

Problematizing the Relationship between Rural Small Schools and Communities: Implications for Youth Lives

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Small schools are often the hub of many rural communities. In the school space, a multiplicity of social, economic and political relationships are sustained, which enhance the vitality of the community. As such, the relationship between small schools and communities is often presented as a powerful one; however, too often as a harmonious, natural and simple construction. This paper article argues that when education, youth and communities are defined through apparently simple, universal, natural and neutral conceptualizations, these are commonly based on prescribed norms that reflect the dominant values of an hegemonic majority. These homogeneous and universal conceptualizations of education, youth and community serve to legitimize processes of inequality and marginalization, and to undermine the goals these aim to contribute to. This article draws from disciplines such sociology of youth, education, rural studies and political theory to problematize the relationship between small schools and communities in rural spaces by analyzing the intersection of education and youth policies, as constructed by neoliberal policies, and the idea of community as presented by communitarians. It argues for the need to rethink the relationship between small schools and communities towards a more plural and socially just one that overcomes processes of exclusion and marginalization.

Les petites écoles sont souvent au centre des communautés rurales. Une multiplicité de rapports sociaux, économiques et politiques se maintiennent à l'école, ce qui augmente la vitalité de la communauté. Le rapport entre les petites écoles et les communautés est ainsi souvent présenté comme un lien puissant; toutefois, il est trop souvent dépeint comme une construction harmonieuse, naturelle et simple. Cet article soutient que lorsque l'éducation, les jeunes et les communautés sont définis par des conceptualisations apparemment simples, universelles, naturelles et neutres, celles-ci sont généralement fondées sur des normes qui reflètent les valeurs dominantes d'une majorité hégémonique. Ces conceptualisations homogènes et universelles de l'éducation, les jeunes et les communautés viennent légitimer les processus d'inégalité et de marginalisation, et compromettent les objectifs auxquels ils voudraient contribuer. Cet article puise dans des disciplines comme la sociologie des jeunes, l'éducation, les études rurales et la théorie politique pour problématiser le rapport entre les petites écoles et les communautés dans les milieux ruraux et ce, en analysant d'une part, l'intersection de l'éducation et les politiques touchant les jeunes, telles qu'élaborées par les politiques néolibérales, et d'autre part, l'idée de communauté comme elle est présentée par les partisans du mouvement communautaire. L'article met de l'avant le besoin de repenser le rapport entre les petites écoles et les communautés de sorte à arriver à une vision davantage pluraliste et socialement équitable qui surmonte les processus d'exclusion et de marginalisation.

Introduction

Rural small schools are commonly viewed as critical organisms of the health of their communities. They can play an important role in the construction (and sustainability) of the community and the post-secondary school futures of their youth. As such, the relationship between small schools and communities is often presented as a powerful one; however, too often as a harmonious, natural and simple construction. Beyond any positive outcomes that might emanate from this relationship, this article argues that when education, youth and communities are defined through apparently simple, universal, natural and neutral conceptualizations, they are commonly based on prescribed norms that reflect the dominant values of a hegemonic majority. These homogeneous and universal conceptualizations of education, youth and community serve to legitimize processes of inequality and marginalization, and to undermine the goals these aim to contribute to. This article seeks to problematize the relationship between small schools and communities in rural spaces by analyzing the intersection of education and youth policies, as constructed by neoliberal policies, and the idea of community as presented by communitarians. To do this, the article draws on different disciplines, such as sociology of youth, education, rural studies and political theory to, thus, offer a way of rethinking the relationship between small schools and communities into a more socially just one that overcomes processes of exclusion and marginalization.

