 kilometres within the CSD of Ottawa still be classified as “not moving” (i.e. not changing the CSD of residence from one-year ago or from five-years ago). We would expect our measure of geographic mobility as an indicator of “turnover” of teachers in schools would underestimate the geographic mobility of teachers in cities as city teachers could change schools but not change their CSD of residence. However, in sparsely population areas (such as Plenty, Saskatchewan), most teachers who change schools would also change their CSD of residence. Thus, we suggest that geographic mobility as a measure of teacher mobility provides more useful information on teacher turnover specifically in rural areas.

<sup>31</sup>Bollman (2020) repeated Figs. 21 and 22 for three different age groups for each province and territory. “Turnover”, as indicated by geographic mobility, was consistently higher, in all population areas, for younger teachers—those under 35 years of age.



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031).  
 \*\* A census subdivision is an incorporated town or incorporated municipality.  
 \*\*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) which includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA.  
 \*\*\* Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Census Agglomerations (CAs) have a population of 10,000 to 99,999 and include the population of neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed persons commute to the CA. Metropolitan Influenced Zones are delineated on the basis of the share of the workforce commuting to a CMA or CA (Strong: 30-49%; Moderate: 5-29%; Weak: 1-4%; No MIZ: 0%)  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2016, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by Ray D. Bolman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 21** Per cent of teachers who lived in a different census subdivision one year earlier, by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031).  
 \*\* A census subdivision is an incorporated town or incorporated municipality.  
 \*\*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) which includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA.  
 \*\*\* Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Census Agglomerations (CAs) have a population of 10,000 to 99,999 and include the population of neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed persons commute to the CA. Metropolitan Influenced Zones are delineated on the basis of the share of the workforce commuting to a CMA or CA (Strong: 30-49%; Moderate: 5-29%; Weak: 1-4%; No MIZ: 0%)  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2016, Custom tabulation .  
 Chart by Ray D. Bolman@sasktel.net

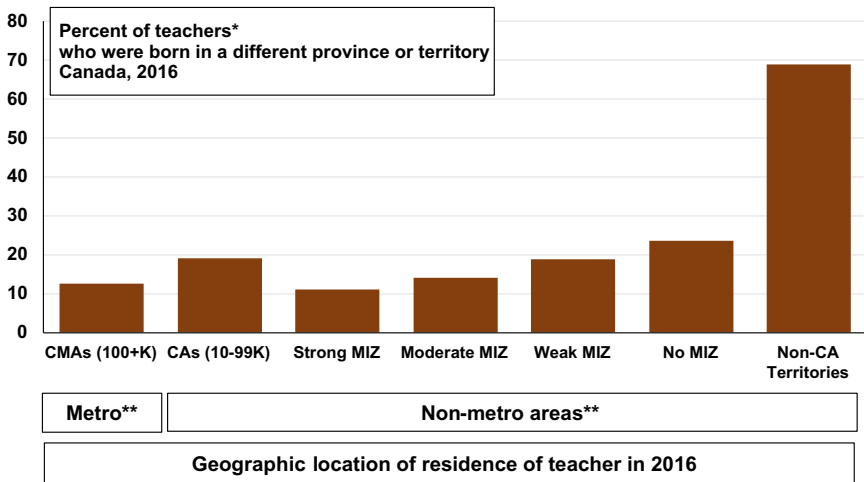
**Fig. 22** Per cent of teachers who lived in a different census subdivision five years earlier, by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada

the Canadian population, 4% of the “non-metro” population and 6% of the “rural and small town” (non-CMA/CA) population.

Figure 22 shows the same<sup>32</sup> rural–urban difference when we look at mobility from five years’ earlier. All the non-metro areas report higher mobility than metro and, the further from an urban area one lives, the more likely one is to have moved. Note that there are some important variations in this pattern insofar as the pattern for moderate and weak MIZ areas is more like the CAs (census agglomerations). They do not follow the pattern of a higher turnover among those in areas further from an urban centre.

A caution is in order here: we do not know if the move reported by these teachers was from one rural area to another, or from an urban to a rural area (or, for those in urban areas from one urban area to another). We only know they reported living in a different census subdivision than was the case five years prior.

Figure 23 gives a slightly different perspective. It shows the per cent of teachers who were *born* in a different province or territory than where they were employed as teachers in 2016—what those in Atlantic Canada would call “Come From Aways”.

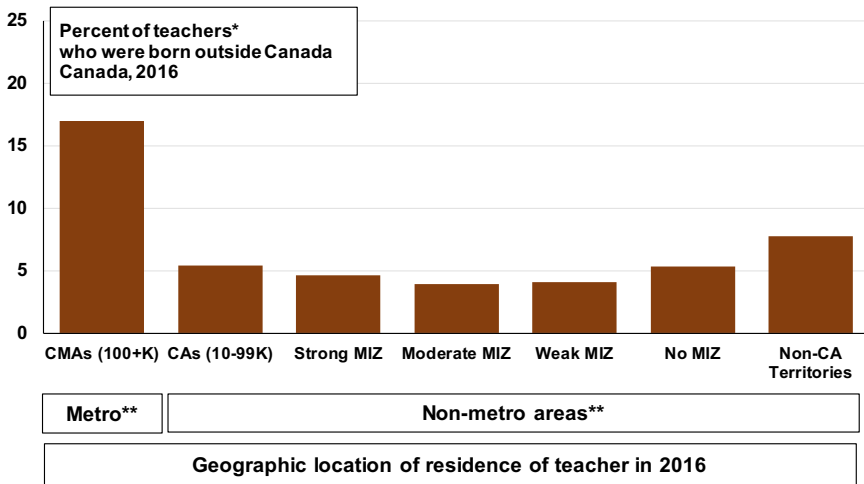


\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031).  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) which includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA.  
 \*\*\* Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Census Agglomerations (CAs) have a population of 10,000 to 99,999 and include the population of neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed persons commute to the CA. Metropolitan Influenced Zones are delineated on the basis of the share of the workforce commuting to a CMA or CA (Strong: 30 –49%; Moderate: 5 -29%; Weak: 1 -4%; No MIZ: 0%)  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2016, Custom tabulation .

Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 23** Per cent of teachers who were born in a different province or territory, by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada

<sup>32</sup>Note that the scale in the two figures (the vertical axes) is different, to accommodate the higher turnover rate over a five-year period (Fig. 22) compared to the one-year turnover rate (Fig. 21). This difference creates a difference in the visual impact of the rural–urban difference in the two graphs. However, it is important to take into account the corresponding numbers and size of the actual difference when interpreting them.



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031).  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) which includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA.  
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 Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2016, Custom tabulation.

Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 24** Per cent of teachers who were born outside Canada, by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada

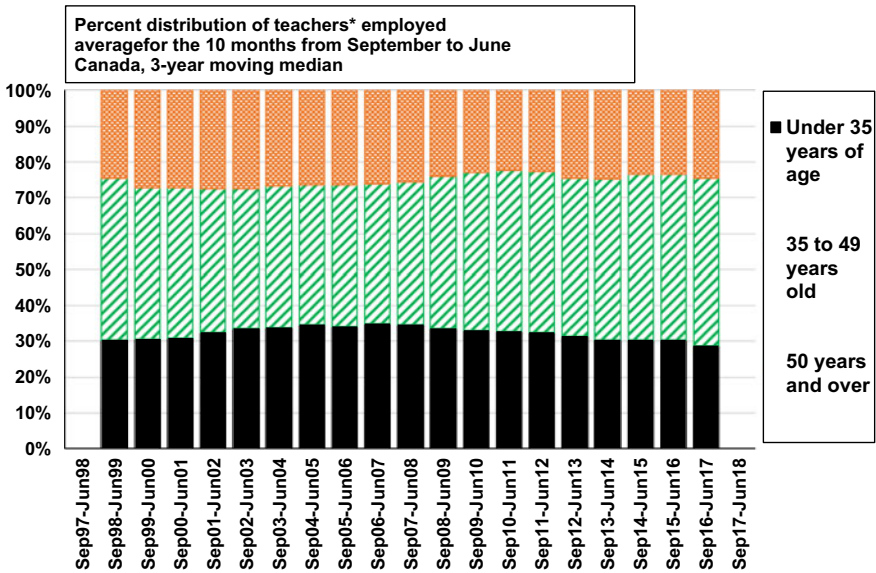
Those living in or near a metro area tended to come from the same province. But as one looks at those in weak or no MIZ areas, and especially at those in the territories, we see a higher per cent who were born in another province or territory.

What about immigrants from abroad? Figure 24 shows that the pattern is quite different than we saw in mobility from another province or territory. Metro centres have a much *higher* per cent of teachers who were born outside Canada than is true in any of the less populated areas. This pattern parallels the fact that immigrants more generally tend to be concentrated in metropolitan areas. Nonetheless, it is worth noting.

There is a higher per cent of teachers born outside Canada in the Territories, compared to the other non-metro areas, reinforcing the notion that the experience in the Territories is different from other rural areas in important ways. That said, the per cent of teachers from outside Canada in the rural areas of the territories is a fraction of that in the larger metropolitan areas.

## 18 Age of Teachers

Does the age structure of teachers suggest that there are a lot of vacancies that are likely to be created in teaching in the next few years? Not really. Figure 25 shows that the age distribution of teachers has, in fact, changed little over the twenty years



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031). Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation. Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

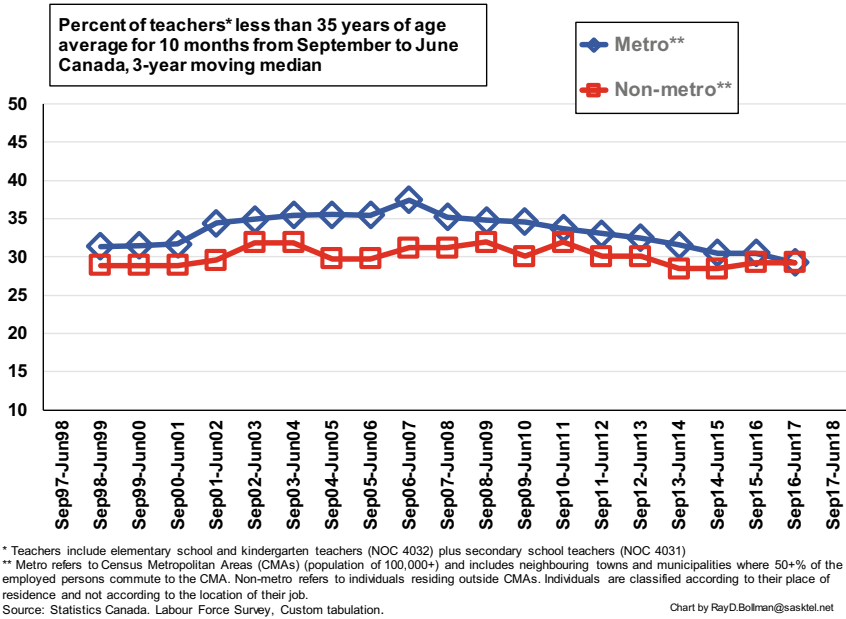
Fig. 25 Per cent distribution of employed teachers by age, 1997–2017, Canada

for which we have data. There is some variation, but the general pattern is that nearly 30% of employed teachers are 50 years of age and older; and about 30% are in the youngest age group (those under 35 years of age).

Over time, a (slightly) higher share of metro teachers have been under 35 years of age (Fig. 26), consistent with more growth in the number of students in metro areas.

Within non-metro areas, the share of teachers under 35 years of age has hovered around 30% since 2000. As noted in the previous footnote, there is a higher turnover among younger teachers but the overall share of younger teachers has remained essentially unchanged over time.

More relevant here, perhaps, is the fact that slightly smaller share of rural teachers is younger (under 35 years of age) compared to the situation in metro centres. Correspondingly, slightly more of the rural teachers are in the 50 years and older group (Bollman 2020). On the one hand, the overall age distributions in rural and urban areas are very similar. On the other, the difference that does exist, slight as it is, suggests rural teachers are no younger than others, and if anything, for many years prior to 2015, they are, if anything, somewhat older.



**Fig. 26** Per cent of employed teachers, less than 35 years of age, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

## 19 Summary, Teacher Geographic Mobility and Age

Using data from the 2016 census that allows for a detailed breakdown by distance from urban centres (the “MIZ” classification), we see that there are some interesting and potentially important differences “within” rural areas. There is evidence of higher levels of mobility in those areas furthest from urban centres (the no MIZ areas). While we do not have information on where these moves originated, the pattern suggests higher teacher turnover in these more remote areas.

It is perhaps unsurprising to anyone familiar with schooling in the northern territories that a large per cent of teachers there come from another province or territory—most likely a southern province.

Immigrants to Canada who take up teaching positions, however, do not seem to flock to rural areas or the northern territories. Rather, they are concentrated in the larger metro areas.

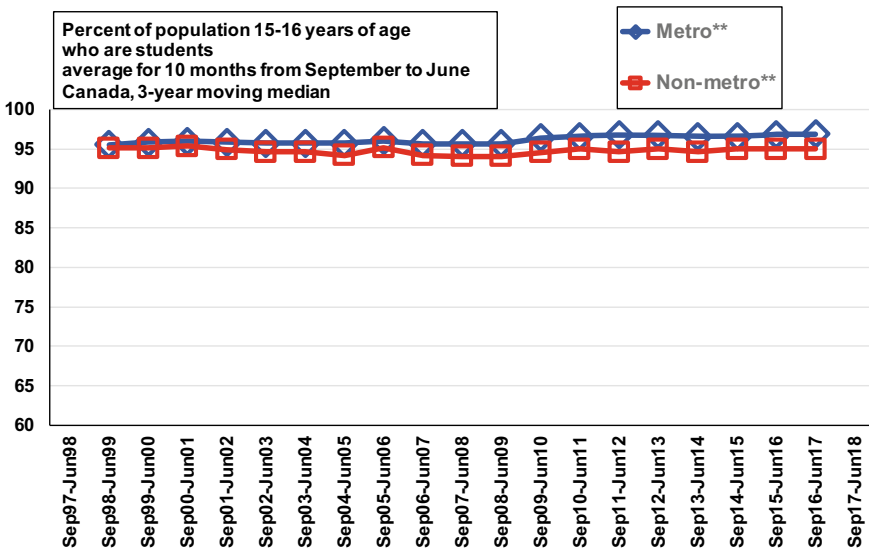
Finally, moving back to time trend data from the Labour Force Survey, information on the age structure of teachers in Canada suggests that (a) there has been little change in this age structure since 1997, and (b) that there is little difference in the age of the teachers employed in rural versus urban (non-metro versus metro) areas. However, the census data on geographic mobility show higher rates of turnover for younger teachers.

## 20 School Attendance and High School Graduation Rates

The previous section looked at a variety of employment and other issues for teachers in rural and urban Canada. What of the students?

Figures 27 and 28 show the school attendance rates by rural<sup>33</sup> versus urban location. School attendance is essentially the same in metro and non-metro areas for individuals 15–16 years of age—but there is a slightly lower attendance rate (95%) in rural areas compared to 97% in urban areas. These high rates of school attendance no doubt reflect the fact that school attendance is mandatory up to age 16 in most provinces.

Figure 28 shows the same trend lines for the somewhat older age group, those 17 or 18 years of age. Here, we see lower school attendance rates in rural areas. In 2017–2018, 84% of those 17 or 18 years of age in urban areas compared to 76% of those in rural areas reported attending school<sup>34</sup> that year.



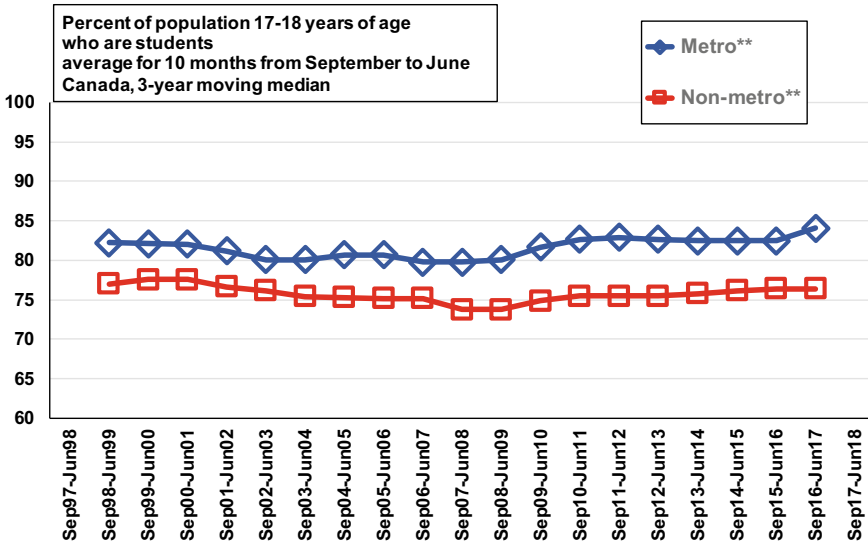
\*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation.

Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 27** Per cent of population 15–16 years of age who are students, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

<sup>33</sup>More detailed analyses (not shown) make it clear that using a population cut-off of less than 10,000 rather cut-off of less than 100,000 makes no difference to these trends. The trend line for rural areas is identical for the two ways of representing “rural”.

<sup>34</sup>In these two figures “school” attendance includes attendance at any educational institution, including a CEGEP, a community college, trade school or university.



\*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) and includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA. Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Individuals are classified according to their place of residence and not according to the location of their job.  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey, Custom tabulation. Chart by RayD.Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 28** Per cent of population 17–18 years of age who are students, by rural–urban location, 1997–2017, Canada

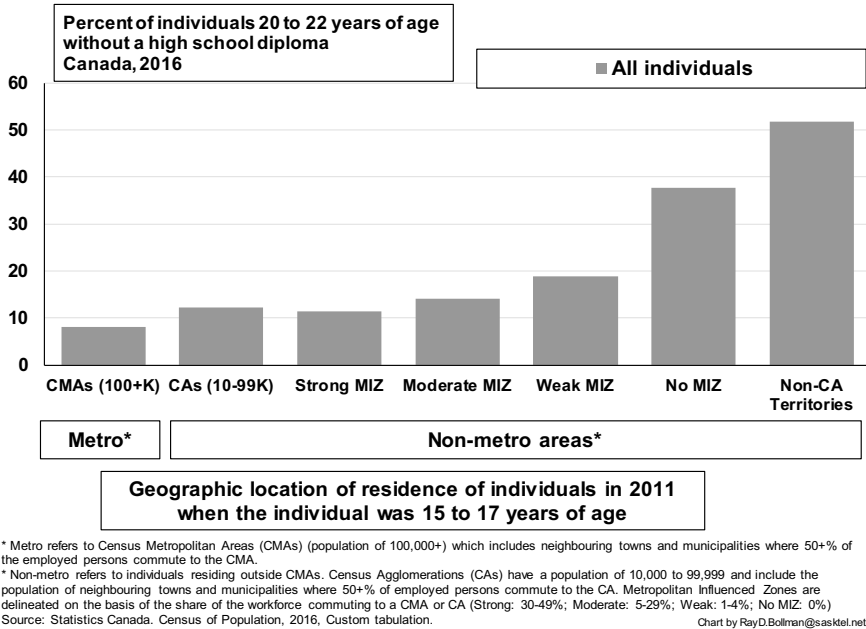
What is more, as we see in Fig. 29, there is evidence that those in rural areas are more likely to have left school without completing a high school diploma. This graph shows the number of those, 20–22 years of age in 2016, who do not have a high school diploma. They are classified by their location<sup>35</sup> five years prior (in 2011) when they were of high school age.

A higher percentage of those from rural areas report that they have no high school diploma. Further, the more “rural” (the weaker the MIZ), the higher the per cent without this diploma. Note the very high levels in the northern territories; over 50% of those in this age group say they have no high school diploma.

This graph illustrates that students of rural schools are less likely to graduate from high school and thus is one key ingredient in the argument that rural individuals have lower levels of education. The other ingredient in the discussion is that individuals with a higher level of education tend to move away from rural areas to find a job.

<sup>35</sup>The decision to consider high school drop-out (non-completion) rates by the location of the individual’s residence when they were 15–17 years of age was to allow an examination of the differential graduation rates of the rural versus urban schools they attended earlier.





**Fig. 29** Per cent of individuals 20–22 years of age without a high school diploma, by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada

## 21 Summary, School Attendance and High School Completion

Given the compulsory school attendance rules, it is not surprising that there is little rural–urban difference in the school *attendance* rates of those 15–16 years of age and that there is little change since 1997 in these rates. The equivalent rates for those 17–18 years of age show little change over time, but *do* suggest a consistent rural–urban difference. Those 17–18-year-olds living in rural (non-metro) areas are less likely than their counterparts in urban (metro) areas to be attending school.

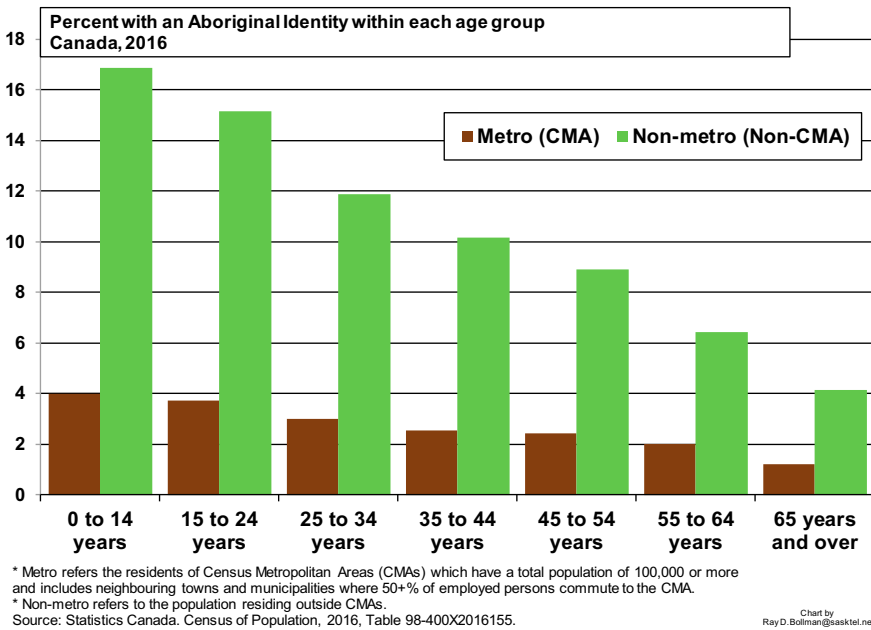
Furthermore, the further one lives from an urban centre (the weaker the “MIZ”), the more likely one is to have left school without completing a high school diploma, according to our information from those aged 20–22 years of age. This finding presents one key to the observation of lower levels of educational attainment among residents in rural areas.

## 22 Aboriginal Issues

There are few issues of importance in Canada that do not require one to take into account the very different experiences of those who identify as Aboriginal. Education is no exception.

In this section, we will provide some data<sup>36</sup> that will hopefully highlight some relevant points to take into account when looking at education in Canada, and particularly education in rural Canada.

Let us look first at the age distribution of those with an Aboriginal Identity. Figure 30 provides the relevant information. Here, we see that there is a much higher concentration of children (0–14 years of age) with an Aboriginal Identity, compared to the adult population. This fact means that, even without any new individuals self-identifying as Aboriginal, the number of those with Aboriginal Identity will rise as these children age.<sup>37</sup> This shift will have an impact on the number of school-aged



**Fig. 30** Population with an Aboriginal Identity, by age and by rural–urban location, 2016, Canada

<sup>36</sup>Data sources for those with an Aboriginal Identity are more limited than is true for some of the other data we have reported. The LFS, the source of our time trends, does not include residents of Indian Reserves. Since identification of Aboriginal Identity in census data relies on self-identification, and the numbers self-identifying in this way have increased with each census, it is difficult to interpret changes over time. Therefore, this section focuses on data from the 2016 census.

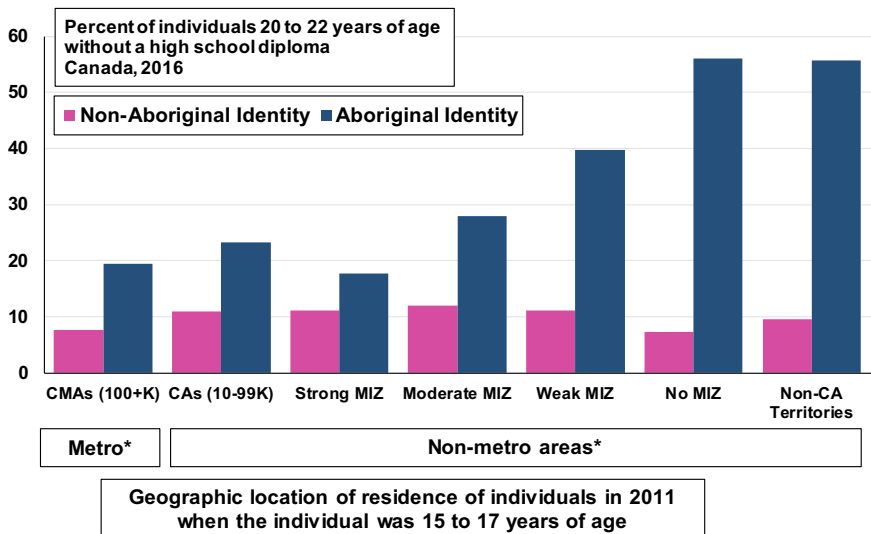
<sup>37</sup>See Bollman (2020) for data on the percent of Aboriginals in each age group within metro and nonmetro areas in each province and territory . There are considerable differences in the concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity by province/territory, and there are also important

children, especially in those locales where there is a concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity.

Figure 30 also gives us some important information about those locales as well. It is clear that there is a much higher concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity in rural/non-metro than in the metro (over 100,000) centres. In general, the more “rural” (the further one lives from an urban centre; i.e. the weaker the MIZ) the higher the concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity (Bollman 2020).

Further, if one looks at the rates of those 20–22 years of age without a high school diploma (Fig. 31), there are a number of important findings.

First of all, in all geographic areas shown, more of the youth with an Aboriginal Identity than others report that they do not have a high school diploma. This difference exists in metro centres, in small urban centres and in each type of rural area. What is more, the further one gets from an urban centre (the weaker the “MIZ”) the larger the



\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) which includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA.  
 \* Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Census Agglomerations (CAs) have a population of 10,000 to 99,999 and include the population of neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed persons commute to the CA. Metropolitan Influenced Zones are delineated on the basis of the share of the workforce commuting to a CMA or CA (Strong: 30-49%; Moderate: 5-29%; Weak: 1-4%; No MIZ: 0%)  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2016, Custom tabulation.  
 Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 31** Per cent of individuals 20–22 without a high school, by Aboriginal Identity and Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada

differences in the concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity by age and province/territory. Not surprisingly, there are high concentrations of those self-identifying as Aboriginal in the three northern territories. Note also the high concentrations in both metro and non-metro areas in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The age distribution of those with an Aboriginal Identity in these provinces means that, in the next few decades, 35–40% of those entering the labour force in non-metro areas, and just under 20% of those in metro areas in those provinces, will be those with an Aboriginal Identity.

difference in high school dropout rates of those with an Aboriginal Identity compared to the non-Aboriginal population in the same type of geographic area.

Secondly, the pattern we saw in Fig. 29 (the more rural the area, the higher the per cent without a high school diploma), *only* appears to hold for those with an Aboriginal Identity. If one looks at the bars in Fig. 31 for those who do *not* report an Aboriginal Identity, there is little rural–urban difference. About 8% of those in the metro centres (of 100,000 or more), compared to about 11–12% or fewer of those in smaller centres have no high school diploma by the time they are 20–22 years of age.

Compare this to the difference by locale for those an Aboriginal Identity. About 19% of those in metropolitan areas and 23% in smaller urban centres report they have no high school diploma. This per cent mushrooms to 40% in weak MIZ areas and is over 50% in the sparsely populated no MIZ areas and the territories.

In other words, some if not much of the perceived current “problem” of rural youth getting less education may well be less of a specifically rural issue and more a reflection of the perennial problem of the position of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, one way to start addressing this educational gap is to have Aboriginal teachers available to teach Aboriginal students. As of 2016, 3.3% of teachers reported having an Aboriginal Identity. Figure 32 shows that the percentage of teachers with such an identity is higher within areas that are more distant from metro centres. That is, the geographic areas where the number of students (and high school dropouts) with an Aboriginal Identity is highest are also the areas where there are more teachers with an Aboriginal Identity. Whether there is a solid match between the need and the teaching staff remains to be seen.

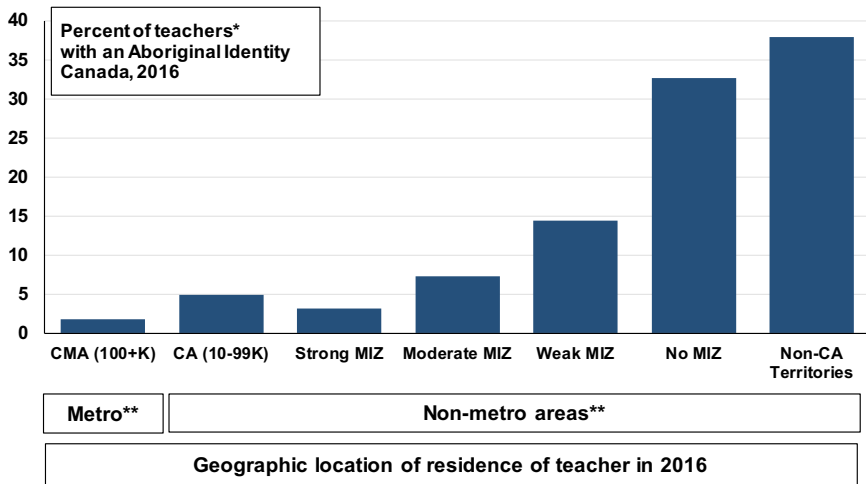
## 23 Summary, Aboriginal Issues

While, in 2016, 5% of the total Canadian population identified as Aboriginal, 7.6% of those under 20 years of age so identified. In other words, the proportion of those who identify as Aboriginal will increase in coming years as these children age. This projected trend means that Aboriginal issues will be even more prominent, especially when dealing with policies relating to children and schooling.

Further, it is clear that rural areas have a higher concentration of individuals with an Aboriginal Identity, compared to urban areas. Indeed, the further one moves from

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<sup>38</sup>Comparing the pattern found in Fig. 31, for the year 2016, with the equivalent results for 2001 (Bollman 2020) it is evident that (a) the overall finding is the same in both years: most of the rural–urban difference in high school completion rates is a reflection of rural–urban differences in concentrations of those with an Aboriginal Identity. (b) From 2001 to 2016, high school completion rates have increased (i.e. drop-out rates have declined) for both those with and those without an Aboriginal Identity. For those 20–22 years of age with an Aboriginal Identity, the drop-out rate went from 46% in 2001 to 29% in 2016; for non-Aboriginal youth 20–22 years of age the rates declined from 16 to 8% over the same time period.



\* Teachers include elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) plus secondary school teachers (NOC 4031).  
 \*\* Metro refers to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) (population of 100,000+) which includes neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of the employed persons commute to the CMA.  
 \*\* Non-metro refers to individuals residing outside CMAs. Census Agglomerations (CAs) have a population of 10,000 to 99,999 and include the population of neighbouring towns and municipalities where 50+% of employed persons commute to the CA. Metropolitan Influenced Zones are delineated on the basis of the share of the workforce commuting to a CMA or CA (Strong: 30-49%; Moderate: 5-29%; Weak: 1-4%; No MIZ: 0%)  
 Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2016, Custom tabulation.

Chart by Ray D. Bollman@sasktel.net

**Fig. 32** Per cent of teachers with an Aboriginal Identity, by Metropolitan Influenced Zone, 2016, Canada

urban areas (the weaker the MIZ), the higher the concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity.

Looking at high school completion rates, the rural–urban difference in high school completion rates, documented in Fig. 29, almost entirely reflects the differences in high school completion rates by Aboriginal status, and the differential concentration of those with an Aboriginal Identity in the more rural areas. In other words, much of this particular “rural” issue is really an issue of the complex status of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

One way of dealing with (a) the increasing need for teachers for Aboriginal children and (b) the higher concentrations of those with an Aboriginal Identity in more rural areas is to hire more Aboriginal teachers, especially in these rural areas. We have seen that there are, in fact, more Aboriginal teachers in the more rural areas. It is clear from the data we present that there will be an increasing need for such teachers, especially in the more rural and remote regions of the country.

## 24 Overview of Findings

In the past two decades, depending upon the province or territory, there has been a decline in the demand for teachers (proxied by the population of school-aged children). Alberta and Nunavut are exceptions. In most jurisdictions, there has been

a recent increase in the population 6–14 years of age. A projection scenario using “medium growth assumptions” indicates that the population of school-aged children is expected to grow in the coming decades. The exceptions are the provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia.

Not surprisingly, the historical trends have shown more decline in rural/non-metro areas. However, the non-metro areas of some provinces have shown an *increase* in their population, 6–18 years of age, in recent years (non-metro areas of Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut).

The number of employed teachers did not decline at the same pace as the population of school-aged children, 6–18 years of age. The ratio of the population 6–18 years of age per employed teacher fell gradually from the early 2000s to 2017/2018. The pattern for this ratio in urban/metro areas and in rural/non-metro areas is essentially identical. In some years, there were marginally more students per teacher in rural areas.

The number of graduates from Bachelor of Education programs has been equivalent to 6–7% of the number of employed teachers from 2000/2001 to 2015/2016. However, the decision in Ontario to halve the enrolment in Bachelor of Education graduates and to extend the programme from a 1-year to a 2-year programme will significantly impact this relationship.

The literature has noted numerous challenges facing rural teachers and facing administrators in attracting and retaining rural teachers. Our general conclusion is that the experience of the average rural teacher is very similar to the experience of the average urban teacher. However, and importantly, the experience of teachers in remote rural and northern areas appears very different.

We did find a consistent rural–urban difference in the share of teachers by size of school. More teachers in rural than in urban areas were employed in smaller schools (that is, those with less than 20 employees). This rural–urban difference is more evident among elementary than secondary school teachers.

## 25 Discussion

This chapter has presented some original analyses, based on Statistics Canada data, that “sets the stage” for a discussion of schools and schooling in rural areas.

It is interesting that the employment situation of teachers differs so little for the average rural teacher compared to the average urban teacher. This may reflect the power of teachers’ unions to ensure consistent terms of employment for its members.

We had expected to find more overall rural–urban differences, given that the research literature documented the challenges rural areas have attracting and retaining teachers, and the higher levels of mobility in rural areas.

Based on this literature, we expected a number of differences that were not evident in the rural–urban comparisons we examined. Specifically:

- a. We expected to find the ratio of annual hires to employed teachers would be greater in rural areas as the difficulty of retaining teachers would be expected to generate a higher teacher turnover in rural areas. Instead, we found the *same* per cent of employed teachers are hired on an annual basis in both rural/non-metro areas as in urban/metro areas. In addition, the rate of hiring is declining, not increasing, as was our expectation. This indicator did not show a higher rural teacher turnover.
- b. We expected more rural teachers to be employed on temporary contracts as rural administrators would be expected to hire an available teacher on a temporary basis while searching for a candidate with a needed specialization for a permanent position. We found (virtually) no urban–rural difference in the share of teachers with a permanent contract. Within non-metro areas, the share of teachers with a temporary contract was marginally greater in some years, including recent years.
- c. As another indicator of turnover, we tabulated the average months of tenure of rural and urban teachers. If turnover was a greater problem in rural areas, we expected teachers would report fewer months of tenure with the current employer, on average. In fact, non-metro teachers have a slightly *longer* tenure compared to metro teachers and this level of tenure has not changed much in the last ten years. Thus, this indicator of turnover suggests *lower* turnover of rural teachers—and turnover is not increasing.
- d. Another indicator of turnover that we considered was the age distribution of teachers. If there is difficulty of retaining rural teachers, we would expect there to be a higher share of younger teachers in rural areas. We found, in fact, a (slightly) *lower* share of younger teachers in rural/non-metro areas—and this share has changed very little over time (with a slight decline in the most recent 10 years).
- e. The above indicators of turnover compared the average rural teacher with the average urban (metro) teacher. To look at the situation across *types* of rural areas, we looked at census data on the geographic mobility of teachers—did the individual change communities in the previous year and in the previous five years? In most rural (non-metro) areas, turnover, as indicated by geographic mobility, was slightly higher than in metro areas (with the caveat that this measure likely underestimates the mobility in urban areas). More importantly, *within* rural areas turnover, as measured by geographic mobility, was much higher in remote rural and northern areas. Researchers studying the situation facing rural teachers should be specific on whether they are studying the situation in metro-adjacent rural areas or in rural remote and northern rural areas. Turnover appears to a significant issue specifically in rural remote and northern areas.

One key to understanding these findings might be the recognition in the literature of the important variation *across* rural areas (Alberta Teachers' Association 2002; Canadian Council on Learning 2006; Dibbon 2002; Eaton et al. 2015; French 2019; Hamm 2015; Lamb et al. 2014; Saskatchewan Learning 2007; Saskatchewan School Boards Association 2010).

Our results do show that the situation in areas far from metro centres is *quite* different from those in more metro-adjacent “rural” areas. In other words, the well-documented “challenges” facing rural communities seem to represent the issues facing those in *remote* rural areas. Those closer to urban areas seem to have experiences that often match the situation in urban areas. If this is the case, it is important that research on rural areas and rural schools be clear about the fact if it is the “distance from urban” component of some rural communities that is creating some of the challenges and not the smaller size associated with being a rural community, *per se*.

While we also document that those who live in communities in weak MIZ, no MIZ and “Non-CA communities in the Territories” make up only about 5% of Canada’s population as a whole: (a) there is important provincial variation in this distribution, (b) the share of the population in these areas that identifies as Aboriginal is higher than in other areas, and (c) the absolute (smaller) size of the problem does not negate its importance.

So, in addition to presenting some previously unpublished data on Bachelor of Education graduates and the employment situation experienced by Canadian teachers, over time, we were able to confirm some important challenges facing schools in some rural communities. One challenge is evident in these higher levels of teacher mobility in remote rural areas. This mobility creates issues for rural students who face high turnover in their teachers, and it creates hiring issues for school administrators, especially when trying to match teachers to the range of specialties required in a given year. And, as Kitchenham and Chasteneuf (2010) note, beyond the challenge of finding teachers to *fill* a position, many northern and remote schools face the additional challenge of finding teachers who are aware of the demands of teaching in a remote area, and who are sensitive to the culture and experience of their students.

Finally, we looked at one indicator of the situation of rural students. We looked at individuals 20–22 years of age in the 2016 census and classified them according to the urban or rural place of residence in 2011 (when they were 15–17 years of age and would be expected to be attending high school). We then determined whether these individuals had attained a high school diploma. Individuals residing in rural areas near to metro centres were generally equally like to have completed a high school diploma as were metro residents. However, the more rural the place of residence when the individual was 15–17 years of age, the greater the share of individuals who had not attained a high school diploma.

Importantly, when these individuals were classified according to whether they reported as having an Aboriginal Identity, we found:

- (a) In each type of metro or non-metro area, individuals with an Aboriginal Identity were much less likely to have attained a high school diploma.
- (b) The share of non-Aboriginal individuals who had not attained a high school diploma was essentially the same across all geographic areas.
- (c) Thus, the urban to rural gradient in the share of youth without a high school diploma is largely due to the higher share of individuals with an Aboriginal Identity in rural remote and northern areas.



In schools with a high proportion of those with an Aboriginal Identity, one proposed solution to these challenges has been to train and hire more Aboriginal teachers. However, as Eaton et al. (2015) note there is simply not enough access to teacher certification programmes for those in remote rural areas, nor to certification programmes to train Aboriginal teachers (see also Frennette 2002; Looker 2010b).

We recognize the complexity of dealing with high school completion rates in rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities. As Corbett and Beck (2016) and others note, completing high school may make little sense for some rural students, if there are (a) few jobs available to them that require higher levels of education and (b) if getting further education requires them to leave their home community (Corbett 2007). Then, the issue would be more of ensuring that high paying, high skilled jobs are available across a range of settings, and that these jobs be more available to youth in remote rural communities.

An important caveat to this message is the fact that the demographic shift in the population, over the last few and the next several years as the baby boomers retire, has created and will create a situation where there are fewer young people coming onto the labour force than there are older individuals exiting into retirement. That is, there will be a labour *shortage* in all population areas, likely to 2029 (Bollman 2014, 2020). This shortage appeared in non-metro areas of Canada in 2008, and in metro areas as of 2013.<sup>39</sup> This shift could well create circumstances where rural youth, rather than “Learning to Leave” (as Corbett 2007 argued), they may “leave to learn” (Foster and Main 2018)—and then have more options to return as jobs open up in both rural and urban areas.

Teachers in remote rural areas need access to supports that are often unavailable or are limited. These include: professional development options, access to reliable high-speed Internet, and mentoring in understanding local cultural norms (Eaton et al. 2015; Kitchenham and Chasteneuf 2010). Beyond simple access to computers and the Internet, teachers in all rural areas, but especially in remote and northern areas, need IT support and ongoing access to training (Looker and Naylor 2010b).

So, while not all rural areas face all the challenges documented in the research literature, these challenges are real enough for those who do face them. Our analysis has helped to set the stage for identifying *where* particular challenges might lie so that they can be better addressed.

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<sup>39</sup>The labour shortfall (fewer individuals projected to enter the labour force than are exiting it) has been and will be more pronounced in some provinces than others. It has been and will be less pronounced in Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan (Bollman 2020).

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# “You Can’t Get There from Here”: Mapping Access to Canada’s Teacher Education Programs



Cameron W. Smith and Peter Peller

**Abstract** Most Canadian teacher education programs are offered in urban centers, resulting in limited access for rural and remote Canadians unwilling or unable to relocate to participate in pre-service teacher education. To better understand the extent of this issue and provide Canadian teacher education programs with current data, this study examines how many Canadians live within a reasonable commuting distance from at least one program—a distance we define as a 1-hour drive, one-way. Using ArcGIS and current Statistics Canada data, we analyze the populations that have geographic access to Canadian programs, the populations that are excluded, and offer recommendations for stakeholders across institutions so that we might continue to improve how we offer teacher education to students in rural and remote communities across the country.

**Keywords** Access to teacher education · Equity · Geographic Information Systems (GIS) · Geographic accessibility · Teacher recruitment

## 1 Introduction

Distance is a key factor in shaping access to post-secondary education (Hillman 2016). Relocation and long travel compound the financial, social, and emotional burdens that students may experience when attending college and university (Turley 2009). The effects of distance are particularly noticeable when considering students from rural and remote areas. Canadian universities are predominantly found in urban centers (Thompson and Gereluk 2017), which limits access opportunities for students who live far from these areas. It is therefore not surprising that rural students

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are underrepresented in universities when compared to their urban/suburban peers (Looker and Bollman, this volume; Looker 2009) and are also more likely to drop out of their programs, possibly attributed more to socio-emotional concerns than academic adjustment (Ames et al. 2014). This out-migration to attend university can have a lasting impact on rural communities, as students who leave their communities are less likely to return (Dupuy et al. 2000; Roscigno and Crowley 2009).

In the case of teacher education, training and recruiting educators is an ongoing challenge for many rural schools and districts (see Montgomery 2018). Previously, studies have identified that rural areas may struggle to attract qualified teachers, both from urban and rural settings (Barter 2008). Like other rural students, rural teachers are also more likely to seek work in urban school authorities than to return to their home communities upon completion of their degrees (Eaton et al. 2015). While reports of teacher shortages in rural areas are complicated by Looker and Bollman (this volume), questions of quality and retention remain.

Yet, despite these recognized challenges, “there are very few studies that quantify the rural teacher recruitment problem” (Miller 2012b, p. 1), particularly in a Canadian context. In response to this gap, this chapter presents an exploratory examination of geographic access to Canadian teacher education from a country-wide perspective. While provincial differences shape teacher education in each region, this problem has been identified as having national implications (Looker 2009).

This study investigates the areas in Canada which are served by an initial teacher education program (ITEP). One method to determine student access to teacher education is to look at commuting distance; according to the Canadian University Survey Consortium Undergraduate University Student Survey (Prairie Research Associates 2011), almost half of students commute to and from their campus by vehicle. This percentage is understandably higher among students who must travel into urban centers from outlying areas (Partridge and Nolan 2009).

Using geographic information systems (GIS), in this case ESRI’s ArcGIS suite, we analyzed three drive-time radii (30, 45, and 60 min) originating at all identified institutions offering teacher education in Canada (Universities Canada 2018). The drive-time radii were then intersected with population data retrieved from Statistics Canada’s 2016 census, to provide a sense of the population that is included and excluded from these “commuting” drives. In other words, longer commuting drives represent less access to teacher education.

Based on this model, this study asks the question: how many Canadians live within commuting distance of a Canadian ITEP? In light of the typical age of teacher education candidates, and questions concerning rural versus urban access disparities, two sub-questions were also posed:

- How many Canadians aged 18-to-50 are in these commuting zones?
- How many rural populations are within these commuting zones?

The remainder of this chapter is divided into five sections. First, we present relevant literature to provide contextual information on questions of geographic access, teacher recruitment, and rural education. Next, we discuss the methodology used to model our investigation of ITEP access. The third section outlines the results of these



analyses, and their implications are then discussed in the fourth section. The fifth section concludes the study.

## 2 Literature Review

GIS research has only recently begun to find its way into studies on post-secondary access (Burke et al. 2016; Frenette 2002, 2004). Indeed, prior research examining post-secondary access has not often taken students’ geographic contexts into account, or benefitted from the analyses available in GIS programs (Byun et al. 2012; Turley 2009). This gap is particularly noticeable given the substantial body of literature on access to educational opportunities, particular post-secondary institutions. Scholars in this area have also been attentive to the challenges facing particular demographics, including rural students (Rosignio and Crowley 2009), students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds (Dache-Gerbino 2017), and racialized minorities (Sohoni and Saporito 2009).

In Canada, various means have been used to examine access to post-secondary institutions. For example, Looker (2009) used data from the Youth In Transition Survey to investigate the different higher education options that are available to Canadian youth, comparing participation rates of urban and rural young people. Also interested in rural and urban differences, Ames et al. (2014) surveyed almost 3000 undergraduates at 6 universities, comparing rural and urban students’ home communities as predictors of their adjustment and attendance in university. Finally, Frenette (2002, 2004) investigated the role of distance in Canadian students’ post-secondary access and enrollment. Using GIS, Frenette geocoded information from the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics to assess the probability of students attending university based on their distance from the closest institution.

The intersection of teacher education access and geographic distance is much less common in the extant literature. While Miller’s (2012b) study examined rural teacher recruitment in New York state, his research was more focused on the choices of first-year teachers following their completion of teacher education. To our knowledge, there is currently no study examining geographic access to Canadian teacher education in this way.

### 2.1 *Analysis of Previous Research*

Access to post-secondary education, particularly from a geographic perspective, has been less explored in the Canadian context compared to the USA. Moreover, access to teacher education in particular is limited compared to studies of general post-secondary access. This may be the result of the difficulty in comparing Canadian educational contexts across provinces, which impacts the ability to collect aggregate data countrywide (Gambhir et al. 2008).

Studies examining post-secondary access with a focus on distance have used a variety of approaches, each with different limitations. For instance, several studies have used straight line, “as-the-crow-flies,” distances (Burke et al. 2016; Frenette 2002, 2004; Turley 2009). While this method is “simple and intuitive,” according to Shahid et al. (2009), there are “very few ... applications where it can yield accurate distance estimates” (p. 2). This is particularly important for calculating commute distances, as commuters are directly affected by road paths, traffic, locations, and access to transportation (Alasia et al. 2017). This is significant in this study, as Canadian undergraduate programs “tend to be relatively local and dominated by commuters” (Davies et al. 2014, p. 40). Based on this research, we therefore do not agree with Frenette’s (2002, 2004) assertion that an 80-kilometer radius of any university can serve as a reasonable commuting distance to a Canadian university. As explored in this study, such a distance would be more than a one-hour journey one-way for students traveling to any ITEP during regular commuting times (Statistics Canada 2016a).

Other researchers have used road distance (Jabbar et al. 2017; Walsh et al. 2015), which uses road networks to calculate more accurate travel when consistent areas are not required (ESRI 2017). As Walsh et al. (2015) note, “accessibility measures based on travel time ... may be preferable” to road network analysis alone (p. 19). While travel time requires specific characteristics (e.g., time of day) that limit its general validity (Shahid et al. 2009), travel time can account for factors such as traffic, speed limits, and other travel factors that simple road distances overlook. Driving 5 km through a downtown core, for example, takes a very different amount of time than driving the same distance on a sparsely used highway.

## 2.2 Access: *Why Distance Matters*

Providing equitable access to higher education is an ongoing struggle, balancing the need for institutional diversity and student attainment with the financial and larger socioeconomic realities of such systems (Pinheiro et al. 2016). In Canada, university campuses are usually found in or near major urban centers in the southern or central areas of provinces (Thompson and Gereluk 2017), “whereas community colleges are more widely distributed” (Statistics Canada 2004, para. 11). Since not all universities offer ITEPs, this varied distribution impacts access to teacher education even more than access to university education in general.

Traditionally, studies of post-secondary access have focused on the *process* of opportunity (e.g., students becoming aware of and selecting an institution), rather than the role and importance of geography of opportunity in determining higher education enrollment (Hillman 2016). However, distance is also an important factor in access to higher education around the world (Gereluk, Dressler, Eaton and Becker this volume). Scholars from Canada (e.g., Frenette 2002; Looker 2009), the USA (e.g., Byun et al. 2012; Roscigno and Crowley 2009), and Australia (e.g., Fleming and Grace 2017; Parker et al. 2016) have pointed to issues of distance for youth

considering post-secondary education. As Turley (2009) notes, the presence of a nearby post-secondary institution—i.e., one within commuting distance—is one of the most significant factors in shaping higher education opportunities. This can be seen in the Canadian context, where students who live outside of the commuting zone for a university are much more likely to enroll in a college program if one is nearby (Frenette 2004).

Put simply, distance matters. Long commutes are associated with negative health outcomes (Statistics Canada 2017d), and rural students who choose to relocate must manage a range of challenges, including financial burdens, such as the cost of moving, rent, and higher cost of living (Davies et al. 2014; Griffith and Rothstein 2009). Further, distance from social supports and family adds emotional costs to this decision (Frenette 2002; Jabbar et al. 2017). While distance is not the only complicating factor, distance can compound other barriers to post-secondary attainment, such as socioeconomic status, parents’ education, and family expectations (Gereluk, Dressler, Eaton and Becker, this volume; Byun et al. 2012). This necessitates an understanding of the intersection of distance and access issues in Canada in order to address these concerns.

Program proximity is also important for providing students with educational opportunities. In the USA, having “colleges in proximity seem to increase the odds of applying to college because they make the transition to college logistically, financially, and emotionally easier” (Turley 2009, p. 141). Students who do not live near a university do not have this option and cannot avoid the costs of relocating if they want to attend a particular program. As Griffith and Rothstein (2009) note, students therefore face real disincentives to apply to faraway programs, particularly if closer, more convenient options exist. Jabbar et al. (2017) echo this challenge: some students explicitly choose to attend programs closer to home because of the “perceived high costs of attending universities” that require them to relocate or move away from their families (p. 771). Indeed, while areas with multiple post-secondary options “have greater educational participation and attainment rates,” (Hillman 2016, p. 995), not all students live in such areas, and not all students are mobile enough to relocate to distant programs.

### ***2.3 Geographic Access and Initial Teacher Education***

Teacher education in Canada takes place exclusively at the post-secondary level, with “more than 55 universities graduating 18,000 new teachers each year” (Gambhir et al. 2008, p. 9). Most of these graduates participate in full-time, on-campus programs that require students to be able to physically attend the program on a regular basis. In recognition of goals for increased access, representation, and teacher retention, however, a number of universities across the country offer either “partial distance education models,” “community-based distance ITEP programs,” or specialized programs for Aboriginal teacher education and other groups (Gambhir et al. 2008, p. 11). Such programs are, in part, a response to the growing recognition that

rural and urban contexts affect teacher labor markets differently and require different responses (Miller 2012a). For example, in the USA, “professional isolation, measured by the distance to the nearest teacher education program, is associated with a lower likelihood of becoming a rural teacher” (Miller 2012b, p. 32). Canadian teacher education programs must therefore consider how their programs will be delivered, including the physical location for program delivery, delivery duration, and the specific communities and contexts the program is meant to serve (Gambhir et al. 2008).

Questions of geographic access to Canadian teacher education are particularly important because of the challenges facing rural teachers. Miller (2012b), for example, notes that rural teacher candidates encounter geographic isolation, professional isolation from colleagues, have access to fewer community services, and may be more distant from friends and family. Adequately preparing students to teach in rural communities is also challenging, as in-city placements do not reflect rural realities, and requiring students to commute significant distances to attend practicum experiences is not always feasible (Van Nuland 2011). Rural areas also struggle to “attract and retain qualified teachers and administrators” (Barter 2008, p. 475), as more rural teachers move into urban communities than the reverse; indeed, Miller’s (2012b) study highlights that teachers from rural areas found their first position an average of 47 miles from their hometown, while those from urban areas were matched with jobs only 17 miles away. Further, Dupuy et al. (2000) found that of the rural students who leave their communities to attend higher education programs, only 32% would return. In a study of teachers in British Columbia, Kitchenham (2000) identified a desire for many rural teachers to find work in more populated areas, given the lack of incentive to stay in rural and remote regions. In the USA, “rural schools are losing many of their community’s best educated young adults who choose to become teachers” (Miller 2012b, p. 35), increasing the challenge of recruiting skilled teachers who are willing to work in rural settings.

Thus, rural and remote schools struggle to attract and retain prospective teachers from both rural and urban backgrounds. As rural schools and communities benefit from having teachers who understand and appreciate the nature of rural life (Kline et al. 2013; Murphy, Driedger-Enns, and Huber, this volume), then, as Miller (2012b) notes, teacher education programs must consider how to address rural teaching barriers and work to structure their programs in such a way that increases the number of graduates who are able and willing to teach in rural or remote communities. As in many professions, geographic access to teacher education is therefore important both for who can attend education and for where teachers are likely to work once they graduate.

## 2.4 *Rurality*

Studies of rural education must necessarily define what they mean by “rural.” As Barter (2008) notes, “how one defines rural can have an impact on the research

approach as well as the research results” (p. 470). Indeed, different authors define rural in quite disparate ways (Byun et al. 2012), relying on different criteria to include or exclude different places and populations.<sup>1</sup> Barter (2008) elaborates that some authors “discuss [the notion of rural] as if everyone knows what rural is” (p. 470), while others define rural areas only in contrast to urban settings, which too is not always clearly defined. We have adopted the Statistics Canada definition of rural which classifies all residents as rural if they reside outside a population center of 1000 or more, and with a population density of <400 persons per km<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Canada 2016b).

Rural students across North America face considerable barriers when seeking to access post-secondary education (e.g., Byun et al. 2012; Davies et al. 2014). For example, rural Canadian students are less likely to enroll in higher education, and if they do enroll, are more likely to drop out due to the “culture shock” and lack of fit with their institution in large urban settings (Ames et al. 2014; Wintre et al. 2008), rather than due to issues of perseverance or academic adjustment (Ames et al. 2014; Looker 2009). Indeed, specifically for attending universities, Looker (2009) found that a rural–urban divide exists across the country even when controlling for other demographic variables. Koricich et al. (2018) note that, over time, the hesitation surrounding the value of post-secondary education can have a compounding effect on communities, where the lack of a nearby institution limits the community’s collective awareness of the role and possibilities offered by higher education (Griffith and Rothstein 2009; Hillman 2016). Thus, when considering distance and access to post-secondary education, it is important to consider how to bring higher education opportunities (and the associated careers which required such education) into rural communities, rather than focusing on how to get youth into post-secondary institutions (Looker 2009). This is particularly important if we are to recruit and retain prospective educators from these areas (Miller 2012b).

Importantly, rural communities and rural students are not a homogeneous group (Corbett 2016). Byun et al. (2012), for example, note that rural populations vary noticeably in income levels, ethnicity, school quality, geography, and population density. “Proximal” rural areas (i.e., ones closer to urban areas) will also have differing characteristics from those of more remote communities (Miller 2012a). Studies of rural issues must also be careful not to frame rural populations in exclusively negative, or exclusively positive, lights when compared to urban centers (Green 2015).

While rural communities face particular challenges, such communities also feature important strengths that differentiate them from larger population centers. As Barter (2008) describes, rural communities often have a strong sense of kinship and cooperative spirit, place a strong emphasis on family ties, and have a unique connection between school and community; all of which contribute to a distinct rural identity. In this study, we therefore recognize rural populations as groups with

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<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed consideration of rurality and its intersection with education, see Corbett (2014, 2016).

unique strengths, but also as citizens in need of quality teachers and access to teacher education.

### 3 Methodology and Methods

This exploratory study's processes follow those of other studies in this field that have used GIS (e.g., Walsh et al. 2015; Sohoni and Saporito 2009). GIS allow users to capture, manipulate, analyze, and visualize both spatial and non-spatial data (Price 2018). As we describe below, we combined Statistics Canada census data and information on the location of Canadian ITEPs. Using ESRI's ArcGIS suite, we examined five key data points to investigate the geographic accessibility of ITEPs in Canada:

1. The location of ITEPs across Canada
2. The geographic areas that fall within commuting distance of these ITEPs
3. The number of people living within those commuting areas
4. The rural and urban classifications of these areas
5. The age of those populations included in the commuting distance

#### 3.1 *Locating ITEPS*

Based on the discussion provided by Gambhir et al. (2008), for the purposes of this study, we define Canadian ITEPs as “a first, foundational stage in [students'] professional development process,” offered at the post-secondary level in either a concurrent or consecutive model (p. 7). While there are variations across provinces, these programs usually take the form of a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree, usually lead to certification to teach in that jurisdiction (e.g., Ontario College of Teachers 2018), and are usually publicly funded. Although some ITEPs vary from these norms, we have included all teacher education programs that we were aware of, in order to provide a more complete picture of the types of ITEPs that students have access to. These include some programs which are privately funded (e.g., Ambrose University), faith-based (e.g., Redeemer University College), or lead to a Masters of Teaching (e.g., Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE]).

ITEPs across the country were identified primarily from the membership of the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE 2017). However, as not all institutions offering ITEP are members of ACDE, additional sites were included from Thompson and Gereluk's (2017) review of satellite and distance teacher education programs. This latter text provided locations from university Web site information, which was clarified and augmented by institution stakeholders. Other institutions were also identified through a search of Universities Canada's (2018) directory. We

**Table 1** Overview of ITEP site locations in regions across Canada

Region	Number of ITEP sites
Atlantic Canada	13
Quebec	12
Ontario	18
Prairies	28
British Columbia	12
Territories	2

drew from these three sources to ensure as complete a list of ITEPs as possible.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these sources identified 85 ITEP sites, including institutions’ main campuses, as well as a number of satellite programs (Table 1).

### 3.2 Calculating Geographic Areas

To calculate geographic areas, we first geocoded the address of each site using ArcGIS Online. From each of these points, 30-, 45-, and 60-minute drive-time areas (DTAs) were generated using the business analyst tool. The driving time function “models the movement of cars and other similar small automobiles, such as pickup trucks, and finds solutions that optimize travel time. Travel obeys one-way roads, avoids illegal turns, and follows other rules that are specific to cars” (ESRI 2018, sec. driving time).

These drive times were selected based on data from Statistics Canada about the average commute to work, as no countrywide data were found for post-secondary commutes. According to 2016 data, 74% of Canadians drive a private vehicle to work, and the average private vehicle commute in Canada was just over 24 min. Given the urban setting of the vast majority of ITEP sites, we chose to round this to data closer to the average commuting time for larger metropolitan areas, which is closer to 30 min (Statistics Canada 2017d). For comparison, we also chose to include the longer DTAs (45 and 60 min). Fewer than 7% of Canadian private vehicle commuters travel more than 60 min, which we chose as our upper limit.

As noted by Statistics Canada, while a commute depends generally on its distance, departure time and traffic congestion patterns can affect the length of a commute such that “some short-distance commutes can take a long time while some long-distance commutes can be relatively quick” (2017d, p. 5). We therefore calculated the DTAs based on a commute on a Monday at 8:00 a.m., as the analysis requires an exact day and time in order to generate typical traffic conditions; this presents a reasonable snapshot for traffic conditions commuters may face while traveling to

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<sup>2</sup>Program models of teacher education in Canada are varied, and often changing to meet the needs of students. Naming conventions and offerings also differ between institutions. While this chapter offers some insights into the locations of these programs, exploring the nuances in how these programs are conceptualized and implemented extends beyond the scope of this research.

class or practicum experiences (Statistics Canada 2016a). The resulting DTAs were then downloaded from ArcGIS Online into ArcMap for analysis.

### 3.3 *Locating People*

Population data were obtained from the Statistics Canada Geosuite database to support analysis at the most precise scale available. First, information from the Population and Dwelling Count Tables was downloaded at the dissemination block (DB) level (Statistics Canada 2017c), and then joined to the corresponding spatial boundary file. This DB total population count is the anchor for all subsequent calculations. DBs are the smallest geographic unit for which Statistics Canada distributes data, and so are useful for narrowing the number of Canadians who live in a particular area. Unlike in other units, there is no rounding applied to the DB total population data, which makes them more accurate for working with the total population.

