Encounters in Theory and History of Education
Rencontres en Théorie et Histoire de l'Éducation
Encuentros en Teoría e Historia de la Educación

Contemporary Joads: Educating in a Rural Boomtown
Les Joads contemporains. Éduquer dans une ville rurale en plein essor
Joads contemporáneos: La educación en una ciudad emergente rural

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Volume 25, numéro 1, 2024

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1116845ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.24908/encounters.v25i0.17242

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, Queen's University

ISSN

2560-8371 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Perez Sapien, K., Montgomery, J. & Vigil, P. (2024). Contemporary Joads: Educating in a Rural Boomtown. *Encounters in Theory and History of Education / Rencontres en Théorie et Histoire de l'Éducation / Encuentros en Teoría e Historia de la Educación*, *25*(1), 329–349. https://doi.org/10.24908/encounters.v25i0.17242

Résumé de l'article

Nous sommes trois éducateurs travaillant dans un espace rural. Nous nous sommes réunis afin de raconter l'histoire des expériences d'enseignants en début de carrière travaillant dans une ville de l'ouest intermontagne en plein essor. Afin de découvrir les défis uniques de ce contexte, nous avons exploré des thèmes liés à la scolarisation dans des communautés en pleine dislocation économique, thèmes représentés par des récits de boom et de récession. Les enseignants font face à ces défis dans les deux phases du cycle. Nous racontons l'histoire de l'enseignement en période de boom, une histoire qui s'inscrit dans l'autopromotion (« boosterism ») associée aux périodes de prospérité économique. Ces périodes de prospérité sont cependant assombries par la conscience des conséquences de l'inévitable crise. Ces tendances économiques ont leurs origines dans des lieux éloignés des communautés touchées. Les enseignants en début de carrière, exposés à des salles de classes en flux, en portent souvent le poids. À partir de cette expérience, nous racontons le récit rural protéiforme qui en résulte. À travers ce récit, nous espérons partager des idées uniques qui résonneront auprès d'autres éducateurs, quel que soit le contexte.

Encounters in Theory and History of Education
Vol. 25, 2024, 329-349

Contemporary Joads: Educating in a Rural Boomtown

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Abstract

We are three educators working in rural space. We came together to craft a story of early-career teachers' experiences working in an intermountain western boomtown. To uncover the unique challenges of this context, we explored themes related to schooling in communities undergoing economic dislocation represented through master narratives of boom and bust. Teachers confront these challenges in both phases of the cycle. Here we tell a story about teaching in the boom, one that nests within the boosterism associated with the economic good times. Those good times, however, are ever shadowed by awareness of the consequences of the inevitable bust. These economic trends originate in places far from the impacted communities. Early-career teachers, exposed to in-flux classrooms, often bear this weight. From that experience, we present a resultant protean rural narrative, and we hope that through its telling we may share unique insights that resonate among other educators, regardless of setting.

Keywords: rural, early-career teachers, boom-bust, narrative

ISSN: 2560-8371
DOI: 10.24908/encounters.v25i0.17242

Joads contemporáneos: La educación en una ciudad emergente rural

Resumen

Somos tres educadores que trabajamos en espacios rurales. Nos unimos para construir una narrativa sobre las experiencias de los maestros en las primeras etapas de su carrera profesional, trabajando en una ciudad emergente del oeste intermontano. Con el fin de desentrañar los desafíos únicos de este contexto, exploramos temas relacionados con la educación en comunidades que atraviesan procesos de desubicación económica, los cuales se manifiestan a través de las narrativas dominantes del auge y la caída. Los educadores enfrentan estos desafíos en ambas fases del ciclo. En este relato, abordamos la enseñanza durante el auge, un relato que se enmarca dentro del entusiasmo asociado con los tiempos de bonanza económica. Sin embargo, esos tiempos prósperos están siempre marcados por la conciencia de las consecuencias del inevitable colapso económico. Estas tendencias económicas tienen su origen en lugares distantes de las comunidades afectadas. Los maestros en las primeras etapas de su carrera, expuestos a aulas en constante cambio, suelen cargar con este peso. A partir de esa experiencia, presentamos una narrativa rural proteica, y esperamos que, a través de su relato, podamos compartir perspectivas únicas que resuenen entre otros educadores, independientemente del contexto en el que se encuentren.

