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Education and Equity in Rural China: A critical introduction for the rural education field.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to introduce issues pertinent to rural education in China to the rural education field and encourage the field to engage with scholarship on this topic. While there is a significant international body of work on the educational concerns of rural China in the comparative education literature, there is no such attention in the rural education field (outside of China, of course). A search of the two main international rural education academic journals, the Australian-based 'Australian and International Journal of Rural Education' (including its predecessor *Education in Rural Australia*), and the USA-based 'Journal of Research in Rural Education' show no articles dealing with rural education in China. A search of the EBSCO database confirms this lack of attention. Yet, the field of rural education (村教育, *Nongcun Jiaoyu*) in China is well-established and very active.

There is attention to China, including rural China, in the comparative education field. Given this circumstance, is the lack of attention to China in rural education journals significant? Pertinent to any consideration is the distinction between the various sub-fields of education and their relationships with the parent disciplines. While rural education is somewhat ambiguously placed, it draws primarily from the traditions of sociology and geography, with broader engagements with the non-education fields of rural sociology and rural geography (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015; Roberts & Downes, 2016). Comparative education, however, is more multidisciplinary (Crossley & Watson, 2011), with scholars in schools of education and various social science departments. The majority of research cited in this review draws from the more traditional discipline of sociology. Important here is that sociology, and the sociology of education, includes attention to rural status as a status marker, but does not engage critically with what "rural" means—this task is taken up more commonly in the sub-field of rural sociology.

Consequently, it may be that critical perspectives on what rurality means are not well developed in studies focused on rural education published in the comparative education literature. This appears to be the case in the example of education in rural China. In the work from the comparative education field cited in this review, the rural is not problematized as the contestable space it is considered to be in the rural education field. That is, the multidimensional nature of the rural and its socio-historical construction is not explored. This critical perspective on the concept of rurality would seem to be the value that the international rural education field can bring to the existing study of education in rural China, and potentially what engaging with the study of rural China can bring to the international field of rural education. However, it may well be that there is little engagement with the sociology of rurality in this field as the rural, and difference, is viewed as such a normalised, taken-for-granted position that it does not warrant study. In this assumption lies possibility, both to better understand the rural in China, but also to understand the social and cultural production of rural in other international contexts.

In this paper, we discuss the position of rural students and schools in the broader context of the Chinese educational system. Rural students are disadvantaged, due to both the poorer infrastructure access in rural communities, and, by many estimates, due to rural classification itself. Yet, because there has been little connection between the international study of rural education and the topic in China, little research in China has brought to bear some of the more critical theories of rurality.

Significance of the China case

Examining the rural in China provides an opportunity to investigate the processes through which rurality is marginalised in the relentless move to modernity. China provides a unique opportunity to examine the processes of rapid urbanisation and its impact on rural people and places, as well as the re-imagination of rural spaces in response to these changes. Given the currency of development and urbanization trends affecting rural China today, trends with deep implications for the people who call these areas home, work in this space can potentially have significant real world implications. The absence, for example, of a broader understanding of rurality limits the capacity for critical engagement with the embedded equity and social justice issues of valuing rural people, places and related knowledges in the Chinese context. Without critical attention to these issues, benchmarks for measuring equity by default reflect and entrench the values of the global metropole.

In China, a set of criteria dictate the official classification of areas into the categories of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’, primarily in terms of demographics and economic activity. Thus, definitions are assigned and clear-cut for school leaders and households, though they may not always keep up with economic developments, and the process by which they are determined might not have been clear-cut. Using official definitions in use in China, the 2010 census showed that China’s ‘rural’ population to account for 50.32% of the country’s total (National Bureau of Statistics 2010). Though, this needs to be tempered by an awareness of the household registration system (*hukou*) in China, where people may be ‘registered’ to a rural region while residing in an urban one.

For individuals in China, rural origins carry important implications for opportunity. Scholars have noted that in Australia, issues of class are very significant within rural communities (Pini & Mayes, 2011). In China, while there is inequality within rural areas, rurality is also an important element of class identity. Rural residency is a form of identity formalised on paper, and in government policy via an internal passport-type system—the household registration system—that impacts life chances in a direct and tangible way. In this way, the entrenchment of rural origins creates a more direct mechanism for rural origins to impact outcomes, compared to the Australian, as well as European and North American cases.

