

Editorial

A New Lens on Rurality: Centering Assets, Agency, and Place

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Educational research has long been influenced by narratives that frame rural, peripheral, remote, and geographically isolated communities through the lens of disadvantage (Corbett, 2020; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). Across many countries, rural education has been discussed primarily in relation to teacher shortages, limited educational opportunities, geographic isolation, declining populations, economic constraints, and restricted access to services (Azano & Stewart, 2015; OECD, 2021; Roberts, 2014). While such challenges undoubtedly shape the educational realities of many communities, these perspectives often risk reducing rural places to what they lack, obscuring the strengths, resources, relationships, and forms of knowledge that also characterize them (Green & Corbett, 2013; White & Corbett, 2014). These strengths, or what we refer to throughout this Editorial as community assets, include the social, cultural, environmental, institutional, geographical, historical and relational resources embedded within places that can support learning, educational leadership, community well-being, and local development. Furthermore, the concept of agency, as conceptualized by Bandura (2001), is the capacity to act intentionally and influence the course of events that impact people's lives. In peripheral, coastal and rural communities, agency is expressed when residents and researchers work collectively to recognize local strengths and inequities, develop contextually responsive solutions, and shape practices that advance community goals. Through such individual and collective action, agency becomes a source of power that builds community capacity and supports efforts to reduce inequities and respond to changing circumstances (White & Downey, 2021).

Recognizing these assets and agency has become a defining feature of a broader shift within rural education scholarship. In recent years, researchers have increasingly challenged deficit-oriented representations of rurality and called for more nuanced understandings of place (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Reid et al., 2010; Tieken, 2014). Concepts such as place-based education, rural cultural wealth, spatial justice, rural resourcefulness, and asset-based approaches have encouraged scholars to move beyond simplistic duality and urban–rural comparisons and instead examine how educational experiences are shaped by the unique social, cultural, historical, and geographic characteristics of places (Grue-newald, 2003; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). This shift does not deny the existence of inequities. Rather, it recognizes that educational challenges and strengths frequently coexist and that both must be considered when developing educational research, policy, and practice (Schafft, 2016; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000).

This Special Issue contributes to this growing conversation by bringing together thirteen papers from diverse international contexts, including Australia, England, Finland, Israel, Scotland, and the United States. While the studies address different educational questions, populations, and settings, they reveal a common commitment to understanding



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rural, peripheral, coastal, and geographically isolated communities as complex educational environments whose assets are as important as their challenges. Collectively, the papers demonstrate the importance of place—not merely as a setting in which education occurs, but as an active force shaping identities, aspirations, professional practice, leadership, community engagement, and educational opportunity. Whether a learner grows up in a geographically remote rural community, a peripheral urban district, or a coastal town characterized by seasonal economic fluctuation, the contours of that place shape access to resources, quality of provision, aspirations, identities, and outcomes. Acknowledging this complexity is, therefore, a precondition for achieving educational equity.

Collectively, the thirteen papers suggest that educational equity in rural, peripheral, remote, and coastal communities depends not on overcoming place but on understanding, mobilizing, and working through place. This perspective is developed across four interconnected themes: understanding rural places and educational experiences; the power of connection between teachers and communities; building local educational capacity; and supporting educational futures for rural students. Together, these themes provide the conceptual structure for the contributions that follow.

Understanding Rural Places and Educational Experiences

A foundational contribution of this Special Issue is its interrogation of what place actually means in educational contexts. Place is not simply a geographical location; it encompasses the material conditions of an area, including its infrastructure, economy, and social composition, as well as the symbolic meanings attached to it. It is through place that communities understand themselves, policymakers categorize and govern localities, and learners and educators experience belonging, aspiration, and identity.

Consequently, the rural–urban binary, while heuristically useful, is recognized across the contributions to this volume as an oversimplification that can obscure as much as it reveals. Rural places are heterogeneous; urban peripheries may share structural characteristics with remote rural settlements, while coastal communities occupy socioeconomic and cultural positions that fit either category comfortably. The papers contributing to this theme therefore expand our understanding of place by demonstrating how different spatial dimensions interact to shape educational experiences.

Grinshtain, Ovenden-Hope, and Downey examine the complexity of place across three distinct international contexts: peripheral communities in Northern Israel, rural–coastal England, and rural Montana in the United States. This analysis highlights the limitations of simplified classifications and argues for place-informed educational policies and approaches that acknowledge both the challenges and strengths embedded within local contexts. Rather than viewing place as a fixed category, the authors present it as a dynamic and multidimensional construct that shapes educational experiences in different ways around the world.

Graham's article, titled *The Grass Ceiling: Hidden Educational Barriers in Rural England*, challenges dominant assumptions regarding educational inequality by demonstrating how rural barriers frequently remain invisible within broader analyses of socioeconomic inequality. The paper argues that rurality itself should be understood as an important dimension impacting educational experience and that educational policy often overlooks the specific barriers faced by rural learners. This connects directly to the concept of educational isolation ([Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019](#)) and the compounding of locational challenges, including geographical remoteness, socioeconomic deprivation, and cultural isolation, into a systemic limitation on school agency and improvement capacity.