Palabras clave: rurales, maestros en las primeras etapas de su carrera, auge-caída, narrativa

Les Joads contemporains. Éduquer dans une ville rurale en plein essor

Résumé

Nous sommes trois éducateurs travaillant dans un espace rural. Nous nous sommes réunis afin de raconter l’histoire des expériences d’enseignants en début de carrière travaillant dans une ville de l’ouest intermontagne en plein essor. Afin de découvrir les défis uniques de ce contexte, nous avons exploré des thèmes liés à la scolarisation dans des communautés en pleine dislocation économique, thèmes représentés par des récits de boom et de récession. Les enseignants font face à ces défis dans les deux phases du cycle. Nous racontons l’histoire de l’enseignement en période de boom, une histoire qui s’inscrit dans l’autopromotion (« boosterism ») associée aux périodes de prospérité économique. Ces périodes de prospérité sont cependant assombries par la conscience des conséquences de l’inévitable crise. Ces tendances économiques ont leurs origines dans des lieux éloignés des communautés touchées. Les enseignants en

début de carrière, exposés à des salles de classes en flux, en portent souvent le poids. À partir de cette expérience, nous racontons le récit rural protéiforme qui en résulte. À travers ce récit, nous espérons partager des idées uniques qui résonneront auprès d'autres éducateurs, quel que soit le contexte.

Mots-clés : rural, enseignants en début de carrière, boom et récession, récit

Introduction

Please God, give me one more boom. I promise not to piss it all away this time.

- *Seen on a Wyoming bumper sticker*.

And the highway is alive tonight
Nobody's foolin' nobody as to where it goes
I'm sitting down here in the campfire light
Searchin' for the ghost of Tom Joad.

Rage Against the Machine

The highway is alive tonight; the byways and the roadside motels and the faded old diners and taco places, all alive. This is a western boom town. Most in town pray for the boom, it means business for service industries always on the brink, it means corporate accounts at the hotels, it means Chevy, Ford, and Dodge pickups fly off the local car lot. In our state, it means more students in seats, the way the state allocates funding for schools. It is good for a district's bottom line. What we have thus far failed to address, however, is the impact on teachers in the overflowing classrooms, witnessing firsthand the challenges that come with the boom: substance abuse, unsettled homes, exploitation—a culture in transitory flux, and one on the edge of the economic precipice. Teachers stand at the forefront of this tumult. This narrative work traces two early career teachers teaching in a boomtown as they relate their experience of the challenges and triumphs of working in this context.

Bust, however, always follows boom. The tide washes over the community leaving a mud ring delineating the high-water mark, as the traffic out of town dwarfs that coming in and contemporary Joads depart in search of ghosts by the campfire light. What stories, then, might our early-career teachers tell?

Perspectives

Through a narrative approach guided by methodological troubling as elucidated by Hendry et al. (2018), and incorporating elements of McCormack's (2004) storying, Josselson's (2004) hermeneutic of faith, and Kim's (2015) data flirtation, we seek to co-create a story that captures something of the experience of teaching in a rural boomtown. Through the framework of a culturally recognizable form of meaning making—the story—we further seek to expand our potential audience, to, in short, construct a compelling narrative. Through the ensuing conversation, we grow (Kim, 2015).

We anchor our evolving story line less in a literature review than a landscape informed by literature surrounding schooling in rural space and place, relying on emergent themes centered on the stories we tell about schooling in rural space/place and rural economies and the narrative of boom/bust. Though we are focused on the American mountain west, we pull literature from the wealth of rural experience. We acknowledge the story that follows represents the voices of teachers new to the field, new to their communities. Our intention is not generalizability; instead, we sought to tell the story of a time and place as perceived by educators.

Rural Schooling

We recognize the complexities of defining "rural," a space we embrace as diverse. Attempts at a sort of atmospheric, quantitative view of what constitutes rurality—distance, connectedness, commute times, density—may lead to decisions that negatively impact schools in these contexts (Brenner, 2019; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Hawley et al., 2017; Kettler, et al., 2016). Despite differences in objective classification, few doubt the vital role schools play in rural communities. Rural schools constitute nearly 30 percent of all American public schools (Mann et al., 2017). The importance of these institutions to their communities cannot be overstated. Schools in rural—and urban—settings are economic and social engines (Tieken, 2014; Moran, 2019).

Perhaps most importantly, schools are existential and impossible to disentangle from the communities they serve, a representation of the success, narrative input, and viable future of a small town (Bauch, 2001; Lyson, 2005; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Even if rural schools exist at the perceived periphery in the larger context within the US, they are central to the communities they serve (Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Schools in rural spaces serve as cultural, political, economic, and social centers (Tieken, 2014). They play a role in organizing local agentic power (Flora et al., 2016). While these schools are as diverse as the communities that produce them, the elemental role they play within the community are consistent across rural spaces (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Lyson, 2005; Schafft, 2016). Within these schools, teachers create powerful connections as mediators of the role of schools. Teachers in rural space find a sense of

belonging and build strong professional relationships that aid in the traverse of challenges (Gallo, 2020). In navigating the complex interplay between school and community, teachers form community partnerships and tend to feel empowered to make curricular change (Parker, 2023; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

