

A Place for Writing: Examining a Place-Based Curriculum for High-Performing Rural Writers

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This study explored how a critical and place-based language arts curriculum influenced high-performing rural students as writers. The sample included 199 students, who comprised the second cohort of students participating in the Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools grant and were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Students in the treatment groups were provided instruction using four language arts units designed for high-achieving rural students, while students in the control group were provided the traditional language arts curriculum for their grade level. This study analyzed 149 pretests and 158 posttests from the 199 students, due to students being absent for testing or dropping from or being added to the study. Qualitative analysis of student pre- and posttest writing tasks supported the conclusion that, while students in the control group made connections to place, students in the treatment group made deeper and more critical place connections. These findings suggest that writing instruction that values students' lived experiences provides opportunities for students to make meaning using what they know and to critically examine their experiences as members of their local communities. This study provides insight into writing classrooms that embrace student experience and view students as valuable members of their communities.

Keywords: writing instruction, rural education, place-based education, gifted education

Opportunity and achievement gaps between rural students and their suburban or urban counterparts are attributed to geographic isolation, lack of resources, decreased funding, and limited access to out-of-school educational resources (Azano, Callahan, et al., 2017; Mattingly & Schaefer, 2015; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). In particular, opportunity gaps affect rural gifted students because decreased funding typically results in fewer specially prepared teachers and fewer resources for this group of students. Often, rural school districts do not have teachers endorsed or trained in gifted education, and when they do, the one gifted resource teacher is expected to provide services to several schools (Howley et al., 2009). If districts do not have gifted resource teachers, general education teachers are charged to differentiate their instruction to challenge these

students, but they may not have the necessary training (Croft, 2015). Students in rural areas, including gifted students, need access to resources, both in and out of school, to reach their full potential (Howley et al., 2009). Therefore, many scholars approach issues related to rural gifted students in terms of equity and social justice.

To that end, sociocultural theories support democratic approaches to writing instruction that value students' individual experiences. Gruenewald (2003) provided a theoretical foundation to place-based education by connecting it to Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy. As Gruenewald argued, the concept of place-based pedagogy connects to critical pedagogy by exploring how place can and should be used in critical ways. These two concepts are connected through the understanding that "the oppressed's reality, as

reflected in the various forms of cultural production—language, art, music—leads to a better comprehension of the cultural extension through which people articulate their rebelliousness against the dominant” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 137). Accordingly, Gruenewald’s (2003) concept of a critical pedagogy was used as a theoretical underpinning to the Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, Engagement) in Rural Schools grant (here to after referred to as Promoting PLACE) as a framework to address the equity issues noted. Critical place theories informed curriculum development, research design, identification processes, instrument development, data generation, and analysis. Because one focus of the project curriculum was critical pedagogy of place infused into writing tasks, we examined the influence of that curriculum on high-performing rural students as writers. Critical pedagogy creates a useful frame for writing instruction because it creates conditions for students to question hierarchies and process experiences with inequality through writing.

Within the context of writing instruction, a critical pedagogy of place provides a framework for understanding that all writers belong to discourse communities (Nystrand, 1989). This means that writers operate within a conversation that has already started and is ongoing; the utterances they make are connected to past utterances and future utterances (Bakhtin, 1986). Once writers commit their words to paper, “an exchange of meaning or transformation of shared knowledge [happens] as writers and readers interact every time the readers understand a written text” (Nystrand, 1989, p. 74) and a common meaning is constructed. Because language and reality are inherently connected (Freire & Macedo, 1987), writing is a way for students to connect their reality with the reality of the classroom.

Relevant Literature

Attending to gifted students in rural settings can be challenging in multiple ways. While opportunity gaps exist for all rural students, some school districts do not have the personnel to provide gifted pull-out or push-in services every day of the week; sometimes districts do not have the resources to

offer any gifted services at all (Azano, 2009; Howley, et al., 2009; Mattingly & Shaefer, 2015). Often, even when a rural school district does have a gifted resource teacher, they may provide instruction across many grade levels in several schools each week and thus can provide gifted students instruction for only an hour or less per week (Azano, 2014; Howley et al., 2009).