The article begins by focusing on critical educators' views of the impact of neoliberalism on education with its universal and, supposedly, neutral values commanded by market imperatives. These educators draw attention to the loss of some key components of community life, in both urban and rural contexts, such as trust, respect, and the notion of public space in the face of neoliberalism. They argue that small schools can serve as powerful institutional vehicles to restore education as integral to the organization of community. I then acknowledge that the link between education and strong community is a cornerstone of rural life, where schools are the hub of the town. The article continues with an analysis and critique of place-based education, a theory that supports the importance of a strong relationship between rural schools and communities. This is carried out, by problematizing the idea of community by looking at social processes of exclusion generated by the construction of knowledge and truth in schools to counteract what is seen as *threats* from globalization to community life. Drawing from political theory, the idea of community as a primarily cultural and moral order, rather than a political one, is discussed. This is followed by a critique of communitarianism by pointing to how the construction of a totality can negate difference at the interior of community thus, reinforcing marginalization. Finally, the article problematizes the relationship between small rural schools and communities and young peoples' lives in relation to youth policy. Looking at the intersection of education and youth policies in rural spaces enables a better understanding of the role of schools in the community. It is argued that this helps students become spatially mobile subjects at the peril of the sustainability of the community they serve. Here the notion of youth-as-transition (adopted by some communities as a consequence of neoliberal education policies and their emphasis on human capital) as a universal category is critiqued as another form of social exclusion for certain social groups that cannot achieve the prescribed policy patterns. The article concludes with approaches for rethinking the relationship between small schools and community in rural spaces towards more socially just ways that can overcome processes of social exclusion.

Neoliberalism, Education and Small Schools

In a book on the relationship between justice and small schools, the American educator William Ayers (2000) criticized the current neoliberal project in education for its homogenization of the process and products of schooling. He claimed that this homogenization materialized in the production of “big schools (that) tend to be mechanistic and managerial, hierarchic and bureaucratic”, in which “youngsters and teachers are treated as if they are interchangeable, even expendable”, and where “big, comprehensive, competitive schools worked for some and failed for many others” (p.4). Ayers words reflect nothing else than what researchers have consistently argued regarding a shift in the goals of education policy driven by a strong link between education and the economy as a relationship founded on the aim to increase national human capital to promote labor productivity to compete within the global economy (e.g. Ball, 2008; Clarke, 2012; Lingard, Creagh & Vass, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Wyn, 2009). This shift in education policy is sustained through a discourse and practice that places the emphasis on efficiency, accountability, competition, performativity and privatization; thus reconfiguring education in market terms (see Ball, 2003; Clarke, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Most importantly, Fazal Rizvi (2013) argues that one of the successes of neoliberalism in education has been its capacity to continue to re-articulate and use a traditional social democratic concept like equity. He affirms, for instance, that currently the personal rights of individuals as equal citizens in a polity are limited and are reduced “to property rights”, with equity located “in the process of acquisition and production of capital rather than in the need to build social communities based on notions of trust and human dignity” (pp. 275–276). In tracing the political discourse that promotes the hope of assembling excellence and equity in education in Great Britain and Australia, Savage (2011) also notes that the adoption of social democratic mantras by neoliberalism, in this case that of *equality of opportunity for all*, is based not on the proposition of being a core human right of any individual but on the goal of utilizing at maximum capacity the human capital of the nation to maintain the economic competitiveness in a fierce global market. Carlos Alberto Torres (2013, through a Gramscian lens, argues that what neoliberalism has produced is not just an all-encompassing project based on a powerful ideological agenda but the construction of a “new civilization design” (p. 80) (what Gramsci defined as a new historical bloc) based on a new common sense. This construction has a global reach never seen before, to promote the idea of “students as consumers not citizens” and encouraging the “concept of possessive individualism and by implication (the demise of) any and all forms of collectivism” (p. 97). Thus, prominent critical educators point towards the impact of neoliberalism to explain the loss of community life and what this entails in schools and education is trust, respect and reciprocity among its members.