This flexibility allowed rural schools to respond to the COVID crisis in novel ways. They adapted to the added complications of rural gaps in access to technology of scale, connectivity, and affordability (White et al., 2020). When schools began to shutter, often over vociferous objections, teachers scrambled to confront a reality at odds with the deep relationships and connections that characterizes the strength of rural education. District level leadership tended to respond reflexively to community resistance by relying on these connections (Lochmiller, 2021). A consequence of rural school pandemic policies was the stark exposure of a divide between the local and the national, of professional discretion and disembodied commercial curricula (Kaden & Martin, 2020). This further complicated curriculum decisions in classrooms upon a return to in-class instruction.

The nuanced approach to reacting to COVID is echoed in varied reactions to diversity in rural space. Though our region remains largely demographically homogenous, schools, particularly in boom towns, are increasingly diverse. This trend has often been overshadowed by a focus on urban spaces as isolated bastions of cosmopolitanism (Hirsch & Borri-Anadon, 2023). Further, many of the problems facing rural space can be ameliorated by recognizing and embracing diversity (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Just as a student population diversifies, so too do educators. It is vital to ensure adaptable support for these teachers to prevent burnout (Korsan, 2022). For all teachers, write Anthony-Stevens & Langford (2020), it remains important to challenge dominant narratives of rurality and incorporate the dynamism of a changing place.

Rural Boom Bust Economies

Rural communities have been buffeted by complex forces largely out of their control. In our part of the intermountain west, something akin to a resource curse has taken hold. We suffer, in Karl's (1997) seminal words, from a paradox of plenty. When an economy originates based solely on extraction, it becomes permanently warped in its development. With no alternative to the easy money provided by a booming resource sector, economic decision makers have little reason to seriously consider alternative models, and they become "locked in" (Karl, 1997). In our state, there are far more clerks than oil workers (or miners, or ranchers) yet the latter groups dominate the policy-making (and narrative creating) in the capital (Census, 2019). Many isolated western rural communities are creations of a striating corporate/government/military program of colonization, and this expansionary impulse contributes to a permanently tenuous economic base (Acuña, 1972; Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Kakel, 2011; Robbins, 1994;

Smith, 2021). With such laser focused economic activity, when the boom comes the population swells and money pours in. The hope a boom generates may prevent communities from proactively planning a more diverse future (Mahdiani, et. al., 2021). With the inevitable bust, the economy craters, money flows out, and many people leave. Additionally, contemporary rural development trends owe much to chance: those places rich in desirable natural amenities (mountains, rivers, lakes, and such) are currently best positioned to weather change (Gjelten, 1982; Nachtigal, 1982; Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003).

As cycles of boom and bust play out across an extractive west, a reserve army of labor—our contemporary Joads—shuffle along the highways, a peripatetic drive that upends the centrality of place characteristic of many rural communities. As Corbett (2009) writes, the result is a disembedding phenomena, the erasure of their informal education and communication networks, a sacrifice to late-stage capitalism. The labor force is mobile without being formal, placeless without being genuinely free to select a destination. Many of these communities and their transitory populations confront what amounts to permanent existential threat, often struggling under the alienating complications imposed through reacting to economic decisions that are made in urban centers far removed both in distance and outlook (Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018).

Schools may mediate these stresses in myriad ways, but often it appears ad hoc, with a reactionary compliance focus subject to a lack of integration and engaged in a discourse of disruption, competition, and funding (Genareo & Filteau, 2016; McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017; Yahn 2017; Zuo, et. al., 2019). The students in these spaces absorb and participate in the shifting identities inherent in this tenuous economic context (Twum-Antwi et.al., 2020). Schools, teachers and students all negotiate the contested narratives surrounding boomtowns in a broader context of contemporary neoliberal dominance (McLaughlin, et. al., 2017: Ward et. al., 2020).

A Method of Sorts

The following is the product of conversations between a professor of education and two former students, Karen and Payton, who ended up teaching in the same district in the midst of an extractive industrial boom. They told (and are telling) their stories; we captured them and together co-constructed a narrative that best (if imperfectly) encapsulated their recollections of the experience. Guided by McCormack's (2004) restorying, the emerging drafts were shared among all authors, and we further honed the storyline. Through this process we uncovered new memories and understandings, achieving something wholly new, a collection of remembrances enabling the expression of a unique experience, one that we hope will resonate with teachers working in a similar place and space. This expression is enabled by, as Hendry (2007; 2018) writes, utilizing narrative to "trouble" method. In no way do we mimic positivism or seek validity or reliability. Instead, as Kim (2015) flirts with data, we flirt with form and theory. What

we seek is ineffable, but readily communicable. That we work within the confines of academia to express and take action ensures a tension at the heart of the work, one that we feel echoes the daily classroom tumult in a boomtown. We tell stories because we think (because we *feel*) they make sense to the broadest possible audience.

