The Meaning of Rural Difference for Bright Rednecks

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This essay considers the intellectual engagement of rural people in the context of their schooling. It argues that rural schooling shares the miseducative purposes common to American schooling in general (i.e., purposes associated with sustaining American global economic dominion). It frames rurally appropriate education as an on-the-ground pursuit of rural alternatives in American life, alternatives explained as the engagement of rural ways of being, living, and knowing—alternatives that only a small minority of rural schools currently embraces. The essay applies the insights it develops about intellectual engagement in rural life to school provisions for academically able rural students. Because gifted students demonstrate a high degree of academic aptitude, the recommendations concern engagement with formal literatures about rural ways of being, living, and knowing.

Introduction

This essay treats the meaning of rural difference for bright rednecks. My use of the epithet is ironic, but it forces readers to confront the fact that the related bigotry remains socially acceptable. The issue for gifted education is whether or not bright rednecks can develop intellect.

By *rednecks*, of course, the essay does not refer to the children of rural and small-town elites, but to the children of the rural working class. If diversity is difference and if the opposite of diversity is exclusion,[1] then the rural working class harbors a realm of meaningful difference largely excluded from considerations of diversity, and from considerations of racism and hatred in America. Of course, a key issue for cosmopolitan and metropolitan Americans is whether

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or not ordinary rural people (i.e., rednecks) are more racist than cosmopolitans and metropolitans. This judgment, however, is not a problem treated in this essay because racism operates everywhere in America, and whether the city or the country is more racist is not just debatable but pointless.

This essay is instead concerned to treat the intellectual engagement of rural people in the context of an on-the-ground pursuit of a rural alternative in American life. This is the problem because schooling has largely withdrawn, or been withdrawn, from this project, and it is a withdrawal that runs from kindergarten through doctoral instruction. The essay sets these rural issues of diversity in the context of racism, corporate authority over the purposes of schooling and curriculum, and the significance (the meaningfulness) of rural ways of being, living, and knowing.

The narrative that follows, however, asks the reader to await the middle of the discussion to hear what *rural* is because the definition is best given after some examples and some unpacking of the important ideas.[2] The entire article concludes, moreover, with a specific example of rural studies conducted with rural students in a unique doctoral program in mathematics education, and it suggests ways that lessons from that experience seem applicable in rural K–12 schooling concerned to engage the intellectual development of academically able rural students.

Three propositions ground the considerations of this essay. First, some rural children exhibit prodigious facility with the academic part of their schooling. Second, this schooling strangely continues to miseducate these children along with the rest. Third, this miseducation takes peculiar and largely unappreciated forms in rural places. Although doubting the mission of rural schooling, this framework informs a critique that still prizes education.[3]

On the matters to be considered here, this essay is less troubled about the fate of these rural children as individuals, and far more troubled about the fate of the rural communities to which these children belong. "Belonging" figures here because it often seems that, with schooling, the state or the nation asserts a primary claim to children; more distressing still is the more recent assertion that children belong to the global economy. This function of removing

rural children from rural places via rural schooling, though, has a very long history.

Rural schools have long been understood as a talent-extraction industry (e.g., Corbett, 2007; DeYoung, 1995; Theobald, 1997), as part of the saga of American industrialization and urbanization. The saga means that rural communities have been places that the ambitious, modernist individuals have, for a hundred years, learned to leave. The belongingness of rural children to their families and communities is of little consequence to the institution of schooling, but it is of immeasurable consequence to their education—and to the futures of rural communities.

The Pity of "Diversity"

Being "different" has practical implications for schooling and for educators not because of simple and honest difference, which is surely interesting and educative, but because of the imputations of inferiority associated with someone else's perception of difference. The great advantage of cultural relativism, as a gift of anthropology, is that it has permitted some part of the populace to distance itself from 19th and 20th century certainties about the world-wide virtues of white-ish skin color and being English. As the appearance of the epithet redneck in this essay perhaps shows readers, this intellectual advantage seems not to benefit rural people and cultures. Why not?

Most rural people (82%) are White (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005), and, according to one rural observer (Bageant, 2007), this fact is apparently confusing to the 80% of Americans who live in metropolitan areas, where social problems are so often associated with the politics of race.[4] A worse confusion, however, is that the devotion of schooling to industrial culture, not to say "bourgeois" culture, remains strong nearly everywhere. Indeed, most of the maneuvering around the concept of diversity seeks to assimilate (include) people with darker skins in(to) the existing bourgeois culture of schooling. For centuries, rural people and rural communities have served as the standard of backwardness for the entire industrializing world (DeYoung, 1995; Goad, 1997; Herzog & Pittman, 1995). To smug inhabitants of the cosmopolitan mainstream, this history

makes it seem wasteful to engage intellectual matters among ordinary rural people (aka rednecks). Once rural is understood in this way—that is, as yet another allegation of inadequate variation from an idealized Anglo standard that turns out, in the contemporary circumstance, to be a suburban and professional norm—the need for the present consideration should also be understandable.

