

## Book Review

Williams, S. M., & Grooms, A. A. (Eds.) (2015). *Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts: The Politics of Place*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.

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Within the complex field of education policy, rural schools and communities are all too often left out of the primary discourse. Education initiatives, policies, and funding systems are typically designed for the majority - suburban or urban communities - and lack necessary modifications to best meet the needs and priorities of rural education systems (e.g., Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Johnson and Zoellner note, "It is important to point out that policymakers often do not intend harm to rural schools; it is their ignorance of the unique assets and challenges of rural schools and communities that results in the unintended and often harmful policy outcomes," (2016, p. 6). This ignorance is not solely attributable to inattentive policymakers, however. Research on rural education policy has not kept up with current political demands; over the past ten years, fewer than a dozen U.S. policy-specific pieces have been published in the *Journal for Research on Rural Education*.

It was therefore with great interest that I started reading the new edited volume on rural education policy: *Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts: The Politics of Place*. Edited by Sheneka Williams, an associate professor at University of Georgia, and Ain Grooms, a policy analyst with the Southern Regional Educational Board, the book focuses on rural educational policies and local contexts, thereby addressing a significant gap in contemporary scholarship. The editors explain "chapters in this volume offer insight into both micro- and macro-level policies and practices that shape educational opportunities for students in rural schools and districts. As such, chapters in this volume investigate the "now" of educational opportunity for rural students and makes recommendations and suggestions for "later"," (Williams & Grooms, p. viii). Framed thusly, the edited volume provides a foundation in rural education

policy from which current and emerging scholars can build upon to move the field forward.

*Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts* is divided into two sections: the macro implications of state and federal policies on rural schools, and the micro implications of local policy and practice in rural schools. The topics within each section encompass a compelling range of policy issues of rural school equity, including school funding, teacher staffing, school choice and charter schools, early childhood education, broadband access, and the implications of globalization for local instruction. While the chapters include a diverse array of methodological and theoretical perspectives, they are linked by a shared critical assessment of the relationship between federal, state, and/or local education policies and their implications for equity in rural schools and communities.

Chapters are also unified in their pragmatic assessment of the assets and challenges in rural communities, presenting the complicated realities of rural education without falling into advocacy or deficit perspectives. For example, the chapter "A New Narrative in Rural Education," by Kotok, Kryst, and Hagedorn, provides a sharp and balanced analysis of a rural community in Pennsylvania. The authors examine the school- and community-based educational practices in a natural gas extraction community that have engendered positive outcomes for school stability, student achievement outcomes, and student return rates. Framing their research to contrast former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's call for the creation of a "New Narrative of Rural Education," (p. 107), Kotok and colleagues contradict Duncan's call for change and illustrate the effective practices already in place in this rural community.

Several chapters also stand out for their exceptional methodological and policy work, thereby elucidating high quality rural education research. Johnson and Zoellner's chapter, "School Funding and Rural Districts," provides a comprehensive overview of the diversity of rural districts and a detailed discussion of how federal and state fiscal policies potentially undermine rural school funding. Johnson and Zoellner's succinct overview of the key issues of rural school funding would be an excellent addition to

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rural education or policy syllabi. The quantitative analysis by Sipple and Yao, “The Unequal Impact of the Great recession on the Instructional Capacity of Schools,” is an accessible discussion of finance law in rural education. The authors use multivariate regression analysis to examine variations across states in school staffing patterns by locale. The chapter is useful in understanding the nuances and variability of federal and state policies on individual locales. It also provides an exceptional articulation of locale-specific research (Coladarci, 2007), and would be a strong example for researchers and faculty developing effective methods of rural policy analysis.

Although the majority of work in *Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts* is methodologically strong, the policy analysis presented in the book is somewhat uneven. For example, several chapters address the implications of the highly-qualified teacher provision of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), yet none reference the 2004 rural flexibility provision that changed these requirements for rural teachers (Eppley, 2009; U.S. DOE, 2004). Likewise, despite the relevance for studies in the book, there was neither a discussion of Race to the Top’s role in rural education policy for states, LEAs, and early childhood education (McNeil, 2014; U.S. DOE, 2013), nor was there mention of the 2002 changes to Title 1 that reduced funding for rural communities (Rural Schools and Community Trust, 2007). While it would be unrealistic to include all contemporary U.S. education policies in the text, it is a significant oversight not to ensure the inclusion of these major federal policies given their relevance to multiple chapters in the book. The edited volume would also benefit from the inclusion of an epilogue to synthesize the overarching themes for readers.

Overall, the scholarship included in the book provides comprehensive analysis of contemporary federal, state, and/or local education policies as related to rural communities. Yet even the missteps in policy articulation and analysis reinforce the value of *Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts*. Rural education policies are under-researched, as the editors note in their introduction. By collecting both established and emerging scholars in one edited volume, this book is a critical first step to develop a foundation of contemporary rural education policy research. The chapters shed new light on established rural education issues such as school choice, finance laws, and early childhood education, while also opening new avenues for research from which future scholars can build and expand with contemporary policy research.

Ultimately, *Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts* is a valuable resource for faculty seeking for contemporary readings to supplement coursework on education policy, rural education, school finance, place-based learning, and educational leadership in rural settings. The text should also

be in the hands of any new scholar interested in researching rural education policy, as the chapters are likely to inspire new work.

Williams and Grooms’ edited volume, *Educational Opportunity in Rural Contexts* is the start of a new conversation in contemporary rural education and policy research. It is up to the scholars who read and follow to continue their work, ensuring rural schools and communities are fully represented in policy research and practice for decades to come.

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