Story Sources

Two of the co-authors shared vignettes about their teaching. Data sources, (if we must name a data source) then, revolve primarily around the oral history-like contributions of two early-career teachers. From these, we cobbled together a coherent and recognizable narrative arc detailing the lived experience of teaching in a rural boom town. We hope that this conversation provides a model for praxis-like meaning making as an alternative to a culturally dominant recording of rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019). We are teachers working in rural space. But what follows is not unique to us. Dislocation and exploitation are global factors of contemporary capitalism. However, we find the consequences become more salient in our communities. Finally, we are telling a story. In the telling, we take action.

And Thus, a Story Unfolds

In 2019, Payton and Karen entered the rural high school arena in the intermountain states. The rural education environment in this high country boomtown was enveloped with unique educational challenges that defined in new ways a Wild West. For these early-career educators, the district's size provided opportunities to grow professionally, participate in curriculum development, and take on leadership positions while also harboring unique challenges.

Entering the district as two of several new hires to Foothills High School (a pseudonym), Payton and Karen comprised half of the social studies department. Not only was the school undergoing changes in the staff body but also changes to the building administration. The former principal at FHS had recently retired, and the new administration was tasked with not only helping the school and staff transition but also the entire community. Payton and Karen often felt like a visible reminder of this transition. Though they felt welcomed and celebrated at times, it was also complex to contextualize the negative attitudes of those who were anxious about the impending changes. Payton and Karen share their story and experience regarding rural economies, schooling, and teaching. As early-career educators, rural education challenged their pre-conceived notions and stereotypes about rurality. Their story illuminates the complexities of rural education that connect schools across the inter-mountain west and beyond.

Boom or Bust: Rethinking the Economies of the Wild West

The geographic remoteness of this fossil fuel focused boomtown is tied to its historical relationship to the land. An initial challenge of teaching in this boomtown was the shortage of housing caused by typical supply and demand imbalances. The rental market was extremely competitive, especially as Gannett (a pseudonym) was experiencing a boom in fossil fuel extraction.

Payton specifically outlines the initial challenges of finding housing in this new community. He states:

> I accepted a job teaching social studies with Dusky Plain School District #1 (a pseudonym) in March of 2019. Upon accepting employment in Gannett, I immediately began to seek housing. This proved to be much more difficult than I had initially anticipated. There were not many rentals available and the rentals that were available were priced higher than I could realistically afford on a teacher's salary.

Karen highlights similar discontent with the shortage of housing in the community:

> I was hired later in the hiring season than Payton. I officially accepted my position in May of 2019. I had not given much consideration to living in this new community as I was living in a more populated community a short 45-minute drive from this new job. I spent the summer of 2019 looking for housing but did not have luck as the start of the new school year approached.

Despite encountering similar challenges, Payton and Karen differed in their approaches to overcoming the rental shortages. Payton explored homeownership in this new community, but shares that even this option was its own challenge:

> At times, energy companies would purchase houses in the community due to the lack of available rental properties. When I eventually looked at purchasing a home in this community, many of the houses for sale in the area had been used by employees of energy companies and required significant repairs. By the time I left FHS, rental properties were available in higher quantities and were significantly more affordable.

Karen reports a hesitancy to put down roots in a rural community because in her perspective homeownership reflected a high degree of commitment:

> Buying a home in this community felt like a serious long-term commitment, I did not feel prepared to make that level of commitment. To be honest, the housing shortage, though frustrating, was not the sole factor in choosing to commute my first year of teaching. I grew up in northwest Arkansas, where the influx of Latino and Asian immigrants redefined the white-black binary of the region as the *nuevo south* emerged as an identity. I was accustomed to racially and culturally diverse

> landscapes. In my hometown, Asian markets and Hispanic mercados were clear landmarks to a nuevo south identity. I moved to the inter-mountain west for college and often questioned if this new frontier was a permanent home. In my first posting, my town underwent an economic boom from 2019 to 2021.

The infusion of people, money, and corporate interests complicated the existing culture of the community. As newcomers, Payton and Karen also represented part of this change. Immersing themselves within the existing culture of their new community would also be an internal challenge.