Against this loss of community life driven by market-oriented imperatives that homogenize education aims towards the production of human capital through competition rather than cooperation, critical educators believe small schools have a role to play. Kenneth Strike (2010) believes that small schools can play an important role in disrupting the current moral individualism exacerbated in schooling through competition and standardized tests, by reviving a communitarian ethos constructed from the idea that education is a relational process. Deborah Meier (2000) sees small schools as powerful alternatives to the neoliberal project with its high-stakes tests regime and its attack on public schools. She also believes small schools can be the conduit to solve the real crisis in society; that is, not a decline in educational achievement but in the “quality and quantity of long term and stable personal relationships” (p. 33). Meier (2000)

advocates for a close relationship between schools and communities, with small schools as an institutional vehicle to counteract the loss of community life or public space. In a similar vein Ayers (2000) argues for placing small schools at the center of “a movement of resistance against the de-politicization of education and the privatization of its purpose” (p. 4). Here is Ayers (2000) on what small schools can offer:

Just as bigness was a deliberate policy, smallness is an intentional answer and antidote, a gesture toward the personal, the particular, the integrated, the supportive. Small schools is a counter-metaphor, perhaps, a more hopeful emblem. It points, first, toward students at the center of the educational enterprise. In small schools ... every student must have a realistic possibility of belonging to a community of learners. There is in students a sense of visibility, of significance, of the hope to negotiate here the tricky terrain of identity. The message to children and youth is clear: You are a valuable and valued person here; without you this entire enterprise would flounder and fail. (pp. 4–5)

In concert with Ayers, Strike, Meier and other critical educators, researchers concerned with rural education have long advocated for the relevance of small schools in making visible students and teachers and their relational approaches to teaching and learning. They have argued for their vital role in the sustainability of community as spaces where social, cultural, political and intergenerational activities are developed and recreated (Bartsch, 2008; Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mullford, 2000; Lyson, 2002; Tompkins, 2008; Wierenga, 2009). Focusing on Australia, Wierenga (2009) and the Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission reports (HREOC, 2000a; 2000b), the latter arguably the most important policy study on Australian rural education, affirm that beyond the provision of physical space to create these relationships, small rural schools promote the wellbeing of the community through the interconnection of its different members through the generation of innovation, trust and social capital. In that sense, both Wierenga and the HREOC reports resonate with Ayers’ identification of small schools as a cornerstone of democratic life in contemporary communities. Key in this relationship is the construction of common knowledge and values that sustain the communal life and the production of place.

Schooling, Community and Place

Educational researchers concerned with the need to strengthen the connection between students and the places where they live have approached the issue by theorizing and researching the notion of place-based education. At the core of this notion is the relationship between the process of schooling, the lives of children and youth, and the wellbeing of communities. In their important edited volume, David Gruenwald and Gregory Smith (2008a) bring several studies from urban, suburban and rural places that reflect the relevance and usefulness of this concept in interrupting school processes that detach themselves from the locality where they are being constructed. In their introduction to the volume, Gruenwald and Smith (2008b) point to a similar problem in recent education policy to that of Ayers and Torres; that is, the construction of a hegemonic and universal narrative of progress based on the production of discourses and practices of managerialism, standardization and efficiency that displaces students and teachers’ attention away from their own communities and encourages the out-migration of students in search of *the good life* away from home. They affirm that a casualty of the phenomenon of *placelessness*, to which schooling and education policies contribute, is the production of

alienated subjects and the decline of community life. Gruenwald and Smith (2008b), against current schooling with its focus on “distant events and standardized knowledge” (p. xvi), see place-based education

[A]s a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life. Place-based or place-conscious education introduces children and youth to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities. It achieves this end by drawing on local phenomena as the source of at least a share of children’s learning experiences, helping them to understand processes that underlie the health of natural and social systems essential to human welfare. (p. xvi)

This is an important and valuable argument in the defense of the rights of all communities and individuals regardless of the place where they are located. Further, Gruenwald and Smith’s proposition is related to Howley, Theobald and Howley’s (2005) now classic essay on the meaningfulness of rural life. Against claims for the need to quantify any social process and output (see Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005, in this case about rural education), Howley and colleagues (2005), drawing on Schutz & Luckmann, argue for rendering visible the *lifeworld* “in the flow of seemingly unremarkable everyday moments, where rural people make rural sense of, and with, their rural lives” and for an education that serves the community rather than promoting “a generic enterprise conducted by a scientifically guided schooling bureaucracy” (pp. 2–3). Like Ayers, Gruenwald and Smith, believe education is primarily constructed in places that are rich in human relationships (see Massey, 1994) that reflect the human condition. Howley and colleagues (2005) affirm that “rural education research simply *must* ask what sort of schooling rural kids are getting, why they are getting it, who benefits and who gets injured in the process, and by what mechanisms” (p. 3, italics in original). Their statement is a direct challenge to the displacing effects of homogeneous and, supposedly, neutral constructions of education under the neoliberal project with its emphasis on individualism and market-oriented principles.

