JOURNAL OF LITERACY INNOVATION

RETHINKING LITERACY INSTRUCTION

VOLUME FIVE, ISSUE TWO
FALL/WINTER 2020
SPECIAL THEMED ISSUE ON RURAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION
ISSUE CO-EDITORS: AMY PRICE AZANO AND SEAN RUDAY

JOURNAL OF LITERACY INNOVATION

RETHINKING LITERACY INSTRUCTION

VOLUME FIVE, ISSUE TWO
FALL/WINTER 2020
SPECIAL THEMED ISSUE ON RURAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION
ISSUE CO-EDITORS: AMY PRICE AZANO & SEAN RUDAY

Table of Contents

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION
AMY PRICE AZANO & SEAN RUDAY, ISSUE CO-EDITORS

Amy's daughter is just finishing her first semester of senior English, during which she read *Othello, Beowulf,* and *Canterbury Tales,* with *1984* next on the syllabus. Books from her previous high school years included *Huckleberry Finn, The Great Gatsby, Animal Farm, Of Mice and Men,* and the other usual, canonical suspects. This is not necessarily a disservice in and of itself. It's the same curriculum we (Amy and Sean) read during high school. For all the grief and backlash against a "cultural literacy," it seems to be alive and well as a reproductive (if not obviously White and male-dominated) agent in public schools. A common curriculum has its value. We mean here not to take issue in that well-seasoned debate. Rather, we invite readers to consider how a homogenized or standardized English language arts curriculum – one that is devoid of context – limits opportunities for students to make meaningful connections to the content.

Place matters. We've made this claim evident in our work over the years. Growing up in a particular place—with its various cultural, social, political, geographical, and familial influences—shapes our view of the world. The last two decades' push for culturally responsive pedagogy, often discussed in terms of urban education, has been effective in yielding teaching practices that honor students' cultural backgrounds in the classroom. Yet, the canon continues to have a stronghold in the curriculum. Even with a standard, core curriculum, culturally responsive or place-based pedagogies can be used to help students connect to the curriculum. As Shakespeare wrote *Othello,* England was confronting an immigration debate. The idea of Othello as a "foreigner" lends itself to meaningful conversations about how various places treat and marginalize "outsiders." In *The Great Gatsby,* Fitzgerald illustrates how place can define a person. Someone with old money from East Egg has worth, whereas a new money Gatsby in West Egg has none; and – by comparison – the George Wilsons in the Valley of Ashes are rarely considered at all. The novel opens itself to important questions about how places hold "value" in the public sphere—and which ones do not. *Huck Finn* and *Of Mice and Men* are rife with opportunities to discuss place-specific issues of race, gender, and class. Our point here is that the curriculum does not necessarily drive the lesson, the critical questions, or the essential understandings for students. However it is achieved, we maintain that an explicit focus on engaging students with their place is a worthwhile objective in the language arts classroom, and perhaps especially so for rural students.

Hence, this special themed issue on rural literacy instruction, begs the questions: What makes literacy instruction *rural*, and why is a focus on rurality a necessary one for the field? Fortunately, the contributing authors in this issue readily provide answers to those questions.

In *A Place for Reading: Leveraging Mentor Texts with Middle Grade Rural Writers,* Rachelle Kuehl discusses the influence of a place-based language arts curriculum. In her article, she demonstrates how rural fourth-grade writers reflected the place-based literature shared with them as part of a language arts enrichment curriculum in their own narrative fiction stories. For teachers interested in selecting rural-focused texts, she provides a diverse list of middle grade novels honoring the intersectional space in rural communities with narratives that explore confrontations with the past, exemplify resiliency, and honor strong rural communities. She argues that in and out of school reading by way of mentor texts can positively influence student writing and provides concrete

examples for how a rural facing ELA curriculum can provide more opportunities for rural learners to see themselves *and others* in diverse ways in diverse rural settings.

Cathie English, in her article, *Developing a Critical Rural Literacy Through Local Inquiries,* takes us through her own educational upbringing in a small rural town where the rural context had little if anything to do with the ELA content of her secondary schooling. Working from the Haas and Nachtigal (1998) frame, she shares her journey in developing a critical place-conscious pedagogy and what it means to live well politically for herself and her students. Her article explores critically engaged citizenry, investigating local issues, and focuses on local inquiry as civic engagement in a secondary rural school to develop a critical rural literacy. English argues that local civic engagement allows for exploration into the politics of place and provides a model for rural educators who wish to enact such pedagogies in their own communities and classrooms.

In considering the unique context of rural schooling, Heather Wright extends the conversation from place to trauma. In her article, *Visualizing a Place for Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in the ELA Classroom,* she examines the existing literature and explores how trauma-informed pedagogies could be useful in the rural ELA classroom. Wright addresses deficit ideologies in rural and makes clear that rural communities are not experiencing or more prone to trauma that other locales but rather looks at structural realities that limit the resources and support systems in rural places, often resulting in the rural school and its teachers to provide the bulk of resources for students and their families. Wright provides readers with an understanding of trauma, its impacts on students and teachers, and ideas for enacting a pedagogical practice that embraces visible and invisible traumas.

In the final article, Chea Parton explores challenges teachers have faced in selecting and teaching rural young adult novels. In her article, *"I Think of My Dog Dying Books": Possible Challenges to and Suggestions for Contemporary Rural YA Literature in Secondary ELA Classrooms,* Parton argues that the ELA curriculum is one way to disrupt the cumulative cultural narrative of rural as a monolith—a single narrative too often portraying rural people in limited and deficit ways. Yet, as she demonstrates in her piece, classrooms without texts for rural students may limit their opportunities to see themselves and their realities reflected in the curriculum, especially when compared to their nonrural peers. Parton offers suggestions for overcoming challenges related to the perceived worth of teaching rural literature and finding rural YA texts, and then teaching those texts in culturally sustaining ways.

These articles encourage teachers to consider the relationship between place and identity. Amy's daughter will graduate in just a few months, having completed all of K-12 schooling in the foothills of Appalachia, without having read one school-based text about Appalachia or any text examining her relationship to and with the place where she lives. She is soon bound for Appalachian State University in her next step in formal schooling and will arrive surely knowing where she's from and what her place means to her. Yet, we can't help but imagine how richer and deeper that insight might be had she benefited from the strategies and texts explored in this special issue.

Haas, T., & Nachtigal, P. (1998). *Place value: An educator's guide to good literature on rural lifeways, environments, and purposes of education*. Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Appalachia Educational Laboratory.

A PLACE FOR READING: LEVERAGING MENTOR TEXTS WITH MIDDLE GRADE RURAL WRITERS

RACHELLE KUEHL
VIRGINIA TECH

Abstract

Mentor texts help teachers exemplify the style, structure, and elements of writing they desire students to emulate. This article demonstrates how rural fourth-grade writers reflected the place-based literature shared with them as part of a language arts enrichment curriculum in their own narrative fiction stories. Students also referenced literature outside the curriculum, showing the strong influence of reading on students' writing. As an extension of these results, the author offers a selection of high-quality contemporary middle grade novels set in rural places that teachers can share with students in various ways (e.g., book groups, independent reading, classroom read-alouds) to help them make personal connections to the language arts curriculum. Suggested novels are set in disparate geographic locations across the United States and include characters from different racial groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and familial structures in an effort to more accurately reflect the diversity in rural spaces than the stereotypical portrayals often found in popular culture. Prevalent themes from the novels include *confronting the past, resilience,* and *strong communities*; these themes are discussed in relation to their relevance to rural students.

Keywords: place-based, mentor texts, middle grade novels, rural

A Place for Reading: Leveraging Mentor Texts with Middle Grade Rural Writers

Teachers often use mentor texts to demonstrate the use of a particular writing skill or strategy they hope their students will attempt to incorporate into their own writing (McKay et al., 2017). In her *Units of Study on Primary Writing* series (2003), Calkins suggested teachers read selected books aloud during minilessons, drawing students' attention to the author's use of specific elements of writing they want them to imitate. Expanding that idea, Muhammad (2020) recommended "teachers should select mentor texts [that have] the potential to cultivate students' skills, identities, intellect, and criticality" (p. 95). In other words, a carefully chosen mentor text can substantially influence students' relationships with literacy, showing them how to use reading and writing to explore who they are and where they come from.

As part of a larger, federally-funded study aimed at increasing rural[1] students' access to gifted education services (Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools [Azano et al., 2017]), researchers reimagined the existing CLEAR language arts enrichment curriculum (Callahan et al., 2017) to center a place-based pedagogy with the goal of increasing curricular relevance for students attending rural schools. Both the geographic surroundings and the community who share a place help shape a student's sense of identity (Azano, 2011), and in essence, a place-based pedagogy is one that aims to enhance students' connections to the curriculum by grounding teaching and learning in the places where students live or have lived (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002). Part of the curriculum redesign for Promoting PLACE involved weaving in mentor texts featuring rural settings researchers hoped would resonate with students who lived in similar places (Azano et al., 2017). Curious about the influence of the selected texts on students' writing, I used data generated from the larger study to seek answers to the following questions:

- What evidence of the influence of mentor texts shared in a place-based language arts curriculum are present in rural fourth graders' narrative fiction writing?
- What types of literature influences outside the curriculum are recognizable in students' stories?

Before sharing my findings, I first describe other relevant research about the use of place-based literature as mentor texts. Then, I present the study and the different ways in which I found evidence of the influence of students' reading— both within and outside the prescribed curriculum—in their narrative fiction writing. Finally, I turn to a discussion of middle grade novels, which are generally considered to be suitable for readers aged 8–12 (Maughan, 2018), with promising prospects for serving as place-based mentor texts for rural students.

Place-Based Literature as Mentor Texts

Discussing her extensive ethnographic studies of elementary writing practices, Dyson (2008) wrote, "as children participate in social activities involving text," (that is, writing and presenting their written work within a classroom community), "they come to anticipate not only written language's functional possibilities, but also locally valued ways of doing, being, and relating to others" (p. 191). As literature certainly helps shape a place's culture (Bordieu, 1983), the sharing of place-based mentor texts holds immense promise for helping students understand the local values of their own communities—and their own identities within those communities—in the way Dyson described. In fact, in contrast with literacy programs intended to improve standardized test scores by providing scripted lessons to teachers that "erase" students' culture (Eppley, 2011; Eppley & Corbett, 2012), place-based literacy practices have been shown to positively affect student learning (e.g., Bangert & Brooke, 2003) while adding curricular relevance (Azano, 2011).

[1] There is no single definition for rurality agreed upon by rural scholars (Longhurst, 2021; Rasheed, 2019). Promoting PLACE used determinations made by the National Center for Education Statistics, which defines rurality based on proximity to metropolitan areas (NCES, 2020) to select participating districts. A fluid understanding of rurality is applied to this study; that is, students who are considered "rural" by any definition may benefit from this research.

Research directly related to the use of place-based mentor texts to encourage rural student writers is sparse, but several studies (Charlton et al., 2014; Ruday & Azano, 2014; Wason-Ellam, 2010) suggest that students are responsive to place-based literature. For example, a teacher and researcher worked to enliven the literacy learning of a group of rural Canadian third graders by emphasizing place (Wason-Ellam, 2010). After sharing multiple picture books that highlighted the beauty of the outside world, the adults brought students outdoors to explore their own community, then facilitated discussions about place and encouraged student responses in the form of art, poetry, and narrative writing. "Place, then, became the construction of stories that these learners told themselves that arose from frameworks of place-based identity, ideology, narrative tradition and imagination" (Wason-Ellam, 2010, p. 286).

In another study (Charlton et al., 2014), teachers from two British elementary schools each read aloud the picture book *My Place* (Wheatley & Rawlins, 2008), which depicts the same home once per decade for two hundred years. After discussing the changes across time, students drew maps of their own place and wrote accompanying stories. The researchers concluded participating in the place-based literacy project "allowed a more complex representation of [students'] place-related identities to emerge" (Charlton et al., 2014, p. 169).

Finally, Ruday and Azano (2014) described a week-long intensive writing course geared to prepare underprivileged high school students for success in Advanced Placement classes. After examining "Where I'm From," George Ella Lyon's (1999) poem about her rural upbringing, and contrasting it with Jay-Z's (1997) rap song of the same name, students wrote their own poems about place. The authors found students' sense of place, and the ways they did and did not feel they belonged in certain places, served as the backdrop for experiences that shaped their developing "inner identities" (p. 97), demonstrating how an approach to literacy rooted in place can show students "ways that writing is relevant to their individual struggles and identities" (Ruday & Azano, 2014, p. 95–96).

Promoting PLACE

One goal of the Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools project (Azano et al., 2017), from which data for this study were generated, was to study the influence of a place-based language arts curriculum on gifted rural students' self-efficacy and achievement. Fourteen school districts located in areas deemed rural by the National Center for Education Statistics based on population density and proximity to urban areas were recruited to participate. All participating districts were considered "high-need" with at least 50% of students qualifying to receive free or reduced lunch based on family income. Districts randomly assigned to the treatment group received the language arts curriculum, adapted to incorporate place-based literature and assignments, which consisted of four units (Poetry, Folklore, Research, and Fiction) to be used with third- and fourth-grade students.

The Fiction unit on which the current study is focused was comprised of 17 lessons, each addressing a different literary topic (e.g., point-of-view, setting, characterization). Lessons usually included sharing excerpts from classic and modern children's literature, discussing principles of writing, and allowing time for students to practice new skills in their own

compositions. As described above, much of the literature included in the Fiction unit was chosen because of its representation of "authentic cultural experiences" (Hollie, 2018) taking place in rural spaces, an effort which aligns with the International Literacy Association's (ILA, 2010) standards calling for teachers to "use literature that reflects the experiences of marginalized groups" (Standard 4, Element 4.2).

As the culminating project, students were asked to use what they learned across the unit to compose a narrative fiction story in any genre they chose. Over several days, students wrote, revised, and edited their work, checking it against a rubric to ensure the inclusion of required elements (e.g., cohesive plot with identifiable conflict and resolution, description of setting, clear point-of-view). Students were encouraged to be creative and "to use senses, emotions, and images to evoke connections between the text and the reader" (Fiction Unit, Lesson 2).

For the current study, I analyzed all 237 stories written by fourth graders as the culminating project of the Fiction unit, with careful attention paid to storylines and characters that shared similarities with the pieces used in the curriculum as well as other familiar literature. After multiple iterations, I arrived at the findings presented here.

Literature References in Students' Writing

Although it would be impossible to recognize every time a student's writing was influenced by something he or she had read, there were many times when traces of other fiction were clearly present in the stories. Students referenced or modeled their stories after fiction studied as part of the Promoting PLACE Fiction unit—both that which had been added to emphasize place and that which had been included in the original CLEAR curriculum—as well as other classic and modern literature.

Literature from the Curriculum

Evidence of the influence of mentor texts shared in the curriculum is present across the stories. For example, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865) was featured in Lesson 1, and five student stories included similar elements. First, much like Alice falls through the rabbit hole, Ruby falls for three hours into "some type of mystical land" in a story called "Off to Australia." [2] Similarly, Kloe, from "Magic is Real," is guided by a bunny when she discovers herself to be in a magical world, much like Alice is guided by the White Rabbit in her tale. When Alice drinks the potion she finds in her story, she becomes tiny, and in two students' stories, characters come across strange potions with instructions to drink them. In "Kate, Kane, and Lora," the three siblings who drink the potion are teleported home, and the boy who drinks the potion in "The Potion" starts talking backwards. Finally, "The Pond" is about Izzy, who, like Alice, is reading a book beside a pond when she pets a "weird bug" (reminiscent of the hookah-smoking caterpillar from the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland;* Geronimi, 1951), and is immediately transformed into a cat. Much like Alice, Izzy is relieved to wake up from a nap and find the experience had all been a dream.

[2] Most of the story titles were student-generated, but I assigned titles to several stories that were originally untitled.

An excerpt from *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle (1962) was studied in Lesson 9, and two stories seemed to incorporate aspects of the classic novel in their work. First, the star of "The Trouble Maker," Tiana, has messy hair, difficulty fitting in, and a tendency to act out, all characteristics of Meg Murry, the protagonist of *A Wrinkle in Time.* Similarly, "Lost Land" features three brothers and a sister discovering their long-lost father is the king of an alien planet, a situation in which Meg and her three brothers find themselves in their story as well. "Haunted Museum," in which a group of friends helps save classmates who had been turned into statues and trapped in the basement of a museum, shares similarities with *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E. L. Konigsburg (1967; Lesson 5), which is set primarily within New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Additionally, "The Turn on the Bullies" is the story of Bob, a clever, kind boy whose family moves frequently and who is confronted by bullies at his new school. In the novel *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen (2002), which was discussed in Lesson 6, a very similar character, Roy Eberhardt, faces the same challenges.

Three "survival" stories were very similar to Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain* (1959), a novel featured in Lesson 6 which includes detailed descriptions of a boy's wilderness adventures. Three fairy tale stories share plot points with the Brothers' Grimm fairy tale, *The Queen Bee* (1886), studied in Lesson 11. In all three *Queen Bee* stories, just like the original, the protagonist encounters three or four "roadblocks" (e.g., wolves, snakes, bees) on a journey through the forest, and the virtue of one character in each story is revealed by the kind way in which he or she treats the animals.

Literature from Outside the Curriculum

As described above, students' writing contained many references to works that were part of the Promoting PLACE curriculum, but because the stories also made frequent references to classic and modern works of fiction not included in the curriculum, findings support other research indicating that talented writers tend to be avid readers (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2014). For example, two classmates wrote stories set in the fictional world created by Rick Riordan in his popular *Percy Jackson* series (2005–2011), which itself borrowed characters from Greek and Roman mythology. In "The Attack on Olympus," a group of young people attends Camp Demigod, a camp for burgeoning gods and goddesses, and ends up leading an epic battle against mythological monsters. In "The Monster Attack," the same cast of characters attends Camp Apollo together, where they work to prevent Pandora's Box from opening. The children who wrote these stories were undoubtably fans of *Percy Jackson*, and their deep knowledge of the characters and settings of these books suggests they have spent ample time reading them outside of class.

As one might expect, this group of rural fourth-grade writers also seemed very familiar with the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling (1997–2007). Three stories were actually Harry Potter "fan fiction" (the characters in the stories were the actual characters in the series, but the writers imagined new experiences for them). Other stories featured teleportation through fireplaces, dementor-like figures with "souls darker than pitch black night," and giant spider-monsters, all elements appearing in *Harry Potter.* Of course, students may have become familiar with *Harry*

Potter by watching the movie adaptations, but the book series is highly popular among middle grade readers.

Several young writers, all girls, wrote stories about a matriarchal dragon kingdom in which female dragons battle for queenly rule, reflecting the *Wings of Fire* children's book series (Sutherland, 2012–). The author of one such story provided a helpful hint to me as researcher by including a note at the end of her story: "Note—This story [was] inspired by *Wings of Fire."* One dragon story, "Dragonwings," is about a group of dragons who discover a plot to kill the ancient Queen Seastar while doing "historical research" at the Altar of Darkness. To thwart the plan, they travel back in time and warn the queen. In "Mystic Plains," Queen Sandune decides to execute several dragons whom she fears will try to overtake her throne, but spares Soar, a trusted advisor, who nevertheless ends up betraying her. Incidentally, four of the writers who appropriated elements from *Wings of Fire* were in the same class, which suggests a literacy culture in which students shared or recommended books.