Place-Based, Critical, and Rural Literacies in Writing Instruction

Place-based pedagogy originated in fields outside education, such as anthropology and environmental studies, and according to Gruenewald (2003), lacked a theoretical foundation in education. By wedding it to critical pedagogy, he created a space to “[encourage] teachers and students to reinhabit their places . . . to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8). Moreover, as students learn about local issues, these local issues inevitably “spiral out” into larger, global issues “because local reality is almost always shaped by much more widespread cultural, natural, and economic forces” (Brooke, 2011, p. 164).

Writing instruction is one avenue for students to explore the connections between their experiences and the curriculum, especially when teachers provide deliberate, intentional connections to community and place in the classroom. These connections are additionally fostered when students are given the opportunity to write without worrying about grammar, punctuation, and form (Donovan, 2016). Grammar and mechanics are important to learn; however, that learning needs to be done in context. When we give students the opportunity to write without worrying about grammar, punctuation, and form, they can focus on ideas first while also giving practical application for any grammar or mechanics lessons students may need. When exposed to place-based writing instruction, students write about things that matter to them and have authority and voice in their writing (Donovan, 2016). Place-based pedagogy also provides a way for students to engage in critical literacies (i.e., embracing the social construction of knowledge as

it relates to our worldviews; Comber et al., 2001; Eppley, 2011).

Rural Literacies and Deliberate Connections to Place

The notion of rural literacies has evolved to incorporate dynamic and socially constructed meaning (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). Donehower et al. (2007) argued their work on rural literacies “highlight[s] the need for continued use of literate action to affect social change for rural peoples and rural communities” (p. 18). Moreover, this expanded view of literacies includes rural communities as global change agencies and as a part of a complex global economic and social network. Rural literacies in this context “becomes a matter of attending to text(s) and context(s)” (Green, 2013, p. 29). Literacies, including rural literacies, are social constructions, and it is important to find ways to connect the work done in the classroom to students’ lives, communities, and place while also connecting students to the larger, global economic and social networks in which their community operates, to reinforce the cultural sustainability of rural communities.

If we think of literacy as the mastery of discourses, then the mastery of discourses in rural communities can be understood as *rural literacies*, particularly as they relate to the social practices used in rural communities to sustain rural places (Donehower et al., 2007). Edmondson (2003), for example, wrote about a pile of corn that was used as a protest. To people outside the rural community of “Prairie Town” its meaning would have been missed, but for local residents the corn represented a rural *text* symbolizing farmers’ collective refusal to sell their corn at an unfair price. The farmers’ rural literacies, that is, their knowledge of local economies and agribusiness in this case, afforded them a powerful way to advocate for their rights. For rural students, the idea of rural literacies can be a vital part of understanding rural places.

To understand the influence of a place-based curriculum on students’ notions of and connections to place in their writing, we asked what influence a place-based curriculum has on high-performing rural students as writers. Understanding students’ connections to place in their writing was used to

inform how a dialogic stance can be incorporated with a critical, place-based curriculum to highlight the affordances and inequities that exist for rural high-performing students.

Sample

The data used for this study were generated as part of a 5-year, federally funded grant (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019) focusing on rural schools. The Promoting PLACE grant had two overarching priorities: to provide an alternative identification process for high-poverty rural schools and to implement a place-based curriculum for those identified for gifted services (in treatment schools). In this article, we use the term *high performing*, as the students may not meet more traditional definitions of *gifted*; however, they were identified for the program based on a place-conscious protocol (e.g., using local instead of national norms). Three cohorts of students participated in Promoting PLACE. Eligible districts for the project were categorized as rural according to National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) coding (fringe, distant, or remote) and considered high poverty by the state where the study was conducted (more than 50% of the district’s students receiving free/reduced lunch). Schools were randomly assigned to condition at the district level to avoid contamination because in some of the school districts one teacher delivered instruction to all identified students. Students in the treatment group were instructed using four language arts units that included critical, place-based elements, while students in the control group were taught using the curriculum their districts typically provided for gifted students. Students in the sample belonged to cohort 2 in the larger Promoting PLACE study, the largest cohort ($N=199$) to have completed the pre/post writing tasks, which participated for approximately 1.5 years in the larger study (grade 3 and half of grade 4).