In particular, rural registration has constrained children’s abilities to move with temporary labor migrant parents, due to fears about lack of access to schools in urban settings. For this reason, huge numbers of rural parents have left children behind in hometowns, as they seek employment elsewhere (Kaifeng, 2014; Jacka, Kipnis & Sargeson, 2013). Policies have evolved over time to better fulfil China’s compulsory education commitments in the context of massive migration. Although policies in various cities have emerged to accommodate China’s mass migration from the countryside, students have had the right to an education where they are registered, especially beyond compulsory schooling, so that rural registration (*hukou*) sharply constrains the education to which one has access.

In what follows, we will outline a background to examining the rural in China, and the contemporary issues shaping rural-urban equity in China. We do so to encourage comparativist rural education scholars to engage more with education in rural China. Indeed, this edition is geared towards this outcome. We have commissioned here six papers of contemporary research into issues relating to education in rural China.

Backdrop

Beginning with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) education policy has been characterised by the contending aims of 'improvement' and 'universalisation' (Andreas, 2004), and the roll-out of educational opportunity in rural areas, compared to urban, reflected this duality of purpose (Hannum 1999). The Cultural Revolution represented the ascendancy of a revolutionary educational model, and saw massive expansions of basic education into rural areas as part of the broader agenda of eliminating class-based inequalities. The goal of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was to eradicate the class inequality by at first closure of all schools and the forced relocation of millions of urban youth to rural areas for labour, and later, opening equal education opportunities to the disadvantaged (Fu, 2005). When schools were reopened in 1968, primary education was nationally standardised as a five-year one-track system, the curriculum of which was based on principles of productive labour and class struggle (Fu, 2005). Instead of advancing those who demonstrated academic ability in examinations, those who were politically active and demonstrated allegiance to the Party and the Revolution were selected for further education (Hansen, 2012). While quality was suspect, access to primary education in rural settings was improved in the period (Hannum, 1999). College entrance examinations were not re-introduced until the late 1970s (Hansen, 2012).

At the end of this period in the late 1970s, China was a highly egalitarian socialist society, with education being offered in a relatively uniform manner. In the decades since China's turn from socialism to markets at the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, China has enjoyed rapid economic growth and dramatic poverty reduction, but an associated shift from being a highly egalitarian nation to a much more unequal one, consistent with the sentiment famously articulated in Deng Xiaoping's admonition to 'let some people get rich first' (Anon 2001). For example, using the Gini coefficient, a standardised means for measuring levels of inequality on a scale of zero to one, where zero denotes absolute equality and one signifies absolute inequality, China has become more unequal. Whether it be the more modest official figure released by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), from 0.30 in 1980, to 0.412 in 2000 and 0.474 in 2012 (Woellert & Chen, 2014), or the more extreme Peking University estimate of 0.73 in 2014 (Enuo, 2014), China is a highly unequal society. Education was viewed as a key pillar of economic modernization after the late 1970s. There was a focus on access in rural areas, and then a later focus on improving quality.

Access expansions were often rolled out in a staged manner along lines of economic development; consequently, access patterns were tied to economic inequalities. In 2003, the State Council's national working conference had for the first time a particular focus on improving access to and quality of rural education. The *Action Plan for Revitalising Education* was drafted, outlining rural-centric policies including the 'two exemptions, one subsidy' plan, which would serve to exempt financially disadvantaged students from textbook and miscellaneous fees, as well as providing subsidies for boarding (Li, 2015). Significant attempts were made to address cost barriers and provide fee-exempt schooling for rural youth around 2006 (see, for example, Wang 2006). In subsequent years policies, and government funding initiatives, have continued to target the improvement of educational outcomes in rural regions, enhance access and provide subsidies to poor rural students.

One counter-trend has emerged, however. A principle espoused in the 1986 compulsory education law was that primary schools should be close to where children lived in villages. This principle changed over time, with urbanization and fertility decline and the hollowing out of villages. Reflecting trends in many parts of the world, a wave of consolidations of primary schools began in 2001, and continued for 10 years, creating both financial and logistical obstacles for students in remote areas (Mei, Jiang, Xiang & Song, 2015). Until 2001, education was primarily funded by government appropriation and surcharges on farmers. The abolition of these surcharges was concurrent with a consolidation program that saw the merging and closure of scores of rural schools. Throughout the program, the total number of rural primary schools had

decreased by a staggering 57.78%, from 609,626 in 1998 down to 257,410 in 2010, and the number of teaching posts by 66.46%, from 199,582 in 1998 down to 66,941 in 2010 (Mei et al, 2015). Demographic factors such as low fertility, outmigration, urbanization in surrounding areas, partly driven by perceptions that urban schools are better, contributed to these changes, the results of which are complicated to assess. The consolidation program, responding to real demographic challenges, nonetheless led to a wide range of issues, including large class sizes, inconvenient and dangerous commutes for students, and increased financial burdens. New efforts are under way to focus rural primary education, in the context of scarcity, in centralized primary schools, ideally with boarding and enrichment facilities.

