Place-Sustaining Education in Rural Areas: Book Review

Johnson, J. D., & Harmon, H. L. (Eds.). (2025). *Handbook on rural and remote education*. Edward Elgar.

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The *Handbook on Rural and Remote Education*, edited by Jerry D. Johnson and Hobart L. Harmon, represents a landmark contribution to international research in rural education. Published at a time of heightened global awareness of the importance of innovative, equitable, and locally grounded education in rural areas (United Nations [UN], 2023; White & Downey, 2021), the handbook delivers more than a collection of 32 chapters authored by 58 scholars from over 20 countries. It advances a cohesive call to action: moving toward *place-sustaining education* in rural areas across the globe. Although the concept of place-sustaining education is not explicitly foregrounded in the handbook, it functions as a powerful conceptual lens for understanding the handbook's significance, illuminating how it centers the strengths of rural people and places in educational practice, policy, and research, and how it advances a transformative vision of rural education as a means of sustaining communities, cultures, and ecologies.

Place-sustaining education views local context not merely as learning content, but as a foundation for empowering individuals and communities to sustain the cultural, ecological, and economic vitality of the places they call home—whether they stay, leave, or return. In Chapter 12, Lowery and Villalba argue that "Education is not for *the other* or *the outside*—it is *for* and *of* the place in which they live" (p. 182). First introduced by Howley (2013) as a vision for education that resists the neoliberal erasure of rural life, place-sustaining education calls for educational approaches that not only draw from rural communities and environments but actively work to sustain them. It intersects with place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), and rural education for community development (Lyson, 2002; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014), while reframing education as a catalyst for actively sustaining and revitalizing local communities and environments. Place-sustaining education challenges educators to prepare rural students not only for success beyond their communities, but also to envision and cocreate livable futures in the places they call home (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2024).

The handbook is structured in six thematic parts—learning and teaching, leadership, education and rural development, innovation, equity and diversity, and future research agendas—which collectively provide a panoramic view of rural education across multiple geographies and systems. As described by the editors (Chapter 1), these six parts represent a deliberate effort to bring together international expertise on critical issues in rural education while responding to global appeals—such as the 2022 UN's Transforming Education Summit—for inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all, including those in rural communities (UN, 2023). The countries represented span those with the largest rural populations globally, such as India, China, and the United States, as well as those with the highest proportion of rural residents, such as Nepal, Ethiopia, and Cambodia. Across the handbook's 32 chapters, place-sustaining education emerges as a common underlying theme, anchoring diverse contributions from across the world in a collective dedication to the sustainability and vitality of local communities and ecosystems in rural areas.

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Themes Advancing Place-Sustaining Education in Rural Areas

Education *of* and *for* Place

Across the handbook, numerous chapters illustrate how rural education must be tied to local knowledge; community life; and cultural, economic, and ecological sustainability. In Chapter 2, Autti and Hyry-Beihammer describe how rural teachers in Finland reinterpret a national curriculum to support students' identity and their sense of place and belonging in local communities. Similarly, Gautam and Lowery (Chapter 5) explore rural Nepalese schools that cultivate a strong sense of place to nurture creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving in their students. Lowery and Villalba (Chapter 12) examine place-conscious education in remote Misiones, Argentina, showing how local schools preserve, sustain, transmit, and strengthen the culture in local communities through long-standing, contextually rooted educational practices. Collectively, these chapters demonstrate how place-sustaining educational approaches help students not only to feel seen but also to become contributors to their communities' future.

Place-Sustaining Educational Leadership

The handbook reaffirms that effective school leadership in rural areas is place based and committed to the sustainability and vitality of local communities. In Chapter 8, Taole and Mukhathi document how South African principals in multigrade schools practice Ubuntu leadership—with an emphasis on interconnectedness, common humanity, respect, and appreciation of shared values—that sustains rural schools as sites of community care. Building upon the "Dare to Lead" school leadership model, Davies (Chapter 11) argues that principals' leadership of Indigenous education in Australia's rural schools should prioritize culturally respectful relationships, value Indigenous culture, support holistic student well-being, and sustain practices that build social capital within the school and between school and community. Rahimi and colleagues (Chapter 13) present longitudinal evidence that rural school leaders in Australia face unique stressors tied to geographic isolation and limited support—factors that threaten their ability to sustain themselves and their communities over time. Taken together, these chapters advance the idea that rural school leadership is not only about organizational effectiveness, but also about sustaining the human and cultural aspects of place.