The data used for analysis were students’ writing from two general writing tasks aligned with skills assessed with state standards. Alignment of the tasks with standards ensured students in the control districts were not expected to undertake a task not included in the grade-level curriculum. After the writing tasks were developed, they were sent to

content-area expert reviewers for review, which elicited revisions, and then were piloted in two schools. Responses on the pilot assessment indicated students were not providing the type of writing expected from the prompt as written; the writing task prompt was revised to include the necessary criteria for genre and form. The final writing tasks were used to assess writing cohorts 2 and 3, which consisted of students added to the study in the subsequent two years of the larger project (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019).¹

Data Sources

For the pretest writing task, administered between January and March of students' third-grade year, students wrote a letter to new students who would be attending their school in the upcoming school year. Students were asked to include both educational and noneducational activities in which new students can expect to participate when they come to the school and that make their school special. The writing task was untimed but designed for students to complete in one session of about 30–40 minutes; students were not expected to spend more than one class session on the writing tasks. For the posttest writing task, administered one year later, students wrote about a place they deemed special, limited to places they actually visited. Students were instructed to describe what a great day is like in this place to someone who has never been, using as much descriptive language as they deemed necessary to paint a picture for the reader. This writing task was also administered in one session of about 30–40 minutes.

Treatment

Students in the treatment group were instructed using the CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results) curriculum model (Azano, Tackett, et al., 2017). This curriculum was modified by project personnel to infuse place-based connections into four language-arts-based units and to ensure alignment with state and grade-level standards. The four units

were designed with rural students in mind and used information from teacher surveys to include deliberate place-based connections. In third grade, students are instructed on the topics of poetry and folklore, with opportunities to connect to local poetry and folklore. In fourth grade, students are instructed on the topics of fiction and research, with opportunities to connect to the stories of their communities and to research topics of interest to them within their communities. Teachers are provided with training by project personnel prior to teaching either the third- or fourth-grade units to ensure they understood the tenets of the CLEAR curriculum. Students were instructed using the curriculum a minimum of once each week; program delivery varied based on district resources and personnel availability.

Data Analysis

A priori place-based codes tied to the explicit focus of the curriculum were developed based on a rubric used by an expert (a rural scholar) to review the project curriculum for the PLACE (place, literacy, achievement, community, and engagement) components. The expert evaluated the project curriculum to ensure it adequately addressed project goals. For example, the criterion for place was “efforts made to integrate prior local knowledge and to embed place-specific characteristics into content,” and for “community” was “opportunities are provided for community outreach and involvement” (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019). The expert read and evaluated the curriculum by responding to such questions as:

- How well does the curriculum address these threats, and do you feel these attempts are successful?
- Does the curriculum emphasize rural strengths, or does it unintentionally focus on deficits?

A priori codes were then used to understand the content of student responses. These themes were further refined by integrating concepts related to

¹ In the larger research study, a scoring rubric was developed, tested, and used to measure growth over time; however, the rubric was not used for the

analysis in this study because it focused on qualitative characteristics of the students' writing.

place and community and from a preexisting framework for analyzing place documents (Azano, 2009). Table 1 lists the a priori codes used by the

first author to identify how students referenced place in their writing.

Table 1

A Priori Place-Based Codes

Code	Criterion
Family/heritage	Describes and/or mentions family (e.g., mother, father, siblings, cousins) and/or information about family characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, country/region of origin, family history stories, traits), living situations, family backgrounds hobbies, or values.
Local people	Describes and/or mentions local people (e.g., shop owners, neighbors, teachers, police officers, politicians).
Local places	Describes and/or mentions local places (e.g., local meeting places, parks, museums, stores, events).
Local histories	Describes and/or mentions local histories (e.g., local folklore, legends) or historic information (e.g., coal mining, civil war).
Community involvement	Describes and/or mentions participation in community events (e.g., fairs, contests, community cleanup, volunteer work).
Other	Connects to community and/or place in their writing, but example does not fit into any previous code. (This code was used to identify connections to nature or the environment, as well as descriptions of these places.)

To analyze student writing, the first author read through each student's pre- and posttest writing tasks, noting references to place related to the a priori codes; sentences, words, and phrases were organized by code in an Excel spreadsheet. Examining student writing for their conceptualizations of place, attending to the individual words and phrases used to make meaning, allowed us to understand ways students use language to connect to the reality of their place. The first author then compared the references between treatment and control groups, using differences to construct key themes related to the influence of the curriculum on students as writers and noting connections between specific elements of the curriculum and the ways students referenced place.