Current structure, access and inequality

In China today, the official school structure is pre-primary (ages 3-5), primary (ages 6-11), secondary (ages 12-17) and tertiary (ages 18-22) (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2016), with 9 years of schooling compulsory. The pre-primary gross enrolment ratio is 83.7 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2016); recent policies seek to roll out universal pre-primary education (World Bank 2018:216). The primary gross enrolment ratio is about 100 percent, the primary-to-secondary transition ratio is 97.93 percent, and the secondary gross enrolment ratio is 95.03 percent (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2016a).

However, at year nine, students sit the high school entrance examination, which determines admission to upper-secondary school (World Bank 2018:216). There is a drop-off with the transition to upper secondary: an OECD report estimates that about 64 percent of 15 to 19 year-olds were enrolled in school (OECD 2017b, 2017a). Those not making the transition to upper secondary are largely rural youth, but there has been a dramatic uptick in access to upper secondary school in recent years (Bai et al. 2019). Students who complete upper-secondary school are eligible to sit the college entrance examination, which determines college admissions (World Bank 2018:216).

While economic development has lifted many out of poverty and educational expansions reflect successes in expanding opportunities to those previously excluded, new economic inequalities in children's lives outside of school create significant challenges to the goal of providing equal opportunities for children to succeed at school (Young and Hannum 2018). Girls have been particularly vulnerable to poverty, in the past (Liu and Hannum 2017), as they marry out of families and cannot offer much future economic security to parents in dire straits, but China has seen a similar trend to other countries in girls catching up to boys in education. Rural poverty is declining, but that which persists is particularly entrenched, and the gaps between children's lives in poor rural areas and wealthier urban settings is now vast. An emerging middle class and elite—much more urban than rural—are providing educational opportunities for children outside of the school system and creating the demand for new structures within the system to serve ambitions for their own children (Young 2018; Young and Hannum 2018). Outside the realm of education, the government has adopted an ambitious, multisectoral scheme to eradicate rural poverty by 2020, with education playing an important role, and has made efforts to roll out pre-primary school, to provide school feeding programs, to provide subsidies for the poor, and to provide centralized boarding schools that can educate and supervise rural children—particularly those left behind by family migration (Hannum, Hu, and Park 2019).

Exams, curriculum, and rural and urban students

Today in China, curricular standards are set at the national level, and provincial authorities develop implementation plans which are subject to review before they can be implemented (World Bank 2018:216). Exams remain a major focus of schools and parents. Meritocratic ideals embodied in the examination-based system in China may trace roots to a Confucian philosophy that associated formal educational institutions and examinations with qualifications for highly-prized civil service jobs (Thomas and Postlethwaite 1983:3). This long-standing tradition of

competition for upward mobility through exams may have set the stage for the view that examinations are tolerated as a fair system to allocate opportunities for advancement under conditions of scarcity. Rural students face several disadvantages. Even under the very transparent and clear focus on exams, rural students could be disadvantaged by the lower teaching quality in rural areas, impacted by the shortage of well-educated teachers willing to relocate to rural areas (Yiu & Adams, 2013), and by low household socioeconomic status, which precludes a lot of extra supports and enrichment (Young and Hannum 2018).

Traditional teacher-centered, so-called “stuffing the duck” pedagogies were criticized in the early 2000s, and a move was made toward a more liberal pedagogical approach - ‘quality education’, or ‘*suzhi* education’ (Kipnis, 2011). The new curriculum reforms in 2001 sought to cement this new style of pedagogy (Sargent 2009, 2011, 2012). Some have expressed the concern that deviating from the more ‘reliable’ tradition of exam-centric education in favour of an ‘elitist’ alternative would only further disadvantage rural students (Hansen, 2012). Urbanites would be advantaged by access to better teachers, private tutors, and other educational resources, while rural students would lack this outside support in adapting to a more nebulous curriculum (Kipnis, 2012). Daniel Xiaoliang Li (2017) has argued that recent changes in the college entrance exam designed to move away from mechanical learning, and toward more creativity and expression, similarly privilege urban youth, who have access to extra-curricular experiences and enrichment.