Problematizing Community

Place-based education, however, is also open to criticism. Jan Nesor’s (2008) review of three contributions to the idea, praxis and relationship between education and place (Theobald, 1997; Bowers, 2006; Gruenwald & Smith, 2008a) makes some important points about the need to problematize the meaning of place and community, and its interchangeable use, thus to avoid falling into non-useful dichotomization, for instance, of local vs. global, or the need to see difference within communities. Beyond correct critiques of the perils of romanticizing community life and contemporary strategies by the state and corporations “to wither the social commons by shedding social welfare responsibilities and shifting them to the locales” (p. 486), in my view, Nesor does not problematize the concept of community, or for that matter, theorize it, and overlooks the impact of neoliberalism on education, and thus the need for endogenous strategies to interrupt educational models that are fundamentally outward looking.

Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2012) offers, in my view, a more complex analysis of the impact of the relationship between place, education and youth than Nesor. In her Foucauldian analysis of schooling and the construction of community, truth and knowledge in rural southern United States, Jackson shows how attempts to resist globalization by promoting “community control

and autonomy” can actually generate “exclusionary and oppressive” (pp. 72–73) discourses and practices against certain members of the community that do not share the values and world-views of the majority. This process was created and sustained through four strategic conditions, *maintenance of traditions*, a *privilege of access*, a *unity in community* and a *control of public image*, which generated a “discourse of rural schooling” based on “normalization, entitlement, control, self-identity, and surveillance” (p. 78). Here appear conceptualizations of solidarity, tradition, loyalty and a shared knowledge and values that are common to the idealized construction of community and to the attachment of place (see Delanty, 2010; Bhattacharyatta, 2004; Studdert, 2005). Jackson found that this production of knowledge and identity was particularly rooted in the unity of the school and community, which serve to teach students the desired values, beliefs and practices that enable them to belong, while at the same time creating a truth and common sense that allowed the marginalization and erasing of any non-desirable difference with any members of the community who do not fit in.

The struggle to maintain traditional rural values against the process of globalization (with its temporal and spatial compression), rapid social change and the increasing diversity in rural population identified by Jackson, has been taken up by critical geographers. Doreen Massey (1994) points out that “a strong sense of place, of locality” can provide “stability” and a “security of identity” against a “feeling of vulnerability ... in the middle of all this flux” (p. 151). Massey (1994) describes this need for a “sense of place” and an “unproblematic identity” as a “reactionary notion of place” (pp. 152–155). Writing about social inclusion and who belongs, and who does not, in rural places, David Sibley (2006) argues that embedded in this discussion is the idea of community. He follows Young’s (1990) politics of difference and the idea of a heterogeneous community, and Bauman’s (1991) concept of the *stranger* (who brings to the *inside* the *outside*), in which both theorists challenge hegemonic and homogeneous views of the social world. Like Massey, Sibley (2006) affirms that views of rural life as idyllic, solid and harmonious tend to represent not only traditional conceptualizations of the place by the locals but that rural places also act as a depository of core values of a nation; whereas those that do not share, and practice, the core values and ideas sustained by the community represent a threat that needs to be excluded, either consciously or unconsciously, by the majority.

Liberals, communitarians and the loss of community life.