In the case of Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians, the misattribution of cultural and intellective incapacity has been persistently linked (ludicrously linked) to skin color and facial features. With rural people and communities, few such spurious and overtly hateful markers of (inappropriately attributed) inferiority exist, but this very lack apparently strengthens the existential claim: Rural inferiority is then more securely misunderstood to be the real condition of rural existence—an allegation that goes well beyond individual bigotry and even beyond institutional racism, engaging a deeper structure of invidious discrimination.[5] Whereas people with darker skins feel the immediate outrage of being judged inferior on the basis of superficialities, the affront to rural people is based on the fundamentals of bourgeois economic and cultural power that are recognized as the way the world rightly is by the supposed necessities of contemporary society (e.g., the supposedly necessary replacement of the horse by the automobile and tractor). These supposed necessities are open to doubt.

In 1848, Marx and Engels famously referenced "the idiocy of rural life" in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, explicitly contextualizing this view of rural people, however, to the bourgeois outlook and accomplishment.[6] This is precisely what the societal status norms represent in setting up suburban residence and professional occupation as "the best." This best, not surprisingly, is precisely what gifted education commends to academically talented rural youngsters, almost without exception.[7] Such a construction appeals inherently to the rural elite but is less appealing to other rural people (Woodrum, 2004).

Rural places are relatively powerless in political, economic, and cultural terms. Rural ways of living and being and knowing are devalued—literally marginalized. To keep breathing the rural air is, in part, to breathe in the acknowledgement of this state of affairs, and the allegations of one's own inferiority. Rural people are, in this way, simply divided from their own meaningfulness and power because

the bourgeois victory identified so very long ago by Marx and Engels continues to dictate to them many of the detailed terms of day-to-day existence in rural places.

Just uncovering the outrage (the cosmopolitan idiocy) requires facility with words and numbers sufficient to call critique and doubt into existence with actual effect on the terms of the deception. These evocations are rare accomplishments anywhere, but they are perhaps rarest where there is no need of them; that is, among the most complacent professionals in the most affluent suburbs. The "21st century skills" ("Partnership for 21st Century Skills," 2004) almost universally promoted by big business will not come close to the requirements to bring appropriate doubt, critique, and action into being. Who *can* do this work? That issue is partly addressed in the last section of the essay. In the meantime, however, we turn to the bourgeois version of societal needs, so-called 21st-century skills.

Suffering 21st-Century Skills in Rural America

State education agencies (SEAs), the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, and many other august bodies presume to understand the requirements of the 21st century. From this presumption, they articulate the aims of schooling in distinctly corporate terms: global economic combat, high levels of qualification in math and science, corporate teamwork, and problem solving. The chief state school officers of the rural states of Maine, South Dakota, and West Virginia have, for instance, recently become enthusiastic founding members of a network of state superintendents devoted to this view ("Partnership for 21st Century Skills," 2004). The corporate authorities behind this particular effort include Dell, Apple, Intel, Texas Instruments, Cisco, Microsoft, Adobe, Verizon, and AT&T. Public schooling now looks less and less covertly public and more and more overtly corporate. Scratching the surface is not necessary; a light buffing will suffice.

In fact, lying to oneself may be the unstated 21st-century skill most important to the corporate outlook. John Gaventa's (1980) study of "quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian valley" interpreted the ideological enslavement as lies that corporations ensure that people

tell themselves, and these lies are communicated and reinforced partly through schooling. Duncan (1996), in an account more politically liberal than radical, showed even more explicitly than Gaventa some of the ways in which Appalachian and Mississippi Delta rural schools are complicit.[8]

My colleagues and I (all family, actually, in this case) have also documented how seldom a libertory agenda is articulated in impoverished rural schools. Among more than 100 educators interviewed for one of our studies of rural schools, just one spoke of educational purpose other than employment (C. B. Howley, A. Howley, C. Howley, & M. Howley, 2006). This rural teacher was, predictably, a vocational agriculture (vo-ag) teacher. The predictability lies in the fact that the vo-ag curriculum has traditionally cultivated the connection between farming and rural community leadership (Elliott, 2002). The termination of vo-ag programs in rural schools means that even this lonely voice is being effectively silenced.[9]

What supplants such voices in rural schools? Standardization and anti-intellectualism replace them with chatter about preparation for global economic combat with 21st-century skills. The conspiracy is not one of individuals, of course, but of institutions, especially large firms, transnational firms, and the governments they shape and dominate. If common purpose (also known as "community") and intellect (or informed thoughtfulness) were finally vacated from our national and local cultures and from the schooling intended to sustain and inform them,[10] what would remain available to any schooling that is educative? Only the resistance of a few outraged individuals.