Four stories were especially reminiscent of fairy tales that were not part of the Fiction unit. "The Gray, Shaggy Dog," for example, is a retelling of *Cinderella*, except that the fairy godmother role is fulfilled by the gray, shaggy dog for whom the story is named. Two stories, "Magic Is Real" and "The Elegant Girl," share similarities with *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White,* respectively, and "Piggy People" is a twist on *The Three Little Pigs.* In "Lost in Australia," just like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900), Ruby finds herself in a magical world and must travel to see a wise old character, the Wizoala (a cross between a wizard and a koala), in order to get home. "Oz Meets Voldemort" is a fan-fiction mash-up of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997–2007), with Dorothy and Voldemort as protagonist and antagonist. Three stories ("Lost Land," "Lost in a Random World," and "Family Always Comes First") are reminiscent of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56), primarily in that characters walk along, then suddenly find themselves in a different—sometimes snowy—world. Finally, the way the formerly-rich princesses in "The Meaning of the Necklace" have to work in the fields among "common" people shared similarities with three separate Bible stories about Ruth, Joseph, and the prodigal son, in which once-wealthy figures find virtue in more meager, work-filled existences.

Middle Grade Novel Suggestions for Rural Readers and Writers

In the Promoting PLACE project (Azano et al., 2017), teachers used excerpts from classic and contemporary literature to teach language arts concepts, and many of their students emulated the writing of these mentor texts, some of which were added to a previously-existing curriculum because of their emphasis on rurality and place. Students also showed signs of having read other works outside the curriculum, further demonstrating the influence of reading on students' writing.

In an extensive content analysis of these data for another project (Kuehl, 2020), I found that after having been taught to understand place as a valuable part of their identities through the reading, writing, and class discussions embedded in the curriculum, students explored place-related identity concepts in their writing. As such, even though students did not necessarily reflect *only*

the mentor texts selected for their place emphasis in their own writing, the fact that students reflected mentor texts *in general*, combined with evidence from previous research (e.g., Azano, 2011; Charlton et al., 2014; Donovan, 2016; Ruday & Azano, 2014; Wason-Ellam, 2010) demonstrating the importance of connecting language arts instruction to rural students' sense of place, suggests that rural students may respond positively to the sharing of place-based literature as mentor texts. Therefore, I am devoting the remainder of this article to sharing a set of middle grade novels set in rural places that I believe are likely to resonate with rural students.

However, it is important to note that rural culture is not a monolith (Ruday & Azano, 2019), and the wide variety of stories written by students living in the same general geographic region demonstrates the diversity found within and among rural communities. For example, although no other students wrote stories with themes of race, it was the primary focus of "Blue-Eyed Girl," a story about a child who feels out of place because she is the only person she knows with dark skin and blue eyes. Meeting other people who share these traits (presumably long-lost relatives) improves the girl's self-confidence, and she affirms her racial identity in the final lines by exclaiming, "I am proud to be different, I am proud to be here, I am proud to be African American!" In many rural communities, racial tensions certainly exist (Wuthnow, 2018), and this study suggests creative writing can be a vehicle for helping students explore how these tensions play out in their own lives.

Recently, author Jason Reynolds was appointed National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, and in a television interview (CBS News, 2020), Reynolds shared his desire to highlight the experiences of people living in mostly-Black rural communities, which he declared to be overlooked when the educational needs of rural people are discussed. Reynolds's middle grade novel, *As Brave as You* (2017), a Coretta Scott King Book Award honoree, is an example of a text set in a mostly-Black rural community that has the potential to dismantle racial stereotypes and to inspire rural students as writers.

Cognizant of moving towards Reynolds's goal of diversifying rural students' experiences with literature, I have assembled a list of high-quality middle grade novels that depict life in a variety of rural places and feature protagonists representative of multiple cultures (Table 1).

Table 1.

Recommended Middle Grade Novels Set in Rural Places

Title	**Author**	**Pub. Year**	**Rural Setting**
As Brave as You	Jason Reynolds	2016	Virginia
Belle Prater's Boy	Ruth White	1996	Virginia
Free Verse	Sarah Dooley	2016	West Virginia
Gone Crazy in Alabama	Rita Williams-Garcia	2015	Alabama
Kira-Kira	Cynthia Kadohata	2004	Georgia
Last in a Long Line of Rebels	Lisa Lewis Tyre	2015	Tennessee
Return to Sender	Julia Alvarez	2009	Vermont
Ruby Holler	Sharon Creech	2002	(location not specified)

Savvy	Ingrid Law	2008	Nebraska/Kansas border
The Exact Location of Home	Kate Messner	2017	(location not specified)
The Parker Inheritance	Varian Johnson	2018	South Carolina
Three Times Lucky	Sheila Turnage	2012	North Carolina
You Go First	Erin Entrada Kelly	2018	Louisiana and Pennsylvania

In the following sections, I share how these novels address themes of history, resilience, and community, all of which I found present in students' stories during the more detailed examination mentioned previously (Kuehl, 2020).

Confronting the Past

A few of the stories written by the fourth-grade students in the Promoting PLACE project described or hinted at problems in a family's past that explained how the characters arrived at their current situations. One exemplary story, "The Vengeful Twins," accomplished this with the inclusion of a flashback scene in which the reader learns that the main character's evil behavior stems from the pain she felt at having been separated from her twin brother when they were children. In the same way, the protagonists in some of the recommended novels discover things about their family's past that helps them understand present-day tensions among family members. For example, *Belle Prater's Boy* (White, 1996) takes place in 1953, after Gypsy's Aunt Belle disappears without a trace from her home deep in the mountains near Coal Station, Virginia. Gypsy's cousin, Woodrow, comes to live with their shared grandparents in town, next door to Gypsy. The cousins become fast friends, and Gypsy learns that some hurt in Aunt Belle's past—specifically, having been passed over by her former beau, Gypsy's deceased father, in favor of her beautiful mother, Love—may have had something to do with Belle's mysterious disappearance. Meanwhile, repressed memories about the circumstances surrounding Gypsy's father's death surface, and the two cousins support each other while trying to find a way to heal and move forward.

In *As Brave as You* (Reynolds, 2016), ten-year-old Genie and his older brother, Ernie, travel to their grandparents' home in rural Virginia while their parents try to work through a difficult time in their marriage. Genie has never met his grandfather before, and he is shocked to discover that "Grandpop" is blind. During their stay, Genie bonds with Grandpop, but seems to realize his use of alcohol to cope with his disability and the death of his other son contributes to the troubled relationship between Genie's father and grandfather:

> He wondered what was in Grandpop's cup. That vinegary smell sure wasn't sweet tea. As a matter of fact, he didn't really wonder what it was at all. He knew exactly what it was. That smell . . . reminded him of Ms. Swanson, the drunk lady who hung out at the Laundromat back home. (Reynolds, 2016, p. 86)

One Crazy Summer (Williams-Garcia, 2015) shares a similar premise with *As Brave as You* in that Delphine and her sisters pay an extended visit to their grandmother, Big Ma, and their great-grandmother, Ma Charles, in rural Alabama during the summer of 1970. While there, the girls learn that a decades-old feud between Ma Charles and her sister, Miss Trotter, who lives in the

same community, stems from a troubling family secret. Long ago, their grandfather had run away from slavery and married a Native American woman. Some of the couple's 11 children looked more "Indian" while some (like their father) looked "colored." Unfortunately, their father's older brothers sold him as a slave. Later, Miss Trotter apparently claimed Native heritage on the U.S. census, which Ma Charles found to be an outrageous and unforgiveable denial of their Blackness. Additionally, the girls realize they are also related to the same White sheriff who terrorizes the family in his night-time rides with the Ku Klux Klan, further complicating their understanding of their own racial identity.

Twelve-year-old Louise Mayhew, protagonist of *Last in a Long Line of Rebels* (Tyre, 2015), learns her huge house in Grey County, Tennessee, built by her ancestors over 150 years ago, is at risk of being destroyed as a matter of imminent domain. Her parents cannot afford to pay the money needed to save their house, so they may have to move away from Grey County. When Louise and her friends learn about an old rumor that gold was hidden on the property during the Civil War, they begin an investigation that leads to a very unpleasant discovery: Louise's family had once owned slaves. Devastated, Louise confronts her dad about not having told her sooner:

> "It's my family. I should know the truth about it."
>
> "You're right. But the truth isn't very pretty, is it?"
>
> "No." I shivered in the heat. "And it makes me feel so bad." (Tyre, 2015, p. 139)

Little by little, Louise and her friends uncover clues that lead them to the diary of her namesake, the original Louise Mayhew, who had been a staunch supporter of the Confederacy, and Louise grapples with what that means in light of a present-day racist decision affecting her friend, Isaac, who is Black.

Finally, in *The Parker Inheritance* (Johnson, 2018), when 12-year-old Candice's parents separate, she and her mother move to her grandmother's home in Lambert, South Carolina to wait out renovations to their house in Atlanta. Abigail Caldwell, Candice's grandmother, was the first Black city manager for Lambert before her passing two years earlier, and she became the town's laughingstock when she had some tennis courts dug up in search of buried treasure. In the attic, Candice finds a cryptic letter to her grandmother from a wealthy benefactor who promised a donation to the town and a reward for the finder if anyone could solve the letter's mystery. With her new friend, Brandon, Candice spends the summer chasing clues, and in doing so, they discover some long-buried truths about the city's racist past.

In each of these stories, readers make discoveries alongside the child protagonists, who are generally naïve narrators who may or may not understand the full picture by the story's end. Mental illness, for example, seems to partially explain the behavior of Grandpop in *As Brave as You* and Aunt Belle in *Belle Prater's Boy,* though that is not explicitly stated in either book. And, while many of the stories offer young readers the chance to learn how historical racist structures are the causes underlying some of the tension within rural communities, the authors stop short of depicting racial violence that may be developmentally inappropriate and potentially traumatizing for middle grade readers (Barker, 2013).

Resilience

Like many of the fourth-grade writers' stories (e.g., the princess sisters who graciously accept their new roles as field workers in "The Meaning of the Necklace" and the boy who learns how to stand up to bullies in "The Turn on the Bullies"), the books I selected depict characters who show resilience in the face of adversity. For example, Sasha Harless, the protagonist of *Free Verse* (Dooley, 2016), was being raised by her older brother, a firefighter in their West Virginia coal mining town, but when he dies in the line of duty, Sasha is placed in foster care. Sasha is loved and nurtured by her caretaker, Phyllis, but when everyone realizes the family next door is kin to Sasha, she moves in with them: her newly-discovered cousin, his unfriendly wife, and their three young children. At school, Sasha joins a poetry club where she learns to express her grief and uncertainty about the future in verse. This poem is an example from when she is too sad and anxious to speak:

> "Anthony Tries"
>
> And tries and tries and tries
>
> to get some words out of me.
>
> I try, too, but they will not rise
>
> from down in the depths of me. (Dooley, 2016, p. 285)

In *Ruby Holler* (Creech, 2002), twins Dallas and Florida have been moved around from one foster home to another their whole lives. They finally land in the safe and loving home of Sairy and Tiller, an older couple who plans to take each of them on separate adventures before settling into life in Ruby Holler, the beautiful place where they raised their own four children. Not believing they can trust the unconditional love shown by Sairy and Tiller, Dallas and Florida plan to run away.

> When there is a full moon in Ruby Holler, as there was on the night that Dallas and Florida left the cabin, the purest silver light makes everything above and below look soft and rich, like velvet. The birds sit quietly in the trees, and all the other creatures seem to move more gently, as if their feet are padded by cotton. . . . They wound their way down the hill and moved slowly along the bank, picking their way over stones and around bushes until Florida said, "Wait. Stop."
>
> "What's the matter?"
>
> "I don't want to leave," Florida said. "I like it here. Nobody ever treated us this good before, and nobody's probably ever going to treat us this good again." (Creech, 2002, pp. 267-268)

The twins had come to realize that Ruby Holler, with Sairy and Tiller, is where they truly belong.

Savvy (Law, 2008) and *You Go First* (Kelly, 2018) both center around the worry felt by their respective protagonists when they are each faced with their father's sudden hospitalization. In *Savvy,* Mississippi "Mibs" Beaumont is the third child in her family to turn 13, the day on which

she expects to receive her "savvy"—a special gift or power bestowed upon each family member on their thirteenth birthday. Yet when Mibs should be focused on discovering her savvy, her father's unexpected health crisis sends her, with her siblings and a few unlikely friends, on a wild bus chase through the Nebraska/Kansas countryside they call home, and Mibs discovers it is her own resilience that is her true strength. In *You Go First*, when Lottie's father is hospitalized, she struggles with guilt in remembering times she had been less than kind to him, while at the same time trying to manage her feelings of rejection after the recent dissolution of a long-time friendship. Unexpectedly, it is her "virtual" friendship with Ben, who lives far away in rural Louisiana, that pulls her through. The two friends connect online to play Scrabble, but have never met in person. Eventually, they end up talking on the phone:

> "Actually, I think I have news, too."
>
> Ben leaned back in his chair. "You go first."
>
> "Well . . . ," said Lottie. "I don't know. Never mind. It's stupid."
>
> "No it's not."
>
> "How do you know? I haven't even told you yet."
>
> "If it's news to you, then it isn't stupid." (Kelly, 2018, p. 163)

Ben is himself dealing with both the bewildering surprise of his parents' recent separation and the constant stress of having to fend off a school bully, and the connection with Lottie helps him feel less alone as well.

In *Kira-Kira* (Kadohata, 2005), which takes place in the 1950s, Katie and her family are Japanese immigrants who move from Iowa to rural Georgia where some of their extended family members are setting up roots as workers in a chicken hatchery. Katie's parents work hard to save money to move from their cramped apartment to a house, especially when Katie's older sister, Lynn, becomes very ill with lymphoma. As the family strains to reconcile their Japanese heritage with life in the small-town south, they must also come to grips with losing Lynn. This scene reveals Katie's disparate thoughts as she gazes out the window of her new bedroom, knowing her sister may not survive the night:

> We lived below what Georgians call the gnat line, meaning all the gnats in the world lived in town with us. My uncle claimed that more bugs lived per square mile in southern Georgia than anywhere in the state. Even in winter there were bugs.
>
> Here are the things I saw:
>
> 1. The tire store—through the window, I saw tires piled inside.
> 2. A lonely tree outside the store.
> 3. The gray sky.
> 4. A crow sitting on the giant tree.

> I cried and cried. For a while as I cried I hated my parents, as if it were their fault that Lynnie was sick. Then I cried because I loved my parents so much. Then I didn't feel like crying anymore. (Kadohata, 2004, pp. 198–199)

Finally, *The Exact Location of Home* (Messner, 2017) depicts the way 13-year-old Zig and his mother, a waitress and nursing student, fall into homelessness when his father's child support payments stop coming. Without a stable place to sleep and do his homework, Zig starts to slide at school and feels too embarrassed to tell his best friends what is going on. As a kind of resistance to the situation he is helpless to resolve, Zig becomes fixated with geocaching, a GPS-guided scavenger hunt where coordinates and cryptic clues lead him from one exact location to the next. When his GPS device is stolen out of his bag at the homeless shelter, Zig feels truly lost.

Characters in each of these stories, as well as those in many of the stories authored by the fourth-grade writers (Kuehl, 2020), endure the struggle and uncertainty of feeling displaced. In some cases, their living situation actually changes as they move from one place to another; in others, it is the loss or potential loss of someone close to them—someone who helps shape their sense of home and place—that leaves them feeling unsettled and out-of-place. Still, with the support of those around them, they find ways to keep moving forward.

Strong Community

Many of the fourth-grade writers' stories featured strong communities that pulled together in times of need. *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009) takes place in a small farming community in rural Vermont. During a time of economic hardship, some of the town's dairy farmers resort to hiring Mexican workers, many of whom may not have the legal right to work in the United States due to extremely restrictive immigration laws. At first, some members of the community gather to protest against bringing Mexicans into their midst, but when the Cruz family, whom many in the town have grown to love and respect, face deportation, local citizens rally around them. Mari, the Cruz family's oldest daughter, receives touching letters from her classmates after she learns her family will be returning to Mexico, including this note from her teacher:

> As you can see, Maria, you left behind many friends at Bridgeport. We hope for the best for you and your family. Always remember that you have a home in our hearts, no matter where you are. Friendship knows no borders! (Alvarez, 2009, p. 283)

Similarly, in *Last in a Long Line of Rebels* (Tyre, 2015), when Isaac, the athlete most deserving of the town's football scholarship to the University of Tennessee is passed over because of the racist actions of his coach, community members join together in protest and raise money to allow Isaac the chance to play as a walk-on his first year.

The tiny town of Tupelo Landing, North Carolina, plays a very big role in *Three Times Lucky* (Turnage, 2012). As a baby, Moses "Mo" LoBeau was found adrift after a hurricane, and the Colonel who saved her now raises her in Tupelo Landing with Miss Lana, a woman with a strong sense of dramatic flair, where they take turns running the local diner. By way of introduction, Mo shares, "The Colonel and Miss Lana are the closest thing to family I've got. Without them, I

wouldn't have a home. I probably wouldn't even have a name. I am bereft of kin by fate" (pp. 2–3). The diner is the gathering place for all the town's out-sized characters, including Mo's best friend, Dale, his car-racing older brother, Lavender, and Mr. Jesse, the grumpy fisherman who is found dead near the beginning of the novel. Mo and Dale are proprietors of their own detective agency, and as they work to uncover clues to the murder mystery that entangles more victims by the day, the quirky residents of Tupelo Landing come together to protect one another and solve the case.

In a similar way, Coal Station, the setting of *Belle Prater's Boy*, is a place where generations of residents raise their families together and know each other's comings and goings. In one scene, Gypsy's Mama hosts the annual garden party, "the social event of the season" (White, 1996, p. 125) that serves to welcome the young women who have reached the "marriageable age" of 18 "and could be included in all the right gatherings with the other women who had a certain social standing in town" (p. 126). In another scene, Woodrow holds court at a weenie roast for all the local schoolchildren, telling story after story to entertain the crowd. In *Savvy*, the more conservative members of the town don't quite know what to make of the eccentric Beaumont family, but they step in to bring food and offers of help during Poppa's hospital stay. In *As Brave as You*, community members gather at the weekly flea market where Genie's grandmother sells her freshly-picked peas, and people seem comfortable with one another despite, or perhaps because of, their various eccentricities. In *Free Verse,* Sasha feels all alone after the death of her brother, and because she cannot bear to hear more bad news about someone else she has grown to care about, she runs away when there is a report of another accident at the local mine. When members of the community search high and low to find her, she comes to realize she matters to the people who share the place she calls home. It is her cousin, Hubert, who comes to claim her at the police station after she is found:

> Hubert has crossed the room to me in two steps and put his arm around me. I don't know if he's touching me in anger or relief until he kisses the top of my head. "Sasha," he says. "God Almighty. . . . You scared me, little lady," he says.
>
> I can't bear the kindness in his voice. (Dooley, 2016, p. 179)

Though rural places are not all the same, a strong sense of community often characterizes the social interactions in small towns (Azano, 2011; Eppley, 2015). Books featuring groups of people who support one another and who know each other's families across generations may spark recognition in young rural readers. In turn, experiencing these familiar relationships in mentor texts may show rural students that the people they know and experiences they have in their own communities might make for wonderful subject matter about which to write.

