

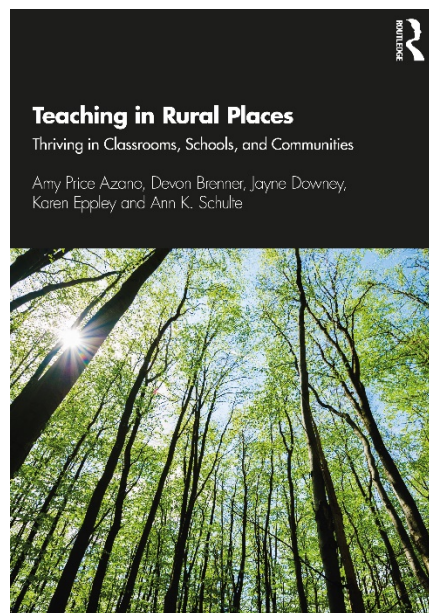
## Book Review: *Teaching in Rural Places: Thriving in Classrooms, Schools, and Communities*

Jesse Longhurst, Southern Oregon University

**Book Reviewed:** *Teaching in Rural Places: Thriving in Classrooms, Schools, and Communities*, by Amy Price Azano, Devon Brenner, Jayne Downey, Karen Eppley, and Ann K. Schulte: New York, NY: Routledge, 2021. ISBN: 9780367376383. 292 pages.

**Keywords:** rural education, rural students, schools and communities

Teacher education and teacher induction programs often encourage their participants to read one of the many books designed to provide novice educators with a foundation for their future work. The genre grows every year and many such texts are excellent. Despite the widespread popularity of such books, however, there have been no such guidebooks written specifically for new teachers in rural schools. 9.3 million students attend rural schools in the United States (Showalter, et al, 2019) and yet, as rural education scholars have pointed out, rural education is both underrepresented and unevenly represented in the research literature (Sherwood, 2000; Thier & Beach, 2019; Their et al, 2021). In my work as a teacher educator, I have observed that rural education is similarly underrepresented in practice-focused work designed for new teachers.



*Teaching in Rural Places: Thriving in Classrooms, Schools and Communities* (2021) fills that important gap. It is that rare text that serves as a primer, as a philosophical framework and practical guide all in one.

Amy Price Azano, Devon Brenner, Jayne Downey, Karen Eppley and Ann K. Schulte have all taught in rural schools, worked extensively with rural teachers and are well-respected scholars in the field of rural education. In addition to their work in rural teacher preparation, policy, literacy, equity, and literacy, they serve on the editorial boards of the field's flagship journals and in leadership roles in the rural education research community. <sup>1</sup>Their commitment to and affection for rural people and rural places is evident in this book, as is their commitment to moving rural education toward the goals of justice and equity.

<sup>1</sup> Copyright (©2021) From *Teaching in Rural Places: Thriving in Classrooms, Schools, and Communities* by Amy Price Azano, Devon Brenner,

Jayne Downey, Karen Eppley, and Ann K. Schulte. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc.

The book is built around two philosophical pillars. The first is that of social justice in rural places and how the work of rural teachers can help to dismantle “spatial barriers to economic, social and political justice” (Preface). The second is that rural teachers can and must develop the skills and cultivate the connections to thrive in their classrooms, their schools and in their rural communities. In order to do so, the authors ask new rural teachers to be critical explorers of place, of place histories and of policy and to work toward deep understanding of and full engagement with the communities in which they work. The authors employ David Greenwood’s (2013) framework of a critical pedagogy of place as a lens to examine and situate the work of teachers in rural places.

Media interest in rural America waxes and wanes. Recent attention to rural voters in the most recent presidential election and to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural communities has brought rural issues into the national spotlight. Unfortunately, as the authors describe in the text, rural is often equated with deficit perspectives. Stereotypes and essentializations of rural people are all too common. This book asks readers to examine their own understanding of what it means to be rural and to approach their teaching work with curiosity and humility.

