



## Book Review: Azano, A. P., Biddle, C., & Eppley, K. (Eds.). (2022). *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States*. Bloomsbury Academic

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### Introduction

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States, edited by Amy Price Azano, Karen Eppley, and Catharine Biddle, is an expansive and comprehensive volume that deals with an array of topics that are important for rural educators, researchers, school leaders and policy designers. The book covers a lot of ground and draws on an impressive list of contributors.

### Reviewer Positionality

As a caveat to the comments made in this review, I acknowledge my general lack of awareness of the United States context which frames this book. I also acknowledge my identity as a White, non-Indigenous male with a history of working in Australian contexts. I feel that at times my position may have flavoured some of my commentary.

### Part I: Foundations in Rural Education

The book rightly begins with unpacking definitions of *rural*, posing the question: “*what do we mean by rural?*” (p. 54). It deals first with quantitative descriptors, which are more or less aligned with statistical geography approaches which tend to quantify rural in terms of distance, population or density (see also Roberts & Guenther, 2021). The section on *Theorizing Rurality* then considers definitions from a conceptual and sociological perspective, covering a good selection of various interpretations of rurality. As a brief introduction, Chapter 1 serves to provide the reader with a fairly expansive overview of the definitional issues associated with rurality, and encourages researchers in particular to critically examine their approach to rural education research.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to a history of rural education in the United States, focusing on how deficit thinking—“*the rural problem*” (p. 86)—emerged over two centuries. The chapter also discusses the economic rationales for rural school consolidation. There are, no doubt, other aspects of rural schooling that could have been discussed in this chapter, but it does capture important foundations that continue to frame the rural in deficit terms.

Chapter 3 picks up the themes of the two preceding chapters to discuss rural critical policy analysis. In my read of the chapter, it lacks focus on education, and perhaps that is reasonable as policies are often developed within a frame of rural deficit thinking which inevitably affects schools. The key point from the discussion that I took away was about the importance of centring “*social justice in a critical analysis of education policy*” (p. 116). The *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* regularly receives articles that report the equity and justice issues that surround rural education (Guenther et al., 2023), so it is perhaps not surprising that this also arises in the United States.

Chapter 4 discusses the corporatisation of rural schools. The author argues that “*Corporate ideology in public education has allowed neoliberalism to become public pedagogy. Neoliberal pedagogy eliminates gendered, racial, and class views and analyses of society in favor of analyzing all relations through an economic lens*” (p. 122). The chapter ultimately encourages readers to recognise the importance of critical rural education as a counter to the economic and political priorities that squash alternative and creative ways of doing rural education.

Chapter 5 examines the role that changing demographics have on rural schools and communities. One of the issues it grapples with is rural out-migration, which creates sustainability challenges for schools, as young families move out and school resources dwindle. But it also notes that the opposite can happen, and the authors use the example of unconventional oil and gas development (which might also be termed *fracking*). The authors point to the diversification of rural communities. To me, the theme of *change*, as both a problem and an opportunity, is important to consider for rural schools.

Chapter 6 addresses the topic of rural poverty and rural schools. The author frames rural poverty around theoretical constructs of spatial inequality or spatial injustice. However, the working definition of poverty relies on government metrics based primarily on income inequality, which to my mind does not capture the more relevant concept of spatial injustice. Income inequality does not necessarily reflect “*racial oppression and exclusion*” (p. 158) which I am glad the author addresses. The latter part of the chapter discusses poverty as it relates to rural schools, offering an analysis that was already covered in Chapter 2 and, to some extent, in Chapter 4. I was a little disappointed that this chapter offered only a limited critical analysis of theory and issues and drew on outdated literature to make its case.

Chapter 7 provides a justification and framework for the enhanced use of data as a tool to “*capture the complexities and integration of schools embedded within the rural communities they serve*” (p. 173). The conceptualisation of schools as an *economic force*, a *social force*, as places to *prepare democratic citizens* and to *prepare workers* provides a reasonable theoretical foundation on which to base data linkage projects. The authors then provide three case studies that broadly address these conceptualised theories. While the challenges and data tips provided are quite reasonable, I felt the chapter could have been better rounded out with a more critical critique of the use of data to tell a story. The recent work by scholars who use a *quantcrit* approach for analysis (see for example, Garcia et al., 2023), could shed new light on the apparent ‘rural problem’. The limitations of objectivity in quantitative analysis in favour of more reflexive approaches (see for example, Jamieson et al., 2023) might also be discussed. It is easy for quantitative researchers to fall into the trap of using established metrics and measures (as I think has occurred in Chapters 2 and 6) to draw conclusions about the *rural problem*, when the real problem lies elsewhere. The need for critical approaches (as suggested in Chapters 3 and 4) remains.