Alternative Pathways in Rural Lives

Rural communities and people are different from the valued cosmopolitan mainstream. Indeed, many rural places are sufficiently different that one might hope for something even more different in the future. That stubborn possibility explains why, when things periodically have gotten bad in cities, human beings have aspired to rediscover their humanity in rural places (e.g., Borsodi, 1933; Orr, 1995; Williams, 1973; Yarwood, 2005). Practices and views exist here (in rural life) worthy of study and extension.

What practices? These might include self-provisioning, neighborly mutuality and cooperation, improvisation and reuse, invention and use of appropriate technology, small-scale enterprise ("cottage industry"), biodiverse farming,[11] logging with horses, refusal of bad schooling, and so forth. Such practices receive almost no attention, even or especially in rural schools, because they so little resemble the skills that the corporate mindset hawks as up-to-the-moment. Honoring these things widely within the curriculum of even rural schools would be a surprising turn of events. Rural views can help.

What views? These include philosophies, critiques, interpretations, literatures, and rural arts and sciences outlined by rurally attuned thinkers such as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, David Orr, and Paul Theobald, not to mention Helen and Scott Nearing, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Henry David Thoreau, and Thomas Jefferson. As an instantiation of "American" culture, the American novel articulates strong rural themes throughout its history. The novel is one institution that assiduously honors the country's vast regional variation and significance. Even in the contemporary era, celebrated writers like Barbara Kingsolver, Annie Proulx, and Jane Smiley represent alternative rural lifeways with both grace and complexity—and also with ample critique.

The wisdom of generative rural works is even such that Americans ought to be grateful to ordinary rural people for sustaining rural lifeways alternative to the massively consumptive corporate mainstream. It was in *Walden*, after all, that Thoreau (1854/2004) observed:

> Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. (p. 216)

Walden, one may as well remember, is the original American text about the difference between miseducation and education. Unfortunately, miseducation has generally prevailed in schooling, especially schooling for ordinary people, as generations of school critics have persuasively argued from Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Henry Adams (in the 19th century) to Ivan Illich, Neil Postman, and Jean Anyon (in the 20th century, and to name nonrural critics only).

Part of this miseducation is the promotion in contemporary schools of the one-best way to live—the middle-class professional way. Perhaps, however, the insistent marketing given this path is another dubious form of consumption (for the original argument describing credentials as a consumer product, see Collins, 1979). Most disturbingly, this marketing effort constructs schooling, not only in myth, but more importantly in reality, as the likeliest path to economic security. More schooling, more earnings—on average. The subtlety of this "on average" is glossed over, however, in the marketing campaign. In the space available, this essay cannot conclusively demonstrate the validity of this outlook on miseducation, but it must at least examine the promotion of the middle-class path a bit more closely as the manifestation of schooling's one-best way to live.

The One-Best Way to Live

As Isaacson (2003) argued in his biography of Benjamin Franklin and as Hanson (1995) argued in his book about the origins of democracy in farming, the American middling classes (farmers and shopkeepers and small-scale merchants) were a bedrock of American life through the middle of the 20th century. To give the historical context briefly, the country-life reformers of the early 20th century were concerned to preserve a rural middle class (traditional petty-bourgeoisie) to balance the influence of a growing urban proletariat (Theobald, 1991). Their intentions were subverted first as the Great Depression (1930–1940) impoverished rural people, driving them to abandon rural places. Then, after the Second World War, the full industrialization and monetization of the farm economy (driving self-provisioning underground) resulted in clearances through farm consolidation. These twin assaults, part of a larger national restructuring of production and markets, destroyed the old independent rural middle class.

The shopkeepers have been replaced by consolidated, national "shopkeepers"—the magnates of the big-box stores.[12] The farmers have been replaced by bad times (continuing low commodity prices and cyclical farm crises) and big machines (large capital investment is typical in commercial farming operations). Many small rural

schools closed and many rural districts consolidated as farmers left the countryside.

What has replaced the farmers and shopkeepers in the middle-class role in rural America? The new middle class is the middle class of managers and professionals (Griffith & Smith, 2005). According to Flora, Flora, Spears, and Swanson (1992), this new class exhibits entirely different commitments from the localized petty-bourgeoisie of Franklin's small cities (Isaacson, 2003) and the independent yeoman farmers that concerned Hanson (1995). The new class is concerned with national and global allegiances, not with local ones, according to Flora and colleagues. In addition, the new class puts devotion to schooling and financial success above attachment to family and community. The middle class to which children of the contemporary rural poor might be recruited is more interested in personal advancement than in sustaining local community. Parents in this new and more corporate middle class fear losing, not their independence, but the privileges their children have enjoyed contingent on their own dependence on corporate allegiance and employment. Schooling is the path to such privileges for their children, and schools are run to ensure that end (Griffith & Smith, 2005).