Findings: Unpacking Sense of Place and Exploring It Through Writing

Of the 199 students in cohort 2, the sample used for this qualitative data set comprised pretest

data from 149 (61 treatment and 88 control) students and posttest data from 158 (78 treatment and 80 control) students, due to students being absent for testing or dropping from or being added to the study. This provided a rich sample to examine student writing as a window into how they are processing their experiences and communicating potential shifts in understanding of concepts and contexts. Seen from this perspective, writing is a means of meaning making, which, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) argued, requires understanding and response. Data analysis identified three key themes indexing how the curriculum influenced students as writers: treatment students (a) used more descriptive and vivid language in their writing about place, (b) shifted their understanding of the important role people play in their places and the stories of their lives, and (c) expanded their concepts of place to those outside the immediate building, locale, or structure. These changes worked together as part of the treatment students' more complex understanding that transcended the

boundaries of their school. This shows a larger concept of place as emphasized throughout the curriculum, where each of the units has explicit ways for students to connect what they are learning to their community and region.

Treatment Students Used More Descriptive, Detailed, and Vivid Language

Treatment students shifted to more descriptive, detailed, and vivid language in their writing from pre- to posttest, illustrating greater proficiency in the use of the tools of the discipline (i.e., writing) to share their experiences with others. The following a priori codes (from Table 1) illustrated this shift: in pretests students referenced “local people” the most in description but used “other” descriptions in posttests, describing nature and the environment. On the pretest writing task, both groups of students used adjectives and a few instances of figurative language, but their use of descriptive language was similar. For example, treatment student 1, in describing the teachers at school, wrote,

The teachers are really friendly. In Kindergarten the classes have extraordinary teachers. Mr. Gill helps you really learn math! The science teacher (Mrs. Panetta) even has pickled bugs! In 3rd, 4th, and 5th you take [state test] but the teachers help you learn your stuff!”²

This student is using several examples of descriptive language with the use of words like “friendly” and “extraordinary.” The student is describing the personality of the teachers but does not provide enough detail to allow the reader to imagine what the teacher is like. In student writing across both groups on the pretest writing task, the description of teachers or school personnel used the most descriptive language used but showed a limited understanding of how to use the tools of the discipline (i.e., to show, not tell).

In their posttest writing, control students used less detailed descriptive language compared to treatment students and did not use showing rather than telling (i.e., using descriptive language to paint a picture) to share experiences. Control students’

use of detailed, descriptive language on the posttest task was similar to that of their pretest writing. They used adjectives or figurative language to describe their experiences but did not evoke the senses or paint a picture with their description. Control student 2, for example, in describing their yard, wrote:

When you walk in you can hear leaves rustling in the wind and you can hear the faint sound of twigs breaking as dozens of deer run through the woods behind my house. They have white tails that whenever they are startled they go up like flags as they sprint away. When you walk in you smell lushing green pine cones. You see a squirrel up in the tree top climbing over branches about to jump on your tree house. It’s mouth is full of nuts its about to go and get more. You hear the stream running in the back in the woods. You want to go see its aqua blue colors very badly.

This student’s description of their yard uses several adjectives and figurative language, such as “leaves rustling in the wind” and “white tails that go up like flags.” This student is trying to describe the yard in a way that evokes the senses, but the student is just telling the reader what they are seeing, smelling, hearing, or touching, preventing readers from creating their own image of the scene. The control students were not using the tools of the discipline to show rather than tell.

Treatment students showed a distinct shift in the use of descriptive language in the posttest results. They shifted their use of descriptive, detailed, and vivid language, using the tools of the discipline to share their experiences in their places. When describing a place special to them, treatment student 2 wrote about the woods in the backyard:

Sometimes I go up into the beautiful, warm, and colorful woods. The trees are tall and extremely colorful in the fall. They are like nature’s firework show booming red, yellow, and orange leave. . . . Another time in woods I went up into a hunting stand and sat down. It was dirty and smelly like old socks. . . . First of all we had to hike through the painful and clingy sticker bushes. Then we

² In this article we have maintained spelling for all student examples, so writing errors are the

students’ own; additionally, all names used are pseudonyms.

had to trek through the woods that were prickly and taller than me!

This student's description of the woods in their backyard uses lists of several different adjectives, "beautiful, warm, and colorful woods," and uses figurative language like "they are like nature's firework show booming red, yellow, and orange leave." Their use of descriptive and figurative language is threaded throughout the discussion of their special place. This suggests students are thinking about place in a more nuanced way, focusing on the description of the place, using the tools of the discipline, so the reader can imagine the scene set by the writer. The use of these tools throughout students' description of the woods exemplifies how writers use description to share their experiences with others.