Australian scholar, Simone White, rounds out the discussion of topics in Part I. She highlights key themes related to place neutrality, rural place and rural standpoint. She comments on the similarities between Australia and the United States, but also notes the significant impact of colonisation on First Peoples of the continent. I am pleased she has made this point, because it does not come out in the contributions of any of the chapters in Part I.

## **Part II: Rural Schools and Communities**

Part II moves to a more specific focus on rural schools and communities. The issues raised here are relevant for rural schools anywhere, not just the United States, though the way they present themselves may of course differ from country to country.

Chapter 8 addresses the important issue of governance. The first section of the chapter is a useful explainer for how public schools in the United States are governed, with a helpful

summary of the structures and functions of governance at state and local levels. The second section provides historical policy development relating to equity, standards and accountability, to help frame two vignettes that serve to provide examples of how complex governance arrangements play out. The authors conclude that “*the politics of rural education remains an area of need for empirical research*” (p. 238). Specifically, they argue that “*further research is needed as well where rural geographies, racial inequality, and White privilege intersect with policymaking and educational governance*” (p. 239). These are, of course, contested issues that may present challenges for researchers.

Chapter 9 picks up on the discussion raised in Chapters 2 to 5 about rural school consolidation, and then moves on to the topic of charter schools. I find it interesting that the author focuses on the structures and constraints of charter schools, while hardly mentioning the merits of local community control of schools. The author concludes that “*the neoliberal intentions of charter law and characteristics of rural communities make charter schools a particularly poor fit for rural areas*” (p. 256). I also find it interesting that there is no mention of independent or private schools as an alternative to public schools.

Chapter 10 discusses rural school leadership. Much of this chapter is a literature review that provides a useful background to theoretical and pragmatic considerations for rural school leaders. The conclusion, however, does offer some direction for future research, with recommendations for a focus on asset-based perspectives, the micropolitics of rural school leadership, issues of diversity and difference, along with a focus on research conducted by principals in graduate programs.

Chapter 11 offers insights into research on teacher labour issues, with a focus on activism. The author argues that there is “*a paucity of scholarly attention to rural teacher labor issues*” (p. 295). The author raises a set of questions that could guide future research in this space. I would expect that readers from other countries would have a different set of questions, but I think the assertion of paucity in scholarship and research is valid.

Chapter 12 addresses the important topic of rural school-community partnerships, with a focus on community-aware practices. Three case studies serve to illustrate these ways of partnering. I often wonder what difference changing the order to community-school partnership would make to the discourses that shape collaborative action (see for example, Kilpatrick et al., 2020; Kilpatrick et al., 2023). I also wonder what a more positive, strengths-based framing of the raised issues would make. The use of deficit-oriented language, such as is used here—“*lack of economic opportunity, poor nutrition, poor health, family stress, and obstacles to family stability*” (p. 297)—perhaps only serves to reinforce the *rural problem* theme that comes up repeatedly in this book. This is not to suggest that problems do not exist, but that they can be framed differently by researchers so that the strengths of rural communities can come to the fore, rather than describing them as “*small, isolated, and fragile rural ecologies*” (p. 310).

Chapter 13 describes collective impact processes in rural areas, though I expect that the principles described would apply to non-rural areas too. The description of the processes and principles resonated with my own experience of collective impact processes that I have been involved with in Australia. A couple of aspects of this chapter left me wanting more. First, while the collective impact examples included rural schools, there was very little discussion about what the actual outcomes were for schools and school communities. Second, I would have liked to see some critical reflection at the end, not only about how it works, but what the challenges are—particularly in the context of rural schools.

Chapter 14 discusses post-secondary transitions and attainment. As with other chapters in this handbook, the premise for the discussion is the *rural problem*. But perhaps worse than this is the premise that the problem is the individual and the family (p. 338) before shifting blame to rural schools (p. 340) and rural geographies (p. 342). In my view, a couple of case studies that

demonstrate how rural schools and communities support students would have given a more balanced—less deficit-oriented—approach. Some discussion about the systemic issues and the policy parameters that either enhance or limit transitions and attainment would have improved this chapter.

Canadian rural education researcher, Michael Corbett, provides an international perspective on each of the chapters in this part. His commentary is nuanced and critical and picks up on what I think are some of the omissions in Part II. His concluding comment is particularly pertinent: “When our work engages critical and messy intersections of settler colonialism and the constitution and maintenance of real and imagined rural space, new, yet long overdue questions emerge” (p. 363). I think what Corbett is hinting at is that many of the questions that should be asked haven’t been asked in this set of chapters.

### **Part III: Curriculum Studies in Rural Schools**

Part III of the book is titled *Curriculum Studies in Rural Schools*. However, in reality, this part of the book deals with a range of interventions and supports in rural schools, starting with early childhood education, before covering a range of topics including rural literacies, trauma-informed approaches, mental health models and student achievement.

