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Edmund T. Hamann

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, ehamann2@unl.edu

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Delineating a Regional Education Research Agenda

If one wants to advance the argument that the Great Plains, as a region, matters—and the very existence of *Great Plains Research* and the Center for Great Plains Studies that publishes it suggest significant support for the idea—then one can ask, How did we learn that they matter? How do they matter? Can we live on them ethically, with a regard for each other and sense of stewardship and responsibility? Education research *in, of, for,* and *with* a region allows us to pursue each of these questions, plus more.

Here we do so, informed by the two central notions that Greenwood (2011, 634) suggests are the core of place-based education: critical geography and bioregionalism. Critical geography asks us to view spaces as expressions of ideologically laden power relations—who counts as *of* a place? Who gets excluded? Whose acts of naming prevail? Whose efforts get lost or rejected? And so on. Bioregionalism has a more explicit link to ecology, and bioregionalists “seek to revive, preserve, and develop cultural patterns in specific bioregions that are suited to the climate, life zones, landforms, and resources of those regions” (634). As one nod to bioregionalism, we “bound” the Great Plains the same way that Michael Forsberg (2009) did with his map in *Great Plains: America’s Lingering Wild* as extending from the northern grasslands of Manitoba and Saskatchewan in Canada, and continuously south, until crossing the Rio Grande into the grasslands of Mexico’s Tamaulipas state. Like Forsberg, whose sandhill cranes (see Forsberg [2004]) are clearly of the Great Plains but not always in them, we note that those who study education in the Great Plains are not always in them, nor are those who attend formal education programs there. One’s ties to the Plains do not need to be constant, nor 100%, to be salient.

This introductory article looks across four very different recently completed manuscripts that each broached the question “What does, or should, an education research agenda for the Great Plains entail?”

Because of the diverse perspectives and circumstances of the authors, even though the number of compared manuscripts is relatively small (i.e., four), collectively they offer a comprehensive and sweeping take on what a region-based educational research agenda can entail, which this introduction proposes to synthesize or summarize. It is our contention that “region” is a crucial but often neglected conceptual category with which to think about education (as well as other issues). Region is larger than a village, school district, city, or state, but smaller than and not necessarily fully residing within the geopolitical boundaries of a nation-state. (Consider Anzaldua’s [1987] identification as the region on both sides of the US-Mexican border as “La Frontera.”) While both amorphous and heterogeneously populated, regions nonetheless have identifiable patterns of linguistic, historical, ecological, and economic coherence. They are viable as an object of inquiry, and that is the work here.

The juxtaposed manuscripts intentionally offer varied theoretical perspectives even as they attend to the same regional geography. It is the stance of this introduction that different perspectives illuminate different data, different possibilities, and different challenges, and thus any effort that attempts to be encompassing, if geographically particular, gains from affirming and including that diversity of perspectives. That said, all these works share consistent attention to the concept of place and place-based education (Greenwood 2011). Phrased another way, they each ask how place matters.

Here that inquiry is collectively interdisciplinary, drawing from both the social sciences and the humanities. Regarding the former, one of the reviewed pieces, by Marjorie Kostelnik, comes from a former dean of a college of education who describes a scenario-driven planning process that involved 40 of her faculty. A second paper, by Amanda Morales, which appears last, adapts the funds of knowledge theoretical framework (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005) to illuminate how

education of rural children could but usually does not intentionally draw on the routine outside-of-school experiences and social network-embedded wisdom that these children bring with them to classrooms that, unfortunately, are often narrowly concerned with national curricula and national standards. A third paper, which appears after Dean Kostelnik's review of a college of education's consideration of a research agenda, is by Vanessa Hamilton, Carlton LeCount, Nicole Parker Cariaga, and Kristine Sudbeck—three American Indian authors and one non-Native. It recounts the long history of treating indigenous populations as objects of study, to be prodded and measured and described but not actually included as coauthors and co-investigators. Its thesis insists on a new way of conducting education (and other) research *with* American Indian populations, rather than *on* them. While in one sense this is “how to” guidance for future scientific inquiry, its epistemological and ontological grounding clearly comes from the humanities' concerns of moral philosophy, or phrased another way, the politics of who and how we should be to one another. The final paper, by Carolyn Albracht, which actually appears second to last, is also in one sense a “how to” but even more clearly takes the humanities as its starting point. Building from John Dewey's ideas of art and experience, that paper describes how environmental education programs, to teach stewardship of the Great Plains, need to enable and shape participants' aesthetic engagement. Phrased another way, we can teach and learn attachment to place.

Looking across these papers, our stance here is that theoretical heteroglossia is cumulatively enriching. There is value to juxtaposing very different strategies of inquiry that nonetheless relate to the same larger question about what a regional educational research agenda could or should entail.

As already suggested, the four underlying papers (which this fifth paper synthesizes) each use different methodologies to ground their various points. Because of this variety, standard aggregation strategies like meta-analysis (allowing combinations of data sets through Z-scoring and the like) and even ethnology (which looks across ethnographies to propose larger patterns) do not fit. Perhaps the best label for this introduction's methods is Ogawa and Malen's (1991) notion of multivocal literatures. They explained, “The literatures for some of the most prominent topics in education are multivocal. They are characterized by an abundance of diverse documents and a scarcity of systematic investigations. De-

spite the nature of the literatures, the salience of these topics generates interest in, and requests for, reviews of the available information” (266).

