



Reimagining Mobility in Rural Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Paths Forward

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Abstract

This special issue explores the complex intersections of mobility and rurality across diverse global contexts. The contributing articles by up-and-coming rural scholars reveal how mobility encompasses multifaceted social, emotional, and cognitive transitions which shape rural individuals' lived experiences and imagined futures. Collectively, this issue calls for more nuanced understandings of mobility in rural education research and policy by recognising it as intertwined with place-based assets, personal needs, and contextualised meanings. This special issue aims to foster innovative strategies promoting educational equity and sustainable development that honour the diverse contexts shaping rural lives and mobilities. Through the platforming of emerging scholars' voices across methodologies and geographies, new strategies promoting sustainable rural education are envisioned.

Keywords: *youth mobilities, rural youth, rural community, rural education, mobility, immobility*

Introduction

Mobility is often thought of as movement between places, jobs, or life stages. Yet mobility is not just about physical movement; it is a vital characteristic inherent to human activities, facilitating transitions between places and enabling social, cultural, political, and economic exchanges (Gasparovic & Prieto-Flores, 2021). In the context of education, mobility is frequently linked with 'leaving'—leaving home, leaving rural places, or leaving behind the past. However, such binary framings, like staying or leaving, rural or urban, stagnant or progressive, seldom capture the complexity and diversity of mobility (Schewel, 2020) and rural lives (Silva et al., 2021) today. As this special issue demonstrates, mobility also encompasses social, emotional, and cognitive transitions that shape how rural individuals seek meaning and imagine their futures.

With this special issue, we aim to foster a vibrant discourse on mobility in rural places, highlighting the criticality of context. It responds to ongoing calls for international and interdisciplinary engagement concerning rural mobility. Our contributing authors, most of whom are emerging scholars, take up this task across geographic, methodological, and conceptual boundaries. By bringing together diverse perspectives and platforming the voices of up-and-coming rural academics, we hope to contribute to the development of innovative strategies that promote educational equity and sustainability in rural areas.

Mobility Bias in Rural Research

This special issue aims to challenge what Schewel (2020) terms a ‘mobility bias’, that is, the tendency to treat movement as progress and link staying put with constraints and incapacity. This bias is particularly visible in research on rural education and migration, where leaving is often portrayed as a sign of aspiration and opportunity, while remaining is associated with stagnation or lack of ambition. As a result, the complex motivations and meanings attached to staying and moving in rural contexts are frequently overlooked. Mobility is neither universally valued nor equally attainable. Its meaning and value shift across social and spatial contexts, and people’s capacities to pursue or avoid it are unevenly distributed along lines of social stratification (Massey, 2013).

The problematic nature of this binary framing of mobility and immobility becomes particularly evident in discussions of rural–urban mobility across different parts of the world. In more developed countries, rural life is often associated with idleness or a place of retreat (Hillyard, 2007), while in developing contexts it is frequently presented to be deficient and a problem to be solved (Huijsmans, 2024; Zhong, 2024). These imaginaries of rural life shape how mobility is valued in different contexts.

Schewel (2020) offers a useful framework for addressing this bias by distinguishing between two forms of immobility: one is driven by structural constraints that limit individuals’ ability to move, while the other is based on preference or desire to stay. She defines immobility as “*continuity in one’s centre of gravity, or place of residence, relative to spatial and temporal frames*” (p. 329). This framework stresses that immobility, like mobility, is never absolute, but dependent on the social, spatial, and temporal contexts in which it is embedded. Therefore, choosing to remain close to one’s family or community may not reflect passivity but can be seen instead as an active expression of agency and belonging (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015).

Intersections of Mobility and Rurality

It is important to research the intersections of mobility and rurality because there are unique opportunities and challenges. In this special issue, we add to the growing body of literature that considers these intersections in a variety of international contexts. For instance, Gristy (2019) highlights the challenges faced by rural youth, particularly their reliance on longer bus journeys to school—a routine yet crucial aspect of their daily lives. Silva and colleagues (2021) offer a glimpse into the mobility patterns of youth in the rural regions of Portugal, highlighting how the decisions these youths make contribute to a larger trend of outward migration, subsequently leading to a drain of human capital in rural areas. Cuervo et al. (2019) find that the movement of teachers into Australian rural schools from elsewhere can help to build human capital, develop aspirations, and generate social capital in the Australian context. And in the Chinese context, Cheng (2019) explores how rural parents’ aspiration for children is mainly focused on rural–urban migration via education, which allows rural children to get a better chance of achieving stable, formal employment outside agriculture. Research like this offers insights into the theoretical importance of exploring education and mobility issues in rural areas, however, there remain many other unexplored dimensions. More international research in this area is needed to develop strategies that not only mitigate the challenges but also harness the potential of these mobility patterns to promote sustainable rural development.

Contributions

In this special issue, we are transported into contexts across the United States of America and China to consider various aspects of mobility. Our empirical articles dive into issues of mobility for researchers, young people, their parents, and teachers. The Rural Connections pieces focus on the lived experiences of two rural educators—one in Upstate New York and one in rural China—

that highlight unintended consequences of metrocentric policies. Finally, the issue concludes with a review of a new book set in the islands of Scotland.