Conclusion

There are countless ways for teachers to help rural students find meaningful place-based literature. Like in Promoting PLACE, they can share excerpts from books such as the ones discussed here to teach various reading and writing concepts. They could choose these novels for class read-alouds or small-group book studies, providing opportunities to discuss the important issues surrounding place within the classroom community. They could simply recommend these

books to certain students (for example, children interested in car racing may especially enjoy *Three Times Lucky*), or they could plan to give a weekly book talk, spending a few minutes at the beginning of class "advertising" place-based books students can find in the classroom library. And while this list provides a running start, I recommend rural teachers pay attention to the Whippoorwill Awards for excellence in rural youth literature (see https://whippoorwillaward.weebly.com) and consult with their school librarians for more ideas.

This article has focused on literature intended to resonate with students because of its similarities with the places where they live and work: essentially, it has focused on the "mirror" aspect of Bishop's (1990) famous "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" metaphor, which urges educators to ensure students can see people like themselves in texts. However, with consideration for the "windows" component, I want to encourage teachers to think beyond the local and to show students how to connect with place concepts—resilience, history, community—in stories set in far-off places as well. Reading texts featuring people who lead very different lives can help children recognize and affirm the common humanity inherent in all of us. Doing so can not only help enhance students' writing, as these fourth graders' stories have shown, but it can also increase students' connectedness to the language arts curriculum and help them discover more about their own identities relative to place.

References

Azano, A. P. (2011). The possibility of place: One teacher's use of place-based instruction for English students in a rural high school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 26,* 1–12.

Azano, A. P., Callahan, C. M., Brodersen, A. V., & Caughey, M. (2017). Responding to the challenges of gifted education in rural communities. *Global Education Review,4*(1), 62–77.

Bangert, S., & Brooke, R. E. (2003). Inviting children into community: Growing readers and writers in elementary school. In R. E. Brooke (Ed.), *Rural voices: Place-conscious education and the teaching of writing* (pp. 23–43). Teachers College Press.

Barker, J.L. (2013). Naive narrators and double narratives of racially motivated violence in the historical fiction of Christopher Paul Curtis. *Children's Literature, 41*(1), 172–203.

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives, 6*(3), ix–xi.

Bordieu, P. (1983). *The field of cultural production.* R. Johnson (Ed.). Columbia University Press.

Calkins, L. (2003). *Units of study for primary writing: A yearlong curriculum.* FirstHand.

Callahan, C. M., Missett, T. C., Azano, A. P., Caughey, M., Brodersen, A. V., & Tackett, M. (2017). *CLEAR curriculum units from the University of Virginia for grade 4: Fiction and nonfiction.* Prufrock Press, Inc.

CBS News. (2020, January 13). Jason Reynolds named Library of Congress' national ambassador for young people's literature. *CBS This Morning.* Retrieved from https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jason-reynolds-library-of-congress-national-ambassador-for-young-peoples-literature

Charlton, E., Cliff Hodges, G., Pointon, P., Nikolajeva, M., Spring, E., Taylor, L., & Wyse, D. (2014). *My Place:* Exploring children's place-related identities through reading and writing. *Education 3–13, 42*(2), 154–170.

Donovan, E. (2016). Learning to embrace our stories: Using place-based education practices to inspire authentic writing. *Middle School Journal, 47*(4), 23–31.

Dyson, A. H. (2008). Staying in the (curricular) lines: Practice constraints and possibilities in

childhood writing. *Written Communication, 25*(1), 119–159.

Eppley, K. (2011). Reading Mastery as pedagogy of erasure. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 26*(13), 1–5.

Eppley, K. (2015). “Hey, I saw your grandparents at Walmart”: Teacher education for rural schools and communities. *The Teacher Educator, 50*(1), 67–86.

Eppley, K., & Corbett, M. (2012). I'll see that when I believe it: A dialogue on epistemological difference and rural literacies. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 27*(1), 1–9.

Garrett, L., & Moltzen, R. (2011). Writing because I want to, not because I have to: Young gifted writers’ perspectives on the factors that “matter” in developing expertise. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 10*(1), 165–180.

Geronimi, C., Jackson, W., & Luske, H. (Directors). (1951). *Alice in Wonderland* [Motion picture]. Walt Disney Studios.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher, 32*(4), 3–12.

Hollie, S. (2018). *Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning* (2nd ed.). Shell Education.

International Literacy Association [ILA]. (2010). Standards 2010: Standard 4. https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/standards/standards-for-reading-professionals/standards-2010-standard-4

Jay-Z. (1997). Where I’m from. On *In my Lifetime* (Vol. 1) [CD]. Rock-A-Fella Records.

Kuehl, R. (2020). *Fourth-grade narrative fiction writing: Using content analysis to examine the intersection of place, high ability, and creativity* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech). http://hdl.handle.net/10919/97918

Longhurst, J. (2021). Defining rural. In A. P. Azano, K. Eppley, & C. Biddle (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury handbook for rural education in the USA.* Bloomsbury.

Lyon, G. E. (1999). *Where I’m from: Where poems come from*. Absey & Co.

Maughan, S. (2018, April 13). Navigating middle grade books. *Publishers Weekly.* https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry news/article/76625-navigating-middle-grade.html

McKay, K. L., Ricks, P. H., & Young, T. A. (2017). Supporting young writers with award-winning books. *The Reading Teacher*, *71*(2), 177–187.

Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy.* Scholastic.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). Rural education in America. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp

Olthouse, J. M. (2014). Gifted children's relationships with writing. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *37*(2), 171–188.

Rasheed, M. (2019). Context and content in rural gifted education: A literature review. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 31*(1), 61–84.

Ruday, S., & Azano, A. P. (2014). "You have no idea where I'm from": Community, culture, and critical literacy in an intensive writing course. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *29*(1), 71–99.

Ruday, S., & Azano, A. P. (2019). Arguments that matter: A place-based approach to teaching argument writing to rural students. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *34*(1), 1–29.

Smith, G. A. (2002). Place-based education: Learning to be where we are. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, *83*(8), 584–594.

Wason-Ellam, L. (2010). Children's literature as a springboard to place-based embodied learning. *Environmental Education Research*, *16*(3–4), 279–294.

Wuthnow, R. (2018). *The left behind: Decline and rage in small-town America.* Princeton University Press.

Children's Literature Cited

Alvarez, J. (2009). *Return to sender.* Yearling.

Baum, F. L. (1900). *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.* George M. Mill.

Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's adventures in Wonderland.* MacMillan and Company.

Creech, S. (2002). *Ruby Holler.* Joanna Cotler Books.

Dooley, S. (2016). *Free verse.* G. P. Putnam's Sons.

George, J. C. (1959). *My side of the mountain.* Puffin Books.

Grimm, J., & Grimm, W. (1886). *Household stories by the Brothers Grimm.* MacMillan and Company.

Hiassen, C. (2002). *Hoot.* Alfred A. Knopf.

Johnson, V. (2018). *The Parker inheritance.* Arthur A. Levine Books.

Kadohata, C. (2004). *Kira-kira.* Aladdin Paperbacks.

Kelly, E. E. (2018). *You go first.* Greenwillow Books.

Konigsburg, E. L. (1967). *From the mixed-up files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler.* Atheneum Publishers.

Law, I. (2008). *Savvy.* Puffin Books.

L'Engle, M. (1962). *A wrinkle in time.* Crosswicks, Ltd.

Lewis, C. S. (1950–1956). *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Book series). HarperCollins.

Messner, K. (2017). *The exact location of home.* Bloomsbury.

Reynolds, J. (2016). *As brave as you.* Atheneum.

Riordan, R. (2005–2011). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (Book series). Penguin RandomHouse.

Rowling, J. K. (1997–2007). *Harry Potter* (Book series). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sutherland, T. T. (2012–). *Wings of fire* (Book series). Scholastic.

Turnage, S. (2012). *Three times lucky.* Dial Books for Young Readers.

Tyre, L. L. (2012). *Last in a long line of rebels.* Nancy Paulsen Books.

Wheatley, N., & Rawlins, D. (2008). *My place.* Walker Books.

White, R. (1996). *Belle Prater's boy.* Square Fish.

Author Bio

Rachelle Kuehl, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Associate at Virginia Tech and Project Manager of the Appalachian Rural Talent Initiative, a project aimed at increasing the number of rural Appalachian students served in Gifted and Talented programs. Dr. Kuehl is a reading specialist and former elementary teacher whose articles about writing instruction, children's literature, teacher education, and rural education have been published in the *English Journal, Journal of Children's Literature, Theory & Practice in Rural Education, Collection Management, Reading in Virginia, the Virginia English Journal,* and the *Teacher Educators' Journal*. She is co-author of a chapter on phonics and phonemic awareness in *What's Hot in Literacy? Exemplar Models of Effective Practice* (2020) as well as two other chapters in forthcoming volumes.

DEVELOPING A CRITICAL RURAL LITERACY THROUGH LOCAL INQUIRIES

CATHIE ENGLISH
MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This article's focus is the use of the local inquiry as civic engagement in a secondary rural school to develop a critical rural literacy. It examines a critical rural place conscious pedagogy with the aim of "being present in, with, and to a place; experiencing place stories; exploring the politics of place; apprenticing ourselves to places; caring for places; and representing places" (Wattchow & Brown 2011). It focuses upon the need for exploring the politics of place through local civic engagement, providing a model for rural educators to enact in their own communities and with their own students, addressing the unique problems or community concerns in rural spaces.

Developing a Critical Rural Literacy Through Local Inquiries

> Somewhere along the way, rural students and adults alike seem to have learned that to be rural is to be sub-par, that the condition of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds—an educational deficiency in particular. –Paul Theobald and Kathy Wood, "Learning to be Rural: Identity Lessons from History, Schooling, and the U.S. Corporate Media"

I was born in a small town. When John Mellencamp's song hit the airwaves in 1985, I happily sang along: "Well I was born in a small town / And I live in a small town / Probably die in a small town / Oh, those small communities." It goes without saying that growing up in a small town in America likely means you were raised rural. And I am no exception. I grew up in the Midwest, in a town of 480 citizens in a spot between two rivers, and when the junior/senior high school closed and consolidated with two other small towns, the new school was named Twin River. I lamented the day in 2000 when the junior/senior high school building built in 1910 was demolished. The community did get to keep its K-4th grades building because parents of young children loathe the thought of busing their wee ones in the early morning hours. The village I grew up in during the 1960s and 1970s flourished with two grocery stores, three gas stations, a motel, a laundromat, a drug store, a grain elevator, a fertilizer company, a barber, two beauty shops, two cafes, several insurance companies, a bank, and a lumber yard. And, of course, three bars and an American Legion. When I hear present-day politicians speak empty words of making our country great again, I think of how small-town folks imagine this past in their mind's eye. Today, there is one gas station/convenience store, two bars, a bank (consolidated, not local), one

café, one beauty shop, the grain elevator, the fertilizer company, the lumber yard, and the American Legion. On Friday nights during Lent, the American Legion hosts a fish fry, drawing customers from around the county; it's likely the best fundraiser throughout the year for community improvements.

My story is not uncommon for a rural student. My secondary English/Language Arts experience was like just about every other secondary student in America. We read *Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Anthem,* and *Macbeth*. As a senior, I experienced ACT prep and complained to my English teacher, Mrs. G, "Why do we have to do this grammar stuff? I learned this in the 4th grade!" I graduated high school with high hopes—going off to the state land grant university with a desire to become an interior designer, because home economics was a course all young girls in rural America took in the 1970s. I was fortunate our school district had hired a recent college graduate who insisted on more than just cooking and sewing in the course. With my future in mind, I was the first girl to take a drafting class. And not unlike a lot of other young people from small towns, by October I had dropped out of college. I had been given no direction, no advice on how to apply for Pell Grants or scholarships, or how to look for or apply for work study jobs; the little money I had saved over the summer working a factory job in a nearby town, dried up pretty quickly. A decade later, still poor, married, with a young son, I returned to get my BA in education at a much smaller state college where my peers were just as poor as me. I was passionate about writing—and wanted to become a writer—and instead of going off to graduate school to pursue creative writing, I took a job as a secondary ELA teacher about 45 minutes from where I grew up, but in a community of about 4,250 (still small town, just not small in the village where I grew up and graduated with 22 others).

I write the preceding paragraphs to illustrate a point: I have long known that rural spaces have been viewed as lesser than. In 1997 I first began to understand a place conscious pedagogy through my initial experience with our university's National Writing Project (NWP) affiliate's Summer Rural Institute. This summer writing institute was meant to celebrate the work of teachers in small rural schools, to create a space of three weeks to share instructional strategies that were effective in our schools—some of us isolated and remote with very little opportunities for professional development. No one needed to remind us that we needed a moment to celebrate because we had long been conditioned to believe that we were "backward, uncouth, unsophisticated—a hayseed, hillbilly, cracker, yokel, hick, or country bumpkin" (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 18). This deficit oriented view of rural spaces didn't end in 1997; only recently have scholars begun to understand the need to enact a critical rural literacy in order to address the specific needs of rural educators as well as address the long-standing stereotypes (e.g., Azano, 2015; Brooke, 2003; Donehower, Hoff, & Schell, 2007; Eckert & Alsup, 2015; Eppley & Corbett, 2012; Franzak, Porter, & Harned 2019; Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen, forthcoming; Theobald & Wood, 2010; Schafft and Jackson, 2010). This NWP rural summer institute was foundational for me as I built my pedagogical framework upon place consciousness, in particular, the seminal text, *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education* by Haas and Nachtigal (1998). In it, they advocate for instilling five senses into our students: a sense of place or living well ecologically, a

sense of connection, or living well spiritually, a sense of worth or living well economically, a sense of belonging or living well in community, and a sense of civic involvement or living well politically. That rural institute in 1997 instilled in me that my teaching held value, that the citizens in my community had value and purpose, and I resolved to impart these "senses" to my students through carefully designed curriculum.

In subsequent years, I continued to adapt and revise my framework of place conscious pedagogy as literacy scholars advocated for a critical place-based pedagogy, merging critical theory with place-based pedagogy (Azano 2011; Eckert & Alsup 2015; Gruenewald 2003a; Grueenwald 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith 2014; Franzak, Porter, & Harned 2019; Kelly & Pelech, 2019; Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen, forthcoming; Smith 2002). Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (forthcoming) advocate for a critical rural English pedagogy that addresses both the local and broader discursive constructions of rurality. Greenwood (formerly Gruenewald) (2019), has reimagined his critical pedagogy of place to advocate for the critical aims of reinhabitation and decolonization, encouraging what he calls decolonization "soul work." Greenwood adapts Wattchow and Brown's (2011) practices for place consciousness in six ways: "being present in, with, and to a place; experiencing place stories; exploring the politics of place; apprenticing ourselves to places; caring for places; and representing places" (2019, p. 365).

Having lived in rural places for almost fifty years of my life, I know firsthand that rural communities have no lack of social justice issues: poverty and its inherent struggles, i.e. proper nutrition, access to effective medical, dental, vision and mental health treatment, transportation needs, job opportunities, economic growth, and, of course, educational resources and well-trained educators. As I continued adjusting my framework toward a critical place-conscious pedagogy in a rural community over a career of 21 years, I focused upon the concept of how I might live well politically, and what that meant for students in my classroom. How did I design curriculum that emphasized how they could become engaged citizens in a small town in the Midwest? How did I design and enact a curriculum that asked secondary students to take a critical stance about their locale, their very home? First, I had to explore what it means to be an engaged citizen and why it's vital for a democracy embedded in a constitutional republic.

Critically Engaged Citizenry

The third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson "insisted that giving information to the people was the most certain engine of democracy: 'Educate and inform the whole mass of people. Enable them to see that it is in their interests to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them…They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty'" (Sandel qtd. in Haas and Nachtigal, 1998, p. 41). If we are to avoid the Dark Ages of a failed democracy, we must continue to educate our citizens. One of the most important aspects of that education is teaching our students how to become engaged citizens. One of the greatest privileges of American citizenship is a public education. As citizens of this democracy we have long supported public education because it "is vested in the trust that the return on our investments (time, concern, and

taxes) to educate other people's children transcends benefits to individuals" (Haas and Nachtigal, 1998, p. 9). However, many Americans now fear that "their trust has been misplaced" and this has eroded support for public schools (p. 9). The loss of this trust in public education comes at a high cost:

> Any arrangement that makes our schools less public will have serious consequences—not only for our schools but for an entire country that was organized around the expectation that there would always be public education to 'complete the great work of the American Revolution.' (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998, p. 9)

To secure our public education and to live well politically, we need to ground our civic education in an immediate locale. This is especially true in rural spaces because they are perceived as deficit based upon a centuries long cultural history of rural versus urban (Theobald and Wood, 2010). Haas and Nachtigal (1998) cite Sandel's acknowledgement that "'grounding political education in a particular place is crucial…self-government [must be] an activity rooted in a particular place, carried out by citizens loyal to that place and the way of life it embodies'" (p. 7). Sandel believes that as citizens in a specific locale, we have the civic resources we need and they are "'still to be found in the place and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities that situate us in the world and give our lives moral particularity'" (p. 8). In rural communities, where the population is sparse, this might mean many of the same citizens serve in several roles, including educators, who not only teach but may serve as city or county council members, or serve on the local library board. It's essential that we enact a critical literacy in our rural schools because young people must take up the work of those who have often served for several generations. It's also important that adolescents understand the roles they might serve, and to know their communities are worthy of their service, and in hopes that they'll stay. Carr and Kefalas (2009) note the devastating effects of the rural brain drain and the outmigration of rural students to urban and suburban areas. Rural students learn early that if they're any good, they'll leave their small towns. Theobald and Wood (2010) write that this culturally constructed message to rural youth is empty and vacuous, but it may have lasting effects. "Rural youth see it and internalize the message it sends. Some reject the message and stay. Others accept it and leave the countryside behind. In either case, the social capital, or wherewithal of rural communities when it comes to improving their circumstances, is negatively affected" (p. 32).

Most American students learn about our federal government through a textbook, but this doesn't engage students in the act of citizenship, nor does it require of them to actually critique their locale, i.e. community, leaders, or schools. In enacting a critical rural literacy, we must engage students in a critique as well as an understanding of our own culture and history. Haas and Nachtigal note that citizenship has lost its currency, and has "'come to mean little more than voting' and that 'Democratic politics has become something we watch rather than something we do'" (p.10). They advocate for a public education that requires students to participate locally where "teachers send students out to see for themselves how democracy works" and where the "school itself [is] a living laboratory of democratic principles…providing rehearsals in civic

practice" (p. 10). Theobald (1997) recognizes that "political decision making is the privilege and responsibility of all, not just of those who successfully run for office" (p. 9).

Considering the current political climate in the United States, it is vital we teach our students that the necessary civility for governing ourselves begins at home where we must "provide role models of integrity, care, and thoughtfulness in institutions whose actions embody their ideals [and] recognize that the process of education is as important as its content" (Orr qtd. in Stone, 2010, p. 33). A sense of civic engagement is the most essential practice of social sustainability which always involves a whole community. Stone writes that we must preserve endangered human cultures just as we preserve our ecosystems. He writes, "Social and economic equity and justice are important to sustainable societies in the same way that maintaining a dynamic balance among members of a natural ecosystem is important to its sustainability" (p. 37). He encourages sustainable schooling where "teachers and administrators model, and students learn and practice, the skills required for cooperative decision making and action" (37).