Two related core tasks of methodology in education research are to give coherence to how a question is pursued and to clarify to readers why an account should be viewed as credible. In this case a third element—genre—also informs methodology. Because a journal has length limits, the number of “core” papers that could be included here is finite, in this case four (or five, counting this introduction). So a task of this paper is to assert that the juxtaposition of those four papers matters, allowing that, while each of the four matter in their own right, reading across them accomplishes something that none can do on their own. In this “post-truth era,” we propose that a reason that false claims have been allowed to prevail and that empirically grounded conclusions are ignored is that the American population writ large and even the community of education researchers has become atomized. We surround ourselves with those who are like us and tune out those who are not. However modestly, we assert that an exercise like this one that brings together different ways of approaching a single larger topic and insists on seeing them side by side, rather than one as better than another, models a stance that perhaps needs to resurrected more broadly. In addition to considering the familiar, we need to look at the unfamiliar, which also proposes to attend to what we claim to be interested in.

The first “main paper” comes from a recently retired dean of a “Research 1” land-grant institution. (Dr. Kostelnik retired from the deanship but continues to serve as a senior advisor to the University of Nebraska president.) The second manuscript came from a team of mainly American Indian researchers affiliated with a community college. They share the often painful history of American Indian education and research on American Indian education on the Great Plains before articulating what research *with* versus research *on* American Indians could entail. The third piece was authored by an art educator and art gallery owner who wrote about invoking the aesthetic as a means for cultivating attachment to and environmental stewardship of place. In turn, the last manuscript was by a self-described “small-town kid” from the High Plains of Kansas who identified her father and uncle as “the first two Mexicans in town” (Morales 2015), but whose essay here focuses on how schools do and don't build on rural kids' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). So what counts here as data is both varied and eclectic.

Of course a different way of thinking about the data is the acknowledgment that all the authors are *of* the Great Plains, meaning they live on them, negotiate them every day, and engage both professionally and personally in these spaces. While biographies vary significantly, in terms of race and class background, age, place of birth, stage of career, experience living away from the Great Plains, and so on, each contributing author can be viewed as an “expert informant” on the topic of what education research in the Great Plains should entail. Each has been recognized through the ancient guild and apprentice logic of graduate education with advanced degrees. Per a jury of experts, we too are experts. Both the diversity of experiences and shared advanced levels of expertise inform why this cross-section of authors together create a multimodal dataset meriting review and synthesis.

The results of both the four underlying papers and this fifth one can and should be scrutinized to appraise if they merit attention. We look briefly here first at the four underlying papers individually before making claims across them. Considering Dean Kostelnik's paper, who else should be the source for outlining an educational research agenda for the Great Plains than education researchers who per their employment by a land-grant institution and the geography of their professional circumstances are education researchers on the Great Plains? To be sure, theirs are not the only relevant voices, but putting forty such individuals in dialogue with each other and knowing that there is a massive infrastructure behind them (e.g., the job security of tenure for many, the support of a grant oriented university infrastructure, etc.) makes this a highly relevant population to consider.

Yet, traditionally, those who have identified as researchers and are recognized as such by university employment have not been a broadly representative cross-section of the population. Nor have they been free from the conceits, blindness, and biases that have long troubled the academy. So the mostly indigenous authors of the second paper offer an important complementary voice to that of Dean Kostelnik in the first paper. The second paper's authors outline how research has contributed to marginality of American Indian populations and distrust by them. As education researchers, like those described by Dean Kostelnik and others, continue their studies on the Great Plains, they need to be more conscious than past generations were about the logics and mechanics of their interactions with the populations they seek to study.

In invoking John Dewey's notion of “esthetic experience,” Albracht neatly sidesteps a “scientific” versus “humanistic” or “emotive” dichotomy about how to teach attachment to the Great Plains and, relatedly, build the value of its stewardship. She allows that both science and art can become pathways to engagement, with questions of “How does it work?” or “What does it look like or sound like?,” supplanted by the deeper “Why does it matter?.” Her work is highly germane to building the audience that might consume the education research of the Great Plains. How do we get students to become adults who care about this place, this region, and thus care about the studies of this place that illuminate how education and community might be fairer, more inclusive, more sustainable, and so on?

Yet, sadly, as Morales's paper illuminates, formal education's tendency to overlook and devalue children's lived experiences with their immediate environment has only increased as advances in modern technology and media have increased. Greenwood (2011) indicates that prior to the formalization and industrialization of public schools, “Local and regional culture and geography were the contexts and the ‘texts’ through which people learned who they were, and what they needed to know to live” (632). While many aspects of public schooling have remained unchanged (for better or for worse), the increased emphasis on globalization driving educational policy has made the local contexts in which we live much less central to the content of curriculum.

The Great Plains is concurrently a key breadbasket to the world, an important cog in some of nature's most spectacular migrations (e.g., the sandhill cranes), host for millennia to some indigenous populations and for centuries to others, and the place where millions of people go to school, pay taxes, feel like (or don't feel like) members of communities, and so on. Understanding how education works and can work in this region and interrogating what education should accomplish in this space in terms of creating affinities, associations, and senses of stewardship are key macro questions that, in turn, illuminate how interdisciplinary education research could and should be pursued in any region. The claim here, applied to a whole region, is that place matters and we should study how people learn to conceptualize it and see themselves and others in relation to it.

Edmund T. Hamann
Guest Editor

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