Many rural families are situated very differently from their suburban counterparts. In the first instance, they do not enjoy privileges like those accessed by the corporate middle class. They depend, in the second instance, on a series of jobs of limited duration, rather than on a durable career allied with corporate interests. They therefore see the educational issue quite differently. Rural parents often realize that pursuit of a great deal of schooling by their children means that the young will leave their rural communities and families, never to return (Corbett, 2007; DeYoung, 1995; Sher, 1977). Because they want to live near their children, then, they regard schooling much more suspiciously than members of the new, more footloose rural middle class—who anticipate separation from their adult children as inevitable and necessary, perhaps even welcome.

Rural education researchers often hear from local educators in impoverished rural communities that "of course, these parents around here don't value education." The claim never ceases to take one aback: If learning is professionally understood to be a natural human activity, then a formative series of learning events (education)

must also be natural to humans (if of varying quality, in school and out). Perhaps educators lodging such a complaint do not understand the claim they are advancing: Their neighbors are less than human.

A far more honest and accurate claim, therefore, is that rural parents (some or many, as the case may be) do not value schooling. An acknowledgement of this sort makes impoverished parents the comrades of Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Henry Adams, Neil Postman, and all the legion of more recent critics of schooling. It acknowledges that such parents have (at the very least) a time-honored point.

If one, then, does make this different claim, and if one acknowledges that rural people have valid reasons for skepticism about schooling, one might begin to make appropriate alterations in how schools work. Where might one get the helpful clues?

Voting With Their Feet: Refusing the One-Best Way

The life paths elaborated by thoughtful young people who are already exercising rural alternatives might harbor some useful insights about how schooling might be appropriately altered in rural communities. This is a novel idea.

Does any such record exist? Indeed it does. Beverly Burnell (2003) provided a detailed account of college refusal among "college-capable" rural young people. Burnell's interviewees were bright rural youth who refused to go to college directly after high school graduation, despite encouragement from school professionals. Some did not intend to pursue baccalaureate degrees, some opted for a plan to pursue postsecondary options later (e.g., after starting a family or starting a line of work), and some put aside planning future schooling in order to resolve more seemingly urgent personal or family situations.

This study is full of surprises (from the vantage of the conventional wisdom of the middle-class path), but perhaps the most poignant passage is this:

> The students were likely not fully aware of all the factors influencing their decision, and as several of them said, were surprised by many of the topics raised for discussion [i.e., by Burnell during the interviews], and in some cases, surprised

> that someone valued hearing about facets of their lives and decisions that they themselves valued. Why should this kind of conversation be unfamiliar and even a surprise to them? Is no one talking with them? (Burnell, 2003, p. 111)

Not only could these young people explain and defend their thinking about the future, they received no assistance in imagining such "alternative" futures from their rural schools. No one is talking to them, one might imagine, because counselors receive no incentive to do so and would confront disbelief if they did. The conventional wisdom (the one-best way of living) is backed by a great deal of corporate and state ideology and power (see the discussion of 21st-century skills) in enforcing the silence that struck Burnell so forcefully.

The choices articulated by Burnell's (2003) students, moreover, are exactly the sorts of life paths my colleagues and I have observed throughout our careers in rural communities, not only among academically capable young people in rural schools, but also among many seasoned adults working in rural schools.[13] A common theme among nearly all such people, young and old, is the desire to keep living in a rural place, especially the one they grew up in, remaining close with their families—which, in rural places, often constitute a durable extended network of relatives and not just the typical middle-class professional's kinship-free Standard North American nuclear family (see Griffith & Smith, 2005, pp. 38–41 on the "Standard North American family").

Burnell (2003) concluded that schools could do a lot more to enhance the odds of success and fulfillment for rural young people who want to remain near family and community. Improvising a decent and frugal life in rural places is a deft accomplishment, as a few of the personal stories in Duncan's *Worlds Apart* (1999) suggest. Rural schools could surely support this option much better than they now do in many communities. Except for the ideology, it would not seemingly be so difficult.

Rural communities also need not only farmers and mechanics (the old middle class) and therapists and physicians (nominal members of the new middle class) but freethinkers and critics disposed to help sustain rural places and positioned in social classes other than the elite. Schools, with their supposed interest in academics and the

intellect, could do something important here as well, and advocates of place-based education already recognize this possibility (Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Theobald, 1997). Oddly, the purveyors of 21st-century skills express no interest in the role of social critic or public intellectual. They want, instead, willing players of their own game: workers eager to go wherever they are sent to do whatever the corporate interest requires there. Being footloose, it seems, is a matter of teamwork.

The Best Practice of Living: A Misconstruction of Schooling

As nearly all of us realize from everyday life, a great many paths to a decent life exist, not just one. And for most humans these diverse paths lead through a variety of trials that are in themselves educative. Indeed, the quality of one's engagement with these trials determines the character of one's life more certainly than a few years' difference in amount of schooling. Schooling is not unimportant, but it becomes important only in light of such trials. This is a perhaps subtle reality, and one that escapes the consideration of many educators. The youngsters in Burnell's (2003) study, however, seem to have understood.

