Rural Voices Book Proves Timing Is Everything

BY AMY BAUMAN

The book *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*, released in June by Teachers College Press and the National Writing Project, could not have debuted at a more timely moment. Launched as it is amidst educational systems challenged by funding pressures and the pressure for greater accountability, this book is a quiet but powerful pitch for another kind of educational system—one that is based on a localized, teacher- and community-driven curriculum—one that is, in short, both place conscious and in keeping with NWP practices. Accordingly this collection of classroom-based essays examines the theory and practice of place-conscious education, the thrust of which is that "real accountability emerges when education teaches how to live well, actively, and fully in a given place" (ix).

*Rural Voices* also represents the first co-publishing venture between NWP and the well-known Columbia University publisher Teachers College Press. The book is part of the established Teachers College Press Practitioner Inquiry Series, having grown out of research conducted by Robert Brooke and colleagues from the Nebraska Writing Project.

The book grew out of research conducted from 1997 to 2000 by a team of Nebraska Writing Project teachers, as part of their work with the National Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools (RVCS) project. The goal of this three-year project, funded in part by the Annenburg Rural Challenge, was to develop and document improvements in local rural education. In the project's first year, participating teachers gathered evidence in their classrooms and schools with which to answer the question, "What's good in rural teaching?" The second year had participants developing public engagement programs from their gathered data. That is, they were looking for ways to allow the public to explore the "what's good" aspect of their community's schools. In the third and final year, teams looked to initiate (or, in some cases, continue) these programs in both regional and national settings. The Nebraska Writing Project was one of six sites selected to participate in the project, with the other sites located in rural areas of Washington, Michigan, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana. At each site, work was completed by a project director, eight participating rural teachers, and an assigned mentor coming from a different writing project site. The Nebraska Writing Project team included site director Brooke; teachers Sandy Bangert, Sharon Bishop, Robyn Dalton, Amy Hottowy, Carol MacDaniels, Phip Ross, Judith Schafer, and Bev Wilhelm; and the group's mentor Marian Matthews (director of the High Plains Writing Project in New Mexico).

Edited by Brooke, *Rural Voices* includes eight chapters written by the Nebraska team's mix of elementary and secondary school teachers, with each essay describing local classroom programs grounded in place-conscious education—the idea of using one's local setting to build real and lasting connections. The book also includes an introduction by Brooke, which sets the stage for the teachers' work, and an afterword by Marian Matthews, whose insights offer a complete picture of the RVCS project from which this book grew. In the book's introduction, Brooke reflects on how both the team and the book grew from the RVCS experience. "While all of us were engaged in some place-conscious teaching beforehand," Brooke states, "working as a team inspired us to clarify what we meant by place-conscious education, why we saw it as important, and how we could bring consciousness of place alive in our classrooms and communities" (14).

As their research for the RVCS project began to take shape, the Nebraska team saw that their findings needed to be part of a larger conversation as evidence not only of what is good about rural education but also of what about rural education works or could work in the broader education picture. Programs developed in connection to place, while cutting across the curriculum in focus, are united by the idea of linking learners with their communities and, further, by their ability to serve as models for both public engagement and pedagogy. The team's desire to make their findings part of the broader educational discussion gave rise to the idea of a book. The resulting eight pieces of writing, grouped into three sections—place-conscious writing and active learning; place-conscious writing and local knowledge; place-conscious writing and regional citizenship—make it easy to see both the writers' thinking and their ultimate intentions at work.

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All of this is certainly enough to recommend the book to potential readers, but the work took on another timely relevance as it coalesced. During 1998-2002, Nebraska faced significant challenges in its educational system because the state’s educational focus, like much of the rest of the country, had come to rest on standards and funding. Suffice it to say that the system was challenged by the demand to do more with less—schools were under greater pressure to meet standards with less money with which to do it—creating a situation in which an understanding of place-based education became more critical to the education discussion. As Brooke explains, many proponents see place-based education as an alternative to an educational system that through standardization effectively creates “migratory citizens” who are equipped with abstract but marketable skills and knowledge but who are only peripherally connected to ideas such as community, civic involvement, and belonging. Place-conscious education, on the other hand, “ultimately involves a vision of the relationship between school, community, and region, a vision that leads to a community-centered way of living rather than an individualized and migratory way of living” (17).

This situation gave the Nebraska teachers an even greater sense of urgency to disseminate their findings and reflections. And from out of the swirl of opportunity and pressure came Rural Voices. Says Brooke of the collision of the time and the project: “We needed to finish this book because of our state context. Nebraska has been one of the only states trying to develop locally-appropriate educational assessments as an alternative to uniform national standards, and we wanted our work to be part of those conversations. Of course, now that several other states—including California—are considering developing their own alternatives, we hope our book can be part of the national discussion as well.”

In theory, few educators could disagree with the premise of this work—a premise that supports place-conscious education and holds it up as one possible answer to the country’s educational quandary. In practice, however, these same educators might see the ideas presented here as bumping up against the one-size-fits-all educational policies—a point that makes this quiet piece of literature enticing. That being said, Brooke and his team must certainly be pleased with their endeavor, knowing that, if nothing else, they have launched their voices and their ideas into a discussion that is far from over.

For more information or to order Rural Voices, go to www.writingproject.org/Publications/books/index.html.

References

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