At the core of Jackson, Massey and Sibley’s arguments is the struggle between traditional rural life and modernization. Functional and organic views of the traditional world were based on the idea that any political order or affiliation to a group (community) rested on a moral order and shared values before any political ties. Thus, community from its origins in social theory came to be defined as a social integration rooted in cultural cohesion, moral totality and spatially fixed providing a share place and proximity (Clope, 2005; Delanty, 2010); of which modernity, with its individualization, rationalization, urbanization and industrialism came to threaten it, thus generating a sense of nostalgia for a past that was, apparently, always better. This process of loss of identity in rural places (which includes economic and political significance in the national agenda, see Brett, 2011) against rapid urbanization has contributed to a revival of the concept of community.

In his analysis of the concept of *community* in late modernity, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) argues that community is one of those words that not only has meaning but also has a *feel*. And this is a good feeling, because the idea of community, and being part of, appeals to a “world

which is not, regrettably, available to us”, where the one we are forced to inhabit is “ruthless”, a time of “competition and one-upmanship” (p. 3), and where social solidarity is vanishing and is being replaced by calls to individuals to take responsibility (Bauman, 2001). Bauman’s interest is in the tension between the security (community) we can gain and the freedom (individuality) we might lose by belonging to a community. This has been a perennial tension between liberalism and communitarianism, exacerbated in times of a risk society (see Beck (1992) for a theoretical analysis of risk society). Against liberalism’s moral individualism, its social concept of the self and view of group membership based on certain rights provided by a state or society, communitarians propose a self that is social but also has a cultural context. In this sense, the preservation of the identity is a key quest in the political community, to the extent that membership to community is based on prior cultural (or moral) ties, rather than resting on the individual, to produce cohesive and consensual association, a totality (Delanty, 2010).

In her work, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), political philosopher Iris Marion Young claims that to reject liberal individualism should not rest on one having to automatically adopt a communitarian political position. Like many critics of liberalism, she criticizes it for its “consumer-oriented presuppositions about human nature” and its view of the “self as solid, self-sufficient unity” (pp. 228–229). Young argues that liberalism denies difference by adjudicating to all individuals a common set of standards of rights and responsibilities without taking into account each individual and social groups’ particular social, cultural, and political circumstances. However, she believes communitarians also fail to see difference by placing the “social subject as a relation of unity or mutuality composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality” (p. 229). As in Jackson’s (2010) example of schooling in a rural community, schools (or for that matter any institution) that promote the construction of a multiplicity of interests and cultures into a totality, serve to re-create and sustain existing power relations and forms of inequality that can only favor the majority of the community. Furthermore, understandings of community, like Sandel’s (1982), on a social transparency and shared subjectivity, or like Barber’s (1984) on a “common consciousness and political judgment” (p. 224), can only assist to construct a truth, a common knowledge and a common sense that is indifferent to the ontological differences between subjects. To create an environment, be this a school or a community, that forces on individuals or social groups a relationship of totality based on a common understanding and/or mutuality to provide a sense of security in liquid and insecure times (Bauman, 2004; Beck, 1992), is most likely to construct a homogeneous, and probably romantic, view of life that elides many of the complexities of the times we live in. As Young (1990) asserts: “This is an understandable dream, but a dream nonetheless” (p. 232).

An implicit argument in this article is the problem of constructing a relationship between individuals, social groups, and/or institutions, based on universality, neutrality and impartiality. These kinds of relationships are what Thomas Nagel (1986) coined as a *view from nowhere*, completely detached from any of the economic, social, political and cultural circumstances that define the human condition and social relationships. Young (1990) already argued against a view of justice based on universality, and abstract and absent from social particularities, which later in her work (Young, 2006) illustrates the ways that schooling constructs winners and losers by generating education policies and standards that were deemed as culturally neutral but that in reality were favoring certain kind of dispositions and knowledge (one here is tempted to trace a connection to Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital). Universal, homogeneous and neutral constructions of youth, education and place serve to stigmatize those views that do not fit with the norm, while simultaneously overlooking any focus on the ways that institutions create their

rules and norms to the advantage of certain social groups over others.

In the next section, the article adds another turn to the homogeneous and hegemonic construction of youth through education policy and communal life by focusing on the impact of the intersection of education and youth policy, and community, on young people's lives.