These contrasting posttest examples show the discernible difference in how treatment and control students used descriptive language. Treatment student 2 describes the special place in a way that evokes the senses, without expressing which sense is being evoked. The use of descriptive language shows readers the place using the tools skillful writers use, while control student 2 is telling readers what they should experience at that place. Students in the treatment group, by using tools of the discipline to show readers, are giving readers the opportunity to create a personal image.

Throughout all four units of the Promoting PLACE curriculum, students are taught the language and tools of the discipline: writers use descriptive language to evoke the senses and paint a picture for the reader. For example, in the third-grade poetry unit, the first four lessons are dedicated to imagery, abstract and concrete words, and evoking the senses. Those concepts are reinforced throughout this unit and the remaining three units. Students are continuously asked to analyze readings for descriptive language, while also using those tools in the writers' workshops interspersed all through the units. Students using descriptive, detailed, vivid language as tools of the discipline shows they are gaining confidence as writers and are able to see themselves as members of the elusive "writers' club" (Stewart, 2011). Treatment students' use of more descriptive,

detailed language in their posttests reflects the constant reinforcement on these skills in their lessons.

Treatment Students' Writing Signaled a Shift in Conceptualizing the Importance of People to Place

Another significant reflection of the curriculum in the writing of treatment students is the shift in how they connect the importance of people to place. This is significant because lessons in the curriculum provided opportunities for students to discuss place, including the importance of people in their communities. Additionally, the curriculum provided instruction on the various forms of characterization (e.g., direct/indirect characterization, round/flat characters). The shift in how treatment students discuss people in relation to place shows treatment students were thinking more complexly about how people function as characters in the stories of their lives while also shifting their concept of place away from the immediate place: their school. The "local people" code was used to index this shift.

On their pretest writing tasks, all students wrote about local people associated with their school, which was not surprising, given the prompt asked them to write about their school. When students wrote about people in their pretest results, they would list many people or groups of people associated with their school. For example, treatment student 3 wrote,

We also have super fun teachers to, some of them let you do games if you finesh. Mrs. Ogelsby is a fun teacher she is my best friend she likes to draw pictures with kids and for kids she is assistant teacher she helps when we go to lab. Mrs. Hallanack is nice teacher to she teaches pre-k.

This student's discussion of several teachers is an example of how both treatment and control students were writing about local people associated with their school. Mostly, students would mention teachers who were "super fun" or "nice," indicating that these teachers are what make their school special. This indication that people are important to the school also shows up in control students' writing. For the pretest results, there is little difference between

treatment and control students' conceptualizations of local people and the important roles they play in place.

Control students also wrote about local people in their posttest writing, typically family members. However, their descriptions of local people suggest they were part of the story being told; they acted more as background characters in the story instead of connecting them to place the way treatment students did. For example, control student 4, when writing about their home, wrote: "My sister Alex which is 5 sleeps on the bottem and her stuffed animals and owl sheets cause she loves owls. Next my sister Tiffany sleeps on the top bunk with dolls and stuffed animals." This student is writing about their home. This student's letter is describing the layout of their home, moving from room to room. They describe their siblings' bedroom and who sleeps where, and mention some personality traits, such as "she loves owls," but their family is functioning in their place as other people who occupy that space, not as part of what makes that place special.

Treatment students wrote differently about their family members in ways that show an incorporation of characteristics of family as part of what makes the place special. Their writing suggests treatment students find places special, as long as their family is there with them. For example, treatment student 4, when writing about home, wrote:

I live in the trailer with my dad, mom, golden lab, and my two little sisters Rachele who is four and Elora who is five months. A few things that make our trailer special are my sister Rachele who is always playing with my chubby funny other sister Elora. Some other stuff that makes our trailer special is my dad because his like our crew chief. My mom on the other hand can be somewhat annoying! She is always demanding for a lot of stuff like clean your room, fold your clothes, GET OFF THE COMPUTER!!! . . . Sometimes my sister Rachele can be soooooo annoying. She is always saying stuff like you need to stop doing that or I'm gonna tell mommy!