The final paper in this theme, by **McHenry-Sorber and colleagues**, advances a spatial equity perspective for educational research. Through the lens of spatial justice, the authors illustrate how educational opportunities and inequalities are often produced through

geographic and social processes. Importantly, however, they also demonstrate how communities mobilize local partnerships, relationships, and resources to respond creatively to contextual challenges. In doing so, they demonstrate community agency, understood as the capacity to act collectively, mobilize local assets, and influence educational opportunities despite structural constraints. This reinforces one of the central themes of the Special Issue: rural communities are not simply sites of disadvantage but also sites of agency and innovation. Taken together, these contributions demonstrate the value of cross-national comparison in distinguishing which dimensions of place-based educational disadvantage are widely shared and which remain context-specific, with important implications for the transferability of policy solutions. Collectively, these papers challenge conventional representations of rurality and establish a conceptual foundation for recognizing place as a source of both constraint and possibility.

The Power of Connection Between Teachers and Communities

Across many of the contributions in this Special Issue, the teacher and the persistent challenge of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in rural, peripheral, and coastal schools emerge as a focal point of both empirical inquiry and policy concern. Teachers' supply in geographically isolated and socioeconomically deprived areas is a global challenge. A recurring insight across the studies gathered here is that teacher retention in rural and peripheral contexts is a question relating to material factors, such as salary, housing, and infrastructure, and to relational and professional ones too. Teachers who feel embedded in the community, who engage in place-responsive pedagogy, and who belong to effective professional networks are more likely to thrive and remain. The second theme that emerged from these papers is an exploration of the relationships between rural teachers and their communities.

Inouye and colleagues examine how rural teachers from four states, California, Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota, defined and experienced rurality. Their findings reveal that rural places are understood by educators as diverse, connected, and resource-rich environments rather than homogeneous or isolated spaces. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives, the study challenges externally imposed definitions of rurality and demonstrates the value of local knowledge in understanding educational contexts.

Leach and Bradbury continue this focus by exploring the characteristics associated with thriving rural teachers. Drawing on the perspectives of rural educational leaders from Queensland, Australia, the authors identify four interconnected dimensions of successful rural teaching: being community-equipped, classroom-equipped, professionally equipped, and personally equipped. Their findings emphasize that successful rural teaching requires much more than instructional competence; it also involves meaningful engagement with local communities and contexts.

Questions of identity and belonging are further explored by **Bæck and Autti** in their study of teachers in rural Finland. The authors' study reveals the complexities associated with teaching in close-knit communities where professional and personal lives frequently overlap. Teachers describe the rewards of strong community connections alongside the challenges associated with visibility, expectations, and limited privacy. The study illustrates the ways in which rural teaching is deeply embedded within local social relationships.

Community engagement is also central to **Fuqua's** examination of teachers' participation in rural sporting clubs in Australia. The study demonstrates how local institutions function as important community assets that facilitate relationship-building, local knowledge development, and social integration. Participation in such spaces supports both professional and personal connections, highlighting the significance of community engagement in rural educational life.

The section concludes with **Reuer and Lux**'s investigation of novice teachers working in remote Montana communities. Their findings suggest that beginner teachers often aspire to implement asset-based and place-conscious approaches but require mentorship and support in learning about community resources and local funds of knowledge in order to effectively bring the community into the classroom. The study further suggests that engagement with community assets may contribute not only to improved teaching but also to teacher retention.

These papers highlight the positive outcomes which can occur when rural teachers are valued and viewed as community-connected actors whose effectiveness and well-being are closely linked to place, relationships, and local knowledge.

Building Local Educational Capacity

Place-based education, understood broadly as learning that is grounded in the local environment, community, and culture, has a long intellectual lineage in progressive education thought and an increasingly robust empirical evidence base ([Gruenewald, 2003](#)). The papers gathered here extend and deepen that evidence base, examining how educational leadership, professional learning, and teacher preparation can be made more responsive to local context. The third theme in this Special Issue therefore explores how educational systems, leaders, and institutions build capacity within rural contexts.

In **Constantinides**' study of Scottish schools they illustrate how collaboration and partnership can strengthen educational equity and sustainability. Through case studies of rural schools, the author documents how rural leaders work with their communities and other institutions to create inclusive and locally responsive educational environments. Rather than depicting rural schools as isolated, the findings reveal schools' capacity to serve as hubs of collaboration and rural community development.

Glisson and colleagues similarly emphasize the importance of responsiveness to local needs through their examination of professional development for rural educators. Their study highlights the value of teacher-informed approaches that are grounded in local priorities and contexts. The authors demonstrate how place-responsive professional learning can strengthen both educational practice and professional community-building.

