

## Rural Education in a Global Context

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In September 2015, the United Nations formally adopted a 2030 agenda as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations, 2015). Leading up to the adoption of the SDG, the international education community considered progress in the education sector since the adoption of the 2015 agenda as established by Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000), and since 164 countries agreed on six Education for All (EFA) goals while meeting in Dakar, Senegal (UNESCO, 2000). Although there has been progress, it is clear that, in many countries, the goal of universal primary education has not been achieved.

It has been estimated that “58 million children between the ages of about 6 and 11 years remain out of school and an additional 63 million adolescents (roughly between the ages of 12 and 15 years) are not enrolled” (Woden, Bell & Huebler, 2015, p. 1). Some of these children never start school, some begin late, while still others start and then drop out. Moreover, in many countries, lagging scores on international achievement tests make it clear that simply enrolling in school does not assure that children acquire even the most basic skills (UNESCO, 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

The SDG includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to move forward at the end of 2015. The fourth SDG goal is to: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015, p. 14). It specifies a number of ambitious targets to be accomplished by 2030. Among these targets are calls for all children to complete a program of early childhood as well as basic and secondary education, the elimination of gender disparities, the development of vocational and technical skills, the promotion of adult literacy, and so on. The challenge presented by these goals is formidable. Not only is the number of children who remain out of school staggering, but progress in reducing these numbers has stagnated since 2007 and, in many countries, children living in poor, rural areas are among the most affected (Woden, Bell & Huebler, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). Further complicating this situation, many schools in rural communities do not have equitable access to the resources necessary to support the students they do serve,

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making it difficult to provide quality education. This issue of the *Global Education Review (GER)* is focused on rural education because the disparities between children living in urban and rural areas remain such a persistent issue in so many countries (UNESCO, 2014, 2015). While access to education varies around the world, UIS and UNICEF (2015) estimate that, on average, the out-of-school population is roughly twice as large in rural areas as it is in urban areas (16% and 8% respectively). Although the challenges that make educational parity so difficult to achieve vary somewhat from location to location, a number of commonalities have been reported in the literature and are reflected in the articles here. These challenges are often interrelated and multifaceted, complicated by issues of poverty, gender, and in some places, conflict. They range from issues of government policy to practical issues of distance and safety. They frequently involve a lack of the most basic resources (e.g. electricity, sanitation, books) as well as issues of preparing, recruiting and retaining teachers (which are addressed in a second installment to be published in January, 2016). While some of the pressures that rural schools face are not unique to this context, many of the constraints are compounded in rural areas because of a multitude of other factors such as distance or isolation from community resources, policies that are designed for non-rural educational settings, and a lack of understanding about what it means to live and work in a rural place.

When we issued the call for papers related to rural education, we were impressed by the response. Article proposals from all over the world flooded our inboxes, and we found ourselves marveling at the diversity of the issues impacting rural communities. As editors, we were faced with the very difficult task of identifying the submissions which reflected the range and complexity of the issues that are of concern to the issue of rural education around the world. In the end we decided to create a

special double issue to capture the richness and complexity of the field. This first installment features articles that explore issues, challenges, and solutions in rural areas with a particular emphasis on implications for policies and partnerships. The second installment, due to be published early 2016, will take up the important topics of teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention in rural places.

The two opening articles in this issue illustrate the complexity and diversity of the issues that affect education in rural areas in distinct parts of the world. For example, Okilwa provides an overview of the challenges to educational access and equity in the Northeastern region of Kenya, with a special focus on issues for nomadic groups. This article highlights the ways in which government policies can interact with issues of poverty, lack of development, distance, political isolation, and cultural practices (such as early marriage and female genital mutilation) and the ways that these issues can contribute to the marginalization of nomadic groups. Okilwa also notes the impact that violence and conflict have had on the people of this region.

In a very different part of the world and with a very different population, Gouleta finds that some of the same issues emerge. In this study, the author considers Khyber Pakhtunakhawa (KP), Pakistan's former North-West Frontier Province and the provincial education assessment practices that affect linguistically diverse children in remote areas. The author describes concerns about fairness in the administration of exams, the impact of limited resources and poor testing conditions on performance, and the role of political interference in the process. In addition to the challenge of assessing and educating children in the midst of great linguistic diversity, this article also highlights the way in which conflict, natural disasters, economic, and socio-cultural conditions influence the assessment processes.

Linguistic diversity is also an issue in the article by Lee and Hawkins who provide another perspective on the impacts of policy on linguistically diverse students in their study of five rural school districts in Wisconsin, United States. Through an examination of local school policies designed to support immigrant English language learners, the authors reveal systemic inequities and challenges of access for ELL students and staff. While these districts are relatively wealthy and resource-rich in comparison to a number of other school contexts highlighted in this issue, Lee and Hawkins's study shows that the difficulties of professional isolation that the teachers experience in these rural communities compound the challenges to equitable support for this particular population of rural students.

Rural/urban disparities were also identified by Kryst, Kotok and Bodovski in their examination of data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) for 8<sup>th</sup> grade science achievement in five post-socialist countries, including Lithuania, Romania, the Russian Federation, Hungary and Slovenia. While the authors found that the students in rural schools had significantly lower science achievement scores compared with their urban counterparts, this difference is not due only to context. Rather, this study highlights the importance of socioeconomic status as a factor affecting education for rural students.

Xu and Law address the complex relationship between rural education and urbanization in China. As the Chinese government implemented economic policies to fuel increased urbanization, rural areas experienced an inevitable "brain drain" as young people moved to urban areas seeking increased opportunity and prosperity. State financing influenced this process by imposing policies that failed to consider unique demographic and geographic conditions. The authors examine policies and structures that helped and hindered

the goal of reinstating a balance of equity between rural and urban areas.

Addressing the rural/urban disparities described in these studies and in the broader literature requires innovative ideas and programs developed to meet local challenges. Several studies included in this issue either describe such innovations or make recommendations for such programs. For example, Ngalawa's description of a primary school in a remote region of Tanzania provides a rich description of one rural village and what can be accomplished when local communities organize and empower themselves to promote education for their children. Similarly, Byker's description of a public-private partnership that provided a laptop to schools in South India also highlights the power of solutions that are tailored to local needs and empower local residents (in this case, school-children). Okilwa emphasizes the need for decentralization of control to meet local needs as well as some nongovernmental initiatives which have focused on the potential of mobile schools to address the needs of nomadic pastoralists for whom traditional brick and mortar schools fail to meet local needs. Similarly, Gouleta notes the role of nongovernmental organizations in establishing pilot literacy projects. It is particularly noteworthy that most of the solutions recommended by other authors in this issue also focus on the need for specific local solutions.

In focusing on the obstacles and successes of rural educational contexts in this and the forthcoming second half of this issue of *Global Education Review*, the authors provide deeper insight about the impact of rurality on students' access to education. By comparing the educational contexts of seemingly disparate nations and communities, we highlight the commonalities among them while also pointing out the unique social, political, and economic factors that are so crucial in formulating sustainable educational change. It is our hope

that readers and researchers will see in these pages some valuable ideas about how we might move strategically toward meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.

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