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## Book Review Rural Education in America: What Works for Our Students, Teachers, and Communities


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## Book Review Rural Education in America: What Works for Our Students, Teachers, and Communities

### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements: Utah State University campuses and centers reside and operate on the territories of the eight tribes of Utah, who have been living, working, and residing on this land from time immemorial. These tribes are the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Indians, Navajo Nation, Ute Indian Tribe, Northwestern Band of Shoshone, Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, San Juan Southern Paiute, Skull Valley Band of Goshute, and White Mesa Band of the Ute Mountain Ute. We acknowledge these lands carry the stories of these Nations and their struggles for survival and identity. We recognize Elders past and present as peoples who have cared for, and continue to care for, the land. We affirm Indigenous self-governance history, experiences, and resiliency of the Native people who are still here today. We acknowledge the land and our mothers as our first teachers. We would like to thank our spouses and our children including: Caeman, Summer, Ryder, Arden Grace, Diem, Ava, Tyus, Mira, Kai, and Eli. Disclosure: Drs. Sunshine Brosi and Sky Marietta are sisters who grew up together in rural Eastern Kentucky in a family of seven children.

# BOOK REVIEW OF MARIETTA, G., & S. MARIETTA. (2020). RURAL EDUCATION IN AMERICA: WHAT WORKS FOR OUR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND COMMUNITIES. HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS.

Sunshine L. Brosi, Ph.D.; Marilyn M. Cuch, MS; Spencer Spotted Elk, BS; Julie Stevens; and Gustavo A. Ovando-Montejo, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

Book review of Marietta, G. & S. Marietta. (2020). *Rural Education in America, What works for our students, teachers, and communities*, Harvard Education Press. Statewide faculty teaching in rural Utah review this book and focus on actions to meet the specific needs of their demographic of rural students in rural communities. The reviewer's reflections on the book developed from a Spring 2022 Empowering Teaching Excellence Learning Circle led by the primary author.

*Keywords:* rural, community, STEM, diversity, education

## Overview

We, the reviewers, live, work, and teach as educators in rural communities in Utah as part of Utah State University's Statewide Campuses. Our teachers' and students' demographic include rural students, who are often marginalized and considered a uniform "other." Drs. Marietta and Marietta explore the complexities of the rural experience in their new book focused on action items in education to meet the needs of these diverse and resilient communities. The structure of the book begins with framing and defining rural communities, discusses the unique needs and successful initiatives in rural areas, and concludes with actions, including successful strategies and recommendations for educational initiatives. The authors, both from and living in rural America, present an *emic* approach to rural education in contrast to vast *etic* research. Their expertise includes research and experiences on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico and in various schools in rural Eastern Kentucky.

## Context

The rural-urban divide is an ongoing issue in the United States, amplified by headlines about moving state lines to divide rural sections of states from urban ones in diverse geographies of Oregon, North Carolina, and Maryland. Rural is often defined as the opposite of urban, with an emphasis on the rural-urban divide and a rural monolith of white poverty, resource extraction, and social conservatism. This dichotomy and simplification results in the mischaracterization of many communities by agencies, including the Census Bureau, Office of Management and Budget, and the National Cen-

ter for Education Statistics (NCES). In the context of this book, rural is defined by the distance from major cities and amenities (such as major airports), population densities, community ties, and a deep sense of place.

In urban settings, opportunities to attend different schools often result in socioeconomic and racial disparities with unique urban problems and urban-focused educational strategies. To further the book's point about the complexities of rural communities, new alternative charter schools are now an option in the Black Belt region of rural Alabama (Marshall et al., 2022). Some might argue for the application of work from poor urban areas to poverty-stricken rural communities. For instance, research in urban schools in the greater Washington, D.C. area found effective strategies for increasing retention included laundry services in the school and bus passes (Williams, 2019). Though these two solutions directly target urban students, other interventions found could easily be applied to rural populations, including a food and toiletry pantry, building positive relationships, providing safety nets and counseling, and focusing on post-secondary plans (Williams, 2019). The complexities of issues and direct interventions aimed specifically at rural schools are often underfunded and overlooked by academic communities.

The authors explicitly respond to the notion of educating children away from their rural communities as a source of outmigration. Though many programs focus on education as a way to move children away from their struggling rural economies, the authors stress the inherent urban bias of encouraged outmigration and note that most adults in the United States live where they grew up regardless of geography. These programs are often from the perspectives of outsiders, and urbanites are not expected to relocate. One such program, with an unapologetically named "Pathways Off the Res" student handbook, was part of the University of New Mexico's Native American Studies Academic and Retention and Intervention (NASARI) program from the Fall of 1990-1996, funded by the New Mexico State Legislature (Belgarde & Lore, 2007).