The DB files were also used in identifying rural and urban regions across the country. DBs are wholly urban (i.e., belonging to a population center) or rural which is an important factor for the study's analysis. Larger census units, in contrast, can be part urban and part rural. Although later analyses primarily use dissemination areas (DAs), explained below, it was necessary to use the DBs as a base to gather the most accurate population data for urban and rural areas. To identify each DB's urban/rural status, the Population centers' cartographic boundary file (Statistics Canada 2018a) was used to generate a rural Canada layer. This was accomplished by taking the symmetrical difference of the Population centers from a national layer data file. The resulting rural Canada layer was then spatially joined to the DB boundary file to classify the DBs as rural and urban: DBs that fell within the rural Canada layer were classified as rural, and DBs that fell outside of this layer were classified as urban.

Given that the DB boundary file is the building block of all other census geography levels, such as dissemination area and province/territory, it is also possible to dissolve (aggregate) the DBs and sum up their total populations in larger census units while maintaining their urban/rural status. As dissemination areas are the smallest geographic area at which age and sex data are available, this was necessary in order to identify Canadians aged 18-to-50 living within the DTAs (Statistics Canada 2017b). The 18-to-50 age range was used as a proxy for the populations who are most likely to attend a teacher education program, and to investigate whether the smaller proportion of young adults in rural areas would influence the population within the DTAs (Statistics Canada 2017a).

DAs merge several DBs into one larger region and provide a compact region with an average population between 400 and 700 (Statistics Canada 2017b). As only total population and total dwelling counts are available at the DB level, the required age-specific data for 18-to-50-year-olds (combined male and female) and total DA population were also collected for each DA from the "Age (in Single Years) and Average Age (127) for the Population of Canada, Provinces and Territories,



Census Divisions, Census Subdivisions, and Disseminations Areas” Census data table (98-400-X2016003).

However, a large number of DAs encompass both rural and urban DBs. To manage this, these DBs were aggregated into separate urban and rural DA parts. The resulting area thus needed to be calculated for each whole or partial DA. Assuming an even distribution of ages, we were able to recalculate the age group population by multiplying that ratio by the sum population of all the DBs that aggregated into each partial or complete DA:

$$\text{Summed DB Population} \left( \frac{\text{DA 18 - to - 50 Population}}{\text{DA Total Population}} \right)$$

We considered this the most accurate method to calculate the 18-to-50-year-olds and the total population within the DTAs by urban and rural areas. The resulting data were checked for their accuracy by comparing their counts to the census-reported DA count. We found that most of our calculations matched exactly, while a small number varied at most by one or two people, thereby confirming the logic of our calculation choice.

These population data were then intersected with the three DTAs (30, 45, and 60 minutes, respectively) retrieved from ArcGIS Online using the ArcMap Identity tool. This identity process creates three resulting features: (1) DAs completely outside the DTA of an institution; (2) DAs completely inside the drive-time area of an institution; and (3) DAs split by the DTA of an institution resulting in multiple parts. For DAs split by a DTA, we took the area within a DA that was covered by a DTA and divided it by the total DA area to calculate the resulting number of people who might be captured within a DTA:

$$\text{Summed DB Population} \left( \frac{\text{DA area covered by a DTA}}{\text{Total DA Area}} \right)$$

Thus, the summed DB population gave us the count for the total population, and the ratio of each DAs 18-to-50 population to the total population maintained the correct proportion for those within the desired age range. The DAs completely outside the drive-time areas were removed, and a new area was calculated for the remaining features (i.e., those that were intersected by a DTA). The ratio of this feature area to the original aggregated DA area was used to recalculate the 18-to-50 and total populations; this adjustment was necessary in order to accurately reflect areas that had changed due to being split into parts. We consider this a reasonable assumption given the size, density, and distribution of individual areas.

When DTAs from multiple institutions overlapped, DAs would be captured (either in part of whole) more than once. While this was necessary for identifying the areas captured by individual institutions, these repeated counts meant that we could not simply add the sums of the populations captured within the DTAs when calculating national or provincial/territorial totals. Since each resulting feature within the corresponding DTA was divided into a separate field through the Identity process,

we were able to run the calculations based on this information. Dissemination areas covered by more than one DTA were further dissected by the number of institutions which overlap it using the Identity tool. The population within it was averaged by adding the population of the feature and dividing by the number of institutions which overlap that area. Thus, if an area was intersected by 4 institutions, the population within it would have been counted 4 times and then divided by 4—thus eliminating any duplication.

In the final stage, we dissolved the features within each DTA to the original DA in two separate layers. The first layer provided the final aggregate totals for the province or territory, while the other provided totals for each individual ITEP site. These analyses therefore provide data for the populations living within 30-, 45-, and 60-minute DTAs of each site, including the total population, the population aged 18-to-50, as well as rural and urban distributions. Additionally, we were also able to calculate the totals of the geographical regions of Canada (as defined by Statistics Canada 2015) using the same process used with the provinces. Descriptive statistics were then drawn from the resulting data tables. The limitations of these approaches are explored below.

### ***3.4 Limitations***

This study examines access from a proximity (distance) perspective. While other access factors are certainly important, some of these have been explored in other studies (e.g., Davies et al. 2014), and they are outside the scope of this study. We recognize that proximity is not the only factor for all populations in all areas. Not everyone in the drive-time commuting zones has the same opportunity, but for the purposes of these questions the division is necessary (Byun et al. 2012). Put simply, while distance is not the only compounding factor, it is nevertheless a factor.

This study looks exclusively at distance to physical sites. While alternatives do exist, such as online and blended delivery programs, these alternatives exist in part as a response to geographic challenges. Thus, these programs too are served when we better understand the current state of geographic access to ITEP sites. While we recognize that populations living outside of the DTAs are not necessarily without any options for ITEPs, due to limited stakeholder responses surrounding the efficacy of these programs, we were unable to include them in this study.

This study also relies on population data available through Statistics Canada, which, while detailed, are limited to an extent. In addition to potential errors within Statistics Canada's data (2018b), certain assumptions must be made in working with the data. We cannot calculate the exact population within the DTAs because household data from the census are not released with its exact geolocation; it is instead associated with the census areas as a region. We must therefore assume that the population within each area is evenly distributed. This may not accurately capture the locations of population concentration which were not large enough to be delimited as their own DB or that are incorporated into larger DAs. However, by using the most

precise data available (i.e. at the smallest geographic areas), we have attempted to mitigate this limitation.

The DTAs, calculated using ArcGIS business analyst tool, are limited to the road networks included in the database. While this includes a variety of roadways and road types (such as gravel and dirt roads), this is not inclusive of all driving routes, particularly seasonal roads. Similarly, a recognized challenge in rural settings, public transit information was not included in the analysis. The DTAs were also set to a Monday at 8:00 a.m., which provides a DTA based on typical traffic patterns and conditions at the designated timeframe (ESRI 2014). This time was chosen to provide a realistic measure of a typical drive to a campus, which can include rush-hour conditions, and straddles the most popular commuting timeframes in Canada (Statistics Canada 2016a).

Finally, the selection of ITEP sites was based on the available data and information gathered from July to December 2017. In conversations with institution stakeholders, we were made aware of changes to offerings and locations of satellite campuses, including the addition and removal of ITEP sites over time. The data described above were re-calculated as new information was made available to us. It is possible that other ITEP sites exist, as the programs are in flux and the information publicly available on different institution’s Web sites may not always be complete or up-to-date (Thompson and Gereluk 2017). While this means that these data may not encompass every ITEP site, we have included every ITEP site that we are aware of.

## 4 Results

In order to contextualize our findings, we first look to population totals across Canada. Table 2 presents the total population in each province and territory, rural and urban populations, and the resulting percentages as reported by Statistics Canada (2018c). Table 3, similarly, presents data on the distribution of Canadians aged 18-50. When compared to the results of the analysis in Figs. 1 and 3, these statistics highlight the inequity in ITEP access between rural and urban areas.

### 4.1 30-Minute Drive-Time Areas

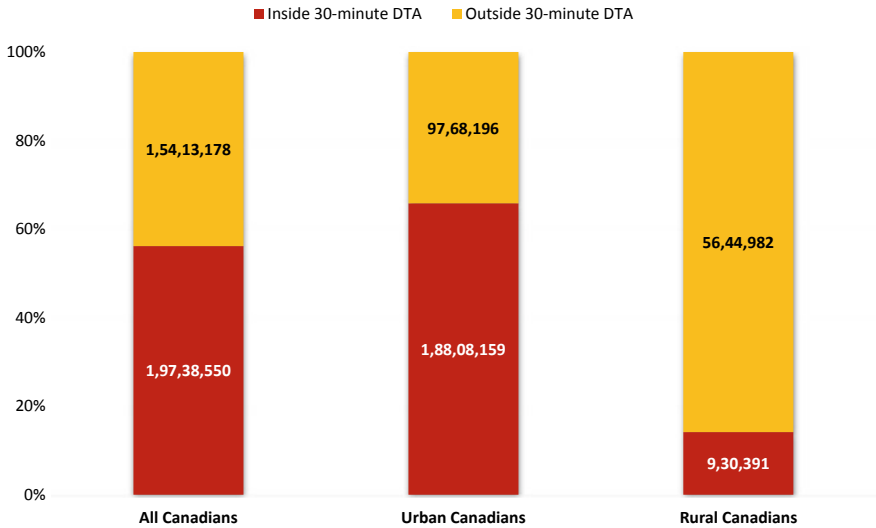
We now turn to the results arising from the analyses we described earlier for 30-minute DTAs. As shown in Fig. 1, 44% of all Canadians do not live within a 30-minute drive of at least one ITEP. This percentage includes 18.8 million urban Canadians, and over 930,000 rural Canadians. Urban Canadians are therefore more likely to be near an ITEP site than their rural counterparts. In other words, while 65.8% of the urban population live within 30 min of an ITEP site, only 14.1% of the rural population do so. This leaves 9.7 million urban Canadians and 5.6 million rural

**Table 2** Rural, urban, and total population counts for Canada, provinces, and territories

Province/territory	Total population	Rural population	Urban population	% Rural	% Urban
Newfoundland and Labrador	519,716	217,988	301,728	41.9	58.1
Prince Edward Island	142,907	78,498	64,409	54.9	45.1
Nova Scotia	923,598	393,629	529,969	42.6	57.4
New Brunswick	747,101	380,919	366,182	51.0	49.0
Quebec	8,164,361	1,591,306	6,573,055	19.5	80.5
Ontario	13,448,494	1,857,981	11,590,513	13.8	86.2
Manitoba	1,278,365	343,136	935,229	26.8	73.2
Saskatchewan	1,098,352	364,848	733,504	33.2	66.8
Alberta	4,067,175	667,803	3,399,372	16.4	83.6
British Columbia	4,648,055	631,776	4,016,279	13.6	86.4
Yukon	35,874	14,142	21,732	39.4	60.6
Northwest Territories	41,786	15,003	26,783	35.9	64.1
Nunavut	35,944	18,344	17,600	51.0	49.0
<b>Canada</b>	<b>35,151,728</b>	<b>6,575,373</b>	<b>28,576,355</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>81.3</b>

**Table 3** Rural, urban, and total aged 18–50 population counts for Canada, provinces, and territories

Province/Territory	Population (18–50)	% of Total Population	Rural Population (18–50)	% of Rural Population	Urban Population (18–50)	% of Urban Population
Newfoundland and Labrador	209,257	40.3	77,636	35.6	131,621	43.6
Prince Edward Island	56,281	39.4	29,581	37.7	26,700	41.5
Nova Scotia	367,256	39.8	139,174	35.4	228,082	43.0
New Brunswick	292,906	39.2	141,361	37.1	151,545	41.4
Quebec	3,380,106	41.4	585,386	36.8	2,794,720	42.5
Ontario	5,817,925	43.3	674,375	36.3	5,143,550	44.4
Manitoba	547,377	42.8	131,139	38.2	416,238	44.5
Saskatchewan	463,890	42.2	132,695	36.4	331,195	45.2
Alberta	1,906,320	46.9	261,017	39.1	1,645,303	48.4
British Columbia	1,984,589	46.9	219,982	34.8	1,764,607	43.9
Yukon	16,327	45.5	5,849	41.4	10,478	48.2
Northwest Territories	20,441	48.9	6,834	45.6	13,607	50.8
Nunavut	17,218	47.9	8,344	45.5	8,874	50.4
<b>Canada</b>	<b>15,079,893</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>2,413,373</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>12,666,520</b>	<b>44.3</b>

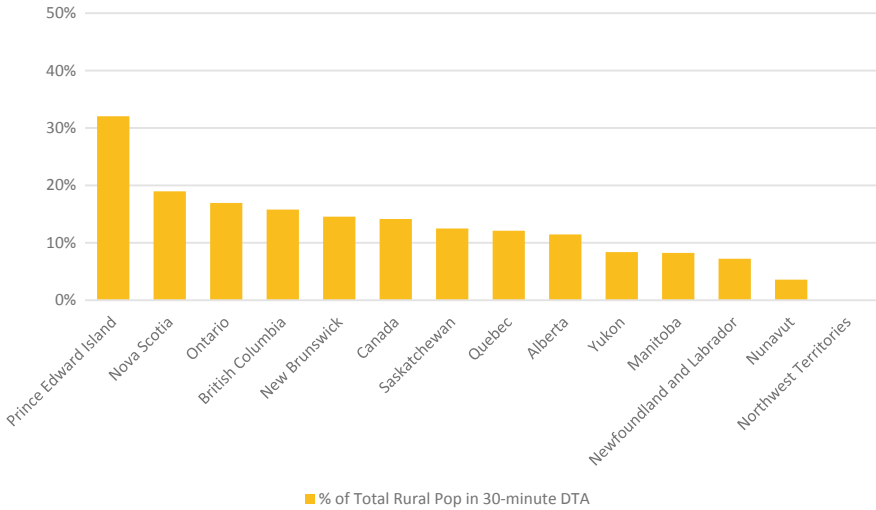


**Fig. 1** Number of Canadians located inside and outside a 30-minute DTA

Canadians outside of the 30-minute DTAs. Given that almost all ITEP sites are in urban areas, this highlights a root concern for ITEP access.

This coverage varies across the country: British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba’s DTAs each encompasses more than 60% of their province’s total populations. By contrast, DTA coverage is much lower in New Brunswick (32.4%), Nunavut (21.5%), and the Northwest Territories (0%). This suggests that while some regions have ITEP distributions that align well with the population concentration, others do not. DTA coverage also varies for rural Canadians. As Fig. 2 shows, Prince Edward Island’s rural DTA coverage is 32.0%, noticeably higher than any other area. Most provinces (7) include 11–19% of their rural population in these DTAs, while other provinces have comparatively low coverage. Only 8.2% of rural Manitobans, for example, are within the province’s 30-minute DTAs, even though 60.5% of the province’s total population live within 30 min of an ITEP.

The least coverage occurs in the territories, as only two ITEP sites are in the region. In the Yukon, only 8.4% of the rural population lives within 30 min of the University of Regina’s collaborative offering with Yukon College. While this single site encompasses 87.1% of the Yukon’s urban population, this does not provide direct access for most of the rural population. A similar issue occurs in Nunavut: Only 3.6% of Nunavut’s rural population lives within 30 min of the program offered at Arctic College in Iqaluit. During the data collection for this data, we found no ITEPs in the Northwest Territories. While Aurora College offers teacher education in Yellowknife in partnership with the University of Saskatchewan, stakeholders noted that the program is not currently admitting students (Aurora College 2018). This speaks to the ongoing need for access to ITEPs in the territories.



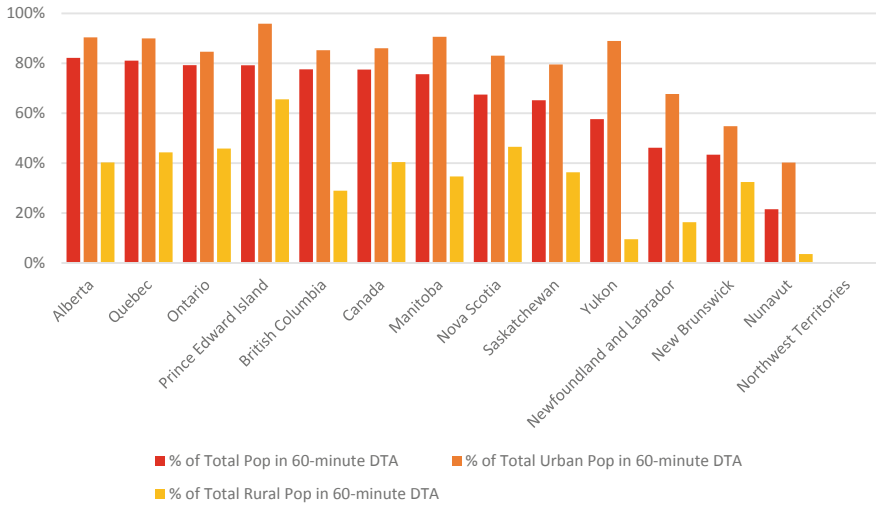
**Fig. 2** Percentage of rural Canadians located inside a 30-minute DTA

Interesting patterns also emerge across the provinces. Of the four Atlantic provinces, three are in the top five for rural coverage at 30 min. The area also contains the only rural main campus, Université Sainte-Anne (Nova Scotia). By contrast, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan (Prairies) each has rural coverages that are below the national average. The opposite is true for urban coverage: Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan’s are each in the top four for urban coverage within 30 min. These differences in coverage within the 30-minute DTA highlight disparities in ITEP access.

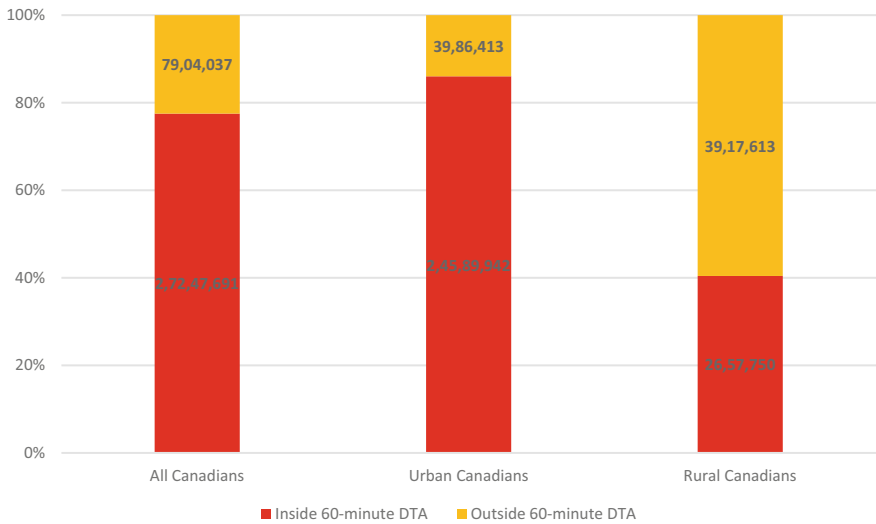
### 4.2 60-Minute Drive-Time Areas

For comparison, we have chosen to include data for the 60-minute DTAs. Figure 3 presents the percentage of Canadians living within these larger DTAs in each province. Expanding each ITEP drive-time area to 60 min encompasses the homes of 77.5% of all Canadians, including 86% of all urban Canadians. While the 60-minute DTAs also encompass more rural Canadians (40.4%), more than half of the rural population is still not included. Put another way, nearly 60% of all rural Canadians live too far away from ITEP sites to commute to those sites on a regular basis (Fig. 4).

As with the 30-minute DTAs, the 60-minute DTAs produce varying results in different areas of Canada. Prince Edward Island remains the most covered area, as its 60-minute DTA encompasses 95.9% of the urban population and 65.6% of the rural



**Fig. 3** Percentage of rural, urban, and all Canadians located inside a 60-minute DTA



**Fig. 4** Number of Canadians located inside and outside a 60-minute DTA

population. Other provinces more closely resemble the national average (e.g., Quebec’s DTAs encompass 44.3% of the rural population), but other areas show noticeably less coverage (such as Newfoundland, where rural coverage is only 16.4%). Each of the prairie province’s DTAs encompass less than the national average, though Alberta’s coverage (40.3%) is only marginally below Canada’s (40.4%).

Owing to the different drive-time radii in different areas, not all areas gain rural coverage at the same rate over distance. In the Yukon, for example, doubling the drive time only increases the encompassed rural population by 1.1% (from 8.4 to 9.5%). By comparison, Ontario's coverage moves from 16.9 to 45.9%, a gain of 29%. These variations mean that areas that are above average within the 30-minute DTAs are sometimes below average at 60 min. British Columbia, for example, has an above-average rural coverage at 30 min (15.8%, the 4th highest), but a below average coverage at 60 min (29.0%, the 5th lowest). New Brunswick shows a similar shift: While the province's rural coverage is slightly above average at 30 min (14.6%), at 60 min it is well below average (32.4%). Despite these variations, the areas of greatest and least rural coverage are consistent at both radii. Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Ontario are, in order, the areas with the most rural coverage, while Nunavut and the Northwest Territories feature the least rural coverage.

### ***4.3 Drive-Time Areas for Canadians Aged 18-to-50***

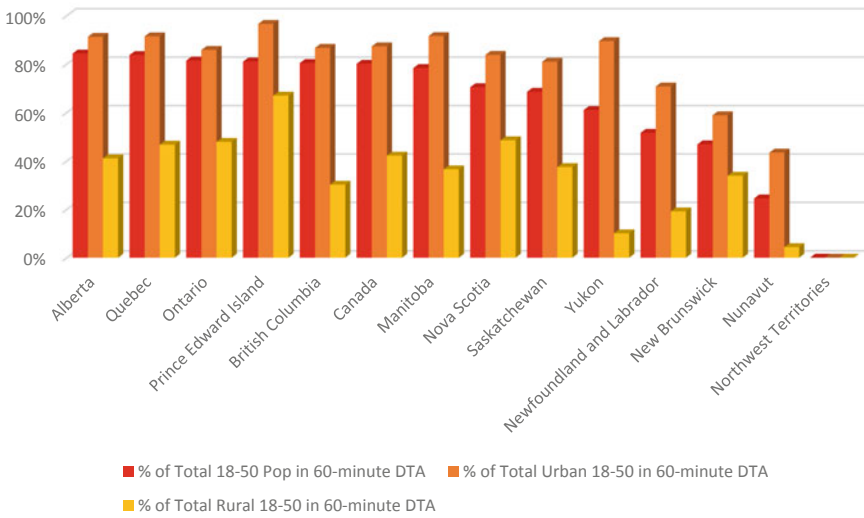
Population data in the 18-to-50 range largely mirror the general population's results at both DTA levels. As Statistics Canada (2017a) notes, there are proportionally fewer young adults (aged 15–29) in rural areas. Indeed, compared to the general population, proportionally more 18-to-50-year-olds live within DTAs. This is true for all jurisdictions and for both rural and urban populations. Since young people tend to live closer to urban areas, where the majority of the DTAs originate, this trend is not surprising.

Figure 5 illustrates these changes at the 60-minute DTA level. When compared with Fig. 3, these increases are relatively minor for both urban and rural populations. For example, 87.3% of urban Canadians aged 18-to-50 are within an hour's drive of an ITEP site (compared to 86% of the total population), while 42.2% of rural Canadians aged 18-to-50 are (compared to 40.4%). In rural areas, only Quebec and Newfoundland see proportional increases above 2% (2.3 and 2.8%, respectively). Similarly, most (10) urban proportions increase by less than 1.5%, with 6 provinces and territories increasing by less than 1%. Thus, while 18-to-50-year-olds served as a proxy for those populations who are most likely to enter an ITEP, the modest increases across the country do little to address the challenges that have already been identified: Namely, that rural Canadians are significantly more likely to live well outside of a reasonable commuting distance to attend teacher education in person.

## **5 Discussion**

These data present insight into the challenge of geography in Canada. It may be tempting, across these data, to assume that since rural Canadians live farther apart and farther away, that their exclusion is inevitable or understandable, at least from the





**Fig. 5** Percentage of rural, urban, and Canadians aged 18-to-50 located inside a 60-minute DTA

perspective of where we can be reasonably expected to maintain ITEP sites. Despite having 85 ITEP sites across the country, nearly 60% of the rural population is still too far from any teacher education program to spend less than 2 h commuting each day. The populations behind these percentages are substantial: 7.9 million Canadians live more than an hour away from an ITEP site, 3.9 million of which are rural Canadians. Taking the 30-minute radii into account, nearly 86% of all rural Canadians would need to make a substantially above-average commute to reach an ITEP site.

With the exception of Prince Edward Island, the smallest province by area, no province or territory has more than 50% of its rural citizens within 60 min of an ITEP site. Using 30-minute drive-times, only PEI’s coverage includes more than 20% of rural Canadians. In every province or territory, the proportion of urban Canadians with geographic access to ITEP sites well exceeds the level of access for their rural peers.

The provinces with the highest percentage of the total population included in the 30-minute DTA (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario) are those with the lowest percentage of rural population. In this sense, a less-than-30-minute commute can only be expected of urban populations. These access gaps are particularly noticeable in the territories. While the population of the territories is relatively small (113,594), all of these people face the very real challenge of having almost no nearby ITEP sites, meaning they must either find a suitable online program or relocate to a far-away campus, a choice that comes with a range of additional costs and challenges. While distance to ITEP sites affects urban and rural Canadians alike, these data show that rural Canadians, particularly rural Canadians living in Canada’s north, are disproportionately affected by distance when making decisions about teacher education.

These results provide further insight into findings from previous research exploring rural and urban participation rates in Canadian post-secondary. Looker (2009) notes that rural youth participation is higher in Atlantic Canada and Ontario than in other regions of Canada. Indeed, three Atlantic provinces (PEI, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick) and Ontario make up four of the top five provinces with the highest rural coverage at the 30-minute commute. For most rural students, long commutes or relocating seem likely if they wish to attend a Canadian ITEP, which as we have noted, are associated with negative health outcomes (Statistics Canada 2017d) and myriad challenges (e.g., Griffith and Rothstein 2009). While Canadians aged 18-to-50 are slightly more likely to live within an hour of an ITEP than the general population, much of this relatively small difference can be accounted for by the fact that more 18-to-24-year-olds live in urban areas than in rural areas and are therefore closer to most ITEPs (Statistics Canada 2004).

## 6 Implications

These data show that the majority of rural Canadians do not have geographic access that allows for reasonable commuting to teacher education. In addition to other factors affecting access, rural Canadians are less likely to live within an hour's drive of an ITEP site and are significantly less likely to live within 30 min, a distance comparable to Canadians' average daily commute. While a large number of ITEP sites exist, including main campuses, satellites, and collaborative offerings, these sites are almost all in urban population centers and are clustered in Ontario and Eastern Canada. As a result, 7.9 million Canadians live too far away from teacher education programs to be able to attend those programs in-person without relocating. These 7.9 million people include 3.9 million rural Canadians, 3 million Canadians aged 18–50, and a sizeable number of children and young adults who grow up in communities where recruiting and retaining teachers is an ongoing challenge. Given these persistent issues (Dupuy et al. 2000; Miller 2012b), it is therefore critical that geographic considerations are made for any ITEP examining the accessibility of its programs and alternatives for rural citizens (Gereluk, Dressler, Eaton and Becker, this volume).

## 7 Conclusion

This exploratory study focused on gaining initial understandings of geographic access to ITEPs across Canada. The findings suggest that while most Canadians live within a commuting distance of a teacher education program, nearly 8 million Canadians live in communities that are not served by in-person ITEP sites. Issues of access therefore go beyond the rural/urban divide, yet it is important to remember that distance to an ITEP disproportionately affects those in rural communities. Canadians living in

Nunavut, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories are particularly underserved, to the extent that many prospective teachers must leave their communities if they wish to attend an ITEP site in person. These data reinforce that we cannot be apathetic to geographic distance as a factor in access and equity of ITEPs.

These findings broaden our understanding of access gaps in the Canadian context, especially since relatively little teacher education access research has drawn on GIS data and analyses. By considering the areas of population that are furthest from current ITEPs, as well as areas where teacher demand is persistent, targeted programs may be better designed which address the unique situations present in these communities. Given the importance of preparing and supporting quality teachers across the entire country, it is our hope that these kinds of data will continue to be used to inform Canadian teacher education.

Building upon this study, future research may further investigate this area by considering:

- How are Canadian ITEPs responding to the needs of rural and remote teachers and communities within their program?<sup>3</sup>
- Does the type of program—consecutive versus concurrent models—influence prospective teachers’ ability to remain or return to their community?
- How effective are blended and online programs in addressing issues of ITEP access across Canada?<sup>4</sup>
- How does commuting change pre-service teachers’ experience and engagement in their programs and professional development?

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<sup>3</sup>In the consecutive model, students may have already left their home communities to pursue their initial undergraduate studies.

<sup>4</sup>Program stakeholders were often hesitant or unwilling to provide information with regard to the demographics and number of students who were pursuing their community-based/blended program models, where options exist, which meant we were unable to provide a meaningful consideration of them in this chapter.

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# On the Educational Ethics of Outmigration: Liberal Legitimacy, Personal Autonomy, and Rural Education



Christopher Martin

**Abstract** The promise of a liberal democracy is to provide each citizen a fair and equal chance at a good life (I do not mean “liberal” in the sense of a political party [The Liberal Party of Canada] or in the popular sense [the set of cultural/economic preferences often associated with so-called “left-leaning” citizens in the United States]. I mean a political and intellectual tradition that sees the relationship between citizen and government founded on a basic moral respect for the equal value of all persons and the associated rights and liberties granted by virtue of that respect). Education plays a key role in realizing this promise. To what extent, however, should educational institutions be responsive to differences in the demographics, composition, density, and mobility of different segments of a liberal citizenry? In this chapter, I will argue that a liberal conception of public education should attend to the meaning and significance of a citizen’s community of origin in the pursuit of a good life, and that this warrants a special consideration for rural educators. By a “liberal conception of public education” I mean an education that takes the promotion of citizen’s capacity for individual freedom in the pursuit of a good life as a key educational aim supported by public institutions such as the school. In Sect. 1, I set out the basic features of a public education as envisaged by liberal political theory, focusing on the conditions that such an education would need to fulfill in order to be legitimate in the eyes of citizens. In Sect. 2, I outline the various critiques levelled at contemporary public education advanced by rural education theorists. In Sect. 3, I explain why these critiques represent a genuine challenge to the justice and legitimacy of liberal public education. Finally, in Sect. 4, I defend an approach to liberal public education that can address this challenge, and I identify the ways in which rural educators can work to realize this approach.

**Keywords** Rural education · Personal autonomy · Aims of education · Political legitimacy · Educational justice · Distributive justice

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## 1 The Liberal Political Argument for Public Education: Some Basics

I will argue that the relationship between liberalism and rural community<sup>1</sup> represents an important consideration in formulating the values and aims that ought to define a liberal conception of public education. But before specifying why I think so, it is worth setting out the broader philosophical and political backdrop of my claim.

It is almost second nature to think of public education as an institution structured by government. But it does not have to be that way. In liberal societies, legitimate state authority over our institutions is conditional. It has to be earned. Political philosophers have sought to determine what conditions have to be in place for citizens to recognize the political authority of the liberal state. One of the leading accounts states that political authority is legitimate when free and equal citizens would be willing to consent. This perspective on legitimacy can be applied to public education (Brighouse 1998). For example, it would be unreasonable to expect citizens to consent to a conception of public education that intended to promote some cultures or ideas of the good life over others.<sup>2</sup> Such citizens would be within their rights to opt out of a compulsory curriculum that endorses a particular religious point of view. It would impinge on the freedom of individual citizens to develop their own sense of identity. The policy would also unfairly distribute the costs and benefits of a publicly funded education system between different religious (and non-religious) groups.<sup>3</sup> A politically legitimate conception of public education, therefore, strives to respect basic rights and liberties that belong to all citizens as well as ensuring that the benefits and burdens of society are distributed more or less equally.<sup>4</sup>

It is one thing to claim that liberal institutions should, in general, respect norms of political justice, and legitimacy. But what makes something a liberal institution in the

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<sup>1</sup>It is of course important not to impose strong and uninformed assumptions about what life in rural communities means, what it looks like, and how it is experienced, especially for a region as large and as diverse as Canada's. My experiences as a child in out port Newfoundland, for example, was quite different than my experiences working as a public-school teacher in a small Labrador community. For more on this, see Corbett and White (2014).

<sup>2</sup>It would be remiss not to draw the reader's attention to the fact that some liberals argue that promoting autonomy just is to promote a particular conception of the good life. This takes us a little further into liberal political theory than is warranted by the aims of this chapter. However, there are arguments in play that show how autonomy can be promoted in schools without privileging autonomy as a view of the good life (see Davis and Neufeld 2007).

<sup>3</sup>A good example is Ontario's history of public funding for Catholic education and no other religious denominations. For a helpful overview of the issues, see Zinga (2008).

<sup>4</sup>As Callan puts it, "[j]ustice depends on the extent to which democratic self-rule honors basic rights and realizes a fair distribution of benefits and burdens among citizens" (2000, p. 141). The relationship between justice and liberal political legitimacy is a philosophically detailed and complex one (see Brighouse 1998). I will not address these complexities, here. Suffice to say that when liberal democracies govern unjustly, they are not only sliding away from liberal political norms, they are unlikely to secure actual consent from citizens. If a liberal political conception of education leads to obvious injustices from the perspective of reasonable citizens, it follows that this conception of education is a poor foundation for the legitimacy of state-run public education in the liberal state.



first place? That is to say, what is about public education *in particular* that justifies it as an institution that should fall under the political authority of the liberal state? What rights, liberties, or benefits is it responsible for distributing? What reasons do we have for protesting when the state decides it does not want to be in the business of educational provision? These are fair questions. The fact that an institution has an educational mission does not entail that it has a *public and political* mission.

What public and political role does education play that justifies its inclusion within a liberal political framework? Philosophers working in the liberal tradition have converged on education for personal autonomy—the cultivation of one’s capacity to make self-determined choices—as one such role.<sup>5</sup> Personal autonomy is a contested concept and, later in the chapter, I will draw out some features of the concept I think are important for rural education. But, very simply, personal autonomy is the capacity to freely—*without coercion or manipulation*—act on one’s own ideas about a good and well-lived life. An autonomous life involves finding a “best fit” between one’s own wants, desires, and convictions and the various ways of living available to citizens in a diverse society. It also involves a capacity to critically reflect on and, if needed, revise those wants, desires, and commitments.

Education for autonomy has a political corollary: the state has a duty to ensure that every child has the equal opportunity to develop the capacity to lead an autonomous life. It, therefore, has the legitimate authority to use its power to direct children toward an autonomy-facilitating or autonomy-promoting education. Public education is the institution in the best position to carry out that role.<sup>6</sup> In the parlance of modern liberal theory, the importance of autonomy as a fundamental interest arguably situates public education within the “basic structure” of a liberal society, that is to say, those institutions to which political justice and political authority applies (Rawls 2005, p. 68).

## 2 Public Education and the Injustice of Outmigration

I have so far set out, in broad terms, the political legitimacy of a liberal public education. Of course, we can compare the *ideal* of a liberal public education with its “non-ideal” reality. This sets the stage for some important, and influential, critiques

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<sup>5</sup>One could reject this argument on the grounds that schools very rarely live up to this ideal. But this is, in a sense, beside the point. As Feinberg puts it, “As critical as these concerns are there is a prior issue that needs to be addressed that asks about the adequacy of the liberal ideal itself and the appropriateness of its application to education. It is this question that is the focus of the communitarian’s criticism of liberalism” (1995, p. 35, footnote 1).

<sup>6</sup>This, of course, glosses over some major differences as we move from classical to social liberalism. J. S. Mill, for example, argued that the state may only interfere in order to ensure that parents satisfy their educational obligations to their children but that public education should not be a monopoly controlled by the state (Ryan 2011, pp. 660–662). Contrast this to social liberals following from John Rawls who argue that we have specifically egalitarian reasons state interference in public educational provision (for an influential and carefully rendered account, see Brighouse 2003).

proffered in the name of rural and remote schooling. These critiques converge on the view that the effects of a public education are disproportionately burdensome for rural communities relative to their urban counterparts. That is to say, public education is (in its current form) *unjust*. Here is why: if education means instilling students with skills and dispositions that will enable them to freely choose different labor markets—a key feature of economic liberalism—students in rural communities will be more likely to abandon their community of origin in order to seek out more lucrative socioeconomic opportunities in urban centers.<sup>7</sup> On this view, an educational ethos that promotes individual freedom (including the ability and willingness to pursue valuable socioeconomic opportunities) unfairly distributes the benefits and burdens of public education. In short, rural communities invest resources into the political framework of a liberal society, while urban centers reap the benefits.<sup>8</sup> And this surely matters for the liberal legitimacy of public education because, as I discussed above, legitimacy is derived from citizen’s willingness to consent to the political arrangements of society.

I should add that this critique is by no means restricted to scholarly discourse. It has, for example, become a major trope of post-Trump journalistic and social media opining.<sup>9</sup> Chris Arnade, for example, has argued that public-school systems in the USA focus squarely on merit, with access to higher education as its end goal, at the expense of rural communities (2019). Arnade uses the classroom metaphor of “front-row kids/back-row kids” to concisely capture the consequences of this emphasis: a polity divided between those who choose to stay in their rural communities (or could not leave) and those who leave in search of different opportunities. The rub is that front-row kids are praised as hard working, upwardly mobile, intelligent, cosmopolitan—and fully worthy of the social esteem and economic advantages that come with that status. Meanwhile, back-row kids are unfairly demeaned as provincial, racist, lazy—and fully deserving of the social ills and economic disadvantages laid at their feet.

The educational implications of such arguments easily follow. Consider the following from Paul Theobald, a prominent defender of rural schooling:

[W]e have designed schools so that they structure in significant risk for students on a daily basis. What happens between kindergarten and high-school graduation is that we weed out those insufficiently prepared to take risks, which is to say, we weed out most children in the building... We teachers are rarely aware of the process. Convinced that we have the knowledge our children must come to know, we ask them in front of their peers if they can, in fact, provide

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<sup>7</sup>This is a phenomenon well documented in the sociological and educational literature. See Corbett (2007) and Carr and Kefalas (2009). As Cuervo (2016) puts it, “rural schools have the capacity to function as talent export industries: the young that the community constructs as ‘talented’ find departure not only attractive but inevitable. Parents and educators embrace this inevitability, which dooms the sustainability of the community. It seems counterproductive to dedicate the community to bring educational opportunities only to bring about its own destruction in the process” (p. 201).

<sup>8</sup>I’ve here aimed to capture the critique in broad strokes. But variations on the critique can be found in a number of loosely affiliated ideological positions including “place-based” education theorists, critical theorists, and philosophical communitarians (see Gruenewald 2003; Sobel 1996; Theobald and Dinkelman 1995).

<sup>9</sup>See also David Goodheart’s distinction between ‘somewheres’ and ‘nowheres’ (2017).

us with the right answer. After years' worth of having the wrong answer...students become silent, indifferent, unaffected by what is going on in the classroom. Those with greater stamina for taking risks survive the process. Although they may not be any more intelligent (as conventionally defined), they have learned to work the system we call schooling, they are headed for advanced placement, for programs for the gifted and talented, and ultimately, they will move on to the interesting jobs in society (which is to say, nearly synonymously, to jobs in urban and suburban America). (1997, p. 46)

Critiques like Theobald's look to be on point. If the state is indeed supporting a public education that sorts people into winners and losers, divides the polity, and rewards self-interest, it seems that we have reasonable grounds to question the political legitimacy of that system.

Recall that my claim is that rural community should be an important consideration in setting out the values and aims of a liberal public education. Does the critique I outlined above provide some reasons in support of this claim? Perhaps not. The defender of a liberal public education could say that while this critique is on the mark, it misunderstands the target. Such criticisms do not apply to the *ideal* of a liberal public education so much as an actually existing "neoliberal" education system that indoctrinates students to value educational credentials and worldly success. In fact, the picture of contemporary public education painted by Theobald, Arnade and other critics lies far from the liberal ideal, rather, it is actually an *autonomy-compromising* education insofar as it coerces, manipulates, or pressures children into thinking that the only worthwhile conceptions of the good life are those logically connected to merit, competition, urbanity, and educational attainment (in the narrow sense).<sup>10</sup> The public education systems of liberal democracies fail the test of justice and legitimacy by failing to *sufficiently realize* liberal political ideals.

I argue, however, that the defender of liberal public education cannot (and should not) rest on this counterargument. We have no reason to assume that replacing "neoliberalized," non-ideal educational institutions with ones closer to the liberal political ideal (perhaps more seriously committed to the development of personal autonomy in the sense that I have sketched above) would appreciably mitigate the (ostensibly) harmful consequences of public education for rural communities. In both cases, people are leaving, it is just that in the "liberal" case, people are leaving because they have freely chosen to do so and in the "neoliberal" case, they are being manipulated into so doing. To be sure, the causes matter, morally speaking. In a free and open society, it is better that people out-migrate because they want to rather than because they *have* to. But the real worry motivating the rural critique, *fundamentally*, is the impact of the education system on the long-term sustainability of rural communities.

Consider: if the decline in the sustainability of rural communities were unjust or harmful *just because* of economic inequality or an unequal (and discriminatory)

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<sup>10</sup>Defenses of rural education, as laudable as they may be, do themselves no favors when they fail to distinguish between economic neoliberalism and political liberalism. The latter offers a range of political principles and conceptual tools that theorists of rural education could draw from in justifying greater liberal state support for rural schooling.

distribution of respect/recognition/esteem we should be perfectly happy with a situation where rural communities receive a fairer distribution of respect and income but many people out-migrated, regardless.<sup>11</sup> But I doubt that rural education theorists (or members of rural communities themselves) would be happy with this state of affairs. And nor should they. What motivates many rural-informed critiques of education, I think, is an intuitive sense that the persistence of community has a value all of its own. And the implication of this, as I will show in the next section, is that the rural critique represents a challenge not merely to a non-ideal school system, but to the liberal *ideal* of public education.

### 3 Communitarianism, Rural Education, and Justice

The philosophical tradition that most directly captures the intuitive sense that community is valuable is termed “communitarianism.”<sup>12</sup> This tradition, in many of its variants, challenges the legitimacy of liberalism as a political ideal *full stop*. Therefore, the challenge that rural community poses to the justice and legitimacy of a liberal political conception of education may be a philosophical one that transcends specific economic policies. Communitarianism is the view that people primarily flourish, form an identity, and relate to one another through membership in community. Liberals can get behind a similar set of claims but there are at least two important differences. First, when communitarians see a conflict between the values and interests of the community and the values and interests of the individual, they tend to think that priority should be given to the values and interests of the community. Second, while liberals accept the idea that we incur a variety of obligations and duties toward others, these obligations and duties are freely entered into. Think of an employment contract or marital obligations. But for the communitarian, we have obligations and duties *to the good of the community* and these obligations and duties are not (necessarily) freely chosen but have purchase on us *simply by virtue of being accepted (or born into) that community* (see Feinberg 1995, p. 49; Callan and White 2003; Theobald and Dinkelman 1995).

From a communitarian-informed perspective, rural communities are treated unjustly when actions or policies undermine their existence. This is where a liberal, autonomy-promoting education comes back into the picture. An *ideally* successful liberal public-school system will teach children to seek out a good fit between who they are and the range of options that exists in an open society. It will emphasize freedom of association and a person’s right to exit their community of origin, should they wish to do so. It will expose them to ideals of the good life different from (and possibly more appealing than) the one inherited from their family. It will equip them

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<sup>11</sup>Though such a redistribution would be an undeniable step forward for justice in rural education. See Cuervo (2016).

<sup>12</sup>See also Corbett’s reconstruction of the communitarian underpinnings of rural education discourse (2014).

with the capacity to critically assess, accept, revise, or reject the dominant norms and values of the community within which they currently reside. That is to say, the ideal of an autonomy-promoting education allegedly frays the bonds that the communitarian takes to be constitutive of community.

The principled conflict between communitarian conceptions of rurality and an education for autonomy is evinced in the aims that rural defenders believe educators should adopt in order to beat back rural outmigration, such as the inculcation of a commitment to their place or community of origin, or place-based education. Again, Theobald is well worth quoting for his directness and clarity on the matter:

[W]herever a school exists, the professionals who work within it must focus their pedagogical energy on the immediate place inhabited by the school; that is, they must make the word “local” in the phrase “local school” mean something if we are ever to be successful at elevating a sense of community in this society... We need to foster a sense that community is a valuable societal asset, something to be promoted rather than destroyed. Rural schools, through concerted pedagogical and curricular attention to the dynamics that impinge on their particular place, can rekindle community allegiance and can nurture that suppressed part of us that finds fulfillment in meeting community obligations. (1997, p. 1)

The education's goals that place-based theorists claim that rural teachers ought to pursue clearly runs counter to the political ideal that an education for freedom is owed to all citizens. It does this by inviting the rural teacher to pressure, manipulate, or indoctrinate<sup>13</sup> the student into “community allegiance” as opposed to freely deciding for themselves—*independently weighing all the options, evidence, pros and cons—*what their future holds.<sup>14</sup> An education for autonomy takes a dim view to the notion that children's preferences should be shaped in the interests of some external social or political goal. It is just as unethical, from a liberal point of view, to use pedagogical methods to deliberately shape children's preferences in order to serve the interest of rural communities as it is unethical to deliberately shape children's preferences in order to serve “neoliberal” goals.

If a communitarian philosophy is being used to justify illiberal aims of education, it might seem logical to conclude that the communitarian outlook is just plain wrong. Would this give liberals grounds for claiming that a liberal conception of public education has no need to attend to the particular concerns of rural communities? No, for at least two important reasons. First, rural communities are found within existing liberal democracies.<sup>15</sup> It is, therefore, inappropriate (or at least an overreach) to frame the issue as a battle between communitarianism versus liberalism to begin

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<sup>13</sup>Ivan Snook argued that a person indoctrinates P (a proposition or set of propositions) if he teaches with the intention that the pupil or pupils believe P regardless of the evidence (1970, p. 100). What ought the place-based educator do in those cases where students hold strong evidence contrary to the belief that they owe something to their community or strong evidence that they will be much better off in life if they leave? I'm not sure that place-based educators have answer to this question.

<sup>14</sup>See Cuervo (2016, p. 201) and Nespor (2008). I outline some of the major claims and limits of place-based arguments in Gereluk et al. (2016).

<sup>15</sup>To be sure, much scholarship has explored the nature and limits of the liberal state's educational obligations to children in so-called “illiberal” communities (for one excellent example see Stolzenberg 1993). These communities often happen to be, as contingent fact, rural and remote. The question motivating this chapter is how, and in what respects, are liberal values applied to rural

with. The challenge posed by rural outmigration for the justice and legitimacy of a liberal conception of public education holds regardless of the coherence of communitarianism as a political philosophy. The real problem lies in determining what exactly the state owes to liberal citizens who happen to live in rural communities, educationally speaking, and if this differs in important ways from what it owes urban and suburban citizens.

Second, valuing community—wanting to be a part of one, having an interest in seeing that community persist over time, the loss we feel when the people we are connected to leave them—is deeply felt and not easily explained away through appeal to political theory. It is one thing to reject a communitarian *justification* of our intuitive sense that community and place matter, on the one hand, and dismissing people's *intuitive sense* that community and place matter, on the other. The latter risks being as condescending as it is poorly reasoned. The choice between leaving or staying in one's community of origin is, for many, a profound (and sometimes difficult and ambiguous) moment in our pursuit of a good life. Writers and artists continually revisit these tensions because most of us can relate to them. In Alistair MacLeod's short story, *The Boat*, for example, the narrator recalls his Nova Scotian childhood in a small fishing town. His reflections center mainly around his father who is decidedly ill-fitted for a fisherman's life. He spends most of his time alone, reading, as soon as his daily obligations—which mainly consists of fishing and mending nets—are fulfilled. The narrator recalls him as both literally and figuratively chafing in the constraints of that life:

My father did not tan—he never tanned—because of his reddish complexion, and the salt water irritated his skin as it had for sixty years. He burned and reburned over and over again and his lips still cracked so that they bled when he smiled, and his arms, especially the left, still broke out into the oozing salt-water boils as they had ever since as a child I had first watched him soaking and bathing them in a variety of ineffectual solutions. The chafe-preventing bracelets of brass linked chain that all the men wore about their wrists in early spring were his the full season and he shaved but painfully and only once a week. (2001, p. 20)

In a pivotal moment, at the end of the story, the father appears to make a drastic choice. The son begins skipping school to help out on the boat. He wants to stay in school, but his sense of obligation to his father overrides this desire. The father leaves one day without his son and (though not explicitly stated in the story) intentionally steers his boat into the rocky shoreline, ending his life. But in so doing, he frees his son to do what he wanted to do, which was to return to school. The son goes on to pursue the life of a teacher and scholar.

One can try to read MacLeod's story as a clichéd narrative about a promising youth who, through an education, overcomes the so-called parochialism of his community. Such a reading plays into uninformed assumptions that some people have about life in a small community. But the story refuses to be read that way. It is more interested in communicating to the reader, with much empathy, the costs for both the people

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and remote communities *whose citizens are liberal?* This also places to the side the question of state control of education, governance rights, and Indigenous Peoples.

who leave and remain in their community of origin. This cost is exemplified in one of the story's final passages:

It is not an easy thing to know that your mother lives alone on an inadequate insurance policy and that she is too proud to accept any other aid. And that she looks through her lonely window onto the ice of winter and the hot flat calm of summer and the rolling waves of fall. And that she lies awake in the early morning's darkness when the rubber boots of the men scrunch upon the gravel as they pass beside her house on their way down to the wharf. And she knows that the footsteps never stop, because no man goes from her house, and she alone of all the Lynns has neither son nor son-in-law who walks toward the boat that will take him to the sea. And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue. (2001, pp. 24–25)

MacLeod's story conveys how community defines the good lives of citizens regardless of their particular choices. When people leave their community of origin, the citizens that remain are, like the mother in MacLeod's story, deprived of the goods that community provides. But when people cannot leave a community when they want to they often struggle to meaningfully participate in those aspects of community life that make those same goods possible. The father, for example, is inclined to be an intellectual and a poet but his community cannot make affordances for such a life.

It seems to me that this tension cuts closer to the reasons why the aims of a liberal public education should attend more closely to the meaning and significance of a citizen's community of origin. Recall that in a liberal society, the political legitimacy of public education turns on reasonable citizens consenting to it. An education for autonomy is consent-worthy for the reason that it secures rights and freedoms owed to everyone. However, *the costs and burdens* of an education system that takes individual freedom an educational priority are going to be greater for citizens that live in rural areas relative to suburban or urban. For a benefits and burdens point of view, such an education draws away a resource that is fundamental to a healthy and stable community: other people. This is an arrangement to which citizens in rural contexts are going to have a harder time consenting.

To be clear, I am not claiming that rural life (in its many forms) is inherently less attractive or valuable. My point is that outmigration is a side-effect of free and open societies, and a liberal education potentially contributes to this side-effect (or at least has no endogenous reason for preventing outmigration-though; see the final section of this chapter). It does not *intend* for things to play out this way. It is not as if the liberal ideal includes the judgement that a rural life is less worthy of state support than an urban one. But there is a sense in which this is beside the point: a politically just and legitimate conception of public education should nonetheless aim to distribute its benefits and burdens fairly, and it looks as if a liberal public education is unlikely to do this.

## 4 Liberal Aims for a Rural Context

I believe that the sharpened version of the rural critique that I have outlined above establishes solid ground for reassessing a traditionally liberal educational aim such as autonomy. Such a reassessment does not have to downplay individual freedom in fundamentally illiberal ways, nor does it have to overreach by tying the future of rural schooling to the wholesale dismantling of the liberal political ideal. Rather, it is a critique that makes sense *within* the liberal political framework: an autonomy-promoting education system risks, without some further consideration, being insensitive to the costs and burdens that are imposed on rural communities.

Those sympathetic to the liberal ideal of a public education might object that no such consideration is required. The development of a person's capacity for freedom is key to exercise their basic rights and liberties. Securing such rights is not something to be compromised. I agree. However, it does not follow that there are features of an education for individual freedom that rural educators should pay special mind to and that rural schools should take pains to promote in order to more fully realize justice and legitimacy. Uncovering these features involves taking a closer look at the idea of personal autonomy itself. Consider that when we think about the exercise of personal autonomy, it is common to think about it in terms of making choices: choices about our career, our relationships, how we structure our time, and so on. But some reflection on the *kinds* of goals we think matter in a good life show that choice is not what matters, intrinsically, so much as a choice among goals that are worthwhile or meaningful to us. The successful exercise of our capacity for individual freedom must be linked to a decent range of meaningful or *worthwhile* options (Raz 1986). A life of equally bad options, on this view, is not an autonomous one. An education aiming for individual freedoms should therefore ensure that students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions sufficient for choosing among *some range* of meaningful options.

I stress "some range" of options because this framing, while a step forward, is insufficient. Not *any* decent range of meaningful or worthwhile options will do. Any decent range of worthwhile options should include options relating to one's *community of origin*, and an education for autonomy should, therefore, include knowledge, skills, and dispositions that allow rural students to seriously consider remaining in that community.<sup>16</sup> There are two reasons for this requirement, one conceptual and one probabilistic.

First, there is a logical connection between a decent range of options *for me* and my community of origin. This is because my community of origin is the default option and the reference point by which I will judge all other options good or ill. Failure to include options relating to my community of origin changes the context in which I make decisions about the good life, from the *opportunity* to choose, to *having to* pursue, some option that takes me away from that community. Neglecting community of origin as a meaningful option, therefore, introduces a uniquely strong

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<sup>16</sup>See also Forsey (2015).



constraint on a person's liberty, a constraint that does not apply when we remove or replace any of the other options that comprise a decent range.

There is also a probabilistic connection between what I take to be worthwhile and meaningful, and my community of origin. This is because my community of origin is likely to (though by no means destined to) contain the relationships and social practices that define who I am and give value to what I do. This is the communitarian truth at the core of many lives lived in a free and equal society. To deny community of origin as part of a range of meaningful options will therefore deny many individuals an opportunity to undertake a balanced assessment—one that includes existing relationships and attachments alongside future opportunities.

What does this mean for rural education? I think that we are now in a good position to see how community of origin can serve as an educational aim that belongs to a just and legitimate liberal education. It does this by insiting on community of origin *as part of* an autonomy-promoting education. Without this requirement, all that would be required is that a student be exposed to *a* range of meaningful options, and this range could contain a largely interchangeable set. But if my argument is right, an education for autonomy requires students to understand their community of origin as part any comprehensive assessment of what their future could look like. In fact, we have reason to think that an explicit focus on community of origin will have additional importance for educators in rural communities. While community of origin may be relevant to all citizens of a liberal democratic society, rural educators will have reason to make additional efforts in helping their students to understand the extent to which, and ways in which, their community of origin is a worthwhile option. This additional effort is justified, in part, because this option may be harder for students in rural communities to discern in a culture that, as rural critics have pointed out, most always frames the good life as something properly sought out (and lived out) in urban or suburban communities.

What would community of origin as a liberal aim of rural education look like? I think that rural educators are likely to already have an intuitive sense of what this could entail. But much care needs to be taken in order to ensure that such an aim is not taken up in a way that undermines the student's developing capacity for autonomy. For example, rural teachers must be forthcoming about both the benefits and burdens of a life in a student's community of origin. It means that students should be given opportunities to question or challenge the evidence that the teacher gives in setting out those benefits and burdens. And it also means that teacher should be explicit in what they are trying to achieve: students should be made aware that the teacher's goal is to help students appreciate their community as a long-term possibility in life. Student should not be manipulated or covertly conditioned into seeing their community of origin as a worthwhile option.

How does this address the problem of justice and legitimacy facing the liberal educational ideal? It will certainly not stop outmigration. However, it will make this ideal more attractive and, as a consequence, more likely to secure legitimacy for an oft-overlooked segment of the liberal polity. First, citizens in rural communities will have an interest in a conception of public education that takes community of origin seriously as a worthwhile option in life. Such a conception signals political

respect and recognition for rurality, and we can also anticipate that a liberal public education that respects community of origin is likely to see more students remain in their communities of origin as a matter of free and informed choice than they would, otherwise. Second, we can be more confident that citizens that leave rural communities are doing so based on an informed and comprehensive assessment of all the options on offer, including community of origin, as opposed to an approach that excludes rural life as a real possibility. Finally, it is important to consider the potential long-term effects of an education for freedom that includes rural community. Students may leave such communities, but some will certainly revisit the possibility of a return to rural life as a desirable goal, while others will have always planned on such a return. In either case, they will bring skills, ideas, and ambitions about how to contribute to rural community.<sup>17</sup> My wager is that such contributions are more likely to happen when rural communities signal confidence about what they have to offer to the rest of a liberal society. One way to signal confidence is through a social vision of a public education that, while more attuned to the important role that community of origin plays in many liberal citizen's conception of the good life is open about the merits and demerits of rural life for any liberal citizen that wishes to take part in it.

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<sup>17</sup>See for example the resurgence of small business in different parts of outport Newfoundland and Labrador. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/millennials-rural-newfoundland-trend-lifestyle-bonavista-trinity-1.4344151>.

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# Reconsidering Rural Education in the Light of Canada's Indigenous Reality



David Scott and Dustin Louie

**Abstract** This chapter reports on findings from a qualitative case-based study examining the extent to which Indigenous cultural traditions and practices were promoted, and Indigenous students felt welcomed and respected in a rural school district in north-western Canada. The authors conducted a series of interviews with Indigenous liaisons working in the district, along with parents and community members from a local First Nation's community. Among the numerous findings, the Indigenous liaisons felt the district was making great strides in these areas. They, however, highlighted the need for a whole school approach where all the responsibility for leading Indigenous initiatives did not rest solely on their shoulders. Of note, community members, in general, did not feel the schools were fully embracing these goals. Guided by a parent and community engagement framework (Goodall & Montgomery), the study critically examines how the district could better support Indigenous students and parents, given the inherent tensions that exist among Indigenous-settler communities in rural Canada.

**Keywords** Indigenous education · Parent and community engagement · Indigenous-settler relations

## 1 Introduction

In what follows we offer findings from a qualitative case-based study (Merriam 2009; Stake 2005) that examined the extent to which Indigenous cultural traditions and practices were promoted in a rural school district in north-western Canada. We additionally worked to uncover whether Indigenous children and youth felt welcomed, cared for, and respected in schools within this district. Guided by a parent and community engagement framework (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Jaynes 2014),

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we sought to identify initiatives and practices the school district could introduce to achieve these aims. To gain insights into these concerns, we as a research team,<sup>1</sup> one of whom is Indigenous, conducted a series of interviews with Indigenous liaisons working for the school district, along with parents and community members from a First Nation where the majority of children attend a provincially run elementary school situated in a small farming community adjacent to the reservation.

In undertaking this study, we sought to add to scholarship that has examined the complex intersection of Indigenous themes and issues in rural settings not just in Canada (Tomkins 2002), but in other contexts as well including the US (Barnhardt and Kawagley 1998; Faircloth 2009; Greenwood 2009) and Australia (Yeung et al. 2013). Noting the important work that has been undertaken in this area, Indigenous issues and themes continue to garner a limited amount of attention in the rural education literature. At present, these topics are generally discussed as separate issues. This separation is unfortunate and cause for concern as it overlooks the unique circumstances faced by Indigenous students and parents in rural areas that may not be present for those in urban settings. In the case of the place now called Canada, this lack of attention denies the ways rural education, particularly in more northern regions, increasingly intersects with Indigenous education.

The impetus to undertake this study is based, in part, on the significant demographic shifts happening in Canada today. In 1996 the number of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people totalled 799,010, accounting for 2.8% of the population (Statistics Canada 2018). However, by 2011 that number had increased to 1,400,685 making up 4.3% of the population (Statistics Canada 2019). In 2016, the number of Indigenous people in Canada grew to 1,673,785 accounting for just under 5% of the total population of Canada (Statistics Canada 2018). According to research by Statistics Canada (2018), this number is projected to increase to 6.1% by 2036.

These statistics however do not tell the full story of Canada's Indigenous reality. A recent census found that close to 60% of Indigenous people in Canada live in "rural" (38.9%) areas or a "small population centre" (20.0%) (Statistics Canada 2019). Given that over 80% of Canadians live in urban centres (Statistics Canada 2017) and 90% of Canadians live within 160 km of the US border (World Population Review 2019), people of Indigenous descent account for a significant percentage of the population in regions peripheral to Canada's demographic core (Looker & Bollman, in this volume). For instance, Indigenous people make up 86% of the population of Nunavut (Statistics Canada 2016), and within the province of Manitoba, one-third (35%) of the population of Thompson and close to one quarter (23%) the population of Portage la Prairie (Statistics Canada 2016).

Adding another layer to these statistics, 1 in 4 Indigenous people in Canada are under the age of 15 with children accounting for 33.0% of the Inuit population, 29.2% of the First Nations population, and 22.3% of the Métis population (Statistics

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<sup>1</sup>The first author of this chapter, Dr. David Scott, is Anglo-Canadian of Scottish and Franco-American origins who grew up in Williams Lake in the interior of British Columbia. Dr. Dustin Louie is a First Nations scholar from Nee Tahi Buhn and Nadleh Whut'en of the Carrier Nation of central British Columbia. He is a member of the Beaver Clan.

