

“Education in rural communities – Schools and Beyond”

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Introduction:

Rural education – where does it begin? Where does it end? In many ways, education in a rural community, is a relatively seamless, and lifelong, process. On the farm, it begins in very early childhood, as lack of organised childcare, and the nature of the old-fashioned family farm, dictate that even the youngest member is at least present for farm chores. My own ‘rural education’ began in 1992 when a life-long dream came true, and my partner and I ventured into the countryside, bought a farm, and a couple of goats, and immersed ourselves in our new community. This immersion included shifting my teaching and research interests at the Faculty of Education, at the University of Western Ontario, to include supervision of student teachers in rural schools; becoming involved in 4-H clubs through our growing herd of goats. I was soon studying various facets of rural education. This included agriculture in the classroom programs, the impact of rural school closures (both immediate and imminent), rural teachers past and present, and adult education opportunities for rural women entrepreneurs. As my research ventures moved more deeply into the rural, the methods of oral history seemed to be the most natural way to proceed and moved me from topic to topic as I became better acquainted with the educators, the learners, the issues and the venues of rural education.

Our learning curve on the farm has been steep as we've become accustomed to using a chain saw and heating with wood; conserving water from our well (after it was finally hooked up to the house); and thawing frozen water buckets for the goats. Our lives now revolve around the seasonal cycles of breeding, births, and some deaths, as we tend our herd of goats, our dogs, and the assortment of house cats, barn cats, and the occasional orphaned racoon, rabbit, weasel, and other wildlife. There is a deep satisfaction that comes from observing nature up close, though we've learned to temper our heroic attempts to save all creatures great and small, accepting that sometimes nature must take its course. There is also a much greater appreciation for our food, the weather, environmental concerns, community, and countless other things, so many of which are taken for granted, or ignored, in an urban setting. The things that I have learned on the farm, so far, have given new life to my teaching and research. As an academic, I had long been interested in the sociology of youth, youth groups, education, and particularly issues related to gender equity. As we became more and more integrated into our new, rural community, I observed the children and adults around us, as they engaged in their traditional activities of 4-H clubs, fall fairs, Women's Institutes, church suppers, and exchanges of news and views at our general store. In often-serendipitous ways, my growing interest in and knowledge of farm and rural life has found its way into my teaching and research. It has enabled me to attract new students with similar interests, forge contacts with colleagues in other disciplines, and build new networks both on and off-campus. I am now able to bring the farm into the classroom as I teach my student teachers-to-be, and teachers already in the profession, about agricultural and rural issues. The farm also provides an ideal classroom to teach disparate groups in a less formal way. Our "students" range from a busload of grade 3 students from a city school, to visiting exchange students from Korea. We also host local 4-H clubs, Brownie troops, and Women's Institute groups interested in goats, and the old fashioned skills of making soap and cheese (which we have learned along the way). Participation in the nearby fall fairs where we show our goats is yet another opportunity to educate

others about these wonderful creatures. We have also acquired some veterinary skills as we diagnose and treat our animals for various ailments, in consultation with our local large animal veterinarian. My partner's reputation has grown as a skilled mid-wife to not only our own goats but to others in the area who call in a panic when they are in the middle of a difficult birth and don't know what to do. Most of these skills have been learned and shared through the oral tradition with friends, neighbours, veterinarians, etc.

As both observer and participant, student and teacher, I have gradually moved past the tendency to want to romanticise all things rural and agricultural. There is much nostalgia and mythology connected with the rural way of life. Butala (1994) and Bonner (1997) are among some recent Canadian authors who explore this phenomenon from quite different perspectives. Though I continue to relish this life and lifestyle, I have also heard, observed and experienced enough in our dozen years here, to appreciate the realities and contradictions which abound in the stories from and about rural communities. For example, the retired rural women teachers I am interviewing for my current research prefer to tell me about the joys they recall from their careers ranging from the one room schoolhouse to the consolidated central school. However, a little gentle prodding elicits sometimes reluctant, sometimes painful stories about isolation, sexual harassment, mistakes made, and failures buried beneath the more positive recollections. In the most south-western corners of the province, black women teachers were **only** allowed to teach in the rural schools, due to the segregation that lasted into the 1960s in some communities and the racism which continued well beyond that date. That's not to say that the positives become overwhelmed by the less happy memories, just that these are less easily told and shared. And much of this history has not yet been recorded in the existing written histories.

For these reasons, oral history becomes the preferred method for collecting narratives from both young and old community members for whom this life is like the air they breath – not something that is considered particularly worth sharing with a

researcher. The number of times I've heard, "you're probably wasting your time, but I can meet with you if you like...."!