In this light, when educators anywhere, but particularly in rural schools, insist so strongly that a baccalaureate degree and a middle-class professional destiny is "best" for everyone, they make two serious errors. First, they err about the superiority of "professional" work over other forms of work: Considerable integrity and intelligence necessarily characterizes excellent work of all sorts, including manual work of all sorts, whereas considerable evasion and slavishness remains an option in professional life (see Wendell Berry's many works that elaborate this point; e.g., 1977). Second, and perhaps more significantly, they act out of hubris in counseling a life course based on such an error. The hubris not only amounts to educational malpractice, it threatens American democracy itself, at least according to the sociologist Christopher Lasch (1995), among many others. Lasch (1995) warned Americans of the danger to democracy from what he termed "the revolt of the elites." Those elites are being created, in part, through the errors of schooling just described.

The alternate pathways to a decent rural life that were being explored by the young people in Burnell's (2003) study, therefore,

represent a critical line of work that rural schools might embrace. Indeed, they must embrace this sort of work if rural communities are to retain local talent locally, rather than exporting it to the national or the "globalized" economy (where it will be used to further undermine rural communities). This work is an uphill struggle, a monumental struggle, for reasons that should be apparent: the norms of the profession, the authority and power of state departments of education in the thrall of corporatist ideology, and the general failure of common purpose (i.e., of "community") throughout contemporary America—and all of this for many decades (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Tam, 1998; Theobald, 1997).

Intellectual Life and Rural Cultures

The foregoing discussion, and from several approaches,[14] raises the issue of the circumstances of intellectual life in the rural U.S. Notably, the U.S. is a nation in which intellect itself is widely disparaged (Hofstadter, 1963; C. Howley, A. Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). The problem of engaging intellect in rural places, however, is not very difficult to conceive, because of what rural is. Addressing the problem successfully may be difficult—but conceiving it is easy.

Readers unfamiliar with rural studies may have been very impatient, throughout this essay, to know what rural is. Of course, many useful schemes exist for separating rural from nonrural real estate,[15] but neither rural education nor rural sociology is much concerned with real estate. These useful line-in-the-sand definitions of rural represent not what rural is, but where what-rural-is would be most likely on view in everyday life corralled by lines drawn on a map.

What Is Rural?

Recently, concerned to be succinct and direct, I offered the following remarks to a group of urban educators:

> Colleagues always want to know what rural is, often because they are mystified, and so I'll tell you. Rural people have connections to working the land, and to a set of concepts about

> place, kinship, and community. The associated meanings and purposes are what distinguishes rural education as a field of work and study. (C. Howley, 2007, ¶6)

Rural education, then, is about realms of meaning already in play in everyday life in rural communities and families. The definition discloses the standpoint of those who adopt it: Rural education should confront the divide between rural life (and rural education) and what has become of rural schooling (in general, but not everywhere). This standpoint could frighten some professional educators, who do not as a rule put community life at the center of interest (courageous exceptions to the rule exist, of course, and they are perhaps becoming more common). The upshot of this possibly unsettling definition, however, is that the actual connection between intellect and rural life becomes rather more obvious, as the discussion explains next.

Intellect and Rural Life

The related meanings of intellect and rural life are so momentous that they have helped constitute philosophy and literature since time immemorial (when the world was almost entirely rural), and they are of ongoing practical significance in the struggle for land, place, community, and family. One may perhaps object that these meanings are not rural qualities per se, but human qualities. If this be the case, it may well be that rural lifeways are more human than urban ones. David Orr (1995) would seem to agree, and that is perhaps why he has counseled reruralizing education.

Cosmopolitans do not, in my experience, entertain this argument willingly, but the argument has, in fact, been articulated by several generations of critics of American-style industrial culture (e.g., Bailey, 1911; Berry, 1977; Borsodi, 1933; Hanson, 1995). The basic outlook of all these writers proceeds from a land ethic, that is, from the notion that care of the land is a defining human activity, and that the worth of humans can be judged from the quality of their stewardship of the land. This argument, moreover, ought to be more convincing to the present generation than to previous ones, especially if the word *earth* replaces the word *land*.

Have we cared well for the earth (and its lands)? The doubts are serious. Perhaps when more of the nation's people were farmers, this obligation was sensed and addressed more strongly. Perhaps not, but one can at least claim that a much larger percentage of the population was aware of the obligation, especially if one recalls the Judeo-Christian obligation to care for the Creation (and the similar obligations in nearly all religious traditions). Perhaps only a civilization that has become inattentive, lazy, blind, and cravenly profane could take the earth to its current precarious state (i.e., mass extinction of species, global climate instability, accelerated deforestation, depletion of fossilized energy sources, depletion and contamination of water resources—not to mention the continuing threat of nuclear destruction and contamination).