The intersection between education and youth policy.

Revealing processes of social exclusion generated by the aim to sustain a community based on homogeneous shared values, as stated above, can be enhanced by making visible the intersection between education and youth policies in particular spaces like rural places. As in education (see Green & Letts, 2007; Roberts & Green, 2013), an initial problem is the non-spatial character of youth policy. (For that matter, many of the important critical educators mentioned above utilize interchangeably the term education and urban education—in other words, they overlook spatial differences.) Cuervo and Wyn (2012) argue against the lack of spatial dimension in education and youth studies and policies by affirming that in an increasingly urbanized society “urban-based lives have come to be taken for granted as standard” and that when policy-makers and researchers look for new understandings of young people's lives “they turn to metropolitan lives where, in the relationship between biographies of individuals and the forces of social changes, new approaches to lives are forged” (p. 1). In other words, within the neoliberal project, education and youth policies are also generally constructed as apparently neutral, universal and impartial, with a focus on achieving a certain pathway to adulthood that is deemed the norm and for which those that do not follow are placed as “at-risk” and in need of state intervention (Wyn, 2009).

In policy circles, at least in the economically developed world, youth transitions to adulthood have been conceptualized as the smooth pathway from education to work, placing the emphasis on the arrival at certain markers of progress (e.g. achieving tertiary education degree, full-time employment) which contributes to generating an unproblematic chain of events in a young person's life (Hall, Coffey & Lashua, 2009). This scenario fails to take into account the individual's social circumstances and the loosening of the links between education and employment combined with the uncertainty and precariousness of the labor market in post-industrial societies (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011; Wyn, 2009). Nonetheless, within the neoliberal environment, tertiary education qualification is viewed not only as a guarantor of national economic prosperity but as indispensable for individuals to gain control over a precarious and insecure future, which includes a shift from collective identities to personal autonomy with an increasing pressure for young people to construct their own portfolios for living and drawing upon their individual resources (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; 2014) to make it work. For young people in rural spaces the normative expectation that they need to study well into their twenties collides with their structural material reality; as for many of them, the lack of a local tertiary education institution signifies the need to become spatially mobile.

Rural youth as mobile subjects.

The intersection between education and youth policies, in my view provides a critical dimension to understanding young people lives in rural places; that of mobilities. It is the assembling of space, mobility and the intersection of education and youth policies that enable a more complete reading of the dynamics occurring in the relationship between schools and communities in rural

places and processes of social inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, the concept of mobility has become critical to understand the relationship between rural communities, schooling and young people's lives, in which the idea of the normative youth is to increasingly become mobile in a mobile and liquid world (see Bauman, 2004). Researchers preoccupied with the relationship between local and global phenomena have also expressed the concern that lack of access to resources for mobility can increase already existing inequalities and stratification in societies, particularly among young people (see Dolby & Rizvi, 2008; McLeod, 2009). John Urry (2007), for instance, affirms that the idea of mobility enables a better discernment of the different capabilities and resources that some individuals and social groups have over others, which contributes to enhance the visibility of power structures and relationships that result in processes of social exclusion. Most importantly, McLeod (2009) is concerned with the creation of a "utopian sense of open possibilities" for young people based on "discourses of mobility, translocality and hybridity" (p. 280) that overlook young people's own particular social and economic circumstances.