It's challenging to impart a sense of civic engagement in this country because of the nature of our educational system, especially in the era of standardized tests and curriculum; however, in rural communities, the function of government is close at hand and accessible. If we empower our students with the how-to and hands-on experience of self-government, we will preserve this democracy. Wasonga (2009) argues for deep democracy as defined by John Dewey. It is a place where "there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it" (p. 202). She notes that deep democracy is both a process and a goal that thrives on "interdependence and the importance of collective choices [community] and actions [justice] in working for the common good…These practices lead to a 'sustained process of open dialogue, right to voice, community inclusion, and responsible participation toward the common good'" (p. 202) It demands "respect and reverence for individuals to participate, and recognizes interdependence, collective choices, and actions for student learning" (p. 203).

Achieving deep democracy is no easy task. In any democratic process there will be conflicts and challenges because there will be power struggles and selfish interests and a fear of losing control. It takes a good deal of skill to work effectively in collaboration but it is worth the effort because the "best democratic community presupposes there is greater efficacy" and it will require "open inquiry, communication, and collaboration, combined with sensitivity, respect, and absolute regard" (Wasonga, 2009, p. 202, 203). Theobald (2009) cites the ancient Greek worldview as a model to emulate because it "looked out to the community in an effort to establish a kind of order or harmony. People looked at the community and its needs to find an individual 'fit'—the communal role that an individual's life might occupy" (p. 9).

Investigating Local Issues

In order for students to find an 'individual fit' in their community, educators need to provide the type of inquiry that leads to the deep democracy that first gives students an opportunity to "fit"

into a *school* community, not just as receivers of knowledge but producers of knowledge. It is especially important for students to become producers of knowledge in rural spaces because of the learned stereotype of being lesser than, in particular, the perception that rural students believe they have to "catch up" when they go on to higher education (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Davies (2011) notes,

> Knowledge and power are intrinsically intertwined. By serving as knowledge producers, students as researchers can challenge deep-rooted educational structures that promote power inequalities…providing students with the knowledge and skills to gather and present information about learning and what needs to change can become a vehicle through which they can assert their rights. (76)

Throughout my early teaching career, my students regularly wrote research papers on the most common controversial topics, so I was re-reading the same argumentative papers every year. My students were not engaged in authentic inquiry that could have initiated civic action. I wanted them to become engaged in our own local issues and become aware that we had problems or concerns right in our own back yard that we should care about. In 2006, I devised a curriculum change in a dual credit college composition course for seniors that allowed students to formulate a local inquiry (see Appendix A). Students wrote papers centered on a critical inquiry concerning a local issue, i.e. the school, the community, the county, or the state. Each student read aloud his or her paper before classmates and was prepared to answer questions from the audience. In addition to defending his or her argument before classroom peers, students were also required to ask relevant questions during each other's presentations and were assessed for both (see Appendix B). I titled these presentations symposiums. As a graduate student I had attended and presented at symposiums and realized that this public forum was a framework I could modify with high school seniors. Students were required to dress professionally, speak clearly, maintain eye contact, and address questions from the audience. Students had to do the critical work of critiquing each other's inquiries in a public forum, their classroom. This practice in a safe public space helped them hone skills I believed would help them engage in the civic work of their present community or future communities.

These skills were transferred when a few students presented their symposium papers before the school board when I encouraged them to do so. One student read her paper about forming a trap-shooting club within the school district which included an argument that even if they did not form a team, those students on a local private team should be allowed absences from school like other students involved in other extracurricular activities. Two young men went before the school board on separate occasions to present their arguments for a school sponsored baseball team which could enhance their playing ability beyond the summers only Legion season. Considering the nature of some of the students' topics, especially within the community, I should have encouraged students to present their arguments at city hall or before the state legislature, especially those students who wrote passionately about the death penalty.

Most students discovered there were plenty of topics to write about within their own school, community, county, or state. The topics at the school level included respect for educators, the lack of respect for the arts in the school, semester exam policies, appeals for new courses, appeals for new athletic teams, No Child Left Behind policies, and the influence of a state football championship upon the school and community. Topics at the community level included the effects of shopping locally, the preservation of local cemeteries, the lack of preservation of historic buildings, the lack of recreational opportunities, the need for a new swimming pool, the care of the elderly, and the need for more restaurants. At the state level, students wrote about the state patrol's Click it or Ticket program, drunk driving, the drinking age, smoking bans, and the death penalty.

What I hoped to achieve with the curriculum change was engaging students in authentic inquiry based upon the need to know their place and how they might elicit change or at least awareness among their fellow students, educators, and administrators. I wanted my students to write "what they know" from their personal investigation of a local issue rather than surf the Internet for a topic that any student anywhere in the country or the world could investigate and produce the same written response. I especially encouraged them to investigate their inquiries through personal interviews. Through mini-lessons students learned how to craft surveys, interview questions (and follow up questions), and formal emails. I also addressed the proper etiquette for phone interviews and the importance of written thank you notes to interviewees. Students interviewed many administrators, teachers, peers and parents concerning school issues. At the community level students interviewed the mayor, city council members, county commissioners, attorneys, police officers, bankers, physicians, city employees, and many business owners. At the state level students contacted and received responses from state legislators, U.S. senators and representatives, and the governor. I also advocated for use of our local newspaper, other statewide news sources, our local museum and library. This opened the door for students to become more aware of their locale and that we do indeed have issues worthy of study. It also presented the possibility for future work which engages them in civic action.

Two students, Jordan and Kayla, serve as examples of this applied critical lens in their local inquires: one focused upon a cultural stereotype and one focused upon an economic concern. Jordan was both a band member and football player and his argument was that athletics should not be perceived as better than the arts. In his paper, excerpted here, he cited two music education articles and our school activities budget report, conducted a student survey, and interviewed six classmates and the band director:

> Really, the attitude that athletics have more merit than arts not only hurts the individual, who might want to sing but is afraid of a judgmental glance from his peers, but the society as a whole, which might be losing talented musicians, actors, and artists who simply never realized their talents. We need to be free to use the gifts we have, and to explore our interests, without having to worry about someone else's idea of 'cool.' Sometimes, you have to be strong *not* to be a

> wrestler. Sometimes, it takes more courage to join the band than it does to join the football team.

Jordan chose a sensitive topic: athletes hold the power position in small rural school environments and often the entire community has a bias towards athletes. They are revered and generate pride in the school and community as well as generate income as most citizens support various athletic events because they are inexpensive entertainment on Friday nights. Most administrators, teachers and students maintain there isn't a bias towards athletes, but Jordan's insights were honest. Not surprisingly, many of his interviews with students were dubbed anonymous—athletes who were afraid of being judged for telling it like it is. He notes in a reflection,

> In my research, I connected with many other students. Some valued one activity over (or at the expense of) the other, but some, it turned out, were just like me, facing exactly the same struggle. I liked finding this; it meant I wasn't alone.

Jordan recognized that his local inquiry was an important step for him personally. He displayed social and cultural awareness of his small town and the ongoing tension between the two social groups. He acknowledged that although our school was not culturally diverse, it certainly had students who were talented in different ways. He also learned something tangible about the research and interview process—some interviewees were quite reluctant about being named. He had to respect the wishes of his peers who feared retribution, and as he presented his argument to his classmates, he showed much poise as he addressed their questions (and often ire). He continued in his reflection:

> Inquiry should begin locally if possible…inquiry should be local so that it's kept small enough to grasp…Also, since we live locally, interacting with the same people and places regularly, sometimes a local focus is more important than a wide scope…I can't solve all of the world's problems, but I can help my neighbor. I can work to protect the local creek. I am most effective at fixing the problems that are nearest me, geographically and socially.

While Jordan focused on a cultural and personal issue in the school environment, Kayla focused on an economic community issue she was emotionally invested in, i.e. supporting the "Little Man" or local businesses. Her uncle owned an office supply store where she also worked part-time. Kayla interviewed seven students who held part-time jobs at businesses as well as three business owners and a teacher who made it a point to shop locally. She writes:

> On average, the high school students said in a survey that they go to [a larger community twenty minutes away] once a week. Usually the trips increase during the summer, and decrease during the winter. They buy a variety of things, many of which were at Wal-mart or the…Mall. Both retailers and students agree that

> they would like more clothing. Other types of retail mentioned were electronics and sporting goods.
>
> In order for us to grow in population, we need more options for our community. With the many new housing projects here in town, we have to have ways to attract more people. More retail locations would be beneficial to previous city dwellers, who are used to being able to get anything they need right away.
>
> If we make more of our community's most requested items available, eventually [our citizens'] weekly trips to [larger nearby town] will decline. They really appreciate being able to stop in on a Sunday afternoon and grab ink for their children's last minute school project. It is vital for our citizens to keep this opinion. By doing this, we will help all the 'little men' who work so hard and support so much of our town. We will keep our business owner's biggest fears at bay.

Kayla's inquiry into adolescent shopping patterns was certainly useful data for small business owners in the community, noting that teens really wanted more clothing choices (trendy and cosmopolitan), electronics (mp3 players, video games, etc.) and sporting goods (both apparel and equipment). As a teacher I should have encouraged her to present her findings to the area chamber of commerce because she certainly had insight into the dilemma area businesses faced—smaller inventories and higher prices. She was quick to analyze how to offset those difficulties by offering customer convenience as an asset. Community and business development groups should partner with 9-12 students and parents in an inquiry that would benefit businesses by conducting the research with the very clientele they hope to bring into their stores.

What struck me most about Kayla's inquiry was how astute she was about the importance of small businesses to the vitality of the entire community. She also showed insight into the potential for a demographic shift of former urban or suburban dwellers moving to a small town—though this is not the current trend, it showed she was aware that some graduates may decide to return and they will want several buying options. She was also very realistic, knowing that starting a new business is risky and takes a great deal of time and money.

Having my students conduct their own inquiries into issues in our local community helped them "make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; at its best [this] political deliberation is not only about competing policies but also about competing interpretations of the character of a community, its purpose and ends" (Sandel qtd. in Haas and Nachtigal 9). I wanted an honest investigation but more importantly, I wanted them to expand their knowledge of their surroundings and the people they interacted with daily. I wanted them to learn that we must know our own local problems and consider what we must do to solve them. In short, I wanted them to become good citizens who have a critical eye about what should matter most: the place we call home.

Eckert and Alsup's (2010) research of critical literacy in rural spaces notes that teachers in small rural communities "are immersed in their students' lives…[they have] deep connections...with students throughout their schooling—connections forged though several levels of classroom instruction, in extracurricular activities, in community organizations and events, and through extensive knowledge of parents and families" (p. 76). They also note that teachers are community leaders and public intellectuals who have significant roles in both academic and administrative decision making with a great deal of autonomy in their curriculum design. My experience echoes these insights, and I argue that because of these connections and varied roles, I was empowered to enact a curriculum that allowed students to critique their locale. This autonomy also allows rural teachers an opportunity to examine the discourse about the perception of rural citizens, and to push back against stereotypes voiced by others.

The very first local inquiry I conducted as a secondary ELA teacher was the result of the city administrator approaching me and asking a simple question, "Do you think your students could collect some of the life stories of some of our citizens in nursing homes? My mother died at 100, but I never got her life story, and that is a tragedy." Because of his question, I worked with local nursing homes, a state historian and a regionally renowned storyteller, and other experts to gather stories—pieces of history—to preserve in perpetuity. For me, those connections and relationships within the community drove my curriculum—and I was fortunate enough to have been given a wide berth and a vote of confidence from my administration and school board to develop curriculum to respond to needs in the community. That first oral history project with students in English 3 lead to subsequent years of oral history inquiries of business owners, farmers, and prominent women in the community in the frame of work ethnographies. In each of those whole class inquiries, students created digital stories, i.e. websites with text and links or websites with digital stories narrated by students with photographs and background music. It also lead to these individual local inquiries of senior composition students, and finally, in my last year of secondary teaching, to an inquiry by English 4 students into our local food pantry, thrift store, elementary backpack program, ministerial association funding, county resources, and Habitat for Humanity because a colleague in history asked me, "Do you think you can have your students do an inquiry into local poverty and hunger? The food pantry was very low on donations this summer."

In another composition student's final reflection about the individual local inquiry assignment, he or she notes, "It helped me become engaged in my community and understand how to research an issue and talk/interview experts that helped influence my own understanding of the said issue. I heard a lot of different perspectives too. I got to be active in the community and get to know people." Getting to know people is the heart of civic engagement. I concur with Stone (2010) that "students can understand a community better by seeing it through the eyes of people who live and work there" (38). Students also recognize there are citizens in the community who hold many kinds of expertise—dispelling the myths of deficiency or less than status that history and media has portrayed about rural spaces. In retrospect, my own sense of having to prove my worth had a significant impact upon whom I became as a teacher—because I grew up in poverty in a small village and witnessed its steady decline over my own adolescence. My rural identity is

tightly knit into my teacher self. I felt a sense of urgency enacting a critical literacy place conscious pedagogy. This urgency was borne out of a sense of loss—mourning—for the place I grew up. I wanted my own rural students to understand the value of their vibrant community and that they could live well ecologically, spiritually, economically, politically, and communally and sustain it well into the future.

References

Azano, A.P. (2015). "Addressing the rural context in literacies research." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 59*(3), 267-69.

Azano, A. (2011). The possibility of place: One teacher's use of place-based instruction for English students in a rural high school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 26* (10). Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/26-10.pdf.

Brooke, R. E. (Ed.). (2003). *Rural voices: Place-conscious education and the teaching of writing* (Vol. 25). Teachers College Press.

Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M.J. (2009). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Beacon Press.

Davies, P. M. (2011). Student participation in school ICT policy-making: a case of students as researchers. *Management in Education, 25*(2), 71-77.

Donehower, K, Hogg, C., and Schell, E.E. (2007). *Rural Literacies*. SIU Press.

Eckert, L.S. & Alsup, J. (2015). *Literacy teaching and learning in rural communities: Problematizing stereotypes, challenging myths*. Routledge.

Eppley, K. & Corbett, M. (2012). I'll see that when I believe it: A dialogue on epistemological difference and rural literacies. *Journal of Research in Rural Education,* 27(1). Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/27-1.pdf

Franzak, J. K., Porter, H. D., & Harned, C. (2019). "We're rural not dumb": An examination of literacy sponsorship. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education, 15*(2), n2.

Greenwood, D. A. (2019). Place, land, and the decolonization of the settler soul. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 50*(4-6), 358-377.

Gruenewald, D. A., & Smith, G. A. (Eds.). (2014). *Place-based education in the global age: Local diversity*. Routledge.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003a). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(3), 619-654.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003b). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational researcher, 32*(4), 3-12.

Haas, T., & Nachtigal, P. (1998). *Place value: An educator's guide to good literature on rural*

lifeways, environments, and purposes of education. Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Appalachia Educational Laboratory.

Petrone, R. & Wynhoff Olsen, A. (Forthcoming). *Teaching English in rural communities: Toward a Critical Rural English Pedagogy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Schafft, K.A. and Jackson, A.Y. (Eds.). (2010). *Rural education for the twenty-first century*: *Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world*. Penn State University Press.

Smith, G. A. (2002). Place-based education: Learning to be where we are. *Phi delta kappan*, *83*(8), 584-594.

Stone, M. K. (2010). A schooling for sustainability framework. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 37*(4), 33-46.

Theobald, P., & Wood, K. (2010). Learning to be rural: Identity lessons from history, schooling, and the US corporate media. In K.A. Schafft & A.Y. Jackson (Eds.), *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world* (pp.17-33). Penn State University Press.

Theobald, P. (1997). *Teaching the commons: Place, pride, and the renewal of community*. Westview Print.

Wattchow, B., & Brown, M. (2011). *A pedagogy of place: Outdoor education for a changing world*. Monash University Publishing.

Wasonga, T. A. (2009). Leadership practices for social justice, democratic community, and learning: School principals' perspectives. *Journal of School Leadership*, *19*(2), 200-224.

Woodhouse, J. L., & Knapp, C. (2000). *Place-based curriculum and instruction: Outdoor and environmental education approaches*. Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Appalachia Educational Laboratory.

Appendix A

College Composition Symposiums Assignment

Introduction: The symposium will be conducted similar to a professional symposium where scholars present their papers or thesis to a scholarly audience. Professionals who have been invited to symposiums have been honored to do so, because they have submitted a thesis or paper that exemplifies the symposium's theme and because they have also presented an exceptionally articulate argument. The purpose of these student symposiums is to give you an opportunity to present your academic inquiries for scrutiny. It also gives you an opportunity for public speaking in a scholarly setting. If you decide to create a mini-documentary film, this will give you an opportunity to present your work and answer questions about it. It may also prepare you for the future which hopefully includes submitting undergraduate and graduate work to conferences and symposiums. The topic for your symposium/final paper must be approved by the instructor, that is, me. This inquiry must be supported by valid and viable research; you must have evidence to support your argument. As Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz write, "You may gather an impressive amount of evidence on your topic—from firsthand interviews, from careful observations, and from intensive library and online research. But until that evidence is woven into the fabric of your own argument, it is just a pile of data. Using your evidence effectively calls for turning data into information that will be persuasive to your intended audience" (308). You must inform me of your topic choice by **[insert date].** Of course, I realize you may decide to change direction throughout the term, but I would advise against this after the midpoint of the term!

Requirements: The argument paper must contain a thesis statement or controlling idea centered on a critical inquiry you have chosen concerning a local issue, i.e. the school, community, county, or the state. You must support your thesis with relevant details and examples and cite your sources. There is a separate section later addressing source materials. You are required to submit **two preliminary drafts that will be graded as a final draft copy each time**. The first final draft quality paper is due on **[insert date]** and the second final draft quality paper is due on **[insert date]**. Any late drafts will receive a **10%** deduction in points **per day** it is late.

According to the syllabus, the first day of symposiums is **[insert date]**. Each of you is expected to read your paper before your classmates and then be prepared to answer questions from the audience**. You are required to dress professionally for your symposium.** In addition to defending your argument before classroom peers, you are also required to ask relevant questions during every symposium. You must conduct yourself accordingly, i.e. respectful listening (including taking notes during the presentation in order to fully comprehend the argument), asking relevant and inquisitive questions, and not attacks of the speaker or the speaker's ideas, and hearty applause when the speaker is finished. You will be **drawn at random** for the symposiums which will be held at the end of the term. We will also conduct a workshop day for each of you so that all members of the class can review your paper and provide feedback.

Workshop days are [insert dates]. The final paper will be graded by a rubric in class the day of your presentation.

In English 11 you learned the MLA (Modern Language Association) style of documentation. This course will focus on learning the APA (American Psychological Association) style of documentation with these requirements:

- **6-8 pages**
- **TEN sources**
- Typed, double-spaced, 1 inch margins on top, bottom, left and right margins
- Title page
- Brief title header and pagination in the upper right hand corner of the paper
- Documentation (parenthetical author-date citations and a **reference** list at the end).

A Word about Sources:

We will look at local newspapers to generate some ideas about symposium topics. You may use an **unlimited** amount of **local PRINT** sources for your symposium. Due to past experience, you will be **limited** to **one school survey** which may be taken only in senior English courses. Surveys must be given to me in advance for distribution. Do not create a problem for yourself by waiting until the last minute. You are limited to **TWO PEER** interviews. However, you may have unlimited interviews with local experts, that is, teachers, administrators, and community members. This year I also encourage you to cite one national source or one global source if it correlates to the topic.