Schools as Drivers of Rural Sustainability

The handbook illustrates that schools in rural communities are more than educational institutions. They serve as drivers of rural sustainability, actively preserving cultural heritage, supporting economic development, and fostering community resilience. In Chapter 16, Cui highlights China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, where schools are positioned as key to reversing outmigration and economic decline through targeted investments in vocational education and talent development in rural areas. Mikelić Preradović and associates (Chapter 18) describe service-learning initiatives in Croatia that develop work-related and digital skills of rural students and adults to address community digital needs and support rural development in a complex technological environment. Tomaszewska and Yelich Biniecki (Chapter 20) examine how lifelong learning institutions like the Universities of the Third Age (UTAs) in Poland empower elderly people in rural areas to remain intellectually and socially engaged, reinforcing the role of schools as inclusive and intergenerational community institutions. Across these contexts, the handbook demonstrates that when rural schools align with local values and community priorities, they become anchors of rural vitality, sustaining people, place, and possibility across generations.

Identity, Equity, and Justice in Place-Sustaining Education

Several chapters in the handbook explore how place, identity, equity, and justice are entangled in the lived experiences of rural students, families, and educators. In Chapter 24, Cuervo argues that achieving educational justice in rural contexts requires addressing both distributive justice, which ensures access to resources and opportunities, and recognition justice, which affirms the diverse identities, experiences, and cultures of rural communities. Beach and Öhrn (Chapter 27) explore how rural schools in Sweden navigate tensions between cultural domination and community empowerment, demonstrating how rural education can simultaneously reproduce and interrupt inequality. In Chapter 29, Azano and coauthors articulate a prospective research agenda that centers spatial equity and justice. Their call is clear: Sustaining rural places means confronting historical exclusions and building educational systems that affirm diverse individuals in rural communities—not despite their identities, but through them. These chapters collectively advance the idea that place-sustaining education also must be identity-, equity-, and justice-sustaining education in rural areas.

Scholarly Contributions and Areas for Further Exploration

Even without explicitly naming and articulating place-sustaining education, the handbook advances its core tenets by showing how schools, educators, and communities sustain cultural heritage, civic identity, and environmental stewardship through education in rural areas. It builds on the long-standing belief among rural education scholars and practitioners that rural education is not a problem to be fixed, but a vital site of knowledge, agency, and community sustainability. Across the handbook, several key concepts associated with place-sustaining education, including place-based teaching and learning (Chapters 2, 4–6, and 12), community development and sustainability (Chapters 10–11, 16, and 18–21), and spatial equity and justice (Chapters 24–29), are operationalized within diverse geopolitical and cultural contexts. From Argentina to Australia, Cambodia to Croatia and Canada, the chapters collectively provide rich, localized accounts that counter urban-centric and urban-normative narratives while reaffirming the potential and promise of rural education.

Methodologically, the handbook showcases a multifaceted range of inquiry approaches in rural education research. Several chapters present empirical research findings using various qualitative, quantitative, and multi-methods study designs, including interpretivist paradigm (Chapter 8), longitudinal survey (Chapter 13), service-learning action research (Chapter 18), participatory action research (Chapter 21), ethnographic meta-synthesis (Chapter 27), and survey with case studies (Chapter 30). Many chapters model collaborative, participatory, and action-oriented research, with rural community members engaged as co-constructors of knowledge rather than subjects of study. These approaches embody the handbook's dedication to place-sustaining, community-engaged inquiry that illuminates the lived experiences of rural students, educators, and communities across diverse global settings.