Canada 2018). Because many schools in rural school districts, particularly in more northern regions, are located in close proximity to Indigenous communities, including First Nation reserves and Métis settlements, it is not uncommon to see provincially run schools where Indigenous students make up the majority of the student body. For instance, a study in British Columbia (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCME] 2018) found 303 public schools in the province where between 20 and 50% of the student population self-identify as Indigenous, and 85 public schools where between 50 and 100% of the students identify as Indigenous. An analysis of the locations of these schools reveals that a majority are in rural locations. This stands in contrast to many schools in urban centres where there may be few, if any, students who self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit.

One of the consequences of the young and growing population of Indigenous people in rural and northern regions in Canada is that, unlike in many urban centres, within these settings Indigenous people and settler populations often interact with one another on a regular basis. As both writers of this article can attest, as we were brought up in such places, such interactions are often fraught with tensions. A number of recent news reports have found that Indigenous people living in rural and northern parts of Canada are more likely to say that racism towards Indigenous people is a serious problem and is, moreover, on the rise (CBC News 2017; Cuthand 2019; Hutchins 2017).

These dynamics parallel findings from the educational research. A large body of literature has shown that the significant disparity between the educational attainment of Indigenous students compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Statistics Canada 2017)—also discussed by Looker and Bollman in this volume—can be attributed to issues related to racism and the way Indigenous students are stigmatized due to their identity (Assembly of First Nations [AFN] 2013; Saunders and Hill 2007; Stelmach et al. 2017). The implications of these sociospatial-demographic realities for rural education, not just in Canada, but in other countries with similar dynamics such as Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa, are profound.

## 2 Relevant Literature

While some areas of Indigenous education have improved over the last two decades (Lewington 2017), worrying disparities continue to remain between Indigenous learners and the non-Indigenous population in Canada. This is particularly true in K-12 educational contexts. The 2016 Census found that non-Indigenous students graduated at a rate of 92%, while off-reserve Indigenous students had a 75% completion rate, which was much higher than the 48% of on-reserve Indigenous students who graduated high school (Statistics Canada 2017). In considering these numbers through the lens of rural education, although statistics are not available, since more Indigenous students in rural settings are living on-reserve compared to those in urban settings (Statistics Canada 2018), there is a reasonable expectation that graduation rates for Indigenous students living in rural regions are closer to 48%. In

contrast, urban spaces are likely to have fewer on-reserve Indigenous students who are enjoying comparably successful graduation rates.

Research has shown that Indigenous students in Canada also experience lower levels of educational attainment (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCME] 2013a, b; MacIver 2012; Redwing Saunders and Hill 2007; Wotherspoon and Schissel 2001). For students attending on-reserve schools, lack of attendance continues to be cited as one of the most significant reasons why Indigenous students are failing to succeed in their studies (Bell et al. 2004; MacIvor 1995). Studies have found that teachers often have lower expectations for Indigenous students (Davidson 2018; Auditor General of British Columbia [AGBC] 2015) who are more likely to be streamed into non-academic courses. As evidence of this, Indigenous students in British Columbia, for instance, make up more than 38% of the students in lower academic alternative programmes in provincially run schools, while only composing 11% of the overall student body (BCME 2013). Lowered expectations from both teachers and students have resulted in significant achievement gaps for Indigenous students.

Accordingly, Indigenous academic achievement needs to be a priority in both research and educational policy within rural contexts. The confluence of a growing and young population with continued disparities in educational success is a worrying trend. As noted by MacIver (2012), “higher than average dropout rates and lower educational attainment levels have contributed to a disproportionately high poverty level for Canadian Aboriginals” (p. 157). Seeking to address this pressing policy concern, a fairly substantial body of research has sought to identify the factors that have contributed to the lack of educational attainment among Indigenous students.

This body of research has found that non-Indigenous teachers often adopt a deficit model of reasoning as to why this is so, thus deflecting attention away from how they themselves, along with structural and historical dynamics, are implicated in this reality (Fisher and Campbell 2002; Garakani 2014; Tomkins 2002). Emblematic of this, in a study by Tompkins (2002) in rural Nova Scotia, when talking about the academic achievement of Indigenous students one teacher argued:

the Mi' kmaw parents and the community don't value education. The teachers say that the parents simply don't care about education and so the kids learn not to care about it. The teachers say it's hard to succeed when they've got those kinds of attitudes at home. (p. 407)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a non-Indigenous teacher in a study in a rural school division in northern Alberta who argued that “a lack of accountability toward attendance” exists partly because “school is not important for parents” and, “therefore, not for students” (Fisher and Campbell 2002, p. 18).

Studies that have honoured the voice and perspectives of Indigenous people, however, tell a much different story. Research has found that many Indigenous students are marginalized within mainstream schools due to experiences of racism (Baydala et al. 2009; Fisher and Campbell 2002; MacIver 2012; Winterflood 2016) and not feeling a sense of belonging (Oskineegish 2014; Raham 2010; Redwing Saunders and Hill 2007; Stelmach et al. 2017). A recent study by Stelmach et al. (2017) that included 75 Indigenous high school students from six schools in Saskatchewan including those

in rural contexts found that Indigenous students reported being singled out due to their Indigenous identity. This included:

assumptions about whether they were in a gang or being perceived as academically inferior; being blamed for starting fights and causing trouble even if this was not the case... [and] deficit theorizing of Aboriginal culture (mascots) in the classroom rather than celebrating aspects of Aboriginality that students could be proud of being part (e.g. *Idle No More*<sup>2</sup>). (Stelmach et al. 2017, p. 15)

In a study involving interviews with Cree students, parents, community leaders, and Elders seeking insights into why students chose to drop out of three provincial high schools located in northern Alberta, Makokis (2000) found that racism was mentioned in the majority of the interviews. This included both overt forms of racism where, as one mother noted, “I can feel for these kids because I went through that and it still exists in this school in this age and time”, as well as more subtle forms of racism including “teacher favoritism or teachers not caring” (p. 175). These studies demonstrate the systemic forms of racism that continue to inhabit school governance, teaching, and curriculum.

To better appreciate why Indigenous children and youth are not thriving in K-12 contexts, it is crucial to appreciate the ongoing legacies of the Indian residential school system (Barnes et al. 2006; Neegan 2005) along with the colonial assumptions schooling in Canada have been built upon (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017). Colonization is a mindset that assumes European cultures and ways of knowing are superior to the rest of the world whether it be religion, language, education, social organization, and economies. The founding ethos of residential school argued that Indigenous peoples needed to be educated in European systems in order to be successful in the Western world. In essence, being Indigenous was not enough. Residential schools are an overt example of colonization, but we can see covert examples in many aspects of contemporary schooling. Teaching from solely European pedagogical traditions, teaching the neutrality of Euro-western knowledge, and content that privileges white settler histories and lenses continue to model colonization in contemporary systems of education. This is true for Indigenous learners, but also for all Canadians who do not come from an European lineage.

For these and other reasons, there is now a growing consensus that transformative change is needed in provincial and territorial systems of education in Canada, as well as within on-reserve schools (Louie and Scott 2016; Ottmann 2010). In this regard, Ottmann (2010) asserted, “statistics signify a need to examine and change, among other things, schooling, teaching, and learning practices for Aboriginal students” (p. 24). Rather than forcing Indigenous students to leave their communities’ cultural traditions and knowledge at the school door, scholars in Indigenous education (Battiste 2013; Castagno and Brayboy 2008) have called for culturally relevant and authentic forms of curriculum and pedagogy that can, according to Antone

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<sup>2</sup>Begun in 2012, Idle No More is a grass roots protest movement led by Indigenous activists that was initially a response to the violation of treaty rights by Stephen Harper and the Conservative Government of Canada. The movement included round dances in public spaces such as malls, and blockades of rail lines.



(2003), promote “healing; self-determination; and reclamation of identity” among Indigenous students (p. 10). Some Indigenous scholars have, however, cautioned against creating an externalized and universal notion of Indigeneity as it can lead to a deficiency discourse where an ideal is created that many Indigenous youth have difficulty realizing due to the destructive legacies of the Indian residential school system (Donald et al. 2012; St. Denis 2004).

Jurisdictions of education across Canada have heard these critiques and, spurred on by the calls of action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), have subsequently worked to develop policies to better support and meet the needs of Indigenous students. This has involved a range of initiatives including increased funding for Indigenous students who attend off-reserve schools (Government of Canada 2018). It has also involved curricular reforms in provincial and territorial jurisdictions of education, including in Alberta (Alberta Education 2019), British Columbia (BCME 2018), and Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education 2018), that have infused First Nations, Métis and Inuit culture traditions, perspectives, and experiences across subject areas and grade levels.

Research suggests, however, that Canadian educators including in Manitoba (Kanu 2005), Ontario (Milne 2017), and Alberta (Scott and Gani 2018) feel a great deal of ambivalence and uncertainty towards such mandates. Within the Alberta context, for instance, a systematic examination of a range of data sources, including government reports and surveys documenting teachers’ responses to the mandate to teach Indigenous histories and perspectives in social studies, revealed a range of resistances towards this curricular directive that remained constant over a nearly twenty-year period (Scott and Gani 2018).

A parallel body of research asserts that Indigenous cultural and language instruction is often undervalued and resourced in many K-12 schools in Canada, including within First Nation communities, while Euro-western knowledge is privileged and is the focus of the majority of classtime (Goddard 2002; Neganegijig and Breunig 2007; Oskineegish 2014). In a qualitative study involving interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators working in remote First Nations schools in Northern Ontario, for example, while all of the educators in the study unanimously supported efforts to promote Indigenous languages, local knowledge, and land-based instructional practices, teachers found that a “lack of culturally appropriate resources in their classrooms” to be a significant barrier in achieving this aim (Oskineegish 2014, p. 513).

### 3 Theoretical Framework

In this study, we apply a conceptual framework that challenges the distinction between parental involvement and engagement. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) argue that too often engagement and involvement are used interchangeably, when there are marked differences between the two. Seeing the spaces between parental involvement and engagement as a continuum, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) argue

that parental engagement involves “a shift in emphasis, away from the relationship between parents and schools, to a focus on the relationship between parents and their children’s learning” (Goodall and Montgomery 2014, p. 399). Despite using the term parental engagement, in this chapter we envision this as extending to community engagement whenever the term is referenced.

Jeynes (2014) contends that historically educators established relationships with parents and community that were limited to communicating directives and policy, rather than collaborative relationships where, indicative of parental engagement, education is co-created. This has been particularly true for minority populations where, steeped in an ethos of parental involvement, schools often make unilateral decisions on the aims and nature of education for students. These one-way relationships prevalent between parents and the school community must be addressed if Indigenous families are to engage meaningfully in the education system. Parental involvement will fall short in an education system hoping to foster substantive change and create a collaborative environment. In this regard, the transformative education many Indigenous nations envision requires moving beyond surface involvement, to complex engagement that empowers Indigenous families (AFN 2013).

Unfortunately, evidence of the distrust of the school system is prevalent for Indigenous people. Parents may feel unwelcomed in the school environment due to the legacy of residential schools and experiences of racism in the education system. This is particularly true in rural contexts where parents are more likely to have attended the schools their children now attend; places where many Indigenous parents felt alienated and unwelcomed as students. It is thus crucial that schools continuously evaluate and renew their parental engagement frameworks and processes. The principle of renewal is embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems (Little Bear 2000). Renewal is ever-present because creation is in constant flux and constantly changing. Since schools are open systems that are affected by the external environment, they must remain conscious of, and responsive to, the shifting nature of the community and the environment where parents and community members are conduits to all that happens in the community—from crises to celebrations.

## 4 Research Design

The design of this research study drew on qualitative case-based methodology (Merriam 2009; Stake 2005) and involved a partnership with a provincial mandated school authority and a First Nation in the north-western plains of what is now Canada. The school district serves a large geographic area of mostly rural hamlets and communities. Overall Indigenous students make up about 15% of the total student population in the district. However, this percentage is closer to 40–50% in a number of schools situated close to First Nation reserves and Métis settlements. In the previous four years, the school district received increased funding from a number of sources to help improve the educational experiences and academic achievement of Indigenous students. This included provincial funding for this research study.

The study involved two main phases. In phase one, after securing ethics approval in the Fall of 2017, the research team spent considerable time developing relationships with the partners in the school district and the First Nation community involved in this study. This entailed ongoing meetings with the school district's assistant superintendent in charge of Indigenous education, as well as visiting the First Nation on a number of occasions to meet with Elders, community members, and leaders including the Chief. While it is not in the space of this article to talk about this process at length, a change in the leadership several months into the project required that this process be extended to develop relationships with the new the leadership council.

The creation of the questions to guide this study was created in the spring of 2019 in consultation with both the assistant superintendent of the school district and the First Nation's education coordinator. These consultations led to the identification of the following questions to guide this study: (1) To what extent are Indigenous cultural traditions promoted and embraced in the school district; (2) To what degree do Indigenous children and youth feel welcomed, cared for, and respected?; and (3) What practices can teachers and administrators in the district adopt to promote school environments where Indigenous students and traditions are welcomed and respected?

To gain insights into these questions, insights were garnered from individual interviews with four Indigenous liaisons (IL 1-4) hired by the district to work with teachers and administrators to support Indigenous educational initiatives. The roles of the four liaisons varied widely from leading Indigenous initiatives as a whole, teaching Indigenous language classes, supporting classroom teachers, or helping families access educational and community services. Insights were also gained from individual interviews with twelve First Nations community members and parents (CM 1-12). Notably, the majority of children and youth in this First Nation attend an elementary school in a small community situated approximately five km from the reserve, or a secondary school 15 km further down the road. Many of the participants from the First Nation had themselves attended schools in this district.

Interviews were subsequently transcribed, and then, with the help of a research assistant, we then undertook a close reading of the transcripts where we developed common categories involving phrases and extended explanations of similar and corresponding interpretations and understandings around our research questions (Miles and Huberman 1994, pp. 55–56). Each of these “descriptive codes” (Merriam 2009, p. 152) was then labelled and grouped together. This data set was subsequently interpreted through both a parental and community engagement theoretical framework (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Jeynes 2014), as well as through the lens of the research literature forefronted in this study.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 *Promoting Indigenous Culture and Traditions*

When asked to what extent Indigenous cultural traditions were promoted in the school district, Indigenous liaisons felt the district was making great strides in that teachers and administrators were much less resistant to these efforts as compared to a decade ago. As one liaison noted:

What I've found is I thought there would be a lot more pushback. It used to be that people would be like you can come and teach about dream catchers after school, but you don't need to come into my classroom and teach. (IL1)

Reflective of this, the liaisons spoke to the positive work they were doing in the district. For instance, one liaison spoke to “the Cree program that’s happening as well – and three FNMI workers at the school, and being on-hand all the time. Like, that makes a huge difference” (IL4).

Given the presence of this support, the liaisons highlighted the dangers of pulling students out during normal instructional time to promote cultural education. As one liaison asserted:

I think the type of Indigenous immersion in classrooms is really important because a lot of Indigenous people don't want their children pulled out to just be like address their needs because they're not keeping up.... it's really important for all of us to know and that's probably going to make that Cree kid in that class feel better, but they didn't have to be pulled out to learn that, you know? It's education for everyone. (IL1)

In identifying challenges, the liaisons cited funding and a lack of resources as an ongoing issue. As one liaison noted, “the district, I think, is trying very hard to engage with Indigenous traditions and promoting this. I think funding has been an issue” (IL2). Adding another layer to this assertion, as reflected in the following statement, the liaisons generally felt that schools with higher Indigenous populations were more engaged with these efforts:

I think we're kind of like as a starting point. There are places like [School] who have Cree classes, and ... that's amazing ... so they are way ahead of one of our really smaller, rural communities who have 7 declared FNMI students who have a Treaty flag up. (IL1)

The liaison went on to note that although the treaty flag was present, it was not necessarily a part of the life of the school in terms of, for instance, being acknowledged during school wide gatherings such as assemblies.

In terms of community members, the responses to this question were less positive. As one participant noted, “I feel like they are not really getting embraced in school, and I feel like they should, they need to do more of that” (CM8). Helping to elaborate on this point, another participant, after noting efforts to teach Cree in the community, asserted:

I think they're very limited because I know they do get funding from the government, 'cause they have liaison workers that work in the schools. But as far as I know the Cree, they only

go to grade three... so, if they don't learn anything within that short period of time, then they're not going to speak it when they get older. (CM1)

Throughout the interviews the lack of Cree language instruction beyond grade 3 was often cited as a limitation of Indigenous education efforts within the district.

## ***5.2 Creating Welcoming, Respectful, and Caring School Environments***

The liaisons all outlined the importance of ensuring that students felt welcomed, cared for, respected, and safe. One of the liaisons outlined this point thusly:

Some of our schools are really close to a First Nations reserve, or Métis settlements and there's a lot of kids who are First Nations or Métis and know that, and they need to be supported and encouraged to be proud, also to have that transition of their life from home to school. (IL1)

They also emphasized how crucial it was to have Indigenous educators in schools. This was reflected in the following assertion: "there's a lady out at [School] who is amazing – she could be considered an Elder. She's amazing. And she's done a lot to make her students feel a lot more welcomed" (IL2). The liaison being referred to here explained that this was possible as her role was to offer support to students and teachers: "I'm out there. If you want some help, call me if you need me to come into your classroom to do a teaching, call me. I'm right here. Here's my schedule. Fit me in where you need me" (IL4). The liaison also noted how building relationships with the community was a key part of creating a welcoming atmosphere including when "me and the principal, vice principal going out to [First Nation] and doing all these visits...or me and one of the teachers going out...this is something that would never, ever have happened before" (IL3).

In terms of community members, a few participants noted the good things the schools were doing to create more welcoming and supportive spaces, such as the fact that "now they have hot lunch at school, that's a good thing" (CM9). Along with this, community members spoke to the need for Indigenous liaisons in schools. One participant asserted that this was necessary as a school "actually had one teacher, one indigenous teacher who was a T.A. She really helped a lot and she was the only Indigenous teacher in the elementary school and she helped all the native kids" (CM9).

Despite such comments, many community members did not feel the schools in the district were necessarily welcoming and caring spaces. As one participant stated: "They're welcomed right up until they get their tuition thing, and then kids just start getting weeded out of there. They're just welcomed there for the money" (CM7). Other participants spoke to how some teachers and administrators were unresponsive to their concerns. This sentiment was reflected in the following statement:

My children do not like going to school at all. My daughter, she was getting bullied here, like, so much. And then, this went on for like, two years. And then, I would talk to the school

and they'd say they were dealing with it, and dealing with it, but I think it just happens everywhere because now, she's going through the same things over there [at another school in the district]. (CM6)

The belief that students can sometimes get singled out in negative ways was expressed by many community members. One community member put the point thusly:

I think there's some of them that they do fit in, but I think the majority of them they get put into like a box, like labelled. They get labelled just because they're from here and then they get unfairly treated, marginalized just because they're from here like just the mentality of the school, you know? Where they're looking at you just because you're from [First Nation] you're a bad person. You fit into this category of people that are like this right? (CM7)

Some community members also identified a need for teachers to have the same expectations for Indigenous students as they do for non-Indigenous students. This point was stated quite strongly by one participant in particular:

Because they're [teachers] not doing anything. They're just passing kids, and by the time they get to junior high a lot of the kids don't know anything and now they need a teacher aid to get all the way through junior high, get to high school, no teacher aids, they're done. (CM5)

It is important to note that not all community members felt that teachers unfairly singled out Indigenous students. As one participant affirmed, "I've been there and there's one teacher I didn't like. But, it wasn't just for Native kids. It was everybody" (CM5).

Throughout the interviews, community members consistently recounted their experiences of racism and discrimination when they were students. One community member put it this way:

"I remember going to school, and I thought racism was like, totally normal, and I was just raised to just ignore it and act like it was not a big deal. And I didn't even see anything wrong with it until I was like an adult". (CM6)

In this same vein, another participant recounted how they felt teachers believed at the time that:

You're not good enough, you're not as good as these non-Native kids. No matter how hard you try you'll never be good enough, you'll never be as good as these ones and if you are I'm never going to acknowledge you. (CM12)

It was clear from the interviews that these past experiences shaped how many community members perceived the contemporary situation for many children and youth in schools.

### ***5.3 Fostering Transformative Practices***

When asked what practices teachers and administrators in the district can adopt to promote school environments where Indigenous students and traditions are welcomed

and respected, the liaisons emphasized the strain they were under. This sentiment was well articulated in the following statement: “It’s more like I’m burnt out on the sense that people are like can we have an elder in? Can we have you come present? Can we have a Cree language teacher? Like everyone wants more” (IL1). The same liaison highlighted the need for a whole school approach when leading such initiatives in ways where the Indigenous liaisons can play a supportive role rather than having all the responsibility placed on their shoulders. In this regard, the liaison asserted: “It’s not fair to be like well, that’s our liaison’s job because that’s the Indigenous celebration, we know that should be a school approach and you should look to them as a resource and as advice and as support right?” (IL1).

Throughout the interviews, the liaisons noted the importance of forging strong and positive relationships between Indigenous parents, community members, and Elders. However, they also articulated that this was challenging. In this regard, participants spoke to the difficulty of getting more community members and Elders to come to the school: “I mean, you know, we do have them come in, I’m not saying that they don’t come in” but “I think that we definitely can do more, but we’re really struggling with getting people from the community to come in and share their knowledge with our students” (IL3). Another liaison highlighted how they themselves struggled to forge connections: “I think some of the FNMI leaders, like myself, will struggle as to – if we don’t have a whole lot of contact already with the Friendship Centres, for instance” (IL2).

When this question was posed to community members, they offered a variety of ways teachers and administrators in the district can promote school environments where Indigenous students and traditions are welcomed and respected. Among the various suggestions, a number of community members spoke to the need to tell Indigenous side of history including the nature and significance of treaties. One member emphasized this point as follows:

They could probably talk about like the Natives have a different version of the treaties than the white people do. They could probably make people aware of that, instead of assuming that our views don’t matter, you know?....This is how our parents talk about our rights to the lands and that. And then the non-Native kids knowing that there’s a second side to the story they could probably respect the fact that Native people have a view that we’re being mistreated and treated unfairly, you know? (CM2)

The most prominent theme involved the need for more cultural activities such as drum making and hand games (e.g. CM6, 7, 10). Community members emphasized how this could be achieved by “using more of our Elders, Elders that have the knowledge” (CM1). Participants also spoke to the need for specific spaces for Indigenous students where they would feel safe. This could include, for instance, “a sacred circle type where they can go in there and talk to people and make them feel more welcomed” (CM 8). Other participants noted the need for youth to be recognized through such initiatives as the youth Inspire Awards (CM10). Alongside these ideas, community members also emphasized the need for more parental engagement. As one community member put it, “All I know is the parents have to get involved with the education. Without that, the kids run them” (HL5).

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 *Overcoming Systematic Barriers and Building Relational Trust*

In contrast to prior research (Scott and Gani 2018), the feedback received from the liaison workers elucidated an increasing willingness among educators in the district to engage with Indigenous communities and ways of knowing in the schools. These findings reflect the ways the calls of the TRC (2015) has caused jurisdictions of education in Canada to institute significant policy shifts so that the curricular and pedagogical practices of teachers are not in conflict with the cultural identity of Indigenous students.

Despite such possibilities, it was clear from the interviews with both the Indigenous liaisons and community members that this work was not necessarily happening on a systematic level. This was particularly evident in the case of Indigenous language classes where, for instance, Cree was only taught up until grade 3 in the elementary school adjacent to the First Nation in this study. The lack of Cree instruction in this district is reflective of prior research highlighting the ways Indigenous language and knowledge is devalued in schools (Neganegijig and Breunig 2007; Oskineegish 2014). According to Oskineegish (2014), this “disregard of cultural and linguistic teachings sends the harmful and false message that First Nations students, their community, and their cultural teachings are less valuable than Western knowledge” (p. 510).

Given the individual openness of many educators to pursuing potentially decolonizing or indigenizing approaches to education (Poitras Pratt et al. 2018), a critical question that emerged from this study concerns why Indigenous cultural knowledge is unrepresented in the schools in this district? One potential reason for this disconnect relates to the separation between individual agency and systemic forces. For instance, despite explicit policy mandates to promote Indigenous education (e.g. Alberta Education 2019; BCME 2018), a lack of leadership among administrators at the grassroots level, where entrenched schooling practices remain persistent, may create an impenetrable barrier for individual teachers. This dynamic may also be further reinforced by how subjects in the humanities, such as social studies, where Indigenous themes and issues are more present, are often devalued. This contrasts with the high import afforded STEM subjects that are typically delivered as abstracted Euro-western knowledge (M. Corbett, personal communication, June 2, 2019).

In such cases, teachers may not actively resist indigenizing projects, but ultimately remain passive, as they may feel they do not have the institutional power to challenge the systemic aspects of the school that continue to privilege Euro-western approaches to communication, teaching, assessment, and parental engagement. A closely related reading of the inability of systems of education to realize transformative change involves the inability of educators to implicate themselves in oppressive elements of schooling. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) argue that most people are unable and unwilling to recognize the ways in which they are unconsciously colluding with



colonial and oppressive agendas. In these cases, teachers confidently state that they treat everyone the same, while the evidence shows they are unconsciously defending colonial mandates and signalling resistance to Indigenous parents and community members. In this way, while teachers may see themselves as open to decolonizing approaches, their desires often do not align with their actual practices.

The interviews pointed to a strained relationship between the school and the First Nation community in this study. Understanding parental engagement differently could begin to address these dynamics. In defining engagement as a focus on the relationship between parents and their children's learning (Goodall and Montgomery 2014), it is clear from the interviews with community members that substantial relationship building has to occur before this form of engagement could become possible. However, as Bryk and Schneider (2002) have found, creating relational trust can be difficult, due to a lack of communication among parents, teachers, and the school who often do not share a full understanding of what they are each trying to achieve.

In this case of the context of this study, perhaps starting with parental involvement as the first step towards a deeper level of engagement could prove fruitful. This could involve, for example, parents and students being invited to the school to learn more about the resources and initiatives available to support students from the community. According to Goodall and Montgomery (2014), while this kind of parental involvement is "clearly not the ideal in all situations, there are still benefits to actions at this point in the continuum [as]...it is a useful foundation from which to work" (p. 403). The most important recommendation for educators and administrators in this school district is to be strategic and thoughtful about relationships including the ways a non-judgemental, supportive, and respectful relational environment could be created.

## ***6.2 The Unique Challenges of Indigenous Education in Rural Contexts***

Interviews with parents and community members in this study confirmed that many Indigenous students continue to be singled out in negative ways within schools this district. Given the extensive references to racism impacting the relationships between schools and Indigenous communities in prior research (Baydala et al. 2009; Fisher and Campbell 2002; MacIver 2012; Winterflood 2016), it is not surprising that participants in this study also spoke to issues of racism. When investigating the implications of racism in this study, it is interesting to consider the unique circumstances of rural, northern communities in Canada, where the Indigenous populations are larger and the interactions between Indigenous and settler communities are far more common. While there are sizeable Indigenous populations in some cities, in many instances Indigenous people live within only a few communities in the city, resulting in many urban inhabitants and students having minimal contact with Indigenous

people. Accordingly, both authors of this chapter have seen a tendency among urban students to have a romanticized or mythic vision of Indigenous people (King 2003) who are, moreover, “very much a figure of the past, frozen in time” (Francis 1992, p. 167).

In contrast, students in rural contexts often have a far less romanticized and anachronistic view of Indigenous people who are part of their daily lives. Ideally, these students would be able to interact as individuals in positive ways. However, in our experiences, racist assumptions and communal pressures began to separate students based on racial and cultural identifications in many rural spaces. As evidence of this, there have been a number of news stories, which have documented the tensions in recent years among non-Indigenous and Indigenous students in rural contexts. A notable example is the fallout from the shooting of Colten Boushie by Gerald Stanley on his property in rural Saskatchewan, and Stanley’s subsequent acquittal. Racial tensions subsequently spiked, leaving both communities feeling unsafe to travel on rural roads and in sections of town where they felt unwelcomed (Cuthand 2019). Such tensions need to be considered when considering the unique circumstances of Indigenous students in northern and rural contexts. While both urban and rural schools can both challenge the limited and anachronistic perspective on Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing, educational approaches in rural contexts have the added challenge of attending to ongoing relational tensions that can be a daily part of student’s lives.

Discussions with community members offered key insights into how these tensions can be addressed. These included providing more cultural activities at the school that draws on the knowledge of Elders and knowledge keepers. However, the Indigenous liaisons made it clear that it was not always easy to find Elders who were willing to come to the school. This reality reflects the relational trust that still needs to be built among teachers and administrators to make the school are more welcoming space for community members who could fulfil this role. The liaisons also highlighted a need for teachers and administrators to take greater ownership of promoting Indigenous education. The liaisons saw a tendency in this regard to put the full weight of these initiatives onto the Indigenous liaisons and Elders. In this way educators positioned this work as living outside themselves and the responsibility of those who are Indigenous, rather than a partnership where ownership is shared (L. Tate, personal conversation, April 26, 2019).

In this same vein, it was also clear from the interviews that Indigenous understandings of the past need to become a stronger part of the life of the schools in the district. As noted by one community member, this different understanding of the past extends to the nature and significance of historic Treaties. However, as was evident in the school where a treaty flag was displayed at the entrance, teachers and administrators were following a tendency to only engage with this symbol on a surface level without considering its deeper historical significance (Lee 2012). According to the Métis scholar Gaudry, within the context of the Plains, Indigenous understandings of Treaties tell a story where the newcomers “were invited into pre-existing territories as treaty partners, as brothers and sisters to share in the bounty of the land, to live peacefully with one another and to envision relationships where we all benefitted”,

which ran counter to what occurred involving “a settler colonial dynamic where Canadians have benefitted largely at the expense of Indigenous peoples, our territory and the value that our territory generated, which comes with monetary wealth” (as cited in UAlberta 2017, para. 11).

### ***6.3 Shifting from a Deficit to Relational Model of Engagement***

Notably, participants from the First Nation community in this study repeatedly voiced their frustration with low expectations, which emerged both in their own experiences in the education system and that of their children. In the literature, we have seen that Indigenous students are significantly overrepresented in non-academic courses (AGBC 2015; BCME 2013) and are not treated as “real students” (Louie and Scott 2016). These are only two manifestations of lowered expectations for Indigenous students. In our personal experiences in schools across western Canada, we have seen myriad other representations of low expectations including a lack of teacher lesson planning and preparation in schools with significant Indigenous populations, limitations in pedagogical diversity, and a tendency to accept failure of Indigenous students.

To address this persistent issue within a rural schooling context, it is imperative to move beyond seeing Indigeneity as a problem in need of fixing within Euro-western standards of academics. Within such spaces, Indigenous families are consistently problematized within educational environments, and viewed as impediment to success of their children (Fisher and Campbell 2002; Garakani 2014; Tomkins 2002). The problematizing of Indigenous families and cultures extends to parental and community engagement. A required foundation of meaningful parental engagement is creating collaboration between the teacher and parent in the best interest of the student’s learning (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Jeynes 2014).

While teachers and administrators remain in a space of assuming that Indigenous parents possess negative or apathetic interests towards the education of their children, genuine and meaningful collaboration will remain impossible. The heart of decolonizing education is challenging these, often unconscious, negative perspectives of Indigenous peoples, their knowledge, and systems of learning. Moving beyond a deficit-based approach means challenging schools on an individual and systemic level to evaluate their collusion with colonial mindsets and deficit-based thinking. It also, moreover, involves creating a healthy and productive discourse between schools and Indigenous communities to work together on decolonizing projects. Once schools begin to address colonial mindsets, there are substantial opportunities to pursue indigenizing projects that can support cultural revitalization.

To achieve these aims, superintendents, administrators, and system leaders need to lead in building ethical relationships that move from community and parent involvement to engagement. As we learned through our own efforts in undertaking this

study, one of the key ways this can be achieved is to understand the parents as part of an Indigenous nation possessing claims to sovereignty and the right to self-determination. As a consequence, determining how such relationships can be fostered should start with conversations and dialogue with community members and leaders where protocols can be developed. In this model, meaningful engagement can occur between the First Nation's education coordinator or the Chief, for instance, and the Principal and Vice-Principal of the school. Such conversations offer possibilities of moving beyond merely community involvement in education, to finding ways to work critically to examine current educational policy, pedagogy, curriculum, and governance from a place of collaborative engagement.

## 7 Conclusion

In considering the implications of this study for rural education, two key themes emerged within this chapter. The first of these concerns the ways rural communities and rurality more generally have often been seen in the literature through a very romantic lens. As Burton et al. (2013) noted (see also Corbett's chapter in this volume), this romanticized view of rurality has promoted a vision of rural schools as places possessing a close-knit connection among students and the community, along with "involved and supportive relationships with families of students... [and] caring and selfless teachers" (p. 6). As these scholars additionally affirmed, this vision of rurality has equally positioned rural communities as ethnically homogeneous with limited racial, linguistic, or cultural diversity. Disrupting such a romantic and ethnically homogenous vision of rural communities, findings from this study demonstrated that the reality of rurality, at least in north-western Canada, is much more socially and racially complex. Specifically, while students and parents form the dominant settler community may find the local schools welcoming and supportive spaces, this study demonstrate that this is not often the case for many Indigenous parents and community members. This insight points to a need for increased attention to the voice of Indigenous peoples and communities within theory and research in rural education. In undertaking such work, this study has additionally highlighted the need to attend to ongoing relational tensions among settler and Indigenous populations that are particularly prominent in many rural and northern settings in Canada.

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# **Rural Identity and Relationality**

# “Growing Our Own Teachers”: Rural Individuals Becoming Certified Teachers



Dianne Gereluk, Roswita Dressler, Sarah Elaine Eaton and Sandra Becker

**Abstract** Attracting and retaining teachers for rural and remote areas are pervasive global problems, and Canada is not immune to these issues. As recommended by the Northern Alberta Development Report (2010), communities need to make an increased priority of local teacher recruitment, by “growing our own teachers” (p. 11). One way to do just that is to allow students to stay in their communities for preservice teacher education, thereby increasing access to potentially qualified individuals who might not otherwise be reached. In light of this provincial directive, this paper will examine the provision of blended preservice teacher education by examining student and instructor perspectives in one community-based program. While the emphasis of the study highlighted how alternative provisions of teacher education programs may better support students who live in rural regions, the results gave rise to the ways in which shifts in our delivery of programs may alter notions of relationality and at an institutional level, the evolving nature of the university itself.

**Keywords** Rural teachers · Blended delivery · Online · Teacher education programs · Relationality

## 1 Introduction

Universities have seen an interesting shift in attempts to be more attentive to the diversity of their students and the spectrum of life experiences that such diversity

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brings. Arguably, the nature of full-time residency at universities was intended to initiate the student into a tradition and practice of being what it meant to be educated well. The immersive experience to be on campus—even live on campus—was part of the ritual of the university experience. How universities reconfigure their space in how they educate students is notable in trying to redress the limitations that traditional on-campus programs may have had on students from diverse backgrounds, and in particular, those who live from distances beyond the urban campus.

In this light, we share our experiences developing and reflecting on a community-based blended online Bachelor of Education program that challenges the traditional university structure to increase equity and access for students in rural and remote areas of our Canadian province in Alberta.<sup>1</sup> The program was conceptualized and developed in response to the need to have more teacher training available beyond what teacher education programs traditionally provide in residency-based urban and satellite campuses (Smith and Peller 2020; Looker and Bollman 2020).

The program provides a blended learning design that recruits and attracts individuals from rural and remote communities across the province. Changing the traditional residency-based format of the university structure, the community-based program provides an intensive two-week on-campus residency in the summer, followed by a combination of online and field experience practicums in students' home communities over the fall and winter. Our intent in designing the program was to allow more students to remain in their communities, rather than uprooting their homes, families, and lives for the duration of their degree. In this sense, we wanted the program to attract more mature members of the community who had familial and community ties, in hopes that they would remain long-standing teachers in their home communities.

The alternative online programmatic approach to offer a Bachelor of Education is in direct response to the ongoing global challenge of attracting and retaining teachers for rural and remote areas (Canter et al. 2007; West and Jones 2007), and Canada is not immune to these issues (Alberta Education 2013; Nova Scotia Department of Education 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education 2008; Saskatchewan Learning 2007). Although teacher shortages in rural and remote areas are historical, in recent years the challenge has become worse (Interorganizational Committee on Teacher Supply and Demand 2002; Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf 2010; Northern Alberta Development Council 2010). There is high teacher turnover in very rural and remote areas (Looker and Bollman 2020), and the constant challenge of teacher recruitment “affects the delivery of quality educational services in rural and remote areas including reserve schools” (Mueller et al. 2013, para. 1). Solutions perceived as radical within the political and educational community are required (Dibbon 2001). As recommended by the Northern Alberta Development Council (2010), communities need to prioritize local teacher recruitment by “growing our own teachers” (p. 11). One way to do just that is to allow students to stay in their communities for preservice

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<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge the meaning of the terms *rural* and *remote* as contested, and the lines that differentiate them can sometimes be blurred (Corbett 2020; Eaton et al. 2015; Looker and Bollman 2020). For this chapter, we consider rural to mean those areas outside urban boundaries (Northern Alberta Development Council 2010) and adopt the notion of remoteness broadly and inclusively within the frame of rurality (Corbett 2020).

teacher education through a blended delivery approach, thereby increasing access to potentially qualified individuals who might not otherwise be reached. The aim is not only to support communities in rural and remote settings, but also to acknowledge and support Indigenous communities who historically have not been part of the broader conversation about rural education (Scott and Louie 2020).

However, resistance to this solution is strong. Some critics are skeptical that teacher education can be delivered effectively in any format other than face-to-face instruction (Eaton et al. 2017; Huss 2007). Other research has indicated that university instructors may be resistant to provide online instruction (Chelliah and Clarke 2011; Downing and Dymont 2013). In addition, administrators in charge of hiring have expressed their reluctance to hire students graduating from online or blended programs (Faulk 2010; Huss 2007). This resistance suggests that care must be taken in the creation of a community-based preservice teacher education program to ensure that instruction is delivered effectively, instructors are supported, and the degree is regarded as robust enough that hiring personnel would accept graduates.

In light of these criticisms, we investigated access to preservice teacher education and the perceptions of instructors and students on blended preservice teacher education. We aimed to shed light on how a blended program of instruction may better respond to rural teacher shortages by attracting and targeting rural students who already live in those communities, and still remain largely in their local community during the duration of their degree. Given this overarching aim to reconceptualize how teacher education might be more responsive to the needs of those who live in rural areas, our research was guided by the following question: What do instructors and students perceive as affordances and challenges within our community-based blended online Bachelor of Education program? Participants included undergraduate students and faculty members who were part of the initial cohort.

In this chapter, we share details about the community-based program we developed and how we tracked student and instructor experience over the first two years of the program's existence, focusing on student and instructor experience. Results were categorized under four key themes with regard to how instructors and students perceive the affordances and challenges of the blended instruction model. First, students and instructors identified the need for a strong relational component to create a supportive learning environment. Second, students and instructors indicated that a robust program design was critical to ensure that graduating students would be recognized as having the essential competencies required by prospective employers and the broader teaching certification board. Third, students noted both challenges and affordances in the use of technology in the online courses. Finally, instructors and students commented on the challenges imposed by institutional barriers. These findings highlight the possibilities and challenges of a blended preservice teacher education that reaches students in rural and remote areas. We conclude with cautious optimism about the possibilities for teacher education for rural and remote students.

## 2 Relationality

One of the overarching themes that emerged was to ensure that a sense of community, or relationality, is promoted and sustained throughout the program. Relationality can be defined as the fostering of strong interpersonal connections (Wubbels et al. 2012). Yet integral to the notion of relationality is not simply one of connection; the quality and interconnectedness of those relations matter. “Human beings, because they are social creatures, require the right kind of social structures to provide the habitat in which they can flourish and this is supplied by the community in which they live and work” (Talivaldis Ozolins 2017, p. 363). A general assumption exists that effective teaching necessarily must start with relationality. The quality of the interpersonal relationships in the classroom and affective connection between a student and teacher are necessary preconditions of learning, and, more broadly, what it means to be human.

As part of that cultivation of relationality among individuals and communities, educational institutions have traditionally been entrusted to foster and cultivate those dispositions among students and in the relational bond between teachers and students. If there is a conscious and purposeful attentiveness to foster relationality in schools, then a requisite responsibility and duty to model and foster those dispositions in a teacher education program seems essential (Kriewaldt 2015). It is thus a fair concern that if relationality is at the heart of teaching, then any shift in the way that teacher education programs foster relationality needs to be done with purposefulness and intentionality. With this in mind, however, there is also a balance that an inevitable tension exists in the context of rural education. The concern is that the more locally responsive and relational rural educators are in defining themselves as distinctive from urban-centric educators, the greater the struggle for legitimacy may be on a larger stage (Corbett 2020).

Of primary concern in the conceptualization of this program was whether a blended learning environment, and particularly those courses that were offered online, would seriously compromise the ability to foster relationality among students. This paralleled the initial concerns of students and instructors who expressed uncertainty as to how the university would create a sense of relationality within the online courses. For instructors, one of the significant concerns in moving to an online mode of instruction was that the vitality and the incidental, informal, and ongoing interactions found in a classroom may be lost.

Face-to-face classroom environments offer the potential to demonstrate, model, and engage pedagogical approaches that are embedded within the particular course. Part of the learning process is being attentive and responsive to the nature of the conversations, watching individuals’ body language, or creating meaningful activities to solidify a particular concept. Some instructors rightfully questioned how this context might be achieved online. Louie, an instructor in the program, noted the importance of modeling:

I think a lot of teaching in the Faculty of Education is about modeling as well. You’re modeling how to teach in your classroom every day, so I think about the course I teach, and

I thought about how you would ... model those ideas [online]. ... I think that's much harder to achieve online.

From Louie's perspective, the traditional approaches to teaching about relationality in the classroom are of central concern. For him, the challenge is how an instructor might replicate how individuals approach their own teaching practices in schools given the limitations that an online environment might pose. In an online environment, the ability to observe, engage, and practice those implicit and explicit pedagogical approaches that enhance relationality and inclusive learning environments may be limited and needs to be addressed in a different way. These assumptions weighed heavily in the design and implementation of the program.

The nervousness about relationality was at the forefront of the minds of rural students, too. They wondered how an online environment could create an ethos of belonging that one might assume occurs in a face-to-face environment. Of particular concern was how instructors would get to know them, and further, how they would connect and bond with other students who were geographically distanced. Jen, for instance, stated, “I think a disadvantage for [the instructors] is they don't get to really see us, or know if something's personal going on, or so they don't really get that connection.” For Jen, relationality was tied to the physical presence of being with the instructor and the nuanced understanding of looking for nonverbal body cues to know when an individual might be overwhelmed or distressed. Jen was apprehensive that this aspect may not come across or be easily identified by an instructor who is present only by means of electronic communication, whether written modules or video chats.

In later focus groups, even after receiving the first few courses during the summer on-campus residency, some students continued to question how one could create a sense of community and the specific aspects of relationality in an online environment. They wanted to understand how instructors would facilitate communities of practice in the online setting when they could not physically model pedagogy in traditional face-to-face formats. Frieda, a student, said,

Assignments ... may be easier to do in class, in a face-to-face class, where[as] it's a little bit trickier to do with us online. ... We've been doing a lot of in-class little side projects, and that, you might not be able to do that online.

Although the concern of feeling disconnected and isolated is both real and tangible, our findings reveal that the students and instructors gradually felt a stronger relational aspect than they had originally anticipated, although it presented itself in different ways. For instance, Esther, a student, compared her previous experience attending a different residency-based program to that of the current blended program. She commented, “We have a lot more support with this program than I have in past post-secondary institutions on campus. Here I feel that I'm not just a number. The staff actually know my name. My classmates know my name.” An interesting manifestation of relationality occurs not in the physical presence, but in the attention of being known in a small cohort of instructors and students. Esther is not lost among a large group of students who may be physically present in a lecture hall, but quite anonymous. In this sense, Esther came to realize that attending lectures on campus

is not a guarantee of relationality; rather, relationality comes from the attention to the interconnectivity among individuals whether that is face-to-face or online.

The intent to make relationality a priority was expressed by Mike, an instructor, who said, “[To build] capacity is [to] make connections with the community students.” Given the heightened concern about students who may feel isolated in an online program, Mike was purposeful in how the lessons would enhance the interpersonal connections. This element was not simply taken for granted or happenstance, which is sometimes the case in a traditional higher education setting.

Georgia, another student, took up relationality in a different way, not simply considering her interpersonal connections to other students in the program but drawing from her own community. She reflected,

So, it’s not like we’re out in the middle of nowhere by ourselves. We have all these resources and a community that’s encouraging us and helping us. Because just from talking to some of these ladies [other students], I know that they have very encouraging people behind them as well in the community.

There is a heightened vulnerability and fear about coming to university, particularly as mature students. Many students in this cohort came from remote areas with small populations, so there was an internalized pressure not to let the community down and not to fail. Yet Georgia saw the community as an opportunity to find moral support and encouragement in her journey as a university student.

Relationality emerged initially as a challenge and later as an affordance. Despite initial concerns expressed by both instructors and students, students found that they were more visible and connected to their peers and instructors than they had expected. They knew their fellow students and instructors and had a strong sense of being in the program together. As well, students noted a more nuanced conception of relationality that went beyond the internal programmatic aspects of their courses. They came to consider how their own community supported them and provided the connections that may have been lost had they moved to a larger urban center to enroll in a teacher education program. They concluded that relationality occurs beyond the parameters of the class; it occurs in the supports and networks that surround the individuals in and around their localities.

One’s place and location foster the relationality of feeling by demonstrating connection to both one’s program and one’s own community. For instructors, addressing the heightened concern about the loss of relationality present in a traditional classroom required intentionality as to how relationality might look and feel in an online setting. There is also an important cultural depth to consider other ways of relationality, which is attentive to the community of origin (Martin 2020). This is particularly the case in creating welcoming and safe spaces for Indigenous students who have previously felt marginalized and unwelcome (Scott and Louie 2020).

### 3 Program Design

The degree to which the program is perceived as credible and reliable in training teachers was highlighted by students and instructors as critical to its long-term vitality and to the success of its graduates. External stakeholders and the broader community need to see the program as robust in comparison with other teacher education programs. If superintendents and principals feel that the program does not develop strong emergent teachers, then the aim to encourage more rural individuals to become certified teachers will ultimately be undermined. There is a vulnerability and external gaze both within the province and beyond given that the program delivery is different. If the degree is perceived to be of lesser quality, then it is a reputational risk for the institution. Moreover, it places graduates in an unenviable position when seeking employment.

Reservations from students about attending this new delivery of program were notable and palpable. Students expressed concerns that online education had connotations of being less rigorous. Hana mentioned, “I’m certain when our diplomas come in, they’re not going to say ‘online,’” indicating that any diploma labeling an online program would be viewed with disdain. There is a vulnerability about enrolling in a new program that has yet to be vetted and worry about how the degree will be received by the school districts. Frieda elaborated, saying, “One of my concerns, even applying for it too, was how it would be perceived. As someone taking it online. Like, when I get hired, would principals and superintendents see it was something less because it was taken online?”

These concerns, expressed at the beginning of students’ time as a cohort, stemmed in part from the novelty of the program. In fact, Georgia, a student, referenced that novelty as another insecurity around rigor: “I’m a little worried that it’s a brand-new program, so what if two years down the road they’re like, ‘This isn’t working, we’re scrapping this,’ and we’re all left with half of a degree?” Georgia’s concerns allude to the long-term sustainability of a program. The personal investment and risk to apply for a program is compounded by the lack of a long-standing track record of success at the institutional level. However, Ester saw the potential that an investment in community would bring over time:

Being rural though, too, I think that where we’re hoping to get hired, our community and everyone, they know us well enough that I think once they see that this program is awesome, this teacher is amazing, and that word spreads, I’m hoping that just builds the reputation for it.

Students voiced concerns that the program would be considered less robust than an urban face-to-face program and noted the heightened scrutiny that the program would have from the outside. In many respects, the students sensed being guinea pigs, wishing for the intended outcomes that the program promised but also recognizing the great risks on a personal and collective level if the program did not live up to its promises.

Instructors shared similar concerns. Louie, an instructor, said, “When people hear any kind of newly developed program, they think it’s going to be watered down.”



If the online program was perceived to be parallel with that of a correspondence course or a degree program that simply grants degrees, then there would be a strong reputational risk for the institution that students could simply “buy a degree.” Louie also noted, “It’s important for the people in [rural] schools to see the rigorous nature of this program.” The assurance that the program would have depth is not simply to be realized by the students; schools also need to understand and appreciate how students are being supported and challenged as future certified teachers. Rose, an instructor, addressed the need to “do some curriculum mapping once we’re done our initial versions of the courses, to see if we really embedded rural content.” Yet, like the students, instructors could see strengths within the program, which attracted many students with previous classroom experience as educational assistants (Danyluk et al. 2020). Louie noted, “The theories that we talk about in class, they already understood those from a practical perspective because they’ve been in the classroom for so long.” At best, students’ previous experiences working in school administrative support roles helped in their transition back to university life. At worst, it may create particular power structures at the local community level in how these students negotiate between their roles as students and their professional roles in the schools (Stelmach 2020).

## 4 Technology

Challenges and affordances with technology emerged as another key finding. Students worried about connectivity and access; instructors worried about their own or their students’ technical knowledge. Affordances became evident when instructors were asked about strong aspects of their online courses.

Students shared initial concerns with connectivity issues. Donna noted, “A lot of us are in rural Alberta. We’re not going to have service all the time for whatever dumb reason—tornado alerts.” Hana shared similar concerns, saying, “We get power outages, and . . . you can phone [the power company], and they’ll say, ‘Oh, they should have power on between this time and this time.’ And they give you about an eight-hour span sometimes.” Although provinces such as Alberta have made significant attempts to ensure broadband coverage in every locality, some of the most remote areas that are located in valleys or mountain ranges may still experience connectivity challenges. These challenges lie outside of the control of the program designers but remain an important consideration.

Instructors recognized different challenges with technology. They noted students’ lack of comfort with using technology that urban students might be assumed to have. Jill, an instructor, said,

A high school student probably knows [more] coming into university. These people, they don’t have that knowledge of how to use D2L [an online learning platform], how to find an article online, how to use Adobe Connect. Maybe even, in some cases, [their] computer skills might not be really up to date. So, the learning curve is quite steep for some of these students.

The instructors' starting assumption was that urban-centric students had more varied technological skill sets than the rural students in the program whether that assumption was warranted or not. A further assumption was that providing programs to rural students placed a heavier burden on the faculty to set up a structure that would create student success. The age of the students factored into their comfort level with basic technology, one that was lower than foreseen from a programmatic perspective. Instructors were ill prepared for some students' lack of understanding of basic operations on a computer or the Internet. Students who had not grown up with computers did not know how to navigate to build their capacity. Not all students faced this barrier, but their ease with technology commonly determined their experience in the program.

Once addressed, some of these challenges were then seen as affordances. Jill, an instructor, experimented with technology to create active learning online so students could engage with the content and with one another. She pointed out,

I tried to do the video, so [I] tried to be there somewhat in person talking about whatever was upcoming that week. I tried to do the news items on a weekly basis, the PowerPoints, commenting on their postings. I think I am probably more encouraging than I would be with students that were here [on campus].

In this response, Jill described practices that helped her to differentiate learning other than what she might normally do in her face-to-face classes. Mary, another instructor, agreed: “Online learning, you just—you have to be clear in a very different way.”

Although connectivity and access are outside of the control of the students and instructors, the findings revealed challenges around students' and instructors' technical knowledge that is key to addressing the needs of students in a blended program. The most surprising finding was the vast spectrum of students who had either no or limited use of technology prior to commencing the program.

## 5 Unanticipated Barriers

Understanding that mobility and financial costs are often barriers for rural and remote students to enroll in an urban-based university program, the program was created to respond to these long-standing obstacles through blended instruction. However, internal and external institutional policy issues were revealed as substantive barriers. Specifically, these barriers included how online courses are taught in other institutions, how financial assistance is determined, and how student supports at the university are distributed. Emerging from these institutional challenges was a sense that faculty members would need to play a greater role given the institutional lags in supporting these off-campus students.

Students in the blended program who do not enter with transfer credit or a previous bachelor's degree must take some of their coursework from other faculties to fulfill their disciplinary requirements. Given that few online courses are offered by the

home institution, students took alternative online courses from other institutions. One concern was the differing expectations and institutional supports for students who were enrolled in online programs. Jim, a student, noted, “We come off a course [from this institution] and then with a course [at another institution].” Students also noted a spectrum of support and quality. Jane, a student, elaborated: “I think that [our education] professors showed it was possible [to have engaged online learning]. ... There was a lot of variety. At [the other institution] you’re sent a box; ... you’re self-directed.”

The education courses were taught drawing upon synchronous and asynchronous learning, which enabled the students to remain in cohorts and feel a sense of connectivity by having regular classes online. In contrast, the students reported that taking other courses through various institutions resulted in feelings of isolation or frustration with the quality of instruction. Specifically, students were not prepared for the correspondence approach that was dominant from other institutions. Students did not attend a synchronous online section, in most cases, and there was little ability to find connection or belonging among the students or with the instructor. The contrast was notable, commonly creating significant dissonance in the quality of the overall program.

Existing financial models were a further challenge. First, a Canadian university’s base funding from the government is determined on a student’s full load equivalent (FLE). However, FLE presumes a student is at only one institution for the whole academic year. This determination results in two problems. First, there is a disincentive for potential partnerships and cross-collaborations in the design of a program with students who enroll in multiple institutions within a year or semester. Second, the students themselves are not seen as full-time when they are enrolled at multiple institutions, which creates significant difficulties to secure student loans. As well, spreading out the courses over the year, with some taken at the students’ local colleges, commonly meant that students did not qualify for scholarships or bursaries as they did not hold full-time status from one designated institution. Mike, one of the program coordinators, mentioned this particular frustration: “They are not actually [our] students in the winter, so they’re not listed as full-time students, so they’re not able to apply for some of the scholarships that are available.” In light of students enrolling in courses at multiple institutions, Mike noted that a goal is to develop internal bursaries and scholarships targeted to these students, which “might give them freedom to take more time off work.” The current financial models result in limited institutional collaborations and force students to work while undertaking full-time studies, thereby potentially impacting both the rigor of the program and the success of students.

Student supports geared toward on-campus students presented another challenge. The barriers of not being on campus, and not “adding up” to full-time status, meant that the community-based students did not qualify for many of the supports and services offered to other students. Rose, an instructor, learned that students in the program were required to pay student union fees, which included a dental plan, but were unable to access the coverage given that there were no eligible dental providers in the rural areas. Yet they could not opt out of dental coverage as it was bundled

with their health plan, which they could use. As a result, program administrators had to advocate for students to be able to opt out of this service. Other benefits such as subsidized use of the gymnasium and reduced fares for bus passes were not available to the community-based students despite them paying for these allowances in their student union fees. Additionally, student writing services personnel had not considered how they might provide support for students at a distance, so instructors had to advocate and even facilitate online writing support. These challenges are illustrative of the multiple aspects of university supports that are commonly set up with the on-campus student in mind.

Given the structural challenges of trying to create a blended learning model that has traditionally not been implemented in undergraduate programs, with a nonstandard scheduling pattern in the summer, fall, and winter, internal supports and workarounds have been common and ongoing to ensure that students receive care comparable to on-campus students. In this way, advocacy from administrators and coordinators was an affordance that surfaced during this research into the program. Program creators were largely unaware of the systemic institutional structures that were limited to the traditional urban residency-based student, and thus the program was ill equipped to deal with them. Advocacy helped to mitigate these challenges.

## 6 Discussion

From these initial findings, three key themes emerged for further consideration. First, although anxiety about relationality was prominent, expanded notions of interconnectedness beyond implicit assumptions of physical presence were observed. Second, technological barriers are a continual challenge given the spectrum of learners' comfort, compounded by variable Internet connectivity, when robust interactive online learning experiences demand a stable and strong Internet connection. Third, internal programmatic supports were necessary to compensate for a lagging central university system. Let us turn to each accordingly.

One of the most surprising findings was the shifting nature of how relationality was redefined and reconceived particularly when students began taking online courses. A common implicit assumption is that meaningful forms of relationality require face-to-face interactions. The nervousness of administration to hire teachers who are enrolled in online courses (Huss 2007), and teacher unions that echo this reservation about teaching, work on this assumption that relationality can *only* be conducted in the physical presence of another person.

Initial findings from this research suggest that face-to-face on-campus courses do not necessarily ensure that relationality is cultivated, nor is it impossible to foster in online courses. The purposeful attention to promote relationality—the emotive and affective components of relationality—with empathy, care, and reciprocity to the relational and connected aspect as a condition of the human spirit remains unchanged (Bamford and Pollard 2018). Just as an on-campus course may minimize or undermine these dispositions, so too can an online course. We contend that the

distinction of whether relationality can be cultivated does not hinge on whether there is a physical presence, but rather on whether relationality is at the core of the learning environment.

As research participants pointed out, in some cases the power differentials experienced in a face-to-face environment may actually reposition the dynamic in an online environment where there are moments of pause and attentiveness to both oral and written language given the mode of instruction and learning. For instance, there is a potential and heightened vulnerability in the permanence of words in an online platform. These vulnerabilities have ironically led to a closer communal bond among students knowing that their written communication has the power to either lift up or devastate. They are all supporting one another in the program.

Of particular significance is whether the learning environment creates an invitation for individuals to be reflective and exhibit aspects of care in their interactions with other individuals. In this instance, given that students remain in their local community, many noted that relationality went beyond the walls of the classroom: They connected not only with their peers and instructor, but then connected with others in their own communities. The artificial construction of the university classroom blurs the interconnectedness of individuals who must understand and negotiate their multiple connectedness and identities. In the process of the changing power, differentials found between a face-to-face and online learning environment, the public and permanent nature of the written posts online, and the limited ability to watch for nonverbal cues, increases program participants' attentiveness to their own ethical responsibilities and the care that they must exhibit to themselves and others. "Throw away" comments one might make in a classroom seem to be reckless in an online setting. The attentiveness to one's words, and one's ability to hear multiple voices through the online platform, reshapes the ways in which communities of practice are formed.

The second key theme that arose moves beyond the relational aspects toward more pragmatic considerations of whether the design of a blended program can maintain the quality and engagement necessary for developing key identified teacher competencies necessary for certification. The pragmatic considerations of the technological aspects of the program highlight the barriers for students who wish to engage in the course and for instructors who may be impeded by the inconsistent technological support in the various areas. Four interrelated aspects of technology emerged as key considerations, two of which pertain to individual human technology literacy and competence, and two of which pertain to technology systems (see Table 1).

The integrated aspects of technology may model how teaching may be possible in robust ways if done well. For instance, as rural schools increasingly provide online subject offerings when there is a scarcity of local resources or subject expertise, the online provision for instructors to model pedagogic practices to preservice teachers provides the potential for modeling divergent ways of teaching and learning. However, given the spectrum of bandwidth in particular rural and remote areas, instructors are attentive to the current limitations of providing interactive sessions during synchronous online classes. This is problematic given that the learning environment may be precarious in any given moment and may create a reluctance for instructors to explore more active forms of learning if the learning hinges upon

**Table 1** Four interrelated aspects of technology for rural teacher education

Broad categories	Notes
Individual technology considerations	
1. Student technical literacy and competence 2. Instructor technical literacy and competence	Students and instructors build their levels of technical competence and comfort as they engage with a variety of technologies used in online teaching and learning
System and infrastructure considerations	
3. Learning management system limitations	Both asynchronous and synchronous systems have limitations. Instructors and students learn to work within imperfect learning environments
4. Connectivity	Internet connectivity, coupled with connection speed and stability, can create limitations beyond the control of students or instructors

the technology. As a recommendation, instructors require support and mentorship around this pragmatic consideration, to be creative to the pedagogical approaches in an online learning environment with flipped classrooms, virtual manipulatives or case studies, and an attentiveness to provide multiple modes of student engagement. Arguably as important, however, is an attentiveness to the external factors that may compromise the online platform regarding the connectivity issues and continued technological support to students during and after their online synchronous learning times. Of paramount importance was the sense that students would feel comfortable with accessible and user-friendly online platforms and continual support.

An unanticipated challenge, however, was not the delivery of the program or the quality of the students. Rather, it was completely unforeseen how an alternative delivery of the program would challenge and disrupt the central infrastructure at an institutional level. And arguably, online learning may be perceived as a threat to the traditional power structures of universities on multiple levels. Policies, regulations, and practices that underpin the way in which support is offered to students centrally and how students receive financial support were unforeseen barriers. The traditional classrooms of urban campuses have been attentive to providing student supports centrally. The supports range from wellness, academic success, career progression, opportunities for experiential service learning. Student fees often support these initiatives with discounts on pricing for the use of facilities, transportation in and around campus, and medical services. Finally, the distribution and criteria for University awards, bursaries, and scholarships were modeled on the full-time residency student.

In almost every case, students encountered barriers to access of these central services. Counseling and wellness were limited to those within the urban area. Academic support services commonly required face-to-face drop in sessions. Financial aid of any kind was based on a traditional fall/winter full-time timetable. In each of the cases, the nature of these nontraditional mature students could have readily

needed many of these central supports, yet none were available. As a short-term fix, internal faculty processes were put in place to provide extra student support where there were institutional gaps.