Michael Corbett's (2007a; 2007b) study of Canadian youth in rural places provides an important example of the impact of the intersection of education and youth policies, and space and mobility in young people's lives. Like other researchers concerned with the lives of children and young people (see Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004; Dolby & Rizvi, 2008; Wyn, 2009) Corbett affirms that being spatially mobile has become a normative requirement of youth in rural places, particularly for those that have access to the required level of different forms of capital to *view* and *follow* this transition. A lack of access to further and higher education institutions and to meaningful work in many rural communities, coupled with the normative policy expectation that young people need to study well into their twenties in the "knowledge economy", has generated in rural youth the necessity to leave their communities (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). This need to spatially be on the move encourages rural youth outlooks that tend to "forget place-based identities and to assume mobile and flexible self-constructions" (Corbett, 2007a, p. 772). Thus, Corbett (2007a) shows how education policies construct an idea of youth based on a subjectivity that has to be "active, calculating, mobile and focused on abstract and increasingly virtual spaces opened up by education" (p. 773) (see also Wyn, 2009). Cuervo (2014) and Geldens (2007) agree with Corbett's view of educational and policy imperatives that generate youth subjectivities that are encouraged to become detached from their local places. Moreover, implicit in these researchers' analyses is the construction of a common sense about youth pathways to adulthood. To this Geldens (2007) adds that for any of their peers that do not have the material or cultural resources, or perhaps the desire, to make this spatial transition, the stigma of "failure" is attached. In sum, like education policies, youth policies also fall into the idea of "geographical blindness" put forward in education policy by Green and Letts (2007), which homogenize the needs and interests of students and schools by establishing urban as the norm and depriving communities of their (apparently) brightest youth. The greatest concern in terms of the relationship between small schools and communities is the fact that under these youth policy imperatives of being mobile, the students that many rural schools and communities construct as successful find departure not only as attractive but as inevitable. In this sense, the school and community place the seeds of their own demise.

Concluding Remarks

At the core of the intersection of education and youth policy in a neoliberal environment and the

relationship between small schools and communities in rural places are deep issues of social justice. Implicit in the hegemonic and universal constructions of education, youth and community is an idea of *sameness*. For neoliberalism constructs education as the development of human capital, while in youth policy young people are expected to be *flexible* and *mobile* in the search of education and labor opportunities (*the good life*). These conceptualizations are rooted in urban as the norm overlooking any spatial difference. Further, entrenched in this neoliberal educational and youth policy environment is an idea of schooling and youth-as-transition that is not supportive enough of young people from socially marginalized groups that do not easily fit into the norms, values and routines demanded by society.

Unfortunately, equality as *sameness* plays an important role in rural education and youth policy (see Cuervo, 2012; 2014); where a greater distribution of resources is in many instances signaled as the panacea for youth and schools problems. Better opportunities for young people in rural places requires a greater distribution of resources, but this also requires, fundamentally, an understanding of issues of recognition and participation in areas of schooling, such as curriculum issues, and in community life. This means constructing and implementing a curriculum that resonates with and is useful to the biographies and localities of young people, rather than one that responds solely to the satisfaction of bureaucratic forces. Place-based education strategies and practices aim to achieve this goal and, as such, they should be encouraged and celebrated. Further, as stated by Ayers (2000), there is a need to value young people's interests and needs, for without them the purpose of education is lost. This entails, for instance, addressing structural inequalities within the curriculum that arise from issues of class, gender, ethnicity and space; thus cementing the way for a plural social justice based on distribution, recognition and participation (see Connell, 1993; Cuervo, 2012; Gewritz, 2006; North, 2006; Robert & Green, 2013). The construction of a plural social justice is a way forward towards reclaiming the education, and its aims, from the neoliberal discourse.

Small schools can be a central component in the construction of a plural social justice. Ayers (2000) notes that they can work as an antidote to and counter-metaphor for the revival of community life against the bureaucratization of education and life. In rural communities, small schools play this role, however, they can also work to reinforce social exclusion. It is important that the current emphasis on liberal individualism through the notion of the *individual self* is not just replaced by another hegemonic construction by communitarians of the *social self*; thus allowing for plural ways of knowing and being. To reclaim social justice, education and youth policies there is a need to produce real equitable and equal opportunities for youth beyond economic goals of human capital production, while at the same time schools and communities need to open up the dialogue to all their members to begin to interrupt current processes of exclusion and marginalization. A strong and democratic school–community relationship should aim to promote the capacity for individuals to actively take command of the decisions that affect their lives, including the possibility of being able to act differently than others wish one to do so. This complex process can be brought forward by rethinking and challenging the notion of *sameness* endemic in conceptualizations of education, youth and community.

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