Where did human society go so palpably wrong? One well-worn argument is that in the corporate rush to realize profits, the accumulation of wealth has accelerated to the point that progress elsewhere in life's projects (safety, justice, aesthetics, and the quality of human relationships) occurs at such a slow pace as to seem unpromising or even irrelevant (Bowers, 2004). This regime of accumulation is, of course, known as capitalism (the usage here is descriptive rather than pejorative), and its founding principle is that accumulation of wealth must proceed without limit and must also feed endlessly back into the process of accumulation—thus dramatically accelerating it (Hobsbawm, 1962). The pace of accumulation thus reaches planetary limits with alarming swiftness, with industrialization the arguably accelerating condition. In decades to come, planetary limits will prove a trenchant worry for this regime of accumulation (e.g., Kunstler, 2005).

This circumstance—the evident existence of natural limits and the economic imperative to ignore limits—explains why discussion of limits to growth are repudiated as pessimistic and negative by corporate leaders (Lasch, 1991). Mere recognition of limits (no matter how obvious their existence) would require humans to engineer a radically different economic regime. Reference to this dilemma may be anathema in the heartland of capitalism, but the reality is nonetheless going to require a great deal of thought and action, whether capitalism survives as a system of economic life or not.

However the reader may judge the foregoing accounts, the discussion ought to demonstrate the relevance of the life of the mind—of a critical disposition toward ideas and plans—to rural places. Momentous issues are involved in rural living, now and for the foreseeable future.

The Relevance of Extreme Talent in Rural Places

Because rural places and cultures exist and because rural people are as subject to "compulsory miseducation" (Goodman, 1962) as anyone, the construct of giftedness is relevant. What ought a rurally located school do with such creatures as "bright rednecks"? The cosmopolitans have one idea (e.g., export them to Singapore and have them concentrate on surpassing the limits to planetary growth); the author and his colleagues in rural education have a different one—arguably a more diverse one.

Our stance on such matters is easily given: Rural schools should serve rural families and communities, not a national and global economic machine. Rurally located schools can render this service only by supporting and helping families and communities to further develop rural lifeways (DeYoung, C. Howley, & Theobald, 1995; A. Howley, C. Howley, & Pendarvis, 2003; C. Howley & Harmon, 2001; Theobald, 1997). Unfortunately, this stance begs the question of what "proper" rural lifeways might entail and where a demonstrable and unusual capacity for academic work fits in. These two projects seem almost incompatible—but they are not. This essay ends, then, with some reflections about the sorts of meaningfulness to be conserved, and not only conserved but developed and extended practically.

One Example: An Existence Proof

For the past 6 years, I have been involved in directing the research initiative of and unusual doctoral program in mathematics education, The Appalachian Collaborative Center for Learning, Assessment, and Instruction in Mathematics (ACCLAIM).[16] The program is unusual in several ways, one of which is engagement with rural issues. We did not want our program to operate as a rural extraction indus-

try, and so we recruited students with a commitment to their rural communities and regions. We also wanted our students to know more about rural places and so included three courses addressing the history, sociology, and education of rural places. None of our students (45 total across three cohorts) had ever encountered rural issues in their previous professional training, and much less had they been asked to examine their work as being somehow connected to rural ways of being in the world—all of this despite the fact that nearly all had grown up rural and were at the time of the initial enrollment in our program working in institutions (K–12 schools or colleges) enrolling rural people.

External evaluators have reported that our students tell them that thinking about rural issues and dilemmas is one of the most memorable features of their experience in the program (Helms, St. John, Smith, & Huntwork, 2005). Although we did not require it, most students have chosen to conduct dissertations (in mathematics education) on topics that address issues relevant to rural communities and ways of living. These developments are the more remarkable in that mathematics is commonly regarded as that part of the curriculum most free from the influence of context. To foil this sort of thinking about school mathematics, one of the Center's leaders likes to respond: "Mathematics is a natural science, but mathematics education is a social science" (personal communication, Bill Bush, October 24, 2002). One mathematician on our team observes that "because mathematics is not tied to any locale it is relevant to all locales" (personal communication, Carl Lee, July 29, 2005).

The work of our rural mathematics education center is perhaps what mathematicians call an "existence proof": Its existence shows that rural ideas and dilemmas can be treated in schools, in actual coursework, with a durable impression on students and toward a rurally appropriate end—that of cultivating locally responsive mathematics education leadership in rural places. Our rural students (ages range from late 20s to early 60s) exhibit exceptional academic capacity. They never heard the story of their lives in an academic setting. What's the relevance to gifted education?