Yet, the nature of the blended program revealed barriers to broader issues of equity and access not only for the students in this rural program, but also for other students who may struggle to make use of the support services that require students to be on campus during regular work hours. It highlighted a broader need that has long been an arguable gap in how higher education institutions address adult learners (Spriggs 2018; Thiel 1984). It is a compounded problem in that nontraditional students who reside in rural areas are already anxious about entering post-secondary education and may struggle to navigate what supports are in place during their degree. When students actively seek the various services, they find that the services either do not extend to them, or that the parameters of the services make it virtually impossible to access them. In this case, the overarching aim of the program to be responsive to the needs of rural students is undermined by the institutional infrastructure that has not yet caught up to the alternative provision of programming. Attempts to create makeshift supports internally within the faculty may provide short-term solutions, but may overly burden a faculty. While students may be appreciative of the efforts within the faculty, it presents a large sustainability issue of whether a faculty can provide the necessary student services in-house.

## 7 Conclusion

Blended instruction holds the potential to reach students in their rural communities with quality preservice teacher education. However, there is still debate as to whether preservice teacher education can effectively be offered in formats other than face-to-face instruction. This research is significant as it works to address equity and access while also investigating the concerns surrounding blended instruction in teacher education. This study sheds light on the need to effectively work to address the challenges that arise in the provision of a blended teacher education program. Preparing preservice teachers from rural and remote communities for teaching in those communities involves bringing preservice teacher education to them in meaningful ways. This education requires a carefully constructed program, driven by both intentionality and sound pedagogy. Through this study, we provided a relevant foundation upon which to base blended teacher education programs: programs that will reach a new generation of teachers, whose preservice teacher education is robust and meaningful, and whose instruction prepares them for their future professional contexts.

The alternative approach to be more responsive to the demographic nature of the program, however, interrupted larger discourses about the nature of university and how our own space at the university might be constructed differently that would shift who was privileged and represented. While the program was largely instrumental to reduce some of the perceived barriers that were dis-incentivizing individuals from

attending urban-based universities, it called into question the nature of the university and the institutional and systemic structures that had supported only a portion of the students who fit the traditional mold. Shifting when courses were taught, how they were taught, not only addressed the barriers facing rural students, but also challenged our views of the struggles that many other students may face as mothers, mature students, and minoritized populations.

The blended online portion also expanded the scope of what relationality entails beyond the face-to-face. It disrupted our preconceptions that face-to-face classes necessarily created community, and online forums were a less desirable compromise. And yet, the nature of the online forums created unintended spaces for individuals to listen, be mindful, and purposeful in the connections that they were making. The power dynamics shifted from the loudest individual. The social media created opportunities for having a range of voices heard. And the notion of time shifted so that students could have the time to reflect and respond thoughtfully to the discussions, not constrained by the confines of the class time. In this way, it shifted our own conceptions of the nature of the university, and the purposes that it serves, and who it privileges.

In the short term, there is a cautious optimism that the alternative provision of teacher education will be attentive to address the perennial high turnover and shortage of qualified rural teachers in Alberta. Early indicators suggest that recruiting interested individuals who reside and remain in those rural communities may hold the key for rural school districts who continue to grapple with finding teachers who are qualified and committed to staying in their own communities. The most concrete measure to assess the effectiveness of this program will be to visit these graduates in their rural classrooms 5–10 years down the road.

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# “Where Love Prevails”: Student Resilience and Resistance in Precarious Spaces



Ferne Cristall, Susan Rodger and Kathy Hibbert

**Abstract** Growing concerns about school-based mental health (SBMH) in Canada have led to questions concerning how policymakers and educators can develop mental health competencies. Coincidental to this movement has been the emergence of a discourse of community and citizenship, emphasizing active, bottom-up decision-making and self-governance. However, in the rural context, in particular, the ability to engage as a community of citizens is too often thwarted by policies that privilege economic interests over the wellness of those affected—as in the case of school closures, which is our focus here. We adopt Jean Baker Miller’s (*Toward a new psychology of women*. Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1976) *Relational-Cultural Theory* (RCT) to examine the experiences of a community in a rural area through the closure of a school. We theorize that meaningful participation is critical to building resilience through examining how students in a downtown medium-size city’s high school independently responded to the threatened closure of their school—with their own unique brand of organization and resistance. In rural districts where the community is part of the fabric of the curriculum itself, school closures can limit a community’s ability to build the “mental health” capital—or *resilience*—needed to sustain its inhabitants. We argue that in the process changes to place can contribute to mental health vulnerability and reduction in well-being.

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**Keywords** Rural education · School-based mental health · School closures · Youth resistance · Resilience

## 1 Introduction

Amidst growing concerns about mental health, resilience and school-based mental health (SBMH) in Canada, attention is understandably expanding from problematizing youth mental health to focusing on how policymakers and educators can promote the development of mental health competencies for students. At the same time, there has been the emergence of a discourse of community and citizenship that challenges educators to achieve “an active, bottom-up citizenship in which people can take a self-governing role in the many divergent communities of their lives” (Cope and Kalantzis 2009, p. 172). However, in the rural context, the ability to engage as a community of citizens is often thwarted by policies that privilege economic interests over wellness (Witten et al. 2001). In rural districts where the community is part of the fabric of the curriculum itself (Miller 1995), school closures limit opportunities for youth to be seen and heard and limit a community’s ability to build the “mental health” capital—or *resilience*—needed to sustain its inhabitants. There is a large literature in the field of rural education on the impact of school closure on communities (e.g. Barakat 2014; Bennett 2013; Corbett and Helmer 2017; Corbett and Tinkhan 2014; Egelund and Lausten 2006). Arguably, “changes to place”—especially in geographic spaces with declining school enrolments—may well be contributing to mental health vulnerability and reduction in well-being (Fraser et al. 2005; Murphy et al. 1988).

In response to news that their downtown Peterborough, Ontario, high school was being closed due to declining enrolment, students organized into the *Raiders in Action* and engaged in resistance to protest decisions made for them (and not with them); they formed human chains, marched, staged silent protests, and more. As they came together in action and brought together a group of people who shared a sense of place and a vision for equity and inclusion, they did not stay stuck in their discontent but worked for change. Resilience, after all, is not a trait to be nurtured independently or without support but rather is developed and shared in community and relationship (Ungar 2012).

A recent study employed Ball’s (1993) policy analysis framework (text, context, and consequence) to examine SBMH policies as they intersect with student and teacher resiliency across Canada (Ott et al. 2017). Recommendations called for more support to:

- (a) work with educators to develop communities of practice on school mental health around the notion of resiliency; (b) consider the structural and material factors that affect people’s ability to be resilient at school, and (c) extend the current focus on promoting student wellness to include teacher wellness. (p. 1)

We are three scholars (two educators and one counseling psychologist) who believe that significant community participation is critical to building resilience.

When the community is disrupted, and engagement in it is silenced, the consequences include a decline in wellness for all involved. In this chapter, mindful of the recommendations of Ott et al.’s (2017) recent study, we examine the experiences of a rural community with declining school enrolment facing the closure of a school. We adopt Jean Baker Miller’s (1976) *Relational-Cultural Theory* (RCT), in which she holds that to be human is to be in community:

to be connected to one another in mutual, growth-fostering relationships. This mutuality is embodied in being authentic, showing empathy, giving and receiving support, and sharing power, and those who are engaged in growth-fostering relationships will experience energy, clarity, an increased knowledge of oneself and others, an increased sense of worth and a desire for more connection. (Rodger et al. 2017, p. 65)

Originally Miller developed RCT as a model for therapy, but in the educational context, “it provides a very useful and practical way to think about, teach, and live in community as a teacher, a student, a family, a community and a team” (p. 65). It provides a framework for understanding the primacy of connection and the ways in which we will disconnect when it no longer feels safe to be who we are, a particularly salient concept with the students’ experiences described here.

The notion of a connection between RCT to *Critically Compassionate Intellectualism* (critical pedagogy, authentic caring, and social-justice-oriented curriculum) has been advanced by education scholars such as Rector-Aranda (2018) and Theobald (1997, 2006). In this framework, both teachers and students are active agents in a social justice-oriented education mission and as an equity-oriented approach to understanding human experience, in context of a complex and disruptive political landscape and event (a school closure), RCT can provide a lens through which power, authenticity, silence and growth can be understood.

## 2 Do Rural Schools Present a “Wicked Policy Problem”?

To start, borrowing a phrase from Corbett and Tinkham (2014), we consider the “wicked policy problem” that rural communities pose to successful governance.

A key role for educators across all school districts in Ontario, Canada, is to meet the needs of their students in ways reflecting the standards articulated in the provincial curriculum (Seasons et al. 2017). At the same time, educators must attend to the strengths and the needs of their local community; they must ensure that students become prepared to participate fully in the life of that community—to take on civic responsibility (The New London Group 1996, p. 60). However, to date, policies and standardized curricula are underpinned by an imperative of “access” to all rather than “appropriateness” (White and Corbett 2014). Studies have documented for example, that the closure of schools in struggling rural communities can have a damaging effect on their “long-term vitality, resilience, and overall well-being” (Seasons et al. 2017, p. 18). Since the rural community may be more dependent upon its limited infrastructure, the community may live in more interdependent ways than its urban

counterparts. Yet school boards are often positioned as adversaries with communities from the outset. The conundrum—and this is the basis of the “wicked policy problem”—is that “small school activists ... [are] focused on maintaining infrastructure and even community survival” while “school boards are mandated to focus on the efficient provision of educational services across wider geographies” (Corbett and Tinkham 2014, p. 691).

The neoliberal logic applied to the human enterprise of the education system fails to meet the needs of rural communities (Cuervo 2016), reducing the connection afforded through complex relationships between people and places to a supply and demand chain based on population density. Like the economic management system it is modeled after, the model has limited interest in all the various links of the chain:

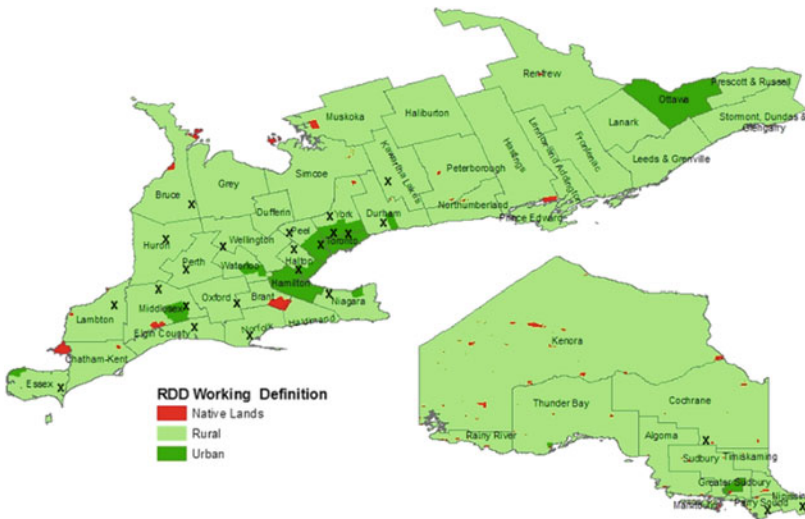
School boards are charged with the responsibility of allocating resources in a fair way across the geography of governance. For local activists though, the problem is framed differently. Here, the view is that school boards dismiss or ignore the quality of the local school; they overlook its importance to the community and essentially cut off the potential for future growth on the strength of evidence that is either incorrect or irrelevant. (Corbett and Tinkham 2014, p. 698)

What do we mean by “rural”? Rurality is more than geography or population density, although these two are most often cited for their role in policy development. In such examples, population sparsity or communities formed at non-commutable distances from urban centers determined how “remote” a community was, and what supports might be required (Deavers 1992). However, we argue that rurality also refers to a way of being in the world. When communities in rural areas first formed, they did so around family, church, and school (Budge 2006) and these networks formed the core of their ability to survive and thrive. Functioning in rural spaces often calls for reciprocal relationships between families, neighbors, and friends in ways that build community while fostering practices of self-governance and sustainability. Peterborough, situated in Eastern Ontario, and the site of this study, officially became a town in 1850 having grown to a population of 2000 people. Based on the growth of its population (now 80,000) it is considered a city.

But who lives in this city? It is interesting to note that Peterborough is often described in terms of its surrounding area—the “Kawarthas”—a chain of lakes in the Trent Severn Waterway. A map produced by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (see Fig. 1), categorizes the entire area as rural. Where cities have formed, they are located within, surrounded by, emerging from the surrounding rural “roots”. The Rural Ontario Medical Program<sup>1</sup> includes Peterborough as one of the rural communities in their rotation of training for physicians. Rurality is more than a geographic *place* or number of people who live in a place. Rurality must also include who the people are who inhabit those places: their beliefs; their histories and their values. In an effort to unpack the reductionist definitions of rurality, Provorse (1996) found that alternative factors such as rural influence or heritage lead people to hold a “rural mindset” (p. 101). He concluded that “rural people live in urban places, and

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<sup>1</sup><https://romponline.com/partners/communities/>.



Map adapted and used with permission of the Economic Development and Policy Branch, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs

**Fig. 1** Rural Ontario, Hibbert (2013)

there are even some urban people living in rural spaces” (p. 112). In other words, rurality is more about where we have come from than where we are currently living.

As educators and mental health professionals seeking to support those living in rural contexts, we must be mindful of the complexities and histories of place. Understanding the diversity of the rural leads to responses aimed at first working with communities to collectively build a response that accounts for their unique histories and needs. As Green (2013) articulates, “pursu[ing] opportunities and creat[ing] public policies and economic opportunities [are] needed to sustain rural communities” (p. 17) (Rodger et al. 2017). Ineffective and insensitive policies result from an inability to see rural communities as “evolving spaces” with a “multitude of social, cultural and political structures of power relationships” (Brann-Barrett 2014, p. 170). As a result, policies tend to override actors who have a personal stake in the community, assuming that rural dwellers are “authors of their own misfortune” in part through their “unwillingness to take appropriate educational opportunity” (Corbett 2017, p. 3). Rather, Corbett and Tinkham (2014) argue, “ordinary citizens desire talk across boundaries, difference and modes of existence to share governance ... [and they] want assistance with the navigation of collective wicked problems ... to talk seriously with one another across difference” (p. 692). Rural areas often have limited access to specialized services, difficulty recruiting teachers (especially with a particular specialization in the maths and sciences) and experienced administrators. Declining enrollment and the closure of small schools mark the consequences of globalization, youth “out-migration” (e.g. Martin, in this volume), and the decline in families working their own land. Economically, this shift reduced the property taxes in rural areas, which saw a parallel decline in funded social services.

Policies that reflect the ideas of local and regional policymakers can afford opportunities for the authentic voices and experiences of students, or they can silence them. According to Relational-Cultural Theory, we grow with and through connections and when we feel it is not safe to be our authentic selves we employ strategies of disconnection that are designed to restore safety, namely withdrawing and protecting the self, attempting to become the self that others want us to be, or fighting for the survival of our authentic self. The fight for survival and the sequelae are described here. Let's look at how these ideas played out in the context of a rural school closure.

### 3 The Case of Peterborough Collegiate and Vocational School (PCVS)

Peterborough Collegiate and Vocational School (PCVS), nestled downtown on the main street, just north of the business section, was known for its historic beauty, inclusivity, social justice activism, artsy atmosphere, and diversity. This safe, inner-city school was a haven for many who had felt “othered”: LGBTQ, Arts, and English as a Second Language students. PCVS—the place—is a major player in this story of student trauma amidst a school board steeped in neoliberal policy—a story of rural school closure, youth resistance, and resilience. In July 2012 the school board closed PCVS. According to the school board, the move was necessary because of declining enrolment in the city's high schools. Following the closure, displaced students were relocated. Many were shifted to the newer, much bigger, sportier, and science-oriented Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School in the suburbs.

Almost two years earlier, the news had flown through its halls of the school that one of four Peterborough schools was destined to be closed. PCVS did not go quietly. Although school staff members were silenced and threatened with disciplinary action from the school board if they spoke negatively about the situation, the students were free to respond. They formed a group called *Raiders in Action*. A large group of them quickly—but thoughtfully and respectfully—mounted a loud, strategic campaign to save their school. Over the next two years, *Raiders in Action* worked creatively and tirelessly to keep the school open, ultimately without success. Some five years after the closure, fourteen of the activists agreed to be interviewed to talk about how this experience had influenced their lives (Cristall 2018).

Although the study had no intention of focusing on questions of mental health, half of the participants raised the issues of trauma experienced during the campaign against the closure.



### 3.1 Growth of Student Resistance

The *Raiders’* approach to organizing, was humanistic and intensely, thoughtfully ethical. Student well-being was an issue. All of their meetings started with a “check-in”; a caring approach to see how members were coping. Their political activism was as much about protecting as protesting.

One of the organizers, Matthew, explained:

We made it part of our mandate ... that the campaign was never based on throwing hate to someone else or throwing somebody else under the bus. If you notice, in all our quotes, we never say, ‘Close this school or close that school’ or ‘you should be fighting with them.’ It’s more us trying to promote the idea that there are alternatives.

Former PCVS student activist Collin Chepeka (2016) was adamant about the group’s priorities. Given that PCVS was “a safe space,” he said, “We just wanted to keep that going in any shape or form.”

As a part of their campaign, *Raiders in Action* organized walkouts. They formed a human chain stretching five city blocks from the school to downtown to demonstrate both their resolve and their support for local businesses (see Fig. 2). On Halloween they creatively marched again, suggesting downtown would be a ghost town without PCVS (see Fig. 3a). They protested blind-folded at a school board meeting. They garnered support from well-known Canadian alumni such as singer Serena Ryder and comedian Sean Cullen. They raised \$52,000 for the *Spread the Net* charity (aimed at reducing malaria in Africa) and found a friend in its co-founder, comedian Rick Mercer (see Fig. 3b). They were sometimes strategically silent; duct-taping their mouths shut and scrawling teachers’ names on the tape in bold letters to protest the board’s decisions and stand in solidarity with their silenced teachers (see Fig. 4). They engaged in protests at Queen’s Park (the location of the Legislative Assembly of



**Fig. 2** Human chain protest down George St., Peterborough, Ontario, September 28, 2011. Photos by Scott Michael Walling



**Fig. 3** a Raiders in Action's Halloween protest, b Rick Mercer with students after PCVS won the Spread the Net Challenge on March 20, 2012. Photos by Scott Michael Walling



**Fig. 4** Day of Silence in support of teaching staff, November 6, 2011. Photo on the left shows student supporting teachers and criticizing the then Director of Education, Rusty Hick. Photo on the right was exhibited in the Spark Photographic Festival, 2013. Photos by Scott Michael Walling

Ontario) that led to their plight being discussed in the legislature (see Fig. 5). They were creatively, subversively strategic—when they had been silenced at a school board meeting of the trustees, they “took over” the camera (see Fig. 6). But they were never violent.



**Fig. 5** Over three hundred calls for a stop to their school’s closure at Queen’s Park, Toronto, December 5, 2011. Photos by Scott Michael Walling



**Fig. 6** Raiders conquer the camera at KPR Board meeting, February 23, 2012. Photo by Alexandra Bilz

Rather, their approach echoed Freire’s (1998) description of an “armed love – the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce” (p. 42). Proud, power-filled, and heartfelt language fuelled their resistance against the school closure.

The *Raiders in Action* also experienced what could be called a hurting love—a critical kind of pain that was not at all acknowledged by the educational and media institutions that objectified and denied their experience. One of them, Mirka, spoke to this point:

If your arguments are coming from a place of passion or emotion like they were for PCVS, you're not going to be taken as seriously. And that's very frustrating. People assume that something can only be critically examined when they distance themselves from it, and while that's true to a certain extent, sometimes distance causes you to lose sight of the thing's value.

About four years after the school closure, an on-line newspaper article (Tuffin 2016) similarly diminished the students' efforts. One of the former students, Collin, responded to the paper, citing the contradiction of how *Peterborough This Week* "relished" the amount of news material that the student campaign provided while disparaging the students' actions with its "invasive" coverage. For example, the paper featured "pictures of sobbing students" alongside articles emphasizing "how dramatic" the students had been. Collin criticized the paper's "assuming and invalidating" editorial while revealing a personal, post-closure experience of being admitted to the adult psychiatric ward at Peterborough Regional Health Centre (PRHC) for attempted suicide. How would the paper "feel to know," Collin asked, "that I have repeatedly self-harmed; that I attribute the development of my severe mental illness with the year the school board treated its own students like cattle?"

Tuck and Yang (2011) explore the idea that "dangerous dignity is the powerful position that youth take up in response to and in anticipation of this ongoing humiliation and hypocrisy" (p. 521). It is also in part this "dangerous dignity" that gave the impetus to the *Raiders* to sustain and persevere in their fight to keep their school open—both in their internal organization and their public actions.

One former student, Evangeline observed that as the closure neared, the conversations became more focused on wellness:

Alright what are we going to do to keep each other safe when we have to go to new schools? ... Those meetings were really important ... Everyone who was spearheading those meetings was really [by now], mentally unwell. ... When you love something so much you can lose your mind.

Kirsten remembered, "I made myself completely approachable. I posted in all the student groups. Here's my cellphone number or here's my home number. You can call me anytime ... and talk to me." When she heard the other students' stories she became aware of "how afraid they were for their future," which, she said, "really pushed me in a way that I might not have been if I hadn't listened."

### 3.2 *Trauma and Resistance*

The interview with Evangeline revealed the depth of despair that circled around the resistance to the closure. The students, Evangeline said, looked at the issue straight on. "Mental health – I think it's important to talk about." If the school board was going to talk about "a successful transition," Evangeline said, "it needs to look closely at how damaged people were because of that decision ... People are still struggling with addictions that they developed during that time. A lot."

In response, fifty-eight local mental health professionals signed a letter to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty expressing concern for the impact of closing the downtown school on the number of youth from “lowest income areas, youth who have left home because of abuse ... and youth struggling with ... mental health disorders” (Peterborough Needs PCVS 2013, p. 180).

Some of the student population had experienced trauma before arriving at PCVS, and the school and its inclusive community and strong relationships had helped them heal. During and after the closure, they were re-visited by grief and loss, and once again, were left feeling diminished, unheard, and undervalued. Evangeline related how high the “safe-place-to-learn” bar was set for disenfranchised youth, and how low the fall was when the school closed:

The PCVS closure made my friendships even more solid ... because we were all queer and we came from working-class backgrounds and from downtown. ... School was already a little tough ... but it felt really good to be at school.

Kirsten joked about the emotional sensitivity: “PCVS had a student body and teachers as well who had an interest in processing trauma. Long before the fight started.” With the school closing, all of that would be lost.

It was during the campaign to keep PCVS open that Jess N began to struggle: “This place that had been a home and family for me was just not a thing anymore. And again what about the kids like me? ... I stepped back from *Raiders in Action* a lot in the second half of Grade 12 because I was feeling very depressed.” After the closure, attending a suburban school, Evangeline was unable “to cope with how othered and unimportant” she felt. “I went from being a well-liked, involved, passionate, and spirited student to a depressed, exhausted, and uninterested one.”

“After PCVS,” Kirsten said, “I kind of fell apart.” She experienced a nine-month breakdown:

It was ridiculous and finally I started to repair physically and emotionally. I feel completely disenfranchised with government, too, and due process. Democracy doesn’t work right now the way that it is. It’s bullshit. I’ve organized very little since PCVS and I’m still processing a lot of that trauma.

Collin was also still dealing with emotional demons that have limited students’ ability to thrive in the years since the PCVS closure. “I think that was kind of beat over my head during that year – which was, you know there are better things to be doing with your time. Why aren’t you focusing on your studies?” The backlash of the experience, the difficulties of expressing emotions, the contradiction—“There is really no pessimism or optimism in me but I really think I miss optimism”—have been transferred to other parts of Collin’s life. “I feel a fundamental hesitation and real trouble about talking to people about what happened. And I think that just really stems from being told that our emotional experiences were invalid.”

### 3.3 *Post-resistance: Learning from Experience*

All of the *Raiders in Action* participants used words such as “cynical,” “disheartened,” “angry,” “voiceless,” “depressed,” and “politically disenfranchised” to describe the feelings they experienced as the school’s closure neared, and as they realized they were not being listened to or valued by the local board’s trustees and senior administration or by the provincial government. Yet 100 percent of them would do it again (fight the closure) “in a heartbeat!” All of the participants were committed to the PCVS community.

Mirka lamented that while she was still trying “to be socially aware,” she was now having trouble acting on her political beliefs. “Maybe that cynicism I inherited from the PCVS process plays into it.” Still, she remained confident. In an admission both harsh and heart-breaking, she said: “I’ve realized it’s important to speak my mind about certain things.” The lesson she learned that just because a school like PCVS is something “special ... unique and important, that isn’t enough to keep it safe.”

Mirka further applied a gender analysis to her point: She recognized the “very high importance” that the board placed “on rationality and objectivity.” For her, “PCVS represents the emotional, feminine point of view and the trustees represent the ‘objective,’ masculine point of view.” She found herself wishing that “people understood that you can be passionate and critical about something at the same time. ... I wish that the trustees would have recognized our youthful voices and our emotions and realized that we were saying something of value.”

Despite the experience, Matthew remained resilient, explaining instead how they “prevailed” against power:

We prevailed with love. It feels even reflective of the States today with Trump and this oppressive force. I mean patterns repeat themselves from the micros to the macros. ... PCVS was like a micro; it was huge for me then, but now it’s like a micro that allowed me to see bigger things happening in the world ... and big systems of oppression. ... I feel that the PCVS ... school closure made me realize how important it is to fight for what you believe in. And to fight for what you love. I think, oh right, that’s what I’m supposed to do with my life, to continue fighting for things that I believe in. We haven’t gotten to here without people doing that.

Alex and Jess A also concluded that many of the students came out of the experience with a willingness to speak their minds more freely and forcefully; Hermione initiated a multi-age ukulele community; Ginny committed herself to acting autonomously and without institutional group-think tactics. Collin and Matthew both mentioned their confidence and how they had acquired certain know-how in organizing protests. Hart talked about the importance of the experience of raising money and social justice awareness for the *Spread the Net* campaign.

## 4 “Wicked Policy” Opportunity

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s curriculum documents are filled with “accountability jargon,” limited to a measurable set of objective metrics. What is missing from this form of accountability are “relationships”—the basis of caring, communal communities. As Parker (2017) argues, Ontario needs “to recuperate what it means to be responsible for rather than accountable to one another” (p. 44). When we remove opportunities for relationships, communities suffer. Parker recommends that “instead of being a means to secure individual financial gain,” the classroom needs to become “a space for the discovery of our responsibility for the other.” It would become “a place of interaction and meaning-making that is rooted, not in the desire for economic wealth, but in the hope of meeting our responsibilities to listen to one another with humility” (p. 55).

The PCVS student campaign against the school closure represents not just a case of collective resistance to arbitrary power, but a refusal to ignore that relationships matter and are absolutely crucial to a healthy life. It is also about questions of power.

As Jean Baker Miller (1976) teaches, traditional theories of human development emphasize individualism and independence. Power is too often uncritically *used against* constituents, but can also be harnessed to produce change. However, change requires those with power, to remove the “unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency ... rather than [positioning them] as passive recipients of dispensed benefits” (Sen 1999, pp. xii–xiii). Miller’s Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) provides a framework for understanding how relationships matter and are a part of a healthy life. Human development from an RCT perspective is about interdependence, not independence. Relationships and relational opportunity and health are critically important in positioning people to be part of a healthy, engaged, and thriving community. The *Raiders’* perspectives on organizing and self-teaching are reminders that the well-being and care for each person’s emotional safety are integral to meeting the needs of the whole student, as well as developing a sense of a communality and building a school community.

People for Education (2017) reports that rural schools in Ontario are disappearing due to government priorities and funding formulas. Cloaked in the rhetoric of democratic procedures, school boards or districts have used the tools of neoliberal policies to make decisions that have often devastated youth and their communities. Perhaps authorities have (incorrectly) assumed that those in rural communities would not resist; perhaps the distance—physical, relational, and otherwise—has given those in power opportunities to minimize what is happening? School closures also shut down relationships.

But resilience is experienced interdependently within the context of communities. Since the nineteenth century, starting with the pushback of Indigenous students and parents against unjust educational directives (Paquette and Fallon 2010; Battiste 2000), unwanted educational policy has met with resistance (Barrett 2015, p. 18; Corbett 2001; Curtis 1988).

Being voiceless and disenfranchised are the sequelae of a disconnection, according to the RCT framework. As Maureen Walker (2008) notes, “to engage in collaborative conflict is to relinquish any claim on the illusion of victory or power over another human being” (p. 139). We need to experience, and learn how to work through conflict, and not be limited by one group needing to have power over another. We need to learn – as government organizations, educators, students, and community members – that to “embrace alternative power is to relinquish any fantasies of happy endings” (p. 142). Students’ experiences of disconnection describe the fight for their authentic selves, and the withdrawal and pain as they experienced rejection of both their ideals and themselves.

The students at PCVS show us that “bone-deep participation . . . doesn’t necessarily deliver a new policy, a new regime, a political victory;” however, it “might re/new an epistemology. Sometimes it can deliver a movement” (Tuck and Yang 2014, p. 14). The moment has come to remove the old “dominant/subordinate” power relationships that have thrived in our institutions and communities for too long. We need to take seriously the idea that it is not only possible and responsible but also necessary to take steps towards a new relational culture; one that adopts a “relational view to policy-making”, respects human rights, takes a “relational approach to decision-making and the implementation of power structures,” (McCauley 2013, n.p.) and ensures structural changes that can reflect positively on interpersonal relationships across organizations. The students at PCVS have shown courage and could only hope that those in power would see them, hear them and respectfully include their views in the overall deliberations. That did not happen.

To shift away from this established pattern demands a break with “wicked” neoliberal policies and their top-down power structures. This shift demands an education that builds a relational culture. Educators need support to develop communities of practice on school mental health around the notion of resiliency and promote social justice and equity in their pedagogies, curricula, and relationships with students and as advocates for students. Administrators must consider the structural and material factors that affect people’s ability to be resilient at school. Policymakers, school board administrators, educators and students all need training grounded in a commitment to building and sustaining a relational culture (Ott et al. 2017). Then, perhaps, in the foreseeable future young people will be able to engage as citizens who can actively challenge and change educational institutions to create more participatory, democratic processes in Ontario’s school system.

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# Rural Schools as Sites for Ongoing Teacher Education: Co-making Relational Inquiry Spaces Between a Principal and a Beginning Teacher



M. Shaun Murphy, Lynne Driedger-Enns and Janice Huber

**Abstract** Through narrative inquiry into the experiences of a beginning teacher and her relational interaction with a principal, this chapter opens possibilities for understanding place as rural context in teacher education. The experiences highlighted in this chapter show rural schools as places of co-making an unfolding relational inquiry space and understanding the rural context as ongoing teacher education. Through inquiry into a beginning teacher's experiences, this research makes visible the need for rural schools and education to be recognized as different from urban schools and education.

**Keywords** Narrative inquiry · Relational inquiry space · Rural education · Beginning teacher experience · Place

## 1 Erin's Story

My parents still live on the farm where I grew up - about 45 minutes from here. My mom is a very interesting lady. I love her very much but I don't think she really knew how to be a mom. There was always food on the table, your bath was done, your lunch was ready. She spent a lot of time outside, and she's not the kind of person that openly gives a hug. Or praise or anything like that. She tries to come help with my kids but she says things like "do we really need a car seat cause we are just driving over here". And, [with sarcasm] fortunately, there is always a shotgun in the truck, so that if we see a deer on the road... and I want to say

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– “mom, really? Could you put it in the case”? But when I was growing up it didn’t bother me. I would sit there and hold the gun on my lap because you might see something. Might be supper! At home, my mom and dad would set up the tins and say “give it a try, see what you can hit”. It was just part of our life. (Research Conversation between Erin and Lynne, December 6, 2015)

We begin with this story from a beginning teacher named Erin<sup>1</sup> as she composed her life in the rural community of Foxhaven<sup>2</sup> in Western Canada. When she shared the above story, Erin, who grew up on a farm in the Foxhaven area, was a kindergarten teacher in her second year of teaching at G. F. Meyer, a K-Grade Six school in the community. Our<sup>3</sup> inquiry alongside Erin, the beginning teacher, and Patti,<sup>4</sup> the second-year principal of G. F. Meyer School, began with wonders about the identity-making of new teachers in relation to school administrators in rural schools. Over time, as we (Shaun, Lynne, and Janice) engaged in “thinking narratively” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 34) with this and other stories of Erin and Patti’s experiences, we gradually awakened to three resonances across the life they were each making: *understanding place as rural context*, *understanding rural schools as places of co-making an unfolding relational inquiry space*, and *understanding rural context as ongoing teacher education*. As our chapter shows, our inquiry into and across these three resonant experiences makes visible the need for rural schools and education to be recognized as different from urban schools and education.

## 2 Narrative Understandings of Experience and Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) is a relational research methodology focused on the experiences of people and based on a Deweyan ontology of experience (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). Alongside Erin and Patti, this meant that we have focused both on the stories they lived and told of their experiences while also simultaneously inquiring into their co-making of coherent life stories together.

Decisions that beginning teachers make for and with children in classrooms are shaped by teachers’ personal practical knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly 1995), those bodies of knowledge unique to each teacher and composed of teachers’ prior experiences and their present teaching practices, which are drawn together and forward in their future plans and actions. As beginning teachers continue to shape their practical knowledge based on previous experiences with teaching in new contexts of practice they also continue to shape personal knowledge by their living in and out of schools (Driedger-Enns 2014). Knowledge is continuously in the making as

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<sup>1</sup>Erin is a beginning teacher at G. F. Meyer School and a participant in the research project.

<sup>2</sup>The names of places and people are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup>Shaun, Lynne, and Janice are the researchers.

<sup>4</sup>Patti is the principal at G. F. Meyer School and a participant in the research project.

it is continuously shaped and reshaped by the continuity of their experience (Dewey 1938/1997) and expressed, in part, through the stories they live by.

The narrative concept for identity, “stories to live by” emerged from Connelly and Clandinin’s (1999) earlier understanding of teacher knowledge as “narrative life history, as storied life compositions. These stories, these narratives of experience, are both personal—reflecting the person’s life history—and social—reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live” (p. 2). For Connelly and Clandinin, stories to live by offer a way to “understand how knowledge, context, and identity are linked and can be understood narratively” (p. 4). In our inquiry alongside Patti and Erin, and in our thinking narratively with their lived and told stories, this understanding of stories to live by, as an orienting aspect to their life writing, was central. In understanding the ways their stories to live by were composed and recomposed across time, place, situations, and relationships we were attentive to the narrative inquiry commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly and Clandinin 2006).

We additionally understand identity making, the composition of a story/stories to live by, as intertwined with curriculum making in that experiences with curriculum shape a way of being, a way of writing a life (Clandinin et al. 2006; Heilbrun 1988). In describing their understanding of curriculum as a “course of life”, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) noted that while “curriculum is often taken to mean a course of study” when our imaginations are set

... free from the narrow notion that a course of study is a series of textbooks or specific outline of topics to be covered and objectives to be attained, broader and more meaningful notions emerge. A curriculum can become one’s life course of action. It can mean the paths we have followed and the paths we intend to follow. This broad sense of curriculum ... [draws attention to] a person’s life experience ... (p. 1)

Understandings of curriculum as a course of life carry implications for a person’s stories to live by. In the making of curriculum, the making of a course of life, a person’s identity, their stories to live by are also in the making as experiences shape each other going forward and backward in time; these experiences are also, always, situated in place. For example, as earlier noted, from our inquiry alongside Erin and Patti we have come to see the need for rural schools and education to be recognized as different from urban schools and education, which is often the focus of many urban teacher education programs (see in the volume: Gereluk et al. 2020; Danyluk et al. 2020). Place matters.

### 3 Inquiring into Experience Narratively

Initially, Shaun lived out a narrative inquiry alongside Patti, Erin, and other teachers, staff, family, and community members connected with G. F. Meyer School into their curriculum making shaped through the development of a school garden (Murphy and Anderson 2016). He gradually became interested in rural schools as sites for teacher

education (Murphy et al. 2017). Lynne had just completed her doctoral narrative inquiry alongside beginning teachers (Driedger-Enns 2014) in which, in part, she inquired alongside Anna, who shared many stories of tension-filled interactions with her principal. Together, in 2015, Shaun and Lynne began a new narrative inquiry focusing on early career teachers and principals and their coming alongside one another as they shaped their own and each other's stories to live by in rural schools.

As this new narrative inquiry at G. F. Meyer was beginning, Lynne was the 2015 Horowitz Teacher Education Research Scholar at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education at the University of Alberta, during which she and Janice, alongside Sonia Houle, received funding that drew them and Ilich Silva Pena into narrative inquiry into teachers', parents', families', and children's co-making of relational inquiry spaces. As they engaged together in thinking narratively about relational inquiry spaces, Lynne drew on her and Shaun's experiences alongside Erin and Patti, Sonia and Janice drew on their inquiry alongside some of the children and families in the small town/rural Alberta school where Sonia teaches (Houle et al. 2019), and Ilich drew on his inquiry alongside a beginning teacher in rural Chile (Silva Pena, Driedger-Enns, Houle, and Huber, in review). When, in 2017, we (Shaun, Lynne, and Janice) were invited to participate in the *Disentangling Rural Teacher Education Think Tank* at the University of Calgary, we collectively engaged in thinking narratively with Erin and Patti's experiences.

Shaun and Lynne's research conversations with Erin and Patti began in September 2015. Research conversations took place in and outside of G. F. Meyer School. Most conversations were with Lynne and/or Shaun, Erin, and Patti together, however, conversations also happened informally as they inquired alongside each other in the school. Of course, Patti and Erin interacted on a daily basis. While Shaun already knew Patti and teachers, children, families, and community members at G. F. Meyer, Lynne also developed relationships as she participated in monthly conversations in relational inquiry circles between parents, teachers, including Erin, and Patti, the principal; Lynne additionally came to know some of the children and families through playground and hallway interactions and as she participated in classroom curriculum making. Time spent in Erin's classroom, staff meetings, assemblies, recess supervision, and conversations in the staff room became part of knowing each other.

Relationships between Shaun, Lynne, Patti, and Erin allowed for the creation and collection of rich field texts. The earlier noted commonplaces of narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin 2006)—sociality, temporality, and spatiality, shaped our collective understanding of, and inquiry into, the field texts, which included: field notes, transcripts from audiotaped conversations, school documents, artwork, photography, and memory box artefacts from Erin's and Patti's lives. Meeting together and apart with Erin and Patti created trusting relationships that extended into everyday life. These conversations afforded the opportunity to understand the complexity of the negotiation of their lives at school. Gradually, field texts of their experiences that showed how they understood themselves in the contexts of school and outside of school were composed and/or collected. Attending to ways Erin and Patti reflected on decisions in relation to children, colleagues, families, and subject matter deepened our understandings of their identities. Thinking narratively, that is, attending

to sociality, temporality, and spatiality in and across the stories lived and told generated this and other research texts (Murphy et al. 2017). Key in narrative inquiry are the ways that relationships and thinking narratively shapes each person's living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). This narrative process continuously foregrounds the relational ontology of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Murphy 2009; Clandinin 2013), including ongoing attention to living in relationally ethical ways alongside participants as the inquiry unfolds and into the future.

While research ethics was obtained from the University of Saskatchewan ethics review board, the school division and Erin and Patti, the ongoing relational ethics and relational responsibilities that shaped the inquiry were supported by the deep relationships gradually formed between Lynne, Shaun, Patti, and Erin, which in turn, supported their collective engagement in sustained conversation (Hollingsworth and Sockett 1994) and created a lens of seeing big (Greene 1995) with attention to the particular lives of each person involved in the inquiry. We now show our (Shaun, Lynne, and Janice's) thinking narratively with Erin and Patti's lived and told stories.

## 4 Understanding Place as Rural Context

My mom is a trapper. Every morning she goes on her trap line and brings home whatever coyotes she caught and hangs them up – She doesn't skin them, she sells them to the Hutterites and others - they come and pick them up. (Research Conversation between Erin and Lynne, December 6, 2015)

Families over generations had carried and lived into stories told in and around what is now known as the rural community of Foxhaven. These stories and families began in the lives of the First Peoples in the area—stories of hunting and trapping were common to everyone, and within this commonality, newcomers interrupted Cree lives. Denying or ignoring the ways that the First Peoples had been in relation to the land and other beings over 1000s of years, treaties were signed in 1876. Ten years later accusations arose of rebels who fought in the Frog Lake Massacre<sup>5</sup> and tensions continued as the Canadian federal government forced the amalgamation of the First Peoples into one Band and onto a “reservation” about 50 km (Onion Lake Cree Nation, n.d) from Foxhaven, refusing to recognize their Chief until this was fully carried out.

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<sup>5</sup>The Frog Lake Massacre was one of the most influential events during the Cree uprising in the North-West Rebellion in western Canada. Big Bear, Chief of the Plains Cree in the region, sought improved conditions for his people through peaceful means and unity among the tribes. However, the food shortage after the near extinction of the buffalo left his people near starvation. On April 2, 1885 incited by hunger, a breakaway group of young Cree men, lead by Wandering Spirit, entered the settlement in search of food. Eight settlers and the Indian Agent were killed. Nine months later six Cree men, including Wandering Spirit, were convicted of murder and hanged (<http://froglake.ca/chief-council/frog-lake-history/>).

In the early 1900s,<sup>6</sup> the newcomer families who told stories of their ancestors as immigrants to this area became children of the people who built the Canadian Northern Railway. Their children lived into stories of the oil boom in the 1970s and into current job loss in the same industry. Over the generations, these families made a school together. Now that building stands empty in the middle of the town of Foxhaven and the current elementary school, G. F. Meyer, is on the edge of the town, near the new high school. Even as industry moved into the area, people continued to farm, hunt and trap; farming, hunting, and trapping are threads in the fabric of the place of Foxhaven. Growing up in the area and now teaching there, Erin's stories of farming, hunting, and trapping were part of understanding her relationship with place both today and in the generations before.

As Lynne, Shaun, and Erin met for research conversations Erin's stories of her mother as a hunter and trapper resonated into how she shaped a place for children in her classroom. For example, when inside, she always had a window open, "even when it's minus 40, just because I need that fresh air in the classroom." In addition, she created an outdoor classroom, next to the school garden, where they found ants and explored the letter "A" by writing in the soil or on paper attached to the shed. She talked about "expanding their [children's] thinking" as being outside took learning to their senses. She said:

I think some of the children in our school are used to being outside most of the day at home. I'm sure in the city that might be overwhelming for kids who are used to being in the cities but like these kids, they go out to play all the time. I had one parent say she was worried bringing her child to kindergarten because they live way out and he's used to being free roaming outside. So to come to school was a big change. She didn't know if he'd be able to sit. And he's done just fine. But the parents were concerned because he's had total freedom outside until now. He brings a lot of what he knows from living outside into the classroom walls - like when a deer sheds its antlers in the fall. A lot of people like to have them as lawn decorations and you can crack them together to call deer when you're hunting. And this little guy, all of his pictures and all of his show and tell were of animals or the [antler] sheds he found or stories about his dogs. Today he's bringing the bear skin that he and his dad got - he talks about going out with his dad almost every day. At the same time, someone else is telling me about going ice fishing or we went hunting or we went to Poppa's and we skinned a deer. I can't say it's this way in every rural community, but in this community hunting is very important. (Erin and Lynne in research conversation, April 2016)

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<sup>6</sup>As described in the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015), "the spread of European-based empires was set in motion in the fifteenth century when the voyages of maritime explorers revealed potential sources of new wealth to the monarchs of Europe. ... To gain control of the land of Indigenous people, colonists negotiated Treaties, waged wars of extinction, eliminated traditional landholding practices, disrupted families, and imposed a political and spiritual order that came complete with new values and cultural practices. Treaty promises often went unfulfilled. ... The outcome was usually disastrous for Indigenous people, while the chief beneficiaries of empire were the colonists and their descendents. ... In the case of Canada and the United States of America, these newly created nations spread across North America. As they expanded, they continued to incorporate Indigenous peoples and their lands into empires. Colonialism remains an ongoing process, shaping both the structure and the quality of the relationship between the settlers and Indigenous peoples" (p. 45).



Beyond statistics of numbers of kilometers from a major urban centre, or other ways of defining rurality, for many of the people in Foxhaven, their understandings of place reverberate with stories passed on from their ancestors of hunting, trapping and farming as a way of sustaining lives. Learning to hunt was and is an important part of a person's education in and around Foxhaven. This knowledge, along with the tools and land where generations have hunted for many years, shape a continuity between people across time. Knowledge begins with spending time exploring outside on their own as children and continues alongside their parents as both Erin and the young boy in her story told stories of hunting with their parents. Children were included in the hunt alongside their parents and then gradually learned to be on their own.

## 5 Understanding Rural Schools as Places of Co-making an Unfolding Relational Inquiry Space

In the evenings you can drive by the school or on the weekend if I happen to come down, there are children all over the place. On their own without parents right there supervising them. Running on the hill and playing on the playground and parents trust that they're going to be OK to come and play. And they know what to do if someone gets hurt, they run home and get mom or they figure it out. There is always a neighbor out in their yard or someone who can help. (Erin and Lynne in research conversation, April 2016)

Erin storied children as having independence when they were playing outside. Parents encouraged children to be out on their own, and a sense of safety accompanied a trust that their children knew how to find help from others nearby if they needed it. There was a sense of care for each other as people composing lives connected by place.

Noddings (2005) explored the significance of place and learning by theorizing that the care of place was linked with the care of others who share in lived spaces, and distant others cultivating their own relationships within place. Erin spoke of how she lived in relation with the place she came from and in relation with the people in the rural town where she was now teaching. She valued the community and the sense of freedom she associated with living in this rural place. She lived in relation with the place where she taught and the people who lived there. She lived in relation and care for and with others with whom she shared that place.

Important in her development of practical knowledge was the influence of Patti, who interacted with Erin individually and in group settings. Erin noted how Patti shaped a school culture that recognized the wholeness of teachers' experiences, knowledge, and lives and ways that their everyday practices were continuously shaping who they were and who they were becoming alongside children and families in the school. For example, Erin was aware of the ways Patti continued to shape educative spaces for her in her becoming a teacher:

Part of it is just who I am and part of it is the atmosphere in the school - like my feelings jive with a lot of the things that we're doing at the school... It's really nice to come to a place

to work where you feel like your opinions matter... (Research Conversation, February 23, 2016)

G. F. Meyer School was a place where Erin felt she belonged. Her beliefs about learning and what school should be matched what she was practicing and who she was becoming. The work she did was appreciated, and this affirmation from Patti and from families of the children in her classroom sustained the stories she lives by as teacher. When there was tension as a result of differences, Patti was significant as she intentionally shaped the school atmosphere, individually and across the entire school population, in educative ways by attending to the particular experiences of all. This approach to diversity created safe space for teachers, children, and families to interact in healthy ways and with curiosity and respect even when tension was present. Patti worked to create a relational school culture and intentionally sustained morale and belonging for everyone. She worked to create a feeling of family and a school both founded on and that continued to become through relationality.

Patti was particularly attentive to the rural context of G. F. Meyer School. Her arrival at the school followed that of a long-term administrator. It was important for Patti to embrace the rural nature of the school and to support teachers' understanding of the importance of place in the lives of families and children. For example, many of the families were involved in 4H, a program to support families in endeavors pertaining to farming. In the school, the 4H beef club was the strongest. In her first year, Patti took a group of children from the school to watch their peers in their final 4H event where they showcased their animals. In the first year, about 30 children participated and in the second year, the whole school attended. This change in school practice and the honoring of the lives of the children in 4H drew Patti into the community in more intimate ways. The community became aware of how supportive Patti was in her making of space for the diverse children of the school.

## **6 Understanding Rural Context as Ongoing Teacher Education**

A longstanding aim of educational design, such as mandated curriculum documents, has been to facilitate learning that is universal and constant across diverse cultural and geographical regions (Ajayi 2014); we contend this aspect is not much different in institutions of teacher education. Often, a focus on the urban space shapes teacher education in universities, given the urban context in which many of these institutions are located (see in the volume: Gereluk et al. 2020; Danyluk et al. 2020).

As Brook (2013) illuminated, "The manner in which we educate our children must recognize that our actions and ideas affect our spaces and places, just as these spaces and places impact us" (p. 293). Together with Brook, as well as other rural place-based theorists (Ajayi 2014; Azano 2011, 2014; Waite 2013), the stories Erin and Patti lived and told as the inquiry unfolded showed how embracing the life-world of teachers in a rural setting may be understood in enhancing teachers' learning and

growth, and therefore the learning and growth of children (see in this volume: Martin 2020; Scully 2020; Corbett 2020).

Significant for Erin was coming to know herself alongside children, but also as an individual in a rural location. She questioned whether University had prepared her in being attentive to these aspects. After high school, Erin completed her Bachelor of Education through a University with a focus on early learning, which included coursework on campus as well as experiences in city centre elementary schools and other urban placements. She spoke of these experiences as preparation for her life with children in schools. Reflecting on those years, her sense of what she experienced at University that applied to her rural context was her work as a planner, however, she clearly articulated a need for more learning with regard to how to be in relation with children and their families. She also referred to her experiences in high school, when she was deciding to become a teacher, as not enough preparation for understanding children and their families. As a teacher now, alongside diverse children whose lives shape and are shaped by families who each have different stories of who they are and are becoming, she looked back on her preparation and saw gaps in her education in high school and in her teacher education in University:

I feel like very little of my University education translates to what I do in the classroom. And, even the high school courses you take to get into college, I feel like have very little to do with when you actually get into university. And I just feel like, after being here – especially that first year, working with that group of kids – there’s nothing in University that prepared me for dealing with some of the behaviors, and some of the family situations. So, yeah, I realize you have to have certain courses but nothing compares to actually being in a classroom with kids. (Erin in Research Conversation with Patti, Lynne, Shaun on December 5, 2016)

As Erin shared and thought with her experiences in this conversation fragment, she said the words “I feel” many times. Her words resonated into questions of learning for children. She wondered if lasting learning happened when there was an emotional connection. She shared a story of when her husband’s grandfather passed away and how her four-year-old son experienced the loss with many questions and memories. She talked about looking at pictures of the grandfather with him and was astounded at his memories of moments in the family:

I don’t know if that was just him or if children in general remember those moments with family and we don’t give them credit.

Erin further told of how they visited her parent’s farm shortly after the grandfather passed and how the birth of a calf helped contextualize the loss of her son’s grandfather in a particular way:

I grew up on a farm where I saw calves being born and so I take my own children to my parents farm – and the first time Tanner saw it he was amazed. At the miracle of it. The calf was all gummed up so it couldn’t breathe. My dad had to clean it and give it mouth to mouth, and there was life. Seeing the breath. He also knows that sometimes animals don’t make it. Just like people – you don’t live forever. Understanding loss – the circle of life - I think that’s a big thing. Maybe kids can remember those emotional connections – maybe they don’t remember things like reading and writing in school but they remember things that they really connect emotionally to.

## 7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we attended to the threads of understanding place as rural context, understanding rural schools as places of co-making an unfolding relational inquiry space, and understanding rural context as ongoing teacher education; three resonant experiences that emerged from our inquiry alongside Erin and Patti and thinking narratively with their lived and told stories. In doing this we attended specifically to Erin's experiences over time as she told and retold stories with us. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter we have come to see the need for rural schools and education to be recognized as different from urban schools and education, which is often the focus of many urban teacher education programs. Inherent in rural education is the need to educate attentive to place. Urban education also has this need. What is problematic is when teacher education educates for urban places without consideration for rural experiences. The complexity for Erin is the need to be attentive to provincial curriculum guides, and be true to her own rural context. In the last field text, Erin talked about maintaining an emotional connection, and possibly outside of school. Knowledge such as this attends to connecting to place, and in Erin's context, it is the place of the rural space. What Erin's stories of the making of her life as a teacher in a rural community and school made visible was her recognition of the value and importance of place, and ways that the ongoing unfolding of co-making a relational inquiry space in classrooms and within rural schools can open their potential to be sites for ongoing teacher education. We see this ongoing, unfolding, and deeply relational and contextual teacher education as a significant resource of rural schools and communities.

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# Becoming a Teacher in a Rural or Remote Community: The Experiences of Educational Assistants



Patricia J. Danyluk, Amy Burns and David Scott

**Abstract** In 2014, a university in Western Canada introduced a new community-based Bachelor of Education pathway targeting students in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. Many students enrolled in this program are current or former educational assistants. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological methodology to have participants reflect on their experiences as they transitioned from educational assistants to the role of teacher over the course of the program. Drawing on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), the authors specifically examine how the experiences of these pre-service teachers impacted their sense of personal identity and social positioning (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). Among the many findings are the impacts of the program on perspectives of self, others' perspectives, school roles, and participants' views of students.

**Keywords** Teacher · Remote · Rural · Educational assistants · Grow your own

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## 1 Introduction

Attracting and retaining certified teachers to work in rural and remote locations is an ongoing global challenge (Canter, Voytecki, & Rodríguez, 2007; Grant, 2010; West & Jones, 2007). In Canada, this challenge is particularly prominent in northern and remote areas. A body of research (ATA, 2013b; Northern Alberta Development Council [NADC], 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; Saskatchewan Learning, 2007) suggests that workload issues related to multi-grade classrooms, difficulties finding suitable accommodations, and a lack of personal connection to the community account for the challenges that educational jurisdictions in the North experience with attracting and retaining teachers.

Seeking to address this challenge, Farrell and Hartwell (2008) advised school jurisdictions to recruit and train teachers already living in the community (p. 28). Along the same lines, NADC (2010) noted that in Canada's North, it is easier to retain teachers who are originally Northerners (p. 7). The benefits of recruiting people from the local community go beyond stemming the high turnover rates in rural and remote schools. Research suggests that teachers recruited from the local community are more likely to possess cultural sensitivity that can lead to increased student success (Gereluk, Dressler, Eaton, & Becker, 2020; Hall, 2012). Developing such cultural sensitivity may take years for teachers from outside of the community to acquire (Danyluk & Sheppard, 2015).

Significant barriers exist however, for leaders seeking to pursue a policy of "growing our own" (NADC, 2010, p. 11) teachers. For many people in remote locations, leaving their community to meet the residency requirements of a Bachelor of Education program is impractical due to factors such as family and employment commitments. To address this issue, in 2014 the university introduced the community-based pathway. The program is unique in that students complete a two-week on-campus residency in Calgary each summer. They then complete their practicum placements and courses, delivered through asynchronous and non-synchronous online formats, within their home community.

A significant number of students enrolled in this program are current or former educational assistants (EAs). While the role of a teacher in a rural or remote community often commands respect and positional power (Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA], 2004; Hargreaves, 2009), this is not often the case for EAs. The majority of Education Assistants are female. School hierarchies and issues of gender, including traditional expectations for women, often diminish the social positioning of EAs in schools. Although not members, the ATA does make reference to educational assistants as "Junior Instructors" and contrasts them with teachers by referring to teachers as being "highly qualified" (ATA, 2013a). Although research has examined how teachers can better work with EAs (Appl, 2006; Bauman, Silla, & Stufft, 2010; Vogt, 2012), as well as how the skills and competencies of EAs can be improved (Taconis, van der Plas, & van der Sanden, 2004), a review of the literature suggests there have been no peer-reviewed studies focused on the transition of EAs to teachers from a Canadian perspective.

Seeking to offer greater insights in this area by employing an empirical phenomenological methodology (Ehrich, 2003, 2005; Giorgi, 1997), this chapter reports on a study examining the experiences of 12 EAs in rural and remote locations in Alberta as they transition to the role of teacher. Drawing on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), we specifically examine how their experiences in this program, including their various practicum placements, impacted their sense of personal identity and social positioning (Johnson-Bailey, 2012).

## 2 Relevant Literature

The global challenge of attracting and retaining certified teachers to work in rural and remote locations (Canter et al., 2007; Grant, 2010; West & Jones, 2007) has been particularly prominent in Canada (Danyluk & Sheppard, 2015) and Australia (Australia Human Rights Commission, 2002; Hall, 2012). Both countries have vast remote and rural areas and significant populations of Indigenous peoples. Writing from the Australian context, Hall (2012) referred to the turnover of teachers who come from outside of the community as the “come and go” syndrome, which she contrasts with Indigenous and local staff in these schools who are “stay and stay and stay” educators (p. 192). Within the Canadian context, the “come and go” syndrome has been apparent in Ontario (Danyluk & Sheppard, 2015; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008), Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Learning, 2007), and Alberta (ATA, 2013b; NADC, 2010).

Despite the complex reasons why educational jurisdictions face significant challenges in attracting and retaining quality teachers in rural and remote areas, policies seeking to address the issue have often been limited to directly controllable factors including, most notably, monetary compensation in the form of rural and northern living allowances and other salary incentives (Looker & Bollman, 2020; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). However, research suggests that such policies have had a limited impact (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1999). This in turn has led policy makers to identify more creative ways to address issues around teacher retention in remote locations. One such solution, championed by the NADC (2010), has involved a policy focused on “growing our own” (p. 11) teachers that seeks to tap into people from the local community, who are already committed to living there, to gain their teacher certification.

For many people in remote locations, leaving their community to meet the residency requirements of a Bachelor of Education program, however, is impractical due to factors such as family and employment commitments. To address this issue, a number of universities in Canada have established partnerships with colleges to serve people living in rural and remote locations who would like to pursue a teaching degree. The University of Alberta, for instance, has partnered with Keyano College in Fort McMurray, allowing students to earn their education degree without having to travel to Edmonton. Another example is the community-based Aboriginal Teacher



Education Program offered at Queen's University in Ontario. Students attend a satellite campus in the Manitoulin-North Shore region and come to the main campus in Kingston for only two summers.

Introduced in 2014 by a university in Western Canada, the community-based pathway explored in this study differs from the satellite campus model. Other than a two-week on-campus residency requirement each summer, students complete their courses through blended delivery. As part of this format, students attend weekly or biweekly Adobe Connect sessions, in which their instructor hosts interactive discussions. Students complete practicum placements in or near their community with the aid of retired principals or teachers who are hired to observe and evaluate the students. As with other programs seeking to serve rural and remote communities, the community-based pathway in this study serves many individuals who are already working as EAs.

### 3 The Ambiguous Role of Educational Assistants in Schools

While EAs, or what are sometimes termed *paraeducators* in the literature, have a long history in schools, their role and presence has changed dramatically over the last three decades. Before this time, the primary role of EAs was often related to non-teaching duties such as playground supervision or clerical support for teachers and administrators (Gilford, 1971). In other instances, they have provided medical, hygienic, or welfare-related services. Although they continue to report undertaking such duties beginning in the 1990s, the majority of EAs reported working directly with students as instructional supports under the direction of teachers in mainstream classroom contexts (ATA, 2013a; French & Pickett, 1997; Mueller, 1997).

The roots of this shift in roles can be traced back to the rise of inclusive educational policies in provincial jurisdictions of education across Canada. Such policies have meant that students with special needs, behavioral challenges, and learning disabilities have been integrated into mainstream classrooms. As outlined by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2009), this shift in education has led to increasing workloads for teachers who "are feeling pressure and are rightfully demanding that more classroom support be provided" (p. 1). As a result, educational assistants are increasingly being employed to provide the additional support that teachers require to address inclusive educational policies.

The qualifications of EAs vary widely across school districts. The educational backgrounds of EAs with less specific knowledge can range from the completion of college programs to the absence of any post-secondary education altogether. Research suggests that schools in rural and remote locations may rely more heavily on EAs than schools in urban areas, due to a shortage of certified special education teachers and the relatively low cost associated with hiring EAs who have limited post-secondary education (Drecktrah, 2000; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997).

However, having such large numbers of EAs in schools has led to controversies related to their effectiveness in supporting students, especially those with special

needs (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, & Bassett, 2010; Webster, Blatchford, & Russell, 2013). A number of studies in the UK context have suggested that EAs, or teaching assistants, actually have a negative impact on student achievement (Blatchford, Webster & Russell, 2012; Farrell & Harwell, 2010; Webster et al. 2013). As Webster and colleagues (2013) noted, “pupils who received the most support from teaching assistants (TAs) had less engagement with a qualified teacher and were found to make significantly less academic progress than similar pupils who received less TA support” (p. 78).

This research has been complicated by the question of whether it is fair to hold EAs and teaching assistants accountable for the academic achievement of students. A parallel body of research suggests that EAs often possess specific knowledge of individual students and can in turn use this knowledge to better support their needs. However, this same body of scholarship suggests that EAs, including those who have worked in schools for a long time, often feel frustrated with the lack of decision-making power they have in addressing the learning needs of individual students (Mueller, 1997; Riggs, 1997, 2002).

Indicative of the various ways that EAs have been deployed in schools both historically and today, disagreements regarding the role and effectiveness of EAs in schools reflect a generalized confusion around where they fit within the educational landscape (ATA, 2013a; Webster et al., 2011). While the varied responsibilities of EAs in schools have led to confusion in the eyes of the public, paralleling other educational contexts, the ATA (2013a), for example, makes it clear that the roles of a teacher and EA do not overlap. Teachers are responsible for diagnosing learning needs, prescribing educational programs, planning and implementing lessons, evaluating student progress, determining a classroom management plan, and reporting to parents. The duties of a teacher cannot be delegated to an EA. EAs can provide limited instruction, but only under the direction and supervision of a teacher.