The government has also attempted to promote vocational education (Hansen, 2012), and is now investing heavily in this sector. According to OECD estimates, in 2015, 42% of Chinese upper secondary students enrolled in vocational education (OECD 2017a:2). In principle, vocational education would provide less traditionally academically orientated individuals with an alternative means through which to attain useful skills and secure employment. The vocational system in China faces challenges in attracting students, because, similar to the situation in many countries, it is perceived as an inferior form of education (Yi et al. 2018; Hansen, 2012), and as scholars have argued, often does not necessarily provide students with relevant skills (Woronov 2016; Yi et al. 2018; Andreas, 2004) - though efforts are being directed to change this perception. One reported challenge is that, for many of those who would be attracted, in theory, to a vocational program, the increasing wages available in low-skill work are an attractive proposition (Kaifeng, 2014). Whether vocational education is a pathway to some degree of economic security, or performs a stratifying function, remains unclear, with a useful possible study being the exploration of how rural and urban students use available vocational education pathways. Tam and Jiang (2015) have argued that the urban-concentrated expansion of vocational upper secondary education makes the expanding opportunity inaccessible for most rural students but helps lower-achieving urban students remain in the “pipeline” for college.

Rural, urban and in between

Although the urban population had grown steadily from 10.6% at the establishment of the PRC in 1949 to 17.4% at the initiation of the Reform and Opening Up policies in 1976, the statistic has grown exponentially since the introduction of those policies to 52.6% in 2012 (Mu & Jia, 2014). Although some migration is associated with educational aspirations, particularly among academically able females, according to one study (Chiang, Kao & Hannum, 2012), most migrants are labourers. This phenomenon has led to two major social issues related to the education of migrant worker children: so-called ‘floating children’ and ‘left-behind children’. Like their migrant worker parents, ‘floating children’ are subject to *hukou* restrictions outside their place of registered residence. As rural *hukou* holders in urban areas, these citizens have, in the past, been unable to enjoy subsidised social services such as healthcare and education in their city of residence (Hannum, Wang & Adams, 2008). Though we note that this is a fast evolving area with new policies being introduced to address access issues and different policies in place in different cities – the effect of exclusionary policies is an important topic for future research.

Migrant schools, or floating schools, provide a more affordable private alternative to the public system for these children, but are often unlicensed, lack professional staff, poorly managed and are inadequately equipped (Mu & Jia, 2014). These schools do not receive government funding, have difficulty ensuring quality, and are frequently subject to closure. Those who do not accompany their parents, the ‘left-behind children’, often attend boarding schools in their registered township, or live with a single parent or grandparents. These boarding schools are often ill-equipped to ensure the healthy upbringing and psychological wellbeing of children (Mu et al, 2013). One Renmin University population survey found that there were approximately 22,900,000 left-behind children, most of whom were concentrated in the poorer middle-western regions. 56.4% of those surveyed resided with a single parent, while 32.3% were being raised by grandparents (Yiu & Yun, 2017). This social problem is intimately tied to the consolidation movement in rural education.

Financing of education

China’s education system began to experience a decentralisation process in the 1980s, as part of a broader financial reform (Zhao, 2009). While details are limited, and hence further research required, there has historically been some evidence of funding disparities between rural-urban and east-west in China. For instance in 2000, the education funding for affluent eastern provinces (such as Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang and Guangdong) was reported to be almost five times that of the poorer Western regions of Shaanxi, Qinghai, Gansu and Xinjiang (Cherng, Hannum & Lu, 2012). In the same year, the average Shanghai primary school student would cost an estimated ten times that of a comparable student in one of the lesser investing provinces (Hansen, 2012). These disparities are caused, in part, by a semi-decentralised funding mechanism, one in which since the 1980s the central government has mitigated its direct role in financing education. Rather, county and provincial level governments are allocated a certain amount of funding which is then accordingly invested at those levels. Central government funding is, at the most basic level, distributed according to the number of registered (ie. *hukou* holding) school age children in a specified area (Mu & Jia, 2014). For poorer areas, however, centrally allocated funding may not be sufficient to provide even the compulsory years of education, and thus has led to the closure of schools, as well as stagnated infrastructure investment (Mu & Jia, 2014). The funding in more affluent eastern provinces such as Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Guangdong, for example, was estimated to be 4.86 times that of the poorer western provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang (Cherng, Hannum & Lu, 2012). For rural areas within those provinces, the disparity is conceivably even higher.