The first portion of the book is devoted to setting the stage for teaching in rural contexts. The authors take the position that “education in rural schools is a project of social justice” (p.25) and use Nancy Fraser’s (2005; 2009) framework that includes *cultural justice*, *economic justice*, and *political justice*. They then dive into the question of what makes a place rural and why place matters. The remaining three sections of the book focus on rural communities, rural schools, and rural classrooms. In discussing community, the authors unpack topics such as partnering with rural families and getting to know rural communities through a “rural community walk”. This is followed by discussion of policy as it applies to rural schools and navigating trauma in a rural context. The authors then take up topics such as technology in rural schools, teaching students with disabilities and the importance of inquiry in rural classrooms. The final chapter ties all of these threads together by asking readers to engage in

deep reflection about their sense of purpose as rural educators—their motivations for teaching rurally, their notions about rurality and the role of place in their own backgrounds and in their teaching.

The book is ambitious and covers a great deal of ground. As a result, some of the sections both swiftly introduce the basics of a concept or topic and then examine it through a rural lens. This can, at times, feel a little rushed. The authors could have assumed that their readers would come to the text with a basic understanding of some topics (i.e. classroom technology or the fundamentals of disability law) and then been able to devote more attention to the rural-specific aspects of those concepts or topics.

It is a book that is accessible, thought-provoking, and practical all at once. One element of the text that I found particularly helpful were the discussion and activity suggestions. These concrete suggestions encourage readers to operationalize and deepen their understanding of the concepts in the chapters. Preservice teachers sometimes complain that their teaching programs are too theoretical. This book provides grounding in important theoretical concepts and historical context while also including a wealth of pragmatic, useful suggestions for practice. It is written in a warm and personal voice and includes many real-world examples that help ground concepts in practice and in the day-to-day realities of teaching.

While the authors do not specifically reference the notion of an ethic of care (Noddings, 1984; 2005), this is a deeply caring book. The text is an example of both Noddings’s “caring for” and “caring about” rural students and rural communities. The authors are careful neither idealize nor demonize rural places. Rather, they ask readers to enter into a sense of relational, critical care with the rural communities in which they will work so that they can thrive as rural teachers.

There is a long history of rural Americans being overlooked, stereotyped, and discriminated against by those in positions of power and those who live in urban or suburban communities. While the intended readers of this book are, of course, rural teachers, ultimately, this book would be a valuable read for

any new teacher, not just for those working and living in rural places.

### References

- Fraser, N. (2005). Reframing global justice. *New Left Review*, 36(36), 69-88.
- Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world*. Columbia University Press.
- Greenwood, D.A. (2013). A critical theory of place-conscious education. In R.B. Stevenson, M. Brody, J. Dillon, & A.E.J. Wals (Eds.), *International handbook of research into environmental education* (pp.930100). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203813331.ch9>
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. 2nd ed. Teachers College Press.
- Sherwood, T. (2000). Where has all the "rural" gone? Rural education research and current federal reform. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 16(3), 159-167.  
[https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/16-3\\_1.pdf](https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/16-3_1.pdf)
- Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now*. Rural School and Community Trust. <http://www.ruraledu.org/>
- Thier, M., & Beach, P. (2019). Stories we don't tell: Research's limited accounting of rural schools. *School Leadership Review*, 14(2), Article 5.  
<https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol14/iss2/5>
- Thier, M., Longhurst, J. M., Grant, P. D., & Hocking, J. E. (2021). Research deserts: A systematic mapping review of U.S. rural education definitions and geographies. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 37(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3702>

### About the Author

**Jesse Longhurst**, PhD, is Associate Professor of Education at Southern Oregon University in Ashland Oregon. She has a BA in theater (1997) from Lewis and Clark College, an MA in education (1999) from Southern Oregon University. She has a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from New Mexico State University (2014). She is a scholar of rural education and teacher education with a particular interest in rural, remote, and island schools, and their communities.