This student is writing about their family members, providing their characteristics, showing the family

dynamic. By describing the personality traits in various ways and providing examples of how those traits manifest, treatment students show how important their family is in their place and the stories of their lives. This student's discussion of their family members provides both direct and indirect characterization, reinforcing the roles each person plays in the family and their place. Even though this student discusses things that are not always positive, such as "My mom on the other hand can be somewhat annoying!" it is clear that this student's family is important to their place; their family plays an important role in the story of their life.

The differences in the depiction of family can be linked to lessons in the fiction unit, which has three lessons dedicated to characters and characterization. In lessons dealing with characters and characterization, students are given several opportunities to describe characters in different ways, so they can develop the skill of showing their importance to the story. The emphasis on the importance characters and people play in the stories they read and write has influenced these students as writers. They expanded their view of who is important to their place from just listing those people to describing them as important characters in the stories of their lives. Hillocks (2007) suggested anyone can write about things as small as "mothers and morning glories and moonpies" (p. 48) because "even the smallest experiences are worth writing about" (p. 37). Students connecting local people to their place in a more nuanced way exemplifies Hillocks' concept.

Treatment Students Expanded Their View of Place to a Larger Concept of Place

Students in the treatment group expanded their concept of place to include places beyond their local or immediate place. The "local places" and "other" codes were used to index this shift in treatment students' discussion of place to outside a building or structure. The curriculum provided opportunities for teachers to connect the lessons to students' place, which provided a space for students to think about the larger conceptualizations of place; students are thinking about place in terms of nature and the surrounding environment.

The pretest results were essentially the same for both treatment and control groups in their discussion of place; the places they mentioned were their schools, which was expected because the prompt asked them to introduce new students to their school. For example, treatment student 5 wrote, "Welcome to [my school]." Students would mention their school and then, per the prompt, go on to describe the things that make it special. Students were limiting their place, even though the prompt asked them to discuss both educational and noneducational activities that make their school special.

On their posttests control students showed some connection to nature or places outside their immediate place, but those were not typically grounded in the local place. Some students would write about their yards or local parks, but most students discussed nature or the environment in relation to places they went on vacation. For example, control student 5, when describing a trip to the beach, wrote: "So it was a sunny day at the beach. It was beautiful so what I done was fish, swim, body surf, and it was sandy so it was perfect for crawdaddy catching." This student's description of the trip to the beach has some description of the environment and nature, but they are describing a place beyond the borders of the locale. This vacation spot is important to this student, but connecting to places beyond the borders of the locale suggests that, without a connection to place in the curriculum, students are not given opportunities to connect their learning to their place, thus do not see what makes their local place special.

The shift in how treatment students conceptualized place suggests they are thinking about place in more complex ways, grounding their concepts of place in local nature and the local environment. The nature and environment students connect to are grounded in their locale; they described the environment, nature, or outdoors in their communities. For example, treatment student 6 wrote about the evergreen trees in the yard:

There are about 4 big, full evergreen trees. They are about 50 ft. tall. I like to climb the soft, brown, strong, branches. When I get about

halfway up there is this opening where I like to hear the birds chirping and see the beautiful sky. When I climb the trees the green thick firs tickle my skin. . . . We sat down on the strong branches until it got dark and we climbed down the big, thick, sturdy, brown branches. Then we jumped down the soft, thin, brown branches crunched at our feet. We walked out of the prickly green firs and found ourselves in the tickly green grass. Now you know why I love these big, tall, sturdy, awesome, green trees. I love those trees.

This student's description suggests these trees are important to them. They climb the trees and "like to hear the birds chirping and see the beautiful sky," which suggests these trees are a place they find solace in nature; they have a connection to these trees. Students in the treatment group described places near their homes or local communities, such as trees and parts of their yard, but they connected those places directly to the environment and surrounding nature. This shift from the immediate place, such as their school, to places beyond their immediate scope suggests they are thinking about place in more complex ways, describing special places connected to nature.

Treatment students' shifts in conceptualizing people and place worked together, indicating people and locations are ways of understanding place and thinking about place in more complex ways. For example, on the posttest treatment student 7 wrote,

My special place is a place I go with four special people. Those people are my cousins, Amelia, Judy, one of my brothers, Auston, and I. This place is a lush field. Beautiful cows graze there sometimes, so we have to be very careful. . . . Once we get to the field, it's almost complete bliss. The best time to play there is in the fall. It's crisp and cool and perfect. . . . This is a place we can play in harmony, something we can't do often. It's special, and I love our big field, a place where we can get along.