The third paper contributing to this theme examines how place-based inequities shape recruitment into initial teacher training in the Cornwall region of England; in **Ovenden-Hope**'s case study they examine how place-based inequities are shaped through transportation systems, housing markets, educational isolation, and access to professional opportunities. The study highlights the need for place-responsive policies, targeted investment, and collaborative teacher education models to address educational isolation and support equitable teacher workforce development in rural communities.

Together, these papers emphasize that educational improvement is possible when educational systems, leaders, and institutions work together to recognize local realities, build partnerships, and respond in positive ways to local, contextual needs. These contributions make a compelling case for place-informed teacher education as a systemic response to the rural teacher supply challenge.

Supporting Educational Futures for Rural Students

Research presented in this Special Issue examines how young people in rural and peripheral communities construct their educational and occupational futures, and how the local opportunity structure, which includes the range of visible role models, employment pathways, and post-school options, shapes those constructions. The interaction between place, identity, and aspiration is complex. The same community characteristics that may constrain awareness of distant opportunities may simultaneously foster a strong sense of rootedness, belonging, and purpose that supports engagement and resilience in education.

The final theme explores some of the issues faced by rural students as they consider and engage in their educational futures.

Coppens and colleagues examine the experiences of rural first-generation college students enrolled at public university in the New England region of the US as they navigate the dominant “College for All” narrative. Their findings challenge simplistic assumptions regarding students’ aspirations and definitions of success, demonstrating how rural students actively negotiate educational expectations while maintaining relationships with place, family, and community. The authors offer an important perspective by highlighting rural students’ agency, identity, and diverse understandings of educational success.

In a study by **Arroyo and colleagues** they examine how rural Latinx students from California navigate access to four-year universities in a college-going landscape shaped by both racialized and rural inequities. Findings reveal that counseling practices, limited university outreach, and assumptions about students’ futures constrained access to four-year pathways and revealed the need for more equitable advising and information-sharing in rural communities. The findings also demonstrated the important nature of rural students’ persistence, aspirations, and cultural resources that students and families mobilize in pursuit of higher education. These contributions connect the place-based analysis of school-level inequity to the broader landscape of post-compulsory education and social mobility, underscoring the systemic nature of place-based disadvantage and the systemic responses it requires.

Concluding Reflections

The central message of this Special Issue is clear. Across different countries, populations, and educational concerns, rural places, people, and their education are important. Throughout all thirteen contributions, educational experiences are shown to be deeply shaped by local contexts, histories, relationships, and geographies. Every place has strengths and assets which can be leveraged to support teachers and their students. With a clear eye recognizing limitation, the papers also reveal the importance of community knowledge, local institutions, social networks, cultural resources, and place-based identities. Whether examining teachers, leaders, students, or communities, the studies repeatedly demonstrate that educational success is rooted in connections among people and places.

Most importantly, the collection reflects a broader shift which is occurring within rural education scholarship. Collectively, the papers move beyond asking what rural communities lack and explore what they possess, contribute, and create ([Crumb et al., 2023](#); [Guenther et al., 2023](#); [Paterson et al., 2024](#)). In doing so, they offer a more balanced and hopeful understanding of the future of rural, peripheral, coastal, and geographically isolated education.

Rather than treating place as a problem to overcome, the studies gathered here invite researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to view place as a source of educational possibility. Such a perspective does not ignore inequality; rather, it recognizes that sustainable and equitable educational futures depend upon understanding both the challenges and the strengths that are embedded within local communities ([Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2026](#); [Flowers et al., 2026](#)). In this sense, the Special Issue contributes to rural education scholarship as well as to broader conversations about educational equity, community engagement, and the enduring importance of place in education.

Several directions for future inquiry emerge from the work presented here. First, there is a need for more sustained longitudinal research that tracks the educational trajectories of learners from rural, peripheral, and coastal communities over time, capturing the cumulative effects of place-based advantage and disadvantage across the life course. Second, comparative international research of the kind modeled by several contributions to this issue offers powerful opportunities to distinguish universal patterns of place-based

inequity from context-specific manifestations, thereby informing more transferable and evidence-based policy responses. Third, participatory and community-based research methodologies, which position rural and peripheral communities as co-producers of knowledge rather than objects of inquiry, represent a frontier for both methodological innovation and ethical practice in this field. Fourth, the intersection of place with other dimensions of identity and disadvantage, including race, ethnicity, indigeneity, disability, and gender, merits sustained attention; place-based inequity does not operate in isolation from these other axes of inequality, and research that attends to their intersection will produce richer and more actionable knowledge.

We are grateful to all the authors who contributed to this Special Issue, and to the reviewers whose expertise and generosity improved the work presented here. We hope that the collection serves as a resource and an invitation to researchers, educators, and policy makers to seriously consider place as a dimension of educational justice.

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