

# Voices & Perspectives from Rural Spaces: An Introduction to this Special Edition of *Thresholds in Education*

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## ***Abstract***

*We begin our introduction by locating ourselves as rural educators connecting back to our rural childhoods, then to our rural K-12 teaching experiences, and finally our higher education positions in rural spaces. Next we invite Peter Greene and Mike Rose into our discussion acknowledging that while all rural spaces are unique, they all bear the promise of public education that is often full of political tensions and contradictions. Deborah Meier and Carol Lee remind us that all our schools must be instruments for civic engagement and learning forming the democratic fibers of our society. This framing 'opens the gates' for our authors to share their stories and research findings that illuminate rural challenges and concerns, contexts and perspectives, opportunities and promise.*

**Keywords:** *challenges, democracy, promise, rural education*

As educators since our mid-twenties, we have both been lucky to have numerous experiences in both K-12 and higher education. Jim's first job out of college was as a USMC Infantry Officer, which is a unique form of education that has in many ways informed his ideas regarding teaching and learning. Both together and before we met, we've lived in rural spaces from Ionia Michigan and Kellner Wisconsin as children to Spotsylvania Virginia where we taught elementary and middle school in both Spotsylvania and Orange Counties. In 2003, we moved with our young family to rural Illinois and have been teaching and working with educators and educational leaders in many rural spaces across west-central Illinois. Many if not all teachers we have encountered not only put their students first but also know they serve the needs of their communities by teaching. Many of the teachers that have long careers in rural schools also have a deep understanding and love of their rural communities. These rural schools and communities, like so many others, are unique, diverse, and complex, and thus part of the web of our still young and fragile democracy.

As we were invited to construct this special edition call for *Thresholds in Education*, we have both been reading and reflecting on the essays in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy* edited by David Berliner and Carl Hermanns. Some of these essays helped shape the context of this call. Peter Greene, a life-long rural educator, echoes what many of us already believe, in his recent essay titled *Our Schools and our Towns Belong to Each Other*, that is

a promise of public education in the United States: that every single child will be given the chance to get as much help, as much training, as much knowledge as they can to help them

build a life. They will be given time, resources, and expert support to figure out how to become more fully themselves, to understand what it means to be fully human in the world.<sup>1</sup>

He follows this by acknowledging that we have not always fulfilled this promise. Many of us recognize that there are competing interests and biases that hinder this promise, we also recognize the need for teachers and educational leaders to disrupt and correct the injustices that continue to affect rural public schools. We can easily assume that there is not a rural space that is exempt from teachers and education leaders in positions that while the goal is to serve all kids, also hold the tension between the political and ethical challenges within their own contexts.

Mike Rose in his essay, “Reflections on the Public School and the Social Fabric,” acknowledges that in the United States, while schooling is a foundational element of our society’s structure there exists these tensions and challenges as,

there is an urban—rural divide, involving economic, cultural, and geographic differences. Deeply embedded in this conflict is pride of place, and emotional attachment to landscape in people...there is an important reminder that even in the most easily definable regions, the bluest of blue states, the reddest of red, there is complexity—that here in the heart of coal country, there are the conflicting political opinions, not infrequently held within the same person. Local schools exist within this regional social and political ecology.<sup>2</sup>

Rose reminds that many individual struggles are also broader community struggles and we all share the opportunity and responsibility to examine individual conflict as well as the social implications. As an educator who has always taken on the opportunity to champion democratic practices Deborah Meier advises us on how we can address injustice, tension and issues in education.

She reminds us “schooling for democracy guides children to discover and develop their individual passions and strengths while also enhancing their sense of belonging and responsibility to a greater society,”<sup>3</sup> this is no more true than in our rural schools and in our rural communities. Debbie concludes,

despite all, I still stand with my words written over 20 years ago and the conclusion of the *Power of Their Ideas*: “no matter how bad things seem today or what bad news may come tomorrow, what makes me hopeful is our infinite capacity for inventing the future, imagining things otherwise.”<sup>4</sup>

The reality, as Meier states, is that there are and will continue to be issues and problems but that there is hope. Hope often sustains action when issues can collectively be named and addressed.

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1. Peter Greene, “Our Schools and our Towns Belong to Each Other” in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*, eds. David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022), 62.

2. Mike Rose, “Reflections on the Public School and the Social Fabric” in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*, eds. David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022), 53.

3. Debrah Meier and Emily Gasoi, *These schools belong to you and me: Why we can't afford to abandon our public schools*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 169.