Chapter 15 starts by describing the landscape of rural communities, before discussing the pros and cons of rural contexts for early childhood education. Two case studies of early childhood programs, designed to support family engagement in early learning, are discussed as exemplars of the kinds of support that can be successful in rural communities. These cases are presented somewhat uncritically and do not speak to what makes them different from the same programs that are run in non-rural communities. Given the importance of place (Webb et al., 2021; Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022) in rural communities, it would have been helpful to understand how rurality expressed through place did or did not make a difference in the interventions described. Nor is there a discussion about what makes them successful or not, beyond parent reports of benefit.

Chapter 16 introduces readers to the concept of rural literacies as “*literate behaviors with the social purpose of sustaining rural communities*” (p. 388). The discussion that follows points to the ways that literacy practices contribute to rural identities, social capital, social justice, schooling, mobility and aesthetics. The idea of literacy practice creating “*rhetorical space*” (p. 394) in relation to social justice is interesting. Among all the points raised in this chapter, this concept provides a fruitful rationale for literacy as a tool for democratic and civic participation, for demanding rights, and for speaking truth to power. For people living in rural and remote communities—who might feel unheard—rhetorical space is essential.

Chapter 17 discusses trauma-informed approaches in rural education. The chapter takes a landscape approach (similar to Chapter 15), where the rural community is the site for trauma-informed practice, and the problems of rural spaces are a background to the need for trauma-informed care. As noted for Chapter 15, it would be helpful to know how trauma-informed practice is different in rural communities.

Chapter 18, which focuses on school-based mental health models, again tackles the topic from a deficit orientation, describing what the rural lacks, in terms of “*anonymity*” (p. 427), “*professional support*” (p. 425), “*opportunities for collaboration*” (p. 425), “*resources*” (p. 423), and more. A model of school-based mental health support is offered, with support from research evidence, though one might wonder what is different about this model compared to what might be offered in a non-rural school. The authors suggest: “*This model of place-conscious professional preparation for rural counselors is a key innovation to help reduce the barriers to mental health services experienced in many rural communities*” (p. 442). If this is truly innovative, one might ask what standard practice is for mental health support in other rural communities.

Chapter 19, the final chapter in Part III, discusses student achievement in rural America. The authors acknowledge the limitations associated with comparing rural and non-rural communities on the basis of standardised tests. That said, the results between rural and non-rural locales are remarkably similar, which runs counter to the argument of rural disadvantage that, in Australia at least, seems to dominate discourses of rural and remote student performance (see for example, Guenther et al., 2014). The good news then is that geography does not determine success. The not so good news presented in this chapter is that, *within* the rural, there are pockets of lower performance that appear to be related to race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Again, this mirrors data from Australia, where First Nations people living in rural remote areas record lower test scores than their non-Indigenous counterparts (see Guenther, 2015). This does not mean that these ethnic groups are inherently disadvantaged, but it does mean that the systems that are meant to support them are not doing their job properly. Unfortunately, the author has missed this possibility.

Philip Roberts rounds out Part III with a discussion from an Australian perspective. One of his first comments is: “*It immediately strikes me then that these chapters may not all fall into the curriculum studies field I know*” (p. 461). This is a fair point. Roberts also quite reasonably critiques the way that rural problems are constructed in Part III in the absence of meaningful engagement with place, knowledge and, importantly too, curriculum. While not denying the issues raised, he sees that the solutions to “*the rural problem*” (p. 461) must be accompanied with “*curriculum work*” (p. 469). Roberts also makes a very pertinent comment about rural educational outcomes:

*When one cannot see themselves in the value system of the nation, or even the dominant global knowledge system, what impact does it have on one’s sense of belonging, especially when they are forced by law to attend institutions that reinforce this each day? (p. 469)*

#### **Part IV: Identity and Equity in Rural Schools**

Part IV of the book turns to matters of identity and equity in rural schools. The topics covered are all issues of significance. I note the editor’s regret about not being able to include topics related to gender and sexuality and Asian/Pacific Island studies. I agree that these would have been valuable.

Chapter 20 explores the intersection of rural and Indigenous education. The authors encourage readers to explore the intersection using lenses of land, sovereignty and survivance as starting points. In part, the issue of *survivance* is a counter to the assimilationist intents of education generally, recognising that there has been a long history of dispossession, the taking of land. The authors acknowledge the importance of place in the discourses of rural education, but challenge this in the context of education on reservations, which they say are often stereotyped as exotic and disconnected. The need to connect rural education with culture, communities and nations within a “*place-based locale*” (p. 493) is seen as a process of resistance against the “*neoliberal defaults*” (p. 495) of education that “*embeds Indigenous cultures into the fabric of the institution and connects people through relationships*” (p. 494). In the Australian context, the discourse of rural place sits somewhat uncomfortably in remote First Nations’ contexts where *Country* offers a similar contrast.