Extending this work to other levels is conceptually easy and practically difficult. One should not underestimate the challenges, which are legion. These challenges have been intimated already: an inherent cultural bigotry that misconstructs rural as definitively inferior; an anti-intellectual culture that disables the critique needed to conceive and sustain this work; a regime of schooling with an instrumental conception of educational purpose; and an authority system that valorizes individual greed far above the common purpose of community. These are formidable foes, but courage, integrity, and alliances can confront them successfully, at least on local terms, and at least sometimes; sources to guide this work populate the reference list.

This essay has discussed gifted programs not at all, but its discussion of intellect and rural ideas and reference to classic rural texts is relevant to gifted education professionals already at work in rural places. Within gifted education, of course, a long tradition of addressing real audiences exists, as does concern for critical thinking. Additionally, in recent years the field has critically examined its own elitism and ethnic biases. These recent learnings of the field are available for local application relevant to place—to a land ethic.

So often in American education, well-intentioned leaders speak of adaptations to context in the process of addressing the familiar "problems" of education: low achievement, achievement gaps, thin parental engagement with local schools, technology refusal, rare use of projects and field work, top-down management, inhuman scale—and on and on. The problems exist, in this way, at the center of attention, while "context" surrounds the center of attention. Strangely, the problems persist, unsolved despite the desperate attempts to find, impose, or declare solutions. Rather than blame our own weak thinking, we educators tend to blame the context: bad parenting, bad cultures, bad luck, bad genes.

Working from "rural context," this essay has argued for a very different outlook from the one described in the preceding paragraph—one in which place figures as the central meaning, a meaning that already exists and is available for use by educators, students, families, and communities. Instead of constituting a set of drawbacks, the central meanings of rural place are a generative set of

educational ideas already on site and in operation. "So what's the snag?" one might ask.

The difficulty (for the rural application) concerns the illusions of our profession. Even many rural educators find it difficult to circumvent these illusions. All of us, indeed, have been inducted into the profession via these same illusions. The illusions construct a reality of practice that is difficult to subvert: (a) best practice (belief that there is a one-best way to do everything); (b) belief that schooling is the same as education; (c) representation of knowledge as definitive rather than contingent; and (d) dependence on political and economic power rather than intellect for authority. My colleagues and I have written elsewhere of these matters at considerable length (e.g., A. Howley et al., 2003; A. Howley, Spatig, & C. Howley, 1999; C. Howley, 2006; C. Howley & A. Howley, in press; C. Howley, A. Howley, & Burgess, 2006; C. Howley et al., 1995); I mention these illusions here only to characterize the way our own professional norms deflect us from a pedagogy of place that engages the intellect.

For rural students explicitly identified as possessing exceptional academic capacity, it would be an easy matter to include the reading and discussion of rurally relevant texts in their schooling. Classic texts exist and are in fact too numerous to be covered completely, even in a sequence of courses like those in our Center's doctoral program. Not only texts, but students' families' own (culturally marginalized) experiences are relevant, and engaging the texts and the experiences jointly is arguably liberating (to judge from the Center's external evaluation). A place-based flavor, then, can be readily added to any rural gifted program.

The challenge for gifted programs, I think, would be to include other willing students and the community in whatever might be done. Here too, a great many examples exist in the literature on place-based education, and new books are appearing regularly on the topic. For a practical grip on the whole sweep of education (not just schooling) that honors place, I still recommend Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal's *Place Value* (1998). It's available as a PDF file online and free thanks to ERIC. Many additional resources are available, as well, on the Rural School and Community Trust Web site.

What one won't yet find, however, is a professional development network that can assist interested rural teachers and admin-

istrators in taking up this sort of work. As this essay indicates, SEAs and national business organizations work (in nearly all states) from a devotion to corporate commitments and the agenda of global economic dominance. These commitments function to confine concern for rural place and community to the periphery of the institution of schooling, no less so in rural than in other schools. Indeed, many local school leaders (with some exceptions) insist that concern for the welfare of their local communities is not their business (see DeYoung, 1995, for one example). Maximizing individual student achievement is (they say) their concern. Hobart Harmon and I (C. Howley & Harmon, 2001) discovered, however, that a large plurality of rural superintendents among those we interviewed understood that the continuing existence of their schools depended on the strength of community engagement. Doubtless, some rural gifted programs exist in such circumstances, which are far more auspicious for undertaking efforts that honor place. And in such places, the success of the effort would be more likely, on average, than elsewhere.

Because gifted students are those with propensities for engaging texts and thinking mathematically, they are able to engage texts and projects that would usually be considered inappropriate for students with other propensities. Most of the readings we demand of our doctoral students would be suitable for gifted high school students.

Although the circumstance of American schooling may be bleak overall in the eyes of those of us who value intellect and thoughtfulness (and reading and writing as the means to think and to invoke intellect), and although the odds that many SEAs will seriously honor place in their curriculum and standards efforts seem slim at present, opportunities do exist in many rural communities (and in a few states). The reason for the survival of these opportunities is that rural communities do not go willingly out of existence. The furor that rural school consolidation evokes from communities is ample evidence for this claim (DeYoung, 1995; DeYoung et al., 1995; C. Howley & Harmon, 1997; Peshkin, 1982).