4. Meier and Gasoi, 167.

What are they and how will rural schools and communities find the capacity for inventing or reinventing their future? Getting specific, Carol Lee points out that complexity of problems our communities, nation and planet face as per curriculum challenges and unruly school board meetings to the public health concerns of a global pandemic to the facets of climate change and in the ever-changing economic woes of rural spaces. She returns to schooling and education reminding us, “The question before us: what role can public education play in preparing young people, each new generation, to interrogate these persistent conundrums into engaging in civic reasons and civic discourse, informed by the commitment to democratic values.”<sup>5</sup>

Thinking about these values and the rural spaces we have lived and taught in from West-Central Illinois, to Spotsylvania and Orange Virginia, or our childhood memories of Ionia, Michigan and Kellner Township, Wisconsin, these spaces are all different, yet an element that is in common is that they all have schools that can be ‘home places’ for the students and for their communities. These places all have stories that need to be shared and learned from because they are the fabric of our society and when we lose even one story or community, there is a tear that if left unmended leaves a gap and subsequently a less than whole community. We are honored to help share the stories and this special edition of *Thresholds in Education*.

## Overview

This special issue’s articles elaborate on the theme: contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural education. Authors were free to engage the theme discretely or simultaneously. As a whole the calls response resoundingly answers why contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural education matter. There is a long history of considering rural spaces as lacking. Rural spaces are unique unto themselves and thus can support the changes and innovations that are necessary for their sustainability. When rural places are resourced and supported, they can find ways to flex and adapt to all kinds of hardship by using assets to foster innovation and create positive narratives of community viability and sustainability. A number of the articles explore issues that rural communities face both historically and currently, yet in different nuances. Some narratives highlight growing concerns that are being encountered that shed new light on what it means to be from and a part of a rural place. Other articles introduce program and pedagogical approaches to be restudied that build on rural and small community assets and successes. These efforts on local and regional levels are leveraged to engage rural communities and improve rural educational institutions and students’ lives. In the end, this special issue is organized into three sections, rural challenges and concerns, rural context and perspectives, and rural opportunities and promise.

To begin the challenges and concerns, Jakubowski’s *Contemporary Challenges of Teaching Social Studies in Rural Settings* examines some oppositions social studies teachers face as they are subjected to ideological conflicts in the community and school settings in rural areas. Following, in *Depictions of Rural and Appalachian Culture(s)*, DeHart writes of Appalachian life and culture, where a number of problematic views persist, as do a number of counternarratives in various media through literacy practices, especially comics linked to the region. Next, Rockwood and Rouse’s study *The Costs of COVID* explores the disproportional impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on two rural neighboring Midwestern states with very different directives during the 2020-

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5. Carol D. Lee, “The Role of Public Schools in the Preparation of Young People to Engage in Civic Reasoning and Discourse” in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*, eds. David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022), 167.

2021 school year. Finally, Chikkatur's *Being in "Their House"* probes the impact on the adult facilitator in her case study of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) team in a rural Midwest high school as it speaks to the potential mutual impact in the community.

The second section, context and perspectives, opens with Fields-Smith and Baker's article *Centering the Lived Experiences* that examines the Black homeschooling movement, a phenomenon that has been largely ignored in the literature and disrupts the idea that homeschooling is a white and urban/suburban only phenomenon. Rivera's *Challenges and Opportunities for STEM Teachers* then explores the teaching experiences of two early-career math teachers working in rural schools and their decisions to teach there and leverage authentic change while suspending assumptions about what is best for rural students. Pattison-Meek's *Teaching for Understanding of Social Diversity* highlights the impact a high school Civics teacher can have on citizenship in his rural community threatened by urbanization. Lastly, Rogers, Rogers, and Miller's *Raising Rural Voices* addresses the challenges and opportunities in rural Alabama schools from the perspectives of teachers, as well as, the impacts of policy and community partnerships.

Our final third section offers opportunities and promise beginning with Arce-Trigatti, Haynes, and Kelley's *Rooted in Appalachia* counters common deficit views of Appalachian people with an alternative lens focused on place-based pedagogies and funds of knowledge. Baronak and Baronak's *Honoring the Power of Place* explores the layers of challenges facing rural spaces ranging from diminishing childcare options, teacher recruitment, and mounting teacher shortages, yet apprenticeship programs and place-based approaches hold promise. Additionally, Watson, McBride, and Singh's *The Everyday Work* explores the role community college STEM faculty play for their students and communities as they describe the rich characteristics of the space and the unique challenges and opportunities found there. While closing out this special issue, Goss's *Culture Shifts* article asks what would it take to make rural school irresistible to students? Their answers explore the impact one school district's innovative directional system had on staff culture and students' experiences in school.

As the editors of this special issue we are honored to present these articles to our wider audience as rural spaces are filled with challenges and concerns, context and perspectives, and opportunities and promise; all that is rural.