This student is describing a place where they and their family members can play together. The field is a harmonizing place for their relationship. People and location matter to the importance of place;

when these two things function together, students see those places as special.

Examples from the curriculum used in the treatment illustrate the chance to connect what students are learning to their place. For example, in the research unit, part of the fourth-grade curriculum, students are encouraged to research something connected to their locale. In lesson 2, the place connection suggests teachers

Encourage students to think locally for their areas of interest. For example, a student who wrote about a musical instrument might be interested in the history of Appalachian music. A student who wrote about a family heirloom may be interested in how their family came to this region of the state. (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019)

This is one of the many opportunities students have to connect what they are learning about research to their hometowns and families. Suggestions for teachers to connect what students are discussing or learning to their communities and places are included in all four units. Place does not have to be a building or a structure; students are thinking about place in terms of nature and the environment and the meanings and feelings ascribed to those places, shown by students mentioning “I love those trees” or their love of their big field.

Discussion

This study created an opportunity to examine how using a place-based curriculum might influence high-performing rural students as writers. Qualitative understandings suggest treatment students moved beyond superficial explorations of place; they connected place to important people who make those places special and nuanced their discussion of place by moving beyond the immediate building or structure to a discussion of nature and the environment. The findings suggest that writing, as a way to process experience and provide a glimpse into students’ experiences, helped treatment students “develop stronger ties to their community [and] enhance [their] appreciation for the natural world” (Sobel, 2005, p. 7).

Using Tools of the Profession as a Common Language

That treatment students shifted their use of descriptive and detailed language to show their readers the place they were describing suggests the importance of teaching writing skills as tools writers use to share their experiences to “take [their] reader with [them]” (Jensen, 2004, p. 58). When a Promoting PLACE curriculum lesson calls for a discussion on descriptive language and evoking the senses in writing, the discussion is based on those elements of writing as tools writers use. This connection to the profession in the curriculum shows up as student’s using more descriptive language in their writing. Connecting instruction and lessons to the work of professionals is one of the primary underlying philosophies informing the development of the CLEAR curriculum, on which the Promoting PLACE curriculum was based (Reis & Renzulli, 2003).

Instructional Take-aways

Treatment students’ use of descriptive and detailed language suggests the discourse community (Gee, 2015) in the classroom led them to the common understanding of the importance of this writing tool. As students use tools of the profession to write about things that are important to them, they are writing with more passion and depth (Worthman et al., 2011). Providing opportunities for students to process their experience as members of their communities and connecting classroom instruction to place apply the concepts of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and the importance of schools reflecting student experiences (Dewey, 1938). Using place as a foundation of experience, while also providing a space for students to enter into dialogue with the curriculum and their experiences, helps them to make their own understandings of the lessons in school, using the tools of the profession (descriptive language, diction, showing and not telling) (Stewart, 2011). To enact this type of instruction, to help students develop as writers, teachers can:

- *Identify ways writers show their experiences in readings and connecting to students’ experiences:* Teachers can help students develop their understanding of

tools writers use by analyzing the texts in the classroom. As students are reading a passage, story, novel, or article, have them identify the tools writers are using for that particular genre. As they annotate the text for tools of the discipline, they can also look for place connections or how they have had similar experiences. For example, in the third-grade Promoting PLACE folklore unit, students were encouraged to discuss how their experiences relate to the stories they read while also focusing on how writers share those experiences.

- *Brainstorm experiences students want to explore:* Teachers can create classroom experiences that help students identify and call attention to what matters to them. Have students brainstorm experiences they want to explore through writing by choosing writing about what they know and what matters to them (Donovan, 2016; Jensen, 2004; King, 2000). Teachers can help students connect experiences with concepts being taught in the classroom through discussion, conferencing, or writing. In the Promoting PLACE curriculum, students did this by taking an interest inventory relating to their sense of place, by looking at artifacts or mementos in their homes or rooms, so teachers could connect the curriculum to students' place.

