

# Introduction: Queering Rural Education

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Across the United States, in response to an increase in state legislation and executive orders targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals, schools and institutions of higher education are shuttering LGBTQ+ student resources and support services, K–12 schools and public libraries are banning books with characters who identify as queer<sup>1</sup> or are interpreted as being queer, and educators across the education spectrum are stopping or questioning how they teach about gender and sexuality and support queer students (Baêta et al., 2025; Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2024; Flannery, 2024; Strunk et al., 2024; Whitten & Thomas, 2023). While these state laws and executive orders have an impact across geographical contexts, they can have particularly devastating consequences for the 15–20% of LGBTQ+ people in the United States who live in rural communities, as they already have less access to queer-

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<sup>1</sup> In this special issue, we often use “queer” to be inclusive of individuals who identify as trans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and intersex.

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This article is part of a special issue of JRRE, “Queering Rural Education,” which is a collaboration with the *Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education*. Click [here](#) to see the full issue.

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affirming structural resources (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). However, while LGBTQ+ people in rural communities face challenges, such as LGBTQ+ youth in rural and small towns reporting less queer-affirming communities and schools (The Trevor Project, 2021), it is critical to challenge monolithic and deficit-based portrayals of rural communities (Movement Advancement Project, 2019; Wienke & Hill, 2013). For example, Wienke and Hill (2013) found that lesbian and gay people living in rural communities had similar well-being and happiness rates as lesbian and gay people living in urban communities. Additionally, queer youth and adults living in rural areas can experience and find joy and community in the face of and despite social and political forces that seek to dehumanize queer and trans people (Movement Advancement Project, 2019; Tate et al., 2025; Whitten & Azano, 2025).

The editors and authors of this special issue, “Queering Rural Education,” seek to center the intersection of rurality, sexuality, and gender in rural education, highlighting nuanced studies and stories of joy, community, and resistance. While scholarship about queer students’ and educators’ experiences in rural education and communities is increasing, such as Clint Whitten and Amy Price Azano’s (2025) published coedited book, *Rural Education and Queer Identities: Rural and (Out)rooted*, the need for scholarship on the intersection of rurality, queerness, and gender in education continues. This special issue is a collaboration between the *Journal of Research in Rural Education (JRRE)* and the *Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education (JQTSIE)*, intended to disrupt the erasure of queer communities in rural education scholarship by centering scholarship across the PreK–20 educational spectrum and across multiple contexts (e.g., educational settings, community settings).

As guest coeditors of this special issue, we collaborated with the editors of both journals, *JRRE* and *JQTSIE*, to determine how best to *queer* rural education and highlight the experiences and stories of queer youth and adults living in rural communities. In summer 2024, the coeditors of the special issue put out a call for proposals, and we received 48 proposals. Darris managed the manuscripts slated for *JRRE*, while Leia and Ty managed the manuscripts slated for *JQTSIE*. The articles in *JRRE* for this special issue center arts-based scholarship, including visuals and poetry, to spotlight individual and collective storytelling of queer students, educators, and adults in rural areas. Given the focus of the articles in *JRRE* for this special issue, many of the articles are shorter in length to make space for art to be centered as an important form of data and a critical expression of experiences and ideas. The articles that will appear in *JQTSIE* are empirical studies that highlight key findings on LGBTQ+ students and educators in rural education. The special issue for *JRRE* is being published in December 2025, while the special issue for *JQTSIE* will be published at a later time, allowing for scholars and educators to have continued dialogue about the intersection of rurality, queerness, and gender in rural education.

The six contributions in this special issue of *JRRE* focus on joy, resistance, resilience, belonging, community, and possibility for queer students, educators, scholars, and community members living in rural communities. In the first contribution, Stephanie Anne Shelton uses paper dolls and narrative vignettes to explore experiences as a queer educator working in a rural school. The second contribution is from Roman Christiaens, who uses a digital storymap to examine their educational journey as a queer rural college student. Ailidh Wallace, in the third contribution, engages an autoethnographic narrative and mixed media artwork to explore their queer identity formation within the context of the rural U.S. South. In the fourth contribution, Carrie Hart and Charlie Mayock-Bradley imagine a textbook on the LGBTQ+ history of a rural town that could be integrated in the local school curriculum, highlighting the richness of queer stories and lives. The fifth contribution is from M. Eliatamby-O'Brien and Griff Tester, who highlight TransRural Lives, the first digital storytelling project that centers the lives of older transgender adults living in rural areas. The final contribution is from Clint Whitten, Casey Anne Brimmer, and Amy Price Azano, who employ poetry and visual art to explore their experiences as editors and the artist who designed the cover art of *Rural Education and Queer Identities: Rural and (Out)rooted*. As editors of this special issue, we want to thank the authors for their powerful stories of queering rural education. We hope all who read this special issue are moved by the transformational stories of hope, joy, and resistance.

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