The student population of FHS consistently experienced an ebb and flow of growth during economic booms and decline during economic busts. The relationship to the land in this boom-and-bust economy complicated the social and economic issues associated with the growth of the town. Payton speaks to this flux:

> Enrollment at Foothills High School during the 2019-2020 school year set a record of about 575 students. This number frequently fluctuated in the three years I was employed by DPSD#1, with attendance dropping to around 520 by 2022. The larger enrollment caused increased classroom sizes, with some classes having more than 30 students.

The ebb and flow of the economic booms also brought an influx of diversity to the community, which appealed to Karen's desire to work with the Latino community:

> As a Latina educator, I felt my otherness stood out, as I was the only woman in my department and the only teacher of color in the building. Perhaps to my colleagues this wasn't the first thing on their minds when interacting with me. However, this impacted how I chose to exist in this new space, as navigating parts of my identity in predominantly white spaces was daunting and tiresome. The boom and bust of the oil field brought a small pocket of Latinx families into the community. Most interestingly, this community represented a broad spectrum of Middle America as my students' backgrounds were not solely from Mexico but also from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. One year, two Hispanic foreign exchange students from Spain and Venezuela broadened the diversity of our student population. As an educator of colour, this community's presence in my classroom was exciting and hopeful. One of the many reasons I entered education was to serve students who looked like me. I initially sought to obtain a teaching position in a district with larger Latinx community to align to this goal. Though FHS was in a predominantly white district, this new pocket of diversity aligned to my educational purposes.

The Latino presence in this community challenged the stereotypes of rural communities as predominantly white spaces. However, this added diversity was contingent on the economic booms that broadened the scope of employment within the region. Payton recalls how these challenges manifested issues within FHS classrooms:

> Course placement was a challenge at FHS because many students had changed schools. Often it was a struggle to determine what courses they should be placed in. Say, students may have had portions of U.S. history at one school, world history at another, and government at a third without completing any of the courses in its entirety. When these students arrived at FHS it was hard to determine what courses they should be enrolled in to meet the credit requirements. Occasionally, a new student who was an upperclassman would end up in a freshman-level course or vice versa.

In 2019, the oilfield was booming, thus an influx of opportunities and challenges quickly changed the landscape of this rural space. The rapid growth resulted in new jobs with vastly higher wages than those traditionally present in the community. The service industries additionally experienced employment growth, especially in restaurant and hospitality jobs. The economic boom equated to higher enrollments at the school, which itself brought complications, as Payton outlines. The influx of new families diversified the cultural makeup of the town, as Karen tells us, but it did not offset the overwhelmingly homogenous demographic of the community.

"Once a Maverick, Always a Maverick:" Centrality of Rural Schooling

The energy of this boomtown was most vibrant during the school sports season, as the community frequently gathered to celebrate their teams. Payton and Karen served as advisors to the student council during their time at FHS, one of the many leadership opportunities into which they would be propelled. In 2019 they both quickly learned how much of their new positions as student council advisors also equated to a "community liaison" title. Karen shares:

> Payton was the staff member initially hired as student council advisor. I inherited half of the job at the start of the school year. I knew Payton from our university studies, and in the spirit of being a team player I offered to help in any way possible. Payton's response was surprising. He said, "well, administration told me I could split the contract with someone. Do you want to let them know we can both do it?" My initial thought was, "well if I'm offering to help, I may as well get paid for this position. How hard could it be?" Which now feels like the biggest understatement. Planning our first homecoming week was a rude awakening, I quickly realized how much this community cared about tradition and how important the high school was to the broader community. We were tasked with planning a week's worth of activities for the student body to engage with, which implicitly meant the entire community. Our student council members quickly caught Payton and I up to speed on the traditional competitions, scavenger hunts, parades, assemblies, and coronations. We had several community members reach out to offer their help. In my own educational experience, I had never encountered anything like it.

The community's unofficial slogan was "once a maverick, always a maverick." This was exemplified by the school's mascot and evoked a powerful sense of belonging. However, in this rural space, that message meant something deeper to those that were born and raised in the town. Student council advisors Payton and Karen had to adapt quickly to this ethos, establishing connections to the community, learning about the local culture, and developing an appreciation for rural students' abilities.

As the population changed with the ebb and flow of the economy, the town rallied around this maverick ideology when facing hardships. Often these hardships tightly mirrored the changing landscapes of the town brought forth by economic boom. Payton remembers what this looked like:

> Unfortunately, living in a boomtown provides opportunities for students to be exposed to illicit substances. Substance abuse among students was prevalent at FHS. Multiple students overdosed during my time at FHS, and several were arrested for drug possession or driving under the influence. Oftentimes, the administrators spent a sizable portion of their day dealing with discipline issues related to students using substances while in school. Because the administration was often busy dealing with these issues, it could be very difficult to contact them. As a young teacher with many questions, this inaccessibility to the administrators proved to be a significant challenge.