The book does not ignore the inherent economic challenges of rural landscapes, including resource-extraction-based jobs, diminished infrastructure, disproportional opioid-epidemic impacts, and impacted healthcare and education systems. These real challenges, however, are often overemphasized at the expense of the benefits of rural locations, including a deep sense of place which is embedded in place-based and identity-based education with benefits to the larger community and strong community ties. The authors also discuss the socioeconomic, racial, and political diversities and intersectionalities that exist in rural communities with an emphasis on Native American, African American, and LatinX communities throughout rural America. Schools that embrace social mobility and create opportunity are described by bell hooks as "The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility . . . we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education is a practice of freedom." (hooks, 2014).

The strengths of rural communities are highlighted in the book, focusing on many of the characteristics that tie us to our own rural communities in Utah: "deep sense of place, strong community and kinship bonds, innate understanding and appreciation of the natural world, development of selflessness, and the central role schools play in communities with few other resources" (p. 35, Marietta & Marietta 2021). In addition, independence and resilience to natural disasters, the Covid-19 epidemic, and other positive traits are described thoroughly in the book. It is noted that Utah is ranked second in inequitable school funding in the U.S. (Farrie et al., 2019). USU's statewide campus system reaches our rural students as proximity to a University has large impacts on post-baccalaureate degree attainment.

## Needs of Rural Students

Striking a particularly relevant point was the discussion of literacy and state language tests. The authors' example is of 4th-grade Navajo students who were asked comprehension questions about a reading passage on the New York City subway system fares and schedules. These students knew "Subway" as a sandwich shop sixty miles away and trains as above-ground cargo containers. The lived experiences of the students had tremendous bearing on how they interacted with

the text, emphasizing the need for culturally relevant instruction and a need to tap into existing rural storytelling knowledge. Focusing on relevant context is especially important for those of us who teach via interactive broadcast, bringing our examples relevant to the locations of our students. New methods such as augmented reality (AR) show promise to enhance discovery for place-based education in rural areas (Gordon-Messer et al., 2022).

In addition to standardized testing bias towards urban identities, programs directed specifically at rural students have resulted in a distrust of the educational system. Settlement schools and boarding schools, specifically for Native American students, focused on teaching students away from communities and their traditions. Many of us and our students are just one or two generations away from these atrocities, resulting not only in severed cultural and community ties but also in transgenerational epigenetics of traumatic stress (Jawaid et al. 2018).

The book focuses on specific needs, including early childhood education, literary programs, STEM and STEAM programs, and college and career readiness. The authors highlight the vast amount of research on the benefit of all-day pre-K options, which are scarce to non-existent in rural Utah. For example, rural literacy programs, including Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which is available in five countries, are undersubscribed in the Western U.S. and especially on Tribal Lands. The authors highlight the impacts of University Extension partnerships, 4-H, and FFA for promoting science education but also emphasize the digital divide due to lack of broadband internet options. A highlight of the book focuses on why fewer rural students graduate from college than their urban and suburban peers. Solutions presented in the book include concurrent enrollment, career and technical education, post-secondary certificates, and university and community interactions which address cultural mismatches.

## Recommendations

A strength of the book is a focus on actions for parity in rural college attainment. The authors outline specific steps to take, including understanding the social and cultural history of your school, identifying forces shaping your context, identifying community strengths and assets, and evaluating programs you have in place. In understanding the history, we find it imperative to acknowledge historical traumas that have occurred under the guise of education in our communities and openly address those traumas that have impacted our Native American students, communities of color, and our two-spirited siblings. Data-driven actions required determining for your community items like the number of children who live with a grandparent, are homeless, and preschool attendance rates. In addition, we find it helpful to work with our local high schools to determine the number of high school seniors who are credit-deficient for graduation, an issue that summer dual enrollment can address. Additional tools outlined in the book include an asset map and sample rubrics for evaluating your programs.

A weakness in the book was an overemphasis on Appalachian communities, which have their own inherent issues and often specific strong sources of funding not found in other parts of the United States or in other countries. Though the need for research on rural education was mentioned several times in the book, we are left wondering about the main themes of this type of research and where to begin when focusing research on rural educational needs. Another limitation of the book is its review of the importance of rural education centers and hubs in identifying, supporting, and disseminating funding related to rural education. These centers, found in many states and related conglomerate organizations, are bastions for intellectual and financial support for solving distinct rural issues. A section on these resources would have improved the book by providing concrete resources for specific future actions.

Though the book is focused on optimism, the underlying conditions of communities disproportionately impacted by climate change, facing additional losses of natural resource-related jobs, and continued rural-urban divides are evident and looming. A statewide rural education center would allow us to systematically address several of the issues outlined in the book. If you are new to thinking about rural communities, or if you are a scholar of rural identities, this book offers

insights into common misconceptions, focuses on rural communities' strengths that are often overlooked, and provides strategies for improving rural education from emic perspectives of researchers committed to rural areas. We encourage you to sit on your back porch, your condo's balcony, or wherever life finds you, listen to the birds sing, and read about where we call home.

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## Acknowledgments

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