Notwithstanding the delineation of duties at the policy level, the realities of classroom and school life can create ambiguities around the roles and place of teachers and EAs. When two adults are in the fluid and dynamic space of the classroom, it can be difficult to work together in collaborative ways while maintaining a clear understanding of the division of responsibilities. Adding to the ambiguity of their roles, teachers are responsible for evaluating the performance of EAs, but teachers cannot discipline or terminate EAs. Still, many EAs report positive relationships with teachers as well as students, which lead them to stay in their positions even when they are low paid and experience stressful working conditions (Riggs, 1997).

## 4 Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 *Positionality and Power*

This study was informed by transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) specifically issues related to positionality or the social location of individuals in terms of the ways they are viewed and classified based on factors such as gender, race, age, religion, class, sexual orientation, and ability or disability (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). These factors impact not only the way people view others but also how individuals see the world. Johnson-Bailey (2012) points out that although women make up half of the world's population, they are disadvantaged in areas such as wealth, earnings, education, and social positioning. Of particular note to this study is social positioning, as this is impacted by perceptions of those unquestioned background norms and behaviors taken as normal (Searle, 1995). As Searle (1995) notes, "the background structures consciousness" (p. 133) and, as such, permits humans the ability to recognize familiar patterns, including positionality. This allows for the categorization of people and their roles in a school; the role of EA versus teacher, for example, is woven into the fabric of North American understanding. To disrupt this consciousness, to undertake learning or activities that cause one to question the expectations of these roles, can impact this positionality.

Power, and the implications of such, is also located in the collective consciousness and is experienced through a lens of familiarity. This familiarity—for example, the role of EA as female and mother—has been the focus of feminist debate since the beginnings of the third wave. Third wave feminist theorists such as Butler (1993) and Hekman (1999) challenged notions of womanhood by deconstructing ideas of gender and power. This is pertinent to the study described here in that notions of power are attached to the concept of EA not only as woman but also as less than teacher. Skrla (2003) describes similar questions around normalized femininity in her work examining the female superintendent. In that work, as in this, conceptions of power become a critical element in the experiences of those involved.

### 4.2 *Employment Options for Women in Rural and Remote Canada*

Rural and remote communities in Canada are often reliant on traditional resource jobs such as logging, mining, fishing, and farming for employment. In most cases, these jobs are filled by men, while women are relegated to a "traditional feminine role supporting male breadwinners" (Corbett, 2007, p. 439). With limited employment and training options, women either leave the community (Walsh, 2013) or find themselves in relatively poorly paid work in natural resource processing or in the service industry (Corbett, 2007). Many of these women volunteer in their children's schools and eventually find themselves working in the role of EA. For those who

wish to become teachers, the reality of having to leave their children and community to acquire a Bachelor of Education makes the dream unattainable.

Corbett (2007) points out that “questions of gender are often insufficiently problematized in rural education research” (p. 431). Further, women’s experiences receive insufficient attention in the study of transformative learning for two reasons. First, as women have been historically disadvantaged, the focus of such research has been on the circumstances of that disadvantage. The second reason is the “erroneous perception that transformative learning is always individualistic” (Irving & English, 2011, p. 305). Alternatively, for women, the collective aspect of relationships often serves as a catalyst for transformative learning (Hamp, 2007).

### ***4.3 Transformative Learning***

Mezirow’s (1978) theory of transformative learning was originally based upon his study of women returning to college. In this work, Mezirow described how education can result in transformative learning and perspective transformation. Transformative learning is “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference, sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habit of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Perspective transformation is a by-product of transformative learning in which learners see themselves and their relationships in new ways. Perspective transformation often results in learners feeling more in control of their lives and less at the mercy of external forces (Mezirow, 1978).

Among the many criticisms leveled against Mezirow’s depiction of transformative learning is that it is individualistic (Johnson-Bailey, 2012) and relies on a single disorienting dilemma, which disregards the fact that transformative learning is not always sudden and can occur over time (Johnson-Bailey, 2006). Further, Mezirow’s conceptualization presents transformative learning in a linear fashion, which negates the holistic manner in which learning occurs (Belenky & Stanton, 2000). The variety of conceptualizations of transformative learning makes it difficult to determine whether it has actually occurred (Cranton & Hoggan, 2012). Illeris (2009) points out that to say that transformative learning has occurred, the learner needs to have experienced some shift in their personal identity and how they view the world.

The theory of transformative learning is especially relevant to teacher education. One of the main purposes of teacher education is to provide the opportunity for pre-service teachers to examine the knowledge, influences, and hidden theories they have accrued over the years (Calleja, 2014). When such preexisting beliefs meet the reality of the classroom, pre-service teachers often experience a disorienting dilemma. This disorienting dilemma is not necessarily one event and can be a series of events that cause pre-service teachers to re-examine their beliefs. This period of transition or learning is uncomfortable and is sometimes compared to grieving (Imel, 1998), during which the learner experiences a wide range of emotions. Consistent with Mezirow’s conceptualization of transformative learning, if pre-service teachers

are able to engage in critical reflection and discourse regarding the nature of the disorienting dilemma, they may begin to experience transformative learning as they adapt their perspectives (Bhukhanwala, Dean, & Troyer, 2017).

Intrinsic to transformative learning is the potential for social activism and change. When learners begin to re-examine their prior belief system, they may begin to question power and privilege in society and want to engage in social change (Johnson-Bailey, 2012).

## 5 Methodology

Through an empirical phenomenological psychology approach (Giorgi, 1997), this study sought to investigate the following question: *What are the experiences of educational assistants in remote and rural parts of Alberta as they transition to the role of teacher?* In examining this question, we additionally sought to ascertain how and to what extent the community-based pathway impacted each participant's perception of personal identity and social positioning. Further, we sought to determine whether participants viewed the community-based Bachelor of Education pathway as a transformative learning experience and, if so, in what ways.

Phenomenology seeks to describe a phenomenon and examine the experience of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants (Patton, 2002). This study utilized the empirical phenomenological psychology approach of Giorgi (1997), who drew upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological criteria to make its application less theoretical and more concrete for the purposes of research. The outcome of the study was a "general structural statement" (Ehrich, 2005, p. 3) about the nature of the experience.

Consistent with empirical phenomenological psychology, each researcher on the team reads and rereads the data before meeting to discuss it. Following this, we identified words or phrases that made up meaning units. Next, we met to determine what was essential to the data and what was extraneous. Finally, the meaning units were synthesized to identify the general structural statement.

Data for this study were drawn from questionnaires and a focus group interview. As part of the questionnaire, participants were invited to submit a drawing that represented their experiences transitioning from EA to teacher. A recruitment e-mail was sent to thirty students in the community-based Bachelor of Education pathway who resided in rural or remote parts of Alberta. Students in the first year of the program were not included in the recruitment as they had limited experience with the program. Sixteen individuals responded to the recruitment e-mail indicating they would like to participate in the study. Of those 16, 12 individuals responded to the questions by participating in the focus group or by submitting a completed questionnaire. Ten individuals completed the questionnaire and five of those individuals also attended the focus group. For those who completed both the questionnaire and attended the focus group, their data were counted only from the questionnaire. Two of those participants also submitted drawings to express their experiences in transitioning from

**Table 1** Participants' years as educational assistants, years in program, and degree status

	Pseudonym	Years as an EA	Years in program	Previous degree
1	Phoebe	10	4	Yes
2	Clare	5	4	
3	Carmen	4	2	
4	Jenny	4	2	Yes
5	Susan	5	3	
6	Pearl	8	3	
7	Lauren	1	3	
8	Beverly	3	2	
9	Lorae	4	3	
10	Jacqueline	13	2	
11	Natasha	10	4	Yes
12	Shelly	4	3	

EA to teacher. All of the participants resided in rural or remote areas of the province, had worked as EAs, and continued to work part-time as EAs while completing the program. They had a range of one to 13 years of EA experience, with an average of six years (Table 1). All were mature students and mothers.

Ethics approval for the study was obtained in February 2018. Because the program is offered as a four-year degree as well as a two-year after-degree, participants included students in the second, third, or fourth year of the four-year program as well as those in their final year of the two-year program. As a result, the data have been analyzed according to the participant's year in the program.

Those students who expressed interest in participating were sent a consent form by e-mail. Once the consent form was returned, the participants were sent a questionnaire with the following questions:

1. Have you ever held the position of Educational Assistant and if so, for how many years?
- 2a. Are you currently working as an Educational Assistant? yes/no
- 2b. If so, how has entering into the community-based Bachelor of Education impacted you as an Educational Assistant?
- 3a. Do you believe that being in the community-based Bachelor of Education has impacted your personal identity (how you see yourself)?
- 3b. If so, in what ways?
- 4a. Do you believe that being in the community-based Bachelor of Education has impacted how others (coworkers, students, family members) view you?
- 4b. If so, in what ways?
- 5a. Do you believe that the experience of engaging in your studies has been transformational (i.e., Have you changed as a person as a result)?
- 5b. If so, in what ways?

Following the collection of the questionnaire, a focus group was conducted using Adobe Connect. As participants in the study resided throughout the province, this was deemed the best way to gather data. The focus group utilized the same questions as the questionnaire but provided participants the opportunity to respond to one another's responses, thus yielding a more robust discussion.

## 6 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data closely followed the steps identified by Giorgi (1997), moving through three primary phases: the phenomenological reduction, description, and search for essences. The phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, involves setting aside any preconceptions and presumptions. The description necessitates accepting what is presented as it is presented, without any analysis of it. The search for essences requires the researcher to search for the fundamental meaning behind the experiences as presented as those experiences relate to the phenomenon being examined.

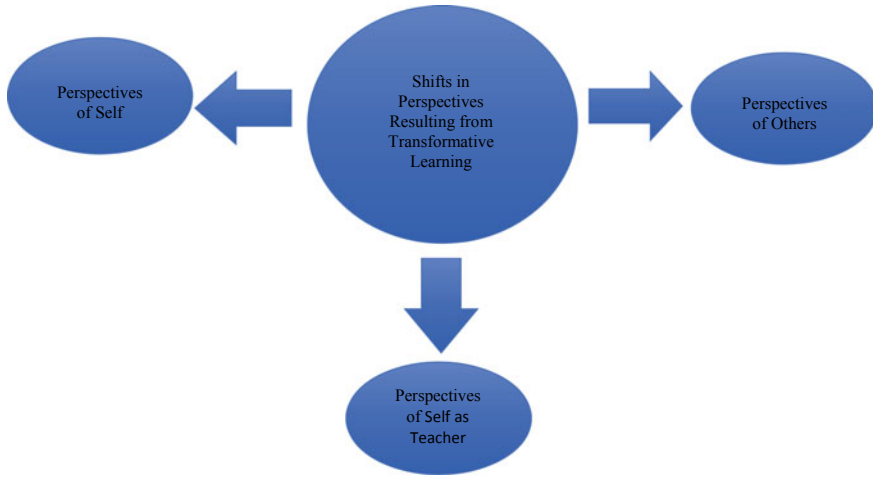
Following this framework, the data were collected and anonymized. Each researcher progressed through the process of reduction and description to determine meaning units. We discussed those meaning units to identify a general structural statement. Using a multiplicity of methods, including the questionnaire, focus group, and drawings, added to the credibility of the data. We analyzed the data in two ways. First, we examined the responses in their entirety and, second, we examined them according to the program year each participant was currently enrolled in. In this way, we could determine whether experiences differed based on the participant's year in the program.

## 7 Results

Ten of the 12 participants in the study described the experience of being in the community-based Bachelor of Education pathway as transformative. Responses pointed to four ways in which transformation was experienced, including a change to self, their perspectives as teachers, the perspectives of school colleagues, family, friends, and community Fig. 1.

### 7.1 *Self*

All but two of the participants felt the program had impacted their personal identity. Participants who were further along in the program were more likely to describe their experiences as transformative. Both of the participants who indicated the program



**Fig. 1** Shifts in perspectives resulting from transformative learning

had not impacted their personal identity were in their second year of the program. Their responses to this question pointed to the likelihood that their personal identity had already been tied to teaching, and as a result, the program had not had as much of an influence.

Several participants described entering the program with a sense of trepidation, feeling perhaps they were too old to go back to university or they might not be able to succeed. Carmen described this sentiment as follows: “When I started there was a voice in my head that said I was too old for this, and also that I might fail” (questionnaire).

As they progressed through the program, participants described becoming intrigued by their evolving sense of identity as teachers, and several referred to experiencing an increased sense of confidence. In fact, the word *confidence* was found in all participants’ responses, with the exception of those in the early stages of the program. Clare described how a new self-identity impacted her both in the classroom and outside of the classroom: “I definitely believe that it has impacted my personal identity. I feel more accomplished because I have gotten through all of my courses with good marks. I am proud of myself and I have more confidence. I am starting to identify as a teacher. This affects how I act inside and outside the classroom” (questionnaire). Shelly stated, “Entering into this program has helped me to overcome my limitations” (focus group). This confidence extended beyond the classroom and into the participants’ personal lives, with Carmen indicating she was more confident in her role not only as an EA but also as a mother.

Participants described how their experiences in the program prompted an evolving perspective of themselves as lifelong learners. Four of the participants used the term *lifelong learner* to describe their emergent identity. Pearl described this evolution in the following way: “I’ve also discovered that I really love learning. I have enjoyed



every course that I have taken so far and found personal and professional application in all of them” (questionnaire). Carmen stated, “I am less afraid to try new things, I see the world differently, and I believe with all my heart that EVERYONE can learn and my growth mindset has developed—I now feel like a lifelong learner” (questionnaire).

Jenny, in her second year of the program, responded to question five, indicating she did not find her studies resulted in perspective transformation. Instead, she suggested she did not experience transformative learning, but that all learning expanded an individual’s horizon:

When it comes to learning, I think it’s impossible not to grow as a person. Engaging in studies open up a person’s mind and forces them to look at subjects that expands their knowledge base and evolves the thought process. So far my studies have broadened my horizons, given me more insight into what it means to be a teacher, helped grow my perspectives about all the possible differences that can arise in a classroom and has taught me how to be more productive and manage my time more efficiently. This program has also made me realize that it is possible to be a single parent, work full time and successfully chase down lifelong dreams (questionnaire).

Still, others felt the program provided the opportunity to pursue a professional path without having to move away from family and community. Clare said the community-based pathway was a real “answer to my prayers, to be clichéd” (questionnaire). She expanded on her comment by describing the restricted nature of learning in remote and rural locations: “Before embarking and completing my studies, I had never really accomplished anything for myself. For many years, I wanted to go back to school and get my Education degree but did not have the opportunity” (questionnaire). Similarly, Lauren described how the program had permitted her to have more of a “personal focus” as opposed to “working to create a family dynamic” (questionnaire). This personal focus permitted Lauren to make the pursuit of her own career goals as priority and her role as caregiver secondary.

## 7.2 *Self as Teacher*

All of the participants continued to work as EAs during the program. Many reduced their work hours to accommodate their studies. Participants found that completing courses in the program improved their work as EAs. Clare stated, “I feel that my skills as an educational assistant improved as a result of partaking in courses that included assessment, diversity and inclusion” (questionnaire). Similarly, Phoebe reflected, “I notice things differently, my observations have been awesome for my understandings of why teachers do what they do, and I have continued to take notes on what I will and won’t do as a classroom teacher” (questionnaire).

It appears as if understanding the theory behind teachers’ actions made the job as an EA more enjoyable. Susan stated, “I have a greater understanding of why teachers do what they do and the methods in how they teach students. I now have knowledge on different types of assessments as well as how to differentiate instruction for students.

I have a greater appreciation for curriculum and how the Alberta Program of Studies affects the outcomes of what students need to learn at each grade level. I also learned how, as an EA, I could provide formative feedback to students so that they can progress in their courses” (questionnaire). Similarly, Beverly described how her days as an EA became more fulfilling: “I find I enjoy my work days more than I did before. As I read and learn new things in my Education courses, I watch and observe for how they play out in real life” (questionnaire).

For some participants, the learning experience had a calming influence on their perspectives of school and their roles within it. For example, Lorae described how her new theoretical understanding “created greater patience within myself” (questionnaire). Natasha stated that the experience had made her more reflective, while Shelly suggested it had “changed the way I look at the world” (focus group). Similarly, Jacqueline stated, “One thing that has happened is that the line between EA and teacher is becoming clearer” (questionnaire). Jacqueline went on to explain that before entering into her studies, she viewed everything in the classroom from the perspective of an EA, after entering into her studies she was able to see things from an additional perspective, that of a teacher.

Participants described a sense of frustration with their roles as EAs. During the focus group, Pearl stated, “I’ve always seen myself as a teacher. Being an EA, being the lowest person in the [hierarchy], has been hard on me. That is why I want to be a teacher.” While Susan echoed that frustration by stating EAs “sometimes are not viewed with as much authority or power. When people find out that I am going through this program, they hold me to a different standard” (focus group). For these women, the lack of power and decision-making authority that came with the position of EA was frustrating and an impetus for their pursuit of a teaching degree.

### ***7.3 Perspectives of School Colleagues***

During their transition from EA to teacher, several participants described how their work colleagues began to treat them differently. They said teachers began to view them more as partners and less as helpers.

I believe my coworkers; specifically, the teachers and administration see me differently. I find a lot of teachers now share resources and information with me. They give advice and outline why they are doing what they are doing. They also ask for my advice and want to know about what different approaches to teaching I am learning. Or they ask how I would approach material (Clare, questionnaire).

Jacqueline also noticed changes in the teacher she routinely worked with: “Teachers have offered ideas about IPPs [individualized program plans]. The teacher that I work with is always saying, ...when you are a teacher you will do this or notice that or find that this is the way things are done” (questionnaire). This newfound status has generated interest among the participants’ EA colleagues. “I would say that my coworkers certainly respect what I am doing; it has spurred some of them to explore

continuing education options for themselves, although not necessarily a Bachelor of Education” (Pearl, questionnaire).

For some participants, their new role as student provided them with an enhanced understanding of the challenges of their own students. In their classrooms, students were intrigued by the idea of their EA being a student and having homework. Susan described how being a student made her “more aware of my students needs and how I can assist them” (questionnaire). Clare said her experiences as a student created a deeper sense of empathy for what her students were experiencing while studying and completing homework.

#### ***7.4 Perspectives of Family, Friends, and Community***

Participants described the positive impact of their studies on their status among family, friends, and community. Clare stated, “I think my friends and family are impressed at the dedication and hard work it has taken to work full time while attending full time school” (questionnaire). Carmen described the importance of their commitment as role models for their own children. “I hope my kids see I am able to be a student at this age, my family believes in me and often when I am working and tell people that I am taking my degree they seem to react in a positive way with much more respect” (questionnaire). Lorae reflected on her new status with her community: “It has given me a professional identity within my community” (questionnaire). This newfound status as role models also came with an increased sense of pressure. The two drawings that were submitted by participants portrayed a twisted path to becoming as teacher filled with both inspiring and deflating experiences as participants attempted to balance their roles as students, EAs, and mothers.

Susan described being appreciative that others were interested in how her studies were progressing, yet at the same time feeling pressure not to disappoint those who had encouraged her. Similarly, when describing how others treated her once they knew she was pursuing her Bachelor of Education, Shelly stated, “Definitely, everyone around me views me differently,” and described not wanting to “disappoint anyone” (focus group). Pearl’s drawing (Fig. 2) points to having a family issue that resulted in a hard choice to complete her degree in four years instead of the three she had planned on. The realities of completing a degree while having a family weighed heavily on the participants and often found them putting their own needs behind those of family (Fig. 3).

## **8 Discussion**

This study examined the experiences of EAs in remote and rural parts of Alberta as they transitioned to the role of teacher. Participants described four ways in which



Fig. 2 Pearl’s depiction of her experiences transitioning from educational assistant to teacher

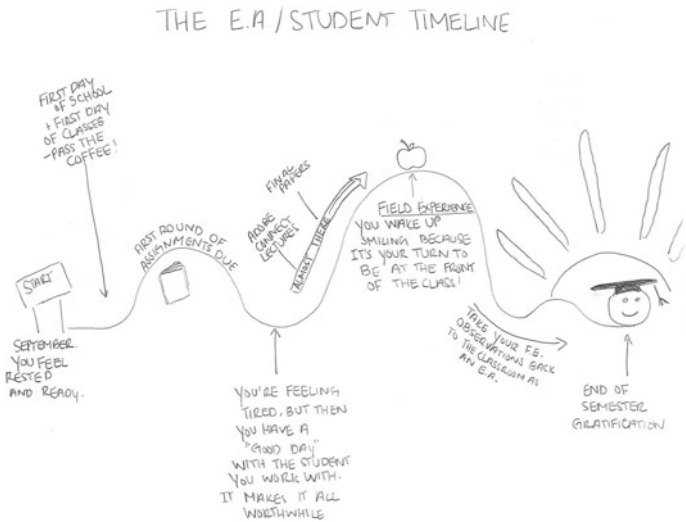


Fig. 3 Shelly’s depiction of her experiences transitioning from educational assistant to teacher

they experienced change: self, others' perspectives, school roles, and their view of students.

We can draw from this study that participants in the community-based Bachelor of Education pathway definitely experienced a shift in their identity that included an increased sense of confidence, a sense of pride about their accomplishments, and a belief that the future would be brighter as a result. Thus, this shift meets Illeris's (2009) criteria for transformative learning. In some ways, the results of this study are consistent with Mezirow's (1978) original study on perspective transformation, in that the participants describe an increase in confidence that impacted the way they see themselves in the world. In their transition from EA to teacher, they increasingly saw themselves in the role of teacher but also as lifelong learners.

It is interesting to note that students who were further along in their program were more likely to indicate that their experiences in the community-based pathway had been transformative. This finding may be related to the age and experiences of the students.

By focusing specifically on women's transformative learning, we address the gap in the literature on women's experiences with transformative learning identified by English and Irving (2012). Elements identified by English and Irving can be seen in our results. Descriptions of shifts in relationships with coworkers, community, and family were woven throughout the data. Participants' descriptions of exhaustion and competing demands were also found throughout the data, and a rollercoaster of emotions ranging from excitement to pressure and disappointment was particularly evident in the drawings. For women, the collective aspect of relationships often serves as a catalyst for transformative learning (Hamp, 2007). For the participants in this study, the collective experience of gathering each year to participate in an intensive two-week period together may have acted as a catalyst for transformative learning to occur.

Additionally, this study examined issues of gender in rural education research, which often go unexamined (Corbett, 2007). Employment opportunities for women in remote and rural locations are often limited. The women in this study did not set out to become EAs and instead found themselves in this role as a result of limited employment and educational opportunities in their rural and remote locations. For some of them, being stuck in the role of an EA was frustrating and restricting. It is possible that this frustration influenced their readiness to view the experience of the community-based education pathway as transformative. Indeed, for many of the participants, the opportunity to become a teacher in their home community impacted their social status within the school, their families, and their own community, resulting in enhanced social positioning and power (Johnson-Bailey, 2012).

The experiences of EAs in rural and remote communities after completing the program and becoming teachers requires further exploration. We plan to complete a follow-up study examining individuals' positionality after completing the program.

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# Rural, Secondary School Parents' Discourses About Feeling in Community in Their Children's Schools: Insights to Shape Teachers' and Principals' Questions



Bonnie Stelmach

**Abstract** Despite a large corpus of research on parents' roles in schooling, less attention has been paid to parents in rural contexts, particularly, in Canadian secondary schools. Written in the style of a letter to teachers and principals, this chapter describes the results of a qualitative study that included 21 parents from three rural, northern Alberta schools and 13 parents from urban schools throughout that province. The aim of the study was to privilege the concept of community over the reigning partnership discourse by examining what makes rural secondary school parents feel in community with their children's schools. McMillan and Chavis' four-part sense of community theory—membership, influence, fulfilling one's needs, and emotional connection—framed the analysis. As might be expected, rural parents claimed a stronger sense of community than did urban parents. However, two discourses were constructed from the data suggesting a more complicated experience for rural parents than typically assumed: (1) family, familiarity, and fitness and (2) discourse of doing. Rural parents' sense of community was contingent upon their history and current engagement not only in the school but in the external community, which impacted how well and where they were situated vis-à-vis unspoken boundaries.

**Keywords** Secondary school parents · Rural schools · Secondary schools · Sense of community · School community

## 1 January 2019

Dear Rural Educators,

I write to you from my acreage home office outside of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada on a snowy morning. Despite the inevitable shovelling, as the daughter of now-retired grain farmers, I know this precipitation is necessary for the spring soil to be optimally ready for seeding.

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My reason for this letter is similarly practical.

I have put my signature on the research landscape in the territory of parents (e.g. Stelmach 2016, 2018; Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan 2019). My current research seeks to understand what makes rural secondary school parents feel *in community* with their children's schools. What I hope to do here is to offer some insights from this study that may move the educational conversation forward on the topic of parents.

Kovach's (2018) "letter-chapter" (p. 231) has inspired me to adopt a format that lies outside the academic norm. Some have argued that academic research is a genre that promotes the "separation of self and knowledge" (John and Ford 2017, p. 11). The personal touch of a letter seems appropriate because the literature on parent involvement places emphasis on relational elements such as trust, communication, and collaboration (e.g. Adams and Christenson 2000; Asnat 2018; Epstein 2018). I want the medium to share in carrying my message.

I am the product of a rural school. Most of my secondary school teaching was in rural schools. I am not a parent, but in my last professional role, I oversaw an Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) project for a rural Northern Alberta school division that employed a parent involvement framework championed by Joyce Epstein in the 1980s, and further developed with her colleagues (Epstein and Associates 2019). Based on Alberta Education mandated metrics at the time, our project reached 17% of our targets—a horrifying failure in comparison to larger, urban school divisions. I pursued doctoral studies to understand why very little changed with regard to the way parents participated in schools despite our efforts. Thus, rural and the topic of parents is my "dwelling place" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, p. 60). Intimate positionality is common among rural educational scholars and is evident in the way they story their research, often launching from an autobiographical point (e.g. Chalker 2002; Fürst 2015; Parmar 2017; Schulte 2016). I, too, begin from such a place with an anecdote.

## 2 The School Council Meeting

Five years ago when I returned to my home province of Alberta to take up my current position, I decided to join the school council of a local high school near the acreage where I live. I was admittedly apprehensive. Would these parents accept me, a non-parent? How would they respond to my input? Would I know where to park or find the meeting room?

The council was prototypical: a group of five White mothers. I took a seat at the table, said hello, and the business started. To be honest, I do not remember the agenda items. I was distracted by the fact that nobody introduced herself, asked who I was, or extended a welcome. I drove home contemplating my naiveté. I had assumed the group would be interested in me and grateful for my interest in them, knowing that school council membership is a challenge for schools not only in Alberta (Brandon and Hanna 2013) but internationally (Esptein and Sanders 1998). I continued to

receive group emails announcing the next meetings, but I did not return. No one inquired about my absence, and I was eventually dropped from the list.

What stayed with me is this: If someone like me with a teaching background and confidence in schools could feel unwanted and uncomfortable, how might parents feel? Do schools think about parents' experiences of school involvement, or are parents simply a metric in Alberta's Accountability Pillar (Alberta Education 2018)? Does "parent involvement" lead educators into practices that overlook relationship, despite rhetorical claims about its importance?

### 3 Questions with Great Power

The outcome-sensitive nature of education logically lends itself to a preoccupation with various student learning measures as the primary end to which parents are a means (e.g. Brueck et al. 2012; Chang et al. 2015; Din et al. 2016; Dove et al. 2015; Gonida and Cortina 2014; Jeynes 2015; Kyle 2011; Sheldon and Epstein 2004). As such, the perennial question among educators and undergirding much research is how can schools increase parent involvement? This is the wrong question.

With this question, educators and policymakers are curators of parent involvement, implementing school-centric (Lawson 2003) practices and putting parents in service to the educational enterprise. Although the premise is that parent involvement positively impacts student learning, Robinson and Harris' (2014) statistical analyses of over 60 traditional school-based or school-driven parent involvement practices found more negative than positive associations. Of interest to me is that examination at the secondary level analyses showed mostly negligible or negative impact. More recently, Seitsinger (2019) reported that teachers' contact with high school parents did not improve students' learning outcomes. Despite these damning findings, these studies have not rocked the field; much research continues to be generated in post-positivist corners (Al-Alwan 2014; Oswald et al. 2018; Shute et al. 2011). The result is an instrumentalist approach that is concerned with delivery rather than relational dimensions.

I am not the only one who challenges "parent involvement" as an organizing principle. Interrogation of nomenclature has been central to how this field of study has grown. Distinction between "involvement" and "engagement" (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Ruitenberg and Pushor 2005), for example, has resulted in new conceptual arrangements, such as communities of parental engagement (Torre and Murphy 2014), collective parent engagement (Alameda-Lawson and Lawson 2016), parent knowledge (Pushor and the Parent Engagement Collaborative II 2015), and equitable collaboration (Ishimaru 2019). By far the most commonly invoked ideal is that of partnership. Epstein (1994), a leading scholar in this area, pronounced that "'school-family-community partnerships' is a better broader term than 'parent involvement' to express the shared interests, responsibilities, investments and the overlapping influences of family, school and community for the education and development of the children they share across the school years" (p. 39). Shirley (1997) echoed this from

the arena of educational change. The partnership has reigned as the leading narrative for the past four decades (Christenson and Reschly 2010; Lareau and Shumar 1996). If you scan provincial or territorial school acts, or national educational policy outside of Canada (e.g., U.S.A's *Every Student Succeeds Act* 2015) you will note how partnership is used descriptively and prescriptively. It is often couched in the language of shared responsibility, implying a collaborative relationship. In my mind, however, partnership connotes a contractual, rather than communal dynamic. It is no wonder, then, that teachers judge parents as committed or apathetic according to their absence or presence at school-sponsored functions.

Furthermore, in practice, partnership works for only a few (Vincent 2000). The social justice campaign has generated important questions regarding the authenticity of partnership for all parents and the school-centric (Lawson 2003) ambitions that reproduce context-blind school practices and expectations. Certain strategies (e.g. volunteering) have become "naturalized" (Fernández and López 2017), which inadvertently privileges and deprivileges social class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Blackmore and Hutchison 2010; Crozier 2000; de Carvalho 2000; Garcia 2019; Katyal and Evers 2007; Kroeger 2019; Mapp and Hong 2010; Michaud and Stelmach 2019; Nygreen 2019; Rollock et al. 2015; Shuffleton 2017). Partnership, then, is premised on parents' bank of or access to certain forms of social capital. Those without it get labeled as uninvolved or hard to reach. Scott and Louie (2020) write about this in Chapter 5, *Reconsidering Rural Education in Light of Canada's Indigenous Reality*, with respect to Indigenous parents, who they claim are judged from a deficit perspective and are assumed to be apathetic because they are not visible in the school. When I think back to my experience at the school council meeting, however, it makes sense that marginalization can be experienced by anyone, and yet the insiders are unaware of the subtle ways in which their actions perpetuate the divide. It also made me wonder how my newcomer status impelled me toward the periphery of that group of mothers, and whether my choice to observe and listen, and ultimately withdraw, signaled disinterest to them.

Manoeuvring around terminology has theoretical value, but constructing the problem in epistemological terms I believe, reifies an entrenched view that working with parents is a pedagogical and technocratic enterprise. This designates it as teachers' duty, which is another constraining assumption. Teachers are expected to be border-crossers (Sanders 2009) and more family-centric (Pushor 2017). But calls to flatten school hierarchies, or christen 'parent knowledge' as a new curriculum (Pushor 2019) while sounding democratic, fails to consider that certain conditions are primordial for parents to feel their perspectives are equally valid.

What I know from past research is that secondary school parents feel unsure about their place (Stelmach 2006, 2013). They are caught: teachers don't *need* them, and their adolescent children don't *want* them, they say. Yet they can't reimagine the parents' role beyond in-school or school-prescribed ways (Stelmach 2013). Belonging and displacement are thematic in the claims secondary school parents make, an issue which epistemological renewal cannot fully resolve. Belonging is an ontological state. Given this, relational dimensions of being and feeling, rather than structural

factors that encourage or impede parents' ability to perform teacher prescribed functions, must be the focus. Turning to the community has the power to challenge the binary thinking and moral categorizing of parents as involved/uninvolved or good/bad that tends to emerge from predominantly elementary school conceptualizations of involvement/partnership. In some ways, my protesting partnership reflects the concerns of Danyluk et al. (2020), who, in the previous chapter, brought forth questions about positionality and social location in their examination of the educational assistants' movement from an ambiguous role to a sense of legitimation among teachers as they pursued teaching degrees. Like the participants in their study who became comfortable seeing themselves as "teacher" once they were acquiring official knowledge, there is an unspoken positioning of parents in the partnership discourse that casts them below teachers. And among parents themselves, a caste emerges with those who participate in ways acceptable to schools at the top, and those who do not comply with expectations at the bottom.

Compared to urban school contexts, the topic of parents in rural schools is a ground that has been lightly treaded. The most recent published literature review on parent involvement in rural schools identified only 18 studies (Semke and Sheridan 2012). Among those 18, one study was conducted in a fly-in First Nations reserve in northern Canada (e.g. Agbo 2007). Synthesizing findings of two literature reviews regarding the most studied rural educational issues, Cicchinelli and Beesley (2017) reported that parent and family engagement was at the bottom of the list of priority topics. Despite the expansiveness of the corpus of literature on parents and schools, the topic suffers from metrocentricity (Campbell and Yates 2011). Given this and the aforementioned, my research question—*what makes rural secondary school parents feel in community with their children's schools?*—is a question with great power, as Block (2008) would say, because it has the potential to "engage people in an intimate way...and invite them to cocreate a future possibility" (p. 105), which I see as a starting point for affecting educational practice.

## 4 Community as Zombie Category

At a Rural Education Congress in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan a couple of years ago, in a session about working with parents, a PowerPoint slide in giant font read: "Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!" Such homilies abound in academic and professional presentations and are met with a lot of heads nodding in agreement. Delegates rise from their seats in these scenes, sufficiently evangelized, and leave with what's presented as the Holy Grail of parent involvement in their minds. Don't get me wrong, teachers and principals: relationships matter. It matters that you build relationships with families. But I am at odds with the oversimplified and dogmatic way we sometimes speak about working with parents, and how uncritical we sometimes are.

Dewey (1899/1990) is often credited for emphasizing community in the schooling context, and it has become imperative to think beyond the classroom to meet the

diverse and often complex learning needs of today's students. Epstein's (1994) overlapping spheres of influence framework was co-terminus with Sergiovanni's (1994) dictum: "community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort" (p. xi). Thus, the idea of community has lineage and widespread appeal, but as Perkins' (2015) argued, "within education, the word *community* is used and overused to the point that it holds little concrete meaning" (p. 319). Community is a zombie category.

As Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2001) put it, a zombie category is "dead and still alive" (p. 203). A zombie category is a taken for granted concept that is void of any substance because it has outgrown the social conditions from which it originated (Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2001). Facebook, for example, has forever altered 'friend.' The notion of community-related to schools and parents is similarly zombified because changes in family composition (Cook 2014; Heilman 2008), challenges to heteronormatively defined gender roles (Blount 2006), technology-mediated living (Turkle 2011), mobility, and plurality have had destabilizing effects on what is assumed about social interactions among members of a school community. Belonging and connection, interpreted through territorial categories, have been the defining features of community (Bruhn 2011; Delanty 2010), but as boundaries erode and distances shrink under the technologies of globalization, some argue 'real' community gets reconfigured as imaginary or symbolic (Anderson 1983). These conditions have pulled at the weave of our social fabric. So where does this leave community?

Education literature has tended to treat community expediently, assuming it is 'already there' as it has been in the past (Tyack 1974), and therefore ready to be leveraged towards loftier educational goals. Examinations of the community are usually found in the creases of the merged domain commonly referred to as School Effectiveness and School Improvement (SESI) scholarship. In SESI scholarship, parents and community are highlighted as a key strategy for enhancing student outcomes. Consequently, the community has been studied from within a techno-rational paradigm in which community is positioned instrumentally and institutionally, and understood within the realm of practice. Furman (2002) confirmed this in her explication of two strands of study in this area, school–community connections and school-as-community. She brought the field forward with a third alternative, ethic of community (2004), arguing for the process as the linchpin for understanding how the community can operate to authentically include parents. Torre and Murphy (2014) were similarly critical of an institutional orientation to family–school linkages. Their proposed model, "communities of parental engagement" (p. 2) emphasizes an ethical stance toward parents. By seeing "schools as communities" (p. 2) they argue for care and trust to guide teachers' practices, but it is not clear that it overcomes the problem of individualization of parent involvement, or significantly shifts the gaze toward a collective.

As an exception, Gereluk's (2006) liberal conception of community offers a way through the limitations of viewing the community as a good in and of itself. Through a Rawlsian application of justice, Gereluk (2006) contemplates belonging, social cooperation, and pursuit of the good as inherent to what community is and why we need it. She reminds us that structures, like schools, are not in and of themselves

communities. She writes, “It is the *ethos* that people find valuable in belonging to a community that is pivotal” (p. 64). This spoke to me when I read it because it captured my motivation for joining that school council: I aimed to contribute to the creation of something I was looking for, something I valued. In thinking about the diverse demographic that characterizes our schools today, what is most helpful and refreshing about Gereluk’s thesis is that community is thought of as layered, meaning that we may find community in multiple ways that are contiguous, rather than continuous.

In contrast to Gereluk (2006), the study of community in other disciplines is embedded in a narrative of loss (Bauman, 2001; Mulligan, 2015). Using Tönnies’ (1963) classical articulation of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), it is argued that community has disappeared into society. The former, characterized by kinship, loyalty and proximity, is portrayed by Tönnies as weakening under the forces of modernization and urbanization whereby social relations are reconstituted in contractual terms, and private interests are prioritized. A well-known contemporary account of this comes from Bauman (2001), who describes social life as ambiguous and fractured—*liquid*—rendering community as a “paradise lost or a paradise still hoped to be found” (p. 3).

Rural places are portrayed as the remaining illustration of *Gemeinschaft* (Corbett 2014). A chorus of researchers points out the problem with depicting rural and rural schools in these nostalgic ways (Bæck 2016; Corbett 2009; Looker 2014; Schulte and Walker-Gibbs 2016). Relations can be frayed and downright acrimonious in rural communities (McHenry-Sorber 2014; McHenry-Sorber and Schafft 2015); rural school closure, for instance, is iconic for exposing fracture lines (see Corbett and Helmer 2017). Despite these empirical studies, rural schools are considered to have an advantage over urban schools when it comes to parent relations, and if parents are disengaged it is external factors such as employment or health that impede them (Jones 2018). Compared to urban schools, rural schools are assumed to have an easier time involving parents. In conducting my study, my aim was to achieve a more nuanced portrayal of community through the eyes of parents in rural secondary schools.

## 5 Conducting the Research: Theoretical and Methodological Frames

Furman (2002) makes an important distinction between factors that contribute to community, and school members’ experiences of it, positing that unless the community is felt, it does not exist. This drew me to McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory. Though dated, their framework was a suitable point of reference as it corresponds with this idea that community has affective dimensions, and with Mulligan’s (2015) contention that community answers our “irrepressible aspiration for belonging” (p. 346). Sense of community is framed through four dimensions:



membership, having influence, fulfilling one's needs, and emotional connection. Sense of community is constituted by fit, agency, purpose, and investment, and when present, these coalesce into belonging.

I conducted the study using a sociomaterial approach (Fenwick et al. 2011), which seeks to clarify “the multiple ontologies that can be detected in the play of things” (p. vii). By denying “received categories” (p. 3), this approach aligns with Mulligan's central thesis that communities are formed, not found.

Three rural schools located in northern Alberta participated in my study. Two of the schools were located in the same town, which had fewer than 3000 inhabitants. One was strictly secondary (Grade 7–12), and the other one, a publicly funded Catholic school served K-12 students. Both schools had fewer than 300 students. The third school (K-12) was the largest (< 600 students), located in a town of roughly the same size and over three hours away from the first town. The principal reported about 65% Indigenous student population.

Data were collected through walking interviews (Evans and Jones 2011) with parents throughout these rural schools, followed by focus groups (Janesick 2016) and 21 individual interviews. My aim was to identify discourses of community and material elements that may have grounded them. I interviewed the principals to learn about context. Heeding Coladarci's (2007) call for rural specific research, once data were collected in the rural schools, I sought urban parents' perspectives via the newsletter of the Alberta School Councils' Association, a provincial parent body. Volunteers were from cities with populations of more than 100,000. Given geographical constraints, some interviews with these parents were conducted via telephone. There was more ethnic diversity among this group of participants, which included settled and new immigrants. I solicited the assistance of a doctoral student to conduct an interview in Spanish with one parent.

In discussing the data in the following, my aim is to amplify rural parents' voices, given they are seldom heard. Data from urban parents served as a point of comparison so that I could feel confident my interpretations about rural parents were not simply coincidental. I want my readers to see them in their own light.

### ***5.1 The Ties That Bind: Discourses of Family, Familiarity, and Fitness***

In a rural context, neither school nor external community exists in isolation from each other or have an independent reality (Sheridan et al. 2017). What rural parents had in common with urban parents was that their in-school interactions were relatively limited unless their children participated in extracurricular sports. Outside of school, however, rural parents connected with students, other parents, teachers and principals through coaching, youth clubs, community celebrations, and municipal committees, which reinforced on-campus interactions. Their extensive involvement in town affairs

often brought them in contact with someone from the school, so when they did go to the school they had touchpoints of familiarity.

A mom said, "I feel like some people are my school family. Some people are my church family." Because school and town overlap, sense of community felt in one instance could transfer into others, and have a grounding effect. This harkens back to Gereluk's (2006) layered nature of the community.

By contrast, the urban parents' sense of community was contingent upon their interactions with or at the school only. Front office staff primarily set the tone, as they were parents' first contact. Most urban parents described their school office encounters in clinical terms; they felt processed, rather than greeted. Parents felt anonymous in a secondary school environment that felt cold compared to elementary. This was the case even in schools that were roughly the same student population as the rural schools in my study. Protocol, such as having to ring a buzzer to be let in impeded urban parents' sense of community. This contrasts starkly with a rural dad's claim, "No one directs you to the office anymore...it's not uncommon to walk through the hallways."

Rural parents were at home in their children's schools; urban parents were literally locked out. For this reason, urban parents questioned the rhetoric of partnership, suggesting parent involvement was on teachers' "checklist." Family was never a word they used to describe how they felt about their children's schools. Even events like Meet the Teacher Night failed to create familiarity or community, and one parent reported eventually giving up introducing themselves. Some stopped going altogether. Thus, teachers and parents did not know each other except in a dehumanized, role-defined way as parent or as teacher. McMillan and Chavis (1986) pointed out that community develops through interactions, and the opportunities for interactions that rural parents had in both quantity and quality explains why they thought of community in terms of family, and urban parents did not.

Rural parents, teachers, and students have multiple orientations to each other (McLelland 1997); the school is not the single defining element of the school-home dynamic. Parents, teachers, and students might serve on the same community board, sit across the table from each other at a community Christmas dinner, serve as volunteers at summer festivals, attend fitness classes together, or live on the same street. Parents' and teachers' children might be invited to the same birthday parties when they're young, and date each other when they're older. Such "thickly layered relationships" (McClelland 1997, p. 110) are the contact points for bonding (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Adhesion is weak or non-existent for urban parents who wait in their cars to pick up their children after school, then drive to their own corner of the city to live their separate lives.

Social connection and community identity are concretely reinforced in the routines of rural living. Wuthnow (2013) wrote: "The town has an identity as a community. Its meanings are inscribed in particular places and the tangible aspects of these places—the park, school building, and stores on Main Street" (p. 3). The rural parents in my study joked about how quick errands stretched into an hour because they always ended up visiting. The post office and the grocery store, and the general office of these schools were domesticated relational spaces where the conduct of business

was an enactment of belonging. This neighboring as Wuthnow called it served a cohesive function, and the sites on which neighboring took place were symbolic markers of community. Membership was also codified by language. In talking about new families, one mom said, “You say something like, ‘Oh, why don’t we go to the DMI for brunch?’ Well, what’s the DMI? Oh ya, you don’t know...we all know what the DMI is because we’ve lived here all our lives.”

What seems innocuous, like referencing the DMI or the impromptu visiting, matters because familiarity makes people feel like they are part of something.

Familiarity is the currency of the community. That it operates outside of the physical location suggests it is more than charming, it is mutually reinforcing. Important to note is that familiarity also makes it evident who is *not* part of something.

Parents admitted that there is an element of superficiality in the claim that “everyone knows you,” but this did not trump the sense of security and safety that came from being acquainted or recognizable. Feeling emotionally secure is an important aspect of membership according to McMillan and Chavis (1986). One mom emphasized that her involvement meant that others could say about her, “I know you. I’ve seen you around. You must be okay.” Trust was exemplified in parents’ feeling they had license to console or discipline others’ children, something that does not happen in our risk-averse, individualized world of today. Looking out for each other was the norm for rural parents. Compassion and empathy were emotional indices of mutual support. This particularity of small towns (Wuthnow 2013) was a proud feature for these parents, and something akin to the preservation of Tönnies’ (1963) *Gemeinschaft*.

When I asked how the community was expressed, the rural parents talked about pitching in to complete harvest when a farmer’s combine broke down, donating goods after a house fire, or joining others to scour the fields for a missing person. When I visited, one school flag was at half-mast because a community member had died. I saw memorials to students and staff members in the hallways, and posters asking for support for someone who had an illness. What touched the town, affected the school. This anthology of tragedies confirmed for rural parents that others would “step up” and “have [their] back[s]” in times of need. “What would a family do? They wouldn’t watch you drown,” a mom stated. Because emotions tend to harmonize during crises and natural disaster, it strengthens a sense of community (Bruhn 2011). Further, sacrifice for others in trying times are emotional investments (McMillan and Chavis 1986) that fortify relations and serve as historical references in the community story.

The kinship that underscores their family metaphor implies solidarity, bonding, and mutual commitment to values and goals. Inclusion is presupposed, but even in the most homogeneous communities, there is always a basis for the exclusion (Bruhn 2011). This resonates with me, having been another white woman among five at that school council meeting. I learned that family was a powerful projection that did not necessarily strike a chord with others. Following the focus group at the school, a mom privately shared with me,

Everyone was talking about community, and once you get into the school there is a sense of community, but it’s hard to break that barrier. You talk about rural, small town. These families have been here—like those four people sitting around the table—those families have

been around here for generations....you gotta almost connect with a family that's a legacy family.

Parents native to these places were equally conscious of the social dynamic:

I think that to be somebody that isn't a generational person here would be hard because there are so many generational families that I think it's a little bit hard to break into that. I think the generational families are the ones that have the real sense that—well, I still feel like [this school] is *my* school, you know what I mean? Whereas when you're coming into a place, it's not—you don't have the tie to it like the rest of us do.

These “legacy” or “generational” families were on the school walls in graduation composites, and I could trace the lineage through sports pendants in the gymnasium and plaques in the trophy cases. Theorists argue that community is no longer a place (Anderson 1983; Blackshaw 2010), but it was clear that rootedness mattered to these parents. During the walking interviews at the schools, parents lingered in places that triggered memories. They spent a long time looking (and laughing) at old photos of sports teams and prom king and queen. The walls were a family album, and it emphasized for me that place is important for contributing to (or detracting from) the affective experience of the community. I wondered, who might have been left out of the conversation?

I was told by non-legacy parents that if you were not *from* there, you were not *of* there, and non-legacy parents endured “constant reminders” of this, particularly if they introduced ideas that challenged convention. Their experiences pointed to an important distinction between belonging and fitting in. One mom's admission, “I used to be a roaring feminist and now I'm more of a closeted one” was telling of the self-censorship some parents practiced. Sameness is a marker of community (Bauman 2001), and McMillan and Chavis (1986) consider the pressure to conform as a troubling aspect of community. Rural parents concealed their true selves to align with majority thought, meanwhile projecting agreement and cohesion. In reality, their sense of community may have been thwarted because of such compromises. Mulligan (2015) considers it the dark side of community that it is projected along divisive lines. Ideology may be one of those fault lines where community becomes fragile.

Urban parents similarly faced gatekeepers, and these were usually discussed in relation to school council where parents and their friends monopolized executive roles for years. New ideas were not always welcome by long-timers, but when urban parents encountered maligning beliefs or opinions, they did not adjust to fit the group. They simply left. In their case anonymity protected them, and the consequences of not fitting did not have the severity as it might in a rural context. I do not mean to be dismissive of urban parents who do get directly involved in their children's schools. My point is that divesting was matter-of-factly proposed as an option, presumably because urban parents could seek community elsewhere. If urban parents felt they did belong, there were limits to what they felt they could do or were willing to do to change this. And this brings me to the second discourse...

## 5.2 *Community Is Not a Noun: The Discourse of Doing*

For these rural parents, community was “what you create.” Simple acts like running a food booth at the basketball tournament or long-term commitments like fostering children conveyed the importance of contribution. They tended to be dismissive when I complimented their extensive involvement in school and beyond, saying, “it’s just what you do [when you live in a small town].” Their involvement was driven by personal and parental duty. Statements such as, “If you want community to give to you, you have to give to it,” or “I wouldn’t *not* be part of my kids’ school just because I need to be” captured sentiments of responsible citizenship and parenthood. Role modeling the value of giving to the community was part of their agenda.

Urban parents’ descriptions suggested community was contained within parent–teacher interactions and emanated from the way teachers, principals, and staff responded to their needs. They felt in community when they were “appreciated [as] an important part of the education process.” They wanted teachers to be personal with them and their children, and since they rarely felt this way about their relationships, they described community in their children’s schools as “distant.” By far the most commonly articulated need was to have information about the school and their children. This was likely because they were accustomed to daily reports from elementary schools. Urban parents’ needs were defined predominantly in cognitive terms as information, communication, and resources, directly in relation to what their children needed to succeed at school.

What was surprising to me was that all urban parents reported having 24 h access to their children’s progress through digital marks programs. Upon further examination, it became clear that technology had an alienating effect on most parents. Few reported consulting the marks site, and at least one said she never bothered to retrieve a password. Thus, by information, I believe parents meant they craved person-to-person communication, especially at times when they felt a need to advocate for their children’s particular learning needs. Their level of influence was limited, however, and this led to frustration. Feeling no agency with respect to their children’s school experiences, a couple of parents reported they completely removed their children from the school.

In rural contexts community is valued for its own sake (Wuthnow 2013), so this explains why *doing community* was an expectation and a condition for belonging among these rural parents. Contributing was not simply a community-minded thing to do; it was a moral imperative and a source of judgement. This was particularly notable when they talked about newcomers. The doctor’s wife, for example, whose inability to integrate, attributed to a “snotty attitude” became the trope of outsider-ness. Those who were “missing their Starbucks” were similarly caricatured.

There was no tolerance for those who complained about loneliness because isolation was considered their choice. The bluntness of this mom’s statement has been indelible:

I’m not sure how many people are going to keep asking you to join, asking you to join, asking you to join and you refusing. How long are you going to keep that up? Because you

know, everybody already has their own social groups. Everybody has their own friends, and so if you don't want to join us—I asked you, and you said, “no.” It doesn't hurt me. It's not keeping me from anything. I already have my life established. It's you I'm trying to help.

Paternalism lurks beneath this mom's good intentions, and the friendliness that these parents projected as characteristics of their schools and towns seemed to have a threshold. The comment gave me insight into how I was eventually dropped from the school council group email. While I expected someone to inquire directly after I missed the following meetings, perhaps I was viewed as failing to respond to what for them was invitational.

There was admission of cliques in these towns: “you were lucky if you get to go for coffee with them or whatever.” The cliquey-ness was not interrogated but rather, justified as an irrefutable reality: “every small town is like that.” It was well-known in one town that parents “drove out” a new school principal who did not move her family up with her from the city. Viewed as non-committal, that principal met with constant resistance no matter the potential her ideas had for improving the school. The micro-boundaries were a fact and a condition of rural living, and in their mind, parents did their part to help others navigate these. But ultimately everyone was held accountable for their own belonging or excommunication.

Children were the focal point of families' activities in these rural places. This was how many parents met like-minded parents, and gained a sense of belonging. Community, therefore, was projected through the young, creating a potential barrier for those whose purpose was not defined through parenthood. Even though children were an “in” to community, the way single teachers were scrutinized suggested there was still an expectation that those without children should take initiative to build connections. Those who “can't wait to get out of town for the weekend” were strongly criticized. Some acknowledged that northern rural life was more suited to nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts, but at the same time, there was no sympathy for those who did not enjoy it: “This can be a really good place to be or it can be hell. Your choice” (School Principal). I wondered about the defensive posturing implicit in such comments. Was it that a choice to wish for or need something other than what was readily available in the community was interpreted as a rejection of their community, and therefore a rejection of them?

The concept of personal responsabilization (Masquelier 2017) is useful for unpacking how choice and agency were interwoven in these parents' narratives. Personal responsabilization emerges from a sociological analysis of the ways in which the neoliberal agenda shapes individuals to be “responsible for their own fate” (p. 57). Drawing on the work of Foucault (1988), Giddens (1991), and Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002), Masquelier defined personal responsabilization as “a process whereby a range of legal, economic and cultural resources are mobilized in an effort to compel individuals to regard themselves and/or others as personally responsible for their actions” (p. 47). While the capitalist mandate is the central feature of Masquelier's thesis, Giddens, and Beck and Beck-Gersheim would articulate it in terms of the self as the center of the social narrative. Olmedo and Wilkins' (2017) neoliberalized subject is instructive here. Their examination of educational policy in

the United Kingdom demonstrates how parents are discursively shaped to consume, govern, and produce in the educational realm. Disciplined by choice, parents internalize their responsibility for their children's education. Where their work strikes a chord is in their claim, "neoliberal subjectivity...is a form of *moralized agency*" (p. 577, emphasis added). When brought to bear on parents' sense of community, these offer theoretical language for the positioning of community within a discourse of doing.

## 6 Reflections ... on Another Snowy Day

In a keynote presentation to the European Research Network About Parents in Education (ERNAPE) in London, UK in 2017, Dr. Carol Vincent suggested that since the 1990s not much has changed in parent scholarship despite a growing corpus. One of the reasons for this—and one that I underlined in my notebook—was, as I had written, "the forgotten role of affect/emotion in home–school relationships" (July 5, 2017). Through the lens of community, we might begin to address this oversight.

Reflecting on that school council meeting I attended, there is an important distinction to be made in how I explain my decision to never return. I could construct the problem as "I was an outsider." I could also say, "I *felt* like an outsider." The latter statement shifts away from the mechanics of an event to the emotions of a person. More than once in past writing I have cited Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) eloquent description of parent–school relations as "tender geography" (p. xi). This phrase communicates the intimacy, fragility, and uncertainty that reside between and within both parents and teachers as they walk with children and youth on their educational journey. It is with this in mind that I close this letter to you, imagining how I might move the conversation forward as a rural educator. I synthesize my learning at the intersections of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four dimensions of membership, influence, fulfillment of purpose and need, and emotional connection. If I were you, a rural teacher or principal trying to shift thinking about parents, here is what I might be understanding more deeply as a result of this study....

Boundaries tell us who belongs and who does not (McMillan and Chavis 1986). As a rural educator, I might know that urban parents have a mightier struggle because they have few interactions to bond with teachers and other parents. They sometimes live far from the school, and school councils are monopolized by gatekeepers, and so this makes an urban educator's task trickier. The scope of the boundaries is small in urban schools; it is confined by limited interaction at the front office or the one-dimensional space of an email. The boundaries of community in the rural context might appear to be boundless, for there is no containing sense of community to the school in a rural setting. The town inevitably plays a role. As a rural principal especially, I would know the boundaries are wide even if the school or town are small because I am expected to be a community leader as well as a school leader (Preston et al. 2013). I might have the experience of my professional integrity clashing with community expectations, sometimes in ways that are irreconcilable (Hansen 2018).

My inter-sectoral work would have taught me that rural schools are embedded in the larger organizational context of the external community (Arum 2000).

While I might rely on the same group of parents who have volunteered in the school over the years to be my finger on the pulse of the community, I would also be questioning who are my legacy or generational families. I would understand how social-spatial attachments create a stronger sense of community for legacy or generational families (LaChasseur 2014; Wise 2015). I would know that they feel entitled and compelled to contribute to protect *their* school as a sacred icon for their community and for them personally. I would question, however, how these ties binding them to the school are cutting off others. I would walk down the hallways of my school and peruse my school website, and ask myself if all families could see themselves here (Pushor and Amendt 2018).

As a rural educator, I would examine whether my actions assume that community is an institutional structure to be applied, or an ecological system to be nurtured (Arum 2000). School councils, which secondary school parents tend to cite when talking about their at-school involvement, are reportedly ineffective in elevating parents' influence on school matters (Corter et al. 1998; Kerr 2005; Leithwood and Menzies 1998; Parker and Leithwood 2000; Stelmach 2016). Yet this is primarily where secondary school parents go to find information and to establish their efficacy. I would remind myself that parents serve on school councils as volunteers. They are not looking for another job (Stelmach and Preston 2008), and so I might be looking for ways to ensure school council participation is mutually beneficial, and not simply serving the school.

In a rural context, school council membership might create a sense of community for parents because they already have connections to each other through their outside involvement. Considering this, I might make a note of celebrating all the contributions parents make in grand and routine ways beyond school council because rural parents have an influence on children other than their own through their various community volunteering. This is different than the particularistic (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003) investment urban parents make in their own children.

"People do what serves their needs" (McMillan and Chavis 1986, p. 13). Rural parents want to experience the feeling of togetherness, and this motivates them to show up. Their actions are proactive compared to urban parents who tend to act when their children are struggling in some way. For rural parents, community is not simply a nice outcome; it is a duty. As a rural educator, I would know that rural parents define sense of community through their actions because I see them out and about in the town, and they pop into the school whenever they can. The school is not necessarily the prime agent of community, however, and this may not align with what teachers expect of parents. If I were a rural principal, I would understand that rural teachers define parent involvement in traditional ways, such as attending parent-teacher conferences and other school-wide activities (Lin et al. 2014), which is a metro- and school-centric way of thinking about parents. For this reason, teachers might not realize that rural parents establish a sense of community in ways other than what teachers expect.



Also, teachers might not realize that doing is the epitome of community for rural parents, and rural parents expect everyone to share that sentiment. Being an isolate is unacceptable, and as friendly as rural parents try to be, they only have so much patience for those who cling to their private lives. “Doing” and “community” are a complicated union. Parents’ level of participation in and contribution to the community and school is admirable on one hand, but you would know from their comments that rural parents are judging others by their standards, and in doing so, are moralizing agency (Omedo and Wilkins 2017). This can be alienating for other parents. I suppose these features embody the “meaner spirits” that Leacock (1931) claims every small town has.

What might be novel to you as an educator—rural or urban—is the idea that parents, not necessarily educators, are centrally positioned in the creation (or destruction) of sense of community for other parents. Much of the literature emphasizes what teachers and principals should do to ensure parents have a positive experience as equitable members of the school community (Angelle 2017; Murphy and Torre 2014; Ruitenbergh and Pushor 2005). The upshot is that teachers and principals bear the burden of meeting all parents’ needs and expectations, and shoulder the blame for lacking hospitality (Ruitenbergh and Pushor), and not prioritizing parents, especially at the secondary level (Povey et al. 2016). And so, given the findings of this study, you may be starting to think that there is complexity in the hyphen of “school–home” relations, particularly given the nature of negotiations that parents partake in with each other in rural communities.

## 7 Postscript...

Bauman (2001) has said the community has a ‘feel’ and Blackshaw (2010) described it as an inner glow. But, dear rural educators, you also have to remember that the concept of community inevitably implies boundaries, and “boundaries create of world of opposites and a world of opposites is a world of conflict (Bruhn 2011, p. 143). I reconcile this through Mulligan (2015), who acknowledges this dark side of community, but posits that the notion of community as projected means we are free also to imagine multiple grounded communities with properties of belonging. My hope is that this letter has helped you understand that while these parents could talk about community, it still has an illusive quality. It can be deeply felt or craved, but its presence and absence cannot be identified in simple, concrete terms or in universal ways, not even in a rural school where you might have assumed it is easily built, acquired or containable.

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# **Place-Based and Land-Based Pedagogies**



# Land and Critical Place-Based Education in Canadian Teacher Preparation: Complementary Pedagogies for Complex Futures



Alexa Scully

**Abstract** After decades of advocacy by Indigenous scholars and communities, Indigenous education in Canadian teacher education is gaining support and status. Throughout Canadian teacher education, the ‘common knowledge’ of pre-service teachers does not include complex understandings of Indigenous peoples, Lands, or history in what is currently known as Canada, and this has grave consequences for Indigenous peoples and Lands. For my doctoral study, I investigated how critical Place-Based Education (cPBE) is enacted in Indigenous education in teacher education practices in Canada to trouble whiteness, centre Land, and disrupt settler colonialism. I came to understand, as some Indigenous theorists had long known, that the conceptual family of Place may not account well-enough for Land—for Indigenous knowledges, territories, and communities, but that critical Place-based education and Land-based education may work together toward building critical understandings of Indigenous futurities in Canada. This research deeply confirms the dual oppression of Land and of Indigenous peoples that is at the heart of the Canadian identity, but it also offers some answers. Indigenous education in Canadian teacher education must include anti-racist education that contends with white privilege, Land-based learning both in and beyond the classroom, and must centre local Indigenous communities by prioritizing relationships and learning contexts with them.