The proposed work furnishes rural students with an alternative account of rural places—one that represents rural meanings and commitments robustly and even combatively. My colleagues and I found in one of our studies that rural gifted students were both more critical of and more attached to their local communities than other

rural students (C. Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). Helping academically talented rural students to engage the existing literatures on rural place will strengthen their attachment and focus their critique. In the end, academically talented students might understand that they can invent decent lives for themselves in the places they love.

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End Notes

1. Diversity is variation and the opposite of variation is better understood as standardization than as exclusion. In most discussions of "diversity," however, exclusion is regarded as the opposite. It seems,

though, that the real issue is who is including whom in what. That, in a sense, is the subject of this essay.

2. The definition of rural is given in the section titled Intellectual Life and Rural Culture, under the subheading What Is Rural?

3. Schooling is to education as the legal system is to justice—both institutions disclose truly appalling slips 'twixt cup and lip, and these slip-ups perhaps come down to an inequitable distribution of resources. The slip-ups, however, cannot be understood without theory and empirical inquiry. Both research and improvement are enterprises requiring doubt and skepticism: they are, in this sense, necessarily dubious.

4. Ethnicities are also sorted in the countryside, although it would perhaps be better to observe, as does the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that culture and poverty are regionalized in rural America: the Mexican border region sees many concentrations of impoverished brown-skinned people, the Appalachian highlands many concentrations of impoverished white-skinned people, the southern "Black belt" many concentrations of impoverished "black"-skinned people, and sections of the west many concentrations of impoverished red-skinned people. Whose racism is responsible for these concentrations, urban and rural?

5. The deeper structure concerns who is number one—one of the most fatuous of American, or perhaps human, preoccupations. This deeper structure of fear and loathing also applies to people with dark(er) skins. Bigots, of course, see this matter rather differently, which is why we call them "bigots."

6. The urbanized and literate proletariat was the intended audience—the supposed destined class of history. Scholars who quote this passage to suggest Marx's hostility to rural life ignore the fact that this passages was part of a critique of bourgeois society:

> The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities and has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semibarbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones,

> nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. (Marx & Engels, 1848, electronic version from the Gutenberg Project, ¶ 22)

One can read Marx and Engels too literally: "rural idiocy," "barbarian," and "civilized" are all used with considerable irony.

7. Not so long ago, WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant) ancestry would have topped the list of the best people, and the lack of children with darker skin pigmentation in gifted programs—and the profession, and the suburbs—was regarded as expected and therefore acceptable. There are those, of course, who continue to argue in favor of the expectation, asserting the genetic heritability of IQ.

8. Public schooling has been described largely, and for a long time, as a compliance routine by a great number of authors of varied commitments (e.g., Adams, 1918; Cohen, 1988; Depaere, 2000; Foucault, 1979; Goodman, 1962; Kohl, 1967; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tye, 2000). Gaventa and Duncan provide specific rural examples.

9. The vo-ag teacher's lone voice also suggests what the loss of farming as a common rural occupation has seemingly meant not only for rural communities but for the nation as a whole—a point made at interesting historical length by Hanson (1995). A corporate allegiance subverts the teacher's voice and its consistent devotion to a locally realized common good.

10. The conclusion that both intellect or community are endangered institutions in America has been reached by a number of writers (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Putnam, 2000; Theobald, 1997).

11. A recent retrospective of 20th century agriculture published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Dimitri, Effland, & Conklin, 2005) notes that farms raised an average of 5 crops in 1900, but now raise an average of one. Monocropping is identified as a disastrous way to farm by many observers of American farming (e.g., Berry, 1977; Hanson, 1995)

12. Most recently in our region, The Tractor Supply Company has arrived, and many independent local feed and farm-supply stores (notably including the regional cooperative) have foundered.

13. Rural school professionals, far more than is the case in cities or suburbs, come from the local community. Teaching jobs are prized positions in most rural communities precisely because they

enable a middle-class option that permits winners of such positions to remain close to family. At the same time, rural teachers have been subjected during their professional preparation to the ideology (perhaps "ideological distortions" would be a more apt term) of the middle-class path.

14. For instance, educational purpose, the significance of rural place, class interest or struggle, and the relationship of life and work.

15. The curious are invited to consult the definitions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/WhatisRural/), the U.S. Bureau of the Census (http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html), and the U.S. Department of Education (http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/page2.asp) for quantitative definitions that, in essence, draw lines on maps to separate rural regions from the rest of the nation.

16. The work of the Center's researchers, which represents work conducted consistent with the stance taken in this article, can be accessed at http://www.acclaim-math.org/researchPublications.aspx.