My research had always relied on oral history methods. The narratives I was to collect would help me make sense of not only my own new rural context, but of the lives, and experiences, of those who had lived the rural life for many generations before I set foot into this community. My 'informants' are my neighbours and those they suggest I speak to next. They are teachers in the rural schools, community leaders, youth members of 4-H clubs, women involved with rural community development initiatives, farmers, and members of the Women's Institutes. Oral history has not only helped provide new insights into various facets of rural education around me, it has also led me from one research topic to the next as my participants have identified individuals and topics that were connected to the discussion we were having. Thus, this article is more about the evolution of my research on rural education, through oral history, than about the detailed findings of each of these projects (either documented elsewhere or still in progress – see references).

Agriculture in the Classroom

Among the first research projects I engaged in upon moving to the farm was the well-organised and networked Agriculture in the Classroom program. A neighbouring goat farmer invited me to participate in the special day set aside for school children at the beginning of the local fall fair. Farmers in the area volunteered their time and livestock to set up inter-active displays on this day, while bus-loads of school children arrived from nearby schools to view the animals and equipment, talk to the farmers, and learn about their particular farming activities. I learned that 'Agriculture in the Classroom' programs have proliferated throughout the province of Ontario, and elsewhere in Canada, since the mid-1970s, spearheaded by a group called Women for the Survival of Agriculture. Canada was experiencing an economic

recession, and farm families were in crisis as they struggled to survive on their farms that could no longer sustain a family. Despite off-farm jobs, farmers were declaring bankruptcy, the younger generation was reluctant to carry on with the seemingly thankless job of farming, and the alarm bells were sounded: Canada's family farms were in danger of disappearing. Spurred on by these local, grass-roots lobby groups, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, together with the Ministry of Education, began to develop curriculum guidelines to answer the questions of teachers and students and integrate agricultural issues into the school curriculum. Ministry officials and local school boards organised workshops; volunteers from the farming community began to visit classrooms as agricultural ambassadors, and slowly bridges were built between neighbouring urban and rural communities. Children who had never set foot on a farm, or thought about where their food originated, were now given opportunities to visit farms or special educational days at nearby fairs. Farmers were trained and provided with resources so that they could communicate with both young and older urbanites, and non-farming rural residents as well, about their vocation, and dispel myths about farming, animal welfare, food safety, and the role of agriculture in the local economy.

Today, a formal organization, Ontario Agri-Food Education, Inc. (OAFE) provides ongoing, full-time support to classroom teachers. In this collaborative venture between the Ministries of Agriculture and Education, teachers and curriculum specialists contribute their expertise together with representatives from the various agricultural commodity groups who help fund the curriculum resource materials tailored to meet the guidelines of various subjects and age groups. As a professor in a Faculty of Education, OAFE provides me with resources, speakers, workshops, and fieldtrips for my students. The students, in turn, take away from these experiences armloads of high quality curriculum materials (free of charge) and new ideas for invigorating their curriculum in ways which are of great interest to students of all ages.

I have found that those who are actively involved in these types of organisations are usually active in more ways than one – rural networks are well-established and highly successful webs of communication and advocacy. For example, one of the participants in my research interviews came to my attention first as the editor of the provincial goat breeders' newsletter to which I subscribe. Subsequently, I discovered that she was the Chair of the Ontario Agri-Food Education organisation's board of directors. She had also been active in 4-H clubs, introducing these to her rural school in Northern Ontario where she had been an elementary school teacher until she retired. And, as with so many people, her foray into this area all began rather innocently. As she said "it all began with a rooster and a hen... actually it started in 1976 when my son, he was just finishing kindergarten and he invited his kindergarten teacher to his 6th birthday party. And when she came to the party she brought him a hen and a rooster... and that started the whole evolution. Yeah – they lived in the doghouse the first summer, the next summer we built this chicken coop. And we got more chickens, and then we got some ducks, and then I fell in love with this goat and I bought her for \$10 and she spent her first winter in the chicken coop. And it just sort of grew and grew – of course, when I'm excited about something, my family and my class got excited about it and I found I could use some of these things, chickens, ducks, and goats and rabbits and anything I could get the kids interested in learning. So I started to use it as a hook for their learning. Then, oh early '80s, I discovered there was an agriculture-in- the- classroom program in the States, so I got resources from there. And then the 4-H program came available and I got involved with the 4-H program and then took it into the classroom and then our school started doing 4-H... and it all evolved from a chicken and a hen!" This woman, though officially retired, has been honoured for her many volunteer services by the provincial government, and continues to be an active presence at county fair displays, in classrooms across the province, and is putting her many talents to use in the service of agriculture. My interview with her was set up because she was a retired woman teacher with a history of teaching in rural schools. The content of

the actual interview, however, covered almost every rural research topic I have ever pursued: 4-H clubs, agriculture in the classroom, teaching in a rural school, and even goats!