**Keywords** Indigenous education · Teacher education · Qualitative · Decolonization · Place · Land

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## 1 Land as First Teacher

The understanding of *Land as First Teacher* (Pueblo<sup>1</sup> scholar Gregory Cajete 1994, 2009; Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., 1994; Anishinaabe knowledge holder Jim Dumont; Métis scholar Greg Lowan [-Trudeau] 2010; Anishinaabe knowledge holder Peter O’Chiese; Mohawk and European scholar Sandra Styres 2011) is of great importance to my conception of place and is central to what I have learned from Indigenous communities, teachers and scholars. Mexican/Tiguan scholar Dolores Calderon (2014), Styres (2011), and Styres et al. (2013) have recently forcefully addressed the importance of Land as a crucial element that is missing from Place-based education, or that at least needs to be more clearly emphasized. I am a white<sup>2</sup> settler (she/her) and an educator who sees myself as profoundly connected to places-in-particular, and I agree. I consistently talk about Land in my conference presentations; what I have learned leads me to take this articulation of Land even further than Calderon (2014) does in that I see the need to centre Land not only in that it is the common ground upon which these socio-economic cultural-political claims are being waged, but I was taught that Land is agentic in and of itself. Land (and water) participates, teaches, and enacts its own processes; plants, animals, and humans are formed by and are reliant upon these interactions. This is the understanding of *Land as First Teacher*—Land shapes people, capital, communities. *Land as First Teacher* is a principle that I, then a young undergraduate, was taught by Anishinaabe-kwe Elder Edna Manitowabi at Trent University in the early 1990s. I have seen echoes of this teaching in the education discourse articulated as *a pedagogy of Land* (Haig-Brown and Dannenmann 2002); many educators, myself included, are now using the term Land-based education. Anishinaabe-kwe artist, advocate and scholar Leanne Betamosake Simpson writes about this principle in multiple mediums, and directs: “If you want to learn something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice” (Simpson 2014, pp. 17–18). My dissertation study explored my teaching of Indigenous education courses and content in faculties of education as well as the teaching of other Canadian academics. From 2009 until 2017, I taught the compulsory course in Aboriginal Education, EDUC 4416 (now Indigenous Education), in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University, both at the Orillia campus in the Chippewa Tri-Council and Williams Treaty territory, and then in the Thunder Bay campus in Fort William First Nation and Robinson-Superior Treaty territory. When I started the teaching, and the study, I situated Land as central to critical pedagogies of Place. As I progressed through my study, I came to understand, as some Indigenous theorists had long known, that the conceptual family of Place may not

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, the nation-affiliation of each Indigenous scholar, Elder and mentor will be identified the first time they are cited. This break from APA 6 has created some awkwardness in citing. I apologize in advance for any mistakes or omissions—this is a practice-in-process.

<sup>2</sup>I self-identify as white despite the danger of centering whiteness as a way of acknowledging my unearned privilege and ongoing learning about enacting solidarity in a good way. Relational accountability is a process that I am committed to learning about, particularly as it relates to the fact of my whiteness, and the implications of my whiteness in my roles as learner, researcher, practitioner and teacher. I do not capitalize whiteness as a style/political choice (see Scully 2015).

account well-enough for Land—for Indigenous knowledges, territories, and communities, but that critical Place-based education and Land-based education may work together toward building critical understandings of Indigenous futurities in Canada.

## 2 Critical Pedagogy + Place-Based Education = A Critical Pedagogy of Place

The Land-based learning that has been successful in the classes that I taught may be enacted in contingent collaboration (Unangax scholar Eve Tuck and Yang 2018) with the pedagogical family of Place-based education (PBE) (see Bowers 1993, 2001; Greenwood 2009; Gruenewald 2003; Gruenewald and Smith 2008; Maori scholar Graham Smith 2002; Sobel 2004; Wattchow and Brown 2011). Gruenewald's (2003) *critical pedagogy of place* is a blending of the discourses of critical pedagogy and Place-based education (PBE). He synthesizes the fields of critical pedagogy, a liberatory educational praxis of social justice (Freire 1970; Giroux 1981, 2009; McLaren 1995), and PBE. Darder et al. (2009) write:

Critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students.... In an effort to strive for an emancipatory culture of schooling, critical pedagogy calls upon teachers to recognize how schools have historically embraced theories and practices that serve to unite knowledge and power in ways that sustain asymmetrical relations of power. Under the guise of neutral and apolitical views of education, practices of meritocracy, for example, rooted in ideologies of privilege, shaped by power, politics, history, culture and economics have prevailed. Schools, thus, function as a terrain of on-going cultural struggle over what is accepted as legitimate knowledge. (p. 10)

Gruenewald called on the critical pedagogues to attend better to Place “so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the wellbeing of the social and ecological places that people actually inhabit” (Gruenewald 2003, p. 3). PBE has been invoked in environmental education, education for sustainability, experiential education, ecological education, constructivist education, geographical, science, and outdoor education, Indigenous education, and at the roots of critical pedagogy. In the 1900s, John Dewey, who is situated as the *father of the progressive education movement* in western education discourse, articulated in some of his core principles of education some tenets that are central to PBE. These include: “the notion that education must engage with an enlarged experience; that thinking and reflection are central to the act of teaching; and that students must freely interact with their environments in the practice of constructing knowledge” (Darder et al. 2009, p. 2).

PBE has developed along the trajectory of experiential environmental education and practice: One of the core objectives [of PBE] is to look at how landscape, community infrastructure, watersheds, and cultural traditions all interact and shape each other.... Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the

active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (Sobel 2004, p. 7)

Over the last couple of decades, outdoor and environmental theorists such as Orr (1992), Sobel (2004), Thomashow (1996), and Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) have called upon fellow practitioners to attend more carefully to the local in their education practices. As a product of the Ontario summer camp system, and of the outdoor education field both as a participant and as a practitioner, it has become increasingly clear to me as I make sense of my experiences that these fields are at best uneven in how they attend to places-in-particular.

In reading widely in environmental education and in education for sustainability, and in many educators who are advocating for PBE, I see a great emphasis on environmental science, on gardens as places of learning, and on the dire need to foster love and care for *nature* in young learners.<sup>3</sup> All of these are powerful practices that can include critical practices and perspectives, and yet, I still notice a distinct absence of attention to crucial elements of Place such as gender, race, class, and ability that have been called for by eminent theorists for decades (e.g., hooks 1990, 1992; Massey 1994; Malpas 1999, 2009). Without engaging in competing marginalities (Dei 2005), the most startling absence for me in my learning trajectory has been that of Indigeneity: With respect to the context of this work, attention to, and respect for, Indigenous knowledges and territories must be included in these programs that *all* take place on Indigenous Lands.

### 3 Place, Land, and Indigeneity

The older I get, the more powerfully the teachings I received at Trent in the mid-90s resonate in me and have ever-greater impacts on the way I see my surroundings and the more-than-human (Abram 1996) web of relations I am in: Places, and the more-than-human beings in them, are agentic in and of themselves. They are beings. It is uncomfortable to assert that both as a white person and as a western scholar, but this is how I see it—this is what I was taught (see also Larsen and Johnson 2017), and this is Indigenous (in this case Anishinaabe) knowledge. In her 2005 work, Julie Cruikshank put it this way:

Glaciers appear as actors in this book. In accounts we will hear from Athapaskan and Tlingit oral tradition, glaciers take action and respond to their surroundings. They are sensitive to smells and they listen. They make moral judgment and they punish infractions. Some elders who know them well describe them as both animate (endowed with life) and as animating (giving life to) landscapes they inhabit. (p. 3)

Cruikshank describes one of her objectives for this text as providing “an account of how interpretations of natural, social and cultural worlds became gradually disaggregated in a place where they were formerly viewed as unified, and to examine

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<sup>3</sup>I reject Richard Louv’s (2008) troubling pathologizing of children in his book on *nature deficit disorder*—better to characterize schooling as morbid and flawed, not children.

the consequences of that fragmentation” (2005, p. 4). This statement mirrors my own learning journey relating to the many theories and investigations of *Place* from different discursive and epistemological traditions.

I appreciate the field of critical cultural geography and urban planning for the investigations into the social constructions of places as sites of resistance, inclusion, and exclusion (e.g., hooks 1990; Massey 1994); indeed, this was central to my master’s work. In my case studies on environmental education facilities in the Don River Valley in Toronto, I carefully examined the blueprints of the buildings, the garden plans, and the plant choices, all to inquire into “who are these places for?” What is being communicated through these designs, choices, and constructions? This, for me, is where the concept of *Place* becomes really powerful. “*Place* was not simply an outcome of social processes though; it was, once established, a tool in the creation, maintenance and transformation of relations of domination, oppression, and exploitation” (Cresswell 2015, p. 46). But even if, as the cultural geographers would have it, *Places* are socially constructed, or, as the philosophers would have it, they constitute human existence, both/each require human attention for significance, for being.

Malpas’ (1999) argument that societies are geographically constructed and responsive is more useful for me, and comes closer to resonating with Indigenous perspectives on Land and *Place*:

*Place* is instead that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established –*place* is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of *place*; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of *place*. (p. 35)

In other words, namely in Cruikshank’s (2005) other words, “local knowledge is never crudely encapsulated in closed traditions, but is produced during human encounters, rather than ‘discovered’. It is dynamic and complex, and it often links biophysical and social processes” (p. 4). Anishinaabe scholar Megan Bang et al. (2014) phrase this very succinctly: “Land is, therefore we are” (p. 45). More recently, *Place* theorists from many disciplines are concerned about the ways that globalization and modernity are exacerbating the eliding of *place*-connections, and that this is having a negative effect on people’s awareness of, and implication in, the dual oppression of nature and people.

Critical pedagogies of *Place* have not done a good job of including Indigenous knowledges, communities, and histories in *places*. *Place*-based education, as outlined by non-Indigenous theorists and practitioners such as Dewey (1907), Evernden (1985), Smith (2002), Sobel (2004), Thomashow (1996), and Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) has tended to emphasize the important understanding that all students come to classrooms with experiences of *places*, and with knowledges, and it is the job of the learning facilitator/teacher to include and extend these knowledges and experiences in the curriculum they are creating, or rather, co-creating, in the school setting. As PBE theorists would have it, constructivism works:

from the premise that the learner's basis of meaning is found in her or his direct experience with a dynamic and responsive world.... with this conception of cognition, knowing does not reside in the brain.... the biological body is not a structure through which one learns, but a structure that learns.... hence, a main concern of teaching is the provision of rich activities that might be interpreted... Complex theories of learning suggest that learning is not about acquiring or accumulating information. Rather, learning is principally a matter of keeping pace with one's evolving circumstances. The learning agent – whether immune system, person, collective, culture or species – is possibilities. Knowledge is contingent, contextual, and evolving; never absolute, universal or fixed. (Davis et al. 2000, p. 66)

In my experience as a learner, as an outdoor/experiential educator as a teacher educator and as a curriculum developer, there is a consistent tension for teachers between the need to 'deliver the curriculum' and the need to adapt learning contexts, and contents, to the actual learners that form the learning community, and to the context of the learning...the Place, the Land. Teaching is an incredibly difficult and rewarding vocation, and as many teacher-educators report, we are constantly asked for the blueprint, or the recipe card, to do it well. For many, teachers are meant to be expert authorities, and many students arrive in faculties of education believing that they know how/what/where to teach given their own long hours in classrooms as students prior to arriving B.Ed. programs. The implication of not knowing, or of being at the beginning of a very long learning journey with regard to some crucial content and context, is very troubling for some. As a teacher of a compulsory course on Indigenous peoples in Canada, with Land at the centre, I have witnessed this unsettling in each and every class I have taught. Most students arrived in my classes with little to no knowledge of Indigenous peoples, Lands, communities, knowledges, economies and cultures in Canada, and this was also reported by the other instructors coast-to-coast-to-coast that I interviewed for my doctoral study (Scully 2018). From K-13 in my own schooling (that dates me a bit!), I attended 9 different schools: urban public and private schools where the students were predominantly white and very privileged, small rural schools where the students were predominantly white from families with diverse socioeconomic status, a large suburban school with very few white students and a large range of socioeconomic status, and small urban alternative schools with students with diversity of privilege and race. Like many who were schooled in Ontario, I remember a unit in grade four about Woodland Indians, with birchbark teepees and the very 'Indian you had in mind' (T. King 2007), with buckskin and headband, and that was it for learning about/with/from Indigenous peoples in school. My learning curve in Indigenous Studies at Trent in 1994–1997 was steep and uncomfortable: I try to keep this in mind in the classes I teach when I see how challenging the new learning is for many pre-service teachers.

While Indigenous education in teacher education can be very unsettling and can produce great resistance within teacher candidates, connecting the learners to the 'new' understandings through the relationships that they already hold with Place can be a generative and productive practice. This emphasis on relationships as a core practice of education for empowered citizenship, including "moments of beauty and enjoyment out in the world" (Darder et al. 2009, p. 4), was a central tenet of the education philosophy proffered by prominent educational philosopher Maxime Greene

(1988). Without repeatable and relatable experience, decontextualized information has little meaning or relevance to the learner. It is the very decontextualization of learning and of information about Indigenous peoples and about Land that supports the fallacy that all Canadians are not implicated in the unjust conditions and exploitation of both.

While all students arrive in classes with knowledge and experience of Place—whether recent or lifelong—this is not true of Land-based knowledge. Land-based knowledge is that which centres Indigenous peoples, territories and knowledges and that is predicated on the fundamental interrelationship of people and Land (Calderon 2014; Scully 2012, 2015; Styres et al. 2013; Tuck et al. 2014). Settler colonialism (see Wolfe 2006), with Eurocentric binaries separating humans and nature have done their epistemological work thoroughly. In my experience as an instructor in a range of teacher preparation courses, it is difficult to shift this binary. I endeavor to create a context where “teachers are challenged to recognize their responsibility to critique and transform those classroom relationships that perpetuate the economic and cultural marginalization of subordinate groups” (Darder et al. 2009, p. 12), and to celebrate the “multiple and contradictory perspectives” (Nieto and Bode 2008, p. 319) necessary to a critical classroom (pp. 31, 32).

In light of this miseducation and its profound effects on Canadian common knowledge regarding Indigenous peoples, lands, and knowledges, in teacher education, critical Place-based pedagogies (cPBE) are still crucial but are on their own insufficient. Although I did just this early in my study, I have come to understand that situating Land as part of, or even central to, critical pedagogies of Place is not enough. Prioritizing learning Land and learning about Land, with and from Indigenous peoples must take a central place in Canadian education: Initial teacher education is a pathway to make a widespread change in service of Land and of Indigenous futurities in Canada.

Since I began teaching EDUC 4416 at Lakehead University on Chippewa Tri-Council territory in 2009, Indigenous education in teacher education has expanded in faculties of education across Canada, from coast-to-coast-to-coast. Simpson (2011) asks, “I wonder how we can reconcile when the majority of Canadians do not understand the historic or contemporary injustice of dispossession and occupation” (p. 21). She also states that “Nishnaabeg thought was not meant to promote assimilation or normalization within a colonial context. It was not meant to be reduced and relegated to a decorative window dressing in western scholarship” (p. 20). As the practice grows and matures, we must keep the goals in sight: This practice is not about improving the praxis of education both in faculties of education and in K-12 environments (although I believe that it does). It is about serving Indigenous futurities in Canada through conscientization and shifting Canadian common knowledge and accountability as these relate to Indigenous Lands, communities and histories in Canada. While both are desirable goals, in the fundamentally colonial structures of the university, and of education as it is practiced in most places in Canada, the deeply cynical box-ticking, add-and-stir and performative measures that are sometimes taken, ostensibly to decolonize or Indigenize, can double-down on and benefit the very structures that continue to sabotage dynamic Indigenous futurities.

As I and other scholars have written, the goals of Indigenous education are to transform Indigenous education in Canada for increased success by Indigenous learners, justice for Indigenous peoples, and greater cross-cultural understanding by non-Indigenous learners (e.g., Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste 1998, 2000; den Heyer 2009; Lenape-Pottawatomi scholar Susan Dion 2009; Godlewska et al. 2010; Haig-Brown and Hodson 2009; Kanu 2005; Scully 2012, 2015; Schick 2000; Cree scholar Verna St. Denis 2007; Tompkins 2002; Tupper 2012, 2013; Tupper and Capello 2008). Employing cPBE alongside Land and decolonizing education have great potential to work towards Indigenous futurities in Canada, and they must not be conflated with one another. It took a few years of my dissertation study to understand how Place and Land were related, but separate.

#### 4 The Trouble with Place and Land

What I failed to anticipate was that my hypothesis about 'doing' compulsory Indigenous education work well, that is, by centering Land, exposes an even greater complexity at the heart of this work. The challenge to be addressed in Indigenous education in teacher education is not only about widespread ignorances about Indigenous peoples, Land and histories in Canada—it is also that many students do not seem to understand themselves *in relation to* Place, to Land, to one another.

The dual oppressions of Land and of people has a shared foundation: the Eurocentric worldview that positions *Nature* as a resource to be admired or consumed, and that positions non-white people, and more-than-human beings, as consumable (Apffel-Marglin 2011; Snelgrove et al. 2014). This dual oppression is a foundational understanding of cPBE (Greenwood 2013). So, the assertion that Land must be at the heart of cPBE that works towards Indigenous futurities in teacher education creates multiple and interrelated challenges to address; these epistemological obstacles go to the heart of the Canadian identity. Canada *The Good*, that values only 'the Indians we had in mind' (T. King 2007), and loves the wilderness, is the Canada that continues to rely on primary resource extraction, and relies on the continued oppression and erasure of Indigenous peoples, and *these are interrelated* (Greenwood 2013; Scully 2015). Fair dealings with Indigenous peoples in Canada mean restitution, reparations and rematriation, and deep respect and support for Indigenous languages, bodies, and *Land* (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012; Manuel and Derrickson 2017; Snelgrove et al. 2014; Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013). Learning about, with and from Indigenous knowledges, territories and peoples in what is currently known as Canada must disrupt Canadian common knowledge to support the deep and complex understandings that can lead to the *right relation*.



## 5 Essentialism and Authenticity

While some generalizations are powerful and important in the work of coming to know Indigenous Lands and peoples, some are damaging. Essentialization of Indigenous peoples through stereotyping and through broad attempts at institutional control of Indigenous peoples has been lethally dehumanizing. While the education systems in Canada have oppressed and essentialized Indigenous peoples (e.g., Battiste 1998; Arapaho scholar Michael Marker 2000), it is of crucial importance that as work is done to redress these oppressions and their legacies, the cure is not further essentialization through assumptions about what Indigeneity is in a contemporary context (Marker 2000). Nehiyaw and Métis scholar Tracy Friedel (2010a, b, 2011), too, has troubled the notion of an *authentic* identity for Indigenous peoples, and youth, in particular, that can be oppressive and archaic for learners. The damage of this call for authenticity has been enormous for Indigenous peoples since contact with Europeans and is tied to Eurocentric notions about Land, wilderness and place (see Raibmon 2005).

While Indigenous knowledge and identity are inherently Land-connected, it must be acknowledged that some urban and non-urban Indigenous people do not have access to their heritage epistemologies. While there is a common experience of being Indigenous in Canada, part of this work is to communicate that there are as many different versions of being an Indigenous person as there are Indigenous people; it is here that some Place discourse can contribute to constitutive and intersectional identities (hooks 1990; Malpas 2009; Massey 1994). This adds yet another layer of complexity to the work of bringing Indigenous education respectfully into schools in Canada. However useful the contributions of Place discourse to understanding decolonization in Canada, all lines of inquiry lead back to the central importance of Land; of deeply understanding Land in the context of Indigenous peoples and knowledges in Canada. This need poses a second, deep problem in this context: Many people do not know Land, just as they do not know Indigenous histories, peoples and knowledges.

Hold on! In a book about Rural Education, am I really asserting that only Indigenous peoples know LAND? Over the last almost-20 years of considering these questions in a variety of contexts, I have had a single question posed to me a few times: How many generations does it take to become Indigenous to a place? I have also been asked why I, as a white settler who is profoundly place-connected, and who is always learning Land, am insecure about my connection to Place, to Land. The answers to both questions are interrelated, for me. The answer for me is: I will never be Indigenous to this place, and I am not insecure about my connection to Place, to Land. I recognize that in the places-in-particular where I am at home in the world, there are Indigenous languages, communities, economies, spiritual practices and cultures that have emerged from long-standing reciprocal relationship to Land. So, if I am serious about being a place-connected human, and if I take seriously my own implication in living well in particular places, in right relation, then isn't it only wise to learn from the peoples and knowledges that emerged here? As a white

settler who benefits daily from wealth Canada has accrued from primary resource extraction (these industries pay for health care, education, infrastructure) and does so much more so than most Indigenous peoples do, I am implicated in the systems and actions of domination that continue to disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples in Canada. These actions, these systems, are done in my name, and being a Canadian means that I am implicated both historically, now, and into the future. So, am I saying that someone who lives and works on a farm that has been in a particular family for generations doesn't know their place, doesn't recognize each undulation of ground, each tree, blade of grass, and the changes of the seasons and the years now? Am I saying that a settler who grew up hunting all their life does not have deep bush skills? No! But I am saying that without an understanding of the place through an Indigenous lens—including knowledges, relationships, dispossessions, practices, and dynamic ecosystems over millennia, then that knowledge is missing elements that would make it deep knowledge of Land. This is a crucial element of Land knowledge—it is dynamic, pragmatic, and is fundamentally about recognizing the Land as kin, not resource (Corbett, in this volume) with humility. I have been working in the north for a few years now (Inukjuak, now Tulit'a), and one thing stays constant...I have seen time and time again that the southern scientists are just catching up to what the Inuit, and the Dene and Métis, have always known to be true. The complexity of Indigenous Land knowledge is held in the languages, in practice on the Land. And languages and cultures, like Land, are dynamic. The deeper the Land-knowledge, the more resilient it is, as it shows relationships and patterns over hundreds and thousands of years that are enacted in daily practices to live well in particular places. As places and ecosystems are diverse, so are these knowledges.

One challenge, then, is a struggle between essentialisms. In Indigenous education, we are working to disrupt monolithic stereotypes of Indigenous peoples. A violence done to Indigenous cultures by colonialism, and by settler colonialism, is to render them static: In this way, culture becomes less flexible, less vernacular, and less resilient. Rather than relating to culture and Land with humility, with humor and respect, culture is rigidly interpreted, and factions emerge about how culture and language are enacted. Friedel's (2010a, 2011) troubling of outdoor education and (non-critical) PBE as experienced by the Indigenous youth in her research expresses some of the violence done by OE and PBE that does not do a good job of learning from and expressing Indigenous connections with Land, with Place (see also Corbett, in this volume).

Conversely, though, can it be inferred that OE and cPBE that does a good job of centering and learning from particular and relevant Indigenous knowledges and understandings of Place will mean schooling, or education, that works better for Indigenous youth? I think so, and so do Battiste (1998), Donald (2009), and many eminent Indigenous educators and scholars who work for better education for Indigenous youth (e.g., Bang et al. 2014; Barnhardt and Yup'ik Elder Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley 2005; Battiste 1998, 2000; Lumbee scholar Brian Brayboy and Maughan 2009; Chambers 2006, 2008; Donald 2009; Friedel 2010a, b, 2011; Marker 2000, 2006; Scott and Carrier Nation scholar Dustin Louie, in this volume). cPBE in teacher education, for OE and for Indigenous education, must work alongside, and centre,

Land and Indigenous knowledges so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Canada might have teachers who have been schooled themselves in education for Indigenous futurities. These futurities may be supported both by exposing the interrelation and implication of all Canadians in positive Indigenous futurities. But how?

By calling for Land-based education, we are in danger of rigidly interpreting Indigenous knowledges and identities; what about urban Indigenous peoples, and those who are not engaged with Land? So—Indigenous education in teacher education cannot only be about Land, as this would elide, again, many complex iterations of Indigenous knowledges and identities. And yet—Land is the progenitor of Indigenous knowledges, Nations, peoples. Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred and Corntassel (2005) described Indigeneity as an “oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in the struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization” (p. 597). Throughout my learning about and from Indigenous peoples, I have been taught, and heard reference to, the “Original Instructions” (Cayuga Chief Jake Thomas, personal communication, January 1996).

No matter where you go on the planet, Indigenous and traditional cultures regularly refer to the “Original Instructions” or “First Teachings” given to them by their Creator(s)/Earth-maker/Life-Giver/Great Spirit/Great Mystery/Spirit Guides. Original Instructions refer to the many diverse teachings, lessons, and ethics expressed in the origin stories and oral traditions of Indigenous peoples. They are the literal and metaphorical instructions, passed on orally from generation to generation, for how to be a good human being living in reciprocal relation with all of our seen and unseen relatives. They are natural laws that, when ignored, have natural consequences. (Turtle Mountain Chippewa scholar Melissa Nelson 2008, p. 2)

Learning these “Original Instructions” is crucial to living well in particular places, and is the pathway to *right relation*. These instructions are responsive and dynamic to changes in ecosystems, relationships, and communities while expressing ancient knowledges built from time on the Land.

Place discourse is full of essentialism—the spirit of place, the genius loci, as immutable, and as discoverable by new inhabitants of place—and can be very exclusive. Progressive Place theorists (e.g., hooks 1990; Malpas 1999, 2009; Massey 1994; Piersol, 2014), geographers (Baldwin, 2012) and cPBE theorists (Chambers 2006, 2008; Greenwood 2013) hold that Places, while they can be sites of domination, also hold multiple experiences, perspectives and dynamic relationships. I align myself with those who understand that Indigenous perspective and knowledge of Place is the deepest—the most adaptive, informed, resilient, dynamic—after millennia, or even 500 years, of the pattern recognition that forms relationships with Place. Where does the wind come from at what times, in which seasons? Where do the plants grow? What factors correlate with the ebbs and flows of populations of plants, animals, birds, insects? What is here now that was not before, in an ancestor’s time? Is there one way to connect to Land? And yet, after deeply studying Place discourse, I am confronted by the understanding that Place, too, is based on colonial logics (Lloyd and Wolfe 2016) of Indigenous erasure and settler futurities. Place discourse has not included Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and connections to places. As I call for Land-based learning and knowledges to be centered in cPBE, I want to be

very clear that Land-based learning, or a pedagogy of Land, is not a subset of cPBE, but it may be a practice alongside it; it is a call to center the Original Instructions, and *all my relations*, in education. cPBE calls into view intersectional oppressions, multiple perspectives on Place, and relationships between communities and human and more-than-human community members. Learners inhabit and inequitably benefit from Indigenous lands, and it is learning from Indigenous peoples and knowledges that demands ethical relationality (Donald 2009) that is particular to these territories, and to Indigenous peoples and communities. Just like with the Indigenization of the university, the call to ‘include’ Land-based learning misses the point that the problem is that it needs to be called in at all: That the colonial structures and practices of education, and of teacher education, make this necessary.

The framing of Land as static, or as a call to authenticity, is another potential interpretation of my earnest call for Land-based education that centres Indigenous knowledge and connection to place, to *Land*. However, this would gravely misunderstand Indigenous connections to Land and Place. Over thousands of years, Indigenous connections to Place/Land are adaptive, vernacular, innovative, flexible. The linked and co-constructed biological and social systems invoked by Cruikshank (2005) earlier in this piece have evolved in relation to one another over millennia in the case of Indigenous peoples and lands. Ecosystems change, cultures change. It would also misunderstand how powerful Indigenous knowledge of Place must be, how grounded, to roll with the dynamics of these changes. Two hundred years of industrial capitalism is turbo-charging change, but the most sophisticated observers of those changes are those whose language and daily practices are tied to those particular places. These knowledges are of profound and immeasurable value—and this value should be for the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and Land, and they are also fundamentally pragmatic instructions about how to live well in a place, with an understanding of interrelationship, of kinship, and of human dependence on and responsibility to the more-than-human.

For us, the ownership of territory is a marriage of the Chief and the land. Each Chief has an ancestor who encountered and acknowledged the life of the land. From such encounters come power. The land, the plants, the animals and the people all have spirit – they all must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law.

The Chief is responsible for ensuring that all the people in his House respect the spirit in the land and in all living things. When a Chief directs his House properly and the laws are followed, then that original power can be recreated. That is the source of the Chief’s authority....By following the law, the power flows from the land to the people through the Chief; by using the wealth of the territory, the House feasts its Chief so he can properly fulfill the law. This cycle has been repeated on my land for thousands of years...Our histories show that whenever new people came to this land, they had to follow its laws if they wished to stay. The Chiefs who were already here had the responsibility to teach the law to the newcomers. They then waited to see if the land was respected. If it was not, the newcomers had to pay compensation and leave. The Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en have waited and observed the Europeans for a hundred years....We do not seek a decision as to whether our system might continue or not. It will continue. (Gitksan Chief Delgam Uukw, May 11, 1987 in Wa and Uukw 1989, pp. 7–9)

Reading what the chiefs said...the relationships between the chief, the Land and the community all flow through each other.... The Indigenous connection to Land is this too.

My (white settler) connection with Land cannot replace this—cannot displace this. I can learn from and respect this relationship, and understand that I have no such claim. In these Indigenous territories, this is part of connecting well to Land, to Place. Enacting this is perilous, and brings the ever-present danger of colonization, of privileging my own futurity over Indigenous futurity, especially considering the pernicious ways whiteness works.

And yet—Land is at the very heart of how I see myself in the world—particular Land, in Anishinaabe territory. Ten years after I have been there, I can walk every inch of it in my head and heart. My connection to Place, and Land, and my relationships to particular Indigenous peoples, communities, and Lands does not qualify or authorize me to speak for, or to speak over, Indigenous knowledge holders. I hope to join the wedge of scholars that demands cPBE, and resources, that centres Indigenous knowledges, scholarship, and community members to support Indigenous futures. I hope to teach in a way that inspires and supports action by settlers, to fight for Indigenous Lands and futures.

If curriculum can be understood as stories we tell about the world and our place in it, then we need to start telling different stories in order to renew balanced and sustainable relationships with the more-than-human entities that give life. What can be the sources of inspiration for these stories of relationship renewal? Becoming wisely aware to the unique animacy of places is a very good place to start. (Donald 2018)

Settlers *must* understand themselves in relation to Land—the obstacles to doing so, and the dysconsciousness (J. King 1991) that supports the exploitation of Land continue to result in terrifying extractions and changes to the lifeways that we, and all other beings on Earth rely on. Settlers *must* understand themselves in relation to Indigenous peoples: the unbearable violences that continue to be enacted upon Indigenous communities and bodies are the responsibility of every Canadian. In a book about rural education in Canada, remembering the violent death of Cree man Colten Boushie<sup>4</sup> is necessary; the media and social media coverage surrounding his death and of the subsequent trial shines a terrible light on the ignorance, mistrust and racialized perceptions that abound in rural settings in Canada, and demonstrates how lethal these are for Indigenous peoples. Learning Land and learning about, with and from Indigenous peoples must take their central place in Canadian education: Initial teacher education is a pathway to make a widespread change in service of Indigenous futurities in Canada and the Lands that we all live on.

Learning the Land in a way that ignores the reciprocal relationship that the Land has with the Indigenous peoples of that Land means violence to the human history of the place; both in terms of the impact the humans have had on the place, and the impact the place has had on the humans. While the Place theorists and many outdoor and environmental educators account for this reciprocity, they still seem

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/colten-boushie-gerald-stanley-not-guilty-verdict-1.5008285>.

to largely ignore Indigenous histories, knowledges and territories. The fidelity of critical pedagogy, and subsequently of critical pedagogies of Place, to social justice, is both important and uncomfortable, as some social justice paradigms do not attend well to communal and relational accountabilities (see also Martin, in this volume; Scott and Louie, in this volume) As Tuck and Yang (2018) remind us:

Social justice education--whether or not we continue to use those words to define it--is the crux of the future of our field. Social justice is not the other of the field of education, it IS the field. There is no future of the field of education if it cannot meaningfully attend to social contexts, historical and contemporary structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and antiblackness. Social justice is not the catchall; it is the all. (Tuck and Yang 2018, p. 5)

From a settler standpoint, ignoring the Indigenous history of the places that are important to me in Ontario would also mean a denial of my own complicity in the continuing oppression and colonization of Indigenous people. Decolonizing my own perceptions of place, and my practice as a teacher of/in places means valuing the Indigenous history, peoples and knowledge born of that place, and acting accordingly. Going forward, I hope this means participating in active restitution to Indigenous peoples and communities (Alfred and Corntassel 2005). In this way, I may be able to inhabit these places in a way that respects land and people and fosters reconciliation between the peoples and the lands of Canada. "To have a sense of place is not to own but rather to be owned by the places we inhabit; it is to 'own up' to the complexity and mutuality of both place and human being" (Malpas 2009). (I think that the 'we' that Malpas writes of is humans, writ large, but I am perennially uncomfortable with writing that seeks to essentialize in this way.)

Learning Land is central to learning Indigenous education in teacher education; as Land is the foundation of Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and traditional economies, it is also at the heart of the violent historical and ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada. For Canadians to move forward in supporting Indigenous futurities means understanding how all Canadians are implicated in these oppressions and in this reordering of our relationships to Lands and to peoples.

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# Onikaniwak: Land-Based Learning as ReconcilACTION



Dawn Wallin and Sherry Peden

**Abstract** This paper describes an innovative land-based program called *Onikaniwak: For those who lead*. Onikaniwak is designed to bolster the capacity of educators to create culturally relevant teaching and learning environments focused on the experiences of First Nations and Métis learners. The chapter outlines the ways in which Onikaniwak supports teacher and leadership education by affirming rural, remote and northern spaces; providing hands-on engagement with experiential pedagogies of place; co-creating an environment of inclusion and respect for diversity, and; acting as a model for transformative learning and reconciliation.

**Keywords** Land-based education · Indigenous education · Culturally relevant education · Experiential learning · Ally-settler relationships · Reconciliation

## 1 Onikaniwak: Land-Based Learning as ReconcilACTION

I am a fourth-generation settler whose family farms land that was “given” to settlers by the Crown under the ruse that the space where we settled was uninhabited and therefore free for settlement. As a child, I remember “picking roots” with my younger sister to help clear the sloughs and treed areas for cultivation. My mom would pack us a picnic lunch and off we would go to hand pile the stones and roots that were too small for the rock-picker behind the tractor to pick up. The novelty would wear off rather quickly in the heat and dust of the day, but every once in a while, my grandfather or dad would point out a “treasure” that would fascinate us. These treasures were arrowheads and tomahawk heads that stood in silent testimony to the fact that we were not the First Peoples whose lives were integrally connected to that particular space. We would run our fingers along the sharp edges of the arrows and the smooth surfaces of the center of the tomahawk and pause to reflect on who left those items behind,

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Sherry Peden: Deceased.

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and what their lives must have been like. Sometimes I would wonder if my steps were the very first on a given piece of land, or if I was stepping into a footprint of someone who came before me. And yet, I would always think that whoever left those items were “wandering through” the territory and had not settled there as we had. I never questioned that the land was rightfully ours. Although I never heard my grandfather speak of Indigenous peoples, I remember that he would often keep the items in the garage, as if in respect to the history of the space that was left unacknowledged in any other venue. Obviously, he did not want the items to be plowed under and forgotten as the other stones were. But neither did the items warrant more attention than cursory novelty, because we were on a mission of agricultural progress.

The words of this paper, and my career of work in the area of rural education and leadership could not be written except for my family’s complicit engagement in Canada’s settler-colonial past. My lineage, and Canada’s 150-year-old heritage stem from the land: its importance to survival, the resources it provides, and the consequences of greed for the dominion over that land that damaged the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

## 2 The Importance of Place: Indigenous and Settler Relationships

The erroneous claim of the Doctrine of Discovery from the time of Christopher Columbus in 1492 created a fallacy that the land that eventually became Canada was uninhabited. The Doctrine of Discovery deemed the land *terra nullius*, meaning that it was not inhabited by peoples who had an inherent claim to it, primarily because those individuals were not Christian, and therefore, not deemed to be fully human (Mahoney 2016; Miller et al. 2010). From the very beginning of colonial contact on what is known as Turtle Island, therefore, the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has been defined by land and place. By the time that the *Royal Proclamation of 1763* was created by King George III, inherent Aboriginal rights to land were acknowledged primarily as a political ploy for westward expansion that would create a “monopoly” for England for dealing with Indigenous peoples who hadn’t been as easily eradicated as was first conceived (Fenge & Aldridge 2015). As a consequence, the *Royal Proclamation of 1763* remains a key legislative document in Indigenous land claims, as it sets up the responsibility of the Crown to negotiate with Indigenous peoples who have inherent rights to land.

At the onset of the colonial relationship, the Crown’s desire for westward expansion and resource extraction favored the position of Indigenous peoples who knew the land, where to find coveted resources, and how to survive the changing seasons (Logan 2015; Mahoney 2016). With time, military might, and the imposition of colonial law and policy, however, the position of Indigenous peoples was greatly eroded. Ultimately, First Peoples were displaced from the lands that were intricately bound to their languages, ceremonies, and culture. In the prairies, the numbered treaties

were negotiated with a spirit and intent that were never realized (Fenge & Aldridge 2015; TRC 2015). Rather, First Nations peoples were segregated onto reserve lands, and the *Indian Act* became the mechanism for administering racist policies of segregation, discrimination, and assimilation (Mahoney 2016; Simon & Clark 2013). Métis people who resisted the assault on their territory were labeled as traitors to the Crown, were put under siege and were literally run off their homelands (Logan 2015). As Ovid Mercredi noted (Strongfront TV 2015), Indigenous people became landless people in their own homelands. Residential schools further alienated Indigenous peoples from the land by displacing children from their family spaces, incarcerating them in institutions where their relationship to land was based on servitude, and denying them their cultural practices and language that are inherently based on relationships to land (Logan 2015; TRC 2015). In fact, it was the severing of Indigenous people from the land, in addition to their families, that caused significant disruption to Indigenous ways of knowing and being, because all aspects of tradition, language and culture are interconnected with the land (Hansen & Antsanen 2016; McGuire–Kishebakabaykwe 2010).

Settlers, on the other hand, were lured to the Canadian landscape by calls of “free land.” Many people came to Canada to escape poverty and hardship in their own homelands; certainly, that was the case for my family. However, as Logan (2015) notes, “Canada gave homes to persecuted and violated immigrant communities, but in order to make these homes available, they violated Indigenous peoples. It is easy to ignore that history” (p. 444).

Although it is difficult to understand how anyone could believe that the entire Canadian landscape was terra nullius, immigrants were eager to start an adventurous new chapter in their lives and were, therefore, more inclined to accept the propaganda of the day. The majority who settled in the prairies were also white European immigrants who upheld Eurocentric worldviews related to dominion over nature and capitalistic progress (Nash 2002). By the time my ancestors settled on the prairies, First Peoples had been displaced from it. People trusted the government, internalized the stereotypes of Indian savagery that convinced them that it was better for Indians to be kept separate, and were desirous of the individualistic dream of prosperity that came with being new landowners—they, too, were colonized even as their position was privileged within the discourse (Nash 2002).

As my own family stories attest, what many people were promised, and what they received when they got to their destinations, were not always the same. My ancestors took ownership of a section of bush that was a far cry from the cultivated farmland they envisioned. My great-grandmother on my Dad’s side of the family moved from a beautiful farm in Sweden near a thriving community of amenities to a dirt floor sod house in the middle of the bush where life was about clearing the land with a horse and axe in order to survive. Life was not glamorous, but people soon realized how integral the land was to every aspect of their being. Because of that, whether out of respect or frustration, a deep connection to the land became an integral aspect of the identity of prairie settlers. This identity was passed on to me; whenever I have the opportunity to be out of the city and on the land, my spirit is nourished.

I acknowledge that my life is sustained by the land of Treaty 6 on the homeland of the Métis Nation, and it is in this space that I have come to cherish, resist, and critique my own sense of history and relationship to the land, and to Indigenous peoples. It is only right, therefore, that it is in this territory that I do my part as an ally, and as a land-based rural educator to repair some the damage of our colonial past, and to restore relationships that were intentionally severed and later forgotten as Indigenous peoples were literally and figuratively displaced from the land, from their families, and by extension, from their language and culture (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] 2015). I believe, similar to Gruenewald (2003) that what is needed is a place-conscious education that:

[...] aims to work against the isolation of schooling's discourses and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling. Furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there. (p. 620)

Place/land provides a common, integral connection between settler society and Indigenous peoples, even if that connection is framed from two very different world-views and experiences. Place/land has been the site of struggle in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and it will, therefore, be place/land that can help us heal and work towards reconciliation. Flynn et al. (2010) note that place-based pedagogies can help students deconstruct white privilege as “[s]tudents are encouraged to examine and respond to the needs of their communities while gaining understanding of how local institutions function and social relationships shape experiences of privileged and marginalized groups” (p. 138).

This paper describes an innovative land-based program called *Onikaniwak: For those who lead*, held on the traditional territory of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation at Egg Lake, Manitoba. Onikaniwak attempts to build the capacity of school leaders to foster relationships with Indigenous peoples and to support culturally relevant teaching and learning that focuses on the experiences of First Nations, and Métis learners (Wallin & Peden 2014). We believe that the reason for the success of the program is due largely to the fact that Onikaniwak affirms rural, remote and northern spaces; it provides hands-on engagement with experiential pedagogies of place; it co-creates an environment of inclusion and respect for diversity, and; it acts as a model for transformative learning and reconciliation.

### 3 Onikaniwak: For Those Who Lead

Onikaniwak was sparked through an alliance between myself, a scholar from rural Saskatchewan with agricultural roots, and my friend and colleague Dr. Sherry Peden, an Indigenous woman “from the bush” in Manitoba. Despite our disparate backgrounds, cultures and life experiences, our close personal ties to rural/remote/northern spaces bonded a relationship that affirmed the need for reconciliation between Indigenous and settler societies. Onikaniwak began as a result of

Dr. Peden's dissertation that found that as long as school principals were not committed to furthering Indigenous education, the efforts of the Government of Manitoba to mandate an undergraduate teacher education course dedicated to that end would be of little consequence (Peden 2011). The purpose of Onikaniwak is to develop knowledge and capacity in Indigenous history, worldviews, culture, and pedagogies for those who will be leaders for reconciliation. The course was developed as a field experience opportunity that was situated at the University of Manitoba and offered as a two-week summer institute at the post-baccalaureate and graduate levels of study. It constituted a number of day-trips to First Nations and/or Métis institutions, schools, and program opportunities that focused on public school leaders. Though the course was successful in its general intent, after its second offering, a research study of its efficacy, and discussions with Indigenous colleagues and Elders confirmed that a rural/remote land-based experiential learning opportunity would more fully enable the instructors to "walk the talk" of Indigenous pedagogy and worldview (Wallin & Peden 2014).

As personal circumstances would have it, Dr. Peden became the Vice President of University College of the North (UCN), which has as its mandate a mission to foster northern and Indigenous education. UCN is also the only University operated by a tri-party governance system that includes an Elder's Council. Sherry was able to use her influence to support the course through UCN, complete with the development of a leadership team committed to designing a culturally relevant, land-based opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. Although a number of writers advocate for land-based programs that incorporate Indigenous perspectives (Borrows 2016; Hansen 2018; Michell 2018; Robidoux & Wade Mason 2017), Onikaniwak remains the first (and as far as we know the only) one of its kind with an emphasis on K-12 and post-secondary leadership open to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as those interested in the course for professional development purposes. Onikaniwak was intentionally designed to incorporate the teachings of Nehiyaw (Cree) and northern Métis Elders, traditional knowledge keepers, academics, community members, and institutional partnerships to deliberately unsettle "whose knowledge counts" in Euro-Canadian educational institutions. For the third offering of the course, Onikaniwak came "home" to Opaskwayak Cree Nation territory at Egg Lake, Manitoba, north of The Pas. Each year since, additional innovations that support land-based learning and Indigenous worldviews have been added to the program, including a family culture camp, cultural programming such as beading, drum and rattle making, medicine walks, sweats, and the incorporation of local food, animals and scenery for learning purposes.

The course offers course credit through the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Manitoba, and Brandon University. Learners from Canadian and American post-secondary institutions have enrolled in the course to receive credit. The course is also offered as a professional development opportunity that has benefited administrators in public and private school systems, college systems, and university systems in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Montana. This program has been offered for eight years, and it continues to grow in scope and enrolment.

## 4 Place Consciousness and the Success of Onikaniwak

The findings of our initial research study and comments and testimonials from participants, facilitators, and the leadership team of Onikaniwak suggest that Onikaniwak is successful primarily because of its deep connection to the land. The following sections detail the ways in which the course affirms rural, remote and northern spaces; provides hands-on engagement with experiential pedagogies of place; co-creates an environment of inclusion and respect for diversity, and; acts as a model for transformative learning and reconciliation.

### 4.1 *Affirmation of Rural, Remote and Northern Spaces*

The learning that occurs at Onikaniwak cannot be learned anywhere else; it is situated in the rural/remote/northern site of Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN), within the particular relationships that exist between settler and Indigenous societies in the area. It was created out of a partnership between UCN and OCN, because of the strong working relationships between individuals at UCN and OCN. UCN has a mandate to focus on northern (rural/remote) education, and Indigenous education. OCN has a desire to promote and foster Indigenous education for its members. The northern landscape has shaped the independent spirit of the people who maintain traditional lifestyles related to hunting, trapping, and fishing, and who wish to pass on their teachings to subsequent generations. The land is replete with traditional medicines, rock paintings along the waterways, and wild animals such as bears, lynx and moose. The language and traditions of the local Indigenous people reflect the sacred responsibility to take care of the land, and each other. The northern, and relatively remote, location, underscores how dependent humanity is on the land for our existence, and necessitates that everyone in camp works together to support our daily activities.

Individuals are awestruck by the beauty of the space, by the water, by the sunsets, and by the diversity that exists in the ecosystem. They are also struck by the enormity of disaster when they learn of the pollutants that have made their way into communities and are destroying this pristine habitat. The juxtaposition of northern beauty and environmental harm become hard lessons to learn once participants move from seeing the site as a “camp” to an understanding that they are guests on the ancestral home of Indigenous peoples who have been differentially affected by environmental harm. There is no way to “unsee” the sites that affirm this northern space, and there is no way to hide in blissful ignorance from the devastation brought about by profit-based interests. The land-based course, therefore, affirms rural, remote and northern spaces, while at the same time, it does not shield people from the environmental degradation that has occurred from clear-cutting of trees a kilometer off the highway, from the pollutants in the waterways, and from the decline in traditional plants and animals. This is rural/remote/northern education in its most fundamental form. The land cannot, and does not, lie.



## ***4.2 Experiential Pedagogies of Place***

The course is also deliberately created around experiential learning activities and pedagogies of place. For example, each day, our morning begins with a pipe ceremony and song that acknowledges the land and asks that we have a good day together. Our relationships are cemented each morning as we sit directly on the land around a fire in a tipi that houses up to 150 people. While the children partake in cultural and land-based activities, the adults are immersed in sessions that include western and Indigenous pedagogies. Each day, participants have the opportunity to engage in cultural activities that are premised on pedagogies of place, including medicine walks, sweats, smoking fish, and cultural teachings that originate in the area. Participants are encouraged to dialogue with the Elders who attend the camp, and who often tell traditional stories around the campfire in the evening. We also learn to respect the camp, and its surroundings, as we are conscious of the imprint our group makes on the site, and we learn to live together as a community.

The academic assignments of the camp include a major emphasis on reflection that is based on temporal understandings of engagement with a place (one reflection before, one reflection during, and one reflection after attendance at the camp). One of the major assignments is to craft an action plan that fosters reconciliation that could be undertaken in one's own place and space (professional or personal), regardless of one's position. The assignment with the most impact each year includes a group assignment where participants of the camp (whether engaged for credit or professional development), work together to demonstrate what they have learned throughout the week with the support of land-based materials or pedagogies. No western technology is allowed. Participants are also taught to respect local Indigenous protocols of place with the offering of tobacco, and other protocols taught to them by cultural leaders. This culminating activity occurs on the last evening of the camp, and is always a demonstration of meaning-making that is much more powerful than any individual written text can offer.

## ***4.3 Environment of Inclusion and Respect for Diversity***

Our camp exemplifies an environment of inclusion and respect for diversity, partly due to the isolation and physical limitations of the camp itself. Frankly, we are growing too big for the space of the facility. This necessitates that participants must sleep in close quarters (sometimes 6–8 to a room on cots), and find ways to live together with shared washroom facilities and limited opportunities for personal space. Some individuals bring tents, and others learn to live with bunk bed sleeping quarters. For the past two years, a number of participants have self-described themselves as gender-neutral and/or transgendered/transitioning students, each of whom has been concerned about their reception from the group. In addition, there has been a growing attendance of international students, as well as participants who do not represent the

cultural backgrounds of either Indigenous peoples or white settlers. In the land-based setting, there has never been a problem with the social attitudes towards diversity; camp participants understand that “making it work” in this less-than-ideal facility is more important than catering to pretentious social attitudes of exclusion. We also articulate an attitude of inclusivity in the orientation prior to camp; we acknowledge that diversity is supported and set norms of inclusion from the start. In addition, the participants who come to the camp are generally predisposed to respecting diversity issues, even though most wind up confronting issues of white privilege, or reversely, issues of mistrust of whiteness as the week progresses. In fact, because the camp deals with many sensitive diversity issues, the intersections inherent in people’s identities often lead to emotional connections to the content in ways that many people do not expect. To help participants deal with these issues, we ensure that there are qualified counselors available to work with individuals, as well as Elders, and cultural healers. We also find that the land is healing—oftentimes, people note that they went for a walk, or a canoe ride, to think things through, and it was the land that soothed their thoughts and hearts.

Inevitably, tensions arise given the deliberate focus on the colonial relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In order to offset some of the tension, we ensure that discussions occur in a safe environment, and the emotions around each of the topics are allowed to surface. None of us live in emotional vacuums, and we are all members of the treaty relationship. Political correctness oftentimes hampers our ability to engage in honest dialogue with each other. Each year, there are conflicts based on issues of contention, whether that includes the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women, children in care, stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples, deliberation on who “counts” for Métis ancestry, land claim issues, etc. We deliberately craft daily sessions in ways that help us build relationships first. We build to a point where we can engage in difficult and emotional sessions on residential schools, and Canada’s genocidal policies, after which we move to topics that help people create some emotional distance as they come to terms with what they have learned about themselves, about school systems, and about Canada’s colonial history.

As a consequence of this deliberate framing of the topics, as well as the consequences of the spatial limitations, we have been able to set up a situation where relationships are prioritized, where care for self, others and land become paramount, and where we see each other as human beings, rather than as categories against which we can discriminate. This is evidenced in the hugs we see each morning after ceremony, at the tears during and at the end of the week, with the care that is demonstrated first by the leadership team, and then by participants as they are moved to care for others in distress, at the attempts to keep in touch that have been initiated by students through the creation of a Facebook page for the course (unsolicited by facilitators), and by the repeat participation of students who come back each year to help support the camp.

## 5 Model of Transformative Learning and Reconciliation

The camp sessions are deliberately crafted to unsettle “whose knowledge counts” in order to transform understandings of teaching and learning. We work very hard to unsettle the notion of teacher as “expert”, and we promote the idea that each one of us can be knowledge keepers who contribute as teachers in some spaces, and who learn from others in other spaces. We privilege the lessons taught to us by the children at camp, as well as the Elders, the professionals, and the undergraduate/graduate students who all hold life experiences to share. We also deliberately unsettle the positional privileges that individuals hold, as we recognize that there is much to learn from personal and well as professional roles of principal/superintendent/dean, or mother/son/grandfather. We recognize in this space that none of us can completely separate ourselves from the plethora of roles we hold, and neither should we do so, because each role we hold adds to the experiences and learning we can share with others. We unsettle the privilege of colonial ideology that exists in systems and educational curricula and discuss ways in which Indigenous teachings can help educators “walk two worlds” (or perhaps more) in culturally respectful ways. We also unsettle the dangers of pan-Indian approaches to curricula and systems thinking that have taken root in our education systems and effectively silence the diversity of Indigenous perspectives.

By the end of the camp, participant perspectives on learning and reconciliation have been transformed. As noted earlier, most participants who come to the camp are predisposed to working towards equity and/or reconciliation. However, many of the non-Indigenous participants have not engaged this deeply on issues of white privilege, their own complicit behaviors of colonization, and their acceptance of institutionalized racism that is alive and well in our school systems. Many have work to do to move beyond feelings of white guilt and white fragility, yet they leave the camp more committed to working towards reconciliation. Many Indigenous participants come to understand more deeply how their family histories are connected to the intergenerational effects of colonialism, the residential school system, or the Sixties Scoop, and they leave better prepared to work alongside allies with less skepticism and mistrust. Perhaps the greatest shift we notice each year is the move from the language of “us” and “them” to the language of “we” in how participants begin to preface their work towards reconciliation. Many non-Indigenous participants claim their hesitancy in doing this work, but they acknowledge themselves as allies who no longer can ignore or make excuses for inaction. The Indigenous participants in the group learn to understand that they are not alone in this work and that there are caring, committed individuals in school systems who want to work towards change. Together, we are stronger, and together, we create the conditions such that our children will realize a spirit of reconciliation that our generation will kindle with efforts such as Onikaniwak.

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, we cannot say with absolute certainty that our course is reshaping educational policy and practice in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. However, we can say that based on the findings of our original research study, the feedback we have received as verbal anecdotes and emails from participants, the information presented on the public Facebook page, and the continual return of participants each year, we are creating a solid base of Indigenous educators and allies from a cross-section of positions in K-12 and post-secondary educational contexts who are committed to changing the education system for all learners as they work in more culturally responsive and land-based ways. As evidence, we leave you with some of the testimonials from participants who volunteered to be part of a professional video we created for the camp:

I've been teaching for 10 years, and I don't have very much experience at all with First Nations and Metis students. Being able to be part of the ceremonies was a great opportunity for me. (non-Indigenous graduate student teacher)

We talk about tokenism, or the tip of the iceberg teaching where people will use symbols, or bring in one speaker, or do one cultural activity, and think that's enough. As a teacher I want this to be an on-going conversation with my students from day one till they graduate. I want to dig deeper into the messy issues. I think I owe it to my students. (non-Indigenous undergraduate student)

For me this is like coming home. I feel rejuvenated. I mean I love my colleagues, but here it's like being at home. (First Nations graduate student social worker)

I came to learn, but I'm finding I'm learning more about myself in this course. We're not even half-way through, and I've reached a personal milestone. It's really touched me in a fantastic, personal way. (Métis post-secondary leader)

I studied colonization, and we're learning tips and tools on how to decolonize our subject matter. But nothing every prepared us to decolonize our work places with our peers, our colleagues, our bosses. Places in general. (First Nations undergraduate student)

Something else I've appreciated has been that they're showing us through action what Indigenous education can look like. They've brought in speakers, they debrief with us, they help us work through difficult emotions sometimes. But they are also giving us the theory and the real, like, why this is so important academically as well as on a more personal level. So for me, I really feel that they're showing, rather than just talking about it, and that's really a powerful thing. (non-Indigenous graduate student school leader)

We believe that the individuals who have come to Onikaniwak leave transformed. They have become more skeptical of the status quo, they are questioning the information they receive in their systems and their communities, and they are deconstructing their own positionality as they deconstruct the foundational assumptions of the systems in which they work.

In 2015, Madden (2015) outlined four pathways to engage Indigenous education with/in teacher education: learning from Indigenous traditional models of teaching; pedagogies for decolonization; Indigenous and anti-racist education, and Indigenous

and place-based education. Onikaniwak utilizes all four of these pathways, underpinned by a focus on relationality, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt 1991). Participants are transformed by an embodied learning experience that engages them cognitively, physically, emotionally and spiritually. As a consequence, participants state that they leave with new “lenses” and cannot “unsee” what they have learned at the camp. Many participants acknowledge that they are going back into spaces where they may be the only person who is interested in reconciliation, though fortunately, a growing number of participants each year state that their educational contexts are making strides towards reconciliation. We fundamentally believe that our land-based, experiential learning course has taken on a life of its own, and we are working on making it sustainable regardless of whether Sherry and I are its facilitators. In our view, it is the land, and the spirit of reconciliation that is doing this good work and changing the hearts of participants; we are simply the facilitators who make sure that the systems in which we work create the space for this transformative experience to occur in the hearts and minds of participants.

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# Developing a STEAM Curriculum of Place for Teacher Candidates: Integrating Environmental Field Studies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems



Kevin O'Connor

**Abstract** Through my relationships with Indigenous communities, I have a deeply held conviction that sustained deliberations on the connections between Indigenous knowledge systems and place-based thinking can provide significant opportunities for reframing teacher education practices. As a science teacher educator, I am interested in the possibilities of a teacher education program based on the principles of “place-based education” that assists teacher candidates to become better able to learn from a science curriculum of place. The purpose of this research is to investigate how teacher candidates’ experiences in environmental place-based field studies with community partners can inform an integrated STEAM practicum semester based on a curriculum of place.

**Keywords** STEAM education · Teacher education · Place-based learning · Theory and practice · Integration · Indigenous knowledge · Critical pedagogy · Self-study · School-university partnerships

## 1 Purpose

As a science teacher educator involved in a new four-year Bachelor of Education program, I am interested in the possibilities of an alternative approach to teacher education based on principles of relational, place-based teacher education that prepares teacher candidates for the complex and ever-changing educational environment. I have taught within traditional “theory-to-practice” (Carlson 1999) teacher education programs at other institutions and, like other educators (Wideen et al. 1998), face the challenge—and frustration—of trying to have an impact on the later teaching practice of our teacher candidates (Dillon and O’Connor 2010). I seek to foster what Argyris and Schön (1974) call *double-loop* learning, vis-a-vis the powerful impact that practicum experiences have on teacher candidates and beginning teachers. One of the reasons for this lack of integration of theory and practice is that

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theoretical/campus-based courses and school-based teacher candidate teaching tend to be completely divided into different time periods, different staff, and different places (Clandinin 1995; Wideen et al. 1998) and “as a consequence, our students quite appropriately divide their professional education into two unrelated parts as they are expected effectively to change discourses and cross culturally determined borders in order to learn” (Rosean and Florio-Ruane 2008, p. 712). Such conclusions have prompted educators to investigate alternate approaches to teacher education that foster realistic experiences (Korthagen 2001) among teacher candidates in order to help them move beyond these typical limitations in their development as teachers.

Most specifically within my particular field of science education, teacher candidates and novice teachers often do not feel well prepared to teach science to their students; in particular, many feel that they possess little content and conceptual knowledge in science because of a lack of exposure or negative school science experiences (Banilower et al. 2013; Fulp 2002; Mantzicopoulos et al. 2008). Beginning teachers may also feel pressured to omit science from their instructional time due to an increasing, often mandated, emphasis on other program of studies (Griffith and Scharmann 2008; Marx and Harris 2006). Another major contributing factor could also lie in the attitudes toward science and the self-efficacy beliefs teacher candidates hold about their own personal ability to teach science (Eshach 2003; Kirik 2013; Riggs and Enoch 1990).

Central to this research is the identification and potential of key features associated with deliberate place-based pedagogical interventions intended to better integrate theory and practice and also expose participants' assumptions and beliefs about their science learning through more effective practices. This includes a focus on a curriculum of place (Chambers 2008), which links peoples and places (rural and urban) and acknowledges a balance and harmony with the environment as part of a knowledge system. The design of our STEAM curriculum of place housed within the four-year Bachelor of Education program at Mount Royal University (Calgary, Alberta, Canada) might be best characterized as a pedagogy that is responsive to local conditions and the cultural, social, economic, and environmental traditions of the educational context (Cajete 1999; Kincheloe 2001; Wattchow and Brown 2011). Focusing on theory and practice links, our program integrates STEAM (Science, Technology, Visual Arts and Mathematics) focused field studies and inquiry-based projects utilizing a place-based approach that puts considerable onus on ecological field studies and longitudinal environmental assessments. Through a social-constructivist lens, in-school seminars, integrated weekly within a 5-week practicum, each involving cohorts of 8–12 teacher candidates from four partner schools, are facilitated by teacher educators to develop a sense of community (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) and support teacher candidates to reflect upon their teaching and develop responsive educational practices and adaptive expertise (Beck and Kosnik 2006; Loughran 2002).

Using terminology from Donald Schön (1983, 1987, and 1995), goals for the interventions are that teacher candidates become consciously aware of tacit principles



that drive their practice (theories-in-action), but also begin to learn to reflect-on-action (post-practice) and eventually to reflect-in-action (during practice) in order to transform their practice as science teacher educators.

Despite evidence of the lack of influence of teacher education courses on candidates' subsequent practice, recent analyses of effective teacher education programs offer promising ways forward through the use of transformative approaches, using teacher candidates' teaching experiences as a basis for learning through critical reflection and socio-constructivist dialogue (Beck and Kosnik 2006; Darling-Hammond 2006; Dillon and O'Connor 2010; Korthagen 2001; Loughran 2002, 2006, 2010) as a recognition in the importance of the *authority of experience* (Munby and Russell 1994). As a science education field, little is known about incorporating such new pedagogical approaches to practicum learning into traditional science education program structures. It is this significant gap in our professional knowledge as science teacher educators that this research addresses.

