

Introduction to Special Issue

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Why study the achievement of rural students? After all, so many educators—and some educational researchers as well—regard the whole business of giving, sweating over, and probing the results of standardized tests as problematic. First, many of us feel that the tests fail to measure the really good things that we've been up to. Second, some of us believe that the tests are irremediably prejudiced against people of color and the poor. Third, others believe that the pervasive use of "high-stakes" testing narrows the de facto curriculum only to what is on the test and may smother teachers' creativity and wisdom. Finally, still others (and at least one of the editors is among this group) believe that using the tests in "accountability" schemes to compare states, districts, schools, and teachers works principally to propagate envy, and its partner sin, greed.

What good, indeed, is student achievement thus viewed? It's a funny question for the two of us to ask, because we also believe that when it comes to schooling, student achievement is among the very greatest of goods. We think everyone should be able to read, write, and calculate. We think that schools, as matters stand and as they are likely to stand for decades to come, are the institutions to do this. Alas, despite generations of school improvement effort (and our sincere hopes), it has not come to pass. Too many students, too many educators, and too many educational researchers cannot themselves do these things. The fault is not in our genes, or stars, but, precisely, in the things on which society generally, and the most influential institutions of society in particular, place value. As Berliner and Biddle (1995) suggest, our schools are not so bad; they have just never been all that good. We must not *need* them to be very good, which, if you come to think of it, is a strange thing to say.

Rather than point out that greed and envy make us as we are, other critics and pundits take great pains to blame someone—anyone—for the apparent lack. Predictably, the well-worn path takes them to the victims, again: students, families, communities. And this is just where the rural theme comes in. Who are the most stupid and backward people in America? In 20th century mythology, the century that witnessed the demise of farming as the most popular occupational choice, the most stupid people were farmers. Farming

was the quintessential rural occupation until mid-century, and in many ways it still is, except that so many farmers have necessarily become mere hobbyists. Their stupidity (a stupidity toward which both of us tend) is, of course, boundless.

But the mythological principle remains the same: Rural people are necessarily lesser, more backward, and decidedly uncultured people. Rural, as Williams (1973) observed, stands for the past, and only the metropolis seemingly has a future. We say "seemingly" because doubts about the healthiness of that future have begun to crop up. Orr (1996) bases his call to "re-ruralize" education on the view that the metropolitan-cosmopolitan future is distinctly clouded. And science fiction writers tend to show cosmopolitan futures whose disturbing qualities stem principally from their continuity with the supposedly superior cosmopolitan present.

Rural people in our experience, however, are not lesser or more backward than other Americans. Increasingly they are not uncultured, but de-cultured, as Berry (1978/1990) has for so very long explained. If you, like us, believe that rural existence has a future, and that rural people are no less than the equal of cosmopolites, then you will understand the importance of rural student achievement. If you go further, and see with Williams that rural places are sites for the contest of wealth and justice, and that rural and urban places make one another, then you will also see why it is important for rural students to engage that contest with all their wits about them. If you go still further and believe with Orr and Berry that the cosmopolitan world is so unlovely and so troubled that it is already foundering, then you will see that rural achievements (not only student ones) must invent a more lovely and less troubled alternative future. Such an invention will require much more than superlative proficiency in basic skills, but it will at least require that.

The articles in this special issue of *JRRE* begin the work that is needed by throwing light on some critical issues. Patty Kannapel and her colleagues confront the dilemma of educational reform, with the loudest voice in the 1980s and 1990s coming from state legislatures, assisted by the various SEA choruses. Kannapel et al. conclude that local circumstances determine the success or failure of state intentions, and they accept the benignity of such intentions. Toni Haas offers a rejoinder, to which Kannapel et al. have replied. Robbie Pittman and his colleagues take on the eco-

conomic chicken and educational egg, concluding that the chicken must precede the egg. Their work suggests another perspective on rural educational reform: In rural areas, the success of SEA intentions may be sharply limited by lousy economies. Though the Kannapel and Pittman articles both embrace the importance of local conditions, they differ on the benignity of the conditions of policy making. The Pittman team is skeptical; the Kannapel team takes extant policy as a given.

Fan and Chen present what we hope will be the final (temporarily final, anyhow) comparison of the achievement of rural, suburban, and urban students. That is, as rural educational researchers have long suspected, once SES is taken into account, achievement differences by locale disappear. In global terms, where you live doesn't make that much difference on how well you achieve. This is good news: Despite the fact that the best and brightest have been leaving rural America for two centuries, the home guard is still keeping up appearances. Either this finding is somehow miraculous or some of our (or their) most cherished assumptions are dead wrong.

Mary Hughes' study shows something else altogether. As states and districts mark outlying rural schools for closure, and then subsequently close them, something peculiar overcomes these outlying schools. The schools become, as it were, *personae non gratis*. Central offices intentionally ignore, berate, punish, and starve them. Such schools become, by reputation, bad schools. But whether they are bad, mediocre, or good schools, they will suffer if slated for closure. A successful management and propaganda plan often (at least according to anecdotal evidence) makes ultimate closure less contentious. Whether such forces are at work in the schools on which Hughes reports, we don't know. She does show that staffing stability and central office support are apparently sufficient to improve service to very poor kids.

Finally, we present the Rural Challenge Policy Program's summary statement on standards. The point of that statement should be well taken, especially in view of the Kannapel and Pittman articles: Standards might have a better chance of exerting influence if those who create them must also actually apply them. Clearly, distant state legislatures, and even energetic SEAs, will have trouble with such a mission. The rural dilemma of systemic reform might be phrased as a question: "Whose system is this, anyhow?"

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We have enjoyed this privileged assignment, and we hope that it serves to advance the conversation about rural student achievement.

References

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