Juxtaposing these two stories by Payton and Karen intentionally illuminates the complexities of rurality and schooling. At the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in the spring of 2020, obstacles present in rural schooling were further exacerbated by a new onset of adversities. The social, political, and economic hardships of the pandemic highlighted equity gaps not solely in the school but across the community. As Karen recalls:

> In March of 2020, we left for spring break right as the pandemic began to make the 24/7 news cycle. Not knowing much, I tried to ease my students' anxieties and assured them that we were lucky to be heading off to spring break. I begged them to wash their hands more consistently and stop sharing drinks/snacks. The Friday before our spring break, I eagerly left the building as I felt an overwhelming amount of burn-out. The pandemic was not the most pressing concern on my mind as I simply wanted a week of uninterrupted rest. I didn't know this would be the last time I would see my colleagues and students this school year. We did not return to in-person instruction until the start of the following school year.

As their first year of teaching came to a halt, Payton and Karen processed the difficulties of navigating rurality, resource access, and economic depressions. The district administration was tasked to quickly answer questions surrounding student computers and internet access, as districts nation-wide prepared to enact remote learning. According to Payton:

> Many of the students at FHS did not have internet in their homes, let alone wireless access. Even in families with internet access, many students lacked devices from which they could access the internet outside of their cellphones.

Karen elaborates on the challenges of equity & access:

> A lot of families in the district had more than one or two children who attended school. So not only was internet and device access a challenge, but it was also difficult to ensure all families would be equipped with the tools necessary to help all their children succeed in a remote setting. I noticed that my colleagues with school-aged children were also in a very difficult position as they had to facilitate learning for their classroom students and help their own children. It was an overwhelming experience. In most contexts, I am a glass is half full type of individual, but the challenges of the pandemic highlighted issues present in the community that were there long before the COVID outbreak. It felt as though our district had to problem solve all of these challenges overnight. I worried a lot about my students' well-being, and I noticed my own mental health took a steep nose-dive.

Payton and Karen's stories highlight the voices of educators as essential in measuring the pandemic's impact on rural areas. The economic boom the community experienced came to a sudden halt at the start of the pandemic. Their stories contextualize how the pandemic added to the existing concerns of the community. This rural school district had historically served as a community center in social, political, and economic capacities. As Gannett navigated the challenges of the pandemic, community members and FHS staff and students looked to the school district for leadership.

Is it Me? Early-Career Educators Navigating Rural Teaching

Early-career educators in rural settings encounter complex learning environments that confront the stereotypes of rurality. Payton and Karen outlined their experience navigating rurality while also emphasizing the benefits of teaching in a rural district. Through this narrative, several layers of rural education are uncovered, which highlight the challenges that early-career educators face regarding autonomy, professional development, and contextualizing the broader community ethos.

Karen expressed her initial perceptions of rural education, which align to current descriptions of teacher autonomy, teacher retention, and early-career professional development in rural spaces:

> The summer before my first year, I was asked to participate in a summer institute with other colleagues to implement the first layer of my administration's new initiatives. The head and associate principals had been recently selected as the new wave of leadership at FHS. The summer institute was the first professional development I was exposed to as a new graduate. My gratitude for this experience was threefold: one, I met several new colleagues who were kind and quickly took me

> under their wing; two, I established my professional identity for the first time; three, I was surrounded by vital school community leaders and district administration. This was most apparent on the six-hour road trip to and from the summer institute, where I shared snacks with the associate superintendent, head principal, and my department head. It would be an understatement to say I felt the pressure to come out of this experience with meaningful tools and strategies to drive my instruction. However, I was motivated to make my first year of teaching meaningful because I appreciated their commitment to my development. I also did not feel like a newcomer, my colleagues and administration valued what I brought to the table.

To Karen, this immediate access to district leadership and initial professional development set the tone for the district's commitment to teacher development. In this context, Karen was introduced to new colleagues and community members which helped to ease some anxieties about the impending school year. This experience infused her with an appreciation for the local school community.

The social, economic, and political histories of this community encouraged both Payton and Karen to implement place-based curricula. However, both educators report anxieties about maneuvering the broader community ethos. The demographic of this mountain-west community paralleled a rising national conservative ethos regarding energy industries and climate change. The regional reliance on a fossil fuel economy ensured resistance to certain topics. For Karen:

> I felt an urgent need to develop curriculum that challenged my students' often limited worldview. However, this desire and agency were also accompanied by a wariness that my instruction would invoke an unpleasant response from the students, parents, and community. I was consistently pulled between the professional dilemma of challenging the status quo and the desire to fit into my new community. This constant pull between the two was additionally challenging as the community did not always reflect my personal and political values.