Final Paper/Symposium Scoring: (250 Points)

Content and support of argument/thesis: 70 points
Citation of sources: 40 points
Defense of argument: 30 points
Organization: 20 points
Manuscript form: 20
Conventions: 20
Listening skills: 20 points
Questioning: 30 points

The date for each student's symposium will be selected at random. ***Students who are not prepared for their symposium receive a zero.*** Students must be prepared for their symposium on the date he or she is scheduled. The symposium paper should be in **final draft form** and should be accompanied by* **copies of all of the sources*** used, including notes from interviews. The symposium/final paper grade is worth 10% of the term grade because it is your term exam. As noted earlier with the preliminary drafts, a**ny part of the assignment that is late, i.e. works**

cited page, copies of sources, final draft form of paper, will result in a 10% deduction per day that it is late.

.

Appendix B

College Composition Symposium Rubric
Revised October, 2012

Trait	Beginning	Progressing	Proficient	Advanced
Content	Symposium lacks a clear thesis and there is little support or evidence for the argument. (0-59)	Symposium may have a clear thesis and may have some support of argument. (58-63)	Symposium has a clear thesis and several examples to support argument. (64--67)	Symposium has articulate thesis and ample evidence to support thesis. (68-70)
Citation of Sources	Student correctly cites 2-3 source in the final paper/ symposium. (0-26)	Student correctly cites 4-5 sources in the final paper/ symposium. (27-31)	Student correctly cites 6-8 sources in final paper/symposium. (32-35)	Student correctly cites 10 sources in the final paper/symposium. (36-40)
Defense of Argument	Student lacks adequate defense of argument when questioned by audience. (0-16)	Student may have a few answers when defending his or her argument. (17-21)	Student has several answers for audience when defending his or her argument. (22-24)	Student has ample answers for audience when defending his or her argument. (25-30)
Organization	Student lacks organization of ideas in the final paper (0-15)	Student's ideas are somewhat clear and organized in paper. (16-17)	Student's ideas are mostly clear and organized in the paper. (18-19)	Students ideas are exceptionally clear & organized in paper. (20)
Conventions	Student has more than	Student has 12-14	Student has 9-11	Student has fewer than

	15 grammar/spelling or syntax errors. (0-15)	grammar/spelling or syntax errors. (16-17)	grammar/spelling or syntax errors. (18-19)	8 grammar/spelling or syntax errors. (20)
Manuscript form	Student has more than 15 format errors in APA style. (0-15)	Student has 12-14 errors in APA style. (16-17)	Student has 9-11 errors in APA style. (18-19)	Student has fewer than 8 errors in APA style. (20)
Listening Skills	Student rarely listens to fellow students or is distracting while someone is speaking. (0-15)	Student listens attentively 50% of the time; student may disrupt once. (16-17)	Student listens attentively 75% of the time; student does not disrupt. (18-19)	Student listens attentively 95-100% of the time; student is completely focused. (20)

This section will be assessed separately once all of the symposiums are done:

Questioning	Student asks one or two questions during symposium. (0-16)	Student asks three questions during symposium. (17-21)	Student asks four questions during symposium. (22-24)	Student asks five questions during symposium. (25-30)

CHECKLIST for DEDUCTIONS: (FIVE POINT DEDUCTION for each item)

____ Paper is not on a local topic or a national topic with local sources.

____ Paper does not contain 8 local sources and 2 national or international.

____ Paper does not use the American Psychological Association (A.P.A.) format

____Student does not turn in a copy of all source material

____Student does not present symposium on day assigned

TOTAL POINTS: _____/220 **COMMENTS:**

Author Bio

Cathie English teaches undergraduate and graduate English education courses at Missouri State University after a twenty-two year career in secondary English education. Her research focuses upon place conscious education with an emphasis in community literacy, teacher leadership and composition theory and practice. You can find her work in the *English Journal*, Teacher-Scholar-Activist.org, and Syracuse University Press's *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia*.

VISUALIZING A PLACE FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

HEATHER LYNN WRIGHT
VIRGINIA TECH

Abstract

The following paper critically reviews current studies on trauma-informed pedagogy. In examining the existing literature, the author explores how adapted trauma-informed pedagogies could be useful in the rural English language arts (ELA) classroom. In finding relevant elements of trauma-informed pedagogy that can be implemented in the rural ELA classroom, the author seeks to offer potential strategies for classroom teachers.

Visualizing a Place for Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in the ELA Classroom

Standing in the industrial-size trash can, searching for a missing hot pink retainer, I wondered at how things had come to this point. Rather than planning for my next class, grading papers, or even finishing my untouched lunch, I was aimlessly searching, literally inside the trashcan, for a student's retainer, which had been accidentally tossed with the remainder of her lunch. I found the retainer, much to the joy of my student, but the event carried with me throughout the rest of the day, in the form of the special scent that only a mixture of school pizza and ranch dressing could produce. That day, the odor of school lunch carried with me, but almost all days in my teaching career, I carried something far heavier: the stories of my students. Their narratives, those spoken and written by the students themselves, and those disclosed by guardians, hung on me throughout each school day, my commute home, and as I lay in bed trying to sleep. Unlike the smell of pizza and ranch dressing, these narratives did not wash out or fade. The stories were persistent and continued to build, quickly impacting me and my role as a teacher. How could I worry about teaching literature and writing when students were dealing with huge events in their lives, from bullying to breakups, parental divorce to foster care, and from depression to abuse?

I found the retainer in the trashcan not because I was supremely motivated or a sleuth at finding orthodontic devices. I found the retainer because another student came, saw that I was in a pickle, and helped me look for the retainer from their position outside the trashcan. My position inside the trashcan did not allow me to see the big picture; I was too deep into the task. Another set of eyes help to point out what I could no longer see. Being in the ELA classroom, my courses were a seemingly natural place for stories to be told and shared, in journal entries, classroom

talks, and reflections. Throughout my teaching career, I carried the stories of my students with me. Stories helped me to better understand the unique experiences of my students, and the nature of the English classroom supported the seeking and sharing of stories. Sometimes, I prompted these stories in class as part of an entire group discussion. *Tell me what you think about Romeo's actions. Would you have done differently?* Other times, the prompting came out of an obvious need, such as the students who frequently wandered into my room during breaks, heaved heavy sighs, and plopped down in the large comfy chair by my desk. *Hey, what's up? Tell me what's on your mind today.* In other words, tell me a story. More importantly, tell me *your* story. The issue is that rural students often do not see themselves in the stories they encounter in the standard curriculum. I saw that issue play out in my classroom. W*hen am I ever going to need to know about* Macbeth*? Why does this matter?*

I wanted my students to see themselves in the curriculum, in the stories being told. To make those connections, I had to get to know my students. At my small rural school, the size of the entire school population and the subsequent size of my classes allowed for me to know a great deal about my students. What I did not realize at the time was that I was experiencing second hand trauma. I heard stories told by administrators trying to protect, guardians seeking insight, and students seeking a listening ear. What I also did not realize was that being in the ELA classroom, I already had the tools I needed to not only help students with their experiences of trauma, but also resolve my own second hand trauma.

Positionality in Rurality and Rural Education

In exploring a use for trauma-informed pedagogy in the rural ELA classroom, I am not asserting that rural schools have a greater need for such supports, either for teachers or students. Nor am I supposing that rural communities have a greater amount of trauma than urban or suburban communities. In thinking about a positionality in rural schools under the umbrella of addressing forms of trauma, it is crucial to address the deficit mindset that is often associated with rurality, where the focus is on the perceived problems of rurality rather than the potentiality of rurality. This deficit mindset can negatively impact those in rural places and their narratives of rurality. This is particularly true of rural students, who are developing their sense of identity. Among the multiple facets at work in the production of identity, for those from rural areas, rurality is a factor (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Rurality is attached to identity formation; thus, dominant cultural narratives of what it means to be "rural" influence said identity formation in terms of "agency" and "self-efficacy" (p. 18). For many, the narrative of being rural is endowed with a strong sense of family and community connections; for others, the narrative of being rural is one of being less or being without, of having less potential than others. The dominant cultural narratives of rurality influence the rural narratives and the identities of students. Because the narratives and identities of rural teachers and students, as rural residents, are so ingrained with rurality, examining aspects of rurality influencing teachers and students is relevant.

Across the U.S., there is a growing need for schools to support students in schools (Nicholas et al., 2017). Specifically, there is the need in rural communities to establish social-emotional

support. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services (2014), almost eight million rural residents are classified as living in poverty; of the children residing in rural areas, 20% are classified as living in poverty. Viewed frequently as the means for resources and activity for the community, schools are also seen as the means of maintaining networks for students as well as building strength (Beebe-Frankenberger & Goforth, 2014). The need to provide support can be complex for rural schools, because, though mandated by the same laws as guidelines as other schools, rural schools have a reality that is inherently unique (Huysman, 2018). In comparison to suburban and urban schools, rural schools often have neither the amount nor degree of resources and support systems that come from local entities. Because of the limited resources from other entities, rural school districts must be the driving entity serving to "provide a quality and appropriate education to the youth of their community" (p. 31). Teachers thus serve as a key resource in rural schools, as they are the ones creating inviting classrooms and implementing curricula. Clearly, rural teachers have great responsibility, making it unsurprising that they, as with all teachers, can be impacted by secondary traumatic stress. Despite the pressure that rural teachers, including myself, feel to support students, we must avoid operating from a deficit mindset that paints the outlook for rural teachers and students as bleak.

Azano and Biddle (2019) explain that the traditional study of rurality is a deficit-minded theoretical lens. Looking at Freire's theories of critical awareness and oppression, Azano and Biddle seek to "frame and reframe rural challenges and opportunities" (p. 4). Freire's (2018) "danger of conscientização" and "fear of freedom" (pp. 36-36) are of great importance in reframing awareness in the classroom, because both concepts are rooted in the experience of the student as they make meaning with the world. For example, in the context of rurality, "fear of freedom" plays out in the form of losing industries and resources, such as the coal industry in Appalachia or the forestry industry in Maine (Azano & Biddle, 2019). These industries are defining aspects of regional rural cultures that positively and negatively impact rural areas. Such potentially negative aspects feed into the deficit mindset of rurality, which impacts the identities of rural teachers and students.

Freire's concepts can be used to develop an understanding of the "troubled dichotomies" that exist in rural areas and rural life (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 5). What is often perceived as problematic can, in rural areas, become a space of potential and promise, such as within the space of student trauma and the secondary traumatic stress of teachers. As I seek to unpack student trauma and the secondary traumatic stress of teachers, I want to tend to the potential deficit mindset that is often associated with rurality and rural schools in connection to "issues" in education. By engaging in self-reflection of my teaching experiences in a rural community, as well as conducting a literature review on current studies in trauma-informed pedagogy, the goal of this research is to examine how the use of trauma-informed pedagogy in the rural ELA classroom can address both student trauma as well as the secondary traumatic stress of teachers.

Trauma

Jennings (2009) calls trauma experienced by an individual as “an event so intense that it results in physical or psychological harm” (p. 9). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2019) describes trauma as: "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." Traumatic experiences impact individuals on behavioral and physical levels, and relate to substance abuse and instability in career pursuits and relationships. However, trauma is not limited to an individual being physically impacted, and can also include viewing harm inflicted on another, emotional or psychological abuse, and neglect (Jennings, 2019). Trauma has a far bigger impact than the physical, and manifests in the lives of students in the form of student trauma.

Student Trauma

To think about how to unpack what student trauma is, I first want to go back to my time in the trashcan looking for the lost retainer. Losing a retainer is not an issue of being unsafe. However, the consequences of potentially losing a retainer could be traumatic and explicitly unsafe for the student. Retainers are an expensive and taxing additional cost on a family; replacing one doubles that impact. Could that financial strain cause trauma for the household, including the student that lost the retainer? Could a parent or guardian express anger or frustration to such a degree that their response would result in a traumatic experience for the student? A guiding definition of trauma for this inquiry is “an overwhelming experience that undermines one’s belief that the world is good and safe” (Brunzell et al., 2018, p. 116). These experiences impact student learning because students often resist learning in the classroom setting, as they are preoccupied with dealing with traumatic experiences.

Frequently, there is a tension between the “real life” students experience outside of the classroom and the “classroom life” that is only experienced in school. Such a statement, as innocent as it is, supposes that the only life that students experience is outside of the classroom. Students’ lives are lived not just at home, but at school, which is where they spend most of their day. Their experiences outside of the classroom are carried into the classroom and those two experiences cannot be separated. That inability to separate experiences inside the classroom and outside the classroom is imperative to remember when thinking about the trauma that some students carry with them into the school day. Events such as school shootings and active shooter drills are generally at the center of focus on school-based trauma. However, students experience trauma in a multitude of ways. Aside from the types of trauma specifically associated with school settings, students each have a unique set of life circumstances that might result in forms of trauma. While student trauma is frequently associated with school-related violence, there are innocuous events such as divorce, long distance moves, or absent parents that might leave a child traumatized. Additionally, children may have experienced or witnessed abuse, be coping with or living with

someone who has a mental illness or have experienced the death or loss of someone significant in their lives. Trauma is often silent and unknown to the greater community, but that seemingly silent trauma is screaming in the lives of classroom students.

The Need to Address the Secondary Traumatic Stress of Classroom Teachers

In order to help support students' ability to learn in the classroom setting, teachers must be aware of best coping practices and instructional tools (Brunzell et al., 2018). In addition, a trauma-informed classroom must also include the secondary traumatic stress that teachers experience in the classroom. Secondary traumatic stress is "a cluster of overlapping concepts including vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue" (p. 118). The term compassion fatigue is sometimes used interchangeably with secondary traumatic stress (Walker, 2019). The symptoms of secondary traumatic stress can look like the symptoms seen with post-traumatic stress disorder, including withdrawal from loved ones, irritability and anger, numbness, trouble focusing, feelings of hopelessness and guilt, issues with sleeping and eating, and constant worrying about students inside and outside of the classroom (Lander, 2018).

Teachers also experience burnout and additional work-related stress, as articulated by Santoro (2011), which has led to a large number of teachers exiting the profession. Both the rate of teachers leaving the profession and the stress level of teachers who stay negatively affect students in the classroom; the impact is greater on students already impacted by trauma and who are, therefore, in need of additional adult support. For Jennings and Greenberg (2009), the result is the risk of the "burnout cascade," an unfavorable spiral that occurs in classrooms where teaching stress is raised by undesirable student behavior, which increases stress in teaching. Because teachers often feel that they are alone, there are ways that schools can support teachers and address that loneliness, including creating peer groups and structuring a trauma-informed school (Lander, 2018). Peer groups have the function of helping in two ways: (1) to improve the success of students, as teachers can work collaboratively on curriculum to address trauma and plan assistance to individual students; (2) to improve the mental health of teachers via school supported mental health resources and peer support.

The Long-Term Impact of Trauma: The ACE Study

Dods (2013) stated that trauma in childhood is not a rarity: 25% to 45% of all young people experience trauma. Whereas "positive or tolerable stress" has been shown to encourage growth in a healthy way, trauma and chronic stress negatively impacts the development of children (Jennings, 2019, p. 17). Trauma produces psychological stress that has the potential to "interfere with all aspects of a youth's life," from their academic performances to their psychosocial functioning (Dods, 2013, p. 74). Young people experiencing stress from trauma have a higher chance of delinquent behavior, substance abuse, health issues regarding mental, physical, and behavioral well-being, and "diminished educational and employment success" (p. 74). Young

people with "trauma histories" may show signs typical of at-risk students, such as poor grades and frequent absences, and may exhibit other signs, such as social issues (p. 74).
Felitti et al. (1998), in looking at the connection between adult mortality and childhood trauma, asserts the need to examine "childhood exposures" as "the basic causes of morbidity and mortality in adult life" (p. 775). Researchers used The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study to connect mortality-linked health issues with the long-term impact of experiences from childhood. The ACE questionnaire, facilitated with 18 total questions, defines childhood abuse within eight of the total questions, using three categories: psychological abuse, physical abuse, and contact sexual abuse. A respondent's "measure of childhood exposure" would be determined by the sum of categories, within a range of 0 (no exposure) to 7 (exposure to all categories listed) (p. 776). The study showed a connection between ten leading mortality-linked diseases in the U.S., such as severe obesity and depression, with exposure to traumas in childhood.

The Place for Trauma Informed Pedagogy in ELA

Just as Felitti et al. discuss the connection between childhood traumas and their impact later in life, traumas manifest themselves in often unexpected ways in the lives of individuals, including teachers. A teacher's stress in the classroom impacts their interaction with students, the students themselves, and the instructional practice of the classroom (Jennings, 2018). The use of trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom should not only benefit students by helping them develop skills to empathize with and cope with traumas, but should also support the classroom teacher as they navigate dealing with secondary traumatic stress. By requiring school educators to "recognize the prevalence, impact, and indicators of childhood trauma," trauma-informed practices seek to support students (Crosby et al., 2018, p. 17).

The ELA classroom is a key place for trauma-informed pedagogy and classroom practices to be implemented because of the share and response nature of the traditional subject area. Students benefit from having an emotional connection to the material in the ELA classroom in order to be engaged (Thein et al., 2015). Though the authors are not specifically speaking to trauma-informed pedagogy, emotional investment is a key component in successful trauma-informed pedagogy seeking to assist teachers and students.

Concepts from the Literature

In reviewing the literature related to trauma-informed pedagogy, two concepts resonated with me: the "critical witness" (Dutro, 2011) and "the speaking wound" (Dutro, 2011; Dutro & Bien, 2014). Given the presence of these two concepts in the literature on trauma-informed pedagogy, I wonder how these pedagogical constructs can be utilized by teachers to inform classroom practices and support teachers?

Witness and Testimony

According to Dutro (2011), the idea of testimony and witness come from the field of trauma studies and the work of Felman and Laub (1992). Dutro explained that trauma studies seek to provide insight into human functions. Dutro utilized the concept of "witnessing testimonies of trauma" as used by the literary theorists Felman and Laub. Originally, "witnessing testimonies of trauma" in literature looked to "literature that testifies to large-scale trauma and the witnessing role of the readers who encounter trauma on the page." (p. 197). Witnessing in literature involves three suppositions: the testimony serves as written experience, the reader has separation emotionally from the testimony, and the act of intentional encounter with trauma in the literature "demands that the reader serve as witness" (p. 197). Dutro takes the lens of the witnessing role in trauma studies, as used with readers and writers in Felman and Laub's work, and applies it to the classroom. Dutro speaks of the "circle of testimony-witness" within the classroom, where "someone's difficult experience enters the classroom (in whatever way that occurs) and demands that others bear witness." (p. 197). The circle continues as the listener, who has been confronted with the trauma testimony via bearing witness, "may respond with personal testimony that, in turn, must be witnessed and, again, may prompt testimony from her witness" (p. 198). Because of the circular nature between testimony and witness as it functions in a classroom, teachers must, in turn, be witnesses to their students and testifiers of their personal experiences (Dutro, 2011).

Such a circular relationship, as articulated by Dutro, is a means of creating a trauma-informed ELA classroom. With their connections in literary theory, the roles of testimony and witness mirror the practice of reader-response. Such reader-response in the form of testimony and witness creates a space for "the speaking wound" and "the critical witness."