4-H Clubs

I also became intrigued with the 4-H clubs in our area. It seemed everyone I met in the community – youth or adult – was in some way engaged in this series of rural clubs. The youngsters could choose from a variety of topics ranging from the agricultural to those with a home economics foundation, and still others with a broader, 'life skills' focus. Adults with expertise in any of these areas volunteered their time as leaders for a series of meetings, field trips, and as invited guest speakers, to educate the youth about a particular topic. Experiential learning is not a new phenomena. John Dewey and many other education experts over the years, have advocated hands-on learning; getting out of the classroom to experience things first hand, and learning by doing. The 4-H clubs (the four H's stand for: Head, Heart, Hands and Health) found in rural Ontario and elsewhere, are models of this way of learning, beyond the school. Of course, farm children have always learned in this way. From a very young age, children are expected to contribute to the day to day chores on a family farm, to the best of their abilities. The 4-H clubs expand their horizons to life-skills and agricultural clubs through the guidance of local leaders, who are often farmers themselves. Generations of rural youth have enjoyed and learned from dozens of 4-H clubs ranging from dairy and beef clubs, to crops, tractors, baking, sewing, photography, and many other topics. Each club culminates with a project, whether showing their calves at a local fair, or mounting a photo exhibit and the community is treated to the skills of its youth. Despite the growing availability of more urban activities – organized sports, Brownies and Cub Scouts, computer games and malls, 4-H clubs continue to thrive and are updated regularly in keeping with current youth interests.

The members of 4-H increasingly view themselves as educators of city youth, and of others ignorant about even the most basic things related to farming. As one teenaged member who raises sheep told me: “people don’t know anything about sheep; instead of saying ‘wool’ they say ‘fur’ and I say NO – they’re so ignorant when it comes to that!” Another was frustrated by the stereotypes associated with farmers: “that farmers go around in overalls and fork manure! It’s not true – they don’t know that it takes a lot of responsibility to be a farmer – like country people know a lot more about city people ‘cause it’s just more interest in that, it’s really disappointing. They don’t think that people who farm are all that intelligent or anything and you have to be. You have to have your wits about you on a farm otherwise you’re not going to do well. You have to know when a ewe is going to lamb, or when the crop is ready to harvest, it’s like common sense, you grow up with it. I don’t know – I just think the ignorance is appalling as far as I’m concerned.” Another of the 4-H members, a 16-year-old high school student, chose to do her geography project on an agricultural topic. “We had an end of the year project that was worth a lot and I did my project on beef cattle and used a lot of my 4-H resources that helped me. My friend did it on cattle too and I’m sure 4-H helped her too. A lot of people don’t understand how food is grown – I think they need to know, and that farmers put a lot of work into it, if we didn’t have farmers we wouldn’t have that much food.” When asked how 4-H differed from school, another young member responded that “in school you learn math and stuff like that, here in 4-H you learn to run a farm, how to make it work, and how to work with different animals. It’s totally different things that you learn, I can learn about a cow in biology, but I have hands-on in 4-H”.

It has been a pleasure for us to host visits by 4-H clubs to our farm each year. Local Goat clubs and Dairy clubs come for an evening or an afternoon to tour our barn, learn about various breeds of goats, and to make cheese or soap with the goat’s milk. Even though these are farm kids, some will try their hand at milking a goat for the first time, and taste goat’s milk cheese, fresh from our

kitchen. Each will go home with a sample of goat's milk soap. Fostering good community relationships, teaching children and adults about the wonders of the inquisitive goat, and sharing the joy of goat kids at play, is all a part of our rural experience. These experiences have also enabled me to better understand the unique aspects of rural communities and rural education.