Deliberate Connections to Place Supports Student Thinking About the Value of Place

The finding that treatment students nuanced how they discussed people and places suggests that a deliberate connection to place provides opportunities for students to “weave complex place-based connections” (Waller & Barrentine, 2015, p. 7). The Promoting PLACE curriculum provided opportunities for teachers to make a deliberate connection to place in the classroom. The influence of this connection to place was evident in treatment student writing. For example, treatment students connected their conceptualizations of place to nature and the environment. This discussion of nature suggests that providing opportunities for students to think about and discuss place in the

classroom, as it relates to the curriculum, helps students nuance how they discuss and think about place—meaning place is more about the connections people have to those places, such as feeling solace when climbing a tree or being a part of nature that holds personal meaning. Using students' experiences as a stimulus for teaching creates opportunities to make personal connections to what is happening in the classroom and enhances the meaning making process (Fecho et al., 2012); this connects to a deliberate connection to place by giving students guidance on how their experience as members of their local communities connects to the classroom.

Students have individual experiences and common experiences as members of their communities, and this affects how they make meaning in the classroom; those differences are a part of the social construction of the classroom reality. Through writing, students coconstruct the reality of the classroom and show a “bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places [they] inhabit” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8). The finding that students are nuancing how they discuss place, connecting places to the people who help to make those places special, suggests they care about how people and places function together in the stories of their lives. A place-based pedagogy provides an avenue for students to express themselves in writing and become an authority in the classroom by writing about things they know.

Instructional Take-aways. Providing students with a space to connect to their out-of-school experiences gives them an opportunity to think about and process experiences in critical ways (Hillocks, 2007). With rural literacies in mind, which are a “matter of attending to text(s) and context(s)” (Green, 2013, p. 29), students' experiences can connect to the texts in the classroom while providing context to help students make meaning. Furthermore, rural literacies are a social construction: the literacies of the texts and contexts are constructed by the people who live there. Providing a deliberate connection to students' place will help them understand how texts and contexts work together to make meaning. These strategies allow teachers to attend to the specific rural context

in which they teach. To enact this deliberate connection to place, teachers can:

- *Connect themes in readings to cultural and local themes:* Teachers can provide opportunities for students to connect the texts of the classroom to what they know. As students read, provide opportunities for students to discuss how the themes of the readings connect to the cultural and local themes. Students can be asked to bring in a family heirloom, photo, or other personal item that a text makes them think of. Students can use these items as a catalyst for discussion or a guided free-write, to help students make meaning with the context of the reading, in connection with their personal items (Stewart, 2011). The project curriculum emphasizes teachers connecting readings to students' experiences. For example, in the Promoting PLACE folklore unit, students examined local stories they knew as part of learning about folklore. This discussion can also take the form of a guided free-write, where students write for 5 minutes on the themes and how they connect, opening up opportunities for students to get their ideas out before having a discussion.
- *Interview family members to understand family stories:* Teachers can provide students with opportunities to understand their family stories by interviewing parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, or even neighbors, asking them about the stories that have been passed down in their families. As students conduct these interviews, they are using their "funds of knowledge" (González et al., 2005) and cultural context to shape the fabric of language and make meaning (Bakhtin, 1981). Then, students can write those stories or a version of those stories that connects to their own experiences. This is similar to the Promoting PLACE folklore unit, which focuses on how stories in their communities become folklore or legend, so students can connect what they know to the curriculum.

Conclusion

The findings and understandings from this study indicate that providing opportunities for high-performing students to connect to and discuss place in relation to the curriculum helps them think about place in more complex ways and expand writing skills. Connecting to place in the classroom emphasizes the importance of communities in shaping who students are and how they learn, valuing students' experiences in those communities.

Writing instruction that connects to place provides opportunities for students to enter into a discourse community (Gee, 2015), entering into a conversation that is ongoing. As students enter into this ongoing conversation through writing about their experiences, they are transacting with other viewpoints and other classmates' experiences to create a strong and positive environment for learning (Fecho, 2000). As students transact with the various texts in the classroom, they also inquire into those transactions, questioning the new texts created through these transactions and how different people can interpret and understand things differently. As Freire and Macedo (1987) asserted, "Reading does not merely consist of decoding the written word or language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with the knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected" (p. 29). Using critical literacies, and critical pedagogy of place, the classroom then becomes a space where there is an understanding that "all [writers] belong to discourse communities" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 71) and where students can use writing to connect their reality with the reality of the classroom. Through writing, coconstructing meanings and experiences, and transacting with texts, students inquire into and challenge the tensions that exist in their communities and lives.

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