Dutro, in discussing the nuances of the circle of testimony and witness, refers to what Caruth (1996) calls "the speaking wound" (p. 198). Because serving as witnesses involves "a taking in" of another's story, the speaking wound is "a trauma borne by another that speaks to the wounds of the hearer." (as cited in Dutro, 2011, p. 198). Dutro notes that students will connect with the speaking wound because, as Caruth argues, it relies on a connection between the speaker and the listener and the shared experience of pain. This concept of the speaking wound also connects to the secondary traumatic stress experienced by teachers, specifically ELA teachers, whose classrooms are a prime space for such discussions.

In using the speaking wound, Dutro offers that within the classroom, "this sharing of students' wounds requires us to awaken to the ways our stories are connected to those we witness." (p. 199). Such sharing also "must be allowed to reveal the potentially different ways that we and students are positioned by our challenges" (p. 199). This is what Dutro calls "critical witnessing": "a self-conscious attention to both connection and difference between one's own and others' testimonies" (p. 199). Teachers must be aware of how they respond and share in the

role of testimonies. The role of the critical witness is imperative when thinking about how the ELA teacher listens and responds to shared testimonies in the classroom.

Findings

Through a review of selected literature on trauma-informed pedagogy, the following are themes that come up in the literature as related to the role trauma-informed pedagogy can play in the ELA classroom and how to support trauma-impacted students and teachers impacted by secondary traumatic stress.

Theme 1: ELA teachers benefit from the use of trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom because of how it fits with common practices in the ELA classroom.

Trauma-informed pedagogical practices are inherently geared towards being student-centered and focused on student trauma. However, in order for trauma-informed pedagogical practices to work in the classroom to benefit students, there must be an intentional awareness to: (1) the reality that teachers are impacted by the trauma in their classrooms, as well as the trauma in their own lives, and (2) the need for schools to support teachers in dealing with trauma inside and outside of the classroom. Rural ELA teachers can benefit from the use of trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom because of how such pedagogical practices fit into the already common practices in the ELA classroom.

The culture and format of the ELA classroom can be used to implement trauma-informed pedagogical practices and support both students and teachers. Read (1998), in her study on the use of the "borderland" paradigm in the classroom, stresses the need to restructure the traditional classrooms to be "more productive for critical teaching and learning" (p. 106) so that student writing and stories can grow. Additionally, Read acknowledges the tension in moving trauma into the classroom space, as there is a historically distinct divide that falls "between the academic realm of the intellectual and the private realm of experience" (p. 113). Teachers and students both experience trauma and vulnerability, and that responding to trauma via published texts in the safety of the classroom is "easier" than doing so in the "social space of teaching" (p. 113).

In order to deal with trauma in the classroom, teachers need support from their schools in the form of a clear system. One such intentional move on a school-level is having smaller classes, which is often the case in rural schools. In examining the "intersections between trauma and learning" in the classroom, Sitler (2009) reflects on studies with two students: Laurie, a fifth grader, and Will, a first-year college student (p. 119). Both students are struggling in their schoolwork and appear to be "unmotivated and disengaged," but each is "living with or recovering from psychological trauma" and both "are learners whose concerns outside the classroom overwhelmed them" (p. 119). Laurie and Will benefited from the fact that they were in small classes, which allowed their classroom teachers to get to know them as students.

Theme 2: ELA teachers can be an important part of the emotional development of their students by modeling meaningful practices in the classroom.

As seen with the need for smaller class sizes to promote student and teacher interaction (Sitler), in implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom, teachers are key. Jennings notes that children and adolescents need adults to help "support" them following trauma, as trauma can impact "healthy development" (p. 12). Read importantly points out that teachers are not psychologists, also noting the difference between education being "therapeutic" but "not professional therapy" (p. 113).

Densmore-James and Yocum (2015) utilize emotional pedagogy with the underlying construct that teachers are part of their students' development of emotional intelligence. The authors explore best-practices via their own classroom experiences, including being part of a community and school in Northern Virginia impacted by the Pentagon tragedy in 2001. The researchers propose a stance on emotional pedagogy that is "holistic" in nature, one which emphasizes all emotions, ranging from "joy to sorrow" (p. 121).

For Sitler, even though teachers are burdened with the regular tasks of teaching and student performance measures, they can see they have a focus on student needs in terms of trauma. In a similar vein, Varlas (2007) states that even just asking how a student is feeling that day can be an act of awareness. Laurie and Will's experience, Sitler observes that these young students were unable to assert any agency over their situations. Students in traumatic situations need spaces that allow them to manage some aspects of their lives, even if that manageable space is outside the home. They also need ways to connect with others. By teaching with awareness, teachers can help to create pathways for students to manage and connect.

Theme 3: ELA teachers can utilize bibliotherapy and writing as part of trauma-informed pedagogical practices in the classroom to create a space for students to dialogue.

Densmore-James and Yocum (2015) discuss the use of bibliotherapy as a means for students to express and reflect on trauma. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the work of Mattie Stepanek, who at the time was 11-years old with muscular dystrophy, helped the lead researcher and her class to deal with the trauma of that day and the days following. Mattie's numerous works deal with the concept of "Heartsongs," the idea that everyone has a heartsong and that, to better the world, everyone's heartsongs need to be listened to and valued. What followed was "the use of bibliotherapy and writing as a crisis intervention approach" (p. 122). The students initiated the project, asking first to read Mattie's works, and then requesting to create their own compilations of heartsongs. However, even with this powerful example of bibliotherapy, the researcher stresses that those educators, despite plans for helping students, "were victims and witnesses to the terror attacks" (p. 123). In addition, the constant news coverage made students relive the events.

Read (1998) references postcolonial theory, asserting the theory to talk about the classroom space as an invented space or a community that is imagined. Within this idea of community, not participating through "bearing witness," creates a danger of actively participating in "social repression" (p. 113). "Communal sharing and witnessing" are of crucial importance to teaching in the space of the borderland (p. 113). Creating a sense of community in the borderland requires examining existing boundaries between students and teachers as well as student-made texts and literary texts (p. 114).

Reflecting upon practices serves both teachers and students in an authentic way. Not all strategies will work with all courses, but reflection and adaptation allow teachers to meet the needs of their students as they seek to address issues of spoken and silent trauma in the ELA classroom. Gibbs, throughout multiple studies, found that teachers communicated feeling inadequately prepared to teach topics of a sensitive or complicated nature within the classroom (Gibbs, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020b). Studies showed that teachers felt they had received inadequate professional development to facilitate trauma sensitive instruction. Gibbs (2020a) cautioned that critical teaching regarding sensitive topics can be problematic if teachers perceive there could be repercussions for tacking potentially divisive topics. When teachers are concerned about censure, they may not seek support in their teaching of said sensitive topic from fellow teachers or administrators (Gibbs, 2020a). If a topic in class triggers an emotional response in a student, the teacher may feel that they are not equipped or may not be equipped to safely, effectively, and appropriately mediate a response (Gibbs, 2020a). Gibbs proposed several suggestions for how to best foster a culture of trauma sensitivity in schools, as well as classroom implementation and professional development, including having long-term goals regarding professional development for trauma-informed practices. Gibbs also stressed the importance of rooting trauma-informed classroom practices within the lived experiences of students to maintain relevance.

For those who want to learn more about trauma-informed pedagogy or fostering a trauma-sensitive classroom, I highly recommend reading Jennings (2019) to gain a better understanding of the ways in which trauma impacts students and teachers, as well as how teachers and schools can implement forward-thinking strategies. In addition, Dutro (2011) and Dutro and Bien (2014) are excellent resources regarding the connectivity of trauma in the classroom and its potential pedagogical links to the ELA classroom.

Discussion

The first year I was out of the classroom, I received a call from my former principal. The news was relayed to me through broken sentences and sudden sobs. One of my beloved students, who always made me laugh, who once accidentally spun me into a bookshelf trying to prove to the class he could salsa, who serenaded the class with everything from Johnny Cash to Nickelback, who had his entire life ahead of him, was gone. I traveled back for the student-led memorial service. At the memorial, I tried to hold my composure for my former students and staff

members. I cried massive tears with a broken heart, unable to help him, feeling unable to help my students and fellow teachers. But as soon my tears came, I was surrounded by students and colleagues, who openly grieved with me. The physical classrooms of the school had gone from spaces for lessons to spaces for mourning. I remind myself that the act of communal grief, and the intentional acts of the staff to support students in the weeks and months that followed, were just as important as any traditional lesson that might have occurred in those classrooms.

We were experiencing trauma together, even though our experiences of said trauma differed. However, trauma is not always felt at a school or group-wide level. Trauma can be the death of a loved one, a cancer diagnosis, incidences of bullying, or divorce. Traumas can be highly visible, but they can also be invisible. Regardless, the impact of trauma on the lives of students is real.

I continue to carry my students' stories with me. I remember the cases of divorce, students tearfully telling me the news they were still struggling to articulate. I remember the students who were bullied, afraid to ride the bus they knew would carry yet another fear-filled afternoon. I remember the student had an unexplained bruise, a newly sewn wound gracing her face just above the eye. More than anything, I remember the stories that remained silent. My heart is heavy knowing that there were stories that I needed to hear but were never spoken. Did I fail at being a critical witness? Did I ignore a heartsong?

I think to 2020 where there is an endless flood of voices of those experiencing trauma. Across the media, there are jokes and memes about the trauma that has come with the year 2020. People are hurting. But the events of 2020 – the Covid-19 pandemic, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd – have shed light on the preexisting trauma from racial and economic disparities that is already present in the lives of students. For those students in rural areas, many of these challenges are made more complex. I think to the student unable to complete work online because of the lack of basic Internet access in their remote rural areas. I think of the student too afraid to speak in online classes, their classroom persona so distinctly different from their home persona due to self-described code-switching. I think to the student who still sees a Confederate statue in their town square while news of another Black death will be discussed at dinner. I think to the rural student who hears the deficit narrative of rurality play across cable news, focusing on the rising number of Covid-19 deaths in rural areas. Whether we are in the traditional classroom or not, trauma continues.

Possible Trauma-Aware Strategies for the ELA Classroom

As teachers, we know that trauma exists in the lives of students. To effectively implement trauma-informed pedagogy that is in the best interest of the student, teacher, and school, specialized professional development is needed. However, I believe that ELA teachers and their students can greatly benefit from using a trauma-aware lens in their classroom as they navigate standard curriculum and required texts. How can we implement strategies in the ELA classroom that are informed by a trauma-aware lens? I think of Shakespeare's (n.d.) *Romeo and Juliet*. I remember I

first read *Romeo and Juliet* in ninth grade English when I was fourteen years old. While I was teaching, the play remained a standard in the state curriculum. Set in Renaissance Verona, Italy, *Romeo and Juliet* begins with heated language that points to the forthcoming trauma for the play's ill-fated protagonists: "From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,/Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean./From forth the fatal loins of these two foes/A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life" (Shakespeare, n.d., Prologue.3-6). Rather than being far removed from the lives of rural adolescent students, I see the characters of Romeo and Juliet as being incredibly relatable for students as they navigate stress that is often beyond their control. Looking at the play, from the beginning Romeo and Juliet, who are both adolescents, encounter stress and trauma, which come from the stress of social expectations (such as the Juliet's father threatening to disown her if she does not marry Paris) to witnessing death (such as Romeo fighting Tybalt to the death). Trauma matters in the play as it serves as a plot device and as a form of testimony.

I see three types of traumatic incidents as existing in the play: (1) incidents of death, (2) incidents of witnessing trauma, and (3) incidents of stress. Regarding incidents of death (i.e., Tybalt murdering Mercutio, Romeo murdering Tybalt, and Lady Montague dying of grief), there are six character deaths in the play, involving primary and secondary characters. These deaths impact the advancement of the plot, how characters respond to said event, and how the characters change as a result of the deaths. All of the deaths in the play are somehow connecting with the actions of the two protagonists. Regarding incidents of witnessing trauma (i.e., the citizens of Verona witnessing the fight between the families in the first Act, Juliet's family discovering her dead, and Romeo witnessing the death of his friend), these traumatic events are centered on violence and death. Each event of trauma witnessed shifts the general physical safety of the character, the social stability of family members and loved ones, as well as impacting the emotional and spiritual welfare. Regarding incidents of stress (i.e., Romeo mourning the loss of Rosaline as a potential partner, Juliet being told by her father that she must marry Pair, and Juliet enacting her plan to fake her death and flee with Romeo), each event occurs as a result of the fallout of violence, family-centered conflict, and as an effort to stabilize social positions.

By using available classroom texts, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, I believe that ELA teachers can utilize witness and testimony (Dutro, 2011; Dutro & Bien, 2014) to support students as they connect to the traumas existing in the text. Students can identify moments of trauma and stress as experienced by the characters and reflect, offer advice, and connect the evidence with the direction of the plot. Such dialogue, which does not require students to disclose trauma nor does it assume experienced trauma, asks students to identify trauma, examine how trauma is dealt with, and explain how the story might change if dealt with differently.

The first activity I propose is "Reading the Room: Breaking Down the Scene" which involves close reading as a means of investigating trauma and stress within the text. Have students focus on situations in the play that they view as being stressful. Ask students prompting questions, such as: How did a character's feel in that scene and why?; How did the character decide to act in response to that event (what did they say, think, physically go, etc.)?; What results from those

actions in terms of the advancement of the play, the character's storyline, or other characters? Following this line of investigation, have students consider "What would have happened *if*…" in regards to situation. For example: How could the character have chosen to act following this event or within the event? What do you think would have been the result of those new actions? These discussions can take many different forms in the classroom such as whole class discussion, the creation of a comic book or series of illustrations, a composed rewrite, or the re-staging of the scene in question. Regardless of the chosen vehicle for discussion, students are exploring the actions that the characters chose to take. Such discussions invite potential dialogue regarding how we navigate situations. What is within our control? What is out of our control? Are there consequences to said actions?

The second activity I propose is "Tell the Story: Writing Narratives." Rooted in using textual evidence, this project allows students to work independently (though you could have students work in pairs or small groups if desired) and engage in creative writing. For the assignment, have students think of a specific scene from the play. The event could be an off-stage event (such as Ophelia drawing) if the teacher wants that option. Just make sure that any scene chosen is somehow connected to direct lines from the text to give evidence for analysis and construction. Have students compose a narrative essay in the voice of a character from their chosen scene. Students should consider: What is my character thinking, reflecting, or worrying about in that specific moment? What is running through the character's mind? Narratives can be witty or serious. Scenes that potentially can work well are (but not limited to): Juliet learning she must marry Paris, Mercutio discussing Queen Mab on the way to the Capulet home, or Romeo as he mourns the loss of Rosaline as a potential partner. The construction of the narrative invites students to investigate the inner thoughts and feelings of characters, figuratively placing students into the characters' shoes. Though students are not directly writing about their personal experiences, they can draw upon past events to better inform and explore their characters. Maybe the student has lost a family member and can relate to Juliet's grief as she mourns the loss of her cousin. Perhaps the student has struggled with the expectations of family members and can sympathize with the struggles of Romeo and Juliet as they navigate the expectations of their families as only children.

We learn in the Prologue that the parents are filled with rage and that it is only with their children's' untimely death that the feud ends. The Prologue ends with the chilling lines: "The which, if you with patient ears attend,/What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend." (Shakespeare, n.d., Prologue.13-14). The lines feel like a command: Listen. There is an echo of Dutro's handling of the critical witness. If we listen to (and watch) the tragic tale that is about to be staged before us -- the audience -- then the play serves as a warning -- it serves as a testimony. By reading the text, students are bearing witness to the events (though fiction) of Shakespeare's play. Such events may speak to their own existing wounds.

Conclusion

As teachers, we can be our own cruelest critics, problematizing issues, what we could have done differently, or what we would like to change. A pedagogical shift is needed in the ways in which we treat ourselves as rural teachers, as well as our rural students. These stories that teachers carry can be heavy. However, through the use of tactics that come from trauma-informed pedagogy, such as using novels that could prompt important ideas regarding traumatic experiences or through creating a culture where students can listen and be empathetic to their peers, ELA teachers can utilize tools to help discuss and cope with trauma in texts, in stories, and in the lives of students inside and outside of the classroom. In this way, the teacher is not in the trashcan alone. In this way, trauma does not remain silent.

References

Azano, A. P., & Biddle, C. (2019). Disrupting dichotomous traps and rethinking problem formation for rural education. *The Rural Educator, 40*(2), 4–11. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.35608/ruraled.v40i2.845

Beebe-Frankenberger, M. & Goforth, A. N. (2014). Best practices in school psychological practice in rural settings. In A. Thomas & P. Harrison (Eds.), *Best Practices in School Psychology: Foundations* (Vol. VI). National Association of School Psychologists.

Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2018). Why do you work with struggling students? Teachers' perceptions of meaningful work in trauma-impacted classrooms. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(2). http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43n2.7

Crosby, S. D., Howell, P., & Thomas, S. (2018). Social justice education through trauma-informed teaching. *Middle School Journal, 49*(4), 15–23. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1080/00940771.2018.1488470

Densmore-James, S., & Yocum, R. (2015). Heartsongs across the world: Using literacy and emotional pedagogy to empower communities of compassionate learners. *Schools: Studies in Education, 12*(1), 118-132. doi:10.1086/680697

Dods, J. (2013). Enhancing understanding of the nature of supportive school-based relationships for youth who have experienced trauma. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne De L'éducation, 36*(1), 71-95. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/canajeducrevucan.36.1.71

Dutro, E. (2011). Writing wounded: Trauma, testimony, and critical witness in literacy classrooms. *English Education, 43*(2), 193-211. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/23017070

Dutro, E., & Bien, A. (2014). Listening to the speaking wound: A trauma studies perspective on student positioning in schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(1), 7-35. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/24546666

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., and Marks, J. S. (2019). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *56*(6), 774–786. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1016/j.amepre.2019.04.001

Freire, P. (2018). *Education for the critical consciousness*. Bloomsbury.

Gibbs, B. C. (2018). Las Traviesas: Critical feminist educators in their struggle for critical teaching. *Curriculum and Pedagogy Collection*, 2018.

Gibbs, B. (2019a). Patriotism, pressure and place: Civic agency in base country. P*eabody Journal of Education, 94*:1, 97-113.

Gibbs, B. (2019b). "I guess I just never realized how tired I had become: In defense of insurgent pedagogy. *Critical Education,* Vol. 10 No. 10.

Gibbs, B. (2020a). Teaching in a troubled time. *Edge:Carolina Education Review, 3*(1). https://ed.unc.edu/2020/09/08/teaching-in-a-troubled-time/

Gibbs, B. (2020b). Word capture, straight refusal, and other forms of resistance. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Winter, 2020.

Huysman, J. T. (2018). Rural teacher satisfaction. *The Rural Educator*, *29*(2). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v29i2.471

Jennings, P.A. (2019). *The trauma sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teachers*. W.W. Norton and Company.