The Rural Practicum

As an advisor to student teachers on placement in rural schools in my county, I serve as a liaison between the schools and the aspiring teachers, many of whom have had no previous experience with rural life. I also learn about the issues facing rural schools: the difficulties of recruiting and retaining rural teachers, the continual threat of rural school closures and the devastating impact this has on a rural community. In the more rural provinces in Canada, a school of a dozen or 30 students is still considered viable, given the distances they must travel. In the more urbanised region in which I live, the board is closing down schools of 400 or more students, despite studies which show this to be not cost-effective. There is little appreciation for what the loss of a school does to a single school rural community. When the children are bussed for long hours to the nearest town or city, and are unable to do their morning chores, or participate in extra-curricular activities, this not only compromises their families but also the quality of their education. Passionate groups of parents, students and community members gather each time a school is identified for closure, but their concerns seem to fall on deaf ears in the provincial capital where farming is a romanticised and remote concept. Meanwhile, rural principals complain that their schools serve as training centres for the newest teachers, fresh from teachers' college, or novice administrators, who quickly transfer to an urban school when the opportunity presents itself. The amalgamation of urban and rural school boards has not helped in this regard – it is even easier to transfer now within the expanded board, and the rural schools are further marginalized as directives come from the urban board offices. Teachers also need to understand the seasonal demands

placed on students from farming families and the ways in which schools accommodate these needs. Though the school boards no longer officially sanction absenteeism during the fall harvest, rural schools continue to accept that this is the way of life and that some of their students will need to be accommodated when they return after the harvest is complete. My own farming experience has enabled us to move easily between the urban and rural contexts, and sometimes act as interpreters of each. My student teachers need an orientation session before they embark on their first practice teaching assignment in a rural school. At first they grumble about the distance they have to drive to get to the school; and the school may not be as rich in resources as some of the larger and newer urban schools they have seen. But inevitably, they come to appreciate the close sense of community, the interesting backgrounds and rich lives of their students, and vast lands surrounding the community. Many will request a second placement at that school. They are amazed at how well the staff knows each student and family and the wealth of information their students bring with them.

The 4-H members I have interviewed have opened my eyes, as well, to the experience and knowledge these young people have acquired throughout their lives on their farms. Some have attended cattle auctions since they were of school age and bought and sold their own animals as they've invested in their own farming careers. One of my neighbours, Kate, who was a senior high school student when I interviewed her, told me her story: "I actually bought my first calf when I was four, and I bought it from my Dad. When I was six or seven there was a herd dispersal sale over on the other side of London – and it was quite a good herd – and I was there with my uncle and a neighbour and they told me which calf to buy. And I remember sitting there in the front row, and I had braids, and so I bid on this calf – I don't know if I waved my hand wildly.... So after that I'd go to sales and the people at the sales barn knew who I was and they knew I was good for the money, and they never questioned it." Kate told me that she intended to

continue farming, and she has since graduated from the pre-eminent agricultural university, works in agriculture and has married into a family with a large dairy farm. She was also keen to share her knowledge with her classmates and teachers as a high school student, and as a 4-H leader. Those who have attended the consolidated high schools in the nearest town have educated their urban counterparts about the agricultural economy around them – from the local crops of soybeans, corn or wheat, to the technicalities of artificial insemination and robot milking machines. Teachers who are aware of the skills and talents of their students can not only tap into this valuable resource in their own teaching, but can also bolster the self-esteem of their knowledgeable students. The students shared with me some of the stigma attached to farming and they were sometimes reserved about divulging their 4-H and farm skills with urbanites who don't value such things. On the other hand, my mostly urban student teachers acquired an appreciation for the rural communities in which they teach, and their skilled students who often open their teachers' eyes to issues and experiences they have not previously encountered. One of my student teachers recounted how a student in her biology class brought in an aborted foal foetus to class one day, leading to an impromptu lesson in dissection and horse anatomy. To her credit, she took full advantage of this 'teachable moment', engaged her more knowledgeable students in helping to teach the lesson, and became more aware and respectful of the rural context and all that it has to offer. When in a farming community, one learns to adapt and take advantage of unexpected opportunities!

Meanwhile, on our farm, we have found that adults are often as fascinated as children once they have their first encounter with goats. Church groups and women's groups, as well as local women entrepreneurs, are just as interested in coming for a visit, learning about the goat farm, and the products made with goat's milk. Though our herd is too small for a full-scale dairy operation, we have managed to create a home-based business making goat's milk soap with our excess milk, and this has opened other doors

and created new community networks, for example with a rural women entrepreneurs group.