The purpose of this research is to investigate how teacher candidates' experiences in STEAM field studies with community partners can inform an integrated practicum semester based on a curriculum of place (Chambers 2008). Many contributions to education have been made through non-Indigenous perspectives of place. Place-based education (Emekauwa 2004; Gruenewald 2003; Penetito 2009; Relph 1992; Sobel 2004; Wattchow and Brown 2011) is an approach to teaching that is grounded in the context of community and environment (Raffan 1993; Theobald and Curtiss 2000) and seeks to help not only students but also communities through employing students, school staff, educators, scientists, and other interested community members in solving community problems (Denise and Harris 1989). However, emerging research suggests that place-based education is limited because it does not critique colonial legacies in theoretical frameworks of place (Calderon 2014). Indeed, many Indigenous scholars are replacing the term "place" with "land" and argue that land-based pedagogies promote the decolonization of education (Ballantyne 2014; Wildcat et al. 2014) by recognizing the intimate relationship that Indigenous peoples have with the land. One challenge with land-based pedagogies is the role non-Indigenous peoples have in this approach to the decolonization of education. This research, in a Western Canadian context, explores this tension as we come to a deeper and shared understanding of our co-responsibility within Treaty 7 relationships. Learning from place emphasizes a relationship with the land (Blood and Chambers 2006), something deeply respected in Indigenous communities and something absent from much of place-based education. Our project seeks to close this gap by considering varying perspectives of place. In this paper, I explore the notion of a STEAM pedagogy of place and its potential importance for teacher education.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The development of teacher candidates' professional practice during practicum and field experiences is of critical importance, yet our understanding of its development

and its relationship to candidates' learning in education courses is extremely limited (Segall 2002). What we do know about candidates' development during practicum and field experiences suggests that education courses have little influence on their practice (Clift and Brady 2005; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner 2005; Wideen et al. 1998). Candidates tend to be socialized into the status quo of school practice or to reproduce their own school experiences (Tigchelaar and Korthagen 2004; Tillema 1998). As a science educator, I question the traditional teacher education process of exposing students to theory (course work at University) and then practice (K-12 classroom practicum) as sufficient in promoting Schön's (1983, 1987) epistemology of practice. Schön's *reflection-in-action* is often unachievable within traditional teacher education programs as students rarely master learning from experience during science teacher education programs in a transformative way (Mezirow 1991, 1995, 1997) that gives them direct access to the experience, specifically an *authority of experience* (Munby and Russell 1994) in developing knowledge from analysis of that experience. Munby and Russell coin the phrase *authority of experience* because of their "concern that students never master learning from experience during preservice programs in a way that gives them direct access to the nature of the authority of experience" (1994, p. 92). They present a challenge to teacher educators:

The basic tension in teacher education derives for us from preservice students wanting to move from being under authority to being in authority, without appreciating the potential that the authority of experience can give to their learning to teach. The challenge for teacher education is to help new teachers recognize and identify the place and function of the authority of experience. (p. 94)

## 2.1 Place-Based Education

In part, by responding to Munby and Russell's challenge, MRU's Bachelor of Education program design seeks to embrace the authority of experience and is broadly rooted in a long tradition of experiential and place-based education, first articulated by Dewey (1938).

In experiential learning, learners are first immersed in the experience of the targeted learning and then are asked to reflect on and analyze their experience in order to make sense of it. Kolb (1984) offers a working definition of experiential learning. "Learning is the process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). In this view, learning is viewed as a continuous process grounded in experience as opposed to simple content or outcomes, knowledge is seen as a continuous transformation process of creation and re-creation rather than an independent and objective entity to be acquired or transmitted, and ultimately learning is seen as a process that transforms experience.

While we often refer to the field experience/practicum as "experiential", it incorporates constructivism as a theory of learning and, we argue, is inextricably tied to the field of place-based education. The notion of "place" can be described to those

“fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other” (Relph 1992, p. 37). Place-based education is an approach to teaching that is grounded in the context of community, both natural and social (Penetito 2009; Raffan 1995; Theobald and Curtiss 2000). It emerges from the particular attributes of a place. The content is specific to the geography, ecology, sociology, politics, and other dynamics of that place (Gruenewald 2003; Woodhouse and Knapp 2000). It provides a purpose to the knowledge and reasoning taught in schools; provides a contextual framework for much of the curriculum (gives meaning to the studies); and engages the student in the conditions of her/his own reality (Emekauwa 2004; O’Connor and Sharp 2013). Our B.Ed. STEAM program is also deeply informed by Indigenous interpretations of Place (Chambers 2008) and the integration of curriculum with land-based pedagogies that are attentive to Indigenous ways of knowing that is becoming more prevalent across the Canadian education landscape (Wallin and Peden 2020). The delivery of this program might be best characterized as the pedagogy of place (Blood and Chambers 2006; Gruenewald 2003); the integration of the student into their home school (practice) and the reinforcement of the essential links between the student, their peers, and place through targeted course work (theory). Through this integrated process, teacher candidates make connections between their experiences in the schools and the theoretical course work and in doing so learn to trust the authority of these integrated sets of experiences.

As part of their STEAM course work, third-year students take part in a wide variety of place-based activities, often in the company of scientists and educators who have been working in a related field. They take part in intensive field studies that involve science inquiry and community activities conducted in a range of settings. Most of the activities involve environmental monitoring and most are longitudinal in nature as they span over a period of years. The community issues students address during their time in the STEAM program are typically characterized as place-based educational initiatives. The ability to infuse an outdoor activity with related environmental field studies benefits the whole educational enterprise (Cajete 1994, 1999; O’Connor 2009). The linking of environmental field studies with an outdoor pursuit gives both the study and the activity additional educational value and meaning (Kawagley and Barnhardt 1999; Smith 2007; Woodhouse and Knapp 2000). In addition, field studies reinforce both laboratories and lectures in specific subjects, addressing a traditional education problem: integrating theory and practice (Dewey 1938). Courses such as geography, survey biology, quantitative chemistry, ecology, and environmental studies are often integrated and lend themselves to field studies that link to a range of outdoor activities. The field studies approach often takes on the mantle of place-based education since many of the field studies are centered on responding to community concerns, studying and collecting data and proposing possible responses to the community-defined problem. Addressing “real” topics and finding ways to apply the prescribed learning outcomes to these studies have proven to engage students in ways that secure knowledge and strengthen positive community attitudes (Sobel 2004). In this respect, including field studies with outdoor pursuits

has been proven to be a successful educational approach (Louv 2005; O'Connor 2010; Raffan 1995; Woodhouse and Knapp 2000).

The ultimate goal of these place-based pedagogies is to have the teacher candidates not only see the relevance and importance of their studies, but also reflect critically since those studies have immediate causal effect on their present pedagogical context as professional teachers and, ultimately, the well-being of themselves and their students.

## 2.2 *Critical Pedagogy and Citizenship*

As our program attempts to provide experiential and place-based opportunities for pedagogical development, teacher candidates spend a considerable amount of time developing an understanding of a certain land base by conducting scientific, social, and political assessments. This is often done with a critical lens, as students, with the support of community partners, are allowed to debate resource extraction, land management, and other contestable issues (Gruenewald 2003; Kincheloe 2005).

Critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Jardine 2005; Kincheloe 2001, 2005; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998) can help teacher candidates transform their teaching experiences into professional knowledge through a deeper understanding of the social, political, and cultural reality of the educational context. Specifically, our science program utilizes problem-posing pedagogies rooted in local and contextual science issues and events that are inextricably tied to place-based education (Breunig 2005; Raffan 1995). Critical pedagogy supports a realistic approach to teacher education as it seeks to provide teacher candidates with opportunities to transform experience into knowledge that in turn informs their practice as they engage in double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1974; Ashby 1952; Mezirow 1991, 1995, 1997). However, the literature on critical pedagogy suggests that the learning of new complex practice involves a good deal of unlearning and relearning and takes a good deal of time and support (Gruenewald 2003; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; McLaren 2003). To assist us with these supports and, in addition to relationships through school-university partnerships, we have created numerous partnerships in experiential STEAM education-related fields that build on our emerging relationships with local organizations such as the Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Centre, Telus Spark Science Centre, Tim Horton Children's Ranch and Fish Creek Provincial Park Society.

Within the environmental STEAM field, it has become increasingly important to have an informed and critical citizenship prepared to embrace responsible environmental and social behaviors (Barr 2003; Hines et al. 1986). Here, I use Glaser's definition of citizenship: "Good citizenship calls for the ability to think critically about issues concerning which there may be a difference of opinion and apply democratic values to the issues. Critical thinking has three components: an attitude of carefully considering problems, knowledge of logical inquiry methods, and skill in applying those methods" (1985, p. 25). The genesis of such citizenship rests in

family, community, and schooling that promotes responsible environmental behaviors. In the examination of the educational processes and social actions that lead to good citizenship, I posit that critical thinking is the central foundation (Freire 1970; Gruenewald 2003; Kincheloe 2005).

Learning to think critically is conceptualized as the acquisition of the competence to participate critically in the communities and social practices of which a person is a member. If education is to further the critical competence of students, it must provide them with the opportunity at the level of the classroom and the school to observe, imitate and practice critical agency and to reflect upon it. Learning contexts must be chosen which students can make sense of and in which they can develop a feeling of responsibility for the quality of the practice in question. (ten Dam and Volman 2004, p. 359)

A crucial condition to critical pedagogy is it needs a context to be relevant and therefore be sustainable (Gruenewald 2003; Penetito 2009). Community issues in which frame place-based learning provide the context for critical thinking, situational conditions, and for attributes such as locus of control. Place-based educational activities focus on environmental and social values, situational characteristics, and psychological variables as community action is open to a range of varying and competing interests (Barr 2003).

The conditions that give rise to responsible environmental and social behaviors are a major focus of place-based science educational initiatives (Louv 2005; O'Connor and Sharp 2013; Sobel 2004). This research explores the ways in which place-based science initiatives may be incorporated in school instructional strategies. These place-based educational initiatives focus on the development of citizenship focusing on a critical knowledge of social, environmental, and political issues and associated action strategies, locus of control, attitudes, verbal commitments, and an individual's sense of responsibility within a community.

This theoretical framework of place-based teacher education is drawn from the literature on educational partner relationships and critical pedagogy with the intent to study theory-and-practice integration. In order to address the research questions crafted around this framework, we present a methodology that connects these dimensions with our investigation of place-based pedagogies.

### ***2.3 Curriculum of Place***

Drawing on a curriculum of place as a theoretical framework contributes to the objectives of this project in redefining our conceptualization of place in STEAM teacher education and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems and place-based education. Integral in our work is a sense of dwelling-in-place, a stance dependent on listening as a “highly reflective and revelatory mode of communication that can open one to the mysteries of unity between the physical and spiritual, to the relationships between natural and human forms, and to the intimate links between places and persons” (Carbaugh 1999, p. 250). It is these intimate links between places and persons that many researchers acknowledge (Blood et al. 2012; Cajete 2000; Chambers 2006, 2008;

Kissling 2012; Kulnieks et al. 2013; Little Bear 2000). In the Blackfoot context, balance and harmony with the environment are recognized as part of the knowledge system. Bastien (2004) writes, “Ontological responsibilities of *Siksikaititapi* are the beginning of affirming and reconstructing ways of knowing. These fundamental responsibilities must be renewed by coming to know the natural alliances” (p. 4). She suggests that Indigenous knowledge is linked to intricate interrelationships within nature. The environment is understood as “the source from which all life originates and from which all knowledge is born” (p. 39).

A curriculum of place recognizes the intimate relationship that Indigenous people have with the land and emphasizes relational ways of knowing. It also problematizes the field of place-based education and unpacks current concerns within the field that involve some educational practitioners who position themselves as culturally or politically neutral yet perpetuate forms of settler colonialism (Friedel 2011; Tuck and Yang 2012). Chambers (2008) presents four dimensions of a curriculum of place as part of a conversation about how this theoretical stance might impact education: a different sense of time, enskillment, an education of attention, and wayfinding. She claims:

In a curriculum of place the activities in which we engage children are the very activities they need to dwell in this place, to be nourished by the place and to nourish it. In a curriculum of place, young people or novices grow into knowledge through engagement in hand-on activities learning side-by-side with masters of the crafts. This knowledge enables people to find their way in that place where they dwell and this knowledge and these skills endow them with identity. (p. 120)

She suggests “a curriculum of place is no longer optional” (p. 125). This inquiry is to build knowledge and understanding from Indigenous, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and cross-sector perspectives of a curriculum of place as it relates to educational programs. This approach to how the program was co-designed with our partners in communities was intended to honor and reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and designed so we can “grow into knowledge through engagement in hand-on activities learning side-by-side with masters of the crafts” (p. 120).

### 3 Methods

Drawing on the research involving self-study as a methodology for studying professional practice settings (Pinnegar 1998), program improvement (Kosnik et al. 2006), and teacher education (Kitchen and Russell 2012) and based on principles of self-study design (Dinkelman 2003; LaBoskey 2004), this research was self-initiated, focused on inquiry into our practice, collaborative, aimed at improvement of our practice, and using multiple and primarily qualitative means of inquiry.

Researchers have identified the need to decolonize research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 2012) and offer insight into appropriate methods, protocols, and ethical responsibilities for Indigenous research (Wilson 2007). Kovach (2009) presents a

methodological approach that centers on a tribal epistemology. Her nonlinear description of its characteristics includes researcher preparation, decolonizing and ethics, gathering knowledge, making meaning, and giving back (p. 45). We drew on this research framework and culturally relational research methods (Donald et al. 2012), and Blackfoot concepts of *aoksisawaato'p* (visiting/renewal of relations), *aokakiosit* (be wisely aware; pay attention), and *aatsimaak'ssin* (responsibility to balance giving/taking reciprocity) to inform our methods of community dialogues and sharing circles. We felt that this may, in part, assist us with our concerns of perpetuating ongoing colonial practices involving land, education, and researcher practices (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Through a social-constructivist lens, in-school seminars, integrated weekly within a 5-week practicum, each involving cohorts of 8–12 teacher candidates from partner schools, are facilitated by teacher educators to develop a sense of community (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) and support teacher candidates to reflect upon their teaching and develop responsive educational practices and adaptive expertise (Beck and Kosnik 2006; Loughran 2002). Prior to the 5-week practicum, teacher candidates participate in STEAM courses that include daylong field studies and a 3-day intensive experiential STEAM program at a remote ranch in the mountain territory of Treaty 7 focused on environmental science land-based pedagogies. While at the mountain ranch, they also lead, in small cohorts of 4–5 teacher candidates, a daylong place-based inquiry science/mathematics project with cohorts of Grade 4 students from a partner school.

In this self-study, we investigated the possibilities for deliberate place-based pedagogical interventions.

Our guiding questions:

- What delivery methods are required in order for our teacher education program to create an innovative, resilient, and culturally rich STEAM teacher education integrated semester?
- What barriers exist to increased consciousness about traditional and contemporary STEAM values and place-based knowledge systems?

### 3.1 Data Sources

The participants in this study included two teacher educators, a Blackfoot Elder, a Cree teacher educator colleague (who acted as our critical friend), two student research assistants and sixty-three teacher candidates. Together, we piloted integrated 7-week intensive STEAM courses in coordination with candidates' practicum experiences and field studies and inquiry projects. As researchers, we engaged in bi-monthly collaborative research conversations, exchanged numerous emails, and kept research notes about our experiences. Mid-way through the course we interviewed 9 teacher candidates, and at the conclusion of the year, we interviewed 11 teacher candidates. We collected artifacts of their learning through course assignments. Multiple

data sources provided trustworthiness as experiences were explicitly documented and analyzed by the researchers in various forms and sites. Data was first coded individually across these sites according to emerging themes that related to the research focus on the process of designing and implementing of a curriculum of place (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We then reviewed our analysis, collaboratively adjusted the codes, and wrote findings together.

## 4 Results

The results are preliminary as they represent the *Pilot Phase 1* of the project (2016–2017) and *Phase 2* (2017–2018). Based on these findings, we will implement a revised STEAM semester in fall 2019 and will share emerging results of *Phase 3* in future publications. Here, we include 2016–2018 results that inform the new phase of the study.

### 4.1 Realistic

The extended period in schools (5 weeks full-time), integrated field studies (8–10 days), and environmental STEAM inquiry projects (2 student-directed; semester-long) allowed students to approximate the work of science teachers to a larger extent than is normally possible in student teaching. The instructional activities address many learning styles, address “real” conditions, and pose “real” problems.

It is hands-on, it's visual, and it's auditory... They get to see things like a frog, beaver or something foreign and then we [teachers] present a learning opportunity and connection right at that moment...that is it, it gets them interested in school but also helps them retain the information. We capitalize on their curiosity, it's beautiful.

(Tony, Seminar)

We are tying in environmental and community issues with education [climate-solar energy]. The kids recognize the change because they have been given a baseline and have done assessments and compare them to that baseline. This is empowering to them...It's their community. It's their life.

(Shannon, Journal Entry)

These students develop skills that are professional life skills that they will carry with them after university and into the classroom.

(Gina, Focus Group)

This realistic approach is based on experiential learning and the promotion of reflection on teacher candidates' teaching experiences through a constructivist learning process where “the student develops his or her knowledge in a process of reflection on practical situations, which creates a concern and a personal need for learning” (Korthagen 2001, p. 15). The role of the teacher educator is not to impart theory as



guidance to teacher candidates, but rather to foster *phronesis* using teacher candidates' practical experience as the base. *Phronesis* refers to a kind of practical wisdom that is concerned with the important specifics of particular situations as a way of not only understanding them well, but of deciding how to respond to them well. The intent of a realistic approach to teacher education is to transform experience into knowledge (Kolb 1984) that reflects the social, political, and cultural reality of the educational context (Kincheloe 2003).

## 4.2 Reflection and Identity

Rather than being viewed as just the occasion to step back from their teaching, the self-reflective and socio-constructivist pedagogy employed in the school seminars were identified as the primary pedagogy that helped students make sense of their experience together and construct their emerging identity as science teachers. This STEAM program was created not only to engage the teacher candidates but also to model a pedagogical approach of engagement of science students (K-9), encouraging their development in skills, attitudes, and knowledge and helping them discover possibilities for their future as professional science teachers.

It's just like, "Is everybody experiencing what I am experiencing here? Are there any people doing the same thing?" And getting the feedback from the other people just made you feel so much better, and then hearing somebody else connect the theories to their practicum and you're just like, "Oh that works too". You just you wouldn't have thought about it in that way. And then getting everybody to say something about it you just keep... You think more. You answer more. And that's the best feedback.

(Nicole, Interview)

I also feel that when the seminars were at the school, I felt like there is a greater responsibility to act in a way that is professional and as a result, I felt like more of the realities of being a teacher were present while having the conversations and I had to approach the conversations more with the mindset of a teacher.

(Bill, Journal Entry)

Honestly it impacted my awareness of my practices because listening to the stories of other student teachers, of course, made me constantly reflect on what I was doing because you hear their stories – the good and the bad, and the frustrating and the nerve-wracking – and you always relate it back to yourself... I think your practice changes without you really noticing, and I didn't really notice until the practicum ended and I really thought about what I did. And the seminars throughout the practicum made me feel better at times, and worse at times, but I think they were crucial for development.

(Abbey, Interview)

If we wish to prepare our teacher candidates for the present and future, they must be immersed in the authority of experience, the knowledge-in-action that helps teacher candidates respond critically to change. Many students discredit their own experiences as they place more authority with those who have experience and speak with confidence and assertion about what it takes to teach. Students are hesitant to

validate and have faith in their own experiences as a guiding basis for knowledge and professional development in their teaching practice. Learning to trust oneself and one's own wisdom gained through reflection upon experience is critical to a strong sense of professional identity (Munby and Russell 1994).

### 4.3 *Place as Pedagogy*

The students valued the seminars and field studies that were held in the natural field study environments and in participating schools rather than back on campus (as is for students in many traditional teacher education programs) and noted that this created a hybrid school/community/land-based semester. The instructional activities address community and local situations and involve a wider community. Activities are often chosen as they involve addressing community issues, concerns, and/or resources.

I think the big way of phrasing it is, being at the schools [elementary/middle] or in the field, it's very much so more focused on the students we are working with... and yet, if we did it here [on campus] we would be back in the frame of mind where we are the students as opposed to teacher candidates. And there's that switch where suddenly we're not in the environment where it's the students we are working with are the focus, because we are back here. And so, I think that's one of the big things is the environment we are put into kind of fosters these sort of conversations we are able to have.

(Terry, Interview)

[In-school seminar] we were talking about the "teaching presence", we kind of reflected on it as a whole group in the school, and then I went into my class. I found I was more aware of, and maybe more confident in it. You can think a lot of things by yourself, but when you have other people who are almost validating it, or being like, 'Oh yeah, me too,' or, 'That is neat,' and you are in the school talking about it... I don't know... in the school (Author) made us think of certain questions we would ask ourselves and those questions are kind of in the back of your mind when you go back in class and you are, 'Okay, I can be this way, a professional'.

(Megan, Interview)

When you are thinking and acting in that [immersion] deep way, when you are connected to the land, learning in a practical way, the retention of the material is tenfold... We went out and worked in the river for half a day. Without knowing anymore, just were engaged in the river, observe, detailed observation... the objective is to come back and explain what you saw and what you now think you know about it based on what you have just seen. It is the little things like that are some of the most powerful teaching tools of the program.

(Christine, Interview)

During the planning stages of the STEAM field studies, one educator reflected on her own experiences of place and how her view of mathematics has shifted because of it:

I have grappled with integrating my notions of place and mathematics education for many years... In this study, I wanted to investigate how 'place' impacted how I taught a STEAM-focused, community and field-based course. I wonder how my experiences of the land and home can be brought forth in teaching mathematics.

(Educator 2, Reflection)

As educators, we were struck by the increase in engagement level demonstrated by our teacher candidates. Not only were they excited and passionate to discuss and engage in the studies, they brought a heightened level of professional conduct and expectations that required us, as facilitators to “raise our game”. In reflection, we spoke often of how we felt like “true” facilitators, as we would consistently be mediating the educational needs of our students (as defined by our course requirements) with the opportunities arising through community engagement and environmental field studies and data collection. The problem-posing pedagogies, seminars, and field studies were challenging as we attempted to disrupt Western forms of epistemologies (Freire 1970; Gruenewald 2003; Kincheloe 2001, 2005) and include various Indigenous ways of knowing (Cajete 1999, 2000; Grande 2004; Penitito 2009) while respecting the competing interests, needs, and worldviews of the participants (teacher candidates, mentor teachers, school administrators, scientists, and community partners) interests, needs, and worldviews.

#### ***4.4 Integration Through Place***

The multidisciplinary approach, which integrated Western and Indigenous perspectives, the science curriculum courses, frequent field study opportunities, 5-week integrated practicum, and in-school seminars promoted a relational aspect to knowledge (i.e., place-based education; Indigenous ways of knowing). The integrated semester linked many “subject areas” and “ways of knowing”, pedagogies, and community interests in addressing projects and studies. These links are often synergistic, yielding more learning than the simple sum of the two subjects addressed.

One thing I found was everything being tied together at one point, and sometimes the seminar would kick into help with what was going on with some of the written work, especially with journals being tied to seminars, I could tie in things that we talked about. Because some of it clicked after our conversation that didn't click before, or something that I'd written in my journal helped click the next concept in class. Everything being tied together worked really well.

(Terry, Interview)

[We would] share a little story about how we were doing what we did the week before and then we would go into talking about something that relates to the textbooks based on what we were doing in the field, and then we would all collaborate on different ways we could assist each other, or that we could handle problems and stuff. I thought it was really helpful to have that.

(Kristen, Interview)

When you think back on everything we have done, it seems so long ago when we started our courses but at the same time it does not feel like we have stopped our journey...just different parts yet it all seems connected. All the parts (alternate pedagogies) were connected in some way and it now seems we used them and brought them together in our time in the schools. I have nothing to compare this to but after talking to my Mentor Teacher and the

other student teacher [from another University], we get a lot of support which I think really helps us, especially when it comes to our teaching.

(Dave, Seminar)

The interconnectedness and the understanding of the relation of things, which is a key component to both Indigenous ways of knowing and place-based education, became a fundamental component of our STEAM program design. Many teacher education programs focus on top-down lessons, single-discipline course design that fragments subject matter. The STEAM program promotes a holistic component of learning, in which learners organize information globally and derive meaning from the relational aspects of the concepts; this is promoted through an integration of practical subject matter.

We developed this STEAM model based on the multidisciplinary element often espoused through Indigenous ways of knowing; the notion of interconnectedness is essential. It promotes a relational aspect to knowledge... My biggest struggle, when trying to assist my students in seeing these connections is how to be authentic and respectful, especially when I am unable to facilitate an Indigenous voice in the field.

(Educator 1, Reflection)

Despite the dissonance that we were experiencing, some of our students seemed to understand the importance of integration, as noted by Tasha:

It's easier to do cross curricular work, kids are so engaged and it's real learning and it can even inspire them for their future careers or even get them involved in other areas. So it's not just that you sit and do your math, it's you do math as you're doing water quality testing....I feel like everything just goes together well.

(Tasha, Interview)

## 4.5 *Resistance*

We often ran into resistance by teacher candidates, colleagues, and other participants, as this is often not a conventional or comfortable approach to teaching and learning. We even questioned our own commitment to this process based on the academic, professional, and personal demands of our time, as shown by an educator writing:

I've just returned from teaching a 3-day intensive experiential STEAM program at a remote ranch in the mountains. I've taken time away from my family, haven't slept well, and am now doing laundry because of a possible bed bug infestation. Is this worth it? What have my students experienced in this place-based curriculum of mathematics?

(Educator 2, Reflection)

Some of the teacher candidates felt the experience in the field was too demanding and long (i.e., 2 nights–3 days). As educators, passionate about place-based pedagogies and an integrated STEAM model, we discussed the value of experience and resiliency.

I still remember reading Ted Aoki's writings of a Japanese Canadian, who stressed the need for those key times to learn as those "moments of tension", when we are no longer experts of those microworlds and we become beginners who search for ways to understand what is foreign (through deliberation and analysis) so that we may feel comfortable and at ease with the task at hand. This speaks to me through experiential and place-based learning, by the inclusion of adversity and resilience into curricular delivery and content.

(Educator 1, Reflection)

Our school and community partners are helping us respond to resistance and think more deeply about embedding and sustaining a curriculum of place.

#### ***4.6 Reconsidering Place***

As STEAM educators, we felt that our attempts to enact a curriculum of place that recognizes the intimate relationship that Indigenous people have with the land and emphasizes relational ways of knowing were impactful. However, we were disappointed that our students seemed to experience a place-based curriculum that was not linked explicitly to Indigenous ways of knowing.

A gap that is emerging is that most students are not making the link between Indigenous ways of knowing place and the importance of land-based pedagogies as something they, as a non-Indigenous educator, can incorporate into their teaching and learning. It is a perception of the "other" that seems to create dissonance. How can I help promote a culture of knowledge creation for these students? One that allows them to incorporate varying perspectives of place, including an Indigenous curriculum of place.

(Educator 1, Reflection)

In the next year of teaching, we intend to begin the STEAM semester in ceremony, learning closely with one of our partners teaching in a reserve school located in close proximity to the remote ranch. We wonder how we can be nourished by the place and how we can nourish it. We anticipate that we will engage in stories of the land and that our design of field studies will invite students to dwell in the place and to experience all dimensions of the place, as we look to shifts in identity needed to authentically experience a curriculum of place.

### **5 Scholarly Significance of the Study**

This research has the potential to inform future STEAM teacher education courses and projects including the creation of relevant Indigenous curricula for universities/colleges, K-12 schools and for not-for-profit organizations, the implementation of educational policies in post-secondary pre-service and in-service education programs. A further investigation into children's learning in a context that integrates Indigenous knowledge and place-based STEAM curriculum shapes our longitudinal research.

## 5.1 *Inclusive Perspectives of Place*

In a Canadian context where Calls to Action are made in response to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2012) and where the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations 2008) has been recently adopted, it becomes important for educators to engage in the decolonization of education. Both documents acknowledge the need to rebuild relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples and these have important implications for educators. Calls to Action made in response to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2012) include co-developing strategies “to eliminate the educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Canadians” that incorporated the principles of “developing culturally appropriate curricula”, and “respecting and honouring treaty relationships” (p. 2). A curriculum of place that integrates the teaching and learning of children, undergraduate students, teachers, and educators can support these Calls to Action within the communities we live.

Based on the current momentum with place-based education, our project seeking to redefine an understanding of place is timely. Place-based education emerges from the particular attributes of a place. We argue that place can be in urban and rural settings, as this research suggests that engaging pedagogy necessarily connects individuals to the land, and not simply those who live in rural areas. The content is specific to the geography, ecology, sociology, politics, and other dynamics of that place (Woodhouse and Knapp 2000). It provides a purpose to the knowledge and reasoning taught in schools, it offers a contextual framework for much of the curriculum by giving meaning to the studies, and it engages learners in the conditions of their own realities (Smith 2007). Place-based education often seeks to help not only students but also communities through employing students, school staff, educators, scientists, and other interested community members in solving community problems (Denise and Harris 1989). Place-based education differs from conventional text and classroom-based education in that it understands students' local community as one of the primary resources for learning (Sobel 2004). Thus, place-based education promotes learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. Addressing a variety of community problems brings into play many different aspects of learning subjects/areas of studies (Kincheloe 2001). The “problems” call for solutions requiring multidisciplinary approaches. In this way, the decolonization of education and the notion of place may better support the heavy lifting that is required to rebuild trust among those communities who have suffered under a history of educational oppression (Stelmach 2020; Scott and Louie 2020). When students deal with “real” issues and work with community members to find solutions, they become engaged (Dillon et al. 2013).

However, many contributions to education have been made through non-Indigenous perspectives of place. Emerging research suggests that place-based education is limited because it does not critique colonial legacies in theoretical frameworks of place (Calderon 2014). Indeed, many Indigenous scholars are replacing the

term *place* with *land* and argue that land-based pedagogies promote the decolonization of education (Ballantyne 2014; Wildcat et al. 2014) by recognizing the intimate relationship that Indigenous peoples have with the land. Battiste (2002) links Indigenous knowledge systems to particular “landscapes, landforms, and biomes where ceremonies are properly held, stories properly recited, medicines properly gathered, and transfers of knowledge properly authenticated” (p. 13). Little Bear (2000) describes the land as integral to the Native American mind. He writes:

Events, patterns, cycles, and happenings occur at certain places. From a human point of view, patterns, cycles, and happenings are readily observed on and from the land. Animal migrations, cycles of plant life, seasons, and cosmic movements are detected from particular spatial locations; hence, medicine wheels and other sacred observatory sites. Each tribal territory has its sacred sites, and its particular environmental and ecological combinations resulting in particular relational networks. All of this happens on the Earth; hence, the sacredness of the Earth in the Native American mind. The Earth is so sacred that it is referred to as “Mother,” the source of life. (p. xi)

One challenge with land-based pedagogies is the role non-Indigenous peoples have in this approach to the decolonization of education. Our future research continues to explore this tension as we come to a deeper and shared understanding of our co-responsibility within Treaty 7 relationships. Learning from place emphasizes a relationship with the land (Blood and Chambers 2006), something deeply respected in Indigenous communities and something absent from much of place-based education. Our project seeks to close this gap by considering inclusive perspectives of place.

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# Place-Based Education: A Critical Appraisal from a Rural Perspective



Michael Corbett

**Abstract** While hegemonic education policy narratives have come to be articulated on an increasingly global scale, place-based education has simultaneously gained traction in educational scholarship and practice. The extent to which the particularities of place should inform, and shape curriculum and pedagogy are what is at issue. What has resulted is a core tension between pedagogies of belonging and pedagogies of mobile aspirations (Cuervo et al. 2019). In this paper, I will examine PBE as a pedagogical idea that has been taken up in rural education scholarship and suggest that it contains rich educational possibilities for connecting the community to schooling that is crucial in rural schools. I also argue, drawing principally on critiques of Chet Bowers and Jan Nesor, that PBE has a number of potential limitations that deserve careful consideration. I argue in this paper that the idea of “place-based” education is a powerful, generative, and yet inherently problematic educational idea that demands critical interrogation, particularly in the current global climate of inward-looking nationalist and place-based politics.

**Keywords** Place-based education · Community · Rural education

## 1 Thinking About Place and Education

Place-based education (PBE) is an idea that had been around for quite a long time. It developed in the United States from the 1980s out of the ideas of seminal rural philosopher practitioners like Wendell Berry (1997), Aldo Leopold (1949/1986), and Kirkpatrick Sale (1985) who provoked educators to start thinking in more complex and specific terms about the importance of place in teaching and learning. At its most basic level, the idea behind PBE is that place is a resource as well as a location for all learning which is the foundation of John Dewey’s critique of traditional, transmission-oriented pedagogies. PBE is a sociospatial vision that recognizes how learners learn somewhere and that geography is entangled in educational practice. It is also a way of looking at education that accounts for the universal importance

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place assumes in pretty much everyone's life as a foundational and lived geographical concept.

Work in PBE<sup>1</sup> has gone in a number of directions in the last two decades following the publication of early work like Paul Theobald's (1997) *Teaching the commons* and the work of Greg Smith (2002), David Orr (1994), David Gruenewald/Greenwood (Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b; Greenwood and Smith 2007), Paul Nachtigal (1983), Toni Haas (Haas and Nachtigal 1998), and David Sobel (2004). I encountered PBE in my own doctoral studies in the late 1990s and found it to be a useful way to help situate my sense that so few educational researchers had much to say about the importance of place. Additionally, I believe that educational theory ought to point toward some vision of a better world. PBE actually does this for me as it seems to do for many rural teachers and rural education scholars and activists.

The further I went, the more it seemed to me that place, as an analytic frame, might rival race, ethnicity, language, sex and gender, and social class as a structural force impacting educational outcomes. But it is more than that. Place is more than a container or context; it is a dynamic, ever-changing space in which things are organized for use. Lefebvre's (1992a) seminal idea that space is produced rather than simply sitting inert represents the foundation for a way of thinking about geography as an active generative process. In addition to being mobile, the idea of place is mutable as well; it can be understood at different scales and no place stands apart from all other places.

Place matters to people, and there is overwhelming research to demonstrate how place attachment is a fundamental human attribute (Altman and Low 1992; Bachelard 1994) illustrating how our sense of space is punctuated and made coherent by the places we stop and experience (Tuan and Tuan 2001). In Nova Scotia, where I was born, to be able to "place" a person means to be able to locate them geographically, but also in genealogy and in social networks, which can influence whether or not the person is considered trustworthy. A stranger cannot be "placed" or located within familiar frameworks. Place limits us and, to an extent, it defines us. We often open conversations with strangers with the question: "where are you from?" Place is where we begin, and the location from which we understand an interconnected world of other places. Yet, it might be argued that this is fundamentally a colonial perspective that treats the place as though it is a point in global geometric space rather than a deep experience of dwelling.

Some versions of PBE might be described as place-limited education in the sense that they appear to begin and end in tightly bounded space. But other articulations understand place relationally, as part of the fluid and shifting networks. So rather than simply attending to the distinctiveness and boundedness of place, the most interesting work in PBE recognizes that it is becoming increasingly problematic to think places as self-contained systems. Place is a slippery concept in this way because every place we can imagine is a part of other places. And by the same token, every

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<sup>1</sup>The term place-conscious education and place-sensitive education are also employed and there are distinctions that can be drawn, but for the purposes of this paper I will stick to the term PBE and use the abbreviation PBE. I will return to the idea of a "base" for education in the conclusion.

place we can imagine contains other places within it. Contemporary thinking about place seeks to understand and come to terms with this complexity, and how place is about connections, hybridities, overlaps and networks. Understood relationally, places become heterogeneous and contested rather than simple and homogenous. PBE might be, as Indigenous scholars, ecological educators, and philosophers like Noddings (2005) have argued, a way of confronting histories of colonialism, racism and environmental dilemmas that form the foundation of the most serious dangers we face today, not only as regions and nations but as a species.

For Heidegger, place represents where and how things are arranged, and sites in which action takes place. Indeed, the very term “takes place” seems to suggest that things happen not at random but in purposive locations. So place itself is active in the sense that it is continually shaped and modified by human agency, but also in the sense that it shapes agency reciprocally. A particular configuration of material objects such as a school classroom, a mechanical workshop, a barn, or a kitchen interacts with us as we interact with it and those within it. Heidegger’s analysis of tools having particular places to be in a workshop and particular uses within the workshop relates to the fundamental relationships between things in space that create coherence for us in the world. In this view, a sense of what it is to be in the world is embodied and emplaced; it is the very ordinariness of everyday places and the arrangement of objects and bodies within them that gives us a sense of coherence as well a sense of knowing what to do there.

A classroom can be thought of as an organization of materials and bodies in space where more or less ritualized performances are enacted day-by-day, week-by-week, and year-by-year. While classrooms differ considerably, in order for actors to know what to do within them, the arrangement or assemblage of objects generally follows some fairly standard patterns. I think it can be said that in many respects, there is often little variation between the place that is the classrooms experienced in primary school and those he or she is likely to experience in university. Places are shaped by things, and by how those things are assembled in space, which includes the differential ability of actors to create and maintain assemblages. At the same time, the things themselves also shape the places in which they exist. Think of the placement of a painting in a room and how it gives form to the room, just as the room itself gives shape to the painting. In terms of the modern classroom, we are slowly coming to grips with thinking about how new technologies might be incorporated productively into the remarkably resilient geography of the traditional classroom with its desks, chairs, and other artefacts, practices and power relations that represent durable traditions of how learning spaces are organized.

As a place, school is an assemblage of tools and bodies which spring into action several days each week through temporal orderings nominated as school terms, school days, periods, breaks, etc. I think there are important educational implications here, not the least of which is that the material assemblage that is a school classroom will contain tools and actors more or less familiar to particular children. The same is true of a cow barn. I use this analogy deliberately here because it is the kind of material assemblage of human, animal, and material objects that may be totally familiar to a rural child and totally alien to an urban kid. I know what to do

in a classroom but have no idea what to do in a barn, and those few times I have found myself in one, I feel deeply ignorant and even frightened. The coherence of these places we call school for particular children, their relative familiarity of the tools within them, and the ways in which people use their bodies with these tools all matter.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of an embodied habitus comes very close to what I think Heidegger was pointing toward and this is that a person's very sense of what it is "to be" is the ability to work in a fluid and seemingly natural way in a place. It is, as Bourdieu puts it, to have a "sense of the game." If we think of schools as workplaces, what kind of work happens there and to what extent is that work understood, at a visceral level, by those expected to participate?

At its most fundamental level, PBE is an attempt to come to grips with the idea that Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas (2016) identifies when he argues that all understanding, and thus, all learning, is intimately connected to place. Epistemologically speaking, this view draws on Heidegger's idea of embodied and located knowing which finds another articulation in the educational sociology of Bourdieu, and which is also consistent with work from Dewey's pragmatism to contemporary work on material engagement and distributed cognition. Dewey's fundamental critique of traditional educative practices is that they were/are too abstract and insufficiently connected to the experience of the child which he saw as fundamental to learning. If we accept Malpas' point, then in order to create a powerful experiential learning environment we need to recognize the centrality of place to learning.

Other ways of understanding what it is to know, argue that the material world is not inert and waiting for us to shape it, but rather, it operates in a dynamic system with us (Haraway 2016; Latour 2007; Malafouris 2013). Our complex relationship with cars, computers, mobile phones and dogs, for instance, illustrate how we are both affected by the non-human world, but also how a car or a computer allows us to think, act and feel in ways we could never do without them. The way that many of us now solve problems through the use of smartphone apps is a good illustration because while we may not know specifically how or what, we have come to understand intuitively that "there'll be an app for that." The smartphone has not just influenced our thinking, it has shaped it. To think about places as human and non-human assemblages can, I think, help us to understand how our living and learning happens within a material surround. The real power of PBE is, I think, the way it opens the possibility for engagement with the everyday more-than-human material world in which students live.

School is a place that is more or less coherent and comprehensible to differently placed children. For me, the most fundamental question here goes something like this: "to what extent is the school a place that is understandable to children?" In other words, it is a place in which they know what to do with the materials assembled there. And is it a place in which they are able to generate things that are comprehensible to those who have power. My research has shown that for many rural children who are accustomed to places or material assemblages that do not resemble school at all (thus my barn reference above), this can be a problem. One of the research participants in my first book, *Learning to Leave* (Corbett 2007) put it this way: "I could never see

the job they wanted me to do in school.” Outside school, in the familiar places in which he grew up, he was fine and knew exactly what to do.

I am drawn to fiction that plays on the theme of the impossible children or teachers who will not or who cannot play the game of school, not unlike my research participant. Such books make the ordinary strange and show us a view of school where the embedded assumptions we hold about what the institution is and thus, should be, are suspended. Høeg’s (2007), *Borderliners*, Beatty’s *The Sellout* (2016), Dangarembga’s (2004) *Nervous Conditions*, or Jones’ (2008) *Mr. Pip* are good examples, and the latter two titles are set in rural locations. In the novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, Coetzee (2017) constructs a child character unwilling to accept the basic ontological assumptions that make performance in school mathematics possible. While he is able to grasp the concept of counting, which involves grouping objects that have similar properties, say, five apples, he operates from the assumption that each apple is unique and different from the others and refuses to place them together in a category. Because he has had little interaction outside his immediate family, and because the practices and authority structures of schooling are foreign to him, Coetzee’s protagonist is a complete failure at school. He can do the math that is expected of him; he simply refuses to accept the conventions of how he is compelled to divide things in the world (by institutional power and not by mathematics). Because he is accustomed to deep deliberation with intimate adults on basic ontological questions, he is offended by the teacher’s insistence that he blindly follows the patterns. PBE, at its best responds to this problem situating education in the pragmatic and the immediate. This follows Dewey’s pragmatist conception of an education that begins not in abstractions like math algorithms, but rather in ordinary experience.

Children learn better through PBE, the argument goes, because they learn in and through an environment they can touch, feel, smell, hear and see. They don’t learn about place; they learn in and through place. While I am in general agreement here, I think there are a number of key problems with PBE that impede our ability to use place as well as we might in teaching. I think this is a particularly pressing problem for rural education at a time when place is often absent from the increasingly globalized educational policy agenda which is under the sway of macro scale, transnational policy, curriculum and assessment agendas. These tend to focus primarily on placeless and standard forms of curricula and pedagogy that are considered to “work” (Biesta 2007, 2011) or which can be shown to have large “effect sizes” (Hattie 2008) regardless of where they are applied. In other words, standardization, and ideas of a generic evidence base for education forces education away from the specificity of place—and by extension, the complex relationality places embody—inscribing linear power relations between a (colonial) knowledge production centre and multiple peripheries.

At the same time though, the spatial turn has influenced studies of teaching and teacher education, particularly in science and environmental education. This is in no small measure the result of the rise of PBE as it is theorized by some key U.S. intellectuals, environmental activists/scholars, action researchers, indigenous/aboriginal educators and others whose work not merely situates, but also implicates, teaching and learning in place. It has also been taken up in physical education, language arts



and social science subjects to a lesser degree. How PBE articulates with generic trans-local educational standards has been a persistent debate between progressive and traditional educators (Eppley and Corbett 2012). Despite serving as one form of critique of broad neoliberal educational agendas, PBE harbors a number of key problems to which I will now turn. These problems go beyond the common criticism that PBE does not prepare children well for a test-driven, standards-based curriculum and assessment system.

## 2 PBE Is Too Narrow: Jan Nesor's Critique

Jan Nesor's (2008) critique is that PBE, as it is articulated in two foundational texts that he analyses (Greenwood and Smith 2007; Theobald 1997), is insufficiently attentive to the way that all places today exist in relation to other places. This is pretty much a truism in human geography, but in education where the incorporation of place into research and scholarship is relatively new, spatial relationality does not appear to be well understood, or at least this is Nesor's contention.

The most trenchant and I think most important emphasis in this critique is aimed squarely at the way that many iterations of PBE, and particularly those located in rural education (notably Paul Theobald's [1997] *Teaching the commons*), hold on to a romantic view of rural communities. Nesor goes on to argue that this articulation of place in relation to education, is not only too narrowly focussed on places as non-relational, self-contained constructs, but that it is also predicated on a set of assumptions relating to human movement, i.e. that people should live lives deeply rooted in place. This position echoes the work of rural philosopher Wendell Berry (whom Nesor does not mention in his critique) and other rural philosophers and ecological activists who have argued for a vision of education that focuses on stewardship and what Gruenewald (2003a) called reinhabitation. In this sense, Nesor argues that PBE is theorized as a redemptive pedagogy that supports what Linda Malkki (1992) calls a "sedentarist metaphysics", or the notion that people should stay put and that this is a good thing that can and should be supported by a pedagogy that attends principally to place.

This is a romantic view, Nesor argues, that is a narrow vision of place, nested within problematic spatial binaries (such as rural–urban) that create, "an idealized image of 'place' as a stable, bounded, self-sufficient communal realm" (2008, p. 479). According to Nesor, this imagery and the ideology it represents justifies a narrative sweep that positions rural places particularly as victims of "outside" global change forces that promote urbanization and disconnection of people from nature. Rather than looking at rural and urban places in relationship as most rural geographers and sociologists have been doing for at least a generation, Nesor argues that PBE promoters tend not only to separate rural and urban in rather stark ways but also sets these spatial categories in opposition to one another.

I have less trouble with copedagogical arguments about how relentlessly urbanizing capitalist modernity systematically disconnects us from nature than Nesor

appears to have. However, I do have to accept his argument about how PBE can tend to support a way of thinking about rural locales as islands. The problematic idea of the rural–urban binary, which has been convincingly critiqued for a generation (Pahl 1966; Williams 1974), has lingered in the work of some rural PBE promoters. The argument is that if we do not treat rural places as special and distinct from the urban and the suburban, geographic disadvantages will be elided, and rural problems will be ignored. Ironically though, it is possible that by isolating out rural places as different and distinct from cities, it may become easier to strip them of services precisely because the rural–urban binary situates rurality as residual and vestigial space in modernity.

Williams (1974) pointed out that the country-city juxtaposition is a way of naturalizing economic and political processes that are fundamentally about a reordering of social space and social relations within them through more or less contested exercises of power. In other words, using the rural–urban binary, it becomes possible to argue that in small rural and First Nations communities, schools, post offices, and hospitals should be closed because the communities in which they exist are inevitably in decline because this is a natural process associated with urbanization rather than the result of urban-based capital formation and metrocentric policy decisions. In other cases, the binary itself is absent and a modernizing singularity simply ignores spaces outside normative urban and suburban geographies. They are absent or off the map so to speak. In the political arena, civil society, as well as in the arts and sciences, a story is told about “changes taking place in the geography or landscape as the result of social contest” (Said 2000, p. 182). Said’s particular interest was, of course, the way that the “Orient” is constructed as other to modernity in order to justify and rationalize “the desire for conquest and domination” (Said 2000, p. 181).

Like the place-based educators he critiques, Nespor does not deny the power politics of place, and there is more to Nespor’s argument that I will not take up here. The essence of his critique, it seems to me, is that PBE tends to misunderstand the way that the idea of place is currently thought about in the social sciences and that it subsequently fails to come to grips with the complex dynamics and politics of produced space, retreating instead into what amounts to an insular, defensive and ultimately diversity-blind rear-guard action against modernity either from naïve and insular communitarian or environmental positions. This produces “separatist dichotomies and moralizing narratives” (2008, p. 489), that perhaps, in today’s terms, play into, and even fuel, the insular, oppositional politics of place and space currently animating right-wing movements around the world.

One important problem with Nespor’s critique of PBE though is that, in my opinion, it denies or trivializes the actual marginalization of rural and communities that are often threatened by metrocentric development. There is indeed defensiveness in many rural versions of PBE and the animus for focussing on local problems is often an attempt to “reinhabit” as David Greenwood/Gruenewald might say. As Berry (1997) and James Scott (1999, 2010) caution, anyone who remains committed to stewardship of land, and who demands the right to stay there in the face of capitalist development and commodification, becomes a problem to be solved, often through violence. Still, as Nespor points out, the very fact that many rural problems are not

themselves generated within rural locales necessitates a broader vision to understand and solve them. Inevitable power dynamics notwithstanding, a relational approach seems to me to be a more productive way forward, and the notion of place relations education might make better sense.<sup>2</sup> Nespor's critique also points to the need for translocal theories that help us understand social change structurally or in terms of power relations operating at multiple levels.

Metrocentric neoliberalism with its efficiency and inevitability arguments that support the withdrawal of services from country places also assumes the binary separation of the country and the city. This problem is also taken up by Australian sociologist Connell (2007) who argued that social theory on both the left and the right, has been developed along the lines of separation of the metropolis and the periphery, which is what Said and others like Gayatri Spivak have long argued. Her idea of "southern theory" supports the recognition and further development of forms of social theory that derive not from Europe (notably France and Germany) and the United States, but from southern and other places outside the global metropolis. The point, with respect to PBE, as indigenous scholars have also argued, is that forms of knowledge that do not fit into the dominant epistemological and ontological terrain of multinational corporate capitalism (which is supported by "northern theory"<sup>3</sup>) are marginalized and invalidated (Battiste 2013; Smith 1999). I will return to this problem in the next section, but what this level of analysis illustrates is the inevitably political nature of knowledge and how it is used to generate the spatial practices that result in select places assuming positions of centrality and importance, while others are simply used up and rendered peripheral (Sassen 2014).

Indeed, one of the most important figures associated with PBE, David Greenwood (formerly Gruenewald), has responded directly to the critique that the place-based education movement has been politically naïve and even retrogressive. From his earliest writings, Gruenewald (2003a) has combined a Marxist-inspired political analysis through critical pedagogy with place-based education to create a hybrid he calls a critical pedagogy of place. The 2003 article he wrote on this topic in *Educational Researcher*, the flagship journal of the AERA is the most heavily referenced piece of writing on PBE with more than 2100 citations at this writing.

### 3 PBE Is Not Narrow Enough: Chet Bowers' Critique

A second major critique of PBE was developed by environmental educator and curriculum theorist C. A. (Chet) Bowers (2008). His pedantic and somewhat caustic article identifies tensions if not weaknesses in the way that place, politics, and culture intersect. Specifically, he takes on David Gruenewald/Greenwood's (2003a)

<sup>2</sup>On this relational point that I return to later in this chapter, see also van Eijck and Roth (2010), Lim (2010), and Waite (2013).

<sup>3</sup>Ironically of course in the Canadian context, "south" is associated with urbanization and settler populations, while "north" typically refers to indigenous people and geographies.

influential claim that critical pedagogy (CP) can be married to place-based or place-sensitive education to create what he calls “the bests of both worlds.” In other words, it should be possible, according to Gruenewald, to promote a critically informed, socially just agenda while attending to place and particularly to environmental problems and colonial histories that have distanced humans from natural ecologies in late modernity. Gruenewald posited that PBE has no clear theoretical foundation, or rather that it has a range of theoretical influences and posits that CP might provide such a foundation.

Bowers argues that Gruenewald’s critical pedagogy of place fails to understand the importance of culture and tradition and how ordinary and time-honoured practices of people who have lived for centuries on the land and sea are effectively ignored, appeals to community, social justice or environmental justice notwithstanding. He goes on to make the claim that CP is essentially a structural modernization theory that is actually incompatible with an emphasis on protecting place-based practices and traditions. In other words, PBE in the hands of its current thought leaders, issues abstract platitudes and theoretical missives about the place while doing little to either understand or support key ecological stewards, particularly Indigenous peoples whose culture and knowledge practices often resists modernist ontologies and epistemologies.

I once saw Bowers perform his critique at a CP-oriented “transformational learning” conference following a presentation by a couple of North American CP luminaries along with several from Brazil who worked directly with Paulo Freire. At the end of the presentation which was sober, even spiritual in tone (the word love was used on more than one occasion), Bowers rose to his feet and informed the presenters that they knew or cared nothing about culture, and in terms of their analysis of industrial development and capitalist modernity, they were no different from George Bush (president of the US at the time).

In a series of books from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s (Bowers 2001, 2003, 2006, 2012) Bowers has been arguing that both Freire and Dewey, upon whom Gruenewald draws heavily in his CP of place article, are essentially hostile to Indigenous knowledge practices and to all traditional non-commodified cultural practices he calls “the commons”—a term incidentally used somewhat differently by Paul Theobald whom Bowers also critiques. The reason for this is that both Gruenewald and Theobald, Bowers claims, end up focussing on the liberation of the individual from tradition and established cultural patterns of behaviour and work. Dewey’s pragmatism, which is said to be the foundation of PBE, and Paulo Freire who is widely acknowledged as the founder of CP, promote a naive liberal philosophy that equates change with progress. Established traditions, conservative practices and the knowledge that supports them are positioned in the ontology and epistemology of the CP of place as impediments to progress.

For Bowers then, there is always the question of what it is that should be conserved as well as that which ought to be subject to change (2003). This, he argues is a problem that can only be answered properly through an engagement with cultural traditions that is respectful and that recognizes multiple forms of knowledge. This is not a new critique of CP which has long been questioned for its assumptions about both the oppression of nature and nature of oppression including how the

(Marxist) ideological roots of the linear, culturally dismissive way that oppression is understood in structural social analysis. A further problem for CP concerns how the alleged “empowerment” this analysis is supposed to deliver can feel quite different from those it aims to liberate and who may feel as oppressed by CP as anything else (Ellsworth 1989).

But Bowers’ critique goes deeper than this, aligning both pragmatism and CP with forms of social Darwinism that obscure, he argues, the ecological challenges presented by technocapitalist modernity and its industrial processes. Both PBE and CP he argues are central theoretical underpinnings for economic, political, social and educational systems to use abstract theory as a set of rationalizing “prejudices that can be traced back to Plato that were, in turn, reinforced by Enlightenment thinkers and most contemporary Western philosophers” (2008, p. 326) to undermine and marginalize non-western cultural knowledge. He goes on to claim how in the process, “indigenous cultures are essentially backward, and this must be modernized by adopting the elitist Western model of development—including modern science” (2008, p. 326). The knowledge produced in this technoscientific apparatus is proprietary unlike Indigenous cultural knowledge (or some rural cultural knowledge), which he argues, represents common property, communal values, and that reflects a conservative approach that intimately understands both local geography and history represented in established practices and oral traditions.

Here, we encounter what I think is the central problem identified by Bowers when he posits incompatibility in the alliance of PBE with CP. For Bowers, the critical in CP is a set of Platonic assumptions about the value and superiority of context-free knowledge in which “thinking when rationally based, is free of the influence of the cultural epistemology encoded in the metaphorical language of the cultural group—and upon which the thinker’ relies and generally takes for granted” (2008, p. 329). Because of this bias, CP is never really able to support what he would consider an authentically place-based way of doing education.

Thus, PBE, in Bowers’ sense should actually abandon the epistemological foundation of Marxist theory and approach cultural locations not with an a priori theory of oppression, but rather with humility, openness, and a sensitivity to understanding through an approach founded in Clifford Geertz’ (1983) idea of thick anthropological description. This is a deep, time-consuming engagement with people in place. Bowers wonders about the actual places Gruenewald has in mind and in his own work and writing; for instance, Bowers claims to focus on the resistance of cultural groups to modernization initiatives in a way that is similar to the work of James Scott (1999, 2010).

Here the commodification of relationships along with the privatization and commodification of knowledge and basic life forms such as genetic material (Harry 2011) and agricultural seed (Shiva 2015), demean and disrespect cultural ways of knowing as retrogressive and residual in modernity. The end result is an enclosure of the commons and typically a degradation of established ecologies. Bowers seems to argue that neither CP nor PBE provide tools to confront this drift because they are entangled in the same philosophical assumptions that support unfettered the technocapitalism that creates the problem in the first place. Bowers takes language and metaphors very seriously and he argues that by accepting the mainstream of modernization arguments

and assumptions, neither movement is able to support places that are not in the business of “liberation” which amounts to overturning tradition, and thus, unconsciously supporting the incessant change endemic to consumer capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

In short, PBE aligned with CP is not sufficiently attuned to the particularities of culture and the knowledge practices and resistance to abstract ideologies that promote change for the sake of change regardless of the local consequences. A place *base* for education is, I think, entirely appropriate, but predicated on the understanding that the place from which we look out to the world is an orientation to the world and not the world itself. Drawing on the work of Lefebvre, Sue Middleton has recently suggested that: “a Lefebvrian critical pedagogy orients itself from the inside of ‘the reality we are studying. We are setting out from its inner movement and from what is possible’ (Lefebvre 2002, p. 56 cited in Middleton 2017, p. 424).”

## 4 Place Relations Education

A key problem with PBE is not so much that it refers, in a more or less sophisticated way to place itself, but rather in the way it refers to a “base.” As such it shares the problems of the other bases that have been proposed for education such as standards-based, outcomes-based, evidence-based, competency-based, etc. Yet, at the same time, a more complex relational vision of how place is understood might actually be a very appropriate centre of operations for educational work rather than the bounded container in which an education begins and ends (van Eijck and Roth 2010; Waite 2013) To use a military or colonial analogy, the “base” is the location at the centre of operations; it is where the leadership is located and the place from which the troops are launched.

To imagine place as the centre raises the question of how we should understand the concept of place itself as Nespor argues. Place is not locale, and to envision it as multilocal and multivocal as Margaret Rodman (1992) suggests, opens up the idea of place itself and renders it flexible, complex, relational, and thus, it may stand a better chance of avoiding the traps both Bowers and Nespor identify. Both Nespor and Bowers, in different ways, encourage attention to how the most seemingly structured and predictable aspects of everyday life are always instantiated in more or less in mundane emplaced agency (Lefebvre 2002). We live/dwell in place and it lives in us (Bachelard 1994; Perac 2008); and it is only through place that we understand anything (Malpas 2016).

It seems to me that if we understand place in relational terms, we arrive at the conclusion that what we call rural or remote communities may be distant from certain other “central” places, but they are both ecologies in themselves and part of larger

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<sup>4</sup>It must be recognized, the bulk of place-based pedagogies and scholarship take place within settler society educational spaces, and in a sense place-based education could be described as a defence of colonial spaces and practices which do little to contest or problematize how places came to be inhabited by the people who claim ownership of those places (Seawright 2014; Tuck and Yang 2012).

ecologies. Such a nested view, drawing on contemporary understandings of place, makes it more difficult to distinguish between insiders and outsiders or to define individuals and groups as other. I do not wish to suggest that power can be elided or evaded by focussing education on place, as has been the case in some variants of PBE. How space is carved up into places is neither natural nor neutral. There is always a complex history of how communities develop, how land was colonized or even stolen, how power and resources have been distributed to produce what appears coherently as “a place.” Then there is the slowly emerging conversation represented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concerning what to do about this history of injustice.

This is to say that the simplistic imagery of the close-knit community, more often than not, hides a history of symbolic, economic and frequently physical violence. Indeed, the extent to which places are linked durably and intimately with other places is one important dimension of power and privilege today. Mobile, highly-networked “spaces of flows” as Manuel Castells (2009) calls them, can be juxtaposed with more bounded and less privileged “spaces of places” in which people are essentially contained, constrained and left out of important networks unable to move very far. Zygmunt Bauman has long made similar arguments about mobility serving as a proxy for power and privilege in a networked world. Mobility seems central to a relational view of place.

Rural and remote communities can also represent places where people know one another well and see one another all the time even though they can also be spaces of isolation and separation. While the opposite can be the case, there is a sense in which the “space of places” might be seen as more predictable, convivial, communal, and for some people, more comfortable and preferable. When I lived in a village in the Canadian north 30 years ago, the common phrase that ended a conversation was “see you tomorrow”, because in all likelihood this is exactly what would happen. This not an uncommon experience in many rural communities where a high degree of what we might term, “face-to-faceness” is normal. Teachers in this Cree/Métis community (myself included) only vaguely understood the potential of place-based learning, and yet there were signs that some teachers at least were attuned to the importance of culture and to figuring out how to respond to the colonial legacy of schooling in the community. The size and relative isolation of the community at the time (television only arrived in 1983, the year I began teaching there), and the importance of traditional practices like hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering were skills that were easily accessed if a teacher bothered to invite an elder into the classroom.

While these local knowledges can provide a foundation and a starting place for learning, to argue that this face-to-face local-oriented curriculum is sufficient for “these kids” is also problematic. Problems that were created through generations of institutional and economic exploitation that provided the foundation for Canadian staples capitalism through four centuries will not be undone, or probably even addressed peripherally by focussing exclusively on one locale and preparing a local workforce for life there. These problems were not generated locally nor can they be solved at this level. While place might be a base, it is only a place to start understanding the

complexity of the interactions that make a place; which is to say, understanding how places are constructed (and by whom), and how they intra- and interrelate. I think, in contrast to Bowers, that this relational orientation is actually consistent with a least part of Dewey's vision of pragmatism, and his persistent encouragement of relational, democratic process.

In Canada, where there are relatively few private schools, we retain a larger measure of the educational commons than is the case in the United States, Britain, or in Australia. This has particular implications in many rural and remote areas where schools tend to remain genuinely inclusive.<sup>5</sup> What I mean by this is that unlike urban and suburban areas where real estate markets effectively segregate schools by social class and often by race and ethnicity, most children in a rural community attend the same school and interact at least at the level of visibility, with a large part of their community age cohort for several hours on a daily basis, at least through elementary schooling. The place-based education vision of Greenwood, Smith, and Theobald can support a pro-public education argument from both a communitarian and an ecological perspective. Bowers' critique of the loss of the commons amplifies the point with his insistence on the ongoing importance of culture, tradition and the way that these can serve to support actual struggles that resist capitalist modernity rather than issuing "theoretical statements about indigeneity" and effectively using Indigenous people to advance other agendas (Nespor 2008, p. 482). Still, a place-based critique of educational privatization is yet to arise.