While the handbook is conceptually rich and methodologically diverse, it leaves some areas open for further exploration. Most notably, the perspectives and lived experiences of rural youth are underrepresented, even as their educational pathways and decisions about whether to stay, leave, or return are central to the long-term sustainability of rural communities (e.g., Mills et al., 2021; Petrin et al., 2014; Saw & Agger, 2021). While the handbook offers rich insights into the roles of school leaders and teachers, it gives comparatively less attention to other key educators, such as counselors, parents, and community elders, who play essential roles in rural and Indigenous education ecosystems (Anazia et al., 2025; Makalela, 2018; Nelson, 2016). Though some chapters discuss collaboration among educators and educational organizations, the volume underexplores cross-sector partnerships, such as those involving postsecondary institutions and industry employers, that are crucial for building and sustaining rural education and workforce development ecosystems (Hartman & Klein, 2023; NASEM, 2024; Saw & Culbertson, 2025). In addition, although several chapters touch on ecological topics, the handbook could engage more deeply with environmental education, especially environmental justice education, given rural communities' disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards and climate change impacts (Eppley, 2017; Guthman et al., 2022). These limitations underscore, rather than undermine, the handbook's significance by highlighting the expansive scope and complexity of rural education.

The handbook extends and globalizes contemporary rural education research by offering new conceptual and comparative breadth. It complements earlier field-defining works such as *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* (Azano et al., 2021), which advanced U.S.-focused conversations around place-based education, and diversity and equity in rural education. Whereas the Bloomsbury volume focuses on rural education in the United States, the handbook brings together contributions from more than 20 countries across six continents, illuminating shared vision and common challenges while emphasizing locally grounded strategies for sustaining rural life through education. The handbook continues the social justice commitments of *Dynamics of Social Class, Race, and Place in Rural Education* (Howley et al., 2014) with a more explicitly transnational perspective. It also extends *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World* (Schafft & Jackson, 2010) and *Rural Education Across the World* (White & Downey, 2021) through a more critically engaged and theoretically grounded exploration of rural education as a vehicle for advancing justice and sustaining rural communities.

Recommendations

The handbook is an essential and comprehensive resource for scholars, educators, community leaders, and policymakers who are committed to developing and sustaining rural communities through education. For researchers, the handbook provides a diverse collection of international case studies and conceptual frameworks that advance theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding and studying various rural education phenomena (e.g., Chapters 4, 26, and 32). Teachers and teacher educators will find chapters on curriculum and instruction (e.g., Chapters 2 and 7) and professional learning and collaboration (e.g., Chapters 6 and 21) especially valuable for programs and practices that aim to prepare and

support educators as stewards of place through teaching in rural communities. Rural school leaders and practitioners will find their realities reflected in the handbook's rich accounts of relational leadership, geographical and professional isolation, and meaningful school-community partnerships. The volume offers promising models and practices of how rural school leadership can employ a place-sustaining approach, grounded in relational trust, cultural relevance, and commitment to local communities (e.g., Chapters 8–9 and 11–12).

At the system level, several chapters in the handbook address policy reforms, cross-organization collaborations, and technological investments (e.g., Chapters 14, 16, and 22) and illustrate how governmental and nongovernmental educational institutions can innovate and facilitate efforts to sustain and revitalize rural education. The handbook also holds value for undergraduate and graduate seminars, professional learning workshops, and cross-sector partnership dialogues that seek to frame and promote education as a driver of rural development and sustainability. In sum, the handbook not only is an important academic text; it is a practical reference for individuals and organizations dedicated to improving and sustaining rural schools and communities.

Conclusion

Viewed through a place-sustaining education lens, the handbook reimagines rural schools as vital anchors of community life, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship. It foregrounds how rural education can support community development and sustainability, not only by addressing structural inequities, but by deepening relationships among people, place, and learning, while honoring the unique knowledge systems, histories, and aspirations of rural communities themselves. By presenting global perspectives grounded in local contexts, the handbook offers a more hopeful and justice-oriented vision of rural education—one that affirms rurality as a source of strength and innovation, and positions education as a catalyst for sustaining communities, cultivating belonging, and advancing equity in rural areas. As a whole, the handbook serves both as a milestone in rural education scholarship and as a catalyst for future work at the intersection of education, equity, and rural sustainability.

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