Empirical Articles

Clint Whitten's autoethnographic article offers an inner journey of his rural Queer identity, combining literary analysis and self-reflection to reveal how mobility shaped his literacy development and scholarly identity. He uses literary 'earworms' as reflection points for his life, demonstrating that mobility is not limited to physical or socially constructed spaces and expectations, nor are trajectories linear. This article invites educational practitioners and researchers to recognise mobility as a pathway to opportunity but also as something deeply tied to how students understand who they are. It urges us to think more broadly and inclusively about the kinds of futures we imagine and provide support for young people whose lives are shaped by multiple layers of marginalisation.

Next, Michelle Bailey shares the narratives of two high school juniors living in rural areas of the United States of America who demonstrate the complexity of push and pull factors that influence decisions to stay or leave their community. While one student dreams of becoming an orthodontist in the city, the other hopes to have a farm in the local, rural area. Their stories show that residential and occupational aspirations are entangled with and influenced by multiple factors, including identity, lifestyle, family expectations, and sense of belonging. It is noteworthy that neither considers leaving as automatically tied to upward mobility. This article calls on educators and policymakers to consider and understand students' aspirations of mobility in more nuanced, contextually relevant ways when supporting students in transition to their post-schooling imagined futures.

Semonti Jannat and Ryan Parsons turn our attention to rural China, exploring how parental out-migration can affect educational investment in left-behind children—those who are cared for by relatives while parents temporarily leave home to work in cities. Their study employs longitudinal survey data and propensity score matching to demonstrate that while parental out-migration does not increase immediate educational expenditures, it does increase the likelihood that families begin saving for future education. This finding highlights a temporal dimension of mobility: migration expands parents' social horizons, which in turn reshape their long-term educational planning. The article makes a significant contribution to the literature on mobility by distinguishing between short-term spending and long-term aspirations; it considers how the temporary, yet limited, mobility of parents can influence their expectations for their children's future upward mobility.

Finally, Brian Cartiff, Svetlana Dmitrieva, Ruiqin Gao, Beatrice Quiroz, Alyssa Raygoza, and Angela Starrett examine factors impacting the sense of mobility of teachers living in rural areas of the United States of America, specifically why some choose to leave their schools or the profession entirely. Drawing on a state-wide survey designed on the Job Demands–Resources model, they analyse how different factors, such as job demands, policy, and personal reasons, relate to whether teachers leave the profession completely or shift to a similar role elsewhere. Importantly, they find that teachers in more remote 'rural distant' contexts weigh these factors differently than those in 'rural fringe' schools. This highlights the contextual nature of mobility considerations and challenges blanket narratives of rural teacher turnover. They close by calling for local school districts to reflect on the reasons teachers leave and to utilise community assets to bolster retention.

Rural Connections

In the first of our *Rural Connections* pieces, Holly Marcolina captures the frustration that rural constituents can feel when elected officials focus on urban conditions at the expense of rural conditions. She presents a passionate argument, outlining many of the ignored or misunderstood

practical realities of rural Upstate New York in implementing the regionally unpopular Zero-Emission School Bus Mandate. As in many places around the world, school buses are a fundamental element of student mobility. Marcolina details how this mobility is under threat by a policy that seems better suited for conditions in the metropolis of New York City than the state's extensive regional and rural areas. For example, in the extreme cold of rural New York, bus batteries cannot hold a charge long enough for some bus runs, nor is there infrastructure to charge entire fleets. For a policy that claims to be for the good of all, the city-based politicians' ignorance of the physical and economic impracticalities has caused undue challenges for rural people and places.

Our second piece is by Hanyue Zhong who presents the story of Yu, an aspiring teacher in rural China who challenges the conventional 'stay or leave' identities. Zhong unpacks how youth social and professional mobilities are influenced through complex intersections of factors such as structural constraints (in this case, the hukou registration system) and family obligations rather than simply a matter of individual aspiration. She goes on to detail factors that influence physical, everyday mobilities of rural people, calling into question the assumption that rurality is tied to immobility. Overall, Yu's story succinctly encapsulates the complexities and multiplicities of youth mobilities and prompts us to reconsider urban notions of 'successful' forms of mobility.

Book Review

Finally, we conclude with John Guenther's review of *Higher Education, Place, and Career Development* by Rosie Alexander. While Guenther and Alexander are both established rural scholars, the book itself considers issues of mobility and place as they relate to career pathways and tertiary education access for rural youth in Scottish island communities, so adding further depth to this special issue. Guenther reflects on his own experiences as he breaks down the key points of each chapter, while both authors stress the importance of recognising and responding to the nuances of place on rural youth mobility. As have so many of the contributing articles, this review and edition reject metrocentric and neoliberal framings of mobility.

Conclusion

This special issue was designed as a supportive platform for emerging scholars. Whether through quantitative modelling, narrative inquiry, or autoethnography, the articles collectively reveal how people perceive, respond to, and impact the conditions affecting mobility in their lives. As rural education research continues to expand globally, we hope this issue contributes to a growing body of work that sees rurality and mobility not as problems to be solved, but as opportunities for unending possibilities.

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