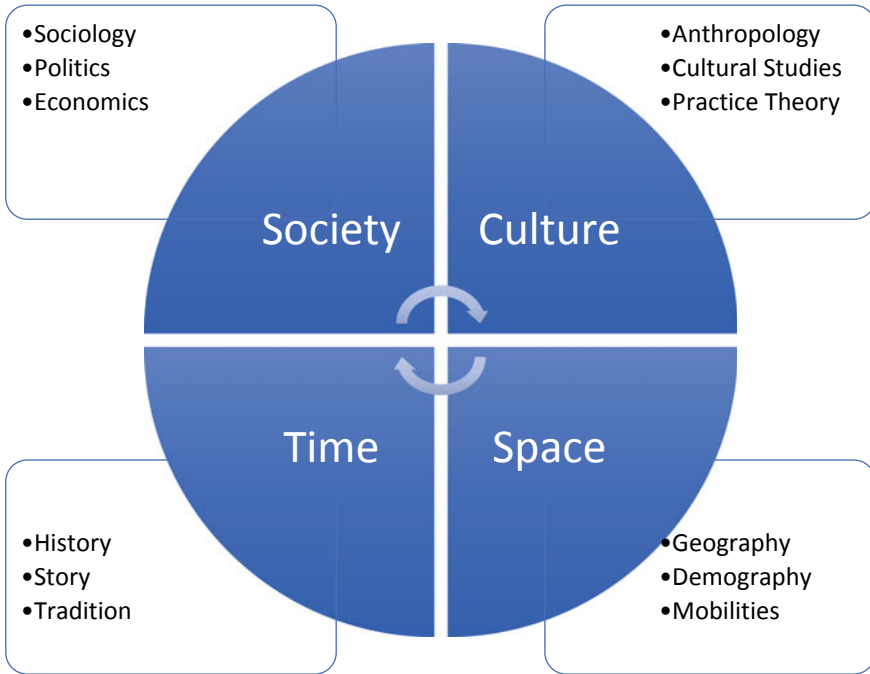
## 5 Seven Challenges for Place-Based Education

I will conclude this analysis with seven challenges for PBE that relate to the idea that place needs to be understood relationally rather than as a bounded container for the agency of particular people. The vision of place I suggest is one illustrated in Fig. 1 that uses theory to simultaneously critique the insularity that Nespor identifies, yet which is not dependent on the kinds of Platonic and Enlightenment epistemological assumptions Bowers points toward. This is a perspective that understands place to be entangled across social, cultural, historical and geographic dimensions as a complex and dynamic assemblage. As geographer Tim Cresswell puts it, "place is made and remade on a daily basis" (2004, p. 70) and Fig. 1 attempts to represent, at least schematically, some of the elements implicated in the making.

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<sup>5</sup>This is much less the case in the quasiprivatized education markets US, the UK and in Australia where rural non-government schools compete with the public schools, often with state funding.





**Fig. 1** A relational view of place

### ***5.1 A Relational Vision***

PBE requires a more philosophically robust, complex and relational view of place that resists binary thinking and a tightly bounded conception of enclaves of isolation. This should include recognition that place-making is always a political act. This ranges in scope from the ordinary work involved in creating a pleasing arrangement of flowers on a kitchen table to officially designating a place as rural or remote. The very idea of remoteness or isolation does more than describe the work; it actually creates an ordering of the world into centre and periphery that has performative consequences for how rural areas are constructed, governed and experienced. This practice can, for instance, support nativist and even survivalist visions that cause people to see themselves as simultaneously exploited, oppressed, noble and fundamentally different. Contemporary understanding of place insists that places exist in relation to other places and can only be understood in terms of how those relations operate.

## 5.2 *A Rural Curriculum*

An educational danger that emerges from non-relational forms of PBE is the idea that certain places contain particular kinds of essentialized people who require a place-specific form of education. What can emerge here is a one-dimensional, exceptionalist view of education that implies that rural people are different from urban dwellers and that they require a different education, one which is typically vocationally oriented, which suits the allegedly concrete and pragmatic character of the population (Corbett and Ackerson 2019). This is not unlike the arguments made for generations about Indigenous or people of African descent being dispositionally or even cognitively suited to menial labour, or at best, routine technical forms of employment. Today we understand this to be a racist argument, and yet, similar dispositional arguments are made about country kids all the time as “born and bred” farmers, fishers or labourers who are non-academic and “hands-on” by nature. This is, I think the central problem with an education that is said to be place-based in the sense that it can side into a parallel contention that people themselves are place-based and that they effectively need to remain there.

## 5.3 *Coming to Terms with Mobilities*

It is the movement of people, things and ideas across increasingly large swaths of space that marks off the modern period. Ferdinand Braudel (1992) has shown how the development of global commerce from the fifteenth century has resulted in a world where markets radically shrink space. Education, and the way we think about it is caught up in this mass mobilization of people, things and ideas. PBE would seem to contradict this reality, arguing instead that the internal dynamics of place are more important, and indeed, more virtuous and natural than the fluidity and relationality of what I have called mobile modernity (Corbett 2005; Forsey 2015, 2017). This is a major tension and also an omission perhaps not so much in the ways in which PBE is practiced, as in the way some of its luminaries tend to reinforce Malkki’s “sedentarist metaphysic.” The challenge is to understand, at a pragmatic level, how can place be re-imagined in transformational terms and as what Tuan (1977) calls a “stopping place” rather than a stasis. To accomplish this I suggest using theory like Lefebvre (1992b) and Soja’s (1996) trialectal conceptual tools to break out of the binaries that ensnare us when we think about place.

## 5.4 *The Temporal/Cultural Dimension*

Connecting rural and Indigenous education means recognizing that historic, cultural practices of First Nations peoples need to be thought through in relational terms. I

take as a foundational assumption that the commodified production of rural space, as it is understood today, is built on a legacy of unresolved territorial claims and a failure of productive dialogue. To put this in stark terms, the spaces that have been carved out and defined as “rural” were typically established on the basis of the outright theft of land from First Nations and indigenous peoples.<sup>6</sup> This theft, as Bowers points out in his critique of PBE, is justified as development and modernization, built upon discursive and material practices that argue for the inevitability of the destruction/demise of epistemologies and ontologies that dispute, challenge, or offer alternatives to global technocapitalism. Leaving these difficult histories out of PBE, which is often focussed on feel-good false histories of allegedly inclusive “close-knit” communities (Corbett 2014), is problematic. It is this very discourse of rural conviviality which ironically obscures established and often staunchly defended exclusions and historical blind spots (Waite 2013).

### 5.5 *Hybrid Understandings*

Rural educators, I have been arguing here, need to promote PBE in the context of both wide and narrow critiques recognizing the distinctiveness of culture while at the same time recognizing how cultures are not separate and self-contained. Rather, culture is now understood to be uncoupled from place representing intersections of individuals and groups who are transformed as they meet and relate into ever-emergent “hybrid” agents (Bhabha 1990).<sup>7</sup> A relational way of thinking about place, I think, should proceed from anti-essentialist assumptions that incorporate the flexibility suggested in Fig. 1.

### 5.6 *Flagging the Dangers of Rural Insularity*

PBE needs to confront the tendency to insularity that Nespor flags and recognize difficult histories, power, and diversity. I suggest that such an introspective turn, which can be supported by a more sophisticated understanding of how place, history, and memory are produced (Said 2000), must include the ways in which a sedentarist and entitled vision of rural culture is manipulated to generate binaries, oppositions and even hatred that support exclusive and insular agendas. The oversimplified but not entirely false way that rural citizens have been associated with, and blamed for

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<sup>6</sup>This problem has not been taken up in the North American rural education literature to any significant extent. This book, we hope at least opens up the conversation as it has been opened in Australia in recent years.

<sup>7</sup>Another way to put this is in the materialist language of human and more than human “becomings” as opposed to human beings (Deleuze and Guattari 1983).

the election of authoritarian populist political leaders is a case in point. Place-based educators need to confront the complex politics directly by managing the tension between honouring cultural particularities and recognizing interrelatedness.

### ***5.7 The Politics of PBE***

Recognition of the politics of the rural, which, as Nespor points out, necessitates a view of the world that goes well beyond the locale. While Bowers identifies other levels of politics and the way that oppression is carried out both physically and symbolically, a retreat into either a naïve defence of local culture or into pragmatically vacant abstract ideology is not likely to be productive. Regardless of their actual engagements with/in rural communities, most advocates of PBE, along with Bowers and Nespor, seem to agree on the importance of an invested, principled, courageous pragmatic engagement in the politics of place (or what Michael Woods [2006] calls the politics of the rural) and the active struggles of people in that place. Paying attention to place means to begin not in theory, but in engagement with ordinary experience as generations of strong rural teachers know well. As Henri Lefebvre (2002) wrote, “to study the everyday is to wish to change it” (cited in Middleton 2017, p. 412), which is inevitably political engagement.

## **6 A Brief Conclusion**

Thinking simultaneously of the “too narrow” critique of Nespor and the “too wide” critique of Bowers can point to a crucial point of tension faced by rural educators. Pragmatically for rural educators, the balance that I think needs to be struck is, in part, what Hernan Cuervo, Simone White and I identify (2019) as finding new ways to work in the interface between what we call pedagogies of belonging on the one hand, and pedagogies of mobile aspirations on the other. The question we ask is: how do rural teachers balance calls for locally responsive pedagogies that support community cohesion, stewardship, and belonging, and at the same time respond to parallel demands that they support individuals to maximize their personal choices in a mobility-oriented economic system? And what is place today anyhow? As real and technologically-mediated “non-places” proliferate (Augé 2009; Berlant 2011) creating both incoherences, partial understandings, echo-chambers and radicalization, the Deweyan and invocation that education must begin with experience in place requires a return to a critical sociological sensibility.

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## **Conclusion**



# Conclusion: Insights and Provocations for the Future of Rural Education—Reclaiming the Conversation for Rural Education



Michael Corbett and Dianne Gereluk

**Abstract** In this chapter, we draw together lessons learned and offer an analysis of some key themes drawn from the preceding chapters which represent a partial and initial attempt to formulate a Canadian perspective on rural education. These themes include the significance of place in rural education and teacher education; the centrality of relations to teaching and learning in rural locales; the complexity and challenge of understanding and responding to diversity and dispelling exclusive notions of rural homogeneity; and the importance of working in the cultural interface to respond authentically and proactively to the Canadian *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*. We highlight the importance of understanding rurality as a complex human and physical geographic idea through the trialectical lens of contemporary spatial theory as perceived/real, conceived/symbolic and lived/experienced.

**Keywords** Rural education · Modernity · Place · Space · Canada

## 1 The Field of Rural Education, Modernism, Efficiency and Community Activism

In the age of global educational comparison, governance and policy borrowing (Ball 2012; Lingard et al 2015; Rizvi and Lingard 2010), Canada has achieved considerable notoriety and is purported to be a high achieving, highly equitable national system. The vast geographic size of Canada, only second to Russia, may cause some international educators to assume that Canadian educators and policy makers have been attentive and responsive to how we might provide rich learning environments for all our children in rural regions. This assumption often mirrors a corollary assumption promulgated in the global testing culture that Canada is a world leader in the

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field which itself reflects the view that robust national social programmes, and an inclusive culture has created a relatively “flat” multicultural, socioeconomic, educational landscape. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD point person on education, has commented that the reason for the success of Canada’s students in the PISA league tables is a strong focus on equity (Coughlan 2017; Schleicher 2014). While there may be a certain truth in this analysis, Canada does not have a single education system, but rather 13 distinct systems (in 10 provinces and 3 territories) that operate independently generating a range of results. The thirteen Canadian provinces and territories are vastly different in terms of physical geography, history, economic structure, urbanization, population distribution, ethnic composition and, of course educational performance as measured by standardized instruments. The intersection of the multiple differences represented by Canadian physical and human geography creates a context in which internal comparisons reveal considerable regional inequities in both educational inputs and outputs.

For our purposes here, Canadian geographic, economic, social and cultural diversity is masked by reportage and analysis that posits a single Canadian “system.” Our central concern in this book has been to develop a partial analysis of the influence of rurality as it has been understood historically, demographically, but also culturally. We are interested in stimulating and contributing to a conversation about education in non-metropolitan human and physical geographies that speaks to the complexity of the idea of the rural itself. Is there substance to the assumption that perhaps Canada is getting it “right”? And is there a “right” way to do things for and with people who live in these rural regions which is different from what is required in cities? This raises questions of space and place in education that have competed with generic and standardized understandings that imagine one uniform or flat educational landscape.

Many of the authors in this book work in rural communities and understand that the spectrum of rural schools in their communities is indeed vast. Trying to identify “rural” proves to be a challenge and may promote the very stereotypes that may undermine the diverse rich and varied nature of rural Canada. If we can say anything about the rural in Canada as a whole, it is perhaps that the space outside the metropolis is diverse. Yet, diversity is not a term often used to describe rural Canada in most policy and civil society discussions. While some rural communities thrive and flourish, others struggle to survive. Rural communities are more or less homogenous, depending in part on how diversity is understood. Seldom is rurality considered in relation to Indigenous nations or issues even though most First Nations land is classified as rural. Neither are rural places today bereft of social class divisions (Howley et al. 2014) or the complexities of sex and gender (Pini and Leach 2011). The political, economic, cultural and religious nuances, relations and complexity across rural social space provide richness and density with respect to how we might think about teacher education.

This is not so much a problem to “be addressed”, but rather an awareness, sensitivity and recognition that is unique to the place and to its people. In this sense, rural teaching and teacher education should be, as Corbett (2010) argues, first of all

a matter of learning where you are. It matters about knowing “that” particular place, and those people, who have a living history unique to the relations, and the lifeblood of what has kept those people together in their locales. It also involves engaging with students and communities about what are now called “futures” both individual career and mobility trajectories and from the point of view of community development.

We think this book illustrates the richness of the emerging conversation about rural education in Canada and beyond. The book contains a variety of approaches to an equally broad variety of research problems in rural education and teacher education reflecting the diversity of rural situations that in turn mirrors the richness of the non-metropolitan experience. Given this diversity, it has been argued that the very idea of rurality is now redundant and essentially defined by what it is not. There is little doubt that the city and urbanism, the dominant geographic category in modernity and most contemporary spatial theory for the last half century or more, have developed an analysis of the city as its dominant themes (Florida 2009; Lefebvre 1992; Mumford 1961; Sassen 1991; Sennett 2018; Williams 1974). As Louis Wirth (1938) put it 80 years ago, urbanism is a “way of life” (Wirth 1938). Indeed, for many social analysts, it can appear as *the* only way life is going as rural space empties out in an urban teleology of progress.

What indeed does the term rural signify today? Almost a generation ago, work in critical geography began destabilizing the demographic notion of rurality as a unified concept (Pahl 1966). This work has generated decades of analysis that focusses on the relations between the country and the city in regions, rather than some imputed fundamental spatial difference between rural and urban. This movement though has not dispensed with the idea of rurality entirely. There is little doubt that the idea of urbanism, which is the dominant spatial teleology in modernity over the last half century or more, has developed an analysis of the city as its dominant theme (Kelly 2013; McKay 2006; Urry 2002). By the 1990s, debates emerged about the usefulness of rural as a central spatial concept given definitional problems that dogged and continue to haunt the field relating to the complex of inclusions and exclusions that the very idea of rurality has represented (Murdoch and Pratt 1993; Philo 1992). This work evolved into a serious consideration of the poststructural contention that ideas create reality rather than innocently describe it. By the time of the publication of the *Handbook of Rural Studies* in 2006 (Cloke et al. 2006), it had become clear that the field had adopted a nuanced sociocultural character that neither reduced rural to a spatial container separate from its urban other, nor understood rural culture as something distinct from the complex problems of/in modernity. Yet, at the same time, the distinctions created in the contemporary field of rural studies still retained its name and worked to understand the specific, simultaneously place-based and globally relational problems beyond the metropolis.

In education, the problem of rurality is both old and new. Schooling, and particularly public schooling, as it developed from the mid-nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in Western capitalist societies, had as a central part of its core mission, the transformation of primary resource focussed labour into an industrial workforce (Corbett 2001; Theobald 1995; Thompson 1967; Tyack 1974). This

involved the standardization of curriculum, teaching standards and assessment practices as well as the development of what Curtis (1988) has called the “education state” concerned with the generation of industrial workers, normalization and biopolitics (Foucault 1977), but also with wresting control of schooling out of the hands of local trustees and into the hands of administrative professionals (Gaffield 1987). The need to provide mass compulsory schooling to entire nations was the priority with little attention to how that might look in various locales. Building schools, training adults (rather rudimentarily) and enforcing and policing the mandatory enrolment of students (with clear brutality towards indigenous children) were the primary emphases to institutionalize a particular form of state compulsory schooling. Small, locally controlled rural schools were criticized by educational modernizers through the twentieth century, and indeed into the present (Corbett 2014; Corbett and Helmer 2017), as the quintessential example of how rural life and rural schools impeded efficiency, development and progress (Cubberley 1922).

Rather than understanding rural schools as a problem to be solved by modernization, or as underdeveloped, vestigial operations that require reform, work in the field of rural education from the 1970s has investigated the ways in which rural schools and the communities they serve, while threatened and challenged by multiple change forces, are valued and supported by rural citizens. They often remain resilient and resistant to administrative efforts to close, consolidate, amalgamate and generally make them more like metropolitan schools (i.e. big and highly specialized). There is much more than can and has been said here, but suffice it to say that the argument has been repeatedly made by rural philosophers, historians, sociologists, educational researchers and activists to think about the rightful role and place of rural education in Canada and beyond (Howley and Eckman 1997; Kvalsund 2009; Theobald 1997).

The field of rural education, particularly as it has evolved in its principal sites of development the USA and Australia, is largely an activist field. Subsequently, rural education scholarship has been preoccupied with promoting the benefits of small, community schools confronting their alleged parochialism, inefficiencies, deficits and deficiencies. Much of this work seeks to challenge the essentially economic educational funding formulas based on student population, arguing instead, from egalitarian cultural, equity and social justice perspectives, that the provision of educational services in rural communities is a state responsibility. Rural education scholarship that has subsequently developed as a global field has retained a defensive and resistant core dedicated to maintaining and enhancing services, attracting and retaining teachers and ensuring that attention and educational resources are deployed outside the metropolis. This has led to critiques that the field is insufficiently evidence-based and objective (Arnold et al. 2005), and that is, it insufficiently theoretically attuned.

This collection of essays develops the emergent transdisciplinary space of rural education in Canada that has not as yet, we would argue, coalesced as a distinct field. While there has been a handful of scholars who identify as rural specialists, there is a greater number working with rural issues in education or in what can be described as rural locations around the country. This collection brings together a number of these researchers some of whom would identify as rural education scholars and others who would be less likely to do so, but who see the potential for providing an alternative lens

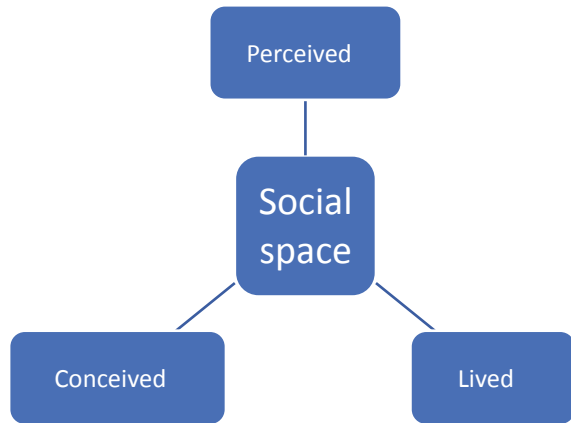
in these debates. Indeed, the creation of this collection may well help many people working outside cities where most academic research and researchers are located, to think of themselves differently and to think about the importance of geography, space and place, not just as peripheral concerns, or more or less important variables, but as central features of their research programmes. This collection simultaneously presents relevant work relating to rural teacher education and rural education more generally in Canada, while at the same time acting as a provocation for scholars to think about their work in spatial terms and consider the complexities and nuances of what Australian rural education scholars have called “rural social space” (White et al. 2011; Reid et al. 2010).

## 2 Thinking Beyond the Binary

We call this in the title of this collection, “reclaiming the conversation”, which is to say recognizing the importance of rural Canada, expanding the scope of its definition to multiple non-urban spaces created in the context of settler society development to include indigenous communities, coastal communities, forestry/mill centres, mining and resource extraction communities, agricultural and energy industry-focussed communities, bedroom periurban and exurban locales, and eco-tourism sites to name but a few. In this collection, we also attend to what Martin Nakata (2007) calls the “cultural interface” or the space that integrates settler and Indigenous peoples. This interface has not yet, in most Western contexts, been a central focus of rural education scholarship. In this collection, we attempt to follow the recommendations of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission and begin to develop theory and empirical research that thinks through the often troubled connections between settler and Indigenous social spaces.

Reid et al. (2010) conception of rural social space that develops Green and Letts’ (2007) trialectical framing is useful here to help understand the complexity of non-metropolitan social space (see Fig. 1). Drawing on the critical geography of Henri Lefebvre (1992), space is understood simultaneously to have realist/perceived (demography, physical geography, distance and movement), idealist/conceived (linguistic and visual symbolic representations, cultural frameworks) and experiential/lived dimensions. The challenge is to think of these dimensions together to create new and richer understandings of social space (see Fig. 3). We perceive space as a material surround, but also through the lens of symbolic representations of space and our embodied experience in space. Lefebvre’s triad integrates realist, idealist and experiential dimensions that generate an understanding of how space is not just

**Fig. 1** Lefebvre's spatial triad



“there” to be seen or to live within, but it is also actively generated through time by agents with vastly different abilities and resources to support spatial production.<sup>1</sup>

Below we (again) reproduce the rural social space model that highlights the importance of multidimensional and relational thinking which is a central theme in this collection. Reid et al. represent trialectical thinking about rural social space by combining geography, economy and demography to represent the interplay of environment, work or transformation of the environment and population. To think about rural space and place using these tools is to consider together the natural and built environments that appear to us in ordinary perception as rural. The image in Fig. 2, for instance, is immediately recognized as representing a rural space. The image also conjures background perceptions about who lives there, what practical activities occur day to day, and possibly additional notions relating to what is produced, where this production goes and who benefits from this work. The representational or symbolic dimension that generates a certain sense of the rural is also mediated by cultural and political understandings as well as by lived experience which is more or less familiar and present in situations like the one depicted in Fig. 3. These assumptions notwithstanding, there is also a strong likelihood that today this type of space contains people not employed in farming, who commute or telecommute and who identify in diverse ways with rurality, or conversely who have no particular rural identification.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The development of massive combines that can accomplish the work of hundreds of agricultural labourers, feller bunchers in the logging industry and modern fish draggers and factory trawlers is rather obvious examples of how the production or rural social space is transformed profoundly by material and cultural practices. But so too is the resilient popularity of country music and consumer behaviours such as the similarly resilient popularity of highest selling vehicle in Canada one of the most heavily urbanized countries in the world, which is the large pickup truck.

<sup>2</sup>An example of this is the Nova Scotia coastal village where Michael currently lives. Of the 130 permanent homes in the village, approximately 100 are unoccupied in the winter months, but from the air, the community looks like a fishing village even though only a handful of people still fish for a living. Ian McKay (2006) points out that in Nova Scotia, which trades heavily on the touristic



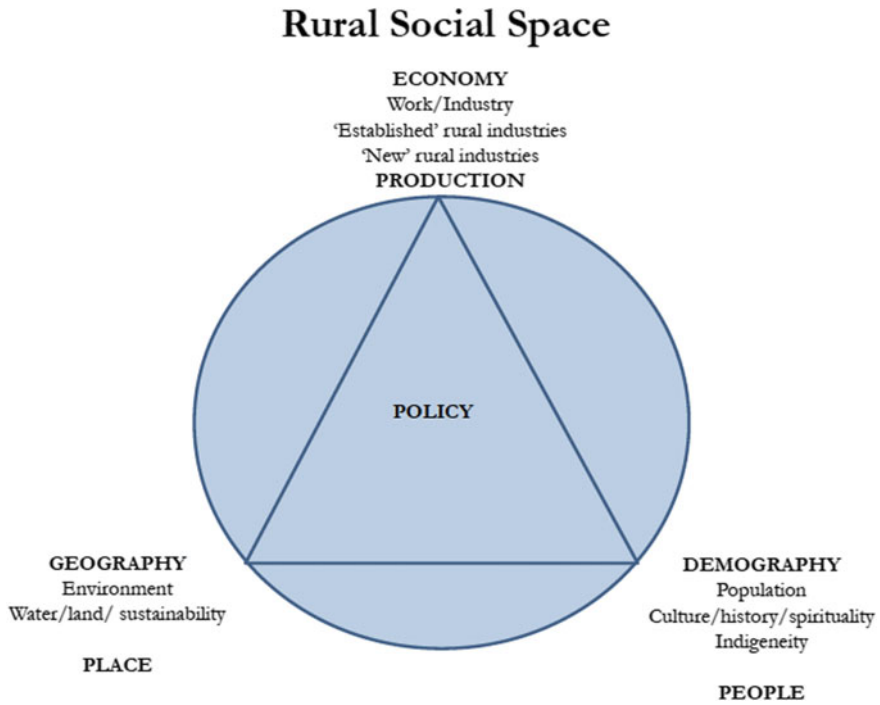
**Fig. 2** Symbolic representations of the rural. Photograph by Michael Corbett

In this collection, we have presented a dialogue amongst different complementary spatial perspectives including the cultural, social demographic and historical dimensions of schooling and teaching non-metropolitan locales, particularly in the chapters authored by Looker and Bollman and Smith and Peller. Corbett, Scully, and Pedan and Scott and Louie also look at the historical forces of capitalist development along with colonialism and its aftermath that have shaped Canadian political history and geography.

Symbolic representations of rurality work through most of the chapters particularly in the section on rurality and place where political theory, sociology and indigenous studies inflect the analysis. This work examines established and emerging representations and symbolic practices embody different and sometimes contested cultural understandings of rural inhabitants as well as rural space itself. For instance, a crucial curriculum question in rural education relates to what Corbett (2018) calls “the location of curriculum” or the extent to which and how place is represented in and through curriculum. Chapters by O’Connor, Wallin and Pedan and Scully take up this question in relation to indigenous understandings of land and land-based

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imagery of a coastal “ocean playground” (the motto on the provincial license plates), there was never more than 20% of the population employed in the fishery and related industries. A Nova Scotian worker was always much more likely to work in a mine, a mill or a store. For an interesting study of the development of Nova Scotia’s touristic imaginary by cultural intellectuals from the 1930s, see McKay and Bates 2010.



**Fig. 3** Rural social space (Reid et al. 2010)

education that invokes a different and more complex “rurality” that which is found in most contemporary North American rural place-based education literature. This work finds resonance with the more politicized rural education work emerging in Australia (Cuervo 2016; Roberts and Green 2013; Roberts 2016). Woven through most chapters is the experiential dimension of rural teaching and rural schooling.

### **3 Issues and Complexities: Thinking Canadian Education in Rural Social Space**

Below we identify and elaborate several key issues and insights arising across the chapters. We find that the field of Canadian rural education shares certain similarities and continuities with problems in the global field, but that there are particularities to the Canadian experience that relate to the diversity and uniqueness of physical and cultural geography.



### ***3.1 Demographic and Sociocultural Landscapes of Rural Teaching***

Looker and Bollman (2020) open this collection with a thorough and expansive analysis of the complexity of teacher demand and supply in rural Canada supported by an extensive appendix (available in the electronic version of the book). They begin though with an equally complex problem which is the very definition of rural itself. While it has become increasingly clear that straightforward demographic definitions of rurality are problematic, this has created the related problem of literally hundreds of different rural–urban classification schemes that are employed around the world. In recent decades, Canadian demographers have moved away from a straightforward rural–urban binary classification scheme to more nuanced analysis, notably the metropolitan-influenced zone (MIZ), a five-point classification system based on the percentage of people in a given locale commuting to work in a metropolitan area.

Somewhat surprisingly, Looker and Bollman find considerable stability in the demand for and supply of teachers to rural places across Canadian geography. This finding interrupts the dominant perception that is commonly played out in provincial policy documents that starts from the premise that there is a high turnover of rural teachers. We recognize, however, that the particular place of some jurisdictions may still face incredible challenges; conversely, on a macro-level, this analysis calls upon educators and policy makers to take a closer examination and acknowledge those teachers who are longstanding educators in these rural schools. Looker and Bollman show how not all places designated rural are equal, and using the more spatially sensitive MIZ rather than a binary rural–urban classification, they demonstrate how remote parts of the country do indeed have difficulties with teacher recruitment and retention.

Looker and Bollman find something similar with school non-completion rates that mirrors established findings showing that the more isolated the community (less metropolitan influence in terms of MIZ classification), the less likely that young people continue into postsecondary education. Other work indicates that when SES is controlled for, rural and urban academic performance is very similar (Cartwright and Allen 2002; Roberts 2016). The implication here is that less remote rural communities tend to be wealthier and tend to look a lot like metropolitan areas in terms of graduation outcomes and educational performance. Yet, as Schleicher (2018) points out, this is not the end of the story, and rurality appears to have a partially independent influence apart from income and other standard structural variables. This analysis suggests the need for further research that nuances what constitutes rurality.

Looker and Bollman also examine the importance of the intersection of Indigeneity and remoteness for understanding school non-completion rates. Their results indicate that for non-indigenous students, school non-completion rates are essentially the same across the gradient from urban to rural to remote locations. The higher non-completion rates in remote rural areas are almost entirely due to high non-completion rates of Indigenous students. These results highlight the important interaction between remoteness and Indigeneity. This issue is also taken up by Scott

and Louie (2020) in this volume as well as by Scully (2020) and Wallin and Pedan (2020) who examine place from an Indigenous standpoint.

In their chapter, Smith and Peller (2020) dig deeper into the specific problem of differential access to teacher education programming using a sophisticated employment of geographic information systems (GIS) to analyse the “commutability” of teacher education programmes in rural Canada. While there is a limited amount of distributed teacher education (see Gereluk et al. 2020; Danyluk et al. 2020), most teacher education programmes in Canada operate in large urban centres. For students living outside the metropolis, this implies commuting. Not surprisingly, they find highly uneven access to teacher education programming for metropolitan and non-metropolitan students across the different provinces. This work problematizes the rural–urban binary and reinforces Looker and Bollman’s work showing that rural is not a singular phenomenon but one that represents a complex of demographic, cultural and mobility dimensions. We also see here how rurality is only comprehensible and useful as an analytic category when it is understood relationally in terms of density, distance, culture and society.

Other chapters in this section, and indeed in the remainder of the collection, speak to some dimensions of what rural means in education as well as how these meanings fit into questions of identity. To return to the rural social space model, this work illustrates the social, cultural, psychological dimensions of the idea of the rural. In addition to demographic representations and the historical and contemporary productivist mythologies of how Canadian geography has developed and what happens there, there is an increasing emphasis on acknowledging and elevating the nature of lived experiences of the rural and the way that symbolic representations intersect with the material in rural social space. Martin’s (2020) chapter addresses a long-standing problems in philosophical and political theory relating to rural studies that have been also taken up in the rural education literatures (Cuervo 2016; Kristiansen 2014). This is the way that contemporary educational discourse does not speak to the idea of belonging or community in a way that relates to the experience of people living in rural places. Martin posits that if educational aims were positioned differently to value community over individualistic neoliberal principles, an entirely novel educational landscape might emerge.

Leaving aside the phenomenological literature on place and dwelling (Bachelard 1994; Malpas 2016), the rural communitarian tradition represented by Berry (1997) and Theobald (1997) as well as by Hooks (2008) has made the argument that the revitalization and even survival of rural communities and an embedded consciousness of stewardship and care are essential to environmental, psychological and social wellbeing as well as to human survival. Of course, as economists are quick to point out, this all assumes a functioning economy. Taking a different tack, and one that resonates throughout the following section, Scott and Louie (2020) take up the challenges of reforming schooling to meet the needs of Indigenous students, many of whom live in areas that are defined spatially as rural, but that are distinct sociocultural spaces, often separate from nearby communities that have been spatially defined and historically understood to be quintessentially rural. Scott and Louie’s work raises important questions about the rural/indigenous interface. This is a complex and often troubled

intersection representing an undertheorized<sup>3</sup> connection between people and place in the context of colonialism and global capitalism. This piece, along with much of the work in the Part 4 on place and land-based education, challenges the romanticism, historical amnesia and exclusivity that often characterizes rural education scholarship. Work such as Scott and Louie's and the pieces in Sect. 4 offer theoretical and methodological challenges to the emerging field of rural education in Canada.

### 3.2 *Relationality and Identity*

The third section entitled Rural Identity and Relationality offers a series of empirical qualitative studies that describe and analyse rural teacher education, and particularly, the phenomenon of the disconnect between people who live in rural communities and most of those who arrive in rural communities to teach there. A chronic problem in the rural education literature globally is that of teacher retention and recruitment (Halsey 2018; Peterson et al. 2018; Reagan et al. 2019). A related problem is a general lack of attention to the unique challenges of rural teaching in contemporary teacher education in Canada. Gereluk, Dressler, Eaton and Becker offer an analysis of a blended teacher education programme for rural and remote teacher education candidates that seek to address the recruitment and retention challenge. Their analysis documents the challenges and success of this programme and raises important questions about the way that face-to-face university professional programming is typically assumed to be the only quality way to deliver teacher education. This presumption, perhaps ironically, excludes potential candidates who are deeply rooted in their more or less remote communities, and who, it can be argued, are precisely the people most likely to remain there because their identities are invested in the place.

The following four chapters all examine different aspects of rural identity through distinct studies of different types of identity investments. Murphy, Dreidger-Enns and Huber focus on the life of an individual teacher whose identity straddles the academic space of school and the vernacular spaces of life in a rural community. They provide an intimate portrait of a teacher who knows intimately where she is, and who incorporates common cultural practices into her curriculum and pedagogy. Indeed, this work shows how place *is* identity and how part of what rurally connected teachers brings to the table is their lived experience in place-based subsistence and cultural practices. In listening and honouring her voice, there is both a unique telling of her story, but also a familiarity that may resonate in what David Jardine (1992) calls an “undeniable sense of kinship and understanding” (p. 51). It is the intent that this telling of the story has a “generative and re-enlivening effect on the interweaving text and textures of human life in which we are all embedded” (Jardine, 1992, p. 51).

This deep experience of place shared by what Gereluk et al. call “home-grown” teachers is also illustrated in the work of Danyluk, Burns and Scott who focus on a

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<sup>3</sup>Undertheorized at least in the field of rural education as David Greenwood (2009) pointed out a decade ago. See also Corbett (2009) and Faircloth (2009).

rural teacher education programme that supported teaching assistants to undertake professional education as teachers. Like other chapters, this study is an investigation of transformation of professional as well as established non-professional community identities. This chapter explores the complexity of this transformation using Mezirow and contemporary transformative learning theory to conclude that it can be very difficult to manage the identity shift involved in transitioning from para-professional to professional, but that these teacher education candidates have access to particular knowledge sets. Danyluk et al.'s work raises questions of rural professionalism, competing commitments, gender and how these teachers developed rich multi-perspectival understandings of themselves, their communities, and of the work of teaching. These three studies all support and contribute to the literature on how place and identity inflect rural teaching, suggesting the need for attention to place and rurality in teacher education.

A central concern in the field of rural education for at least the last century has been the consolidation, amalgamation and closure of rural schools which is part of broader decline of rural services. This phenomenon relates to changing industrial structure, dearth of jobs, outmigration and ageing rural populations which generates a chronic tension at the heart of rural education discussions which tend to focus on a discourse of decline. There is an ever-expanding literature on the topic, and while there is some contestation about the ultimate effect of rural school closures on community cohesiveness and survival, the rural education literature generally supports the idea that rural citizens deserve access to proximate basic schooling where possible. Ferne Cristall, Susan Roger and Kathy Hibbert provide a close look at one community's experience of the loss of a school. An important issue that this raises is what Corbett and Helmer (2017) identified as disparate world views separating administrators who hold a technical-rational and geographically dispersed view of fairness and justice as opposed to community members who understand their schools as critical infrastructure for a vibrant, livable community. This raises questions about the appropriate assessment of "impact" as well as related questions concerning the relative worth of places and ultimately of people themselves. The field of rural education is replete with the literature concerning the marginalization of communities and the evolution of metrocentric educational policy (Beach et al. 2019).

Bonnie Stelmach, whose work in rural education has concentrated on parents and parenting and has been developed through a broader engagement with the field of parenting and education, offers a critical analysis of relationality and identity. She develops a key distinction between parent involvement and parent engagement to analyse the ways in which school communities are understood and constituted through particular discourses. Typically, rural schools are mythologized as places where inclusive members of "close-knit" communities work to support each other and the school itself. Stelmach's analysis of insiders and outsiders in micro-level school governance and support groups reveals a much more complex picture of the roles of parents and professional educators who establish and maintain boundaries and control in rural schools. Local hierarchies and other forms of social, moral and psychological distinction are employed by parents to reveal something of a social class structure

within rural schools that mediates who may and who may not have voice in school communities. As such, this work reflects a growing interest in intersectional and poststructural analysis of rural schools as sites of complex identity work and power dynamics (Schulz 2017; Tieken 2014; Jackson 2010).

### ***3.3 Place and Land***

The final section of the book dwells on a central theoretical, methodological and pragmatic focus in the field of rural education which is the valorization of place. In recent years, this focus in rural education has taken up two theoretically rich streams of inquiry. The first is a deeper analysis of social space which draws on work from critical geography and poststructural theory. The second is a movement towards intersectional analysis and exploration of potential connections between indigenous educational issues and rural education as a field (Davies and Halsey 2019). In this section, Corbett's chapter addresses principally the first issue, while the other three chapters speak to the rural/Indigenous cultural interface which is a space that harbours considerable potential for emerging scholarship and much needed theoretical, methodological and empirical work.

Scully positions land at the centre of her analysis capitalizing the term to indicate a level of reverence not commonly found even in the most spatially aware and place-involved analysis in rural education. Drawing on John Dewey and Indigenous scholarship, she works across intellectual traditions but with a clear emphasis on Indigenous understandings of land. Her analysis posits that land is the foundation of learning and teaching inflected by Indigenous conceptions of culture and community. These values and practices she argues, along with Martin in this book, have been lost or disregarded in the headlong rush towards differentiation and individualization represented by the neoliberal individualism. Scully teases apart and then rejoins the fundamental ideas of land and place to make an argument that there is depth to an Indigenous concept of land that can be elided in place-based education that has its roots in productivist understandings of rurality in settler societies. As Scott and Louie point out, it is in rural areas that some of the most extreme racialized tensions and the most deeply rooted populist political cultures take root and thrive. Intolerance, nepotism and exclusivity often in communities that receive few newcomers over generations and established "legacy" families exercise considerable local control as Stelmach points out in her chapter.

Dawn Wallin and Sherry Pedan's chapter examines a leadership initiative that purposely integrates land-based education into rural leadership training. The intent of this leadership initiative offers an example of the ways that both land/place and Indigenous knowledge can be productively combined. The power of the land itself as both a teacher and as a venue for reconciliation or at least productive encounters is illustrated in their analysis. This work raises questions concerning not just the "what" but also the "where" of education and the significance of the material surroundings for learning. Where learning occurs shapes its content/character and attempts to abstract

the learner out of place has been long contested by rural education scholarship. This, of course, is a lesson, but moreover an ontology that Indigenous elders, scholars and activists have long promoted.

While Wallin's and Pedan's focus is targeted towards educational leaders, Kevin O'Connor attends to the ways in which teacher educators can foster similar dispositions for future teachers in teacher education programmes in their emerging pedagogical practices. Working with preservice teachers, O'Connor draws on his background in outdoor and science education to develop a conception of land/place-based education that is also informed by his experience working in Indigenous communities and elders. Parallels may exist between the ways in which outdoor and project-based science education intersect with principles of land and place-based education. This work provides guidance for how future teachers may be able to better conceptualize and implement practices that may, at first glance, be potentially overwhelming for a beginning teacher. O'Connor offers a practical and accessible alternative way to embed pedagogical and curricular approaches that are aligned to land and place-based education as part of their larger obligations to support the calls to action in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*.

Finally, Corbett's chapter returns us to the familiar rural education ground as he critiques the place-based education tradition both from the perspective of its tendency, in many iterations, to ignore culture and particularly Indigeneity and in the way that it can tend to construct a false image of rural places as self-contained and isolated geographies. This work compliments the preceding chapters by arguing for a more complex, relational view of place and space that challenges the comfortable assumptions that tend to underpin the previous generation of place-based education scholarship and practice.

#### **4 A Canadian Perspective on Rural Education**

We think this book has opened up a distinctively Canadian perspective on some of the principal preoccupations of the field of rural education that provide some provocations and lessons for national and international audiences. First of all, our work here demonstrates both the distinctiveness of the Canadian context and how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has opened up a different sort of conversation about the national educational experience. A very narrow, and distorted, historical picture of the injustices inflicted upon Indigenous peoples over multiple generations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has interrupted the stereotype of Canada as an ideal sites of schooling and educational equity. While there is a great deal of work to be done, it is clear that the field of rural education that focusses on the world outside the metropolis is an important site for reconciliation and the kind of community building necessary for a sustainable future.

Developing professional teachers who have the flexibility and sensibility needed to teach effectively beyond the city is crucial. So is the deep history of the Indigenous/rural interface, and we think this collection opens up some productive honest dialogue, provocative and generative accounts of practice and ideas to move us towards a better future. While this may be uncomfortable for many white rural teacher education candidates accustomed to the comfort and insularity of their established communities and world views, rural social space is integrated into the mainstream of globalized capitalist social, cultural and economic relations. It is clear that much of rural Canada is marginalized with the context of metrocentric social and economic policy. Yet at the same time, rural spaces contain significant historical legacies and contemporary examples of more or less overt racism, sexism, classism and intersectional oppression. Thus, within marginalized rurality, there are layers of marginalization that call for the same understandings of structural disadvantage needed in complex, diverse urban educational settings.

We hope that this book invites others into this conversation to shift the discourse towards a collectively responsibility that honours the ways in which rural Canadians can flourish and thrive as part of the greater civil society. While examples, studies and analysis in this book have focused on rural education in Canada, we do believe that the debates offered here lend themselves to a broader international discussion. For us, this is a continuing conversation—not to be approached as if there is a simple solution—but one intended to allow us to move forward alongside and together respectfully with our communities beyond city limits and those who inhabit those lands. Rather obviously, this conversation is just beginning and has a long way to go.

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# Afterword: Place-Consciousness and Education Change Networks to Empower Rural Learners



Leyton Schnellert

**Abstract** Educational renewal in rural schools and communities can be stymied by many challenges including teacher isolation, staff turnover, and failing resource-based economies. Education change networks within and across rural communities can nurture educators' professional development through collaborative inquiry and connect educators interested in taking up equity-oriented, place-conscious pedagogies. This afterward draws from the chapters in this book to outline how rural education transformation can benefit from and be realized within education change networks that take up multiple perspectives including the more-than-human world, reconciliation with Indigenous communities, and service learning.

**Keywords** Rural education · Place-consciousness · Education change networks · Social justice · Teacher professional development

## 1 Introduction

According to Stelmach's 2011 synthesis of international rural issues and responses, worldwide we face challenges such as out-migration, gender inequity, and poverty. Thus, we have mesosystem issues such as declining enrollment and staffing as well as microsystem issues such as remoteness, curriculum relevancy, and the need for multi-sectoral partnerships. These issues are true across Canadian teacher education contexts as illustrated in the chapters of this book, yet Canada's rural educators must also consider and engage with the specificity of place.

I work and live in British Columbia, Canada's westernmost province, spanning a total area of 944,735 square kilometers, two time zones, many mountain ranges, sudden weather changes, and 198 distinct First Nations. Our geography and climate create regions that shape us and our (sometimes arbitrary) identities and educational opportunities. The Interior. The Kootenays. The Okanagan. The Stikene. The Nas. The Gulf Islands. We define—and limit—ourselves with these boundaries. Yet, rural

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education in BC takes up some interesting boundary-crossing approaches that make us possibilizers and inquirers. I hope to reinforce the work in this collection by making a case here for how place-consciousness taken up within education change networks can support and spur rural educators to address local challenges and opportunities and connect us across regions, provinces, Turtle Island/Canada, and beyond.

As a rural teacher educator and researcher, I spend countless hours driving and flying between communities in British Columbia. Last week I drove from Kelowna to Nelson, Castlegar, New Denver, Nakusp, Invermere, and back to Kelowna experiencing powerful educational encounters with educators in each community. These encounters included a focus on place-based education, sought to position rurality as central in our work and learning, and made an effort to advance reconciliation. Orange Shirt Day, September 30th, 2019, had just occurred and the experiences and impacts of residential schools for Indigenous students and their families loomed large. A dinner meeting with the coordinators of our West Kootenay Rural Teacher Education Program and the local instructors of our Indigenous Education course reminded me of the important work that we have ahead of us. Rural communities and our relationships with the land, Indigenous Peoples, and social justice-oriented education are emergent and complex, as several chapters in this collection illustrate.

Throughout the chapters of this book, the challenges faced by rural communities, teachers, and students are evident. Looker and Bollman highlight teacher retention and recruitment, Critstall, Rodger, and Hibbert look at the privileging of rural economic interests over well-being, Stelmach writes of rural parents' sense of community, Wallin and Peden attend to reconciliation between rural communities and Indigenous Peoples through land-based education, and Scully calls for Land as First Teacher, bringing a critical lens to place-based education that recognizes land as agentic. Corbett writes that when we take up place relationally, "places become heterogeneous and contested rather than simple and homogenous." Corbett encourages us to move to critically-oriented place-based education as "a way of confronting histories of colonialism, racism and environmental dilemmas."

In line with Wallin, Peden, Scully, and O'Connor I embrace place-conscious pedagogies that, according to Gruenewald (2003) Greenwood (2013), use sensory, sociological, political, ideological, and ecological lenses to challenge the traditional commonplace of school as a distinct entity and instead welcome education to occur within and with the community—relationally, reciprocally, and with social responsibility. He wrote:

...pedagogy becomes more relevant to the lived experience of students and teachers, and accountability is reconceptualized so that places matter to educators, students, and citizens in tangible ways. Place-conscious education, therefore, aims to work against the isolation of schooling's discourses and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling. Furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there. (2003, p. 620)

School structures and approaches to curriculum often ignore local social and environmental issues, missing opportunities to develop students' critical thinking and personal and social responsibility. As never before, educators have the opportunity

to invite our children and youth to develop a deeper understanding of social and environmental issues and engage in problem-solving to address these challenges. But rural educators often do not have the background nor the supports to transform their practice and collaborate with local communities in ways that are place-conscious and develop student agency. Corbett's chapter in this book on relational place-based education highlights possibilities for rural educators, students, and communities to both embrace and revitalize their places. But, transforming teaching practice is difficult. Without opportunities for educators to challenge the sources and consequences of their assumptions, well-intentioned professional development may unintentionally reinforce and/or replicate inequities and the status quo (Schnellert et al. 2015) in rural schools and communities. Rural educators need opportunities to come together to problematize how they focus on place, who belongs in it, and how to transform rural education discourse and pedagogy.

In this afterward, I offer an additional notion—that educational transformation from multiple perspectives including reconciliation with Indigenous communities, holistic education, and twenty-first-century learning, to name just a few, can be powerfully realized within and across rural communities when we connect educators interested in taking up place-conscious pedagogies through education change networks.

## **2 Supporting Educators' Pedagogical Growth Through Education Change Networks**

Many educators continue to struggle in their attempts to integrate place-conscious pedagogies into their teaching, despite efforts and initiatives to help them change and evolve their pedagogy. Specifically, educators need opportunities to decentre dominant ways of knowing and reconceptualize teaching and student success (Pidgeon 2008; Schnellert et al. 2015). To achieve this, we must collaborate with Indigenous and non-Indigenous community partners within education change networks to support pedagogical transformation from place-conscious perspectives (Davidson and Schnellert *forthcoming*). Educational change networks are professional learning networks that engage teachers and community members as collaborative inquirers into practice and co-authors of situated innovations (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009; Pennington 2007; Schnellert et al. 2015). Promising findings suggest the capacity of education change networks to improve educator engagement (Hadfield and Chapman 2009; Schnellert et al. 2018) and ability to strategically and systemically disseminate innovative pedagogy (Hargreaves et al. 2015; Stoll 2009). However, questions about how education change networks can best support teacher professional development that take up Indigenous contributions remain. My colleague, Sara Florence Davidson, and I have been working together to explore what this might mean. Research in this area has yet to focus on the generative potential of education change networks in supporting educators to work with Indigenous educators, community partners, and

researchers to generate practices that draw from local Indigenous ways of knowing and being. We need to know how education change networks can spur pedagogical innovation, particularly for educators in rural communities seeking to take up Principle of Reconciliation 4, that requires engagement in “constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism that have had destructive impacts on Aboriginal peoples’ education” (TRC 2015, p. 3).

In Critstall, Rodger, and Hibbert’s chapter, the authors look at the privileging of rural economic interests over well-being. Rural communities often struggle to embrace change and new perspectives (also see Stelmach’s chapter). In British Columbia, the provincial Rural Education Advisory wonders if it is possible to find synergies between the needs of resource-based economies, local issues (e.g., environmental, racism, natural disaster relief), and opportunities to engage students as agentic citizens addressing local challenges. Twenty-first-century learners need to be flexible, creative, critical thinkers who are able to learn from and within a variety of environments (OECD 2015). The future of our communities as more sustainable, diversity-positive, equity-oriented, and socially responsible depends largely on our future leaders and citizens. Education systems—from classrooms to schools to school districts—are recognized as central to supporting students to develop twenty-first-century capacities (critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, personal and social awareness and responsibility). Because most rural classrooms and schools continue to look the same as they have for more than 100 years, such goals for student learning require significant innovation and shifts in teaching practice and school organization. The issue here is not to reform a system that is broken but to transform systems to embrace place-conscious and Indigenous ways of thinking, learning, and education. Despite extensive research calling to move away from rote, factory model style schools, educators and society have struggled to evolve from what they know and have experienced. Educational systems need to develop students as agents of change and empower children and youth to understand and shape the world around them. This begins with developing students’ understanding of their local environment and empowering thoughtful action through learning that is outdoors, experiential, and place-conscious. It is critical for our children and youth to develop a deeper understanding of social and environmental issues and land-based and Indigenous perspectives in context, engage in problem-solving, and take action to address these issues.

Place-conscious pedagogies develop both individuals’ deeper understanding of environmental and social issues and the skills to make informed and responsible decisions now and in the future. There are several barriers that make the shift to place-conscious pedagogies difficult. Educational systems continue to value and promote school success based on colonial and industrial ways of knowing and learning; these traditional conceptions of and approaches to education take up a deficit perspective, particularly towards students of Indigenous ancestry and those with learning and behavioral challenges. This deficit orientation to diverse learners fails to recognize their funds of knowledge and does not offer them opportunities to be leaders and

change makers. Colonization discounts many Indigenous education practices including those that align with environmental and place-conscious education such as learning from and on the land. Lastly, another barrier is that place-consciousness requires teachers and students to learn outside the four walls of the school, a significant shift for all.

If place-conscious pedagogies are to have a meaningful impact on social and environmental issues then students must be supported in becoming agents of change (Orr 2004). Raising consciousness in local settings while facilitating active participation in natural and social environments can increase students' sense of agency and affirm their ability to accomplish important goals (Gruenewald 2003; Smith 2007). It is accepted that achieving outcomes for learners is dependent on teachers taking up new practices; therefore, what we need to effect transformation is to: develop the knowledge and expertise of educators; adopt practices to meet local needs as determined by and with local Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and organizations; and nurture teacher morale and investment in place-conscious pedagogies (Hare and Davidson 2019; Ryan and Weinstein 2009).

### 3 Education Change Networks

Education change networks have been found to impact teachers' learning as well as their practice and outcomes for students (Butler et al. 2013; Hargreaves and Shirley 2012). Education change networks assist teachers to integrate new ideas into practice (Butler and Schnellert 2012; Cartier 2009; Stoll 2009). Particularly impactful education change networks span schools and school districts to inspire innovation and share knowledge (Brown and Poortman 2018). Studies of education change networks have increased dramatically in recent years with promising findings in regard to the potential of networks to improve community engagement (Hargreaves and Shirley 2012); build on evidence-based approaches to enhance student learning (Butler and Schnellert 2012; Hadfield and Chapman 2009); and spread innovative approaches strategically and systematically (Stoll 2009). An education change network brings together stakeholders who identify shared goals, develop plans, enact diverse strategies, and collaboratively reflect on and adjust their plans and approaches. An example of such a network would be when interested members within a region meet together monthly to investigate, share successes, and problem-solve ways to change structures and practices to increase students' access to service-learning related to local social issues.

Collaborative, inquiry-based education change networks have significant potential to enable knowledge mobilization, improve communication, flatten hierarchies to facilitate relational trust (Butler et al. 2015; Sahlberg 2007), and move past rhetoric to actual change in practice and outcomes for students. Almost all studies of education change networks, however, concern schools that are in urban or suburban environments. Studies of networks thus far have almost entirely excluded rural schools from diverse and geographically distant settings. Additionally, what is missing are studies

that illuminate how recurring patterns of action can create an amplified impact within a connected system (Easley and Kleinberg 2010).

One key aspect of equity-oriented education change networks is the role and positionality of the facilitators (who may also be researchers such as myself). In my work with educators in rural and remote education change networks (e.g., Cherkowski and Schnellert 2018; Schnellert and Butler 2016; Schnellert et al. 2015) my university-based co-researchers and I participate as facilitators and resources to the inquiry community. We model—through think-alouds—awareness of own backgrounds, biases, and cultural norms. In so doing we invite reflexivity and critical reflection as part of education change network activities. Together we examine our practice and network activities using the place(s), culture(s) and knowledge(s) of educators, and their students and families. Centering non-dominant perspectives acts as a way to disrupt normative practices and open up spaces for learning with and from equity-seeking communities and the more-than-human world. By sharing and validating diversity, equity-oriented education change networks make space for social justice and place-conscious oriented inquiry.

### ***3.1 Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning***

One rural network that spans rural schools and school districts across British Columbia is *Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning*. It is a partnership between British Columbia's Rural Education Advisory and the Ministry of Education and presents an occasion to (re)consider how we foster change in education. *Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning* was conceptualized as a strength-based approach to celebrate and learn from innovation in rural schools. School teams attend online networking sessions during the school year and an annual face-to-face symposium in the Spring. Each site project is facilitated by school-based educators passionate about their innovation. Since 2011, forty-nine *Growing Innovation* projects from rural schools and school districts across the province have participated in the network.

In each context, educators work together in inquiry teams with the goal of improving student engagement. Participants at each site include teachers and school-level administration. Online sessions using Zoom are facilitated by myself and a retired rural school district superintendent. All participants share responsibility for creating, advancing, and mobilizing knowledge that makes a difference for rural learners in their schools and across the province. Together we work to generate knowledge about pedagogical practices that take up place-consciousness and nurture the development of twenty-first-century learning competencies. To join *Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning*, inquiry teams must outline how they plan to collaborate with community partners to address a local issue or opportunity. They share what they are learning in our Zoom meetings during the year, at our yearly symposium, and on our website, [www.ruralteachers.com](http://www.ruralteachers.com). Our most recent analysis of data regarding the impact of *Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning* revealed several themes



that might inform rural education change networks in other Canadian jurisdictions including:

1. *Education change networks enable work that is authentic and organic.* The most common theme derived from interviews, focus groups, and written documents was that teacher and student learning is situated in context and emerges from local issues, culture(s), and resources/economies. Inquiry and innovation happened in relation to tensions—and opportunities—that arose from geography (e.g., access to environmental educators and projects), local needs (e.g., poor graduation rates for Indigenous learners), and school demographics (e.g., school reconfiguration due to declining enrollment). Educators were able to leverage these opportunities to transform learning environments, develop and deepen pedagogical approaches (e.g., project-based and social action-oriented learning), and offer students local, authentic place-conscious learning.
2. *Relationships with communities are changing.* A common theme derived through the analysis of data sources pointed to changing relationships within communities where *Growing Innovation* projects took place. These ranged from reconciliation efforts between non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities, reinhabitation and/or revitalization of native plants and species, collaboration between community educators and public school educators, and working with elders and other experts in the community. *Growing Innovation* members offered examples of reinvigorated and sometimes healing encounters and partnerships with community members, groups, and organizations. This is particularly important in rural settings.
3. *Collaboration and dialogue around important topics are enabled.* As intimated in the two previous themes, schools and students became communication conduits. Hybrid, third spaces were created where community members, groups, and organizations came together with schools and students to explore issues, generate ideas, and develop opportunities to collaborate on topics such as food security, deforestation, school closures, endangered species, proposed industry initiatives, and natural disasters (i.e., flooding, forest fires) to name a few.
4. *Rural districts and schools are being strengthened.* One interesting outcome has been the revitalization of the profile of rural schools and school districts and their contributions as sites of innovation. Countering the discourse that educational innovation happens first in urban and suburban schools and districts, *Growing Innovation* projects have become recognized as leading examples of theory- and research-based ideas and practices. Due in part to how nimble a small rural school can be and how much leadership and agency is required of even the newest of teachers, *Growing Innovation* teams and their projects have been featured across rural school districts—provincially, nationally, and internationally—by different constituent groups, with video documentation of innovations shared and referenced widely by teacher education, practice, policy, and research communities in rural, urban, and suburban venues.

5. *Practices are changing and confidence is building.* Across data sources, evidence of practice change and a deeper understanding of and confidence in student-centered, place-conscious, open-ended, and inquiry-oriented pedagogies was evident. Significant shifts were often attributed to access to examples from other *Growing Innovation* sites. Because practices from other sites could not be easily transposed to new settings, interviewees talked about how they had to ask many questions of one another, collaborate to create their own applications in their own sites, and developed confidence from these interactions between their local teams and educators from other GI sites.
6. *Student and teacher engagement is evident.* Finally, and perhaps most importantly, student and teacher engagement was evident across data sources. Participating educators spoke of renewed energy for their teaching, becoming more engaged with others in their school and local communities, and rediscovering their passions in teaching. Many highlighted how connecting with teachers with similar passions and issues from rural sites across the province was rejuvenating and affirming. Many teachers were the only specialists in their school or the only teacher at their grade level(s) in their school and community. Student engagement was the most commonly reported outcome across projects. Each team had to complete a year-end report regarding their project and impacts for which they provided evidence. Two trends emerged related to students: (1) at-risk learners often became leaders and their strengths became evident when engaged in hands-on, authentic, issue-based, and/or in-the-community learning and (2) most learners in *Growing Innovation* projects attended school more frequently and demonstrated increased academic confidence.

*Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning* is a messy, emergent endeavor. More often than not, a project will take an unexpected turn and the entire focus of the team's energies changes. We try not to evaluate sites on whether they met their goals, instead we ask teachers what they did, what they learned, what barriers and supports they encountered, and about outcomes for students. Analysis of *Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning* has surfaced visible and tangible examples of place-conscious practices derived locally but shared with other rural teams across the province. There is a great deal of apologizing in initial cross-province meetings as busy rural educators face inclement weather, changing demographics, staff turnover, and communities not familiar with service learning. Planned timelines are rarely achieved. Yet time and again, situated innovations shared by those who generated them with students, colleagues, and community partners make the *Growing Innovation* education change network a space of possibility where divergent thinking, risk-taking, and educator renewal are celebrated. Researching *Growing Innovation* has offered me valuable insights into how rural school districts can nurture teacher agency and distributed leadership. Professional knowledge is generated by group members and shared between rural schools across the province instilling pride and confidence in local practices, solutions, and communities.

Such initiatives and related research hold great promise to advance and disseminate understanding about how education change networks can support educators and

learners in rural and remote communities to explore and embrace place-conscious pedagogies. Attending to rural and remote networks offers a window into the ways that isolated educators can advance their practice through collaborative inquiry and draw from, adapt, create, and inspire pedagogical innovations in their classrooms, schools, and school districts.

The chapters in this book are, in a way, an emerging education change network of Canadian researchers seeking synergies and opportunities to push the edges of our work. Many of this book's chapters are the result of questions for inquiry that surfaced in authors' contexts related to local challenges in rural teacher education and/or for the teachers, students, families, and/or communities with whom they work. Our contributions and research are stronger thanks to a peer review process than enabled dialogue between researchers and peer reviewers as critical friends. In a country as vast as Canada, where K-12 education and teacher education are regulated by province, rather than federally, this book has fostered a sense of belonging for its authors. The multiple theoretical and methodological approaches enacted in the various studies mirror the geographic, cultural, and political diversity of Canada and its regions. Sharing, validating, and asking questions about the diverse stances and approaches across our work has enabled discourse that we, often isolated like the rural teachers and schools we work with, rarely encounter. This informal network—through this book—is spurring place-conscious knowledge generation and the dissemination and mobilization of our research across Canada and beyond and catalyzing new collaborative inquiry opportunities that disrupt industrial and colonial perspectives and practices in rural education.

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