Karen's story uncovers an additional layer of teacher retention in the rural context. She recognized that rural spaces contain often dominant political stances and inclinations in conflict with an incoming novice teacher's views. The community's economic ties to extractive industries ensured largely homogenous support for the preservation of the town's main source of employment, even as it ran contrary to her emerging educational philosophy. Payton's perspective adds context:

> One of the major challenges of teaching in a boomtown is in introducing students to opposing points of view. My time in Gannett coincided with the 2020 election and the COVID-19 pandemic, two events that served to further polarize the nation. I found many of my students to be hypersensitive to any content that did not align with their beliefs. Students may be blatantly dismissive of new ideas, or even openly challenge them in class as false, stupid, evil, etc. Students who disagreed with the majority

> were oftentimes afraid to vocalize their opinions. I taught several sections of freshman world regional geography. As part of the study of geography, we naturally focused on the industry, climate, natural resources, and physical characteristics of various locations. Part of the classroom discussion inevitably included discussions about the negative impacts human activity and the extraction industries have on the climate and environment. There was frequent pushback as a significant percentage of the students in my classroom had at least one parent who worked in energy. The broader community hesitated to accept the hard truths about the negative impacts of the fossil fuel industry, and in the classroom my students made claims that 'climate change is a hoax' or that alternative energy sources were not feasible.

Payton and Karen report decisions about their curriculum were difficult to negotiate. Both educators had to make crucial curricular decisions about class discussions, combating misinformation, and engaging reluctant students.

An exciting component of their in-flux surroundings was the level of autonomy these educators remember. Karen summarizes their experience:

> Payton and I both were tasked with revamping the civics curriculum at FHS. I often felt a sense of imposter syndrome as a first-year teacher, but having a collaborative partner helped ease the fear and trepidation. Part of our administration's new initiative was implementing a separate collaboration and planning period, meaning we had two different class periods where we did not see students. This caused an increase in class size, which was challenging, but it also meant that our collaboration and planning periods were sacred. I had the opportunity to plan, grade, or even just take a break during my planning period. Our collaborative period is where our department had time to design common assessments, curriculum maps, revisit our priority standards, or seek out advice from department members. We were even challenged by our administration to do a team building activity once a week to build the rapport in our department. I do not mean to make this place sound idyllic, but our administration tried very hard to implement structures that supported our development as individuals, departments, and a school. When I made my decision to leave FHS in 2021, I was very saddened to leave this type of building culture because it was so essential to my development as an early career educator.

Though rural districts often face the challenge of teacher retention, Karen reminds us why some educators seek out rural environments. Her story reveals how rural spaces can be nurturing and empowering environments for early career educators.

Discussion

We wrestled with Azano and Biddle's (2019) encouragement to create alternatives to a dominant mode of outside meaning making in rural space—the dichotomy. Our efforts were complicated by several factors in our corner of the American West. One of those

complications, boom/bust cycles, are the legacy of striating state construction on the back of colonial expansion—in lieu of mythic yeoman farmers, there were railroad barons who constructed the model for the coal and oil, and cattle barons that followed. We attempted a counter-narrative to contrast that of a deeply Jung-like shadowed reality, though one that tempts Manichean dualism. Instead of clear delineations, we have a fuzzy borderland between a proudly declared individualistic and self-sufficient culture, even if one obviously belied by the harsh reality of our inhospitable surroundings—"once a maverick…"—and a fanciful creation buttressed powerfully by Hollywood mythmaking. We are left with a dichotomous arc, too deeply ingrained in how we make sense of the world to overturn easily. What we cling to, as we muddle through storylines, is place. And here we have room to enact in more conscientious ways Azano and Biddle's (2019) admonition against dichotomies. In that spirit, we play with place not as model or theory, but as hooks (2009) and Berry (1996, 2012, 2019) do: celebrating the peculiar *and* prosaic, protean *and* provincial, finding story in the gaps, describing things that are undefinable in ways but that must be felt . . . as conversation, as praxis.

In their conversation, Karen and Payton found themselves creating competing narratives contrary to the hegemonic ones present in their communities. Karen described the gender and racial subtext of the story the community told about itself and wanted teachers to echo. Here, too, is an undercurrent we are eager to explore further: that extraction booms, as McHenry-Sorber et. al. (2016) explored in similar circumstances, uncover master myths underpinning community relationships and narrative control. Payton and Karen's school, nestled in their community, was subject to the whims of corporate power as a defining characteristic in the same way as towns throughout the empty quarter west. This is both acknowledged and *courted*, driven by a self-conscious need to assert that we are the right kind of community with the right kind of people. Even as many rural spaces in the west transition away from extraction-based economies into amenity-rich services they share an ethos of individual power. The reliance, however, remains on outside investment.