Jennings, P.A. & Greenberg, M.T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, *79*, 491-525. http://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

Lander, J. (Sep. 2018). Helping teachers manage the weight of trauma: Understanding and mitigating the effects of secondary traumatic stress for educators. *Harvard Graduate School of Education*. https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/09/ helping-teachers-manage-weight-trauma

Nichols, L. M., Goforth, A. N., Sacra, M., & Ahlers, K. (2018). Collaboration to support rural student social-emotional needs. *The Rural Educator*, *38*(1). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v38i1.234

Read, D., & Read, D. (1998). Writing trauma, history, story: The class(room) as borderland. *Journal of Advanced Composition, 18*(1), 105-121. https://www.jaconlinejournal.com/archives/vol18.1/read-writing.pdf

Santoro, D.A. (2011). Good teaching in difficult times: Demoralization in the pursuit of good work. *American Journal of Education*, *118*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1086/66201

Shakespeare, W. (n.d.) *Much Ado About Nothing* (B. Mowat, P. Werstine, M. Poston, and R. Niles, eds.). *The Folger Shakespeare*. https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/much-ado-about-nothing/

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (n.d.). "Trauma." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2019, October). "Trauma and Violence." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence#:~:target Text=SAMHSA%20describes%20individual%20trauma%20as,or%20spiritual%20well 2Dbeing.%22

Sitler, H. (2009). Teaching with awareness: The hidden effects of trauma on learning. *The Clearing House, 82*(3), 119-123. https://doi.org/10.3200/TCHS.82.3.119-124

Thein, A., Guise, M., & Sloan, D. (2015). Examining emotional rules in the English classroom: A critical discourse analysis of one student's literary responses in two academic contexts. *Research in the Teaching of English, 49*(3), 200-223. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24398700

Theobald P. & Wood, K. (2010). Learning to be rural: Identity lessons from history, schooling, and the U.S. corporate media. In K.A. Schafft & A. Youngblood Jackson (Eds.), *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world* (pp. 17-33). The Pennsylvania State University Press.

U. S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. (2014). Rural poverty and well - being. http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well - being/poverty-overview.aspx

Walker, T. (Oct. 2019). "I didn't know it had a name": Secondary traumatic stress and educators. *National Education Association*. https://neatoday.org/2019/10/18/secondary-traumatic-stress/

Author Bio

Heather Wright is a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. She is a former secondary education teacher in North Carolina. Her research interest is in the ways in which rural teachers support rural adolescent voices.

"I Think of My Dog Dying Books": Possible Challenges to and Suggestions for Teaching Contemporary Rural YA Literature in Secondary ELA Classrooms

Chea Parton
The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

Because place is crucial to the development and enactment of cultural understanding and practices, it is vital for rural teachers and students to engage with rural texts in rural (as well as sub/urban) English classrooms. This article explores some challenges teachers have faced in selecting and teaching rural YA texts as well as outlines possibilities for teaching such texts in secondary rural ELA classrooms.

"I Think of My Dog Dying Books": Possible Challenges to and Suggestions for Teaching Contemporary Rural YA Literature in Secondary ELA Classrooms

Though rural places and schools are usually thought of as vast open spaces with small populations, one-fourth of US public schools are rural and one-fifth of K-12 students attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2017). Although millions of rural students attend rural schools, their cultures, experiences, and needs are understudied and largely missing from both academic and young adult (YA) literature (Whippoorwill Committee, 2020). Likewise, despite there being "many rural Americas" (Lichtor & Brown, 2011), the cumulative cultural narrative (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) of rurality presents it as a monolith - often depicting rural folks as "Rednecks. Inbred hicks. Toothless hillbillies. Racists and homophobes clinging to guns and Bibles" (Kruger, 2020). This representation of rural places and people contributes to a single story (Adichie, 2009) that needs disrupting across rural, suburban, and urban contexts to paint a more complex and nuanced picture of rural people and places. One way to do that in secondary ELA classrooms is through text selection—the books teachers include in classroom libraries and their instruction.

As Bishop (1990) demonstrated in her landmark discussion of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, it is important for people from marginalized communities to see themselves represented in literature. While there is a growing focus on representing and teaching the stories of historically underrepresented populations (e.g., people of color, those in the LGBTQ

community) in young adult (YA) literature, rurality has not yet been part of that movement. Despite the importance of including rural stories in classrooms, they are often not part of teachers' curriculum. For example, though I spent K-12 in a rural school district, the only book I can really remember reading that connected to my farm-girl existence was *Charlotte's Web*. In this way, intentionally choosing rural texts to include in classrooms is an innovative practice.

This article reports on a piece of a larger study examining rural out-migrated (i.e., left the rural for the sub/urban) teachers' personal and professional identity development across rural and sub/urban places to consider why teachers who identify as rural or have deep ties to rural places might choose not to include contemporary rural YA literature in their courses, suggestions for overcoming those challenges, and instructional practices for including rural texts in the classroom.

Drawing on Previous Work

To understand teachers' experiences with text selection, I draw connections between place, reading and identity. Place harbors the cultural values and beliefs that become instrumental to our identities and worldviews (Massey, 1994, 2005; Parmar, 2017; Reynolds, 2017; Whitlock, 2017). Dominant cultural narratives surrounding rural and sub/urban people are constantly being (re)written and are often most easily recognizable in popular culture (Howley et al., 2014; Reynolds, 2017; Theobald & Wood, 2010), including YA literature. Likewise, reading as a transaction is deeply connected to readers' identities and experiences (Rosenblatt, 1987, 1994). Understanding people's connections to reading in this way can shed light on how teachers' understandings of their identities can impact the books they choose in their own reading lives as well as those they choose to bring into their classrooms.

Because place is closely connected to identity (Webb-Sunderhaus, 2016) and identity influences the way we interact with what we read (Rosenblatt, 1994), it is important to consider how teachers curate diverse reading experiences for students as well as how their decisions surrounding text selection are connected to their own identities. Important work has been done around reading multicultural literature in urban environments (Baxley & Boston, 2009; Brooks & Cueto, 2018; Kirkland, 2011; Sciurba, 2014; Tatum, 2014). However, although research about rural teaching and learning has grown in recent years, studies of teachers' and students' interactions with and reactions to rural literature are hard to come by (Azano, 2014; Parton & Godfrey, 2019; Petrone & Behrens, 2017).

One recent piece (Eppley, 2019) described how close reading a rural text was shaped by and continued to shape the reader's identity as a rural person. Eppley's experience demonstrated how reading can "scaffold identity formation" (Richardson & Eccles, 2007, p. 341) and how sociocultural aspects of our world both shape and are shaped by literature (Devitt, 2004). Not only did reading the rural text happen through her identity, but her rural identity was made visible and affirmed through her reading. While texts that serve as mirrors should not be the only

texts students encounter, reading texts reflecting students' place-connected identities aids in the construction of both meaning and identity. However, in classrooms with limited to no texts representing rural life, students who identify as rural do not get the same opportunity to see themselves and their realities as much as their sub/urban counterparts. Therefore, it is important to consider how teachers can make space for "rural youth (as well as all children) to have literature reflecting their diverse identities and geographies" (Whippoorwill Committee, 2020, p. 1). To that end, this article reports on some of the challenges that teachers in the study faced bringing contemporary rural stories into their classrooms, and provides suggestions for overcoming those to bring rural YA into secondary ELA classrooms.

Methodology

This article reports on findings discovered as part of a larger multiple case study (Thomas, 2016) that explored how rural out-migrated teachers took up, rejected, and/or blended aspects of their personal (non)rural identities and how those identities impacted their instruction. I use the term (non)rural intentionally to signal the complicated nature of participants' identities. Though it may seem counterintuitive – how can a person be both nonrural and rural at the same time – (non)rural reflects the important and complex interactions between who participants have been, who they are, and who they are becoming across the rural and sub/urban places of their lives. This article discusses findings around teachers' decisions to include (or not) rural YA texts in their classroom libraries and/or instruction, considers obstacles teachers face in making such texts part of their practice, as well as what it could look like if they did.

Context & Participants

This article focuses on four participants as particularly illustrative cases of rural identity's impact on reading instruction.

Finley

Finley identified as a White, "small-town girl." She spent her formative years in a small town in north Texas. After graduating from her rural high school, she out-migrated to a sizable city in south Texas to attend university. She began her first year teaching English language arts in a rural school not far from her hometown. She then moved to teach in a larger district and completed her masters, after which, she became an instructional coach. She was in the classroom for a total of 10 years and had spent two years in her role as instructional coach in her current district.

Jacqueline

Jacqueline identified as a rural Black, Gullah Geechee, woman and grew up in a very small town (population 600) in South Carolina. She reflected fondly on her experiences as a student in a

rural school. After graduating in a class of 113 students, Jacqueline attended a university not far from her hometown, planning to become a lawyer. However, life intervened, and she decided she was meant to be a teacher. After moving to Texas, Jacqueline was approached by the principal of her children's school and encouraged to take a job as a literacy and library assistant, eventually gaining her licensure. She had been a teacher for the last 13 years.

Mary

Mary identified as a suburban White woman. Her story is one of a second-generation rural out-migrant. Her grandparents still live in the small Texas town she often visited as a child, but her parents out-migrated to the city to go to university before she was born, deciding to stay in the city "for the education of their kids." She had always felt a deep connection to nature and remembered being deeply affected by the disruption and animal deaths that came with urban sprawl. After completing her undergraduate education at a small private school north of University City, she taught in southwest Texas and Colorado before moving back to Texas to teach in a school north of University City. She had been teaching for eight years.

Riley

Riley identified as a White woman from the University City area although she grew up in a "tiny, tiny town" in west Texas where her parents grew cotton and soybeans. Because she has lived in the University City area for the past 15 years, it felt more part of who she is now than her hometown. After graduating in a barn with her 39 other classmates, Riley out-migrated to attend a large Baptist university. After earning her degree and ELA licensure, Riley began her search for a school that felt like a good fit. Teaching in several different types of districts around University City, she struggled to find one that felt right. The rurban (Stephens, 2019) district she was in at the time of the study had felt the most like home to her, which led her to spend the most time teaching there. She had been teaching for 13 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through four audio-recorded interviews with each participant occurring every four weeks from October 2019 to February 2020 as well as artifacts of teachers' connections to place. All interviews were transcribed orthographically representing what teachers said as they said it to reflect their language practices and discourses in an authentic way. Data were analyzed first in individual cases using open coding (Saldaña, 2016) to produce initial codes from which second cycle codes arose. In the second cycle, pattern coding was used to develop categories, identify which seemed to be most salient, and group codes into themes. These themes were then used across individual cases to perform cross-case analysis.

Positionality

As a participant observer and researcher in the context of this study, I identify as a White, heteronormative, cisgender, woman with hillbilly roots from a rural town who taught ELA in a rural area. In several of these identities (i.e., White, heteronormative, cisgender researcher), I occupy spaces of power and privilege. Likewise, because I grew up in a rural place, and identify as rural, in interviewing other rural out-migrants I occupy the status of insider. However, not all rural areas are the same, and there may also be aspects of who I am in my Appalachian-infused Hoosier rurality that made me an outsider to their rural experiences.

These various positionings (Davies & Harré, 1990) and identity affiliations undoubtedly affected the way that I interacted with participants, how they interacted with me, and the choices I made in terms of research design. The questions I chose to ask during interviews and the lenses that I took up in analyzing and making meaning of the data that I collected are inextricably linked to who I am, what power and privilege I have, what I value, and what I believe. All measurements are affected by the calibration of the instrument, and as this is a qualitative study, I am that instrument.

Findings

The teachers in this study discussed how their connections to rural and sub/urban spaces worked to shape their personal identities, reading lives, and their ideas around place and curriculum. Though they acknowledged that considering place as part of instructional design is important to developing culturally sustaining practices, they were unsure of just how instruction would need to shift across spaces. Despite the challenge of articulating specific differences, each described aspects of teaching that were specifically shaped by connections to place. One major teaching practice they discussed was text selection/the cultivation of classroom libraries. All the teachers worked in districts that had adopted reading workshop pedagogy and/or allowed teachers freedom in text selection. Thus, the role of their identities in those selections is a salient factor to consider in their decision-making. The following sections discuss teachers' understanding of the importance of place to practice as well as their consideration of its impact on their selections of texts.

Teachers Consider Rural Culture and Pedagogy

While some teachers seemed to recognize their rurality as culture, others did not. Finley discussed her views on rural as culture this way:

> I always joked. Like, 'Ah, I don't have a culture. I'm white from a small town.'[laughs] 'What kinda culture is that?' You know? Anything outside of that felt like culture… But I'm sure I woudn't've described it that way before.

Although she had not previously considered rural places as connected to culture, through our interviews, Finley, like the other participants in the study, discussed her belief that teaching would need to look different across places.

Though they experienced difficulty describing how practices would need to shift across rural and sub/urban places, all participants believed that, to be effective, instruction would need to look different. Riley thought about it this way:

> Do teachers in diff'rent places need to employ diff'rent techniques? So, my initial response is yes. Like, the communities are diff'rent and the expectations are diff'rent. But I don' really know, like, I couldn't pinpoint what that is, becuz, I'm just thinking about like, my past and knowing where I've been. There were places where I had to change kind of who I was and how I taught to fit better there.

Here, she reflected on how her own rural and sub/urban experiences and (non)rural identity impacted her teaching in the past. While she considers how the cultural values of communities shape learning needs and expectations, she does not discuss the specific practices in her teaching that she changed or how they responded to the different needs and expectations of the communities in which she was teaching.

Like Riley, Jacqueline's initial response to this question was, "Yes that goes without saying." However, she found it difficult to say in what way. As she thought aloud, Jacqueline considered some specific aspects of curriculum (e.g., content) but not how instructional delivery would need to look different.

> That's responsive teaching - in that context and content have to matter. That always matters because the content isn't the end, it's a means to a particular end, an' that's, you know, engaging you in how to learn. Right? An', an'... yeah building some content knowledge and content skill, but that's not the, it's just a means to an end. So content, I see that changing, but also context is completely diff'rent, right...There would be some things that are universal and some things that are very specific, right, so. So, absolutely. I think if I were to go back home an' teach in what I think still looks like a very rural school…it would be diff'rent.

In her initial processing of this question, Jacqueline focused on how the content being taught would need to look different. Although she did not mention specifically how teachers might need to engage students in learning differently, she did briefly lift it up as a significant aspect and goal of teaching. Believing that some things would be context-specific and others would be universal, Jacqueline adopts a perspective that blends both local and global thinking. However, in our discussion, she never discussed specific aspects of content or instructional delivery would need to be different.

Despite the difficulty of articulating just *how* instruction would need to be different, the teachers all described ways place and their place-based identities shaped and was present in their instructional practices. The following sections describe how teachers' own connections to place impacted their text selections as well as ways teachers can use text selection to foster critical consideration of students' identities in, connections to, and participation in their rural communities.

Challenges to Text Selection as Place-Shaped Practice

Movements like #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #OwnVoices demonstrate how diverse text selection has become an essential aspect of ELA instruction. However, unlike easily searchable and widely available curated lists of popular/new urban YA books, there are virtually no curated lists of contemporary rural YA titles (Parton & Godfrey, 2019; Petrone & Behrens, 2017; Whippoorwill Committee, 2020). Additionally, teachers' place-connected identities - whether rural or otherwise - can take up deficit notions of rural people, places, experiences, and stories, impacting their assumptions of rural representations in literature. For example, most of the teachers had extensive classroom libraries and discussed their desire to build collections that contained mirrors and windows for every student in their classrooms. For teachers teaching in rurban (Stephens, 2019) schools that still served rural students, this proved to be complicated because of the ways that teachers understood their own (non)rural identities and how they connected those to the work they did in their classrooms.

Identifying Rural YA Titles

When I asked Mary, Riley, and Finley if they could name any rural texts they taught or that existed in their libraries, they all struggled to think of any. Rather than give the teachers a specific definition of "rural text," I allowed them to identify texts that fit that description according to their own definitions of rural (Tieken, 2014). From the titles they identified (e.g., *The Beef Princess of Practical County*, *Sounder*), it was apparent that they defined rural as the not-urban and connected it to the natural (e.g., farming and hunting). They also struggled to name rural texts that were published more recently than 30 years ago. On the other hand, they were prepared to name several contemporary urban titles right away. Even though each of them works in schools that still serve rural students, their classroom libraries largely did not reflect those students' identities or the rural parts of teachers' own identities.

In her own reading life, Mary enjoyed reading books that take place in rural settings and named *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver as one of her favorite books. Enjoying texts with strong connections to nature including poetry by Mary Oliver and Jim Harrison, Mary liked reading things that affirmed a connection to the natural world largely fostered by the time she spent on her grandparents' farm. Despite naming these as important aspects of her own reading life, Mary had difficulty identifying any recently published YA books depicting contemporary rural living.

Mary: [long pause] I think of um like my dogs dying books … Um. So, um, *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Chea: My students loved that book.

Mary: I know, well, me too! That's one of the first books that really spoke to me, and I talk about it every year with kids. Like, I read it - this is the first book that I read multiple times that was like a chapter book.

Chea: And it speaks to your, like the way that you talked about urban sprawl and how even though your existence was kind of a suburban existence, you still saw nature disappearing and things dying, you know, like, and you're also kind of predisposed to kind of noticing that because you have family who are farmers and, right?...Who are connected to the land, and so that's something that you are predisposed … to paying attention to that maybe not other people would be.

Mary: Yes. Yes...Um. Uh. I wanna think of more.

Chea: I was curious especially about contemporary YA.

Mary: What is the, I haven't read it, but um, it's the *Coyote Sunrise.*

Chea: Oh. I don't know that one.

Mary: It's brand new... Um. And then I think of, um, like *Secret Life of Bees*. Um….Okay. Um. *Sounder*. That was rural. That's another dog one.

Chea: That one's pretty old, I feel like.

Mary: Yeah. That one is old. [long pause] What's the one that, it's something with a moon.

Chea: *Walk Two Moons*?

Mary: Sharon Creech. Yeah. *Walk Two Moons*…Yeah. That's an oldie but a goodie... Um. I feel like *Star Girl* has elements of maybe more suburbia but on the edge, suburbia to rural…But yeah. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. It's kinda historical because it's memoir.

Chea: I mean, we don't have to keep thinking about it, it's just, the difficulty, because if I asked you, "Okay, um, what are some of the, you know, what are some urban books that you have in your-

Mary: Oh yeah. I've got like 10 right off the bat!

Here, Mary revealed how her connection to rural spaces impacted her own reading habits and the kinds of books she enjoyed as both a young person and adult. Perhaps this is the reason her classroom library consisted of older rural fiction – books that she read and enjoyed in her own youth. Furthermore, while booksellers and publishers often compile lists of newly published "urban fiction," they are very rarely (if ever) accompanied by lists of recently published rural fiction. So, despite her own reading tendencies and that her school "is definitely a school that serves rural families," Mary's classroom library had very few texts depicting contemporary rural life. However, the ease of finding urban texts as well as their connections to Mary's focus on social equity meant that she could think of titles in her library "right of the bat."

Riley and Jacqueline also expressed the difficulty of finding contemporary rural texts. Riley discussed there being "a gap" in YA publishing and the challenge of finding books that reflected a rural ruggedness that appealed to some of her readers. Jacqueline wished there were more children's books depicting kids of color growing plants, raising livestock, and living a rural existence in general. She excitedly told me of recently discovering *Gabe's Green Thumb*, a book that depicts a young Black boy "growing things out'n the country," because it illustrated an experience that is largely missing from children's literature.

> I was so happy about this book [*Gabe and His Green Thumb*] becuz there's this little boy with his Afro on the cover, an', you know, an' his thumb is green, an' he's growing vegetables. And that's like my grandson, like he loves to grow things…I'm like, "Oh my gosh…I love that people are writing the books that they wish they had when they were children…writing books for Black children, especially. Well, writing books that position them as doing things that they actually are doing but just never saw themselves in books doing.