Women in Rural Economic Development

In a similar fashion to the Agriculture in the Classroom programs described earlier, farm and rural women began to organize around other ventures, as well. Rural women had long worked together for the betterment of their communities through the local Women's Institutes, which were founded in rural communities more than 100 years ago. It is often farmwomen who take off-farm jobs, typically in teaching or nursing, to provide a stable family income. But with farming and their communities facing serious economic threats, women began to work on more local business oriented initiatives in order to provide additional income for their families, while enabling them to stay close to home and contribute to the economic viability of their rural community. Women in Rural Economic Development (WRED) formed as a province-wide organization in the 1980s, to train rural women in business and entrepreneurial skills, to help secure small business loans, and to provide ongoing resources and guidance as women established businesses in their homes and rural communities. As we were beginning to experiment with soapmaking with our extra milk, a local chapter of WRED was forming. We quickly joined this small, but rapidly growing, network of women, all of whom were new to business. Once again, we found ourselves both learning and sharing our own experiences as we experimented with various methods of production, marketing, sales and other business skills. During the summer months we sell our soap at nearby fairs and festivals, participating in community events, and expanding our growing rural network.

This new experience translated into yet another offshoot for my research at the university. While I had never explored adult education before, my interest in gender equity issues in education prompted me to explore the lives of farm girls and women, as they moved through both formal and informal educational experiences, which ultimately led them to become entrepreneurs in their

communities. The activities of neighbouring girls and boys on their farms and in the 4-H clubs, the volunteer leadership contributions of their parents and others in these pursuits, the role of rural schools in our communities, and the importance of teachers who are sensitive to the rural context, have all become very important to me in both my work and my life on the farm.

The Best of Both Worlds

I readily concede that I have the 'best of both worlds'. My livelihood does not depend on the vagaries of weather or disease, even though I share anxious moments with my neighbours during haying season as I watch for rain clouds - both when it should and shouldn't rain. My work at the university provides me with a decent, steady income, a good pension when I retire, and colleagues and friends who share my academic pursuits. While they don't fully understand my commitment to morning and evening milking chores, seven days a week, and all night vigils when the goats are giving birth, they are interested and supportive of my work. The teaching cycle of a faculty of education fits neatly with the seasons of the farm: I breed my goats to give birth in February and March, when my students are practice-teaching in nearby schools, and my university schedule is more flexible. I have deliberately chosen rural schools for my part of the practicum supervision. I can mark exams and prepare lectures from my home office, from where I can keep an eye on developments in the barn.

Yet even as my life at the university and life on the farm sometimes seem to be worlds apart, the greatest thing of all is the academic freedom I have to bridge that seeming gap. I don't have to leave my rural community to carry on with my research – and the things I learn day to day, both by happenstance, and by design, I can carry back with me to the classroom, and to the rural schools where my students are learning to become teachers. The farm has opened doors to opportunities I had never imagined when I embarked on my academic career. And oral history has become a

conduit for the development of inter-linked research and pedagogical experiences. I have encountered new colleagues, and travelled to conferences in places I have never been before, all because of my research on rural education. Coincidentally, as I began to explore this area, a group of colleagues at the University of Saskatchewan sent out a call for presentations for the first National Rural Education Congress, held in Saskatoon in 1996. This timely event encouraged me to embrace this area of research, take it further, and continue to share my findings from rural Ontario schools and communities with colleagues from across the country at this now annual event. As I write this, I have just returned from the inaugural gathering of an Atlantic centre for rural education at Acadia University. This is where my academic work and chosen lifestyle truly intersect. At these conferences of rural educators, including teachers, school board trustees, superintendents, and directors of education, as well as academics such as myself, the conversation will as likely turn to drought conditions and the impact on crops, as it does to school closures and amalgamations in rural communities. Those who are parents share worries about their children: to encourage them to stay on the farm or stretch their wings as they head off to post-secondary education in the city? One man brags about how his teenaged daughter impressed her boyfriend's family by stitching up their cow's prolapsed uterus! Where else would one so naturally discuss these seemingly diverse topics with the comfortable sense that everyone in the room understands the connections. And where else is oral history so appropriate a method to begin to try to understand and interpret the interconnectedness of lives and livelihoods, past and present?

I have also been able to give back to my adopted community as a result of my research. I have spoken out about school closures in rural communities, responded to media queries about rural schools, and welcomed students and teachers to our farm. I have shared my research with the various organizations that have contributed to my work, and I continue to learn from my neighbours, the local farm newspapers, and the various networks with which I am involved. I am also able to contribute to the

research of others, because of my unique rural perspective. Recently, a group of colleagues and I have embarked on documenting the history of women teachers in Ontario during the 20th century (see: Coulter, 2001-2002) My contribution? The experiences of rural women teachers, of course! Searching through local archives, and interviewing retired women teachers in surrounding communities has given me even greater insight into the history and culture which surrounds our small parcel of land.

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