There is hope, of course. There are deep wells of inventiveness, and there are multiple storylines to engage with. Again, in the spirit of work by McHenry-Sorber & Schafft (2015), we may enact these storylines through schools as we create counternarratives of communities proposing their own place-specific way forward. Thus, this work represents our attempt at finding ways of writing our own myths to illuminate our tale as one of many in the mountain west. The fact remains: we like teaching here; we like living here—with all the challenges—and we seek to use our experience to subvert the cycles that capture us. As Karen relates, this rural space was "essential to my development as an early-career educator," and though the community did not "reflect personal or political values," it was also a special place. Too, however, as Payton and Karen suggest, in addition to learning their way into the craft, educators in

rural boom towns encounter issues of, drug abuse, housing shortages, and challenges of navigating “myopic worldviews.”

The place in which we engaged in this conversation was enmeshed in the factors that assure this ebb and surge, the fluidity of economic disjointedness. When we explore the intermountain west, we roll through town after town not so different from our own, with evocative names—Ten Sleep, Medicine Bow, Nucla, Paradox, Bairoil, Lusk, Wagon Mound—all chasing elusive myths; seeking mythmaking perhaps, that ability to author their own stories in the wider cultural narrative. However, one thing is undeniable: this chasing of dreams, allusions to opportunity, this uncovering of past horizons in the promise of the next boom is *predicated on teachers like Payton and Karen waiting, in classrooms*. There is no cycle when there is no school; there is no boom. Teachers in classrooms are indispensable to facilitate some backstop in the form of socialization and the simulacra of American acculturation. That is asking a lot, especially when those teachers can’t know day-to-day who will be seated in their classrooms. It is a big ask of teachers struggling to build relationships with the untethered students moving with the growing seasons and extraction prices.

When mythmaking in the rural west, those stories that contain a cultural poetry—of sufficiency, of protection, of help reluctantly accepted, of stoicism and social ordering via the canonical creed—seem to prevail. But it remains that it is the cities with banks (or as the Joads called them, those monsters-made-of-men), corporate boardrooms, and bull statues that still make the decisions. Decisions that we react to; decisions that enliven the roads and the taco stands that lead to the boom: students in seats, profit at the Chevy dealer. And then we are left with the only thing that, with all its weight, we can really count on in a boom/bust town on a high windy plain:

> A large drop of sun lingered on the horizon and then dripped over and was gone, and the sky was brilliant over the spot where it had gone, and a torn cloud, like a bloody rag, hung over the spot of its going. And dusk crept over the sky from the eastern horizon, and darkness crept over the land from the east (Steinbeck, 1939).

Which gets us, finally, back to Tom Joad. Memorable in book, film, and song, he represents this urge to do right, to protect those abused by these vast exploitative systems. The Joads were on the road; they had to be, much like the pool of laborers and their children, still in this country, whether chasing booms or growing seasons that enable a few to accumulate profit and the many to find themselves unmoored on an increasing shattered landscape. Karen and Payton had these students, and in a sometimes-short amount of time they worked to impact them, to teach and love and inspire, to create the semblance of roots in rural space. This kind of rootedness—it doesn’t mean we have to be stuck in place—suggests that we can uncover the rhythm and understand a place enough to care for it and hope that we, and others, find hope there. And that was what we sought to do, understand that place. Find some hope.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Through this work we sought to tell a story that is both familiar and somewhat unusual for those working in education, especially those in rural educative contexts: that boom/bust economic cycles are a continuous feature of intermountain rural space, particularly in what Joel Garreau (1981) calls the Empty Quarter West. What is less understood is what teaching in these economic cycles (giddiness/despair) is like for practitioners, particularly those just beginning their careers. We challenge this cyclical dichotomy through nuance, repositioning ourselves in our community as our experience swirls in the eddies of discourse about rural schooling. That this community went through a boom/bust cycle is undeniable. Whether that experience exemplifies the colonized and shadowed West or objective economic phenomena matters less than the stories that emerge to make sense of it all. Through our telling without reliance on simple morals, we co-construct a conversation with our reader, one that is predicated on eschewing suspicion or appeals to verisimilitude (or any other self-conscious attempt at positivist mimicry) (Ricoeur, 1991). Instead, we fully believe there is benefit in this story being told, even just as an interesting tale well told. Like teachers new to the craft, we *become*; we re-make ecologies. We rely, then, on our readers, nesting your lived experience in our own, finding shared meaning in the creation of connection.

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