Jacqueline's discovery of *Gabe's Green Thumb* directly reflects the missions of both #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #OwnVoices. Reading books by rural Black folks about the rural experiences of rural Black folks was not something she got to experience as a child. Because she had difficulty thinking of any children's books that reflected her experiences growing up in a rural town, Jacqueline was excited that her grandson would have access to books that illustrated a Black rural experience. Furthermore, in her discussions of the books reflecting the experiences of rural Black folks when she got older, many of the texts she named were narratives of Black pain (Millner, 2019), so seeing a text that focused on a positive aspect of rural Blackness was important to her.

Relationships between Identity and Text Selection

Besides the difficulty of finding contemporary rural fiction to add to their libraries, Finley and Riley, discussed how their libraries and text choices reflected the relationship they had with their

rural identities. While Mary's positive relationship to the rural parts of her identity led her to read texts that affirmed it, Finley and Riley's more strained relationship with their rural identities seemed to deter them from looking for (or valuing) rural stories. They both felt that the limited number of rural texts in their classroom libraries and teaching was deeply connected to their choices to build their personal identities by rejecting the conservative politics and racism present in their upbringing. Riley struggled to think of a single title in her collection and Finley felt she had never read a rural book.

Riley admitted, "Because I grew up … pushing away from [rural conservative values], I was the one looking for sci fi, looking for other. I tried to get out of it, so." Unlike Mary who still seemed to embrace connections to the rural in her own reading life, in rejecting the rural conservative values she grew up around, Riley felt she continued to navigate away from texts that she believed might reflect those. Finley discussed this phenomenon in much the same way, saying, "I almost feel like because I push back so much that I have never recommended, and I don't know if I've ever read, like I'm even trying to think…a [rural] novel. No." While many contemporary texts actually take up issues of rural conservative political values in critical ways, both Riley and Finley assumed they would reinforce them because of their rural settings. From those assumptions, they both excluded rural texts from their own reading lives and the books they recommended to students/housed in their classroom libraries.

Discussion & Possibilities for Practice

Teaching and designing culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) curriculum should more explicitly consider place along with the other intersectional identities of students and teachers. Because sub/urbanity is privileged as a cultural reference point (Alexander, 2010; Corbett, 2006; Theobald & Wood, 2010), teachers should work to design curriculum and instruction to sustain students' rural identities, cultural practices, and connections to rural places. One way they can do this is through the intentional selection, recommendation, and teaching of rural YA fiction. However, as these findings demonstrate, even teachers with deep ties to rural places, people, and identities experience challenges to this kind of work because: (1) The ways they build and understand their rural identity can be deeply connected to their decision not to seek out rural texts; (2) It is difficult to learn about newly published rural YA books since the publishing industry privileges sub/urban stories; and (3) In their teacher preparation, teaching reading in culturally sustaining ways has always been framed by a sub/urban context. In the following sections, I offer suggestions for ways to overcome these challenges.

Rural YA as Worthy of Teaching

One of the first major obstacles teachers faced in including rural YA in their instruction was that they did not consider them worthy of teaching. Though Finley, Mary, and Riley wanted to provide students opportunities to interact with and critically think about representations of diverse peoples and cultures, books featuring stories of contemporary rural living were

conspicuously missing from their classroom libraries and instruction. For Finley and Riley, this stemmed from a direct connection between their own opinions toward their rural upbringing and the value of rural culture and stories. Because they both worked to push against conservative values and ideologies they felt were foundational to their rural communities, culture, and identities, they intentionally chose not to read them or include them in their instruction. Believing that rural stories would work to reify the very aspects of rural culture they worked to oppose in their personal and professional lives, they felt such texts would not positively contribute to their equity-focused pedagogies.

Much like the efforts teachers make to decolonize their curriculum (de los Rios, 2017) to be sure that an array of cultures are reflected in the reading done in their classrooms, teachers with rural backgrounds and those teaching in rural schools (as well as teachers across geographic regions and classifications) should acknowledge that rural stories and experiences matter by including them in their curriculum. Reflecting on why those stories are missing from their instruction and being intentional about including representations of contemporary rural people, place, and culture can provide students with important mirrors of their own experiences often not present in their learning (Santillano, 2020). Likewise, having open discussions with students about aspects of rural living, experiences, and culture that they do or do not appreciate in connection with the literature allows both teachers and students to think more deeply about how their identities as people contribute to their teaching/learning and how they relate to the world.

Finding Rural YA Texts

The second major obstacle teachers faced was finding rural YA texts, which is challenging because there are no curated lists like those dedicated to urban YA fiction. One strategy to finding rural YA texts is to look at lists of YA literature writ large to read the titles and summaries offered there. For example, *Jen J.'s Booksheets* is a list of children's and YA literature curated from award winners and the collated starred reviews from six different journals (i.e., *Booklist, The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, Horn Book, Kirkus, School Library Journal*, and *Publisher's Weekly*). In the publicly accessible spreadsheet, teachers could scan titles and abstracts to find those meeting the definition of rural that makes the most sense for their classroom. Other possible sources include the new Whippoorwill Awards and blogs such as *Dr. Bickmore's YA Wednesday* and *Ethical ELA*. From my own reading life and these sources, I have provided a list of titles that reflect a variety of rural geographies, cultures, and intersectional identities that teachers might find helpful as they get started.

Table 1
Suggested Rural YA Titles

Whippoorwill Award Winners	
Bone's Gift by Angie Smibert (2018)	*Zora & Me: The Cursed Ground* by T.R. Simon (2018)
Hurricane Child by Kheryn Callender (2018)	*The Orphan Band of Springdale* by Anne Nesbet (2018)
Copyboy by Vince Vawter (2018)	*The Gone Away Place* by Christopher Barzak (2018)
Louisiana's Way Home by Kate DiCamillo (2018)	*The Call Me Guero* by David Bowles (2018)
Give Me Some Truth by Eric Gansworth (2018)	*The Good Demon* by Jimmy Cajoleas (2018)
Other Rural Titles of Note	
Hope Was Here by Joan Bauer (2005)	*Touch Blue* by Cynthia Lord (2012)
Sadie by Courtney Summers (2018)	*Knights of the Hill Country* by Tim Tharp (2013)
Exit, Pursued by a Bear by E.K. Johnston (2017)	*Far from Xanadu* by Julie Anne Peters (2005)
The Hired Girl by Laura Amy Schlitz (2017)	*The Last Buffalo Hunter* by Jake Mosher (2002)
Orbiting Jupiter by Gary D. Schmidt (2017)	*Dairy Queen* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock (2007)
Sawkill Girls by Claire Legrand (2018)	*The Queen of Kentucky* by Alecia Whitaker (2012)

Murder on the Red River (2017) and *Girl Gone Missing* (2019) by Marcie R. Rendon	*The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner (2016)
The Mosaic by Nina Berkhout (2017)	*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily Danforth (2013)
The Smell of Other People's Houses by Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock (2017)	*Dumplin'* (2017) and *Puddin'* (2019) by Julie Murphy
The Season of Styx Malone by Kekla Magoon (2018)	*Last Exit to Normal* by Michael Harmon (2008)
as brave as you by Jason Reynolds (2017)	*Bull Rider* by Suzanne Williams (2010)

Teaching Rural YA in Culturally Sustaining Ways

Once teachers decide to include and find rural YA that suits their classrooms, deciding how to teach them in culturally sustaining ways can feel daunting because rural cultures are not taken into consideration when preparing teachers to design culturally sustaining instruction. Because there was little to no focus on rurality in their experiences as preservice teachers learning about culturally sustaining pedagogies, applying such a frame to their teaching felt unwieldy and unfamiliar. While some of the concepts in each of these pedagogies seem transferrable, because they are connected to urban populations and speak directly to urban culture (e.g., Paris & Alim's [2014] focus on Hip Hop rather than bluegrass), designing instruction within these frameworks requires a shift in thinking.

Considering the geography, structure, and culture of the rural schools in which they teach, teachers could engage students in activities that ask them to consider (a) the geography, customs, and culture of their schools and communities; (b) their roles in the community; and (c) how where they are impacts who they are, what they know, and how they know it. Teaching this way provides students opportunities to deeply examine and reflect on their rural cultural identities and practices as well as confront and disrupt the often deficit dominant rural narrative that persists in society.

I want to acknowledge here that I understand that not all districts allow their teachers the same freedom of choice the teachers in this study experienced and that these suggestions assume. For teachers who are required to teach certain texts, it is my hope that they still have freedom enough to choose supplementary (print and/or multimodal) texts or excerpts that could be in conversation with those required texts. These suggestions could also work if teachers had space to cultivate menus of rural readings from which students choose for independent reading projects. Wherever teachers exist on the spectrum of freedom of reading selection, I hope the

following suggestions spark ideas for ways that they can include stories of rural people, places, and cultures as part of their instruction.

Rural YA and Popular Culture

Because so much of what defines dominant narratives of rurality comes from popular culture (Reynolds, 2017; Theobald & Wood, 2010), critically examining rural representation in rural secondary ELA classrooms is important (Slocum, 2014). Whether living in- or out-side of rural areas, people use these depictions of the rural to form understandings of what it means to be rural, embody, and enact rurality. Through activities that ask them to think critically about both overly deficit and romanticized depictions of rurality, students can come to a more critical and balanced understanding of where they are from and who they are as rural people and learners.

For example, teachers could pair TV shows such as *Duck Dynasty* or *Swamp People*, clips from films such as *Hell or High Water* and *Hillbilly Elegy*, commercials for companies such as Farmersonly.com, and media coverage of mining disasters with rural YA novels (See Table 1 for possible rural texts) to examine ways that the media takes up or challenges oversimplified notions of rurality. Likewise, looking across time at older texts such as *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Green Acres*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (both the TV show and the film from the '90s) could provide an interesting avenue to consider how the dominant narrative of rurality has shifted (or not) over time.

In their examinations of dominant narratives of rural people, students and teachers could ask:

- What about the TV show, film, commercial, and/or YA novel does/n't ring true to their own experiences as rural people?
- What about their own experiences as rural people feels missing or misrepresented by the texts?
- Why might the creators of the texts choose to represent rural life and people in the ways they have? How might it contribute to society and students' own understanding of what it means to be rural in both positive and negative ways?

Rural YA and Arts Integration

When combined with a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003), arts integration offers opportunities for students "to see more in [their] experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured" (Greene, 1995, p. 123). Such approaches allow students to critically examine how they are understood and positioned by themselves and O/others because of where they are from. In the following, I discuss the possibilities of photography, song-writing, and finger painting.

When reading a rural YA text, students could complete a photo voice (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) project in which they

take photos of their rural communities and use understandings of them to frame their consideration of the place of a novel. For example, *The Smell of Other People's Houses* (Hitchock, 2016) takes place in rural Alaska and offers rich descriptions of the novel's town and ecology as well as the characters' connections to both. While reading the novel, students could use photography to consider the differences and similarities between their community and the one featured in the novel. Such a project provides students an opportunity to consider the nuances across rural communities, disrupting the single story (Adichie, 2009) often told of rural places/people. Likewise, it asks them to consider both the beautiful and problematic aspects of their own communities, making space to develop complex understandings of their communities and who they are in them. Additionally, such a project could be presented in exhibition to community stakeholders to honor what is good about the community as well as call for social change.

Country music has been incredibly influential in both constructing and questioning what it means to be a rural person (Abdelmahmoud, 2020). Artists like Rhiannon Giddens, Jason Isbell, and Dolly Parton (as well as many others) have been working to call attention to inequity in both the country music genre and society writ large, in some cases catching them ire from their more conservative fan base. In Zentner's (2016) *The Serpent King*, Dill Early is an aspiring song-writer who writes to process his identity and experiences in rural Redneckville, TN. Engaging in reading/listening to how country music has worked to construct what it means to be rural, how other artists have worked to consider their own identities in connection to where they are from, and even writing their own songs, students can connect more deeply to Dill's story and continue to construct complex understandings of narratives of rurality, their own communities, and their own identities.

Using another mode of artistic expression, students could use finger painting to explore how authors use place to shape both the geographical and psychological landscapes of their characters (Parton, in press). *Sadie* (Summers, 2018) is a good text to pair with this technique because of the way place (and movement across places) shapes the stories and identities of the characters. Using a low-risk technique like finger painting allows students of all artistic abilities access and confidence to engage with their thoughts through a mode other than traditional approaches to writing. Painting the geographical and psychological landscapes of the characters, as well as their own, would offer opportunities for students to critically question the rural world in the text as well as the rural world around them. Considering and juxtaposing what is present in and missing from their depictions of the rural, suburban, and urban landscapes of the texts, students can engage with representations of the rural as well as their own rural realities.

Conclusion

Encouraging teachers to consider how their connections to place shapes their identities and teaching, as well as how students' connections to place impact their identities and learning, can help them craft place-connected culturally sustaining pedagogies. Considering how place-

connected identities and experiences are represented in classroom libraries and teachers' practices would be beneficial for all teachers in all schools no matter their geographical origins or locations. However, because of the underrepresentation of rural places and people in current discussions of culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) ELA instruction, it seems particularly important for rural teachers and students. Because participants' connections to their own rural identities impacted the kinds of texts they were likely to choose for their libraries, it is vital that teachers think about how their (non)rural identities are connected to their practices. Likewise, because rural texts are not as easy to find, teachers must be even more aware and intentional in their search and knowledge of rural titles. Using a variety of texts - including pop culture and art - in concert with rural YA literature is one way that rural teachers can engage students in critical considerations of dominant cultural narratives surrounding rurality, their own identities, and their rural communities.

References

Abdelmahmoud, E. (2020, June 5). Rewriting country music's racist history. *Rolling Stone*. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/country-music-racist-history-1010052/

Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *The Danger of a single story* [Video]. TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Azano, A. P. (2014). Rural. The other neglected "R": Making space for place in school libraries. *Knowledge Quest*, *43*(1), 61–65.

Baxley, T. P., & Boston, G. H. (2009). Classroom inequity and the literacy experiences of Black adolescent girls. *Education and Society*, *27*(2), 77–89.

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, *6*(3).

Brooks, W., & Cueto, D. (2018). Contemplating and extending the scholarship on children's and young adult literature. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *50*, 9–30.

Davies, R., & Harre, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Theory of Social Behavior*, *20*(1), 43–63.

de Los Rios, C. (2017). Toward a Corridista consciousness: Learning from one transational youth's critical reading, writing, and performance of Mexican Corridos. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 455–471. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.210

DeVitt, A. (2004). Writing genres. Southern Illinois University Press.

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. Jossey-Bass.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational researcher*, *32*(4), 3-12.

Hitchcock, B. S. (2016). *The smell of other people's houses*. Random House.

Howley, C. B., Howley, A., & Johnson, J. D. (Eds.). (2014). *Dynamics of social class: Race, and place in rural education*. IAP.

Kirkland, D. E. (2011). Books like clothes: Engaging young Black men with reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *55*(3), 199–208. https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.00025

Kruger, P. (2020, April 9). *What don't most liberals realize?*. Quora. https://www.quora.com/What-dont-most-liberals-realize.

Lichter, D. T., & Brown, D. L. (2011). Rural America in an urban society: Changing spatial and social boundaries. *Annual review of sociology*, *37*, 565-592.

Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place, and gender*. Blackwell Publishing.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage.

Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97.

Parmar, P. (2017). Who am I?: Cultural identity in rural schools. In W. M. Reynolds (Ed.) *Forgotten places: Critical studies in education* (pp. 157-168). Peter Lang.

Parton, C. (in press). A bleak picture?: Critical pedagogy of place and finger painting with *Sadie*. In L. Pitre & B. Maldonado (Eds.). *Empowering student voice through arts integration and young adult literature.* Rowman and Littlefield.

Parton, C., & Godfrey, V. (2019, November 11). Critically reading place in YA depictions of the rural. [Blog post]. http://www.yawednesday.com/blog/critically-reading-place-in-ya-depictions-of-the-rural-by-chea-parton-and-vickie-godfrey

Petrone, M., & Behrens, A. (2017, May 31). Reading YAL for representations of contemporary rurality. [Blog post]. http://www.yawednesday.com/blog/representations-of-contemporary-rural-people-and-places-in-yal

Reynolds, W. M. (2017). Rural place: Media, violent cartographies, and chaotic disruptions. In W. M. Reynolds (Ed.) *Forgotten places: Critical studies in education* (pp. 31-43). Peter Lang.

Richardson, P. W., & Eccles, J. S. (2007). Rewards of reading: Toward the development of possible selves and identities. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *46*(6), 341–356. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2007.06.002

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1987). Efferent and Aesthetic Transactions. *English Literature in Schools, ed. VJ Lee (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1987)*, 101-17.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work.* SIU Press.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Sciurba, K. (2014). Texts as Mirrors, Texts as Windows: Black Adolescent Boys and the Complexities of Textual Relevance. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *58*(4), 308–316. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.358

Showalter, D. Klein, R., Johnson, J., & Hartman, S. (2017). *Why rural matters 2015-2016: Understanding the changing landscape.* Report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from https://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/WRM-2015-16.pdf

Slocum, A. (2014). Look what they said about us: Social position work of adolescent Appalachians in English class. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, *13*(3), 191-209.

Stephens, J. T. (2019). Teaching critically where rural and nonrural cultures intersect. *American Educational Research Journal, 56*(6), 2043-2076.

Strack, R. W., Magill, C., & McDonagh, K. (2004). Engaging youth through photovoice. *Health promotion practice*, *5*(1), 49-58.

Summers, C. (2018). *Sadie*. Macmillan.

Tatum, A. W. (2014). Orienting African American male adolescents toward meaningful literacy exchanges with texts. *Journal of Education*, *194*(1), 35–47.

Theobald, P., & Wood, K. (2010). Learning to be rural: Identity lessons from history, schooling, and the U.S. corporate media. In K. A. Schafft & A. Y. Jackson's *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world*, pp. 17-33. Penn State Press.

Thomas, G. (2016). *How to do your case study* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Wang, C. C., & Redwood-Jones, Y. A. (2001). Photovoice ethics: Perspectives from Flint photovoice. *Health education & behavior*, *28*(5), 560-572.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health education & behavior*, *24*(3), 369-387.

Webb-Sunderhaus, S. (2016). “Keep the Appalachian, drop the redneck”: Tellable student narratives of Appalachian identity. *College English, 79*(1), 11-33.

Weber, S., & Mitchell, C. (1995). *“That’s funny, you don’t look like a teacher”: Interrogating images, identity and popular culture*. Routledge.

Whippoorwill Committee. (2020). The inaugural year of the Whippoorwill Book Award for Rural YA Literature. *The rural educator*, *41*(1), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v41i1.984

Whitlock, R. U. (2017). Memoir of Littleville School: Identity, community, and rural education in a curriculum study of rural place. In W. M. Reynolds (Ed.) *Forgotten places: Critical studies in education* (pp. 169-188). Peter Lang.

Zentner. J. (2016) *The serpent king.* Random House.

Author Bio

Chea Parton is a farm-girl, former rural high school English teacher, and current assistant professor of instruction at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests include representations of the rural in young adult literature, film, and other pop culture texts; rural out-migrant teacher identity development; place-responsive pedagogy; and place-based professional development. Her most recent publication is "A Bleak Picture?: Critical Pedagogy of Place and Finger Painting with *Sadie*" (in press). She currently serves as section editor for "Voices across the Field: Grad Students in Rural Education" in the Rural Education SIG Newsletter.