Until 2001, education was primarily funded by government appropriation and surcharges on farmers. The abolition of these surcharges was concurrent with a consolidation program that saw the merging and closure of scores of rural schools. Throughout the program, the total number of rural primary schools had decreased by a staggering 57.78%, from 609,626 in 1998 down to 257,410 in 2010, and the number of teaching posts by 66.46%, from 199,582 in 1998 down to 66,941 in 2010 (Mei et al, 2015). Although the consolidation program was undertaken with the hope of improving efficiency, the end result is somewhat unclear and complicated by demographic functions such as low fertility outmigration, urbanization in surrounding areas, and partly driven by perceptions that urban schools are better.

Access to higher education

Although measures have been undertaken to improve access to compulsory education, such as the ‘two exemptions, one subsidy’ policy, and pledges from government including Premier Wen Jiabao’s 2006 statement regarding the abolition of all financial burdens for those enrolled in the nine compulsory years, academic prospects beyond this stage seem to differ vastly by urban-rural residence status. Before one can even sit the College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*) in attempt to gain highly competitive place in a tertiary institution, they must first take the Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination (*zhongkao*). Like universities, senior secondary schools have a

threshold for accepting students. Should a student fail to meet that threshold, they may be accepted if their parents are willing to pay a so-called 'school selection' administration fee (Xie & Postiglione, 2015).

Although the *gaokao* is sat on the same days nationally, and the examination content is relatively comparable between provinces (Jacka, Kipnis & Sargeson, (2013), equality of opportunity is limited by provincial government control over the exam and admissions. For example, in 2011, Hansen (2012) reports that of those admitted to the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing, for example, only 15% were rural senior high school graduates. In the same year, rural examinees accounted for 60% of the national cohort (Hansen, 2012). Cut-off scores and quotas are determined each year by the Ministry of Culture, but ultimately students residing in cities with greater numbers of tertiary institutions are advantaged with both lower cut-offs for local students, and also a higher concentration of local choices. There are certain preferential policies in scores and score cut-offs for members of officially-recognized ethnic minorities. However, for the most part, rural students are disadvantaged by their geographical remoteness, though new policies to increase rural student mobility are being reported.

Concluding comments

This introduction has examined the Chinese education system and its relationship to rural education in recent years. It is, necessarily, an overview of macro level policies, statistics and ethnographic data. Such an approach has been taken to illuminate how ideology, history and culture, redefine equity and quality in the Chinese context. The aim being that in doing so we will encourage more rural education researchers, particularly those from the within-nation tradition, to consider a more comparativist perspective. Such an approach, we suggest, helps us understand the social, historical and cultural production of rurality, and consequently sharpens the focus on this construction in within nation studies. China's distinct history, culture and geography make it an ideal context for such work, and for interrogating our own assumptions.

In this context aspirations towards 'equality' and the definition of 'quality' would appear to be a fluid concept for policymakers. That is to say, equality of opportunity at the basic level could be achieved nationally, hence the goal of a nine-year compulsory education system being realised, while equality of opportunity may not. Indeed much like the definition of 'rural' itself, 'equality' and 'quality' are rather vague and inconsistently used. However such confusion allows insight into the use of ideological rhetoric and its selective use of language. The concept of 'quality' is perhaps even more fluid than 'equity', given that equity can be (and has largely) been realised at a very basic level. However what such 'quality' means for rural communities, and on whose terms, remains an important avenue for rural educational research.

Overall a number of key observations about the nature of rural education in China have been explored, that rural education scholars may wish to engage with in more detail. Specifically; Interregional selective development advantages those in affluent provinces and severely disadvantages rural and migrant students; intraregional 'key-point schools' and highly inequitable allocation of funds has created a highly competitive and unequal system; the quality of education has improved overall (albeit less equally), and equity in access has been achieved at a basic level (nine years of compulsory education); there are a range of social issues stemming from the *hukou* system, including access to education, as well as the psychological wellbeing of rural/migrant children; it would seem to be the case that the goal of education differs between actual knowledge acquisition in highly developed areas, and maintenance of social harmony in more volatile areas; and finally; tertiary education remains elite, and those who take the *gaokao* in provinces with more universities are advantaged by preferential thresholds. These insights highlight the different ways that rural regions, and education in those regions, is engaged with compared to other national contexts.