Chapter 21 focuses on English Learners (ELs) in rural education. In Australia, we would describe such students as learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect or coming from backgrounds with Languages Other Than English. The chapter reflects the reality that the United States continues to be populated with migrants and refugees. Those that settle in rural communities may challenge the stereotypical monocultural whiteness of those places. The chapter turns to the challenges faced by ELs (for example, educational interruptions and limited first language literacy), and the challenges faced by teachers who may not be trained to work in that area. From an equity perspective, the authors argue a role for dual language programs

coupled with better preparation for teachers in these contexts. Chapter 22 addresses *African American Education in the Rural South*. Place recurs as a theme here. But this time race and geography are seen to be responsible for marginalisation, along with under-resourcing. The authors argue for contextually relevant policies and “*equitable access to high-quality teachers*” (p. 538) as potential solutions. Chapter 23 continues the theme of race as a determinant of educational equity for Latinx students in rural schools. A point of distinction from the previous chapters appears in this quote:

*The marginalization of rural Latinx youth is also perpetuated by formal and informal school policies, such as tracking and policing and surveillance related to language. Rural Latinx students are tracked into lower-proficiency courses that will not qualify them for college admissions. (p. 545)*

The response suggested by the authors is aligned to improving school climate. Several times, they refer to educator-student and family relationships as critical for student success.

Chapter 24 again picks up the theme of race, with the author examining the issue of *Whiteness in Rural Education*. The author defines whiteness in terms of “(a) colorblindness, (b) whiteness as ontological expansiveness, (c) whiteness as property, and (d) whiteness as assumed racial comfort” (p. 558). She argues for a disruption of whiteness, through the actions of educators, through the curriculum, and through research. In Australia, discussions about whiteness in rural or remote education are often met with resistance from white people themselves who resent being labelled as such or having to engage in reflexive self-examination (Macdonald et al., 2023; Schulz, 2014). The challenges of disrupting whiteness in the United States are significant for anti-racist educators and researchers, as they are in Australia—but perhaps for different reasons.

Chapter 25 moves away from race to a discussion about special education in rural schools. This is an issue that has not received much attention in rural education research in Australia (Guenther et al., 2023) and is ripe for exploration. The authors of this chapter promote *Rural Tier Systems of Adaptive Support*, which is a way of suggesting a resourcing model that takes account of student need. This is not a particularly new idea and is probably not only an issue for rural schools (Roberts & Webster, 2022), except that access to services in rural communities can be difficult.

Chapter 26 considers the *Challenges and Innovative Responses in Rural Gifted Education*—another issue that is seldom discussed in Australian rural education research literature. This is clearly set out by the authors as an important issue for rural students, partly because of access issues, and the perception that differentiated approaches for gifted students might encourage them to leave their rural community, which relates to “*concern of the effects of out-migration on rural communities*” (p. 595). The interesting contribution of this chapter, though, is in its conclusions: that a redefinition of giftedness to encompass a broad range of characteristics, rather than a narrow focus on test scores, resulted in identified gifted students outperforming a group of students who were identified through conventional measures.

An international response to the chapters in Part IV is given by Cath Gristy, who provides a European perspective on the issues raised. She points to the different definitions of *rural* and how this to some extent ameliorates the “*recalculation of emiseration so prevalent in rural education literature of the past*” (p. 616). She argues that these chapters offer stories of positive experiences of rural education, which is perhaps partly true, but the nature of research is itself defined by what problems it addresses. Clearly, Part IV does address some serious problems associated with rural education.

### Concluding Remarks

The 26 chapters and international reflections about rural education in the United States provide comprehensive commentary on a range of issues that represent challenges and opportunities for

academics, education practitioners, policy designers and implementers, and researchers. While it is comprehensive in its coverage, it is not exhaustive and gives space for further investigation and scholarship.

I think the *rural problem* is overstated in this book. The chapters are replete with examples of rural education problems, but there is little discussion or examples from thriving rural communities and thriving rural schools. Some examples of positive rural education and positive outcomes from initiatives would have balanced some of the more deficit-oriented thinking that comes through in many of the chapters.

Another area that I think could be included is the role that evaluation plays in assessing change in rural school communities. I appreciate the importance of research, which is strongly represented in the book, but I think there could have been more examples from evaluations of rural educational programs and policy, and there could have been a more specific focus on the role that evaluation plays in making improvements.

The editors and other contributors to this volume are all well-respected researchers and academics, many of whom have a strong publishing history. As such, the book demands attention from emerging scholars and academics outside the United States. One minor concern I had, though, was the dated nature of many of the references. In presenting a handbook like this, I feel that evidence of the latest research and scholarship should be presented. However, the editors have done an excellent job structuring the book and including international insights. It will be a valuable library addition for anyone working in the field of rural education.

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