The papers in this edition

The following papers that make up this edition report current cutting edge research into rural education in China. They are amongst the first to do so with an explicit focus on, and for, the rural education field. Together they provide an overview of some of the key contemporary issues of rural education in China, being undertaken by some of the key scholars in this space. The edition bring together early career, and more established, scholars from China, the United States of America and Australia working in this field.

We conceive these papers, and the issues and references they draw upon, as important guides to linking rural education researchers in the within-nation tradition with those from comparative and international education traditions. Readers will also note the breadth of methodologies engaged here, with papers ranging from ethnographic studies to detailed statistical analyses. With an eye to methodology researchers will appreciate the great potential of theories not generally engaged with in within-nation rural education, and the strength of the statistical techniques, similarly not common outside the USA tradition of within-national rural education.

In the first paper Clothey, Otkur and Morrisin explore the intersection of rurality and ethnicity, with reference to rural Uyghur students in higher education in China. Relating to the growing interest in ‘intersectionality’ this paper reinforces that rurality and ethnicity need to be considered together, as it is how the issues interrelate that insight is gained, and understanding advanced. Clothey, Otkur and Morrisin draw on policy analysis, ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews to explore the meanings created through their analysis. Notably, this work links to research on minority, first nations, and indigenous communities and education elsewhere. A final note – readers will have picked up on the use of the term ‘minority’. In the context of research in China, the convention is to refer to ‘minority’, for all groups other than the dominant ethnic majority of the Chinese nation.

Su, Harrison and Moloney continue the focus on ethnic minority students in the second paper of this issue. In this paper they explore the impacts of inland boarding school on the cultural wellbeing of students, something certainly of relevance to rural boarding school students in other countries, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia. Applying Foucault’s concept of normalisation, a concept that seems prime for adoption to research investigations of metro-centricity/metro-normativity, Su, Harrison and Moloney bring the systematic review methodology to the rural education field.

Turning the focus to minority language, with reference to the Tibetan community, Bai Yang examines policy discourse using an ethnographic case study methodology. The focus on issues of moral-cultural order through matters of language policy that will resonate with readers from other parts of the world, where in those contexts the issues may pertain first nations languages.

Returning to the importance of intersectionality, Kong & Zhang explore the intersection of gender and rurality in rural China. Their study examines maternal gender attitudes, change in maternal gender attitudes over time and the relationship between maternal gender attitudes and the subsequent achievement of boys and girls. Here we see a strong statistical methodology brought to an issue often implicated in rural education issues – that of gender stereotypes that are often perceived to be residual in many rural communities. Work of scholars such as Bryant & Pini (2011) and Lennon (2015) are notable reference points here.

Bringing issues of community decision-making and the necessity of good information on which to engage communities, Li examines school funding in rural China. In this study Li extends technologies of publicly available information on school funding used in Australia to China’s rural communities (or at least one research site) to encourage community engagement in grassroots governance. In so doing, Li sets up an interesting tension between understandings of the role of community and equity in advocating for rural communities.

Moving to a focus on the preparation of pre-services teachers, something that is particularly dominant in Australia at least (Downes & Roberts, 2018), Qin & Villarreal explore the experiences of pre-services teachers in rural schools in China. In this paper, through an impressive quantitative methodology rather than the dominant qualitative approach often applied to such studies, Qin & Villarreal investigate teachers' perceptions of how well their pre-service preparation prepared them for rural schools. This research illuminates the point that what teachers perceive to be the 'normal' in preparation is shaped by national context, as is the need for culturally responsive pedagogy.

In the final paper of this edition Lin compares the experiences of rural students in rural colleges and urban students in urban colleges. By so doing Lin highlights the unique needs of rural communities and how these communities use educational pathways. Focussed upon differences in the returns of educational investment, in the context of the new area of Business English adopted in China. Referencing longitudinal data, this research reflects a change in China's rural areas as the returns for rural students begin to equal their urban counterparts. In this paper, Li highlights the changing economic opportunities in rural regions and how these developments create opportunities for rural students, perhaps even more so than urban students. This is an insightful analysis, as the value of education to rural students and the representation of rural students in higher education are areas of major international focus.

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